

Poverty Reduction Strategies in an Ethnic Minority Community: Multiple Definitions of Poverty among Khmer Villagers in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Abstract

The Khmer people are one of four groups in the Mekong delta making up around 1.3 million of the total population of 86 million in Vietnam. They account for a large proportion of the poor compared to other group, with 53% considered falling under the poverty line (General Census of population and housing, 2009). Several national programs have been carried out to improve the lives of poor Khmer people. In An Giang province, in particular, where the majority of Khmer people live with 35% recorded poor, an agricultural development policy, a Government Program 134 (Note 1), and resolution 25 (Note 2) have been implemented, including agricultural modernization, house building, and saving credits.

Based on the field data collected from three months' ethnography in a Khmer farming village in An Giang province, this paper argues that different social actors have multi-facet definitions and measurement of poverty. Khmer's notion of being poor/well-off show little variation; they refer to define it by their own impoverished situation as due to a low level of income, coming from poor households (inherited/generational poverty), lack of sustainable work, low or no level of education, and lack of agricultural land. In particular, the latter factor is seen as an important reason for their poverty, according to their own definition. Further, there is emerging consensus among development professionals in Vietnam that poverty correlates with ethnic minority status due to low education, which leads a lack of involvement in business, an inability to manage their family finances, and a reluctance to apply for official jobs.

To the extent that Khmer people are living in poor circumstance, this paper also debates that state interventions may bring both advantages and disadvantages to the poor, such as agricultural modernization policy and saving credits for husbandry. Moreover, their livelihood practices lack dynamism, complexity, and diversity compared to poor Vietnamese people, due to their tradition and language barriers. Compared with poor Vietnamese, Khmers seem to be more excluded, more vulnerable, and insecure in attempting to move out of their poverty.

Keywords: Khmer people, Mekong delta, poverty reduction strategies, definitions of poverty

1. Introduction

Poverty reduction efforts in Vietnam, especially targeting for ethnic minorities, have been carried out by channels of the governments and organizations by implementation of various policies and projects, that its results have remarkable achievement during implemental time. Among of 53 ethnic groups in Vietnam, large amounts of Khmer populations are found in the Mekong delta make up 6.49% population (with around 1.05 million of 16 million) and 1.5% in Vietnam (roughly 1.3 million of 85.8 million) (General Statistical Office, 2009) with their poor proportion is higher than average (32% compare to 23% of entire region). The provinces

with highest poor rate are also those with residing of largest Khmer population. In other words, within any province having Khmer community, poverty incidence among them is substantially higher than other provinces in the region. Such remarkable consideration seems harder for Khmer compared to other groups to escape out of poverty (MPDA, 2004). This fluctuation could indicate that changes within poverty alleviation strategies might have caused by change in some ethnic groups' poverty rate. Hence, this paper in this sense will aim to Khmer group that have lived separately in isolated area rather than the poor Khmer in other areas.

Case study of Khmer people who depends on agricultural activities in the two mountainous districts of An Giang province in the Mekong delta - Tri Ton and Tinh Bien district is the example has the poverty rate is much higher than other Kinh majority, Cham and Hoa ethnic groups in this region. There has been although implementation of poverty alleviation resolution and programs in An Giang province so as to bring better lives for the poor Khmer ethnic group. Among of them, there are the program No 134, resolution 25 carried out since 2005 and agricultural modernization policy as well. Meanwhile the former is in terms of providing land for cultivation, for building house, and saving credit for husbandry, the latter is regard to intensify crops and increase harvesting machines in agricultural activities. However, its result is not remarkable due to few numbers of Khmer households have been escaped out of poverty but the rate of becoming poor is still higher than other groups.

Previous studies of development further in the Mekong delta have often been failed to pay much attention of local ethnic perception about governmental development program, and there has also little study respect of landless and poor Khmer group. So, this paper in regard focuses on the notion of their poverty and everyday lives among Khmer villagers. It argues that one aspect which could have impact efforts of poverty reduction is various poverty views can be defined and approached with different involved actors. This working research also could help explain the reason why some ethnic groups poverty rates stay high compared to other groups by connections between the differing their own perceptions of poverty and the poverty alleviation efforts. Moreover, by identifying problems which have been emerging in the everyday practices of the landless and poor people, their coping strategies will be discussed over various points in this paper.

In this paper, I will firstly give an overview the pictures of the research site in addressing poverty and the research methodology as well. Analyze multiple definitions among different Khmer groups in community and other actors (NGO, scholar and researcher) that emerged from qualitative research will be followed. The latter exercise focuses on local daily practices coping with their circumstances.

