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**Agricultural Sciences in Upland Northern Vietnam:
Situating Research in a Dynamic Environment**

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**Forschung zur Entwicklungsökonomie und -politik
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Discussion papers in this series are intended to stimulate discussion among researchers, practitioners and policy makers. The paper reflects work in progress. This paper has been reviewed externally by Prof. Dr. Dieter Neubert, Department of Development Sociology, University of Bayreuth, and internally by Prof. Dr. Franz Heidhues, Institute for Agricultural Economics and Social Sciences in the Tropics and Subtropics, University of Hohenheim.

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an introductory overview over the socio-cultural context of Northern Vietnam to agricultural researchers. The paper focuses on the interplay between Vietnam's lowlands and the uplands to specify what makes the Northern uplands a distinct region; as an object of empirical agricultural research and as a context of application of research results.

The paper reviews the developments of selected social institutions from pre-colonial times to the current era of "renovation". First, developments in Vietnam's legal and administrative structures are outlined. Second, education and higher education, particularly the agricultural sciences, are discussed. The third and main part elaborates on social, political, and economic specifics of the Northern Uplands. It is suggested that the relationship between formal and informal institutions is crucial for understanding the dynamics of contemporary uplands Vietnam, particularly in the given multi-cultural situation.

Keywords: Vietnam, Northern uplands, agricultural research, ethnic minorities, institutions

Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
GCOP	Government Committee on Personnel and Equipment
GoV	Government of Vietnam
HAU	Hanoi Agricultural University Number 1
IDRC	International Development Research Center (Canada)
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
NA	National Assembly
NIAH	National Institute for Animal husbandry
NMR	Northern Mountain Region
R&D	Research and Development
SAM	Mountain Agrarian Systems (French acronym)
S&T	Science and Technology
TUAF	Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VCP	Vietnam Communist Party
VASI	Vietnam Agricultural Science Institute
VND	Vietnamese Dong. 1 US Dollar equivalent to c. 16,000 VND
WU	Women's Union

Agricultural Sciences in Upland Northern Vietnam: Situating Research in a Dynamic Environment¹

Rupert Friederichsen

1. Introduction

“Independence, freedom, happiness” is the slogan heading every official document in Vietnam. ‘Understanding Vietnam’² beyond the level of slogans and stereotypes is difficult for many (Western) foreigners, not only due to the language barrier. Understanding contemporary Vietnam to some degree requires one to look at the extremely diverse ways and conditions of living and the many cultures found in the country’s regions. It also requires delving into Vietnam’s long history to trace under which influences social institutions developed and how they function today in a rapidly changing environment.

Such background knowledge also is a precondition to understand the Vietnamese’s current ways of thinking about the various actors and their practices in rural areas of Northern upland Vietnam with which the present paper is concerned. Focusing on the (Northern) uplands adds an additional level of complexity to ‘understanding Vietnam’, because the analysis has to take into account the interplay between the distinct lowland and highland histories, economies, politics and cultures. Since the political, economic and intellectual centers of Vietnam are located in the lowlands and controlled by the Kinh majority, understanding the uplands constitutes a challenge not only for foreigners but also for the Vietnamese themselves. According to Rambo and Jamieson (2003), much of the thinking of political decision makers about problems and solutions concerning the mountain areas is not empirically founded, but rather based on misconceptions and ignorance of the uplands and their peoples.

This paper was written as part of a collaborative research program called The Uplands Program, under which research into sustainable land use and rural development in the Vietnamese Northern uplands is being conducted³. The wide range of topics addressed – legal and political issues, (higher) education, and the ecology and socio-economics of the Northern

¹ The financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council) for carrying out this study is gratefully acknowledged. I thank Dieter Neubert, Andreas Neef and Franz Heidhues for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² ‘Understanding Vietnam’ is the title of a book by Neil L. Jamieson (1993), outcome of 30 years of direct involvement with Vietnam; firstly working for the U.S. Agency for International Development, later on as an academic studying Vietnam’s literature, culture and people’s contemporary life.

³ Research activities within The Uplands Program started in the year 2000 and are ongoing. The second research site of The Uplands Program is Northern Thailand. For more details see www.TheUplandsProgram.net.ms

uplands of Vietnam – cannot by far be treated exhaustively in this paper. Rather, they were chosen with the intention to provide a starting point for agricultural researchers who prepare for work in the Northern uplands, and therefore wish to familiarize themselves with the history, culture, and society of Vietnam. The underlying notion of ‘agricultural science’ is that of a science that takes people, their culture and social institutions into account, and hence must strive to integrate the natural sciences and the social sciences. In addition, this paper attempts to contribute to overcoming a simplistic and ethnocentric view in which the situation of mountain peoples is framed as follows: “despite governmental efforts to better their lot, the tribal population of Vietnam still follows primitive ways of life, eking out a miserable existence exploiting the infertile and inhospitable terrain constituting four fifths of the country’s area” (SarDesai 1998: 5).

2. Legal and Administrative Framework

Apart from the Viet kingdoms, the main empires extending into territory of what today is Vietnam were those of the (Southern) Khmer, the Cham (Central Vietnam) and the Chinese (Northern Vietnam; cf. SarDesai 1998). Because the empires of the Khmer and Cham were limited to the Southern and Central parts of Vietnam they probably left less of an imprint in contemporary Northern Vietnamese culture. In Northern Vietnam, the main cultural traditions are of the ethnic Vietnamese (also called ‘Kinh’ or ‘Viet’), of the Chinese (called “Hoa”), and of the peoples inhabiting the highlands. In the following, Chinese influences are discussed at some length due to the important role attributed to them by many scholars.

2.1. History⁴

The Vietnamese trace the history of their states back to the third millennium BC. ‘Van Lang’ was the legendary first Viet-empire in the Tonking (Red River) Delta. From the Red River delta region the Vietnamese gradually expanded their rule to the South and into the Northern mountains. The Vietnamese empires carried different names over time: ‘Au Lac’ in the 3rd century BC and ‘Nam Viet’ after 207 BC. Sources from this period before Chinese domination (111 BC-939 AD) are particularly scarce. Finally, in 1802 under the Nguyen dynasty, the country received its current name ‘Viet Nam’.

⁴ This section draws for the most part on the work of the legal scholar Pham Duy Ngia (2002) ‘Vietnamese Business Law in Transition’. See also SarDesai (1998) and Nguyen Khac Vien (2002).

A popular saying in Vietnam goes: “The king’s rules come after the village’s customs”. According to the scholar of law Pham Duy Nghia (2002: 6, 28), the foundation for this lasting Vietnamese tradition -the parallel existence of customary village law and state statutory law- was laid under the prolonged Chinese domination. State statutory law was imposed by the Chinese administration but with limited success for a number of reasons. Chinese officials were only present ‘down to’ district levels and the Chinese language and script divided a small elite from the mass of the people. In the villages, customary law was powerful “as a result of the strong feeling of the Viet people for community on the one hand, and of the constant resistance against foreign rulers on the other” (Pham Duy Nghia 2002: 9). At least in part, ancient Viet habits were also in stark contradiction to Chinese, Confucian principles. Viet customs guaranteed women the freedom to choose their spouses and to get divorced. Confucian law consistently demands the submission of women; submission to a father, husband, or, in case of the husband’s death, to a son.

After independence in 939 A.D., the influence of Buddhism increasingly marked legal development from the 11th to 14th centuries and led to a practice of less draconian punishments and more humanitarian concerns, such as amnesties under the Ly dynasty (1010-1225). Under the Tran dynasty (1226-1400), the country was divided into provinces, districts and communes and a central judicial system was set up. Yet, “unlike Western legal tradition no distinction was made in Vietnam between the feudal judiciary and administrative bodies. The local chiefs (mandarins) acted as the chief judges. The mandarin was also the only person in charge of prosecution, adjudication and accusation.”

Major early collections of laws in Vietnam are the Le Code (1483) and the Gia Long Code (1812). The Le Code was used for over three centuries, not least because it included many originally Vietnamese elements and was in accordance with local traditions. In contrast, the Gia Long Code imitated Chinese legislation and was never applied by the Vietnamese people (Pham Duy Nghia 2002: 22). Pham Duy Nghia (2002: 23) provides a summary of how Vietnam’s pre-colonial legal history still influences life in contemporary Vietnam:

1) Overwhelming penal orientation of the law (“anyone who does x is to receive punishment y”) together with ill-developed civil and commercial legislation and legal practice. Therefore, “in all probability, the legal awareness of the Vietnamese people relating to the regulations of the 1995 Civil Code is still very low.”

2) Confucian ethics ('li') and moral rules are incorporated into legal codes and rules for the conduct of rulers and their subjects. "Self-perfection and persuasion of people conforming to the moral rules 'li' should be the way to maintain an ordered society. In a Confucian society, the law has only a subordinated role to manage the country, in case of need."

