

THE EFFECTS OF FREE MIGRATION OF NORTHERN MINORITIES ON LAM DONG SOCIOECONOMICS FROM 1976 TO 2015

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Abstract

The history of formation and development of Lam Dong province (Vietnam) is associated with the immigration of different groups of people, including ethnic minorities from the North. As a result of immigration, northern ethnic minorities are present in most areas of Lam Dong province, but mainly in remote areas of Lam Ha, Dam Rong, Di Linh, Bao Lam, Da Teh, and Cat Tien districts. The purpose of their migration to Lam Dong was to find a place with favorable land conditions for agricultural production. This article is the result of research into their lives using archival sources and provides an analysis of the impact of free migration of northern ethnic minorities on the socioeconomic development of Lam Dong from 1976 to 2015. From the research results, this article points out the positive effects and limitations of free migration on the socioeconomic development of Lam Dong. It also offers suggestions for taking advantage of the strengths and mitigating the limitations of free migration.

Keywords: Economy; Free migration; Lam Dong; Northern ethnic minority; Society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Lam Dong, apart from the Kinh people and local ethnic groups, there are also ethnic minorities who have migrated from the North. This population inflow has occurred in Lam Dong since 1954 due to the collective migration of the Republic of Vietnam's government policies. After 1975, the number of ethnic minorities from the northern areas in the Central Highlands increased rapidly as a result of free migration, including that of four main ethnic groups: Tay, Nung, Hmong, and Dao (Bùi, 2011, p. 183).

The ethnic minorities from the North came to Lam Dong in many different forms; they brought their various cultures and production methods. These characteristics had certain impacts on the economics, culture, and social issues in Lam Dong in the past as well as today.

By analyzing the effects of free migration by ethnic minorities from the North on the socioeconomic development of Lam Dong from 1976 to 2015, we make suggestions and offer solutions to exploit the positive aspects and minimize the limitations of free migration.

2. THE SITUATION OF FREE MIGRATION TO LAM DONG FROM 1976 TO 2015 – OVERVIEW

After 1975, the migration policy carried out by the state to build new economic zones in the Central Highlands led to free migration of ethnic minorities from the northern mountainous areas to Lam Dong. The migrants included the Tay, Nung, Hmong, and Dao ethnic groups, all of whom originated from Thai Nguyen, Cao Bang, Son La, Lai Chau, Yen Bai, Lang Son, Bac Can, Lao Cai, Hoa Binh, and Ha Giang provinces. The migrants followed their families and fellow villagers during this free migration, as they were in difficult economic conditions in their old homeland (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 1995).

From 1976 to 1986 the free migration of ethnic minorities to Lam Dong was less than the Kinh (Viet) migration. The Kinh people moved in large numbers when migrating to Lam Dong and other provinces in the Central Highlands following the plan to relocate the workforce. According to statistics of the People's Committee of Lam Dong Province, 1,100 households with 5,700 people migrated freely to Lam Dong from 1976 to 1985. Among them were a number of ethnic minorities from the North living intermixed in villages and communes in Lam Dong province (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 1997a). Trần's study (1992, pp. 62-63) shows that since 1979 the free migration to Lam Dong and the Central Highlands has been increasing rapidly.

After 1986, and especially from 1990 to 1995, free migration to Lam Dong increased quickly due to the economic benefits of coffee farming as well as general economic growth and improvements in social life. Statistics show that from January 1990 to June 30, 1995, a total of 9,744 households with 49,242 ethnic minority people from the North migrated to Lam Dong, accounting for 30.9 percent of the total number of free migrant households. Among them were 32,215 Tay, 7,834 Nung, 3,965 Dao, 565 Hmong, and 4,663 people of other ethnic groups (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 1997b).

The highest level of migration of ethnic minorities from the mountainous North to Lam Dong was for two years from 1996 to 1997 with 3,052 households with 12,803 people (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2005). From 2005 to 2015 free migration still took place, but the number was less than in the previous period (776 households with 3,422 people), including 1,235 Tay, 1,272 Hmong, 476 Nung, 277 Hmong, 128 Dao, and 34 Thai people (Công an tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2016).

