

Social Capital in Vietnam: Initial Findings from Sample Surveys

Dang Thi Viet Phuong[†]

Introduction

Vietnam is an agricultural country with over two third of the population living in rural areas. The country is populated with nearly 87 million people (GSO 2010) living in an area of over 330.000 km², with 3.260 km coastal line. In 2010, Vietnam's GDP reached 6.78 percent (approx. 100 billion USD), or per capital income of 1,168 USD. Together with reform policies since mid 1980s, Vietnam has become one of the success stories in poverty reduction. The rate of poverty decreased from nearly 60% in 1993 to approximately 14% in 2008 and 10.6% in 2010. As a lower middle income country, Vietnam economy is developing significantly, and also facing with various social problems, inequality, underemployment, labour migration and a range of other social security issues.

Nam Dinh is a province with an area of 1,651 km², located at the Southeast of the Red river delta. Just like the Delta, the province is densely populated by nearly 2 million people (1,110 people/km²), of which 83 percent live in 210 rural administrative units (out of over 230 units of the whole province). In 2010 the province's GDP reached 550 million USD, with economic structure divided into agriculture, forestry, fishery accounting for 30%, industry&construction: 32%, service: 38%. Nam Dinh is the land of traditional festivities where many religious festivals are held all year-round. Nam Dinh is also famous for education and training with a high percentage of population pursuing higher education.

Vi Xuyen urban ward locates in central Nam Dinh city, it constitutes of 2,500 households. The active work force accounts for 33.6 percent of the ward's population while the economic structure of Vi Xuyen ward mainly consists of small scale industry, service and trading. Household economy plays a key role when nearly 500 households of the ward are doing retail and minor businesses, providing a wide range of essential commodities for local people.

Giao Tan is an average rural commune in the southeast of the province. The total area of the commune is 504.5 hectare, of which 304 ha is used for paddy rice cultivation. The commune

[†] Deputy Head, Department of Social Security and Social Work, Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

is consisted of 2,600 households, with 8,200 people. 73% of the population are active work force, but much of the labour force joins the informal sector in big cities. This is a typical agricultural commune, with high percentage of local labourers working as peasants (95%). The estimated annual income from paddy rice cultivation in 2011 is around 1 million US dollars.

Two surveys were carried out in two localities (Vi Xuyen urban ward and Giao Tan rural commune) in Nam Dinh province. The survey in Vi Xuyen ward was implemented first in November 2010, then came that of Giao Tan commune in May 2011. 200 household representatives (mostly household heads, 100 in each locality) were selected by proportional random sampling. Selected people were interviewed in a face to face manner, with a semi structured questionnaire.

Apart from questionnaire-based survey, several in-depth interviews were conducted, in order to collect qualitative data to supplement quantitative data from questionnaires. Field observation also constituted an approach for obtaining characteristics of the area and community. This approach assisted survey data analysis and report compilation.

Although the research team applied several techniques to minimize the non-sampling error, due to small number of observations, it was not easy to run cross tabulations, bi-variable or multi-variable. Otherwise, low frequency of appearance cannot ensure statistical significance, hence it limits interpretations.

In this paper, social capital is defined as a variety of entities with two elements in common: *“they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors - whether persons or corporate actors - within the structure”* (James Coleman, 1988 cited by A. Portes, 1998). In James Coleman’s point of view, social capital comprises some aspect of social life as social network, social norms, and social trust, which facilitates collective action of members to achieve common goals (Trần Hữu Quang, 2006). James Coleman considers social capital as a structure, a framework for transaction among actors. Social capital facilitates collaboration among individuals and production activities, it is a resource available to all members. *“Social capital is social structure resource which individuals can utilize as economic capital”* (James Coleman, 1994: 302).

Characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Vi Xuyen urban ward	Giao Tan rural commune
Sex	46% male, 54% female	30% male, 70% female
Age group	80% in 40-79 years old	< 40 years old: 20% 40-59 years old: 49% ≥ 60 years old: 31%
Education	66% finished high school and higher	69% finished high school and higher
Religion	81% no religion, 16% Buddhist, 3% Catholic	Almost no religions
Occupation	16% self-own business 62% retired 1% unemployed	63% agricultural jobs 19% non-agricultural jobs
Marital status	80% married 7% single 13% divorced/ separated/ widowed	84% married 3% single 13% divorced/ separated/ widowed
Living in current locality	31% living > 30 years 22% living ≤ 10 years	97% living since being born
Family structure	69%: 2 generations 28%: 3 generations	15%: 2 generations 22%: 3 generations
Living conditions of households	90% living in private-owned houses 99% having clean water 100% having wastes collected and treated 100% having televisions 90% having fixed-line phones 83% having mobile phones 54% having computers	90% living in private-owned houses 78% using household well water 97% having wastes collected and treated 98% having televisions 44% having fixed-line phones 84% having mobile phones 15% having computers
Economic conditions of households	79% having wife/husband as primary income earner 47% having 2000-4000USD income/year 23% having >4000 USD income/year	81% having wife/husband as primary income earner 17% having 2000-4000USD income/year 4% having >4000 USD income/year

Social capital in Vietnam: Initial findings

Social capital and social trust

In both survey sites, we find a high percentage of respondents saying that many or most people are trustworthy. In Giao Tan rural commune, approximately three fourth of respondents says that many or most people are trustworthy. In their point of view, those people are trustworthy because they are peasants and members of the community. Close relationship in the community reinforces social trust. Face-to-face and daily interactions enable members to recognize one another easily. In Giao Tan, 47 percent of respondents assert that they consider neighbors as relatives; 49 percent have relations which enable mutual assistance, consolation, consultation, etc. People in this community are proud of their close relationship with relatives, neighbors and friends. A 50-year-old man said: *“We are not afraid of theft, free to leave the door unlocked when going out. That is impossible in cities. With the door unlocked, there would be nothing left as we come back home”*. In such a closed rural commune, a person is known for his/her origin, which dated to his great grandparents, through which mutual trust gains firm foundation.

Almost all of respondents have gone through at least one difficult situation (lean harvest, loosing job, accidents to themselves or loved ones, when bread-winners in the family were seriously ill or died, etc.), while nearly a half of them expected and received assistance from others. For the other half, two thirds say they did expect but received no assistance while one third did not expect at all. As for improving living standard, almost all respondents say they cannot hope for assistance from the government, non-governmental organisations or some influential persons. 69 percent affirm they would have to rely on themselves other than on help from others. It is indeed difficult to expect assistance from others while the entire community is poor.

To measure reliability of different institutions to individuals in daily life’s difficulties and/or in the event of natural disasters, we applied a scale from 0 to 3, of which 0 indicates lowest level, no reliability; and 3- high reliability. Results show that there is quite large social network surrounding an individual in case of difficulties or natural calamities. However, family, relatives, friends and neighbours are most reliable source of assistance. Figure 1 shows that primary group (family, relatives) is the most important assistance, lesser reliability are friends, neighbours, and other institutions.

Figure 1: Expectation of assistance in the event of natural disasters or difficulties in daily life in Giao Tan commune



The majority of respondents (63%) in Vi Xuyen urban ward report to trust a lot of people. The number of people saying "very few people can be trusted" only accounts for 4 percent. People who regularly participate in the voluntary activities tend to have higher trust on people. 67.3 percent of those who often participate in social activities report that "a lot of people can be trusted" while 60 percent of respondents who do not join in any social activities assert that only some people can be trusted. This finding assumes that the participation in social groups might have an important impact on each individual's formation of social capital (trust is turned into social capital). However, this finding is different with what Norlund (2007) concludes about the impact of participation in the social organisation on individual's trust, ie. those who belong to many organisations do not have higher level of trust in comparison with others.

The trust in people is linked with one's interaction with others in the community and society. In both survey sites, people trust each other through direct contacts. The frequency of visiting friends, acquaintances and relatives is relatively high. In Vi Xuyen, 38% of people report to meet friends and acquaintances several times a week, 26% report once a week or several times a month. Only 1% of respondent never meet their relatives. Besides, the percentage of having contact with neighbour is very high in urban area. (½ of respondents know and have contact with almost all neighbours, 40% have contact with many neighbours). Many report that they have intimate relationship with many neighbours, considering them almost "as same as relatives" (42%).

