

Participatory Poverty Assessment

Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh Districts

Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam

Oxfam Great Britain

September 1999

Participatory Poverty Assessment Team Members

Final Report	Site Reports	Design and Training
Nguyen Phuong Quynh Trang Stefan Nachuk Georgina Houghton Nguyen Quynh Trang Than Thi Thien Huong	Nguyen Phuong Quynh Trang Emma Woodford	Emma Woodford Stefan Nachuk Heather Grady Nguyen Quynh Trang Le Dai Tri

Fieldwork		
<p>Chau Thanh Team:</p> <p>Than Thi Thien Huong Stefan Nachuk Emma Woodford Thai Thi Ngoc Du Huynh Thi Bich Van Lam Thi Cuc Huynh Phan Thanh Ton Nguyen Duy Linh Pham Van Mot Tran Van Huyen Son Doi Thach Nhu Hung Le Thi Bich Son Nguyen Nhat Quang Le Nhat Minh Tu</p>	<p>Team Leader Team Support Documenter Gender Specialist Interpreter Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher/Interpreter</p>	<p>Oxfam GB Oxfam GB Consultant HCMC Open University Tra Vinh Regular Education Center Chau Thanh People's Committee Chau Thanh District Tra Vinh DOLISA Thanh My Commune Thanh My Commune Hoa Loi Commune Hoa Loi Commune Long An Community Health Center HCMC Red Cross Consultant</p>
<p>Duyen Hai Team</p> <p>Le Dai Tri Nguyen Phuong Quynh Trang Nguyen Quynh Trang Nguyen Thi Loan Huynh Hong Ha Bui Huu Hanh Nguyen Van Lanh Le Thi Phuong Pham Trung Tin Le Cong Minh Tran Thi Toan Tran Thi Thu Huong</p>	<p>Team Leader Documenter Gender Specialist Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher Researcher</p>	<p>Long An Community Health Center Consultant Oxfam GB Tra Vinh Women's Union Duyen Hai DOLISA Long Toan Commune Long Toan Commune Long Vinh Women's Union Long Vinh Commune Long An Community Health Center Long An Community Health Center Care HCMC</p>

Acronyms

CEMMA	Committee for Mountainous and Ethnic Minority Areas
DOLISA	Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FP/RH	Family Planning/Reproductive Health
GOV	Government of Vietnam
HEPR	Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction program
HG	Household Group
HH	Household
HYV	High Yielding Varieties
LACHC	Long An Community Health Center
MOLISA	Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs
NCPFP	National Committee for Population and Family Planning
Oxfam GB	Oxfam Great Britain
PC	People's Committee
PCF	People's Credit Fund
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
ROSCA	Rotating Savings and Credit Association
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VBA	Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
VBP	Vietnam Bank for the Poor
VND	Vietnam Dong
WU	Women's Union

Vietnamese Terms

<i>chi</i>	a measurement of gold equal to 10% of a tael
<i>cong</i>	local land measure (1000m ²)
<i>gia</i>	measure of rice (1 gia=20 kg)
<i>hui</i>	local term for various types of rotating lending groups
<i>la</i>	palm leaves used for weaving
<i>kinh</i>	ethnic Vietnamese
<i>nhiem vu</i>	duty, official responsibility

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
1 INTRODUCTION	9
1.1 Objectives of the Tra Vinh PPA	9
2 PPA THEMES	10
2.1 Well-being of the poor	10
2.2 Priorities of the poor	10
3 RESEARCH SITES AND METHODOLOGY	11
3.1 Tra Vinh province	11
3.2 Study Locations	12
3.2.1 Duyen Hai	12
3.2.2 Chau Thanh	12
3.3 Research Team	12
3.4 Selection of sites and participants	13
3.5 Sample size	13
3.6 Research Methodology	13
3.6.1 Difficulties and constraints in methodology	17
3.6.1.1 Selection of Participants	17
3.6.1.1.1 Duyen Hai	17
3.6.1.1.2 Chau Thanh	17
3.6.1.2 Understanding of language and concepts	17
3.6.1.3 Time constraints	17
3.6.1.4 Issues of Sensitivity	18
4 WHO ARE THE POOR AND WHAT DIFFICULTIES DO THEY FACE?	19
4.1 Marginalized groups	21
4.1.1 Landless Poor	22
4.1.2 Poor Khmer	23
4.1.3 Poor Women	23
4.1.4 Physically Isolated People	25
4.1.5 Illiterate People	25
4.1.6 Poor Children	26
5 WHY ARE PEOPLE POOR?	27
5.1 Few options for income-generation	27
5.2 Inability to Accumulate Savings	28

5.3 Landlessness	30
5.3.1 Landlessness has increased dramatically in recent years	31
5.4 Risky income-generation options	32
6 WHAT ARE THE POOR’S SUPPORT NETWORKS AND COPING STRATEGIES?	36
6.1 Support Networks	36
6.1.1 “Social Capital”	39
6.2 Coping Strategies	40
6.2.1 Ease of Access	43
7 HOW DO EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAMS ASSIST THE POOR?	45
7.1 Basic Assistance	45
7.2 Credit Services	45
7.2.1 Unclear policies regarding collateral limits loan accessibility for poor people	47
7.2.2 Discretionary powers of leaders and unclear credit selection procedures disadvantage the poor and marginalized	47
7.2.3 Subsidized government -financed lending programs are not sustainable because repayment obligations are not enforced	48
7.3 Extension services	51
7.4 Health Services	53
7.4.1 Basic Health Services	53
7.4.2 Reproductive Health and Family Planning Services	53
7.5 Education Services	54
7.6 Government Outreach to the Poor	56
7.6.1 Poor people lack voice in community decisions	56
7.6.2 Poverty is defined by the state, not by the poor	57
8 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS	59
8.1 Trends	59
8.2 What was not mentioned	61
9 APPENDICES	63
9.1 Appendix 1. Maps of research sites	63
9.2 Appendix 2. Description of research communes and villages	64

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Participatory Poverty Assessment was a group effort, and would not have been possible without the significant contributions of many people.

We thank the Tra Vinh People's Committee for their support throughout the process of this study. We also thank the commune, district and province level cadres of Tra Vinh Province who dedicated their time and effort to this exercise. Their knowledge, insights and dedication are greatly appreciated.

We are grateful to Dr. Le Dai Tri and his team from the Long An Community Health Center, who contributed professionalism and deep knowledge of participatory skills to the team. Thanks also to Ms. Emma Woodford, Professor Thai Thi Ngoc Du, Ms. Le Nhat Minh Tu and Ms. Tran Thi Thu Huong, consultants who participated in various aspects of the study. Mr. Frank Noij and Mr. Lam Phuoc Hoa of the Tra Vinh PPP were also helpful.

The report was written and edited by many people. We thank Ms. Georgina Houghton for assembling a first draft for the team to read and comment upon, and Ms. Pam McIwee for her patience in editing several drafts of both the site reports and final report.

The World Bank in Vietnam covered the majority of the costs of the study and the report. We thank especially Ms. Nisha Agrawal for this contribution, and for supporting Oxfam and our partners in contributing to the Vietnam-specific poverty analysis, and the global analysis undertaken by the World Bank itself through the Voices of the Poor and WDR 2000 initiatives.

Special thanks to Oxfam GB staff members Ms. Nguyen Quynh Trang and Ms. Than Thi Thien Huong, and consultant Ms. Nguyen Phuong Quynh Trang, for their contributions throughout the study, and their tireless dedication and analytical rigor in the final days of report preparation. Their work was above and beyond what Oxfam could have expected from them.

Finally, our sincerest thanks go to the individuals and households from Chau Thanh and Duyen Hai districts who opened their homes to us and shared their valuable views, opinions and ideas. Without their support, this study would not have been possible.

Any errors or omissions in this report are the responsibility of Oxfam GB.

Stefan Nachuk
Acting Country Representative
September 1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Objectives

In April 1999, Oxfam Great Britain (GB), in conjunction with the Tra Vinh People's Committee and the World Bank, conducted a Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) in Tra Vinh Province. The findings from this study will contribute to the 1999 World Bank-GOV poverty report, to be presented at the 1999 Consultative Group meeting, and also contribute to the Bank's global report Voices of the Poor, which will feed into the 2000/1 World Development Report on poverty.

The purpose of this exercise was to better understand who the poor are, how the poor themselves define poverty, what the priorities of the poor are, and what significant changes over time have affected the well being of people in the province. Specific objectives of this exercise were to:

- Influence poverty alleviation policies and strategies, particularly the government's *Hunger Eradication, Poverty Reduction (HEPR)* programs, in Tra Vinh and elsewhere in Vietnam
- Strengthen Oxfam GB's understanding of poverty, and bring greater rigor to its analysis of poverty in Tra Vinh
- Increase awareness among people and officials in Tra Vinh regarding dimensions of poverty and different approaches to poverty alleviation

Methodology

Two separate teams of researchers conducted studies simultaneously in Chau Thanh (a well-off district) and Duyen Hai (a poor district) in Tra Vinh. Researchers used qualitative research methods, primarily Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools, to understand how the poor defined *well-being*, or what constitutes a *good life* as opposed to a *bad life*. In addition, priorities and concerns of the poor were explored in order to understand how the poor themselves identify and implement strategies for stability and accumulation in their own lives. In addition, in trying to understand their needs, it was important to learn about the various support networks that the poor depend or rely upon. A number of PRA tools were employed to gather this information.

Overall Findings

Most people in Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh are better off than they were ten years ago. They have higher incomes, more savings, better nutrition and health, more government services, and more of their children are attending school (and staying there longer). Even when remarking upon their personal problems, most respondents strongly confirmed these trends. In addition, it appears that the government's efforts to target poor people (through HEPR programs and other services) have had some success.

In addition, most people in Tra Vinh expect life to continue to get better. People are diversifying and expanding their investment strategies through land purchases, investments in livestock, or other new endeavors, including HYV rice, duck raising, or aquaculture. With widespread (though not universal) primary education, the current generation of children will have higher degrees of literacy than their parents' generation. In turn, this generation will

have better skills and knowledge, enabling them to apply new technologies, or to find work in the nascent labor-intensive manufacturing or services industries in the Mekong Delta. In other words, there is a reasonable chance that a significant percentage of people in Tra Vinh are on the path towards pulling themselves out of exclusive dependence on subsistence-level, agriculture-intensive livelihoods.

However, it appears that there is a group of people (perhaps the bottom 20% in each district) who are the *static poor*, trapped in a type of poverty that will be difficult to reverse. Many of these static poor are landless, and it appears that returns to selling wage labor (the only viable income generating activity available) are so low that it is very difficult to save enough to purchase assets, such as land. Compounding this problem, most of these people are also in debt to both government lending programs and/or private moneylenders. If they default on a government debt, they are not eligible for a new loan, and if they cannot repay private moneylenders, they still must repay interest—some families have paid much more cumulative interest than they originally borrowed in loan principal.

The *static poor* are not demonstrating improvements in education, health, or income levels. On the contrary, the lack of a viable safety net, combined with cash incomes that are insufficient for accumulation of savings or assets (or even paying school fees, in many cases) implies that this new class of people will have limited choices and opportunities in the future.

Increased socio-economic differentiation is visible throughout the two districts as asset markets become more flexible and as successful farmers begin to benefit from larger-scale production and diversification. Differentiation is strongly (though not exclusively) associated with landlessness and land agglomeration. Many farmers attempt more lucrative (but often riskier) income generating activities. Those with skills, capital, and luck can generate significant surpluses, and can then buy more land, diversify production, build up assets to protect against economic shocks, and hire laborers to help them.

Yet, for those who fail, there are often no second chances. They are saddled with debt, and as a last resort, must sell their land to repay these debts. At this point, they are in danger of becoming the *static poor*. Current government services, which focus on providing small loans (but include other types of assistance as well) to the poor appear to be of limited help; many people who took the “first round” of HEPR-type loans in the early 1990s have defaulted because they lacked skills, were unlucky, or did not take repayment seriously. As a result, local cadres are less willing to extend loans to the same families or individuals again, fearing that people who have previously defaulted will likely do so again.

Provision of another loan to a *static poor* family will probably fail if the loan is made in isolation. The static poor do not, in most cases, have the land, labor skills (which in turn are constrained by low education and bad health) or additional cash to make an investment succeed, and lift them out of poverty. The fact that so few landless people have been able to purchase land or accumulate assets is powerful evidence supporting this finding.

Recommendations

Health and Education Services

Health and education services, rather than credit, should be subsidized. At the local level these services are extremely inadequate, mainly because not enough financial resources are being put into improving them. One way to generate the necessary funds to improve these services would be to stop subsidizing credit (as it does not work anyway) and charge commercial interest rates, and then investing that subsidy into health and education services. The money could be used to buy new equipment, to upgrade facilities, and to provide additional training for health workers and teachers. In addition, incentives should be created to encourage health workers and teachers to work in remote areas.

Credit Services

Credit should not be subsidized-banks and other lending institutions should charge market interest rates and then provide adequate outreach and savings facilities to the poor. In addition, more sources of credit need to be established and/or encouraged. Loan amounts and terms need to be appropriate to different kinds of production, and increased efforts need to be made to lend to remote areas. Finally, savings should be encouraged as part of credit programs.

Extension Services

Incentives need to be created in order to increase the willingness of extension staff to work in, or travel to, remote areas. This can be done through increased salaries and training. In addition, extension programs and materials that are appropriate for the local community need to be developed to meet educational level and language barriers.

Continued participation of local people

The PPA introduced more ways of communicating with the poor, and local institutions can use this as a starting point for continued dialogue with poor people. Cadres who participated in this study had basic training in participatory methods. These skills should be developed on a regular basis, and the cadres should be encouraged to solicit the ideas and views of poor people before making decisions that affect the community at large. Poor people should be included in the design, implementation and monitoring of projects in their communities to promote more appropriate and sustainable solutions for ending poverty.

1 INTRODUCTION

In April 1999, Oxfam Great Britain (GB), in conjunction with the Tra Vinh People's Committee and the World Bank, conducted a Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) in Tra Vinh Province. This was one of four similar studies carried out in different parts of Vietnam (other sites were Lao Cai province, Ha Tinh province and Ho Chi Minh City). The findings from the four studies will contribute to the 1999 World Bank-GOV poverty report, to be presented at the 1999 Consultative Group meeting, and also contribute to the Bank's global report Voices of the Poor, which will feed into the 2000/1 World Development Report on poverty.

1.1 Objectives of the Tra Vinh PPA

The purpose of this exercise was to better understand who the poor are, how the poor themselves define poverty, what the priorities of the poor are, and what significant changes over time have affected the well being of people in the province. Specific objectives of this exercise were to:

- Influence poverty alleviation policies and strategies, particularly the government's *Hunger Eradication, Poverty Reduction (HEPR)* programs, in Tra Vinh and elsewhere in Vietnam
- Strengthen Oxfam GB's understanding of poverty, and bring greater rigor to its analysis of poverty in Tra Vinh
- Increase awareness among people and officials in Tra Vinh regarding dimensions of poverty and different approaches to poverty alleviation

This PPA is one component of the Participatory Provincial Partnership (PPP) of Tra Vinh province, an initiative of NGOs and the World Bank which grew out of an Aid Management and Coordination Conference held in Tra Vinh in late 1996. The PPP was initiated in February 1997, with The World Bank, UNDP, Oxfam GB and the Tra Vinh Provincial People's Committee as major contributors. Its main purpose is to serve as a link between the various donor and NGO activities, and help establish and facilitate a comprehensive plan for effective HEPR in the province.

In July 1999, a workshop was organized in Tra Vinh by the PPP to review the activities of the cooperation to date. Preliminary findings of this PPA were presented, as well as an overview of the work of UNDP, the World Bank and the People's Committee's HEPR programs. This revised version of the paper takes into account suggestions and recommendations made by participants at and after the workshop. It also incorporates suggestions made from a half-day feedback session with local cadres who were PPA researchers.

It is our hope that the in-depth understanding of poverty provided by this study will contribute to the ongoing poverty alleviation strategies in Tra Vinh.

2 PPA THEMES

The PPA was designed to correlate closely with the main themes suggested in The World Bank's Consultations with the Poor: Process Guide for the 20 Country Study. These themes include an analysis of perspectives on the *well being* of the poor, and the *priorities* of the poor.

