

Modernization and Participation in Nghia Trung

- An analysis of the relevance of the modernization and participatory approaches to development in the Vietnamese context of the ongoing SANREM CRSP project

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Acknowledgements

This report summarizes the findings of my Master's thesis that was submitted in October 2007 to the Department of Information and Media Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. The thesis is based on research carried out in October 2006 in connection with the SANREM CRSP project "Agroforestry and Sustainable Vegetable Production in Southeast Asian Watersheds". I collected the data for the thesis through 14 qualitative interviews with farmers living in the project's Vietnamese research site, Nghia Trung Village in Binh Phuoc Province, and with the greatly appreciated support of, among others, Dr. Manuel Reyes (North Carolina A&T State University), Dr. Poul Erik Nielsen (Aarhus University), Dr. Dang Thanh Ha, Duong Thi Kim Lan, Tran Thien Minh (Nong Lam University), Binh Phuoc Province Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and Nghia Trung Village People's Committee.

1. Introduction

Within the field of development communication, the modernization and participatory approaches stand out as each other's contrasts. The former imply the assumption that development problems are caused by a lack of knowledge among Third World populations and that, consequently, interventions should be aimed at providing people with information to change behaviour. As opposed to this, the latter imply the assumption that development problems are caused by structures of oppression and that interventions should therefore be aimed at empowering people to take control of their own development. Since the 1970'es, the modernization paradigm has been subjected to immense criticism; especially from participation advocates stating – among other things – that modernization interventions are repressing, that these projects exert power on local people by defining their traditional knowledge and way of life as primitive and inferior. More recently, however, participation critics have drawn attention to the fact that uneven power relations are inevitable, and that participatory interventions too imply the exercise of power, since – among other things – empowering certain groups often contributes to the oppression of other groups.

The main argument of my thesis is that, since both paradigms imply normative judgments made by the development organization – judgments of insufficient knowledge *or* oppressing power structures – and thus the exercise of power, neither the modernization nor the participatory approaches can be said to have a greater objective legitimacy than the other. In stead, I argue that each paradigm might have certain relevance in a given context. Based on this assumption I set out to create and implement a method of analysis that can determine the relevance of the modernization and participatory paradigm in the Vietnamese context of the abovementioned SANREM project.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the thesis is based on a discussion of the modernization and participatory approaches to development on three levels: the ideological, the methodological and the ontological level.

2.1 Ideological discussion

The ideological level contains the paradigms' implicit assumptions about the nature and causes of development problems. As mentioned above, within the modernization paradigm, insufficient knowledge is seen as the cause of development problems, whereas, within the participatory paradigm, oppression is seen as the cause. The paradigms' ideological relevance in a given context thus depends on the extent to which these different, normative diagnoses are appropriate in that particular context. This means that, logically, four ideal-typical situations exist that call for different types of interventions (see table 1).

Table 1	Oppression	No oppression
Insufficient knowledge	<p>Situation type 1: Local people are oppressed and have an insufficient knowledge about the given development topic.</p> <p>Intervention: A combination of modernization and participation?</p>	<p>Situation type 2: Local people are not oppressed but have an insufficient knowledge of the given development topic.</p> <p>Intervention: Modernization</p>
Sufficient knowledge	<p>Situation type 3: Local people are oppressed but have a sufficient knowledge about the given development topic.</p> <p>Intervention: Participation</p>	<p>Situation type 4: Local people are not oppressed and have a sufficient knowledge about the given development topic.</p> <p>No intervention</p>

2.2 Methodological discussion

The methodological level contains the paradigms' assumptions about how interventions should be carried out in order to solve the different types of development problems. Within the modernization paradigm, the traditional focus has been on top-down communication of knowledge from scientists and experts to local people. Criticism from within the modernization paradigm itself (e.g. Rogers, 1976) as well as from participation advocates (e.g. Chambers, 1983), however, points to the fact that many interventions fail to change the behaviour of local people, because the interventions are not compatible with local cultures, or because local knowledge is sometimes actually 'better' and more effective in the local context than the knowledge of scientists and experts. Therefore, within the modernization ideology, it is often fruitful to incorporate local people's perspectives, needs and problems into development projects through participatory methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and the like, in order to secure the project's compatibility with the local context.

