

BASIC FEATURES OF THE LABOR FORCE IN RURAL AREAS

by NGUYỄN XUÂN KHOÁT

The socio-economic development in rural areas has required us to analyze and estimate exactly features of the rural labor force in order to find out ways to employ it reasonably. This article will discuss some basic features of the labor in rural areas today.

1. The growth of labor force in rural areas

The rural labor force at present is rather abundant. According to the General Department of Statistics, it included 27 million laborers in 1993, representing 73.5% of the national labor force. This percentage tended to increase in the past 20 years.

Table 1: Importance of rural labor force

Year	1976	1980	1985	1990	1993
%	68.0	69.9	72.2	72.3	73.5

Every year, there are about one million young people joining the working population and looking for jobs. Most of them live in rural areas. In three years from 1991 to 1993, the rural working population made an increase of 3.2 million (around one million of which are redundancies from the public sector, discharged soldiers, laborers returning home from abroad, etc.). This is an army of young laborers who can acquire technical and business knowledge quickly if they are educated carefully. They also constitute a big market for consumer goods. However, this army which is abundant and on the increase has great demands for job and makes the problem of manpower surplus more serious.

2. Uneven distribution of labor

In rural areas at present, agriculture (mainly cultivation and animal husbandry) attracts nearly 85% of the labor force while manufacturing and service occupations

employ around 15%. This structure is backward and unreasonable. The following tables show us the changes in the structure of rural labor force:

Table 2: Agricultural laborers

Year	1976	1980	1985	1990	1993
Agricultural laborers (thousand persons)	12,596	13,885	18,808	21,863.1	23,700

Source: *Nông nghiệp Việt Nam 1945-1995* (Vietnam Agriculture 1945-1995), Thống Kê, Hà Nội, 1995.

Table 3: Division of rural labor

Occupations	Year	1989	1993	1994
Primary occupations (mainly agriculture and forestry)		84.9%	82.6%	80.6%
Manufacturing and service occupations		15.1%	17.4%	19.4%

Source: *Lao động và Xã hội* magazine, September, 1993
Rural labor census, General Department of Statistics, 1994.

Thus, the labor force employed by manufacturing and service occupations is small. The division of labor is backward, therefore the most urgent matter is to develop manufacturing and service industries with a view to changing the structure of rural labor force.

In addition, the rural labor force is distributed unevenly over regions. Regions specializing in staple products haven't taken definite shape yet. The increase in labor force varies with natural conditions, resources, level of development of the productive forces, etc. of regions. This leads to increasing disproportion between labor force and means of production which restricts the economic development in rural areas and makes uneven distribution

of wealth among various regions more serious.

Because of low quality of life, health of laborer is poor. Most of them are of small and slender build. Comparing

Table 4: Increase in working population by regions (1,000 person)

Region	From 1991 to 1995			From 1991 to 2005 (est.)		
	People coming to working age	Increase Total	%	People coming to working age	Increase Total	%
Whole country	7,562	5,150	2.75	23,550	15,700	2.45
Mountainous regions in the North	1,197	720	2.55	3,800	2,460	2.55
Hồng Delta	1,480	960	2.45	4,730	3,000	2.30
North Central Vietnam	1,030	860	3.75	3,230	2,370	3.00
Coastal Central Vietnam	870	580	3.0	2,600	1,760	2.70
Western Highlands	240	160	2.35	850	420	2.95
Mekong Delta.	1,915	1,510	3.35	5,762	5,762	2.70

Source: *Thị trường lao động và việc làm* (Labor Market and Job) National Planning Committee Information Service, 1990

3. Manpower surplus in rural areas

As stated above, the better part of rural labor force is working in agricultural occupations, while the per capita farming land is small (0.26 ha) and on the decrease because of urbanization and an increase in building land. So there aren't enough jobs for them although the land could be grown with one more crop or two. Farming occupies only a third of working time of a rural laborer. Many laborers have to divide work among themselves or go to big cities for jobs. In 1993, there were some 1.3 million laborers (4.81% of the rural labor force) who were out of job.

Moreover, rural laborers usually get only simple, manual or part-time jobs so their labor efficiency is low. Many surveys show that it takes from 10 to 20 workdays to produce 100 kg of brown rice in Vietnam, whereas it takes only few hours in developed countries. This situation certainly leads to low personal income. In addition, the distribution of income in Vietnam is very uneven: there is a big gap in personal income between agricultural and industrial laborers, and between villagers and townsfolk. According to a survey carried out by the General Department of Statistics in 1993, the poor families represented 22.14% of rural households (with the personal income under VND50,000 a month), while the rich ones (with personal income of VND250,000 or more) represented only 2.29%. This fact shows that in the purely agricultural economy, the rural labor force will keep on facing low personal income and seasonal unemployment.

4. Quality of the rural labor force

Because of many traditional and economic factors, the rural labor force has a lot of good qualities (they are industrious, inventive, patriotic and creative) which constitute a basis for socio-economic development and participation in national and international division of labor. However, the rural labor force has many weak points that make them inadequate to meet requirements posed by the industrialization and modernization.

- Regarding health standard, some important indicators (physical strength, life expectancy, average build, etc.) are rather low. Their average diet can only supply about 1,960 calories per day (this amount is usually lower in certain localities), which is equivalent to the amount consumed by a Southeast Asian person 30 years before.

Personal spending of rural laborers and their families as well, is mainly on food (70.1%). At present, 40% of farmers are living in huts with some pieces of furniture; 0.97% of households had no bed, 4.3% had no mosquito net, 9.5% no blanket, 55.2% had not enough warm clothes for winter.

with the period before the Anti-American Imperialism War, the height of young people reduced by 3cm; the weight by 4kg; the number of undernourished under-fives was on the increase (from 11.4% to 14.2% in the past five years). Other indicators are also lower than the world average. This situation has affected greatly the working population in rural areas, and the whole country as well.

- As for the education of rural laborers, the situation is also alarming. According to the general census in 1989, of 25.14 million laborers in rural areas, 1.5 million had secondary education, 670,000 finished advanced studies and 250,000 had college (and higher) education. In Vietnam, there were around 8 million illiterates and the better part of them lived in rural areas.

According to statistics collected in 1993, the general education in rural areas was downgraded seriously: 10% of pupils were drop-outs because their families were in financial difficulties, 62.1% of rural laborers saw no film all year round, 70.68% didn't enjoy entertainments. The system of libraries in rural areas almost fell apart. Farmers rarely read books or magazines. These facts show the gap between the education level of rural laborers and requirements posed by the industrialization and modernization.

- The professional knowledge and skills of rural laborers are therefore very low. They can do only manual jobs based on experience. The army of intellectuals is small and uneven distributed. They produce almost no effects on socio-economic development in rural areas. Young people coming to working age every year receive no vocational training. This situation becomes a major obstacle to the application of techno-scientific advances to production, improvement of labor efficiency and reasonable employment of rural labor force.

Reference materials:

- *Kinh tế học về tổ chức phát triển kinh tế Việt Nam* (Economics of Vietnam Economic Development, Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1993).
- PTS Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, *Nông thôn Việt Nam 1945-1991* (Vietnam Rural Areas 1945-1995), Thông kê, Hà Nội, 1995.
- *Dân số lao động Việt Nam: Vấn đề giải pháp* (Vietnam Working Population: Problems and Solutions), Thông tin lý luận, Hà Nội 1992.
- *Lao động và Xã hội*, 9.1993 (a magazine)
- *Kinh tế Nông thôn Việt Nam ngày nay* (Rural Economy in Vietnam Today), Tư tưởng Văn hóa, Hà Nội, 1991.