2.1 Well-being of the poor

In introducing the concept of *well being*, we sought to understand how the poor defined what constitutes a *good life* as opposed to a *bad life*. The roles of income and consumption are the starting points for investigating well being of the poor. However, other issues also affect well being, such as lack of control and vulnerability of the poor over their lives, marginalization of the poor by the local and larger community, availability (or lack thereof) of institutions serving the poor, and stability and accumulation strategies of the poor.

2.2 Priorities of the poor

The priorities and concerns of the poor are closely linked to issues of well being and vulnerability. This study sought to explore how the poor themselves identify and implement strategies for stability and accumulation in their own lives. In addition, in trying to understand their needs, it was important that we learn about the various support networks that the poor depend or rely upon.

Within this framework, we explored the following questions:

Who are the poor and what difficulties do they face?
Why are people poor?
What are the poor's coping strategies and safety nets?
How do existing institutional programs assist the poor?

Because these concepts are not mutually exclusive (e.g. people with little land are poor, and they are poor *because* they have little land), there is understandably considerable overlap between the various sections. These questions merely serve as a framework for this report.

It is important to note that the *purpose of this exercise was to understand poverty through the voices of poor people* in Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh communes. This study does not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of the lives of all people in the province; rather, *it is biased towards presenting the situations of the poor*, and highlights the particular difficulties the poor face with income generation, relying on safety nets, accessing government services, and other aspects of their daily lives.

3 RESEARCH SITES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Tra Vinh province¹

Tra Vinh, situated to the southwest of Ho Chi Minh City, is one of the poorest provinces in the Mekong Delta. It is bordered to the north and south by the Hau Giang and Tien Giang rivers, both branches of the Mekong. To the east lies the South China Sea, along 65 km of coast, and to the west lies Vinh Long Province (which until 5 years ago was joined to Tra Vinh, forming the province of Cuu Long). The road to Tra Vinh is generally good, and the trip from HCMC takes about 6 hours by automobile, including a ferry crossing.

The official population of Tra Vinh is 1,007,000 people (148,270 households), who live in Tra Vinh town and 7 districts: Cau Long, Cau Ke, Tieu Can, Chau Thanh, Tra Cu, Cau Ngang and Duyen Hai. Over 29% of the population is ethnic Khmer. There are also a number of ethnic Chinese (5-6% of the population), and a tiny Cham population. The number of “poor” households, earning less than 90,000d/person/month is 33,545, of which 11,525 households earn less than 60,000/person/month.

The economy is predominantly based on the production of rice, and in recent years fishing and aquaculture. Over 80% of the population are dependent on the agricultural sector. The total area of agriculture land is 145,000 ha, of which 117,000 ha are devoted to rice and 24,490 to mangroves. The soil in the province, however, is becoming increasingly poor in terms of water-holding capacity and nutrients, and is severely affected by acidity and salinity. Most people survive through small-scale subsistence farming, but recently have to find other income generating activities. The official unemployment rate is around 10%.

In recent years, people have poured a substantial amount of money and resources into the development of shrimp farming, particularly in the districts of Duyen Hai and Tra Cu. This has proven to be highly volatile and risky, as in 1994/5, almost 100% of shrimp harvests failed completely. There are several other income-generation activities, including animal husbandry (mainly pigs and cows), growing mushrooms, raising pythons, handicrafts, and services, but these are still very limited. Many people resort to daily wage labor, an occupation that provides low income and very little job security. Demand for labor is limited even in the high season, and on average, a person can expect to work only 10-15 days in a month, for between 10,000 and 30,000 VND per day. In the season of low labor demand, both the numbers of days working and daily wage are lower. Income per capita across the whole province is thus predictably low—less than \$150 USD per year—and access to health and education, or even clean water, is limited.

¹ The majority of this section is from de Mauny and Hong, Landlessness in the Mekong Delta, The situation in Duyen Hai District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam. Hanoi, Oxfam Great Britain, June-July 1998.

3.2 Study Locations²

3.2.1 Duyen Hai

Duyen Hai district is about 50 km from Tra Vinh town in the eastern part of the province. It is a coastal district, located next to the mouth of the Hau Giang River, and is made up of one district town and 9 communes. The total population of the district is about 80,332, of which 48% are male, 52% are female. Of the total population, above 18% are ethnic Khmer. Duyen Hai is considered one of the poorest districts in Tra Vinh province, with an average GDP per capita of less than \$100 USD/year. There are 3,460 “poor” households (20% of the population) and an unknown number of “very poor” households.³

There is a total of 38,000 ha of land in the district. Of this, 20,000 ha are classified as agricultural land and 18,000 ha as forestland. Forestland, despite the classification, does not always contain tree cover or even shrub, and aquacultural land is included in the definition of forestland in Duyen Hai.

Shrimp farming is the main economic activity in the district. Other economic activities include agriculture, animal husbandry, growing palm leaves (*la*) for roof thatching and wall paneling, and selling day labor, which mainly consists of digging ponds for shrimp farmers and weaving *la* panels. Some people are also involved in petty trade, and some are involved in very small-scale self-employment, including catching frogs and crab for food or to sell. The main agricultural crops are rice, sugarcane, watermelon, corn and pumpkin.

3.2.2 Chau Thanh

Chau Thanh district is located on the outskirts of Tra Vinh Town in the northeast of the province. Chau Thanh is one of the wealthiest districts in the province. Pockets of poverty still exist, however, especially among the Khmer, who make up 35% of the population. At the time of writing, complete statistical data on the numbers of poor households in the district had not been obtained.⁴

The main income-generation activity, as in most of the Mekong Delta region, is rice cultivation. The recent development of the Australian funded *Tam Phuong* irrigation project has increased the number of harvests from 2 to 3 per year in some areas. Outside the *Tam Phuong* catchment area, however, poverty remains at a high level, with large numbers of landless households and high levels of illiteracy.

3.3 Research Team

Members of the research teams were a diverse group, including Oxfam GB staff, independent consultants, and local government cadres from the province, district, and from all four communes. The Duyen Hai research team consisted of 6 women and 6 men, while the Chau Thanh team had 7 women and 7 men.⁵

² See Appendix 2 for background on all PPA communes.

³ Noij, Frank. Participatory Poverty Assessment, Tra Vinh Province, Secondary Data Report, 1999. In this report, poor households are households with an average income between 90,000 VND per person/month, and very poor households are households with an average income of less than 40,000 VND per person/month.

⁴ See Noij, Frank.

⁵ See first page for roster of research team members.

About half of the researchers (the district, province and commune leaders) participated in a 6-day training course introducing participatory assessment tools and techniques. Most of those who were not able to attend the full training were already familiar with participatory assessments. They did, however, take part in the last two days of training, which included workshops on methods and gender.

3.4 Selection of sites and participants

The research plan was to select the wealthiest and poorest villages in each commune based on interviews and mapping exercises done with the commune leaders. The village selection criteria included numbers of landless, numbers of Kinh and Khmer, land-use patterns and numbers of households headed by single women. In each village, the richest and poorest hamlets were chosen as research sites. The selection of hamlets was based on wealth rankings done by the village heads, with similar criteria to those of village selection.

3.5 Sample size

A total of 119 households were visited by researchers between the two districts (69 in Chau Thanh, 50 in Duyen Hai). In terms of focus group discussions, 78 men and women attended the 8 sessions held in Chau Thanh, and 81 attended the sessions in Duyen Hai. The total number of village level participants is thus 278, although there was some overlap in between household visits and focus group attendance.

3.6 Research Methodology

Quantitative information-gathering methods, while useful for generating statistical information regarding income and consumption, do not capture all the dimensions of poverty as felt by the poor themselves, nor can they answer many of the “why” questions relating to poverty. Therefore, PPAs use qualitative research methods, primarily PRA tools.

Field researchers collected data in the following types of sessions:

- Household Group 1 (HG1): individual interviews with either the man or woman in one household
- Household Group 2 (HG2): individual interviews conducted separately and simultaneously with both husband and wife in a family
- Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with groups of 8-10, either all men or all women

Within each of these settings, different tools were used by researchers in order to understand the nature, causes, characteristics of poverty, as well as priorities and strategies of people to escape from poverty. A summary and evaluation of tools used by researchers can be found in Table 1 on the following page.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY AND EVALUATION OF PPA TOOLS EMPLOYED WITH TARGET GROUPS IN TRA VINH

Tool	Target Group	Purpose	Effectiveness	Comments
Individual interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commune leaders • Village leaders • Hamlet leaders • Women and men (HG1, HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided general introduction to each area, provided specific information on certain topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received • Simple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some cases there were participants who were reluctant to answer, but this was not a common problem
Socio-economic Mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commune leaders • Village leaders • Hamlet leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual summary representation of the hamlets that provided information on levels of poverty in the selected area, local natural resources, infrastructure and other local features • Used to assist in selecting hamlet research sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received • Provided research team with efficient overall view of community layout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although participants were reluctant to draw at first, they became more enthusiastic (e.g. picking out different colored pens to represent different areas) as the exercise progressed
Wealth Ranking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Village leaders • Hamlet leaders • Women and men (HG1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided information on individual household economic status • Provided information about vulnerability of poor households • Provided information about social exclusion of poor households • Helped determine households to be visited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes well received • Some participants became restless because the exercise took so long • Most useful as an interview tool for village leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originally it was the first exercise in HG1 visits, but it became apparent that it was taking away from the quality of the rest of the interview, and thus was separated into an exercise conducted on its own with a family • In a few cases disruptive neighbors or family members made participants nervous by telling them to be careful about what information they were supplying about their neighbors
Trend Analysis (community)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General overview of history of communities and changes in community well-being over the last 10 years • Provided information on risk and vulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally well received 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of participants had not lived in the community for 10 years and thus could not provide information
Case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG1, HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided research team with in-depth information about a particular aspect of a family's life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received • Provided in-depth information about a particular subject or participant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This tool was good for those who tended to be shy—it enabled people who were not necessarily comfortable talking in groups to talk about their lives and issues affecting their lives

Tool	Target Group	Purpose	Effectiveness	Comments
Seasonal Calendar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided information on periods of well-being (and lack thereof), seasonal food shortages, peak labor demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received • Provided large amounts of detailed information when conducted correctly (in some cases the participants were rushed by the interviewer and the calendars were thus drawn in haste and not very reliable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although the exercise was designed so that participants drew the calendars themselves, most felt uncomfortable doing so and interviewers ended up drawing calendars to the respondent's instructions • Participants were very thoughtful in their drawings—in several cases they drew different lines to represent what their income would be during the same time period if they did and if they did not have a successful shrimp season
Cause/Effect tree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (FGD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided opportunity for participants to identify and analyze problems faced in their daily lives having to do with their poverty situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received at first, but the exercise ended up taking too long, causing participants to become restless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of “problems” listed should have been limited to around 5 • Number of participants should be limited (although the research team did reduce the number of participants from 10 to 8, the group was still a bit too big, causing the exercise to take too long • Should not be conducted along with another tool (many participants have lost interest by the time this one is finished with)
Pairwise Ranking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (FGD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided opportunity for participants to analyze problems which they had identified themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise became too long in the FGD setting because it took place after the cause/effect tree, another long exercise • Participants misunderstood the exercise (for example, when asked what was more of a problem in their lives between “illness and lack of land,” they insisted “illness” even though in reality it had not been a problem in their lives • They understood it to be hypothetical, and thus insisted that <i>if</i> they were to fall ill, it would be devastating for their families)
Institutional Analysis (scoring)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (FGD, HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided insight into the different organizations associated with the communities along with their perceptions of these organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ineffective in both the household and FGD setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals were reluctant to give “bad” scores to their village leaders or other groups/people they knew personally

Tool	Target Group	Purpose	Effectiveness	Comments
Venn Diagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided insight into the different organizations associated with the communities along with their perceptions of these organizations (same as above) • Provided insight into informal “assistance-oriented” relationships between families and neighbors, community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received • Provided participants with the opportunity to carefully and thoughtfully consider the different types of assistance they had received from government organizations and individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tool was added at the discretion of team leader because the team was having so much trouble gathering data using the problem scoring method for institutional rankings. Therefore it was only used in a few households, so the data collected through it was not as complete as it could have been • Participants were generally asked to do the exercise twice or three times in order to confirm the accuracy of their institutional rankings (for the most part, repeating the exercise yielded similar results, which indicates that the interviewee was fairly sure of his or her evaluation of the assisting institution or individual)
Daily timetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided insight into gender differences within the family in terms of division of labor and the time spent on individual tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well received • Oral rather than visual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was difficult to do and confusing for some participants because time schedules are not necessarily the same every day
Problem scoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided opportunity for participants to analyze problems which they had identified themselves • Provided team with insight into most important issues facing villagers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally well received 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants tended to see “problems” mainly in terms of finances—they often could not make the connection between other more vague difficulties in their lives as “problems”
Time line (household)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women and men (HG2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided general overview of family history within the last 10 years • Provided information about risk, vulnerability and coping strategies • Provide information on usage of household resources and capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally well received • Provided the opportunity for participants to reflect back over their life history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was difficult in some cases for participants to remember exactly when specific events occurred during their lifetime

3.6.1 Difficulties and constraints in methodology

3.6.1.1 Selection of Participants

There was not enough time to hear the views of the poor in the *selection* of the target villages and hamlets. Research sites were chosen based on the commune and village leaders' perceptions of well-being, not on those of the poor. The original goal was to meet with 100 households in each district (50 households per commune), but due to limited time and the length of each interview, this target was not met in any of the 4 communes.

There were also some constraints in terms of methodology that were specific to each district.

3.6.1.1.1 Duyen Hai

All the villagers selected by the research team to join in focus group discussions (FGDs) were either poor or very poor, so there was some overlap, particularly in Ben Chuoi village, of household participants and FGD participants. In addition, the research team interviewed more relatively well-off households than originally intended, because on some days researchers had to seek additional households to interview if there was duplication between target households and those that had already attended the FGD. In these situations, researchers generally improvised by either choosing another household on the selected list, or, if that was not possible, going to neighboring houses.

3.6.1.1.2 Chau Thanh

In Hoa Loi commune, the wealthiest village was not selected because a PRA survey had previously been carried out there by a UNDP team and Oxfam GB did not want to repeat the process in the same location.

The number of participants in FGDs varied in communities with many landless families, and depended upon the availability of employment on any given day. Landless households could not afford to miss work to attend these discussions.

3.6.1.2 Understanding of language and concepts

Terms such as “well-being” and “vulnerability” are not only difficult to translate into Vietnamese, but were also new concepts for many government cadres. In the field, concepts of well-being, exclusion, and marginalization were difficult to discuss with local people, even when these terms were altered to fit the local context.

3.6.1.3 Time constraints

Training time was restricted, and not all people participated fully. The first 6 days of training were attended only by Tra Vinh province, district and commune staff, and there was not enough time for less experienced researchers to fully grasp the new PPA concepts.

Some of the PRA exercises were also hindered by time constraints. For instance, in the Women's FGD in Long Toan commune (Duyen Hai), the cause/effect tree took almost 3 hours to complete. As a result, by the time the large group broke up into smaller ones to do the pairwise ranking, institutional analysis, and organizational analysis, half of the participants had left to go home, and those who stayed were distracted and not able to concentrate. Thus, after this first FGD, the team leader decided to limit the exercises in the large FGD to the cause/effect tree and pairwise ranking. Organizational and institutional analyses were conducted separately with smaller groups, and were given more attention in the individual household interviews.

3.6.1.4 Issues of Sensitivity

The wealth ranking and institutional analysis exercises were sensitive, as participants were often reluctant to speak candidly about their neighbors, community leaders, or community organizations.

Even though the research team made every effort to dispel such rumors, some villagers believed that the wealth ranking exercises were a way to determine eligibility for future loans, so some participants ranked their friends as poor (whether or not they were poor). In addition, when neighbors or other family members were present, they sometimes interrupted and tried to influence participants' answers.

In Duyen Hai, the household institutional ranking exercise was difficult because participants were hesitant to give low scores to village leaders. They would assign fairly high scores even if they had commented that a certain leader or organization was not helpful or did not do much for the community. In Chau Thanh, one participant changed the score he had given a local official from a 4 to an 8 when the official appeared during the exercise.

In the second week of research in Duyen Hai, the team leader asked some researchers to replace the institutional ranking tool with a Venn diagram exercise; this was much better received by participants and yielded more convincing results.