2. Overview of Research Site in Addressing Poverty

According to latest census from GSO in 2009, there are about 1.26 million Khmer in the Mekong delta, occupy about 6.49% of population as a whole. An Giang province, at the head of Mekong delta, borders with Cambodia and Vietnam, has not only plain area, but also mountainous. Its population is approximately 2.2 million with about 90,000 Khmer people, making up 6% of population in this province. Le Tri is a mountainous area populated by ethnic minorities, connecting Tinh Bien and Tri Ton district of An Giang province. It has a special terrain (half is plain area; half is mountainous). Its area is 2,550 hectare, in which the area under agriculture is 1,721 hectares, the area for forestry is 683 hectares, the area for use purpose is 83 hectares, and the area for living is 63 hectares. Khmer people occupy about 50% of its total population. This site is chosen to research because Le Tri commune is one of the poorest communes in the Tri Ton district of An Giang province. Large Khmer households make up over 50% population of this commune. There are a total of 1,500 households with 6,230 people, in which there are 748 Khmer households with 3,049 ethnic Khmer people. According to the statistics records from the provincial people's committee between 2006 and 2010, from provincial to commune level, the poor proportion of Khmer households is higher than the poor rate of average (Table 1). At the end of 2009, there were 434 poor households in Le Tri commune with making up 38.50% all of households, in which Khmer poor households occupy 313 households (Annual Report People's Committee, 2009). The classification of being poor people is based on the criteria from the national poverty line index in general and Labor and Social Welfare Service in An Giang province particularly. Poor households in the rural area have an average income/capital/month below 400,000 VND (Note 3), and poor households in the urban area have an average income/capital/month below 600,000 VND. The majority of its Khmer inhabitants have a living by rice-growing and cattle husbandry type '*nuoi chia*' (Note 4) (in Vietnamese, or normal cows) (Van, 2009). Most are engaged in survival strategies as wage agricultural labor, remaining in this local engage in small-business and other non-farm activities, practice along agriculture.

Table 1. Poverty proportions of the Khmer population of An Giang province and Le Tri commune Unit: %

Component	2006-2008	2009	2010
The overall poor rate in An Giang province	7	5	3.5
The rate of the Khmer poor/the rate of total Khmer households in An Giang province	45	40	35
The overall poor rate in Tri Ton District	18.25	14.25	10.25
The rate of the Khmer poor/the rate of total Khmer households in Tri Ton District	43	38	30
The overall poor rate in Le Tri Commune	30.39	26.44	27.50
The rate of the Khmer poor/the rate of total Khmer households in Le Tri Commune	40.11	38.50	36.02

Source: The report of socio-economic development of provincial people's committee, 2010

Further, since the border war ended in 1979, ethnic Khmer people from other provinces or from near the borders of Cambodia came back to their homeland in Le Tri commune. At that time, there were some households could get back their cultivation land, while others who lost their land and house because of inequality distribution from the local government. As a consequence, those who mainly work in wage labor are more vulnerable. Later, up until the post-socialist market reforms of the late 1980s, the agrarian economy of An Giang was predominantly cashless. In fact, in the early 1980s, due to the lack of a water irrigation system, Khmer people who lived in the mountainous area had grown only one crop of rain-fed rice field in high-lying fields (on the mountainous area) and one crop of floating rice (Note 5) (Khmer *srauv vea*) in the marshy rice field area (on the plains area). To articulate with the goal of national development so as to ensure the improvement of the socio-economic and living standards of the local people, large scale water projects in the local area were initiated to support the intensification of rice production in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, since construction of an irrigation system (canal 2) in Le Tri commune in 1992 by the government, farming systems in this commune have been dramatically transformed, from one rice crop yearly to three rice crops yearly and vegetable diversity as well (Participatory Research Appraisal, 2006). Nonetheless, it is also said that during this period of time just over 20 percent (about 236 Khmer households) of this village (household interviews, 2009) lost their agricultural land due to construction of the irrigation system. I could explore this issue is probably seen as the main first cause of landlessness and poor for Khmer people.

As mentioned early, in response to the high poverty incidence among Khmer groups in the Mekong delta and based on their basic need as well as their living condition, the government has endorsed some crucial programs and resolutions to deal with poor circumstances. Since then, the provincial government of An Giang province has promulgated the program 134 and resolution 25 for the poor in terms of supplying houses and improving their income through saving credits (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The former is modified from the national program 134 to make sure it is suitable with natural condition and living condition in provincial area. The latter is as 25/DA-UBND in 08/Dec/2008 of provincial level through the resolution 74/2008/QD-TTg on 09/June/2008 of Vietnamese government.



Figure 1. House building in the program 134



Figure 2. One of components in the resolution 25

Through the above village history, I learn why Khmer inhabitants stay poorer than other ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta, by looking at internal mechanisms and external mechanisms as well. In other words, there are

several reasons for the selection of this research site: (1) The living standard of Khmer people is relatively low; (2) Poverty reduction policies in terms of supplying houses and saving credit for husbandry and small business are carried out continually; (3) Agricultural production is their main income and application of machinery in agriculture is also remarkable; (4) They are faced with many kinds of socio-economic problems.

