SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM: DOI MOI AND SOCIAL WELFARE

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INTRODUCTION

A number of the so-called ‘tiger economies’ of Southeast Asia (such as Thailand, Korea, Singapore and Indonesia) in 1998 experienced severe ‘economic downturns’. The economic repercussions were experienced as reduced standards of living, lower expectations of progress and other social dislocations (such as riots and public demonstrations). At the time, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was relatively untouched by these economic events in the rest of Asia as it had no stock exchange and no international currency exchange. Vietnam now has a fledgling Securities Trading Center (SACOM) and a VN Index (VNN, Friday 11 Oct, 2002). However, there are few companies listed on the exchange; for example, there are only 17 of some 800 SOEs (state owned enterprises) listed, many of whom are undergoing some degree of privatisation (or ‘equitisation’ in Vietnamese parlance).

After years of isolation at the international level, in 1995 Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), joining Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand as part of an economic bloc. In addition, in the same year the United States agreed to normalize relations with Vietnam. However, like other countries who are opening themselves to the global market, and since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the USA, Vietnam is unable to escape the effects of economic crises in Asia or other parts of the world. Yet it is still seen as a ‘developing tiger’ with high growth and a considerable potential yet to be realized. In this article, I will explore one aspect of development in contemporary Vietnam, social development. This is to provide a focus on how ‘social development’ is contingent on, and inextricably linked with, economic development. In exploring social development, I will emphasize how community development is contributing to the social development of Vietnam and consider how local level community development is
being implemented to improve community conditions and the lives of local people within the national context. Before doing so, it is necessary to consider the context for such development. This requires attention to the unique history of Vietnam within Southeast Asia, and to the political and social structure of the country as a socialist democracy. For brevity, I will use the name ‘Vietnam’ rather than the acronym SRV or the full title of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

**POLITICAL STRUCTURE**

The political structure of Vietnam is most important for any understanding of its economic and social development. Its components include the Communist Party and its Congresses, the National Assembly, the Politburo, People’s Committees, and Mass Organizations under the Fatherland Front.

According to Quinlan (p.18-23), the most important influence is that of the Communist Party, whose influence extends from the highest state organs to the grassroots level in local villages. According to the constitution, the National Assembly, a body of 498 members, is the supreme organ of the state and it is responsible for electing the President and Prime Minister and other top officials. Members of the National Assembly are nominated by the Party and mass organizations, and represent local levels.

In practice, however, the Politburo, a group of 15 members (the Central Committee of the Party has 150 members) who represent the upper echelons of the party, controls the legislative agenda and formulates the state’s long-term strategic directions. The Secretary-General is the ‘primus inter pares’, first among equals, within the Politburo. The President has the right to nominate candidates for a number of key positions and serves as commander of the armed forces, while the Prime Minister is responsible for the day-to-day governance of political affairs. On the political landscape, provincial governments enjoy a high degree of administrative autonomy and are often at odds with the central government. National Congresses of the party, held every five years, are also important structures for defining the country’s overall direction, for formalizing policies and for supporting the leadership.

Another part of the societal structure includes the People’s Councils and People’s Committees. When the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) took over the South after the so-called ‘American war’, the administration set up a number of revolutionary people’s committees, composed of party members and others loyal to the cause, for local administration.
and maintenance of law and order before elections could be held. Elections were subsequently held for People’s Councils at local levels. The People’s Councils create People’s Committees dealing with areas such as Agriculture and Rural Development; Construction (including urban housing); Trade; Science, Technology and the Environment, and; Transportation and Public Works. Other People’s Committees deal with more social-oriented affairs such as Health; Education; Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs. The national government structure is organized through Ministries such as the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the newly created Ministry of Population, Family and Children—all of which have counterpart Departments at the municipal level (such as, the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs or DOLISA).

A third structure is that of the Fatherland Front. Under the umbrella of the Front are a number of mass organizations such as: Women’s Union; Farmers Association; Youth Union; Aged Care Association; Trade/Labour Union; Peasants Association; it also includes professional associations and religious organizations. The Front actually grew out of the banning of political parties and the disbandment of a number of quasi-political’ third force’ organizations created under the former regime. However, it now constitutes an important level of ‘non-government’ organizations within the civil society.

