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**THESIS**

**ENDURING POVERTY: EXPLANATIONS FOR THE  
PERSISTENCE OF MINORITY POVERTY IN VIETNAM**

by

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March 2017

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MINORITY POVERTY IN VIETNAM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the persistence of poverty among ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Ethnic minorities are consistently poorer than the Kinh-Hoa majority in Vietnam, having benefitted less from the country's economic growth and targeted government poverty alleviation programs. Why does poverty persist among ethnic minorities despite Vietnam's efforts to improve the wealth and living standards of poor minorities in mountainous and rural areas? This thesis argues that ethnic discrimination and cultural differences between ethnic groups contribute more to the persistence of minority poverty than geography and agricultural livelihoods. When prosperity levels are compared between the ethnic majority and minority groups, between ethnic groups in similar geographic regions, and between ethnic groups with agricultural livelihoods, the result is that minorities are typically poorer than the majority even when both groups live in the same areas and work in the same job sectors. Thus, ethnicity has a greater impact on interethnic inequality and poverty than geography or livelihood. This thesis finds that cultural differences between minority and majority ways of life, social factors of ethnic discrimination, and ethnocentric poverty alleviation programs are the main limiters of the returns to assets and inputs of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CSA	Country Social Analysis
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GSO	General Statistics Office
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NMBS	Northern Mountains Baseline Survey
SOE	State-owned Enterprises
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
VHLSS	Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey
VLSS	Vietnam Living Standards Survey
VND	Vietnamese Dong

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

In the 1990s, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam instituted a number of land and business ownership reforms to reverse its course toward economic failure, resulting in a steady decline in poverty throughout the country. Poverty, however, declined more evenly and substantially among the country's Kinh and Hoa ethnic majority than among the country's various other ethnic minorities. Recognizing the monopolization of poverty in the country's minority population, the government of Vietnam set about to reduce minority poverty through numerous internationally funded studies and poverty alleviation programs. While there is evidence that poverty alleviation programs have made significant progress in improving the income and poverty rate of ethnic minority groups according to studies conducted by Nguyen et al. and the United Nations Development Program, many minorities in the Central and Northern Highland regions continue to exist at or well below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> This paper asks, Why does poverty persist among ethnic minority groups in Vietnam despite the government's efforts to combat poverty and socioeconomic inequality among the country's ethnic minority population?

## B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The Vietnamese government has implemented economic policies and programs specifically designed to target poverty in ethnic minority communities for nearly 20 years, but the little progress these projects have made have caused some government leaders to wonder whether the ethnic minorities are worth helping.<sup>2</sup> Poverty reduction schemes have reduced the number of ethnic Kinh living in poverty twice as rapidly as other ethnic minorities, according to Valerie Kozel, which "has led to pessimism about

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<sup>1</sup> Cuong Nguyen, Tung Phung, and Daniel Westbrook, "Do the Poorest Ethnic Minorities Benefit from a Large-Scale Poverty Reduction Program? Evidence from Vietnam" (MPRA Paper No. 50689, Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2013), 25, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/pramprapa/50689.html>; United Nations Development Program, *Impact of Program 135-Phase II through the Lens of Baseline and Endline Surveys* (Hanoi, Vietnam: UNDP, 2012), 110.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Kozel, *Well Begun but Not Yet Done: Progress and Emerging Challenges for Poverty Reduction in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014), 175, doi:10.1596/978-0-4648-0006-1.

the likely effectiveness of future development programs and reinforced the stereotypes of ethnic minorities as culturally ‘backward’ (*lac hau*), uneducated, and unwilling to help themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Kozel asserts that although the government continues to tackle the minority poverty issue with a “constraints-based approach,” the persistence of negative attitudes toward minorities affects how minority group members view themselves and leads to further stereotyping of the affected community.<sup>4</sup>

Research on the persistence of ethnic minority poverty in Vietnam is conducted mostly for normative reasons, but there may also be political and security implications for poverty research. For one, many human rights organizations see the Vietnamese government’s relationship with its ethnic minority population as antagonistic and in violation of international human rights laws. Due to these suspected human rights violations, defense policy-makers in Washington secured only a partial lifting of the long-held U.S. ban on defense security with Vietnam. While the Defense Department supported the lifting of the ban, despite maritime territorial uncertainties in the South China Sea, lawmakers and human rights advocates strongly protested the lifting of the security assistance ban.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, improving the living standards of the country’s ethnic minority groups, many of whom live along or near the country’s borders, could help to secure the country’s borders by obtaining the loyalties of minorities to the state. Raising the living standards of the ethnic minority groups and increasing the participation of the minorities in local and state government would improve the minorities’ overall situation. Additionally, a greater sense of inclusion in the national identity could improve the relationship between the state’s minority population and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), leading to fewer instances of human rights abuses, which could improve the Vietnamese government’s relationship with the United States and other Western countries.

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<sup>3</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 175.

<sup>4</sup> See World Bank, “Misconceptions and Stereotyping” in World Bank, *Country Social Analysis: Ethnicity and Development in Vietnam, Summary Report* (Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2009), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2009/01/10960965/country-social-analysis-ethnicity-development-vietnam-vol-1-2-summary-report>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Eases Embargo on Arms to Vietnam,” *New York Times*, October 2, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/world/asia/us-eases-embargo-on-arms-to-vietnam.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/world/asia/us-eases-embargo-on-arms-to-vietnam.html?_r=0).

## C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at the overall poverty picture in Vietnam, identifies the characteristics of the poor, and points out the main causes of poverty among Vietnam's ethnic minorities. The trends in explaining why poverty persists among ethnic minorities in Vietnam is that minorities have fewer resources and experience lower returns on those resources due to cultural norms, ethnic discrimination, and the inefficient design and implementation of government social programs.<sup>6</sup> The research suggests that government programs are too broadly designed and ethnocentric in their delivery. Instead, programs that account for specific cultural beliefs, customs, and needs would better serve poor minorities.

### 1. The Poverty Picture

By the 1980s, decades of colonization, disunity, and civil war had left the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as one of the world's poorest economies. After the war ended in 1975, the VCP attempted to set up a Stalinist command economy in South Vietnam to unify the country under one economic model, but economic growth was slow and dependent on subsidies from the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> In 1986, inflation, caused by printing more money to deal with government deficits, rose to 487 percent, and the World Bank estimates that the country was one of the five poorest countries in the world, with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US\$130 per year.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing the need for a drastic change, the Sixth Party Congress of the VCP took steps to reform the country's economy by electing a reformist as the Party's general secretary and replacing the Soviet-style command economy with a regulated market economy in 1986.<sup>9</sup>

The economic reform policies of the late 1980s, called *Doi Moi* (meaning "change and newness"), had a dramatic effect on the state's economy. Land law reforms, begun in

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<sup>6</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Dwight H. Perkins, *East Asian Development: Foundations and Strategies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), Chapter 5, Kindle edition.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Glewwe, Nisha Agrawal, and David Dollar, *Economic Growth, Poverty, and Household Welfare in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2004), 1–2.

<sup>9</sup> See Perkins, *East Asian Development*, Kindle edition; *Ibid.*, 2.

1988, significantly changed the agriculture sector by giving decision-making authority to farming households.<sup>10</sup> The state reduced inflation by terminating failed state-owned enterprises (SOE) and gradually liberalizing privately owned enterprises in the 1990s and 2000s, increasing the number of privately-owned businesses from 31,000 to 460,000 in the last decade of the 20th century.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the liberalization of trade attracted foreign investment, increased exports to 19.7 percent per year from 2000 to 2007, and led to Vietnam's membership in the World Trade Organization by January 2007.<sup>12</sup> The impact of the reforms on the economy was unmistakable: per capita GDP growth measured in the local currency grew from less than 2 percent in the years 1985–1987 to nearly 8 percent in the mid-1990s.<sup>13</sup> In the last decade, Vietnam's economic growth has slowed, but the World Bank still puts per capita GDP growth at a healthy 5 percent.<sup>14</sup>

The economic reforms in Vietnam have also had a positive impact on poverty reduction. Using a poverty headcount ratio of \$1.90 per day (2011 purchasing power parity) the World Bank determined that “the fraction of people living in extreme poverty dropped from over 50 percent in the early 1990s to 3 percent today.”<sup>15</sup> By 2010, Vietnam had already achieved a number of Millennium Development Goals (MDG), well before its 2015 deadline, and had made several improvements in education, health, and life expectancy.<sup>16</sup> For its incredible achievements, the World Bank recognized Vietnam as a model for poor states in the region to follow; however, as the economy grew and millions rose above the poverty line, one problem became more prominent.

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<sup>10</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> See Perkins, *East Asian Development*, Chapter 5 for how Vietnam closed down poorly-performing SOEs while not giving up the SOE system in the late 1980s. Kozel, *Well Begun*, 17, details the Enterprise Law of 1993, which made it easier for private citizens to open their own businesses.

<sup>12</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> “World DataBank: World Development Indicators,” World Bank, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=VNM&series=&period=#>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Vietnam: Overview,” World Bank, last accessed 15 December 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview>.

<sup>16</sup> See Kozel, *Well Begun*, 1; World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*; UNDP, “About Vietnam,” United Nations Development Programme, <http://www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

Not everyone in Vietnam benefitted from Vietnam's explosive economic growth. As the economy grew, socioeconomic inequality increased between the country's poor ethnic minority and the Kinh ethnic majority. According to Valerie Kozel, ethnic minorities make up 15 percent of the state's population, but in 1998, they made up 29 percent of Vietnam's poor.<sup>17</sup> By 2010, ethnic minorities comprised 47 percent of the poor in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> Kozel writes, "by 2010, minorities were, on average, 5.1 times more likely to be poor than the Kinh and...substantial gaps in living conditions are evident throughout Vietnam."<sup>19</sup> Even though overall income and expenditure levels have increased for the ethnic minorities along with the rest of the population, the disparity between the ethnic minorities and the Kinh majority has increased.

## 2. Characteristics of Poverty

Recognizing that a severe issue in interethnic inequality had developed, the government of Vietnam, in cooperation with the World Bank and other aid organizations conducted numerous studies to determine the causes of poverty within ethnic minority communities. Statistical data used by researchers to understand poverty in Vietnam comes from the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys (VLSS) taken in 1993 and 1998 and the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) of 2002, 2004, and 2010.<sup>20</sup> These surveys, administered by the General Statistics Office (GSO) of Vietnam, collect detailed information from households, communities, and provinces on household composition, education level, health, expenditures on necessities and education, income, employment, housing, property ownership, local infrastructure, and commune

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<sup>17</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>20</sup> See Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Poverty in Vietnam" (working paper, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Manchester, United Kingdom, 2010), <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/publications/details/ethnic-minority-poverty-in-vietnam>, 4; Katsushi S. Imai, Raghav Gaiha, and Woojin Kang, "Poverty, inequality and ethnic minorities in Vietnam," *International Review of Applied Economics* 25, no. 3 (2011): 250–1, doi: 10.1080/02692171.2010.483471; Kozel, *Well Begun*, xix; Rob Swinkels and Carolyn Turk, "Explaining Ethnic Minority Poverty in Vietnam: a Summary of Recent Trends and Current Challenges" (draft background paper for CEM/MPI meeting on Ethnic Minority Poverty, World Bank, Hanoi, 2006), 1, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTVIETNAM/Resources/Ethnic\\_Minority\\_Poverty\\_in\\_Vietnam7.doc](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTVIETNAM/Resources/Ethnic_Minority_Poverty_in_Vietnam7.doc).

characteristics.<sup>21</sup> Much of the research also uses supplementary surveys and qualitative data to enhance their overall understanding of poverty in Vietnam. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) conducted a survey that recorded how poor minority group members perceived their socioeconomic situation, which was determined through a series of questions that the survey participants answered.<sup>22</sup>

According to the *2009 Population and Housing Census in Vietnam*, the Tay, Thai, Muong, Nung, and Hmong are five of the largest minority groups in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint where each of these groups reside, since many of the groups and their sub-groups can be found throughout Vietnam and its neighboring countries, but for the most part, the Tay, Thai, Muong, Nung, and Hmong minority groups can be found in the Northern midlands and mountainous regions.<sup>24</sup> The Khmer also make up a large portion of the minority population in Vietnam, living predominantly in the Mekong River Delta region of South Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> Smaller groups of minority ethnicities live in the Central Highlands of Vietnam including the Gia Rai, E De, Bahnar, and Koho ethnic groups.<sup>26</sup> The smallest minority group is the O Du with under 400 people in Nghe An Province in the northern central coast of Vietnam.<sup>27</sup>

A proximate cause of poverty evident to the researchers and targeted by government programs is that minorities are poorer than the Kinh because they live in isolated rural areas. Many of the studies show that ethnic minorities often reside in isolated areas, rely on agriculture and subsistence farming to meet their needs, and lack the education, health, and infrastructure available to those living in lowland and urban

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<sup>21</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 37–8; Asian Development Bank, *Indigenous People/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction: Viet Nam* (Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2002), 32, <http://www.adb.org/publications/indigenous-peoples-ethnic-minorities-and-poverty-reduction-viet-nam>, 32.