3. Methods of Research

This study combined a number of research methods in order to approach poverty issues. Ethnography was chosen as a methodological framework for studying poverty perspectives and offering an opportunity to examine perceptions and activities in my field. The study is based on both qualitative (group discussion, in-depth interviews) and quantitative method (questionnaires survey).

Group discussion: Drawing from the method of Participatory Rural Appraisal, 6 group discussions were organized. Author intentionally based on the government's criteria which are income sources and households' assets to classify 3 sub-groups as non-poor, escaped from poor, and poor which was with 5 men 2 women for every Kinh and Khmer people group in their community, with Kinh people as comparative group. Those meetings were addressing questions concerning general information at the village level; perceptions of poverty, income resources, and income generating activities return were discussed in detail.

In-depth interviews: Key people who know well about the implementation of poverty reduction program in An Giang province were selected and surveyed. Researcher, NGO, and scholar in An Giang were the focus of a questionnaire designed to understand more their perception on the reason for poverty and factors effecting supportive programs. Further, about 3 household heads for every sub-group (poor, non poor, and escaped from poor) being classified during the above focus group discussions who also interviewed. In depth interviews with diverse households group were implemented to understand their notion of poverty and coping strategies when being faced difficult circumstances. However, the interviewers should not be inconsiderate, since poverty is a very sensitivity matter for the poor; the questions should not be offending either.

4. Meanings of Self-Generated Local Khmer's Poverty

Poverty definitions and approaches to poverty among different societies in general and different actors in particular are diverse so they will be considered as socially constructed discourses. So, in this section, findings of the interviews concerning notion of poverty reflects aims to examine how and to what extend the poverty discourse have been constructed in Khmer community context in the Mekong Delta. Different to other previous studies, the rural poor household in this study was defined and characterized on the basis of poverty line with the purpose of argument to this criterion with their real situations. This means that the income or consumption is set of under poverty line is defined as poor; subjects in this study classified as poor group who have generated their income under 400,000 VND. As mention of PACODE (Care Organization belongs to NGO), this approach has data availability on poor people (as defined by GSO) is easier to find and get access to, since they are provided for through the governments' poverty line and other official documents. However, the statistics of monthly income of the poor rarely reveal their practical conditions. According to the Kinh, some households have many children that are dependent people sharing their income for survival or some whom have second or third income sources as well so income is possibly unreliable criterion to consider they are whether poor. In addition, as reflected by officials the level set for the poverty line itself is not realistic. This means that the minimum income required meeting basic needs of a person in their locality, regardless of other needs like entertainment, education and health care, ranges between 400,000 – 450,000 VND per month, much higher than the MOLISA poverty line. Following the view of MPDA (project of Mekong Delta Poverty Analysis, 2004), the poverty line normally is used for selecting localities for aid allocation or rewarding, so the study adopt this hint in monitoring and classifying poor households to examine the impact of poverty alleviation programs.

As mentioned earlier, among the three ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta (Khmer, Hoa, and Cham), Khmer make up majority and face significant socio-economic difficulties. The poor Khmer are same as other ethnic groups seen as having little agricultural land or no land or less opportunity to seek job sustainability. Concerning the perception of poverty among the Khmer ethnic group based on the group discussions, in-depth interview from different actors, this resulted in a long list with some reasons given for the Khmer poor socio-economic standing, including a shortage of capital, generational poverty which poverty has cling their fortunes from generation to next generation, heavy reliance on incomes from agricultural production, and high levels of landlessness. So, this part coins some aspects concerning about Khmer poverty as follows:

4.1 Economic Aspect

According to them, the poor are viewed as someone who obviously lacks money. They have to work for others, and usually go far from their home. Same as MPDA (2004), this survey also contends more than 80% of poor Khmers have engaged in off-farm and about 10% non-farm as wage labors regarding low paid, manual labor, low availability of any work, not enough to meet the household needs, and no-job sustainability. When asked to give an estimated amount of income for a typical poor household, the answer was approximately 40,000-70,000 VND per day.

Chau P, 32 years age, is the head of his family with 3 generations and also as the main labor to support for his old mother and two children. His family has been belonged to poor Khmer household at Trung An village, Le Tri commune. According to him, his family has kept poor-book (Note 6) about 15 years, he is seasonal agricultural labor as his main income and he attempt to work very hard. He usually goes far from his home to other province and to Cambodia for rice harvesting, pesticide spraying, fertilizer supplying. However, there is not sustainable means of income by developing of the agricultural mechanization status instead of hiring labors. This means that it has limited his working particularly and hired laborers in general in recent years.

(Household interview, 2010)

Other Khmer farmers consider their burden with debts/loans (from relatives, neighbors and agricultural bank) for feeding their family, or for treating their sickness, or for setting up some income generating activity that to be as characteristics of poor Khmer. The case of Mr. Chau T who is poor Khmer villager asserted about his situation:

My feeling is always worried about paying debt to Agricultural bank because I mortgaged my 3,000 square meter cultivated land during 6 years when my mother was sick at that time. After years, I can not afford to take my land back, because I am the main labor in my family and have only income source from hired labored. As a consequence, with my low and unstable income generation, I could only support to my family and return bank's interest every month. So, as far as my concern, lack of income is the crucial reason for poverty.