3) The dualism between State statutory law and the village's customary law. Customary law, for example, regulates the business activities of professional associations (in professional villages) and is enforced by sanctions such as pecuniary rewards or fines, promotion or demotion in village rank, beating and expulsion from the village in cases of serious crimes. Public and social opinion, together with the Vietnamese sense of community, probably makes peer pressure the strongest enforcement mechanism of customary law.

Over the second half of the 19th century the then ruling Nguyen dynasty lost its sovereignty to the French colonial power and the country was divided into three parts; the Southern Cochinchina, the Central Annam and the Northern Tonkin. Under French colonial rule, a road system, modern cities, plantations and industrial centers were created in Vietnam and hence brought an end to the traditional organization of Vietnam as a "relatively isolated, 'enlarged village' in which over millennia relatively few changes took place." (Pham Hong Tung, Pham Quang Minh and Nguyen Quang Hung 2001: 3). The Vietnamese resisted colonial rule from the first and succeeded in toppling Japanese/French domination in August 1945, when the Viet Minh declared Vietnam an independent nation. They had to fight two more wars before the sovereignty of a unified Vietnam was accepted internationally.

While still fighting the Indochinese War (1946-1954) against the French, the North Vietnamese government decreed a land reform in 1953⁵. The land reform was an attempt of the communist government to reduce the power of rural elites and owners of large land holders by redistributing land and assets such as animals and tools to smallholders and landless. In addition, land reform was intended to help consolidate the Communist Party's power in rural Vietnam. Implementation of the land reform caused significant turmoil and violence in rural areas, because land reform teams punished, often arbitrarily, those classified as 'despots', despot-leaders', 'traitors' or 'reactionaries'. Classified as such, many people were dispossessed, imprisoned and executed. Historian Pham Quang Minh estimates that

⁵ In 1955, also the South Vietnamese government decreed a land reform (see Pham Quang Minh 2003: 122).

around 14.000 people were executed during the land reform⁶. In the late 1950s, the tenth party plenary decided a ‘correction campaign and self criticism’. During this campaign, roughly 23,000 formerly persecuted ‘class enemies’ were rehabilitated as innocent and freed from prison and the party admitted mistakes in the implementation of the land reform. Furthermore, to mitigate the excesses of land reform and to re-establish order in the villages, part of the land reform was undone by giving back land and assets to the former owners.

After land reform, the North Vietnamese government initiated the collectivization of production. The transition to agricultural production in cooperatives was more successful in the North than in the South of the country.

Since the final victory of April 30th 1975 in the war against the USA, Vietnam has been reunited⁷. The reunified and independent state was built according to a socialist government structure⁸.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Vietnam’s economy and agriculture entered a major crisis. Crisis, amongst other things meant food shortages, high inflation and declining growth rates of national income (Luibrand 2001: 21, see also Kerkvliet 1995). In the 1980s, crisis triggered far reaching and still ongoing reforms from centralized planning towards a market economy. This ongoing process of renovation (known in Vietnam as ‘doi moi’), and moves towards allowing private property and markets will be discussed after having presented a sketch of the politico-administrative structures in the following section.

2.2 Contemporary Administrative Structures

Currently, the political system of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is organized according to the constitution of 1992. The National Assembly is Vietnam’s parliament with legislative, representative and oversight responsibilities as mandated by the constitution. Vietnam is a one-party system since 1988 and direct challenges to the power monopoly of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) are not tolerated.

⁶ Historiography of the land reform is highly contested, e.g. the estimates about the number of people killed over its course vary between 10,000 and 675,000, and no official numbers have been made available by the VCP (Pham Quang Minh 2003: 241).

⁷ The war known as “The Second Indochina War”, “The Vietnam War”, or “The American War” is clearly of immense political significance both nationally as a main element for the legitimation of the VCP, and globally in the context of the Cold War (cf. e.g. Kolko 1994) but will not be pursued here due to restrictions of space.

⁸ For a rough self-description of the political structures see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/English/Vietnam/Political.htm>

The country today consists of 61 provinces, more than 600 districts and 10,330 communes. Communes are the smallest administrative units and usually comprise several villages. The four major cities Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang and Haiphong are treated as municipalities which have the status of provinces.

The Central Government currently comprises 20 ministries, 5 ministerial-level agencies and 26 other agencies (UNDP 2001, McCarthy 2001). As can be seen in figure 1, the executive (Government), legislature (National Assembly) and judiciary (Supreme People's Court and People's Procuracy) can formally be divided at the national/central and local administration levels.

The highest positions at the national level are divided amongst a 'troika' comprising the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, and the General Secretary of the VCP. These three normally represent the regions (South, Center and North) and the spectrum of political positions within the VCP. The president of the state has mainly representative functions. Nevertheless, he is the supreme commander of the armed forces, has the power to issue amnesties and to pass laws.

Executive: The Prime Minister is the head of the government and appointed by the National Assembly (NA). He leads the central government, hereafter referred to as Government or Government of Vietnam (GoV). It is constituted by the ministers and further heads of government agencies with ministerial status (see Annex 1). Income sources of the central and local administrations differ: The local administrations collect revenues from the land tax and business registration tax. Income tax and value added tax are sources of income for the central GoV.

Three new ministries were set up in 2002; the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications. Environmental concerns, formerly under MOSTE, are now the responsibility of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. However, legislation regulating environmental protection is still nascent in Vietnam (Bach Than Sinh 2003).

Legislative: "The National Assembly is the highest representative organ of the people and the highest organ of State power of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The National Assembly is

the only organ with constitutional and legislative powers” (Article 83, Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1992⁹).

The NA’s most important functions include the “election, release from duty and removal from office” of the highest charges in the bureaucracy¹⁰ and sanctioning the proposals of the Prime Minister on the appointment of members of the Government.

The NA has further fundamental powers to “make and amend the Constitution”, control conformity to it and pass laws with a simple majority of NA deputies’ votes in favor. The NA’s 450 deputies (27.3% women and 10% Non-VCP members) meet twice a year during May and October and are currently in their 11th legislative period from 2002 until 2007. Between the meetings, the Standing Committee of the NA carries out the NA’s tasks.

The President, Prime Minister, the Standing Committee of the NA and a group of more than one third of NA deputies can convene extraordinary sessions. Submissions by ministers to the NA or the VCP have to be approved by the GoV.

Ministries are organized as line agencies. At the provincial level, most of the national ministries have departments. The Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), for instance has sub-divisions called departments at the provincial level (DARD) and departments (e.g. land administration department) and stations (extension, veterinary station) at the district level.

The VCP, though separated more clearly from the state since 1992 than in the previous constitution, remains in a powerful position. Assessments of the role of the VCP in policy-making range from ‘opaque’ (McCarthy 2001, 2002) to ‘sole political power at all levels of state administration’ (Zingerli 2004: 73). Article 4 of the constitution asserts the VCP’s leading role: “The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, the faithful representative of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh’s thought, is the force which leads the State and the society.”

⁹ this and the following citations from the Constitution are from the English translation provided by UNDP; <http://www.un.org.vn/donor/civil/index.htm>

¹⁰ These charges include: the President and Vice-President, the Chairman of the National Assembly, the Vice-Chairman and members of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister, the President of the Supreme People’s Court and the Head of the Supreme People’s Office of Supervision and Control.

Most importantly, the VCP influences decision-making processes through its ca. 2 million members. Party members hold the majority of higher-ranking positions in the public sector and account for around 90% of the NA's deputies. Furthermore, the VCP can influence policy-making by issuing Directives and Resolutions. A recent, consequential example is Directive 30/CT issued by the Central Committee of the VCP on Grassroots Democracy in 1998. The directive has been implemented by the government in decrees, such as the Decree on Grassroots Democracy at the Commune (Decree 29/1998/ND-CP). The VCP is headed by the General Secretary and the Politburo and has cells within all ministries and most universities (cf. St. George 2003: 170). The Vietnam Fatherland Front, a Party-controlled umbrella organization for associations, must monitor and approve candidates for the NA before they can present themselves to the electorate.

Judiciary: The People's Courts have the power to "apply the law" but not to interpret it or "to create new rulings for those cases where legal stipulation is still lacking. Officially, the competence to 'interpret' law, meaning to "clarify the meaning of stipulations in case of doubt or uncertainty" belongs to the Standing Committee of the NA (Pham Duy Nghia 2002: 57). In practice, however, the law is interpreted by a multitude of secondary legislation issued by the administration and the VCP. The People's Procuracies can initiate lawsuits but also have a watchdog function to monitor compliance with legal procedures and the compliance of secondary legislation with the constitution.