4 WHO ARE THE POOR AND WHAT DIFFICULTIES DO THEY FACE?

In each village, we carried out well-being ranking exercises with village leaders and local people in order to determine how people defined relative wealth and poverty. No particular indicators were suggested to participants—rather, they were asked to define the different levels of well-being in their village and explain why they placed certain families into respective categories.

Although lack of capital was mentioned by many participants in both Chau Thanh and Duyen Hai as a major reason for being poor, people's definition of well-being went well beyond cash income and assets. Local people characterized the poorest households in terms of vulnerability to debt and illness, and lack of other means of production in which to invest. They also elaborated an extensive list of criteria which describe a nest of related problems which afflict the very poor, such as children dropping out of school, not enough to eat, dependence on wage-labor,⁶ lack of clothes and equipment, and illness (see Table 2, next page).

⁶ Dependence on wage labor has a consistent bad connotation in this and many other parts of Vietnam. While opportunities for earning wages through informal employment can be assumed to be positive, it is often considered negative because: 1) it connotes lack of land for self-employment and family-controlled production, 2) in an area with surplus supply it means wages are very low, 3) it is highly seasonal and leads to vulnerability, 4) in the absence of rights to a minimum wage or reasonable wage 'floors' it can be highly exploitative and 5) it very often represents repayment of a loans through mortgaging of labor in advance (future substitution), which again is generally exploitative of the indebted poor.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF WELL-BEING INDICATORS USED BY LOCAL PEOPLE IN RANKING EXERCISES .⁷

Type of Household	Chau Thanh	Duyen Hai
well-off households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own between 8-50 cong land • have good harvests • own agricultural machinery • receive overseas remittances • own livestock (cows, pigs, poultry) • own newer model motorbike • own furniture • have house made of cement/brick • children study to 10th grade • have electricity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own between 20-100 cong land • have series of good shrimp harvests • have multiple shrimp harvests each season • own plowing & digging machinery • own household equipment such as a refrigerator • own newer model motorbike • own furniture • have brick/concrete houses, tiled floors
average households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own 5-20 cong land • do not own plowing machinery • have average style house-bamboo/stone houses • own TV/thresher machines • own enough furniture • can find enough work/have jobs • fewer children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own about 10 cong of shrimp land • no food-deficit period • have larger, but bamboo house • own TV/radio • good shrimp crop (10,000/year)
poor households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own less than 10 cong of land • have poor houses (bamboo/leaf roof) • sell labor • have debts • no capital • have more children/small children • do not have electricity • own simple furniture • have illnesses in the family • own small livestock (pigs and poultry) • no savings • sold land to cope with disaster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own 3-5 cong land at most • no capital • sell labor • raise less than 5,000 shrimp/year • must rent land for shrimp • farming own bamboo/leaf house with dirt floor • must buy shrimp inputs on credit • no TV or radio
very poor households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not enough to eat • no land • dependent on wage labor • have debts • have illnesses in the family • children drop out of school • no savings • cannot repay loans in cash • not enough clothes • many children • no livestock • no equipment/machinery/TV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no land • no capital • dependent on wage labor • not enough to eat • have small bamboo houses with dirt floor • must rent land to raise shrimp (if they can afford to) • no TV or radio

Based on these indicators mentioned by local people, it was possible for us to conclude that the poor and marginalized possess similar characteristics and face many similar problems in the two districts, including lack of productive resources (land, capital), sickness, illiteracy, dependence on selling labor, and chronic debt. The main

⁷ Source: well-being ranking exercises in the Thanh My, Hoa Loi communes in Chau Thanh District and Long Vinh and Long Toan communes in Duyen Hai District.

difference between the two districts in terms of poverty indicators was that in Duyen Hai, the well-being of a family was heavily dependent on shrimp farming—well being was often based on the amount of land owned for shrimp farming, the number of times a family harvested shrimp in one season, the size of shrimp harvests, etc.

4.1 Marginalized groups

Among the poor in Tra Vinh province, there were a number of specific groups who local people said were especially vulnerable to poverty. People from these groups sometimes felt marginalized by and excluded from the community as a whole. Members of marginalized groups tended to face specific problems that made their situations particularly difficult (see Table 3, below).

TABLE 3. PROBLEMS FACING MARGINALISED GROUPS IN DUYEN HAI AND CHAU THANH⁸

	Chau Thanh	Duyen Hai
The poor, in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of production resources (land, labor, capital) • sickness • illiteracy, children dropping out of school • debts • exclusion from credit • <i>health problems related to selling blood</i> • dependence on selling labor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of production resources (land, labor, capital) • sickness • illiteracy, children dropping out of school • debts • exclusion from credit • <i>exclusion from extension services</i> • <i>inability to apply shrimp farming methods promoted by the extension service</i> • dependence on selling labor
Landless poor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dependence on selling labor • chronic indebtedness to expensive moneylenders • <i>shrinking labor market (due to increase in numbers of poor and landless people and influx of newcomers)</i> • lack of capital, skills, knowledge, ‘know-how’ to break the cycle of poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dependence on selling labor • chronic indebtedness to expensive money lenders • <i>extreme vulnerability to shocks</i> • lack of resources and opportunities to break the cycle of poverty
Poor Khmer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language barriers (in life, at school) • less skilled in trading than Kinh (due to language difficulties, lack of network, etc.) • landlessness (not inheriting land) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language barriers (in meetings, technical training courses, in traveling outside the communities and meeting people) • less skills in trading than Kinh • landlessness • <i>negative stereotypes against them</i>

⁸ Source: PPA exercises with poor people in Chau Thanh and Duyen Hai. Problems that were only mentioned by poor people in one district are *italicized*.

	Chau Thanh	Duyen Hai
Poor Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carry the burden of family planning (men do not take responsibility) • lack of voice compared to men (not being invited to meetings, not having decision making power in the family) • <i>poor health because of women feed husbands and children first</i> • <i>lower daily wage than men</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of control over reproductive health (due to inadequate FP/RH information and choice, lack of decision making power, lack of participation and cooperation of men) • lack of voice compared to men (not being invited to meetings, not having decision making power in the households)
Physically isolated people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor information • poor access to roads, markets and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of information about and access to government services • poor access to roads, markets and services
Illiterate people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulties in interactions with government services (loans, health care, child registration, etc.) • <i>lack of self confidence in monetary transactions</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulties in interactions with government services (loans, health care, child registration, etc.) • <i>inability to get vocational training</i>
Poor children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cannot afford school fees • must leave school early • must begin working at a young age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cannot afford school fees • must leave school early • must begin working at a young age

4.1.1 Landless Poor

Poor landless people in both districts identify the mutually reinforcing problems of reliance on selling labor and lack of productive resources as two of their most serious problems. Given the low returns to selling labor, it is not surprising that this results in an inability to save money or develop the skills necessary to break out of poverty.

In Chau Thanh, people perceived that the labor-selling market is becoming more competitive, as more poor and landless people enter into it. While there is a higher percentage of landless people in Duyen Hai than in Chau Thanh (18% vs. 10%), there is a higher percentage of “near-landless” in Chau Thanh (14% vs. 6%) than in Duyen Hai. It may be that high-risk shrimp farming in Duyen Hai has resulted in more rapid landlessness than in Chau Thanh, and that the process is just beginning to be felt in Chau Thanh.

Landlessness contributes to chronic indebtedness and extreme vulnerability. Most of the poor told team members that being landless is a “lose-lose” game; the longer one is landless, the worse one’s situation becomes. Therefore, the long-term landless in Duyen Hai have dropped further down the economic ladder.

Poor landless people in both districts have difficulty accessing services, and have few opportunities to improve their lives. Landless laborers are likely to have less access to health and other services because they are away from their homes working during daylight hours when cadres visit. As many landless people travel for weeks or seasons at a time (in Chau Thanh), they also miss other village-wide services, such as credit applications or extension training that require several days of involvement.

4.1.2 Poor Khmer

Khmer people in both districts identify many similar problems, including language barriers, landlessness, and fewer skills in trading/business than Kinh people. While many Khmer are conversant in Kinh, some are not, and they feel uncomfortable attending meetings or training courses if they do not understand Kinh well. This fact alone almost guarantees that those uncomfortable with the language will have great difficulty participating in community affairs, and raising their concerns in meetings. In addition, some do not have the language skills to attend training events. In addition, landlessness, a problem for many people in Tra Vinh, is especially strongly felt by the Khmer. Though the research teams did not obtain statistics regarding landlessness of different ethnic groups, the Khmer mentioned this problem more frequently than did Kinh, saying that their families historically did not have land for them to inherit.

Many people in Duyen Hai, both Kinh and Khmer, held a general perception that Khmer are poorer than Kinh because by nature they are poor “planners,” they do not calculate adequately (*khong biet tinh toan*), or they are simply not as logical and methodical as Kinh when making business plans or financial decisions. Researchers felt that there was little evidence to support this stereotype. Although Khmer did tend to be poorer than Kinh (e.g. in Long Vinh commune, the poorest village had the highest number of Khmer living in it), there were a number of Khmer PPA participants who had been successful in various economic production activities. Even they, however, tended to describe Khmer people with the same stereotypes in mind.

Some Khmer subscribe to negative stereotypes of themselves...

Mr. K, a Khmer man in Xom Chua village (Duyen Hai) who is well off due to three successful shrimp seasons, still felt that Kinh were better thinkers and planners than Khmer, and he attributes his success to learning from Vietnamese business colleagues. He elaborated and explained that Kinh were more “worldly”-- they traveled more and thus were able to learn more from the outside world and apply their learning. “*Some Khmer have never even left this neighborhood,*” he said.

Attendees at a men’s focus group discussion in Xom Chua village echoed this idea by stating, “*we hear about Tra Vinh [town], but have no concept of it.*”

4.1.3 Poor Women

A high proportion of households in Chau Thanh are headed by women. Of 54 female-headed households in the two communes, 24 (46%) are led by women whose husbands had either left or died. The remainder were unmarried, had husbands who were incapacitated, or were wives who owned the household land. Of these, 14 were ranked as poor or very poor, 3 as average, 2 as relatively wealthy and 1 as rich. Four women-headed households were not mentioned at all during the ranking exercise because other villagers were uncertain of their status, indicating that these households are very isolated. Only well-off female-headed households had strong family networks to assist them (including remittances from overseas in one case).

In Duyen Hai, all but one female-headed household were ranked “poor” or “very poor,” and were usually widowed or deserted by their husbands. They survive by doing whatever work they can find: in Long Toan it is making and selling alcohol,

while in Long Vinh it is weaving *la* panels for house construction. They also depend extensively on assistance from neighbors and relatives.

Local authorities-- from village leaders to bank officers—sometimes discriminate against women who are heads of households and will often insist on dealing with a man. A widow in Kinh Dao village (Duyen Hai) reported that she was been denied loans from government programs several times because she has no one to guarantee the loans in the event of her death.

Customary attitudes and gender stereotypes mean that some women also self-select themselves out of formal procedures, believing this work is not appropriate for a woman. One women responded to questions about access to financial services or attending meetings with, “*you should ask my husband about borrowing money from the bank.*” In focus group meetings in Chau Thanh, people noted there were discriminatory attitudes towards single women by government officials. A widow from Nha Dua village (Chau Thanh) summarized the sentiments of some women when she said, “*when my husband was alive the tax officers were not very strict, but after he died they became very strict.*”

In addition, there is only a space for one person’s name on registration papers, and generally the husband is listed (for residence and land use certificates). Not only are women rarely approached by government staff, but should a woman’s husband die suddenly, she will be denied access to credit requiring collateral because her name is not on the required papers. Legally transferring land ownership to the widow takes a very long time and requires literacy, confidence, and administrative fees. Poor women are easily intimidated by these procedures.

A woman who loses her husband is extremely vulnerable

Ms. M is a 37 year old widow whose husband died in 1997 when she was 3 months pregnant. Unable to work while pregnant, and struggling to raise 2 other young children, she quickly fell into debt and had to mortgage their land for about 3 million VND to buy food. Life improved a little after she went to work in Ho Chi Minh City to work as a domestic servant between 1997-8, but she is still 2 million VND in debt.

Ms. M currently goes out to work from 6.30 am to 5 pm and lists her main difficulties as having the money to buy back her land, and then loneliness. Her older daughter is now in grade 6 at school, while the younger daughter is still too young.

She says that other households with more assets are able to borrow HEPR funds, but she has been refused. When she has approached private moneylenders they also have denied her a loan claiming that she has no loan security because she has no land and no husband. Her dream now is to save enough capital to raise pigs and ducks, while her daughter’s dream is freedom from debt for her mother.

Researchers in Chau Thanh also identified low wages as a serious problem for women, as they appear to make less than men do. However, this was not identified as a problem in Duyen Hai, perhaps because women and men (mostly) do different work: women weave *la* panels, while men dig shrimp ponds. Since shrimp pond digging is seasonal, while weaving *la* panels is a year-round occupation, it is likely that women’s total earnings may exceed men’s in many families in Duyen Hai. This

has not, however, necessarily earned them decision-making power over the household budget.

Almost all households reported that men spent a significant portion of household income on tobacco and alcohol, despite women's disapproval. A man in Kinh Dao village (Duyen Hai) said that he meets with his friends to drink about 20 times per month, each time spending around 30,000 VND (ie.,600,000 dong) per month. In some households this constitutes around 50% of monthly income. One woman said, *"whenever they make money, men in the neighborhood pool their money together for alcohol and food – if they have money they prepare a dog, if not, a duck....women do not dare to eat, they save their money in case someone in the family gets sick."*

Some women complained that these drinking bouts can result in physical abuse when husbands come home drunk. *"There are 2 men who live near me who beat their wives,"* said a participant in Long Vinh commune (Duyen Hai), who confirmed comments a number of women had made about spates of drinking by groups of men. Another woman in Xom Chua village (Duyen Hai) confided, *"Lots of women in this neighborhood are beaten by their husbands. Lucky for me my brother lives nearby, so if my husband starts coming after me I run to my brother's house."*

Women in both districts also experienced a lack of control over family planning and reproduction. Researchers identified poor health as serious issues for women in both districts, as they work very hard and often have poor diets.

4.1.4 Physically Isolated People

Physically isolated people in both districts cited lack of information and poor access as their biggest constraints. Isolated people often find out about meetings after they happen. One woman in Xom Chua village (Duyen Hai) said, *"I have lived here for 10 years and never been called to a meeting of any kind."* Others complained that the only times they are contacted is when the commune needs to mobilize free labor. In Chau Thanh, poor people without a television or radio talked of feeling isolated and helpless. One person said, *"I live quite far from other people...by the time I hear about things the opportunity has passed."*

Some remote families in Long Vinh commune (Duyen Hai) said they were unable to access free vaccinations for their children because commune staff were reluctant to go to their houses to inform them. If someone did go to the physically isolated house and the family was not at home, the worker would not return, and the family would thus miss the vaccinations.

4.1.5 Illiterate People

Illiterate people in both areas cited difficulties in interacting with the government as serious concerns. Being unable to read an instruction manual, fill out a loan application, or apply for a child's registration all confine illiterate people to their homes, or force them to work through literate people. Researchers felt that more people in Chau Thanh expressed discomfort with illiteracy than in Duyen Hai. Since it is clear that illiteracy is higher in Duyen Hai, researchers thought that perhaps illiterate people are part of a larger minority in Duyen Hai and thus do not feel as

“different” as those in Chau Thanh. Also, Chau Thanh residents have more opportunities to go and trade in Tra Vinh town, where lack of reading skills would be felt more keenly. However some people in Duyen Hai did feel that illiteracy would make it more difficult to obtain vocational training, such as tailoring.

4.1.6 Poor Children

Poor children are a marginalized group. Their education is often sacrificed when families find school fees unaffordable and/or their labor is needed to earn income. This was a common scenario in both Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh, and was found in both poor and average households. Girls in better-off families appear to be more likely to leave school early to support the education of their brothers (even older ones), but in poor households, both boys and girls equally tended to leave school after the third or fourth grade.

Children without birth certificates are not permitted to attend school. This disproportionately affects the poor since it costs 15,000 VND to obtain a birth certificate for a child who does not have a birth proof paper issued by a clinic (because the child was born at home). In Duyen Hai, an estimated 50% of women give birth at home because they cannot afford the clinic fees or live too far away.

