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Retaining the Old Countryside, Embracing the New Countryside: Vietnam's New Rural Development Program

Some [social and economic divisions], such as the dichotomies between countryside and city . . . are as familiar today as they were obvious to observers [in the 1960s].

—Ian Coxhead¹

It is often imagined that the countryside represents a space of continuity in a wider world of change. Rural-urban dichotomies, notwithstanding deepening rural market integration, are seen to remain as persistent, acute, and deep today as they were half a century ago, as reflected in the quotation that opens this article. These continuities extend from the persistence of the family farm,² the relative geographic isolation of rural areas,³ and the perception of the endurance of rural social norms.⁴ Across Asia, a “truncated” agrarian transition seems to be causing the attendant semi-proletarianization of rural labor.⁵ For many policy makers and some scholars, these continuities and incomplete transitions are seen as problematic because they are perceived as indicative of a stagnant agricultural sector and a hidebound farming population.⁶ Across Asia, governments have been intent on modernizing farming and the countryside, often for reasons that appear remarkably similar.⁷ The

government of Malaysia, for example, in mapping out the challenges facing rural areas and the farm sector, argues that “[t]he overriding issue in [Malaysia’s] agriculture sector is the predominance of small-scale . . . [and] . . . ageing farmers,” which “have led to farming not being approached as a business with profit maximisation objectives . . . [resulting] in low incomes for farmers,” necessitating a solution, which “is critical to closing the rural-urban income gap.”⁸ So, too, in Vietnam a New Rural Development (NRD) program [Nông Thôn Mới]—designed to shape a “new countryside”—was introduced in 2010 with a very similar confection of justifications.

The NRD program is only the most recent attempt by the central government to impose itself on the fields and farmers of Vietnam. Since the 1950s, the north Vietnamese countryside has been turned upside down by events, as the area has been disrupted by war, floods, and famine, as well as by policies, as the authorities in Hà Nội have, in turn, collectivized, re-collectivized, and then de-collectivized production.⁹ Scholars working across Vietnam have highlighted the complexities of land ownership in Vietnam’s history, and there is arguably no more important dimension of the Vietnamese government’s relationship to its people than the question of land ownership.¹⁰ Perhaps the most striking aspect of Vietnam’s rural historiography is the gap that exists—and it is a persistent one—between state pronouncements and policies on the one hand, and farmer practices on the other. As Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet writes in the context of the country’s policies of collectivization, farmer behavior was “often at odds with what collective farming required, what authorities wanted, and what national policy prescribed.”¹¹

Taking this policy/practice gap as our starting point, in this article we explore the continuities of rural livelihood diversification strategies amid the purported epochal shift embodied in the rhetoric of the NRD program. We show that despite the program’s post-agrarian emphasis, peasants have maintained subsistence farming as a key aspect of their labor and identity. This is particularly true with respect to rice farming and points to a disjunction between the state’s forward-looking goals for the countryside and the villagers’ demands to hold on to traditional farming practices, seemingly in the face of the logics of efficiency and modernization. Looking at the present and to the future, this article also outlines the importance of off-farm employment activities for households but demonstrates that these

initatives originated from villagers themselves and not because of any state mandate. In other words, what is interesting about livelihoods in the three villages we focus on in northern Vietnam is that they diversified and retained farming without any clear influence from a massive state-sponsored initiative like the NRD program. We argue that the balance between “old” agrarian practices and “new” aspirations, as Vietnamese rural communities described them and which we use to frame the article’s empirical sections, has no clear basis in the state’s rural reform policies.

These arguments are situated in long-standing debates about land reform in Vietnam,¹² and, relatedly, the ongoing conversation concerning policy and practice in the country.¹³ The state’s efforts to “modernize” Vietnam are ingrained in virtually every facet of Vietnamese society, and the literature is relatively strong in explaining how cities in Vietnam grapple with urban reform policies.¹⁴ Yet evidence of how modernization is understood and practiced among rural people is surprisingly thin given that it was here—in the countryside—that the reforms began. We explore the distance between agrarian society’s everyday practices and state-led modernization policies reflected in the NRD program.¹⁵ While most commentators recognize, as Danielle Labbé does, that the Vietnamese government has “since the late 1980s . . . taken important policy steps with the aim of turning a poor agrarian society into an urban based, industrial one,”¹⁶ we have an incomplete understanding of how societies in the countryside have transformed from “poor” to middle-income while retaining many of their agrarian household activities. This is even more the case because rural reforms in Vietnam have played such an important role in national discourses of national modernity [*hiện đại*], development [*phát triển*], and civilized nationhood [*văn minh*]. The cases presented in this article also provide support for the primacy of everyday, on-the-ground practices when considering rural transformation in Vietnam.

In pursuing the overall aim of ascertaining and explaining changes in our field sites, we are also highlighting a continuing puzzle in Vietnam’s agrarian transition—namely, the copresence of a thoroughly modern national outlook promoted by the government on the one hand and what, on the surface, appear to be resolutely entrenched farming practices on the other, reflected most obviously in small-scale, household-based agricultural

production. Accounting for these counterpoints in the countryside is critical in understanding the ways in which policy relates to action in a country like Vietnam with a one-party, communist system that regularly gets applauded (and applauds itself) for its national policy “improvements.”¹⁷ While there is no doubt that living standards throughout Vietnam have seen dramatic improvements over the past thirty years (including in rural areas), our research attends to the degree to which rural citizens themselves are the drivers of change. After we outline the NRD program and our field sites in the next two sections, we use evidence gathered from these three rural field sites to investigate the balance between what residents called the “old” and the “new,” highlighting how NRD program logics were not mentioned when peasants discussed transformations over time. Relatedly, we also show that the NRD program’s modernization goals have been applied piecemeal and without attribution to the introduction of formal policy.

Situating Vietnam’s NRD Program

The NRD program was drawn up with the aim to develop Vietnam’s rural areas, upgrade the countryside’s infrastructure, modernize and boost farm production, and thereby improve the living standards of rural people (Figure 1). While poverty has declined steeply over the *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] period initiated in the late 1980s, it still remains more than eight times higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas—poverty is, therefore, largely a rural phenomenon. In 2016, urban poverty, based on data from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, stood at 1.6 percent, and rural poverty at 13.6 percent.¹⁸ The state has used figures such as these to justify its interventions in the countryside.

