

# LOOKING FOR FOOD: THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY OF THE HMONG IN VIETNAM (Anthropological Perspectives on Food Security)

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“ The Hmong just need a hammer, a machete and a maize grinder for their livelihood”  
(Hmong folk saying)

## Abstract

*Finding food was the difficult journey for the Hmong in the past, and it remains so at present. Projective reports indicate that it will be difficult in the future also. Having lived in the northern highlands for several centuries, the Hmong's primary food production activities are shifting cultivation, livestock breeding, and terrace field farming. Recently their forests have been seriously destroyed and under the provisions of the 1993 Land Law, their cultivable land has been limited. Moreover, their isolated communities, their low level of education, and their lack of information denied them access to scientific and technological advances and the market economy. These are the main reasons for the Hmong's current state of poverty as well as low and unsustainable food security. To achieve food security in the future, they have to solve the following contradictions: land limitation verses increasing population, food production verses conserving forest and water resources; the need for production development verses low level of education, and the changing forms of livelihood verses traditional customs.*

**Keywords :** Hmong, food security, incomes, livelihoods, challenges, sustainable.

## Introduction

Food security is a pressing global issue at present. Up to 800 million people in Africa, Asia and Latin America still suffer daily food shortages. Although it is the world's second largest rice exporter, Vietnam has not yet resolved the question of food security. This is especially true for the ethnic minorities who are vulnerable and disadvantaged during the developmental process. Many of them still live under the poverty line.

This paper discusses food security for the Hmong - an ethnic minority group living mainly in the highlands of northern Vietnam. This ethnic group shares many typical historical and cultural characteristics. Their residential areas are isolated, remote and inaccessible and their typical farming method is upland rice and corn cultivation. In the past many centuries, the Hmong's journey has been mainly to find food. And this was the main reason for them to lead a nomadic life, to practice shifting cultivation and to migrate. In reviewing the Hmong's food security, I would like to answer the following research question, “What challenges face this ethnic group in resolving the question of food security as they continue their nomadic lifestyles and shifting cultivation and when household land use is limited by the 1993 Land Law?”

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## 1. Conceptual Review of Food Security

1.1. Food security has been the concern of many people, particularly since 1970s. However, the concept of food security remains controversial. According to Maxwell, there are some 200 definitions of food security. (Maxwell, 1996: p. 155) This is because each person and each organization looks at food security from their own approach. I would like to cite two definitions from two organizations that have an important effect on food security worldwide. In 1986, World Bank defined food security as, “Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” According to the Plan of Action of the World Food Summit held in Rome in November 1996, “Food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

Many people consider food security to be a problem of poor nations in developing regions. (Food Security for Developing Countries, 1981) Yet, of late, people have realized that food security is also needed for even developed countries because the food quality first of all relates to a healthy life. Moreover, attention must be paid to the food market, particularly in changing political and cultural conditions. Taiwan’s experience during the 1990s in the solution of qualitative food without chemical pesticides and fertilizers is a lesson to be learned on this issue. (Food Security in Asia, 2000: 205-228) In Thailand the traditional concept “More fish in the water, more rice in the field” is replaced by “Good food and good life.” (Food Security in Asia and Pacific, 2000: 294)

Concepts of food security have evolved. For example, the level at which food security is discussed has also been changed over the past several decades. During the 1960s and 1970s, people laid more stress on food security at the global and national level. But since the 1980s, many people think that food security at the household and even individual level should be the focus. (Jonathan Rigg, 2001) This is because some countries, such as Brazil have exported a large volume of food but many of their people still suffer food shortages. (Pursuing Food Security, 1987:1) Such a change in thinking about the level of food security has further involved anthropologists, as well as social scientists in the research on the question of food security. When dealing with food security, economists and agronomists stress the issue of production and consider it a basic indicator of food security. Meanwhile, anthropologists and sociologists are concerned about food consumption and food aid among family clans or in the community. (Parker Shipton, 1990; Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2002) Anthropologists consider the household and individual level when studying poverty and lack of food security. Indicators relating to this level are often different from those of scientists working in agricultural or economic fields.

Food security closely relates to many other factors. According to Maxwell and Wiebe, food security of the non-urban inhabitants is closely linked to their land ownership and entitlement to natural resources. These authors show a diagram of the chain of relationship between land and food as follow: Resources  $\Rightarrow$  Production  $\Rightarrow$  Income  $\Rightarrow$  Consumption  $\Rightarrow$  Nutrition status. (Daniel Maxwell and Keith Wiebe: 1998) Meanwhile, anthropologists consider the role of culture, particularly local knowledge as it relates to the settlement of the problem of food security. (Pottier, 1999:15-16) In fact, food security also relates to other aspects, such as population growth, food market and services, non-agricultural income generation, etc. In the context of seriously degrading world environment, the link of food security and sustainable management of natural resources, particularly with highlanders, is the concern of many people. It

presents a challenge in both the present and the future. (Sustaining Food Security and Managing Natural Resources in Southeast Asia – Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2002)

During the early 1990s, many people thought that food security should be placed in the context of livelihood security, because lack of food security is only an expression of hunger and poverty. (Jonathan Rigg, 2001) Yet, in such a case, though sustainable livelihoods can replace food security, food remains very important because of its position in livelihood. Sharing this viewpoint, some scholars pose the issue on food chains (Jonathan Rigg, 2001), or food systems. (Food Systems in the World, 1989) With this approach, Pottier pointed out that when considering food security we should know “What people eat, what they grow, how they trade, who they turn to in need”, and these questions should be placed within a comprehensive inter-relationship. (Pottier, 1996: 26) Maxwell also held that food security can be achieved through synthesizing many forms in which the need for food is also based on culture and food security should be closely related to nutrition security and health. (Maxwell, 1996)

To solve the question of food security, economists and agronomists tend to favor technical solutions, taking economic and technological investment measures to develop agricultural produce. However, this solution cannot be applied in all cases. In each nation or region, depending on specific time and conditions, suitable solutions should be applied. In Vietnam the key to food security in the past years had been through a thrust in land policy. (Food Security in Asia and the Pacific, 2000: 305-311) With regard to many African countries, the immediate problem to be solved is a political solution. Food security cannot be achieved in that region if warfare continues.

In short, over the past four decades, according to Maxwell, the perception on food security has been changed through three paradigms: (i) From global and national level to household and individual level, (ii) From food security to livelihood perspective, or from food security to sustainable livelihoods and (iii) From objective indicators to subjective perceptions. (Maxwell, 1996: 156)

During this process, involvement of anthropologists in food security issue has been increasing. However, their contribution is more effective when considering policies on food security and studying cultural aspects relating to food security. (Pottier, 2000: 1-4)

1.2. Vietnam is among the countries that have committed to the international community to achieve food security. This commitment is expressed in a report submitted to the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996. (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1996) The issue of food security in Vietnam is now placed in the framework of the national strategy for poverty reduction. To implement the strategy, beside the overall socio-economic development strategy, Vietnam also carries out key programs including Program 135.<sup>1</sup> This is a socio-economic development program for mountainous, remote, and border areas and off shore islands and the key beneficiaries are ethnic minorities.

