

Sedentary and Free Migration in Central Highlands Today

Nguyễn Duy Thụy*

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Abstract: Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands) is a particularly important strategic area in terms of economy, politics, security, defence and the ecological environment of Vietnam. The issue of sedentary cultivation, settlement, and free migration is of great significance to the economic, cultural, and social development of the Central Highlands (Trần Đại Quang, 2012; Bảo Yến, 2021); however, there is still a shortage of studies on the issues from the perspective of researchers, other than administrative officers. The author conducted a number of studies on sedentary and free migration in the region, and applying different scientific methods (surveys, questionnaires, closed and open interviews). The results show that project-based migration has not yet completely met the needs of migrants, while free migration continues and some new problems have arisen, which confirms the findings of the Gia Lai province Committee for Ethnic Minorities (2020). The State should further improve the efficiency of state management of sedentarisation, settlement, and free migration; perfect administration, population and land planning; mobilise and allocate reasonable investment capital; and increase investment in religious activity in ethnic minority areas.

Keywords: Free migration, sedentary cultivation, ethnic minorities, Tây Nguyên (Central Highlands).

Subject classification: Public Policy

1. Introduction

The Central Highlands consists of five provinces (Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, and Lâm Đồng) spanning a natural area of about 54,000km². Its total population numbers over 5.8 million people, accounting for 6.1% of Vietnam's total population. The region currently has 62 district-level administrative units and 726 commune-level administrative units. Particularly significant is that all Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups have a presence in the Central Highlands. For analysis of this research only, the author categorises the population of the Central Highlands into three major groups: the Kinh (accounting for 64.69%), 12

* Institution of Social Sciences of Central Highlands, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Email: thuycongtuoc@gmail.com

local ethnic groups (accounting for 26.58%), and ethnic minorities who have migrated to this region from other areas (such as the Tày, the Nùng, the Mông, the Thái, the Mường, and the Dao from northern areas who account for 8.73%) (General Statistics Office, 2019). One of the issues that the Party and State pay special attention to in the Central Highlands is the sedentary settlement of ethnic minorities and free migrants to this region.

Resolution No.10-NQ/TW dated 18 January 2002 of the 9th Politburo on Socio-economic Development and Assurance of National Defence and Security in the Central Highlands in 2001-2010 Period, and *Conclusion No.12-KL/TW*, dated 24 October 2011 of the 11th Politburo (on continuing to implement *Resolution No.10-NQ/TW* of the 9th Politburo on the development of the Central Highlands in the 2011-2020 period towards the objective) focuses on “Perfecting the work of sedentary cultivation, settlement and stabilisation of life for local ethnic minorities, especially for people in remote and isolated areas, revolutionary bases, and border areas, and for new immigrants and free migrants who face difficulties, in order to limit and move towards ending free migration.

Planning and preparing for the construction of resettlement projects is intended for building a complete economic and social infrastructure, freeing up land for production use and residential areas in order to accommodate more local people and some who have decided to settle in the region, including those resettled from some hydropower projects” (Trần Đại Quang, 2012).

In fact, from the early 1990s to today, the free migrants arriving in the Central Highlands have had significant positive and negative impacts on economic and social development, as well as on security and defence. Therefore, it is critical to solve the issue of migratory, sedentary, and settled populations to have a positive impact and limit negative ones. This paper presents the current status of migration, sedentary cultivation and settlement in the Central Highlands, and the implementation of state policies in these matters, as well as making some recommendations for state agencies in implementing this policy in the region.

2. Migration in Central Highlands today

2.1. Free migration

Since 1975, the Central Highlands has always experienced large-scale population changes, experiencing the fastest increase in the country. In 1976, the region’s population numbered only 1.2 million people. This was made up of 14 ethnic groups, of which ethnic minorities accounted for 69.7% of the population. By 1993, the population had increased to 2.37 million people with 35 ethnic groups. In 2003, numbers grew to 4.67 million with 46 ethnic groups; and by 2019 it had risen to 5.8 million people from all 54 ethnic groups, and a population density of 109 people/km² (GSO, 2021).