<sup>23</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *2009 Population and Housing Census of Vietnam* (Hanoi, Vietnam: GSO, 2010), last accessed 17 December 2015, <http://www.gso.gov.vn/khodulieudanso2009/>, 134–147 and 181, Table 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

locales.<sup>28</sup> Particularly, poverty is concentrated in the rural areas of the Northern Highlands and the Central Highlands according to official poverty estimates and the World Bank.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, the government focuses many of its poverty reduction programs on building infrastructure and improving access to isolated minority communities.

Ethnic minorities living closer to coastal areas and near large cities also tend to fare better than the highland minorities. Recognized for their business expertise, the ethnic Chinese (*Hoa*) minority enjoyed the economic growth of the 1990s along with the Kinh majority. Due to their economic success and integration with the Kinh majority, the Hoa are often lumped together with the Kinh in studies examining ethnic minority poverty.<sup>30</sup> Two ethnic groups, the Cham and Khmer, who also live in the inland Delta regions along with the Kinh and Hoa, have relatively similar income levels to the Kinh-Hoa majority, although their health and education levels pale in comparison.<sup>31</sup> The Tay, Thai, Muong, and Nung groups also experience better expenditure levels than the poorest minorities, who live in both the Northern Midlands and Mountains as well as the Central Highlands regions of Vietnam.<sup>32</sup>

The geography argument, however, is incomplete because income disparity between ethnic groups also exists at the local level. Kinh living in the same geographic area of ethnic minority communities tend to fare much better than their non-Kinh neighbors do.<sup>33</sup> The World Bank's *Country Social Analysis* (CSA) confirms,

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<sup>28</sup> Dominique Van de Walle and Dileni Gunewardena, *Sources of Ethnic Inequality in Vietnam* (Policy Research Working Papers, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1999), 13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-2297>; Asian Development Bank, *Indigenous People/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction*, 28.

<sup>29</sup> See Kozel, *Well Begun*, 6; World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Bob Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: A Socioeconomic Perspective" (Policy Research Working Paper, Macroeconomics and Growth, Development Research Group, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2002), 17, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2002/05/1783728/ethnic-minority-development-vietnam-socioeconomic-perspective>.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Wells-Dang, "Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: What Leads to Success?" (background paper prepared for the 2012 Poverty Assessment, Hanoi, May 2012), 7, [http://www.ngocentre.org.vn/webfm\\_send/4084](http://www.ngocentre.org.vn/webfm_send/4084); Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Poverty," 8.

<sup>32</sup> Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Poverty," 8.

<sup>33</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 48; Swinkels and Turk, "Explaining Poverty," 3, 7.

Non-minorities that live in impoverished regions are no poorer than they are elsewhere and have experienced high rates of poverty reduction when compared to their ethnic minority neighbors (Swinkels and Turk 2006). Baulch, Pham, and Reilly (2008b), in a regression analysis of VHLSS data from 1993 to 2004, report that less than one-half of the ethnic minority poverty gap can be attributed to poorer endowments and living in remote areas.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, in the same geographic region, two different minority groups may have starkly different poverty levels. As the World Bank shows, the poverty rate of the Hmong in Ha Giang province is 42 percent, compared to the poverty rate of the Tay minority living in Ha Giang (19 percent).<sup>35</sup> Thus, geography alone cannot explain the problem of poverty in different regions of the country.

Other researchers in the literature look at cultural reasons why the minorities are poorer. The culture argument proceeds two ways. Some in the Vietnamese government, see minorities as being too “backwards” or superstitious to change their farming techniques.<sup>36</sup> This argument that the minorities are a hopeless cause stems from long-held beliefs that the Kinh are superior in nature to minorities.<sup>37</sup> While minorities do have different beliefs and actions that could inhibit the efficient production of resources, anthropologists and researchers from outside Vietnam perceive the Vietnamese culture and the ethnic minority cultures to be incompatible in certain cases; thus, the government must change its approach to poverty reduction by taking into account the minority groups’ cultures.<sup>38</sup> Anthropologists have specialized in researching how the Vietnamese government’s policies on land resettlement, sedentarization, and wet-rice cultivation,

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<sup>34</sup> Swinkels and Turk, “Explaining Poverty,” 2–3 quoted in World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 3; Bob Baulch, Hung T. Pham, and Barry Reilly, *Decomposing the Ethnic Gap in Living Standards in Rural Vietnam: 1993 to 2004*, (a mimeo, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 2008), quoted in World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 229–30.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–4.

<sup>38</sup> See Bob Baulch, Hung T. Pham, and Barry Reilly, “Decomposing the Ethnic Gap in Rural Vietnam, 1993–2004,” *Oxford Development Studies* 40, no. 1 (2012): 108, doi. 10.1080/13600818.2011.646441; Thi Thu Phuong Nguyen and Bob Baulch, “A Review of Ethnic Minority Policies and Programs in Vietnam” (draft of policy review for the Centre for Analysis and Forecasting Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, and Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 26 October 2007), 33–4; Kozel, *Well Begun*, 190.



enacted to increase farm production in rural areas, actually contributed to the economic plight of the minorities in rural areas.<sup>39</sup> Since the French colonization of Vietnam, a belief persisted that “the Montagnards could learn from the Vietnamese community in the fields of agriculture (abandoning shifting cultivation), commerce (introduction of money), industry (introduction of a work ethic), hygiene, education, and religion (elimination of superstition).”<sup>40</sup> In their research, both Oscar Salemink and Gerald Hickey contend that while the government blamed regional deforestation on the minority groups’ practice of shifting cultivation, it was Vietnamese settlers, illegal logging, and wet-rice cultivation techniques unsuitable for highland areas, which actually contributed to regional deforestation.<sup>41</sup>

While views held by the government affect minority ways of life, differences between cultures have an impact at the local level as well. Pamela McElwee provides evidence from case studies to show that the Kinh have different community ties and values from some of the ethnic communities.<sup>42</sup> McElwee shows that although the government believed that mixing the Kinh and minority groups would help the poor minorities to learn better production techniques, cultural divides and prejudices inhibit this progress.<sup>43</sup> Many of the anthropologists and social scientists reviewed in the literature recommend the government change its implementation of poverty reduction

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<sup>39</sup> See Oscar Salemink, “Sedentarization and Selective Preservation Among the Montagnards in the Vietnamese Central Highlands,” in *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif*, ed. Jean Michaud (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 125–148; Gerald Hickey, *Shattered World: Adaptation and Survival among Vietnam’s Highland Peoples during the Vietnam War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 264.

<sup>40</sup> Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 89.

<sup>41</sup> See Salemink, “Sedentarization.”

<sup>42</sup> Pamela McElwee, “Becoming Socialist or Becoming Kinh? Government Policies for Ethnic Minorities in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” in *Civilizing the Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities*, ed. Christopher R. Duncan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 182–213.

<sup>43</sup> Pamela McElwee, “Blood Relatives or Uneasy Neighbors? Kinh Migrant and Ethnic Minority Interactions in the Trùng Sơn Mountains,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008): 100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2008.3.3.81>.

programs to be more mindful of the needs and cultural nuances of the targeted people groups.<sup>44</sup>

So far, I have explained how the relative isolation of minority communities and cultural differences with the Kinh majority contributes to disparities in interethnic wealth, but racial discrimination also plays a role.<sup>45</sup> In 2010, United Nations Independent Experts on Minority Issues and Extreme Poverty found that stereotypes of ethnic minorities as “backwards” and “*moi*,” (savages), pervades legal documents and official rhetoric.<sup>46</sup> Policies aimed at alleviating poverty in minority communities are written with the idea that the minorities needed to “catch up” to the Kinh majority.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, racial discrimination does not stop at long-imbued stereotypes and well-intentioned policy. Some human rights advocacy groups implicate the authoritarian Communist party government for permitting human rights abuses by local authorities against ethnic minorities, for perpetuating myths that ethnic minorities are backward societies, and for unjustly accusing ethnic minorities for being members of anti-government organizations.<sup>48</sup> These advocacy groups submit that the government’s authoritarian structure facilitates racial discrimination, which contributes to the inequality faced by minority communities.

The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights contends that despite the Constitution of 1992 stating that Vietnam guarantees “equality, solidarity and mutual assistance among all nationalities, and forbids all acts of national discrimination and division,”

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<sup>44</sup> Baulch et al., “Ethnic Minority Development,” 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR), *Violations of the Rights of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam* (alternative report on the Implementation of the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 2012), 13–4, [http://www.queame.net/eng/docs\\_detail.php?numb=1780](http://www.queame.net/eng/docs_detail.php?numb=1780).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Montagnard Christians in Vietnam, A Case Study in Religious Repression*, March 2011, 3–4, <http://www.hrw.org/node/97638>, quoted in British Home Office, “Country Information and Guidance, Vietnam: Ethnic Minority Groups” (2014), 18–9; Sonia Palmieri, “Representation from the Top: Ethnic Minorities in the National Assembly of Viet Nam” (Case Study, Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme, Mexico, 2010), 3 and 5; “State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Vietnam,” Minority Rights Group International, 3 July 2014, accessed 27 April 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53ba8dc75.html>.

additional articles within the Constitution are arbitrarily written to allow the authoritarian Communist government to repress political dissent.<sup>49</sup> The committee argues that the government uses the law to curb minority rights and condone racial discrimination.<sup>50</sup> For example, from an economic standpoint, Montagnards in the Central Highlands have lost rights to their ancestral lands as the state sponsors migration by Kinh into Montagnard territories.<sup>51</sup> Although the Vietnamese government states that all people own the land, which the government administers, the migration of Kinh into Montagnard areas has made it difficult for the Montagnards to find equality in jobs and income or to gain credit from banks.<sup>52</sup>

In essence, a review of the literature characterizes poverty in minority groups by geographic location, being unassimilated with the Kinh-Hoa majority, and greater instances of racial discrimination. The next section will examine the government's response to poverty among this unique segment of the population, and it will discuss reasons why poverty persists in minority communities despite targeted government interventions.

### **3. Explanations for the Persistence of Poverty**

A few studies examine the programs and policies that the government has undertaken to alleviate poverty in the mountainous and rural areas as well as regions with a high density of ethnic minorities in the population.<sup>53</sup> One of the goals in Vietnam's Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy is to "raise the living standards of ethnic minorities," and the Socio-economic Development Plan for 2006–10 further

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<sup>49</sup> Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, "Violations," 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 21–2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 27–28.

<sup>53</sup> See Baulch and Nguyen, "Minority Policies and Programs"; Bob Baulch, Thai Hung Pham, and Thi Thu Phuong Nguyen, *The Economic Development of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam* (Policy Review for Institute of Development Studies/Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, 2008), accessed 15 December 2015, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/the-economic-development-of-ethnic-minorities-in-vietnam-english>; John V. Dennis, "A Review of National Social Policies, Viet Nam," Poverty Reduction & Environmental Management in Remote Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Watersheds Project (Phase I), 2000, last accessed 16 December 2015, <http://m.mekonginfo.org/assets/midocs/0003350-society-a-review-of-national-social-policies-viet-nam.pdf>.

committed the government to reducing inequality by providing opportunities for jobs and education as well as increasing the level of participation by the people in poverty reduction programs and plans.<sup>54</sup> Vietnam is also one of the only countries in the world to create an MDG specifically for enhancing ethnic minority development.<sup>55</sup> The slow progress of change, however, has led some officials in Vietnam to give up, believing that the ethnic minorities are too “backwards” or “tradition-bound” to achieve equity with the Kinh.<sup>56</sup> Many of the researchers note that this Kinh perception of the minorities’ inadequacy is reflected back on some minority communities who, in turn, start to believe that they are incapable of achieving a better way of life for themselves.<sup>57</sup>

Why do some minority groups in Vietnam still experience extreme poverty despite the government’s attempts to improve socioeconomic inequality and poverty in the country? Overall, the literature points to three different culprits: cultural norms of poor minority groups that affect their ability to escape poverty, racial discrimination, and the poor implementation of programs and policies created to assist ethnic minority groups. Bob Baulch asserts that lower returns could be the effect of cultural norms that prevent the minority group member from achieving equal production levels or the result of ethnic discrimination placed on them by society and the government.<sup>58</sup> Yet, he and other researchers also agree that the government can play a role in improving minority poverty by reducing ethnic discrimination and creating poverty-alleviation programs that are sensitive to the cultural practices of the different minorities.<sup>59</sup>

Since poverty in geographically isolated communities is not significantly relieved by infrastructure and development projects, researchers have considered why poverty-reduction programs failed. Government programs, suggest researchers, are not effective because the Vietnamese government fails to include minority group leaders in the

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<sup>54</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 46.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Swinkels and Turk, “Explaining Poverty,” 17; World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 244.

<sup>57</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 244.