Table 1: Laws and secondary legislation

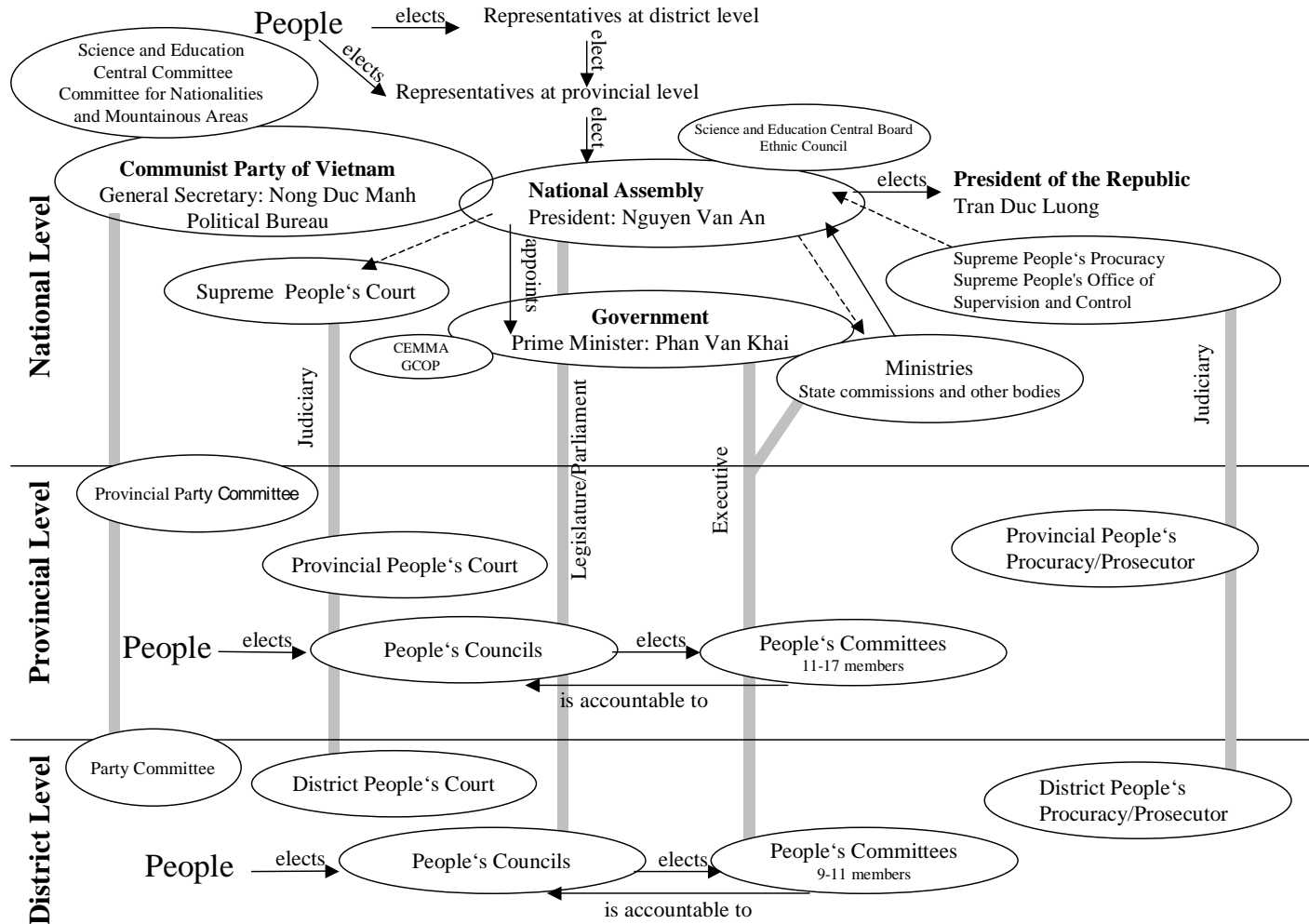
Type of regulation	Issued by	Status
Law	National Assembly (NA)	Highest form of legislation
Ordinance	Standing committee of NA or NA	Second highest form of legislation
Decree	Central Government	To implement laws and ordinances; often supplemented by more detailed "Regulations"
Circular	Individual ministries	Clarifies how a ministry will implement a law, ordinance or decree
Official Letter	Individual ministries	Minor decision on implementation matters; not necessarily for public distribution
Guideline	Prime Minister	Not legal instruments; policy outlines indicating that governmental committees should be set up to deal with issues

Source: McCarthy 2001: 38

The Government Committee on Personnel and Equipment (GCOP) plays an influential though indirect role with regard to civil servants, as it designs the responsibilities, function, authority, and organizational structure of Ministries and other agencies under GoV. Furthermore, the GCOP is responsible for submitting plans to the Government and drafting laws and secondary regulations on issues such as “training and upgrading civil/public servants and members of the People’s Councils including rules and regulations on management, remuneration, reward, and punishment vis-à-vis civil/public servants, and administrators at communal, ward, and township levels” (McCarthy 2001:18).

Figure 1 shows the main political structures of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Figure 1: Legal and political structure of Vietnam



2.3 Recent Changes in the Legal Framework

Vietnam's legal framework is rapidly changing and becoming more complex. "The National Assembly (NA) and the NA Standing Committee have promulgated more laws and regulations in the last 15 years than during the preceding 40 years. This has created a new legal framework for a multi-sector socialist market economy that has steadily replaced the old centrally planned economy and laid the legal basis for comprehensive renovation of the country" (UNDP 2001: 9). These developments are part of Vietnam's ongoing renovation policy, known as 'Doi Moi', officially announced at the Sixth National Congress of the VCP in 1986. Whereas economic reforms have been far-reaching beyond doubt (WTO accession is expected in 2006), the scope of political reforms is less clear, and the VCP's claim to sole political power does not seem to be immediately threatened (Gainsborough 2002).

Vietnam's polity is a single party system, "where the Communist Party of Vietnam holds the monopoly of the political process and does not tolerate direct challenges to its authority" (Vietnam Country Strategy Paper 2002: 5) and is hardly reconcilable with Western ideals of a division of powers and a liberal, pluralistic political system¹¹. Reforms are mostly restricted to the economic sphere with the guiding image of a 'socialist-oriented market economy'. Politically, 'democratic centralism' continues to be the guiding image. Democratic centralism means that 1) dispute about political alternatives is an exclusively party-internal affair and once decisions have been taken they must be followed by all Party members and 2) lower ranks and local government agencies have to bow to decisions of higher ranks or government bodies. In line with the thesis of the predominance of democratic centralism are analyses which point to the importance of senior and retired army and Party members in articulating reform proposals and criticism concerning the abuse of power and positions in the state apparatus (Schönherr 2002: 12, 2003: 11, Amnesty International 2003).

However, this unchecked concentration of power invites its misuse. In accordance with external observers, the Vietnamese government acknowledges the problem of corruption within the state apparatus and the abuse of power-wielding positions. Spectacular cases of corruption as well as the NA sessions are now being aired on television and covered by other

¹¹ Human rights issues in particular are discussed controversially. For the current dispute, compare the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch websites and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' responses <http://www.mofa.gov.vn>; for an assessment of the situation after the 10th Party Congress in April 2006, see Thayer 2006.

mass media, a new phenomenon, which has been interpreted as a sign of slowly increasing transparency (Schönherr 2003; see also Abrami 2003).

So, while Western observers, following the paradigm of a liberal, multi-party democracy “often point out Vietnam’s totalitarian and authoritarian tendencies” (Zingerli 2004: 70), Vietnam has embarked on a project named ‘grass roots democratization’.

Decree 29 is known as the ‘Grassroots Democratization Decree’ (GRDD; decree 29/1998/ND-CP) and was promulgated in May 1998¹². It was followed by a Law on Complaints and Denunciations (Prohl et al. 2001) in December of that year. Now available studies on the results of and experience in implementing the GRDD are often based on a narrow empirical base (World Bank 2000, Prohl et al. 2001, Zingerli 2004), but agree on the difficulties in implementing decree 29 (Fritzen 2000, see also World Bank 2002). The World Bank states “province and district levels have not delegated management responsibility to the commune level” (World Bank 2002: 99). The reasons for slow change identified by these authors are civil servants’ habits and attitudes, top-down procedures, insufficient training and hence a lack of capacity among commune-level civil servants, a lack of incentives (career rewards) for civil servants to publish the commune budget or undertake participatory planning in line with the decree and the rather ceremonial nature of commune level People’s Councils.

Residency and migration: Together with economic liberalization, disparities in the possibilities for employment and making a living increased and so did numbers of internal migrants. Migration, once mainly state-led, is now increasingly spontaneous and uncontrolled. Between 1994 and 1999 mostly young people (especially the 20-24 year cohort) migrated. About 1.5 million moved from rural to rural areas; about 1.2 million migrated from the country to the city and only 0.4 million moved in the opposite direction (UNDP 2001: 35). Migrants must seek to obtain a residence permit and register in the area where they live as a precondition for obtaining work permits, for school admission and for access to the public health service. The link between the issuing of a residence permit and access to public services makes the issuing of residence permits a powerful policy instrument to control migration (Guest 1998).

¹² For an English translation and explication of the GRDD, see UNDP’s web pages <http://www.un.org.vn/donor/civil/index.htm>.

