

Livelihood Resilience and Adaptive Capacity: Tracing Changes in Household Access to Capital in Central Vietnam

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Summary. — This article analyses the implementation and outcomes of national development programs in a mountainous commune in Vietnam. The article traces the history of State intervention and the capacity of households and the community to adapt to change. The assessment reveals unintended consequences of the programs which strongly influence the ability of households to adapt to change. Some households possess more adaptive capacity given their better access to capital while others remain vulnerable because they are constrained in accessing resources and engage in nondiversified livelihoods. If shock events become more frequent, the livelihoods that are nondiversified will be most at risk.

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1. INTRODUCTION

After two decades of strong economic growth Vietnam reached the status of “lower middle-income” country in 2009 (World Bank, 2011). This achievement is partly attributed to the *Đi Mới* reform policies implemented by the Vietnam government that have enabled the country to shift from a centrally planned- to a market-oriented economy (Ravallion & van de Walle, 2008). While Vietnam remains a one-party State and central institutions still exert significant control, this shift has brought about a process of decentralization in which some decision-making powers have been transferred from the center to provincial governments, who have considerable authority over lower administrative levels (World Bank, 2005). Furthermore, a process of devolution of forest- and land-use rights to communities and households has taken place (Clement, 2010).

Aspects of the government’s socio-economic and environmental accomplishments have been criticized. Firstly, achievements in poverty alleviation have not been evenly distributed across the country. While the percentage of the population living in acute poverty declined from 57% in the 1980s to 7% in 2005, most of these improvements in living standards have occurred in lowland areas while mountainous areas have lagged behind (Vien, Leisz, Lam, & Rambo, 2006). Questions have also been raised about whether environmental rehabilitation programs in the Vietnam have achieved desired results. Some observers argue that national development projects have continuously focused on infrastructure development, with less attention given to environmental impact assessments and conservation measures (World Wildlife Fund for Nature, 2003).

This paper has two objectives. The first aim of the paper is to examine how government policies implemented at the local level in one commune – through national land-use and development programs with dual objectives of socio-economic development and environmental rehabilitation – have influenced and changed the livelihood objectives of local people by altering their access to resources. Secondly, the paper analyses the degree to which unintended impacts of these large-scale national programs have enabled or constrained the capacity of households and the community in the commune to adapt to environmental change. On the basis of this analysis, recommendations are provided which are mainly

geared toward international organizations and policy makers in Vietnam and other South-East Asian countries with interest in the nexus between natural resource management, environment, and development. The analysis is carried out using data collected in a representative mountainous commune in central Vietnam.

The next section presents a brief overview of the sustainable livelihoods approach, a discussion of the concepts of resilience and adaptive capacity and how both can be used for the purpose of analyzing the impact of rural development programs in Vietnam. Before engaging in the analysis, government policies and programs with major implications for populations in mountainous areas will be presented. This is followed by a description of the study area, field methods, and the approach used to collect data.

2. SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AND RESILIENCE

The Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) can be used to analyze the outcomes of a particular intervention in which actors are enabled or constrained in accessing and using various livelihood resources (or forms of “capital”) which are needed in order to cope with stresses and shocks and for the pursuit of livelihood strategies (Institute for Development Studies, 1998). SLAs have their origins in activist participatory research, agro-ecosystem analysis, applied anthropology, farming systems research in the field and rapid rural appraisal (Chambers, 1994). The SLA is an interdisciplinary approach which focuses on individual, household, or community access to five forms of capital: natural, social, financial, physical, and human (DFID, 1999; Institute for Development Studies, 1998).

After a peak in the use of the SLA at the beginning of the century, the approach fell out of favor both within the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development

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(DFID), the donor agency which promoted the approach most extensively, and in the broader development assistance community. According to DFID, the shift away from SLA was due to a number of factors such as the increasing influence of economists who favored an emphasis on national scale transformation rather than the use of approaches suited for local-level analysis (IDS, 2008).

The SLA remains a highly useful approach for local-level assessments rather than for assessments at the national level. Given the current focus of donors and international organizations on the development of small-scale agriculture and family farming (FAO, 2014), it is argued here that the SLA remains as vital and necessary as ever for use in the context of natural resources management and rural development. Small-scale agricultural systems are highly diverse, especially in mountainous areas, which is often the result of an adaptation response to harsh and difficult biophysical conditions. These resilient systems can play a key role in ensuring that enough food is produced for a rapidly expanding population, especially in countries that are prone to hunger and environmental degradation (FAO, 2012). Arguably, the SLA is required for understanding diverse small-scale farming systems, how they have adapted in the past and what is needed to strengthen their capacity to adapt in the future.