<sup>58</sup> Baulch et al., “Ethnic Minority Development,” 11.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

decision-making process, and the government's ethnocentric approach to poverty alleviation conflicts with cultural norms of minority group members.<sup>60</sup> For example, although the Government of Vietnam promotes the people's participation in local government in ethnic minority communes, opportunities for participation are limited to the government's agenda.<sup>61</sup> Participation in Vietnam exhibits a "taking part in" rather than a "being part of" approach, argue Dao Thi Hoang Mai and Nguyen Thi Anh Tuyet, who point out that while the right to participate in politics is written in Vietnam's Constitution, many decisions on development projects and programs are made at higher levels of government without consulting the local people.<sup>62</sup>

There is a sizeable amount of literature on the problem of ethnic minority poverty in Vietnam, much of it conducted by international organizations like the World Bank and the government of Vietnam. This literature review looked at existing research on socioeconomic inequality in Vietnam, the causes of poverty among the minority population, and assessments of the government of Vietnam's approach to combatting poverty in ethnic minority communities. In conclusion, studies on the causes of minority poverty and its persistence in Vietnam point to cultural reasons, racial discrimination, and the ineffectiveness of government programs designed to combat interethnic inequality.

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Although the literature provides evidence for causes of poverty in Vietnam, the persistence of socioeconomic inequality proves that the problem is not easily solvable. Katsushi S. Imai et al. affirm, "why disparities in well-being and in poverty rates persist between the ethnic majorities and minorities is far from obvious. It may be asked, for example, whether ethnic minorities are poorer simply because they are located in remote areas or because they do not have enough human or physical capital, such as education or

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<sup>60</sup> Thi Hoang Mai Dao and Thi Anh Tuyet Nguyen, "Citizen Centered Local Governance in Vietnam: The Participation at Local Level," in *Citizen Participation in Selected Local Governance of Asia Pacific Countries*, ed. Achmad Nurmandi et al. (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: APSPA and JKSG, 2015), 126.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.; Palmieri, "Ethnic Minorities in the National Assembly," 15; and World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, chapter 10.

<sup>62</sup> Dao and Nguyen, "Local Governance," 126.

land, or because of any structural constraints (e.g., social exclusion).”<sup>63</sup> Although reducing deeply imbued poverty requires a holistic view of the causes of poverty, I will consider the three main factors discussed in the literature. Since the government has the power to enforce policies that reduce racial discrimination, and since it has the ability to create programs that take into account minority groups’ cultural differences, I hypothesize that the government does not design programs to eliminate interethnic inequality. Since the government, however, has only so much sway over how minority and non-minority groups interact with each other, I also consider to what level racial discrimination and cultural differences affect the persistence of poverty among minorities in Vietnam.

#### **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

To identify why poverty persists among Vietnam’s ethnic minority communities, first, the method this thesis uses controls minority communities for factors that affect their income and poverty levels such as where they reside and what their livelihoods are. The profile of the minority population in Vietnam is large and diverse, and it is difficult to place the minorities into large generalized categories. Many of the poorest minorities, however, live in the Central and Northern Highlands while the more established minority communities inhabit the lowland delta regions. Thus, this thesis studies existing research to compare and contrast poverty or wealth between the minority groups and the Kinh-Hoa majority, between upland minority and upland Kinh-Hoa groups, and between minority groups and non-minority groups in agriculture, to determine whether upland geography or agricultural livelihoods have a greater impact on minority poverty than ethnicity itself. From there, I examine the persistence of poverty among the poorest minority groups along the dimensions discussed in the literature review—cultural differences, racial discrimination, and ineffective government policies and programs—to determine how each factor affects interethnic inequality in Vietnam.

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<sup>63</sup> Imai et al., “Poverty, Inequality and Ethnic Minorities,” 250.

## **F. THESIS OVERVIEW**

This thesis includes three additional chapters. Chapter II describes how ethnicity, geographic location, and livelihoods characterize patterns of poverty and show how differences in ethnicity cause interethnic inequality. In Chapter III, I explain how minority cultural norms, racial discrimination, and the inadequate design of the Vietnamese government's poverty reduction programs perpetuate the patterns of interethnic inequality described in Chapter II. Finally, the last chapter suggests policy recommendations to combat minority poverty in Vietnam.

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## II. THE POOR IN VIETNAM

Since most ethnic minorities live in upland areas and work as farmers, living locations and income sources of ethnic minorities could account for the cause of their poverty. The geography and agricultural income source of ethnic minorities, however, is not the only reason for poverty among ethnic minorities. A third dimension, that is, having lower returns on social and economic inputs in a majority-ruled society because one is an ethnic minority in Vietnam, an effect that I hereby refer to as the ethnic minority dimension, affects the poverty of minorities to a greater degree than the dimensions of geography and livelihood. If where one works and what one does for a living are the only factors that contribute to poverty in Vietnam, then Kinh-Hoa farmers and upland dwellers should be as poor as minority farmers and upland dwellers. Yet, as this chapter shows, ethnic majority upland dwellers and ethnic majority farm workers are actually better off than ethnic minorities in these same dimensions. First, this chapter provides information on the three main dimensions along which poverty varies in the country: ethnicity, geography, and livelihood. Second, this chapter compares poverty rates, income, education, and health standards between minorities and the majority within the three main dimensions of poverty to highlight how ethnic minorities are worse off than the ethnic majority all three dimensions, thereby supporting the argument for the existence and impact of the ethnic minority dimension on minority poverty.

### A. WHO ARE THE POOR IN VIETNAM?

According to the vast literature on poverty in Vietnam, three facets of human society characterize the poor. The first is ethnic minority identity. Ethnic minorities constitute more than 50 percent of the poor in Vietnam, despite being only 14 percent of the population.<sup>64</sup> The second group is composed of people who live in upland areas, where limited infrastructure development, market access, and public services restrict

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<sup>64</sup> Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, *The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census: Completed Results* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Government Statistics Office, 2016), 134, [https://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799](https://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799).

economic development.<sup>65</sup> Farmers and other agricultural laborers are the third group of people most likely to be poor.<sup>66</sup> Even though farming is the backbone of the Vietnamese economy; it is the worst performing sector of the economy.<sup>67</sup> The following sections take a closer look at the faces of the poor in this Southeast Asian country.

## 1. Ethnic Minorities

The face of the poor in Vietnam largely belongs to the country's ethnic minorities. The poverty rate among ethnic minorities was 59.2 percent in 2012.<sup>68</sup> This number is even more staggering compared to the Kinh-Hoa poverty rate, which was less than 10 percent in 2012.<sup>69</sup> While living standards and poverty levels have improved for the entire population of Vietnam, minorities lag behind the Kinh-Hoa in multiple dimensions of economic development including income, health, and education.<sup>70</sup>

The 54 different ethnic minority groups of Vietnam have varying levels of poverty. For example, the Hoa share equal or better wealth with the Kinh, while the Khmer and Cham of the Mekong Delta are the wealthiest non-Hoa ethnic minorities.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, the Central Highlands and some northern upland minorities are the poorest.<sup>72</sup> The living standards of different ethnic minority groups can also vary within the same geographic region. In the northern mountains, the living standards of Tay, Thai,

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<sup>65</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> "Socioeconomic Situation in 2015," General Statistics Office of Vietnam, last accessed 12 November 2016, [http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=622&ItemID=15515](http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=622&ItemID=15515).

<sup>68</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty and Migration Profile 2012* (Hanoi: Government Statistics Office, 2012), Table 1, [https://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13889](https://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13889).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Bob Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Poverty in Vietnam" (working paper no. 169, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2010), 5, [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication\\_files/WP169%20Baulch%20etal.pdf](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/WP169%20Baulch%20etal.pdf); Mekong Development Research Group, "Poverty Situation Analysis of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam 2007–2012: Key Findings from Qualitative Study" (Sub-PRPP Project - CEMA, Hanoi, 2013), 4–5, last accessed 12 November 2016, [http://www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/library/poverty/poverty\\_situation\\_analysis.html](http://www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/library/poverty/poverty_situation_analysis.html).

<sup>71</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 170.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 167; Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Poverty," 8.

Muong, and Nung people are considerably better than the Hmong and Dao who live in neighboring villages.<sup>73</sup> Ethnicity, therefore, stratifies all the ethnic groups of Vietnam.

## 2. Upland Dwellers

The poorest regions of Vietnam are the northern mountainous regions, the Central highlands, and the North Central coast.<sup>74</sup> These regions are mostly rural, upland areas, with a high population density of ethnic minorities. Poor agricultural conditions, minimal infrastructure, limited access to commercial hubs and public services, and the small number of off-farm job opportunities harden everyday life in the upland regions.<sup>75</sup> In 2012, the regions with the highest poverty headcounts were the upland areas of the Northeast (34 percent), Northwest (59 percent), and Central Highlands (30 percent).<sup>76</sup> These poverty rates contrast with the rural, lowland Mekong Delta (16 percent), home of the Khmer people, the country's second largest ethnic group, and the South Central Coast region (15 percent), where the country's poorest ethnic minorities are found.<sup>77</sup> The differences in affluence between the lowland and upland areas is distinct, caused by the limited accessibility of highland areas to major lowland markets.

In stark contrast to the upland and lowland rural areas are the urban Southeast and Red River Delta regions. These lowland regions contain the country's two biggest economic and governmental sectors: Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Even though urban poverty is becoming a problem in the major metropolises, the two regions still boast the country's lowest poverty headcounts.<sup>78</sup> The low poverty rate in these industrialized regions probably correlates with the fact that most of population is Kinh. The richest ethnic minority group, the Hoa, also cluster in Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>79</sup> It is difficult to assess how much topography versus urbanization contributes to the regional wealth of the

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<sup>73</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 167; General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty Profile*, Table 1.

<sup>74</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty Profile*, Table 1.

<sup>75</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 9 and 28; World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 53–4.

<sup>76</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty Profile*, Table 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 22–4.

<sup>78</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty Profile*, Table 1.

<sup>79</sup> Calculated from Census Steering Committee, *2009 Population and Housing Census*, 134–211.

urban lowlands, but the low-lying landscape and close proximity to seaports of both regions facilitate urban development.

### 3. Livelihoods

Vietnam's sudden economic growth has been a blessing and a curse: production in the industrial and service sectors blossomed, but agriculture became the lowest contributing economic sector.<sup>80</sup> According to Nguyen Quoc Viet in a paper for the Vietnam Institute of Agricultural Engineering and Post-Harvest Technology and Nguyen Van Luat for the Food and Agriculture Organization, Vietnamese farmers struggle with low levels of mechanization, limited crop diversification, and a deficient marketing and distribution system.<sup>81</sup> Farmers in Vietnam are also susceptible to climate change, natural disasters, insect and pest invasions, and fluctuations in crop prices.<sup>82</sup> These obstacles along with poor quality crops and accordingly low prices, translate into high risks and low incomes for crop and livestock farmers.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, wealthier households in Vietnam are those that have moved out of semi-subsistence farming into private enterprise, trade, industry, and service jobs.<sup>84</sup>

Kozel notes that about 41 percent of households in Vietnam work in agriculture, and nearly one third of these households live below the poverty line.<sup>85</sup> World Bank research records that “65 percent of the poor and 73 percent of the extreme poor” are

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<sup>80</sup> “Socioeconomic Situation in 2015,” General Statistics Office of Vietnam, last accessed 12 November 2016, [http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=622&ItemID=15515](http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=622&ItemID=15515).

<sup>81</sup> Nguyen Quoc Viet, “Some Achievements on Agricultural Mechanization in Vietnam” (paper for the Vietnam Institute of Agricultural Engineering and Post-harvest Technology), 2–4, <http://www.unapcaem.org/Activities%20Files/A09105thTC/PPT/vn-doc.pdf>; Nguyen Van Luat, “Crop Diversification in Vietnam,” in *Crop Diversification in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Minas K. Papademetriou and Frank J. Dent (Bangkok, Thailand: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2001), 152, [https://coin.fao.org/coin-static/cms/media/9/13171763115260/2001\\_03\\_high.pdf](https://coin.fao.org/coin-static/cms/media/9/13171763115260/2001_03_high.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 180.

<sup>83</sup> World Bank, *Transforming Vietnamese Agriculture: Gaining More for Less, Vietnam Development Report* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Hong Duc Publishing House, 2016), xi, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/24375>.

<sup>84</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 96–8.

<sup>85</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 96–8.

engaged in farming activities including crops, aquaculture, forestry, and livestock.<sup>86</sup> The Northern Highlands, North Central Coast, and the Central Highland regions, where many households rely on agricultural work or subsistence agriculture, have the highest rates of poverty in the country.<sup>87</sup> These regions also have large ethnic minority populations, who depend principally on farming for employment and subsistence.<sup>88</sup>

## **B. A MINORITY PROBLEM**

Because ethnic minorities primarily live in upland areas and work as farmers, it is reasonable to assume that ethnic minorities are poor because of their geographical and livelihood choices. If minorities are poor because they live in isolated mountain communities, then poverty among Kinh households in these same regions should also be high. Likewise, Kinh and non-Kinh workers competing for jobs and wages in the same labor market should have similar returns on their endowments in education, credit, and employment. Ethnic minorities in the same job field and geographic area as the ethnic majority, however, often have lower standards of living than the ethnic majority. This section compares inequality between the Kinh-Hoa and non-Kinh-Hoa in the dimensions of poverty rate, income, education, and health; between Kinh-Hoa and non-Kinh-Hoa in poor upland areas; and between ethnic minority and Kinh-Hoa majority farming households to illustrate the effect of ethnicity on the poor in Vietnam.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 96, Figure 3.1; and Government Statistics Office, *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, 2012*, 126–9, Table 3.4.

