

Vietnamese Farmers' Organisations

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Summary: The article presents results from a survey of Vietnamese Farmers' Organisations. This covered both official and private bodies, and so permits comparison between various Party-sponsored cooperatives and other organisations. The sample covered provinces in the north, centre and south of the country, and generated a database with information from interviews with 1,800 households. This was complemented by extensive qualitative work, both through interviews and focus groups.

Orthodox Leninist collectivisation occurred in north Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and, after Reunification in 1975-76, in the south. Successful in south-central Vietnam in the late 1970s, cooperatives were never firmly established in the Mekong delta. After partial reforms in 1981, 1988 saw more far-reaching measures widely labelled 'decollectivisation'. However, by the late 1990s many cooperatives remained. Passage of the Cooperative Law in 1996, which inter alia introduced 'new-style' cooperatives as a vehicle for Party-sponsored rural development as well as requiring all cooperatives to operate under it, was widely ignored.

The research shows that regional differences remain considerable. In the south, farmers' organisations reflect a neo-institutional economic logic, with forms reflecting varying issues, such as those to do with market failure in a technical sense. In the centre, whilst official forms are largely de rigueur they are managed with a high officially advocated degree of 'managed democracy'. In the north, complex political manoeuvres use the shells of formal structures as a theatre for conflict and negotiation, within which economic issues play a certain part.

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Introduction

A short background history

Reform, liberalisation and the contending meanings of decollectivisation

The history of collectivisation movements in Vietnam is complex and far from uncontentious.¹ In terms of official reports, and not a few histories, the north was collectivised by the early 1960s, and remained so until Order # 100 in early 1981 permitted a partial return to family-based farming. Then, in 1988, Decree # 10 further reduced the power of cooperatives. The south, meaning the Mekong, was never really collectivised. US-inspired Land Reform, which created a ‘middle peasantry’, combined with local Party dislike of cooperatives to generate effective failure. In the south-centre, however, farmers were collectivised rapidly in the late 1970s, and thereafter policy followed a similar pattern to that in the north. *It is important to realise, though, that there has never been any Party or state decree that overtly ‘decollectivised’ rural Vietnam, despite frequent presentations and foreign interpretations to that effect.* This study shows that the political and ideological base for ‘socialist production relations’ – ie cooperatives – remains very strong.

Whilst official policy has followed a relatively clear and uncontentious path, what was going on in reality has been far less simple. Village-level studies have shown the importance of local politics based upon inter-family rivalries, often structured around groups brought into power by Land Reform and collectivisation. This picture, where collectives are part of a wider rural political economy, was argued strongly by early studies.² Other portrayals, including official ones, see cooperatives as instruments of local development and one basis for local authority. Here, one can often gain the impression that cooperatives became of little importance after Decree # 10, and that, along with the emergence of the market economy in 1989-90 came a ‘decollectivised’ countryside. This, our data as well as that of others shows, was not in fact the case.

The survival of cooperatives after decree # 10

By 1995, very few of the cooperatives left over from the ‘high tide’ of socialist collectivisation had in fact been disbanded – some 5% (See Appendix 3). Of those

¹ See Fforde 1989; de Vylder and Fforde, 1996; Vickerman 1986; Beresford 1988; Kleinen 1999, in English. See the References to this article for some of the extensive Vietnamese literature.

² Fforde 1989 and Vickerman 1986. See also Kleinen 1999.

that were left, some 10% were operating as sources of local added value, mainly through services supply. The rest were in effect acting as local landlords, collecting levies of various types, which were very unpopular and a main cause of the rural unrest in Thai Binh and other provinces in 1997. Of these, about half provided no services to their members at all.

Clearly, this is not a rural economy with factor markets that can be considered as 'normal' in any simple sense. Whilst land use rights existed formally, and various rights to beneficial transfer were recognised, implementation and regulation of these rights were highly contingent. The 'local state' could not be assumed to be neutral. For example, reports indicated that in the late 1990s the Party issued instructions to local cells to rein in, through various measures, processes of land concentration in the most densely populated regions. These had significant but hard to measure impacts upon local resource allocation decisions.

It can easily be speculated that, in a rural economy where land concentration is limited, there is ready potential for the extraction of resources, either as a 'differential rent', or as a simple extraction. The latter can be viewed as coming from a surplus, otherwise used by the farmer for investments directly in production, human resources or elsewhere. Or it can be viewed as pushing farmers' incomes from agriculture down below subsistence levels, requiring therefore the farmer to create incomes from other sources in order to retain good relations with local authority. The political economy of north and central Vietnam reflects this logic: the central stage for the playing out of struggles over resources that would otherwise appear as rent are the local organisations, within the commune, of which the cooperatives are part.

This is quite different from the situation in the Mekong, where the main focus for accumulation of profits from the rural economy is sited above the commune, in the structures that funnel rice and other exportables through state businesses.

This in part makes easier to understand just why it is that political tensions within the commune should be so important in the north and centre compared with the Mekong. Also, it throws light upon the far higher degree of monopoly in cash crops that exists

in the Mekong than in the north and centre.³ With the major process of appropriation occurring well away from the farm gate, Mekong delta farmers are - so far - freer to organise than others.

Our data shows that farmers' saw little value in the old-style cooperatives, and so their continued existence until the establishment of their successors, mainly through 1998, confirms their lack of democratic content. As importantly, their existence was the result of historical factors as well as the local political economy and the ongoing national support for them, both ideologically and materially (see below).

The situation in the late 1990s and its wider historical context

The emergence of the contradictory structure of imposed new-style cooperatives (in north and centre) and private cooperatives⁴ (in the south) reflects powerful political and historical forces. These have strong effects upon the pattern of information generated.

Since the new-style cooperatives are official, and state-sponsored, there is an increasing volume of reports and research that justifies them and argues for their further support. On the other hand, since the economic space into which they have been inserted clearly offers opportunities for enhanced local value-added, this creates two sources of information that goes in the opposite direction. Where they have not been imposed, such as Long An, we see private alternatives. Where they have been, the relative failure of the new-style cooperatives, and the pressure against what has emerged in the south, reveals itself in local tensions and missed opportunities.

