



Food Security versus Food Sovereignty: Choice of Concept, Policies, and Classes in Vietnam's Post-Reform Economy

TRAN THI THU TRANG

ABSTRACT. This article discusses two important concepts of food security and food sovereignty in the context of Vietnam's post-reform economy. It examines Vietnam's persistent choice of the food security framework, its resulting policies and their implications. The article argues that the choice of food security framework has served to justify the promotion of industrial agriculture and international trade. While this model has led to increased food productivity, it failed to guarantee access to and quality of food, the other two important pillars of the food security framework. More important, the article argues that the continued adoption of food security and industrial agriculture is not neutral but reflects the shifting position of the Vietnamese government away from the peasantry for the benefits of capital accumulation by other classes.

KEYWORDS. food security · food sovereignty · industrial agriculture · *doi moi* · Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has often been cited as a success story among developing countries for achieving a combination of annual GDP growth rate of mostly above 7 percent and annual poverty reduction rate of 4 percent since the country launched its transition from planned to market economy in the 1980s (Balisacan, Pernia, and Estrada 2003, 1). From being a food importer, Vietnam has become a world exporter of several key agricultural commodities such as rice and seafood. Such an optimistic view has been echoed by numerous reports from multilateral agencies, government bodies, and academic research, implying that the economic policies adopted by the Vietnamese government have largely been on the right track. Despite this success and optimism, however, policymakers, researchers, and development agencies have started showing concerns about the country's capacity to feed its population in the future, especially in view of the recent global food crises.

Cumulated concerns led the Prime Minister's Office to issue Resolution No. 63/NQ-CP on Ensuring National Food Security in 2009. In this resolution, the government situates food among its priorities and affirms food security as its chosen conceptual and policy framework.

The concept of food security has many different definitions, but its origin can be traced to the Bretton Wood institutions. Reflecting the post-World War II food shortage, food security then implied efforts to increase food production and national self-reliance (Lee 2007). These included technological solutions in agrochemical fertilizers and pesticides, high-yielding varieties, and agricultural mechanization. These solutions, termed as the Green Revolution, had been actively promoted by the World Bank and the government of the United States in the Third World in the 1960s and 1970s.

The above strategies led to increase in food productivity and production output. However, a number of studies have pointed out that food security was not just a matter of production but of distribution. Amartya Sen, in his book *Poverty and Famine*, demonstrated how famines could occur amid sufficient food supply, due to insufficient access to food (Sen 1982). Such critiques led to the incorporation of "access" into the food security framework in the 1980s (FAO 1983; World Bank 1986). The 1996 World Food Summit has broadened further the food security concept to include the quality aspect of food. In 2003, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) formulated the definition of food security as follows: "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food and food preferences to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life" (2003, 8).

This latest definition of food security highlights the need to ensure access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. However, it is silent on the mechanisms to achieve this goal. In fact, the food security framework is presented as "a non-political, essentially technical concept and approach" (Alex de Wad, quoted in Doornbos 2006, 8). It leaves governments and development actors to identify strategies of their choice, which in most cases imply the continuation of industrial agriculture with green revolution technologies and greater international trade. This flexibility might explain the widespread adoption of the concept as it does not challenge the existing agricultural model nor demand radical changes that could threaten the status quo.

In contrast to food security, food sovereignty represents a very different conceptual and political framework. While food sovereignty shares similar objectives about access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food as the food security framework, it differs significantly from the latter in several key aspects. First, food sovereignty is the outcome of a bottom-up process through the work of Via Campesina, a transnational movement of poor peasants and small farmers (Borras 2010, 790). Second, unlike food security, food sovereignty includes mechanisms to achieve stated objectives. At the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, the framework identifies four priority areas: “the right to food, access to productive resources, mainstreaming of agroecological production, and trade and local markets” (Lee 2007). The first priority area defines “the right to food” similar to that of food security—that is, access to safe, nutritious, and culturally acceptable food. However, the other priority areas of food sovereignty clearly identify the approach to achieving the right-to-food objective, which opposes industrial agriculture, the use of agrochemical inputs, concentration of land and other productive resources, and international trade regime, which are implicit in the food security framework. And finally, food sovereignty sharply differs from the food security approach in its perception of food. For the former, food is not a mere market commodity to be produced, exchanged, and consumed but something that carries different sets of social relations. By advocating for access to productive resources, agroecology, and local and regional markets, food sovereignty proposes a paradigmatic change that removes the production, exchange, and consumption of food out of market principles and re-embeds these processes within the society. Food sovereignty is therefore a conceptual framework with a clear political objective opposing mainstream agricultural model and neoliberal policies (Borras 2010, 779; Lee 2007). The framework has become a rallying point for different social groups, uniting “close to 200 (sub)national organizations from 56 countries in Latin America, North America, Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe” (Borras 2010, 779).

Despite the increased worldwide advocacy for food sovereignty, mostly by civil societies and academics, Vietnam has faithfully endorsed the food security framework. The Vietnamese government, through its 2009 Resolution on Food Security, demonstrates the continuation of its food security framework and its development strategy based on industrial agriculture, international trade, and technological solutions. While the Vietnam National Farmers Association is a member of Via

Campesina, it has not promoted food sovereignty principles in the country. Other civil society and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) have also been very silent on food sovereignty. A simple Google search in February 2011 for *an ninh lương thực* (food security in Vietnamese) yielded about 13.4 million hits (more than 6.5 million if the term was written with Vietnamese diacritics) while *chu quyền lương thực* (food sovereignty in Vietnamese) yielded only forty-five results (less than four thousand with diacritics). Most of these food sovereignty hits merely report about the movement in other countries and not in relation to Vietnam per se. A few researchers and NGOs have adopted food sovereignty in their analyses and project activities. However, they tend to use food security and food sovereignty interchangeably or define food sovereignty merely as “the right to food” (Anh 2010; Thanh et al. 2009). As discussed above, while food sovereignty advocates the “right to food” similar to the food security approach, the former also emphasizes three important and radically different principles to achieve this goal. Thus, by defining food sovereignty only as the right to food, these actors do not necessarily move away from the food security framework.¹

This article argues that while this chosen framework of food security and its implicit strategy of industrial agriculture could result in higher productivity and export revenues, this model fails to ensure access to and quality of food—the two pillars of the food security framework itself. In fact, the article argues that this choice is not neutral but reflects the changing position of the Vietnamese government that moves away from the peasantry and sides with other classes at the expense of the former.

INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Self-reliance on food has long been one of the primary concerns of the Vietnamese government. Upon arrival to power in 1954, the government had made efforts to industrialize the agricultural sector as a way to achieving food self-sufficiency. Its objective was to obtain large-scale, intensive, and technology-driven production by collectivizing land, establishing agricultural cooperatives, and promoting the use of industrial inputs, notably of modern varieties (MVs) and agrochemicals. The government, however, did not encourage the mechanization of agricultural production to make use of its large rural workforce. Investment in agriculture in the first half of the 1960s was five times

higher than that in the 1958-60 period and mostly for irrigation and MVs (Bhaduri and Rahman 1982, 35-42; Vinh 1997, 100-106). While irrigation has long been part of wet rice farming in Vietnam, its intensification is crucial to the adoption of those MVs. In the second half of the 1960s, the government pushed further its industrialization efforts by forming high-level cooperatives, allowing large-scale specialized production and further adoption of modern technologies (Long 1993, 167; Kerkvliet 2005, 85; Taylor 2007). However, inappropriate production organization of the cooperatives resulted in sluggish food production. In addition, the increase in scope and intensity of the Vietnam War by the mid-1960s significantly drained food and other resources out of the countryside. As a result, the country suffered from food scarcity and had to depend on food imports (Kerkvliet 2005, 85-86).

The end of the war in 1975 exposed the weakness of the cooperative system, triggering the economic reform in the 1980s, which liberalized production and exchange, allowing the private sector to be part of the economy, thus marking the transition from a planned to a market economy. The government reduced the scale of production by breaking down large cooperatives into family farms but remained in line with its modernizing objectives, pushing further for industrial agriculture through irrigation, the use of modern rice varieties, and agrochemical inputs. For instance, from the start of reunification to the end of the 1980s, national hydraulic investments amounted to about 62 percent of all agricultural capitalization (Miller 2007, 197). Most of those efforts were carried out in the Mekong Delta and allowed double or triple cropping in a single year. About three hundred thousand hectares of single-crop deepwater floating rice paddies were transformed into double or triple-crop irrigated fields in the early 1980s (Bong 2000). Hydraulic engineering has also allowed the widespread adoption of short-cycle high-yielding cultivars, which tripled from six hundred thousand hectares planted in the Mekong Delta in 1975 to 2.1 million hectares in 1993, a surge from one-third to three quarters of the area's paddy fields in twenty years (Pingali et al. 1997, 351-52; Young et al. 2002, 8-10; see also discussion in Thanh and Singh 2006, 117; Kähkönen 2009, 206-8; Sneddon and Binh 2001, 246-47; Miller 2007).

The adoption rate of MVs in the country had increased on average from 17 percent in 1980 to 90 percent in 2000, while that in the Mekong Delta was slightly above 93 percent in 1998 (Bong 2000; Ut

and Kajisa 2006, 168). Hybrid rice varieties, which further increase productivity but require seed processing at every generation (GRAIN 2008), were also introduced into Vietnam in the early 1990s and planted on more than 720,000 hectares by 2009 (Bong 2000; VOV News 2009). In turn, the application of chemical fertilizers increased by an annual average of 11.5 percent between 1976 and 1992 (Pingali et al. 1997, 352; AgroViet 2010; IRRI 2009; see also Ut and Kajisa 2006, 170-72). Inputs came in short supply by the late 1980s as troubles flared up in the Soviet Union, the main supplier, and across the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon). The Vietnamese government, however, quickly addressed that scarcity by liberalizing the input markets, allowing the private sector to sell directly to farmers. It also decentralized agrochemical importation, authorizing provincial governments to purchase directly abroad using their own funds (Fforde and Sènèque 1994, 21; Fforde and De Vylder 1996, 180; Pingali et al. 1997, 348; Hai 2003, 53). As a result, Vietnam was able to increase its import of fertilizers from 1.8 million tons in 1989 to 2.1 million tons in 1990 (Fforde and Sènèque 1994, 33). Since then, the use of agrochemical inputs has further intensified. In the production of rice, the use of chemical fertilizers had increased from 41 kg/ha in 1976 to 182 kg/ha in 1994 (Young et al. 2002, 14-15). The annual national consumption of fertilizer had increased from four hundred thousand tons in 1976 to eight million tons in 2009 (Young et al. 2002, 15; AgroViet 2010). Similarly, the use of plant protection agrochemicals grew rapidly from twenty thousand tons in 1991 to fifty thousand tons in 2009 (Dasgupta et al. 2005, 5; AgroViet 2010; see also Le Coq and Trebil 2005, 545). Having quickly caught up with other Asian countries on the Green Revolution, Vietnam now makes a comparable use of agrochemicals, even surpassing others in some respects (Pingali et al. 1997, 350; Dung and Dung 2003, 2-3).

