THE DEVELOPMENT CRISIS IN VIETNAM’S MOUNTAINS

NEIL L. JAMIESON
LE TRONG CUC
A. TERRY RAMBO

The mountain areas of Vietnam, which are home to one-third of the nation’s people, are in a state of deepening environmental and social crisis. Future decades may well see the uplands suffer widespread environmental disaster and massive human tragedy. Only by recognizing the complex dynamics that drive development, and by fundamentally rethinking development strategy, can the risk of calamity be minimized.
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SUMMARY

The popular image of a Vietnamese landscape is that of a verdant plain checkered by rice paddies. But most of the country is actually hilly and mountainous, and a third of Vietnamese people live in upland areas. Fifty years ago, the lowlands were teeming and the mountains sparsely inhabited. Since then, rapid population growth, driven by both natural increases and national resettlement programs, has brought about drastic changes in the uplands. Poverty, population growth, environmental degradation, social marginalization, and economic dependency are now interacting to create a downward spiral that is currently reaching crisis proportions, both socially and environmentally.

The significance of this crisis is overlooked because current thinking about the uplands is based on a number of popular misconceptions. Among these is the belief that the uplands are remote, empty, and exotic—certainly not central to national development. What happens there, however, has serious ramifications extending to the whole nation, and beyond it to other mountainous regions in Southeast Asia and Southwest China. Environmental degradation, the loss of biological diversity, the deterioration of watersheds, and the marginalization of ethnic minorities are just some of the problems occurring in Vietnam’s uplands and throughout this vast mountain region.

Well-intentioned national and international efforts to ameliorate the problems have produced only very modest results. In some cases they have worsened the situation. For despite the enormous changes in the size and nature of Vietnam’s upland population, a “lowland” perspective continues to dominate national life. Indeed, the imposition of lowland models upon upland realities is a major determinant of the crisis.

When these simplistic and distorted views of mountain life shape development planning, they contribute to the downward spiral in which so many upland people are now caught.

Thus, the spiral cannot be reversed without reform of the underlying structures of knowledge, power, social organization, and economy that control the direction of development. A crucial step is to challenge the conventional wisdom that shapes development models and replace it with new approaches based on observation and analysis. The success or failure of efforts to develop the uplands are critical to the achievement of national development goals. Unless the current downward spiral can be reversed, the future well-being of the whole country is at serious risk.
THE DEEPENING CRISIS IN UPLAND DEVELOPMENT

The mountainous areas of Vietnam are in a state of deepening environmental and social crisis. Unless current trends are reversed, there is a real danger of widespread environmental disaster and massive human tragedy. To minimize the risk of calamity, a more realistic and sophisticated understanding of the nature of development problems in the uplands is required. The problems are most acute and understanding of the crisis is least clear in the Northern Mountain Region, a vast area extending several hundred kilometers from Quang Ninh, Lang Son, and Cao Bang provinces on the northern border with China down to Nghe An Province in the central region. Although this paper focuses primarily on the situation in the northern uplands, most of the analysis is relevant to Vietnam’s uplands as a whole. (See maps, pp. 8, 11, and 18.)

The signs of crisis are numerous and readily visible. Very rapid population growth, the consequence of both the high birth rates and declining death rates of many minority groups, and the massive in-migration of people from the already overpopulated lowland areas of Vietnam (the “lowlanders”), has placed excessive pressure on an already degraded environment. Over the past 40 years, extensive deforestation has seriously depleted the natural resource base. Biodiversity has plummeted. Rapid population growth is undermining the sustainability of existing agricultural systems because increased food demand has drastically reduced the length of time that fields are allowed to lie fallow (after burning to clear vegetation, as is done in the traditional swidden method of farming). Soil erosion has reduced the fertility of millions of hectares of land. Vast areas of formerly forested land are now classified as wastelands and barren hills and mountains. In the most-damaged areas, landscapes are virtually lunar in appearance.
Restoration of full productivity to these areas will require a very long time, even if further degradation could be instantly stopped, which is unlikely.