For peasant farmers, most consequentially, the NRD program asks them to turn their subsistence agricultural plots into more financially profitable enterprises and, barring that possibility, to sell their land to those who will. However, the NRD program is at its core a multifaceted set of ideologies and practices designed to upgrade every dimension of the Vietnamese countryside. A brief history of the NRD program provides some context.

One of the state initiatives that first mentioned the NRD program was the Resolution of the Seventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Tenth Communist Party Congress, held in 2006) on



FIGURE 1: Building the New Countryside [Nông Thôn Mới] in Lam Điền Commune, 2017. Photo by Jonathan Rigg.

“Agriculture, Farmers, and Rural Areas.” The resolution affirmed that “[n]ew rural development needs to be associated with modern infrastructure, appropriate production methods, synchronous development between agricultural industry and private services, the stability of rural community, rich culture, the development of human resources, and the protection of the ecological environment.”¹⁹ In late 2010, the Central Steering Committee passed the National Target Program on New Rural Development, titled “The Implementation of the National Target Program on New Rural Development for 2010–2020.”²⁰ The general objectives of the program are

to build a new countryside with gradually modern socioeconomic infrastructure and rational economic structure and forms of production organization; to associate agriculture with quick development of industries and services; to associate rural development with urban development according to planning; to ensure a democratic and stable rural community deeply imbued with national cultural identity; to protect the environment and maintain security and order; and to raise people’s material and spiritual lives; along a socialist orientation.²¹

Though the original conclusion of the program was set for 2020, a national conference in 2019 reviewing the program confirmed that the NRD program as of now has no end point. The conference also established an orientation and tasks for carrying out work in the years to come.²²

From 2010 to 2019, the country mobilized 2,418,471 billion đồng to implement the program. The government contributed 319,289 billion đồng or about 13.2 percent to the overall budget. The other sources of funding came from credit (including development investment credit and trade credit); funds from enterprises, cooperatives, and other economic sectors; contributions from local people and communities; and other unnamed sources.²³

The state has been meticulous and ambitious in outlining the NRD program. For reasons of space we will not outline all eleven elements of the program but wish to emphasize a few that relate directly to our research on land use and peasant livelihoods. The first objective, to “build a new countryside,” is most prominent and encourages redirecting subsistence farming to commodity agricultural production, including a vision for more small and medium-scale industries and services to spring from villages throughout Vietnam (which also relates to the third and fifth elements about commodifying rural products by utilizing existing village networks). The second priority is to develop infrastructure like transport systems, electrical grids, cultural and sports activities, healthcare, education, commune administration offices, and irrigation systems. This facet has perhaps been the most successful and visible accomplishment of the NRD program, as rural areas are now much better served by facilities than they were in 2010, at the beginning of the program. Other core elements of the NRD program include improving sanitation, education and training opportunities, and environmental protection, as well as the longstanding emphases on strengthening culture and security throughout rural Vietnam.²⁴

There are nineteen indicators to measure the progress of these dimensions in rural communes. These are divided into five criteria groups. Rural communes become “new” if a commune meets or passes all nineteen criteria. If 75 percent of a district’s communes become “new,” it is rebranded as a new rural district. If 80 percent of a province’s districts are new rural districts, the province becomes a new rural province.²⁵

One important point to mention in the context of this research is the NRD program's interest in developing the intersection between land and peasant livelihoods. Specifically, the program aims to establish stronger household, farm, and cooperative economies by encouraging an intensification of agricultural land use. For example, in 2012, the Hà Nội People's Council (an organization that oversees a large number of peri-urban agricultural communes) issued a resolution to pilot numerous initiatives to encourage the development of agricultural production. In this resolution, there are elements supporting agricultural land consolidation and exchange.²⁶ At the commune level, the program alludes to the benefits of agricultural land consolidation and exchange because smallholders are able to have larger plots of land to improve household economies. In practice, specific localities—such as Lam Điền Commune, one of our field sites—were directed by local officials to consolidate and upgrade the productivity of agricultural land. For example, in 2015, there were 81.63 hectares of agricultural land in Lam Điền Commune that were successfully changed and consolidated.²⁷ On paper, many smallholders abandoned subsistence farming in order to consolidate their land into larger and potentially more profitable plots. However, many households have continued to cultivate their tiny, scattered plots of agricultural land and have resisted attempts at consolidation, a point we explore later in this article.

Vietnam's national political economy is one of "market socialism," or a "market-based economy with socialist orientation."²⁸ Under this system, the state holds the land management and allocation rights.²⁹ Over three iterations of the country's land laws, in 1988, 1993, and most recently in 2013, the state has extended its "pro-urban" land-use agenda by strengthening industrial development further—and further out—from Vietnam's urban centers.³⁰ For example, the 1988 land use law was enacted to incentivize rural landholders to use their agricultural lands more productively,³¹ but subsequent versions have opened up legislative space for land speculators to generate profits by transforming rural areas to industrial and other pro-development (e.g., housing and retail) uses.

If we could loosely call the aforementioned aspects of the state's land use policies "urban" and profit-motivated in their orientation, then the "socialist" or "pro-poor" side of the government's initiatives center on

modernizing the countryside.³² This is encapsulated in the NRD program's plans because it layers resources committed to the physical landscape (especially infrastructure) with sociocultural directives emphasizing self-improvement and "internal strength" that align closely with Vietnam's ambiguous yet persistent goals to modernize rural society. One can see in the NRD program a more robust iteration of long-held state-led rural directives that reward rural geographical locations with status if their community reaches a set of physical goals associated with cleanliness, safety, and community strength. Since the early 2000s, there have been cultural award programs instituted throughout the countryside for sparsely populated rural settlements that hold cultural power or larger settlements that have achieved ambiguously defined cultural "strength."³³ In the past, there has been little more to these awards than a community advertisement acknowledging their accomplishment at village entrances, but the NRD program signaled a new direction from the party to enhance rural spaces and people using large-scale financial and educational investment. Noted by Minh T.N. Nguyen as a means for the state to "modernize the countryside while educating rural people to become certain kinds of citizens,"³⁴ the NRD program represents one more in a long line of policy efforts to "develop" peasant communities under the logics of the state.³⁵ Overt support for off-farm employment and training opportunities; investment in improving roadways, waterways, and electrical grids; and the distribution of agricultural technologies all illustrate the degree to which the state envisions a post-agricultural rural world in Vietnam, and many of these have been successful outcomes of the NRD program.

