



Land Holding Changes and Kinh and Khmer Farmers' Livelihoods in Thoi Thuan B Hamlet, Thoi Lai Town, Co Do District, Can Tho City, Vietnam

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Abstract

Prior to 1975 the Saigon regime in Vietnam implemented land reforms in the form of private property rights. After 1975, land reform based on an egalitarian approach to land distribution for every household member eliminated both large scale land holdings and landless people. However, land redistribution and the establishment of agricultural cooperatives in South Vietnam was not as effective as the Government would have liked. It is said that methodological shortcomings and the inexperience of the State in implementing agrarian transformation led to the failure of this reform. Since the introduction of the 1993 Land Law and neo-liberalist policies, land has effectively become a commodity distributed through market mechanisms. Therefore, land can now be bought and sold by and to anybody. Commoditization of the land has increased the gap between the rich and the poor. In fact, the neo-liberalist ideology focuses on effectiveness and efficiency but not social security, because the Land Law reforms have introduced competitive power relations and an insecurity of land tenure. Some poor farmers do not have enough capital to invest effectively in agricultural production, leading to the sale of their land and them becoming landless. Therefore, in order to survive, wealthy, medium and poor farmers, as well as landless people, have had to diversify their livelihoods through a combination of on-farm, off-farm and non-farm activities.

Keywords: Egalitarianism, Land law, Neo-liberalism, Commodity, Diversify, Livelihood

1. Introduction

Land reform, particularly of farmland, has, over the years, been a major strategy of the State in seeking to manage land, control people and improve rural societies in Vietnam. However, the different political periods have reflected different land reform strategies. As a result, land holdings and the lives of the farmers in the Mekong Delta have been affected by the land reforms taking place prior to and since 1975. The impacts of these policies are reflected in the land holding situation at my local research site.

In Thoi Lai town, I selected Thoi Thuan B hamlet to be my research site, because this hamlet contains a large area of agricultural land affected by the 1993 Land Law, with a greater amount of diversification in occupations (which now include farming, small industrial and business enterprises, and service businesses), a greater number of Khmer and poorer people, and more complex social relations and networking taking place than in the other hamlets in Thoi Lai town.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Scope of the Study

My study is focused on the land holdings and livelihoods of the different Kinh and Khmer farm households in the study area, especially the poor farm and poor landless households in the community. Since the 1993 Land Law was introduced, the farmers and landless people have had to cope with a scarcity of land resources in their rural area.

However, in order to understand how the farmers' land holdings and their livelihoods have changed since the introduction of the State's *Doi Moi* policy (the Vietnamese State decided to shift from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, the so-called "*Doi Moi*" policy, at the end of the 1980s), those land holdings and livelihoods introduced by the Saigon regime and also during the reunification of the country after the American-Vietnam war will also be revealed.

2.2 Research Site

Within the context of the agrarian transition, Thoi Lai town in O Mon District was changed to Thoi Lai small town in Co Do District in 2004 and then was changed to become Thoi Lai District earlier this year (2009). It comprises five hamlets: Thoi Thuan A, Thoi Thuan B, Thoi Phong A, Thoi Hiep and Thoi Hoa A. Thoi Lai town is located 30 kilometers away from central Can Tho to the east. Thoi Thuan B hamlet, with 508 households and 3096 inhabitants, was selected to be my research site because the hamlet has a large amount of agricultural land (107 hectares), and displays a large amount of diversification in terms of different occupations, a large number of Khmer and poor people, and a more extensive social network than the other hamlets in Thoi Lai town.

2.3 Data Collection

The data for my study was gathered from participants (farmers, landless people; hamlet, small town and district officials), through focus group meetings and discussions (including the different economic household groups of Kinh and Khmer people, the village elders and hamlet officials), household interviews (with farm households and landless households; both Kinh and Khmer), individual in-depth interviews (with farmers and landless people from different economic groups: Kinh and Khmer, the elders and officials) and from key informants (the elders, hamlet and small town headmen and leaders of the hamlet and small town associations), and was cross checked through field observations and secondary information in the form of relevant studies and reports.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied during my research; therefore, the way in which I gathered my data was through my integration into the Kinh and Khmer farmers', and the poor landless people's everyday practices in terms of both their ordinary everyday life and their production practices, besides also obtaining information from questionnaires.

The necessary data and information required for carrying out the research could have been collected at a number of different levels, such as at the city, district, village, hamlet, household and participant levels. However, this data and information would only have been considered as an initial help for carrying out the research, because, in fact, data collection for social science studies tends to be very complicated; data and information at different levels is interrelated, so that one might not be able to separate one from the other. Moreover, a number of data collection techniques should be applied whenever a researcher wishes to obtain information at any level. For all these reasons, I gathered the necessary data and information from research questions and in line with my research objectives.

2.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

References and data on the different kinds of household and the different actors, were collected and analyzed using quantitative methods (using Excel and SPSS), both for description and for a comparison between the different groups of farmers and landless people. I also used qualitative methods to capture the social relations, networking and livelihood diversification aspects of the different economic groups, as well as between the Kinh and Khmer households, in order to reveal the livelihood strategies they use to adapt to the land policies.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Classification of the Households in the Thoi Thuan B Hamlet

Generally, according to the household classification provided by the key informants (the local elders and hamlet leaders), poor households occupy about 37 percent of the total number of households in the hamlet. The number of better-off Kinh households is higher than that of the Khmer, and the percentage of poor Kinh households is lower than the Khmer. In addition, poor farm households stand at only 27 percent, but the poor landless households make up 45 percent of all households. The percentage of poor farm Khmer and poor landless Khmer households is higher than that of the Kinh.