Government in Vietnam is all-pervasive with people governed by various levels of government. Besides the national government, there are Provincial, City, District and Ward (commune) levels. In addition to the provincial level, five cities rate as ‘independent cities’ with the same rank as a province; they include Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Hanoi and Hue (first rank); Hai Phong and Can Thu (second rank). Of these independent cities, in a country of some 80 million people, Ho Chi Minh City is the largest with a population of 5,285,454 (in 2001); with 22 districts (17 urban; 5 rural). Within rural areas in the provinces, the provincial governments administer villages, hamlets and communes.

WARS AND THEIR AFTEREFFECTS

Vietnam has been a country at war for most of the century, first against the French colonials who occupied the country until 1954, with the Americans until 1975, with Cambodia when they occupied that country and installed a new government in 1978, and with China in 1979 who wanted to ‘punish’ the Vietnamese for this occupation. The conquest of South Vietnam in April 1975 by the
communist forces of North Vietnam led to the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The ‘American War’ was a defining moment for the political unification of Vietnam. Once unified, however, the country faced a number of daunting problems. The long war had disastrous effects on the society and economy; for example, the North Vietnamese economic infrastructure was destroyed while serious ecological effects of defoliation (caused by the US military’s program to deny food aid by spraying foliage with herbicides), on soil erosion and productive capabilities of the land, were apparent in South Vietnam. In the South, the problems of reconstruction were economic, social, political and ideological. The economy was on the verge of bankruptcy, a famine was threatened in central Vietnam, there were more than 3 million unemployed people (including an army of a half-million prostitutes), 6-7 million people had been forced to leave their homes in villages and needed to be re-settled, and there were an estimated 2.2 million war casualties. Added to this, the economy had been completely dependent on the US funded war and industry, was 100% dependent on foreign countries for raw materials and 85% dependent for fuel and machinery, and bankers and fleeing officials had stolen most of the country’s foreign exchange reserves (Sar Desai, p. 332).

The early reforms after 1975 were directed to concentrate resources to develop the state sector as the foundation of economic development; in effect, develop the state planning apparatus. For rural areas, the reforms meant land redistribution followed by collectivization, leaving little room for autonomous markets for agricultural produce, labour, capital and other resources (Kerkvliet and Porter, p.6-7). The problems, however, facing the country were enormous while the decisions made by the political leadership to overcome these problems were increasingly called into question.

Effectively, the country was never completely unified, as North Vietnam remains more of a bastion of pure socialism while South Vietnam has always retained some measure of capitalism. For example, it has been stated that Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) has never fully implemented Hanoi’s ‘socialist transformation’ policies and allowed small producers to continue operating after 1975 (Hiebert, p.59).

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE: DOI MOI

A major change of direction in the management of the economy and society occurred with the introduction of the policy of *doi moi* (economic renovation or, simply renovation) in 1986. *Doi moi* allowed for more market-oriented monetary
policies; decentralization of state economic management and decision-making to state-owned enterprises; adoption of an outward-oriented policy in economic relations; agricultural polices to allow long-term land use rights and freedom in marketing products; reliance on the private sector as the ‘engine of growth’ and giving more latitude for state-owned and private enterprises to deal directly with foreign markets (Murray, p.24). The change was described by Politburo member Dao Duy Tung:

In the past, the model of building socialism as far as the economy was concerned (involved) two kinds of ownership, state and collective with a centrally planned mechanism. Now, Vietnam has transformed into a multi-sectoral market economy, although the public sector still plays a management key role. Vietnam has decided to combine economic growth with social progress, the expansion of social welfare, encouraging people to make their fortunes legally and at the same time eliminate famine and alleviate poverty, improving education and health, reducing excessive subsidies and the slavish reliance on the state. (Viet Nam Economic Times, January 1995).