(Interview with Mr. Chau T, 45 years old, on December 2010)

As a consequence the economic aspect of the poor people they define themselves as unable to save money due to the fact that most of their everyday-earnings covers food for their family. This means that there is next to nothing left by the end of the day. In other words, most of poor Khmer rely on seasonal agricultural works, so they do not run small businesses or have the ability to take up proper income-generating activities same as the Kinh to combat poverty result in lacking of capital. However, some of Khmer households, contrasting of most of Kinh, are aware of the different government policies and programs available to them which can provide them with the opportunity to improve their situations such as by borrowing money from Social Policy Bank to start up some income-generating activities. Interestingly, some Kinh group of escape from poor respond that they do not want to escape from poverty any more because they would like to use poor-books to be accessed those government services, including reduction and exemption of school fees, having health insurance cards. An illustration of this case is Mrs. Thu But who has big family with four generations belongs to the Kinh group of escaped from poor.

For my family, we are out of poor circumstance in the early this year because of being considering our households economy. However, we, with four generations, who in reality have to stay in small house that limited space in daily activities for us. Hence, withdrawn our poor books by local authorities this time is unequal for our families; we need to have a poor-book to be assisted by some local reduction poverty programs, such as health insurance card supplying, education attainment supporting, and house building. If there is without having poor-book, it means that we will not be received any assistance and we cannot save money in order to buy the big new house.

She claimed that she disagrees with the national poverty line to construct the poor people because of:

Government defines poor household by a new poverty line basing on the market economic development that does not rely on existing human resources. In the locality, there are too many dependents in family that was essentially out of poverty when considering based on your income, however, their lives in fact are still very difficult. Therefore, current poverty line (400,000 VND/person/month) for poor households is not feasible. This is more pressure into the different group households, remained, threshold and escaped poor households.

(Interview Mrs. Thu B, 55 years of age, belongs to escaped from poor group of Kinh household, in 2010)

Referring to the above argument, it is stated that Kinh people considered the concept of poverty as an intrinsically part of “feeling poor” instead of an important that “causes them to be poor”. The head of poverty reduction programs in An Thanh village admitted Kinh people in practice have their requests and essential needs are higher than ethnic people. On the contrary, Khmer poor households, although they do view income as an important aspect of being poor when comparing to those who are well off and escaped from poor, they do not see income as the end goal to lead the life they want to. There is little doubt that economic factors determine the sources of earnings and the unique spending patterns associated with the nature of economic activities play a most vital role in explaining low level of income causing poverty. Well-off Khmer and Kinh households defined as having no economic worries or burdens, money to access knowledge/education, can afford to give children an education, assets provide for the family, save money, can expand their business and enough land to increase their income (Figure 3).



Housing of Khmer well-off group



Housing of poor Khmer group

Figure 3. Difference between features of well-off and poor housing Khmer farmers in Trung An village, Le Tri commune

4.2 Economic Logic of Poverty

Secondly, having little land or landlessness is partly the reason Khmer communities are poor. The greatest obstacle for poverty reduction in Khmer community in the Mekong Delta is that the majority of poor households are landless or have small plots of land, while the development of local businesses and creation of job opportunities have been very slow. Having said that, landless agricultural household were particularly concentrated in the southeast and Mekong Delta, where they comprised 89% of the total number of households relying on agricultural activities (Scott and Chuyen, 2004). According to the Khmer respondents landlessness was as part of being poor and as a reason for their poverty. If they have more land, they would be able to farm more and have enough food for their families and for business purposes. In relation to this, there are contradictory opinions concerning the reasons why landlessness is widespread in the Mekong Delta, especially in Khmer community. Land is an asset that they can pledge or sell/mortgage land use rights to households. Therefore, no land or less land leading to poverty as a result of land use right to be transferred follow the landowners' expectations and consider. In other words, after the mortgage or sale their land, they will have more revenues and longer use. As a consequence, there is no land and little land is not a problem, at least for a short time. In the same token, Care Organization (NGO) recognized that many Khmers cause this situation themselves due to indebtedness or because they sell/lease it. So Khmer poor group only consider the short-term advantages of selling their land, not the long-term consequence of doing so. Landlessness problems lead to consequences for poverty, but not cause of poverty as local Khmer people views. This means that, any household sell/mortgage their land to pay off their debts has been easily dropped into under poverty line.