Guest argues for less such state involvement in the labor market and proposes “that in addition to strengthening the system of population registration, that the system of residence permits be eliminated” (Guest 1998).

Agricultural sector: The process of privatizing the agricultural sector began in the 1980s. Decree 100 (1981) allocated land-use rights of fields to households. Households still had to contribute a rice quota to the cooperatives but could keep the surplus. Resolution 10, issued by the VCP’s Political Bureau in 1988, continued the shift in control over agricultural production from cooperatives towards households. With resolution 10, households received longer-term use rights to land and the role of the cooperatives in the production process was reduced to service provision (Pham Quang Minh 2003: 327).

Another cornerstone of legal developments with a major impact on the agricultural sector is the 1993 Land Law, specified in several subsequent decrees (cf. Sikor 1999: 177). The law regulates the allocation of land use rights to individuals, households and state or private organizations. Under the new Land Law farmers can exchange, lease, inherit and pawn land use rights. Types of land as differentiated by the law are 1) agricultural and forestry land, 2) rural residential land, 3) urban land, 4) land for specialized use and 5) unused land. Land allocation was defined as comprising cadastral survey, mapping, title registration, and the issuance of land use right certificates. District governments are entitled to decide on issues concerning land allocation and administration.

Development policy and aid: Throughout the 1990s, the arena of development policy became crowded with foreign and international agencies. In 1999, 45 national donor agencies and 350 International Non-governmental Organizations were working in Vietnam (Wolff et al. 2002: 95). Bilateral cooperation in the form of Official Development Aid (ODA) is led by the Japanese JICA in terms of volume (321 Mio. US\$ in 2001; UNDP 2002: 5). While JICA is strongly involved in infrastructure development, the development of legal institutions and human resource development is a more prominent issue in the smaller bilateral programs of Britain’s DFID, Germany’s GTZ or Canada’s IDRC (see e.g. IDRC 1999). Several projects aim for capacity-building among local civil servants; e.g. the DFID/World Bank Northern Uplands Program or the GTZ Social Forestry Development Project, which developed participatory village planning processes for rural areas. IDRC was consulted during the process of drafting the new ‘Law on Science and Technology’.

Over the last few years, an increase in the number of agricultural research and development projects in the northern uplands can be observed. According to UNDP, out of 1189 rural development projects, over 300 were located in the Northern Mountain Region (NMR) (UNDP 2000:27).

The Asian Development Bank has compiled a list of 28 decisions, mainly secondary legislation, dating from 1989 to 1998 all of which aim specifically at mountain regions and their peoples (ADB 2002: 11). These policies often take the form of National Development Programs such as the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Program or Program 135. Program 135, usually referred to as the “Poorest Commune Program”, has been in operation since 1999. Its objective is to reduce poverty in the poorest parts of Vietnam. It has since its inception spent 308 million US\$ on new roads, electricity and water supplies, infirmaries and schools. (Vietnam News August 16, 2003). However, the amount of benefit to poor villages and individuals, which are not necessarily identical to poor communes, remains unclear.

This section has shown that, besides its one-party structure, the pace of socio-political change in Vietnam is rapid. The situation is hence increasingly complex and the consequences of change are difficult to assess. However, one constant is that international actors play an important role in the economy and the attempts to administrative reform. This holds true also for the history and current developments of the institutions of education.

3. Research and Higher Education

The focus of this section is on the organization of research and higher education; central pillars of the Science and Technology (S&T) system. In order to perform, the national S&T system needs a ‘knowledge environment’ in at least two spheres. First of all, primary and secondary education needs to function and supply well-trained students to become future researchers. Secondly, a knowledgeable recipient population, including administrators, extensionists and common citizens who can use and translate scientific findings into improved practice.

In the fall of 2003, at the beginning of the Vietnamese school year, newspapers reported that the number of enrolled students was close to 22 million, equivalent to nearly 30% of the total population. This figure includes 178,000 college and 838,500 university students besides students in pre-, primary and secondary schools. The corresponding number of teachers is 856,440, and a shortage of 50,000 teachers is contended (Vietnam News, 05.09.2003).

It is widely recognized that Vietnam has achieved high enrolment rates and high literacy rates (e.g. UNDP 2001: 37). Yet, Vietnam's public investment into education has been comparably low during the 1990s. Consequent of generalized scarce funds are low wages for teachers and limited availability of didactic materials such as textbooks, pens and notebooks. Both indicators are especially low in remote regions such as the Central Highlands and the NMR (World Bank 2002).

An official from the Ministry of Education and Training adds to the picture by calling attention to the need of constantly improving two concurrent and mutually enforcing processes: learning and teaching. He notes that 40,000 junior secondary teachers "will have to be re-trained" and, adding the center/periphery dimension, "government incentives have not been enough to attract good teachers to remote areas, or keep them there for the long-term" (Vietnam News, 03.09.03).

3.1 History

Knowledge and education are traditionally highly valued in Vietnamese culture. The tradition of Vietnamese higher education reaches back to 1076, when the first National University was built close by the temple of literature in Hanoi. Until 1779, Doctoral candidates were instructed in Chinese Han script, Confucian literature and values, and statecraft. After the final examinations, doctoral laureates could take part in the royal examinations to qualify for positions at the court or become mandarins and govern provinces. Doctoral laureates who did not take part in the royal examinations often worked as (village) teachers after graduation. In the Sino-Vietnamese tradition of higher education, the artistic and the practical were conceived as belonging together and were closely intertwined by placing education firmly at the service of the state:

"Literature and public service were not distinct realm in traditional Vietnam. Poets contributed to the economic life of their times by bringing high-yielding maize from China, improving techniques for silk weaving and reed mat weaving, and developing a system of irrigation canals. Many of the most brilliant statesmen and diplomats were also poets." (Huu Ngoc and Lady Burton 2004: 21).

However, traditional higher education was exclusively reserved for a small group of male, upper-class individuals and hence only absorbed a tiny fraction of learners. Most children and adolescents were educated in village schools, where most decisions concerning teaching contents and methods were in the hands of the individual teacher. This pattern of an elitist

court (or high) culture and education on the one hand and village schools and folk culture on the other parallels the traditional dual structure of law (statutory/Confucian versus customary/village), mentioned in section 2.1 (see also Taylor (2003) for a related discussion of the differences and the construction thereof between Vietnamese folk religion and ‘high’ culture and beliefs).

Higher education in colonial Vietnam was organized following the French model. Thereby, Western forms of organizing education, such as modern universities and colleges and the break down of study areas such as law, medicine, engineering, etc. were introduced to Vietnam. While Western style education initially was employed to serve the colonial interest, later on the Vietnamese independence movement took up elements of it for their own cause. In the beginning of the 20th century, a group of Vietnamese intellectuals, called ‘Dong Kinh’ movement, rejected the elitist and traditional system of literary education. Instead, Dong Kinh propagated a modern, natural science oriented program of education, free of charge for Vietnamese men and women and the use of a romanized Vietnamese script (‘quoc ngu’):

“They [Dong Kinh] took on themselves the task of illuminating the Vietnamese on the importance of learning science and technology. They nourished the zeal for modern education. In the eyes of Dong Kinh supporters, the Vietnamese had to use the science of the West –not the literary erudition of former times- if they were to liberate themselves from the grip of the West.” (Hoa Phuong Tran 1998: 184)

The American influence on South Vietnam’s education system until 1975 will not be detailed here, but the Soviet influence since the 1950s needs some elaboration due to its significant impacts on higher education in Vietnam. Elements, which were taken and adapted from the USSR include curricula, a focus on natural science and engineering, the concentration of research not in universities, but in State Research Institutes and the adoption of Marxist-Leninist doctrines as the exclusive base of the social and political sciences. In other words, “a new model of universities which was similar to those in the former Soviet Union was set up for training cadres to serve the planning centralized economy” (Ministry of Education and Training 2000: 36).

Since 1975, the national higher education system has been subject to many changes in nomenclature, responsibilities and procedures. Attempts to democratization did not stop before universities’ gates but have also not succeeded straightforwardly. For example, the

election of university rectors by staff and students, introduced in 1987, was abolished again in the early 1990s (St. George 2003: 186).

Since the 1990s, radical changes are occurring also in the domain of foreign influences on Vietnam's higher education. While dominant in the foreign book sections for three decades, Russian language textbooks are since the late 1980s being rapidly replaced, mostly by translated books or books in English language. Non-existent until recently, training in Western countries and contacts with Western scientists has now practically replaced the old personal and institutional bounds with Socialist countries (cf. Hoa Phuong Tran: 201 ff.).

3.2 Formal Structures of Higher Education in Agriculture

Currently, three main state bodies are responsible for nationwide higher education matters such as the design of new curricula, credits necessary for graduation, the breakdown of knowledge areas and the establishment of new majors; “[...] all three principal central state bodies responsible for education (VCP, National Assembly and the MOET [Ministry of Education and Training]) must all approve new proposals before they can be implemented. Although the MOET usually 'raises and drafts' policy on education, it must then seek approval from the VCP Committee for Science and Education, and the National Assembly Committee for Culture, Education and Youth, leading to long delays in implementation” (St. George 2003: 174).

