

# Poverty Alleviation Policies and Ethnic Minority People in Vietnam

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## I. Introduction

Poverty is a situation in which a person cannot live a life that he/she “has a reason to value” (Amartya Sen). Our problem is, then, how to define “the life that he/she has a reason to value.” It is generally believed that such a life can be achieved by a certain minimum level of income and this is the reason why poverty is usually defined in terms of income. In this case, income is important as a means to achieve something. It is undeniable that income is a useful means to achieve a decent life and measure of the quality of life, but having a means (income) often differs from achieving the ends (a life that he/she values). To depend too much on income may be called a kind of “income fetishism.” However, if all people have the same (or similar) concept of decent life, this will not cause any serious problems but when people have different ideas as is the case of ethnic minority people, this will cause serious problems. A policy which is designed to eradicate poverty for majority people and therefore to promote their own value may contradict the value of the minority and in this case their situation may be worsen. For example, slash-and-burn cultivation on which minority people depend may be prohibited by reason to protect forest areas and conserve environment, but it may deprive the minority people of their subsistence. They may be given land to compensate their lost land but if they cannot adapt to the new circumstances, they will be impoverished. If their culture depends on their system of cultivation, they may lose culture at the same time. By losing culture, they may lose dignity as a human being in some cases. As Adam Smith wrote, to participate in social life “without shame,” which means “with dignity,” is an important functioning of human being. Thus poverty is not simply a matter of material life but a matter of well-being which includes both material and non-material life. This is what I found in the central highland in Vietnam several years ago, and this is the difficulty of poverty alleviation for ethnic minority people, which made me to turn to the capability approach.

In more general terms, what I have argued for the past several years was a case of conflict in which two different groups have different values and different concepts of poverty and one of them suffer from the same poverty alleviation policy. If

poverty alleviation policy, which is an intervention to the life of the poor, is formulated based on the concept of poverty of the one group, it may worsen the poverty of the other. Our question is, now, how to formulate poverty alleviation policy which really improve the quality of life for both groups. Since our scope includes non-material life, our approach should be inevitably beyond the income approach and this is the reason why we need the capability approach in this case<sup>1</sup>.

The capability approach sets human being at the center of our analysis. It is not a means to achieve “high economic growth rate.” We often argue to achieve high economic growth at the cost of anything. We argue inequality whether it promote economic growth or not. But important thing is whether people’s life improves or not. Even if income inequality may be increased or economic growth rate may be decelerated, this does not matter if peoples’ well-being is improved.

In fact, we already knew the limitation of income approach (or GNP) in the 1970s but we did not have alternatives at that time. Since Amartya Sen proposed his capability approach as an alternative to income approach, his concept has been gradually spread. The Human Development Index (HDI) is just an example. The participatory approach, which is now widely used, is not just a matter of technique for development but a way for the poor to formulate their concept of poverty by themselves and a way to reflect their concept on the policy. The emphasis on social capital is also not just a matter of technique for development but a reflection of importance of human relation for human well-being. In spite of the negative response at the beginning, the capability approach had profound impact in development fields.

This paper will start by explaining the problem of ethnic minority people in the next section, and then discuss the limitations of income approach and commodity approach in Section III and IV, respectively. In Section V, the capability approach will be explained and Section VI is conclusion.

## II. Ethnic Groups in Vietnam

In Vietnam, ethnic minority people accounted for 14 percent of the total population in 1998 and are officially classified into 53 groups. The majority, or ethnic Vietnamese, is called Kinh. Historically, Kinh people lived on lowland in Red river delta and Mekong river delta and along coastal plain and ethnic minority people, on

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<sup>1</sup> In the case in which this kind of conflicts may not exist, however, the traditional income approach may be still relevant, especially when human well-being is a monotonous increasing function of income. However, this does not seem to be realistic if we take into consideration the non-market information such as environment.

the other hand, lived on the mountainous areas except for a few groups. In Vietnam, low land is very limited and the population density in the lowland is very high. Such high population density of Kinh people was supported by intensive wet rice cultivation. On the other hand, the mountainous areas were sparsely populated and the large land per capita was needed for shifting cultivation to be sustainable<sup>2</sup>.