<sup>88</sup> Tuyen Quang Tran, “Nonfarm Employment and Household Income Among Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam,” *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja* 28, no. 1 (2015): 703, doi: 10.1080/1331677X.2015.1087872.

<sup>89</sup> Comparing the poverty rates and income of various groups to ascertain poverty levels is self-explanatory; however, the choice to use education and health as additional factors may require some justification. Education is used to measure human capital in this thesis because of its positive impact on income and expenditure levels, that is, household heads with higher levels of educational attainment tend to have higher expenditure levels. This can be seen in the 2012 VHLSS data, which shows that the highest level of education attained by 75 percent of the population, over the age of 15 and in the lowest income quintile, attained a lower secondary education or lower, and barely any households in this income quintile achieved a college level degree. Meanwhile, members of the highest income quintile were most likely out of all income groups to achieve an upper secondary, college, or university degree. General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2012*, 72–3, [http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13888](http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13888).

## 1. Kinh-Hoa versus Non-Kinh-Hoa Groups

The Kinh and Hoa ethnic groups are generally wealthier than non-Kinh and non-Hoa ethnic groups in Vietnam. First, the poverty rate between the Kinh-Hoa and the ethnic minorities is startlingly unequal. In 2010, the poverty rate among the Kinh-Hoa was 12.9 percent, while all other ethnic groups had a poverty rate of 66.3 percent.<sup>90</sup> Although the poverty rate decreased for both groups in 2012 (59.2 percent for minorities and 9.9 percent for the Kinh-Hoa), the disparity between groups remained.<sup>91</sup> Second, minorities who live below the poverty line are much poorer than Kinh-Hoa who live under the poverty line. In 2012, poverty gap measurements were only 1.9 percent for the Kinh-Hoa compared to 19.2 percent for all other ethnic groups.<sup>92</sup> Finally, poverty severity, which measures the depth of inequality among the poor, was only 0.6 percent for the Kinh-Hoa and 8.2 percent for ethnic minorities in 2012.<sup>93</sup> These statistics show that ethnic minorities experience much wider-spread and deeper-set poverty than the Kinh or Hoa ethnic groups.

On average, the Kinh-Hoa earn twice as much income as ethnic minorities. Mean per capita income for rural Kinh households was 23,099,000 Vietnamese Dong (VND) in 2012, growing 8.6 percent over a ten-year period.<sup>94</sup> Per capita household income for rural minorities, on the other hand, while growing at a respectable 6.1 percent from 2002 to 2012, was still less than half of rural Kinh household incomes at only 11,153,000 VND.<sup>95</sup> This slower rate of minority income growth could result from the lack of non-farm jobs available to minorities in rural areas. Alternatively, as Tran Quang Tuyen suggests, minorities in the Northwest Mountains may share less in the distribution of non-farm wage income because they lack the “provision of education programs and physical

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<sup>90</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty Profile*, Table 1;

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Brian McCaig, Dwayne Benjamin, and Loren Brandt, “Growth with Equity: Income Inequality in Vietnam, 2002–12,” (research paper, Wilfrid Laurier University and University of Toronto, 2015), Table 4, retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5Kjg1b9s7JRZk95SmZzcmJLWs/view>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

infrastructure such as paved roads, and the expansion of local enterprises.”<sup>96</sup> As long as ethnic minorities have less access to non-farm incomes, then income inequality between the Kinh and non-Kinh will persist.

Ethnic minorities have lower secondary school enrollment rates than the Kinh-Hoa, a disparity that contributes to income inequality. Data from the VHLSS supports the correlation that greater levels of education lead to higher incomes: more households in the highest income quintile in Vietnam achieved an upper secondary school certificate or higher than households in the lowest income quintile did.<sup>97</sup> Gross enrollment rate in primary school education was over 100 percent for all the most populous ethnic groups (population over 1 million) surveyed in the 2012 VHLSS.<sup>98</sup> Enrollment rates, however, begin to drop off for all ethnic groups at the lower secondary level, and by the upper secondary level, significant disparities between all the largest ethnic groups begin to appear.<sup>99</sup> Specifically, the Kinh, Hoa, and Tay ethnic groups maintain upper secondary school gross enrollment rates around 78 percent, but all other ethnic groups average a mere 40 percent gross enrollment rate.<sup>100</sup> Why do so many minority households stop sending their children to school? For many rural minorities, enrolling in secondary school can be a strain on the household, especially if the school is located far from the village. To some families, the high expenses of transportation, boarding, and entry fees is not worth the loss of potential farmhands.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Tran Quang Tuyen, “Income Sources and Inequality Among Ethnic Minorities in the Northwest Region, Vietnam.” *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 18, no. 4 (2016): 1252, doi:10.1007/s10668-015-9700-8.

<sup>97</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, “Percentage of population aged 15 years old and over by highest certificate, urban rural, region, income quintile, sex and age group,” *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2012*, Table 2.2, 72–3, [http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13888](http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13888).

<sup>98</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, “Gross Enrollment Rate by Urban Rural, Region, Sex and Ethnicity of Household Head,” *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2012*, 76–7, Table 2.3, [http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13888](http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=4&ItemID=13888).

<sup>99</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, “Gross Enrollment Rate,” 76–7, Table 2.3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> World Bank Group, *Country Social Analysis*, 66; Baulch et al., “Ethnic Minority Poverty,” 21.

Lastly, ethnic minorities have lower life expectancies as well as higher child and infant mortality rates than the ethnic majority, according to data compiled by the United Nations Population Fund from the 2009 Population and Housing Census.<sup>102</sup> In 2009, the five largest minority populations—the Tay, Thai, Muong, Khmer, and Hmong—all had lower life expectancies than the Kinh (74 years).<sup>103</sup> The Khmer (72.1 years) had the second highest life expectancy, while the Hmong (64.3 years) had the lowest life expectancy.<sup>104</sup> Rates of infant mortality were lowest among the Kinh at 13 in 1000 babies dying within a year of birth; no other group had infant mortality rates lower than 18 in 1000.<sup>105</sup> The rate of child mortality (under five years) was 19 in 1000 for the Kinh, while the child mortality rate among the groups averaged 42 in 1000 births.<sup>106</sup> The literature points to a number of reasons for lower health levels among ethnic minorities including a lack of access to health facilities, reluctance to seek medical treatment, or limited knowledge of modern infant and early childhood care.<sup>107</sup> Ethnicity can be major determinant of health in Vietnam, especially for groups that lack local access to quality medical facilities.

The Kinh-Hoa majority are better off than ethnic minorities in multiple dimensions of well-being. Minorities have higher poverty rates, lower incomes, fewer wage and off-farm jobs, lower levels of school enrollment and educational attainment, lower life expectancies, and higher infant and child mortality rates. Many ethnic minorities live in remote mountainous areas where access to wage labor, school and health facilities, and quality farmland affects their potential earnings and quality of life,

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<sup>102</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Ethnic Groups in Viet Nam: An Analysis of Key Indicators from the 2009 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census* (Hanoi: UNFPA, 2011), 21–22.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Vietnam Ministry of Health and Health Partnership Group, “Joint Annual Health Review 2014: Strengthening Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases” (Hanoi: Medical Publishing House, 2015), 134, [http://www.jahr.org.vn/downloads/JAHR2014/JAHR%202014\\_EN\\_full.pdf](http://www.jahr.org.vn/downloads/JAHR2014/JAHR%202014_EN_full.pdf); Mats Målqvist, et al., “Ethnic Minority Health in Vietnam: A Review Exposing Horizontal Inequity,” *Global Health Action* 6 (2013): 3–10, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3589437/> or doi: 10.3402/gha.v6i0.19803.



but is geographic remoteness the only cause of interethnic inequality? The next section explores this question by comparing living standards between Kinh-Hoa and non-Kinh-Hoa who live in these geographically rough upland areas.

## **2. Kinh-Hoa versus Non-Kinh-Hoa in Upland Areas**

Both Kinh and ethnic minority groups residing in the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam have higher poverty rates than people living in other parts of the country, but even within the same region, minorities have higher rates of poverty than Kinh, which World Bank poverty maps show.<sup>108</sup> Figure 1 depicts poverty incidence by province, district, and commune in 2003. As expected, the provincial level map shows that the Northern mountains and Central Highlands have poverty rates of 50–80 percent; however, when the researchers disaggregate the maps by district and commune, it appears that certain districts and communes hold higher concentrations of poverty.<sup>109</sup> A close look at the district and commune maps reveals that some communes and districts with low poverty incidences (colored green) in the upland areas actually sit within poor areas, thereby lowering the province's overall poverty rate. To show how ethnicity correlates with poverty, the World Bank also created maps that illustrate poverty rates by Kinh ethnicity and by non-Kinh ethnicity (Figure 2). These maps clearly show that in the upland areas of the Central Highlands, the Central Coast, and Northern Mountains, ethnic minorities have four to six times the poverty rate of the Kinh.<sup>110</sup> Thus, if ethnic minorities have higher poverty rates than the majority in the same upland district or commune, we can conclude that upland geography is not the only determinant of minority poverty.

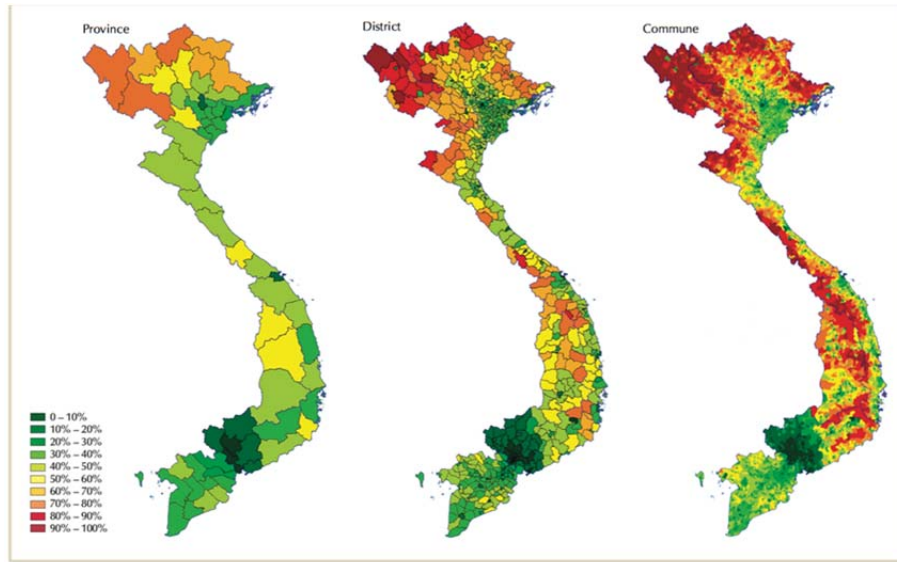
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<sup>108</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Rob Swinkels and Carrie Turk, "Poverty Mapping in Vietnam," in *More Than a Pretty Picture: Using Poverty Maps to Design Better Policies and Interventions*, ed. Tara Bedi et al., (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007), 274, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/342674-1092157888460/493860-1192739384563/More\\_Than\\_a\\_Pretty\\_Picture\\_ebook.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/342674-1092157888460/493860-1192739384563/More_Than_a_Pretty_Picture_ebook.pdf).

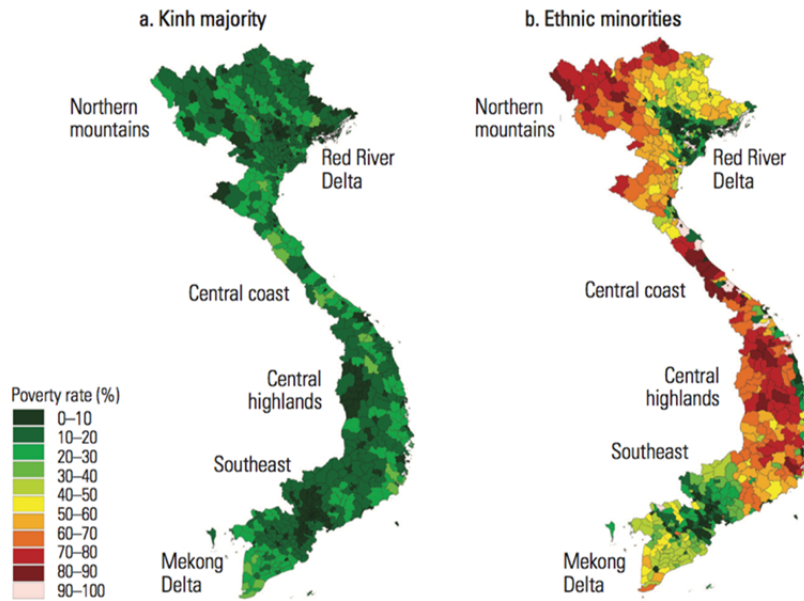
<sup>110</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 9.

Figure 1. Poverty Incidence by Province, District, and Commune<sup>111</sup>



Sources: Minot, Baulch, and Epprecht 2003.