Research in this second direction has been rather limited. The 'macro politics' of the situation can be seen influencing the overall picture we have of what has been happening.

The current situation must thus be understood in its broader political and historical context. To repeat, it is unwise to assume that factor *markets*, rather than non-market mechanisms, are the dominant resource allocation mechanisms.

Despite the emergence of a market economy in 1989-90, the political philosophy of

³ IFPRI 1996; according to interviews in 1996, whilst the Long An provincial staples company controlled around 85% of the province's rice surplus, that in Thai Binh only managed to obtain around 15% - AF.

⁴ The term 'private' is preferred to alternative as such as 'informal', or 'genuine', since it reflects these organisations lack of state sponsorship, control and support.

the Vietnamese Communist Party remains somewhat unchanged. Socialist production relations (state and collective) are still viewed as being superior in political and developmental terms, and so to be encouraged. But the Vietnamese polity remains fragmented in various ways, including regionally. Thus, in areas of the country where local political opinion differs from the overall 'line', in this case the Mekong, policy is not implemented.

*Old wine, new bottles?*⁵

As we argue below, the behaviour of the authorities towards the new-style cooperatives is strongly reminiscent of the treatment of their predecessors. They receive important levels of assistance from the Party and State, and they were established as part of a systematic program of top-down implementation directed from the centre of the Party's apparatus. The latter involved clear violation of both the democratic spirit and a central element of the government's decree (# 15) on agricultural cooperatives, which stated that members had to make formal applications to join.

Yet the new-style cooperatives are far less extensive in scope than their predecessors. Indeed, whilst they group almost all members of the communes, they lack a clear basis in most areas of local economic activity. Instead, their productive activities are usually somewhat monotonous, typically limited to irrigation and pest and disease forecasting. This is in part because their ability to add value in input supply is very weak and they provide little assistance to farmers in product marketing and sales. Their main function seems to be the levying of taxes, contracting and various charges. Parallel to this, however, they confirm their essentially political nature in the ways in which they confuse social and economic activities, with their encouragement of merit-worthy visits to the aged, invalids, families of war-dead and so forth.

Political processes outside the cooperative, ie of the local power structure and Party, almost always appoint the leaders of the new-style cooperatives. These processes are quite familiar from the ways in which a range of Mass Organisations⁶ is operated, with, for example, leaders 'introduced' to the masses (perhaps 4 from which 3 must

⁵ "Really, it is just 'old wine and new bottles' (binh moi, ruou cu)" [Quang Tri QD: p. 3] – note that original, commercial, strategy was the reverse – new wine in old bottles.

⁶ That is, the Party dominated structures such as the Farmers' Union, the Women's Union and so forth.

be chosen). Cooperatives of this sort are thus best seen as managed by people whose power base depends upon their position within the local political elite, rather than their capacity to manage.

The leaders are most usually from the old cooperatives, which largely remained in existence, albeit often inactive. They are often also from the local Party or administration. They are only rarely 'new faces'. But they have received many training courses from the state, and most have been retrained for their new positions. The position in the south, however, in Long An, is quite the reverse, with the dominant private cooperatives led by 'new' people, but without significant state training support.

Regional variation and regional history

The very great differences in local political history and culture show up in the variation in the nature of the new-style cooperatives, and private cooperatives, in Ninh Binh, Quang Tri and Long An. In Ninh Binh, the local political leadership is softer and less aggressive in its demands than in Quang Tri. The cooperatives tend to impose lower levies on their members, and certainly do not impose levies on land area (which is contrary to the State decision on agricultural cooperatives already mentioned). In Quang Tri the leadership is more assertive. In neither are there many private cooperative forms, which are strikingly absent from the rural landscape compared with Long An, in the Mekong. And in Long An there are no new-style cooperatives, matching the general failure in the past to secure an effective collectivisation of the Mekong.

The striking relative absence of private cooperative forms in the north and centre

There are very few private cooperative forms in the north and centre; in significant numbers reflecting their potential for farmers, they are not yet possible, and indeed would need to expand into local political and economic space that has been pre-empted by the new-style cooperatives. In Long An, however, this space contains a range of dynamic forms that meet a range of farmers' needs. These cooperative forms are not associated with the Party and its Mass Organisation systems, unlike the new-style cooperatives in Quang Tri and Ninh Binh, where they are.

Long An benefits from the fact that there never have been official cooperatives of any strength. The local Party therefore does not really value or rely upon them. State

guidance and support has therefore gone into other areas instead. Ideologically, the local political leadership has far less belief in the classic Marxist-Leninist thinking relating ‘socialist relations of production’ to the requirements of the national political system, and to national economic growth. Thus they are less conservative.

In addition to this, the rural population has been able to build up and preserve ways of cooperating to local advantage. There is no fear of cooperation, and this is helped by the failure of collectivisation in the past. They are also less worried by markets, and so less wary of the consequences of pro-market sentiments. There is greater social acceptance of landlessness and land concentration, and so people are more tolerant of land being used as a basis for the emergence of the private sector. Finally, both as cause and consequence of this, there is a far lower perceived risk to contributing capital to cooperative ventures outside the family than in the north and centre. This points to a significant aspect of the weakness of the new-style cooperatives, which is their failure to mobilise – in practice – capital contributions from their members. Often, these were not actually paid up, although cooperators had agreed to pay them as part of the formal procedure to join. However, as we have already argued, these procedures were usually a case of ‘new wine in old bottles’, with very limited democratic content, so cooperators’ failure to honour such commitments is far from surprising.

The theoretical rationales for cooperative forms

The theoretical rationales for cooperative forms are many. Here we distinguish between four: the ‘orthodox’ Marxist-Leninist position; the ‘community development’ position; and two economic arguments, one based upon ‘externalities’ and the other upon ‘transactions costs’.

