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Changing women's livelihood strategies in a suburban area in Hanoi
during the course of socio-economic transformation: A case study

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Abstract

This study aims at applying the livelihood strategy approach in understanding how women in a suburban area deal with the choices in economic activities in order to create their livelihood strategy. Using qualitative interviews of women in Nhu Quynh town (Van Lam district, Hung Yen province), a suburban area of Hanoi City, and the study explores livelihood strategies of women before and after 1997, when the Nhu Quynh commune was reclassified into an urban area. By analyzing three groups of women who are involved in agriculture, production/service, and paid work, the study shows that before 1997 most of the women in Nhu Quynh had conducted different agricultural production activities at the same time in order to increase their income. After 1997, they have been engaged in different earning activities at the same time, either agriculture or non-agricultural production or both, which are always planned well in terms of time, health, ability, available budget, before being carried out. All of the individuals' livelihood activities target one thing: improving income for a stable life. On the one hand, individuals' earning activities are coordinated with those of other family members to implement the livelihood strategy of their family. Socio-economic factors affect women both positively and negatively. On the other hand, livelihood strategies of their household help women to overcome the difficulties in the economic transition period, step by step adapting to the changes and development.

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Introduction

Vietnam is a developing country with approximately 80% of the population living in the rural areas. Since the economic reform known as *Doi moi* in mid 1980s, the state subsidization has been largely reduced; privatization and production activities in the informal sector have been developed. The economic reform has resulted in rapid economic development with a high rate of GDP growth¹. However, a large part of the population is facing new challenges and has changed their livelihood strategies to adapt to the new situation. Socio-economic reform in Vietnam has resulted in changes in all aspects of life, including individuals and households' livelihood strategies.

In the challenges of the Reform period, the role of women becomes significantly more important for the household income and reproductive strategies. They are themselves actively accessing and producing jobs, and approaching the market. They are, while caring for housework, also undertaking income generating activities. In other words, they are following their own strategy with different ways of earning a living and together with other family members implementing a family livelihood strategy (Luan, 2002).

Until now, there have been many studies on actual living conditions, jobs, poverty status, health condition, etc. of women, undertaken by a number of offices and organizations. Some of those studies concentrated on the changes of occupational structure, living standards, social stratification, poverty reduction, community development, female headed household. In common, those studies only pay attention to separate topics like livelihood activities, healthcare, childcare, education of women but have not considered their living, income generating activities as a livelihood strategy. Moreover, there have been quite a few sociological studies to identify social patterns of livelihood strategies of women and the trends of transformation.

This research aims at applying the livelihood strategy approach in understanding how women in a suburban area deal with the choices in economic activities in order to create their livelihood strategy. It asks what are livelihood strategies of women and how do they carry out the tasks in reality? I will explore this topic in Nhu Quynh town (Van Lam district, Hung Yen province). Nhu Quynh used to be a rural community before 1997. In 1997, Nhu Quynh was reclassified into an urban area. From an analysis of qualitative interviews of women in Nhu Quynh town, suburban area of Hanoi, about their lives before

¹ The World Bank, Vietnam Development Report 2004: Poverty, December, 2003.

and after 1997, I hope to show that studying livelihood strategies may contribute to the studies on family and gender in Vietnam in connection with global economic integration.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before operationalizing the concept of “livelihood strategies”, necessary for my own analysis of the data in Nhu Quynh town that follows, I would like to explore the background from which this concept has emerged, that is, the recent studies of sustainable development, more specifically, the concept of “livelihood” and “sustainable livelihood”. I will then pursue further to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the livelihood strategies concept, and its application to different geographical contexts across the globe.

The founding ideas of livelihood are presented as early in the works of Robert Chambers as mid-1980s, and then developed further by Chambers and Conway in early 1990s. Scholarly research have shown that while the concept of employment has fallen short to account for multiple activities and sources of food, income and security of people in both rural and urban areas, the concept of sustainable development is evidently more effective (Masika and Joekes, 1996:6). It is recognized that “employment as conventionally understood account for only a “small fraction” of work in the poor countries and that attention to livelihood is preferable, encompassing all forms of activities which ensure survival and enhance living conditions” (SIDA² 1995, cited in Masika and Joekes, 1996: 9). Masika and Joekes have shown that “sustainable livelihood” is more useful in understanding the realities of life facing the poor.

Development agencies such as ODI³, DFID⁴, and other multi lateral international organizations and donors such as WB, UNDP⁵, SIDA, etc. have since adopted the concept of livelihood and sustainable livelihood in their policies and practice in poverty alleviation activities. According to Chambers and Conway, “a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shock and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future while not undermining the natural resource base” (Chambers and Conway 1992, cited in Masika and Joekes 1996:6). DFID has provided a sustainable livelihood framework that consists of five

² Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

³ Overseas Development Institute, Portland House, UK

⁴ Department for International Development, UK

⁵ United National Development Program

basic capital assets, namely natural, social, human, physical, and financial (DFID 1999) based on acceptance of the definition of livelihood mentioned above.

Development researchers and practitioners have eventually developed the concept of livelihood to account for diverse ways of living of people. Ellis, for example, has defined livelihood as “the activities, the assets, and the access that jointly determine the living gained by an individual or household” (Ellis 1998, cited in Ellis 1999). Of the two ways of defining livelihood, one addresses access, while the other draws attention to capabilities. However, in the final analysis, access is also access to assets and their use. Therefore, an emphasis on access at the same time includes the “potential” or “possibility” to access and use/control assets.

Most studies have also emphasized that sustainable livelihood is used equally effective for both rural and urban areas (Ellis 1999; Masika and Joeke 1996; DFID 2000). The authors have noted that in both rural and urban areas, a majority of the poor have individual, household, and community strategies in order to obtain employment; and apart from these employment, there are a myriad of economic activities involving informal sectors, the exploitation of common natural resources, livestock sharing, and relying on social networks for various support to cope with crisis phases (Chambers 1995; SIDA 1995; Chambers and Conway 1992; Davies 1996a; Grown and Sebstad 1989; cited in Masika and Joeke 1996).

An important aspect of the concept of livelihood is its inclusiveness – it ranges from capacity, assets/properties, to daily activities that reproduce people’s life. Those assets and activities ensure not only daily life but also allow individuals and households to accumulate, strengthen and develop capital, invest in means of production and expand its production; improve education and job training; offer health care for oneself and other family members; and overcome obstacles, natural disasters, or social and political changes that have enormous impact on their life and family. While reproducing their life in an evolving fashion, individuals and households develop their potential in both present and future.

Sometimes people may also engage in livelihood activities, like cutting down trees for fuel and hereby creating deserts. In this case, unsustainable livelihood is a possibility with destroyed environment, etc. So I think it is important to make a distinction between “sustainable livelihood” and “livelihood”. Livelihood strategies may be sustainable or may not be. Livelihood strategies address choices of activities of individuals fairly comprehensively. Sustainable livelihood also concerns sustainability of a wider

environment than individual and family. To study livelihood strategies seem to be more of an analytical venture and sustainable livelihood more a policy approach.

The major strength of the sustainable livelihood approach is that it places people at the center and analyses their livelihood activities and the changes of these activities through time, with special attention to their own perspectives, the impacts of various policies and institutions on individuals and households and aspects of poverty, and thus encourage them to reach sustainable goals (DFID 1997:5, cited DFID 2002). The holistic approach of sustainable livelihood addresses issues of multiple activities, not only income or food security, but also other assets ranging from nature (land, water) to social (social networks and support systems), human (skills, knowledge, health and education), physical (markets, roads, communication), and financial (capital/economic means) and capabilities (Norlund 2003). In short, “sustainable livelihoods are derived from people’s capacities to access options and resources and use them to make a living in such a way as not to foreclose for other to make a living, either now or in the future” (UN 1998). However, this approach entails a certain disadvantage, precisely at the core of its strength. In particular, its holistic and all-inclusive character makes it difficult to operationalize in a specific context.