However, when returning to agricultural modernization is longstanding policy orientation in Vietnam such as investment of agricultural machines, construction of irrigation systems, drainage and flood control, application for new varieties, fertilizers and so on, this paper can argue that reasons why indebtedness are widespread among Khmer community due to being pressured from market integration. At the beginning of the 20th century, these changes accelerated with the introduction of the “Doi Moi” policy, thanks to the agricultural development of irrigation systems, and floating rice and rain-fed rice were rapidly replaced by irrigated rice. The irrigated system is a much-diversified system. In the areas that are not affected by annual flood or by soil problems, farmers grow three rice crops per year or even seven crops over a period of two years. This leads to increased agricultural

inputs with a rather high usage of chemical, fertilizers, and high yielding seed varieties. Further, mechanization is also a significant cause of excluding the agricultural laborers who have little and no land. On the other hand, this type of development usually goes ahead, meanwhile most national programs on poverty reduction focusing on the agricultural sector in the Mekong Delta lead to limited participation of those poor groups, especially among Khmer communities. As matter of fact, Khmer ethnic in the Mekong Delta are missing out on many of the benefits of the liberal reforms. Lack of capital, knowledge and experience excludes them from development programs. How can farmers afford to learn all these new technologies? How can they suddenly analyze the market information, get enough capital, rent labor, have draught power and build the required field constructions? As a consequence, the development of agriculture is a new challenge for poverty alleviation strategies and raises wider concerns about social differentiation among farmers.

Although contrary to the subsistence theory of production happens among Khmer community but in practice, with declines of rice prices and increasing of input costs of production, Khmer medium and poor farmers had become trapped in debt and unable to pay off their debts incurred in agricultural production have had to sell their land or seek work as unskilled migratory labors. An alarming recent socioeconomic trend in the Mekong Delta, Xuan (1998) claims while some of the poor became poorer and suffered and some of the non-poor were pushed below the poverty line. Case study of Mr. Chau T is as above illustration:

The family of Mr Chau T (45 years of age) has 5 members, who do not own any agricultural land because 1 part parcel of land was lost due to the irrigation construction project in 1992 and because remaining part was sold to pay their debts in 2007 due to failed their crops and now being classified poor household in village through receiving a poor-book. They (couple) have worked as seasonal wage laborers with an income of about 600,000VND per crop, but currently in the situation with harvesting machines, they have been excluded in development process and become as unemployed people. So, now they can attain our subsistence by gleaning rice on the farm after harvest or borrowing money from their relatives or receiving food from the temple in their locality.

(Household interview, 2009)

Therefore, in this context the national poverty alleviation No. 134 promulgated some policies for supporting production land and piped water supply in which agricultural land is one of necessary matter resolve the landlessness status happening amongst Khmer community in the Mekong Delta in recent years. However, the existing difficulties in social and economic life of the policy beneficiaries increasingly arose, becoming heavy pressure in each locality. As Mr. L who is the vice-head of the Bureau of Tri Ton district Labor Invalids and Social Affairs pointed out that:

The situation of “hidden” sale and mortgage agricultural land among ethnic Khmer group is complicated. Many ethnic minority households currently have certificates of land use rights, but actually have “white hand” and still employed or hired laborers for others. In contrast with the household on the list are entitled to program number 134, their assets have dozens of cultivated land.

He continues that

“...there are some subjective and objective reasons for this circumstance. Some Khmer poor households who lack the capacity to overcome the risks and uncertainties in their business and their lives tend to choose urgent solution is land mortgage, or land sales. This was also the fact that many families are supported to redeem their land, but they sold that land back in a short time later. Unfortunately, we can not collect this exact data...”

(KIP interview with district authority in 2010)

In this regard, this survey can explain the issues from different angles, the critique from intellectuals, NGO and scholar in the Mekong Delta that the root of not being succeed in businesses and land scarcity within Khmer households is due to low education (this issue will be discussed in detail in next section). This is seen as due to the fact that only 74% of Khmer children are enrolled in primary schools and many Khmer boys are rather sent to pagodas to “attend Buddhist education”, not to attend vocational trainings. According to Prof. VTX (interviewed 2010), almost of extension staffs in training courses are Vietnamese and even are not professional to impart their lectures regarding agricultural production activities. As a consequence, Khmer farmers can not follow them to apply these methods for their paddy fields.

On the other hand, examining with other Kinh and Khmer groups who escaped from poverty claimed that landlessness is not the cause of poverty because some of them could combat their poverty circumstance by selling/mortgaging their land to become as unskilled laborers in urban cities.

With happiness on her face, Mrs. Neang P, who has all of 4 members in family are unskilled migrated workers in Binh Duong city, said that her family mortgaged 3,000 m² own cultivated land to migrate into urban area for seeking another works with salary about 1,7 million VND per month per person.

(Household interview, 2010)

4.3 Cultural Logic of Poverty

When asked about the causes of poverty, the most common answer was the “lack of education” and the lack of schooling of a considerable part of the population, especially among Khmer women. In statistic, the large number of illiterates and the high rates of Khmer villagers dropout of school as important causes of poverty.