Research Setting

The primary data gathered for this article comes from fieldwork in three communes in northern Vietnam: Đại Bái Commune in Bắc Ninh Province's Gia Bình District and Hát Môn and Lam Điền Communes, in Phúc Thọ and Chương Mỹ Districts, respectively. The latter two communes are now part of Hà Nội's recently expanded administrative area.³⁶ Fieldwork was conducted between 2015 and 2018 by the authors along with the support of Vietnamese research assistants who undertook commune-wide surveys on the project's behalf.

Đại Bái Commune consists of four hamlets and is located in the western part of Gia Bình District, covering an area of just under 620 hectares. Of this, 385 hectares are classified as agricultural land. In 2016, the total population of 10,516 in 2,715 households was primarily engaged in agriculture and craft work. The number of poor households numbered 121, giving the commune a poverty rate of just under 5 percent. Along with a mixed farm economy, Đại Bái is known for its bronze casting, which is reputed to have been undertaken in the area since the beginning of the eleventh century. This industry continues to be an important source of employment, helping to explain the commune's comparatively low poverty rate by national standards. As an example of the NRD program funding allocated by the government to individual communes, the commune received 65,215,400,000 đồng for rural development between 2010 and 2016 (USD 2.8 million).³⁷ The funding was used to develop five areas: rural planning; socioeconomic infrastructure; business and production methods; culture, society, and environment; and the commune political system. By 2016, Đại Bái documents indicated that the commune officially achieved all nineteen of the new rural area criteria.³⁸

Hát Môn Commune is a ward of Phúc Thọ District and is around thirty kilometers from Hà Nội's city center. The commune consists of ten clusters of houses and covers 434 hectares, of which 254 hectares are agricultural land. At the time of our research, the population consisted of around 8,000 inhabitants in 1,843 households. Some 42 percent of adults worked in agriculture and the remainder in various nonfarm pursuits, including craft work, cottage industries, construction, and commerce. Poverty rates were similar to those in Đại Bái, with 89 households categorized as "poor" in 2016 or a little more than 4 percent of the total population. Another 103 households, or 4.8 percent of the total, however, were classified as "near poor." The agriculture sector in the commune was mixed, including crops and livestock. Hát Môn received far less support than Đại Bái: 21,781,250,000 đồng (approximately USD 950,000) from the state's budget.³⁹ The funds were used to support the same areas targeted for improvement as Đại Bái. Hát Môn also officially achieved all nineteen of the new rural area criteria.

Finally, Lam Điền Commune is around twenty-five kilometers from the Hà Nội city center and covers 811 hectares, of which 524 hectares are

classified as agricultural land. The commune consists of five hamlets, with 2,820 households and 12,013 inhabitants. Like the other communes, the farm economy was mixed with crops and livestock, including some seventy poultry farms and twenty pig farms. Around 40 percent of working-age villagers made a living in farming and the remainder participated in various nonfarm activities, many of the latter outside the commune. There were also approximately one hundred people from the village working overseas (mostly as domestic helpers or in construction). Like many communes throughout Vietnam, Lam Điền suffered from a labor squeeze as younger residents found work further away. This has driven the mechanization of farmwork (although transplanting continued to be done by hand), with younger generations absent and laborers from less prosperous communes visiting the village on a short-term, casual contract basis to work.⁴⁰ Out of the national budget, the commune received 97,921,000,000 đồng (approximately USD 4.2 million) to develop according to the NRD program's principles. Like Đại Bái and Hát Môn, Lam Điền targeted the same areas in their commune and attained all nineteen new rural area criteria.⁴¹

Methodology

These three communes were selected after pilot visits by the authors to six locations in northern Vietnam. The final choices of Đại Bái, Lam Điền, and Hát Môn were guided by a combination of factors including their proximity to Hà Nội, the continued importance of farming at these sites, the presence of alternative income-earning opportunities, and the welcoming attitude of the commune authorities. Our initial visits revealed that the three communes were subtly if importantly distinct in terms of the role that farming played.

Along with observing the everyday lives of local people, we were also able to carry out in-depth interviews with sixty local people and commune leaders. To maintain consistency, twenty local people were interviewed in each of the three communes. Among the sixty local participants there were thirty-one men and twenty-nine women; forty-five respondents were under sixty years of age and fifteen over sixty years. A range of residents from the comparatively wealthy and middle-income to the underprivileged were interviewed, along with residents with a variety of educational backgrounds

(e.g., most of those under fifty years old had graduated from [at least] high school). We did not inquire about respondents' Communist Party membership status because we did not feel it was critical for the research.

With respect to our respondent questions, we collected data in two general forms. The first part of our interviews and questionnaires asked questions related to general respondent backgrounds, including name, age, hometown, marital status, occupation, number of family members, number of family members living at home, and level of educational attainment. Due to our interest in landholdings and cognate livelihood strategies, the second part of our interviews and questionnaires asked respondents to share how much land they owned, how much land they cultivated, what they grew or raised (and how much and for whom they produced these goods), relative cost of inputs, whether or not their children cultivated farmland (and for what purposes), what occupations their children undertook, whether their children knew how to farm or enjoyed farming as an occupation, whether they hired contract labor, and their household remittance patterns. Taken together these interviews and surveys represent a relatively comprehensive portrait of smallholder land use patterns in the three study sites.

Respondents were identified through introductions by local officials or other research participants and established relationships between villagers and the lead investigator or research assistants.⁴² Interviews were carried out in the homes of respondents and in the commune headquarters when interviewing local officials. Each informant was given a small honorarium of 50,000 đồng (around USD 2.50) for their time. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Additional data were also collected by the first author and local Vietnamese research assistants.⁴³ In addition to these interviews, documents from the three communes were collected and analyzed, in particular those produced by the communes' People's Committees, such as "Report on the Results of the Implementation of Criteria for New Rural Development Communes" and "Report on the Implementation of Socioeconomic, Security, and Defense Affairs." These documents provided further information concerning the field sites' environmental and socioeconomic contexts and their conditions and histories.