Regarding only the free migrants to the Central Highlands, from 1976 to 2000, there were 98,687 households with 459,106 people. Ethnic groups with the largest number of free migrants were the Mông, the Dao, the Tày, and the Thái in the provinces of Điện Biên, Hà Giang, Cao Bằng, etc. In the period 2005-2017, according to statistics of the Central Highlands Steering Committee, the total number of free migrants to the area totalled about 25,732 households with 91,703 people, of which: Kon Tum province had 7,243 households, with 21,708 people; Gia Lai province had 6,250 households with 23,624 people; Đắk Nông province had 5,391 households with 8,038 people; Lâm Đồng province had 3,862 households with 14,639 people; and Đắk Lắk province had 2,986 households with 8,038 people.

In 2015, the National Assembly promulgated *Resolution No.113/2015/QH13* dated 7 November 2015 focused on basically solving the situation of free migrants in mountainous and midland areas. After five years of implementation, the arrangement of free migrants underwent a number of remarkable changes yielding many positive results, and there was a sharp decrease in free migrants from the northern provinces to the Central Highlands. In the period of 2015-2020, the number of free migrants to the Central Highlands numbered 2,040 households, with an average of 550 households migrating freely each year. Thus, in this period, the situation of free migrants decreased more than 10 times compared to pre-2015 (Bảo Yên, 2021).

Although this number is decreasing, it still occurs every year and the complexity tends to increase. The free migrants are mainly Mông with high swidden cultivation characteristics. They choose to reside in remote areas, on the edges of forests or in sub-zones of protected and special-use forests; or they may illegally reside on forestry land protected by forestry companies or forest management boards.

Free migration has a double impact on the socio-economic development of localities in the Central Highlands. On the positive side it increases the population, and contributes to the formation and development of new residential and production areas; it contributes to the regulation of population density and reduces the pressure on employment in both the departure and arrival provinces; it contributes to additional human resources; it effectively exploits natural resources, expands the agricultural production area and output; it promotes the process of integration and development for local ethnic groups; it creates cultural diversity; and contributes to ensuring national security in the region, especially in border areas.

However, on the downside, free migration brings with it many negative consequences such as: disrupting planning and population organisation, and land use and socio-economic development. For example, in Đam Rông district of Lâm Đồng province, and Tuy Đức and Krông Nô districts in Đắk Nông province, the population spread is complicated due the number of free migrants which has exceeded the number of initial reviews when the project was established. Spontaneous residential areas have not been planned, essential infrastructure has not been invested in; living conditions, especially children's education, medical examinations and treatment, transport facilities, and daily life encounter many

difficulties. Sub-zones 249 in Ea Lê commune, and sub-zones 267, 268 in Cur M'Lan commune, Ea Súp district, more than 20km from the centre, suffer from a poor road network and limited access to healthcare and education. Free migration also leads to a series of social security problems, such as households facing many difficulties, most of which do not have household registration books and hence are unable to take advantage of social security policies. Some places with free migrants suffer from social evils (e.g. opium smoking and illegal gambling), which threaten to provoke, cause division and conflict between the free migrants and local ethnic groups; and potential factors causing disunity and instability in security, politics and national defence.

Free migration also makes it difficult for local authorities to manage, because some migrants destroy forests, encroach on forest lands, impact on trade, cause land disputes, and illegally exploit forest products. Moreover, local authorities encounter many difficulties in managing household registration and demographics because of the lack of identification documents such as identity cards and household registration books. According to data from Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông provinces surveyed by the author, in 2019, 720 households which migrated from the north had no household registration books, the majority being the Mông people (Institute of Social Sciences of Central Highlands, 2019). Free migration impacts greatly on forest protection in the Central Highlands due to the frequency of slash-and-burn cultivation, deforestation for production land, severely damaged forests, and disrupted biodiversity. The ecological environment was affected and changed, causing new natural disasters in the region. In recent years, the forest area in the Central Highlands has been shrinking day by day due to deforestation caused by free-migrants.