One study of Sustainable Livelihood in Southeast Asia, in which Vietnam is a case. This is a comparison between 8 communes across the country (Norlund 2003). In this study, a number of cases have been presented in order to demonstrate a social transformation towards an increasingly market based society and the multiple ways in which communities and households respond to opportunities in order to increase their livelihood. The author points out that many of the resources are being exhausted and new economic activities are needed everywhere in order to face the future. This study will suggest how this approach may be utilised by policy makers and donors in Vietnam in planning policy, etc.

One problem that arises from the introduction of “sustainable livelihood” to a Vietnamese context, according to the author, is the difficulty in terms of language and terminology. While there exists in practice vernacular term for the similar concept, the translation and application of an academic construct is always problematic when it comes to research practice (Norlund 2003).

Livelihood strategy approach can identify livelihoods of different social group in communities, in particular, men and women. When apply this approach, it may identify which groups have livelihood strategies are either sustainable or unsustainable.

A researchers have successfully applied this approach in studying poverty across the world. In her comparative study of South Africa and Appalachia, for example, Oberhauser examines the contextual nature of gender livelihood strategies through a comparative study of rural women's producer groups in former homeland of mentioned locations (Oberhauser 1998). The author compares collective economic strategies of rural women in two peripheralised regions which have experienced social and economic transformation in recent decades. The discussion focuses on the link between socio-economic conditions and gendered livelihood strategies, and the economic viability of two groups as sustainable income-generating activities. The study shows that high levels of poverty in rural areas are partly due to the labor system whereby males migrated to urban factories and mines. Gender relations and divisions of labor in the studied areas were greatly affected by the migrant labor system that left women to maintain households and look after agricultural production in the rural areas. Women in fact became de jure heads of households and affected households and community livelihood strategies. Rural women have to involve themselves in income generation, they have primary responsibility for domestic tasks and agricultural production, burdens which place significant pressure on their time and physical well-being. Moreover, the economic restructuring leads to the increase of informal sectors and opens new opportunities for women. In these peripheral areas, there are different types of jobs for women and men, where women tend to receive lower salary and limited activities for training, credit, and technological inputs. Women therefore take part in cooperative actions of collective organizations, and involve in economic activities in informal sectors. This comparative study, in short, provides a fruitful analysis of the common features as well as differences in livelihood strategies in different political contexts.

International scholars who study Vietnam as well as Vietnamese researchers have also applied this approach in case studies across the country.

A case study in the commune in mountainous areas (Institute of Sociology (IOS) 2001a) shows that over the past 10 years, the implementation of the Reform policy has brought about new changes in rural areas. In the subsidy period, people worked with cooperative. They got paddy, maize, etc. from the cooperative. Since economic reform, family/household works as an economic/production unit. Family had its own production plan for surviving. It means that the revival of the function of economic/production which was insignificant in the cooperative period has made families to find new livelihood strategies and to adjust to the new conditions. The study mentions opportunities and

constraints within which families are formed, developed, and dissolved at the end of the family cycle. Different families deal with opportunities and constraints in different ways. Strategies that families are using in order to secure for themselves the best life are possible given the opportunities and constraints. The important point of this study is that there is a family collective action program shared by the individual members and significantly influencing individual action. This implies that any plan, intention, etc. of families are normally reached consensus of all family members. There is division of labour appropriating with different family members.

Another study describes the comprehensive picture of the situation of migrant women from rural to urban areas and analyses reasons for women to migrate to cities while leaving family and children behind in order to seek job opportunities and income despite having to work and live in bad conditions. Migrant women have more job opportunities than men. When a wife migrates the husband stays at home, while in contrast, when a husband goes to cities as migrant the wife stays at home with carrying children, parents in law, and involving agricultural activities. Men and women are always negotiating for the migration decision. They co-operate to implement a livelihood strategy of their family to receive more benefit (Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc 2000). However, this study is not going into this aspect further.

A number of studies and researches conducted by different organizations in Vietnam also mention income generating activities of women. Some of them have indicated that individual women and their families have been restructuring their livelihood strategies in order to secure their survival and development of individual and family welfare in the new conditions. However, in all of these studies, researchers agree that women are very important in poverty reduction. They involve actively in a lot of activities in the families as well as in the communities, such as generate income, preserve environment, save credit, family planning, child and mother health care, etc. (CARE 1999; IOS 2003a).

Having acknowledged strengths and possible analytical difficulties and drawing lessons from the above mentioned studies by colleagues, I have adopted the concept of livelihood strategies with the following working definition:

Family relations and individual behaviors are considered as integrated components of a livelihood strategy carefully elaborated and shared by the family members. At the same time, we recognize that each individual member may have his/her own livelihood strategy, and that the family livelihood strategy is the product of interaction of the individual strategies pursuit by its members. The key point here is that family relations and individual behaviors are not random, spontaneous, and dependent only on individual characteristics, but also conditioned by the common livelihood strategy. (IOS, 2001a)

To make it operational, we can define livelihood strategies as the ways people make their living, in particular, how they make and spend money, manage to survive and develop socially and meaningfully in the daily life. This paper will only focus on the ways in which individuals carry out multiple income generating activities in cooperation and negotiation with other family members in order to sustain household living over a relatively extended time period. According to this perspective, livelihood strategies include the optimal division of labor for each individual in the household to ensure the highest income as well as the overall security of the family as an entity; the concept also implies the harmonization of economic activities within the household, given the major common goals, which is shared by individuals and according to which individuals plan and take their own actions. In other words, by using “livelihood strategies” in this paper I mean “a systematic survival view point and goals which guide and integrate livelihood actions of the individual” (IOS 2001a).

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study intends to explore livelihood strategies of women in the transformation to market economy in Vietnam. Specifically:

- Livelihood strategies of women before and after 1997
- Factors affect women’s livelihood strategies

3. METHODOLOGY⁶

For identifying women’s livelihood strategies in the socio- economic transformation, I chose a case study of a small township located in the Red River delta. My research is based on qualitative data and information collected in the study on “Identifying Income Generating Activities of Women in the Process of Urbanization: The Case study of Nhu Quynh small town, Van Lam district, Hung Yen province, Project of Strengthen research capacity building on Gender for Sustainable Development, which is supported by CIDA, September, 2003. This thesis is based on my own analysis of the data collected from this research. The use of data from existing research for the purpose of this thesis is permitted by the team leader of the research group. Moreover, the concept of livelihood strategies is relatively new in the Vietnamese context and there is a lack of both theoretical discussion

⁶ This part is based on the following literature on methodology:

Babbie E. (1992). *The Practice of Social Research*, pp. 101-113, chapter 13

Bryman, Alan, (2001). *Social Research Methods*, pp. 33-54, pp. 276-280, pp. 282-285

Bernard, Russell H. (1995). *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, pp. 361-371

and empirical research in my country, not to mention the scarce library resources. Upon my request, and given my personal interest on the issue, my colleagues from abroad generously sent selective articles and book chapters, on which I could construct the literature review of the thesis. In order to have a comparative perspective, I have also selected items from different regions in the world to be included in the review.

The pre-existing data, in this case transcription of 20 interviews, remained untouched when I first used them after the research phased out. In order to construct the analysis as it is in the thesis; I have developed the coding scheme on my own and made the first attempt to process the data. In other words, except for not conducting the interview on my own, the entire data processing and analysis is that of my own.