It is increasingly difficult for millions of households to meet their basic subsistence needs. Many ethnic minority households in particular suffer from food shortages and nutritional deficiencies. According to virtually all development indicators [e.g., per capita income, life expectancy, educational levels, food security], people in the uplands are much worse off than their lowland compatriots. Moreover, the gap between the two appears to be widening in both relative and absolute terms. These differences are predictable given the initial advantages enjoyed by the lowlands, and they have accompanied rapid development everywhere in the world.

Inequalities are also increasing within and among upland regions, and among different sectors of the upland population. For example, gender inequalities appear to be worsening as many families devote scarce cash to educating sons while daughters are kept at home to provide labor for household-operated farms.

Most serious of all, cultural and social dislocations of various kinds over many years may have impaired the capacity for adaptive change that is demanded by a rapidly changing context. Overstressed people and communities are short of the psychological resources and social capital [expressed through trust and reciprocity] required to initiate positive changes. Apathy and self-destructive behavior [alcoholism, drug addiction] are indicators of this phenomenon; enlistment in nativistic movements, such as the millenarian cults currently flourishing among the Hmong of the northwestern mountains, is another. Such indicators suggest that communities are deprived of some of the human resources they

The Common Problems of Mountain Communities Around the World

Development problems in mountain areas are not, of course, unique to Vietnam. It is sobering to realize that one could readily substitute the names of a host of Asian countries for that of Vietnam throughout this text and the account would remain valid without having to alter its contents to any marked extent. Nepal, India's northeastern frontier regions, mountainous Burma and Thailand, Tibet, and the mountain areas of Yunnan Province in southwestern China, are all upland areas that have encountered similar problems of development and appear caught in their own downward spirals. Nor is the problem unique to the developing countries of Asia. Appalachia, the large mountain region in the southeastern United States, remains a byword for rural poverty, despite having been targeted for more than 30 years by massive government development projects and the expenditure of billions of dollars of development assistance funds. Vast areas of the American West, especially those incorporated in the reservations of American Indian tribes, are in an even worse state. The appalling conditions there are a disgrace to the world's richest nation, but countless government projects have failed to significantly improve the health, education, and living standards of the reservation inhabitants. Vietnam policymakers must recognize that their problems of upland development are neither unique nor caused solely by their own shortcomings, and that the difficulties they have encountered in effecting positive change in the lives of minority peoples are widely shared with other countries, including the United States. This understanding should help them move toward a more realistic appraisal of the possibilities of upland development, and provide them with an opportunity to learn from the experience of others. Perhaps they can avoid some of the traps and impasses encountered by development initiatives in other upland regions.
need to meet the challenges of rapid change.

In the face of these growing problems, the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam, assisted by numerous foreign development organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have given and are giving a high priority to upland development. Despite stringent budgetary constraints, the government has committed very significant financial resources to improve upland living conditions and regreen barren hills. The central treasury also heavily subsidizes administrative, educational, and health services in upland provinces. A number of projects have successfully piloted innovative approaches to upland development. [See box on “The Policy Context for Upland Development In Vietnam” on p.6.]

But the very modest results are far less than the level of investment should have produced, and they are far less than the situation demands. Many factors have contributed to this situation—difficult terrain, lack of infrastructure, corruption, excessively cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, etc.—but development planning based on misconceptions and misinformation about the uplands is the main cause of the crisis. Development planning is too often based on a simplistic and distorted view of conditions of life in the mountains: ecological, economic, social, and cultural. Many of the largest and most important upland development programs have been based upon false assumptions, stereotypes, and wishful thinking. Fundamental reorientation is required in research, planning, implementation, and monitoring of upland development.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UPLANDS FOR VIETNAM’S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Few people appreciate the importance of the mountains to Vietnam’s future. Their attention is focused on the cities, especially Ho Chi Minh City, and to a lesser extent the Red River and Mekong deltas, where growth is rapid and progress evident even to the casual observer. Why should anyone worry about what is happening or failing to happen in the hills and mountains, a little-known region commonly thought of as having only minor significance for the nation’s economic development? The answer is that the uplands are much more important than is generally recognized; what happens there matters not just locally but has ramifications extending to the nation as a whole, indeed to the whole mountain region of mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China. The spread of environmental degradation and the related loss of biodiversity; the growth in crossborder trade of all kinds, including that of endangered plant and animal species; the deterioration of upland watersheds that must supply growing populations in both lowlands and uplands—these are but some of the problems common to the uplands of all the countries that comprise this vast mountain region.