Within the participatory ideology, the PRA-methods have been criticised for their lacking potential to transform uneven power structures, because many organizations merely see participation as a means to implement modernization projects in the most effective way. Some participatory approaches like 'Communication For Social Change' (CFSC) and 'Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques' (REFLECT), however, have a genuine aim to permanently increase marginalized peoples' participation in their society. These approaches focus on catalyzing and facilitating an internal

dialogue among oppressed groups in order to make local people reflect on and discuss their problems and take action to improve their situation. Or by giving ‘voice’ to marginalized groups so that their perspective is considered in the political decisions that affect their lives.

In this regard, I would argue that, ideologically, the SANREM project is a modernization project, since the overall focus is on transferring technology (the VAF-system) to the farmers. The project, however, uses participatory methods to make sure that the proposed VAF-system is compatible with the local context and thus increases the probability that local farmers will adopt the technology.

2.3 Ontological discussion

The ontological level contains the assumptions about human behaviour, knowledge and power that lie implicit in the modernization and participatory paradigms’ fundamental theories, namely Everett Rogers’ ‘Diffusion of Innovations’ and Paulo Freire’s ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ respectively.

In Rogers’ theory, the individual is considered to be an economically rational actor, whose behaviour is the result of conscious considerations of the costs and benefits associated with the range of possible actions in a given situation. According to Rogers, the actor always chooses the most profitable behaviour. This means that, when an individual is presented to a new technology, he/she will consider its usefulness and adopt the technology if it proves more profitable than the individual’s current behaviour.

As opposed to this, Freire considers the individual to be an agent, whose behaviour is formed by the power structures of society. Since the powerful class of ‘oppressors’ in a given society have the power to define what is right or wrong, their world view is perceived by all members of society as natural, as the obvious truth. Therefore, the oppressors’ privileged position in society is also perceived as legitimate by the oppressed, although it is fundamentally arbitrary. In this way, the oppressed is subjected to ‘symbolic violence’, i.e. the imposition of systems of meaning and knowledge onto groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate.

3. Methodology

Before I turn to the actual analysis, I will give a brief overview of the data collection process. During my one-week fieldwork in Nghia Trung, I interviewed a total of 14 farmers. I chose respondents who differed from each other in terms of ethnicity, wealth class¹ and hamlet² in order to secure a certain level of representativity (see table 2).

Table 2	Ethnicity	Wealth class	Hamlet
Respondent 1	Kinh (Vietnamese)	Wealthy	3 (central)
Respondent 2	Kinh	Intermediate	3
Respondent 3	Kinh	Wealthy	2 (fairly central)
Respondent 4	Kinh	Intermediate	2
Respondent 5	Kinh	Wealthy	2

¹ I use the same wealth classes as Ha et al. use in the baseline survey report.

² Nghia Trung is comprised of nine hamlets and some of them are quite remote due to the poor quality of the road system.

Respondent 6	Hoa (Chinese)	Intermediate	9 (fairly central)
Respondent 7	Hoa	Wealthy	9
Respondent 8	Kinh	Poor	9
Respondent 9	Stieng (Indigenous)	Intermediate	8 (remote)
Respondent 10	Stieng	Poor	8
Respondent 11	Stieng	Intermediate	5 (remote)
Respondent 12	Kinh	Wealthy	7 (remote)
Respondent 13	Stieng	Poor	4 (fairly central)
Respondent 14	Stieng	Poor	4

The interviews were carried out as qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth conversations focusing among other things on the respondents' current farming practices, their perception of their own problems and possibilities, their efforts to improve their farming methods and maximize profits, their farming related communication, and their vision of the future.