The orthodox Marxist-Leninist position combines political and economic considerations.⁷ Socialist construction, and economic growth, requires increasing land yields so as to raise food production – a major element of urban consumption. Under conditions of increasing returns to scale, as was the case in Western European grain production, this implies increasing size of farms, which, under capitalist conditions, would lead to the emergence of a landlord class whose political interests would be

⁷ A good Western appraisal can be found in Bray 1983.

opposed to those of the socialist regime ('Dictatorship of the Proletariat'). The increasing size of farms would increase land yields in various ways, most importantly through permitting a greater development of the social division of labour which classical economists from Adam Smith onwards stressed as a central element of increasing productivity. Thus collective farms, as initially developed in the Soviet Union, offer a solution to both the political and economic sides of the problem. However, if economies of scale are absent, and increasing land yields can be attained *without* increasing the average size of farms, then this argument is greatly weakened. Indeed, as Bray (1983) and others stress, and as is clear from recent Vietnamese experience, very large gains in land yields can be attained *without* major changes in the average farm size.

Central to this position, however, is its 'voluntarism'. That is, that it seeks to impose a certain institutional form in order to meet certain goals, understood a priori.

Thus we can find leading agricultural economists such as Mellor (1966) arguing that cooperatives tend to be 'pushed' by government, leading to very poor performance (op.cit.p.341-342). This is one of the major problems with any 'voluntarist' position, since it imposes ostensibly democratic and autonomous forms, which then in practice become neither democratic nor autonomous. Indeed, Attwood and Baviskar, in an excellent survey of Indian experience (1995) start their text with the statement that "Many rural development projects have failed because they were imposed from above" (op.cit. p. 3).⁸

The 'community development' rationale is rather different. This takes as given the idea, which is very attractive, that self-management offers a range of values to members, which include economic as well as non-economic outcomes. The ILO (1988) offers a clear presentation of this view. Here the non-economic outcomes include moral outcomes: "... if [a cooperative] is to serve its purpose, it must ...stand firm on certain broad moral principles of mutual aid and shared progress." (op. cit. p.5). Similar strongly articulated attitudes can be seen across a range of perspectives. Benello et al (1997) support cooperatives from the powerful 'post-development' position critical of institutions such as the WTO; Pestoff 1991 points to the wide

⁸ For an revealing comparison of the advantages of service cooperatives over the producer cooperatives of classic socialism, see Deinenger 1995.

range of benefits, not just economic, that stem from cooperatives in Sweden; Baviskar and Attwood 1995 survey the complex history of cooperatives in India; but writers like Dieter Benecke 1972 stress the importance of economic factors despite the attraction of cooperation per se.

Cooperatives have also been studied from anthropological, political and other perspectives. However, economics has tended to look at the comparative economic performance of cooperatives.

From economics, we must note the seminal work by Ward (1958) arguing that a cooperative was simply a business that sought to maximise income per worker, rather than profits (in terms of neoclassical economic theory). Thus it would tend to be inefficient, producing less than if the assets were managed by a profit-maximising firm. Note, though, that such an organisation is seen as 'capitalist' in the sense that the cooperative owns capital and buys and sells on markets. This approach, though, tells us little about why such an organisation should form. For this we must consider the ideas of 'market failure' – that is, how conditions that objectively prevent markets from operating ideally create incentives for different organisational forms to appear.

Consider first the problem of 'externalities'. If an economic activity creates costs or benefits that are not captured by some priced good or service, which operates upon the interests of whoever decides how much of it to produce, then there is a problem. If it is benefits that are external to the producer's accounting, then too little will be produced. For example, if an irrigation scheme benefits people who do not have to pay for the water, then arguably it will be too small. If a way existed to internalise these benefits so as to ensure that all who benefit pay whoever is producing the irrigation services, then it would add value to the situation. Conversely, if the externalities are costs, then too much will be produced. One can imagine a situation where the irrigation scheme removes water from fields where farmers cannot influence the scheme. Again, bringing them into an organisation 'internalises' the costs. *Thus it can be seen that non-market solutions, such as cooperatives, offer ways of increasing welfare through increased efficiency, when they internalise costs or benefits that were previously external to the calculations of cost and benefit that determine output.* From these arguments, and so long as institutions are not imposed, we can expect forms of cooperation to arise spontaneously when externalities exist that can be internalised, and where markets cannot do so.

Now consider the issue of ‘transactions costs’. These can be understood widely as the costs of forming economic relationships. If trust levels in a society are high, these tend to be low. Economic agents do not need to invest time and money in acquiring information to reduce the risks of transacting. This is just one example. In a rural society where many commodities and services are usually lacking (such as reliable information on the risks of borrowing from a bank) non-market forms of organisation can arise that enable transactions costs to be reduced. One obvious example is credits, where informal mutual-guarantee groups offer ways of reducing the costs of doing business that arise from a range of problems, such as relative lack of lenders’ information on borrowers’ capacity to repay (especially if the lender is a bank). From these arguments, and so long as institutions are not imposed, we would expect forms of cooperation to arise spontaneously when they offer opportunities to overcome high transactions costs.⁹

Both of these two latter perspectives are well expressed within modern neo-institutionalists economics (eg North 1995 and Bates 1995). It is worth stressing that the *potential* for improved economic performance identified by these economic perspectives tells us little about whether, and if so how, such forms will appear.

The literature on the economics of cooperative forms is rich. See, for example, Dow and Putterman 2000 point to the existence of a wide spectrum of workers’ rights to control across capitalist economies, through such issues as European co-determination (worker representation on company supervisory boards), tax implications for employee stock ownership plans, worker buy-outs and so forth.

Conclusions

The literature argues that we should expect cooperatives to form under two quite different sets of conditions. First, imposed from above; second, arising spontaneously in ways that reflect the ability of these forms to add to local welfare in situations where markets fail to work properly, such as through externalities or high transactions costs. In the latter case, we should expect spontaneous cooperation to occur in areas such as irrigation, credit provision and activities where information is crucial but not marketed. In both of these situations, the literature referred to here as ‘community

⁹ See Ghatak and Guinnane 1999 for a survey of joint liability lending methods. Holloway et al look at the role of transactions costs in institutional change in milk-marketing;

development' would argue that local sentiments would also enter into the picture, such as regarding affective attitudes to working together, and towards imposed forms.

The formal institutional setting

The wider context

The rural population under study lives within a varied set of institutional structures. First, there are those typical of a Leninist formal political regime: the Party, its Mass Organisations (such as the Farmers' Union), state bodies such as the People's Committees, and official cooperatives (both 'old-style' and 'new-style'). Besides these, people lived in households, typically two or three-generational in form, with the family-unit (ho) acting as the holder of land property, of population registration and other important relationships with state authority. Finally, there were various non-agricultural cooperatives, private businesses (perhaps registered as Companies), SOEs, and informal groups and sites of cooperation (to, to hop tac).