Fundamental Misconceptions

The critical significance of Vietnam’s uplands is overlooked because current thinking about this region is based on a number of fundamental misconceptions. The first of these misconceptions is that Vietnam is basically a lowland country. In fact, until 40 or 50 years ago few ethnic Vietnamese lived at higher elevations. The result is that history, literature, and popular culture reflect a lowland perspective. Foreigners received the same misleading impression of a lowland country from wartime television images of troops advancing across seemingly endless rice paddies. Thus the Vietnamese state and modern mass media have both unwittingly conveyed the impression that upland development is not worthy of serious attention. In reality, almost three-fourths of Vietnam is covered by hills and mountains. Few lowlanders have had the opportunity to travel widely in the uplands. Most perceive the uplands as remote and exotic, and not part of their central concerns with development.
The Policy Context for Upland Development in Vietnam

Over the past decade Vietnam has displayed a remarkable rate of economic growth. Efforts to stimulate economic development in the context of a market economy with a socialist orientation have included Directive 100 in 1981, the overall policy of renovation (doi moi) set forth at the Communist Party Congress in 1986, Decision 10 in 1988, and the 1993 land law. Agricultural production has increased so much that Vietnam has moved from the brink of famine to become the second largest rice-exporting country. A continuing series of institutional reforms has opened up many sectors of the society while maintaining its basic stability.

A Special Emphasis  Under the slogan “the mountain areas must be developed simultaneously with the low-lands,” the uplands have received special attention during this surge of national development. Numerous laws and directives have been issued with the aim of facilitating the development of the uplands and especially of improving the lives of the ethnic minority peoples who reside there. As early as 1968, Resolution 38 established the Fixed Cultivation and Permanent Settlement Program to assist upland ethnic minorities believed to be migratory shifting cultivators to build new and better lives. This has now evolved into the Department of Fixed Cultivation and Permanent Settlement and Development of New Economic Zones within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The program is heavily funded to promote development in poor and remote upland areas.

In 1992, Decision 327 set forth a set of policies to regreen the uplands. Subsequently, Decision 556 in 1995 refocused the program on the restoration and protection of natural forests and specified the rural household as the key actor. Large sums have flowed into the upland provinces from the central treasury under the 327 program. Meanwhile, Instruction 525, issued by the Office of the Prime Minister in 1993, set forth an overall strategy for the accelerated development of ethnic minorities and upland areas. This strategy emphasized the modernization of agriculture, the strengthening of educational systems, the development of infrastructure, and the provision of safe water throughout the uplands.

Concern For Minorities The Socialist Republic of Vietnam clearly places a high priority on upland development. The Party and the government have demonstrated great concern for the welfare of ethnic minorities for many years. This special emphasis on upland development has deep historical roots in the Resistance War period, when the Vietnamese liberation forces had their secure bases in the mountains of the Viet Bac and relied heavily on the support of the ethnic minorities. Since 1954, ethnic minorities have been granted numerous rights and privileges in Vietnam that have not been available to minorities in many other countries.

First of all, they have been granted full rights of citizenship. Article 5 of the Constitution guarantees each ethnic group the right to use its own language and system of writing, to preserve its ethnic identity, and to promote its own positive customs, habits, traditions, and culture. The Constitution also mandates preferential treatment for ethnic minorities in terms of education (Article 36) and health care (Article 39).

Ethnic minorities also receive heavily subsidized access to basic commodities such as kerosene and cooking oil. The government subsidizes distribution of iodized salt in upland areas where iodine deficiency makes goiter a major health problem. All upland provinces, and most districts, have special boarding schools to provide education to ethnic minority children from isolated areas.