In general, after 1975, with the aim of resettling the population throughout the country, Lam Dong province has welcomed a large number of migrants from both organized and free migration. In particular, the number of free migrants increased rapidly after the migration plan to build a new economic zone in Lam Dong ended, especially after Lam Ha district was established in 1987. Most of these migrants are Tay, Nung, Hmong, and Dao. The purpose of this migration to Lam Dong was to find a place to settle, the destination being land for agricultural production and forested land. The migration has had both positive impacts and certain limitations on the local socioeconomic development.

3. MAJOR INFLUENCES ON LAM DONG SOCIOECONOMICS

3.1. Influence on the economy

3.1.1. The exploitation of land and economic development in remote and mountainous areas

Lam Dong is a mountainous province with a large land area, especially land for agriculture production, with 200,000 hectares accounting for 20 percent of the province's natural area (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2001, p. 226). This area has many advantages in land resources, but due to the complicated topography and isolation, much of the local potential has not been exploited effectively. Therefore, the free migration (including that of northern ethnic minorities) to Lam Dong has contributed to promoting land use and production development. After 1975, thanks to the activity of the immigrant population, including both organized and free migrants, the reclamation work in Lam Dong increased in both size and intensity. Specifically, 40,267 hectares of reclaimed land were put into production from 1975 to 1985, as were another 100,733 hectares from 1985 to 1995 (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 1996). From 1996 to 2003 the reclaimed and restored land was 13,854 hectares (Sở Nông nghiệp và Phát triển nông thôn tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2003). Thus, free migration has contributed to expanding the amount of agriculture production, especially in remote and mountainous areas of Lam Dong province.

Although the ethnic minorities who came to Lam Dong lack the capital for production, most of them can work. They are the labor force contributing the development of remote, mountainous, and border areas of Lam Dong province. They are also the ones who quickly adapt to new living conditions because of the natural features of Lam Dong, a mountainous province suitable for their mode of life. The traditional production methods, such as shifting cultivation and wet rice cultivation, have been quickly changed into industrial crop cultivation with higher economy and efficiency (Nguyễn, 2019, p. 31).

3.1.2. Effects on the goal of economic restructuring

The free migrants to Lam Dong belonging to the Tay, Nung, Muong, Thai, Dao, and Hmong ethnic minorities originate from the Northern mountainous provinces; they are from large families and lack productive land in their old homeland (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 1995). They migrated from rural areas and their livelihoods are based mainly on agriculture with minor manufacturing. They mainly cultivate tea, coffee, rice, potato, cassava, and corn. Because the economic value of these crops is not high, most of the households have a difficult economic life. Another point is that their production is uncoordinated, manual, small-scale, self-sufficient, and lacking organization. Their products are hard to sell, and it can be difficult to improve the quality of their lives. According to statistics of Lam Dong province, the average monthly income per person of the Hmong (501,600 VND) and Nung (769,900 VND) ethnic groups is the lowest in Lam Dong (Cục Thống kê Lâm Đồng, 2016, p. 160).

Lam Dong is aiming to transform its economic structure from agriculture to industry and services, but for many years the economic structure has not been improved as the value of agriculture production still accounts for a high proportion. With the method of uncoordinated agriculture production, not following the plan decision, the high rate of poor households among the free migrants has increased, so it obstructs economic development of industry and services in Lam Dong. This is the problem affecting economic restructuring of Lam Dong province.

