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## **Redressing Disadvantage or Re-arranging Inequality? Development Interventions and Local Responses in the Mekong Delta**

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The Mekong delta of Vietnam presents a number of paradoxes for those attempting to forge a national development strategy. Since agricultural liberalization policies handed back to farmers power over their land, the delta has become the nation's most productive agricultural region. Yet the proportion of its farmers who have over the same period lost possession of their land altogether is also among the nation's highest. A second paradox is that although the Mekong delta has the poorest overland transportation network of any region in the country, it nonetheless manages to send abroad a greater volume of agricultural exports than any of the other regions. Third, the delta has some of the highest rural incomes in the country despite also having the lowest educational enrolments. Finally, in spite of sustained official efforts to assist the delta's large Khmer Krom ethnic minority to attain social and

cultural parity with the delta's ethnic majority, it would appear that the former group has slipped further behind the latter group in terms of these objectives.

In these respects the Mekong delta challenges a number of key assumptions on which the development orientation pursued by the Vietnamese state and international aid organizations is based. Agricultural decollectivization and land liberalization policies have aimed to improve the livelihoods of rural people by putting more control and responsibility over land into the hands of farmers. Yet their result has been that increasing numbers of Mekong delta farmers have had to sell their land and now have less access than ever to the profits from the delta's agricultural economy. Second, according to development agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), areas with high levels of road-based transport infrastructure should witness the highest levels of market participation and growth. Remote areas, away from roads, purportedly miss out on the benefits of market integration and the material and cultural well-being of the population suffers. Yet the delta's dynamic response to the economic reforms shows that roads are not necessarily preconditions of market-based growth, wealth, and well-being. Thirdly, the delta's relatively good economic achievements in the face of some of the nation's lowest educational enrolments challenge the assumption of national and international development planners that high levels of formal schooling are needed to achieve high incomes and good growth. Finally, lack of access to markets, remoteness, and low educational enrolments is held to account for the poor socio-economic performance of ethnic minorities such as the Khmer Krom. Yet in many respects the Khmer Krom people's affirmation of their exclusivity, isolation, and a unique tradition has only intensified as a result of attempts to deepen markets and extend roads, schooling, and ethnic majority institutions into their homelands.

These paradoxes can be explained by a detailed look at local conditions. Examination of the Mekong delta's response to the state's development initiatives shows the operation of historical, ecological, and cultural factors that lie outside the development theories that inform government policy. To presage my key arguments, at the dawn of the reform era, the state's collective management of land was not necessarily the most serious barrier local farmers faced in obtaining profits from their agricultural activities; in fact, agricultural collectivization in the

Mekong delta did not last for very long and only a small proportion of the delta's cultivated land and farming households were ever effectively collectivized (Beresford 1991, pp. 131–32; Pingali and Xuan 1992, p. 700). Perhaps more importantly, profits in the agrarian economy were also a function of local people's differential access to non-land capital and services and to sources of extra-local wealth, power, and information. Likewise, well before the push to extend roads into the delta began, its residents were able to trade both within and beyond the region thanks to the delta's system of waterways that provided them excellent communicative access. The people of the delta have also been able to draw upon a wealth of local pathways of information exchange and knowledge transfer that rivals the formal educational system favoured by the state. Some of these local cultural institutions have themselves emerged in resistance to central pressure. For example, a long history of central attempts to introduce institutions such as markets, communications infrastructure, and schools into the delta, which have favoured the mainstream ethnic group, have led the Khmer Krom to emphasize isolation, collective solutions, and ethnic distinctions in an effort to sustain their communities in the face of their systematic disadvantages vis-à-vis those whom they regard as settler colonists in their traditional lands.

Indeed by failing to take these local factors into account, reform policies may have exacerbated inequalities and exclusions rather than reducing them. Policies that freed up private economic agency not only restored decision-making over land to farmers but also consolidated the hand of those with access to non-land resources and a favourable position in the translocal economy. Hence market integration policies, even though they may have boosted export-led production, appear to have decreased rather than enhanced many primary producers' ability to profit from their land. Similarly, the building of roads into remote stretches of the delta, far from connecting the residents of such areas to markets and services, would appear to have consolidated the position of those already advantageously placed in its water-based communications network. In contrast, the state's attempt to boost enrolments through increasing public and private finances to schools would appear not to have diminished the salience to locals of many of the alternative cultural and religious pathways through which they have continued to exchange knowledge and pass on lessons learnt. In fact, the exclusivist, isolationist, and

culturally fundamentalist orientations espoused by many Khmer Krom people may have been reinforced by the state's attempts to improve the lot of this ethnic group, enflaming, or confirming long-standing tensions rather than mitigating or resolving them.

This survey of local responses to several state development initiatives in the Mekong delta aims to test the adequacy of an orientation to development that might be characterized as a one-size-fits-all approach. One of its hypotheses is that many of the considerable achievements of the delta have occurred in spite of, not because of the state's policies. Formal solutions may be less effective than existing local practices by which locals aim for self-empowerment and self-realization. Indeed, imposing a national or central model for development may deepen pre-existing inequalities. This is not to say that local solutions will necessarily be sufficient in themselves or inevitably superior to institutionalized interventions in redressing disadvantage. Rather, the aim of such an investigation is to try to apprehend local historical, ecological, and cultural legacies more clearly to see where formal interventions can be made that bolster the positive effects of such legacies and to overcome the exclusions that are equally characteristic of delta society.

## **Institutional Assumptions and Interventions**

In this section I discuss four key elements of the state's socio-economic development strategies for the Mekong delta. They are the devolving of economic responsibility onto farming households; the extension of infrastructure projects, particularly roads, into rural areas; efforts to redress the low level of educational enrolments of children in the delta and attempts to improve the socio-economic standing of the delta's large ethnic Khmer minority.

In the 1980s, facing a severe economic crisis, the Vietnamese government began to roll back its war-era commandist economic orientation, under which the state had exercised near-exclusive control over all aspects of production, redistribution, incomes, and prices. According to party leaders the "bureaucratic centralist" approach inhibited economic development in that it offered few incentives for individuals and families to increase production. By placing responsibility for investment and management decisions in the hands of bureaucrats, the planned economy model was plagued by inefficiencies, waste, and

corruption (Kimura 1989; Fforde and De Vylder 1996). The *doi moi* or renovation reforms, promulgated in 1986 and continuously refined since that date, comprised a radically different policy approach. They aimed to give a prominent role to households, private enterprises, and foreign investors as central players in a market-based economy. Private ownership and trade was legalized, subsidies for protected state enterprises were reduced, and efforts were made to achieve greater integration with world markets (Vo Tri Thanh and Pham Hoang Ha, in this volume). In the agricultural sector, some of the main reforms included the dismantling of state production collectives, the sanctioning of private commerce in agricultural commodities and granting secure land title to farmers, who were empowered to make decisions over production, and the sale, exchange, and inheritance of use rights. As a consequence of these reforms, food production increased dramatically in the late 1980s, commerce in agricultural commodities began to flourish, and the country went from being a net importer of primary produce to a significant exporter of agricultural products.