According to IDRC (1999), the organizational setup in Vietnam for research and development (R&D) can be divided into three main components:

A) Laboratories and other R&D units within the government ministries or under the control of government agencies

B) Some university and higher-education departments that perform research as part of their normal activities

C) National institutions that are not directly under an individual government ministry or agency (e.g. National Center for Science and Technology and the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities)

The Uplands Program co-operates with agencies under categories A) and B). Partners from category A) are the Vietnam Agricultural Science Institute (VASI) and the National Institute for Animal Husbandry (NIAH); partners from category B) are the Hanoi Agricultural

University Number 1 (HAU) and the Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF). HAU and TUAF's primary mandate is teaching; the personnel, equipment, libraries and other resources to conduct research are very scarce. Both agencies are under the Ministry of Education and Training. Scientific research institutes such as VASI and NIAH are organized under line ministries - the Ministry of Agriculture in both cases. Their main mandate is to conduct research, whereas training is done only at the M.Sc. and Ph.D. levels. All four organizations have a high number of international partners in common; a brochure issued by HAU, for example, lists over 40 universities and research institutes from 16 countries. Established in 1956, HAU is the oldest and also the largest agricultural research organization in Vietnam. Table 2 provides an overview of the human resources, course formats and the structure of knowledge areas (faculties) of HAU.

Table 2: Staff, teaching, and organization of Hanoi Agricultural University

Number of teaching staff	500
Number of Ph.D. degree holders	128
Number of Professors and Associate Professors	92
Annual Student Admission	2000
Regular System (B.Sc. Degree)	1,500
In-service system (B.Sc. Degree)	500-600
Masters Degree Program	100
Doctoral Degree Program	50-70
Faculties	Agronomy, Animal husbandry and veterinary science, Post-harvest technology and Food processing, Technical teachers training, Agricultural engineering and electricity, Economics and rural development, Land and water resources management, In-service training, Human and social sciences, Postgraduate studies, In-service training (Total: 10)

Sources: Website of HAU and brochure issued by the organization; numbers as of 2000

In-service training refers to universities' mandate to offer B.Sc.-level courses to the public as well as public servants of district towns and their surrounding communes and villages. University teachers therefore have to travel to the hinterland districts on a regular basis to teach close to the in-service students' residential areas.

3.3 Recent Developments

According to the IDRC, agriculture, forestry and fisheries are relatively neglected in the national S&T-strategy as compared to the priority areas of information technology, biotechnology, new materials, and automation (IDRC 1999, chapter 12). The scale of the challenge ahead of university-based agricultural research in Vietnam becomes visible only if two factors are considered together: 1) The secondary importance of agricultural research in Vietnam's overall research strategy and taking into account that 2) "only very slowly, step by step, is a research-based university system in Vietnam starting to emerge" (IDRC 1999, chapter 5).

Institutional framework: Just as the overall politico-economic system of Vietnam, the organizational and legal frameworks of science are changing, too. On the ministry level, the former Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (MOSTE) has been renamed in 2002 and restructured as the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST). The current legal framework for research is the "Law on Science and Technology", passed on June 9th, 2000 by the National Assembly and promulgated by the State President, going into effect January 1st, 2001.

Not surprisingly, an expansion of concepts and forces of the market economy into higher education can also be observed. Instead of training 'cadres for the centralized planning economy', now more and more courses are created and designed to meet the demand of the labor market and hence 'produce' a skilled labor force for the emerging private sector. In addition, private universities and colleges, together with fee-paying courses in public universities currently make up nearly 50% of students enrolled in higher education (cf. Hoa Phuong Tran, 1998: 208ff).

Agriculture: At VASI and TUAF, newly established departments indicate an increase in the attention paid to the upland regions: The Northern Mountain Research Center (NOMARC) at VASI has set up facilities in Yen Bai province. Another example is the Agro-forestry research and development center for the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam at TUAF.

International research activities are also increasing in the NMR. An example comparable to The Uplands Program is the French-Vietnamese¹³ Mountain Agrarian Systems Program (SAM), active in Bac Kan province since 1998 (for a summary of SAM results to date see Castella and Dang Dinh Quang 2002).

The age structure of University employees is worthy of attention, due to university staff's high average age of 57 years. (Ho-Kyoung Kang 2001:12, data from 1997). The retirement age is 55 for women and 60 for men, so a significant turnover in personnel will take place over the next few years. This turnover will replace the age group of those still in leading positions, who almost without exception received their graduate and post-graduate training in formerly socialist countries, such as the USSR, China, Bulgaria, or the German Democratic Republic. With this turnover of personnel, a new generation with a very different educational and experiential background will take over. The experiences brought home by the young academics that studied and currently study in countries such as the USA, Australia, Thailand or the Philippines will certainly be very diverse. Maybe the shared characteristics of this new generation's knowledge will become apparent only as difference against the background of the orientations of their predecessors, trained in socialist countries.

3.4 Working Conditions

The problem of scarce financial and material resources in Vietnamese universities is obvious; salaries of university staff are low, and libraries and laboratory facilities are ill equipped. Even a first-time visitor who takes an attentive look at the buildings and office equipment of Vietnamese universities perceives the precarious state of affairs. Considering that a professor's regular monthly salary is below 100US\$, leads to the more fundamental question of incentives for civil servants in general. I follow McCarthy's complaint that: "At present, the salaries paid to civil servants are so out of alignment with the economic realities of Vietnam that, regardless of the relevant regulations, nearly all civil servants need to augment their wages with supplementary sources of income." (McCarthy 2001:23).

In this regard, the situation in Vietnam's research organizations is reminiscent to that described by Rahmat M. Samik-Ibrahim (2000) for Indonesia.

¹³ VASI is the main cooperating partner on the Vietnamese side.

He argues that the obstacles to and characteristics of research in a developing country are a “lack of funding, less productivity, low effectivity/efficiency” as well as a lack of collaboration among researchers. Another crucial constraint is access to literature; “[...] researchers in developing countries find that some of the most frustrating problems they face are in the library, not the laboratory.” Given scant libraries, researchers have less access to the traditional channel of print publications. Moreover, ‘publish or perish’ has not become a norm. There is less pressure to publish as compared to industrialized countries, since employment and tenure are not so strongly influenced by this activity. It is not uncommon that the thesis/final project becomes the only major publication in the whole career of a researcher. Since researchers are most often under-paid by their organizations, ‘survive or perish’ becomes the way of life by juggling many unrelated activities at once.

Many Vietnamese university teachers and researchers at research institutes behave according to this description: juggling several jobs at one time, mostly publishing few scientific articles or books. In addition, topics often seem to be dictated by (foreign) projects instead of being derived from own past research and own research programs. Because foreign funded (development) projects are esteemed employers for academics, considerable part of the work is not academic research but consultancy work for development programs (cf. St. George 2003: 327). According to a Vietnamese head of faculty, however, the university management positively encourages such leaves from university duties. Because this kind of temporary employment is seen as improving the teachers’ base of experience, their language and methodological skills and, of course, supplementing their income.

Agricultural research in Vietnam was and is mainly focused on lowland areas and related topics; traditionally research into the uplands and their ethnic minority populations has been the domain of anthropologists. But since about the mid 1990s, increasingly also agricultural research is being conducted there (see e.g. Tran Duc Vien and Pham Thi Huong (2001), Tran Duc Vien (2005)). The following section discusses some areas that make Vietnam’s uplands a region with particular challenges for not only for foreign, but also Vietnamese agricultural researchers.

4. The Uplands: Distant in Space and Time

The views which plains people or lowland, national majorities hold about the mountain, indigenous, ethnic or hill tribe minorities in Southeast Asia can be understood as finding

‘them’ distant across both space and time (Jamaree Chiengtong 2003: 152). Despite Vietnam’s continued and targeted efforts to ‘develop’ the upland regions and their (mostly minority) inhabitants, many challenges remain. Repeatedly, development policies have been observed to be not particularly sensitive to and appropriate for local cultures (Wandel 1997, ADB 2002, Le Trong Cuc 2003, Salemink 2003, Duncan 2004).

87 per cent of Vietnam’s population is ethnic Vietnamese, and only in the 20th century did significant numbers of Kinh migrate from paddy-cultivating lowland and delta areas to the upland regions of Northern and Central Vietnam. The uplands were and are home to 50 out of Vietnam’s officially 53 ethnic minority groups (Khong Dien 2002: 28), and more than thirty ethnic groups live in the Northern region (Michaud 2000: 54).

This section begins with a historical sketch of Northern upland Vietnam, and then provides descriptions of the current socio-economic situation and population dynamics. Finally, the cultural marginality of the Northern Mountain Region in relation to ‘lowland Vietnam’ as manifest in the notion of the backwardness of ethnic minority uplanders is discussed - the uplands: distant in time.