Figure 2. Poverty Rates in Vietnam by Ethnicity, 2009<sup>112</sup>



Source: Estimates based on the 2009 Population and Housing Census and the 2010 VHLSS.

<sup>111</sup> Rob Swinkels and Carrie Turk, "Poverty Mapping in Vietnam," in *More Than a Pretty Picture: Using Poverty Maps to Design Better Policies and Interventions*, ed. Tara Bedi et al., (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007), 274, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/342674-1092157888460/493860-1192739384563/More\\_Than\\_a\\_Pretty\\_Picture\\_ebook.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/342674-1092157888460/493860-1192739384563/More_Than_a_Pretty_Picture_ebook.pdf).

<sup>112</sup> Kozel, *Well Begun*, 10.

Poverty maps are useful for visualizing the spatial impacts of poverty and ethnicity in Vietnam, but for a detailed understanding of ethnic wealth disparity, we can zoom in on the Northern Mountains of Vietnam, an extremely poor area with a large population of ethnic minorities and significant interethnic inequality. To establish baseline data for a poverty reduction project in this region, the Government Statistics Office conducted the 2010 Northern Mountains Baseline Survey (NMBS). Of the 1800 randomly selected households from six Northern provinces, over 95 percent were ethnic minority from the Tay, Thai, Muong, Hmong and Dao groups.<sup>113</sup>

The NMBS shows large inequalities in poverty rates and income between the Kinh-Hoa and all other ethnic groups in the Northern Mountains. For example, the Muong ethnic group had a poverty rate of 50 percent, the lowest among the ethnic minority households surveyed, while the rate of poverty among Hmong households was 81 percent.<sup>114</sup> Income per capita of Kinh-Hoa households in the Northern Mountain provinces, which averaged 7738 VND, was also higher than all ethnic minority income per capita.<sup>115</sup> By group, the Tay, Thai, Muong, and Dao had an average income per capita of 5500 VND.<sup>116</sup> The Hmong and all other ethnic minorities in the sample had an income per capita of only 3850 VND.<sup>117</sup> These numbers provide us with concrete examples of the poverty rate and income inequality between the Kinh-Hoa and ethnic minorities in the mountainous northern regions.

Besides having higher poverty rates and lower incomes, rural minority households in the upland areas also earn less income from wage labor and non-farm self-

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<sup>113</sup> Viet Cuong Nguyen, “Ethnic Minorities in Northern Mountains of Vietnam: Poverty, Income, and Assets” (research paper, Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2012), 3–4, last accessed 14 November 2015, <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/40769/>; Tran Quang Tuyen, “Income Sources and Inequality among Ethnic Minorities in the Northwest Region, Vietnam,” *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 18, no. 4 (2016): 6, PDF, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281491894\\_Income\\_sources\\_and\\_inequality\\_among\\_ethnic\\_minorities\\_in\\_the\\_Northwest\\_region\\_Vietnam](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281491894_Income_sources_and_inequality_among_ethnic_minorities_in_the_Northwest_region_Vietnam).

<sup>114</sup> Viet Cuong Nguyen, “Ethnic Minorities in Northern Mountains of Vietnam,” 7–8.

<sup>115</sup> Tran Quang Tuyen, “Income Sources,” 6, Table 1.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

employment.<sup>118</sup> This is meaningful because wage and non-farm jobs earn much higher incomes than agricultural jobs.<sup>119</sup> In Tran Quang Tuyen's analysis of the 2010 NMBS, the author found that the percentage of minority households engaged in wage labor was only 32 percent compared to 37 percent of Kinh-Hoa households in the survey.<sup>120</sup> The share of wages toward total income was also higher for non-minorities.<sup>121</sup> Wage work contributed to 24 percent of total Kinh-Hoa income, while the income share of wages for non-Kinh workers was only 10 percent.<sup>122</sup> This means that the small majority—the Kinh in the Northwest mountains—will have significantly more wealth than the non-Kinh who make up the majority of the population in the Northwest.

In a smaller, more remote sample of upland households in the North Central Coast, a similar pattern of non-farm work in relation to ethnicity emerges. To measure and explain the symptoms and causes of relative poverty between ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority, Van Le et al. developed an index of poverty using multiple dimensions of income and domestic assets. The researchers limited their study to a sample of 200 households from the Tam Quang commune in the mountainous North Central Coast region.<sup>123</sup> In the sample, 80 percent of households belonged to the Thai ethnic minority group, and the other 20 percent were Kinh.<sup>124</sup> The Thai were much more likely to be farmers (53 percent) than the Kinh (25 percent), while the Kinh took more non-farm jobs (46 percent) than the Thai (12 percent) did.<sup>125</sup> In the Tam Quang study, Kinh non-farm jobs paid three and a half times the salary of non-farm jobs worked by Thai households.<sup>126</sup> Thai farmers, on the other hand, earned only a little more than their

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 10–1, Table 2.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 6–7.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 12, Table 2.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Van Le et al., “Symptoms and Causes of Poverty in a Rural Vietnamese Commune: Does Ethnicity Matter?” *Journal of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Tropics and Subtropics* 115, no. 2 (2014): Abstract, <http://www.jarts.info/index.php/jarts/article/view/2014121946863>.

<sup>124</sup> Van Le et al., “Symptoms and Causes,” 70.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Table 1.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

Kinh neighbors.<sup>127</sup> Consequently, it is not surprising that instances of poverty were higher among the Thai than among the Kinh households. What the Tam Quang commune study and the 2010 NMBS show us is that even when non-Kinh are the dominant ethnic group in terms of size and social networks, they are still not as affluent as the Kinh group. The Kinh still have more social capital and connections than their less fortunate neighbors, allowing them to succeed in business despite their “minority” status in an overwhelmingly ethnic minority population.

From this comparison of ethnic minority and ethnic majority households in upland areas, we see that ethnic minorities earn less than the Kinh-Hoa and have higher rates of poverty than the majority. World Bank poverty maps provide a visual understanding of how ethnic minorities have much lower poverty rates than Kinh in the same provinces and districts, and localized surveys like the 2010 NMBS and Tam Quang study show that ethnic minorities are consistently poorer than Kinh-Hoa because they share less in the distribution of non-farm work and wage labor. The unequal distribution of wage labor could be attributed to a lack of physical access to job markets, or it could be that ethnic minorities are not hired for wage jobs when Kinh workers are available. In the end, these cases show that geography is not the key cause of ethnic minority poverty. The next section compares Kinh-Hoa and non-Kinh-Hoa in agriculture to see if a prevalence of minorities in agricultural roles is to blame for the persistence of minority poverty.

### **3. Kinh-Hoa versus Non-Kinh-Hoa in Agricultural Livelihoods**

Finally, we come to the section where this thesis compares the wealth of Kinh-Hoa farmers to non-Kinh-Hoa farmers to prove that minorities are poorer because of their ethnicity. This thesis bases this comparison on the assumption that minorities are the poorest of the general Vietnamese population because they are predominantly farmers, and the farming sector is one of the weakest earning sectors in the economy. If all else is equal, then Kinh farmers with the same resources and endowments should be just as poor as minority farmers are; however, if minority farmers are poorer than Kinh farmers are,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

then this suggests that another factor contributes to the poverty of ethnic minority agriculture households. To accomplish this, I look at different studies on farming households in rural communes and districts to see if minority farmers are worse off compared to their Kinh counterparts. A cursory look at the data is surprising: in the Central Highlands, where many indigenous minority groups have profitably entered the coffee farming business, the monthly income per capita of workers engaged in agriculture is higher than any other region.<sup>128</sup> It appears that ethnic minority farmers in the Central Highlands are actually better off than Kinh farmers in other parts of the country. Yet regional data paints an incomplete picture of the earnings of minority farmers.

One issue or aspect that makes the 2012 VHLSS income data unreliable is that it does not disaggregate income data by ethnicity, so it is not possible to tell from the VHLSS whether minority farmers are poorer than Kinh farmers are. To determine whether Kinh farmers still earn more than ethnic minority farmers, I used the 2010 VHLSS, which contains a dataset on communes receiving assistance from Program 135. The Vietnamese government established Program 135, the Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas in 1998 with the goal of reducing the incidence of poverty in extremely poor communes through infrastructure and commune center development as well as “resettlement, production, and training,” write Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Bob Baulch.<sup>129</sup> The Program 135 dataset is useful because we already know that residents of Program 135 communes are living below the poverty line. In addition, Kinh households are found within Program 135 areas and can be compared to ethnic minority households in Program 135 areas. Data from the 2012 VHLSS substantiates the expectation that minority farmers earn less than Kinh agricultural workers, which shows that in every step of the agricultural process from preparing the land to harvesting the crop, both male and female minority farm workers earned an average of 17,000 VND less per day than Kinh

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<sup>128</sup> Government Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, 2012*, 204.

<sup>129</sup> Nguyen and Baulch, “A Review of Ethnic Minority Policies,” 5.

farm laborers.<sup>130</sup> The biggest split in daily earnings was seen during the harvesting stage, when Kinh earned approximately 24,000 VND more than ethnic minorities.<sup>131</sup>

There could be several reasons why minority farmers earn less for their harvests. For one, minorities have lower quality land-holdings than the Kinh, resulting in lower quality and lower quantity production.<sup>132</sup> In Van Le et al.'s study of the rural Tam Quang commune, wealthier households were those with more livestock (buffalo to pull farming equipment), irrigated lowland, and mechanized farming equipment.<sup>133</sup> Of the 160 Thai households and 35 Kinh households sampled, Van Le et al. found that Kinh households owned nearly twice as much irrigated lowland than the Thai, giving Kinh households an advantage in farm production.<sup>134</sup> Additionally, Le et al. discovered that ethnicity had an effect on the relative poverty of a household even when the researchers controlled the households for endowments; that is, even when households had the same capital in quantity and quality of farmland and farm equipment, along with education, employment, social networks, and trust in the government, more Thai households were still poorer than Kinh households were.<sup>135</sup> Adding to the definition of good land quality, Saurabh Singhal and Ulrik Beck, using data from the Vietnam Access to Resources Household Surveys from 2006–2014, found that non-Kinh farmers also had additional burdens of land such as having to travel farther to reach their fields and having less security in their land ownership because a larger share of their land was not officially tenured under state land laws.<sup>136</sup>

Another disadvantage minorities face in agriculture is their ability to obtain credit. Farmers need loans to start planting cash crops or to increase their farming capacity. Yet,

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<sup>130</sup> Government Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, 2012*, 555.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 113.

<sup>133</sup> Le et al., “Symptoms and Causes,” 73–4.

<sup>134</sup> Le et al., “Symptoms and Causes of Poverty,” 73–4.

<sup>135</sup> Le et al., “Symptoms and Causes of Poverty,” 75.

<sup>136</sup> Saurabh Singhal and Ulrik Beck, “Ethnic Disadvantage in Vietnam: Evidence Using Panel Data,” (working paper, United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, Helsinki, Finland, 2015), <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/ethnic-disadvantage-vietnam>.

in many cases, minorities have received less or no credit from banks.<sup>137</sup> In Singhal and Beck's study, the data revealed that although more non-Kinh households applied for loans, lenders often rejected loans to minorities, and minorities received smaller loans than Kinh borrowers did.<sup>138</sup> When some minority farmers are unable to (or choose not to) receive credit from formal lending systems, they turn to informal lenders, believing that they can negotiate more flexible terms down the line if needed, according to researchers from the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE).<sup>139</sup> For example, minority farmers in the Central Highlands have been borrowing from private lenders, who can provide larger loans without a waiting period.<sup>140</sup> The problem with borrowing from private lenders, however, is that the terms are sub-optimal with high interest rates, short-terms, and risky penalties.<sup>141</sup> The World Bank reports that in a number of cases, the penalty for forfeiting on a loan was a certificate of land tenure.<sup>142</sup> In other cases, minority farmers had to repay their loans with their coffee produce at prices set by their lender. If the lender set the price lower than the market price, the lender could resell the coffee they received as payment at a higher price, and the farmer would be unable to pay off other debts, resulting in cycles of poverty and indebtedness.<sup>143</sup> From the start, minority farmers face bigger obstacles to poverty reduction than the Kinh because of their limitations in obtaining satisfactory credit.

Finally, poverty reduction among rural minorities can occur when they are able to diversify their production with other agriculture and non-farm ventures. When farmers in Vietnam diversify their farms with other crops and livestock, they are better able to handle fluctuations in crop prices and weather patterns as well as increase their total

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<sup>137</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 147–57; Singhal and Ulrik, “Ethnic Disadvantage in Vietnam,” 14.

<sup>138</sup> Singhal and Ulrik, “Ethnic Disadvantage in Vietnam,” 14.

<sup>139</sup> “Minority Farmers Rely on ‘Black’ Credit,” *Vietnam News Agency*, September 30, 2016, <http://vietnamnews.vn/society/343691/minority-farmers-rely-on-black-credit.html#hKIWE1OUYL9bwHf.97>.

<sup>140</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 157.