Retaining the Old Countryside

The question that lies at the heart of this research is, Do we see the government's vision of a "new countryside"—pursued through its NRD program and supported through considerable, but varying, investment—reflected in the practices of villagers? The answer, as we will show, is a rather unsatisfactory—but perhaps inevitable—yes and no. Yes, because peasants have pursued post-agrarian activities; and no, because they have continued to rely on subsistence agriculture that is considered unproductive and inefficient according to the NRD program. Additionally, the off-farm activities developed by peasants are not necessarily outcomes of the NRD program but arise out of villagers' own entrepreneurial interests. Much of the rest of this article, then, tries to unpack why it is that rural households have chosen to enthusiastically embrace some aspects of the NRD program while ignoring other components, and more broadly, why the NRD program seems to have little bearing on their livelihood decision-making strategies.

Villagers have taken on nonfarm work, leading to a further diversification of the local rural economy, with consequent increases in income and improvements in material well-being. There are, however, trade-offs with this strategy, with smallholder households spending less time cultivating their land as they allocate time and effort to other activities. This process involves a careful choreographing of work across the generations and also between households as wage labor has become increasingly important as a means of sustaining farm production. The application of technology, the introduction of new cash crops like decorative flowers, and small, high-profit business operations such as ornamental fish (koi) are all central to the NRD program. These elements have appeared in farmer strategies but, as we will argue, they have been used for reasons—and with outcomes—other than those envisaged by the government. For the government, these are innovations designed to raise farm production (output) and thus increase rural incomes while meeting the country's food and non-food farm needs. For many of the farmers in our field sites, however, they have been used as a means to sustain (rather than increase) output in the context of labor shortages and have been directed at meeting home consumption needs rather than generating a surplus for sale. The state views the NRD program through a productivist lens; farmers, however, have embraced

elements of the NRD program with a mindset of security and sustainability. This is one of the reasons farmers were somewhat surprised when we asked about the NRD program: most said they were aware of the program but did not benefit or have any experience of it. And yet when viewed from the productivist standpoint of the state, the policies have been “successful” in driving change in the countryside.

The first significant point to note is that the state’s NRD program targets aim to improve the economy and living standards of Vietnam’s rural areas to meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization.⁴⁴ To this end, the dominant goals are to restructure the rural economy and agricultural production through enhanced agricultural extension; apply scientific and technical advances to agriculture, forestry, and fisheries; mechanize agriculture and reduce post-harvest losses; and promote the introduction of industries in rural areas to create jobs for a growing rural labor force. Yet agricultural land holdings are small, which is a major impediment to achieving these aims. This can be seen in the case of Kim Thị Tam in Hát Môn.⁴⁵

At the time of our research, Kim Thị Tam’s household had two *sào* of paddy land (720 square meters; one *sào* equals 360 square meters) and ten *thước* (240 square meters) of riverbank land.⁴⁶ This land was scattered across five plots, consisting of one plot of river bank land (ten *thước*) and four plots of paddy field (fifteen *thước*, eight *thước*, five *thước*, and 3.8 *thước*). When this land was allocated to the household in 1993 there were four adults eligible to receive land; Kim Thị Tam, her husband, and their eldest daughter and eldest son. Their youngest son was born after 1993 and was therefore not eligible to receive agricultural land. In total this household received 960 square meters of land, or 240 square meters each.

The amount of agricultural land received per person, and also the calculation of who in a household was eligible to receive land (adults only, or children as well as adults, for example), varied from commune to commune and locality to locality, reflecting local conditions. Across the villages, however, the areas of land allocated to households were small. In both Lam Điền and Đại Bái Communes, interviewees told us that each household member received only one *sào*, slightly more than the 240 square meters allocated per person in Hát Môn. But from the point of view of

modernizing and commoditizing the countryside in line with the NRD program, the allocation of only small areas of land is a major obstacle. To achieve the commodity production, modernization, and economic efficiency objectives of the NRD program, it is necessary to consolidate land into larger units of production. It is therefore critical to understand the importance of these (small) farms for household livelihoods and livelihood strategies on their own terms and not in relation to the NRD program.

Perhaps the most important point is that for many households, rice is grown mainly for household consumption and not sold on the market (Figure 2). Tam's household has been able to produce around eight hundred kilos of paddy (unmilled rice) from two *sào* of paddy field. This has been sufficient only to meet the consumption needs of the household. A second theme from our interviews, along with growing rice to meet the subsistence needs of the household, was a desire to grow rice for consumption that farmers know is safe; in other words, people were interested in traceability as well as subsistence security. A 59-year-old male informant in Lam Điền Commune explained, "Actually we don't make any profit from growing rice; yet [at least] we have clean [safe] rice to eat."⁴⁷

If anything, and taking a farming-centric viewpoint of rural livelihoods, farmers were relying *further* on subsistence, own-account farming, rather than engaging with the productivist logics of the NRD program. Importantly, however, they could afford to do this because nonfarm work was, in effect, cross-subsidizing rice production and farmwork. Among young people, nonfarm work primarily included service-related jobs in Hà Nội and its peri-urban areas. For middle-aged and elderly laborers, nonfarm work often meant small household business activities ranging from light industrial production and repair to food preparation. This "paradoxical co-presence of subsistence and commercial activities and logics, or 'deagrarianisation without depeasantisation', raises the possibility that the 'peasantry' continue to persist, both as social groups and as a peasant style of living and identification" even in the context of thorough-going market integration.⁴⁸ Land was not permitted by the commune authorities to lie fallow or idle, but at the same time it was not intensively farmed, as the NRD program envisaged, according to respondents:



FIGURE 2: Rice bin for storing rice for home consumption in Đại Bái Commune, 2018. Photo by Jonathan Rigg.