Another issue which emerged in both Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh was that children were being intimidated by pressure from teachers who constantly reminded them in class that their parents had not yet paid their school fees. One 11-year-old girl in Qui Nong A village (Chau Thanh) said, *“the school always asks us for the money and we have no money, so I want to drop out.”*

5 WHY ARE PEOPLE POOR?

Village wealth ranking exercises done by respondents revealed that there is still a very high percentage of poor and very poor in the two communes. Even in Phu Tho, a well-off village of a well-off commune (Chau Thanh), respondents ranked 34% of their neighbors as either poor or very poor. In Long Vinh, a poor commune in Duyen Hai, one village had up to 67% poor or very poor (as ranked by residents).

5.1 Few options for income-generation

The local economies in both Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh are not diversified. People rely almost exclusively on shrimp farming in Duyen Hai, and HYV rice cultivation and duck raising in Chau Thanh. Beyond these production activities, there are relatively few wage labor opportunities. Farmers in Duyen Hai continue to risk impoverishment on intensive aquaculture while poor rice farmers in Chau Thanh struggle to invest more in intensifying their rice production in the face of decreasing marginal returns to new investments in inputs.

Table 4 below details the various income-generation options currently available in Chau Thanh and Duyen Hai.

TABLE 4. INCOME-GENERATION POSSIBILITIES IN CHAU THANH AND DUYEN HAI

	Chau Thanh	Duyen Hai
Production activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rice farming • growing secondary crops of fruit and vegetables • raising small livestock (ducks, pigs, fish) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shrimp farming • growing secondary crops including watermelon, pumpkin and limited rice • raising pigs • growing/harvesting <i>la</i> for house paneling
Local wage labor and self-employment		
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • repairing dykes • construction/carpentry work • cultivating rice (transplanting, weeding, harvesting) • petty trade and other services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • digging ponds for shrimp • farming (2 months of the year) • harvesting <i>la</i> (Long Vinh) • catching frogs and crabs • petty trade and other services
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cultivating rice • making noodles • making rice paper • petty trade and other services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • harvesting <i>la</i> (Long Vinh) • weaving <i>la</i> panels • peeling shrimp for a seafood processing company (Long Toan) • petty trade and other services

Migrant wage labor		
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working on fishing boats • working on coffee plantations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • almost none, because men are bound to their shrimp ponds
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working as domestic servants in Ho Chi Minh City • working in factories in Tra Vinh or Ho Chi Minh City 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very little

The table above shows that there are only a few main income generation activities in each commune, and since production activities require land, the landless and near-landless must depend on the limited wage labor and self-employment opportunities. In Chau Thanh, people can seek employment away from home in other Mekong Delta provinces or even Ho Chi Minh City, but this is time-consuming and poorly paid. Men in Duyen Hai often cannot travel because they must stay near home to cultivate their shrimp crop. One man in Giong Gieng village (Duyen Hai) explained the dilemma, *“There is work if you are willing to go far away from home, but if you do that, who is going to take care of your shrimp at home?”*

5.2 Inability to Accumulate Savings

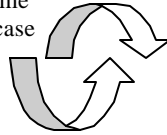
It is very difficult for poor families in Tra Vinh to accumulate savings. One very poor woman in Xom Chua village (Duyen Hai) summed up the plight of the poor, saying, *“Poor people cannot improve their status because they live day by day, and if they get sick they are in trouble because they have to borrow money and pay interest.”*

As mentioned earlier, for those with little or no land, there are few employment options, and those options pay extremely low daily wages. In Duyen Hai, weaving *la* panels pays as low as 5,000 VND/day in the low season. Digging shrimp ponds pays higher, but only men do this very heavy labor. In Chau Thanh, transplanting rice seedlings and harvesting average 15,000 VND/day. These jobs, however, generally exist only two to three months out of the year, and the rest of the time there is very little work.

The poor can barely earn enough to subsist if they are lucky, and if the slightest mishap occurs within the family, they often must borrow from moneylenders, who generally charge interest rates of 10-15%/mo (and sometimes much higher). Thus they risk becoming trapped in a spiral of debt, as was the case with one family in Duyen Hai, who had been paying 10%/month interest on a loan of 200,000 VND (20,000 VND/month) for four years, and to date, has still been unable to pay any of the principal. The box below describes the debt spiral dilemma.

The dilemma of poor farmers - The Debt Spiral

In Tra Vinh, the vulnerability of poor farmers to overwhelming debt reflects a lack of buffers against unforeseen expenses such as social obligations (weddings and other celebrations), natural disasters (drought or flood), physical incapacity (illness or accident), and especially high interest rates on informal loans. Meeting these expenses often leads to an irreversible loss of assets, plunging families into a cycle of spiraling debt. The scenarios below illustrate how easily households can be pushed into extreme poverty by a single random event - in this case illness.



The Case of Duyen Hai

A hypothetical landless family of six living in Long Vinh, a poor commune in Duyen Hai, has 4 laborers and 2 younger children still in school. The father falls ill and is hospitalized, leaving only 3 wage earners contributing to the family income. The hospital costs are **500,000 VND**, which the family must borrow at a *private moneylender rate of 10%/mo.*

Because the family is landless, *the only way to earn income is through wage labor.* The most typical form of wage labor in the area is making *la* panels and digging ponds for shrimp farming for a few months (men only), which nets an average of about **25,000 VND** between the three laborers per day (**750,000 VND/month**).

Minimum food costs (rice and basic staples) for a family of this size is **17,000 VND/day (510,000 VND/month)**. Other household expenses including cigarettes, alcohol, medicines, etc. average about **3,000 VND/day** and school costs average **3,000 VND/day** over the year for the **2 children in school**, which includes money for breakfast, school contributions, clothes, books and incidentals (total **180,000 VND/month**). Bare minimum family expenditures therefore comes to **690,000 VND/mo.** But they must also pay **50,000 VND/month** interest (10%) on the loan they took to pay for the father's medical expenses.

Thus the absolute minimum expenditure per

month for this family is **740,000 VND**-*if there are any other minor illnesses, mishaps in the family, or a failed shrimp season, they will have a cash shortage and will then either have to borrow rice on credit, sell labor in advance, or take out an additional loan from an informal lender.* Their dilemma is obvious-they will never be able to repay the loan principal **500,000 VND**, condemning them to a spiral of debt from which they cannot escape.

The Case of Chau Thanh

In Hoa Loi, a poor commune in Chau Thanh, the same family will have a somewhat different scenario when faced with the same illness. The *main wage labor activity is rice farming*, which pays on average **15,000 VND/day/person**, or **45,000 VND/day** for 3 laborers. However, the work is only available on average about 10 days/month, bringing the average family income to **450,000 VND/month**. In Hoa Loi, *there is also the coping strategy of selling blood, which almost everyone who has the strength will do.* Selling blood pays **150,000/person/time**, and each person sells blood on average once every 3 months. Between 3 adult members of the family, this brings in an additional **450,000 VND/month**, taking monthly family income to **900,000 VND/mo.**

Expenditures for the family in Hoa Loi would be similar to the family in Long Vinh, except that the average *informal moneylender interest rate in Hoa Loi is 20%/mo.* Thus, in addition to the 690,000 VND/month bare minimum family expenditure, they pay 100,000 VND in interest on the informal loan taken out to pay for the father's medical expenses. Total basic family expenses comes to 790,000 VND/month, leaving barely over 100,000 VND extra for any other unforeseen expense. Thus the family in Hoa Loi is just as seriously condemned to a debt spiral to the family in Long Vinh, not to mention putting their health in danger by regularly selling blood.

5.3 Landlessness

One of the main reasons for poverty in Tra Vinh, according to local people, is landlessness. Results of the 10-year timeline exercise indicated that 80% of all respondents in Duyen Hai felt that their lives had improved over the last 10 years. The 20% who felt life had stayed the same or gotten worse tended to be among the poorest and often landless—the population that must depend on daily wage labor as their primary source of income. They are in almost hopeless situation—unable to get credit because they are in debt and thus unable to borrow more. In addition, the landless lack the necessary collateral required by most banks and credit programs.

A well-off person in Duyen Hai said, “*The poor cannot improve their status because they don’t have capital or land: they are always working for wage labor and eat first and pay back later. They borrow 1 chi of gold and it becomes 2 - how can they repay it? Raising shrimp requires capital. Planting fruit trees requires land.*” However, landlessness is a serious, and increasing, problem, as households either mortgage or sell their land to invest in productive activities that are fairly risky.

Table 5 below illustrates the seriousness of the landlessness problem in Tra Vinh.

TABLE 5. TOTALS OF LANDLESSNESS IN TRA VINH⁹

District	Landless HHs	HHs with less than 2000m ²	HHs with more than 14,000m ²	Total HHs	Total Population
Duyen Hai	2,625 (18%) ¹⁰	827 (6%)	5,175 (35%)	14,650	72,249
Chau Thanh	2,730 (10%)	3,799 (14%)	5,664 (21%)	26,666	131,537

According to provincial sources, there are almost twice as many landless people in Duyen Hai as in Chau Thanh (though the total percentage of people who are landless OR have little land is the same—24%). At the same time, Duyen Hai also has many more people with large landholdings than Chau Thanh. One reason for this may be that people in Duyen Hai rely primarily on shrimp raising, which is riskier than rice farming; thus those who fail usually fall into serious debt and must sell their land (to repay debts). Also, the potential profits from shrimp farming are much higher than profits for rice farming, so shrimp farmers who succeed have extra capital to buy more land. Finally, the quality of land is much lower in Duyen Hai, so people without enough capital to undertake shrimp farming might prefer to sell their land, as they cannot use it for any income generating activities.

Many respondents confirmed that it is relatively easy to become landless, but extremely difficult for a landless person to make enough money to purchase land. In both research sites, team members heard many stories of people selling their land, but *almost never heard* of a landless person who had been able to purchase land.

Selling labor or making *la* panels in Duyen Hai may earn an individual approximately 10,000 VND per day. For a family of four, 10,000 VND per day is enough to buy

⁹ Source: de Mauny and Hong, *Landlessness in the Mekong Delta*, 1998

¹⁰ Independent Oxfam research in Duyen Hai in 1998 found that the percentage of landless people ranged from 9 to 60% in four selected villages in the district.

rice, but nothing more. This family, given current conditions, will probably never be able to buy back their land.

Landlessness Can Happen to Anybody...

A former Party leader in Nha Dua village (Chau Thanh) used to own 12 cong of land. He had a very good reputation among the local people for honesty and hard work, and he had to support a large, extended family. Little by little, he sold his land to pay for family expenses, until he had no land left to sell. He is no longer a cadre, and is forced to sell labor to survive—he is now one of the poorer people in the village, and sees no hope of being able to purchase his land back.

5.3.1 Landlessness has increased dramatically in recent years

More families are becoming landless. Tra Vinh province authorities listed only 770 landless households in 1994, but 17,458 in 1997. Clearly, more people are becoming landless in Tra Vinh. Findings from the research, including comments from team members, local cadres, and participants, indicated a number of reasons for this problem.

First, starting in 1993-94, many people took out formal sector loans for the first time. They were unable to use the money well, or were unlucky, and were therefore forced to sell their land (their only asset) to repay the loan. Second, some people may have sold their land when the co-operatives broke up in the early 1990s, but the sales were not officially registered until some years later. Third, in Duyen Hai, shrimp raising started in the early 1990s, and the first big failure of the crop was in 1994. Since then, there have been both good and bad years; every time there is a bad year, some farmers (without savings) must sell their land to repay debts. Fourth, land markets are more developed than they were in past years, making sale/mortgage of land much easier than it used to be. Fifth, wealth differentials are greater than they used to be, as there are many wealthy farmers who have both the means and desire to purchase additional land in order to increase their production capacity. Sixth, farmers with small landholdings *may feel* that the potential returns to owning 1-3 cong of land (“near landless”) are less than returns from selling labor. Seventh, there are more wage laboring opportunities available than there used to be, so the relative returns to wage laboring have increased in recent years (though it is not lucrative). Finally, land which begins to suffer from salinity or poor irrigation may be of such low value to a farmer that he/she may sell it.

The province, concerned about increasing landlessness, passed Plan 01 in 1997 to reduce landlessness. Measures included: credit for landless families, training, mobilizing funds for poor farmers, and making land sales more difficult. It is unclear if this strategy is working, though anecdotal evidence from local people indicates that despite the province’s best efforts, landlessness continues to grow. The strongest message that was communicated to team members was that land is the only asset that many people own, and that they normally only sell it if they feel they have no other options. In such cases, it appears that nothing could prevent distress sales of land, except income support from the government to the poor.

“Our Dream is to Own Land”

A family in Hoa Loi commune (Chau Thanh) borrowed 5 million VND to rent 10 cong of land for 3 years. The loan must be repaid in 3 yearly installments of 2.5 million VND each to a total of 7.5 million VND (an interest rate of 50% on the loan). Somehow, after 3 years of working as hard as they could and saving as much as they could, they repaid the loan and interest, but they still do not have enough money to purchase their land. They do not see how they will ever make enough money to buy the land. They fear that they are condemned to a life of tenant farming.

5.4 Risky income-generation options

The income-generation options of people in Tra Vinh are not only limited, but risky as well. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the investment cycle of the main income generation activities. In Duyen Hai the activity is shrimp farming, a risky, but potentially lucrative, activity and one that many farmers said they believed would pull them out of poverty. In Chau Thanh, the major investment of choice for farmers is in high yielding varieties of fast-growing (85 days) rice and duck raising. There is less risk than in Duyen Hai, due partly to major irrigation works built over the last decade and diversification of production, but nevertheless people can suffer major losses if they happen to have unsuccessful harvests coupled with unsuccessful duck raising.