<sup>141</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 156.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 156–8.



income.<sup>144</sup> Households with members who engage in wage jobs and those who operate non-farm businesses also earn more than farm-only households do.<sup>145</sup> Thus, as Andrew Wells-Dang determined, successful farmers are those who take risky measures to plant a large cash crop, then diversify their agricultural production or transition their farms to a trade or service enterprise.<sup>146</sup> The proportion of minorities who transition to wage jobs and non-farm businesses, however, is far less than the majority, as seen in the section on Kinh-Hoa versus non-Kinh-Hoa in Upland Areas.

### **C. CHAPTER II CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this chapter was to describe poverty dimensions in Vietnam and show that poverty is higher among ethnic minority groups than majority groups along these dimensions of poverty. First, I detailed the three groups of people that make up the poor in Vietnam—ethnic minorities, people who live in mountainous areas such as the Northern Mountains and Central Highlands, and households that work in agriculture—to provide a basis for my argument. Then, I conducted three comparisons of wealth between the ethnic minority and ethnic majority. The first comparison served as a control group to show that ethnic minorities are less affluent than the Kinh in multiple dimensions of wealth including poverty rate, income, education, and health. The second comparison between Kinh-Hoa and non-Kinh-Hoa in upland areas proved that even in the same upland commune, the Kinh-Hoa are still better off than ethnic minorities. The final comparison on Kinh-Hoa and non-Kinh-Hoa in agricultural livelihoods pointed out the significant disadvantages ethnic minorities face as farmers compared to Kinh-Hoa farmers. Overall, this chapter shows that ethnic minorities are poor because of their ethnicity, geography, and livelihoods. Through the process of elimination, I determined that ethnicity and its associated social factors have the strongest effect on the perpetuation of minority poverty. The next chapter looks at the social factors that cause the persistence of ethnic minority poverty.

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<sup>144</sup> Singhal and Beck, “Ethnic Disadvantage in Vietnam,” 8.

<sup>145</sup> McCaig et al., “Growth with Equity,” 24–5; Tran Quyen Tuyen, “Income Sources and Inequality,” 17.

<sup>146</sup> Wells-Dang, “Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam,” 33–6.

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### **III. EXPLANATIONS FOR THE PERSISTENCE OF MINORITY POVERTY**

To combat interethnic inequality, the Vietnamese government has rolled out a number of poverty alleviation programs in ethnic minority areas, especially in the Northern Mountains. Although the state has recorded improvements in living standards, the cycle of poverty continues in mountainous and ethnic minority areas. I argue that minority poverty persists despite poverty alleviation programs and nationwide economic growth due to three social factors: minority cultural norms, ethnic discrimination, and ethnocentric government programs—which this thesis discusses throughout the rest of the chapter. This chapter explains how minority cultural norms impede economic growth, discuss the impacts of racial discrimination on minorities and how this affects wealth accumulation, and show that government programs are inefficient at reducing poverty because they incorporate ethnocentric policies.

#### **A. THE IMPEDIMENT OF MINORITY CULTURAL NORMS**

William A. Haviland et al. write that social obligations protect the intactness of a group.<sup>147</sup> Groups that choose social unity over the advancement of wealth are more concerned about their group's survival than individual survival. As long as the current standard of living is tolerable, the desire to expedite income growth remains secondary to altering group values.<sup>148</sup> In 2004 and 2005, Pamela McElwee conducted fieldwork in the Truong Son mountain provinces (in the north central coast) to observe the social interactions between Kinh migrants and ethnic minorities.<sup>149</sup> In her observations, the researcher witnessed certain minority groups knowingly forsake income-generating activities. For example, in many of the ethnic minority villages there are small convenience shops, which Kinh migrants normally own. When McElwee asked the minority villagers why they declined to operate convenience shops as the Kinh had, they

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<sup>147</sup> William A. Haviland et al., *Anthropology: The Human Challenge* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011), 464–5.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> McElwee, “Blood Relatives,” 85 and 99–100.

responded that if a minority group member opened a store, then that storeowner would be obligated to lend money to family members and neighbors, allow the purchase of goods on credit, or offer gifts to other members of the community without anticipating repayment.<sup>150</sup> The pressure to share assets are “leveling mechanisms,” explain Haviland et al., reduce friction between the haves and the have-nots in the group, thereby promoting group cohesion.<sup>151</sup> For the minorities in McElwee’s sample village, it was better to maintain a level of economic equality between group members than to upset the social balance.<sup>152</sup>

Unfortunately, methods of social unity for one group can become social problems to other groups that do not share those same values. McElwee shares the story of a Kinh woman married to a Pa Co ethnic man who was forced to shut down her village shop after losing money to unrepaid loans and relatives who purchased on credit.<sup>153</sup> Because her husband was Pa Co, she was restrained from demanding repayment from the Pa Co villagers. A Kinh person assumed the storefront, but the new storeowner also found herself contending with Pa Co villagers who would not repay their loans.<sup>154</sup> Another Kinh storeowner in a Van Kieu village complained that reciprocity was not fair between social classes.<sup>155</sup> “The local people here hate the rich. When we first came, because we were poor, they would give us rice and help us out. Now that we are doing better, they don’t like us. They accuse us of exploiting them.”<sup>156</sup> The minorities interviewed by the World Bank explained that the minorities and the Kinh have different outlooks on how to conduct business. The minorities “viewed market transactions as social relations between people in which one needed to treat and be treated fairly and generously.”<sup>157</sup> In each of these cases, the usual rules of borrowing and lending money conflicted with the cultural

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<sup>150</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 222; McElwee, “Blood Relatives,” 85 and 99–100.

<sup>151</sup> Haviland et al., *Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, 464–5.

<sup>152</sup> McElwee, “Blood Relatives,” 100.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 222.

<sup>156</sup> McElwee, “Blood Relatives,” 102.

<sup>157</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 219.

norms and values of the minority group, complicating relations between the minorities and the Kinh members of the village.

Moral values can also play a role in keeping minorities from fully participating in the Vietnamese economy. In minority villages interviewed by the World Bank for the Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA), researchers often heard that minorities were unwilling or did not know how to manipulate the prices of their goods to increase their profits.<sup>158</sup> When it came to lending money, groups like the Mnong, believed that it was better to be generous than to take money, and they often had difficulty charging interest or demanding repayment for a loan since this practice went against their cultural values.<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, Kinh migrants in minority regions, like those interviewed for the PRA, were generally more interested in the profitability of business than the morality of business even if their profits resulted from unfair business transactions with unsuspecting minorities.<sup>160</sup> Accordingly, significant clashes between the morals and ethics of minority and majority cultures prevents minorities from benefiting from the Kinh system of business.

Due to their limited experience with credit and financial services, some minorities are unable to borrow money effectively. In 2006, World Bank researchers conducted qualitative local research to collect responses to a variety of questions including “Why can’t some ethnic minorities access the formal credit system?”<sup>161</sup> One of the answers they received from a Hmong community in the Northern mountain province of Ha Giang was that they were afraid of falling into debt with the formal credit sector.<sup>162</sup> In the CSA, the World Bank researchers report, “we heard stories of Hmong families who had borrowed money from a bank because they were told they should do so, then hid the money someplace, and only took it back out again for repayment (by which time they

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<sup>158</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 219.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 155

also had to pay interest on the money which they had not used).”<sup>163</sup> In a survey conducted by the ADB, researchers found that ethnic minority women from Dak Xu commune ended up poorer after taking out loans because they did not know how to invest the loan funds to generate enough income to repay the loan with interest.<sup>164</sup> In general, the CSA noted that a distrust or misunderstanding of the banking system manifested most often in the poor, those with fewer years of schooling, and those without fluency in the Kinh language.<sup>165</sup> Borrowing money is an important and often necessary starting point for households that want to break the poverty cycle, but many families and minority farmers are unsure of how to use credit because they have not grown up in a culture or society that is accustomed to the use of financial services.<sup>166</sup> The International Labour Organization (ILO) once offered *Start and Improve Your Business* training to ethnic minorities in the early 2000s, but it is unclear whether or not the Vietnamese government continued finance and business training programs for minorities after the ILO program ended in 2007.<sup>167</sup>

Ethnic minorities often speak their own language at home and only learn Vietnamese as a secondary language.<sup>168</sup> Successful citizens, however, need language fluency to continue education, trade in the marketplace, use government services, understand contracts, and migrate for work; thus, lacking Vietnamese language fluency can be an overwhelming challenge for impoverished minorities. When the GSO administers the VHLSS, it provides an interpreter to survey respondents that require any

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<sup>163</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 155.

<sup>164</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Indigenous People/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction*, 34.

<sup>165</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 156.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>167</sup> See Jens Dyring Christensen and David Lamotte, *Ethnic Minorities - Emerging Entrepreneurs in Rural Viet Nam, A Study on the Impact of Business Training of Ethnic Minorities* (working paper, no. 13, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2000); Karlis Goppers and Mai The Cuong, *Business Training for Entrepreneurs in Vietnam: An Evaluation of the Sida-supported Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) Project* (Stockholm, Sweden: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2006), 49, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/---ifp\\_seed/documents/publication/wcms\\_143285.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_seed/documents/publication/wcms_143285.pdf).

<sup>168</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 100.

assistance in understanding the survey questions.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, to coarsely determine how language ability affects minority poverty, Bob Baulch and his team designated households that used an interpreter in the 2006 VHLSS as households with limited fluency in the *lingua franca*.<sup>170</sup> With this assumption, Baulch et al. could calculate that “rural ethnic minority households who cannot speak Vietnamese well are 1.9 times more likely to be poor than ethnic minority households who can speak Vietnamese, and 7.9 times more likely to be poor than Kinh and Hoa living in rural areas.”<sup>171</sup> Similarly, findings from Nguyen et al.’s analysis of the 2006 VHLSS data revealed that households with fluency in Vietnamese received twice their returns to education than households without language ability.<sup>172</sup>

Migrating to urban areas for wage work is one way families in Vietnam have been able to boost their total income, but this tactic can be especially hard for non-Kinh laborers who may feel out of place in the city.<sup>173</sup> As such, many ethnic minorities are reluctant to migrate to urban areas for work, preferring instead to remain close to their local villages so they can be near family and close friends.<sup>174</sup> In his field research, Andrew Wells-Dang learned that most of the minorities in Dak Lak and Lao Cai provinces who had left their homes to work in urban factories had returned home within a few years.<sup>175</sup> Some of the reasons given for coming back to the village were that the returned workers did not feel confident in the city, they were not making much higher wages, and “living far away from home is not culturally comfortable.”<sup>176</sup> According to Andrew Wells-Dang, minorities from the Central and Northern Highlands have not yet

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<sup>169</sup> Baulch et al., “Ethnic Minority Poverty in Vietnam,” 9.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Hoa Thi Minh Nguyen et al., “Language, Mixed Communes and Infrastructure: Sources of Inequality and Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam” (research paper, no. 12–07, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, 2012), 20–2, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2095776> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2095776>.

<sup>173</sup> Wells-Dang, “Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam,” 21–22.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 22.

developed a meaningful ethnic support network in the major cities because they only began migrating for work recently. Without people of the same language, culture, and social network to assist with housing, funds, or business contacts, Wells-Dang concludes that minorities have a harder time adjusting to the urban, Kinh-dominated areas and often end up returning to their home villages where, despite lower incomes, they feel more comfortable socially.<sup>177</sup>

Lastly, many ethnic minority communities own land communally, so decisions regarding the sale or purchase of agricultural land, forested areas, or livestock are often made by group elders rather than by individual households.<sup>178</sup> Even though the Land Law reforms committed the tenure of land to individual households, some ethnic minority groups still make decisions on land communally, thus preventing families from benefitting from their individual land rights.<sup>179</sup> Besides land, livestock is also considered a communal right among some minority groups. An anecdote from the (CSA) illustrates how major market transactions become the affairs of the extended family: “If someone in a household were to sell a buffalo without telling others in the clan, it would be considered an offense just like stealing (*lay trom*) something outright from the clan and the offender would be punished. The offender would have to reimburse the clan for what had been sold illegally in this circumstance.”<sup>180</sup> Similar to the first example on overlooking debts, sharing assets levels the ceiling for each family in community and compels togetherness, but unfortunately for the poor, communal rights to property also inhibit economic growth.

## **B. RACIAL DISCRIMINATION**

Like other ethnic minority groups in the world, the minorities of Vietnam are subject to various forms of discrimination by the ethnic majority. The prejudice and racism experienced by minorities range from stereotyping and racial profiling to

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<sup>177</sup> Wells-Dang, “Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam,” 22.

<sup>178</sup> Baulch et al., “Ethnic Minority Poverty in Vietnam,” 39.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 220.



mistreatment and human rights abuses. Both negative and positive stereotypes lead to deeply-ingrained and widespread misconceptions about minorities that affect their ability to access credit and financial services, earn equal returns to education and production, be viewed positively by society, pursue higher education and positions of leadership, and be treated fairly by local authorities. While racial discrimination presents itself in ways beyond these examples, it is difficult to empirically assess how racial discrimination affects returns to characteristics.<sup>181</sup> Thus, the following examples from qualitative research studies show how stereotyping and racial discrimination negatively impacts returns to Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

Racial discrimination can affect how minorities gain access to credit and financial services. The World Bank survey for its CSA found that most minority groups in its sample took out loans less often than the Kinh (except for the Thai and Nung), and Kinh borrowers obtained large loans (5 million VND) twice as often as minority borrowers.<sup>182</sup> One reason for these differences in borrowing patterns is the discrimination against ethnic minorities by loan officers. The CSA authors provide an example of Ede coffee farmers who claimed that the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (VBARD) denied their loan applications because the staff believed that “minorities were not creditworthy of large loans.”<sup>183</sup> In another case, Nung minorities in Dak Lak province alleged that Kinh loan applicants received larger loans because they bribed their creditors with cash payments. These perceptions of discrimination against minorities were validated by CSA researchers when local district officials told the researchers that “minorities ‘don’t know how to use credit’ and that they often squandered it on ‘property and vehicles’ instead of investing it to raise their incomes.”<sup>184</sup> In reality, the CSA survey found that most minorities invested their loan funds in agricultural supplies and livestock.