2.2. Migration in projected-based resettlement

Implementation of large projects in the area (including the resettlement project itself) often results in needing to relocate households in the project area in order to free up space. This requires the government to arrange new settlements; i.e. project-based resettlement. By 2018, only 13 out of a total of 42 approved projects had been completed, while 29 were unfinished but still needed relocating. Many projects have now exceeded the scale in terms of the number of households and people.

A report by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the review results of localities show that the Central Highlands provinces currently have more than 11,200 free-migrant households which settle and integrate into residential areas and there are still nearly 19,000 households scattered outside the planning area that need to be settled and effectively arranged into projects.

However, there are a number of unapproved projects, some of which have been ongoing for more than 10 years without enough capital allocated. For example, in Kon Tum province, by 2019, the People's Committee issued a decision on a project to allocate people, involving 300 households and 1,500 individuals, with a total investment of nearly

VND 150 billion. To date, nearly VND 133 billion has been paid, yet the project has not been implemented because only 126 households have received land and only 67 have been supported with building their houses (Cao Nguyên, Hoàng Thanh, 2020). Some projects have not been planned in accordance with the people's production practices. For example, in the project of allocating free migrants in Ea Kiết commune, each household was allocated 600m² of production land, but this is not enough to meet their production needs according to traditional production methods.

2.3. Limitations of migration management in Central Highlands

The implementation of projects and programmes on sedentarisation and settlement, and stabilising migrants has achieved certain results, helping local ethnic minorities and free migrants to stabilise their lives. However, the implementation of these policies still has some limitations and inadequacies, specifically as follows:

Firstly, migration management is still heavily administrative and not really scientifically based. Some migrants of the Central Highlands provinces created complicated issues such as disputes and land encroachment; cutting down forests for cultivation and illegal exploitation of forest products; illegal buying, selling and transferring of agricultural and forestry land; participating in social vices; violating regulations on religion; and adversely impacting on political security and national defence. Some free migrants suffer from hunger, under-age marriage, lack of education, and do not have household registration books or personal identification documents. Areas such as Ea Súp district (Đắk Lắk province), Krông Nô, Đắk G'long, and Tuy Đức districts (Đắk Nông province), and Đam Rông district (Lâm Đồng province) are hot spots of spontaneous migration due to hundreds of ethnic minority people arriving from other localities every year. With such a challenging situation, population management needs advice from experts to ensure policies are implemented effectively, and to avoid conflict or budget waste. However, such input in the process of building and implementing migration management remains insignificant.

Secondly, the implementation of population stabilisation projects has progressed very slowly, creating new complications and limited the funding available for population stabilisation. Completion of some projects is slow or overloaded; they may suffer planning failures, or not fully achieve the objectives and effectiveness. Many infrastructure projects degrade quickly or fail to serve their purpose. Central budget capital for arranging and implementing projects on the settlement and stabilisation of free migrants, has only met just over 40% of demand (in another provinces this figure is only 22%); many projects remain unfinished, protracted, fail to meet the planned schedule and targets which leads to waste and reduced investment efficiency. Others have not been approved, while some have been ongoing for over 10 years without enough capital allocated. For an example of this, we can refer back to Kon Tum province and the plan to allocate 300 households - mentioned previously. This is one of many projects that have not been implemented.