Moreover, there has not been any report or proceeding of this research published neither in Vietnamese nor English. As mentioned earlier, strictly following the ethical protocol, I have consulted my colleagues for their approval to use these data. Besides the on-going proceedings by the project personnel themselves, my thesis then becomes one of the first proceedings of this body of data, independent of any other attempt.

As *a qualitative research, in-depth interview* will serve as the major mode of inquiry. The interviews conducted within the scope of CIDA project (2003) contain in-depth information on occupations, division of work within the household, income generating activities before and after 1997 and at present. The transcriptions also provide detailed information of the socio-economic context of the locality as well as other factors concerning policies that may affect women's livelihood strategies. Besides, existing statistical data of the local authority will also be drawn upon.

Woman Interviewees: A total of 20 women with different economic activities were interviewed. Of those, seven women were involved in agricultural production (growing rice, flowers, subsidiary food crops and raising livestock), ten were involved in non-farming activities (trading and selling; and production workshops) and three worked in enterprises (see appendix 1: Studied villages and Interviewees).

Interviews have been conducted based on interview guidelines. The questions focused on occupations in two different periods: before and after the year 1997 (the year of the township's establishment), including: reasons for changing occupations; advantages and disadvantages for doing occupation; satisfaction of occupation, living standard: income and stability; strategy of coping with difficulties; comparison of changes in occupations; socio-

economic factors affecting women's livelihood strategies, etc. (see appendix 2: Interview Guidelines).

It should be noted that age serves as one important criterion of the selection. Since age is related to the biographic circle of a woman, or a person in general, it is a key in understanding her life experience. A woman in her early twenties in 2003 very likely used to live with her natal family in 1997, and therefore, her narrative of changing livelihood strategies would be very different from that of a forty year old woman. For this reason, in the following thesis, I will cite the age of each informant as an indicator of the time span of her own memory.

In order to compare the livelihood strategies before and after 1997, retrospective questions will be employed. In this study, the interview guideline contains retrospective questions in order to retrieve the information of each interviewee in her or his past. These retrospective interviews reveal the changing process of occupation and livelihood strategies of women in this community.

The *unit of analysis* in this study is individual women and their families. The comparison will be made between the situation before and after 1997 to date. The result of this study will also be compared with similar studies in other locations in Vietnam, for example, the study in Yen Bai province conducted by Institute of Sociology and other Institutions (please see references). How family status affect individuals?

To see change over time, this study adopts retrospective questions to collect information, asking women about their activities before and after 1997. The study has several advantages as follows:

- Low cost
- Possibility to track changes of the livelihood strategies of the same individuals interviewed and their families
- Rich qualitative information from the in depth interviews

However, this study may have the following disadvantages:

- The qualitative design does not allow representative sampling
- Retrospective questions may produce incorrect answers due to faulty memory of the interviewees

Facing financial, time and human resource constraints, plus the lack of pre-existing cross country and longitudinal database in Vietnam, this design is useful for explorative research.

Concepts employed in this study:

- Livelihood strategy (see above)

- Livelihood strategies of families and individuals must refer to the following aspects:
 - Access to resources (land, credit, information/skills)
 - Use of resources for production (occupation, income generating activities, division of work)
 - Use of resources for service activities (education, health care, other social organizations and service)

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Studies site

Geographical location

In the past, Nhu Quynh was a commune in Van Lam district, Hung Yen province, one of the seven Hong river delta provinces. Located near the highway 5 from Hanoi to Hai Phong, Nhu Quynh is bounded by Gia Lam district, Hanoi city, about 15 km from the centre of the capital. The commune has an important position in the communication network – a bridge linking the two biggest cities in the northern region, Hanoi and Hai Phong. In 1997, Nhu Quynh township was established by the provincial People's Committee's decision.

Nhu Quynh township consists of four villages and a street. It has a natural acreage of 710 hectares, including 381 ha of cultivable land as there is still a part of the population involved in agricultural production. Its population is 11,900 people with 3,000 households, an average population size in Vietnam's rural areas. As a traditional community in the Red River delta, the Kinh (or the Viet) is the only nationality living in the commune.

Economy

In the 1990s, industrial parks developed strongly in Hanoi's suburban areas, including the Sai Dong industrial park which is located near Nhu Quynh commune. The commune has a position convenient for communications, trading and development.

Currently, major income generating activities of the township include non-agricultural and agricultural activities. At present time, about 200 households earn their income solely from agricultural activities. The number of households that make earnings from various activities both from agriculture such as paddy, and other subsidiary food crops and non-agricultural activities such as production using recycling materials, tailoring, rice paper making, soya curd, etc. have increased in recent years, especially when the commune turned into

township. Despite the fact that agricultural production tends to be reduced in the township, as is the case also of other suburban areas, it still remains one of the township's major sources of income (IOS, 2001b, 2003b, Socio-Economic Changes in Hanoi's Suburban in the Process of Urbanization).

Living standards

The average per capita income in Nhu Quynh is about 400 USD per person per year. The number of well-off household accounts for 19.7 percent while that of average households is 79.2 percent. Poor households makes up 1.1 percent of the commune's total. Nhu Quynh's poverty rate is lower than the national urban average (about 10 percent). All households in Nhu Quynh have televisions and radios. Telephones have become a popular means of communication in the township.

Infrastructure

All roads in the township were concretized and all people have access to the national electricity grid. Water from drilled wells is used for daily life. The township has schools, a kindergarten and a health centre. The Nhu Quynh market which long ago was a place of exchange and communication of many communes in the area has been developed intensively at the end of the 1980s and in the period of Renovation in Vietnam. Long ago, Nhu Quynh market was a trade exchange place of many communes in the region. It has developed very quickly since late 1980s when the renewal cause of Vietnam began. (Source: Background Information of the Township People's Committee, 2003).

With the above characteristics, Nhu Quynh is a suitable place for the study of occupation changes of households, especially women. A study on the occupation changes of rural women was conducted in September 2003 (see section 3: Methodology).

4.2 Women's livelihood strategies before 1997

The following sections, 4.2 and 4.3, focus firstly on income generating activities that women are involved in. Secondly, it highlights that ideas women have about engaging in earning activities are not random, but are results of interaction of activities between women and other family members, especially their husbands. In a way, women carry out these activities by selecting with consideration of other family members, in particular, their husbands.

This section looks at livelihood strategies of women in 3 different groups before 1997: one group of women involved in agricultural production; one group involved in production workshops or services and one group of workers.

The women involved in agricultural production

In this group, seven female interviewees and their families were involved in agricultural production. They grow rice, subsidiary food crops, and breed animals.

In 1997 when the township was established, Nhu Quynh farmers had access to the market economy. However, traditional agricultural activities still dominated other activities. Rice acreage still occupied the largest area in each family's cultivable land. The farmers (one 47-year old woman, one 39 years old, and one 44 years old) often used allocated land for rice cultivation. Subsidiary food crops such as maize, potatoes, soybean and groundnuts were alternately planted with a small acreage under traditional farming methods. Fruit trees have not developed and considered as an income-generating source for families. Livestock breeding is also on a small scale. Farmers raise livestock only to make use of their families' bran and vegetables.

Some families began planting tuberose flowers, apple and grapefruit. This is a hard work because "initially we have no experiences. We must sell tuberose flowers and fruits in Hanoi because they could not be sold here in the locality" (a 39-year-old woman). They faced many difficulties in agricultural production because of a degraded irrigation network and an unstable national electricity grid. Buffaloes and cows are still used for ploughing. It is common that

Most of the families raise a pair of pigs, chickens and grow rice, cucumbers, tomatoes, cabbages for use and sale. We must work hard because all farmers in the village plant vegetables, making prices lower. (a 44-year-old woman).