Some non-poor Kinh and Khmer households contended that reason for Khmer poverty is due to low education levels. The findings of table 2 are true that more than 60% and 28% of poor Khmer people in the area are illiterate and have not finished primary school. It is a fact that most of them as seen in table 2 have high proportion of primary level education, but actually they did not finish this level, normally they finished second grade at the primary level. Even though, compared to Kinh group regarding higher education (college/university) between non-poor Khmer and Kinh has wide gap with the former is lower than 3 times the latter, 11.1% and 3.6% respectively. Emphasizing these cultural factors, leaders and intellectuals in the Mekong Delta place great emphasis on education and training as paths out of poverty. In this relation they refer to poor ethnic people feel that the formal sector institutions have excluded them. Some locals have expressed their exasperation that despite sustained efforts by the more enlightened ethnic Vietnamese group to “raise” the Khmer intellectual level to parity with their own, the economic situation of group has still not improved. In the same vein of scholar VTX, Vietnamese education system in rural areas is inadequate that almost all pupils have difficulty understanding and coping with their lessons and teaching ability is also limited. Further, there is small proportion of Khmer pupils still struggle with the official curriculum, repeat years in school leading to dropout rates high. Meanwhile, indicators in education attainment result in increasingly inferior in education system.

Table 2. The education standards among different groups in Le Tri commune

Social groups		Illiteracy	Elementary	Secondary	High school	College/university
Kinh (%)	Non-poor	0.0	44.4	18.5	25.9	11.1
	Escaped from poor	16.7	46.7	16.7	13.3	6.7
	Poor	27.8	51.9	17.7	1.3	1.3
Khmer (%)	Non-poor	57.1	17.9	21.4	0.0	3.6
	Escaped from poor	50.0	28.6	14.3	4.8	2.4
	Poor	61.1	27.8	9.3	1.9	0.0
Average		41.4	36.3	14.6	5.1	2.5

Source: Household survey, 2010

With respect to religious practices and traditions are often conflicted respects with poverty that poverty is bad because deprivation involves suffering. Yet the salvation religions offer is not material wealth, and certain types of poverty can even be beneficial in reducing distractions that otherwise interfere with the spiritual life (Loy, 2010). So, in relation to this aspect, Care Organization mentions that outsiders see these as a “development barrier”, which means that outsiders view these expenditures as hindrances for further development among Khmers. Taylor (2007) analyzed the notion of “moral accumulation” was advanced by provincial officials in a recent poverty study to explain why the Khmer remain the poorest group in the Mekong Delta. The argument follows that caring less about economic enrichment than moral attainments; the Khmer devote their energy and scarce material resources to merit-making and pagoda refurbishments. According to Mr. Chau S who is the Khmer vice-head of the Trung An village claims that:

.....due to longstanding religious practice, most Khmer people also perceive ideas and organize major religion events do not depend on their existing capabilities. He concerned

although local officials who canvass Khmer but inefficient because due to low education level; this results in unaware what is limited and what is increased in order to have reasonable expenditure in their family. As far as I concerned, the majority of the Khmer poor feel that they do not know why they are poor, mostly having the temporary lives through day and working so hard, but as his view that reason is due to being have job instability, and unaware in how to calculate reasonable revenues and expenditures resulting in they always have face uncertainty lives.

(KIP interview with local staff in 2010)

In conducting fieldwork, on the other hand, local authorities even though local Khmer staffs are satisfied with their remarkable achievement in recent years with respect to promulgate about expenditure-reducing strategy and time-limitation in Khmer traditional ceremonies, festivals, weddings and funerals. When asked about this, most of the interviewed Khmer said that they only contribute money or make some of offering, when and if they can afford it. Kinh and Khmer groups practice different religions; Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. As seen in table 3 the number of households in contribution or donation to their temple from different groups, the contribution to pagodas of the Khmer group is higher than Kinh group, with 69% and 8%. Amongst the Khmer, it can be said that the religious practice of the poor Khmer is highest rate compared to remaining non-poor and escaped poverty groups, 16 households compared to 6 and 7 households. According to them, this reflects their sense of belonging to their community and their ethnic background. Furthermore, it gives them the support, encouragement and comfort they are in need of when living in an impoverished situation. The family of Neang T exemplifies this case, she is widow with two daughters who are 14 and 20 years, her family belongs to the poor household list of commune. Although her income generation is just enough for her daily expenditure she always contributes to the temple 10kg rice for temple every month because with in good faith she hopes that her husband soul in the sky would be happy. Hence, throughout this story as representative for Khmer religious orientation they do not consider this issue as related to their poverty as outsiders' views and they can be seen themselves as rich people in morality.