In this transformation the Mekong delta has led the way. The region is a densely populated low-lying plain, with fertile soils and a moderate climate. Well irrigated by the Mekong and drained by a network of canals, some regions of the delta are capable of three or more rice crops a year. Shortly after the liberal reforms were introduced, the delta's farmers began to produce rice in quantities that greatly exceeded their subsistence needs. By the late 1980s, the delta had become the country's leading supplier of rice and fruit for the domestic market and much of its agricultural surplus was being exported abroad. Since the late 1980s, Vietnam has been consistently in the front ranks of the world's rice-exporting nations. According to one recent report, it exports on average three million tonnes of rice a year, thanks largely to the surpluses generated by the Mekong delta's farmers, who supply 90 per cent of the country's rice exports (*Viet Nam News*, 1 May 2003). More recently, aquaculture products such as fish and shrimp, as well as vegetables and pulses grown in the delta have also been exported overseas.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1990s the delta's thriving agricultural economy was consistently touted as one of the main success stories of the leadership's *doi moi* policies. Household incomes increased rapidly and by 1998 five of its provinces were wealthier than the national average, despite having predominantly rural economies (UNDP 2001, p 108).<sup>2</sup>

Despite this good news concerns have been voiced at the Mekong

delta's poor economic indicators such as its low level of industrialization, weak uptake of local value-adding processing industries, high level of unskilled labourers, underutilization of a large agricultural workforce, stagnating household expenditures, low proportion of households with rapidly rising expenditures, and the persistence of significant areas of poverty (Do Thien Kinh et al. 2001, p. 40; Haughton 2001, pp. 16, 19; Haughton et al. 2001, p. 127; Mekong Delta Poverty Analysis 2003; *Viet Nam News*, 11 April 2002). In addition, levels of landlessness in the delta have increased more rapidly than most other regions in the country (Luong 2003, p. 99). Farmers have been hit by declining commodity prices and rising agricultural inputs costs. New industries such as catfish and shrimp production have been plagued by price fluctuations, trade disputes and disease, and the unchecked exploitation of coastal mangrove forests for shrimp production has exacted a significant toll on the environment.

One of the factors that analysts and planners have identified behind this poor socio-economic performance is the delta's low level of physical infrastructure, in particular its lack of an adequate system of modern roads. According to the Ministry of Communications and Transport, "the Mekong delta has a convenient waterways network but its overland transport grids are the worst nationwide", with only 76 per cent of its communes accessible by car, as opposed to 99.4 per cent of the communes in the north Vietnamese plain and 97.9 per cent in the southeastern region (*Saigon Times Daily*, 2 July 1997). In 2003 the Deputy Minister of Transport reported that 153 of the country's 269 communes lacking roads to their centres were found in the Mekong delta, and many of those which had roads became inaccessible in the rainy season (*Viet Nam News*, 7 June 2003). The delta's dependence on rivers presents an obstacle to its development, according to a background piece providing the rationale for a water resource project funded by Australia's aid agency AusAID, which also funded Vietnam's first bridge across the Mekong:

Life on the Mekong River has led to a settlement pattern built on an extensive system of irrigation and drainage channels. Most of the towns in the region are located on rivers or junctions in the primary irrigation and drainage system and a high proportion of rural settlement is located along canals rather than in any clearly articulated urban hierarchy of hamlets, villages and towns. The resulting lack of roads and infrastructure services has had a serious impact on regional economic development. (Three Delta Towns Water Supply and Sanitation Project 2004)

There is a high level of unanimity among the major aid donors who offer advice and assistance to Vietnam that improving road transport infrastructure will lead to a host of socio-economic benefits. A recent World Bank report stated that improved physical access to markets, health, education, and other amenities, offered by the system of all-weather roads it advised Vietnam to develop, would be central to triggering growth in rural areas (World Bank 1999). The ADB reported that upgrading the Phnom Penh–Ho Chi Minh City highway greatly increased trade flows and boosted business for those who live along that road (ADB 1998, p. 1; Nair 2002, p. 12). A report by the Japanese think tank, the Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, concluded that the combined effects of the Australian-funded My Thuan bridge over the Mekong and the World Bank–funded highway improvement between Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong delta city of Can Tho led to a rise in Can Tho’s gross domestic product (GDP), boosted its industrial production, raised its income earned from tourism and also likely reduced poverty (Graduate Institute for Policy Studies 2003, pp. 14–19). Contributors to the UNDP report *Living Standards during an Economic Boom* wrote that areas remote from roads have high poverty, low poverty reduction, low incomes and a low proportion of “shooting stars”, households with rapidly rising living standards (Haughton et al. 2001: 128; Kinh and Baulch 2001, p. 118). Households with rapidly falling expenditures, or “sinking stones”, of which the Mekong has a disproportionately high number, are more likely to be found away from a road passable for cars (Haughton et al. 2001, p. 128). A report by the Mekong Delta Poverty Analysis project (MDPA) also found that communes with good access to roads have lower rates of poverty (MDPA 2003).

Action based on this resounding unanimity as to the beneficial impact of roads has been swift and spectacular. The World Bank, the ADB, and the Australian and Japanese governments have divested hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to improve trunk roads into the delta and build bridges spanning the Mekong. The Vietnamese government has put aside a substantial proportion of national, provincial, and local budgets to build and upgrade roads and bridges connecting the smaller urban centres in the delta. A special objective of state planners has been to eliminate the countless planks, logs, and bamboo poles that provide locals a practical path over the delta’s smaller waterways, which are

referred to with modernist embarrassment as “monkey bridges” (see, for instance, 9th Party Congress 2001, p. 16). This burst of development has, in a short period of time, transformed the face of the delta. Gleaming roads surrounded by urbanized strips now connect the large centres, where only a decade previously the principal mode of transportation between these places was by water. A substantial proportion of the population of the delta has turned its back on the waterways and have relocated their homes and businesses alongside the new network of roads.

For some observers of the Mekong delta’s socio-economic conditions, a more worrying problem is the delta’s “low cultural [that is, educational] level” (*trinh do van hoa thap*). The region is considered “low” in human capital, and access to knowledge (*kien thuc*) and information (*thong tin*), as measured by school attendance. Statistics collected by various agencies show that the delta has some of the weakest school enrolments in the country. A team of analysts working for the UNDP noted that more than half of the adults in the Mekong delta have not completed even a primary diploma (Bui Thai Quyen et al. 2001, p. 81). Another UNDP report pointed out that despite good indicators in income and growth, the Mekong delta’s poor “human development” (indicators of which include access to schools and the participation of skilled labourers in the workforce) inhibit its further socio-economic progress. Although Mekong delta provinces perform well in producing and exporting diversified agricultural products, their low level of education is taken to explain why poverty reduction has not been sustained in the region (UNDP 2001, pp. 53–54; see also Vu Quoc Ngu, in this volume). A discussion paper by an Antwerp-based development centre reported that in 1997 the number of teachers and doctors serving the population in the Mekong delta was much lower than the national average, the percentage of students enrolled in second-level (*cap hai*) education was just over half the national average, and those in third-level (*cap ba*) education less than a quarter of the national figure (Nguyen Pham Thanh Nam et al. 2000, p. 8). These are disturbing trends when considered against the region’s relatively high growth and exports. As the discussion paper noted, this is really an accentuated instance of inequality, in that the high contribution to the country made by the region in exports is disproportionate to the low investment in the region’s human capital (Nguyen Pham Thanh Nam et al. 2000, p. 20).