The reliability of my survey is subjected to a number of problems that I encountered during my stay in Nghia Trung. First of all, I had to make use of non-professional interpreters who didn't have optimal language skills. Secondly, all the interviews were supervised by government officials, and this might have influenced the respondents' statements. And thirdly, I was not allowed to record the interviews on tape, so I've had to rely on my notes in the analysis. Despite these problems, my overall evaluation is that my findings are quite reliable.

4. Analysis

The purpose of my analysis is to examine which relevance the modernization and participatory paradigms can be said to have among the farmers of Nghia Trung in order to determine the optimal approach for the SANREM project. In this regard, each paradigm can be said to have relevance if the paradigm's aforementioned ideological and ontological preconditions are present in the given context. In paragraph 4.2 and 4.3 I will summarize the findings from my 'modernization analysis' and 'participation analysis' respectively. First, however, I will give a brief description of my analytical perspective.

4.1 An ethnicity perspective

In the thesis, I focus especially on the differences between Nghia Trung's three largest ethnic groups: The immigrated Kinh (Vietnamese) and Hoa (Chinese) peoples, and the indigenous Stieng people. I have chosen this ethnicity perspective because the development policies of Southeast Asian governments towards the region's ethnic minorities are considered by critics to be quite problematic. In the book *Civilizing The Margins*, anthropologist Christopher R. Duncan and other contributors describe how some SEA governments seek to minimize ethnic diversity by implementing programs aimed at assimilating and controlling ethnic minorities: "*In these cases, central governments see assimilation as the key to promoting political unity and national security.*"³

³ Duncan, 2004: 9

In the case of Vietnam, anthropologist Pamela McElwee notes that since reunification in 1976, the socialist government has tried to incorporate the country's ethnic minorities into the socialist society by placing extensive restrictions on their traditional ways of life. This process includes programs aimed at eradicating 'primitive' forms of swidden agriculture as well as the resettlement of Kinh people to highland areas traditionally populated by ethnic minorities, "*both to "help" minorities develop (the official reason), but also to increase the security of highland areas and provide fertile lands to lowland Vietnamese from crowded deltas.*"⁴

In 2001, thousands of ethnic minority people demonstrated in the provincial capitals of the Central Highlands protesting against the high rates of Kinh immigration, deforestation and loss of traditional lands caused by the immigrants, as well as the Vietnamese government's development policies. According to the authorities, however, the riots were the result of "*reactionary elements*", *particularly U.S.-based activists and former wartime opponents*"⁵ conspiring against the government. Hence, the protests haven't led to any profound changes in the government's policy towards the ethnic minorities.

The effects of this policy are also visible in Nghia Trung. The area has been subjected to a large immigration of Kinh and Hoa people since reunification. This – along with the introduction of market economy and the prohibition of forest clearing⁶ – has forced the indigenous Stieng people to give up their traditional subsistence swidden agriculture in favour of sedentary cash cropping, and they still struggle to adapt to this type of farming.

4.2 Modernization analysis

The objective of this analysis is to determine which relevance the modernization paradigm has among the farmers of Nghia Trung, that is, to examine whether the ideological and ontological preconditions of this paradigm are present in the given context. The question of whether the ideological preconditions are present relies on a normative judgment of whether SANREM's proposed VAF-system is more efficient and beneficial to the farmers than their current farming methods. Due to my lacking knowledge of farming and because SANREM scientists are currently carrying out research to appropriate the VAF-system to the local context, I have chosen not to focus on this issue. In stead, my analysis examines whether the modernization paradigm's ontological assumptions about man as an economically rational actor are consistent with the actual behaviour of the farmers of Nghia Trung. In this regard, the analysis reveals profound differences between the Kinh and Hoa farmers on one hand and the Stieng farmers on the other. I will summarize these differences below.