This classification is derived from the local knowledge and experience of the farmers and the local authority employees, whose ages range from in their forties to their seventies, and include both Kinh and Khmer farmers who have lived in this hamlet between 33 and 55 years, and therefore know well the livelihoods of the local households in the community. As a result, they were able to share their ideas and understanding in order for me to classify the total of 455 households by their status in the hamlet, based on assets such as land holdings, labor, income, house situation and equipment/machinery. As a result of this, I came up with the following classifications for the farmers in the study area: (i) better-off, (ii) medium and (iii) poor, all of whom can be either landed or landless. The results of this research are shown in Table 1 in the index (from a group discussion, October 2007).

3.2 Landholding Changes and the Livelihoods of the Farmers at the Research Site (Thoi Thuan B) before 1975 and up to 1992

The landholding of the farmers in this hamlet was large during the French colonial period, due to the fact that there were large areas of land but that the population was small. Under the Saigon regime the landholdings of the farmers in South Vietnam gradually reduced, through the introduction of many land policy changes (for example during the Presidencies of Ngo Dinh Diem, then Nguyen Van Thieu), including the program entitled 'Land to the Tiller' (Callison 1983, Smith et al. 1967), together with an increasing population. The land reforms of Ngo Dinh Diem allowed each landlord household to allocate a maximum of 130 hectares of land for farming; any excess land was then bought by the State to sell to tenants. Under the different land reforms of Nguyen Van Thieu each landlord household was allowed to have only fifteen hectares of land for farming, while the rest of the land was bought by the State under a sponsor's fund from the USA; this land was offered to the tenant households with a maximum of four hectares per household, and land use rights were certificated by the State. In response to the Land to the Tiller program, some landlords had their large areas of land split between many households, not always within their family, for instance:

In the case of Mr. Chieu, village officials foresaw the land policy changes of President Nguyen Van Thieu. Prior to the dispossession of his land under the Land to the Tiller program, he possessed a large area of land; about 26 hectares of farmland. He offered up only 6.4 hectares of his land to his sons and daughters and retained 2.6 hectare for his own rice production. Therefore, about seventeen hectares of his farmland was claimed (*Truất hữu*) by the Saigon government and was distributed to thirteen landless tenants living along Tac Ca Di canal in Thoi Thuan hamlet. After 1974 the amount of land he owned was smaller than before the land policy change (Si, June 2008).

In the case of Mr. Tran Van Di, a landlord, he had left home permanently for the security of the city during the war between Saigon and the National Liberal Front of South Vietnam; therefore, tenants cultivated rice on his land. Under the Land to the Tiller program, between 1970 and 1974 his land was dispossessed, with 39 hectares along the Xeo Xao canal, five hectares along the Thoi lai canal, and 26 hectares in O Mon district being offered to tenants, and with his daughter receiving compensation. Similarly, Mr. Tran Van Thanh's land was taken by the Government: 34 hectares in Thoi Lai (village, and the teacher Hien had six hectares of his land dispossessed in Tac Ca Di of the same hamlet (Cang, May 2009)

As a result, the landholdings of both the Kinh and the Khmer farmers in this hamlet reduced, though the land left was still enough for one farm household to operate; one farm household was able to retain from one to five hectares of rice paddy field prior to 1975. However, according to the eldest person in the hamlet, the household landholdings here became fragmented after 1974. Landholdings had to be at least ten hectares per household, a scale favorable for profitable rice production. Some landlords lived in other places, yet had land in this hamlet. Although both Kinh and Khmer farmers had the same conditions and difficulties during the war, particularly under the Nguyen Van Thieu regime, the Khmers' livelihoods were more vulnerable than those of the Kinh, due to the limitations of their manpower resources (less education, poor management of households, and farming based). Thus, the landholdings of the Khmer reduced faster than those of the Kinh. (Cang, June 2009)

After reunification of the country and under the socialist regime, the landholdings of the Kinh and Khmer in the Mekong Delta, particularly in the hamlet, came under a land policy whose aim was the egalitarianism of landholdings for every farm household member. To achieve this, the production teams (the lower levels of the Agricultural Cooperative) cut the excess land from the large landowning households and offered it to the landless households or the small landowning households, in which the family laborers (main labor, additional labor, elders and children) were each given a different amount of land. The limitations of this land reform caused some land ownership conflicts among the farmers, because the State emphasized its key role in the arrangement of the agricultural sector under the new socialist orientation. The State played a very important role in the creation of 'transformation' and acted as a development agency. The State simplified everything in the planning process in advance and took a top-down approach to the management of natural resources (farmland) and people (farmers). This approach was criticized by Scott (1998) in *Seeing like a State*. Each family member held a very small piece of land, from 0.05 to 0.2 hectares. In this way, through the use of power relations, some local authorities were bias in their offering of land to their landless relatives, those who had just immigrated into the hamlet, even though they had no farming experience, while the other landless households were given no land. Moreover, some production team authority members agreed with their relatives in advance who would receive the land. In these cases, the receiving relatives implicitly borrowed the land, but did not return it later on. This situation created conflicts among the farmers. This decision made the situation of the farm households unsatisfactory, but the centralized power of the State at that time was very strict. This problem was also criticized by Hirsch (1990), who said that in a local development process, not all the people benefit from the developments; some people do benefit but for others, they are left with less power to control their resources, particularly land, as shown in the context of rural development in Thailand. However, the activities of the production teams in the hamlet were just as formal and the farmers understood that the farmland did not belong to them, and that the agricultural materials were not