Further compounding the problem and causing concern among local intellectuals, the Vietnamese state, and development analysts is the rise in religious orientations and activities in the Mekong delta (see Do 2003; Luong 1994; and Taylor 2001a, 2002, 2004 for surveys of the recent revival in religious activity in the Mekong delta). The proliferation of these religious pathways in the Mekong delta is commonly considered by Vietnam's intellectuals as a result of the delta's low levels of educational participation. Such orientations are frequently interpreted as a characteristic response by uneducated people to failure or crisis. Religious solutions to economic problems are still considered by many local leaders and scholars as wasteful, harmful, and even exploitative to individuals (Taylor 2004, pp. 92–93). While formally endorsing freedom of religion, the state has remained wary of the delta's religious culture, seeing in it a possible threat to security or a potential opening to be exploited by subversives. The state systematically intervenes to regulate what it regards as negative manifestations of religious practice (Taylor 2001a, p. 351; 2004, p. 45). Religious orientations are also correlated with poverty. Some social scientists working for development agencies have linked religious affiliations to poverty and cite survey evidence that associates nominal atheism with higher household incomes and expenditures (for example, Kinh and Baulch 2001, p. 119; Baulch et al. 2002, pp. 9, 12).

The ten-year strategy for socio-economic development endorsed in 2001 by the 9th National Party Congress resolved to make formal schooling more accessible to people living in remote and rural areas such as much of the Mekong delta. In practical terms these initiatives have included building more schools in rural areas, lowering or eliminating school fees for those below the national poverty line, building roads connecting population centres to schools, making the curriculum more relevant by incorporating vocational training, and bringing cheap, relevant occupational training into the reach of agricultural communities and ethnic minorities. However, while government spending on education has increased in recent years, so too has the proportion of contributions that families have had to make towards educating their children. Some observers note that government spending on education in Vietnam has been lower than other countries in the region and has failed to keep pace with increases in enrolments of students. These critics argue that the consequent shortage of learning facilities and real decline in teachers' salaries have contributed to the low quantity and quality of

education in the Mekong delta. Furthermore, the human resource development policies issued by Mekong delta provinces have lacked a strategy for improving education and fostering a skilled workforce (Nguyen Pham Thanh Nam et al. 2000, p. 12).

A more recent issue of concern is that the Khmer Krom ethnic minority of the Mekong delta are missing out on many of the benefits of the liberal reforms. According to government statistics, the Khmer Krom number around one million. They live predominantly in provinces in the southeastern and western reaches of the lower delta, separated from Ho Chi Minh City by one or two main branches of the Mekong delta, and provide the agricultural labour required in rice cultivation. They have their own language, Khmer, and the majority are followers of Theravada Buddhism. They live closely around pagodas, which are social, religious, and cultural centres. A number of reports show that the Khmer Krom are a locally disadvantaged group. Poverty among the Khmer Krom is more than 20 per cent above the national average (Baulch et al. 2002, p. 4). In Soc Trang, a province with a large number of Khmer Krom residents, the Khmer Krom were about half as likely as the ethnic Kinh to come from a rich household and nearly twice as likely as the latter group to come from a poor household (MDPA 2003, p. 30). Lack of capital, knowledge, and experience excludes Khmer Krom people from investing in lucrative new industries in their homelands such as shrimp raising (Oxfam 1999). The lower secondary school enrolment rate of the Khmer Krom, at 22.5 per cent, is around one-third that of the ethnic majority (Baulch et al. 2002, p. 7).

The reasons given for the Khmer Krom's poor socio-economic standing include a shortage of capital, heavy reliance on incomes from agricultural production, and high levels of landlessness. They suffer from geographical remoteness; their settlements are located away from the waterways, river ports, and roads of the region, giving them poor access to markets and services. Lack of income, distance from schools, and difficulty with the Vietnamese language are given as explanations for their low educational enrolments. There is an emerging consensus among development professionals in Vietnam that poverty correlates with ethnic minority status, explained by one group of analysts as due to their "cultural remoteness" (Baulch et al. 2002, p. 17). Nationwide figures show that non-Kinh/Chinese ethnic groups have a higher poverty rate (Do Thien Kinh et al. 2001, p. 38), a lower poverty reduction rate

(Haughton et al. 2001, p. 13; Vu Quoc Ngu, in this volume), and earned income 40 per cent below the national average (Kinh and Baulch 2001, p. 102).<sup>3</sup> The main solutions the government has pursued to rectify these disadvantages include the provision (in grants and loans) of financial assistance, livestock, and seedlings to ethnic Khmer people, educational and health fee exemptions, lowering educational entrance requirements for Khmer Krom students and providing free education in specialized boarding schools in district and provincial centres to “groom” for leadership selected members of this ethnic minority group.<sup>4</sup>

A further factor identified by government planners and their advisers has been the purported cultural or “subjective” deficits in Khmer Krom culture.<sup>5</sup> Mekong delta provincial leaders interviewed by a team of researchers investigating perceptions of poverty variously considered that the Khmer Krom were disproportionately poor because they spend too much on their community festivals and pagoda refurbishments; have a religious orientation that is not geared to saving for the future; possess an insular mindset that restricts their exposure to the knowledge and experience needed to flourish economically; and have a culture of dependency on government handouts (MDPA 2003, pp. 20, 23). I have found it common, although such views are certainly not universal, to hear these and even harsher assessments of Khmer Krom cultural orientations from ethnic majority members of the lower Mekong delta community: that the Khmer Krom are lazy, unintelligent, simple-minded, or steeped in a backward-looking culture. Emphasizing these cultural factors, leaders and intellectuals in the Mekong delta place great weight on education and training as paths out of poverty. However, some locals have expressed to me their exasperation that despite sustained efforts by the more enlightened ethnic Vietnamese group to “raise” the Khmer Krom’s intellectual level (*dan tri*) to parity with their own, the economic situation of this minority group has still not improved.

## Consequences and Responses

In the remainder of the chapter I attempt to isolate issue by issue the effects of these development interventions on people in the delta. Despite some successes these approaches have also had the unintended effect of deepening inequalities within the region. I argue that this result occurs because the interventions are based on problematic assumptions or a

failure to take local conditions into account. I also describe the solutions pursued by locals in the face of these policies. The following survey provides many instances of locals finding their own solutions to the socio-cultural exclusions they confront. However, as the evidence suggests, these measures have not in themselves been able redress inequalities of a structural nature.

## **Of Markets and Mobility**

We have had a decade-and-a-half to appreciate the impact of Vietnam's market-driven development policies. On the one hand, immense productivity has been unleashed and the goal of reducing poverty has been met to near universal acclaim. Residents of the delta cite the year 1990 as the time of a marked turnaround in their fortunes after fifteen years of poverty, food shortage, and desperate attempts to leave the country. Yet the equally destabilizing result of policies to stimulate improved market access is beginning to come to light. Studies such as that conducted by Oxfam in Tra Vinh uncovered evidence of persistent poverty and growing rural stratification (Oxfam 1999). In the early 2000s AusAID launched a major poverty survey that revealed the existence of entrenched "pockets" of poverty in the delta (MDPA 2003). Since the late 1990s the region's primary producers have been telling a story of declining profits and increasing pressures on farmers to sell their land. More significantly the changing agricultural structure of the region reveals new forms of exclusion from the pathways to well-being and the emergence of a marginalized rural proletariat.