Generally, women in Nhu Quynh at that time often grew rice, subsidiary food crops by intensive production and raised animals in a traditional way and were engaged in petty trade to lead their lives. They suffered much hardship in the transition from the subsidy supply-demand economy, with government subsidy where they did not need to think much about a market economy where they themselves have to take care of many things, from preparing water, seeds, to how to consume their farming products.

The women involved in the production and service sector

Before the Reform process, when agricultural production was a major economic activity in Nhu Quynh commune, there were few small shops to sell fish sauce, salt, kerosene and soaps. After the reformation, trading activities began to develop in the commune, particularly along the two sides of the highway No 5 and near the Sai Dong's industrial park of Hanoi. Shops offer more items to sell to farmers.

The interviewed women had before 1997 participated in non-agricultural activities, including trading scraps, being tailors, hairdressers, selling steamed rolled rice pancake, soft drinks and other essential goods. Those activities have been strongly developed after the economic reformation.

In 1987, I rode a bicycle to collect scrap at many places and then sold them in Hanoi. I must do farming together with running small-scale family businesses so I was very busy. Farming is not very busy compared to trading. I saw that owners of shops selling waste materials for recycling brought scrap with high profit I wanted to buy a machine to do like them. But, I had not enough money at that time. (a 37-year-old woman).

Income from non-agricultural activities in the township was not stable because of little demand from consumers. Very few people went to hairdressers' at that time. "There are no clients in May and June because farmers are very busy at harvest time. And no one thinks of having their hair cut before the harvest," (a 35-year-old woman). Cake maker "made many kinds of cakes, including square sticky rice cake (banh chung) and fried cakes. I made delicious cakes and many people were fond of them. But people's taste has changed so I had to stop making cakes" (a 42-year-old woman).

According to the interviewed people, non-agricultural activities were mainly at a small scale. Buyers of scrap had no processing machines and the means of transport were only bicycles and motorbikes. Tailors have to cut and sew clothes themselves. Cake makers make cakes manually. Hence, to ensure income, apart from trading and being workers, women in Nhu Quynh took part in agricultural production. They had to combine non-agricultural and agricultural activities.

The female workers

Before 1997, the number of people in the commune, especially women that worked in enterprises was not many. Two of the three interviewed women said that their income mainly came from planting rice and subsidiary food crops, breeding animals and trading. All the three female interviewees were given priorities to work at enterprises after 1997 under an accord of changing land for the enterprise.

My family had six "sao" (a sao is equivalent to 360 square metres) of land to plant rice and subsidiary food crops. I also bred pigs, made wine and ran a small business for more income. When companies bought land, we were given priorities to work at enterprises. (a 38-year-old woman).

Before 1997, most of Nhu Quynh women had conducted different agricultural production activities at the same time in order to increase their income. Many started to move from solely farming activities to combining non-agricultural and agricultural activities to earn for

their living. Women in the agriculture group are more likely to take part in many income generating activities more than other groups.

4.3 Women's livelihood strategies at present (after 1997)

Since 1997, Nhu Quynh has seen great changes in socio-economic development. In 1998, the provincial authorities planned to build an industrial park in Nhu Quynh. The district administration has proposed make Nhu Quynh into a commercial centre of the district in the 2000-2010 period. About 50 ha of cultivable land has been transferred to the industrial park and part of the land in villages in the communes has also been transferred to joint ventures. Many domestic enterprises and companies have entered into joint ventures with foreign companies to build plants and enterprises in the local land. To date the Nhu Quynh industrial park has had 25 domestic and foreign joint venture projects. It has been recognised as an effective industrial park. This change has affected the local people's daily life in general and women in particular.

The women involved in agricultural production

In recent years, each family in Nhu Quynh have used part of their land to grow tuberose flowers, apple and spices vegetables which bring higher income than rice (with average annual income of between 3 and 4 million Vietnamese dong⁷ per *sao* of tuberose flowers)

Growing tuberose flowers are popular in all villages (five out of seven interviewees planted tuberose flowers in their land). According to them, tuberose flowers bring in high income on the market. Tuberose flowers can be sold at the growing spot or at the township market and in Hanoi. Moreover, tuberose flower is a perennial plant; farmers can save their time because they have not to grow the flower for the next crop.

Maize and potato need crops seasons, but tuberose can be grown all the year round. People can harvest tuberose flowers after a year of planting. They only re-grow tuberose after three years so they can save the time. (a 47 year-old woman).

The interviewees considered the benefit of growing tuberose, saying that

Earnings from paddy are not much. Meanwhile earnings from each *sao* of tuberose flowers is around 2-3 million Vietnamese dong. With such money I can buy 1.5-2 tonnes of rice as against 0.2-0.25 tonnes if growing rice. After comparing the two plants I decided to grow tuberose. (a 38 year-old woman).

Although getting more benefit from growing tuberose, each family in Nhu Quynh only put 1-2 *sao* under tuberose flowers because it is difficult to grow such a new kind of plant which is not familiar to the local people.

⁷ 1 USD equivalent to 15.7 Vietnamese dong (in the time of the end 2003)

I don't know where tuberose strain came from. In my village, some people had planted tuberose. I started to grow the flower just a few years ago. At first, I was very worried about caring the flower and marketing them. Only when I successfully planted tuberose and sold them easily I felt happy. Now I can sell tuberose flowers at my gardens and seldom have to go to sell them at the market. (a 44 year-old woman).

Although tuberose brings more benefit and need less investment, "growing tuberose flower is more difficult than growing rice because of much things to be done" (a 44 year-old woman). Every three weeks we have to eliminate weeds and it takes us much time.

Meanwhile, they have much time to do housework if they grow rice (women-, 38 years old; 49 years old; and 42 years old). However, cultivating tuberose flowers on one or two *sao* is appropriate to their time and working capacity.

Some among the interviewed women do not plant tuberose flower. They plant spice vegetables which also bring as much benefit as tuberose and are suitable to their working capacity (a 35-year-old woman). According to them suitable work means they have experiences (after piloting the plantation of vegetables); not so difficult to nurture vegetables and a market is available. In particular, planting those vegetables bring more benefit than other plants.

Women often have responsibility for breeding animals on a household scale. In Nhu Quynh, many women have effectively combined the development of livestock breeding with other trades. For example, they can make use of soya waste when making soya curd, rice bran when husking paddy and distiller's grains when making wine to feed pigs. A woman said

I make soya curd from 15-16 kg of soya bean to sell for the whole day. Many workers buy my soya curd in the afternoon when they leave the enterprises. Based on making soya curd selling for people, and having soya waste I think I should feed pigs. (a 47 year-old woman).

Some households have used industrial animal feeds in raising livestock, thus saving their time budget and energy.

In the past, there was no popular cattle-feed provided by the Conco brand. At present, conditions for breeding animals are better because of animal feeds and maize available in addition to distiller's grains. I do not need to cook food for pigs. My family has a bio-gas tank and this makes my pigsty clean. Pigs are washed and fed well so they grow very quickly. In particular, pigs are now vaccinated or treated promptly when getting disease. (a 44 year-old woman).

Thanks to the calculation and demands for pork by Hanoi and industrial parks near Nhu Quynh township, pig breeding in large scale with more than ten of pigs have been developed in every village, bringing higher income for all families.