Table 3. The number of households in contribution to temple amongst different groups

Ethnic	Social group	Without contribution	Contribution	Total
Khmer	Non-poor	0	6	6
	Escape from poor	2	7	9
	Poor	11	16	27
	Total	13	29	42
	Proportion (%)	30.95	69.05	100
Kinh	Non-poor	5	1	6
	Escaped from poor	7	1	8
	Poor	23	1	24
	Total	35	3	38
	Proportion (%)	92.11	7.89	100

Source: Household survey in 2010

As the same token from scholar Prof. NVC supported that:

This matter belongs to the Khmer cultural life and cultural tradition; they do not think their contribution to the temple such a waste and a cause of poverty. For example, a ethnic family offers a free party for his villagers in the event of store opening, he actually has great significance for two issues in terms of cultural issue and economy, food is expressed as sacred cultural beliefs in their spiritual, this is in addition an opportunity to create network with other people in village; and who is also respected by everyone in the village. So, as far as their perception is not wasted as local staff said.

Going back Khmer situation, it is really meaningful to them, and of course they do not think this aspect is cause of poor as local staff saying. Another example to be clear explanation that almost Indonesian woman work in the island only decorate on trees at the resort, meanwhile

Indonesian men play cock-fighting. However, I myself think their work is actually attracting tourists, and thus that is their income of source.

(KIP interview with scholar in 2010)

On the contrary, when talking to some other well off Khmer households in this village, this issue should be considered because the story showed to be more varied. They continued that this was an aspect not likely to change over time. Mr. Chau S continue to show a case of fund used for improper purpose of the poverty reduction program

Ms. Neang C, 36 years of age, has one youngest brother who would be attended Buddhists education during teenage time since 2000. At that time, due to lack of money but her family would like to have a party before her brother becoming as monk, she decided to sell cattle that was being supported by provincial poverty reduction program. As a result, she was indebted to this program because of using subsidize in wrong intention.

(Household interview, 2010)

4.4 Social Aspects

Besides the economic aspect of poverty, the findings of the interviews also show the feelings when having the poverty certification as poor-book mentioned earlier. From my interviews with Khmer and Kinh villagers discussing about this aspect, I learned that different people have different understandings and feelings. Several of the interviewees said that this does not make poor Khmers feel ashamed or poorer; they felt the government acknowledged their poverty circumstances and was giving them the needed attention by giving them a poor-book. This discourse has been widespread among local authorities and non-poor Kinh groups that most of poor Khmer villagers used to depend on supports. Yet this study argues the rate of poor Kinh respondents much more than the rate of Khmers having above views. In other words, they felt more relieved and relaxed when having a poor-book, since they can send their children to school and take them to hospitals if necessary without worrying about payment and receive other provincial poverty reduction programs, meanwhile some poor Kinh households felt poor because other people portrayed them as poor result in they try to improve their living to escape poor.

Mr T, 50 years of age with 2 sons who have studied secondary school and high school. Nonetheless, he complained why local staffs withdrew his poor-book so that one of his sons cannot pursue studying at high school. Although his family income improved, affordability for his son to school is his great challenge.

(Household interview, 2010)

However, this discourse is firmly entrenched among the poor Khmer in the Mekong Delta who see themselves as over-whelming poor and likely depending on outside interventions to move out their poverty. Hence, with this in mind, this attitude which depends on external supports is popular not only from Khmer poor groups but Kinh poor and Kinh escaping poverty groups as well.

According to Khmer poor interviewees they feel part of their community because they are still shown respect from better off members of their community and their explanation for this is that people are not seen as inferior because they are poor. Instead, people share the idea that everyone is doing their best to get by in life and therefore there is nothing to criticize or disrespect. According to the poor Khmers, respect is seen as a very important aspect due to the affect it has on them. They explained that the respect they get from both other poor and well off Khmers help to stimulate them; they feel supported and encouraged to keep trying their best to improve their situation. An example is that Mr Chau H belongs to elderly and solitary household was classified poor group, his family has been living in their neighbor's house for over 50 years, by simply borrowing. In short, the poor Khmer people did not feel that they were left outside their community due to their poverty.

5. Adaptation of Livelihood Practice for Poverty Reduction

Before examining livelihood diversification among poor Kinh and Khmer households, this paper looks at general impacts of provincial poverty reduction programs applying to Khmer community in An Giang province.

Beyond the high rate of poverty in the Khmer community in An Giang province, the question of how to reduce the poverty situation and improve local people's living standards is of great concern for the local government in terms of rural development. In the past few years, both local government and NGOs have carried out a number of programs and projects in this region to improve Khmer people's livelihood. For instance, the government

program 134 and resolution 25 have been undertaken to support the poor ethnic communities in the Mekong delta. Moreover, many development projects have also been carried out by NGOs, such as CARE organization and HEIFER International, to support financial capital as well as to provide training for raising livestock and cultivation. Some of these projects have contributed to reduced poverty in many Khmer ethnic communities.