Thirdly, many projects and resettlement areas have had hundreds of billions VND invested, yet people do not move to these areas because they are not aligned with their customs, farming habits, and production methods, and offer no opportunity for input. For example, the project to arrange and stabilise free migrants in Ea Kiết commune (Cu M'gar district, Đắk Lắk province) aims to relocate and stabilise the life and production of Northern Mông households migrate and encroach on the forest core area under the management of Buôn Ja Wâm, a one member limited liability company. Investment in infrastructure invested in the settlement includes a well built concrete road, a centralised clean water system, electricity power lines to homes, a community cultural house, and a school. However, the project is far from where people live and farm; therefore, it is inconvenient for production. Furthermore, the traditional livelihood of agricultural production methods depends on forest resources; therefore, the project is not suitable with the people's farming and living practices; hence, they do not move to these settlements. Some households, though, register in the resettlement project areas for the purpose of household registration, but in reality they usually stay in their old residential areas deep in the forest. Therefore, projects on resettlement, stabilisation and arrangement of free migrants have not achieved the desired effect.

Fourthly, the management to help people avoid falling into the “low-income trap” in the community of free migrants or local ethnic minorities is not effective. When migrating to the Central Highlands to find work, although life is still hard and difficult, compared to the conditions where they came from, the ethnic minority households that migrate freely still have a better life. They have an opportunity to ensure they cover their minimum food and clothing requirements, and their travel and production conditions are less strenuous. Many programmes and projects to stabilise migrants only focus on providing housing with a certain area for the migrant households to freely engage in agricultural production without paying attention to ameliorating livelihoods, creation of favourable conditions for advancement, development of human indices in these communities. Therefore, after a period of time, free migrants and ethnic minority people sell their allocated plots of land and migrate to other places or divide the land between their children to work. This leads to a spiral of the “low income” trap, in which multidimensional poverty leads to migration and vice versa.

Fifthly, the stable arrangement of free migrants from other places has not fully resolved the associated negative consequences such as deforestation, encroachment on forestry land, and land disputes. Statistics show that within the ten year period of 2010 to 2020 in the Central Highlands about 0.314 million hectares of forests have been lost; the average rate of natural forest loss is about 46,267ha/year. One reason is blamed on the free migration of people encroaching on land used for production. In addition, due to the lack of strict and effective management at/of all levels of people using and managing forests, conflicts and disputes arise between free migrants and other forest management entities. Some areas have become hotspots of security and social order, land disputes, deforestation, and disturbance to the local people's lives such as in Ea Súp, Tuy Đức, and Đắk Glong

districts. According to a 2019 Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment report, in the Central Highlands provinces, there were 40 long-lasting complicated disputes and lawsuits over agricultural and forestry land, of which 14 have not been fully resolved (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2020).

Sixthly, in some locations, the settlement and stabilisation of free migrants are not suitable for their farming practices and livelihoods, essential infrastructure is not guaranteed; or due to lengthy project implementation processes, infrastructure has deteriorated before project completion. Regarding free migrant allocation in Ea Kiết commune, each household is provided with 600m² of production land; however, this is not enough to meet their production needs according to their traditional production methods. Some projects in Kon Tum face many shortcomings including unfinished settlement houses (lack of doors, unplastered floors, no kitchens), and a lack of clean water source. Therefore, the ethnic minority people in the assigned group are often not interested in moving to the settlements.

Due to favourable natural conditions and sparse population density, the traditional farming methods of the local ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands is not nomadic but rather settled in rotation. It is also known as closed rotation in the area of each community in accordance with customary law. After 1975, the migration programme under the Party and State's plan to build a new economic zone, the free flow of migrants in the later stage, along with the impact of policies of the State on the livelihoods of local ethnic minorities, decreased the average productive land area of households. Moreover, ethnic minorities using traditional livelihood methods mainly farm extensively based on outdated production techniques, so they cannot adapt to changes in enough time. Therefore, the stabilisation of farming and settlement for the local ethnic minorities needs to focus on supporting residential and production land, transferring science and technology, and changing people's livelihoods. On the contrary, for ethnic minorities from the northern provinces following nomadic practices (such as the Mông, the Dao, etc.), it is necessary to focus on arranging projects to stabilise the free migrant population, gradually helping them stabilise their lives.