In order to get more income from growing tuberose flowers or other subsidiary food crops, women in Nhu Quynh have to think carefully before they take part in new activities. They

have to think of the application of new techniques, the benefit between rice and flower, time and income as well as housework. They have chosen proper solutions to be suitable with their health, convenient and useful to available resources. They can combine the cultivation of rice for food with growing vegetables and feeding animals for foodstuff, and growing tuberose flower for additional income.

Trading is a popular activity in rural areas. All interviewed women in the agricultural production group have taken part in trading activities in the communal market or selling fruits and flowers in Hanoi. They said that it is convenient to go to Hanoi by bicycles or motorbikes and their trading activities in Hanoi often bring higher benefits.

I often buy potatoes and other vegetables in the countryside and sell them in Hanoi. At longan or litchi season, I buy longan and litchi in Hai Duong and dracontomelum (qua sau) in Nhu Quynh and then sell them in Hanoi. My husband and I can earn 5 and 7 million Vietnamese dong or even 10 million a year from trading fruits. Last year, my family earned more than 10 million Vietnamese dong. If my family is only involved in agricultural production, one of my children could not study at a senior secondary school and two others could not work in companies. If only cultivating rice, my family cannot succeed as in the current situation. (a 47 year-old woman who have two children working at the Nhu Quynh industrial park and another studying at the senior secondary school).

In Nhu Quynh, every woman in the families surveyed is involved in three to four income-generating activities. They said that doing many things at the same time such as growing rice, flowers and vegetables or raising livestock or running small-scale family businesses will ease their concern because “we earn a little from everything. Gains from this offset losses from that” (a woman, 42 years old) or because “this year’s poor rice harvest forced us to switch to the cultivation of apple, grapefruit and flower, each of which added a little to the general income.” (a woman, 38 years old).

The results are similar to findings from other studies on rural families, that there is a shift from a single livelihood method, such as growing rice, to a multi-dimensional livelihood strategy in rural areas (IOS, 2001; Norlund 2003). Moreover, in Nhu Quynh as in other rural areas in Vietnam, the concept “poor farming” has also changed its meaning. In the subsidy time, it only meant growing rice. Now many “poor farming” families invest in a wide range of agricultural cash-crop products such as tea, fruit trees, and livestock, as mentioned above.

It is pretty reasonable for such planning given the Vietnamese agriculture’s heavy dependence on weather conditions. Their multi-income generating activity secures women’s lives and their families and they choose livelihoods that match their capacity, time budget and energy with low risk, and securing their livelihood. In certain aspects, over

time, their income generating activities in this period (after 1997) have grown in different level and directions compared to those in the period before 1997

The women involved in the production and service sector

There is a gradual switch from manual to mechanised production across local industries. Garbage collectors have mechanized the recycling process. Prior to 1997, bicycles were a common means to transport garbage. Now, it is motorbikes, or even trucks, that will do it. Collectors operate in larger areas of garbage collection, even using telephones to communicate and cars for transportation

Now I don't go and collect by myself. If they have cargo, they will call us and we will drive a truck to collect it home. Sometimes, we have to drive outside the province and input can come to a few tones a day. We buy scrap plastics to produce plastic strings. We hire four workers, paying them 600,000 VND a month with luncheons. Our products sell well because of high demand. Our income is stable, averaging 10 million VND/month. Annually, deducting all kinds of costs and spending, we save about 70 million VND. (a woman, 37 years old).

To smaller scrap material dealers, earnings, though not as big, are stable.

My home has a recycler, which my husband and I run with our children's additional support. Our income stood at one or two million VND before 1997 but since then we have earned 7-8 million VND a month. We keep as savings 4 million VND a month. (a woman, 44 years old).

The hairdresser's and tailor's have seen more clientele, who are town dwellers and workers from nearby factories. A hairdresser had the idea of selling children's toys in her shop.

As my shop is near the market, where many people pass by. I thought why I shouldn't capitalize on this. Eventually, an idea came to me that given that my clients normally having children, selling children's toys is best. (a woman, 35)

Local tailors have acquired more sewing machines, hired more labour and expanded their business from making garments on orders to producing ready-made clothing.

My business has grown fast over the past six or seven years. I used to do it all by myself but now when there are an increase in orders and a tendency for ready-made garments, I have bought more machines and hired people to help me. I have six workers whose monthly salary has trebled from 300,000 VND in 1998. My monthly savings has also increased from 1 million VND to 2-3 million VND now. (a woman, 40 years old).

The main production activities such as waste material recycling, services, garment, etc, have been much developed since the town was established. The women who have been working in such jobs, have higher income and have no time for agricultural activities. These activities, according to women, have been considered as hard and give lower income than their current economic activities (a woman of 47 and the other 37 years of age). But some families, whose main income comes from waste material recycling, small scale nylon bag production, etc, have been continuing tuberose and water melon growing and pig or

cow breeding. According to those women, pig breeding now is a bit easier and they have higher income than before 1997. The animal breeding is considered as one of the main family incomes but “benefits from animal breeding have been seen as money saving or a reserve...” (a woman of 44 years old).

So, before 1997, most of the women in the service/production group had still conducted agricultural activities beside non-agricultural production, but now some of them have changed completely to non-agricultural activities. Some are still running both, but with less hard work and higher benefits. The making of rice papers as input for spring rolls has been mechanized. Women owners of rice paper mills have hired more labour to expand production. They conduct multiple functions at the same time: engaging in production themselves, teaching hired labour and managing business. Production has reached a higher level and larger size but is suitable to women’s working capacity and brings higher income to improve living conditions for them and their families.

Female workers

Women working in local joint ventures are usually less than 40 years of age. The three women interviewed in the survey are also under 40. Two have senior secondary schooling and the other, junior secondary education. They are the people who lost their farmland to the building of industrial zones and they are in return employed to work in the industrial zones under the latter’s commitment with their community. They said they are employed as unskilled workers while those who have skills don’t come from their community. (38-years- old and 28-years-old women).

All three women agree that they were given jobs that are stable in income and appropriate to their capacity. One of them had undergone a training course for tailors before she officially started work. Another was taught to do the grunt work. They said work in the joint venture is not as hard as farming but yields stable income, higher than that from farming (38-years –old woman; 31-years-old woman and 28 –years-old woman)

However, joint venture workers are not well-paid. One of them has to work overtime for more money while the remaining two do extra work at home. One drills rice wine and raises pigs. The job has been passed down from her mother-in-law, which she said, aims to increase income for the family on one hand and on the other, “to keep up the customer base and in case she quits her job in the joint venture, she will have it to survive” (woman, 38). Another woman, besides work in the joint venture, keeps tending to rice fields, raising 30 pigs and assisting her husband in his sale business. She said:

When I am aware that demand for pork exists, I sets up a pig farm using bio-gas technology. I spend my joint venture pay on food and drinks and use earnings from husbandry to refurbish my house and buy things for my husband and children. (a woman, 28).

Driven by the aim of increasing income to improve living standards, Nhu Quynh women involve themselves in various farming activities besides their work in the joint venture, which earns them low but stable pay.

Whoever they are, farmers, traders, or wage earners, Nhu Quynh women are all found being involved in many livelihood activities at the same time. Farmer women have been carrying out the agriculture production towards diversification. Some of the women involving in service/production group have changed completely into waste material recycle, nylon bag or tie-string production, etc. that are non-agriculture activities. Some of this group is still running both types of activities including production, trading, etc. (non-agriculture) and other activities such as animal breeding, wine brewery, trading, etc. (agriculture). The female workers have been conducting extra-job in free time, etc. In other word, women in Nhu Quynh have been engaged in different earning activities at the same time, either agriculture or non-agriculture production or both, which are always planned well in terms of time, health, ability, available budget, before being carried out.