3.1.3. Depleting the forest resources

As presented above, the free migrants to Lam Dong focus on the places that still have land available for agricultural development. In addition, they also settle in areas where people are not allowed to live, such as upstream forests, protected forests, planted forests, or forests and lands that have been allocated to households for management. Many protected and special-use forests are under threat due to the impact of free migrant communities. The production customs of some northern ethnic minorities, especially the Hmong and Dao, is shifting cultivation, so the forest is destroyed for cultivation. Since the 1990s, the number of Hmong people migrating freely to Lam Dong has more and more increased. They concentrate on living in remote mountainous areas where forest land is still abundant. They are causing the loss of old-growth forest in upstream areas as well as reducing the area of natural forest in some local areas. According to the People's Committee of Lam Dong province, the Hmong people who came to Lam Ha in the 1990s (part of Dam Rong district since 2004) consist of about 150 households with more than 800 people living in the forest and clearing it for cultivation. They destroyed 54 hectares of bamboo and protected forests (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2002) for three purposes: land for cultivation, for building houses, and for firewood to sell to meet urgent needs of life (Nguyễn, 2003, p. 160). According to statistics for Lam Dong, 62.5% of the total forested area was destroyed for cultivation between 2008 and 2015 (Chi cục kiểm lâm tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2016) (See Figure 1).

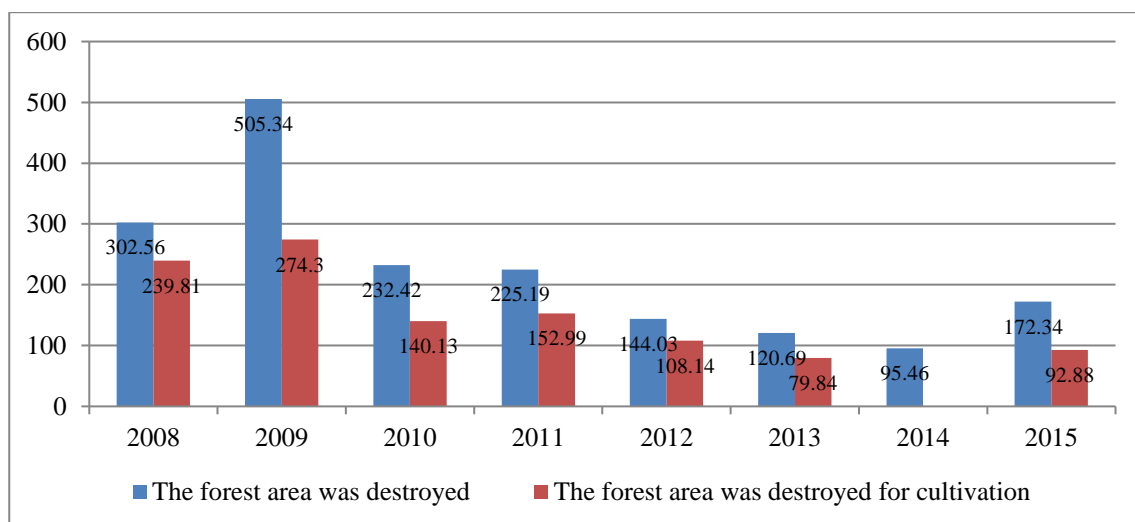


Figure 1. Forest area destroyed (hectares) in Lam Dong from 2008 to 2015

Note: Unit: ha.

Source: Chi cục kiểm lâm tỉnh Lâm Đồng (2016).

The deforestation for cultivation is one of the factors that seriously degrades the ecological environment, exhausts the water supply, increases erosion, and degrades the soil. In addition, people also illegally exploit plant and animal forest products, including many rare species.

3.2. The impact on population and labor

3.2.1. A diversified population structure

The waves of migration have increased the population and significantly changed the ethnic structure of Lam Dong. According to statistics from 1975 to 2015, the population increased by 3.89 times mainly due to the increased immigration from other provinces (UBND tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2001, p. 109).