In addition to industrialization of the agricultural sector, the Vietnamese government made efforts to integrate into the global economy in the 1990s. It implemented a number of policies, notably the 1993 Land Law that some consider as “the most radical and determined step toward establishing private land-use rights” (Hayami 1994, 9), the development of the agricultural processing industry and an export-led agriculture, and the normalization of trade relations with China and the United States and accession to regional and global trading organizations, notably the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and The

World Trade Organization (WTO) (Fforde and Sènèque 1994, 1-2; Cuc 1995, 89; Thayer 1999; Kokko and Sjöholm 2004, 70; Dosch and Tuan 2004, 197-98). These marked a significant shift in the Vietnamese development strategy as the country was trying not only to increase its agricultural production but also to gain access to international agricultural markets. This occurred as neoliberalism became a dominant global discourse, which advocated the incorporation of food production with international trade through a number of agreements under the Uruguay Round and later the WTO (Lee 2007).

The above efforts have led to significant growth. Vietnam became not only self-reliant in food but also an important food exporter in the world market. It moved from “importing about half a million tons of food annually in 1986-1988, [to becoming] the third-largest exporter of rice by 1989” (Dodsworth et al. 1996, 4). Vietnam has now become an important world producer of food, accounting for 15 to 20 percent of the global rice market volume (IRRI 2007). Agricultural export revenues also increased significantly. “In 2002, the total export turnover of agri-forest products was 2.8 billion USD, that is, up by 3.1 times as compared with that of 1990” (MARD, 1). During the 2008 global food crisis, the Vietnamese government decided against free trade principles, however, by temporarily freezing rice exports to ensure domestic food security and increase rice export value amid reduced export quantities. Nevertheless, despite all these successes in food production and export revenues, post-reform policies of industrial agriculture and global market integration in Vietnam have failed to ensure availability of nutritious and safe food and access to them for everyone—the other two pillars of the food sovereignty framework.

Since the reform, many studies have documented the reemergence of class differentiation as a result of horizontal capital accumulation. In the Mekong Delta, some studies find that larger farms use more hired labor and apply technological innovation in their production, such as machinery, high-yield varieties, fertilizers, and insecticides. Since 1998, however, the price of inputs has increased steadily while the price of rice has fluctuated. Only rich farmers are able to make profits from industrial farming. In turn, poor peasants had to sell their land to richer farmers, mostly due to debts, production failures, and sickness. The land market was well established, especially after the implementation of the 1993 Land Law that legalized the transfer of land-use right, and has led to intensified land concentration and increased proportion of landless peasants in the Mekong Delta. Akram-Lodhi (2005, 84)

demonstrates that “whereas 28 percent of rural households in the Mekong Delta in 1994 had less than 0.2 hectares of land, by 1997 the figure had risen to 37 percent (World Bank and ADB 2002, 49). Similarly, whereas 16.9 percent of rural households in the Mekong Delta were landless in 1993, by 2002 that figure had risen to 28.9 percent” (see also Taylor 2004; Le Meur 2005; Luong 2003). Land concentration and peasant differentiation are also observed in the northern uplands as well as in the Central Highlands where ethnic minorities have lost their land to state farms and Kinh migrants for the cultivation of new cash crops such as coffee (Henin 2002; Van 2002 and Loi 2000, cited in Suu 2004, 271).

Many of those landless peasants have become rural laborers or urban migrant workers (Akram-Lodhi 2005, 95). Some might view it as a positive sign that the country is moving successfully from an agrarian to industrial and service-based economy. This transition would see the dynamic nonfarm-sector pulls along the more passive, laid-back agricultural sector either through consumption and investment linkages and making the agricultural sector more industrialized and productive. However, despite the government’s persistent efforts to industrialize and modernize the country, the industrial and service sectors both in cities and the countryside have seen few development projects that could absorb a large number of rural exoduses. “In contrast to China, pre-reform Vietnam did not encourage rural industrialization. Nor therefore did the institutional structures exist from which rural off-farm enterprises could be nurtured and launched once markets liberalized” (Van de Walle and Cratty 2003, 7 quoting O’Connor 1998). Limited job offers imply vulnerability to poverty or low income for migrant workers. According to FAO studies, 14 percent of the Vietnamese population is still undernourished, most of them being small landholders and landless peasants as well as poor urban migrants (FAO 2004; 2008, 48). A recent study by Pincus and Sender (2008) has also shown that while figuring among the poorest groups, migrant workers are excluded from official statistics, notably the well-known Vietnam Living Standards Surveys (VLSS) and the Vietnam Household Living Standards Surveys (VHLSS). This implies that Vietnam’s success on poverty reduction might have been overestimated (ibid).

Post-reform industrial agriculture and global market integration also affect those remaining in the countryside. Peasants are increasingly facing the broken promises of *doi moi*. While they have obtained higher

productivity, they have also become increasingly dependent through upward and downward linkages on actors outside of the peasantry for production and marketing of outputs. This has increased the cost of production but with diminished productivity. For example, while the amount of agrochemical inputs has increased rapidly, “the average amount of paddy produced per kilogram of fertilizer declined from 50 kg in the period 1976-81 to 20 kg by 1994-95” (Young et al. 2002, 14-15). The de facto privatization of land as a result of the 1993 Land Law and the rapid processes of land concentration and urbanization have also skyrocketed agricultural land price. Several Vietnamese real-estate websites, such as Nhadatvang.vn, Muabannhadat.com.vn, and nhaban.com, advertised paddy fields and agroforestry land for sale at about USD 100,000.00 per hectare. Although it is not clear whether buyers of those lands would invest in rice and agroforestry or rather in urban and industrial activities, this nevertheless put a lot of pressure on the land market and increased investment costs to farmers.