The difference in population density pushed Kinh people to the central highland, which was a promising frontier for Kinh people, contrary to the textbook pattern that poor people migrate from rural to urban areas. The migration policy and land policy of the Vietnamese government encouraged Kinh people to migrate to this area. "After the war years, the communist government embarked on a major resettlement campaign: it banned collective land ownership, declared traditional tribal lands state property available for redistribution and forbade nomadic slash-and-burn farming practices, forcing hill tribes to settle down." (*Time*, April 2, 2001) It seems ironical for the communist government to ban collective land ownership to dispossess the land from the ethnic minority people and to redistribute to the majority people. As a result, the population of Dak Lak province doubled to 1.9 million in the 1990s. The population share of ethnic minorities in Dak Lak decreased from 50% in 1975 to 25% in 2000 (*Time*, April 2, 2001). With the luck of the coffee boom in the world market and with the support of the government agricultural policy, the migrants began to grow coffee and now Vietnam became the second largest coffee exporting country in the world. However, the influx of a large number of migrants to the central highland caused conflicts on land. A large proportion of ethnic minority people who were less responsive to the market signal lost the chance, except for those who had been growing coffee for decades since the period of French colonization. In this process, ethnic minority people became relatively poorer in the region.

In spite of the land disputes, the Vietnamese government did not neglect the rights of ethnic minority people. Though local officers may regard the ethnic minority groups lagged behind, the official stance of the government was to "respect and promote the fine cultural identity of ethnic groups."

*"From now to the 2000, active and steady measures should be taken to achieve the three main targets of eradicating hunger, alleviating poverty and stabilizing and improving the living conditions and the health of people of ethnic minorities as well*

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<sup>2</sup> This contrast is similar to the one between Java and outer islands. See Geertz [1963].

*as of inhabitants in mountain and border areas; to wipe out illiteracy, raise the people's intellectual standards, respect and promote the fine cultural identity of ethnic groups...*"(Development Orientations in Key Fields, a document of the VIIIth National Party Congress of Vietnam)

In spite of this statement, the poverty alleviation policies were designed for Kinh people, which may be accountable because the majority of the poor were Kinh due to their large population share. As Table 1 shows, ethnic minority people accounted for 13 percent of the total population in 1993, which increased to 14 percent in 1998 due to their higher population growth rate. Their incidence of poverty is much higher than Kinh, though it decreased slightly from 86% in 1993 to 75% in 1998. In terms of severity, the poverty among ethnic minority people was more serious. However, in terms of the number of the poor, the majority was Kinh, which accounted for 80.8% and 71.7% in 1993 and 1998 respectively due to their large population share. The percentage of ethnic minority increased gradually from 19.2% to 28.3 % in this period, which means that the ethnic minority groups lagged behind in terms of poverty alleviation.

The fact that Kinh accounted for a large number of the poor but that their poverty was not as serious as ethnic minority people makes a typical case that an easy way to achieve dramatic poverty reduction is to focus on the less serious majority, namely Kinh. It seems inevitable for the poverty alleviation policies to assume Kinh's life style, society, culture, and environment, which often conflict with those of ethnic minority groups. In the following sections, I will explain how such conflicts occurred.

Table 1. Population share (%)

	Population Share		Incidence of Poverty		Distribution of the Poor	
	1993	1998	1993	1998	1993	1998
All	100	100	58	37	100.0	100.0
Kinh	87	86	54	31	80.8	71.7
Minority	13	14	86	75	19.2	28.3

### III. Poverty Line Approach for Ethnic Minority Groups

In Vietnam, two poverty lines, namely "food poverty line" and "overall poverty line," are estimated to identify "hunger" and "poverty" respectively by the Vietnamese

Living Standard Survey (VLSS) conducted in 1993 and 1998. The difference between them is that the overall poverty line includes non-food expenditures, which accounts for about one third of overall poverty line. According to the World Bank publication, Vietnam seems to have achieved a dramatic reduction of hunger and poverty from 1993 to 1998 (Table 2). That is, the incidence of hunger decreased from 24.9% to 15.0% and the incidence of poverty decreased from 58.1% to 37.4%. The “success” is usually explained by the rapid economic growth of Vietnam in this period. This implies that Vietnam is a case that economic growth led by open-door policy accompanied poverty alleviation, perhaps with increasing income inequality.

Table 2. Poverty Lines in Vietnam

	Year	Poverty Line	Poverty Incidence
Food Poverty Line	1993	VND 749,723	24.9%
	1998	VND 1,286,833	15.0%
Overall Poverty Line	1993	VND 1,160,363	58.1%
	1998	VND 1,789,871	37.4%

Source: World Bank, *Attacking Poverty*, 1999

Theoretically the poverty line should be adjusted to reflect the regional variation. Especially for Vietnam, which is a long country from the north to the south, the climate variation is not negligible. In the cold northern mountain region, more expenditure will be needed for clothes than in the hot central highland. This means that if the same poverty line is applied to both regions, it will underestimate the poverty in the north or overestimate the poverty in the central highland. The migration flow of ethnic minority people from the north to the central highland indicates the living condition in the latter is better than that in the former. Even Kinh people migrate from the north to the central highland. They left their hometown looking for land in the sparsely populated central highland. For the eyes of these migrants, the central highland is a promising region abundant with land. The coffee boom in the mid-1990s accelerated the migration and people rushed to the central highland. If the income poverty statistics is correct, why did people move to the “poorer” region such as the central highland? Can the poverty line approach adequately capture the living conditions of such diversified population?