The conception and indicators on food security in Vietnam have been closely related to indicators on poverty. Vietnam has coordinated with the World Health Organization to develop

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<sup>1</sup> Program 135: On July 31, 1998, the Decision No. 135/1998/QĐ-TTg was signed by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to establish a socio-economic development program for mountainous, remote, border areas and off shore islands. This Decision is called by other name is Program 135.

indicators on poverty of households based on their food income. These indicators have changed in the past years:

In 1997, the average income per household member was in mountainous areas less than 15 kg of rice (~VND 55,000/person/month), in the plain less than 20 kg of rice (~VND 70,000) and in poor urban areas less than 25 kg of rice (VND 90,000). In 2001 these figures were VND 80,000, VND 100,000 and VND 150,000/person/month respectively.

The average food share per capita in Vietnam has increased from 303 kg in 1990 to 440 kg in 2000. This is one of the basic conditions which was able to reduce the percentage of poor households in the country from 25% in 1993 to 15% in 1998. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2002)

## 2. Overview of Socio-Economy and Research of the Hmong in Vietnam

2.1. Before the census listing of Vietnam's ethnic composition of 1979, the Hmong in Vietnam were called by other names such as Meo, Mong, etc. According to the 1999 population census, the Hmong population was close to 800,000, ranking 8<sup>th</sup> among the 54 ethnic groups in the country. They concentrate mostly in the northern mountainous provinces of Ha Giang, Nghe An, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Son La, Yen Bai, Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang.

Many researchers believe that the Hmong immigrated from China into Vietnam about 300 years ago and the largest exodus was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1975, some Hmong have freely migrated to Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands). The Hmong have been categorized into four groups: White Hmong (*Mong Do*), Flowery Hmong (*Mong Lenh*), Blue Hmong (*Mong Sua*) and Black Hmong (*Mong Du*)<sup>2</sup>.

The Hmong live mainly in mountainous areas more than 800 meters above sea level. For example, in Muong Long commune, Ky Son district, Nghe An province is 2,000 meters above sea level. In these areas, the weather is temperate and the topography is inaccessible. However, until a few decades ago, many forests remained there which were very favorable for their slash-and-burn farming, for the cultivation of traditional herbal plants, for cattle raising, hunting and gathering. The residential conditions of this ethnic group have greatly impacted their socio-economic development and food safety.

In traditional society, and even at present, village (*jiao*) is the residential unit and also a very important social space for the Hmong. On average, each village has 30-40 household families and some villages have hundreds of household families. The Hmong population has grown rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s with the growth rate of 3.4% per annum. The reason for this growth is that population and family planning programs have not been well implemented in those areas. It is also because children remain an important labor force of the family. The village old folks and family clan chiefs are very important and they not only influence the enforcement of customary laws and cultural life of the village, but they also play a decisive role in the management of land and natural resources, of development of production and even migration.

So far, the Hmong's economy remains autarkic and their key economic activities are cultivation and livestock breeding. People who live along highways and near urban areas also engage in service trades or work as hired laborers for additional income. However, in general the

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<sup>2</sup> The Hmong names and Hmong letters in this paper are documented by Vietnamese

Hmong still face many difficulties, not only in economic terms, but also in accessibility to healthcare, education and information. Therefore, most of the Hmong villages belong to Region III<sup>3</sup> which is categorized by the Government as disadvantaged and therefore enjoys preferential policies.

2.2. Many Vietnamese scholars have been interested in the Hmong group, particularly since the 1960s. Hundreds of works, including published books and articles in the scientific journals, research papers presented at symposiums and workshops and many graduate thesis have been written about this ethnic minority group. However, most of the scientific papers have been published in Vietnamese. Those research projects focused on the following areas:

- *Overview research*: such as historical, economic, social and cultural which aim to understand the most basic issues of the Hmong. (Be Viet Dang, 1978; Cu Hoa Van – Hoang Nam, 1994; Hoang Xuan Luong, 2000)

- *Cultural research*: such as material culture, social culture and spiritual culture. (Vuong Duy Quang, 1987; Pham Quang Hoan, 1994; Ky Son district People's Committee and People's Council, 1995; Tran Huu Son, 1996; Vuong Xuan Tinh, 1997; Ho Ly Giang, 2000)

- *Socio-economic research*: a diverse area of studies relating to natural resource potential in Hmong villages. (Hoang Huu Binh – Nguyen Xuan Thuong, 1989) cultivation and livestock breeding (Nguyen Anh Ngoc, 1989; Ta Duc, 1989; Nguyen Van Minh, 1994); the Hmong and world plants (Diep Dinh Hoa, 1998); changing economic structure (Nguyen Ngoc Thanh – Ngoc Thi, 1996; Nguyen Duc Thang, 1998)

In recent years, some non-Vietnamese researchers have also undertaken research projects on the Hmong in Vietnam. But they focus mainly on the impact of tourism on the group's economic, social and cultural life. (Michael Digregorio, 1996; Trish Nicholson, 1997; Jean Michaud, 1998)

So far no research project on Hmong food security has been made public. Yet the issue has been covered somewhat in socio-economic research papers as mentioned above or in research projects on sustainable development in the northern mountainous areas. (Research Center on Natural Resources and Environment, 2002) This material provides favorable bases for this paper to inherit and from which to make comparisons.

### **3. Food Security in the Context of the Food System and Livelihood of the Hmong**

When studying food security of the Hmong, I consider it in the context of their food system and livelihood at the household level. Food security issue at the research sites was also placed in social, community and market relationship context in the region. The question I pose is: we can understand more about the food security of members of this ethnic group through household food security research although they live in different regions? This research context is different from the food security research that I conducted of the Ro mam, a very small ethnic group which resides only in one village. (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2001) However, I think that the indicator of food security for the Hmong household at the research sites not only reflects the state of food security

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<sup>3</sup> Region III: Based on geographical and socio-economic condition, mountainous and remoted areas are divided into 3 regions by the Government: Region I is urban areas (center) ; Region II is villages are near urbans and highways; Region III is farer villages from the center with difficult socio-economic conditions.

of that community but also partly shows the food security of the Hmong ethnic group in general. As discussed earlier, although the Hmong live in different parts in Vietnam they share a similarity in that their residential area is located in the highest area of the region with similar socio-economic conditions. Moreover, an anthropological approach to food safety research relies on culture and Hmong culture is quite uniform. For this reason, the result of such research on separate villages contributes to findings of the state of food security of this ethnic group as a whole.