1) The Kinh and Hoa respondents seem eager to invest money in their farming system in order to maximize their profits. They often prioritize investment in farming input higher than consumption. A typical example of

⁴ McElwee, 2004, p. 199

⁵ McElwee, 2004, p. 182

⁶ Decision 90, 1990 (according to my Vietnamese source)

this lies in the following statement from a Kinh farmer: *"Our income is not enough for everything; we have a lack of money. It is just enough to invest in farming, but not enough for food."*

Except for one person, respondent 11, the Stieng respondents seem less focused on investing in farming and maximizing profits. They don't seem to share the Kinh and Hoa respondents' economically rational prioritization. For example, one respondent said: *"When we don't have enough money for food, how can we invest in farming."*

2) The Kinh and Hoa respondents choose their crops by watching the output prices and investing in the crops they believe to be the most profitable. They often plant more than one type of crop to minimize their vulnerability. Except for respondent 11, the Stieng respondents don't mention the output prices in the interviews and grow only cashew.

3) The Kinh and Hoa respondents reflect extensively upon the factors that affect their farming outcome. This includes the weather, pests, soil quality, soil erosion etc. Furthermore, they try to solve or minimize problems and utilize opportunities in order to maximize their profit. One Kinh respondent said: *"Farmers try to solve every problem. They make their own experiences and discuss to find the best solutions."* For example, the Kinh and Hoa respondents use a range of different techniques to reduce soil erosion on their fields, and they use intercropping techniques to make better use of their land.

Additionally, the Kinh and Hoa respondents seem very interested in improving their farming skills and learning more efficient farming techniques. This may be illustrated through this statement from a Hoa farmer: *"I need more information. Information is very necessary for farming. I need the knowledge, and if it is good, I will apply it."*

Except for respondent 11, the Stieng respondents don't seem to reflect on the factors that affect their yield to the same extent as the Kinh and Hoa respondents. For example, when I asked one Stieng respondent about the quality of his land, he replied: *"I don't know about this. Only scientists know about this."* Likewise, these respondents don't seem as eager to solve their problems or utilize their opportunities. None of them have attempted to reduce soil erosion, and – apart from respondent 11 – they don't use intercropping techniques.

This may, of course, be seen as a consequence of lacking knowledge about soil erosion and intercropping – and not necessarily mean that the Stieng respondents act in a less economically rational way compared to the Kinh and Hoa respondents. However, another profound difference between these groups is that the Stieng respondents – except for respondent 11 – don't seem particularly interested in improving their knowledge. In the interviews, the Stieng respondents make different kinds of 'excuses' about why they don't try to learn more efficient farming techniques. Most of the Stieng respondents say that they don't bother to learn new technology, because they don't have enough money to implement it – although some of them are actually better off than many Kinh and Hoa farmers. And when I asked one Stieng respondent whether he discusses farming techniques with his neighbours, he replied: *"It is very easy to grow up cashew trees, and everyone around here knows how. So there is no need to ask anyone."*

4) As a result of their eagerness to improve their farming techniques, the Kinh and Hoa respondents seek out information from a range of different sources including TV, the farmers' association, the extension system, and not least their friends, relatives and neighbours. As one Kinh respondent put it: "*When farmers in this region see successful farmers they ask for advice.*" In accordance with the ontological assumptions of the modernization paradigm, the Kinh and Hoa respondents furthermore meet the received information with an economically rational, critical consciousness, that is, they evaluate any new technology in terms of costs and benefits and only adopt it if it proves more efficient than their current methods.

The Stieng respondents – apart from respondent 11 – consult the abovementioned communication sources to a much lesser extent, and they don't seem to discuss farming methods with their neighbours very often. When I asked one of them what he does if he lacks knowledge about a certain topic, he replied: "*I don't know whom to ask.*" Another Stieng respondent said: "*Everybody have their own fields and they all work for themselves.*"

The modernization analysis thus suggests that the behaviour of the Kinh and Hoa farmers correspond to the modernization paradigm's ontological assumptions about man as an economically rational actor. This means that – provided that the VAF-system turns out to be more profitable than their current farming methods – the modernizations paradigm is indeed relevant among these farmers.

Regarding the Stieng farmers, however, the relevance of the modernization paradigm is more doubtful, since they don't seem to act as economically rational actors, don't seem focused on maximizing their profit, and don't seem very eager to improve their farming methods. In this regard, the more economically rational respondent 11 can be seen as an exception representing an unknown sized group of Stieng people to whom the modernization paradigm may be relevant.