The ethnic and demographic structure in Lam Dong is quite diverse and includes three main population groups: the Kinh majority, the local minorities, and the northern ethnic minorities. Lam Dong had about 25 ethnic groups in the period from 1979 to 1989 (Trần, 1992, pp. 62-63); the Kinh people accounted for 69.5 percent, local minorities 13.5 percent, and ethnic minorities from the North and other places accounted for 17 percent. Due to the impact of migration, especially free migration, by 1999 Lam Dong had 40 ethnic groups living together. From 2009 to 2019, the figure remained stable at 43 ethnic groups (Cục Thống kê Lâm Đồng, 2019).

Among the ethnic minorities in Lam Dong, the Nung and Tay people have the largest population, ranking fourth and fifth in 2009. Therefore, the northern ethnic minorities have become a sizable part of the Lam Dong population. From 1975 to 2015, free migration contributed to many changes in both the size and structure of ethnic groups in Lam Dong. The presence of ethnic minorities from the North has made the composition of the population in Lam Dong more diverse and plentiful.

3.2.2. *Additional labor resources*

Free migration contributes to the voluntary redistribution of the workforce. From a theoretical point of view, migration can distribute labor between regions, ensuring the linkage of employment opportunities and surplus labor between different regions. Moreover, free migrants are also active in finding jobs to improve their lives.

After 1975, the rate of planned and free migration contributed decisively to the population and labor growth in Lam Dong province. Although there are certain limitations and uneven production skills, the ethnic minorities from the North who freely migrated to Lam Dong have provided an abundant source of labor for the province. According to the Lam Dong Statistical Office, the working age population from 15 to 59 accounts for 84.2 percent of the total number of people moving to Lam Dong from other places (Cục Thống kê Lâm Đồng, 2015). The source of the population and labor are ethnic minorities from the North who supplemented and gradually overcame the shortage of labor in the expanding agricultural production of Lam Dong. This is a diverse human resource with low labor costs in the specialized agricultural areas of Lam Dong, such as: Cat Tien, Da Teh, Da Huoi, Di Linh, and remote mountainous areas with few workers. The migrants contributed to solving the urgent seasonal labor demand, such as harvesting and processing of coffee, vegetables, and flowers. This is the potential labor force for the agricultural sector in Lam Dong. In the process of exploiting new land, free migrants are quite active in changing crop structure and occupations to quickly adapt to new conditions.

3.2.3. *The population quality*

Population characteristics in Lam Dong differ in terms of culture and socioeconomic development, so free migration has certainly impacted the development of Lam Dong. According to the 2014 survey data of the Lam Dong Statistical Office on the schooling rate of households, the high school completion rate of the Tay is 65.63 percent. For the Nung, 50 percent finish lower secondary school and none go on to high school. For the Hmong, 66.67 percent finish lower secondary school and 50 percent finish high school. In comparison, the overall completion rates are 97.54 percent for lower secondary school and 72.19 percent for high school in Lam Dong (Cục Thống kê Lâm Đồng, 2016, p. 118). Thus, the education level of the northern ethnic minorities living in Lam Dong is lower than the province as a whole. In particular, the rate of school attendance of the Hmong people at the appropriate age and by education level is only 55.56 percent, the lowest in the province (Cục Thống kê Lâm Đồng, 2016, p. 119).

Today, socioeconomic development requires a highly qualified workforce to rapidly grasp developments in science and technology and to facilitate technology transfer. However, the northern ethnic minorities who freely migrated to Lam Dong are mostly unskilled workers with low levels of education and low incomes, affecting the quality of the population and labor force of Lam Dong.

It cannot be denied that this migration flow has brought many benefits in promoting the use of land, especially the land potential in remote and mountainous areas that are difficult to exploit, and in supplementing the labor force at low cost. On the other hand, the free migration of northern ethnic minorities has also caused limitations in Lam Dong's socioeconomic development, notably among them, the impact on economic restructuring, environmental destruction of upstream and protected forests, and the quality of the population, especially low education and professional expertise. This is also a problem that requires Lam Dong to have many solutions to resolve.