This research paper on food security of the Hmong is mainly based on the results of the survey conducted in two Flowery Hmong (*Mong Lenh*) villages in the two provinces of Ha Giang and Lao Cai in 1998 and 2002. In addition, I compared those villages with other survey sites in the provinces of Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Son La and Nghe An during the implementation of a Research Project of the Hmong in Vietnam by the Institute of Ethnology which was funded by Toyota Foundation in 1994–1995. (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 1994-1995) The methodologies applied in the field surveys were participatory observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and statistical data.

### **3.1. General information on the survey sites**

#### **3.1.1. Nam Pien village:**

This is the village of the Flowery Hmong (*Mong Lenh*) and Red Dzao in Nam Ty commune, Hoang Su Phi district in Ha Giang province. However, the Hmong community in this village live in an area higher up and far from the residential area of the Dzao. Previously, their residential area was in Van Tho Chai village but during the 1970s, due to a reorganization of local administrative structure, their village was merged with that of the Dzao into a new village named Nam Pien. In this research, I focus my studies on the Hmong households only, considering them a separate community.

Nam Pien village is located in an area 1,200 meters above sea level, 3 km from the commune center and the main road linking the district with the province. But the road to the village from the commune is tortuous and steep. There is no other way but to travel to the commune center by foot. In 1998, there were 35 Hmong households in the village with 272 people. The Hmong group in Nam Pien manages 22 ha of wet fields, 58 ha of upland fields and 15 ha of forest. Their agricultural production mainly comprises wet rice cultivation on terrace fields, maize and cassava crops on upland fields and shifting lands <sup>4</sup> and tea growing in the gardens surrounding home. Livestock breeding is under-developed. During winter buffaloes and cows often die.

#### **3.1.2. Suoi Ho village:**

This is the village of Flowery Hmong (*Mong Lenh*) in Sa Pa commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province. Many Vietnamese researchers hold that the Hmong group in Sa Pa is Black Hmong because they wear black clothing without embroidered patterns. In fact, they consider themselves *Mong Lenh* and only a very small group consider themselves *Mong Du*.

Suoi Ho is located in an area 1,400 meters above sea level, about 2 km from Sa Pa district town, and 1 km from the highway. From the highway to the village, people have to travel on

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<sup>4</sup> Villagers also cultivated mazes and cassavas illegally on shifting lands on the forest managed by commune official, but I could not count up amount of those lands.

foot. In Suoi Ho, there were 69 household families with 535 people in July, 2002. The village's natural land area is more than 450 ha, including 44 ha of wet rice land and 256 ha of forest land and the rest is bare hills and waste land. Suoi Ho villagers mainly farm on terrace fields, growing maize and cassava. Livestock breeding is under-developed because of the shortage of feed. In winter, cattle often die. As the village is near the district town of Sa Pa, a well-known tourist attraction, street vendors and hired workers are needed, particularly during out-of-the growing season period.

### 3.1.3. Other survey sites:

They include villages in Giang Chu Phin commune (Meo Vac district, Ha Giang province), Sa Phin commune (Dong Van district, Ha Giang province), Thanh Van commune (Quan Ba district, Ha Giang province), San Sa Ho (Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province), Chieng Kheo commune (Mai Son district, Son La Province), Huoi Tu and Muong Long communes (Ky Son district, Nghe An province). There, I mainly conducted qualitative studies on the eating habits of the Hmong, including aspects relating to food security. The common feature shared by those research sites is their location which is more than 1,500 meters above sea level, accessibility is difficult and living standards are similar. The only differences are their ecological systems and food sources. The Hmong in the districts of Ha Giang live on high limestone mountains, hence their main starch food is maize while the Hmong in other provinces live on earthen mountains and their main starch food is rice. The local Hmong in those research sites are the White Hmong (in Meo Vac–Ha Giang and Ky Son–Nghe An), Flowery Hmong (in Dong Van–Ha Giang and Sa Pa–Lao Cai) and Blue Hmong (Mai Son–Son La).

## 3.2. Farming system

When studying the state of food security of farmers, it is important to know their farming system as it is the primary source of their income.

### 3.2.1. Cultivation:

*Wet rice fields:* Both Nam Pien and Suoi Ho villages cultivate on terrace fields. The Hmong here have a long history of reclaiming land to build terrace fields, therefore they have settled down and set up their village hundreds of years ago. Some terrace fields of the Hmong in Suoi Ho have hundreds of levels. They have been reclaimed on slight mountain slopes having few stones. The terraces have been built up very carefully, over many years by several generations. Therefore they are the most precious asset of each household family.

Before the enforcement of the Land Law in 1993, wet fields of the Hmong in the two villages were given to agricultural cooperatives. Later on, due to ineffective operations of cooperatives, the villagers got back their land. At the time of my research, there had been a distinct difference in the acreage of wet fields held by different households. Some households had more land because they had inherited it from their ancestors, or reclaimed it and built it up by themselves years ago or because they have few sons so that the land does not have to be divided into small plots. The difference in land use, particularly wet fields has created pre-conditions for widening the gap between the rich and the poor in the Hmong communities under my survey. It is also the basis for the differences in food security between household families. Table 1 shows the status of the use of wet rice fields between households.

Table 1: Use of wet rice fields in Nam Pien and Suoi Ho

Nam Pien				Suoi Ho			
Households possessing wet fields	Average m <sup>2</sup> /pers	No.of households	% compared to total	Households possessing wet fields	Average m <sup>2</sup> /pers	No.of households	% compared to total
Many	1,500-1,700	5	14.3	Many	1,000-1,200	3	4.5
Average	600-800	22	62.9	Average	500-700	61	78.0
Few	80-120	8	22.8	Few	100-120	5	7.5
Total		35	100.0	Total		69	100.0

Comparing the use of wet fields of the two Hmong villages, we see that although they are some 100 km away from each other, there are some similarities and some differences. The difference in the land owned per person by households possessing more and households having less wet land is dozens of times. The differences shown in the number of the two groups of households (those possessing many and those with few wetlands) in Nam Pien is larger than that in Suoi Ho village.

The Hmong grow both old and new rice strains on their terraced fields. But they tend to replace the traditional varieties. They only still grow traditional rice varieties on terraced fields of high places which can tolerate cold weather. In Suoi Ho village, traditional rice varieties, such as *ble la*, *ble du*, *ble cha*, *ble de* are often grown. In the 2002 crop, about 60 percent of the acreage in Suoi Ho village has been planted with new rice varieties which were provided with subsidies by the district agricultural extension agency (30 percent lower than the market price). The yield of the new rice strains is about 2.5 ton/ha. Meanwhile in Nam Pien village, people used to grow glutinous rice along with the traditional varieties of rice while they grow other rice with the newer varieties, such as Tran Chau Lun and CR.203. Some households buy new rice varieties from China. The use of fertilizer – both organic and inorganic is popular in both villages.