Although we still keep growing rice, we do not spend much time and concern in rice growing. . . we use machines and services . . . so we do not have to spend as much time on the rice fields as we used to.⁴⁹

Actually, there is hardly any profit from growing rice. The main reason we keep growing rice is to keep our land allocation. . . [Due to costs] we have to

spend nearly half of the income from rice growing to meet production expenses.⁵⁰

The “solution” would be to encourage households that have income from sources and activities outside of farming to waive their rights to their land. Yet across all three communes, the common refrain was that even when they do not use their land or do not cultivate it intensively, they would not think of relinquishing their small plots of paddy. As one informant in Đại Bái Commune explained:

Researcher: Why do you and other households continue to keep your agricultural land?

Informant: We must keep the land. If this generation sells the land, the next generation will not have land to cultivate.

Researcher: But if the next generation goes out to work, isn't it the case that they will not live here [to cultivate the land]?

Informant: When I pass away, I do not know. However, before passing away, I will advise my children to keep the land.⁵¹

For many rural households, agricultural land represents security. Although nonfarm jobs may yield higher incomes and cultivating agricultural land has not brought great economic benefits, many rural people continued to keep their land as a security blanket and a safety valve, thinking that if they face difficulties, there is always their land and farming to fall back on. Thus, households were neither willing to intensify production and modernize agriculture nor wanting to allow others to farm their land and therefore permit economies of scale to take hold. Both approaches to modernization—intensification through the application of modern inputs and extensification through land amalgamation—were being stymied not by “backward” or “traditional” agrarian practices but by the pragmatic demands of household food and land security seen against the interplay of farm and nonfarm activities and opportunities. From a policy perspective this is where the NRD program may seem unsuccessful because it has not been able to completely incentivize farmers to move away from subsistence agriculture. Looking more closely at the situation on the ground, however, the NRD program represents a set of policies that many villagers may agree with but

which are laid out along a linear path to modernization that they have refused to conform to.

One means to achieve the economies of scale and processes of modernization that come from land consolidation is through leasing land to commercial companies.⁵² Most households, however, did not want to lease their land to companies even if it meant augmenting their earnings. In Hát Môn Commune, for example, a commercial firm wished to lease riverbank land to grow vegetables. Yet the company was unable to get a single household to agree to lease their land. An informant in the commune explained:

Researcher: People from a company came to lease agricultural land here, didn't they?

Informant: Yes, but the local people did not agree [to do so].

Researcher: Do they [the company] intend to grow vegetables?

Informant: Yes, they intend to grow vegetables.

Researcher: Why did you not let them lease your land?

Informant: In general, each person has their own opinion. But if we let them lease our land for fifty years, we will lose our land, and they were not interested in leases of one or two years.⁵³

In summary, according to our research, there were three rather different security concerns preventing farmers from engaging in land consolidation practices that have been encouraged by the authorities through the NRD program. First, there was a basic, risk-minimizing “peasant” desire to maintain access to, and use of, rice land to meet subsistence needs. If all else failed, at least that would be assured. Given Vietnam’s famine conditions of the late 1970s and early 1980s and the meager living conditions that characterized most of the rural north until the turn of the millennium, this is understandable.⁵⁴ It is easy for observers (and perhaps policy makers too) to forget that at the time (the late 1970s and early 1980s), the incidence of rural poverty in Vietnam was around 50 percent. Second, farmers had concerns about food safety, a worry fanned by health scares emanating from China.⁵⁵ These anxieties may be groundless, but they were mentioned by many of our respondents. And third, there was a fear that if land were leased to a commercial firm, or even to other villagers, especially if it was for more than one year, households might lose access to their land. Possession—or occupation—as the saying goes, is nine-tenths of the law. These

three concerns combined to impede land consolidation and the production efficiencies that come from such consolidation.

All of this only becomes fully understandable, however, when it is viewed against what is happening to livelihoods from a nonfarm perspective. Along with maintaining agricultural land to cultivate at a small scale, smallholders have diversified their livelihoods. As illustrated through the case of Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh in Đại Bái Commune,⁵⁶ who besides growing rice, vegetables, and corn on the household's agricultural land was also a small-scale handicrafts trader. At sixty-two years old, Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh convinced her husband to retire early from the commune police force to assist her in her business, arguing that when he was a public servant, he "only made [a small amount per month], which was [only] enough money to buy gasoline to go to work." Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh explained, "honestly, if I do agriculture, I do not have money," so she consolidated her household labor around making bronze pots and trays like other villagers in Đại Bái. Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh classified her household as "having just enough to eat" but her household belies the poor conditions she described. The family hired contract labor to help with harvesting and transplanting the four *sào* of rice land they own; any leftover rice not consumed by her and her husband was given to her daughter for her daughter's family's consumption. Like many others in the village, Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh's family raised chickens for the household but did not raise any other livestock because they did not have the space to do so. In addition, her eldest daughter operated a small business with ten employees nearby. Although Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh self-identified as a "peasant" or "smallholder" household—using the term *hộ gia đình nông dân* [farming family]—only she cultivated the land (with the support of contract labor), and their income from nonfarm work far exceeded the value of agricultural production. Across Hát Môn, Lam Điền, and Đại Bái Communes, smallholders work their plots of just a few *sào* more in accordance with the past than with the future set out by the NRD program.

This, however, is not the only agrarian change narrative evident in the three communes. In contradistinction to the case of Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh and others like her, there were also households seemingly embracing the NRD program, modernizing their production methods and engaging fully

with commodity production. However, they largely ignored the operations of the NRD program reforms and instead couched their activities in terms of livelihood diversification.

Building the New Countryside

In Lam Điền Commune, a group of farmers were becoming thoroughly commercial in their agricultural methods and outlook, borrowing money and taking considerable commercial risks in transforming their production methods. Their approach is broadly in line with the logics of the NRD program and the prime minister's vision of building a "new" Vietnamese countryside, with its emphasis on creating "modern socioeconomic infrastructure [and] rational economic structure and forms of production organization."⁵⁷ Yet informants claimed no overt recognition of the NRD program nor did they acknowledge if their profit motivations were shaped by it. This lack of connection between state reform policies and household activities lends itself to the belief that, in line with classic studies on state reform policies in Vietnam,⁵⁸ it is the state that formulates policies based on people's actions rather than the government creating economic opportunities for its citizens to implement in their everyday lives.