Doi moi has provided an impetus for a number of market-driven reforms. For example, the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), in the face of outdated technology and management methods, decided to establish a new department of vocational training to strike a balance between the supply and demand for skilled labour (Viet Nam News, Thursday January 8, 1998). And following a strategy of ‘equitisation’ or share purchases in state-owned enterprises, has come the use of private funding for schools, hospitals and cultural activities. Foreign and domestic investment in health care and education is now encouraged. Australian investors funded the first international standard general hospital in Vietnam, which opened during 1997 in Hanoi. It is expected that ‘non-state’ institutions will be responsible for almost all of kindergarten schooling, 10-15% of primary schools, 25% of preliminary secondary schools and 50% of junior secondary schools; in addition, foreign colleges and universities are allowed to open their own schools in Vietnam (Lam, p.14-19).

In spite of economic renovation, the situations of many Vietnamese have not changed markedly since 1975. The World Bank (1996, p. 126ff) states that poverty is still widespread in the country, although it has been a focus of attention since unification. The Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VLSS), the first nationally representative household survey carried out by government with the technical assistance of the
World Bank, developed new poverty lines based on a benchmark per capita caloric requirement of 2,100 calories a day as well as an allotment for non-food essential items. The survey found about 51 per cent of the Vietnamese population is poor, with half of the poor (25% of the population) are food-poor in the sense that they cannot meet their daily basic calorie requirement even if they were to spend all their income on food. In addition, poverty is much higher in rural areas than in urban areas; 90 percent of all the poor are concentrated in rural areas while three quarters of these are farmers. Other indicators of poverty show increases in the number of female-headed households, households with more and younger children (under the age of 15) and number of street children (estimated 30,000 in Ho Chi Minh alone, according to the VNN, December 28, 1997). The Vietnam Development Report 2000 found that the proportion of people with per capita expenditures below the poverty line declined in the period 1993-98 and stood at 37 percent in 1998. While the gains in poverty reduction have been both broad and widespread, the Country Assistance Group (2000) raised concerns that these gains are fragile, and that the momentum of growth and the quality and sustainability of development must be improved.

Despite health care modernization, poverty reduction and advances in combating malnutrition, the National Institute of Nutrition calculates that there are still about 2.5 million malnourished children in Vietnam. The reduction is lower in rural and mountainous regions with shortages of clean water, poor environmental hygiene, fewer institutions such as kindergartens and medical facilities; prolonged flooding has also slowed work to lower malnutrition in the Cuu Long (Mekong) Delta (VNN, October 11, 2002).

Ethnic minorities (such as the Tay and the H’mong) who represent 15 percent of the population—with the exception of the Chinese—have a higher incidence of poverty than the national average: ranging from 66% among the Tay to 100% of the H’mong. In 11 mountainous provinces that contain 30% of the poor, the infrastructure system is so dilapidated that about 700 communes have no access to electricity, safe water, schools and health clinics.

In another study by Ho Chi Minh municipal authorities, about 25% of poor households live in slum dwellings interspersed throughout the city’s outer districts. Since a ‘charity house’ campaign was launched in 1995, over 2,000 houses have been built with funding from government, local people, the National Fatherland
Front, with the support of business. The City Administration is committed to build 30,000 houses each year, with half targeted for low-income people. Added to this, a number of State-owned enterprises (SOEs) have used their own capital and ‘welfare funding’ to build houses for their workers (VNN, Saturday April 18, 1998). These initiatives cannot, however, meet the urgent demand for lost-cost housing among the poor, especially those who live in slums on polluted rivers and canals. In addition, prostitution and drug use are increasing, as is the trafficking across the Chinese and Cambodian borders of Vietnamese women who are sold into prostitution (Bangkok Post, 18 January 1998). To counter such ‘social disorders’ the national government set up a Social Evils Prevention Department, and it is involved in finding ways to censoring the Internet to prevent access to pornography.