While production costs increased rapidly, profits have decreased or been unstable. Efforts to integrate into the global market have opened more markets for Vietnamese products but also exposed producers to more vulnerability. The country and its agricultural producers have faced competitiveness and volatility in the international market. While peasants continue to invest their resources in a variety of agricultural activities, the results are far from certain, depending on the nature of the specific markets in which they participate but over which they, as well as the Vietnamese government, have little control. Increased production costs, reduced profitability, and unstable markets have led to bankruptcies, leaving many farmers in debts. From small-scale watermelon growers in Hoa Binh province to large-scale shrimp, rice, and coffee producers in the Mekong Delta and Highland, the experiences have been similar—that is, of unpredictable success (Cau 2010; Trang 2009, 2010). Tra Vinh province, for instance, has lost about 30 percent of its industrial farms due to failures over the last decade. Similarly, Dong Thap province has also lost about 50 percent of catfish farms (Binh, Dai, and Canh 2010). Many that have kept farming find themselves in an impasse, not knowing in what farming activities to invest. Others continue farming for the sole objective of keeping access to food as profits are insignificant (from 2010 field research by the author in several localities in the Red River Delta).

Industrial agriculture and global market integration allow vertical capital accumulation. On the one hand, peasants, both rich and poor,

find their production costs surge while increases in productivity and sale prices have not been commensurate (GRAIN 2008; York 2008). On the other hand, industrialists, merchants, creditors, and technocrats have taken advantage of the increase in business opportunities from monocultures and peasant dependency on commercial seeds, hydraulic infrastructure, agrochemical inputs, processing, and commodified distribution. This process thus allows the extraction of agricultural surplus through upward and downward linkages at the expense of the peasantry.

Not only have industrial farming and global market integration impoverished the peasantry and reduced the latter's capacity to access food, those processes have also affected the quality of food, with many food scares documented in both domestic and international markets over the last decade (Scott 2005, 5-6; World Bank 2006; APEC 2006). These include, for instance, the abuse in the use of pesticides and preservatives in vegetable and fruit production; drugs, hormones, and other chemicals in pork meat and seafood; formaldehyde in rice noodles; urea in fish sauce; and carcinogenic agents in soy sauce. As industrial agriculture and global market integration imply higher capitalization thresholds, larger production scale, and deeper dependence on industrial inputs, farmers are being squeezed by different actors outside the peasantry while assuming wider risks and often for reduced profit margins. Yet with the large amount of investment already vested, it would be difficult and costly for them to quit and embark on other economic activities. Many peasants would resort to whatever means available, including unsafe production practices, to safeguard their investments. In the shrimp industry, for instance, many have abused chemicals to guard off diseases while some resorted to cheating practices to cope with market fluctuations and maintain some profits or at least recoup their investments (field research in Giao Thuy, 2010). In fact, unsafe practices in production and processing rarely seem to be acts of ignorance or malice but spring from farmers' coping strategies to claim back profits eroded by the overwhelming dominance of the agrofood industry.

INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE AS A CHOICE OF CLASS

As shown above, the Vietnamese government adopts the food security framework, emphasizing access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food as its objectives. It considers, however, industrial farming, with the

Green Revolution technologies and international trade, as the means to achieving these objectives. The latest government resolution on food security clearly confirms this chosen strategy (Government of Viet Nam 2009). Yet this model has been found inefficient and inappropriate to the Vietnamese context where land is scarce and inputs are mostly imported and thus costly while labor is more abundant and relatively cheap. In turn, its reliance on large-scale production, heavy use of agrochemical inputs, and international trade have led to impressive increase in production output but caused land concentration, inequalities, impoverishment, and inadequate food access as well as dubious food quality. These problems would necessitate questioning this industrial agriculture model and pondering alternatives along the line of food sovereignty framework. Yet, the upholding of industrial agriculture raises the question whether the latter may have long been the main objective, with food security as its mere justification.

In fact, industrial agriculture has long been supported by the Vietnamese government as a tool of capital accumulation and surplus extraction. For instance, during collectivization, state extraction had increased rapidly. "In 1966-1975, state agencies extracted about 19 percent of the distributable staple food production from cooperatives; in 1976-1980, the figure was 21 percent. In 1981-1986, it jumped to 26 percent and in 1987 it reached 29 percent" (Kerkvliet 2005, 206). Similarly, "in the late 1960s-late 1970s, a collective cooperative took on average 13-15 percent of distributable production. The proportion increased during the 1980s, reaching 21 percent by 1987" (*ibid.*). However, this extraction was used to finance the American war and social and economic developments that also benefited the peasantry. The government, for instance, systematically built primary schools and commune healthcare centers, considering "formal education and health services as rights of citizenship" (London 2004, 128). "[B]etween 1975 and 1980, gross enrollments in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education increased by 19 percent, 25 percent, and 28 percent respectively" (*ibid.*, 129). Similarly, the government also prioritized investments in rural infrastructure. According to Vinh (1997, 106), investments in irrigation in 1966-1971 and 1971-1975 were 4.04 and 6.06 times higher, respectively, compared to those in 1955-1957. Numerous irrigation schemes started at this time and attracted a large number of rural laborers.

This reflected a symbiotic relationship between the state and the peasantry. The state relied particularly on the peasantry to gain power

and to win the wars. It was therefore careful to gain the support of this sector. The land reform policy in the 1950s and subsequent collectivization policies had been part of strategies to promote socialist egalitarian principles, thus gaining legitimacy among poor peasants, rewarding revolutionary support and stabilizing the new political system (Kolko 1997, 121-24; Kerkvliet 2005, 256). This thus explains why despite hardships, peasant resistance during collectivization was not open or confrontational but constituted mostly of individual acts that resisted the inappropriateness of the cooperative's production but did not question state legitimacy and ruling (Trang 2009).