Formally, Leninist mistrust of 'outside' social activity paralleled the Constitutional and orthodox political positions that gave priority to so-called socialist forms: state business, and cooperatives. Note, though, that this really only meant official cooperatives, and there was no evidence of state support for forms of cooperation that were 'outside', in the sense of not being – unlike the new-style cooperatives – subject to the 'control' of the Party in the same way as its Mass Organisations. It must be stressed at once, though, that 'control' should be understood in a limited sense, for the actual content and reality of these bodies was subject to negotiation. However, it is correct to use such a strong verb in this context, due to the ways in which the Party retained control over matters such as cooperative leadership selection, the decision to establish the cooperative, and, importantly, the attitude of the local political apparatus to *other* forms of cooperation. Tolerated in the Mekong, if not encouraged, these were far from supported in the north and centre.

The cooperative Law, state decree # 43-CP on the Model Cooperative Statute, and key elements of "legality"

The highest legal body of the Vietnamese state, the National Assembly, passed a Cooperative Law in April 1996. This was followed by State decree 15-CP of February 1997, on policies to stimulate cooperatives. These were both subject to the key Party Order # 68 of May 1996, which laid down that cooperatives were 'objectively' needed

for rural development.¹⁰ It is reportedly secret, and so has not been examined directly in the writing of this report. However, its commitment to cooperatives can be seen in the references to it in the 4th Plenum of early 1998, when the movement to establish the new-style cooperatives was already under way.¹¹

There was opposition within the Party to these policies, as well as a concern to present them as not unfavourable to private farming activities. But the dominant position is clear (see Appendix 3). Further, other parts of the state economy were to support these bodies, such as through the allocation of bank credit and tax concessions.

Contradictions were clear, however, in the view that these new-style cooperatives, like the old ones, should act as procurement agencies for SOEs.

Various elements of the Cooperative Law and the Model Statute passed by the Government (Decree # 43, passed in April 1997) placed obstacles in the way of presenting the new-style cooperatives as being 'legal'. In addition, since the Law stated that all cooperatives had to operate under it, and many cooperatives did not re-establish themselves, these tended in any case to violate the Law. The main obstacles were:

1. The prohibition upon a cooperative imposing levies based upon members' land-holdings. This pressured them not to act as landlords, but of course the resources could be extracted in other ways.
2. The requirement that members complete an application form, to join.
3. The requirement that members make some contribution, a 'share'. As we will see, whilst these were often inscribed in cooperative regulations, they were very rarely paid in.
4. The general requirement that cooperatives operate in a democratic manner (eg, that they are organisations set up voluntarily by their members, controlled by them etc). As we will see, their members show little sign that the leadership is viewed as being properly chosen.

By December 1999 formal re-establishment of some 3,104 cooperatives had occurred (32% of the total), with some 2,542 (26%) reporting that they had carried out documentary preparation for it [Nguyen Dinh Huan 2000a: 43]. Almost no new-style cooperatives existed in Long An province, in the Mekong [Long An QD: 3].

¹⁰ See Appendix 1.

¹¹ See Appendix 3, quoting other work.

The sample and its context – background information

The sample

Three research principles were adopted.

First, adapting and improving methodology as the research was carried out.

Second, spending considerable resources upon qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups.

Third, creating a sound quantitative database, combining household interviews with general data on local conditions.

We started with some preliminary investigations in Ninh Binh, a province in the Red River Delta. These gave us insights into linguistic matters, the tensions in the rural areas associated with the movement (based upon Order 68) to establish new-style cooperatives, and the relatively limited extent of private forms of cooperation. A draft questionnaire was implemented. This was then refined, along with focus group and interview methods, and implemented in Long An (Mekong Delta) and Quang Tri (Central Vietnam). This 'second questionnaire' was then re-implemented in Ninh Binh. Whilst the first questionnaire had generated some voluntary responses regarding private forms of cooperation, by far the great majority of respondents did not reply to these questions in the second round. However, they were quite happy to comment on the new-style cooperatives, to which, by this time, they most belonged.

The survey thus covered three provinces. In each, two districts were chosen, and in each three communes, giving six communes in all. The commune is, practically, the lowest level of the state structure in Vietnam, possessing, like a district and a province, a People's Committee. Below the commune, villages possess village leaders and were often the basis for cooperatives in the history of the expansion and then contraction of cooperatives. Almost all the new-style cooperatives are coterminous with communes, and thus seen as rather large, since the commune-level old style cooperatives of the 1970s and 1980s presented various problems related to their size which were eased when they were broken up to village-level in the late 1980s. With 600 households interviewed in each province, the entire questionnaire household survey totals 1,800.

Choice of communes and districts

The communes and districts were chosen from delta regions, and were selected so as to give a relatively wide range of non-agricultural activities as well as forms of cooperation. They thus represent populations with relatively high levels of development of the division of labour within the rural economy, and with organisational forms beyond the family that accompany this. The households were chosen at random, from the household roster of the local authority.

Some general conclusions from the qualitative research

This preliminary study has not carried out statistical analysis, and what follows is based primarily upon the qualitative research results.

Quang Tri

Quang Tri, like Ninh Binh, had implemented a movement to re-establish the old cooperatives. Of the 277 in existence, at the time of the research 238 had been re-established, and of the remaining 19 either had been or would be dissolved [Quang Tri QD: p.2].¹² Implementation was top-down and problematic.

“According to the law, (a cooperative) cannot levy funds (eg welfare funds), but in some places they still do so, but around 60-80% less than before. It would be wrong to say that cooperatives are a heavy burden to their members as now it is very hard to impose levies” [idem. p.2].

The cooperative is the ‘bridge’ for getting technical improvements to the farmers ... the local authority cannot do so. Much has been said, but they will not. In many places the cooperative does this well. [Idem. p.3].

The new cooperatives, like the old ones, were chronically short of capital. Often, they had to use capital put into the old cooperatives as loans, and still owed by them, into the new ones.