For the most part, I bracket the situation in the Central Highlands. Son La province will serve as a preferred example of Northern mountainous Vietnam, since most of The Uplands Program’s empirical studies are conducted in this province.

4.1 History of Northern Upland Vietnam

It is believed that Tai migrants coming from Southern China, some 700-800 years ago, first populated Vietnam’s Northern uplands. Prior to the 1880s, when France officially annexed the region, the Tai people (including the Thai and Tay according to the current Vietnamese nomenclature¹⁴) were the dominant group. In the 19th century, the region was frequently invaded by wandering rebel groups from Southern China (Yunnan and Guangxi) and occasionally imperial Vietnamese military parties were sent in to restore order (Michaud 2000: 54).

The Tai were organized in principalities called ‘muong’, displaying a strictly hierarchical class structure. The classes included noble rulers, public servants and commoners who had to

¹⁴ Cf. Dang Nghiem Van (2001); see Keyes (2002) for a critical account of the ‘scientific’ project of naming ethnic groups, based on the cases of China, Thailand and Vietnam.

supply rice and labor. At the bottom of the social ladder were slaves belonging to other ethnic groups who served at the rulers' houses (Pattiya Jimreivat 2002: 150).

These Tai principalities, since the 17th century were organized in a federation called the *Sipsongchutai* (Federation of Twelve Tai Cantons; geographically equivalent to the upper valley of the Black River). Over time, the local chiefs of the Sipsongchutai paid tribute to different courts (Luang Phrabang, Burma, China) and finally to Hue (Michaud 2000: 53-54). However, outside-domination was consolidated only by the French colonial and later by the Vietnamese postcolonial state administrations.

Smaller ethnic groups such as the Hmong immigrated to the region at later dates (most Hmong arrived between mid 19th and early 20th century) and settled at higher altitudes and in more isolated villages, where they continue to live. Historically, the outreach of Vietnamese law into mountain regions was limited and, according to SarDesai, "the Montagnards¹⁵ have never displayed a high regard for the law and government of the plains people" (1998: 5). However, especially since Vietnam's wars for national independence, highlanders in the Northern and Central Highlands have become increasingly entangled with the Vietnamese state. The military support route 'Ho Chi Minh Trail,' which went through the Central Highlands, and the fall of the last French bastion at Dien Bien Phu (1954) in the North are only the two most prominent examples of the strategic importance of minority territory and minority support to the cause of Vietnamese independence. Hence, ethnic minorities played a crucial role in Vietnam's struggle for independence. Accordingly, since its foundation in 1930, the Indochinese Communist Party promoted a unity-in-diversity approach, which promoted minorities' cultures and customs while at the same time incorporating them in the anti colonial military operations (Mc Elwee 2004: 191). The final defeat of French troops in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu could only be accomplished with the help of the local Black Thai, Hmong and other ethnic groups. The subsequent proclamation of the "Tai-Meo¹⁶ Autonomous Area" in 1955 can be seen as an early post colonial attempt to reward the minorities' contribution to national independence and to grant a certain amount of autonomy to minority

¹⁵ The use of the term 'montagnard' is contested for its colonial and pejorative connotations and is used inconsistently. Usually it is used as a container term for the autochthonous peoples of the Central Highlands (cf. Salemink 1991). Michaud (2000) however, applies it to the ethnic groups of Central and Northern upland Vietnam.

¹⁶ Meo or Miao has been used as an ethnonym for the Hmong people in China and Vietnam. Due to its pejorative connotations, the official name was changed to Hmong in the 1979 official listing of Vietnam's ethnic groups and has since been the commonly used ethnonym (Khong Dien: 19).

peoples. The Tai-Meo Autonomous Area only lasted from 1955 to 1959 because of the state's difficulty in controlling the area and the danger of separatism (Rändchen 1996: 87). Since 1975, the region is integrated into the Vietnamese state as Son La and Lai Chau provinces.

During the American War, support for the North Vietnamese National Liberation Front by minorities from the Central Highlands was an important factor for the North Vietnamese victory over the South (Mc Elwee 2004: 192 ff.).

4.2 Socio-economic Characteristics of the Northern Mountain Region

As a whole, the Northern Mountain Region (see Annex 2 and 4) and ethnic minority groups continue to be among the poorest and least developed of Vietnam, as shown in UNDP's Vietnam Human Development Report 2001. The southern province Ba Ria-Vung Tau occupies the first rank in terms of Human Development Index. However, as most of this southern province's GDP comes from oil and gas revenues that accrue largely to the central Government, this rank says little about the living conditions of the province's inhabitants. The metropolitan areas of Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Da Nang follow on the top HDI ranks, whereas most of the lowest ranks are occupied by provinces in the Northern uplands (UNDP 2001: 88). The discrepancy and specific challenges for ethnic minorities arise from "remoteness, inadequate infrastructure and physical and social isolation" as well as under-representation in local administrations (Wolff et al. 2002: 23). Son La now occupies the fifth-lowest place in UNDP's Human Development Indicator ranking (UNDP, 2001: 89; Annex 2) but also occupies a special position in Vietnam's overall development strategy due to the building of a new hydro-power dam near to Son La town.

The economy of the NMR is predominantly agrarian and farmers' livelihoods are based on a broad spectrum of agricultural and forestry activities. Irrigated paddies are used intensively and bear one to two rice yields per year. Upland areas are mainly under maize, to a smaller degree under cassava, and, with a decreasing tendency under upland rice. More recently, industrial crops such as sugarcane and cotton are produced on larger scales under contract schemes with processing companies. Fruits such as banana, mango, lychee and plums are cultivated and marketed on a small scale by many households. Large ruminants serve as a source of cash income (predominantly cattle) or as draught animals (mostly buffaloes). Other animals such as pigs, goats, chicken and fish are raised both for home consumption and for sale.

The Tai held and still hold a rather privileged position among the region's ethnic groups in terms of power through political representation and relative cultural closeness to the Kinh, and in terms of the economically advantageous location of Tai villages in centrally located, water-rich valley bottoms. Generally, Hmong villages are less connected to infrastructure and markets, but they also seem to suffer less from land scarcity, a common feature in the valleys (Friederichsen 1999). Hence, typical land use patterns can be explained by ecological conditions and market access and associated to different ethnic groups. Thai, Tay, Muong and Kinh people's farming systems are usually based on paddy rice and often include several marketable crops such as maize, vegetables, fruits and industrial crops. Furthermore, aquaculture is a typical feature of these valley bottom production systems. Ethnic groups who tend to inhabit higher altitudes, such as the Hmong, Kho Mu or Xinh Mun are usually more restricted in their choice of crops and most of the area is under maize and upland rice. Whereas opium substitution programs introduced fruit production (mainly to the Hmong), the marketing of fruits and of other perishable products is often hampered by the precarious conditions of roads.

Geographically, the Northern Mountain region is characterized by a marginal but strategically important position (bordering Laos and China) and mainly mountainous terrain, mostly between 300-1000 m.a.s.l. This relief allows for the construction of hydropower dams such as the Hoa Binh dam and the Son La dam; the construction of the latter is to be initiated in 2005. To allow access to the new dam also with large vehicles, impressive construction works along National Highway No. 6 between Hoa Binh and Son La are under way and will affect the whole Northwestern area. At the same time, comparably small but numerous infrastructure projects are rapidly making ever more villages accessible by car and truck.

4.3 Population Dynamics in the Northern Mountain Region

As a combined result of in-migration from the densely populated lowlands and autochthonous local population growth, the NMR has experienced an increase in population of 300% between 1960 and 1984 (Jamieson 1998: 10).

Under the central government's resettlement policies, between 5 and 6 million people (were) moved from the lowland to upland regions between the 1960s and 1990s in order to exploit 'unused' land, forest and other resources (ADB 2002: 10; Pfoffenberger 1998). Of these, roughly 2 million settlers immigrated into the NMR. From the 1960s onwards, New

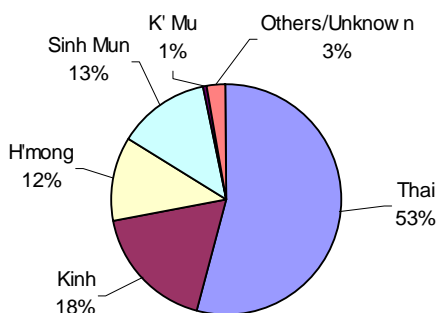
Economic Zones were organized in the form of state agricultural and forest enterprises and newly founded villages. Settlers included government staff, soldiers demobilized after the war of resistance against the French, Kinh migrants from densely populated northern lowland villages and ethnic minority groups. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the focus shifted from planned to spontaneous migration and the focus of Kinh migrants' destinations shifted from the NMR to the Central Highlands that were booming economically due to coffee cultivation (cf. Salemink 2003).