The Mekong delta exports much of the rice it produces to the rest of the country and to the outside world. However, despite this impressive export performance, the returns have been less than glowing for the primary producers of this commodity. Discussions that I have conducted on an annual basis since 1999 with farmers across the Mekong delta indicate that growing rice as a small producer during this time has been strongly associated with making losses and getting into debt. The small landowners and agricultural labourers I have been talking with have described their occupation of rice farming in such terms as "a guaranteed way to become poor" or as "an occupation of the poor". The factor most frequently mentioned as the reason for the decline in their fortunes is the reduced profit ratio for agricultural commodities. Since 1998, the

prices of agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, pesticide, herbicide, mechanical and labour services have steadily risen as these inputs have become more numerous and comprise more value-added products and services. By the same token, the prices of the agricultural commodities themselves have fluctuated, and, in many cases, such as rice, have declined (mentioned also in Luong 2003, p. 91). Since 1999, the profit ratio for producing rice has been characterized as negative. This is the most common reason small landowners and landless labourers have given for selling their farming land. On more than one occasion rice farming was described as "a sure way to lose your land".

A host of additional demands for cash press down on the delta's primary producers: to purchase daily consumables, to cover health and educational costs, to constantly rebuild their cheap but high-maintenance houses, to repay interest on debts, and to contribute to community festivals and life-cycle ceremonies. To defray these costs, many farmers have few other resources but their harvest income. Yet harvest sales meet only a fraction of the costs of poor farming families. Moreover the income from rice farming comes only twice or three times a year, for other commodities even less frequently, whereas the need for cash is continuous. Small farmers face significant structural weakness trading within this seasonal market. They are under financial pressure to sell their produce as soon as it matures at a time when everyone else is doing the same and prices are depressed. To meet their constant need for cash, many take out a loan against an estimated harvest value, minus the interest on the advance, which further reduces their harvest's value. Given the absence of any other sources of income, there is no choice but to sell a parcel of their land to get out of mounting debt. Yet the sale of land itself imposes further costs on those who sell. Doing so may well divide a family, or force a family to relocate away from areas where they know the local conditions as well as from social networks, cultural capital (such as neighbours who are fellow language speakers), and access to community support institutions such as pagodas and churches.

Against the relentless decline in profits, farmers experience considerable instabilities. Health problems, environmental changes, floods, and pest infestations are an integral part of today's farming life in the Mekong delta. They add to the costs incurred and precipitate land sales. A further source of instability is the external economic environment. The Mekong delta is deeply integrated with extra-regional markets in

terms of the distribution and sale of its primary produce. Farmers sometimes blame the low demand for their produce on their leaders, who they accuse of failing to secure new overseas markets. Yet most are aware that the prices of their resources are kept low by competition with other producers of these same commodities in a global context, as well as by the subsidies for producing these commodities provided by wealthier competitors. The opening of the US market coincided with an upsurge in local catfish production for export, however, local producers reported that prices in this commodity declined steeply when the US imposed tariffs on catfish imports from Vietnam (see also *Viet Nam News*, 27 March 2004).

One of the main problems facing local commodity producers is that a great many of them are locked into the small-scale, low-value, localized "end" of an economy in which the prices of their land and labour are declining relative to the other inputs that are needed for production. The value of land to farmers has to be assessed in relation to their access to the other forms of capital that are needed to thrive in the delta's agricultural economy. Today land is being sold for cheap prices by farmers who cannot afford the high costs associated with using it to their benefit. As locals have told me, land-use rights are not worth much if you cannot use them to improve your livelihood. A lot of the inputs into primary production are highly capital-intensive, entailing the use of expensive herbicide and pesticide technology that minimize weeding and pest control, imported fertilizers, commercial mechanized services, and specialized inputs by organized labour teams. As Ngo Vinh Long noted was already the case in the late Republican and early post-war eras, the Mekong delta's agricultural economy is marked by widespread use of mechanization and high-tech inputs, organized labour provision and commercial credit services (Ngo Vinh Long 1984). Agricultural outputs are similarly handled through capital-intensive harvesting, storage, transportation, processing, and marketing services.

These dimensions of the agricultural economy entail the provision and utilization of diverse forms of non-land capital, technology, and commercial services, which are high-cost, mobile, and often deployed over a geographically extensive area. For many farmers these types of tangible and intangible resources are simply out of reach. Yet access to such assets is more determinate of fortunes in the Mekong delta's economy than ownership of land, agricultural knowledge, or strong local

or community ties. There is little to distinguish those who work in this sector of the agricultural economy from those who provide other commercialized services. Creditors, transporters, and marketers, for instance, blur the agricultural/non-agricultural divide, employing their capital and providing their services to a diffuse range of clients. They may come from farming families, but their work requires a combination of flexible forms of capital, access to market information, specialized knowledge, a good network of connections and access to power holders.

Conversations with a wide range of Mekong delta locals about the factors needed to get ahead in an economy of this kind elicited the following variables, in rough order of emphasis. Access to financial capital (*von*) is the most commonly cited requirement. Two important sources of this are inheritances and remittances from overseas and urban-based relatives. Access to power is also very high on the list. Power holders and their brokers benefit from their capacity to exert and to trade in influence, selectively apply or evade the law, and channel public resources into private ventures. Access to power holders and decision-makers (whether through kinship or forged connections) helps to mitigate the costs incurred by licensing, taxation, and forms of regulation and to obtain information relevant to one's business. Knowledge is highly valued, including education in scientific and technical principles, occupational training, access to market information, and richness in work experiences. Location is also important, the proximity of one's residence and enterprise to marketplaces, urbanized or industrialized population centres, government services, roads, waterways, intersections, confluences, and the main trans-regional or inter-regional communications arteries. For those who are not native Vietnamese speakers, such as the ethnic Cham and Khmer, language competence (in Vietnamese and sometimes also Chinese or English) is frequently cited, as are other forms of cultural capital such as ethnicity, gender, religious orientations, community support networks, cultural seniority, and forms of local prestige.

As the agricultural economy of the delta shifts to increasingly emphasize extra-local capital, social relations and knowledge, locals' participation in it delivers returns that are strongly marked by class. The top end of the Mekong delta's agricultural economy is occupied by commercial agricultural input and service providers, creditors, processors, transporters, labour recruiters and organizers, and urban-based

commodity traders. The wealthiest people in the Mekong delta are involved in activities as diverse as running a service station, managing a fleet of trucks, a rice thresher or an ice-making plant, distributing fertilizer, construction materials, or motorized vehicles, raising catfish, converting rice fields to grapefruit orchards or shrimp ponds and speculating in real estate. They include government agents who use their power for economic advantage. The most successful economic agents are those with diversified interests in several such ventures at once, giving them the flexibility to distribute risk between initiatives and to shift capital in and out of investments. The bottom end of the agricultural economy is made up of small-scale, localized primary producers who own a small amount of land but little additional capital to convert their land to new uses or buy into the off-farm service economy. They have limited experience beyond farming, localized social contacts, few connections to those in office and lack access to overseas remittances.<sup>6</sup> Unable to earn the income needed to pay for commercial goods and services or acquit themselves of debt, many farming households are forced to sell their land and family members end up working locally or further afield as manual labourers or small-scale service providers.

Those who work in the agricultural economy of the Mekong delta could hence be divided into three strata:

1. "Input capitalists" and service providers who deploy costly, high-tech, diversified, and mobile capital or provide specialized services over an extensive area. "Output capitalists" who transport, process, and market the primary produce, making use of capital such as threshers, trucks, mills, storage facilities, and market stalls.
2. Localized small-scale rice farmers, horticulturalists, and livestock raisers who are unlikely without the benefit of some other source of income or alternative variety of capital to break out of subsistence poverty or, as has been the case for many rice farmers, reverse a decline into landlessness.
3. Landless workers such as those who work for low wages for local farmers or as unskilled labourers for agricultural input and output capitalists, or as small-scale traders and service providers.