In terms of activity, there was, according to official views, very little diversification by the new-style cooperatives. They kept up irrigation, plant protection and veterinary work, and that was about it. But it was ‘more voluntary’.

Local officials were aware of ‘very interesting’ ‘voluntary cooperatives, real cooperatives’ (sic – “mo hinh HTX tu nguyen, co HTX thuc su la rat hay”), but these had not developed much. They were mainly involved in land preparation and

¹² See also Appendix 1.

transport.

“The danger is that whilst nothing had really happened to move cooperatives onwards, along came the cooperative Law and then the change based upon a ‘movement’ (phong trao)¹³ came. The current danger is the change as a ‘movement’. There is a decision of the province Party Committee on this. Really, ... it was imposed and there is a competition (thi dua)¹⁴ to see who can do it faster.” [Quang Tri QD: p. 4].

The fieldwork suggested that the real picture was rather different. Implementation was stiffer than in Ninh Binh (see below). For example, each cooperative of the old style was permitted 36 officials, so that a commune with perhaps 1,500 families with 3 cooperatives could have over 100 [Quang Tri QD: p. 125]. This had been greatly improved with the implementation of the new-style model. Officials tended to have been trained, and in general state support and resources had been significant. This meant that these new-style cooperatives, for all their lack of democracy, were an important channel for outside support to farmers in what was a very poor area. The cooperatives, thus, were not really essentially designed to increase local value-added, rather to channel in outside resources and capture a limited share of what was available locally.

The incentives acting upon cooperative leaders to support local development were therefore weak. They appeared often to act as salaried officials, with very low performance bonuses [Quang Tri QD: p. 126].

“The problem is that cooperatives must have a role for them to exist, but what is that role? In principle, they must prepare written applications, but we can forget about that. The fact that assets remain from the old cooperative encourages people to join the new one in order not to lose their rights.

If we compare the prices charged by cooperatives and the private sector, then the cooperative is probably dearer. It would be wrong to say that the private sector traders are swindlers. The people think that the cooperative is a reliable place for society and community, and not very important on economic grounds. Thus most of it is formal only (hinh thuc) [Quang Tri QD: p. 128].

The problem is how to get people voluntarily to demand services from the cooperative, rather than forcing them to use services put in front of them ... In that way of thinking, the more the cooperative does, the more the cooperator will have to contribute” [Quang Tri QD: p. 129].

A central point was that the economic surpluses coming out of the rural areas were rather low, and state support from outside rather high. This is a very poor region of

¹³ That is, implementation on a top-down basis in the traditional manner of Leninist mobilisation.

¹⁴ The word, ‘thi dua’, is again that from the tradition Leninist repertoire, dating back to the Stakhanovite model workers of Stalin’s time.

Vietnam, suffering from floods and other natural disasters. Thus farmers' attitudes to state-sponsored cooperatives were often rather positive (see below). But, as the officials report, they did not have much impact upon local accumulation and growth.

Ninh Binh

'Re-collectivisation'

The data on the political issues at local level related to this is unclear, and, as already reported, farmers simply did not respond to many of the questions in the questionnaire related to this.

Private forms of cooperation

In *Ninh Binh* -

“A number of genuine forms of cooperation have appeared and are appearing. Where the market is better developed the need is stronger and clearer. Talented people in the rural areas want to set up private cooperatives but the environment for them to do so does not yet exist” [[Project Scientific Conference in Ninh Binh: p.9].

1997 saw an attempt to implement this according to a provincial-level plan, but this failed. Stronger efforts were then made in 1998, with greater success [Project Scientific Conference in Ninh Binh: p.9].¹⁵

Long An

The situation in Long An was very different from that in the other two provinces. Local officials had a far more supportive attitude towards private forms, and were extremely unenthusiastic about the official cooperatives. In fact, two of the latter had been set up (in 1998), but were viewed as having no results, and had lost their capital as cooperators would not repay debts [Long An QD: 3, referring to Tan An township]. Conversely, private groups (to) were divided into two types: economic cooperation groups (to kinh te hop tac), with assets above 5 mn dong and with potential for growth 'to become cooperative'; and all others, which were referred to as 'associate groups' (to lien ket). Examples of the latter were capital assistance groups and labour exchange groups [Long An QD: 4, idem.]. Their comparison of the population's views was clear:

“Our farmers like joining 'associate groups' in agriculture because the two cooperatives have just appeared and have no results, they have big debts and will probably collapse, whilst they also have to put up with the management committee, its costs and the fact that personnel are not really elected democratically whilst the

¹⁵ See Appendix 1.

cooperative has too little capital ... *the direction of the province is to develop the cooperative economy. Both types are good ...*

The state wants to have its hand upon ('nam') the farmers from the political aspect rather than derive economic resources from them." [Long An QD: 4, idem].

Thus, in Tan An official reports acknowledged near 8,000 people (of a total population of 112,000, with 50% in agriculture) in such groups. Granted a family size of over 5, this suggested that a very high proportion of the farming population was in such organisations. All of these had to 'go through' the Mass Organisations, but "the state is still not happy about it" [idem p. 5].

Groups in Tan An: power and water – 98; seeds use – 10; irrigation – 3; borrowing – 65; labour exchange in rice transplanting – 3; seeds production – 8; livestock and poultry – 5; consumption (savings) – 2 [idem].

Besides the two categories reported by officials, research pointed to a third group, called 'private associated groups' (to lien ket (or hop tac) kinh te tu nhan).

In general, the qualitative research showed that all three shared certain characteristics. First, the Mass Organisations played a central role in supporting them and helping them obtain registration with the local authorities. Second, most were relatively recent, and so they were clearly still developing. Third, quite unlike Ninh Binh, the Party and local authorities were very 'gentle' in their treatment of them, so it was far easier for them to form [idem. p.14].

The various forms, and their location in the local economy, appeared logical. That is, that they responded to local conditions (rather than being imposed upon them). Thus, they were clearly profitable, adding to local value-added, were supported by farmers and, despite the overall pressure upon the local Party to move faster, were thought 'a good thing'. A central point here was that there was a diversity of forms amongst these private organisations, reflecting a process of institutional exploration of opportunities, and quite different from the uniformity of the 'new-style cooperatives'.