*Upland fields and gardens:* These are important land resources for the local households at present when the State has already allotted land and forest to households and they have no conditions now to lead a nomadic life and reclaim new land. This type of land has been left to them by their ancestors, and part of the land has been reclaimed recently by themselves. At the survey time, the land resources to be reclaimed in Nam Pien have been distributed. However, local people illegally continue to clear for cultivation natural forests that are under the commune level management. However, this area is higher up and remote from the village and is not convenient for cultivation. In Suoi Ho village, the land resources available for reclamation have all been allotted to households. The land which has not yet been allotted to households is uncultivable as it is full of stones and gravel. Most of the households who have more wet land also have more upland fields and gardens as they are related to agrarian history and the capacity of land reclamation and the land relationship of each household family. However, the difference between owner households having more wet fields and less wet fields is not great. (see Table 2)



Table 2: Use of upland fields and gardens

Nam Pien				Suoi Ho			
Households possessing upland/gardens	Average m <sup>2</sup> /pers	No. of households	% compared to total	Households possessing upland/garden	Average m <sup>2</sup> /pers	No. of households	% compared to total
Many	5-7,000	3	8.3	Many	3-4,000	10	14.4
Average	3-4,000	20	77.4	Average	1-2,000	51	74.0
Few	1-2,000	5	14.3	Few	500-700	8	11.6
Total		35	100.0	Total		69	100.0

On upland, people in Nam Pien village mainly grow cassava because the soil there is exhausted. If they grow maize, they need to invest in fertilizer. Meanwhile, people in Suoi Ho grow more maize of both old and new varieties on upland. There are two traditional maize varieties – the *pac cu chzua* (ordinary maize) and *pac cu blau* (sticky maize). The new maize variety P.11 is also becoming more popular but the seeds are only used for feeding animals because, although this variety gives high yield (1.5 tons/ha) but its taste does not appeal to humans. On garden land, people in Nam Pien grow tea while people in Suoi Ho grow forest trees and herbal fruit trees (*amomum aromaticum roxb*). In the gardens surrounding their residence, they grow vegetables or fruit trees.

Compared with other areas, there are some differences in the use of land of the Hmong in the two survey sites. First, in cultivation activities, the Hmong here mainly grow wet rice while the Hmong in Ha Giang, Son La and Nghe An provinces mainly practice upland cultivation. However, some of their crops are very valuable, such as sedentary farming in Ha Giang high mountainous area and poppy crop in Ky son district, Nghe An province (when poppy plants were not yet prohibited). During the first half of the 1990s there remained a lot of shifting cultivation land for the Hmong in Nghe An and Son La provinces. The Hmong in Hoa Binh province had to travel into thick forests of neighboring Thanh Hoa province to clear land for cultivation. (Nguyen Van Minh, 2000) In Thai Pin Tung commune, Dong Van district of Ha Giang province, the Hmong only grow upland maize and bean crops with an average area of 11,400 m<sup>2</sup> per household. (Center for Natural Resources and Environment Research, 2001: 65)

For highland cultivators, their crops are diverse. They include both food crops and subsidiary crops as essential supplies to their daily life. Here, many traditional rice varieties have been preserved and developed. For example, in Huoi Tu and Muong Long communes in Ky Son district, Nghe An province, I myself could list dozens of highland rice varieties, such as *ble do*, *ble lia*, *ble xa*, *ble chsa*, *ble tau*, *ble ti*, *ble kho ta*... Highland rice yield is about 1 ton/ha and in infertile fields, only 0.7-0.8 tons/ha. In the high limestone mountainous areas in Ha Giang province, due to population pressure, the Hmong had to shift over to growing new maize strains since the 80s and by the early 90s, the new maize varieties had become popular.

### 3.2.2. Livestock breeding:

*Cattle:* In the two survey sites, cattle have been raised for draught force, meat, offerings and for sale. The cattle raised there include buffaloes, cows, horses, goats, and pigs. Rich households and those who have more available labor raise large herds of cattle. In Nam Pien, in 1998 there were 65 buffaloes and cows, and 32 horses. Five households had 3-4 buffaloes and

two horses; and four households did not have any. There was a small number of goats in the village, only 15 goats in all; and there were 147 pigs (including 27 sows). Four households had more than 10 pigs each. In Suoi Ho village, in 2002, three households, considered the richest in the village had 3-6 buffaloes and 10-15 pigs. Of the four households considered poorest, two did not have any cattle at all.

*Poultry:* Chickens, ducks, and geese are raised but the number varies from one household to another. There are different reasons for this, such as epidemics and slaughtering for offerings. However, at the time of our survey, there remained a tendency that rich households raised more poultry. In Nam Pien village, the five rich households each raised more than 20 fowl, three times higher than the average households. Of the poor households, some did not raise any poultry. In Suoi Ho village, the situation was similar. Three rich households each raised 15-25 poultry, while two poor households did not have any.

*Fish rearing:* Although situated in an area 1000 meters above sea level, some Hmong households are able to raise fish. In Nam Pien village, some households raise fish in their wet rice fields. They raise local carp species after transplanting rice in the field. To prevent fish from flowing out of the field when it rains and the water overflows the edges, farmers plant palm leaves in the field as shelters for fish. Twenty-two households in the village raised fish in the 1997 rice crops, and each harvested minimum 5–7 kg, and maximum 50 kg of fish. Besides, five households have ponds and raise mainly pikes.

In Suoi Ho village the Hmong do not raise fish in their rice fields but dig ponds for fish rearing. They raise different species of fish, such as pike, carp, anabas and some natural fish species caught from Y Chu De stream that runs through the village. There are seven households in the village that have ponds for fish rearing and in 2001 each harvested 7–20 kg of fish.

Compared with the livestock breeding conditions of the Hmong in other areas, particularly cattle raising, there are some differences in the two surveyed sites. There are more favorable conditions for cattle raising (buffaloes, cows, horses) those surveyed sites than in Meo Vac and Dong Van high limestone mountainous areas because there are forests for grazing. But cattle raising in Nam Pien and Suoi Ho villages is less developed than in Ky Son district, Nghe An province because there are more pasture land in Ky Son. Some Hmong households raise 10 cows and buffaloes each and many have more than 5 heads. Cows are raised not only for draught but also for meat, offerings and sale and even for bull fighting. During market days, bull fighting is organized. Bulls raised for fighting are very healthy and strong and they are the wealth of their owners as each can be worth VND 10 million (in 1995, about US \$800).

### 3.2.3. Afforestation:

Here, we list afforestation in the system of cultivation, not forest protection. It is because the planting of forest trees is done on the land allotted to households or on long-term contract (more than 20 years) while forest protection are done on short-term contractual quota with the State.

