

Inadequacies of Human Environment in the Mekong Delta

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The Mekong Delta is the national key producer of commercial farm products and has contributed a lot to the food security, but it also faces inadequacies of human environment, which is the greatest challenge after Vietnam's accession to the WTO. This paper discusses three main points: theoretical bases, evidence from realities and suggestions about policy to develop the human resource in the delta.

1. Theories of human environment in rural areas and growth

According to J.V. Braun (1991) the human environment in rural areas reflects in two aspects: health – nutrition and educational level of human resource. There will be no sustainable growth when the human environment in rural areas is not improved over years.

Haddad and Bouis (1991), and Strauss (1986) maintain that there is an interactive relation between growth and improvement in health- nutrition.

- (1) Growth generates jobs and incomes
- (2) Jobs and incomes facilitate improvements in health and nutrition of peasants.
- (3) Better health and nutrition, in its turn, affect favorably the economic growth.

According to E. Alves (1998), low educational level (high illiteracy) of peasants prevents them from understanding such concepts as sustainability and environmental degradation and necessary techniques of reducing waste of resources, therefore new techniques of enhancing the productivity and protecting the environment are not disseminated and applied by peasants.

Conclusions of economics show that investments aiming at improving the human environment in rural areas are necessary for the sustainable growth.

2. Fact from the Mekong Delta

a. Educational level and economic growth

Based on data collected from 60 provinces and cities (not including HCMC, Hà Nội, Bà Rịa- Vũng Tàu, and Hải Phòng) by the World Bank and General Statistics Office in 2004, the estimation model (Dinh Phi Hồ 2008) shows that the literacy ratio in Vietnam depends on personal income: when the personal income rises by 1% the literacy ratio rises by 0.14%. Thus, increase in the personal income is a condition for the literacy ratio among peasants. According to the GSO (2004), the illiteracy ratio in the Mekong Delta was high (10.2% as compared with the national average of 8.8%), the school admission ratio was low (61.5% compared with the national average of 72.1%), the ratio of college and university students to 1,000 people was of the lowest level (four in comparison with the national average of 17). Thus, more investment in the education is a problem to the Mekong Delta.

Figure 1: Ratio of illiterate adults and per capita GDP

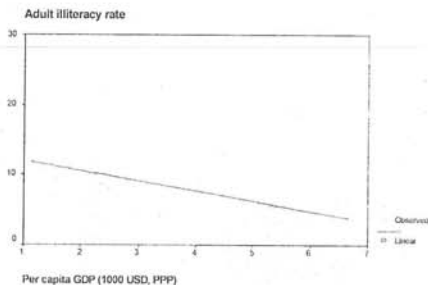


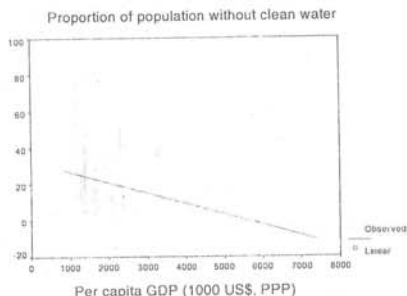
Figure 1 shows that the high ratio of illiteracy in the Mekong Delta and inverse proportion between the per capita GDP and the ratio of adult illiteracy of Vietnam.

b. Health, nutrition and economic growth

The estimation model (Dinh Phi Hồ 1, 2008) shows that the ratio of malnutrition among under-five children depends on the personal income. The first is inversely proportional to the latter: an increase of 1% in the personal income allows a decrease of 0.4% in the number of malnourished children. Thus, the increase in the personal income is a condition for improvement in nutrition for rural residents. According to the GSO (2004), the ratio of malnourished children in the Mekong Delta was high (25.1% compared with the national average of

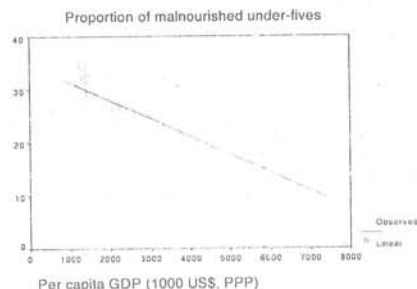
26.6%), so was the ratio of residents provided with clean water (31.5% compared with the national average of 15.9%). Thus, besides the economic growth, the health care service for the Mekong Delta is also a problem to solve.