This paper examines general some impacts of governmental program 134 and resolution 25 which have currently applied to livelihood strategies of Khmer and Kinh poor people. In particular for this local, while the former is to provide house building, the latter is to support saving credits for small business and cattle husbandry. Most of these programs have operated using a top-down approach that has ignored the participation of Khmer people, such as the decision in buying cattle belongs to local authorities while Khmer local villagers have experience in selection good cattle breed for husbandry. Furthermore, uneven distribution occurred in Khmer poor community shows that some escaping poverty households have still been provided cattle in order to increase income source while some real Khmer poor until have no-support. On the contrary, regarding the program 134, according to Van (2009), in terms of reducing poverty, it only affects to that there is only a small change in structure of jobs, the sources of household income does not changed and the percent of households borrowing money is still high at both periods before and after having the house.

In other words, this is the ideology of mainstream development focusing on the structures and little attention to people, while the poor Khmer people become victims, as powerless as objects. According to Taylor (2010) most Khmer villagers in the Mekong Delta readily acknowledge their poverty and lack of economic power in relation to the supposedly more politically powerful Vietnamese.

In order to respond with their poverty circumstance, Yaro (2002:12) suggests that, the strategies pursued by households have been described as coping strategies, which are geared towards maintaining a continuous flow of food for household consumption. This approach considers food as the main priority, and all coping strategies are geared towards maximizing immediate consumption without regard for the repercussions of those strategies.

A popular trend is the collective diversification by Khmer poor household members into agricultural wage labor income-earning activities as a principal source of coping. From their land and common property, women and children contribute to their household economy by harvesting the products that have some value, such as wood from forest, grass from paddy fields, and snail/crab, water hyacinth flowers during flooding for sale, or herding cattle for others in village to supplement family income (Figure 4).



Khmer children herd cattle and collect grass for cattle feed

Figure 4. Additional Khmer children's employment in Le Tri commune

Meanwhile, beside the poor Kinh households set up their small business as street vendors, wage migratory worker in city urban. The ultra-poor employ this activity is critically important because it helps reduce dependence on a single source of income, which constitutes a key determinant of vulnerability (Middleton, 2001). During fieldwork, it was very interesting strategy in terms of diversifying income sources for survival is that poor Kinh households could be flexible their livelihood much more than poor Khmer people. They rely on "backyard gardening" producing their own food both for consumption and for sale (Figure 5).



Kinh poor people farmer cultivate flowers for sale during Lunar New Year

Backyard gardening for sale and for consumption by poor Kinh household.

Figure 5. Income diversification of Kinh households in Le Tri commune

In contrast, many poor Khmer farmers prefer to their off-farm work as cattle husbandry and seasonal agricultural employment. In addition, they prefer to obtain through their informal social networks of family and friends, and prefer to learn from their neighbor's successes and problems, rather than through official government channels.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the context of social and economic vulnerabilities experienced by poor Khmer farmers in Le Tri commune of An Giang province as well as Khmer perceptions of poverty and coping strategies at their disposal. Drawing on the survey data as well as life history interviews, this research analyzes the impact of pathways out of poverty's programs on local ethnic livelihoods.

According to the interviewees, it seems despite having to struggle for survival in their daily practices, the poor defined their poverty by their own poor situation. No matter what kind of situation they are in, state intervention may bring both advantages and disadvantages to the poor, especially for solitary households or poor women who are the most vulnerability and face insecurity in their livelihood.

As discussed, in this regard, it is important that poverty alleviation programs be designed to cope with all types of poor. Especially in time of difficulties, several actions or programs should be carefully designed so that they can help the poor mobilize their assets to avoid increased vulnerability. If planners are to offer appropriate assistance to poor people struggling for survival, they must first acquire a better understanding of the lives of those they aim to assist. As is clear from the case studies presented in this paper, there are many types of poor, each with their specific problems, and response.

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Notes

Note 1. Program number 134: the decision number 134/2004/QD-TT date 20/Jul/2004 was promulgated. It is about providing the poor ethnic groups who still face difficulties in their lives with the land for building house, and chance to access clean water.

Note 2. Resolution number 25: is as 25/DA-UBND in 08/Dec/2008 of An Giang provincial level through the resolution 74/2008/QD-TTg on 09/June/2008 of Vietnamese government in supports of occupation solution for ethnic minorities.

Note 3. Vietnamese currency: \$US 1=20,000 VND (the exchange rate in 2010)

Note 4. "Nuoi chia" is a raising style that happens in both periods, starting when poor person receives a female calf from the owner. When the cow gives birth the first time, it will belong to the owner if it is a female calf. If not, it is sold and the received money is divided equally into two: one half for the owner and one half for the raiser. The second time a calf arrives, either female or male; it will belong to the raiser. Later, the rule is repeated. During the raising time, if the cow dies for whatever reason, there is no compensation. In a case the contract is ended by the raiser, this cow will be sent back to the owner.

Note 5. Floating rice can be planted in an area of seasonal flooding so long as the floodwaters do not rise faster than about 0.1 meter (4 inches) a day, a rate with which the rice can keep pace. Thus it has a growing season of about 9 months.

Note 6. Poor-book is given to them, who fall under the poverty line by the government. The government officials are given the authority to decide who are eligible for poor-book. The poor book would give poor people the opportunity to be received the Government's support.