3. Sedentary in Central Highlands today

3.1. Actual sedentary practice in Central Highlands

Sedentary settlement is stable accommodation for sustainable development of production. The policy of sedentary cultivation of the Party and State for local ethnic minorities and free migrants from other places is reflected in a number of policies. These include:

Decision No.193/2006/QĐ-TTg dated 24 August 2006 on “Approval of the programme on population relocation in natural disaster areas, especially difficult areas, border, islands, free migration, critical areas and very important protection forest, strictly protected area of special-use forest in the period 2006-2010 and orientation to 2015”;

Decision No.33/2007/QĐ-TTg dated 5 March 2007 on “Policy to support migration for implementation of sedentary cultivation and settlement for ethnic minorities in the period 2007-2010”;

Decision No.1342/QĐ-TTg dated 25 August 2009 on “Approval of sedentary settlement plan for nomadic ethnic minorities until 2012, integrated with Programmes 135”;

Decision No.33/2013/QĐ-TTg dated 4 June 2013 of the Prime Minister on “Continuing to implement the policies of supporting migrants to implement sedentary cultivation and settlement for ethnic minority communities until 2015”;

And *Decision No.2085/QĐ-TTg* dated 31 October 2016 on “Approval of specific policies to support socio-economic development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas for the period 2017-2020”.

Sedentary projects are implemented in two forms: centralised and mixed. Concentrated sedentarisation is the construction of population spots from 30 to 60 households. Alternating sedentarisation means supporting a village or commune to receive each individual household. The point of implementing sedentary work is to encourage the locality to interweave in order to take advantage of the existing infrastructure system, and at the same time local households have sufficient conditions to help new ones move in. In implementing the above, the Central Highlands provinces have issued plans, programmes, and projects to arrange and stabilise the population.

In Kon Tum province, the work of sedentary cultivation and settlement is focused especially on local ethnic minorities. During the 2016-2020 period, seven sedentarisation and settlement projects intercropped in Đắk Hà, Kon Plông, Đắk Glei, and Sa Thầy districts. In addition, through schemes and policies of the government, the province focused on supporting sedentary cultivation and settlement in new places for 363 households with 1,679 members of ethnic minorities (Dương Nương, 2022a).

Gia Lai province authorities also determined that the work of sedentarisation and stable arrangement of free migrants are important tasks. The province has mobilised resources and integrated many sedentary and settlement programmes under the motto “The State and the People work together”. Up to the year 2020, the province organised sedentary cultivation for 2,260 households who migrated freely from other localities, concentrated sedentary cultivation at ten points for 664 households, built 65 infrastructure projects, and 50.86km of roads with a budget of VND 112,199.38 million. These policies have contributed to the stabilisation and settlement of over 90% of the province’s ethnic minority households (Gia Lai Provincial Committee for Ethnic Minorities, 2020).

In Đắk Nông province, investment has been made in 12 projects of population arrangement and settlement. The total approved capital is VND 1,436.969 billion, of which the central budget is VND 1,194.459 billion and other capital is VND 242.510 billion. From 2016 to July 2021, the total of stabilised households numbered 4,448 of which 4,815 were arranged in concentrated projects, and 263 households allocated to interweaved projects (Đắk Nông Provincial People’s Committee, 2020). Also in this period,

implementing *Decision No.2085/QĐ-TTg* dated 31 October 2016 of the Prime Minister on “Approval of specific policies to support socio-economic development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas in the period 2017-2020”, the government provided the province with a total budget of VND 271.734 billion for implementation while from 2017 to 2020, the province was allocated VND 13.643 billion. The focus has been on investing in two traffic projects and building four school classrooms as part of two concentrated cultivation and settlement projects (People’s Committee of Đắk Nông province, 2020).