The record shows that both within the National Assembly and in many provincial and district People’s Committees, ethnic minorities have been represented to a degree that exceeds the percentage of minority people in the general population. Within the National Assembly, Article 94 of the Constitution mandates the formation of a Nationalities Council. This council studies and makes proposals to the National Assembly on issues concerning ethnic minorities, and supervises and controls the implementation of policies on ethnic minorities as well as the execution of programs and plans for socioeconomic development of the highlands and regions inhabited by ethnic minorities.

Special oversight Beyond this, within the executive branch of the government, under the Office of the Prime Minister, a ministerial-level Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA) was created in 1993 to monitor and supervise the implementation of all government programs directed toward or affecting ethnic minorities.
A second misconception is that the uplands are sparsely inhabited, indeed virtually empty, and thus are socially and economically unimportant. In fact, the uplands contain some 24 million people, or one-third of the national population. The population of the Vietnamese uplands is larger than the total population of Australia or the combined populations of Laos and Cambodia; in fact more people live in Vietnam’s uplands than in all of the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) combined.

A third misconception is that the uplands are remote marginal areas where events have little impact on the national welfare. In fact, the Vietnamese uplands are of immense ecological, economic, and political importance to the nation as a whole. Indeed, few regions of comparable importance are so complex or so poorly understood. The strategic significance of the uplands has not diminished in the years since the Viet Minh (the anti-French resistance fighters) won the struggle for national liberation at Dien Bien Phu in the northwestern mountains in 1954. A 1979 border war with China, an exchange of gunfire between the two countries in 1992, and continued sensitivity along the border all serve as reminders of the region’s enduring strategic importance. The area also contains natural resources of great significance to the national economy. The Hoa Binh hydropower project in the uplands, for example, is the main source of electricity for the nation today. What happens in upland watersheds determines the supply of water for human consumption and agriculture in the lowlands. The uplands are also exceptionally rich in biological and cultural diversity. The Vietnamese uplands are home to 51 different ethnic groups from three major language families. The Kinh have the largest population of any group in the uplands today (and constitute fully 85 percent of Vietnam’s entire population). The 50 minority groups range in size from only a few hundred people (e.g., the Chut, the Ruc) to more than a million (the Tay). Many provinces have a dozen or more distinct groups within their boundaries. Lai Chau Province alone has some 20 different groups residing within its borders. This remarkable cultural diversity is matched by a remarkably high degree of environmental diversity, with great variations in climate, soil, vegetation, and wildlife within and among regions.

In every respect, the uplands are much more important to Vietnam’s overall situation than is commonly recognized. The success or failure of efforts to develop this area will be of critical significance to achievement of national development goals. Indeed, unless the current downward spiral can be stemmed, the future well-being of the whole country is at serious risk with potentially serious repercussions for the entire region.

UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Discussions of upland development in Vietnam tend to focus on describing current problems rather than on how the pace and direction of development are determined. Examining problems from a sectoral standpoint is typical: deforestation, poverty, gender inequity, and so on are examined individually. (Solutions tend to be defined in equally narrow terms. Thus, the response to deforestation is to establish tree planting campaigns and the strategy to alleviate poverty is based on creation of microcredit programs.) These problems are important, of course, but they are merely symptoms of underlying forces, interacting in complex ways, that collectively shape development trends in the uplands.

Officially, all citizens of Vietnam are referred to as being Vietnamese. Members of the majority ethnic group, called “ethnic Vietnamese” or “lowland Vietnamese” in Western publications, are referred to by citizens of Vietnam as “Viet” or, most commonly, “Kinh” [people of the capital]. In this paper the term “Kinh” is used.
CAUGHT IN A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

The Vietnamese uplands are caught in a downward spiral that promises to accelerate over the next 20 years. Five elements act as driving forces of this spiral: 1) population growth; 2) environmental degradation; 3) poverty; 4) social, cultural, and economic marginalization; and 5) dependence on nonlocal systems. The first three elements have been linked in mutually amplifying ways for decades. Population levels are already extremely high, in many areas exceeding sustainable carrying capacity with existing technology. There are simply too many people trying to wrest a living from fragile environments with limited agricultural potential. Natural resources are seriously depleted and continue to be destroyed at alarming rates. Poverty (and its constant companions: hunger and malnutrition, sickness, social problems) is widespread and is proving to be difficult to reduce, let alone eradicate. The final two elements of this system—social, cultural, and economic marginalization, and dependence on nonlocal systems—have become more significant in recent years. They are already interacting with the first three elements and threaten to have even more profound and negative effects in coming decades.