Contrary to the image of objectiveness of the income approach, it seems rather arbitrary if it is used to identify the poor. A more practical problem is that the poor cannot be identified by their income level. Contrary to the sample survey, it is

practically impossible to measure accurately the income level of all households. Practically at commune level, poor households were chosen by their own judgment according to the budget constraint for poverty alleviation. Even though this does not rely on income, the selection seems to be fair to villagers because villagers know who are classified as poor. Practically they recognize poverty not by income but by functionings such as health and education, which is very close to the capability approach.

#### IV. Definition of the Poor Commune

The commodity approach, that is to check what kind of assets people have, may seem to be more reliable than income approach but there still remains arbitrariness. In Vietnam, poverty is identified at commune level in terms of infrastructure, which can be considered as a kind of commodity approach. There are five criteria for the poor commune as follows<sup>3</sup>:

- (1) Poor households: More than 40% of households in the commune is poor.
- (2) Transportation: Poor communes locate more than 20 km away from a development center that has hospital, school, government office and other basic infrastructures.
- (3) Key infrastructure: Poor communes lack electricity, road, irrigation, clean water supply, school, hospital, and so on.
- (4) Social indicators: Illiteracy rate of poor communes exceeds 60%.
- (5) Agricultural conditions: People of poor communes depend on forest and shifting cultivation.
- (6) Credit and market access: People of poor communes lack credit and market access.

Based on the criteria, 1,715 communes are identified as the “most difficult and poor communes” in 1998<sup>4</sup>. However, these criteria are so ambiguous that the identification of poor commune can be arbitrary. For example, the first criterion presumes that all households are surveyed. However, this is impractical due to the limited number of staffs and the limited amount of budget. The questionnaire of the survey includes a list of 20 items to calculate household income. The income is expressed in terms of rice,

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<sup>3</sup> The criteria are actually adjusted by taking into consideration the characteristics of the commune. However, we neglect the adjustments in order to discuss the limitations of the definition.

<sup>4</sup> The number of the poor communes increased to 1,870 in 2000 by reshuffling some of them after one year’s operations of the Program.

which is called rice-equivalent income, and rice-equivalent poverty lines are used to identify the poor household, which are 15 kg, 20 kg, and 25 kg of rice equivalent income for mountainous, rural and urban areas, respectively. The rice-equivalent income is not the amount of rice that people actually consumed but household income expressed in terms of rice (or household income divided by the price of rice). Therefore surveying rice-equivalent income is as difficult as surveying household income. With a very limited number of survey staffs and a very limited period to survey, the result of the survey contains considerable errors and sometimes poor households are chosen arbitrarily. Or the number of the poor households may be fixed consistently with national target<sup>5</sup> so that the national target is always achieved as planned.

The second criterion requires constructing a development center within 20 km from any commune. However, the meaning of 20 km varies according to the location and road condition. Therefore 20 km does not have a significant meaning.

The fourth criterion tends to identify the ethnic minority groups as poor if they use their own language in daily life and are not used to Vietnamese. This criterion has an implication that those ethnic minority people who speak their own language are poor even though their economic condition may not be poor and that this may make the ethnic minority people feel their language as well as culture inferior to those of the majority, which may lead to loss of self-respect for ethnic minority people.

The fifth criterion requires stopping shifting cultivation in mountainous areas. To prevent deforestation is a dubious reason to prohibit shifting cultivation, but once it is prohibited, it will affect the life of ethnic minority groups if shifting cultivation is an important factor of their life. If their current life is a result of coevolution of environment, culture, society and economy, prohibiting shifting cultivation will affect the non-economic aspects of their life.

The sixth criterion has an ironical implication. It recommends (and sometimes forces) borrowing money even though people do not want to borrow. Some people prefer borrowing no money to be free and independent. The condition of market access also has a strange result in some communes as if people are misunderstanding that the market economy toward which Vietnam is now transforming can be achieved by constructing market building.

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<sup>5</sup> There was a case that the number of the poor households was determined by the budget for poverty alleviation. It was derived by dividing the budget by the amount of money allocated to each household. If such a practice is prevailing all over the country, the number of the poor households is determined by the national budget and therefore the national target of poverty reduction.