The local state could be seen, despite the contrary pressure from general policy, to be developing interventions to support this process.

Farmers' and private cooperatives

The opinions of farmers were gathered from interviews, focus groups and the written questionnaire. As should be clear, the very nature of the movement to set up 'new-style cooperatives' added a political element to farmers' responses, and this should be

born in mind.

Ninh Binh

In the first survey, farmers reported belonging to a limited but significant range of what were referred to as ‘voluntary forms of specialised cooperative groups’ (to hop tac nghe nghiep¹⁶ tu nguyen). 14% of the sample reported belonging to land preparation groups, 1% to transport groups, 20% to quarrying groups, and 19% to construction groups. 2% reported belonging to purchase and sale groups. Besides this, 12% reported belonging to an old-style cooperative and 85% to a new-style cooperative. This probably reflected the closing stages of the re-establishment movement. [Ninh Binh SR1: p.20]

Farmers also expressed rather clear opinions about what could be done by the state and province to help ‘real, voluntary cooperative organisations’. Whilst only 60% thought that ‘procedures should be simplified’. Around 90% thought that they should be lent capital, receive training on management and technical work, and support to purchase of products from traditional sidelines [Ninh Binh SR1: p.62].

More pointedly, whilst 70% thought that the district should act to improve local democracy, again so as to support these organisations, 87% said that training was important, 83% argued for loans. Almost none argued for better markets [Ninh Binh SR1: p. 63]. A similar pattern of stress upon training was offered when the question was posed in terms of the commune [idem].

Finally, this first survey also revealed that only 10% of interviewees felt that they were aware of the procedures required to establish a voluntary cooperative [Ninh Binh SR1: p. 54].

In the second survey, as has already been reported, almost none of the interviewees were willing to offer an opinion about ‘private’ cooperatives.

In Ninh Binh, therefore, one can conclude that complex political manoeuvres use the shells of formal structures as a theatre for conflict and negotiation, within which economic issues play a certain part. This conclusion relies heavily upon the nuances of the qualitative data and interviews.

¹⁶ ‘Nghe nghiep’ usually refers also to artisanal activities.

Quang Tri

Some 3% of farming households reported belonging to private cooperatives (C501). Of these 15 responses (in the sample of 600), 2 said they based internal organisation upon 'emotion', 2 'as though it were a family', 2 'as though it were a share company'. In terms of activity, 3 were in production and processing, 1 in veterinary work, 1 reported in mutual capital assistance (c512a), 2 in construction, and 4 in wood processing. None admitted to being involved in production, processing or transport of agricultural or artisanal product. There was some evidence that the official cooperative created work for private cooperatives. 3 of these had been set up in 1991, 1 in 1992 and 1 in 1999 (c513a). 4 reported support from the local authority in setting up the private cooperative. This took the form of training, introductions and support in relations with higher authority. 4 of them contained Party members or officials (c520a).

A significant number of these cooperatives had written internal regulations governing how profits were to be distributed the responsibilities of the management, and so on.

On the whole, they were not growing fast. Yet they were considered to be more effective than the new-style cooperatives (c528.1), more democratic and more likely to support increases in farmer welfare (c528.6). Most contributions, according to those who replied, were in money (c529.7). Amounts were around the 3.5 million dong level (c530b).

These organisations appeared small, from 6 to 13 in size (c517b). Farmers felt that it was worthwhile registering them c538.1.

Finally, there was evidence that private cooperatives had been set up over the years, but that they had often failed, for reasons such as market conditions ("no market"), poor understanding, and because the environment was unfavorable (c545.6).

It must be stressed, however, that there were very few 'private cooperatives', and so the sample from which these opinions were drawn was very small indeed.

Long An

In Long An the picture, as already reported, was quite different from in Quang Tri or Ninh Binh. Around half of farmers interviewed reported belonging to 'real voluntary cooperatives'. Those who did not, replied with reasons such as 'unnecessary', 'unaware of how to do it', or 'unsuitable for me'. Only 12% replied that they wanted

to avoid nuisance from the local authority (c502.4). 30% said they had insufficient capital.

A central issue was ‘what was necessary for such organisations to add to local value-added’¹⁷, and here farmers had a range of opinions. 60% (of those replying and members of such organisations) thought that the state should help, 63% that the state should assist with training, 46% that they state should help farmers carry out traditional artisanal work, 76% that the state should ‘give them work’, 92% that it should operate according to community values¹⁸, 38% that it should operate in the market, 95% that people should help each other and 92% that they should operate legally.

Many farmers belonged to more than one such organisation – around half. Unlike northerners, management according to ‘emotions’ was not valued highly (by 41%) and only 29% thought the organisation should be managed like a family. Only 10% thought it should be managed like a share company, and only 4% ‘like a cooperative’. And 90% thought it should be organised democratically.

Areas of activity were far more developed than in the north or centre. Very few were engaged in production/processing or transport. 2% were in construction, 10% in product marketing (tieu thu) (c507.8, 507.9), 5% solely in processing, 25% in irrigation, 24% in field protection, 12% in veterinary work, 21% in pest control, 14% in harvesting and drying, 30% in agricultural technology transfer, and 3% in goods supply. Over 50% were in power supply and 12% in capital support.

Most of these organisations were called ‘groups’ (to – 82%), but some were called ‘teams’ (nhom). 25% had been set up before 1990, 35% in 1991-95 and the rest subsequently. *The pattern of year of establishment shows slight peaks in 1989 and 1995.*

In general, 85% said that the local authority supported them, but only 7% said they received any training. 23% reported getting market information, 22% management information, 36% instruction on the law and 54% letter of introduction.

The units were larger than in the north – around 70% had 1-30 people, 23% 30-100.

¹⁷ Literally, ‘lam an co hieu qua’ – to make a living with positive results’.

¹⁸ Ie ‘tinh lang nghĩa xóm’.

41% had family members in them (from the point of view of the interviewee) and 52% had Party members or officials. Here it is worth recalling that half the rural population belonged to such organisations.

The advantages over simple family-based activities were as follows: capital problems (44%), technical knowledge (29%), and management skills (26%) managing relations with the local authority (56%).