Agreement with husband, children and other family members

As mentioned above, women in Nhu Quynh town have been carrying out multi-income generating activities at the same time with choice and consideration. In the following, it highlights the idea of these women's activities interact with those of other family members, in particular, with those of husbands.

The local women do not carry out these activities alone. All interviewed said before getting down to a new livelihood strategy, that they discussed with their husbands, who might not be involved, and their children, if they are grown ups (women farmers, 47 and 44; women service workers, 40 and 37; and women factory workers, 38 and 31; and others). The agreement with the husband serves as the first guaranty for the success of the women.

Generally, my husband and I pay respect to each other. We discussed with each other everything from growing flowers, breeding pigs, procuring furniture to building houses. Whenever he wants to buy anything, he always consults me or whenever I want to start a business I always bring it to the dinner table for my husband and children to debate. I like consulting my children as they are now mature. Sometimes, my husband doesn't like the idea I propose and he says, 'it is up to you. If you feel you are able to do it, then go ahead'. If he disagrees, I will give it up no matter how much I am into it. It is a good idea to inform and consult each other before starting anything. (a woman farmer, 44 years old).

Having studied well what they plan to do, those women still put convincing their husbands above all.

Once, my husband wanted to buy a machine but we were short of cash. I wanted to borrow money to buy it but he did not because he was afraid of repaying debts. I convinced him hard, saying it is payable within a few months or a year. He then gave in and said hesitantly that 'it is up to you'. Things will come okay only when an agreement exists between the husband and the wife. If my husband had rebutted, I would have not pressed ahead. (a recycler woman, 37).

Conversely, if the wife is undecided on a purchase, the husband will think twice (woman-a nylon bag producer, 33 years old). The women interviewed said it is not easy to determine who contributes a larger share. Younger women said when it comes to decision, they have a majority vote. Their husbands, they said, should be aware that women understand better than men what to do (women service workers, 37 and 35; a woman worker, 28). Older women said, although they are more dynamic at work, it is their husbands who will have a final say (a woman farmer, 47; a woman service worker, 44; a woman service worker, 44). It is possible that younger women are more dynamic but it is also possible that older women choose to keep harmony in the family.

Many women surveyed were happy about the equality of status in the family. They said it is important for the wife to refrain herself and keep her temper if she is to maintain order in the family. Also, they said, the wife should have discipline in some affairs. For example, it is a wife's job to go to the market or do the washing. She should find time to do house chores and should not ask her husband to do it unless she is too busy (a woman farmer, 47; a woman sales keeper, 30). Basically, women think their role in the family is to prepare meals, do the washing, and care for the children and other family members. Some said although they are the bread earners of the family, they always need support from their husbands and credit should be equally shared. A woman said however busy she is, she should go to the market, prepare the meal, do the washing because men never do them in the family (a woman, 45 years old).

Normally, the husband and the wife share the work.

My husband and I get up at 2am. One grinds beans while the other makes a fire. Having ground, my husband moves on to make tofu. I prepare beans for tomorrow and bake the tofu he has made. Then, I go to sleep. My husband continues with the procedure until 7h30 when he eats breakfast and goes to sleep until 10h30. I get up earlier than him to bring tofu to the market. Whenever I feel tired, I tell him to take up my share of the job. (a woman farmer, 47 years old)

If the wife is busy doing her business, her husband will take care of house chores and look after the children so that she can focus on her work (*a woman tailor, 40*). And vice versa,

“my husband is a driver, who travels here and there; I am the person who is in charge of housework and look after the children.” (a woman, 38).

Children’s schooling, production expansion, introduction of a new crop or a product line into production, etc. are important issues requiring decisions from both the husband and the wife. For example, some women said, it is the father’s role to check children’s study performance and help them study at home because the mother is normally inferior to him in this area (a saleswoman, 47; a woman factory worker, 44), however, the mother should be aware of the importance of her children’s schooling and be alert to draw their attention to study (a woman farmer, 47; another woman farmer, 44; a woman service worker, 37). In the family of women surveyed, the study of children is given top priority. The common concept here runs that children should be given opportunity to overcome what is considered a disadvantage, to have parents without graduate education. But parents are also aware that it is not always money that can secure their children a berth at the university. Invariably, it is their job to care for and facilitate their children’s study and it is their children’s ability that will decide whether they can enter a university or not.

At work, business does not always run smoothly. It is collaboration between the husband, the wife and children that matters when there are misfortunes, such as crop failures due to unfavourable weather conditions, stagnant sales due to lack of customers, loss of capital and illnesses. Many women interviewed said when they are in hot water at work; it is their husbands who support them. Therefore, they give the credit firstly to their husbands and children (a woman service worker, 44; a woman farmer, 47; and others).

Things in the family are naturally arranged. When the husband is in charge of business, the wife serves as a secretary, keeping records and preparing meals and vice versa. Each family member has an assignment to do, which they can exchange among one another and an unwritten rule runs that one’s work shouldn’t affect the others’. All of the individuals’ livelihood activities target one thing: improving income for a stable life. It is due to those agreements and principles that keep the family together.

4.4 Socio-economic policy affecting livelihood strategies of local women

Socio-economic policies have strong impact on the development of the Nhu Quynh township. Since the establishment of the township, non-agricultural activities have dominated in the local production activities of the area which used to be an agrarian commune.

The booming of Hanoi and industrial zones nearby Nhu Quynh open windows of opportunity for local people to get involved in income-generating activities, which is a factor in the town's development. It contributed to directing local population, especially young people to vocational training. However, it was not until 1997 when the commune was elevated to town status, that Nhu Quynh people, especially women, really had opportunities to practice what they were interested in.

The economic reform policy has created favorable conditions for production development. People become more dynamic in approaching the market to earn for their living. Six years has passed since the transformation into township, and the development of Hanoi and its industrial zones, Nhu Quynh has become a developing town. However, socio-economic development policies have both positive and negative impacts on the income and living standards, infrastructure and job opportunities for different occupation groups.

Some positive effects

Concerning living standard, all interviewed women answered that since the time of transferring into township in 1997, many changes have occurred in local people's lives. Income of people living in the town has been improved visibly compared to 5 years ago.

A better-off woman said:

My house now has a flush toilet. I have switched from a cooker using coal to a gas cooker for five years now. There is a colour TV set, a video player, a motorbike and a telephone set in my house. Electric rice cookers can be found in every house of this town. We hardly see a house without it. (a woman farmer, 37).

A middle-income woman said:

Life is getting increasingly comfortable. In 1997, life was hard on me when I had to provide for little children and an oft-ill husband. At the time, I couldn't afford to buy meat for weeks so our meal used to be simple rice and vegetables. Now food is plentiful and more colourful. (a woman farmer, 47).

The industrial zones have attracted a large number of workers to town. Business is easier to run, sales of consumer goods and foodstuff have increased many times, spelling a change in the local way of living. In the market, the number of trading households has been increased from 30-40 in the past to nearly 200 at present time.

When Nhu Quynh was yet to be elevated from commune to town, there were also hairdressers and video rental shops but business was small and slow. Now video rental shops are full of video tapes and discs of all types and the hairdressers' are crowded with local women and female workers from nearby joint ventures, who come to make themselves up. (a woman, 40).

To farmers, agriculture development policies have been paid great attention by the government in order to improve the lives of farmers who are a major proportion of the population in the country. Diversification of crops and livestock has been one of the

strategies in the agriculture development program. Farmers have been introduced to new plant and animal varieties of high yield, quality and marketability. Flowers such as tuberose and fruit trees replace classic crops such as maize, potatoes and cassava; and new breeds of livestock with a high proportion of mean meat make their ways here. Farmers have more chances to select what crops suit their land and farming capability and they have learned to grow a wide range of crops at the same time to increase profitability. New intensive farming techniques help save time and energy for other income-generating activities. The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and the Integration Pesticide Management (IPM) program help to ensure lucrative harvests.