Figure 2: Ratio of population without clean water by per capita GDP



The Figure 2 shows that a high proportion of rural residents in the Mekong Delta was not provided with clean water, and there was an inverse proportion of the per capita GDP to this group of population.

Figure 3: Ratio of malnourished children by per capita GDP



c. Poverty and growth

The human environment in rural areas also includes sustainable living for residents. High proportion of the poor implies employment risks in rural areas.

The Figure 3 shows a high proportion of the poor in the Mekong Delta (20% compared with the national average of 15.1%) and an inverse proportion of the per capita GDP to the number of the poor.

With such a high proportion of the poor, the Mekong Delta can achieve a sustainable development.

Based on data about family living standard collected in 2004 (VHLSS 2004) from 360 families in 120 communes of 26 districts of seven coastal provinces in the Mekong Delta, the estimation model (Trương Thanh Vũ, 2007) shows that educational level and rural communications affect the level of poverty among peasants. If the probability of poverty of a family is 10% it falls to 7.3% when its education rises by a year. When road reaches their house, the probability falls to 2.8%.

3. Conclusion

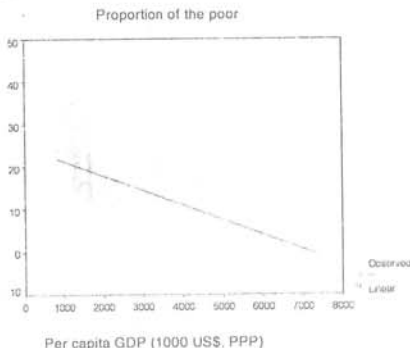
Both theories and facts from the Mekong Delta show that the economic growth affects improvements in the human environment in rural areas. This environment in the Mekong Delta includes many inadequacies that affect unfavorably the quality of human resource. Under current conditions, the Government had better pay full attention to the following problems:

(1) Investment in human development:

Priority must be given to the task of mobilizing all domestic and foreign sources of capital for human development in rural areas. This policy must aim at:

- Improving the educational level and disseminating knowledge of agriculture among rural residents.
- Improving the living conditions in rural areas (health care, infrastructure and environmental sanitary).
- Developing vocational training and creating non-farming jobs.

Figure 4: Proportion of the poor by per capita GDP



- Mobilizing all possible sources to carry out rural development programs.

(2) Transfer and application of technologies:

This policy should aim at combining scientific research, application and technology transfer to serve the peasants. Specific objectives are:

- Developing fast the bio-technologies and accelerating the mechanization of agricultural production should be considered as central tasks.

- Attracting technical assistance programs conducted by international institutions and developed countries to get access to modern technology and giving financial support to research and application programs conducted by local organizations.

- Helping the agricultural extension system operate to its full capacity in order to improve peasants' knowledge by providing it with fund, competent technicians, and mass media (and other means) needed for transferring new technologies to peasants.

- Giving preferential treatment to farm product trading companies engaging in transferring new technologies and buying and exporting produce from peasants.

- Developing high-tech parks in areas specializing in producing commercial farm products and areas with special eco-system.

(3) Creating non-farming jobs and reducing the poverty in rural areas:

The poverty reduction program must be linked with the policy to create non-farming jobs in rural areas and aims at the following objectives:

- Prioritizing the allocation of financial support from international institutions, such as ODA, WB, IMF, and ADB, to projects to develop rural infrastructure, improve environmental sanitary conditions, develop small and medium enterprises in labor-intensive industries, and train teachers; nurses and agricultural development officials.

- Giving preferential treatment to civic organizations carrying out programs to supply vocational training courses in rural areas and develop rural communities, especially in areas of minority groups.■

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