The highest annual population growth rates at the national level occurred between the 1950s and 1970s and reached up to 3.8%. Family planning policies and the widespread adoption of birth control measures by women has since the 1980s led to decreasing population growth rates (1.35% in 2001; Khong Dien 2002: 136). Yet, continuing population growth is a factor to be reckoned with in the future, especially in the NMR where over 40% of the population is under 14 years old and hence “the population will almost certainly double again in little more than twenty years” (Rambo and Jamieson 2003: 147). In the NMR and according to ethnic group, the share of population under 14 years varies strongly. The lowest value in 1992 was found among the Kinh (33%), followed by the Thai (40%) and championed by the Hmong (46%; Khong Dien 2002: 109, 112).

In addition, policies aiming at the sedentarization of shifting cultivators influenced population dynamics. Sedentarization plays a prominent role among the policies dealing with minority issues and are illustrative of the related discourse. In 1968, resolution No. 38 was issued by the council of ministers: “This 1968 law was aimed at combining sedentarization with collectivization, resolving the problems of nomadic farming and forest destruction at the same time. The resolution had three clear objectives: to achieve stable livelihoods, stable mind-frames, and ethnic unity.” (Khong Dien, 2002: 93). By 1998, 3.8 million people had been resettled through that program. Since sedentarization was also considered a means to achieve poverty reduction in the mountainous regions, each household was entitled to receive 3.5 million VND besides other support (extension, training, etc.) to establish a livelihood as fixed cultivator. Since 1998, these activities are part of program 135 (ADB 2002: 12). However, planned resettlement remains a problematic issue in the NMR. Due to the construction of the new hydro-power dam close to Son La, more than 90,000 people will be resettled in the coming years (Vietnam News August 23, 2003) and it remains to be seen how easily they will be able to adapt to their new environments.

In sum, relocations of a significant scale continue to occur and the growing multi-ethnic population of the NMR provinces shows an increasing share of Kinh people. The shares of Yen Chau district's (Son La province) main ethnic groups are shown in figure 2. As can be seen, the Black Thai continue to be the majority ethnic group, but are now followed in numbers by the Kinh.

Figure 2: Ethnic groups of Yen Chau District



Source: Luibrand 2001: 44

4.4 The Knowledge Environment in the NMR

Most children receive basic education in their home villages. Traveling to or boarding in commune and district centers are common options for secondary education. These secondary and boarding schools are usually located in the district centers. Since 1975, the language of instruction has been Vietnamese. Teaching in minority languages has been formally allowed since 1993 (Rändchen, 1992: 87), but does not take place to my knowledge. Teachers are mostly lowland Kinh and often stay in mountain villages for a limited time only. Hence, close ties and an intimate mutual understanding between villagers and teachers must be considered the exception rather than the rule.

Nevertheless, rapid increases in primary and to a lesser degree secondary school enrolment, especially in the NMR and Central Highland regions, has been documented recently (Nguyen Nguyet Nga 2002, see Annex 3). The figures also indicate, that the current gap in enrolment rates between urban and rural areas is as severe as that between lowland and highland areas.

4.5 The State on the Local Level

Local state administration at the district and –as the lowest administrative level– communal levels extend even into the most remote areas of the NMR. As indicated in figure 1, the executive organs are under the People’s committee. Although the People’s councils elect the People’s Committees and have a supervisory role in theory; in practice their role seems to be ‘rather ceremonial’. Party cells are present on all levels (including most villages) and must be considered a, if not *the*, most powerful organization.

District and commune level: Recent research into the implementation of the grass roots decree in two communes of Bac Kan province indicates that several factors determine the scope for democratic participation in mountain communes (Zingerli 2004). While the government speaks of ‘perfecting democracy’, Zingerli finds the implementation of the grass roots democracy decree following a top down manner; hence a contradiction in itself. She also points to the importance of communication between government officials and citizens and claims that information about policies is prone to being monopolized by officials and not available to most citizens. Considered ignorant by officials, citizens then are also often not interested to actively participate in the political process. Furthermore, democratization occurs under more or less enabling conditions. In one of the studied communes, flexible arrangements between villagers and the state could be worked out, while in the second example, central interests were stronger and political participation much more restrained. In that case, central government’s decisions to enforce nature conservation undermined the local political process. Summarizing Zingerli’s analysis, the space for grass roots democracy and arrangements between statutory and customary law in a given locality is greater if the interest of central government in that location is less.

The main offices to support the agricultural sector are the veterinary office, plant protection office, and the agricultural extension office. The district Agricultural Extension Office in Yen Chau has to cover 14 communes (ca. 60,000 people) with 19 extensionists. It cooperates with the World Bank, GTZ and other international organizations in areas such as ‘participatory village planning’, ‘land use planning’ and ‘training of trainers’ (cf. Social Forestry Development Project 2004). The main activities carried out by the extension service are the conduct of trainings for farmers and the set up of demonstration plots in order to disseminate agricultural techniques related to newly introduced and improved crop varieties or crops. However, the actual influence of the extension service on farmers’ activities is unclear. It

should not be overestimated, since the available financial and human resources are very scarce. In addition, extension workers are present down to the commune level only since around the year 2000 and even today, factual presence and effective work of extensionists is mostly concentrated along major roads and the more centrally located communes.

Village level: Sikor (1999: 63ff.) describes the situation in early 20th century Black Thai villages as defined by customary rules and characterized by a high degree of village autonomy. Today, autonomy is reduced and customary law co-exists with statutory law. In any village, one will find a number of formal and widely standardized posts and organizations. Each village has a village headman who is elected by the residents and not appointed by the administration. He (no female village head is known to me) does not enjoy the status of a public servant but earns a monthly ‘compensation’ of up to 100,000 VND. The second remunerated position is that of the village ‘policeman’. In many villages, one also finds one or several Party members who are usually rather powerful individuals due to their position, connections to actors outside the village, and privileged access to information.

An important element of the political system of Vietnam is the national network of unions, called mass organizations, under the Vietnam Fatherland Front. The unions are important because they assure the diffusion of central Party policy all the way to the individual level and hence link the state to the everyday lives of citizens. Each union caters for a specific type of citizen such as “women”, “youth”, or “farmers” and each one spans from the national to the village level. Facilitated by this system of unions, at least some policies could be implemented very effectively. After massive campaigning and implementation of medical birth control, family planning is now widely accepted (cf. Poverty Task Force 2002: 11-12). Policy implementation is facilitated, because in the overwhelming majority of farm households at least one family member is a member of either the Farmers Union, Veterans Union, Youth Union, or Women’s Union (cf. Theesfeld 2000: 3). For the sake of brevity only the tasks of the Women’s Union (WU) shall be treated in this section. Leaders of the WU manage a range of tasks in one or several villages. The main responsibility to which village leaders refer is “to disseminate policies” which they receive from the commune. Central among these are family planning policies. The task of the village leader then is to “manage family planning” by for example distributing and advising villagers on the choice and appropriate use of contraceptives. Furthermore, village WU leaders reported that they were responsible for registering deaths, births and people moving in or out of the villages. Credit funds are

typically set up from member's contributions and managed by the WU leader. In many Black Thai villages, WU leaders also act as contact person for a commercial cotton company who wants to introduce a new cotton variety in the village.

A network of organizations that reaches from the national level down into all villages is hence in place and assures the dissemination and implementation of Party policies. To which degree different policies govern local people's lives is often difficult to assess, since in public discourse villagers tend to present the situation 'as it ought to be', hence replicating Party discourse rather than local practice. Few in-depth studies have been published to date about the complex interplay between and the relative importance of formal and informal rules. The new land law is a case in point to demonstrate the complexity of institutional change in the uplands.

4.6 Institutional Change on the Village Level

In 1994, one year after a new Land Law was issued, a General Department of Land Administration was created in Son La, offices were set up at the provincial and district levels, and one cadre was assigned to monitor the implementation at the commune level (cf. Sikor 1999: 179).

Agricultural production is most people's main source of income in the NMR, and upland fields on often very steep hillsides occupy most of the agricultural land area. In the NMR, the most important land types are agricultural land planted with annual crops and forestry land. Beneficiaries were entitled to use the land for 20 and 50 years respectively. Furthermore, tax obligations were regularized in the Land Law and specified for upland and paddy areas. Tax obligations are now based on the size of the land holding (maximum 2 ha crop land) and independent of whether or not the area was cultivated in a given year.

Based on a study in three Black Thai villages in Yen Chau district, Sikor (1999: 180) shows that the borders of upland fields vary from year to year according to the labor availability within households. Hence, he concludes, "the Law conflicted with the fluidity of households' uplands holdings as it was based on the assumption that field boundaries were relatively fixed".

With regards to agrarian change in Black Thai villages of Yen Chau, Sikor (2002: 85) argues that while the commercialization of agriculture over the last decades lead to the emergence of markets for agricultural products, inputs and consumer goods, it did not create markets for

land and labor in the same scope. Inequality between households did increase but the main underlying processes (increasing wealth over the life cycle) remain stable. The shift from collective to individual control over agriculture at the local level happens slower than national policy would have it. In summary: 1) local institutions endure, 2) policies are domesticated through the cohesion and autonomy of villages and 3) vertical cleavages between villagers and the state are common.