We now grow crops with chemical fertilizers, pesticides and an abundant supply of livestock excrement. Our output is more marketable because we grow what the market needs. Poor households are allowed to get access to bank loans. As long as you have a project, you will have more favourable conditions than in the past to implement it. (a woman, 44)

Livestock also has been changing to a larger scale (see section above). Science and new technology have been introduced step by step to farmers

To people involved in trading telephone is the means for communication (40-years-old and 30-years-old women), size of production groups have been extended and improved gradually.

At first, our family had only small capital for investment. We invested three millions in a plastic grin machine. After one year, we could increase to dozen of millions, then to 100 millions. Then we invested in recycling machine of about 30 millions. Now, we earn 10 millions each month. In the past, our old generation only collected baggage; they did not know how to recycle them into goods. Now their offspring already use machines to produce things. (woman, 37 years old)

Machine production with new products available has gradually replaced manual production. This indicates that advanced technologies are introduced step by step in the area.

To women, housework has been made much easier. Women could save their time to do other income generating activities. They have more opportunities to contribute to the income of their families. They also could participate more in social activities conducted by the local Women's Union. The role of women in the family and in the community have evidently been improved.

Housework has become easier. Although my home is far from the town market, I can have everything from the hamlet market. Three or four years ago, it took me quite a long time to go shopping. Now I can do it at any time of the day, be it at noon or in late afternoon after work. I don't even have to do it, because they will bring it to the door for me. Trade now comes so convenient. In the past it took time to cook with firewood. Now using a gas cooker and an electric rice cooker enables me to do other things while cooking. There is no worry about fetching water because it will be pumped to an overhead tank for gradual use. We find life more comfortable nowadays. (a woman, 44).

Her thinking is echoed by others, which demonstrates an enormous improvement in the life in the Nhu Quynh town.

Concerning job opportunities, with the development of industrial zones, companies come to recruit town people. More and more people have received a job, which, though not well-paid, can give them a stable income. The life of women in local community has seen a facelift with more convenient facilities for daily use such as gas cooker, telephone, and other industrial products such as fertilizers, and cattle-feed. In communes and towns of suburban areas around Hanoi city, many women and men increasingly participate in industrial production, handicraft, and services, while their participation in agricultural activities decrease (IOS 2003b).

Infrastructure: One of the Government's policies is the development of infrastructure which creates the basic condition for development and poverty alleviation.

Infrastructure and living conditions for local people in the town has been improved. Roads within the commune are accessible for heavy trucks, which come to load cargo as far off-road as small hamlets. Private production facilities are connected with the national electric transmission grid. Telephone access and computerization have facilitated production and business.

Some negative effects

Difficulties in applying new technologies: However, there are problems along with development as well. Local farmers complained they have troubles with the new plant and animal varieties. A lack of farming know-how in applying new crops and varieties while availability of agricultural counseling is limited to teach them. The network of extension workers has been not fully developed. Women know about rice varieties and flowers that are good in the market but they do not know how to grow them. Many local women farmers failed, losing more of their already meager investment.

In the cultivation of flowers, I have to probe a way for myself. Because there is no one who can guide me how to grow, sometimes I stand to harvest, sometimes I don't. At the start, I grew on a small scale to test the land, which may be cultivable in this place but may be not in that place. So, it is costly. (a woman, 45).

Losing farmland to industrial zones put Nhu Quynh women at a disadvantage. Those who qualify to work in the zones, before that is a training course, should be in the age group 18-30. Those who are older can be employed to do things requiring no skills. Many companies employ local women to work in their garment and footwear production lines, which, Nhu Quynh women, most of whom are farmers, have yet to prepare themselves for. Moreover,

in the period of Reformation, gender inequality existed in education between boy and girls⁸. The number of men who were selected to mechanical, technical and more qualified occupations are higher than those of women. This increases gender inequality. Moreover, the worst hit women who are probably above 40, and who, after losing land, cannot find appropriate jobs in companies and it is hard for them to find new jobs.

Adverse gender effects: Moreover, the fact that women participate in many income generating activities in some extent has made women spending more of their time and energy for the livelihood of their families.

Environmental pollution: Lack of drainage and waste planning, which is not comprehensive cause environmental pollution. This is currently a burning problem to product workshops in town

One cannot avoid the smell that comes from local plastic processors. Especially at the crack of dawn, when kilns start burning coal, the air is filled with carbonic. (a woman, 37).

In addition to air pollution, waste water discharged from production facilities is gravely threatening agricultural production.

My fields are not yet affected by the waste water, but it has already taken its toll on the other side of my village, leaving farmland non-productive. Whatever crops you plant, rice or vegetables, they are all doomed. (a woman, 35).

The pollution problems in Nhu Quynh are true in other production workshops of communes or towns elsewhere in Viet Nam (Tuan 2003; IOS 2001b 2003b). Moreover, an increasing number of migrant workers employed in the industrial zones have crammed into the town. Rental houses without proper toilets are mushrooming, deteriorating the living environment.

It is typical that crowdedness spells disorder. There is thousands of people renting accommodation in the village, whose human waste cause pollution. It can be less depressing in the rented houses with flush toilets but it is terrible in those without ones but accommodating a dozen of people. Daily, their waste spoils the air, disturbing the village's hygiene. The good old days are gone. (a woman, 37).

Therefore, the economic reform policy has brought about economic growth and improvements in the people's living standards: increase of income, means of living in the families have been improved, technology has been applied step by step in both production and lives of people. Opportunities for jobs increased, infrastructure, and people's lives become more and more stabilized. However, a portion of the landless population, especially middle-aged women hardly gain access to the labour market, most resorting to unskilled labour and this deepen gender inequality. The booming of private production facilities and

⁸ Vietnam Living Standard Survey 1998, General Statistical Office, 2000

industrial zones, which is not matched with development of drainage and waste treatment systems, has destroyed the environment, affecting public health. Social evils such as drug abuse and prostitution arise and tend to proliferate in the near future.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The economic reform has led to poverty reduction and rapid development in Vietnam. In 1988 the poverty rate was at 75% (Dollar, 2001, extract from UNDP 2001), but in 1993 it was only at 58% and down to 37% in 1998 (Haughton, 2001, extract from UNDP and GSO, 2001). The average income per capita increased from 157 USD in 1991 to 352 USD in 1998. Such successes, beside the appropriate policies of the Government, were also the results of the strong efforts of people (including women) through their earning activities. Application of the livelihood strategy approach for studying the earning activities of women in Nhu Quynh town is one of the attempts to show this. A summary of the results of the study are presented below.

- Five years after its establishment, Nhu Quynh has become the most developed town of the province. Here, people have experienced market activities as they have for a long period run small businesses between Hanoi and their home town, or they have been hired as workers after the commencement of economic reform. Some had found a job in Hanoi; some found work in other areas (for example migration to the South). Some could earn sufficiently for their life while others have better income and started activities of trade, service, etc. independently at their Nhu Quynh home town. The formation of the town has created favourable conditions for the development of small trading shops, services, workshops of wasted material recycling and so on.
- Before 1997, when the town was not established, women in Nhu Quynh had performed a number of different agriculture production activities such as rice growing, other types of crops and cattle breeding, pure agricultural activities. Some women had combined these activities with for instance small trading and cake production and had a better income. Agricultural activities were conducted as traditional intensive farming. Non-agricultural activities were small scale, mainly handicraft.
- After 1997, in general, women in the town have applied more new techniques into agricultural production such as in growing flower and cattle breeding. Non-agricultural activities, as recycling wasted materials, have become quite common in the town. These production activities are now conducted by machines and on a larger scale (in terms of

number of people engaged and more modern machinery). Some households have given up agriculture and concentrate on goods production or do services. Women usually calculate the time and effort consumed, the reasonable level of investment and have a plan for implementing living activities with high effectiveness.