enough for appropriate levels of production; therefore, production team members worked less hard and took little responsibility. This was the reason why rice production in the Mekong Delta became very low, leading to a lack of rice available for consumption throughout the whole country, and also leading to the importing of food from overseas countries. The lives of the Kinh and Khmer farmers in the production teams were tough during this period, because their already small landholdings (under one hectare for a farm household), reduced further due to the change in land policy, together with the return of the population to the rural areas from the cities and urban areas after the war. The lives of the farmers were therefore under the control of land policies and rural agricultural production changes during this period. Although the ideology of the State tried to adjust the unreasonable distribution of land by restructuring landholding patterns and tried to solve the unsatisfactory situation of the majority of the farmers in the hamlet by allowing farmers to retain some land, the process under the amended land policies after 1988 allowed the negotiation of land to take place among the farmers, but with the local authorities acting as referees, and as a result, those farmers (the receivers of land due to the land reforms) who were powerless readily became landless during this negotiation process. Gradually, the receivers of the land returned the land to the land owners. For instance, Mr. Cang (household A) owned land before the establishment of the production teams, and Mr. Tay (household B) possessed Mr. Cang's land during the production team period. The production team took 0.6 hectare of Mr. Cang's land and offered it to Mr. Tay in 1985. Then, Mr. Tay cultivated rice on this land until 1988. Under the 1988 land policy, and under pressure from the original landowner (household A), the receiver (household B) of the land had to return the land after negotiating with the owner. Mr. Cang told his story as follows:

"I heard that a farmer (household A) negotiated with household B to receive his own land in Dinh Mon village during 1988-89; therefore, I went to see the leader of the production team and Mr. Tay, and told them that I would take back my land to cultivate rice. After that I sowed his land with rice, he was angry and argued with me about that; and gave his report to the village headmen to solve the problem. I had to attend many meetings to negotiate with him about this matter. Finally, I did succeed in my expectations and have continued to use this 0.6 hectare of land for rice production, but without compensation." (May 2009)

According to Mr. Cang's observations, since returning the land some old landless people have lived on it with their sons or daughters, while some have moved to other places in order to survive; some are still there as hired laborers (doing non-farm or off-farm jobs), earning a subsistence living (May 2009).

3.3 *Landholding Changes and the Livelihoods of the Farmers in Thoi Thuan B since the 1993 Land Law*

Vietnam has two economic systems under the current Land Law: planned land classification at the macro level and privatization of land use rights at the macro level under economic liberalization. (Otsuka 2002:118-23).

The significance of the 1993 Land Law is that farm household autonomy was established by authorizing long term land use, five rights of land use and entrusting all production stages to the farmer (Nakachi 2001:83).

3.3.1 Status of the Sale, Purchase, Mortgage and Inheritance of Land since the Land Law

Nineteen percent of Kinh households and 25 percent of Khmer households in the hamlet have dealt with the sale, purchase, mortgage and inheritance of land since the 1993 Land Law was introduced. However, some of these changes in land ownership occurred before the law came in. In total, thirteen percent of Khmer households have bought land, which is double the number of cases for the Kinh households at 6.3 percent. However, 27 percent of the better-off Kinh and Khmer households have bought land. Similarly, 62 percent of Khmer households have mortgaged their land, double the number of Kinh households at 31.3 percent, within which 69 percent of the poor households, 37 percent of the medium income and 27 percent of the better-off households have mortgaged. Meanwhile, 25 percent of the Khmer households have sold their land, which is higher than the Kinh households at 18.8 percent. In terms of status 31 percent of the poor, 25 percent of the medium income and nine percent of the better-off households have sold their land. About nineteen percent of Kinh households have inherited land from their parents; which is less than the Khmer households, based upon discussions with them. Inheritance has occurred for about eighteen percent of the better-off households; higher than the percentage for the medium income and poor households.

Through this variation of land ownership, I may interpret that the land holdings have certainly changed for all of the Kinh and Khmer households, that is, the better-off, medium, poor farm and landless households, since the 1993 Land Law was introduced. Since that time, the Khmer have mortgaged, bought and sold their land more than the Kinh. The mortgage and sale of land has occurred more for the poor farm households than for the medium and better-off farm households. In fact, some better-off farm households have also mortgaged and sold their land at the research site. This can be explained by the fact that since the 1993 Land Law was introduced, the distribution of land has been linked, not only to a greater differentiation between rich and poor, but also to the emergence of divisions within the rural agricultural labor force. This has been perhaps the most important process at work in rural areas as a result of the introduction of the market system for both commodities (agricultural products) and labor. The process is now apparent not only in regions where land is abundant, but also, and perhaps to a greater extent, where land is scarce, as at the

research site. The rural population should not and cannot cling forever to such small plots of land in order to maintain its livelihood. Some of the farmers have had to sell their land in order to accumulate enough funds to change their profession, and the market economy has opened up a number of alternatives in this area. In fact, it would be correct to say that it is not poverty, but rather dissatisfaction with their excessively low standard of living that has compelled farmers, both in land-rich and land-poor areas, to seek alternative sources of livelihood. One does not only see poor, incompetent or lazy farmers being forced to sell their land to richer farmers, but also rich farmers who have had to sell to those richer than they. On the other hand, rural poverty is clearly in sharp decline (Phong 1995: 165-84).

Since the 1993 Land Law, which introduced five rights, the liberalization of selling, buying, mortgaging, using and inheriting farmland has taken place among the households at the research site. The Khmer farmers now sell their land more often than the Kinh farmers do. Firstly, they mortgage part of their land when they face problems such as serious diseases, lost production, accidents and disasters; though in some cases both Kinh and Khmer farmers mortgage their land for the wedding of their sons or daughters. Secondly, they may mortgage the rest of their land if the family has continuing financial problems and is building up debts year on year. Finally, the farmers here may sell their farmland, legally or illegally, in order to resolve particular problems. As a result, they may become landless households. Therefore, the pattern of ownership of farmland has changed, with land redistributed between villagers through its trade, purchase and inheritance. Moreover, the polarization of land holding between the better-off and the poor farmers, and between land owning and landless people, has become more of a problem and the hamlet's boundary has been narrowed in recent years, due to the re-division of the hamlet as part of the urbanization process.