Population Growth

"Too many people, too little land" is a phrase that aptly describes the situation in Vietnam today. Some parts of the lowlands are among the most densely populated parts of Asia. In the uplands, densities are lower but the population has grown rapidly since national independence. Birth rates among many of the area's ethnic minorities are well above the national average. The extension of public health services into even the remotest mountain areas, an effort in which Vietnamese can take legitimate pride, has dramatically lowered mortality rates. The combination of higher birth rates and lower mortality has made annual rates of growth exceeding 3 percent not uncommon in highland communities.
Out-migration, the safety valve for overcrowding in other countries, is not a realistic option for upland peoples

The growth of the local population has been greatly augmented by programs to resettle lowlanders into the uplands. More than four million, and perhaps as many as five million, people have moved from the lowlands to upland areas since 1954. The northern uplands alone experienced an increase in population of more than 300 percent between 1960 and 1984, the result of natural local population growth and a massive government program to resettle people from the overcrowded Red River Delta. More recently, the main flow of migration has been to the Central Highlands, particularly Lam Dong and Dak Lac provinces.

Despite the lingering illusion on the part of some planners that the uplands are still sparsely populated, the current average density of about 75 persons per square kilometer is very high when viewed in terms of the very limited amount of arable land. The Vietnamese government has recently acknowledged that migration to the Central Highlands is contributing to loss of forests and to serious environmental degradation there, and has promised to try to stop further relocations to the area.

Population growth is a problem because of the scarcity of arable land in the uplands. Only a tiny fraction of agricultural land is suitable for wet-rice cultivation, the only sustainable high-yielding system of cereal production in Vietnam. More than half the surface area of the Northern Mountain Region has slopes of over 20 degrees. There are less than 1,000 square meters of agricultural land per capita [an area twice that size is needed to meet minimal food needs] in the 11 northern upland provinces, and even less than that in the northern central uplands of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces. Population density is either rapidly approaching or has already surpassed the carrying capacity of the land in large parts of the uplands.

Moreover, despite strong government support for family planning in recent years, and the rapid acceptance of birth control by many women, the current high rate of population growth will not decline in the near future. This reflects the fact that the upland population is an extraordinarily young one. Well over 40 percent of the population in the northern uplands is under 14 years old. Only about 6 percent is over 60. A continued high rate of population growth is built into the system for several more decades regardless of how vigorously family planning is promoted. The population will almost certainly double again in little more than 20 years.

A safety valve for overcrowded populations in other countries is out-migration: some individuals and families simply leave to seek a better life elsewhere. In Vietnam this is not a realistic option. The government resettled lowlanders into the uplands to solve existing overcrowding problems in the lowlands. Underemployment and unemployment are extensive throughout Vietnam, and an uplander moving into the lowlands will be competing for scarce jobs against people who have better educations and stronger social networks.

Environmental Degradation

Fifty years ago dense forests covered most of the uplands. But forest cover has dropped to less than 20 percent in most of the northern mountains, falling to 10 percent in most of the northwest. Most remaining forests are of poor quality with only a low volume of valuable timber. Species of high economic value are becoming rare. The rate of reforestation cannot keep up with the rate of cutting.

Land degradation is widespread. Throughout the uplands, erosion and leaching of nutrients have reduced soil quality. Yields in swidden fields have declined to as low as 400 to 600 kilograms of rice per hectare (compared to the six or seven tons now frequently achieved in the Red River Delta). As a result of population pressure and loss of forest land, the fallow period in swidden farming is steadily declining. In many places fields are cultivated for three or four years, then