Of the two survey sites, planting new forest was carried out in Suoi Ho village, not in Nam Pien. In the village, three households have contracted with district officials for tree planting on 106 ha. They started the tree planting contract in 1988, and then grew trees in several seasons by hiring laborers in the village. According to the terms of the contracts, after 20 years, they can exploit timbers. During the years waiting for exploitation, they can cultivate crops while trees are

small and only collect firewood and non-timber products. Households who are involved in afforestation are well-off as they can hire laborers. This is a new feature in the current life of the Hmong because in the past, they were only used to destroying forests. This is also one of the few cases I have recorded during my field visits in the Hmong ethnic minority villages. Those forest managers have earned income from selling firewood. Some households earned VND 200,000 in 2001.

### 3.3. Cash income of household groups

Cash income has a great impact on food security and in many cases, this income does not depend on food production. Income calculation is quite complicated and difficult even for economic experts. However, it is not because of that reason that we cannot point to the state of the cash income in the survey sites. Here, I just present basic indicators on cash income of household groups that relate to food security (see Table 3); for the income in food and livestock breeding has been reflected in the cultivation system. The exchange rate between VND and USD in 1997 was VND 12,000 = 1 USD, in 2001, VND 15,000 = 1 USD.

Table 3: Cash income of households of differing economic levels

Unit: VND 1,000

Order	Source of income	Nam Pien (1997)		Suoi Ho (2001)	
		Household economic level		Household economic level	
		Highest (n=5)	Lowest (n=8)	Highest (n=3)	Lowest (n=5)
1	Cultivation	2,000	100	18,000	0
2	Livestock breeding	3,000	0	2,000	0
3	Forest product collection	0	0	0	1,000
4	Working as hired laborers	0	200	0	1,000
5	Services	0	0	0	200
	Total	5,000	300	20,000	2,200

Note on the cash income sources in two villages:

*Cultivation*: In Nam Pien people grow tea. They sell fresh tea buds to the Tea Processing Enterprise (VND 1,500/1kg) or dry them manually to get dried green tea. Meanwhile in Suoi Ho, people grow herbal fruit trees (amomum aromaticum roxb). Fourteen households in the village grow herbal fruit trees but only three get a good yield – about 300 kg/household, and the sale price is VND 60,000/kg. *Forest product collection*: Mainly collecting firewood to be sold to people from the district town. Each person can collect a *gui* (bundle) of firewood/day, and sell for VND 10,000. Farmers can collect firewood in the forests surrounding village or in the national park. The period for firewood collection during the year is July – October. *Working as hired laborers*: They work for people in the district town doing gardening, digging house foundations, and working as porters. During the out-of-season period, some 20 households in the village are involved in these types of jobs. *Services*: Vending goods (including clothing and handicraft articles produced by the Hmong ethnic groups) in Sa Pa district town and serving as tourist guides for tourists and visitors.

Compared to Dong Van and Meo Vac-in Ha Giang province, and Mai Son-in Son La province, the cash income sources in the two villages studied, particularly in Suoi Ho are diverse.

But no income comes from trading like in Huoi Tu and Muong Long communes in Ky Son district, Nghe An province. In these two communes, 30 Hmong households have since 1993 run shops at local markets and many have been involved in trading cows and buffaloes and even trading cattle to Laos. (Nguyen Ngoc Thanh-Ngoc Thi, 1996)

### **3.4. Natural food sources**

In Nam Pien, the natural food sources for the locals, such as vegetables, roots and wild animals are richer than those in Suoi Ho as the village is located close to a thousand-hectare natural forest which is under the commune's management. The Hmong can exploit up to 40 kinds of vegetables, roots and fruit from the forest. Such vegetables and fruit are a regular diet of the local people. In the village there are 22 guns for hunting and the villagers often hunt wild animals, such as weasel and fox and sometimes boar and sambar deer. In Suoi Ho village, the natural food sources are less than in Nam Pien village as there are fewer forests surrounding the village. Hunting remains but as a hobby. Hunting is often organized after harvesting (in November) and hunters have to travel a long way, even to other districts in Son La province.

The natural food sources from other survey sites are also different, depending on the local socio-economic characters and natural conditions. Where people practice shifting cultivation and there remain forests, more natural food sources can be exploited. The result of our survey in 1994 and 1995 shows that the Hmong in Mai Son, Son La province can collect 10 types of bamboo shoots, nine kinds of mushrooms while the Hmong in Ky Son district, Nghe An province can collect 11 kinds of vegetables, four types of mushrooms and six types of fruit. And to mix with rice or replace rice, they can use the bark of a type of tree and two types of wild roots. The tradition of collective hunting after the harvesting remains popular in these areas. (Vuong Xuan Tinh, 1994-1995)

### **3.5. Borrowing and food aid**

Borrowing and food support are undertaken between households in the community or outside the community and between households and the State or social organizations. Within the community, this not only occurs during the period of food shortages but also in the form of offerings and gifts, etc.

Borrowing and food aid are quite popular within a community. When we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with poor households in the two villages (Nam Pien-4 and Suoi Ho-6), the interviewees said when they suffered food shortages, they often borrowed food from their relatives first. The rich or average households often provided food aid to their relatives more than to other villagers. For example, Mr. Sung Chu Hoa's household family is an average household in Nam Pien village. But in 1997, the family gave relatives 20 kg of rice, and lent them VND 400,000 without interest. Another example in Suoi Ho village: in 2001 Mr. Hang A Giang – a poor household had to borrow VND 1,000,000 from his relatives without interest. Food aid (rice, wine, meat) or cash are also popular in a community when someone builds a house or holds a funeral. In Suoi Ho village, if a family builds their house, each household in the village contributes VND 10,000 while the offering of each household to a funeral is VND 20,000. In general, this situation is popular in many ethnic minority areas in Vietnam. (Rita Lijstrom, Eva Linkog, Nguyen Van Ang and Vuong Xuan Tinh, 1998; Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2001)

Food aid provided by the State only takes place in case of famine relief. In both villages, during the period of our survey, there had been no State relief aid. For development support, the

State grants credit loans to the local households. The Hmong in these villages get preferential loans with low interest rate (0.8%) as they belong to Region III which is given priority. By July 2002, more than 60% of the households in Suoi Ho village had received preferential loans totaling VND 100 million. The borrowers each get maximum VND 5 million and minimum VND 1 million. In Nam Pien village, in 1997, 10 households were granted loans for settlement to sedentary farming with VND 500,000 each. However, loans with high interest rate remain among individuals, but often between the villagers and the outsiders. In Suoi Ho village, the Hmong often access borrowings from the Kinh people (major ethnic) from the district town but only pay interest for cash (4–5%) not rice loans.