4. SOME SUGGESTIONS

4.1. Settlement and production development for free migrants

4.1.1. Mitigate the shortage of productive land

As mentioned above, the free migrants to Lam Dong mainly work in the agricultural sector and in the areas with fertile land and untapped forest land. The main income of northern ethnic minorities in Lam Dong is from agricultural production, in which cultivation is the main livelihood activity. However, because most households face a shortage of productive land, their economic lives still face many difficulties. Therefore, while a part of the migrant population works as day laborers, the rest pursue their livelihoods by deforestation for cultivation, which is a traditional farming practice of some ethnic minorities in the North.

In fact, the forest land converted to agricultural land by free migrants is often not favorable for productive cultivation due to steep terrain or due to being inconvenient for traffic (UBND huyện Đam Rông, 2017). Lack of productive land is the main cause of deforestation, especially of the old upstream forests in remote mountainous areas. According to the writer, to resolve the above situation, the local government needs to replan land use and allocate land to free migrant households. In particular, to minimize the negative effects on arable land and to limit deforestation by free migrants, more attention should be paid to the training of production techniques for high-quality agriculture.

4.1.2. Improve the technical level of production in agriculture

The northern ethnic minorities still follow their old techniques and have not applied new farming methods, so the productivity of livestock and crops is still low. In order to improve incomes and the quality of life for the ethnic minorities who migrated freely to Lam Dong, the local government should aim to improve the quality of human resources, guide people in cultivation and animal husbandry, preserve the agricultural products after harvest, and encourage people to learn business skills so that households have stable incomes to ensure a better life. The notable thing is that in Lam Dong, with its good natural conditions, people should intercrop food crops with cash crops such as coffee, tea, and pepper to meet food needs but still have high-value agricultural products. In areas favorable for wet rice cultivation, such as Ro Men (Dam Rong) and Tan Van (Lam Ha) communes, the local authorities need to invest in building irrigation and

instructing people on how to use appropriate chemical and organic fertilizers so that they are less dependent on natural conditions, especially in the dry season.

In addition, linking households to form a larger production model in order to focus capital money, human resources, techniques, and production tools also requires the attention of local authorities. In particular, the state does not allocate capital but establishes production facilities to develop production models combined with agricultural product processing to create jobs directly for free migrants, and at the same time to take advantage of the abundant low-cost human resources.

4.1.3. Stable life associated with tourism development

Lam Dong needs to link the economic development of ethnic minorities with the key economic sector of tourism. As a province with strong tourism resources including the city of Dalat and many famous natural landscapes, it is possible to develop specialized tourism activities focussed on ethnic minority culture, ecotourism, and experience tourism in Lam Dong. Apart from traditional tourism activities, the local government needs to build new thematic tours to meet the new trends of tourists, such as cuisine, festivals, and experiences. The strengths of the northern ethnic minorities living in Lam Dong need to be exploited.

4.2. Stabilizing the free migrant's place of residence

Beside the settlement sites arranged by the local authorities, there are free migrant households living in the forests of Lam Dong, like the Hmong and Dao, who tend to move. Therefore, the authorities need to arrange for them to settle in stable residential areas and to build projects to stabilize the population, especially in communes in remote mountainous areas close to Dak Lak and Dak Nong. This is also significant in contributing to the exploitation of productive land in sparsely populated areas. These projects need to be invested in heavily to ensure the dual goals of socioeconomic development and security and defense.

In order to stabilize and improve the lives of the northern ethnic minorities in Lam Dong, the local authorities need to pay attention to shifting from crop rotation to sedentary cultivation. For sedentary farming, in particular, the prerequisite is productive land for people, completion of land allocation, and land use right certificates for people to feel secure in production. However, funding land for settlement is also a difficult issue for land policy. The local government should promote the harmonious settlement of sedentary relationships associated with reasonable residential planning to ensure sustainability in accordance with general planning.

In areas with a high concentration of ethnic minorities, local authorities need to classify them and coordinate with other provinces to facilitate immigration, such as providing support for declarations, verifying by mail, and guiding legal procedures. Moreover, when conducting an investigation on immigrants, the authorities need to grasp the farming practices and the living standards of each population group as a basis for making a stable life plan for each migrant.