These three strata vary significantly in their ability to profit from and derive sustainable livelihoods from their participation in the agricultural

economy. The majority of people involved in primary production in the Mekong delta occupy the bottom two strata. The lower group is increasing in size as members of the middle stratum lose their land (see also Luong 2003, p. 99; Scott and Truong, in this volume).

One of the most significant points of convergence between the top and bottom strata is their new relationship to locality. On the one hand, there are those whose invested capital is convertible, mobile, and is deployed over a geographically extensive area. They utilize favourable access to extra-local sources of income, power, information, and connections to generate their profits. On the other hand, there are workers from poor farming families, whose knowledge, experiences, and connections are limited to the demands of small-scale local production. As the return to land assets is becoming increasingly unprofitable they leave home or sell their land and move around in search of new demands for manual labour, although demand for this is weak (and often seasonal) and remuneration is low. The Mekong delta is home to a large and growing rural proletariat who live away from home, are on the move constantly looking for work, earn low wages (when they can find work), and lack the opportunity for education and training. Following this path provides them few opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and doing so entails a considerable loss of social and cultural capital. Many seek work in the urban centres of the delta, or in nearby cities such as Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City, although their incomes, relative to the urban cost of living, are low. Work conditions for male and female migrants from the delta's dispossessed farming families are unstable and often exploitative and training opportunities are restricted. Both classes are therefore marked by increasingly loose connections to particular localities, a high degree of mobility, occupational volatility, and commercialization. However, landless workers and migrant labourers benefit little from this novel relationship to space and are not in a strong position to upgrade their ability to participate in this economy in a more sustainable way.

## **Responding to Roads**

Against this background of inequalities in the Mekong delta's commercialized agricultural economy and local responses to them, we see several problems with the programme of extending transport

infrastructure into communities in the name of spurring growth and reducing inequalities of access.

To begin with, it is clear that the delta has performed far better than other rural areas despite the absence of a comprehensive road system. Well before the push began in the late 1990s to develop such forms of rural infrastructure, the delta was being universally lauded for its advanced integration with world markets, the high productivity of its commercial agriculture, high exports, relatively high incomes, and rapid response to new industrial forms such as mechanized agriculture and value-added livestock and aquaculture production. Aiding its first-rank status as an agricultural commodity exporter has been the unique advantage of its highly developed system of waterways and a water-based transport system that connects the region internally and to the outside world. The comparative advantage of waterways is borne out by a local comparison. Throughout most of the 1990s, An Giang province was the delta's largest rice exporter, the epicentre of the profitable new industry of fish cage aquaculture, and home to a thriving cross-border trading economy. These achievements occurred at a time when An Giang was cut off from the rest of the country by two branches of the delta and travel by road to Ho Chi Minh City took upwards of five hours. Much of the province remains inaccessible to road-based transport for several months each year during the flood season, during which time An Giang's huge and diverse flotilla of freshwater craft provides the only viable form of transport. Meanwhile Tien Giang, one of the delta's most fertile provinces and situated only 80 kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City to which it is connected by a very good highway, has failed to return on these physical advantages. Industrial development in the province is meagre, the province attracts very little foreign investment, efforts to develop processing facilities for its significant fruit industry have floundered and few local employment opportunities exist for its well-educated workforce. The reasons for Tien Giang's relative stagnation are complex.<sup>7</sup> They relate to ecological, demographic, political, and cultural legacies that are not included in the calculus of transport infrastructure planners. This comparison suggests that applying the technological fix of more or better roads will not in itself bring the results that proponents of such development claim.

Second, the extension of land-based transport infrastructure into the purportedly "remote" areas of the delta, presupposes a territorially

confined population, an assumption that flies against the evidence that local people are forging their own solutions to disadvantage by moving around. Let us take the example of Tra Vinh province, one of the poorest in the delta, surrounded on three sides by waterways and home to a large population of Khmer Krom people. Business people in the provincial capital attribute the poverty of their homeland to its status as an “end-of-the-road” province (*tin h cung*). Unlike the bustling crossroads provinces of Can Tho or An Giang, they say, once you arrive in Tra Vinh there is no place left to go. Yet the face of Tra Vinh has been transformed in recent years by the development of a road network linking the provincial capital to outlying districts and its coastal areas. I have travelled several times up and down the new road to the coastal district of Duyen Hai, talking to those who live along it. Locals tell me that in their lifetime, what was once a dirt track, almost impassable in the rainy season, has become a busy highway along which Hyundai and Isuzu trucks zoom, flanked by increasing numbers of new brick residences and commercial outlets. “Nearly all the residents of these roadside dwellings have come from beyond the local area”, a seventy-year-old ethnic Chinese man and native of Cau Ngang told me. “They moved here from the provincial and district capitals, from elsewhere in the delta or from even further afield, seizing the opportunity provided by relatively cheap land prices in an advantageous location”. Asked why the original inhabitants had sold their roadside land, he replied that as rice farmers they had already been selling their land for some years, piece by piece, to repay the debts incurred in this unprofitable venture. When offered good prices for their land, few hesitated to sell so as to acquit their debts and make a fresh start elsewhere. In addition, nearly all lacked the capital to upgrade their land and buildings for a new roadside business, not to mention the necessary business know-how and fluency in the Vietnamese language. Therefore the decision to sell was not difficult. Some relocated to the interior where land prices were cheaper. Other quickly exhausted the income from the sale of their land and sought portering, construction, and labouring jobs in the district and provincial capital or in Duyen Hai.

A similar story is repeated along the other newly developed roads in rural areas of Tra Vinh and in Soc Trang provinces where I have pursued the same enquiries. As roads extend outwards like fingers from the delta’s urbanized centres and riverports, residents from these places flow outward to settle along them. The rationale of these roads is to

empower remote communities by bringing factors such as markets, facilities, information, and services into closer reach. However, their net effect is to open new opportunities for those who are already advantageously placed with respect of these factors. The following excerpt from a conversation I had with a resident of Tra Vinh town offers insights into some locals' response to such developments:

Xuyen, a shopkeeper in Tra Vinh's central market, tells me that since the year 2000, buying up roadside land on the outskirts of the town has become one of the hot new investments for townspeople. Many locals have more than sufficient funds to buy up a parcel of land, by virtue of their town-based business or thanks to funds sent by their overseas relatives. Like Xuyen himself, many are looking for a secure new investment or else trying to find a place for their children to set up in business.

Xuyen says that he has on occasion learnt about the plans for a new road or infrastructure development from government planners in the provincial capital, who he often meets in business and social interactions. Everyone knows that if you can get in quick and buy up a piece of land before a project becomes public knowledge, the price will eventually rise to perhaps ten times its original value when the new road is finally opened up.

The best thing about these investments is that locals usually sell at cheap prices, because they tend not to know about the plans for their area. Xuyen confided that the way to get rich quickest is to buy land from Khmer people who he says do not understand the ways of the world. Because they don't have the calculating mentality of the Vietnamese, he explained; they sell up quickly at a fraction of the land's true cost.

He says the biggest beneficiaries of new road developments are government cadres. They always know in advance of others where a new road will go and make their purchases well before this information becomes public. Because of the risks of exposure for corruption, cadres usually buy only a little land for themselves and do it discretely, sometimes registering it in a family member's name. They can make extra money by tipping others off and helping them through the complicated land transfer and registration process. Members of the local transport and construction authorities benefit most from construction contracts, retaining up to a third of the project finances for themselves by overbilling or using inferior materials (Fieldnotes Tra Vinh 2002).