The reform period from the early 1980s and mid-1990s reduced state's extraction of agricultural surplus, allowing the peasantry to retain a bigger share of their output. This reduced poverty and contributed to peasants' improved livelihood. However, the peasantry has been increasingly differentiated, impoverishing and forcing many into landless laborers. In addition, nonstate actors have also quickly stepped in to extract agricultural surplus through their downward and upward linkages. While extraction has been exercised from different directions by different actors, it has benefited mostly other classes outside the peasantry (GSO 2000, 17-18). In addition, the state through the health and education programs has dropped its former objective of providing social services that are free and accessible to all. As a result, "between 1989 and 1991, enrolment in lower and upper secondary education in Vietnam declined sharply—by over 40 percent in many places—and would not recover to 1985 levels until the mid-1990s" (London 2004, 130). "Vietnamese consumers' 'out-of-pocket' expenditures accounted for perhaps 70 percent of total (both state and private) mass education expenditure" (*ibid.*, 132).

However, the above policies with the clear impacts on the peasantry do not result from bureaucratic ignorance or shortsightedness but reflect the shifting position of the Vietnamese government away from the peasantry for the benefits of other classes. One of the most glaring examples of such change has been the state support of the appropriation and conversion of agricultural land, including paddy fields, into higher-value crop production, urban expansion, industrial zones, as well as recreational developments. According to Le Dang Doanh (quoted in Mydans 2011), a well-known economist in Hanoi, "We have a totally opposite situation from the past, when the Communist Party of Vietnam was taking land from the landlord and distributing it to the

farmer . . . Now the Communist Party and the government are taking the land from the farmer and handing it over to the private sector.”

In 2001, for instance, the government authorized the conversion of sixty thousand hectares of coastal paddy land into shrimp ponds across twenty-three provinces (Lebel et al. 2002, 318). Other land losses since the early 1990s have been to industrial, urban, and recreational rezoning (Suu 2009, 12). By 2007, Vietnam had 150 industrial parks, occupying more than thirty-two thousand hectares, with plans, according to Dang Huy Dong, deputy minister of Planning and Investment, to “develop an additional 40,000–50,000 hectares of land for industrial parks throughout the country over the next five years, totaling 60,000–80,000 hectares. He said the goal for 2020 was 120,000 hectares of industrial parks” (Quang 2010; see also Suu 2009, 13).

The conversion of agricultural lands into golf courses is another vivid example of this new state-peasantry relationship. In 2008, Vietnam had 123 golf courses, occupying about forty thousand hectares, much of which converted from agriculture or forest lands. For instance, a 2007 golf course project in Hung Yen province was laid entirely on 180 hectares of paddy fields of the Nghia Tru and Long Hung communes. Another golf course and recreational center of 254 hectares in Hanoi also took over rice land in Sai Son commune, Quoc Ai district (Ton 2008; see also Tung 2009). While golf courses reclaim vast areas of agricultural production and displace numerous rural households, they provide recreational services to a few, and accumulation opportunities to even fewer. In 2008, the number of golfers across Vietnam (a country of eighty-six million people) was estimated at five thousand, of which a mere two thousand frequent the golf course.

According to Nguyen Tri Ngoc, head of the Crop Production Department, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, “Vietnam’s agricultural land is being uncontrollably devoured by industrial parks and golf courses. No country in the world can reclaim rice cultivation land as easily as Vietnam can” (Tung 2009). The charge is led by a class coalition of investors, builders, service providers, and, most important, authorities. The latter often use administrative discretion—including illegal means, such as record falsification—to appropriate land and pass it on to developers. In the Vinh Long province, for example, the productivity of paddy fields in newly designated industrial areas was marked at 4 tons/ha, much lower than

the actual 6-7 tons/ha, to downgrade land category and legalize its conversion (Phong 2010).

As a result of those developments, paddy land has declined significantly, from 4.5 million hectares in 1978 to 4.1 million hectares in 2009. It is expected to shrink down to 3.5 million hectares by 2020 (GSO 2000, 15; MOIT 2009). Even when taking into account the improvement of land and crops resulting in double and triple yearly cropping, rice-harvested areas increased from 5.5 million hectares in 1980 to 7.7 million hectares in 1999, but then sloped down to 7.4 million hectares by 2008, a drop of 4 percent (IRRI 2009). Such conversion trends have affected not only food production but also livelihoods, notably of poor rural households due to lack of adequate income alternatives. For instance, while shrimp farming often provides better returns than rice, that production is geared toward export to affluent national markets at the expense of staple grains for all groups of consumers, including food insecure ones. Fforde and Sènèque (1994, 13) had already noticed a significant decline in food production from the northeast of the Mekong Delta, near Ho Chi Minh City, where by 1991 it was down “to half of the yearly subsistence requirement.” Similarly, between 2000 and 2004, the conversion of 5,500 hectares of land in Hanoi had affected 138,000 families, of which a third were rural households (Suu 2009, 13). Overall, the grabbing of agricultural land has affected more than six hundred thousand households of which more than 50 percent were unable to maintain their previous living standard (Tap chi cong san 2008; Tuyen 2008). The conversions have also come with environmental costs that have further impact on production and food security. The waste discharges of industrial zones have been extensively documented (Em 2007; Hien 2010), like the increased use of water and agrochemical in golf course maintenance (Ton 2008).

This change in state-peasantry relations has led to increased rural unrests, notably in relation to land. While resistance has taken different forms and channels, from formal complaints to informal acts, at the individual or collective scales, and of spontaneous or organized nature, their number and intensity have increased rapidly (Trang 2009). For instance, through the legal system, formal complaints related to land use received by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) have increased from about five thousand in 2003 to twelve thousand in 2007 (World Bank 2010, 47). From another source, land disputes account for 70-80 percent of the total

litigation cases in Vietnam, while the number almost doubled from eighteen thousand in 2005 to over thirty-one thousand in 2007 (Binh 2009). Other farmers, skeptical of or frustrated by formal channels, have reverted to direct confrontation. Rural unrest sprung in the Central Highlands in 2002 where ethnic minorities had lost land to state farms and lowland Kinh migrants for the cultivation of new cash crops such as coffee (Trang 2009). In January 2009, some two thousand peasants protested against land grabbing for an urban commercial and recreational project in Van Giang district, Hung Yen province (Phuong 2009). A month later, similar issues mobilized another four hundred peasants protesting against local authorities in Long Thanh district, Dong Nai province (BBC 2009).

