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Leaving the Rice Fields, But Not the Countryside: Gender, Livelihood Diversification and Pro-Poor Growth in Rural Viet Nam

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Summary

In the late 1980s, Viet Nam initiated a programme of “economic renovation”, *doi moi*, to promote the transition from a centrally planned to a market-based economy. The key goals of the policy package were economic growth and social development, while the key means included decollectivization of agriculture, price liberalization, devaluation to achieve more realistic exchange rates, reduction of public sector employment and a concomitant promotion of private sector enterprise. The reforms were remarkably successful. Annual GDP growth rates rose, while poverty declined. Exports performed strongly, increasing at more than 30 per cent per annum after 1988. However, challenges remain. Rates of per capita growth are still low, as Viet Nam has a high ratio of labour relative to other factors of production, including physical capital, infrastructure, land and natural resources. The expansion of employment opportunities poses a major challenge for state policy. There is also concern that sections of the population have not benefited from the transition to the market economy, and that the pre-reform pattern of low rates of economic growth combined with “shared” poverty is being replaced by higher rates of growth but greater inequalities in income and opportunities.

Poverty has remained a rural phenomenon in Viet Nam, and there is considerable underemployment in the countryside. With the lifting of restrictions on population mobility, flows of migration have been rising, from rural to urban areas and from the northern mountainous areas to the south. Rural employment and poverty reduction have consequently received particular attention in policy discussions. The objective is to encourage the rural population to “leave the rice fields but not the countryside”. The increase of small farm productivity, the diversification of rural livelihoods and income sources, backed by improvements in rural roads and infrastructure, are seen to hold the key to achieving this objective.

This paper is concerned with the interrelated issues of poverty, prosperity and diversification of rural livelihoods, which are considered central to the achievement of rural development. It explores these issues from a gender perspective. Gender-specific information could help to establish whether policies to promote economic growth and poverty reduction in the countryside might be more effective if gender were taken more explicitly into account. The authors begin with a general discussion of the concepts of household livelihoods and livelihood diversification, and then focus on

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