As Xuyen's account indicates, infrastructure developments do not automatically extend benefits to those living in their path. Rather they reward and indeed enhance the benefits accruing to those with the ability

to take advantage of them. The key factors that allow people to do so are financial capital to purchase and upgrade the land, access to information about development plans, cultural capital such as language fluency or occupational experience to capitalize on opportunities provided by the new infrastructure, and connections to those in office. Far from helping the poorest members of the community, such projects augment the position of those holding these pre-existing advantages.

The response of those in whose name such projects are advanced is often to move away from the path of the road. As a result they may end up even further away from the markets, services, and centres of information and power than they were previously. At the same time, such developments serve to dislocate people from local economic relationships, neighbourhood support networks, religious and cultural institutions and a community of fellow language speakers. This occurred recently to many Khmer Krom people who used to live on the outskirts of Tra Vinh town, an area in which town extension redevelopments have been in place since 2000. Buddhist monks in one of the local pagodas told me that formerly this had been Khmer land. There were only one or two Vietnamese families living in the area. Now the monks say the people living along the newly improved road beside the pagodas are exclusively Vietnamese. When townsfolk came in with offers to purchase the land, many of the locals sold up and moved away to the interior where the land was cheaper. In doing so, they lost touch with customers and patrons with whom they had built goodwill, as well as their fellow Khmer speakers and the pagodas which served as the centres of community support, education, and religious, and cultural life. Only a few of the original residents of the area maintain contact with the pagoda. Rather than reducing poverty as many proponents of road-building claim, it may be more accurate to say that such projects merely rearrange it.

## **The Limits of Schooling**

Given these problems with physical infrastructure it may appear more appropriate to follow the recommendations of analysts who propose greater investment in "human resources" as a means to boost the delta's economic fortunes (for example, Nguyen Pham Thanh Nam et al. 2000). The educational picture in the Mekong delta that is painted by many agencies is a dark one. Adult literacy in the delta is the second lowest

of Vietnam's eight regions and its net high-school enrolment rate is the lowest in the country (United Nations Development Program, 2001, p. 105). However, this region throws up a number of paradoxes that challenge the assumptions of development thinkers who link educational enrolments to economic outcomes. Per capita incomes in the Mekong delta are 1.6 times higher than in the north central coast even though the delta's high school (*cap ba*) enrolment rate is only half that of the latter region, which is the same as the national rate. A similar story emerges if we compare two Mekong delta provinces. Despite its low educational enrolments, in 1998 An Giang province had a higher per capita GDP than the better-educated Tien Giang province:

**TABLE 7.1**  
**Educational Enrolments and Incomes in Two Mekong Delta Provinces**

<b>Province</b>	<b>Secondary School Enrolment Rate (1999)</b>	<b>High School Enrolment Rate (1999)</b>	<b>Per Capita GDP (1998)</b>
Tien Giang	44.1%	21.3%	US\$264
An Giang	26.7%	13.3%	US\$320
All Vietnam	46.9%	27.3%	US\$305

Source: UNDP (2001, pp. 104–5, 108–9).

Moreover, in 1998 An Giang's dynamic economy was based on a higher contribution from industries and services and a lower contribution from agriculture as a percentage of GDP than the better-educated Tien Giang province (UNDP 2001, p. 110).

One explanation commonly given for the delta's low school enrolments is that its people are too busy seizing the opportunities at hand for economic advancement to educate their children. According to this view, the favourable economic opportunities available to residences of provinces such as An Giang and Ca Mau in fact undermine educational attendance.<sup>8</sup> Such an explanation is not very satisfactory as it precludes education as one of the ways by which locals who have the means to do so pursue economic opportunities at hand. Many students from families of means make their way to urban centres to study and they stay there or move on to wherever there is a demand for their skills. One report

noted that of those Mekong delta-based students who travelled to Ho Chi Minh City to attend university in the mid-1990s, almost none returned to work in the delta after their graduation (*Saigon Economic Times*, 2 February 1997). As long as a differential exists between the delta and such localities in industrial and technologically specialized work opportunities and income-earning potential, one might reasonably expect this flow to continue. The analysts who identified this “brain drain” dynamic propose that more local human resource investment is needed to develop and retain a more skilled local workforce (Nguyen Pham Thanh Nam et al. 2000, p. 11). However, such a measure might only increase the strain on local educational budgets, which effectively subsidize the city’s demand for educated labour. As for children from poorer families in the delta, one commonly hears the view that parents, who are used to a low-skilled agricultural lifestyle and who are steeped in “traditional” or insular ways, do not understand the value of educating their children. Some critics argue that parents’ “irrational” failure to appreciate the benefits of education denies their children access to knowledge that would help them escape their poverty. Such a perspective fails to note that there is little high-skilled work available locally to justify the mounting expense to parents of putting their children through school.

Each of these explanations views the economic options available to people in the Mekong delta, quite paradoxically, as a barrier to the development of local knowledge and skills. Neither offers convincing evidence that further educational investments will yield local economic rewards. A neater and more convincing alternative to these arguments is that the option presented by the formal education system simply does not meet the needs of the local economy. Nor does it mesh effectively with local patterns of sociality and forms of cultural identification.

The paradox proposed in these explanations emerges because they confine the terms of the debate to formal education. The absurd implication of arguments based on this definition of “human resources” or “human capital” is that the considerable economic achievements of the delta have somehow been obtained through only minimal engagement of its resident’s intellectual capacities. School-based education is currently the only indicator used in surveys of human capital in Vietnam. This is a centrist and statist definition that needless to say leaves out a host of other “informal” paths for circulating and reproducing

knowledge. As it turns out, the Mekong delta is exceptionally rich in these resources. The delta's waterways, along which most of the local population reside, travel, and exchange services, goods and ideas, provide a communicative network of unmatched connectivity. The region is a repository of distinct patterns of association, customary knowledge, and intellectual traditions specific to its many local, religious, and ethnic subcultures. It has many different kinds of non-state schools, such as those maintained by the Chinese, Cham, and Khmer ethnic communities, and offers diverse vocational pathways through a host of occupational forms. The notion that locals' pragmatic opportunism or ignorance keeps them out of government schools overlooks the fact that they are already "enrolled" in these alternative forms of information exchange.