The aspect of the rural economy in our study communes that accords most closely with the NRD program vision is the development of the livestock sector. A group of households in Lam Điền converted their households' paddy land into livestock breeding farms. Bùi Văn Đức's household is one such case.⁵⁹

Bùi Văn Đức's household was allocated five *sào* (1,800 square meters) of paddy land in 1993, calculated on the basis of five family members receiving one *sào* each—Bùi Văn Đức, his wife, and each of their three children. In February 2016, Bùi Văn Đức converted this land into fishponds, fruit gardens, and a pig breeding facility, while retaining a small area as rice land to meet the family's subsistence needs. It cost 300 million đồng (USD 13,000) to build the infrastructure necessary to set up the pig breeding facility (Figure 3), including a bank loan of 100 million đồng. At the time of our interview in August 2017, Bùi Văn Đức remained in debt but hoped that with a good price for pork he would be able to pay off the loan in the



FIGURE 3: A pig breeding facility in Lam Điền Commune, 2017. Photo by Jonathan Rigg.

next year or two. If the price of pork remained weak, however, it would take a few years longer.

We are raising about forty pigs, three of them are old sows, which bear two litters each year. . . . We always simultaneously have hogs and piglets so that there is no waste . . . It [the income from breeding pigs] depends on the market price and our breeding situation each year. Last year the price was around 47/48/50 thousand đồng per kilo so we earned 200–300 million đồng [USD 8,500–13,000]. This year the price has gone down, [and] we don't know how much we will earn.⁶⁰

Bùi Văn Đức's household strategy closely resembles the stated aims of the NRD program and the commune's rural development vision. More specifically, the commune party leadership shared with us four objectives that align with the NRD program's broader initiatives: to support animal and plant seed breeding; to encourage growing high-yield rice varieties; to promote cultivating a wider range of crops for the market; and to advance mechanized agricultural production. Moreover, Bùi Văn Đức is far from being a unique case in this commune. By 2015, Lam Điền Commune had nineteen intensive pig farms and forty-three poultry farms. The commune

also had 286 households that had transformed their paddy land into mixed farms encompassing livestock, fruit orchards, and fishponds.⁶¹

A second way in which we can see the aims of the NRD program being realized is through the leasing of land to other households, thus consolidating an amalgamation of holdings into larger units of production. While the state could conceivably point to this change as an indication of NRD program implementation, respondents made no mention of any official incentivization policy that pushed them toward expanding the profit potential of property through leasing additional agricultural land. Bù Văn Đức's household is, again, a good example. This household leased an additional five *sào* of paddy land to grow rice, compensating the household holding the land use rights with a payment of thirty kilos per crop of paddy per *sào* of land (two crops are produced annually):

We have been leasing this [new] land for two years. They [the household with the land use rights] had rice paddies but they left them uncultivated, so they let us grow rice on their land. We pay them a rate . . . [of] 300 kilos each year. . . . Last year we grew rice on 1,800 square meters, which produced forty-two rice sacks. Each rice sack weighs forty kilos. The last crop [in May] was good, while this crop is not because of mice [infestation].⁶²

An exchange with another farmer in Lam Điền Commune traces a similar story of land lease and exchange:

Researcher: You have rights to 2,160 square meters of land, while last year your family cultivated 3,600 square meters of land. Whose land is the remaining area?

Nguyễn Văn Nhung: I leased an area of more than 1,800 square meters from Mr. Sung and from Mr. Khóa to cultivate it.

Researcher: When did you lease the land?

Nguyễn Văn Nhung: We've leased Mr. Sung's land for four years. We pay him fifty kilos of rice for each *sào* of land we lease. That price is rather high, but the land is good and we have good cucumber crops [as well as rice], which bring us an income of over 20 million đồng [USD 860] annually.

Researcher: What about the land leased from Mr. Khóa?

Nguyễn Văn Nhung: That land is 540 square meters. He charges us twenty kilos of glutinous rice each year.

Researcher: How long have you leased his land parcel?

Nguyễn Văn Nhung: It's for four to five years.

Researcher: Why don't they cultivate their land?

Nguyễn Văn Nhung: Because they have income from other sources. Mr.

Sung's son is a bricklayer; he goes to work and earns income for his family.

Mr. Khóa's family owns a private computer shop [where young villagers play games] and a karaoke service as well. Those private businesses bring his family lots of profit. Moreover, the young [our children] don't want to work in agriculture like us.⁶³

Note here the ways in which profits from the land are drawn from its exchange and use values. In other words, middle-class farmers who work in off-farm activities outsource their agricultural work to neighbors through land leases (thereby drawing financial profit as landlords), while also ensuring that they redeem some of the rice yield that leaseholders extract from it. This mixture of land use arrangements and profit opportunities is not captured in policies like the NRD program, yet they formed a critical component of agrarian practice in the three communes at the time of our study.

A third way we can identify a new countryside being built in line with the NRD program is through the mechanization of agricultural production. Most farmwork was mechanized, with the exception of transplanting, which was done by hand in the three communes in our study.⁶⁴ Plowing, harrowing, and harvesting were all mechanized, however. In Hát Môn, this dates from around 2007. Before then, farmers used buffaloes and cows to till their land. By the time we started our field research in 2015, privately owned hand tractors, costing around 30 million đồng each (USD 13,000), were used to till the land. Harvesting machines were introduced slightly later, each one costing between 600 and 700 million đồng (USD 26,000–30,000). At planting or harvesting time, the head of a cluster of households would contact the owners of tractors or harvesting machines to arrange a mutually convenient time to till the land or harvest the crop. The price for harvesting one *sào* of paddy land was 160,000 đồng (USD 7), and for tilling one *sào* of land, the cost was 130,000 đồng (USD 6).⁶⁵

Now cultivating is much less labor-consuming thanks to [it] being mechanized. It takes us only a few days to transplant rice seed by hand.⁶⁶

Yes, I rent [a machine] to plough. For harvesting, we also use a machine. Harvesting machines belong to private people [and they] are used to harvest for the whole commune. You pay according to how much land you have.⁶⁷

The spread of mechanization closely follows the logics of the NRD program, raising labor productivity and applying new technology. It has not, however, emerged because of the NRD program; mechanization pre-dates the program and came about because of wider developments, discussed above, separate from the program. That said, it did create a wider policy context conducive to the (further) mechanization of agricultural production.