Clearly, the move to a market economy has had difficulties. The 4th Plenum of the VN Central Committee of the Communist Party notes that management of the transformation to a market economy shows ‘confusion’ (VNN, 6 January 1998). The Plenum concluded that while the GDP increased by 9% in the first two years of the 1996-2000 Plan, there was an uneven distribution so that gaps between regions and between income levels widened. Part of the problem was defined in terms of bureaucratization, corruption and wasteful spending. At a seminar to discuss the World Development Report 1997, Dr. Vinh of the National Administration Institute listed five tasks for the State to ensure substantial progress toward a better society; among these are investment in social services and infrastructure, and the reduction of poverty and protection of the vulnerable. As in capitalist countries, Vietnam is struggling with the role of the State in a market-oriented world.

Another speaker, Nguyen Van Thao, a member of the Government Office’s Specialist Reform Study Group suggests that the process of development has its own features in Vietnam and that a redirection of the State’s role should accord with the fundamental principle expressed by Ho Chi Minh: ‘To leave people to what they can handle; do together with the people that which they can partly handle; do only what the people can’t handle’ (VNN, ‘State is a ‘mid-wife’ to development, World bank told’, Friday April 10, 1998).}

**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE WELFARE SYSTEM**

After a hiatus of some 23 years (after the ‘American War’) social welfare is back on the agenda. There is an awakening recognition of social problems in the country, particularly in relation to invalids and war veterans, the elderly, children
and farmers. We should distinguish between so-called ‘universal’ social programs and others that are targeted to meet individual needs. Universal social programs may be said to exist in education and health care. The specific or targeted programs may be said to constitute ‘welfare’ provisions. There are formal and informal welfare systems.

**FORMAL WELFARE SYSTEM**

The government-sponsored part of the formal social welfare system is financed by taxation. The taxes are raised at the municipal level and 80% is forwarded to the national government to be re-distributed across the country. The ‘formal’ social welfare system exists mainly for invalids, war veterans, children in need of care and protection (including abandoned children and street kids) and the elderly. Various estimates state that there are about 1 million disadvantaged children in Vietnam; ‘disadvantage’ includes nine categories: homeless, street children; disabled’ drug addicts’ prostitutes, orphans, poor, war-affected children (including children affected by Agent Orange) and abused children. The formal welfare system includes social centres that are geared toward rehabilitation, care and protection and serve the elderly poor, the homeless, street children and drug addicts. Some programs have been developed with the help of other national or international agencies. For example, the Children’s Peace Village at Thanh Xuan on the outskirts of Hanoi was established in 1991 with the support of the German Friendship Association. The school provides education, physical and psychological rehabilitation for children with birth defects who are believed to have resulted from their parents’ experience during the American war (Australia-Vietnam Dialogue, p. 31).

The eradication of poverty and vulnerability, promoting social equity, accelerating rural development and improving public administration, transparency and participation are central features of the current country assistance strategy to deal with development in Vietnam (Vietnam Country Assistance Strategy 2000). The main program to target assistance to the poor (The Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Program or HEPR is considered to have limited impact because of lack of ownership from local Governments (ibid, p.18). While there are a plethora of issues to deal with (such as inequality, domestic violence, governance and access to resources), one of the main concerns is in the area of developing public safety nets, including some forms of social insurance, to help people cope with poverty, resettlement, displacement from jobs (including the changes in state owned enterprises) and other hardships (see, for example, Preston 1999).
As in other countries of the region, poverty eradication efforts call for a mix of strategies such as income generation, access to resources, encouraging participation, self-help and micro-credit. On 4 October 2002, the national government (Decision 131/2002/QD-TTg) established a Social Policies Bank to benefit people targeted by the government’s social welfare policies. This non-profit lending institution, will have an initial legal capital of VND 5 trillion (US$ 330 million), and mobilise other capital from individuals and organizations, government and People’s Committee’s at all levels. The bank will be based in Ha Noi and have branches nation-wide, and replace the Bank for the Poor. (VNN, October 10, 2002). The formal welfare system includes the work of non-government organizations, mainly international NGOS but including local level voluntary or community-based organizations (including local projects funded by international aid or in partnership with Vietnamese funding). Indeed, the Vietnam government believes that partnerships among the government, agencies and the people themselves is necessary to solve the economic, social and environmental problems facing contemporary Vietnam.