63% had written internal regulations. Only 6% had written stipulations on profits sharing. Indeed, profit sharing was not a major focus of most of these bodies. Most saw their 'market' as only being within the commune (90%) (c524). And most felt that small units (less than 10 'ho') were suitable – 60%.

Why were they better than official cooperatives? 96% said that it was because they were truly voluntary, 92% that they were democratic, 90% because they developed community sentiments and 85% because they could raise members' living standards. In general, contributions were made simply by family, not by land area. Almost all families did make contributions (c529.4), and in money.

In Long An, therefore, farmers' organisations reflect a neo-institutional economic logic, with forms reflecting varying issues, such as those to do with market failure in a technical sense. This provides fertile ground for investigating where and how, and most importantly how organised, private cooperatives significantly add to local value-added.¹⁹ Research must distinguish the extent to which this occurs through static efficiency gains from effects upon accumulation and growth.

Farmers' and the new-style cooperatives

Ninh Binh

As in Quang Tri (see below), reported attitudes to the old-style cooperatives were somewhat nuanced. 87% belonged to the new-style cooperatives. Most had joined in 1998. Only 17% had written an application to join. About half reported that contributions were made according to land area, in rice, on average about 20 kg of paddy, but only 1% reported that they had actually paid already. There was a high level of unwillingness to answer questions about the levels of democracy in the new-

¹⁹ Expansion of this line of research will be a major focus of the development of this preliminary work, using the databases generated.

style cooperatives. However, 78% reported that they had not had assets of the old cooperatives returned to them (c318).

About 50% of respondents reported that cooperatives supplied seeds, 80% that they dealt with irrigation, and 19% that they supplied fertiliser and 85% that they protected the fields. 20 reported that the cooperative sold products outside the commune (c321.g). Seeds supply had improved (c328.a), as had water supply, fertiliser and other services. The new-style cooperative was thought to have had a positive effect upon local markets, prices and market information. About 20% of respondents felt that the management was competent, in various ways. There was again hesitancy in answering questions about competence in any depth. 5% agreed that a 'higher level' would have to introduce them for them to be approved, but 92% declined to answer at all. There was considerable confusion about who actually made up the management committee of the cooperative (c340.b et seq).

Quang Tri

In Quang Tri, 98% of respondents were members of a new-style cooperative. Most had joined in 1998 but 27% in 1997 (earlier than Ninh Binh). Almost none contributed according to land held, and were clear about this. 29% contributed according to labour, 35% did not contribute at all. 44% contributed in money and almost none in paddy. Mean contribution was 600,000 dong. 51% had actually contributed at the time of interview (c317.1).

They were far more willing to defend the name of the new-style cooperatives. Nearly 50% asserted that working privately would be worse (c317.6). 55% felt that a private cooperative would not be more profitable. Around 50% had received funds back from their contributions to the old cooperative. Activity incidence was higher than for Ninh Binh – 95% reported getting seeds from the cooperative, 96% that it carried out irrigation, 95% that it supplied fertiliser. However, far less reported cooperative activity in marketing (*tieu thu*) – 1% (c321.g), but 29% reported credits from it. 92% received veterinary services, and 88% agricultural technology. Most thought also that services such as irrigation, seeds supply and fertiliser supply had improved.

Interestingly, only about half reported assistance with floods and storms *from the cooperative*.

This picture, granted the levels of contributions, suggests state support in these areas.

The new-style cooperative had limited effects upon markets and prices (37% and 27% reporting an increase).

A high proportion of respondents reported knowing how many members of the management committee there were (90%) and in general about who managers were (85% for the Manager, 93% for the deputy but only 70% for the other members. 87% knew who the accountant was. 77% reported that the Manager of the cooperative was *not* a Party committee member (Dang Uy Vien) (c346.3). Over 50% thought that he or she had no other posts.

In Quang Tri, therefore, whilst official forms are largely de rigueur they are managed with a somewhat higher officially advocated degree of 'managed democracy'.

Long An

In Long An there were almost no new-style cooperatives.

Final research findings

The conclusions of the study are relatively clear.

First, for political reasons the Party decided to seek to bring the rural population of north and central Vietnam into the new-style cooperatives, and by the start of 1999, in the areas studied here, had been generally successful. This was in no sense a bottom-up movement. *This study, of course, throws no light upon just why this political decision was taken.*

Second, for those farmers within the new style cooperatives, there is little evidence of willingness to contribute resources to them. Irrigation, electricity and what other limited inputs there are from the cooperative are generally managed on a sales basis by specific groups, so in effect these are not any more than empty shells sitting between the farmer and other organisations.

Third, farmers are careful and wary about their opinions. They see a need for cooperation, are sceptical about the capacity of the official cooperatives, and are extremely wary of them.

Fourth, the areas where cooperatives have arisen spontaneously reflect various economic logics. On the one hand, we can see (in irrigation and credit, for example) attempts to internalise externalities and reduce high transactions costs arising from various problems. On the other, we can also see cooperation in areas where private

owner-managed organisation would probably be more efficient (for example in quarrying) but is likely to be inhibited by the need to use kinship links, or to avoid the appearance of capitalist organisation.

Fifth, the evidence shows that, were it not for the official cooperatives, and the attitude of the Party at all levels that lies behind them, rural development would be faster and more sustainable. This conclusion has two main roots. First, it is the implication of farmers' own opinions. Second, it follows from the evidence that the natural path of change involves the development of private forms of cooperation that improve efficiency. We expect that statistical analysis of the rich database would show how social and private welfare rises when and if private forms of cooperation are present in greater numbers.

Finally, the diversity of forms of private cooperation is of great and positive importance. It shows that they are a response to diverse local conditions and opportunities, rather than being externally imposed. Also, it shows how a better development requires active interventions that improve the ways in which local institutions fit into local conditions. In this sense current Party advocacy of the new-style cooperatives is deeply conservative and a hindrance to socio-economic development. Given that state institutional development is almost entirely focussed upon them, through training courses and other resources, a re-allocation of attention to private organisations would obtain better results.

Policy implications

The most robust policy implications follow from universalistic developmental logic. That is, the combination, supported by the political judgment of the Mekong, of the political *redundancy* of official cooperatives ('they are not needed to support local political authority') with the fact that *better developmental results*, in terms of dimensions such as economic growth, income distribution and community development, will come from a healthy and varied diversity of cooperative and non-cooperative forms.