Reconciling the Old and the New Countrysides

The exchange with Nguyễn Văn Nhung, Bùi Văn Đức's story, and the progressive mechanization of production reveal the ways in which the two narratives—one of retaining the old and the other of building the new countryside, reflected in the phrase “deagarianization without depeasanti-zation”—are not in tension and contradiction, but are in fact closely connected. In practice, many plots of paddy land were left uncultivated because the land holders went to work in factories or did other jobs, leaving households with a labor deficit. The plots that were worked, moreover, were cultivated foremost with subsistence sensibilities, not market logics. This sensibility is in direct contradiction to the land-for-profit model built out of the NRD program. The leader of Lam Điền Commune told us that around 40 percent of villagers worked in farming and 60 percent in an assortment of nonfarm work within and outside the commune.⁶⁸ Those who worked away from the commune returned home to work on the land when they were needed (primarily at harvest). One of the attractions of mechanization has been to address emerging labor shortages arising from the diversification and delocalization of work. But even with these adjustments, it often made sense for those households with a labor deficit to lend or lease their land to other villagers.

Why was there a consistent desire to hold on to land even when it was a chore or an outsourced labor burden, especially when the NRD program encourages farmers to either sell their land or have it appropriated for monetary gain? Though the answer is multifaceted and is the subject of

a separate article,⁶⁹ there are indications in the empirical material recounted above that reinforce the arguments in that paper. We did not see the NRD program driving agrarian change in the research sites. Rather, the NRD program operated as a background factor in a context where other concerns and pressures were far more influential, including labor shortages that encouraged mechanization, the avoidance of agricultural work by the young, and a desire to maintain access to land “just in case.”

An entrepreneurial streak that encouraged agriculturalists to pursue off-farm employment opportunities was generally met with open arms in all the communes we studied. Once again, whether this was a result of the NRD program or one of its drivers is an open question. Certainly, there are particular areas where the NRD program’s goals overlapped with smallholder interests, especially in the spheres of multi-occupational, off-farm strategies. This is the primary link between the NRD program and households and it is one that shows no signs of abating. Our respondents did not necessarily comment explicitly about how government incentives encouraged them to pursue other jobs, but that does not mean that policy and practice do not intersect. The NRD program sets out a path of deagrarianization, and rural communities appeared to be following that path in their pursuit of other jobs away from the family farm. As we have argued, this makes sense because it interlocks with subsistence or semi-subsistence farming. Even while material wealth has accumulated, job and training opportunities have proliferated, farming technologies have multiplied, and more and more children have left the family farm for other work, the countryside continues to be new and old in equal measure.

A broader issue raised in our analysis is that of the implementation of national policies in a post-socialist context. For some, Vietnam is rife with rampant state-led corruption, land-grabbing, dispossession, and a generally bullying and disconnected approach toward rural livelihoods. What we found is that, in keeping with research on previous eras of state land management schemes,⁷⁰ the truth is more complicated. It cannot be said that the NRD program policies were followed in lockstep by communes in northern Vietnam, but neither can it be said that state and society interests were out of step with one another. At the very least our work is representative of the tentative ways in which smallholders and state policies have

engaged in an ongoing conversation about how to move local socioeconomic interests forward in a period of enhanced market opportunities. John F. McCarthy, in his work in Indonesia's Aceh Province in Sumatra, notes how the teleology of modernization is being thwarted, even while local people embrace the essence of modernization.⁷¹ He refers to this as "progressing sideways," writing that farming is "linked both to stagnation and indebtedness but also survival and capital accumulation," with farmers being at once market aware and subsistence inclined. This paper offers similar findings of "sideways progression" in northern Vietnamese rural households.

At the start of this paper, we made the observation that while it is easy enough to mark out what the NRD program *is*, what it *becomes* and what it *does* do not smoothly follow. This is because policies must engage with the messiness of conditions in communes like these three in northern Vietnam, and the social desires, economic trade-offs, cultural memories, and political interests that constitute such settlements and the households that comprise them. If policies find traction, and if the rhetoric of the New Countryside finds parallels in the decisions of rural households, then this is more by coincidence than by design.

Finally, and more generally, the binaries that often inform debates over agrarian change—farm/nonfarm, intensification/disintensification, household labor / wage labor, and subsistence production / commodity production—are shown in the cases we describe here to be in play simultaneously, with households sometimes embracing all of these positions at the same time. This raises a wider question, also considered in McCarthy's paper,⁷² about the "direction" or teleology of agrarian change. Where are these three communes headed if households, collectively and sometimes even individually, are, at one and the same time, both backward-looking and "new" in the actions they take, the livelihoods they cultivate, and the views they hold? These binaries may inform theory and structure policy, but they are not distinctions that hold much meaning for rural people.

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam's New Rural Development program envisages the creation of a newly modern rural Vietnam. Drawing on fieldwork, this paper argues that the program has had little bearing on peasant livelihood strategies. The

emergence of deagrarianization has not arisen as a result of the program but because of household interest in maintaining a diverse set of income activities. These two contrasting rural realities—the advance of deagrarianization against a backdrop of continued subsistence farming—coexist and are mutually supportive. Peasant livelihood diversification strategies have been perpetuated without much attention to broader state-led initiatives aimed at “reforming” the countryside.

KEY WORDS: *Agrarian change, national development programs, state-society relations, Vietnam*

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28. Danielle Labbé and Clement Musil, “Periurban Land Redevelopment in Vietnam under Market Socialism,” *Urban Studies* 51, no. 6 (2014): 1146–1161.
29. Labbé, “Critical Reflections on Land Appropriation,” 150–155.
30. Erik Harms, *Saigon’s Edge: Space, Time, and Power on Ho Chi Minh City’s Rural-Urban Margin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
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32. Ibid., 151.
33. The element “All people unite to build a cultural life” [Toàn dân đoàn kết xây dựng đời sống văn hóa] started in 2000 in relation to the NRD program. The contents of the element are to develop the economy; support people to build wealth legitimately, thereby reducing poverty; build a “healthy” political ideology; build a “civilized” lifestyle, socially disciplined, while living and working under the law; build a clean, beautiful, and safe cultural environment; build solid cultural and sports institutions; and improve the quality of grassroots culture and sports activities. The NRD program’s cultural dimensions are partially developed from the policy of “all people unite to build a cultural life.”
34. Minh T.N. Nguyen, “The New Countryside and the Pocket of the People,” 1–18.