4.7 ... Distant in Time

The idea of distance in time is based on the view of a single, linear and evolutionary path of development. Following the Kinh on this path, minorities are seen as having to catch up with development. The concern for minority issues has been institutionalized in the government's Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas, the National Assembly's Ethnic Council and numerous laws, policies and programs which intend to directly or indirectly promote minority interests (for a list of related policies and programs, see ADB 2002: 11; see Tran Duc Vien and Pham Thi Huong (2001) for case studies of policy implementation and outcomes).

The following quote from a document issued by a provincial 'Office of Fixed Settlement, Fixed Cultivation and Migration' in 2000 shows how 'modern', lowland, Kinh culture and agricultural practices are promoted and taken as the point of reference for minority people. In this discourse, minority people appear, above all, as passive recipients of development efforts, as destroyers of nature and as people who have to change their way of living:

“The Fixed Settlement and Cultivation work has contributed to the limitation of deforestation for cultivation, and the living standard of the ethnic minorities has dramatically improved. It has stabilized their lives. It is an appropriate policy that meets people's wishes. It presents an opportunity to exploit local natural resources and introduces ethnic minorities to new and scientific methods of production. Fixed Settlement and Cultivation has provided the province with conditions to improve agroforestry profitability, and at the same time restore the environment. The Fixed Settlement and Cultivation policy has mobilized people to divide extended households into nuclear units and set up home gardens. It provides support with accommodation and organizes the communities in a new cultural style. The ethnic minorities have stopped nomadic grazing and started using manure for cultivation of

rice and other staples, and they have clean water for a more hygienic lifestyle.“

(cited from ADB 2002:12)

Jamieson (1995: 365) criticizes this mindset as Kinh ethnocentrism. Ethnic minorities, depicted as living “free in the forest” should “settle down to live in the valleys to grow food and industrial crops instead of continuing their unstable nomadic way of life on the mountain tops”; hence, traditional ways of life are devalued, and integration into industrial modernity are promoted, along with the implicit demand to adopt a way of life that resembles that of the Kinh. The discourse of scientists and government officials alike is mostly couched in the language of ‘transferring knowledge and technology to minority people’ in order to ‘improve their livelihoods’. Progress, modernity, (scientific) knowledge and ultimately superiority in this discourse are attributed to Kinh whereas the opposites apply to mountain peoples.

Jamaree Chiengtong’s observation that minority peoples (in Thailand) were depicted as “people who were left behind, who could not catch up with modern civilization” and, worse still, “refused civilization” however, has to be adapted for Northern Vietnam. While it can be asserted that minority peoples are generally felt to be distant in time, most often Kinh people differentiate between ethnic groups: Thai, Tay and Muong peoples are considered culturally closer and more developed, whereas groups such as the Hmong and Dao are considered very distant and underdeveloped. Furthermore, rapid changes in minority people’s living conditions have been observed.

“Those among ethnic minority groups who want to preserve traditional values and lifestyles will come under severe pressure from the surrounding community and their prospects [...] are bleak.

On the other hand, those individuals and groups which see merit in education, health services, trade and material wealth and prosperity will find that *doi moi* is providing unprecedented opportunities.” (Wandel 1997: 486)

And, despite general disadvantages, individuals of minority descent have reached highest positions in Vietnam. An example is Nong Duc Manh who is an ethnic Tay and General Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party since 2001.

5. Conclusions

This paper sought to convey a sense of the dynamics, which currently transform Vietnam. In order to understand and successfully act in this dynamic environment, it has suggested that

analysts should familiarize themselves with long-term historical developments as well as current issues in political, economic and cultural life¹⁷.

Some major themes concerning Vietnam's uplands have been raised that make this region a particularly complex area for research. In particular, the classical Vietnamese theme of the dualism between the formal and the customary domains challenges the analyst to understand a situation where structures in both domains are highly dynamic and increasingly intertwined. Considering furthermore, that on the local level, 'the king's law', read formal, centrally defined institutions are only effective to the locally determined and bargained extent brings local and customary rules to the forefront. Plenty of work remains to be done in this subject area. Scientists are still a long way from adequately understanding and spelling out what the local-central interplay means for different domains of regulation, for each of the over 50 minority groups living in the Northern uplands, and for each of their specific ecological and social environments. For this undertaking, the cross-cultural interplay between lowland and upland peoples, constitutes a challenge on the level of analysis (how do government regulations relate to ethnic social institutions?) as well as on the level of field work (how does translation into Vietnamese language and the presence of ethnic Vietnamese influence data collection?).

In the extension of (agricultural) research into the uplands, foreigners play a considerable role as donors as well as field workers, conducting empirical research. Since foreign field researchers, in most cases depend heavily on lowland people's and local authorities' support for data collection, field research typically occurs in a cross-cultural triangle. This triangle includes Vietnamese lowlanders, upland minority people and foreigners. This constellation is challenging, but can also be seen as an opportunity to overcome deadlocks of culturally one-sided knowledge. A central challenge and opportunity of this work context is to review one's own views and cultural biases, to question existing stereotypes and misconceptions, and finally, to communicate findings to the diverse local stakeholders.

¹⁷ Several edited collections have recently been published that provide an overview over current debates among Vietnam scholars: Hy V. Luong (2003), Kerkvliet and Heng (2003), Kerkvliet and Marr (2004), Beresford and Tran Ngoc Angie (2004), McCargo (2004), Taylor (2004).

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Annex 1: Central Government Ministries and Agencies

Ministries

1. Ministry of Justice
2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
3. Ministry of Planning and Investment
4. Ministry of Industry
5. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
6. Ministry of Fishery
7. Ministry of Trade
8. Ministry of Construction
9. Ministry of Transport
10. Ministry of Science and Technology
11. Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs
12. Ministry of Culture and Information
13. Ministry of Education and Training
14. Ministry of Health
15. Ministry of Finance
16. Ministry of Defence
17. Ministry of Police
18. Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (founded 2002)
19. Ministry of the Interior (founded 2002)
20. Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (founded 2002)
21. State Bank
22. State Inspection
23. Committee on Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas
24. Government Committee on Organization and Personnel
25. Office of the Government

Other agencies

26. General Department of Post and Telecommunication
27. General Department of Tourism
28. General Department of Custom
29. General Department of Statistics
30. General Department of Sports
31. General Department of Metrology
32. General Department of Cartology
33. General department of Tax
34. Government Committee on Regions
35. General Committee on Border and Boundary
36. Government Code Committee
37. Government Pricing Committee
38. State Committee on Population and Family Planning
39. Committee for the Protection of Mothers and Children
40. National Centre of Social and Human Sciences
41. National Centre of Natural Sciences and Technology
42. Vietnam News Agency
43. Voice of Vietnam
44. Vietnam Television
45. Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy
46. National Institute of Public Administration
47. State Auditing Agency
48. State Securities Commission
49. Social Security of Vietnam
50. National Reserve Department
51. National Aviation Authority

Source: Updated from Mc Carthy 2001

Annex 2: Socio-economic data for the Northern Mountain Region

Locality	Population (1999)	Population per km ²	GDP per capita (D '000)	Literacy rate	Longevity (years)
Bac Giang	1,492,200	391	2,204	93.5	67.4
Bac Kan	275,300	57	2,204	85.5	66.6
Cao Bang	491,100	77	2,503	76.6	62.4
Ha Giang	602,700	77	1,521	68.1	58.8
Hoa Binh	757,600	164	2,180	92.0	67.3
Lai Chau	588,700	34	1,847	51.3	63.7
Lang Son	704,600	86	2,846	89.4	65.2
Lao Cai	594,600	74	2,107	69.3	66
Quang Ninh	1,004,500	169	4,626	92.8	71.7
Son La	881,400	62	1,823	69.5	66.1
Thai Nguyen	1,046,200	278	2,359	65.4	69.4
Tuyen Quang	675,100	116	2,245	87.2	66.8
Yen Bai	679,700	100	2,205	84.8	67.2
<hr/>					
Vietnam	76,324,800	231	5,221	90.3	70.9
<hr/>					
Northern Mountain Region (13 provinces)	9,793,700	130	2,359	78.9	66

Sources: ADB 2002:30, Vietnam Administrative Atlas 2003

Annex 3: School enrolment rates 1998

	Primary	Lower- Secondary	Upper-Secondary
Vietnam	91.4	61.7	28.6
Urban	95.5	80.3	54.4
Rural	90.6	57.9	22.6
Northern Upland	94.1	56.4	22.2
Red River Delta	95.6	83.2	45.2
North Central Coast	92.5	62.3	29.6
Central Coast	88.1	64.4	31.8
Central Highlands	80.2	43.9	10.5
South East	93.4	71.7	36.3
Mekong Delta	86.9	45	17.4

Source: Nguyen Nguyet Nga (2002). Figures are in percent of the population aged from 6-18