4.3 Participation analysis

The objective of this analysis is to determine which relevance the participatory paradigm has among the farmers of Nghia Trung, that is, to examine whether the ideological and ontological preconditions of this paradigm are present in the given context. The ontological preconditions are present if the behaviour of groups or individuals in the context corresponds with the participatory paradigm's ontological assumptions about man as a more or less oppressed agent. Whether or not the ideological preconditions are present relies on a normative judgment of whether the oppression is of an unacceptable degree and whether it causes development problems. I will summarize my findings below.

1) Within the participatory terminology it is possible to understand the differences between the Kinh and Hoa respondents on one hand and the Stieng respondents on the other as a consequence of different world views, that is, profoundly different perceptions of what farming is. In this regard, it is obvious that the Kinh and Hoa respondents perceive farming as an economic discipline. To these farmers, maximization of profit is the ultimate purpose of farming, and investment, efficiency, knowledge gathering and hard work are the

most important means to achieve it. The Stieng respondents – apart from respondent 11 – seem to have a different world view. To these farmers, consumption and socializing seem more important than efficiency and maximization of profit. It is likely that this world view stems from the Stieng people's traditional subsistence agriculture, which unlike cash cropping does not encourage farmers to increase their farming yield above the level of their family's consumption.

2) It is obvious that the perception of farming as an economic discipline is the dominant world view in Nghia Trung Village, Binh Phuoc Province, and probably in all of Vietnam. Most of the representatives from the agricultural authorities (including Nong Lam University) I spoke with during my stay in Vietnam described the Stieng farmers and other ethnic minorities as backwards, primitive, or even lazy. According to the authorities, the purpose of the extension system is thus to modernize these farmers, and this corresponds well with the aforementioned, criticized policy of modernization and assimilation carried out by the Vietnamese government.

3) As a result of the general dominance of the economically rational world view, the Kinh and Hoa respondents have a very positive self-image. All of them generally seem to perceive themselves as good farmers, which may be illustrated with very direct statements such as: *"I am a good farmer"*, *"I know a lot"*, and *"in general, I know everything about technology."* Furthermore, these respondents participated in the interviews with pride and seemed eager to tell me and my small team of government representatives about their advanced farming methods and their agricultural and economic achievements.

The Stieng respondents, on the other hand, seem to have a very negative self-image. Apart from respondent 11, these respondents were generally reluctant to participate in the interviews and seemed more or less embarrassed to talk about their farming practices, as if they expected that my team and I would frown upon their less economically rational approach. These respondents' lacking self-confidence also manifested itself more explicitly through statements such as: *"I don't know anything about farming, so how can I help other farmers?"* and *"we don't know anything about technology."*

This collective low self-esteem is most likely caused by the fact that the Stieng people's traditional world view has lost its legitimacy with the introduction of sedentary cash cropping, the immigration of Kinh and Hoa people to Nghia Trung, and the government's policy of modernization and assimilation. According to the dominant, economically rational world view, the Stieng people's traditional way of farming is by definition wrong, and thus, the Stieng farmers are by definition poor farmers. It seems that even the Stieng farmers themselves have adopted this opinion, and it is likely that their fatalistic attitude and their lacking efforts to improve their livelihood partly stem from this low self-esteem.

These findings correspond well with the ontological and ideological assumptions of the participatory paradigm. This means that the participatory paradigm is relevant among the oppressed Stieng farmers, whereas the Kinh and Hoa farmers seem to be relatively free, since their world view is the dominant one. In this regard, respondent 11 must represent a group of Stieng people who have managed to adapt to the economically rational world view and don't suffer from a low self-esteem (anymore).

5. Suggestions for the project's communicative approach

In the following, I will discuss and make suggestions for the communicative approach of the Vietnamese part of the project "Agroforestry and Sustainable Vegetable Production in Southeast Asian Watersheds".