### **3.6. The gap between the rich and the poor and state of household food**

During our site survey, I witnessed the differences and similarities in the concept of rich and poor of the Hmong community compared to the national criterion. In terms of similarities, the Hmong's criteria and the national criteria are based on food income to define rich and poor. For example, according to the Vietnam government's criteria in 1997, a household in the mountainous area is considered poor if its production of food per capita was under 15 kg/person/month. This income not only serves their daily meals but also to be spent on other things. Villagers in the two survey villages also consider food shortages an important condition for defining poverty but it is not the only one.

Households considered poor by the community suffer chronic food shortages to the level of about 6 months per year. However, during our site survey, some households, although not suffering such food shortages, are still considered poor. So what is the basis for the definition of a poor household in the two Hmong villages of Nam Pien and Suoi Ho?

Land, particularly wet rice fields, is the first and foremost important criterion. Five households in Nam Pien and three in Suoi Ho are considered rich because they have the largest area of wet rice fields and have “enough rice to feed the family for the whole year without having to buy rice.” Even in Suoi Ho village where wet rice field does not generate more income than herbal fruit trees, it is still listed as the first important criterion for defining a rich household. The reason is that the income generated by the wet rice field is stable and lasting while herbal fruit depends much on the market and its price is always fluctuating. In Nam Pien village, during my site survey, there occurred land disputes. Some households have been asked by others to return the land they have been allotted by the cooperatives because that land had previously belonged to the latter's ancestors. Although they have not yet returned the land because, they are waiting for the local authorities to settle the dispute, and they have not yet suffered from food shortages, they are already considered poor because there is the *risk* of losing their land. If they lose the land, the average land per capita of those households will be lowest in the village.

Products that generate cash income are only considered the second criterion for defining a rich or poor household. They vary from one village to another. In Nam Pien, a rich household also has a large cattle herd (buffaloes, cows, horses) and then large tea plantations (more than 3,000 m<sup>2</sup>). Meanwhile in Suoi Ho village, after wet rice fields, herbal fruit crops come second, and then a large cattle herd. A poor household often has little wet rice land and neither herbal crops nor cattle.

Because of the differences in criteria, rich and poor households are defined differently by each village and hence the differences in data provided by local authorities. For instance, in Suoi

Ho village, the local authorities identify that 60% of the households as poor. The rate is similar to that in Sa Pa commune and it is the second poorest commune in Sa Pa district. Meanwhile, the local villagers only admitted that five households in their village are poor and the rest are well-off and average. According to them, poor households should suffer from food shortages for six months of a year while the average households are in food shortages for 3–4 months a year. Food shortages include the shortage of rice or maize but not other food such as meat, fish, eggs or vegetables. In the months of food shortages, besides borrowing, these households have to go street vending, to collect firewood, work as hired laborers to earn money.

In Nam Pien village, there are also differences in defining rich and poor households between the local authorities and the community. According to a report by the commune and village authorities, in 1998, 50% of Hmong households were poor while the community itself reported that there were only 8 poor households (22.8%). Those households considered by the community as poor are insufficient in rice or maize for more than 7 months a year. Here, although cassava is grown on a large area, it is not the locals' favorite.

In the two villages, food consumption between the groups of rich and poor households is very different. I have not yet surveyed their food consumption for an entire year, but only in the time of my survey interviewing representatives of household groups. In Nam Pien the survey was done in November 1998, and Suoi Ho in June 2002. These data are not complete but they can be used as an example for reference (see Table 4). Food items (rice, maize, potatoes, cassava) and food-stuff (meat, fat, fish, eggs, vegetables etc.) used daily are calculated into calories, in accordance with the guideline provided by the Ministry of Health (Ministry of Health/ Institute of Nutrition, 1998).

*Table 4: Average daily food consumption per capita of household groups of different economic status*

*Unit: Calories/person*

Household economy	Nam Pien (Nov,1998)				Suoi Ho (June 2002)			
	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Total	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Total
Rich	1,050	850	1,160	3,060	920	710	850	2,480
Average	820	600	850	2,270	650	520	580	1,750
Poor	810	520	730	2,060	610	300	520	1,430

The above table shows that food consumption of rich and average households in Nam Pien village is higher than the minimum level of 2,100 calorie/person/day – the level that provides enough energy for a person to undertake basic activities. However, this case does not reflect the real food consumption in Nam Pien because November was their harvest time. The villagers have available rice and fish and need more energy to work on the field, therefore food was more abundantly used. According to the locals, during normal time of the year, their use of food is less or about two-thirds of the figures shown in the table above. If it is the case, in both average and poor household groups, food consumption in that period of time is under 2,100 calories. Meanwhile in Suoi Ho, the survey was conducted (June) when villagers just finished rice transplanting and engaged in tending upland crops. At that period of time, many households ran out of rice and had to borrow from others or collect firewood for sale or work as hired laborers. Here only rich households are sufficient in food while the food consumption of a poor household represents only 60 percent of the rich household.

Food supply and food expenditure of the Hmong in the two surveyed villages reflect the status of their food security. In other sites, although a quantitative survey has not yet been conducted, I do not see any brighter prospects. Why is it so? To answer this question, food security for the Hmong should be considered in their historical context and other economic, social and cultural factors.

#### **4. Challenges to Food Security of the Hmong in Vietnam at Present**

In section 3, I focused on the status of food security of the Hmong in the two case studies and compared it with some other research sites. What are the challenges to the food security of the Hmong at present? To answer this question, we should place the question of their food security in the social, economic and cultural context of the highlands in Vietnam.

##### **4.1. Environmental changes**

The environment in the highlands where the Hmong live has seen many changes, particularly in recent decades. Some changes have had a negative impact on the life of the Hmong, mainly respect to food security.

The major change of the environment in the region is the serious reduction of forest coverage. From 1943 to 1990, the forest coverage in Vietnam (mainly in the highlands) dwindled from 43% down to 28.4%. (Vo Quy, 2002: 99) From the 1960s to the 1990s alone, every year, Vietnam lost some 120,000-150,000 ha of forest. (General Statistic Office 2000: 56) In recent years, the area of forests nationwide has increased: by 2000 Vietnam had nearly 11 million ha of forests, of which more than 9.4 million are natural forests (including restored poor forests) and more than 1.4 million ha of planted forests with the average nationwide coverage of 33.2%. However, natural forests continue to be destroyed and there remains only 10% of forests rich in resources. (Vo Quy, 2002: 99) Precious timbers have been seriously logged and wild animals and birds are scarce as they have been aggressively hunted. (Nguyen Van Lung, 2002: 460) In northern highland provinces where the Hmong are living, from 1943–1990, the ratio of lush forests reduced from 98% down to just 17%. In many provinces, the coverage of natural forests, particularly rich forests is very low: Lao Cai: 5.3%, Lai Chau–7.8%, and Son La–12%.