There were two poverty alleviation programs called Program 133 (or HEPR) and 135. Details of these programs are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Programs 133 and 135

	Program 133 (Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction, HEPR)	Program 135 (Support for the Most Difficult and Remote Communes)
Executive supervisor	MOLISA (Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs)	CEMMA (Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas)
Duration	1998-2000	1998-2005
Target	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce the poor to 10% of total households by 2000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce the poor households by 4-5% per year for 1998- 2000</li> <li>• Reduce the poor households to 25% by 2005</li> </ul>
Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in infrastructure</li> <li>• Re-settlement and re-location</li> <li>• Assist in extremely poor areas</li> <li>• Education to the poor</li> <li>• Health care to the poor</li> <li>• Assist in production and income generation activities</li> <li>• Extension services for agriculture, forestry and fisheries</li> <li>• Credit provision</li> <li>• Training the program staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in residential planning</li> <li>• Promoting agriculture production and processing</li> <li>• Infrastructure building: roads, water supply, irrigation, electricity</li> <li>• Build community center: school, health center</li> <li>• Training for staff in village and communes</li> </ul>

Source: Shindo [2000].

Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Program (HEPR or Program 133) was a multi-sector program with 20 ministries involved in the implementation. The main achievements of the program until 1999 are summarized as follows:

- 4 million households borrowed credit with subsidized interest.
- Over 3 million people were trained to start production and enterprises.
- 3.4 million sick poor people were treated without payment.
- 1 million students were exempted from school fee and given free textbooks.

- On average 300,000 poor households have been reduced every year so that the national target to reduce the poor to 10-11% by end of 2000 is achievable.

Program 135, or the Program for the Most Difficult and Remote Communes, focused on the especially difficult and remote areas, which coincide with the mountainous areas where the ethnic minority groups live. It was administered by CEMMA (Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas). In this program 1,870 communes were identified as the target poor communes in 1998, which account for 18% of all communes in Vietnam, whose total population amounts to 7 million.

In this program the poor communes could choose some infrastructure projects within the limit of the allocated budget from a list of infrastructure projects including road, small-scale irrigation, water supply, electrification, school building, health center building, and local market building. Out of 2,274 proposed projects, 39% were for construction of road, 27% for school building, 19% for small-scale irrigation, 7% for water supply, 5% for electrification, 1% for health center building, and 0.5% for local market building. As a result, we can see unusual buildings of schools, hospitals and markets in the poor areas, scenery that we sometimes encounter in developing countries. A small number of children may be seen in the school if people in the commune are too poor to send their children to school. Pupils in the school may not have textbooks. And hospitals are not installed necessary medical equipment, nor supplied with enough medicines. People do not have enough money to go to hospital. Market building may be constructed but no transaction is done within it because it is not comfortable to stay in it. Irrigation is for the non-poor in the poor communes, not for the poor who do not have enough land to be benefited from it. Road may provide business opportunities for the non-poor in the poor communes or in other communes and it just stimulates consumption of the poor who may waste the money borrowed from the Bank for the Poor or somewhere else and accumulate debt. Or it may result in exhaustion of natural resources of the commune.

The commodity approach seems to be arbitrary in choosing what kind of goods (or infrastructure) to be necessary for poverty alleviation. This may be resulted in inefficient allocation of budget. This inefficiency arises from the fact that it focuses on the means to live a life, not on the life itself. To have a means does not necessarily mean to achieve the ends. To focus on commodity will lead to the well-known failure of “commodity fetishism” (Karl Marx).

## V. Functionings and Capability

Since both income and commodities are less reliable, we have to focus on the life more directly by looking what a person can do and can be, which is called “functionings.” This is the basic idea of Amartya Sen’s capability approach. The *functionings* are “the various things a person may value doing (or being). The valued functionings may vary from such elementary ones as being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease, to very complex activities or personal states, such as being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect” (Sen [1997] p.199). And the set of vectors of functionings, from which a person can actually choose, is called *capability*.

Capability contains all achievable functionings, which include not only the achieved functionings but also those functionings are achievable but actually not chosen by the person. Capability shows the range of what a person can do and can be and in this sense it reflects *freedom* of people. “Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another. Just as the so-called ‘budget set’ in the commodity space represents a person’s freedom to buy commodity bundles, the ‘capability set’ in the functioning space reflects the person’s freedom to choose from possible livings” (Sen [1992], p.40).