This repository of local forms of communication and knowledge is too often dismissed as so much narrow localism, superstition, or outmoded custom. However, a strong case can be made for the situational relevance and potency of these communicative pathways. Let us take just three examples from the province of An Giang. The pilgrimage to Ba Chua Xu, the largest religious gathering in southern Vietnam, brings millions of people together annually in the worship of a spirit whose efficacious power is said to underpin economic and social life in the region. The goddess encodes a submerged version of history, efficacy, and morality, in which local ethnic groups, historical figures, and occupational groupings are deemed to have made a more significant contribution to the well-being of locals than the nationalist, socialist, and liberal reformist heroes celebrated in official historical discourse (Taylor 2002). In worshipping this and other goddesses associated with her cult, pilgrims venerate images of socially authoritative and commercially competent women as the key sources of value and efficacy. Their rites emphasize and recapitulate a set of values and patterns of sociality that are based in inter-generational, gendered, and market-trading norms. These people consider the goddess as the key to business success, their rites emphasize dyadic relationships with the goddess, their protocols of interacting with her very much conform to the social norms of the households and marketplaces from which most of her followers are drawn. Many of those who propitiate her are the most economically successful people in the region (Taylor 2004). The Hoa Hao Buddhist faith, whose origin and heartland is in An Giang province represents a very different local path to empowerment which places

greater emphasis on collective solutions, a spiritually magnified notion of obligation to the national community and a sense of universal relatedness that is common to the other religious and ethnic cultures in the Mekong delta (Taylor 2001a, p. 350). As some local observers have intimated, An Giang farmer's adherence to Hoa Hao Buddhism, far from being an autarchic or isolationist creed, may help account for the immense agricultural productivity of the province since the reform era commenced (Pham 1999). The Muslim minority who live along the Vietnam-Cambodian border follow Sunni Islam, a faith that links them to communities in Cambodia, the Malay world, and the Middle East. Nakamura has demonstrated that although regarded as ethnic Cham by the Vietnamese state, members of this local community emphasize Islam as the basis for their identity (Nakamura 1999). Rather than such sub-national identification representing an insular, inward, or backward-looking orientation, their faith emphasizes these Muslim people's position as mediators in the political, cultural, and economic frontier comprised by their locality. Islamic ethics condition their involvement in a credit and trading network that stretches from the Cambodian border into far-flung settlements in the Mekong delta and up to Ho Chi Minh City and their insistence on membership in a universal fraternity transcends the parochial identifications promoted by the nation-state.

### **Development as Dispossession**

Of all the local, ethnic, and religious communities in the Mekong delta the Khmer Krom, who are the delta's largest ethnic minority group, give voice to the most sustained criticism of the negative effects of the state's market-oriented development approach. Such a response is of a different intensity and quality to those advanced by other locals who are also often critical of the state's centralizing policies. In my conversations with several score Khmer Krom monks, farmers, small business people, and civil servants in eight provinces of the delta between 1999 and 2004, I was told a consistent tale of the economic, social, and cultural marginalization of Vietnam's ethnic Khmer people. The Khmer Krom commonly describe themselves as the poorest people in the delta: "Our people live in poor thatched houses with dirt floors and meagre furnishings. The brick houses and well-furnished businesses that one sees are nearly all owned by Vietnamese and Chinese families." Or, "the

Khmer are concentrated in the part of the delta with the poorest soil and lowest water quality, in areas where it is impossible to grow fruit or raise fish", the most lucrative economic products in the region. They also point out the narrowness of their occupational base:

The Khmer make our living chiefly from farming rice, or labouring in the fields. No one gets rich from farming rice. In fact being dependant on rice agriculture for a living usually means one loses money over the long run and finally one has to sell one's land.<sup>9</sup>

In the last ten years or so the Khmer Krom have been losing their land at a rapid rate, due to indebtedness, the low rice price, the high cost of fertilizer and pesticide inputs, and due to mounting health and educational expenses:

To get ahead or to simply break even these days, one needs to have an economic base — a stall, a boat, a vehicle, a market stall — to sell a commodity that is in demand, or adapt one's fields to a new higher-earning product. But few of us Khmer have the capital that is needed to set these up or respond flexibly to market shifts.

In addition, the Khmer Krom say they suffer from remoteness:

We live outside the provincial capitals and deep (*sau*) in the countryside where there are few roads, markets and services. ... There are almost no Khmer living along the sides of the roads and none living in the market centres. ... The only Khmer in towns are those in portering, construction or transport jobs.

Khmer Krom people also comment on their disadvantages with respect to the cultures of business and officialdom: "Even if we had the capital to set up a stall, we lack information, experience in business, knowledge of the wider world, contacts with those in power and Vietnamese language skills." Khmer Krom students complain that they persistently fail in the state school system for a variety of reasons: "We lack the fees to attend school, we struggle with the language, and schools are frequently located far from our homes."

Many Khmer Krom I have spoken with are also critical of recent institutional efforts to improve their lot. For instance, they claim that much of the money and material aid designated for poor Khmer families never makes it to the recipients. Loans programmes have consistently proven ineffective and often fail. Some regard the state's "135" poverty-alleviation programme for remote and ethnic minority peoples as

inadequate and corruptly administered. As one monk in Soc Trang told me: "The majority of the Khmer are in urgent need of assistance but this programme aids only a small number of people, the poorest fraction of the delta's poorest group". Another allegation is that the Khmer are rarely informed in advance of new economic investments or infrastructure developments in their area. They are neither consulted to gain their input into a new development project, nor are they empowered with capital or business experience to take advantage of its introduction into their local area. As for educational assistance, a common allegation is that a large proportion of the scholarship money dedicated to Khmer students goes missing. Despite the fact that education is provided to many Khmer people free of charge, and that school and university admission requirements are reduced, Khmer students still struggle with a curriculum taught in an unfamiliar language. Even in areas of Khmer population concentration only two hours a week at the most are devoted to teaching basic Khmer literacy. Khmer Krom people complain that the history, culture, and geography components of the curriculum have an ethnic Kinh focus, overlooking the specificities of local history and not addressing the achievements of Khmer culture. The ethnic minorities boarding school programme is widely regarded as a mechanism to cultivate a new generation of cadres rather than as an equity-based programme opening opportunities for ordinary people. With the lessons in these schools taught in Vietnamese, many Khmer Krom see these schools as a tool of assimilation. Moreover, there is a strong perception that few ethnic Khmer get jobs in the local administration. One also hears the view that those who have official jobs find themselves in low or at best, deputy (*pho*) positions, their promotion checked by those who maintain an ethnically exclusivist agenda. Hence, the state rarely arbitrates in favour of the Khmer. Nor, despite mouthing a commitment to an ethnically diverse society, does the state provide concrete practical measures to allow the Khmer to preserve their culture. Indeed, some Khmer Krom argue that camouflaged by a rhetoric of multiculturalism and symbolic gestures that make it appear that the state is trying to help the Khmer, the consistent effect of the state's policies has been to impoverish, isolate, render stupid their people and thereby extinguish their culture.

Khmer Krom people's own solution to the dire predicaments they face and that are briefly sketched out here has been to disengage from

relations offering them no hope of success. Under intense economic pressure many farmers have no other alternative but to borrow money from private money lenders, and, when unable to make interest payments, sell their land. In several districts and villages surrounding the urban centres of Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, and Can Tho, I was told that within living memory all the local landowners had been Khmer. The majority owned sizeable plots of land and many of them were wealthy. Now only a handful of Khmer hold small parcels of land in these areas and most local landowners are ethnic Kinh. In several localities I was told that the steepest decline in Khmer Krom land ownership occurred during the last ten years. Some who remain in such places say that their dispossession from the delta has gone on for centuries: "How can a people who lack power and connections resist those who have such means". Others have argued that the Khmer people's downfall has been their own ethic of honesty, frankness, and trust in their dealings with others: "We are not like those Vietnamese, who will stop at nothing for economic gain, including theft, cheating, lying, or even selling their own daughters."<sup>10</sup> Other Khmer Krom people consider their main disadvantage has been their limited recourse to the institutions of the state to press their claims, which has tended to back the claims of the settlers against the original inhabitants. Those who have lost their land move away from the commercial and administrative centres, where they are at a disadvantage, to establish a new settlement alongside other ethnic Khmer people. Once again, locals have told me, this is an old story. A common response to Vietnamese and French colonialism has been to move to a place where there is less "noise" (*on ao*), that is, cheating, injustice, and conflict. There they have rebuilt their monasteries when able to do so. Buddhist monasteries are a total institution for the Khmer Krom, a place for interring the cremated remains of their ancestors, seeking the blessing of Lord Buddha at each stage of the life cycle and in economic activities, observing seasonal and religious festivals and renewing bonds with one's neighbours. "They are the centre of our life," I was often told, "unlike the case of the Vietnamese, who follow all manner of religions." Monasteries are also places of socialization and learning. On ordination, a young man is trained to control his desires and quell his passions and he is cultivated for a life as an honest, restrained, sober member of a household. Apart from training in Pali and Buddhism, Khmer monks also study Khmer and Vietnamese

language literacy and receive free of charge supplementary lessons in the state school curriculum from older monks and Achar.