Examples in the Formal Welfare System: Education and Health Provision The formal welfare system includes social transfers as well as social programs. Social transfers represent 10% of the national budget, nearly as much as on education and health. However, social transfers (including pensions and social relief) are not well targeted to the poor. More than 80% of the social transfer budget is spent on social security for government workers while funds need to be better targeted to the rural poor and other poor who are not covered by the social security program (World Bank, 1996, p.128).

Hiebert (180ff) notes that real spending on education has dropped, and while the country has an adult literacy rate of 88 percent, school enrolment rates are falling and teachers are abandoning their jobs. At the same time, the quality of education has fallen due to factors such as overcrowded and dilapidated school building, a lack of textbooks and teaching materials, inadequate curriculum and teaching methods and poorly paid and under qualified teachers. With the decline of the public education system, some private and semi-public schools (and universities) have been set up by groups of teachers. Ho Chi Minh City Open University is an example of a semi-public university, operating on an open and distance education mode, which relies only on tuition fees to survive.

Public health care is in a difficult, if not as critical a condition
as the public education system. Since 1975 some health indicators have improved. For example, infant mortality fell from 156 per 1,000 births in 1960 to 53 live births three decades later, and life expectancy jumped from 50 years in 1970 to 65 in 1990. But at the present time, there are problems related to malnutrition, access to safe drinking water (only one in three rural families have access) and a high incidence of mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria.

Despite these problems, expenditures on health care are low; in 1990 spending on health care was less than $1 per capita (World Bank, 1992). The poor tend to use commune level health centres more but only 5% of the health budget is allocated to primary health services while 11% is spent on hospitals where the wealthier go (World Bank, 1996, p.127). Many public health facilities are poorly resourced and health care workers are forced to work in other enterprises to obtain an acceptable salary. In rural areas, there are instances where village clinics are closed even during normal office hours as staffs are out doing other things. Do moi has brought some innovations to the system; for example, ‘after hours’ private clinics are sprouting up so that health workers can provide care and add to their meager incomes (Hiebert, p.177).

The World Bank (1996, p.127) recommends that government needs to target its public spending to reduce barriers to the utilization of primary and secondary schools and commune health centres and district hospitals used by the poor, and improve the quality of these services.

Formal social services are also provided by agencies such as Departments for Population, Families and Children (CPFC) and the Youth Union. For example in Ho Chi Minh City, in the ‘child welfare’ area, the CPFC works at all levels (city, district and commune). It has a chairperson as well as number of Vice-Presidents (who specialize in linkages with other mass organizations). It is involved at the policy and planning level (as a counterpart of UNICEF) with staff engaged in compiling statistics, services planning and work with mass organizations and the Ministry of Health). It focuses on issues of community health and is involved in seven action programs (dealing with counseling and nutrition).

The Youth Union also works at all levels on ‘youth issues’ on issues which run the gamut from health care, education and culture, to those of ‘difficult children’ such as homeless youth. The staff of the Youth Union sees their role as liaising and working with other groups such as the Labour Union, Women’s, Union and the CPFC. They are organized to work
at all levels, with sections for urban youth, rural youth, youth workers and students. They liaise with staff in other provinces and with the Vietnamese Youth Association. The prevailing norm as well as the responsibility is for such mass organizations to collaborate on specific issues and projects for children, youth and other people.