The 1993 Land Law might be understood as the official way through which the farmers can solve their problems, having become indebted during the difficult agricultural cooperative period, by allowing them to mortgage or sell their land in order to pay-off their debts. Through the Land Law, land has implicitly become private property and a high value commodity which can be used over the long term; it can be transferred and exchanged with anyone in society. Therefore, since 1995, this change in the pattern of land holding has continued at a pace and has become popular among farmers. Some farmers can now buy more land, while others may have to sell their land for various reasons and in line with varying strategies, leading to a wider gap in terms of the economic situation of the households. The purpose of selling land is to facilitate a change in job or due to a lack of labor in the case of both the better-off farmers and the poorer farm households, or to repay a debt in the case of the poorer ones. The better-off people in Thoi Lai and Co Do district buy farmland along the road between Xeo Xao bridge and Tac Ca Di bridge, which is located in Thoi Thuan B hamlet. Normally they buy land located within 50 to 100 meters of the road to make their homesteads and to develop their non-farm jobs (factories, cafeterias, grocery stores and other services). Since 2000, the sale and purchase of the farmers land in the hamlet has continued at a slow pace because the price of land has increased many fold, from 01 câ of gold in 2000, to 03 câ of gold⁴ and even 05 câ of gold per 0.1 hectare in some places by 2009. In addition, the land resources (a farmer's natural capital) have become scarce and more valuable, while population pressure has increased under urbanization within the hamlet. Thus, the farmers have attempted to retain their valuable farmland for either subsistence, commercial or integrated farming purposes, an approach which has depended on their livelihood capital and the strategies of the various farm household groups, both Kinh and Khmer.

The 1993 Land Law has encouraged the farmers to produce more rice for domestic consumption and for export, and simultaneously forced the transfer of land use rights among the farmers; and between the farmers and entrepreneurs, leading to a greater number of landless people and at the same time, the appearance of larger farms. In fact, more poor farmers, both Khmer and Kinh, have become poor and landless, due in part to the changes brought about by neo-liberalist land and market economy development policies introduced by the Vietnamese State.

The custom of the older generation of both Kinh and Khmer farmers was based on land being a sustainable factor in their livelihoods, under any political regime, especially for the poor farmers, because they had to subsist on a small piece of land under risky conditions. However, this risk has increased in recent years under the development of a global economy. Therefore, all the different groups of farmers (better-off, medium and poor farmers) have had to rent land or rent out their own land, depending on their livelihood strategies, strategies which have had to be flexible at all times. For instance, now, when some of the farm households face problems, they have to sell their land to the better-off households in order to resolve them, while the better-off households may have a parallel strategy where they rent this same land to those who they bought it from, or to others, in order to obtain an income. They therefore continue to possess this land for other strategies, such as for land speculation. In other cases, such as for tenants (the better-off, medium, poor farmers and landless have available family labor), they can rent land from both the large landowners and from small landowners for their income or subsistence, whereas the landowners (large landowners, better-off farmers who lack family labor; medium and poor farmers who lack family labor or who are indebted) rent out their land to tenants in order to obtain income or to pay off debts. Actually, renting and renting out land for rice production or for other purposes has occurred in the hamlet over a long period, since French colonial times. Due to farmland being a scarce resource, landowners do not have a lot of land to rent out; therefore, the landless people and medium or poor farmers now find it difficult to rent land for farming purposes.

I visited Mr. Lieu Huong (a poor landless Khmer) as he prepared the 0.4 hectares of land that he had rented from Mr. Lieu Ty (a better-off Khmer farmer) six years before. This Khmer landowner only rents his land out to Mr. Huong for the Autumn-Winter rice season (with a low rice yield being common) each year, with compensation in-kind of 300 kilograms of paddy. The landowner grows rice once or twice per year depending on the climate. For instance, the previous rice season he fallowed land due to the bad weather. In fact, before, Mr. Huong expected to rent in at least one hectare of land for rice production every year to feed his large family, but the farm land is no longer available. The land holding per farm household here is smaller than it was in the past.

In the case of Mr. Cang (an elder), he is a better-off Kinh farmer who does not have enough labor to produce his own rice, so he rents his land (0.6 hectare) out to his neighbor with compensation in-kind of 1800 kilograms of paddy, instead of the previous 2000 kilogram of paddy per year (June 2009).

3.3.2 Scale of Farm Holdings for the Farm Households in 2007

About 50 percent of the better-off farm households, both Kinh and Khmer, hold at least one hectare of farmland at the research site, a suitable amount for farming, whereas only thirteen percent of the medium farm households hold one hectare or more. However, no poor farm households possess this size of land, either Kinh or Khmer. Therefore, 87 percent of the medium income farm households, both Kinh and Khmer, manage less than one hectare of land. Meanwhile, all of the poor farm households have less than one hectare, and in particular, about 90 percent of the poor Kinh households and 60 percent of the poor Khmer households keep less than 0.5 hectare. As a result, farm size is somewhat small for the medium households and too small for the poor farm households, both Kinh and Khmer. This small size of farm holding makes it difficult for the medium farm households to produce enough and is very risky for the poor households' subsistence. As a result they survive through carrying out extra work beyond farming (both non-farm and off-farm activities), while the better-off farm households either specialize in farming, or diversify their activities.

Table 2 shows the amount of land by different farm households, both Kinh and Khmer, and shows the different farm holding sizes across the various categories of farm household. The farm sizes of the better-off households come out at over 1.5 hectare per farming household, whereas the medium farm households hold a maximum of 1.5 hectares. In contrast, the poor households barely reach less than one hectare, while most in this category possess less than 0.5 hectare. As a result, the better-off farm households work on commercial production rather than subsistence production, whereas the medium and poor households tend to rely on subsistence production. In fact, all the groups of farm households, both Kinh and Khmer, utilize flexible commercial and consumption practices with their agricultural products, especially rice.