3.2. A number of recommendations for sedentary tasks

Firstly, state agencies need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of sedentary management, and settlement and stabilisation of free migrants. The State should pay attention to investment in socio-economic development in the northern mountainous provinces in order to limit free migration, and minimise this flow to other regions, including the Central Highlands - it is not only an administrative and economic issue but also a matter of ensuring social security stability. The State should strengthen the consolidation, construction, and promotion of operational efficiency of the political system at the grassroots level in stabilising socio-political conditions. It should also train and foster a contingent of cadres, especially from the ethnic minorities at commune and village levels, ensuring that they have certificates of tertiary school education or higher, and to gradually improve their theoretical and professional skills in order to: be accomplished in economic and social management; to master the regimes and policies of the Party and the State; to be flexible and creative in organisation and implementation; and to effectively carry out good land management, forest management and protection work; to thoroughly solve the problem of illegal deforestation, and the invasion, sale and transfer of land; and to limit the situation of free migration.

Secondly, state agencies need to do well in administrative, population and land planning. Specifically, they need to: (i) complete the review, adjustment and supplementation of the master plan on population arrangement in each province; (ii) take the initiative in formulating really urgent population arrangement projects for submission to competent authorities for approval on the principle of prioritisation and concentrated investment as a basis for allocating capital for implementation; (iii) review the area of land owned by, and originating from, agro-forestry companies where free migrants and local ethnic minorities are living and working; and (iv) formulate a suitable plan to arrange and stabilise the population with the aim of handing over the locality and to establish a land fund for construction of projects - the aim being the stable arrangement of free migrants and ethnic minorities on the spot or clearing and returning the land back to the agro-forestry companies that has been encroached upon, or to relocate people to other areas.

Thirdly, state agencies need to mobilise and allocate reasonable investment capital for sedentarisation, settlement and stabilisation of the lives of migrants. In particular (i)

building and allocating capital plans for migrant projects on population arrangement aiming to make use of capital received from central and local budgets, and other legal financial sources; (ii) prioritising the allocation of sufficient capital investment in difficult areas, stabilising the population, and developing production, ensuring government budget investment capital is used to arrange and stabilise residence in the period 2013-2020 according to *Decision No.1776/QĐ-TTg* dated 21 November 2012 of the Prime Minister; (iii) to bring in policies to support production development in poor districts according to *Resolution No.30a/NQ-CP*; (iv) to continue to support capital from the government budget already in the target to implement projects on allocating and stabilising the conditions of free migrants with difficult lives: e.g. those without homes, residential or production according to planning regulations of the Central Highlands provinces.

Fourthly, state agencies need to focus on carrying out empathetic religious work in ethnic minority areas. Specifically, they need to: (i) effectively implement social policies and those directed towards ethnic minorities and remote areas, revolutionary bases, hot spots, border areas, and localities where ethnic minorities observe their religious practices, especially Protestantism; (ii) pay close attention to the management of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the Central Highlands; (iii) constantly improve the material and spiritual life of important local people such as the ethnic minority village elders and chiefs, and key religious leaders, and promptly settle disputes, complaints, and pressing concerns among the people; (iv) promote the responsibilities of religious organisations and dignitaries, especially the religious leaders, to ensure the transfer of position and ordination; (v) the construction and repair of places of worship must be legally compliant; and (vi) conduct annual review and classification of full-time staff with training plans.

4. Conclusion

Currently, on the work of sedentary cultivation, settlement, and stabilisation of free migrants for local ethnic minorities and those who migrate freely to the Central Highlands is basically an issue of stabilising lives and changing livelihoods, designed for ethnic minority groups who still face economic difficulties. The policy system related to sedentary work, settlement and stabilisation of these people is basically stable and relatively complete. However, policy implementation remains limited. Therefore, overcoming these limitations, dealing with violations in the arrangement and stabilisation of migrants in a correct and timely manner, and increasing resources for policy implementation are important implementation factors. The State's policy on sedentarisation, settlement, and stabilisation of free migrants should further ameliorate the daily lives of people in the area.

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