Figure 1. Shrimp farming cycle in Duyen Hai

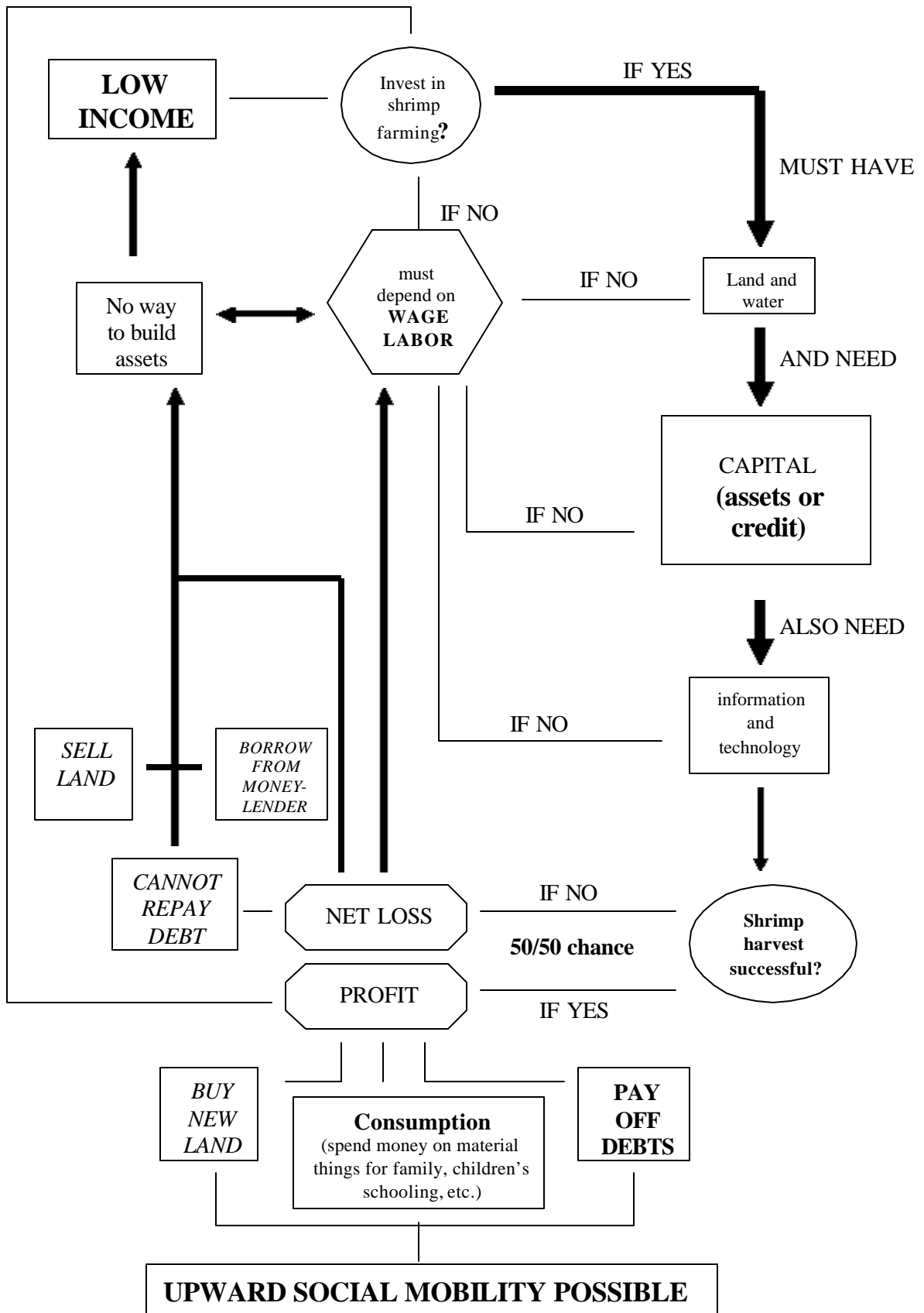
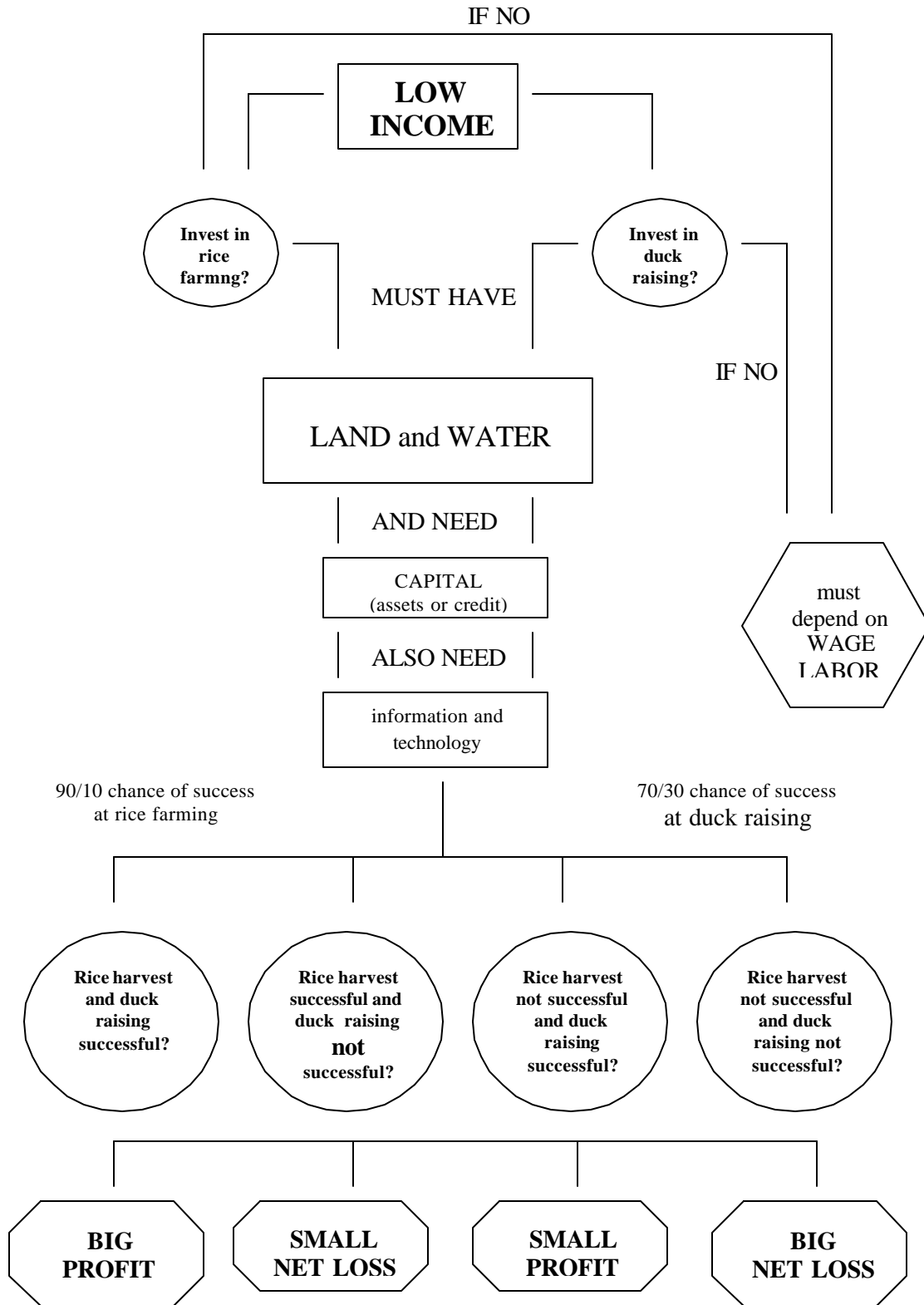


Figure 2. Rice farming and duck raising cycles in Chau Thanh



In Duyen Hai:

Shrimp farming requires small amounts of land, but large amounts of capital, strong technical skills, and a great deal of luck. There is approximately 50% risk of failure. Still, successful shrimp farming will generate HIGH profits.

In Chau Thanh:

Growing HYV rice requires more land than shrimp farming, small to medium amounts of capital, reasonably good farming skills, and some luck. There is an approximately 10% chance of failure. Successful rice growing will generate LOWER profits.

Successful duck raising requires small amounts of land, medium amounts of capital, good animal raising skills, and considerable luck. There is an approximately 30% risk of failure. Successful duck raising will generate MEDIUM profits.

Because of their respective farming activities, people in Duyen Hai employ a high-risk, high return strategy, while farmers in Chau Thanh employ a low/medium risk, low/medium return strategy. This implies that there will be more landlessness in Duyen Hai, as people who fail in shrimp farming are forced to sell their land. In addition, there will be a small group of very wealthy people in Duyen Hai, who are lucky and skilled enough to succeed at shrimp farming for a few years in a row. These farmers will purchase more land, and will buy it from people who have failed at shrimp farming, or from people who had no assets to cushion themselves against unexpected crises. The people selling land will have nothing left to sell but their labor in the future.

In Chau Thanh there will also be differentiation, but it will not be as fast, nor as severe as in Duyen Hai. Current evidence on the greater number of landless people in Duyen Hai supports this. Given a choice, it is likely that people in Duyen Hai would try to reduce their risk by diversifying production into rice, animal-raising, and shrimp-cultivation. Some people will become wealthier as they diversify into new forms of production, and as they trade more intensively in Tra Vinh town and beyond. Others will fail, grow poorer, become landless, and be forced to rely on selling labor.

Wage labor possibilities in Tra Vinh are largely in low-return endeavors—the income is just enough to buy food, but rarely provides enough earnings for a households to build up assets and escape poverty.

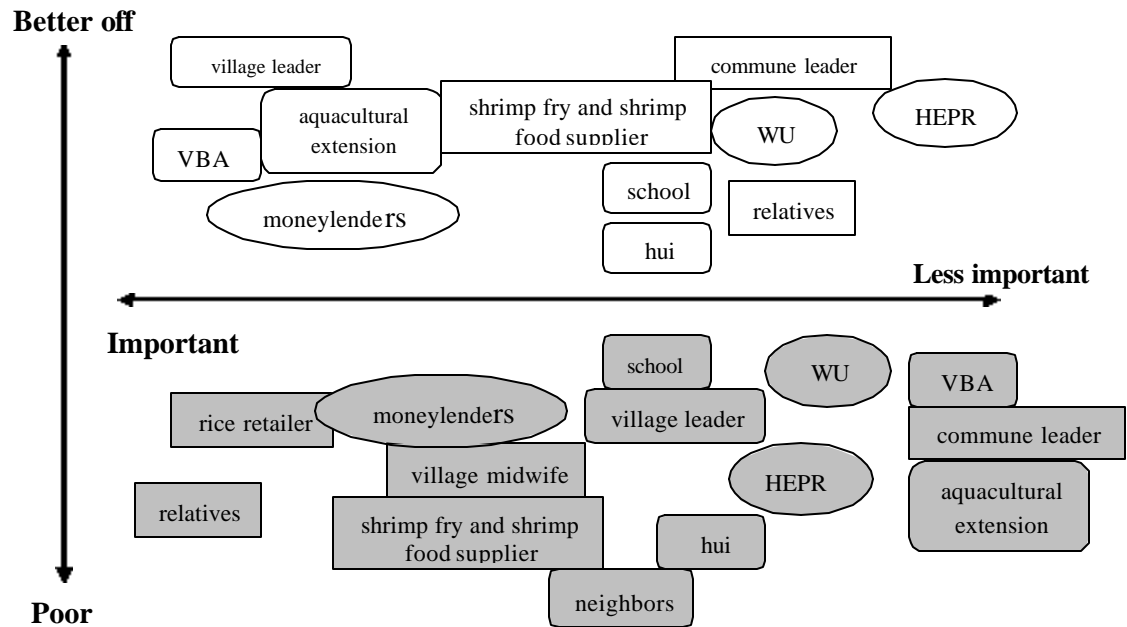
6 WHAT ARE THE POOR'S SUPPORT NETWORKS AND COPING STRATEGIES?

The poor in Tra Vinh turn to a number of different support networks during times of need. During this PPA, participants referred to both formal and informal networks, which include official government offices, government programs or mass organizations as well as relatives, neighbors or neighborhood retailers.

6.1 Support Networks

It became clear during the PPA that poor people tend to value and rely on informal networks while better off people more often seek support from formal networks. Figure 3 below, compiled from participants' Venn diagrams and researchers' impressions from the PPA, illustrates the situation in Duyen Hai.

Figure 3. Informal and formal networks relied on by people in Duyen Hai



There is a clear contrast between the rich and the poor. The rich usually find financial or political support in the more outward oriented, political and commercial institutions which have connections with the village, such as the commune and village leadership, the VBA, large ROSCAs, suppliers of agricultural inputs, the WU and HEPR staff. The poor, on the other hand, rely much more on informal institutions such as rice and shrimp fry/food retailers (who sell on credit), midwives (who often provide free services and medicine on credit), and private moneylenders. These inward-oriented services are small, convenient and adaptable. Terms are flexible, and loans can be repaid in kind, with cash, or through provision of free labor to the lender. Repayment can also be deferred. These are also services with which poor households can

reciprocate when others are in need, and in this way they begin to accumulate and exercise social capital.

Figures 4, 5 and 6 below illustrate how people from different categories of *well-being* ranked various institutions. Again, they show that the rich tend to favor formal institutions, while the poor are more likely to rank informal institutions as important in their lives.

Figure 4. Institutional rankings by Mr. D, a “well-off” man and head of Farmers Association in Long Vinh commune (Duyen Hai)

Score	Institution	Quotes from Mr. D.
100	VBA	<i>They provided me with the capital without which I could not make a living.</i>
100	Farmer’s Association	<i>I participate and I have salary of 240,000.</i>
80	Aquacultural Extension	<i>They helped with technical information about shrimp farming.</i>
80	Commune Health Center	<i>They take care of us if we’re sick.</i>
30	Informal Moneylenders	<i>They give loans to cover shortfalls</i>

Figure 5. Compilation of institutional rankings by “average” people in Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh

Rank	Institution	Quotes from villagers
1	Village head	<i>He is very important. He is involved in deciding who gets loans. He can help you.</i>
2	VBA	<i>The bank has loans. We need capital. So we rely on the bank.</i>
3	Shrimp fry supplier	<i>Our family lacks capital, so we have to buy shrimp fry on credit.</i>
4	Private money lenders	<i>Everybody depends on them.</i>
5	Shrimp food supplier	<i>They also let us buy on credit.</i>
6	Private health practitioners	<i>We go to Mrs. B when someone gets sick. All the time. We buy medicine. We get injections. She also lets you owe her the money for some half a month.</i>
7	Commune PC	<i>That is the government, and they take part in loan approval, so they are important. But they are far from us.</i>
8	Aquacultural extension	<i>I have attended a couple of classes. However, even if you go to class, your shrimp may still die.</i>
9	Women’s Union	<i>There is a women’s union chapter, and they used to give loans, but not for the last 2 years.</i>

A comparison of the rankings of “average” people (above) and “poor” people, (below) shows that the poor are truly the most socially marginalized group—they have little contact with village and commune leaders, and have virtually no way to access the VBA. Those who are average, on the other hand, are able to access these institutions. It is important to note that the poor rank HEPR high on their list, indicating that at the very least, the HEPR program is well-known. Even those who have not actually received HEPR loans recognize the program’s goal of helping the poor.

Figure 6. Compilation of institutional rankings by “poor” people in Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh

Ranking	Institution	Quotes from villagers
1	Relatives	<i>My sister Ba is the most helpful to my family. She lent us some land to work on. We do not have land. Our parents are very important in our lives. When we are out of food, we go there and eat with them.</i>
2	HEPR	<i>A few families have loans from HEPR. And it is low interest. It is meant to help. So let it be ranked 2.</i>
3	Local rice retailers	<i>They let us take rice and owe them the money when we do not have money.</i>
4	Private money lenders	<i>We need them. Everybody owes money to private moneylenders. But they charge us interest, and a lot.</i>
5	Village head	<i>He is the head of the village, and is good to us. But he cannot help us much.</i>
6	VBA	<i>The bank helps people, but our family does not have land, so we cannot borrow.</i>
7	Commune PC	<i>They are the government, so they must be important, but we do not get help from them.</i>
8	Women’s Union	<i>We only know that Mrs.D works for the women’s union, but we do not know who else is involved, and Mrs. D has never asked us to join.</i>
9	Farmers’ Association	<i>We do not know anyone in it, or what it does.</i>

6.1.1 “Social Capital”

Informal networks effectively constitute ‘social capital.’ However, the rich are often better served by these connections and relationships because they can offer favors in return, including information and knowledge, and personal advocacy with community financial institutions or authorities. The poor, on the other hand, can only accrue small amounts of social capital as they do not have the means to readily return favors. They can only hope for a small network of reciprocal arrangements which they may call upon in emergencies.

There was some evidence of desire for social capital by poor farmers in Tra Vinh, which can be seen in the proportion of incomes spent on contributions to social activities in the community such as weddings, funerals and birthday and death anniversary celebrations. For example, in Chau Thanh, up to 50% of incomes can go to such expenses, and there is a quite formal ‘schedule’ of expected contributions that is known to everyone. The poor even borrowed money in order to meet these perceived social obligations, while at the same time they were hesitant to borrow to

invest in other productive activities. A typical range of expenses was:

Celebration	Expected Contribution
<i>Death-days in community:</i>	1 kg sugar or ½ kg MSG
<i>In own household:</i>	500,000 dong/year
<i>Weddings</i>	10,000 - 40,000 VND in Hoa Loi up to 100,000 VND in Thanh My (per person attending)
<i>1st birthday</i>	10,000 VND (per person attending)
<i>Tet</i>	600,000 VND (total expenses for one family)

Participants reported that, on average, a poor family will attend at least 20 of these events each year. This means that without including Tet, at least 1,000,000 VND or between 40-50% of the annual incomes of many is spent on earning social capital.

6.2 Coping Strategies

It became evident during institutional ranking exercises that different people ascribe varying levels of influence to institutions. Some people ranked institutions based on actual impact on their family, while others viewed them more broadly and based their rankings on impact within the community. Even if institutions were ranked based upon impact on the family, rankings could still be drastically different due to the criteria applied.

For example, in one family where both husband and wife were asked to do a Venn diagram, the husband ranked informal moneylenders as extremely important, because his family relied heavily on loans from this source. The wife also confirmed that the family often borrowed from informal lenders, but ranked them quite low because they collect such high interest on the loans and therefore are not primarily concerned with helping (moneylenders typically charge around 10% and as high sometimes as high as 15% per month; in Chau Thanh there were reported cases of 100% interest rates on very short term loans). In this case, the husband ascribed importance of an institution to access, whereas the wife defined it as assistance.

In general, the coping strategies of the poor tended to involve the smaller, more inward-oriented institutions such as relatives and rice retailers, over the more formal and wider social institutions such as the VBA, People's Committees or Women's Union. This is related to ease of access to these various institutions, and there was uniformity between the two sites of Chau Thanh and Duyen Hai.

In both Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh, most poor households found it easy to borrow small amounts from relatives or from private moneylenders. However, large amounts were out of reach because of constraints such as collateral requirements, or, in the case of private moneylenders, a lack of belief that the poor can repay large amounts.