These small farm holdings have become even smaller during the periods of agrarian transformation over different historical periods, in particular as the result of significant population pressure and also during the period of state centralization when land was redistributed amongst the peasantry. Besides, a polarization in land holdings has emerged (larger farms for the better-off and less land or a landless situation for the poorer households) through the sale and purchase of land under the 1993 Land Law.

3.3.3 Farm Holding of the Farm Households

Generally, the data in Table 3 shows that the size of farm holdings for the households at the research site is not large enough to maximize the profits made from rice production. Land holding sizes of the farm households are popularly of a small or medium size. More than 50 percent of the farm households have less than one hectare of farmland.

The average size of farmland of 0.6 hectares, is shared fairly equally between Kinh and Khmer farm households in Thoi Thuan B hamlet. This farm holding is too small for a five family member household to produce rice. However, the differences in land holding size are clear between each group of farm households, both Kinh and Khmer. The farm size of the better-off farm households is 0.5 hectare more than that of the poor farms among the Kinh, and this trend is similar for the Khmer, with a variation of 0.6 hectares. I think it is this difference in the size of land holdings which creates the differences in income between the better-off and the poorer farm households. While the land holding of the medium farm households is 0.2 hectare higher than that of the poorer ones, for both Kinh and Khmer, the land holding of the medium households is 0.3 hectare lower than those in the better-off category for the Kinh, but is 0.4 hectare lower in the case of the Khmer. In term of farm holding, the move from being in the medium farm household category to the poorer category is easily made, as the medium households are affected by many external factors, such as unreasonable prices for their inputs and outputs, low agricultural production and climate risks, while the poorer households cannot as easily generate enough income to buy farmland as the medium households. Similarly, it is very hard for the medium households to move into the better-off category simply by expanding their land holding, because the price of farmland is rising. The medium and poor farm households, both Kinh and Khmer, often do not have enough farmland to farm seriously, with the land area per farm household at less than 0.5 hectare for the poorest.

The largest farm holding for the Kinh, at 2.7 hectares, is bigger than the largest Khmer farm household, which is 1.9 hectares. These largest farm holdings of the Kinh and Khmer belong to the better-off farms. The medium farm households of both the Kinh and Khmer have the same maximum farm holding of 1.5 hectares, while the poor farm households of both groups have the same maximum land holding of 0.75 hectares. Normally, the better-off farm households and the top households within the medium category, both Kinh and Khmer, have enough farmland to carry out agricultural production, especially rice production. In general, the smallest farmland size for a farm household is 0.1 hectare for both Kinh and Khmer; and in the various groups of Kinh and Khmer households, the smallest land size of the better-off and medium Khmer households is 0.4 and 0.3 hectares respectively. This information implies that those farm households which have the smallest land area in the better-off and medium income categories, both Kinh and Khmer, also have other income streams, as mentioned previously. In this case their other income streams, such as from off-farm and non-farm work, are more important than their farming income.

3.3.4 Farm Holdings of the Household Members

As the results in Table 3 show, the average farm holding of each household is a little higher for the Kinh farms at 0.15 hectares, than for the Khmers' at 0.13 hectares. The trend in the average land holding per household member increases a little from the poor to the medium households, then again to the better-off farm households: both Kinh and Khmer. Small farm holdings amount to less than 0.2 hectare per household member across the different groups of farm households: both Kinh and Khmer. However, the largest area of farmland, at 0.8 hectares per household member for the Kinh, is nearly double that of the Khmer, land which is distributed mostly in the better-off farm household category. The minimum land holding per household member is under 0.1 hectares; too small for both groups of farm households to earn a living. There are big variations between the largest and the smallest areas of farmland per household member, for both the Kinh and the Khmer. However, this large variation is 0.8 hectare per household member for the better-off Kinh farm households, while the variation is 0.5 hectares per household member for the poor Kinh farm households and the variation is 0.3 hectare per household member for the medium Kinh households, as well as the medium and better-off Khmer households. The lowest variation of 0.2 hectare per household member can be found among the poor Khmer farm households. Actually, these variations in farmland per household member depend on the size of both the farm and the number of family members in a particular farm, and in a particular economic group of farm households. These results reflect the fact that, in reality, the size of land holding is not always directly correlated with the size of the family across the different farm households, either for the Kinh or the Khmer, and often fluctuates in specific cases. For instance, one better-off household has only a small amount of farmland, but their main source of income is from non-farm work and they have a big family of seven members, while another poor farm household also has a small amount of farmland and has a small family of only three members. In this case, the farm holding per household member of the better-off farm household is lower than that of the poor household. Thus, their land holdings per household member are in opposition to the usual trend.