The reason for forest losses is slash-and-burn farming. In the northwest of Vietnam, during the 1970s and 1980s, according to the estimation of Le Ba Thao and Tran Duc Giang, every 2-3 years, local people destroyed 150,000 ha of forest to have 60,000 ha of upland rice, 45,000 ha of cassava and 35,000 ha of maize. (Hoang Huu Binh-Nguyen Xuan Thuong, 1989) Upland farming is also the cause of forest fires. From 1977-1986, in Hoang Lien Son province (now Lao Cai, Yen Bai and Nghia Lo provinces) nearly 36,000 ha of forests were burnt. In a Hmong village in Mu Cang Chai district (Nghia Lo province), in 1978 alone, there were 44 forest fires, destroying more than 180 ha of forests. (Hoang Huu Binh-Nguyen Xuan Thuong, 1989). In other hand, the Government policy on self-sufficiency on food of this period was also encouraged people in mountainous areas did slash-and-burn farming.

During 1990s, forest loss was also due to rampant logging. At that time, Vietnam just embarked on the process of renovation, focusing on shifting the economic management of bureaucratic, State subsidies over to the market economy. Experiences in the management of a new economic mechanism were limited, leading to loose management of natural resources and forests. According to statistics released by the General Statistic Office, in the 1986–1999 period, the volume of timber exploited in the whole country was at its peak: in 1990, 4.5 million m<sup>3</sup>; and

then declined and by 1999 the figure was only 2.1 million m<sup>3</sup>. (General Statistic Office, 2000: 89) However, the figure is not precise because illegal logging has not been taken into account.

Since 1990 Vietnam's natural forests have been declining. Forest loss leads to soil degradation and scarce water sources. Most of the unused land is located in steep topography where soil is exhausted and nutritiously poor. About 60% of land, mainly upland has been exhausted, leading to degradation of fauna and flora. Many areas including those in the northern mountainous provinces of Ha Giang, Cao Bang and Lai Chau suffer from serious shortages of fresh water. (Vo Quy, 2002: 103-105) During my field visits in the Hmong villages in Dong Van and Meo Vac districts, Ha Giang province in 1995, I myself witnessed the drying up of most water sources and the price of fresh water (brought up from Ha Giang provincial town) was up to VND 2000 /liter – about two-thirds of the price of a liter of gasoline.

Environmental degradation has also been clearly shown in the research sites. Most of the mountains and hills in Nam Pien, Suoi Ho and other areas have been denuded. According to the locals, in the past several decades, these areas witnessed thick forests and rich wildlife. Environmental degradation has seriously affected their cultivable land, crop yield and output, domestic animals and natural resources.

#### **4.2. Changes in land use and land management**

In the traditional society of the Hmong, land management was the function of the village and family clans. Based on the land allocated by the village, each family clan has its own cultivated area. Its members only had the right to use the land, but they were not allowed to sell it. If any household family moved to other area or someone died without heirs, their land then belonged to the family clan. The village community respected the land use right of its members if they themselves had reclaimed the land. (Pham Quang Hoan, 1994)

Over the past four decades, since 1960, many policies of the Vietnamese State have changed the traditional ways of land use of the Hmong. Among them, the *Policy on Settlement and Sedentary Farming* and the *1993 Land Law* have had the strongest impact.

The Policy on Settlement and Sedentary Farming was promulgated in 1968 relating to people who lead a nomadic life. The nomadic Hmong was most typical of these people. The objectives of settlement and sedentary farming policy are to help the people stabilize their lives and limit forest destruction. However, it takes much time and money to achieve these objectives. By 1998, 28,400 households (comprising 175,000 people) had still led a nomadic life with shifting cultivation while 367,000 households (2.3 million people) had settled down but still doing shifting cultivation. (Do Van Hoa, 2002: 306) Settlement and sedentary farming of the Hmong have undergone ups and downs. For example, in the former province of Hoang Lien Son (now comprising Yen Bai, Nghia Lo and Lao Cai), by 1988, of the total 118,799 Hmong people only 42,343 people had been settled down to sedentary farming, achieving only more than 40 percent of the target. During those years, many Hmong people continued their nomadic life and shifting cultivation in the east-west direction and moving from highland to lowland seeking forests to be cleared for cultivation. (Nguyen Anh Ngoc, 1989) In Lai Chau Province, by 2002, 4,436 households with 28,699 people (mostly the Hmong) continued their nomadic life and practiced shifting cultivation. There are many reasons leading to continued nomadic life of the Hmong and other ethnic minorities. One of the reasons is that it has been their traditional way to settle the problem of food security. The Hmong are very used to resolving their food security problem by leading a nomadic life and slash-and-burn farming.



Under the 1993 Land Law agricultural and forest land is allocated to households, individuals and organizations for management. The boundaries between administrative units have been delineated. The allocation of land to households has been carried out on the basis of land quota and status quote, that is, each household in the northern mountainous areas was allotted not more than 3 ha of agricultural land and 30 ha of forest land. In fact, in the northern mountainous areas, very few households were allotted up to allowed that amount of lands, as the areas were populous and there was not much land. So, the difference in the land use in the mountainous areas compared to the past is that all the land has its owners, therefore, it is hard to lead a nomadic life or to grasp new land. Nomadic life can only be led in the areas of natural forests which are under loose management of forest enterprises and State farms. This is also the reason for the Hmong to freely migrate to the Central Highlands in the past years. For the Hmong in the two research villages, before the enforcement of the 1993 Land Law, although they had settled down but still practiced shifting cultivation and it was to supplement the food shortages as wet rice cultivation did not provide enough food to feed the family.

In the current land use conditions, to achieve food security, the Hmong have to change the structure of their farming and their livelihood.

### **4.3. Population growth**

From the General Population Census in 1989 to 1999, the population growth rate in Vietnam declined from 2.1% to 1.7%. This is a great progress in the national population and family planning work. However, in light of ethno-population this work has made no progress in the ethnic minority groups, including the Hmong. The average annual population growth of this group in the 1989-1999 period remained 3.4%, 0.2% higher than in the 1979-1989 period and 0.5% lower than the 1960-1974 period. Compared to other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam's northern mountainous areas their population growth rate in the 1989-1999 period was always less than the previous decade. For example, the annual population growth rate of the Muong in the 1979-1989 period was 3.0% and the figure was only 2.2% in the 1989-1999 period; similarly, the figures of other ethnic groups such as the Tay are 2.9% and 2.2%; the Nung: 2.4% and 1.9%; and the Dzao: 3.3% and 2.7% respectively. When compared to other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, the population growth rate of the Hmong is among highest with a rate of 3-4%. (Khong Dien, 2002: 143)

At the research sites, I did not have opportunities to study annual population growth rate of the Hmong in several years because of insufficient data and documents, but through the study on household's demography I noticed that married couples in the reproductive age had many children. The married couples in the two villages of Nam Pien and Suoi Ho in the under 40 age group have 4-6 children each, and several couples have 8-9 children. According to some population and family planning officers in the provinces of Ha Giang and Lao Cai, it is very hard for them to carry out family planning programs in the Hmong areas due to false beliefs concerning the detrimental effects of contraception methods. Some Hmong women do not want to insert IUDs for fear of carrying a strange object in their body. In some cases, when women who have had IUDs inserted die, their families urge that they be removed before burial.