We usually tend to measure people’s well-being by their achieved functionings but this neglects people’s freedom to choose. “This ‘well-being freedom’ may have direct relevance in ethical and political analysis. For example, in forming a view of the goodness of the social state, importance may be attached to the freedoms that different people respectively enjoy to achieve well-being. Alternatively, without taking the route of incorporating well-being freedom in the ‘goodness’ of the social state, it may be simply taken to be ‘right’ that individuals should have substantial well-being freedom” (Sen [1992] p.40). From this point of view, the poverty eradication policies must indicate this well-being freedom. A uniform policy applied to all ethnic groups may not have any room for well-being freedom. Such a policy may worsen the poverty of some ethnic groups. Therefore well-being freedom policy is a very important factor in poverty alleviation policies for diversified target groups. Capability to function can be an important part of social evaluation.

We can define various kinds of activities of human being as functionings, which range from elementary to trivial ones. It is practically impossible to list all the functionings. But we need not worry about the trivial ones. We just focus on elementary and complex functionings that matter for human well-beings. Sen gives

some examples of these functionings as follows:

- (1) Elementary functionings
  - a. Adequately nourished
  - b. Free from avoidable disease
  - c. Avoiding premature mortality
  - d. Adequately educated
  - e. Having essential non-food consumption goods
  - f. Being well-sheltered
- (2) Complex functionings
  - g. Being happy
  - h. Taking part in the life of the community
  - i. Having self-respect
- (3) Trivial functionings
  - j. Playing golf

The elementary functionings may seem to be similar to those of Basic Human Needs (BHN) but the difference is that the latter is closer to the commodity approach.

It may seem that the data to evaluate functionings are scarce but actually, to the contrary, we have lots of non-monetary data such as health, nutrition, education, etc. In the capability approach we need not calculate the total amount of money that a person spends for consumption. We may check whether a person is adequately nourished by a simple medical check or by the health data administered at health center. This means that the capability approach can use various data more efficiently and need not waste resources for interviewing poor people. Furthermore this approach does not require evaluating the consumed goods at the market price. Since the market prices are varied among different regions and locations, this procedure brings in some errors in the estimation of poverty. The capability approach can avoid such errors.

With a limited number of functionings we can do much more than expected. "In the context of some types of welfare analysis, e.g. in dealing with extreme poverty in developing economies, we may be able to go a fairly long distance in terms of a relatively small number of centrally important functionings and the corresponding basic capabilities, e.g. the ability to be well-nourished and in other contexts, the list may have to be much longer and much more diverse" (Sen [1992], pp.44-45).

In the examples mentioned above, playing golf is cited as a trivial functioning.

However, for some people it may be one of the most important functionings to attain his/her basic well-being. We cannot say that he/she is stupid if he/she attaches the highest priority to play golf than any other and spends considerable proportion of his/her income for playing golf that is necessary for his/her basic food. Such cases sometimes happen in the aspects of religion and culture. In such cases those functionings are closely related to the complex functioning, especially having self-respect. Sometimes the poverty alleviation policies emphasize too much raising income level. They may, at the same time, deprive them of this complex functioning. And if these functionings are indispensable for his/her well-being, his/her poverty will be worse even though his/her income may increase.

While Sen is very cautious in identifying the content of the capabilities or the list of functionings to be enhanced, Nussbaum who is an Aristotelian philosopher and a collaborator of Sen “in investigating the concepts of capability and quality of life”(Sen [1999] pp. xv-xvi) specified it in Nussbaum [2000, pp. 78-80]. The list includes:

1. Life: Live a life of normal length, not dying prematurely.
2. Bodily Health: Good health, adequately nourished, having adequate shelter.
3. Bodily Integrity: Being able to be secured against assault.
4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought: Being able to use these senses.
5. Emotions: Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves.
6. Practical Reason: Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.
7. Affiliation: Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction.
8. Other Species: Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. Play: Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over One’s Environment
  - (A) Political Environment: Participation.
  - (B) Material Environment: Being able to hold property.

Nussbaum said, “The list is open-ended and humble; it can always be contested and remade. Nor does it deny that the items on the list are to some extent differently constructed by different societies” (Nussbaum [2000], p.77). Thus this list is not intended to be forced universally and the contents may be different according to the society to apply this approach. However, it seems to be very useful to show an example of how the capability is defined.

## VI. Conclusion: The Impact of the Capability Approach

What kind of difference can the capability approach make? What the capability approach tries to do is just to shift our focus from the income aspect of human life to human well-being itself. In terms of economic theory this means our objective function changes from income maximization to “well-being maximization” though Sen carefully avoid the word “maximization.” This shift may seem to be trivial but its impact is profound as seen in the participatory approach, social capital, human development, and so on.

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