The Khmer Krom charge that they are being dispossessed by the development initiatives of the Vietnamese state situates the Khmer as victims of the collective oppression of one people by another. There is no doubt that this critique, uncomfortable as it may be for the state to accommodate, has strong foundations in social practice. Paradoxically, one way of confirming this is that other ethno-religious and localist groups living in the delta have voiced similar although differently emphasized criticisms of their institutional, economic, and cultural marginalization. At the same time it is rare to hear from those Khmer Krom who espouse this critique that there may be some ethnic Khmer who have succeeded economically, who have well-placed businesses in market centres, who are educationally successful or serve in the state apparatus. Although such exceptions do exist, the tendency of Khmer Krom critics is to minimize or discount such cases that complicate the narrative of collective dispossession. Faced by a process of rapid and multi-dimensional marginalization, their consistent and coherent response is to emphasize the threat to their survival as a people. Given the rapid loss of land that the Khmer Krom face and the radically dislocating effects of the state's development projects, their insistence that such results are intended is understandable. In practical terms such a perception leads many Khmer people to retreat from places where the economic dice are loaded against them, to redouble their focus on their pagoda-based religious life, to emphasize their social exclusivity and moral uniqueness as a people and to pass onto their children stories about the historical wickedness of the Vietnamese people. For the individuals who do integrate successfully and win acceptance in the mainstream Vietnamese-speaking world, such adaptation can come at the cost of loss of fluency in their mother tongue, of connections to home, and of community recognition. Those who adopt such a strategy may not be considered as Khmer by those who define the Khmer Krom collectively as subjects of ethnic oppression, a distinction that keeps the lines between ethnic groups clean and sharp. Such responses call into dispute views that the Khmer Krom people's cultural identifications are anterior to, isolated from, or somehow not calibrated to the realities of the modern world. Their critique of structural dispossession forces us to rethink suggestions that to solve their problems, the Khmer Krom

need to engage more fully with market relations, overcome their isolation and their insular residence pattern, or modernize their outmoded cultural orientation. Indeed in the current situation, the construction of Khmer Krom culture as an ancient, exclusivist, and religiously monolithic way of life, which is threatened with extinction by forces hostile or indifferent to their plight, needs to be understood as a coherent response to their contemporary experience of inequality.

## Conclusions

The state's development interventions in the Mekong delta are premised on good intentions, to extend to the residents of this unique region the opportunities and resources which have delivered economic prosperity and cultural well-being in the cities and imagined cultural heartlands of the nation. Policies to introduce free markets, roads, and schools into the Mekong delta, and to extend them to all, regardless of ethnicity, aim to rectify the delta's lack of the factors that are presumed by planners to be necessary for development. Yet many of the positive socio-economic achievements in the Mekong delta have occurred in spite of the state's attempt to impose its vision on the region. The region's high agricultural productivity owes much to its highly developed non-land-based market economy. The delta's waterways have facilitated high levels of trade and communicative exchanges, even where roads are absent. Religious and cultural orientations have served residents of the delta well in the reproduction of knowledge and promulgation of lessons and values that are sensitive to local conditions. The Khmer Krom maintain a strong sense of collective identity and invest in community institutions that have provided a safety net in a context of rapid socio-cultural change. Mistakenly seen as indicators of disadvantage or obstacles to development, these local non-institutionalized practices or pathways in fact account for the considerable successes of the delta's people. However, despite their relevance to locals, these local solutions, be they land sales, migration along or away from roads, or the intensification of religious or ethnic affiliations are not in themselves panaceas but responses to inequalities that divide delta society. Hence, development interventions that do not take into account localized patterns of economic, spatial, informational, and cultural activity may undermine solutions with proven value as well as accentuating the inequalities to which they respond.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> According to a *Viet Nam News* feature on the agricultural achievements of the Mekong delta 28 years after liberation, the delta supplies more than half of the rice, fruit, and seafood that Vietnam exports overseas (*Viet Nam News*, 1 May 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> These provinces were, in decreasing order of per capita GDP, Kien Giang (US\$332), An Giang (US\$320), Ca Mau (US\$318), Can Tho (US\$308), and Long An (US\$307). The poorest provinces in the delta were Bac Lieu (US\$231) and Dong Thap (US\$219). The national average per capita GDP in 1998 was US\$305 (UNDP 2001, pp. 108–9).
- <sup>3</sup> Some analysts argue that correlates of ethnic minority status such as geographical remoteness and inadequate schooling have more determinate effects on poverty than ethnicity per se (Kinh and Baulch 2001, p. 118). Yet others argue that interventions aimed at overcoming geographical disadvantage, without targeting ethnic minority households in particular, may deliver disproportionate benefits to locals from the majority ethnic group (Van de Walle and Gunewardene 2001, p. 177).
- <sup>4</sup> This terminology is found in the ten-year strategy for socio-economic development issued in 2001 by the National Party Congress (9th Party Congress 2001, p. 22). In its summary of projected economic development orientations for the Mekong river delta region, the document does not mention any measures specifically targeting the Khmer Krom.
- <sup>5</sup> The tendency for Vietnam's state officials and intellectuals to attribute the poor economic standing of ethnic minority groups to perceived weaknesses in their culture has been criticized by some foreign scholars and domestic development advisers (see, for instance, Evans 1992; Rambo and Jamieson 2003; Huynh Thu Ba et al. 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> One case where such a group have been unable to break into a new market is the raising of catfish (*ca basa*, *ca tra*) in floating cages. This enterprise is out of reach to the majority of farmers due to its high capital costs, locational specificity in the upstream portion of the delta, and the need for producers to maintain good relationships with a network of suppliers, buyers, and local authorities, as well as access good market information and keep abreast of specialized and constantly changing aquaculture techniques. The conversion of fields for raising tiger shrimp (*tom su*) is another recent investment movement. This occurs in all the coastal areas of the delta. This is also very expensive and many poor farmers simply sell their land to others when their land is designated for conversion because they cannot afford the costs of doing this. Sometimes this option is imposed on them by the tyranny of the majority who elect to flood an area with salt water.
- <sup>7</sup> A discussion of the problems of long-term marginalization as identified by

- residents of the Tien Giang village of Vinh Kim is found in Taylor (2001b, pp. 159–91).
- <sup>8</sup> In 1998, the southern province of Ca Mau had the lowest high school enrolment rate of the entire country at just 8.0 per cent, although its per capita GDP of US\$318 was higher than the national average (UNDP 2001, p. 108).
- <sup>9</sup> All comments in quotes are taken from notes of my conversations with Khmer Krom people in Vietnam from 1999 to 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> The term “Vietnamese” (*nguoì Viet Nam*) is commonly used by the Khmer Krom as a synonym for the ethnic Kinh or Viet group.

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