Obviously, the population growth rate of the Hmong continues to be a big pressure on their food safety.

#### 4.4. Limited access to science and technology

This is a limited access to scientific and technological knowledge to be applied in agricultural production and business activities that generate income. This limitation is expressed through the fact that the Hmong are not dynamic in changing the structure of their crops and animal breeding or in investing in intensive farming or in developing other occupations.

The cause of limited access to science and technology is first of all low educational level. According to the 1989 General Population Census, up to 80% of the Hmong population is illiterate. (Bui The Cuong and Vuong Xuan Tinh, 2000) Meanwhile, the 1999 General Population Census shows that 69% of the Hmong older than five years of age never go to school, 82.3% are women. These figures place the Hmong 14<sup>th</sup> of the 16 ethnic groups which have illiterate rates from 52-90.5%. Because of such an educational situation, the rate of university graduates in the group aged more than 13 is only 0.01%, and there is only one person having post-university level among the Hmong population. Therefore, the Hmong rank 50<sup>th</sup> among the ethnic groups having high ratio of technicians and professionals. (Khong Dien, 2002: 153) Education in the two research villages is in the similar context of the Hmong ethnic minority group in general. In Suoi Ho village, none of the villagers finished grade 9. Only one student of grade 7 and another one of grade 8 from the village are studying at the district boarding school, 7 students of grade 6 are studying at the commune cluster's school and most children drop out after finishing primary school. In Nam Pien village, only 2 students are studying at the district boarding schools and 50% of school age children drop out after finishing grade 2 (at primary school in the village).

Limited access to science and technology is also due to language barriers. Because the Hmong live in isolation and their education is low, particularly women, not many of them can speak the national language, Vietnamese, fluently. In each village, only cadres or demobilized soldiers can speak Vietnamese fluently. Limited access to science and technology is also due to lack of information. In neither of the two research villages is there a TV set. In Nam Pien village, only 15 percent of the households possess a radio set and in Suoi Ho village, the figure is 22%. Due to such an educational condition, language barriers and insufficient information, it is hard for the locals to have access to scientific and technological advances, social and cultural knowledge as well as the government's policies. The application of new strains and animal breeds and fertilizer in agricultural production has been slow and ineffective because most of the people just imitate one another.

#### 4.5. Impacts of traditional culture

Traditional culture here is understood as past vestiges which remain present in the current lifestyle and which have even become customs and norms.

What traditional cultural factors have had negative impact on food security of the Hmong? In my opinion, three farming customs are the most detrimental:

*Firstly-* the custom of *growing poppy crops*. Historically, the Hmong is considered the ethnic group that has grown poppy crops on the acreage larger than other group in Vietnam. (Be Viet Dang, 1978: 296) This special crop has once been grown in 600 communes of 40 districts in 9 northern provinces. In the 1991-1992 winter-spring crop, 12,000 ha of poppy plants were grown, producing 50 tons of opium. (Nguyen Van Minh, 1994) The biggest producer of poppy crops is Ky Son district, Nghe An province. In 1994 when I conducted a field visit in the district,

although the government had banned poppy growing, each Hmong household still harvested several kg and even dozens of kg of opium per crop. Opium has once played a major role in the life of the Hmong (in some places, its output is higher than other agricultural produce). It has been used for smoking and medical treatment.

In 1992, the Vietnamese State included in its Constitution a provision banning the growing of poppy and using opium. Ten years have elapsed since the implementation of this provision of the Constitution, and poppy re-cultivation is still seen in some localities. In Son La province, according to statistics provided by local authorities, by Feb. 21, 2002, 204 villages in 74 communes from 9 districts had re-grown poppy crops on an estimated area of 650,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, in the province of Lai Chau, the acreage under poppy plants in 2001 was 60,000 m<sup>2</sup>. These figures are certainly much less than they are in reality. So, after implementing many campaigns to eradicate poppy crop with the government's financial support to replace it, it is not easy for local people to give up growing it. Here, there is an actual contradiction between the interest and traditional culture of the Hmong and that of the nation. Moreover, the preservation of this tradition and custom in many localities contribute to increasing opium addiction among the Hmong and prolong their poverty.

*Secondly* - the custom of *shifting cultivation*. This custom is a very heavy vestige of the Hmong as discussed earlier. In the two research villages, upland cultivation still plays an important role in their daily life. In other villages, upland cultivation is the main means of their living. However, there is a contradiction here. The Hmong now have few conditions to lead a nomadic life with shifting cultivation. Therefore, they have to practiced upland farming on the limited land they have been allotted. If they maintain their custom of upland farming on large areas without intensive farming, their farming activities will not be very effective.

*Thirdly* - the custom of *self-sufficiency of food*. This custom has always stimulated the Hmong toward the direction of food production, taking food as the objective of their activities. In fact, this is not only the custom of the Hmong but also of other highland ethnic groups. It is also an indicator of the state of under-development and unsuitability to the market economy. In the market economy, the key is to generate income and it is the income that contributes to ensuring food security. For this reason, the autarkic food lifestyle will reduce the dynamism and will not tap the local potential and strength to create more income.

Those are just three key factors of traditional culture that exert negative impacts on food security of the Hmong. In reality, food security is also affected by other factors of traditional culture such as migration by family clans, gender relationship and eating habits, etc.

## **Conclusion**

The result of my survey in the two Hmong villages in comparison with other places shows that the status of food security at household level in this ethnic minority group remains unsustainable. More than 80 percent of the households in those villages are insufficient in food while their cash income to buy food is unstable, particularly in Suoi Ho village. A wide gap in income and food security between rich and poor household groups remains.

The direct cause of this situation is first of all the *land condition*. Shortages of cultivable land, particularly wet fields, gardens and sedentary upland make the locals very difficult in food production and cash crops. Land limit and low crop outputs under-develop livestock breeding.

Besides, *sideline occupations have not been developed*, thus limiting the Hmong in generating their income.

To achieve food security in the future, they have to solve the following contradictions: land limit verses increasing population growth, food finding verses conservation of forests and water sources; the need for production development verses low educational levels and knowledge; and the change of forms of livelihood verses obstacles of some traditional customs. Only when these contradictions are resolved, their food security can be sustainable.

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