

# **Ethnic Minority Attitudes Towards Education in Vietnam**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Educational disparities between the Vietnamese majority and ethnic minority groups are well documented. Minorities have higher rates of illiteracy, lower rates of both primary and secondary school completion, higher rates of grade repetition, more ethnic minority students are not in a grade appropriate for their age, and very few ethnic minority students continue their education past secondary school. In trying to address these issues, the Vietnam government has invested in educational infrastructure and teacher training. Yet ethnic minorities continue to lag behind their majority counterparts.

This research uses both quantitative and qualitative data to examine educational attainment and attitudes towards education among the Tai ethnic minority. Quantitative survey data will examine changes in educational attainment by age and differences by gender. Qualitative data from ethnographies and semi-structured interviews will examine the attitudes and values towards education, the perceived costs and benefits to educational attainment, and the barriers to educational success.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Vietnam has been identified as one of the countries making the most impressive progress towards the Millennium Development Goals for poverty reduction, with a poverty rate reduction from 58% to 10% between 1990-2010 (UNDP, 2010). Unfortunately, poverty reductions have not been equally shared by all in the population, with poverty concentrated among Vietnam's ethnic minority groups. Although accounting for only 14% of Vietnam's total population, ethnic minorities account for over half of Vietnam's poor.

Education has emerged as the solution to combat poverty, and the government has invested heavily in ethnic minority education. Yet, substantial educational disparities between the majority and ethnic minority groups remain and show little evidence of improvements. Vietnam's ethnic minorities have lower net enrollment rates at both the primary and secondary school level (Baulch, 2002). In mountainous areas in the north and central parts of Vietnam, less than half of all ethnic minority children are attending lower secondary school at the right age (Baulch et al., 2009).

Virtually all the research available on education among ethnic minorities in Vietnam uses data from either the Vietnam Census, the Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VLSS), or the Survey and Assessment of Vietnam's Youth (SAVY). Although these national level data sets provide valuable data on discrepancies, there is much that is left hidden and unanswered. We use a unique community-based study involving 16 Tai ethnic minority villages to better understand educational decisions, the value and anticipated benefits from education, and the perceived barriers and rewards to education.

## **BACKGROUND**

Vietnam is a multiethnic society with substantial ethno-cultural diversity. The Kinh comprises 84% of Vietnam's 82 million population, with 52 different ethnic minority groups

making up the remaining 16%. The Chinese make up about 1% of Vietnam's population and are often grouped with the Kinh because of their socio-economic similarities. Ethnic minorities are those that have Vietnamese nationality and reside in Vietnam, but who do not share the identity, language, and other cultural characteristics with the Kinh (World Health Organization, 2003). The Kinh primarily inhabit the fertile delta regions and coastal plains, while minority groups mainly reside in mountainous, less fertile, areas.

Using large, national level data for examining educational issues among ethnic minorities does have four primary drawbacks. First, self-reports of individual school attendance or child's school attendance are likely biased since school enrollment is mandatory. It would be against the law not to send one's child to primary school. This issue may be further exacerbated by the location of interview. For example, most of the SAVY interviews in rural areas, where ethnic minorities live, were conducted at the government Commune Headquarters. This setting may have increased the incentive for respondents to report higher rates of school attendance than is actually the case. Therefore, national data may actually under-estimate ethnic minority educational disparities.

Second, there are substantial linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic differences among Vietnam's 52 different ethnic minority groups. National datasets contain too few numbers of each ethnic group to permit analyses by specific groups. Furthermore, members of specific groups are often scattered across provinces so that the experiences of one group in one province may differ from the experiences of the same group in a different province. Additionally, there are sub-classifications within ethnic groups that add further complexity (e.g., Flower Hmong, Green Hmong, Black Hmong).

Third, most ethnic minority groups speak a language other than Vietnamese and their fluency and ease with Vietnamese may be quite limited. Therefore, surveys conducted in Vietnamese may be problematic. Translation from Vietnamese to ethnic minority languages is rare, and when it does occur there is little testing of its validity.

Finally, although majority-minority group comparisons are a useful starting point for highlighting disparities, within group analyses allow for a more detailed understanding of specific processes and concerns. We use multiple data sources from the Families and Communities in Transition (FACT) project to examine educational participant and achievement, and values and attitudes towards education, among a single ethnic minority group—the Tai, Vietnam's second largest ethnic minority group.

## **DATA**

FACT is a unique, community-based sample covering remote, rural areas with little infrastructure. In fact, all 16 villages that are part of the study lack electricity. First, district and commune records were used to identify Tai villages that were socio-economically similar in two districts in the Nghe An province. Next, ethnographic data focused on cultural similarities, identifying 16 villages that were very similar on economic, social, and cultural factors. Data include both quantitative (a survey data collection with all village residents age 16 and over, a little over 4,100 individuals) and qualitative (ethnographic data collected by ethnographers in each village and semi-structured interviews) sources. Ethnographic data was collected in Fall 2011 and 2012. Ethnographic data will again be collected in Fall 2013. Survey data was collected in Summer 2012. Semi-structured interview data was collected in Summer 2013.

## **PLANNED ANALYSES**

This paper will use a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data contain household roster records that provide information on each household member's educational attainment. While disparities between the Kinh and ethnic minorities are evident, and while gender disparities in education in Vietnam are also well documented, less is known about gender disparities within groups of ethnic minorities. Even less is known about if and how this gender disparity has changed over time. Our survey data contain educational information collected on whether an individual ever attended school, the last grade they completed, and the reason why they stopped attending school. We will use this data to examine why male and female Tai stopped going to school. Next, qualitative data from ethnographies and semi-structured interviews will identify key benefits and costs to education. This research will highlight how educational attainment of the Tai minority Vietnamese has changed over time, Tai's attitudes towards education, and how Tai families make educational decisions. Given the focus on reducing educational disparities for poverty reduction efforts, this research will provide program and policy makers with key insights into the barriers they face.