3.3.5 Farmland Holdings of the Farm Household's Main Labor

The data in Table 3 reveals that the average land holding for the farm household's main labor force is 0.2 hectares for both the Kinh and Khmer. The size of farm holding per main labor at my research site seems to have changed little when compared to the size of farm holding before *Doi Moi* (during collectivization), which ranged from 0.15 to 0.2 hectares. However, it does reflect certain changes in landholding, such as the redistribution of land among the farm households in the hamlet after twenty years of renovation and after fifteen years of the 1993 Land Law being in place. Actually, the average farm land size for the main labor increases for the better-off farm households, for both the Kinh and Khmer, while farm holding size of a main labor is lower for the medium and poor farm household in each group. This implies that the 1993 Land Law has directly increased the incentive for the better-off households with higher capital potential to buy farmland for rice production or accumulation, rather than for land speculation, whereas the poor farm households have had to sell their farmland, and the medium households have responded either by buying farmland or by selling their land, the option they choose being based upon their livelihood status. In fact, land holding has become more polarized across the various farmer groups since the Land Law was introduced. However, this polarization of land holdings has not occurred on the scale expected by the Marxist perspective, which states that the penetration of capitalism into the countryside leads to the polarization of land holdings and the development of impersonal wage labor relations, so that the peasantry disappears and the proletariat emerge. Actually, the peasantry here has not disappeared at all; the landless people have emerged and been able to rent farmland from the landowners in order to farm. Meanwhile, small farmers still exist in the context of the fragmentation of farmland, just as Kautsky assumed the persistence of small farm holders, and this situation is still a major phenomenon in Southeast Asia. The persistence of small farms can be attributed to their low costs of production, as they are able to utilize family members for work practices (McLaughlin 1998). Moreover, family farming is far from dead, in either the developed or developing countries. The 'agrarian question' was largely about their disappearance and replacement by capitalist farms, or their subsumption by agribusinesses; however, they have continued to compete successfully with capitalist farms over a long period. Nowadays, economies of scale are largely captured by farms within a normal family-operated range.

Pluri-activity (diversification) is not only a means by which otherwise uneconomic farms survive; it is also a way to increase income and expand opportunities, as farms are able to be managed with less labor. The adaptability and efficiency that family farmers have demonstrated in recent times continues. It is time that the old agrarian question was inverted to become: how and why does family farming survive, and why will it continue to do so? According to Brookfield and Parsons (2007), those who still expect family farming to soon disappear are likely to be disappointed. Their study reveals a constantly renewed set of contradictory forces in rural organization, within which the family mode of organization, arguably perhaps the oldest in all of farming, has shown constant adaptability and therefore resilience. The pluri-active farm family can, if it remains intact, allocate its resources in an efficient manner, and nothing can diminish this competitive advantage. These authors do not expect the coming generation of family farmers to experience conditions any more sympathetic than in the recent past, but they have confidence in the next generation's ability to survive through this period (Brookfield and Parsons 2007, cited in Brookfield 2008). I believe this notion implies that small-scale farming and agricultural land will continue to exist under certain conditions, although the preference for non-farm jobs among the younger generation is now apparent, and modernization and industrialization policies in the rural farmer agricultural sector are now in place in Vietnam.

One important development is that the better-off Khmer farm households have obtained a larger amount of land per household main labor than the better-off Kinh farm households. This reveals the capacity of the Khmer farmers within the development negotiation process, to generate greater income by creating more work and larger social networks in support of their livelihood strategies. Ethnic Khmer people, particularly the poorer farmers and landless, are often active, not always passive as commonly thought. This evidence is strongly supported by scholars like Anan (1989) and Fegan (1989), who indicated that there are a number of relationships between the landowners and the landless peasants in the context of commercial agricultural production, though they recognize and acknowledge the trend towards the concentration of land in the hands of a small number of landowners. However, for them, landless peasants are not victims of agricultural commercialization as classical theorists suggest, but rather active actors who can diversify their livelihood. Although these scholars go beyond the essentialist thinking of the classical theorists, they still consider land as a basic source of a peasant's livelihood. According to them therefore, peasants have motivations to diversify their livelihoods, because they have lost their own land. Thus, in my study site, some of them, both the Kinh and Khmer farm households, have worked to accumulate farmland. Now, a proportion of Khmer farm households are able to adapt their livelihood strategies. I therefore believe that the 1993 Land Law has stimulated the farmers in terms of their agricultural production, at the same time as the accumulation and concentration of farmland or the release of farmland has occurred, but in reality the better-off farm households have had more opportunity to buy farmland than the other farm groups, both Kinh and Khmer, and in contrast, it has been easier for the poor farmers to lose their farmland, due to higher risks. The poor landless people still find it difficult to buy farmland due to the rise in land prices over time, within the competitive liberal market economy.

The average land holding per household main labor has not changed much across the different farm households, both Kinh and Khmer, since the 1993 Land Law was introduced. Nevertheless, the largest labor farm size in Thoi Thuan B hamlet is 1.4 hectares for the Kinh households and 0.6 hectare for the Khmer households, which compares to the holdings of the production teams before 1986. The 1993 Land Law has thus created a large stratification in terms of farmland per household labor across the different groups of Kinh and Khmer farm households. It is now clear that the largest area of farmland per labor among the better-off Kinh households, is double that of the medium and poor households in the Kinh group, and the better-off and the medium households in the Khmer group; and is four times the area of the poor Khmer households. There is also a large variation in the farmland held per labor for each farm household across both the Kinh and Khmer groups. For instance, these large variations show the land holdings as varying between 1.6, 0.7 and 0.4 hectares for the largest and smallest farms among the better-off Kinh households, the medium Kinh and Khmer households, as well as poor Kinh and Khmer farm households respectively.

3.4 Notions of the Agrarian Transformation and the Livelihoods of the Farmers and the Landless Farmers

Like other developing countries, Vietnam has defined the peasant economy as a traditional and backward sector which is stuck in a subsistence way of life. For this reason, it is argued that the peasant economy needs to be transformed into a market-oriented economy. Since the time of *Doi Moi*, a variety of policies and programs have been implemented aimed at rural development based upon the industrialization and commercialization of production in rural areas. It can be argued that a change in State policies has been one of the most important factors in bringing about agrarian transformation in Vietnam (Le 2009).