INFORMAL WELFARE SYSTEM

The ‘informal’ welfare system operates very much through community level organization, including a reliance on mutual aid. It is apparent that reliance on self-help and mutual aid is an integral part of the Vietnamese social structure, with community culture and services provided by a variety of religious groups. The importance of self-reliance and autonomy is captured by Wintle (1992, p.405) who quotes from a conversation with general Vo Nguyen Giap, former commander of the Viet Minh army which fought against the French colonialists:

_In 1941, when Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam, we had no weapons at all to fight against the French. But then Ho gave us the best weapon of all. It was the idea, independence and socialism. This idea was absorbed into the Vietnamese mind._

Many reasons can be offered for the self-reliance within the informal welfare system; they include, for example, the inability of the economy to finance a more comprehensive ‘system’ of welfare benefits and social services and a reluctance until recently to build such systems (mixed economies of welfare) that have been developed in capitalist countries. They also include an ethic which expects people to help themselves; the fledgling nature of the social welfare system; and the relatively small number and status of social science professionals (such as psychologists, sociologists and social workers) who can be involved in social program development and delivery. In particular, social work is not recognized (since 1975) as a separate discipline and generally falls under the umbrella of ‘sociology’.

It is important to recognize the importance of the Fatherland Front in developing ‘informal welfare’ initiatives. While the ‘formal’ welfare system may be associated with government, many self-help initiatives are encouraged by mass organizations associated with the Fatherland Front. Much of the appeal seems directed to the sense of patriotism of citizens, although there are various forms of ‘encouragement’ for citizens to donate money, time and labour. A few of the informal welfare initiatives include:

_Leaders Uniting for Building a Good Life at the Community Level:_ This program embraces actions such as neighborhood clean-ups, the
introduction of neighborhood monitors (involved mainly in issues of safety) and in organizing self-help initiatives.

Voluntary Labour and Special Labour: In Vietnam able-bodied people are expected to donate ten days a year to voluntary work for the state. This especially applies to men between 18 and 40 years.

Welfare Funds: There are programs to encourage the provision of social welfare at local levels. For example, there is a campaign to encourage people to donate at least 15,000 dong (approximately 1.5 dollars) per quarter. The actual amount solicited depends on household income. The results of these local campaigns are used to pay for staff at the local level. These staff are involved in youth work, concentrating on local safety issues.

War Invalids-Gratitude Housing: Another campaign is aimed at obtaining resources, including housing, to support the survivors or parents of ‘war heroes’. People are asked to contribute as a duty of gratitude to those who fought in wars of defense or liberation. These funds are then used to help to build housing for poor war invalids (the cost for such housing is in the order of 13-15 million dong per house, or $1300-1500 Australian).

Open Houses for Street Children: The HCM City Volunteer Youth Force established three ‘open houses’ for children who live on the streets. Almost 300 street kids, who earn a living on the streets as shoe shiners, beggars, newspaper or lottery ticket vendors, are semi-permanent residents of these houses. The Roman Catholic and Buddhist churches are seen as the two most important resources to encourage the provision of social welfare at local levels and directly support children and other people in special difficult circumstances.

Bui The Cuong (2000) sums up the current situation of social welfare following ‘doi moi’. He includes three forms of social welfare that he calls traditional, social welfare based on a socialist planned economy, and social welfare based on a socialist oriented market economy (following doi moi). He notes that following doi moi more societal institutions are expected to be involved in social welfare activities. The state plays a new role in encouraging contributions from all these sectors, there is a role for the private sector, an increasing role for local governments and for individual households. While strides have been made in a number of social welfare areas, he indicates that there remain problems in social security, health care and education.
COMMUNITY LEVEL ISSUES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Many of the ‘social development’ initiatives are taken at local levels. As social workers and health educators begin to work with representatives of mass organizations and People’s Committees, the problems of school drop-outs, street kids, the homeless, youth, young families, the elderly, invalids and poor women’s groups are increasingly coming to the fore. And as such problems are recognized, issues such as literacy, credit, public health, primary health care, childcare and protection are beginning to be addressed. Some of the main community-level issues in Vietnam now include the provision of primary health care, HIV-AIDS, basic education and attention to school dropouts, street kids and homelessness, slum improvement and poverty.

Addressing these community-level issues brings into play a more intricate pattern of agencies and their agents. Generally, the approaches used follow a community development model that emphasizes the building of community capacities, including community consciousness, group formation, coalition building, and leadership development.