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that despite the alternative framework of food sovereignty, the Vietnamese government has shown no interest in what it offers, and remains instead strongly committed to a framework of food security based on industrial agriculture. It promotes large-scale farming; intensive use of machinery, agrochemicals, and modern rice varieties; and the integration of farmers into the global market. While the country has so far reached high levels of productivity, it has failed to ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all, the other two aspects of food security. Furthermore, industrial agriculture has led to land concentration and class differentiation within the peasantry. On the one hand, this process has turned many into landless rural laborers or migrant workers, threatening their livelihood and access to food. On the other hand, it increasingly subjected those who have remained in the agricultural sector to unequal power relations for the benefits of actors outside the peasantry. Despite producing more, the peasants' share of the profit has been shrinking. This affects not only their livelihoods but often the quality of products, as some have turned to unsafe agricultural practices as coping strategies.

Despite the mounting limits and contradictions of industrial agriculture, the fact that the Vietnamese government maintains its course on food security and industrial agriculture is not the result of an intellectual shortcoming. Instead, it reflects a political economy that is shifting political and state support for the peasantry toward the benefit of other nonfarm groups. As discussed in this article, that trend largely responds to the rising power of the country's new bourgeoisie

through the *doi moi* transformation of the past twenty-five years, with its interests vested in the continuity of industrial agriculture, hence antagonistic to systemic alternatives that food sovereignty would offer.

As it grows stronger with market integration, privatization, and the restructuring of processes and relations of production throughout the Vietnamese society, such political economy is becoming a formidable obstacle to change. Yet, while social contradictions and pre-revolutionary patterns of class relations and struggles reemerge, other structural constraints are quickly emerging. In addition, as Fortier discusses in this issue, the spectre of climate change and energy crisis conjures with the dynamics exposed here to set the stage for a reckless synergy of mounting threat to food security and the unwillingness to reconsider alternative policies. The Vietnamese state therefore urgently needs to take stock of its strategy, acknowledge the social and physical limits of industrial agriculture, and face the power of entrenched interests before it grows even stronger. On that revisiting, the reorganization of food production and distribution along principles of food sovereignty offers not only viable alternatives, but possibly the only path to avert the collapse of Vietnamese food security. ❁

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the editors of *Kasarinlan*, Dominique Caouette, and the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. Any error or omission remains my sole responsibility.

NOTE

1. Such endorsement of the government's food security framework and the lack of an agrarian social movement on food sovereignty have not been surprising considering the political environment in Vietnam. The Vietnam National Farmers Association is one of the mass organizations sponsored by the state and has served state interests. Other organizations are independent from the state but nevertheless have to function under state control. Several studies demonstrate that while those organizations enjoy relative freedom, especially at the local level and in relation to social and economic issues, they are rather silent in relation to other sensitive issues such as government policies and democracy (Nørlund 2007, 88; Hannah 2007). The issuance in 2009 of Decision 97/2009/QĐ-TTg, limiting independent research to some approved subjects, and the subsequent closing down of the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies, a critical research and policy advocacy organization, demonstrate the government's determination to control and keep civil societies under defined parameters.

REFERENCES

- AgroViet. 2010. "Fertiliser Law Urged to Stop Losses." Accessed September 22, 2010. http://www.agroviet.gov.vn/en/Pages/news_detail.aspx?NewsId=292&Page=1.
- Akram-Lodhi, Haroon. 2005. "Vietnam's Agriculture: Processes of Rich Peasant Accumulation and Mechanisms of Social Differentiation." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 5 (1): 73-116.
- Anh, Dao The. 2010. "Revisiting Agrarian Transformations in Southeast Asia: Empirical, Theoretical and Applied Perspectives." In *RCSA International Conference*. Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). 2006. *APEC Regional Study on Food Safety: Focal Point on Vietnam*. APEC Secretariat.
- Balisacan, Arsenio M., Ernesto M. Pernia, and Gemma Esther B. Estrada. 2003. *Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction in Viet Nam*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.
- BBC. 2009. "Land Riot in Dong Nai." *BBC Vietnamese* 20 (February).
- Bhaduri, Amit, and Md Anisur Rahman, eds. 1982. *Studies in Rural Participation*. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH.
- Binh, Le Quang. 2009. "A Brief on Industrialization, Urbanization and Land Conflicts in Vietnam." In *Seminar on Commercial Pressures on Land*. Utrecht.
- Binh, Le, Binh Dai, and D. Canh. 2010. "Kinh tế trang trại nhìn từ thực tiễn: Cam cu và vo no" [Reality Check: Coping and Bankruptcies of Industrial Farming]. *Sai Gon Giai Phong*, November 19.
- Bong, Bui Ba. 2000. "Bridging the Rice Yield Gap in Vietnam." In *FAO: Bridging the Rice Yield Gap in the Asia-Pacific Region*.
- Borras, Saturnino M. 2010. "The Politics of Transnational Agrarian Movements." *Development and Change* 41 (5): 771-803.
- Cau, Nguyen. 2010. *Da Nang tham bao trang trai* [Failures of Industrial Farming in Da Nang]. Da Nang City.
- Cuc, Nguyen Sinh. 1995. *Nong nghiep Viet Nam (1945-1995)* [Agriculture of Vietnam (1945-1995)]. Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House.
- Dasgupta, Susmita, Craig Meisner, David Wheeler, Nhan Thi Lam, and Khuc Xuyen. 2005. "Pesticide Poisoning of Farm Workers: Implications of Blood Test Results from Vietnam." World Bank Policy Research Paper.
- Dodsworth, John R., Erich Spitller, Michael Brulke, Keon Hyok Lee, Kenneth Miranda, Christian Mulder, Hisanobu Shishido, and Krishna Srinivasan. 1996. *Vietnam's Transition to a Market Economy*. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund.
- Doornbos, Martin R. 2006. *Complex Emergencies, Food Security and the Quest for Appropriate Institutional Capacity*. The Hague: Institute of Social Studies.
- Dosch, Jorn, and Ta Minh Tuan. 2004. "Recent Changes in Vietnam's Foreign Policy." In *Rethinking Vietnam*, edited by D. McCargo. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Dung, Nguyen Huu, and Tran Thi Thanh Dung. 2003. *Economic and Health Consequences of Pesticide Use in Paddy Production in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam*. IDRC.
- Em, Kim. 2007. "Ố nhi mc khu công nghi   mi n Trung." *Tuoi Tre*, March 4.

- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). 1983. *World Food Security: A Reappraisal of the Concepts and Approaches*. Director General's Report, FAO.
- Fforde, Adam, and Stefan De Vylder. 1996. *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam, Transitions; Asia and Asian America*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Fforde, Adam, and Steve Sénèque. 1994. "The Economy and the Countryside in Vietnam: The Relevance of Rural Development Policies." Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies.
- . 2003. *Trade Reforms and Food Security: Conceptualizing the Linkages*. Rome, Italy: FAO.
- . 2004. "Food Insecurity and Vulnerability in Viet Nam: Profiles of Four Vulnerable Groups." FAO ESA Working Paper No. 04-11. FAO.
- . 2008. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2008: High Food Prices and Food Security Threats and Opportunities*. Rome: Italy: FAO.
- GRAIN (Genetic Resources Action International). 2008. *Vietnam: The High Stakes of Hybrid Rice for Farmers*. Barcelona: GRAIN.
- GSO (General Statistics Office). 2000. *Statistical Data of Vietnam Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery 1975-2000*. Department of Agriculture, GSO. Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House.
- Government of Viet Nam. 2009. *Nghi quyết số 63/NQ-CP ngày 23 tháng 12 năm 2009 của chính phủ về đảm bảo an ninh lương thực quốc gia* [Government Resolution No. 63/NQ-CP of 23 December 2009 on Ensuring National Food Security]. Hanoi.
- Hai, Luu Thanh Duc. 2003. *The Organization of the Liberalized Rice Market in Vietnam*. Economics Department, University of Groningen, Groningen.
- Hannah, Joseph. 2007. *Local Non-Government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-Society Relations*. Seattle: Department of Geography, University of Washington.
- Hayami, Yujiro. 1994. "Strategies for the Reform of Land Property Relations." In *Agricultural Policy Analysis for Transition to a Market-oriented Economy in Vietnam: Selected Issues*, edited by R. Barker. Rome, Italy: FAO.
- Henin, Bernard. 2002. "Agrarian Change in Vietnam's Northern Upland Region." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32 (1): 3-28.
- Hien, Tran Duc. 2010. "Ô nhiễm môi trường ở nước ta hiện nay: Thực trạng và một số giải pháp khắc phục" [Pollution in Vietnam: Situation and Solutions].
- IRRI (International Rice Research Institute). 2007. "Important Rice Production System under Pressure." *Science Daily*, October 10.
- . 2009. *IRRI World Rice Statistics*. http://beta.irri.org/solutions/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=250.
- Käkönen, Mira. 2009. "Mekong Delta at the Crossroads: More Control or Adaptation?" *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 37 (3): 205-12.
- Kerkvliet, Benedict J. 2005. *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Kokko, Ari, and Fredrik Sjöholm. 2004. *The Internationalization of Vietnamese SMEs*. The European Institute of Japanese Studies.
- Kolko, Gabriel. 1997. *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace*. London; New York: Routledge.