Table 6 on the next page illustrates the range of options for accessing capital, revealing a pattern of small borrowing and continual interactions with neighbors and family for both everyday survival and coping with unexpected crises. The range of

coping strategies also includes ongoing substitution of future capital for inputs on credit, future labor for food, and future labor for cash, especially for minor medical and food emergencies.

TABLE 6. FINANCIAL AND SUBSTITUTION SUPPORT STRATEGIES OF THE POOR ¹¹

Demand or Need	Financial support strategies of the poor	
	in Duyen Hai	in Chau Thanh
Large amount of cash for severe crisis such as ill-health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sell or mortgage assets such as land • borrow from relatives • borrow from private moneylenders (borrow from different sources in order to obtain the amount needed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sell or mortgage assets such as land • borrow from relatives • borrow from private moneylenders • (borrow from different sources in order to obtain the amount needed)
Immediate moderate amount of cash to meet moderate crisis such as ill-health or crop failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • borrow from neighbors and relatives • borrow from private money lenders • sell assets such as land or crops • futures substitution¹² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • borrow from neighbors and relatives • borrow from private money lenders • sell assets such as livestock • <i>send children to live/work in someone else's house</i>
Cash or food to meet seasonal shortfall in wages or food production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sell labor • borrow from neighbors and relatives • borrow from private moneylender • eat less/economize • futures substitution • <i>children drop out of school to work</i> • <i>purchase on credit (food)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sell labor • borrow from neighbors and relatives • borrow from private moneylender • eat less/economize • futures substitution • <i>sell blood to hospital</i>
Cash for regular recurrent expenses such as school fees, production inputs, social obligations & Tet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sell labor • join neighborhood hui (ROSCA) • futures substitution • borrow from relatives and neighbors • <i>purchase shrimp fry and shrimp food on credit</i> • <i>children drop out of school to work</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sell labor • join small ROSCA • futures substitution • borrow from relatives and neighbors
Cash for investment in new opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preferential government lending programs (HEPR, WU, VBP) • borrow from private money lenders • borrow from relatives • <i>purchase shrimp fry and shrimp food on credit</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preferential government lending programs (HEPR, Ethnic Minorities Board) • borrow from private money lenders • borrow from relatives

One coping strategy that is particularly dangerous but quite widely used in Chau Thanh is selling blood. People in Chau Thanh can sell blood to Tra Vinh hospital and earn 150,000 VND per visit, which means that from one visit, a person can earn the equivalent of about 10-15 days of wage labor. Participants said that people go on average of once every three months. This option is not available to Duyen Hai

¹¹ Strategies that were only mentioned in one area are *italicized*.

¹² Where future labor is substituted for rice, future labor for cash, future cash for rice and future rice for cash.

residents, as the hospital in Duyen Hai does not buy blood, and Duyen Hai residents live far from Tra Vinh town.

6.2.1 Ease of Access

Although the poor in Tra Vinh do have a number of networks that they rely upon, some are not easy to access, as they can require a person to have collateral or significant social capital. Thus they must turn to coping strategies such as selling assets, selling labor, pulling children out of school or selling blood, all of which can be harmful and send the poor even deeper into poverty. Table 7 below describes the ease of access to some of these strategies.

TABLE 7. EASE OF ACCESS TO VARYING SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Strategies	Ease of access	
	in Duyen Hai	in Chau Thanh
Sell or mortgage assets such as land	very easy (there is demand for shrimp farming land)	not easy
Borrow large amounts from relatives or helpful neighbors	not easy (varies depending on the financial situation of each family)	not easy (varies depending on the financial situation of each family)
Borrow small amounts from relatives or helpful neighbors	fairly easy	fairly easy
Borrow large amounts from private money lenders	not easy (money lenders do not trust the poor to be able to repay large loans)	not easy (money lenders do not trust the poor to be able to repay large loans)
Borrow small amounts from private money lenders	fairly easy (at very high interest rates, usually around 15%)	fairly easy (at very high interest rates, usually around 15%)
Sell assets (crops in Duyen Hai, livestock in Chau Thanh)	easy (disables the poor from accumulating assets)	easy (disables the poor from accumulating assets)
Futures substitution	easy (traps the borrower)	easy (traps the borrower)
Sell labor	not easy for men (jobs available only 4 months per year, digging and cleaning ponds) fairly easy for women (farming, making la panels)	not easy (not enough jobs around)
Eat less/economize	easy (can be harmful to health)	easy (can be harmful to health)
Children drop out of school to work	easy (but harmful to children's future)	
Send children to live/work in someone else's house		not easy (not enough jobs around)
Sell blood to hospital		easy (but dangerous)
Join neighborhood hui (ROSCA)	fairly easy	not easy (not many small ROSCAs around)
Purchase shrimp fry and shrimp food on credit	fairly easy (there is high competition for business among retailers)	
Purchase rice on credit	fairly easy (rice retailers want to keep business)	
Borrow from preferential government lending programs (HEPR, WU, VBP, Ethnic minorities board)	not easy (requires collateral and connections)	not easy (requires collateral and connections)

Formal sector institutions, loans and trade connections (suppliers of seed, shrimp feed or fry) are generally only sought out by the poor when they attempt to make new income-generating investments. However, since poor households have little material or social collateral to offer lenders or leaders, they often “self-select” themselves out of the formal credit process, fearing that they will not be given a loan.

The poor borrow from private moneylenders as a last resort, because the interest rates are too high for anything other than small scale, emergency loans. Moneylenders are normally wealthier farmers, traders, or retailers who extend credit for rice and other staples. When they have surplus cash, they often lend it out at high rates of interest to the poor.

These two factors - inability to borrow large amounts from formal programs and reliance on small-scale emergency loans from the private lenders - trap the poor into a cycle of small transactions from which they can rarely escape. As one woman in Duyen Hai said, “*The plight of the poor is that they can borrow little, so they work little and they make little.*”

7 HOW DO EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAMS ASSIST THE POOR?

Participants mentioned five categories of institutional programs that assist the poor in Tra Vinh, which includes basic assistance, credit, extension, health, and education services. This section provides an analysis of some of these institutional programs, drawing on data gathered from various PPA exercises where participants discussed and evaluated institutional effectiveness.¹³ Because strong government programs depend heavily on government outreach to the poor, this section also contains a brief discussion on outreach. A number of policy and practice issues arise in this analysis, and specific recommendations are made for improving some of these existing government programs (recommendations are not intended for one specific group or organization; rather, they are general in nature because their implementation requires the collaboration of local government, NGOs working in the area and donors).

7.1 Basic Assistance

Because the region has been victim to some natural disasters in recent years (most notably Typhoon Linda in 1997), some local residents have been given money, food, blankets, mats and mosquito nets. Most participants did not know the actual source of any these relief items—just that they were disseminated at the commune level by the People’s Committee. In addition, some people in Long Vinh commune (Duyen Hai) mentioned free medication supplied by the Red Cross.

7.2 Credit Services

The VBA is the major formal sector credit institution in the rural south and provides 80-90% of all loans to the countryside, representing some 29% of all its lending in 1998.¹⁴ It mainly operates as a commercial lender, but is also responsible for the distribution of large amounts of relief and development funds, which are lent out at reduced interest rates and clearly earmarked for the poor. HEPR funds, House Foundation Funds, VBP lending and the Typhoon Linda relief funds in 1998 were all channeled through the district branches of the VBA.¹⁵

In addition to the VBA, a few other institutions either lend money directly to farmers or provide funding for credit programs in Tra Vinh. Loan funds currently available in Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh include:

- Vietnam Bank for the Poor Funds, made available as part of HEPR programs
- The 120 Job Creation program
- CEMMA funds for ethnic minority people
- Funds for building house foundations in flood-prone areas
- Typhoon Linda relief funds (in the form of loans)
- Funds for restoring production land (after natural disasters)

¹³ See page 6, Research Methodology section.

¹⁴ Gainsborough, Martin. A Study of Banking in Southern Vietnam, with a focus on Tra Vinh Province, Hanoi, Oxfam Great Britain, July 1999.

¹⁵ Pairaudeau, Natasha. Who Wins? Who Loses? Microfinance in Duyen Hai District. Hanoi, Oxfam Great Britain, April 1999.

The sources of credit in Duyen Hai are summarized in the table below.

TABLE 8. CHANGES IN SOURCES OF FORMAL CREDIT IN DUYEN HAI 1995¹⁶-1999¹⁷

Lender	Source of funding	1995 (VND)	Borrowers (h/h)	1999 (VND)	Borrowers (h/h)
VBA	Central Bank	Unclear	N/A	65 bn.	12,500
VBP	Central Bank	1.2 bn	1,200	3 bn	2,415
PCF	Shareholders (90%) Central 10%)	N/A	N/A	4 bn	>1,000
District WU	VBA	2 bn	3,000	N/A	359
	Terres des Hommes Consortium, 120 Job creation Program 327	81 mill N/A	N/A	578 mill N/A	
District Farmers Association	CEMMA } HEPR }	N/A	>1,000	134 mill	119
	120 Job Creation	1.6 mill			
DOLISA	HEPR } CEMMA } GOV land fund }	N/A N/A N/A		1642 bn	>3,000

Almost 20,000 households have taken out loans in 1999, close to 4 times as many as the 5,200 households in 1995. The average loan size has decreased in line with rising numbers of borrowers over the last four years, indicating a trend towards lending to small borrowers.

Although direct lending to rural households has increased dramatically, growth has been curtailed in recent years as a direct result of dangerously high numbers of overdue loans in the south.¹⁸ Additionally, a new government interest rate policy is effectively squeezing bank profit margins to the point where interest rates do not cover the level of risk involved in bank lending. The VBA's response has been to tighten access to loans through strict collateral requirements, and to reduce overheads by reducing mobile banking services.¹⁹ VBA officials claim that any expansion in lending is not possible without a matching commitment to improving the skills of loan officers, who are under-trained and over-worked.²⁰ This reinvestment in human resource development is not possible until the ceiling on interest rates is removed to allow increased profit margins for banks.

¹⁶ Grady, Heather. Ideas and Issues for Gender Planning in Oxfam's Program : Duyen Hai, Tra Vinh, Oxfam Great Britain, 1996, pgs. 9-10.

¹⁷ Pairaudeau, pgs. 23-24.

¹⁸ Gainsborough, p. 8.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ According to the State Bank, the average loan portfolio of a single credit officer in the south is 800 households worth 5 billion VND. (Gainsborough, p.8)

Based on discussions with PPA participants, the research team concluded the following problems with government lending services:

- Unclear policies regarding collateral limits loan accessibility for poor people
- Unclear selection procedures and discretionary powers of local leaders disadvantage the poor
- Subsidized government-financed lending programs are not sustainable because repayment obligations are not enforced

7.2.1 Unclear policies regarding collateral limits loan accessibility for poor people

Many participants said that loans from the VBA (and other banks) are accessible mainly to those who are better off, as loan application procedures are complex and the banks often require borrowers to have collateral. Although official VBA policy states that loans of less than 500,000 VND do not require collateral, 11% of the participants in Chau Thanh and 6% in Duyen Hai said that they were excluded from bank loans because they lacked collateral (for larger amounts, loans are calculated on the basis of land area used as collateral, where 200,000 VND can be borrowed for each cong of land held by the borrower). However, farmers in Chau Thanh reported that in reality those with only 1 or 2 cong of land were unable to borrow at all.

In Duyen Hai, participants said that local leaders often applied an unofficial restriction to those wanting to borrow money for shrimp farming. To borrow over 5 million VND, the applicant needed not only to have land as collateral, but also to provide proof in the form of a receipt from a supplier that the borrower had already purchased at least 10,000 shrimp.

7.2.2 Discretionary powers of leaders and unclear credit selection procedures disadvantage the poor and marginalized

In the research sites, credit funds from all sources are currently dispersed through the VBP, DOLISA and mass organizations, such as the Women's Union and Farmers' Association. Each program provides loan with different terms, using different selection criteria and collection mechanisms, and local village and commune cadres are often charged with administration of all or some of them. Consequently, there is a great deal of confusion about who receives this subsidized lending, and the poor often stated that the power to decide rests solely with local leaders. As a poor farmer in Nha Dua village (Chau Thanh), commented, "*Life here depends on the People's Committee; our lives are better if they are more active.*"

Most participants did not understand where loan funds came from or how they were administered, and people who had received funds before often had no idea *why* they had received a loan. They commented that they were not invited to attend meetings to get information about loans and procedures, but rather, simply nominated by the village leader to 'make an application'; some were successful, some were not. Most participants only knew that their loan came from the 'government' (*nha nuoc*).

In general, poor people felt that loans were often disbursed based on being "connected." In an FGD in Chau Thanh, one participant stated that those who have

social connections with commune leaders are more likely to get loans, even if they have not yet repaid previous loans. Another man in Nha Dua village (Chau Thanh) expressed a similar sentiment- *“People who work in the People’s Committee can borrow money easily because they know the right people.”*

Many poor people felt that richer households were receiving funds meant for the poor. Some participants attributed this to the fact that better off people are more connected. While discussing HEPR loans, a FGD participant in Qui Nong A village (Chau Thanh) recalled, *“There were some meetings and they told us to submit applications, but then only three people received credit. All of these people were not poor at all...they had land and buffalo.”* Similar cases included a very wealthy man in Long Vinh commune (Duyen Hai), whose family owns 40 cong of land and who was given a loan of 5 million VND meant for victims of Typhoon Linda. Poor families were denied these funds on the grounds that they lacked collateral or had existing debt. In another case in Long Toan commune (Duyen Hai), a household ranked ‘average’ in well-being (with 10 cong of land), was able to receive loans from three funds: 4 million VND from the Typhoon Linda Fund, 5 million VND from the House Foundation Funds, and 2 million VND from the Women’s Union.

Households that are physically isolated or socially marginalized suffer the most--they often do not hear of loan programs because they live too far or are not a part of village leaders’ circles. In Chau Thanh, one respondent said, *“I heard that people can borrow money, but I don’t know how to borrow...I don’t know who to ask.”*

7.2.3 Subsidized government-financed lending programs are not sustainable because repayment obligations are not enforced

An important objective of state lending programs is to provide low cost finance to the rural poor as an alternative to high interest loans of moneylenders, which trap the poor in poverty. However, precisely because the interest rates on these loans were so low, repaying them is often a low priority—borrowers are more likely to repay loans taken from informal lenders first, since the interest rate on them were much higher. In addition, since those who default on loans are not punished in any way (other than not being allowed to take out additional government loans), there is little incentive for borrowers to repay. In the long run, this is dangerous to the sustainability of the loan program.

HEPR lending, for instance, has not fared well in Long Toan commune (Duyen Hai), where Giong Gieng village was a pilot site. Many households who borrowed some years ago have still not repaid loans because of unsuccessful shrimp seasons. Of the 12 families in Ben Chuoi village in the same commune (Duyen Hai) who borrowed HEPR loans, 4 families have left the area without repaying their loans, 4 more have repaid the loan by taking out another government loan, and the last 4 have defaulted. This leaves a putative success rate of 0%.

Tien Chua syndrome: ‘State money is free money’

Several respondents in Duyen Hai said they had failed to repay loans not because they were unable to, but because it was more beneficial to keep the money and continue paying low interest rates than to return it and have to borrow from a private moneylender. Often no interest had even been collected. One man in Xom Chua said, “If they ask me to repay it, (HEPR loan) I will. But nobody has asked, and it’s better for me not to.”

It appears that people are less likely to take repayment obligations seriously when they perceive the loan selection process as being based on friendship with local authorities or on blind luck. If borrowers are randomly selected, receive no visits from bank staff, and are expected to repay money in installments to a local level cadre who may be a social acquaintance, then many will not feel pressured to repay.

Changes over time – credit services in 1995 and 1999 in Duyen Hai

In Duyen Hai district, there is no doubt that the **availability** of funds to the poor has increased dramatically in both range and amount over the past 5 years. But in terms of **access**, some of the same issues identified as obstacles in a 1995 report have not yet been resolved. The 1995 report prepared by Oxfam (UKI)²¹ identified a series of problems related to access to credit by the poorest households. Here they are compared with current findings from the PPA survey.²²

Access: In 1995, villagers reported that they were not taught how to access formal sources of credit, and consequently were unable to find out how to borrow. This was also the case in 1999. As in the earlier survey, villagers said that they had heard of government credit programs but did not know how to access them, despite the increased amount of funds available.