On these issues, a typical way in which services are developed starts with a health education worker or social worker engaging with people around issues of water supply or nutrition. During the early stages, the workers assist with information or technical assistance on how to grow vegetables and raise poultry. Following interaction around this specific assistance, workers might be trusted to organize general community meetings around the care of children. Issues such as literacy and the inability to access general and/or special education will be raised, with a focus on finding ways to assist children to go to school. This focus on children will shift to other women’s or family issues. For example, women’s health issues will be raised. While this can emphasize primary health care, it often moves to issues of nutrition, poverty and community development.

One of the main areas that comes up is that of the lack of income to meet basic and emerging needs and the lack of capital to initiate a business and use local resources. This leads to discussions on credit and local economic development. Practitioners and local people begin to consider ‘community economic development’ and how local people can participate in the economy and begin to be more self-sufficient. The action plans to be implemented may include remedies such as organizing a credit union or developing business opportunities for local people.

Since issues are seen as community-level issues, the resolution of
these issues will involve social and health workers in working committees with representatives of People’s Committees, mass organizations under the Fatherland Front and the Party. This emphasis on getting the input from all relevant actors at each level is an important ingredient in a commitment to solve social problems. In their action planning, the workers will provide facilitation to assist the nucleus group to develop as a group (or organization) and to write submissions to governments, NGOs and other sources to fund services. While their work involves initial support and participation from representatives of government and mass organizations, organizations in the process of local community development help to educate these representatives to encourage a more ‘bottom-up approach’ by institutions in working with local people.

**SOCIAL WORK IN VIETNAM**

It is fitting to end this article with some reference to social work in contemporary Vietnam. As noted above, there is an occupational group of ‘social workers’ but the profession is not yet fully developed since doi moi. However, there are a number of social work courses of varying intensity and length under a variety of auspices (such as in universities, Ministry for Population, Families and Children; Trade Unions; and in training colleges sponsored by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs). However, the courses lack social work educational materials; many of the teachers are not social workers and do not understand social work; and training for social work educators is haphazard. One of the pre-eminent pioneers in the resurgence of social work in Vietnam, the late Nguyen Thi Oanh, notes that a question may be asked how community development can work in a socialist country, answering that it is in part due to the fact that the failure of ‘top-down’ programs has changed government thinking (1996, p152). Through her efforts and that of other colleagues (both social workers and sociologists), such as Do Van Binh, Dr. Thai Thi Ngoc Du, Nguyen Ngoc Lam and Bui The Cuong, social work and the community development approach has gained considerable standing in the country. While social work is still practiced mainly in a ‘fields of practice’ model (such as by working with youth, the aged, children), professional methods have infused work in rural development, in poverty alleviation projects as well as in urban situations. Important institutional bases have emerged out of practical social work such as the Social Development Research and Consultancy group (SDRC) that provides capacity building assistance and Mai Handicrafts that employs low-income families to make handicrafts and uses the surplus for social
work services. As a result of this pioneering work, there are more social work courses as well as social work content in degree courses, and more graduates from both internal and overseas courses who are practicing in Vietnam. Most of these are in the south but more are practicing in the north.

CONCLUSION

The directions currently being taken in Vietnam under doi moi are meant to strengthen market processes, to encourage foreign investment and to develop the economy of the country. Social development programs remain a low priority, although there is increasing recognition and attention being given to deal with social problems. While some social development indicators have improved, there remain endemic problems of poverty, with attendant issues such as homelessness, malnutrition, decreased access to public health care and to education. There is a formal and informal welfare system. The formal system is organised to assist certain categories of people in need (such as war invalids, children in need of care and protection) while the informal system provides for more self-help measures, and encourages co-operative working relations and commitment by social care workers, local cadres, mass organisations and the party. While social work is moving to regaining a professional status in Vietnam, the community development approach is the strategy of choice in dealing with a variety of social development issues at various levels, including the local level. This approach stresses widespread participation, use of groups and group discussion methods, coalition formation and local leadership development. Training for this new approach is being implemented through government ministries, universities, some non-government organizations, as well as though interactions between social care professionals with representatives of People’s Committees, mass organisations and the Communist Party on specific issues or projects.

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