35. David Hunt, “‘Modern and Strange Things’: Peasants and Mass Consumer Goods in the Mekong Delta,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 9, no. 1 (2014): 36–61.
36. The information that follows is mainly drawn from documents of each commune’s People’s Committee, Communist Party Committee, and Commune People’s Council.
37. Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Đại Bái [Đại Bái Commune People’s Committee], “Báo cáo kết quả thực hiện các tiêu chí nông thôn mới đến năm 2016 của xã Đại Bái, huyện Gia Bình, tỉnh Bắc Ninh” [Report on the Results of Implimentation of Criteria for New Rural Development Commune until 2016 of Đại Bái Commune, Gia Bình District, Hà Nội], 2016, 3.
38. Ibid., 23.
39. Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Hát Môn [People’s Committee of Hát Môn Commune], “Báo cáo kết quả thực hiện Chương trình 02-Ctr-TU của Thành ủy Hà Nội về Phát triển nông nghiệp, xây dựng nông thôn mới, nâng cao đời sống nông dân giai đoạn 2016–2020,” Chương trình 03-Ctr/HU của Huyện ủy về chuyển dịch nhanh cơ cấu, ứng dụng mạnh mẽ tiến bộ khoa học – Công nghệ vào sản xuất trên địa bàn xã Hát Môn” [Report on Results of Implementing Program 02 - Ctr-TU of Communist Party Committee of Hà Nội and Program 03 of Communist Party Committee of Phúc Thọ District], 11.
40. Interview with Chairman and Vice Chairman of Lam Điền People’s Committee (December 7, 2016).
41. Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Lam Điền [Lam Điền Commune People’s Committee], “Báo cáo kết quả thực hiện các tiêu chí nông thôn mới năm 2015 xã Lam Điền, huyện Chương Mỹ, thành phố Hà Nội” [Report on the Results of Implimentation of Criteria for New Rural Development Commune in 2015, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District, Hà Nội], 2015. One notices that all three communes addressed the same parts of their respective societies and were equally awarded for attaining all of the requisite criteria laid out under the NRD program plan. We believe the paper is even more critical in studying the NRD program given the uniformity—and therefore continued opacity—of the actual outcomes of the policy on the ground.
42. All of the respondent’s names have been anonymized.
43. The three authors of this article conducted one-third of the total interviews across all three communes. In addition, the research assistants Nghiêm Thị Thủy from the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences; Võ Thị Cẩm Ly from Vinh University; and Vũ Yến Hà from Vietnam Trade Union University assisted the first author in the remaining field interviews. Though they are not coauthors on this paper, the research assistants were hired and compensated for their time and efforts.

44. See, for example, Andres Wells-Dang, "Political Space in Vietnam: A View from the 'Rice-roots,'" *Pacific Review* 23, no. 1 (2010): 93–112; Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014).
45. Interview with Kim Thị Tam, female, 49 years old, March 3, 2018, Hát Môn Commune, Phúc Thọ District.
46. *Thuộc* literally means "ruler" in Vietnamese and is used in the northern part of Vietnam to designate a small rural land unit of measurement.
47. Interview with Bùi Văn Đức, male, 59 years old, August 12, 2017, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
48. Jonathan Rigg, *Rural Development in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
49. Interview with Nguyễn Thị Dinh, female, 34 years old, April 25, 2018, Đại Bái Commune, Gia Bình District.
50. Interview with Phạm Đình Anh, male, 60 years old, August 12, 2017, Hát Môn Commune, Phúc Thọ District.
51. Interview with Nguyễn Thị Mạo, female, 49 years old, December 14, 2017, Đại Bái Commune, Gia Bình District.
52. "Phó thủ tướng trả lời về tích tụ đất đai" [Deputy Prime Minister's Answer to Land Consolidation], *VnEconomy*, August 16, 2018, <http://vneconomy.vn/pho-thu-tuong-tra-loi-ve-tich-tu-dat-dai-20180816094219998.htm>.
53. Interview with Kim Thị Tam, female, 49 years old, March 3, 2018, Hát Môn Commune, Phúc Thọ District.
54. Ken MacLean, "The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Vietnam during the Subsidy Period (1975–1986)," *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (2008): 281–303.
55. Judith Ehlert and Nora Katharina Faltmann, eds., *Food Anxiety in Globalising Vietnam* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
56. Interview with Nguyễn Thanh Mạnh, female, 62 years old, December 4, 2017, Đại Bái Commune, Gia Bình District.
57. Thủ tướng Chính phủ, "Quyết định phê duyệt Chương trình mục tiêu Quốc gia."
58. Kerkvliet, *Power of Everyday Politics*.
59. Interview with Bùi Văn Đức, male, 69 years old, August 12, 2017, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
60. Interview with Bùi Văn Đức, male, 69 years old, August 12, 2017, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
61. Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Lam Điền [Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, "Báo cáo kết quả thực hiện các tiêu chí nông thôn mới năm 2015 xã Lam Điền, huyện Chương Mỹ, thành phố Hà Nội" [Report on the Results of

- Implimentation of Criteria for New Rural Development Commune in 2015: Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District, Hà Nội], 2015, 17.
62. Interview with Bùi Văn Đức, male, 69 years old, August 12, 2017, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
 63. Interview with Nguyễn Văn Nhung, male, 58 years old, August 12, 2017, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
 64. There is no broadcasting of rice in any of the communes.
 65. Interview with Kim Văn Vinh, 51 years old, March 3, 2018, Hát Môn Commune, Phúc Thọ District.
 66. Interview with Bùi Văn Đức, male, 69 years old, August 12, 2017, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
 67. Interview with Nguyễn Thị Mạo, female, 49 years old, December 14, 2017, Đại Bái Commune, Gia Bình District.
 68. Interview with the chairman of the People's Council of Lam Điền Commune, December 7, 2016, Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District.
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