Institute for Development Studies (1998) views resilience as a key component of sustainable livelihoods and defines it as the ability of livelihoods to cope with and recover from stresses and shocks. This definition refers both to the ability to cope, through temporary adjustments in response to change, and adaptive capacity, through long-term shifts in livelihood strategies (Institute for Development Studies, 1998).

The concept of resilience has gained traction in several disciplines and research domains such as ecology, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and social protection and other domains in which shocks, risk, and vulnerability are examined (Béné, Godfrey Wood, Newsham, & Davies, 2012). However, a wealth of different conceptualizations and definitions of resilience exist (Bahadur, Ibrahim, & Tanner, 2010; Béné *et al.*, 2012). The Resilience Alliance (2002) views resilience as a property of linked social-ecological systems with three main characteristics: the amount of change the system can undergo while still retaining basic functions, the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization and the ability of the system to build capacity for learning and adaptation. Similarly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines resilience as “the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration, or improvement of its essential basic structures and functions” (IPCC, 2012). Specialized agencies and programs in the United Nations have also started using their own definitions and applications of resilience. Increasing resilience to threats and crises is one of five main strategic objectives of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2015) while the World Food Programme has placed climate resilience high on the agenda (World Food Programme, 2015). The resilience work of FAO aims to describe and measure those characteristics of systems which allow the absorption of natural hazard impacts as well as reducing the vulnerability of people to hunger and poverty (FAO, 2013). However, currently there is a trend toward viewing resilience as an ability, in recognition of the fact that systems and associated processes are not static but are constantly changing and evolving, rather than viewing it as an outcome that can be quantitatively measured (Béné *et al.*, 2012).

Much like the rationale behind the SLA, proponents of resilience thinking argue that the complex problems of environmental change and the strong linkages between humans and nature cannot be investigated through mono-disciplinary approaches but requires interdisciplinary research (Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2003). Many scholars currently define resilience as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance without losing its basic structure and function and the capacity for self-organization and learning (Berkes *et al.*, 2003; Klein, Nicholls, & Thomalla, 2003; Nelson, Adger, & Brown, 2007; Turner *et al.*, 2003). Using a resilience lens provides a means of examining how communities and households respond to change in coupled social-ecological systems and how they can build the capacity to adapt to environmental change and shocks (Berkes *et al.*, 2003).

This article examines how communities and households have responded to past socio-economic, and environmental changes, in order to assess how these responses will influence their ability to adapt to ongoing and future environmental changes. Resilience is understood here as a measure of the level of access to endowments of capital – financial, natural, physical, social, and human – that can be mobilized in order to respond and adapt to environmental change. Adaptive capacity is broadly understood as the ability of a system to adjust, modify its characteristics in order to moderate damage, take advantage of opportunities, or cope with the impacts of shock events (ODI, 2010). In this article, adaptive capacity is defined as the ability to diversify or shift livelihood strategies, by mobilizing and using capital forms, in order to absorb stresses and shocks.

Figure 1 shows how resilience and adaptive capacity can be integrated in the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. The vulnerability context includes the particular natural or man-made shocks and stresses which affect individual, household, and community access to livelihood resources, i.e., forms of capital. Livelihood resilience is determined by existing access to resources and will therefore determine the extent to which individuals, households, and communities are able to absorb shocks. Access to various forms of capital, determined by resilience, can increase opportunities for influencing and interacting with structures and processes which are either directly or indirectly involved in managing and responding to stresses and shocks. These include different levels of government, specific government policies, actors from the private sector, laws and institutions. These, in turn, can enable or constrain access to assets and also shape the long-term livelihood strategies which are pursued. The specific livelihood strategies which are pursued may also influence processes such as government policies and laws. Adaptive capacity is shaped by these long-term livelihood strategies and if adaptive capacity is high there are good opportunities for increasing well-being, reducing vulnerability without compromising the natural resource base.

As indicated in Figure 1 and according to Parry, Canziani, Palutikof, van der Linden, and Hanson (2007), the adaptive capacity of a system is influenced not only by the level of economic development and technological innovation but also by social factors such as human capital, governance structures, social values, perceptions, customs, traditions, and levels of cognition. Hence, assessing which and how government interventions have altered household access to endowments in both positive and negative ways can provide useful insights into the current ability of households and communities to adapt to environmental changes. Such assessments can also be used to provide useful feedback on government policies and strategies for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

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