




Indigenous Peoples



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Growth in Vietnam is strong but not shared equitably across ethnic groups

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Vietnam has invested heavily to improve the welfare of its minority populations, a diverse set of 53 groups dominated by ethnic Tay, Thai, Cambodian, Chinese, Muong, and Hmong populations. Minorities make up roughly 14 percent of the total Vietnamese population, and majorities—consisting of ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese—comprise the rest. The Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Area Affairs, a ministerial-level government body, has representative agencies at the district level in geographically strategic areas or areas with an ethnic minority population of at least 5,000. A bevy of government-sponsored programs covering a wide range of issues including poverty reduction, education, and health have improved the welfare of minority groups. For example, minorities are entitled to cash subsidies on land reclamation and cash grants on food, production tools, and seedlings. Businesses that operate in mountainous and ethnic areas have access to price and transportation subsidies. But the effectiveness of individual programs is unclear. Few data on costs and benefits exist, and there are concerns about program overlap and inadequate oversight.

As for most Vietnamese, living standards have improved for minority populations—between 1993 and 2006 the general poverty rate

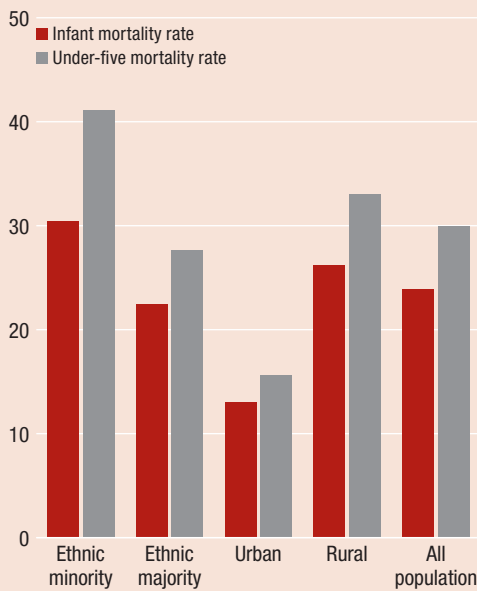
fell 42 percent, and extreme poverty fell 18 percent. This is an achievement, but in 2006 the general poverty rate for ethnic minority groups was still 52 percent, more than five times that of ethnic majority groups. So, while majority and minority groups have thrived—boosting living standards, health, and education—ethnic minority groups still lag behind. From 1998 to 2006 health care improved for the whole population, but at a faster rate for ethnic minority groups than ethnic majority groups. But because they live in communities with less access to health facilities than ethnic majority groups, ethnic minorities have lower quality health care and are 16 percent less likely to visit a hospital when they are ill. Infant and under-five mortality rates are higher (figure 1), and ethnic minority women are less informed about the prevention of AIDS.

Education levels, a key indicator for subsequent economic prosperity, also lag: the illiteracy rates for ethnic minority groups are 29 percent, more than twice that of the majority. Ethnic minorities have less access to education, higher dropout rates, and later school enrollment. Ethnic minority teachers and bilingual education are in short supply. Around 8 percent of ethnic minority people have a completed upper secondary degree and less than 1 percent have a tertiary degree,

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FIGURE 1
Child mortality rates

Per 1,000 live births, 2002



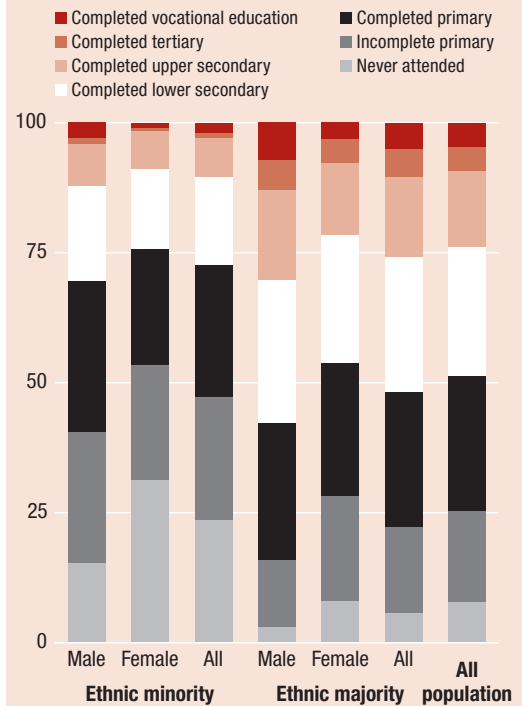
Source: Vietnam Demographic and Health Survey 2002.

around half to a fifth of ethnic majority percentages (figure 2).

Employment patterns are part of the problem. While there has been a restructuring of the Vietnamese economy in recent years, more than half of ethnic minority people (55 percent) still work in agriculture compared with 30 percent of ethnic majority people. Living predominantly in rural and mountainous areas (though more were living in urban areas in 2006 than in 1998), ethnic minorities have less productive land and off-farm employment and are more dependent on swidden agriculture. The average ethnic minority worker earns 15 percent less than the average ethnic majority worker. About two-thirds of the earnings differentials between ethnic groups can be attributed to differences in endowments and one-third to differences to the returns to endowments. Ethnic minorities have less access to formal financial services and markets and poorer returns from markets. And ethnic minority children are more likely to

FIGURE 2
Educational attainment, ages 15 and older

Percent, 2006



Source: Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2006.

drop out of school and work than ethnic majority children.

Overall, ethnic minority people have higher access to preferential credit, free health care, tuition exemption or reduction, and agricultural promotion activities. But despite various government assistance programs that are specially targeted at ethnic minority groups, they still suffer from lower utility access and household assets than ethnic majority people, especially in rural areas. Ethnic minority groups tend to live much farther away from commune facilities than ethnic majority groups. For example, the average distance to a paved road is about 1 kilometer for ethnic minority communes, 5–6 times longer than that for ethnic majority communes.