It can perhaps be said that, through a modification of the ideology contained in Lenin's and Kautsky's works, the Vietnamese Government, in the era of globalization, has tried to convince that, under the impact of neo-liberalism within a socialist orientation, land and labor in rural areas should be rearranged such that the land is concentrated in the hands of a few large households. This process has caused increased landlessness; landless people have become wage laborers in the agricultural or other sectors. Therefore, Vietnam is now following other developed countries and some

developing countries, whose aim is to mechanize the agricultural sector and modernize agriculture in rural areas. So, the Government has tried to improve the situation in three areas: agriculture, rural areas and farmers' lives - in which the debate about farmers' lives has been at the core of the debate. Since 2008, the Government of Vietnam has mobilized farmers to accumulate large areas of farmland, instead of small farm holdings, and to apply mechanization and commercialization practices within the agricultural sector in order to increase the efficiency of production of agricultural products, particularly the production of high quality rice in the Mekong Delta for export. Obviously, this new land policy is likely to increase the polarization of farm holdings and the stratification of livelihood strategies among the farmers in rural society. So, what are likely to be the livelihood trajectories of the small farmer communities and of the small farm labors, under the process of agrarian transformation in Vietnam, which is strongly affected by neo-liberalist policies under globalization? This issue requires global, comprehensive measures whereby the Vietnamese State needs to play a very important role in creating macro-strategies for the country to be able to deal with the impacts of global and regional economic processes upon local people. The ideology of the Vietnamese Government is perfect for the improvement of the three important issues: agriculture, rural area development and farmers' lives in the countryside. In fact, there are a lot of problems in rural areas at present, including: a lack of infrastructure and credit, the application of mechanization, small land holdings, poor channels of commercialization, a lack of markets, unstable and unreasonable prices of inputs and outputs, a poor quality and quantity of agricultural products, low levels of competition, poor organization of agricultural production, seasonal labor, a lack of jobs, as well as unstable livelihoods among the poor small farmers, poor landless people and other social actors. Of course, many problems have appeared as part of the implementation of agricultural policy in rural areas, and the poor, small farmers have been strongly influenced. Therefore, the Government needs to determine what the priority is in term of providing benefits (including social benefits) to the farmers, particularly for the small farmers and poor landless people; an action that will need to involve all the social actors involved in the process of agrarian transformation. To do that, a bottom-up approach from the grassroots level and opening up real democracy for all the social actors involved, needs to be implemented. Otherwise, the small farmers and poor landless people are at risk of being excluded from the benefits of national development. Therefore, ensuring stable livelihoods for the poor, small-scale farmers and the landless people should be of concern and included in future policies. These problems have been proved to exist within the reality of the rural situation, through the conflicts and trade-offs that have taken place in economic, environmental and social terms, under urbanization, the expansion of industrial and commercial zones and the modernization of agriculture; between the farmers, local people and private or collaborative partners, as well as the Government, across the whole country. As a consequence, urbanization has had increasingly positive and negative impacts on the livelihoods of households in my study area. There have been different opinions about the impacts of using farmland to build new sections of the working offices of the People's Committee of the Co Do district since 2005, and its school since 2008. Local authorities at the hamlet, small town and district levels, and some farmers, think that the local state has provided a reasonable amount of compensation to the households in the construction area. However, some farmers, and the landless people who live in this area, are not totally satisfied about the land price they have been offered under the compensation package, and have different opinions about transitional costs too. Why is this? It may be because of the unequal benefits being provided. My belief is that when a rural development project is set up by the State, its investigation, implementation and measurement should be looked at carefully, across many aspects, in order to benefit all social actors in the community, and in order to avoid looking at the plan only at the blueprint stage, thus ignoring potential benefits and dis-benefits for the local people. Moreover, compensation paid by the state often does not reflect the actual market value of the land being built upon (Kerkvliet 2006).

Although debates on agrarian transformation are diverse, one can reveal that several contemporary scholars have focused on two key trends of change, these being the "post-peasantry" (Kearney 1996) and "de-agrarianization" (Elson 1997, Rigg 2001). Both approaches try to argue against the classical peasant theories, which suppose that peasants live, produce and reproduce in rural areas, and that their lives are heavily dependent on arable land (Wolf 1966). In contrast, the current theorists of the peasantry argue that land is no longer a necessary condition for rural livelihoods. Elson (1997) and Rigg (2001, 2005) borrow arguments from different scholars in order to convince us that "lives and livelihoods in the Rural South are becoming increasingly divorced from farming and, therefore, from land". In addition, they assert that rural livelihoods have shifted from on-farm to off-farm activities, so that off-farm occupations have become increasingly important as sources of rural household income. As a result, peasant life is no longer bounded and self-contained within the village or rural community. The boundaries between rural and urban, peasant and non-peasant, agriculture and industry, and tradition and modern, have been deconstructed (Kearney 1996). By so doing, current peasantry theorists conclude that "the age of the peasantry in Southeast Asia has come to an end" (Elson 1997).

I argue that agrarian transformation is not only a uni-linear process of commercialization and industrialization of the peasant economy, as foreseen by several current scholars, especially Rigg (2001, 2005) and Elson (1997), and by most developing countries' governments. Instead, the process of agrarian change is actually very complex, and depends upon

the specific historical, social, cultural and even political contexts within which it takes place (Eder 1999, Kitahara 2004).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Both Kinh and Khmer farmers suffered the same living conditions and difficulties during the war and under the Saigon regime; however, the Khmers' livelihoods were more vulnerable than those of the Kinh, due to their limitations in terms of manpower resources. After reunification of the country and under the socialist construction process within Vietnam, the land holdings of the Kinh and Khmer in the Mekong Delta, particularly in Thoi Thuan B hamlet, fell under land policies such as the redistribution of land holdings to every farm household member. This policy, implemented under the poor management practices of the production teams, did not stimulate the farmers to produce enough food for the country; therefore, the farmers' livelihoods were difficult at that time.