Poor-focused: Five years ago some households did not borrow because they were afraid they could not repay loans. The lending agencies themselves also did not lend to the poor because they were afraid that the poor could not repay. In 1999, this situation has changed somewhat. First, there is a hint that the advent of more specifically poverty-oriented loan funds has created a trend towards more borrowing by the poor, but unfortunately had led to borrowing with less concern about the consequences of default. The second result of this is that the lending agencies themselves are applying increasingly stringent selection criteria and focusing on the 'viable, working poor' in order to ensure repayment and curtail outstanding debts. Thus, the very poorest are still not reached.

Collateral: Another concern which arose 5 years ago, and is still present today, is the need for more flexible collateral requirements. In 1999, this problem appears to be more complex than four years ago. Land has become the preferred form of collateral by lending agencies, which can result in mortgaged land being forfeited by poor households who cannot repay debt. Even those landless households with several sources of employment are unable to borrow from some sources, even though they may have valuable assets such as boats or other equipment. A new form of collateral, where borrowers must provide written proof of purchase of shrimp before loans are approved, has also appeared recently.

Loan uses: In 1995 there were 2 major areas of concern around the issue of unprofitable use of loans: loans were being used to repay existing debts, and investments in productive activities were not taking place. Five years on, the trend seems to be to use group borrowing mechanisms and peer pressure to recover existing debts, as an alternative to 'transferring debt.' However, examples of chronic debt resulting from ill-designed programs and extension support still exist.

Lessons learned from changes in the last four years:

More credit programs and more money are available in general
Access to credit by the poor remains a problem
Few savings mechanisms exist
Repayment rates continue to be poor
Lending institutions are not designed to suit the needs of the poor
Credit institutions are tightening selection criteria
The Women's Union has the best record for reaching the poorest

Recommendations to improve credit services

- **Subsidies do not work.** It is clear that the subsidized interest rates currently offered by the VBA and other HEPR lending programs serve as a disincentive for borrowers to repay on time, especially when they borrow from informal moneylenders at interest rates of up to 15%. Thus, interest rate caps should be

²¹ Hopkins, Susannah, The Situation of Poor People in Long Vinh and Long Khanh Communes in Duyen Hai District, Oxfam GB, June-July, 1995.

²² Pairaudeau, 1999.

removed in order to create incentives for banks to lend money. In addition, banks (and bank staff) should be given incentives to lend to remote areas.

- Poor farmers are willing to take out loans at usuriously high interest rates, indicating a clear need for *more sources of credit*. Mass organizations and semi-formal organizations should be encouraged to lend money, again, without interest caps. The formation of People's Credit Funds (PCFs) should be encouraged in Tra Vinh. These loan funds can meet the needs of people who require smaller loans for shorter periods of time.
- *Loans amounts and terms need to be appropriate to different kinds of production.* Farmers in Chau Thanh who want to grow fruit trees might need a relatively small loan but a longer loan term, while shrimp farmers in Duyen Hai might need larger loan amounts for shorter periods of time. Loans should be coordinated with production schedules (more loans should be made available at the start of farming season) and should be coupled with extension services.
- *Savings should be encouraged as part of loan programs.* It is clear that it is very difficult for most people in Tra Vinh to accumulate savings. Promoting a savings component to loans not only encourages people to get into the habit of saving, but also builds loan funds, making more money available for farmers to borrow.

7.3 Extension services

In both research sites, the income-generation ability of poor people was hindered by the lack of strong extension services. In Duyen Hai, shrimp farming courses were either inaccessible or too advanced for poor farmers, and in Chau Thanh, farmers spoke of going to courses where they understood very little.

Participants in both communes in Duyen Hai acknowledged that the district extension center does hold shrimp farming courses for farmers. Accessibility to the courses, however, is a problem for poor farmers—many participants said that better off men were more likely to be invited to attend classes (women were almost completely excluded). Out of five household participants who said they had attended a shrimp farming course in Long Toan (the better-off commune in Duyen Hai), two were wealthy, two were average and only one was poor. In Long Vinh, the poorer commune, only 2 household participants mentioned attending a shrimp farming course, and of those, one was poor and one was well-off. In addition, although local people said that aquacultural extension officers were often seen in the village at the beginning of the shrimp-raising season (around Tet), there was no evidence that the timing of HEPR loans was coordinated with seasonal schedules, or that extension officers were available for recipients of these loans.

Even those who were invited to extension trainings encountered other problems. The shrimp farming courses offered by the district aquacultural extension center are geared towards commercial shrimp farming or at least farming on a larger scale. Thus, the courses are not suited to small farmers with limited education, limited landholdings, and lack of resources. Moreover, instruction materials are technically complex and require a high level of literacy in the Kinh language.

Lack of access to adequate extension services also affected livelihoods in raising livestock (pigs, ducks and chickens) and growing fruit trees. A poor farmer who had attended courses in Nha Dua village (Chau Thanh) commented about agricultural extension training, “*they haven’t taught us anything about technology--we have to find out for ourselves from the newspaper or radio, from friends or by watching other people who work effectively.*”

Poor extension services can have serious economic impacts on marginalized households. One focus group participant in Giong Gieng (Duyen Hai) lamented, “*One of my pigs was sick, having piglets, and I called the vet. He said my house was too hard to get to because he had to cross the river. I even brought a boat out to get him, but he didn’t come and my pig died.*”

Recommendations to improve extension services

- ***Create incentives to increase the willingness of extension staff to work in or travel to remote areas.*** Poor households often live in inaccessible areas, far from roads that become impassable anyway during the wet season. Extension workers not only lack means of transport, but it is also difficult for them to find the time to make overnight trips to remote areas. Salary bonuses, time off or other incentives need to be offered to encourage workers to travel to remote areas.
- ***Increase salaries and training.*** Often, extension workers are also part-time farmers because their government salaries are not sufficient to support their families, and thus workers are forced to seek other ways to generate income. Extension workers also need to be given the opportunity to attend training courses on a regular basis in order to keep their knowledge and skills up to date.
- ***Develop extension programs and materials that are appropriate for the local community.*** Extension materials need to teach methods that are feasible given the economic situations of local people (e.g. shrimp farming materials need to be geared towards small farmers). The language level needs to be appropriate for people with low educational levels, and need to be developed in Khmer for people who do not have a strong command of the Kinh language. Courses need to be accessible for anyone who is interested in learning, and village leaders and extension workers need to increase efforts to ensure that anyone who wants to attend is able to.

7.4 Health Services

“Poor people cannot improve their status because they live day by day, and if they get sick then they are in trouble because they have to borrow money and pay interest.”

- poor woman in Xom Chua village (Duyen Hai)

7.4.1 Basic Health Services

Researchers found significant discrepancies between the opinions of local cadres and villagers in terms of the quality of health services. Commune and village cadres spoke positively about several recent health extension campaigns, in particular anti-malaria and dengue fever campaigns. They also reported that immunization programs for children have reached 100% of children in Chau Thanh and 97% of those in Duyen Hai, and that in general, villagers sought the services of the local health centers more often than that of private practitioners. Moreover, they reported that consultations, and some medicines, are free for the poor.²³

Local people, on the other hand, said that health services did not have a significant role in the communities. In Thanh My commune (Chau Thanh), health services are not available, and local people must go to the district or province town for treatment. For those who live in on the outskirts of the commune, the distance is particularly prohibitive. In other research sites, commune health centers exist, but generally are only used in emergency cases as their services are too expensive (even though services are supposed to be free, participants reported “hidden costs,” which include transportation, lost wages and nominal consultation fees charged by staff). Participants also said that free medicines were almost never in stock at the health centers. Thus, people simply buy medicine from local shopkeepers or seek advice from private practitioners or midwives, who are less expensive and sometimes will allow payment to be deferred.

7.4.2 Reproductive Health and Family Planning Services

Although several respondents in Duyen Hai identified having too many children as one factor contributing to their poverty, very few participants in either site knew much about family planning and most did not use contraceptives. It was reported by local leaders that contraceptive methods such as the IUD, condoms and oral contraceptives are free, but team members met only one woman, from a well-off household in Gieng Gieng village (Duyen Hai), who said she receive free pills from the Women’s Union (not all female participants were actually asked questions about contraceptive methods by researchers, so this data is probably skewed). Other participants said that they had to pay for condoms and IUDs at the commune health center, and were reluctant to use them because of the cost and the inconvenience of going there.²⁴

In Duyen Hai, very few women said they had received pre-natal care during pregnancy, mainly because they did not have any problems during the pregnancy, and they considered routine checkups to be an unnecessary expense. Many women gave

²³ Noij, pgs. 15, 29, 33.

²⁴ Researchers did not obtain information about the costs of contraceptive methods.

birth at home because midwives charge very little or are willing to perform delivery services as a favor, taking money only to pay for medication. Some participants estimated that 50% of women give birth at home and 50% give birth either at the commune health center or hospital.

Recommendations to improve health services

- ***Subsidize health, not credit.*** Health services at the local level are extremely inadequate, mainly because not enough financial resources are being put into improving them. One way to generate the necessary funds to improve them would be to stop subsidizing credit (as it does not work anyway) and charge commercial interest rates, and investing that subsidy into health services. The money can go a long way in buying new equipment to upgrade facilities, providing additional training for staff, creating mobile health units, etc. Explore the possibility of this subsidy going towards a health insurance system for the poor.
- ***Provide incentives for health workers willing to work in remote areas.*** This recommendation is similar to the one for extension workers. Pay higher salaries or create better work conditions for health practitioners who are willing to work in remote areas. Provide incentives (e.g. scholarships) for local students to study medicine and then come back to the area to work.
- ***Implement a reproductive health/family planning program.*** Currently there is no program of this sort in the study sites, other than the family planning motivators from the NCPFP government system (and they seem to be ineffective). This is one area in which an NGO who works in reproductive health can make a significant contribution. The program design should be appropriate for the local community (e.g. materials should be appropriate for those who have low levels of education, who are illiterate, or who speak only Khmer). It should also contain a strong component to increase mentaking responsibility for family planning.

7.5 Education Services

Local schools were generally ranked somewhere in the middle by participants during institutional ranking exercises. Primary schools are physically accessible in all research sites, and actual costs for primary education are not high. Although the information provided by participants was not exact, researchers concluded that schools do not charge a fee, but that students generally pay a school maintenance contribution and pay for their books.²⁵ Participants reported, however, that in Chau Thanh these contributions and book costs are not compulsory for poor students, and in Duyen Hai, they are waived for Khmer children.

Even under these conditions, in Chau Thanh school contribution costs and other costs such as books and clothing were often cited as a deterrent for families from sending their children to school. Children who do not make contributions are often pressured by their teachers. One girl in Hoa Loi commune (Chau Thanh) said, “*the school always asks for money, and we have no money, so I want to drop out.*” This sentiment was echoed by many other poor households.

²⁵ It was confirmed that by law, there are no primary school fees.

In Duyen Hai, almost none of the children of poor families attended school past grade 9, or lower secondary school, and most did not go beyond grade 5 (primary school). It was confirmed that parents tend to prioritize particular children to attend school or sometimes allow each child to attend school for only a few years. It seemed, however, that contrary to previous findings by Oxfam GB, it was not the *high costs* of primary education (school fees are waived), but the *opportunity costs* of children working that caused them to leave school early—children often left school to work and contribute to the family income.²⁶

Participants had very little to say about the quality of the schools and teaching. In Thanh My commune (Chau Thanh), some people expressed concern over the location and physical state of the local school. In Duyen Hai, where Oxfam GB has built a number of satellite schools, some participants knew that schools had been built with foreign assistance (*giup do cua nuoc ngoai*), but did not know specific details.

Recommendations to improve education services

- ***Subsidize education, not credit.*** This recommendation is similar to the one regarding subsidizing health rather than credit. Credit should be provided at commercial interest rates, and the money earmarked to subsidize credit should be invested in education. The money could be used for improving existing and building new schools (especially satellite schools in remote areas), purchasing books and equipment for classrooms, raising salaries for teachers, providing scholarships to encourage students to become teachers, etc. Local students (Khmer students in particular) should be encouraged to become teachers.
- ***Poor and Khmer students need to be targeted for retention.*** Schools can use MOLISA indicators of poverty to identify households to be targeted for free tuition, textbooks and exemption from other related fees. This targeting should go beyond primary education, to encourage poor students to pursue secondary and higher education. Monitoring needs to be undertaken to determine whether students who are targeted stay in school. There could be incentive structures to award teachers and other school officials who improve retention.
- ***Create incentives to encourage teachers to work in remote areas.*** Again, this is similar to the recommendation in health and extension sections. Provide higher salaries, better working condition, and other incentives to teachers who work in remote areas.

²⁶ Researchers were unable to obtain data on when fee waivers began. If this was recent, it helps explain the apparent shift in reasoning regarding why children stop attending school. It was also suggested by one researcher that in the few years prior to 1997 (when the most detailed Oxfam GB study was done), shrimp farming was quite unsuccessful in Duyen Hai and thus income levels were at a low. This could also have contributed to parents feeling that education costs were too high to send children to school.

7.6 Government Outreach to the Poor

One of the most significant issues raised by the poor throughout this PPA is the lack of participation on the part of poor people in most aspects of the programs and strategies meant to support them.

7.6.1 Poor people lack voice in community decisions

The poor said repeatedly they were not invited to community, and had no way of finding out what services were available or how to gain access to them. In Giong Gieng village (Duyen Hai), one woman said that her children missed out on free childhood vaccinations because local cadres were not dedicated to reaching out to the villagers. *“They sent someone out to tell me once, but I was not home at the time. No one ever came back.”* Another woman the same village said, *“I have lived here for 10 years and have never been called to a meeting of any kind.”*

Some participants perceived that local cadres only contacted villagers when they expected something from them. One woman who lives on the outskirts of Kinh Dao village (Duyen Hai) said, *“because I live so far away they are lazy. They only contact us when they want us to work for the government, digging a canal, digging dirt.”* This sentiment was echoed in Chau Thanh by an FGD participant: *“They don’t invite me to meetings, but they invite me to public works.”*

Even when villagers are invited to community meetings, it is usually to inform them about decisions that have already been made by local leaders, not to consult villagers for their opinions and ideas. Before the session started, one man who came to the FGD in Giong Gieng village (Duyen Hai) said, *“I am glad I was invited to a meeting today, but do we get to talk? Usually we do not get to talk, we just come and listen to them talk.”* In Chau Thanh, another FGD participant said, *“they [village leaders] talk a lot, so I cannot remember what they said in the meeting.”*

In Kinh Dao village (Duyen Hai) farmers were not consulted when irrigation work, meant to benefit shrimp farmers in the same village, cut through farmland, rendering much of it useless. Farmers claimed they were not forewarned; rather, they were invited to attend a meeting and informed that the decision had already been made. Since land use certificates have not yet been issued in this village, no compensation will be paid for lost land, as local farmers have no legal claim to it.

Women who attended an FGD in Kinh Dao village (Duyen Hai) said that they felt vulnerable to government decisions, and had no say in community issues. Mrs. D, whose family lost 4 cong of land said, *“What can I say? I did not complain about losing the land because they are the government and I am a citizen and we don’t dare stir things up or challenge anyone.”*

A consultative process?

At one time Mr. D owned 30 cong of land in Kinh Dao village (Duyen Hai). A few years ago he lost 12 cong when a road was dug through the commune. Last year he lost another 13 cong due to the digging of the irrigation canal. This land was not lying idle – his family had dug ponds and invested in shrimp and crab that he was raising at the time. They lost everything.

He knows that nobody who lost land due to this project will be compensated, and does not want special treatment. However, he did feel that he should be compensated for his investments in digging the ponds and buying inputs for the crops. He was never invited to any meeting or discussion to be informed, and though he has submitted a claim to local officials, has had no response beyond being told to wait. *“I know the government built the canal to help the citizens, but they should at least have taken into account the people who would lose their land.”*

When questioned by researchers, some local cadres said they were aware that they were not effectively reaching the poor, but appeared to feel powerless to do more. It was evident that some of the local leaders were extremely hard-working and dedicated, but were limited by inadequate operating budgets, lack of time, and in some cases, lack of appropriate skills.

A good cadre

Mr. N is the head of one village in Duyen Hai, and is a special leader. He is a Kinh man living in a predominantly Khmer village, and has won the hearts of many villagers, Kinh and Khmer alike, who told us, *“we just love him here.”* He was described as a pleasant, soft-spoken person whom the villagers often seek for help. He works hard. He tries to help people solve their problems. He is also very helpful in the process of applying for loans.