- Women in Nhu Quynh are earning a living with different types of activities at the same time. They try to arrange their work so not to overlap or disturb the activities of their family members in order to increase income, improve living conditions, education and jobs of the family members. They plan their activities in a way that facilitates it. That means, it is suitable for their capability, health and living circumstances of the family. The housework is arranged in a way that requires each family member to perform it as their obligation. Simultaneously, science and technology support the individual in implementing successfully his/her earning activity. The livelihood strategy of the family is then formed. In this case, it is produced on paper but it is set up based on suitability and ability of each family member. It may or may not be well recognized by the family members. To a woman, the family is considered as her first priority. The life and future of the children and family have become the main driving force for women in Nhu Quynh. It is also the main aim of Vietnamese women in general.
- A typical feature of women in Nhu Quynh that is easily recognized is that they have a farmer origin. That is why almost all their living activities are focusing on agricultural production. It is the basis for other development activities. Women in Nhu Quynh and their families have been following the formula: strengthening the current activities, discovering and developing step by step new activities. They engage at the same time in many different activities in the way of maintaining current agricultural activities and opening/expanding other agricultural activities (for the farmer woman group); or investing and expanding other non-agricultural activities (for the woman group in other production or services); or other jobs (being workers). The most important point is that they are at the same time maintaining agricultural activities at a certain level until other new activities succeed.

So one can say that the activities of women in Nhu Quynh do not only indicate the independent role of individuals but they are also conditioned by the livelihood strategy of the households. Those activities have shown both the generality and diversity of livelihood strategies. A livelihood strategy is one of the measures for overcoming the changes of socio-economic environment in transformed economies.

Besides, it is also necessary to mention about the disadvantages currently affecting people, in particular women, in this process.

Some disadvantages currently affecting of women in Nhu Quynh.

- The environment is deteriorating, with negative effects on the health of the community and women, the sustainability of environment and exhausting natural resources of the country. Housing conditions of the workers in joint-venture, companies are still very poor, especially sanitation facilities, which cause serious pollution.
- Land and job losses due to the development of industrial zones have caused a disadvantage for women. They have to accept simple work due to limitation of education, lack of time for adapting the changes, etc. That deepens gender inequalities and the division of work between men and women. This is a very common problem not only in developing but also in developed countries.
- Many studies on career in Vietnam show that Vietnamese women, in general, have much less education and training possibilities compared to men as they have to earn the living, spend time for looking after the children and other family members and do the housework. Conducting a number of living activities at the same time may be the solution for increasing income, but women have to spend so much time and effort into such activities that they have quite a limited time for professional training. So women in Nhu Quynh are facing that problem and, consequently, gender inequity becomes more serious.
- Women also have limited access to credit, especially to government credit. Until now, there are many government policies and rules that encourage and facilitate for women to get access to credit, but the rate of women in Nhu Quynh who access government credit is still low. One of reasons is relating to excessive necessary procedures. When credit is needed, they get the loan from other credit sources with high interest rate. Furthermore, the psychology of not being able to pay back the loan by most women and their family makes it more difficult to access credit sources.
- Although there have been much change, women are still considered to have less influence on final decisions. They always try to keep the peace in their family. The man is often the final decision maker. There is still the conception that women are “weaker” than men as men often do heavy and important work, while women often do “easier”

work and housework is considered to be the duty of women. That makes gender discrimination become more serious in the community.

Being a town in a developing country, facing a lot of difficulties in the transformation period from subsidized to a market-oriented economy, Nhu Quynh has just started its first steps of development. Agricultural production has been diversified; there is development of intensive farming, of handicraft and services. There is the recovery and improvement of traditional production, replacing manual labor by machinery. The salary-paid workers increase from day to day in parallel with the development of industrial zones around the town and in Hanoi. Women in Nhu Quynh and their families have implemented multi-livelihood strategies, diversified their work and increased their income. These strategies help women to overcome the difficulties in the economic transition period, step by step adapting to the changes and development.

The livelihood strategy approach let us recognize the internal driving force out of family boundaries and community and help to envisage the initiatives and choice of individuals in a transforming economy. Women in Nhu Quynh are active persons in diversifying their own livelihood strategies in the context of the country's socio-economic changes.

Appendix 1

Studied villages and Interviewees

The study was conducted at following villages:

Ngo Xuyen village: this is a “pure agriculture area” (e.g. most of households have main income from agricultural activities). Interviewed women are planting rice, growing flowers or small trading (in Hanoi), husbands are planting rice, have jobs as building workers or are workers in companies or labour for rent.

Minh Khai village: this village had 100 mau (1 mau = 3600 square metres) being used as industrial zone. The remaining area is 200 mau. Most households have their main income from non-agricultural activities. Interviewed women are mainly engaged in plastic recycling, waste material trading, small trading, being workers in companies/enterprises in the town. There are 30-40 automobiles of all types, 102 machines for waste plastic recycling, and 26 transformers for their production.

Ngoc Quynh village: 1/3 of village area has been handled over to companies. Most households have main income from non-agriculture activities. Interviewed women are workers in companies, small trading of fruit/flower (in Nhu Quynh market or going to Hanoi), food processing (e.g. making rice paper, bread, etc.). Almost the households in the village have TV and motorbike (some have 2-3 motorbikes).

Nhu Quynh street (pho Nhu Quynh): has quickly developed since the shift from the commune to the town with different types of job: trading businesses, services (restaurants, guesthouses, soft drink, garment, hairdressers, sundries, ready-made clothes trading, good transportation service, etc). After 1990, the population rate has been increased rapidly. At the time being, about half of population is from external areas (a large portion is the staff of offices in the town have a house in the town after their retirement). All the households have motorbike. 60% of households have telephone at home. Some households have trucks for rent in goods transportation. Interviewed women are the owners of trading shops,...

In Pho Nhu Quynh, environment is polluted due to the absent of sewage collecting and drain system, dumping ground, public rubbish tanks, due to waste from restaurants and production workshops. Environment problem is also with the air pollution due to production processes and food cooking using coal. This is problem of the township as a whole

Number of Female Interviewees

	Ngo Xuyen	Minh Khai	Ngoc Quynh	Nhu Quynh	Total
No of female interviewee	5	5	5	5	20
Agriculture	4	1	1	1	7
Production/service	0	4	4	2	10
Worker/office worker	1	0	0	2	3

Appendix 2

Guidelines for Individual Interview

I. Income generating activities at present

1. What income generating activities are you enjoying at present (main and extra activities)?
2. Why have you chosen these activities (advantages and disadvantages)?
3. Do you content with your livelihood activities? What are reasons?
4. What have you do for undertaking these activities?
5. What is your income of livelihood activities? Is it stable?
6. What is the living standard of your family?

II. Income generating activities before the town established

7. Which income generating activities you did before the town established? Which were advantages and disadvantages of these activities?
8. What is your income of livelihood activities in that time?
9. What was the living standard of your family in that time?

III. Ideas of interviewee on changes of economic development condition before and after the town established

10. What changes of economic development condition of individual at present compared to before?
11. Which are these advantages and disadvantages conditions?
12. What are conditions for you develop household economy?

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