The significance of the 1993 Land Law is that farm household autonomy has been established, by authorizing long term land use, entitling households to five land use rights, and entrusting all production stages to the farmers. However, land holdings have since changed, certainly for the Kinh and Khmer. Among the better-off, medium income and poor farm households as well as the landless households, the Khmer have mortgaged, bought and sold land more than the Kinh since the Land Law was introduced. The 1993 Land Law encouraged the farmers to produce more rice for domestic consumption and for export, and simultaneously forced the transfer of land use rights (with land as a commodity) among the farmers and between the farmers and the entrepreneurs, and led to a greater number of landless people; with large-scale farms appearing. In fact, both poor Khmer and poor Kinh farmers have become landless due, in part, to the changes brought about by the neo-liberalist land and market economy development policies introduced by the Vietnamese State.

An analysis of 208 farm households in 2008 in the study area showed that farmland size is small for the medium farm households and too small for the poor ones, both for the Kinh and the Khmer. This small size of land holding makes it difficult for the medium farm households to produce enough, and very difficult for the poorer households' to subsist. As a result, they survive by carrying out extra work beyond farming (non-farm and off-farm activities), while the better-off farm households either specialize in farming or diversify their jobs. There are big variations between the largest and the smallest farm size per household member for both the Kinh and Khmer. Moreover, certain changes have occurred in land holding patterns and a redistribution of land holdings among farm households in the hamlet has taken place, after twenty years of renovation and fifteen years after the introduction of the 1993 Land Law. Actually, the average size of farmland per unit of main labor has increased in the better-off households, while the land holding has reduced for Kinh and Khmer medium and poor farm households. The 1993 Land Law has created significant stratification in terms of farmland across the different groups. The largest areas of farmland held per unit of main labor for the better-off Kinh farm households, is double that of the medium and poor farms for the Kinh group, and the better-off and the medium farms for the Khmer group; and is four times the size of the farmland held by the poor Khmer farm households.

The small size of farmland owned by the villagers has become even smaller as a result of agrarian transformation over the different historical periods, together with the increasing population pressure, during which time land policies during the centralization period were aimed at an egalitarian redistribution of land holdings to the peasantry. Since that time land holdings have become polarized (large farms in the hands of the better-off and less or no land for the poor farm households) through the legal sale and purchase of land under the 1993 Land Law. This gap in land holdings has created a big difference in incomes between the better-off and the poorer farm households. However, small farm and agricultural land still exists under certain conditions, although a preference for non-farm jobs among the younger generation of farmers has recently appeared, and modernization and industrialization policies in the rural-farmer-agriculture sector have developed in Vietnam. Therefore, the current changes in the process of agrarian transition in Vietnam require appropriate policies for rural-farmer-agriculture development, together with State national development policies to support those who are challenged by the existing policies, because the poor can easily be excluded from the benefits of the changes in policies. A change in the State policy framework has been one of the most important factors brought about by agrarian transformation in Vietnam. However, we should be aware that this agrarian transformation is not only a uni-linear process of commercialization and industrialization of the peasant economy; agrarian change is very complex and depends upon specific historical, social, cultural and even political contexts. In fact, the ideas and the livelihood strategies of both the Kinh and Khmer farmers within this agrarian transformation process, have to be constantly on the move and be creative and knowledgeable, in order to allow their social networks to adapt to any changes in livelihoods, whether based upon subsistence, commercial or industrial production, and under neo-liberalist developments.

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Table 1. The Different Numbers of Farm Households and Landless Households (Kinh and Khmer) in Various Groups at the Thoi Thuan B Research Site

Kind of Households (HHs)	Better-off (no.)/Rate (%)	Medium /Rate	Poor/Rate	Total
Kinh Farm HHs	77 (43)	55 (31)	45 (26)	177 (100)
Khmer Farm HHs	12 (31)	15 (38)	12 (31)	39 (100)
Landless Kinh HHs	71 (47)	35 (23)	46 (30)	152 (100)
Landless Khmer HHs	3 (3)	22 (25)	62 (72)	87 (100)
Total Kinh HHs	148 (45)	90 (27)	91 (28)	32 (100)
Total Khmer HHs	15 (12)	37 (29)	74 (59)	126 (100)
Total Farm HHs	89 (41)	70 (32)	57 (27)	216 (100)
Total Landless HHs	74 (31)	57 (24)	108 (45)	239 (100)
Total HHs	163 (35)	127 (28)	165 (37)	455 (100)

Source: Group discussion, October 2007

Table 2. Size of Land for the Different Farm Households

Size of Farmland (hectares)	Kinh Farm Household (%)			Khmer Farm Household (%)		
	Better-off	Medium	Poor	Better-off	Medium	Poor
> 1.5	08	-	-	17	-	-
1.0-1.5	37	12	-	33	13	-
0.5 - < 1.0	28	35	12	42	47	43
< 0.5	27	53	88	08	40	57
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N = 208	75	51	41	12	15	14

Source: Household Survey, 2008

Table 3. Land Holdings for the Different Farm Households in Thoi Thuan B Hamlet

Categories		Kinh Farm Households (FHH)				Khmer Farm Households (FHH)			
		FHH	Better-off	Medium	Poor	FHH	Better –off	Medium	Poor
Farmland (hectare)	Ave.	0.65	0.87	0.55	0.34	0.67	1.0	0.61	0.41
	Max.	2.7	2.7	1.5	0.75	1.9	1.9	1.5	0.75
	Min.	0.1	0.15	0.1	0.1	0.15	0.45	0.3	0.15
Farmland/HH Member (hectare/person)	Ave.	0.15	0.18	0.12	0.10	0.13	0.19	0.11	0.09
	Max.	0.8	0.8	0.3	0.5	0.34	0.34	0.33	0.25
	Min.	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.04
Farmland/Main Labor (hectare/person)	Ave.	0.21	0.25	0.18	0.12	0.22	0.34	0.18	0.14
	Max.	1.6	1.6	0.75	0.75	0.85	0.85	0.75	0.4
	Min.	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.09	0.04	0.05

Source: Household survey, 2007