Discrimination can also affect equality in education and pay. The disparities in education and poverty between the ethnic majority and minority indicate that some level

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<sup>181</sup> Baulch et al., “Ethnic Minority Poverty in Vietnam,” 43.

<sup>182</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 148–50.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

of racial discrimination exists, but it is difficult to determine where and when the discrimination occurs. A study by Hoa Thi Minh Nguyen et al. examined the effects of ethnicity on returns to education in both mixed and non-mixed communes.<sup>185</sup> By comparing minority to majority returns to education in mixed communes, the researchers could control for language competency. The result was that Kinh households had higher returns to education than minority households with the same years of schooling and that the difference in returns to education was higher in mixed communes than non-mixed communes.<sup>186</sup> The researchers speculate that minorities experience lower returns to education in mixed classrooms because they are not getting the same level of attention from teachers and staff as the Kinh students or due to unequal treatment or opportunities in the labor market.<sup>187</sup>

Much of the discrimination faced by ethnic minorities takes the form of negative stereotyping. These stereotypes include beliefs that minorities are lazy, they do not know how to make a living, they are uneducated or unintelligent, and they are unmotivated to improve themselves.<sup>188</sup> The CSA contends that these stereotypes directly affect how minorities see themselves and how authorities view the contributions of ethnic minorities.<sup>189</sup> For example, the CSA survey found that “ethnic minorities were more likely to consider themselves backwards: 47.1 percent of minorities said their ethnic group was backwards, as compared to 16 percent of Kinh respondents.”<sup>190</sup> Twelve percent of minorities interviewed for the survey reported that minorities were lazy, while no Kinh held this same self-perception.<sup>191</sup> The idea that minorities are “backwards” or slow to “catch-up” is wide-spread and brazenly declared in state media and official

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<sup>185</sup> Nguyen et al., “Language, Mixed Communes and Infrastructure,” 21–22.

<sup>186</sup> Hoa Thi Minh Nguyen et al., “Language, Mixed Communes and Infrastructure,” 21–22.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 235.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

documents.<sup>192</sup> A report commissioned by the iSEE found that state newspapers portrayed minorities negatively more often than positively, associating minority people with negative words such as poverty, shabby, indebted, depraved, superstitious, lazy, and illegal.<sup>193</sup> As a result of the media's influence on popular thought, the CSA survey also found that many Kinh people held negative views of minorities as backwards, lazy, and uneducated. These evaluations depended on the minority group in question. Groups that were culturally more similar to the Kinh like the Tay and Nung were perceived less negatively than more dissimilar groups like the Ede and Hmong.<sup>194</sup>

Negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities disrupt the development of minority youth. Stereotypical notions of ethnic minorities as low-achievers affects how teachers treat and interact with ethnic minority students. Teachers may give less attention to minority students because the teachers see minority students as having less potential, affecting the motivation and self-esteem of minority students. In a study of low motivation for education achievement among ethnic minority secondary school students in Lam Dong province, Ngoc Tien Tran found that teachers' negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities had a damaging effect on the education motivation of ethnic minority students.<sup>195</sup>

Several local teachers admitted that some teachers showed biased behavior toward ethnic minority students. This was expressed in class interactions. Teachers paid less attention to ethnic minority students. Some even abandoned ethnic minority students. They required the students to sit silently in the class without giving them any attention. The abandoned

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<sup>192</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 237; Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment and Department of Sociology, Academy of Journalism and Communication, *Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities on Printed Newspapers* (report for Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment, Thế Giới Publishers, Hanoi, 2011), 19–20, last accessed 22 April 2016, <http://isee.org.vn/Content/Home/Library/331/portrayal-of-ethnic-minorities-inprinted-newspapers.pdf>.

<sup>193</sup> Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment and Department of Sociology, Academy of Journalism and Communication, *Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities on Printed Newspapers* (report for Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment, Thế Giới Publishers, Hanoi, 2011), 19–20, last accessed 22 April 2016, <http://isee.org.vn/Content/Home/Library/331/portrayal-of-ethnic-minorities-inprinted-newspapers.pdf>.

<sup>194</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 241–3.

<sup>195</sup> Ngoc Tien Tran, "Factors Associated with Low Educational Motivation Among Ethnic Minority Students in Vietnam," *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 32 (2013): 132, <http://en.apu.ac.jp/rcaps/page/content0089.html/>.

students gradually felt disgusted with school, hardly participated in the class activities, got poor educational performance, felt being discriminated and eventually dropped out. The problems between students and teachers existed due to the physical and social distance among teachers and students, differences in cultural sensitivity, lack of extra-curricular activities, and lack of encouragement and praise from teachers.<sup>196</sup>

Even at young ages, ethnic minorities are harmfully influenced by negative stereotypes. It can be generalized that students who receive negative or no attention from their teachers are less motivated to perform well or continue in school.

Perhaps the most extreme form of racial discrimination experienced by minorities are human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch records that Central Highland and Northwest mountain minority Christians have been singled out by the government for practicing religions that have not been registered with the government and charged with anti-government propaganda and seeking to undermine the state.<sup>197</sup> The repression of religious freedom and harassment by police has pressed some minorities to flee to Thailand and Cambodia. The human rights organization reports that ethnic minorities from the Central Highlands were held by police for several months in 2014 and 2015 for “questioning about their religious or political activities and possible plans to flee Vietnam.”<sup>198</sup> These minorities have been detained and abused by local police for holding prayer meetings and gathering to protest state land grabs, which are sold to commercial companies and resettled Kinh households.<sup>199</sup> Human rights abuses including physical and emotional trauma, land acquisition, and unmerited incarceration severely limit the ability of ethnic minorities to earn a living.

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<sup>196</sup> Tran, “Low Educational Motivation,” 132.

<sup>197</sup> “Persecuting ‘Evil Way’ Religion: Abuses Against Montagnards in Vietnam,” Human Rights Watch, June 26, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/26/persecuting-evil-way-religion/abuses-against-montagnards-vietnam>.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> “State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Vietnam,” Minority Rights Group International, 3 July 2014, accessed 27 April 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53ba8dc75.html>.

### C. ETHNOCENTRIC GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Since 1998, several government policies and programs concerning the economic development of ethnic minorities and mountainous communities have been carried out to mixed results.<sup>200</sup> These programs were designed to target specific deficiencies in the development of Vietnam's poorest minority and mountainous communes. Some programs, however, like the resettlement and sedentarization campaigns actually worsened ethnic minority conditions.<sup>201</sup> While well-intentioned, many government programs have been unable to achieve their goals due to poor targeting, incompatibility with the minority groups' customs and culture, and failures to address the source of slow economic development among minority groups.

In the last several decades, the government has approached ethnic minority issues from the perspective that "backwards" minorities need to "catch up" to the Kinh by mimicking Kinh methods of economic growth.<sup>202</sup> The resulting top-down policies provide minorities with little to no opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes of poverty-elimination. When unintended outcomes of government policies occur, the government often blames the minorities.<sup>203</sup> For example, to increase food production and reduce deforestation in the highland areas of Vietnam, the government began a large campaign to sedentarize swidden farmers and resettle lowland Kinh in the midland and highland regions. The program helped to curb overpopulation in the cities and identify land rights, but as a number of anthropologists have pointed out, resettlement and sedentarization became a huge hindrance to minority development.<sup>204</sup>

For one, Kinh migrants who were resettled in minority areas were given ancestral minority lands, leaving the minorities with less agricultural land and creating space for conflicts to break out between the indigenous inhabitants and the Kinh newcomers.<sup>205</sup> In

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<sup>200</sup> Nguyen and Baulch, "A Review of Ethnic Minority Policies," 1.

<sup>201</sup> McElwee, "Becoming Socialist," 201.

<sup>202</sup> Swinkels and Turk, "Explaining Ethnic Minority Poverty," 19–20.

<sup>203</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 239.

<sup>204</sup> McElwee, "Becoming Socialist," 201; Salemin, "Sedentarization."

<sup>205</sup> McElwee, "Becoming Socialist," 200.

the late 1990s and early 2000s, millions of lowland Kinh migrants were moved into the highlands to be “helpful examples” in the development of sedentary farms, to secure the Central Highland frontier environment, and to move Kinh people from crowded lowland areas to “unused” land areas, writes Pamela McElwee.<sup>206</sup> Oscar Salemink explains that the sudden and large influx of Kinh migrants along with the establishment of state-owned logging enterprises in the forests and the introduction of irrigation systems for wet-rice cultivation in the highlands resulted in massive land erosion and deforestation. Yet the government blamed the reduction of the forests on the swidden farming techniques of the minorities.<sup>207</sup> As indigenous residents saw their lands snatched up by millions of incoming Kinh, tens of thousands of documented conflicts erupted.<sup>208</sup> Some lands were eventually returned to the minority groups, but the lands conceded by the settlers were often of lower quality.<sup>209</sup> In actuality, the resettlement program did little to help the native inhabitants of the Central Highlands come out of poverty.

The sedentarization of “nomadic” minority groups were another major policy focus of the Vietnamese government, which saw swidden agriculture as a “backwards” method of farming.<sup>210</sup> By offering land and aid to minorities in exchange for the minority people’s cooperation in setting up permanent village settlements, the government hoped to voluntarily change swidden agriculturalists into stationary ones. The purpose of the sedentarization campaign was “to reduce shifting cultivation and shifting residences and ‘settle’ ethnic minority households; to contribute to poverty reduction; and to contribute to a reduction in deforestation and other environmental impacts,” explains Nguyen Thi Phuong and Bob Baulch.<sup>211</sup> The government, however, was unable to fully alter the agricultural practices of the highland minority groups for three reasons, writes McElwee: swiddening had a better “labor to output ratio,” upland lands were “not suitable for

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<sup>206</sup> McElwee, “Becoming Socialist,” 199.

<sup>207</sup> Salemink, “Sedentarization,” 127–8.

<sup>208</sup> McElwee, “Becoming Socialist,” 200.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Salemink, “Sedentarization,” 126–7.

<sup>211</sup> Nguyen and Baulch, “A Review of Ethnic Minority Policies,” 7–8.

permanent cultivation,” and the minorities were often given “poor quality land that no one else had wanted” in return for settling into permanent villages.<sup>212</sup> Instead of improving the lives of minorities, the Vietnamese government’s plans to sedentarize mobile groups depleted the resources of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and Northern Uplands.

Other top-down, non-participatory government programs designed from an ethnocentric Kinh viewpoint like the sedentarization program are also unable to alter the direction of minority development because they fail to incorporate the values and needs of minority communities. The CSA reports on a development project carried out by the Ministry of Culture that attempted to help a Hmong minority community in Ha Giang by giving them elephant rice seedlings to grow animal feed.<sup>213</sup> When the development team returned, they found that the Hmong had neglected to plant the seeds, throwing them into hole in the ground instead. The development team then criticized the Hmong for being “stupid” and dependent on government instruction. Yet the development team had not consulted the Hmong community elders to determine the group’s needs before distributing the seedlings, relying instead on their own opinion of what was best for the Hmong village. Instead of assuming that the minorities did not know what to do with the seedlings, the World Bank suggests that the Hmong in Ha Giang did not see the value in spending man-hours and resources on seedlings that would not benefit them, so they found a way to dispose of the product that was taking up space while following the government’s orders at the same time.<sup>214</sup> When a government imposes certain programs on minorities based on its own cultural values, it runs the risk of wasting money on programs and policies that the minorities will not use. The negative outcome is often blamed on the minorities, but this waste of aid resources could be prevented by engaging the target population in the decision-making and development processes.

Government programs based on misconceptions about ethnic minorities also hinder development. Because there is a widespread belief that minorities are autarkic, the

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<sup>212</sup> McElwee, “Becoming Socialist,” 199.

<sup>213</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 239.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

Vietnamese government invested in infrastructure development and the construction of commune centers where minorities could trade their products.<sup>215</sup> Philip Taylor, however, notes that the main beneficiaries of infrastructure development in Vietnam are people from the provincial capitals who use their expertise in land development to profit from businesses and land speculation.<sup>216</sup> Likewise, commune centers built through Program 135 funds are more often used by Kinh residents than ethnic minorities since ethnic minorities tend to live farther from the towns where commune centers are built. Minorities do engage in the market, but they do so in areas closer to their villages rather than in the commune centers paid for by the government.<sup>217</sup> If the government throws out its pre-conceived notions of minorities and deliberately studies the needs and wants of the minorities themselves, then instead of building unused commune centers, the government could help minorities by teaching them marketing skills.