- Le Coq, Jean-François, and Guy Trebuil. 2005. "Impact of Economic Liberalization on Rice Intensification, Agricultural Diversification, and Rural Livelihoods in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam." *Southeast Asian Studies* 42 (4): 519-47.
- Le Meur, Pierre-Yves. 2005. "The Local Politics of Land and Water: Case Studies from the Mekong Delta. In *Etude/Document de travail*. Paris: Groupe de recherche et d'échanges technologiques (GRET).
- Lebel, Louis, Hoang Tri Nguyen, Amnuay Saengnoee, Suparb Pasong, Urasa Buatama, and Kim Thoa Le. 2002. "Industrial Transformation and Shrimp Aquaculture in Thailand and Vietnam: Pathways to Ecological, Social, and Economic Sustainability?" *Ambio* 31 (4): 311-23.
- Lee, Richard. 2007. *Food Security and Food Sovereignty*. Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne.
- London, Jonathan. 2004. "Rethinking Vietnam's Mass Education and Health Systems." In *Rethinking Vietnam*, edited by D. McCargo. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Long, Ngo Vinh. 1993. "Reform and Rural Development: Impact on Class, Sectoral, and Regional Inequalities." In *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective*, edited by W. S. Turley and M. Selden. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Luong, Hy V., ed. 2003. *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Rowman & Littlefield Pub.
- Miller, Fiona. 2007. "Seeing 'Water Blindness': Water Control in Agricultural Intensification and Environmental Change in Mekong Delta, Vietnam." In *Environment, Development and Change in Rural Asia-Pacific: Between Local and Global*, edited by J. Connell and E. Waddell. New York: Routledge.
- MARD (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development). n.d. *Vietnam's Agriculture: A Strategy toward WTO*. Hanoi: MARD.
- MOIT (Ministry of Industry and Trade). 2009. "News: Food Security Programme Will Stop Hunger by 2012." MOIT. Accessed March 28, 2010. <http://wto.nciec.gov.vn/English/Lists/Announcements/DispForm.aspx?ID=7>.
- Mydans, Seth. 2011. "In Vietnam, Politics Lag While Growth Jumps." *New York Times*, January 17.
- Nørlund, Irene. 2007. "Civil Society in Vietnam: Social Organisations and Approaches to New Concepts." *ASIEN* 105: 68-90.
- Phong, Sai Gon Giai. 2010. "Trần lan khu công nghi p Đ ng b ng Sông C u Long: Ch y đũa và lã ng phí." *Sai Gon giai phong*, August 9.
- Phuong, Quoc. 2009. "'Hàng nghìn' nông dân bi u tình" ('Thousands' of Peasants Demonstrate). *BBC Vietnamese*, January 7.
- Pincus, Jonathan, and John Sender. 2008. "Quantifying Poverty in Viet Nam: Who Counts?" *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3 (1): 108-50.
- Pingali, Prabhu L., Tri Khiem Nguyen, Roberta V. Gerpacio, and Tong Xuan Vo. 1997. "Prospects for Sustaining Vietnam's Reacquired Rice Exporter Status." *Food Policy* 22 (4): 345-58.
- Quang, Minh. 2010. "Infrastructure Problems Slow Vietnam Industrialization." *Thanh Nien*, May 14.
- Scott, Steffanie. 2005. *Emerging Agro-food Markets, Supply Chains, and Regional Rural Development Prospects in Nghe An Province, Vietnam*. Waterloo: University of Waterloo.
- Sen, Amartya Kumar. 1982. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Reprint ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Sneddon, Chris, and Nguyen Thanh Binh. 2001. "Politics, Ecology and Water: The Mekong Delta and Development of the Lower Mekong Basin." In *Living with Environmental Change: Social Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Resilience in Vietnam*, edited by W. N. Adger, P. M. Kelly, and Nguyen Huu Ninh. London: Routledge.
- Suu, Nguyen Van. 2004. "The Politics of Land: Inequality in Land Access and Local Conflicts in the Red River Delta since Decollectivization." In *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, edited by P. Taylor. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- . 2009. *Industrialization and Urbanization in Vietnam: How Appropriation of Agricultural Land Use Rights Transformed Farmers' Livelihoods in a Peri-Urban Hanoi Village?* Hanoi: East Asian Development Network.
- Tap chí công san. 2008. "Việc thu hồi đất phát triển công nghiệp và bảo đảm phát triển nông nghiệp, cải thiện đời sống nông dân" [The Conversion of Agricultural Land for Industrialization, Assured Rural Development and Improved Rural Livelihood]. *Tap chí công san* 12 (156).
- Taylor, Philip. 2004. "Redressing Disadvantage or Re-arranging Inequality? Development Interventions and Local Responses in the Mekong Delta." In *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, edited by P. Taylor. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- . 2007. "Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants: Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development in Vietnam." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2 (2): 3-56.
- Thanh, Hoang Xuan, Dinh Thi Thu Phuong, Ha My Thuan, Pham Viet Son, and Dinh Thi Giang. 2009. *Viet Nam: A Right to Food Assessment*. ActionAid Viet Nam.
- Thanh, Nguyen Cong, and Baldeo Singh. 2006. "Trend in Rice Production and Export in Vietnam." *Omonrice* 14: 111-23.
- Thayer, Carlyle A. 1999. "Vietnam's Integration into the Region and the Asian Financial Crisis." In *Keynote Address to EuroViet 4 Conference*. University of Passau, Germany.
- Ton, Tran Minh. 2008. "Những mối đe dọa từ sân golf" [Dangers from Golf Courses]. *Tap chí công san* 15 (159).
- Trang, Tran Thi Thu. 2009. "State-Society Relations and the Diversity of Peasant Resistance in Viet Nam." In *Agrarian Angst and Rural Resistance in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, edited by D. Caouette and S. Turner. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 2010. "Social Differentiation Revisited: A Study of Rural Changes and Peasant Strategies in Vietnam." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 51 (1): 17-35.
- Tung, Thanh. 2009. "Eating the Feeding Hand." *Vietnam Investment Review*, August 25.
- Tuyen, Ngan. 2008. "Oạt thu hồi đất nông nghiệp" [Massive Appropriation of Agricultural Land]. *An Ninh Thủ Đô*, March 24.
- Ut, Tran Thi, and Kei Kajisa. 2006. "The Impact of Green Revolution on Rice Production in Vietnam." *Developing Economies* 44 (2): 167-89.
- Van de Walle, Dominique, and Dorothyjean Cratty. 2003. *Is the Emerging Non-Farm Market Economy the Route out of Poverty in Vietnam?* Washington: World Bank.
- Vinh, Ha. 1997. *Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam Trong Bước Chuyển Sang Kinh Tế Thị Trường*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
- VOV News. 2009. "Năm 2010 phấn đấu nâng diện tích lúa lai thương phẩm lên 775.000 ha" [Efforts to Increase Hybrid Rice Production Areas to 775,000 Hectares by 2010]. *VOV News*.

- World Bank. 1986. *Poverty and Hunger: Issues and Options for Food Security in Developing Countries*. World Bank.
- . 2006. *Vietnam Food Safety and Agricultural Health Action Plan*. World Bank Report 35231.
- . 2010. *Modern Institutions*. World Bank.
- York, Geoffrey. 2008. "Vietnam's Farmers Face Paradox of the Paddy." *Globe and Mail*, May 1.
- Young, Kenneth B., Eric J. Wailes, Gail L. Cramer, and Tri Khiem Nguyen. 2002. *Vietnam's Rice Economy: Developments and Prospects*. University of Arkansas Research Report 968.

TRAN THI THU TRANG is assistant professor at the School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa. Her research and writing focus on Vietnam's rural transformation under market reforms and globalization, including issues of social differentiation, local politics, peasant resistance, and food safety and sovereignty. Send correspondence to the author at trangtran@uottawa.ca.