4.3. Construction of traditional and sustainable resettlement sites

Migration to join relatives is one of the most common reasons for migration of the Tay, Nung, Hmong, and Dao ethnic groups according to research by Phillip Guest (Guest, 1998, pp. 18-19) who shows that the social network, including relatives and friends, influences the decision to move and the direction of movement, and provides assistance in migration. Therefore, building gathering places for free migrants in Ro Men, Tan Van, and Tan Thanh communes should follow the approach of forming sustainable communities that focus on establishing traditional lifestyles.

It must be emphasized that the Tay, Nung, Hmong, and Dao ethnic groups attach much importance to the role of community and family. They like to live near relatives and family, which they consider an important basic element to help them quickly stabilize their lives and preserve their traditions and identity (Nguyễn, 2003, p. 85). It is the habit and tradition of living among the clan and village. Therefore, in the process of building new residential areas, Lam Dong needs to pay special attention to preserving and promoting the customs, habits, and living arrangements of the ethnic groups. The cultural activities of the communities include folk festivals such as *Lồng tồng* (to the fields) of the Tay and Nung and *Gầu tào* (spring outing) of the Hmong. Performance arts, such as Khen dance, folk singing, and folk games also need to be studied and organized by local cultural agencies. For the Protestant Hmong who migrate to Lam Dong, local authorities need to allow people to register for religious activities in groups or at home to ensure their religious needs are met as well as the normal life for the believers, like the model in Ro Men commune, Dam Rong district.

Free migrants in general, when coming to a new land, want to stabilize their residence soon to build a new life. In fact, when living and production conditions are stable, they all consider newly settled land as the second homeland and tend to remain in that place for a long time. Therefore, promoting the traditional living characteristics and customs of the population groups in the resettlement will contribute to building sustainable communities, helping them to feel secure and encouraging them to remain for a long time in the new place. Creating this factor will be an important solution to limit free migration.

In short, migration is a normative issue in socioeconomic development, so the authorities at all levels cannot prohibit migration through administrative measures. Instead, the migration process can only be adjusted to the requirements of the economy, politics, sociocultural factors, security, and national defense in both the place of origin and immigration. In addition, migration shows the relationship between supply and demand for labor, population, and economic development, and the socioeconomic structure is always changing in the direction of development. Therefore, the authorities cannot prevent free migration; they can only find ways to limit its negative effects and promote its positive effects.

5. CONCLUSION

Free migration, including that of the northern ethnic minorities to Lam Dong from 1976 to 2015, is a major feature in the development history of this locality and is a historical socioeconomic issue that has impacted the development of Lam Dong. Ethnic minorities migrated from the North to Lam Dong to find employment opportunities in agricultural production and to improve their lives.

The migrants have also brought about many positive impacts and some limitations on the socioeconomic development of Lam Dong province. It can be said that the free migrants have contributed to the exploitation of the land's potential and to economic development in remote mountainous areas, replenishing the labor resource at low cost, especially in seasonal agricultural production, diversifying the population structure, and increasing cultural diversity. On the other hand, migration has also caused a number of consequences for Lam Dong's socioeconomic development, such as affecting economic structure transformation, depleting forest resources, reducing the quality of the population in Lam Dong, and making the relationship with other people and public order more complicated.

Migration is a socioeconomic phenomenon with positive and negative sides, but including many negative effects. This is a complex issue requiring authorities at all levels to have many measures and policies to manage this phenomenon. Migration policy must aim to strengthen the state management to stabilize residential areas, stabilize lives, and develop production for free migrants. The writer suggests that building resettlement sites into sustainable communities within the setting of traditional cultural values is a viable and effective way to minimize free relocation.

Good management of free migration in Lam Dong to make use of the strong points and to minimize its limitations is currently one of the main administrative duties in the socioeconomic development of Lam Dong.

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