Social capital and living arrangement

For people in the two survey sites of Vietnam, to think of livelihood improvement, most of them think of values of subsistence. In Giao Tan commune, over one third of respondents consider sufficiency of food and to be able to buy consumer goods as livelihood improvement; while nearly 50 percent think of having enough cash earnings. The situation in Vi Xuyen urban ward is quite similar. 90 percent consider livelihood improvement means having enough cash earning, 60 percent wish to have enough money to buy consumer goods, and 53 percent think it means 'to have enough food'. What they desire to improve in the future are also related to basic needs. For Giao Tan commune, 34 percent of respondents need adequate fresh water; 20 percent want to have enough food, 25 percent hope to improve sanitation, 15 percent wish to have better health conditions. In both two survey sites, increasing income is the most desirable thing, about two third of respondents specially want to improve their income. This result might have relation to the hardships that almost all respondents had faced in the past, with two third of the surveyed people had experienced the insufficiency of money to live on.

Table 1: What do you want specially to improve the most your livelihood (%)

<i>What specially want to improve the most your livelihood</i>	<i>Vi Xuyen</i>	<i>Giao Tan</i>
Getting water for household use	0	34
Getting fuel for household use	0	6
Getting food	11	20
Increasing income	66	72
Child rearing	13	16
Methods of preparing food	1	6
Sanitation	10	25
Transportation access	12	8
Communication (telephones)	1	9
Health care condition	11	15
Other	14	12

In Vi Xuyen, social differentiation seems to be higher than that in Giao Tan. There are 11 percent of respondents who affirm that they do not need to improve anything in their current life, ie. they are quite satisfied with their living conditions. Meanwhile, within this small sample, 32 percent admit that they do not think their life can be improved. This idea is found significant in male group of 60 years old and over.

Approximately 60 percent of respondent in two survey sites (a little higher in Giao Tan) say that they do not find any way to improve their life other than relying on themselves. It is hardly possible to rely on others for livelihood improvement. Almost all respondents say they cannot hope for assistance from the government, non-governmental organisations or influential persons or relatives oversea. Talking about hardships in the past, 41.7 percent in Vi Xuyen report to have borrowed money to overcome difficulties. A similar percentage say that they did not receive any support to overcome the hardships. Whereas in Giao Tan, people find more sources of assistance in difficult situation: 58.5 percent borrowed money from someone, 38.3 percent got a loan from local bank, and 52.1 percent received money support from others. However, when considering all sources of support, it is mostly families, relatives, neighbours and friends that provided support for people in need. Local authorities and residential groups are not significant in helping their people. That is the reason why very few people think of these agencies when they are in need.

Social capital and social participation

The surveys' results show that three out of four respondents in both survey sites participate in social activities, among whom more than a half make their regular participation. The participation in social activities helps people have more opportunities to receive and exchange the information with other people in the community, that's the basis for expanding social relationships.

Findings from 100 respondents in Giao Tan commune give out a list of 32 groups of different types including unions, clubs, guilds and associations that they are participating in. This number is even more than that in Vi Xuyen ward (with 21 organisations). Among those participating in social activities in Giao Tan, 75 percent are member of at least three organisations. The list of organisations is classified under two categories: mass organisations and voluntary social organisations. The mass organisations include Women's Union, Veterans' Organisation, Youth Union, Peasant Association, etc. The voluntary social organisations include coeval association, school-fellow association, colleague association, association of bonsai, etc. The list of such social organisations shows that social voluntary activities develop well in the locality. However, 80.5 percent in Giao Tan and 89.3 percent in Vi Xuyen report that the purpose of their "social participation" is for their own hobbies, sports and recreational activities. Other civic or economic activities (ie. disaster or crime prevention, irrigation, handicraft production, etc.) are rarely reported. The frequency of their participation in these organisations is mostly found a few times per year, mainly to pay visits to members when they are hospitalized, or in funerals or weddings of members' families. Social cohesion in this case is for emotional and recreational needs.

Table 2: Kind of activities you participate in voluntary activities (%)

<i>Kind of activities you participate in voluntary activities</i>	<i>Vi Xuyen</i>	<i>Giao Tan</i>
Sports, hobbies, recreational activities	89.3	80.5
Disaster or crime prevention activities	10.7	6.5
Irrigation, water resource management, environmental conservation, etc.	1.3	6.5
Agricultural improvement, vegetable cultivation, fruit cultivation, livestock management, etc.	0.0	35.0
Handicraft production	0.0	2.5
Activities at work (labour union)	13.3	2.3
Loan, credit	30.6	-
Other	34.7	35.0

One of the important functions of social capital is to bring benefits for the participant as the members of the social networks. For the majority of respondents in both survey sites, they appreciate the benefits that are attached to their own, such as they could make friends who share the same values (57% in both sites), or they might find the activity productive to them. In participating in social activities, they find themselves more attached to the local communities (64% in Vi Xuyen and 64.9% in Giao Tan); or they could make connections with local people (52% in Vi Xuyen and 48.1% in Giao Tan). Almost no one in both localities feel regret of having participated in voluntary activities.