#### **D. CHAPTER III CONCLUSION**

This chapter looked at reasons why poverty persists among minorities in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government implemented economic policies to spur growth among ethnic minority communities, but minority cultural norms, ethnic discrimination, and ethnocentric government programs have hampered wealth distribution and growth among many ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The culture of ethnic minorities differs significantly from that of the Kinh majority, going way beyond differences in language, dress, and customs. As this chapter points out, some ethnic minority groups place greater value on group social cohesion and communal living, discouraging individual members from seeking or attaining greater wealth. Other cultural aspects such as language use and familiarity with financial and credit systems can impact the ability of minorities to take advantage of income development policies and programs.

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<sup>215</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 239.

<sup>216</sup> Phillip Taylor, "Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants: Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development in Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2007.2.2.3>.

<sup>217</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 207.



The impact of racial discrimination is also discussed in this chapter. Racial discrimination against ethnic minorities can take many forms from the less aggressive forms of negative stereotyping to the more overt forms of land grabs and abuse by police and other authorities. The impact of negative stereotyping can impact minority group members' abilities to receive equal education, get the same access to credit and services, and be treated fairly and humanely in society. While the government has enacted legislation to ensure the rights and equality of ethnic minorities, the fate of minority group members is still largely subject to how well the Kinh-led administrations view and integrate ethnic minorities into their communities.

Finally, even though government programs exist to reduce poverty and increase economic development among the poor minority communities in Vietnam, many times, these programs and policies fail to reach their targeted goals. Oftentimes, policies fail because they are developed from an ethnocentric Kinh point of view, which sees minorities as a lower class of people who need to catch up to the Kinh by using the same tools and approaches that worked for Kinh households. The differences in cultural and social norms between the Kinh and ethnic minorities, however, limit the success of government programs. Oftentimes, government poverty programs are designed from a top-down perspective and with little input from the ethnic minority members themselves on what they value, resulting in lower than expected returns on government-funded programs.

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## **IV. CONCLUSION**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Interethnic inequality and the persistence of poverty among ethnic minorities in Vietnam is a complex problem. This thesis looked at the literature on ethnic minority poverty in Vietnam to determine three dimensions of society along which poverty most often exists in Vietnam—ethnic minorities, people living in upland areas, and people who subsist on agricultural job earnings. Then this thesis compared the poverty of minorities to the poverty of the Kinh and Hoa ethnic groups in the categories of ethnicity, geography, and livelihood to show that poverty and inequality are endemically ethnic problems. Finally, this thesis examined how cultural norms, ethnic discrimination, and some poverty alleviation programs have led to the persistence of poverty among ethnic minorities in Vietnam. This chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the thesis and recommendations on how the Vietnamese government can improve poverty alleviation programs in the future.

### **B. OVERVIEW**

The introductory chapter of this thesis presented the research question: why does poverty persist among ethnic minority groups in Vietnam despite the government's efforts to combat poverty and socioeconomic inequality among the poorest ethnic minorities? Studies conducted by the Vietnamese government and foreign researchers for the World Bank agree that the problem of ethnic minority poverty in Vietnam is largely a minority problem, and poverty continues to plague the poorest minority communities due to cultural norms, increased exposure to racial discrimination, and the impact of ethnocentrically-designed poverty alleviation programs. With these causes in mind, the thesis was set up to compare interethnic inequality among three dimensions of poverty and to discuss how cultural, social, and governmental impacts delay the advancement of poor minorities.

The first comparison of poverty between the two main ethnic groups contrasted the poverty rate, income levels, education standards, and health statistics between the

groups. At the national level, only 13 percent of Kinh-Hoa people lived below the poverty line, while the poverty rate among ethnic minorities stood at 66 percent.<sup>218</sup> Poverty depth and poverty severity were also strikingly worse for ethnic minorities. Regarding income levels, the data reveals a disparity in earnings; rural Kinh-Hoa earn twice as much as ethnic minorities. Minorities have lower rates of secondary school enrollment, an effect of the scarcity of nearby schools in minority villages, minority families pulling their children from school to work or earn additional income, and high education costs. Health-wise, minorities have lower life expectancies and greater rates of infant and child mortality. The first comparison establishes that ethnic minorities are poorer than the ethnic majority in consumption levels, income, education, and health.

The second comparison examined the differences in poverty between upland ethnic minority and upland Kinh-Hoa households. Poverty rates are higher among ethnic minorities not only at a national level, but also at district and commune levels. The poverty map presented in Figure 2 highlights the difference in poverty rates between ethnic minorities and the Kinh majority within the same district. Even in the same area, where resources and topography are similar, ethnic minorities have a much higher incidence of poverty. In upland provinces like the Northern mountains, the North Central Coast, and the Central Highlands, the difference in the incidence of poverty between minorities and the Kinh-Hoa can reach 60 percent (Figure 2). Differences in income in upland areas are similar to those at the national level; the poorest minorities in the Northern mountains earn half as much as the Kinh.<sup>219</sup> The disproportion in income between upland minorities and upland ethnic majority earners could be caused by the differences in wage employment. Not only do ethnic minorities earn less in wages and non-farm self-employment, but they are also less likely to have wage jobs or operate non-farm businesses.<sup>220</sup> The findings of this section show that geography is not a key determinant of poverty for ethnic minorities because minority households are still worse

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<sup>218</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Poverty Profile 2012*, 1.

<sup>219</sup> Tran Quang Tuyen, "Income Sources and Inequality," 6.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–11; Le et al., "Symptoms and Causes of Poverty," Abstract.

off than majority households in the same district and communes when access to resources and endowments are the same.

The third comparison between agricultural minority households and agricultural Kinh-Hoa households evidenced that Kinh-Hoa farmers are wealthier than ethnic minority farmers. In a Program 135 commune, Kinh-Hoa earned higher wages than non-Kinh workers in every stage of the farming cycle, especially during the harvesting stage.<sup>221</sup> The lower profits of minority farmers are attributed to several factors. One, minority households often have lower quality land; two, minorities have less access to quality credit or they receive smaller loans than most Kinh-Hoa; and three, minority households are less likely to have diversified farms and non-farm businesses.<sup>222</sup> These differences in wealth and earnings suggest that a dominance in agricultural life is not the primary cause of poverty among ethnic minorities.

Chapter III of this thesis addressed the research question of why poverty persists among poor ethnic minorities. Through an analysis of the research, both qualitative and quantitative, I determined that poverty persists among Vietnam's poor due to a combination of three reasons. The first reason is that the cultural norms of ethnic minorities prioritize group togetherness over economic enrichment. The second cause of the pervasiveness of minority poverty is racial discrimination, which prevents ethnic minorities from receiving needed resources for future investments. Finally, poverty persists because poverty alleviation programs developed by the Vietnamese government are poorly targeted, designed, and administered to meet the unique needs and cultural values of ethnic minorities, resulting in failed or below desired outcomes. The third chapter examines these three causes of lingering poverty.

Minority cultural norms cause a persistence in poverty because they discourage minorities from advancing socially and economically in favor of maintaining group intactness and social equity. The examples provided in this section include how some

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<sup>221</sup> Government Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Vietnam Household Living Standards 2012*, 555.

<sup>222</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 113 and 147–57; Singhal and Ulrik, “Ethnic Disadvantage in Vietnam,” 14; Tran Quang Tuyen, “Income Sources and Inequality,” 7–11; Le et al., “Symptoms and Causes of Poverty,” Abstract.

minority community members avoid repaying loans or feel obligated to overlook debts, and how decisions to buy or sell household assets like livestock, land, and farming equipment are communal decisions. Sometimes, the minority way of doing things is in direct conflict with Kinh values and ideologies, and the resulting distrust can lead to more conflict and racial animosity. In other cases, ethnic minority communities are just beginning to integrate with the Kinh majority and way of doing business, so that speaking the Kinh language, borrowing money from financial institutions, and migrating to Kinh urban areas for work are still unknown and uncomfortable concepts. From these examples, we see that minority cultural norms can be major obstacles to wealth enhancement.

Racial discrimination also inhibits economic growth for poor minorities. This section of Chapter III showed that racial discrimination affects minorities' ability to access credit. Official credit lenders may refuse or offer smaller loans to minorities because they think that minorities are less creditworthy.<sup>223</sup> This thesis also points out that minorities experience fewer returns to education, indicating discriminatory practices in education, job attainment, and pay. A great deal of the racial discrimination experienced by ethnic minorities is a result of the negative stereotyping that abounds in Vietnamese society, especially in official state media sources.<sup>224</sup> This thesis finds that negative stereotyping affects not only outsider perceptions of ethnic minorities, but also ethnic minorities' perceptions of themselves. Furthermore, the level of negativity directed at ethnic minorities varies among different minority groups so that some groups are considered to be more "backwards" than others.<sup>225</sup> Most egregiously, many minorities suffer human rights abuses that result in illegal immigration out of the state, major trauma, or death. The effects of racial discrimination on ethnic minorities are hard to measure, but discriminatory acts and words do become obstacles for minorities who are trying to exit poverty.

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<sup>223</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 155.

<sup>224</sup> Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment, "Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities on Printed Newspapers," 7.

<sup>225</sup> World Bank, *Country Social Analysis*, 241–3.

Finally, this thesis looked at a few programs directed by the Vietnamese government to lower poverty and encourage development among ethnic minorities. Two early programs that had a detrimental impact on ethnic minority prosperity were the resettlement and sedentarization programs of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The government of Vietnam applied these Kinh-centric methods of development to ethnic minority communities because they believed that Kinh cultural norms such as fixed settlements and wet-rice cultivation were better than the minorities' swidden farming techniques. The examination of literature written by numerous anthropologists indicates that the resettlement and sedentarization programs had long-lasting negative effects on ethnic minority communities including interethnic conflict, land erosion, and land loss. As this thesis points out, some government programs still fail to address the needs and consider the expertise of ethnic minorities in farming the upland areas. In this last section, I provide some policy recommendations on how the Vietnamese government can improve its programs to reduce poverty among ethnic minorities.

### **C. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

First, to establish better poverty reduction programs for ethnic minorities, the Vietnamese government must recognize its role in the negative stereotyping of ethnic minorities. The state should understand how negative stereotyping engenders poverty among ethnic minorities and commit to eliminating all forms of discrimination against ethnic groups, especially in the state-controlled media. Perpetuating the myth that ethnic minorities are difficult to help, lazy, incompetent, or backwards affects how the rest of Vietnamese society views the minorities and treats them in school, business, and government. It also has a detrimental effect on how minorities view themselves, lowering their hope to escape poverty and limiting their expectations for success.

Second, while the Vietnamese government has recognized the importance of seeking and incorporating the desires and needs of minorities to target and develop poverty alleviation programs, it still needs to redesign or shelve programs that do not fit the culture and ways of the ethnic minorities. Minority methods and needs differ from the Kinh because of their values and cultural norms, their experiences as an oppressed

people, and an understanding of their particular geographical area. Instead of imposing ideas, policies, and programs on the ethnic minority people, the government of Vietnam must encourage and elicit more participation from ethnic minorities to determine how poverty alleviation programs can encourage development and economic growth. For example, as M. Cairns and D. P. Garrity suggest, instead of creating circumstances that force shifting cultivation groups into fixed settlements, the government could work with agricultural scientists and indigenous farmers to determine how the merits of shifting cultivation and science can be combined to improve land use for groups accustomed to a particular pattern of planting.<sup>226</sup>

Third, training in agriculture, specific vocations, and other skills should be provided to minority and non-minority students who are unable to continue their education beyond primary school. While it is preferable that students have the resources to participate in secondary school, at this moment in time, secondary school education may be an unattainable luxury for some. The government can reduce this deficit by providing on-site, short-term training in subjects such as how to effectively borrow on credit or how to check market prices to avoid selling below cost. If new hybrid methods of farming in upland areas are devised, the government should also be prepared to offer in-depth, hands-on training to those who would benefit from the new farming methods. Providing better quality training on credit services and ongoing financial coaching may help to overcome poverty in certain minority communities.

In conclusion, reducing widespread poverty among Vietnam's ethnic minorities is a process that will require much time and forethought. Although the government is committed to taking steps to tackle ethnic minority poverty through research and funding, it must attempt to purge factors that limit the development of ethnic minorities, namely, ethnic discrimination and human rights abuses. Additionally, government programs should be designed with input from ethnic minority farmers, workers, women, and students and be directed by ethnic minority community leaders. Besides targeting the

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<sup>226</sup> Malcolm Cairns and Dennis P. Garrity, "Improving Shifting Cultivation in Southeast Asia by Building on Indigenous Fallow Management Strategies," *Agroforestry Systems* 47, no.1 (1999): 39, <http://www.worldagroforestry.org/sea/Publications/files/journal/JA0131-04.pdf>.



actual needs of minority group members, by designing programs with insight from minority members, the government can also anticipate and adapt to differences in cultural norms and values. If actions like these are taken, poor ethnic minorities will be one step closer to becoming thriving members of Vietnamese society.

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