It might even be argued, that the present policy actually *discourages* the emergence of sustainable cooperative forms, and so *encourages* the emergence of a non-cooperative 'capitalist' private sector which, one understands, is exactly what is not intended. This paradox is striking.

Two fundamental policy implications follow.

First, there is a need for learning processes that allow these facts to be realised and appreciated.

Second, resources are needed to facilitate these processes. These should take the form of interventions to the learning process, such as but far from exclusively research, and selective material interventions so as that the process is not empty of practical content. The evidence from existing interventions, such as the UNCDF RIDEF project in Quang Nam, strongly supports this pragmatic mixture.

Singapore February 2001

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Party decisions on cooperatives

Central Level

68 CT-TW on the development of cooperative economy in all branches and economic areas (probably passed 25/5/96 – see Appendix 3).

Provincial level

Ninh Binh – # 02 of the provincial Party Committee on the development of cooperative economy in all branches and economic areas.

Quang Tri – # 06-NQ-TU of the Executive Committee of the Party Provincial Organisation (Session XII) on the development of the cooperative economy and cooperatives in all economic branches and areas, signed 17/4/1998

Long An – # 07-NQ/TU signed 13/8/1997 on the development of cooperative economy in all economic branches and areas.

District level

All districts established *Committees for implementation of # 68* (ie to manage implementation of the decree). The People's Committee of the district then passed a Decree promulgating a 'Project', typically with a title that dealt with reinforcing and a first step in reforming (Doi Moi) the activities of agricultural cooperatives.

Appendix 2 - The sample

Ninh Binh province (north Vietnam): Quang Thien, Gia Tan and Gia Lap communes, Gia Vien district; Ninh My, Ninh Van and Ninh Phong communes, Hoa Lu district.
Research carried out mid 1999.

Quang Tri province (central Vietnam): Hai Phu, Hai Que and Hai Vinh communes, Hai Lang district; Trieu Dong, Trieu Thuong and Trieu Trach communes, Trieu Phong district.

Long An province (south Vietnam): Long Hiep, Luong Hoa and My Yen communes, Ben Luc district; Binh Tam, Huong Tho Phu and Loi Binh Nhon communes, Tan An township.

Appendix 3: "Policy towards the new-style cooperatives as reflected in formal documents"

Extract from "Economic development and organisation in Vietnam's countryside in early 1998: rural institutions, the new-style cooperatives and implications for the restructuring of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD)",

Adam Fforde, Paper for VIE/96/008/A/01/99, Draft @ Tuesday, February 24, 1998, PARP-MARD/Lincoln/UNDP/ADUKI

"Policy towards the new-style cooperatives as reflected in formal documents"

Background

During the first half of the decade, many but no means all of the cooperatives set up during the period prior to 1988 were dissolved. According to an official report, by

1995 there were some 16,250 agricultural cooperatives left out of the peak of over 17,000.²⁰ These were of three types:

- A minority (10%) that were still operating effectively, mainly in services supply.
- A substantial number, around 40%, who still operated in providing a number of inputs, but relied for their incomes upon levies upon cooperators' land, which was generally unpopular (source cited in fn p.3)
- Another substantial number (45%) that only really existed on paper, but which yet secured incomes from such measures as sales of cooperative assets, reclaiming debts from cooperators or imposing levies upon their members. This provoked great discontent and led to the cooperative acting as a restraint upon the development of the family economy (reference as above).

The key issue here was the ability of cooperatives of the old type to impose land levies. In total, it was common for these to amount to up to 50% of the gross rice yield.

The legal position is laid down in the new Cooperative Law. There are two key provisions in this that bear upon the development of rural institutions in the closing years of the decade:

1. All cooperatives have to operate according to this Law. This implies that all existing cooperatives have to be re-established, which is a major burden and permits cooperators to question their rationality, given the unpopularity of most of them (see above).
2. The new Cooperative Law specifically prohibits the imposition of levies upon cooperators' landholdings.

There is no information to hand about the extent to which the process of re-establishment of cooperatives has developed. It appears that the intention was that this happen rather quickly and extensively, but the rural unrest of 1997 may be one reason why this process has been made complicated. VCP policy was and remains that this should happen.

The Party position is laid down in Order # 68, which was re-affirmed and acknowledge in the early 1998 4th Plenum -

“There should be a strong development of cooperative economic forms (in the rural areas), with reform of the activities of SOEs in agriculture and the rural areas and the development of SOEs in distant and remote regions ...

There should be a continued development of the autonomous role of the family and individual economies. There should be a concentration upon guiding a strong development of farmers' forms of economic cooperation in accordance with order # 68 ... and the Cooperative Law”

Order # 68 refers to the need for the collective economy to become the “political and social foundation of our country” (p.2). What are its functions envisaged to be?

²⁰ Data from ‘Tóm tắt báo cáo ... ‘ (see [References](#)).

1. Acting as agents for SOEs in the procurement of agricultural products in 'their areas' (p.5)
2. The state bank at province and city level is expected to re-allocate capital between cooperatives, without subsidising losses (p.7).
3. Receiving 'favourable conditions' in terms of issues such as taxes, allocation of credit (p.7)

It is hard to judge, given the policy stance adopted, just what the likely effects are upon new entrants - who, in the environment above and around farming families, are the intended targets of state policy? What has been happening? What is most clear, however, is that the private sector is not viewed as having high priority, and indeed lower priority than cooperatives and SOEs.

This policy stance is viewed by some senior experts in MARD as problematic. The micro level evidence from Thanh Hoa pointed to a lack of farmers' control over these organisations similar to that reported above for their predecessors. “

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Note. The work reported on here has collected large volumes of Vietnamese secondary sources and reports, not detailed in this Bibliography. All texts are in Vietnamese unless otherwise stated.

Documentary collections and Reports

SR (Summary Report) — Summary Reports based upon the databases from the household interviews. Note that for Ninh Binh, where there were two surveys, there are two of these.

QD (Qualitative Data) — transcripts of interviews and focus groups done by the Project for each province.

Note, questions are referred to as 'Cxxx' — eg 'C501' in the text).

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