Being members of certain organisation(s) is popular in Giao Tan and Vi Xuyen. However, as members, they are concerned mostly on sports or their own hobbies or recreational activities. People in these two localities are not much interested in politics, 57 percent of Giao Tan sample and 34 percent of Vi Xuyen admit that they are not interested in politics at all. It seems that these people try to create a bonding network instead of bridging network, where members connect each other and also connect with outside networks. The bonding network, vice versa, is the type of network in which members have close relations in a small community, the network of close relations. Bonding network may be considered the same as that practiced locally within a village. For that similar feature, members in bonding network tend to be closed to the outsiders.

Conclusion

Social trust versus internal consensus: Survey results show that majority of respondents have trust in others. The analysis proves the relationship between social trust and the regular direct contact with relatives, friends, acquaintances and neighbours. Social trust creates internal

consensus in small communities. People tend to have the quite high reliability on the close relationships as relatives, neighbours or friend, acquaintances.

Safety nets versus family/relative groups: We find mostly the role of primary groups rather than secondary groups. For people in rural areas, the scope of their safety nets relies heavily on their family/relative groups. The safety nets of urban people are a little larger, but primary groups are still the core of the net.

Improving livelihood versus continuing subsistence: Imagination of people on how to improve their life in the future is still surrounded by subsistent needs (having enough food, cash for consumer goods, etc.) People wish to improve their life by continuing their subsistent living standards.

Social participation versus recreational activities: Participation in the social activities, social organisations allow the individuals to exchange, share development resources during the interaction with other individuals in the community of which the individuals are members. However, the so called social participation is surrounded by just recreational activities or paying visit to members. Although there is high percentage of people participating in many voluntary activities/associations in both rural and urban areas, it does not mean that they have strong civil spirit.

Social capital versus sustainable development: social capital is considered to be effective in improving livelihood, but in both sites, most people still have to rely on themselves, help themselves in case of difficulty. People seem to have wide range of social capitals, but they are not strong enough for sustainable development.

Social capital in the two communities exists to some extent. The credibility, mutual affection within communities create contact networks of internal consensus. Forms of mutual support do exist, but they are still limited to the support of people within the primary group of families and relatives. Though the support is available, people think of relying on themselves in difficult situations rather than looking for help from others. Although social capital does exist, it is too weak to be capable of generating any internal changes.

Reference

- Coleman, J. S. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital", *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure (1988), pp. S95-S120.
- Fukuyama, F. 2000. "Social capital and civil society", IMF Working paper WP/2000/74.
- General Statistical Bureau. 2010. *Census 2009: Major findings*. Statistical publishing house.
- General Statistical Bureau. 2011. *Statistical year book 2010*. Statistical publishing house.
- Giao Tan People's committee. 2010. "Report on the results of socio-economic development in the year 2010 and objectives and tasks set for 2011".
- Giao Tan People's committee. 2011. "Report on the organisation and activities of the People's committee, period 2004-2011".
- Nam Dinh's Statistical Department. 2009. *Nam Dinh statistical year book 2008*. Statistical publishing house.

- Norlund, I. 2007. *Filling the gap: The emerging civil society in Vietnam*. UNDP report paper.
- Portes, A. 1998. "Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology". *Annual Reviews of Sociology*. Vol. 24: 1-24.
- Trần Hữu Quang. 2006. "Tìm hiểu khái niệm vốn xã hội" (Examination of the concept of social capital). *Tạp chí khoa học xã hội* (Social sciences review), No. 7, pp. 74-81.
- Vi Xuyen People's Committee. 2010. "Report on the results of socio-economic development in the year 2009 and objectives and tasks set for 2010".
- Vi Xuyen People's Committee. 2010. "Report on the results of socio-economic development in the first half of the year 2010".
- Vi Xuyen Communist Party report, April 2010.