5.1 An ethnicity perspective

First of all, I find it highly problematic that SANREM apparently hasn't considered the ethnic diversity of the Vietnamese highlands in the planning of the project. Any project that has a purpose of modernizing the farming methods of Southeast Asian farmers should thus bear in mind the SEA governments' oppressing policy of modernization and assimilation towards the region's ethnic minorities (Duncan, 2004).

Furthermore, I find SANREM's cooperation with the Vietnamese authorities (including NLU) problematic, although I recognize that it is necessary in order to carry out the project. By cooperating with a system that oppresses ethnic minorities through a process of more or less forced modernization and assimilation, SANREM is indirectly supporting this oppression.

5.2 Modernization

The modernization analysis shows that the modernization paradigm is relevant in the case of the Kinh and Hoa farmers, provided that the VAF-system turns out to be more profitable than these farmers' current farming methods. If SANREM wishes to improve these farmers' farming methods, I would thus suggest that the project continues the ongoing participatory research in order to make sure that the technology is indeed compatible with local needs and circumstances. This, however, does not mean that the project is ideologically a participatory project. The overall purpose is to transfer technology to the local farmers, and in this regard, the thesis includes suggestions about how to do this in the most effective way, drawing on parts of the analysis not mentioned so far in this report.

In the project proposal it is mentioned that the scaling up part of the project will partly consist of building the host countries' capacity to manage and disseminate the VAF system technology. In the case of Nghia Trung, the thesis concludes that the Vietnamese government's extension system as well as the farmers' association may have problems reaching the most remote areas. And since the farmers in many cases live in separate sub-communities according to ethnicity and origin and primarily share knowledge within these groups, there is a risk that, if the VAF system technology is disseminated through these channels, it will not reach the remote areas.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the training carried out by the extension system may be difficult to understand for illiterate farmers. This means that, if the VAF system technology is disseminated through this channel, the least educated farmers may not be able to understand and adopt the technology.

I thus suggest that these problems are considered in the planning of the scaling up/capacity building part of the project. Finally, TV programs about farming issues (BPTV, VTV1, and VTV3) seem popular among the Kinh and Hoa farmers, and since 95 percent of the farmers in Nghia Trung have a TV (according to NLU's

baseline survey), it may be useful to cooperate with these programs in order to disseminate information about the VAF system in Nghia Trung as well as in other areas.

5.3 Participation

The participation analysis shows that the participatory paradigm is relevant in the case of the oppressed Stieng farmers. If SANREM wishes to improve the situation of these farmers – who in my opinion are actually the ones most in need of aid – a modernization approach is not likely to be successful. On the contrary, the abovementioned modernization approach can be seen as a strengthening of the existing structure of oppression, adding legitimacy to the modernization policy of the Vietnamese government. Instead, what is needed seems to be an ideologically participatory approach that focuses on permanently increasing the Stieng people's status in society and self-esteem as well as strengthening their influence on the political decisions that affect their lives.

This does not necessarily mean that all Kinh and Hoa immigrants should leave Nghia Trung, and the Stieng people should be allowed to go back to their traditional subsistence swidden agriculture. Irreversible changes have been made, and the Stieng people's redefinition of themselves and their farming practices must continue. Ideally, however, the Stieng people should be empowered to take greater control of this process themselves, and thus, the Vietnamese government's policy of modernization and assimilation should be replaced with a participatory, democratic approach in which the Stieng people have a better opportunity to discuss and define the goals and means of the change process.

Approaches such as the aforementioned CFSC and REFLECT may have a potential to catalyze and facilitate this participatory process at the grassroots level. These approaches, however, imply that the Vietnamese government must allow communication experts to work with groups of Stieng people or implement community media projects. This is highly unlikely, since it will ultimately challenge the government's sovereignty and control of ethnic minorities. Therefore, the most realistic approach for SANREM in this situation may be to engage in advocacy work on behalf of the Stieng people and other ethnic minorities, that is, to encourage the Vietnamese authorities to implement policy reforms that respect these peoples' right to participate in the decision making process regarding issues that affect their lives.

Literature

As mentioned, this report is a summary of a 100 page Master's thesis. The original thesis draws on the following literature:

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