His village has meetings much more frequently than the other villages we visited, where people complained about not being able to have meetings at all and not having the chance to talk. One man in Mr. N’s village actually complained about having meetings so often, but said that it was good to have information. These meetings give people the power to raise their voices in matters related to their lives. One example relates to the government plan to dig a canal through this village. At the time of research, the plan was being stalled, due to villagers’ disagreement over potential land loss. Negotiations are still underway, and villagers say the canal should be dug, but a reasonable scheme of loss sharing or compensation should be worked out first. Another village in the same commune, on the other hand, had no discussion the local people when a canal was dug through their land. The people there feel they have no voice when it comes to government decisions.

7.6.2 Poverty is defined by the state, not by the poor

Government measures of poverty are broadly based on income from and expenditure on rice. The poor, however, define poverty using a number criteria, not just rice consumption. During the PPA, none of the households in Chau Thanh or Duyen Hai used the MOLISA criteria of 90,000 VND/person/month as an indicator of poverty.

When farmers applied their own poverty criteria,²⁷ in Nha Dua village (Chau Thanh) they identified 39 poor and very poor households compared to only 20 identified using MOLISA's poverty criteria. In Phu Tho village (Chau Thanh) farmers identified 25 poor households using their own criteria, compared to local government figures defining only 14 households as poor.

Government agencies charged with targeting of services to the poor may be underestimating the numbers of people in need, leading to inadequate supplies of material and financial supports. Underestimating these numbers compromises the planning of effective health and market infrastructure, agricultural and aquacultural extension, electricity, irrigation and domestic water even before tackling the special needs of the poor.

In addition, MOLISA data collection is based on structured questionnaires seeking information on household income and assets. However, an analysis of what people *own* may not reveal much about what people do not have, what they want and what they need. More importantly, it does not tell planners about what strategies farmers are employing to pull themselves out of poverty, and what services are needed to support those strategies. Finally, it does not enable planners and policy makers to understand the causes of poverty in order to be able to provide critical support from the national level.

Recommendation for improving the participation of poor people

- ***Use this PPA as a starting point to base continued dialogue with poor people.***
Cadres who participated in this study had basic training in participatory methods. These skills should be developed on a regular basis, and the cadres should be encouraged to solicit the ideas and views of poor people before making decisions that affect the community at large. Poor people should be included in the design, implementation and follow-up of programs designed to assist them.

²⁷ See Table 2 (p. 14) for indicators of poverty as defined by the poor during this PPA.

8 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

This final section includes the ideas of the writers of this report. While most of the ideas are based on the data gathered from the PPA, they are also informed and influenced by our cumulative knowledge and experience related to past work in Tra Vinh.

8.1 Trends

Most people in Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh are better off than they were ten years ago. They have higher incomes, more savings, better nutrition and health, more government services, and more of their children are attending school (and staying there longer). Even when remarking upon their personal problems, most respondents strongly confirmed these trends. In addition, it appears that the government's efforts to target poor people (through HEPR programs and other services) have had some success.

In addition, most people in Tra Vinh expect life to continue to get better. People are diversifying and expanding their investment strategies through land purchases, investments in livestock, or other new endeavors, including HYV rice, duck raising, or aquaculture. With widespread (though not universal) primary education, the current generation of children will have higher degrees of literacy than their parents' generation. In turn, this generation will have better skills and knowledge,²⁸ enabling them to apply new technologies, or to find work in the nascent labor-intensive manufacturing or services industries in the Mekong Delta. In other words, there is a reasonable chance that a significant percentage of people in Tra Vinh are on the path towards pulling themselves out of exclusive dependence on subsistence-level, agriculture-intensive livelihoods.

However, it appears that there is a group of people (perhaps the bottom 20% in each district) who are the *static poor*, trapped in a type of poverty that will be difficult to reverse. Many of these "static poor" are landless, and it appears that returns to selling wage labor (the only viable income generating activity available) are so low that it is very difficult to save enough to purchase assets, such as land. Compounding this problem, most of these people are also in debt to both government lending programs and/or private moneylenders. If they default on a government debt, they are not eligible for a new loan, and if they cannot repay private moneylenders, they still must repay interest—some families have paid much more cumulative interest than they originally borrowed in loan principal.

The *static poor* are not demonstrating improvements in education, health, or income levels. On the contrary, the lack of a viable safety net, combined with cash incomes that are insufficient for accumulation of savings or assets (or even paying school fees, in many cases) implies that this new class of people will have limited choices and opportunities in the future.

Increased socio-economic differentiation is visible throughout the two districts as asset markets become more flexible and as successful farmers begin to benefit from larger-scale production and diversification. Differentiation is strongly (though not exclusively) associated with landlessness and land agglomeration. Many farmers attempt more lucrative (but often riskier) income generating activities. Those with skills, capital, and luck can generate

²⁸ Based on Oxfam GB's ongoing work with the Department of Education and with individual schools. For specific information on enrolment rates, see Nachuk and Fancy, The Way to School in Duyen Hai, Oxfam GB, Hanoi 1997.

significant surpluses, and can then buy more land, diversify production, build up assets to protect against economic shocks, and hire laborers to help them.

Yet, for those who fail, there are often no second chances. They are saddled with debt, and as a last resort, must sell their land to repay these debts. At this point, they are in danger of becoming the *static poor*. Current government services, which focus on providing small loans (but include other types of assistance as well) to the poor appear to be of limited help; many people who took the “first round” of HEPR-type loans in the early 1990s have defaulted because they lacked skills, were unlucky, or did not take repayment seriously. As a result, local cadres are less willing to extend loans to the same families or individuals again, fearing that people who have previously defaulted will likely do so again.

Provision of another loan to a *static poor* family will probably fail if the loan is made in isolation—the static poor do not, in most cases, have the land, labor skills (which in turn are constrained by low education and bad health) or additional cash to make an investment succeed, and lift them out of poverty. The fact that so few landless people have been able to purchase land or accumulate assets is powerful evidence supporting this finding.

It is said that it costs the most to reach the poorest, and local governments in Tra Vinh probably do not have the resources to do so at this time. Researchers found that local cadres feel that since they cannot help everybody, they would help those people who are most likely and able to benefit from assistance, as they do not have the time, funds, or incentives to assist the whole population. Since the poorest are the most difficult people to assist (the isolated, the poorly educated, the Khmer), they probably receive fewer government services, overall, than do the rich. The rich know local cadres, know the services available, and know how to use these services (education, credit, and health) most effectively.

Many cadres spoke of their duty (*nhiem vu*) to assist the local population. There is clearly a strong expectation on the part of leaders, and a strong ethic instilled within the government system, to follow orders and fulfill local plans. However, local cadres are poorly paid, and have few material incentives to work harder. Feedback loops from local people to cadres (and then back again) are also poorly developed, meaning that cadres do not always know how their work is perceived by local people, nor do they receive many suggestions regarding how to improve the quality and outreach of the services they provide.

Local cadres are often part-time farmers because their incomes are so low that they cannot survive by depending upon their government salaries. They must engage in a range of activities to increase their monthly incomes. Normal strategies include farming, working a second job, or making extra money from an official function (for example-- selling seeds or fertilizer, or tutoring students).

There is no bonus system to encourage them to work harder and achieve targets set by the government. There is a strong difference between the public discourse of “public duty,” and the private discourse of “how can I survive on this salary?” However, this is not only a salary issue. Advancement through the ranks depends upon many criteria, and as yet, there appears to be no system of competitive examination to employ people in the civil service, and no clear criteria for advancement.

At the same time, there appears to be no consistent system of sanctions to punish cadres who do not meet expectations/targets set out for them. The result is confusing—cadres have few

incentives to work harder, but also relatively little concern that they will be replaced if they do not meet targets set out for them. Responsibility for all HEPR programs ultimately rests with the provincial People's Committee, and they are directly responsible to the Prime Minister's office. In other words, responsibility for outcomes are vague enough that individual cadres may not see themselves as having any personal connection or responsibility for contributing to these outcomes. Many cadres spoke in terms of process, "we do the best we can with limited resources," but few expressed a strong sense of personal responsibility for specific results in his/her area of responsibility.

8.2 What was not mentioned

Given the strong connection between economic growth and poverty alleviation, it was notable that very few people mentioned off-farm employment in factories as a viable income generating option. Vietnam has not yet experienced the boom in off-farm employment that many other SE Asian countries have in the past 30 years. As a result, most people in Tra Vinh have three viable options: farming, household enterprises, or selling labor. The small-scale manufacturing and services sector has not yet taken off (outside a few big cities).

However, given the trends we have outlined above, the one clearest method of avoiding the dispossession of a significant minority of the population would be the development of widespread labor-intensive sectors. Tra Vinh should be well positioned for this type of growth, for several reasons:

- It is located in southern Vietnam, where small-scale private enterprises are growing fastest.
- It has good river transport (for moving manufactured goods).
- The People's Committee of Tra Vinh has a strong stated commitment to attracting investment (though it will be a new and challenging task for them to build the private, off-farm sector into a significant economic force).
- There is a large pool of unemployed or under-employed people.

Yet development of labor-intensive sectors has not occurred, and it is unclear exactly why this is so.

Finally, few people mentioned the possibilities of either: a) using existing resources more efficiently, or b) generating rapid economic growth, which would lead to an increase in jobs, tax revenues, and services.

We see scope for doing the same work more efficiently than it is currently done. Improved management of resources, coordination, and planning could yield more efficient services for the population, as well as more benefits for local cadres charged with implementing these services. In addition, regular evaluations of outcomes will ensure more regular feedback to both decision-makers and implementers. Civil service reform was not mentioned in the PPA, but there are almost certainly significant benefits to be gained from: a) improved recruitment procedures, b) fewer, but better-qualified, officials, c) clear incentives/sanctions for cadres, d) clear expectations of good performance, and e) clearer feedback mechanisms.

Generating economic growth would help address many of the issues raised in this report. More jobs and tax revenues would both provide more income generating opportunities and more tax revenues. There has never been significant off-farm employment in Tra Vinh, and

though many people would like to see this, few believe it will come about in the near future. However, viewed in the perspective of a rapid increase of household-level and micro-enterprises in HCM City (and selected Mekong Delta provinces), this possibility needs to be taken seriously, and provincial leaders need to better understand how they can create an environment conducive to both improved short-term poverty alleviation AND longer-term economic growth.

9 APPENDICES

9.1 Appendix 1. Maps of research sites

9.2 Appendix 2. Description of research communes and villages²⁹

CHAU THANH DISTRICT

Thanh My Commune

Created in 1998, Thanh My commune, reportedly the wealthiest commune in Chau Thanh district, is located approximately 15km south of Tra Vinh Town. It has a land area of 1,989 ha. Out of a total number of 1,467 households, 1,453 are Kinh. The 14 ethnic Khmer households are located throughout the seven villages in the commune.

Population Statistics of Thanh My Commune

Ethnicity	Men	Women	Total	# of Households
Kinh	3744	4199	7943	1453
Khmer	47	37	84	14
Total	3791	4236	8027	1467

Among 183 poor households in Thanh My, 111 are landless and sell labor, raise livestock (ducks and pigs) and cultivate fish. 20 more landless households are classified as better off as they have stable incomes from making and selling noodles, and involvement in carpentry and rice paper production. In the wealthier areas vegetables and fruit trees are grown such as sapodilla, longan and more recently coconut which is sold for processing and export to Thailand.³⁰

Income from migrant labor supplements agriculture. This usually takes place between the harvest and new planting seasons in February and March. Target areas for migration include Dong Thap province and the ports of Vung Tau and Ca Mau. More locally, men often go to Long Hai to borrow fishing boats. Some have gone to buy cheap land in a New Economic Zone in Dong Thap province, and some leave for coffee plantations. Those who buy new lands usually keep their fields in the commune. Migrants will sometimes mortgage their land before leaving and reclaim it when they return. While there are no reliable statistics about labor migration, an estimated 120 - 130 people leave the commune for a few months a year. However, at the time of the research around 221 people were thought to be away. There was no explanation to account for this discrepancy in the figures, and migration is hard to monitor, as few people register their movements.

In Thanh My commune, Phu Tho and Nha Dua villages were selected as the relatively rich and poor research sites, respectively.

Hoa Loi Commune

Located 5km away from Tra Vinh town, Hoa Loi commune is the poorest in the district with high numbers of landless people and about 50% ethnic Khmer according to commune statistics. Noij's report puts the percentage of Khmer at 66.2% and overall population at

²⁹ Commune descriptions were taken from the two site reports from Duyen Hai and Chau Thanh. The reports had different authors, which accounts for the difference in the way communes were described and statistics were presented.

³⁰ Noij, Frank. Participatory Poverty Assessment, Secondary Data, Oxfam GB, Tra Vinh, April 1999.

8,667 people. Within the commune there are 4 Kinh and Khmer villages and 4 predominantly Khmer villages.

Population Statistics of Hoa Loi Commune

	Men	Women	Population	Households	Landless
Kinh	1329	1548	2877	590	157
Khmer	2650	3087	5737	1178	293
TOTAL	3797	4635	8614	1768	450

For our research, Qui Nong A and Da Hoa Nam villages were selected as the relatively rich and poor villages, respectively.

DUYEN HAI DISTRICT

Long Toan commune

Long Toan commune is a relatively wealthy commune in Duyen Hai district. It is located around the urbanized center of Duyen Hai district Headquarters, and thus does not have a physical center other than district headquarters. Because of its location, it has easy access to transportation routes.

The total number of households in Long Toan commune is 1591 with a total population of 8774 (average household size of 4.3) of which 4,444 are male and 4,330 are female.³¹ The large majority (98%) of the population is Kinh, and the remaining 2% is Khmer.³² About 9% of the households are considered “poor” and 7% are considered “very poor.”

The commune is comprised of 4976 ha of land. The three main types of land usage are aquaculture/shrimp farming (3491 ha), natural forest (751 ha) and agricultural (216 ha). According to commune head Mr. Ba Hong, over 90% of households participate in shrimp farming. Annual income per capita in 1998 was 300 USD.

There are a total of 12 villages in Long Toan commune. For this research, Ben Chuoi and Giong Gieng were chosen as a relatively wealthy and the poorest villages, respectively. General information about the population of the two research sites in Long Toan commune includes.³³

Population Statistics of Long Toan commune

Village	# of hamlets	# of persons	# of HH	# of Kinh HH	# of Khmer HH	# of landless HH	# of female-headed HH	Area of Land
Ben Chuoi (wealthy village)	5	522	151	148	3	17	6	63.2 ha
Giong Gieng (poor village)	3	448	110	108	2	40	10	N/A

Long Vinh commune

Long Vinh is one of the poorest communes in Duyen Hai. It is located on the western side of the district, and its center is approximately 20 km from the district center. It is physically isolated from the center of the district. The road that leads to the commune from Duyen Hai town is made of dirt, and one section is particularly difficult to navigate during the rainy season. Products to and from the commune are transported mainly by boat, as it is hard for trucks to reach the commune, particularly in bad weather.

The total number of households in Long Vinh is 2,063, with a total population of 10,493 (average household size is 5.1). There are 4,827 males and 5,666 females. The commune has

³¹ These numbers were provided during the team’s initial meeting Mr. Ba Hong, commune head and other leaders.

³² “Kinh” includes ethnic Chinese, many of whom have lived in the area for several generations. The numbers here are different compared to the commune’s annual report—according to the report, Kinh are 92% of the population and Khmer are 8%.

³³ Information about individual villages gathered from interviews with village leaders.

a significant Khmer population (about 20%). About 45% of the households are considered “poor” and 3% are considered “very poor.”

Long Vinh is comprised of 6,028 ha of land, much of which has become excessively salinated and is therefore unsuitable for rice farming. The three main types of land usage are aquaculture/ shrimp farming (1572 ha), cultivated forest/growing palm leaves (1085 ha) and natural forest (1453 ha).

There are 195 landless households, of which 125 are Kinh and 70 are Khmer. There are 10 villages in Long Vinh commune. For this research, Kinh Dao and Xom Chua were chosen as the relatively wealthy and poorest villages, respectively.

Population Statistics of Long Vinh commune

Village	# of hamlets	# of persons	# of HH	# of Kinh HH	# of Khmer HH	# of landless HH	# of female-headed HH	Area of Land
Kinh Dao (wealthy village)	6	N/A	305	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Xom Chua (poor village)	4	1229	237	79	158	N/A	N/A	480 ha