

THE NEW LIFE HAMLET PROGRAM: A TOOL FOR
DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH VIETNAM

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The basic problem common to under-developed countries is widespread poverty. Most under-developed countries also suffer from political instability and outmoded social institutions which make progress more difficult. In South Vietnam, to these problems must be added the further complication of intense Communist subversive activities. The long war against colonialism and Communism, with all of war's destruction and confusion, has brought radical change to all aspects of national life.

From the political standpoint, anti-colonialism may be said to produce a generalized anti-authority reflex; and, in no small measure, nationalists who have come to power inherit a complex of old grievances which do not lend themselves to quick, comfortable reconciliations. Tribal differences, religious divisions, ethnic competition, local xenophobia, anti-traditionalism, urban migration and the wide gap between the masses and the elite -- all foster and solidify cleavages within the national society. Under conditions of extreme economic under-development, the magnitude of the overall problem appears to increase daily.

Faced with the enormous complexity and variety of their political, social and economic problems, South Vietnamese leaders have attempted, upon the one hand, to impose the rule of a single group and to employ hard discipline in enforcing solutions, and, upon the other, to create a kind of "grand push" by incorporating internally and diffusing through the society new values and norms, new behavior patterns and services. The ultimate objective of the leaders is to consolidate their own positions under some legitimate form, and, at the same time, to seek an appropriate program of development for the country.

Launched in 1961 as one of many measures taken towards this aim, the hamlet program was an important and decisive step toward stabilizing the situation and paving the way for an overall political, social and economic revolution. The hamlet program however, in addition to the expected opposition of the Communists, faced the intense and prolonged antagonism of the entrenched traditional elites and apathy and passive resistance from those groups which wished to continue in traditional patterns economically and socially.

One of the chief obstacles in the government's effort to reach the hearts of the peasants stemmed from the peasants' innate distrust of officials. This mistrust, built up through decades of colonial misrule, was compounded by the ineptitude, venality and malfeasance of the government's low ranking cadres.

The Revolution of November 1963 struck the hamlet program with near-fatal force. Irresponsible declarations by certain Army generals, coupled with increased Communist activity and the intrigues and tamperings of traditionalists and elite groups almost wrote off the entire program in the waning days of 1963.

The new group which came to power in late January of 1964 effected certain minor revisions in the basic hamlet concept statement of values and purposes, but retained its revolutionary flavor. Still aiming, then, at the hearts and minds of the people, the New Life Hamlet program places emphasis now upon the problems of leadership and cadres and attempts to focus other activities of the government in support of the hamlet concept.

What, then, of the other efforts toward economic and social improvement in South Vietnam? In an attempt to measure the influence of the hamlet program as an institution of change in Vietnamese society, the student will investigate to what extent the new development values and behavior are incorporated internally in the program -- in its doctrine, organizational designs, staff incentives and rewards, performance criteria, etc. He will, at the same time, through case studies, evaluate the development impacts of the program upon the individuals and groups involved, with complementary institutions with which it does business, and ultimately, upon the entire Vietnamese community for which the program was established.

The student's main concern, however, is to (1) compare the South Vietnamese New Life Hamlet program with development approaches adopted by some other under-developed countries -- Nehru's Democratic Collectivism, Senghor's African Socialism, Nyerere's Communitarianism, Sekou Toure's Communocracy, Nasser's Democratic, Socialist, Cooperative Democracy -- and, considering the dual problem of Vietnam -- promoting security to prevent a take-over by international Communism and the promotion of sufficient stability to permit internal development -- to (2) find out the various factors involved which could lead to the total success of the program, or its dead failure, or to a prolonged stalemate (since the military coups and juntas may spur development, but can hardly produce a stable political order).

8/3/66