

GOAL: AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOR EVERY HAMLET

After security the first desire in most hamlets is for an elementary school. The situation in Vietnam today, however, is such that immediate realization of a nationally financed elementary school in each hamlet is unrealistic if not impossible. Yet, the importance of hamlet schools to the national counter-insurgency program is such that some way must be devised to answer the need. A school in each hamlet should do more to establish the hamlet as a "way of life" than any other single measure.

PROBLEM - To devise and launch a nation-wide schools program that will permit the simultaneous construction of elementary schools in all hamlets requiring them and the training and payment of teachers.

The possible solutions include massive long-term U.S. educational assistance, the heavy subsidization of private schools, and the imposition of additional piastre taxes. Each of these has distinct disadvantages. Even if granted, massive U.S. educational assistance destroys initiative and is contrary to the GVN principle of helping the people to help themselves. The wholesale subsidization of private schools is hardly compatible with the principles of compulsory-free education as established by Article 26 of the Constitution. The last method named, new national or provincial piastre taxation, would be open to psychological exploitation by the Communist and would become an unbearable burden on those communities where few surplus piastres are generated. Yet the problem, however one views it, is one requiring additional public means -- taxation.

There is another solution. It calls for payment of hamlet school taxes in piastres, labor, or "in kind" according to the ability or desire of each individual, thereby giving him the capability to contribute his share to a hamlet school program by additional labor alone, a commodity he can more easily afford and one that in no way will lower his existing private standard of living.

A "type" situation might be a hamlet of three hundred families with 300 children needful of elementary education (first 3 grades). At the earliest opportunity a provincial educational official visits the hamlet and tells the people how they can immediately acquire a school and teachers if they have the will to do so. He shows them plans for a three-classroom school, interviews the best qualified school teachers and explains to the people the national wage scales based on the qualifications of teacher applicants.

Working from his "fact sheet," he then tells the people how much in piastres and labor it will cost them to build a sturdy school, utilizing the local materials, augmented by a share of USOM cement

and other materials. He adds to this initial cost the labor and piastres required for permanent fixtures including a well, school dispensary, playground, clearing of land for agricultural instruction and other refinements. These, he explains to the people, are initial one-time costs. He adds to these the costs for teacher training at the provincial center. (This should be little more than transportation and a nominal charge for instruction materials since in this type of self-help undertaking, both the teacher and his family should be eligible for PL 480 food during the period of training or, it may be that the province can assume all or part of the teacher training costs). For purposes of dramatically illustrating to the populace how a given unit of labor has equivalent value in piastres, he first itemizes all costs in piastres. With the vocal participation of the populace, he then reduces or eliminates the piastre cost for each item, leaving little more than hardware and a few instructional aids for the initial costs of the school facility.

Next, the provincial educational representative explains the annual cost for operating the school. He includes estimated costs in labor and materials for maintenance of the school and grounds. He then tackles recurring costs, item by item, leaving expendable supplies and teachers' salaries until last. For this example, expendables (chalk, note-books, pens, pencils, etc.) might average 50 piastres per student or 15,000\$ per year; three teachers' salaries averaging 2,200\$ each per month or 80,000\$ annually for a total approximating 100,000\$ each year.

He then explains how the populace can build publicly-owned houses (eligible for USOM commodity assistance) for each of the teachers. If these are fine "prestige" homes, a deduction in salary of 700\$ for rent might be considered reasonable. He suggests that those who do not wish to contribute in any other manner might contribute food, clothing, other items needed by the school-teachers' families -- perhaps in total reducing the piastre requirement to as little as 500\$ or 18,000\$ annually for the three teachers. This added to the other annual piastre expenses should approximate 30 or 35,000 piastres. With our hamlet of 300 families, 100 might choose to contribute in labor or in kind. On this basis the other 200 families' annual assessment should be only 150\$ per family -- about 12½ piastres a month. If the hamlet populace appear unable to stand even this nominal taxation, the educational representative suggests a public revenue-producing agricultural or industrial undertaking to which the populace contributes its labor. This could easily eliminate the piastre requirement entirely. Before leaving, the provincial educational representative mentions that the school can also serve evenings for adult trade and literary education.

The concept of taxation in kind pre-dates the concept of taxation in currency. This in part is how the United States was able to build its early community public services. It is the logical way for under-developed, currency-poor, countries to immediately elevate their "public" standards of living. It equates work with money. The advantage of this method is that the demand for useful public services in each growing viable hamlet always can exceed supply, thereby giving all the ability to better their private and community standards of living without sacrificing present meager incomes or savings. And what family cannot afford to give a few hours of additional labor each month?

Perhaps the most important residual gain in this concept will be the establishment of a firm national tax base -- one in which the people quickly learn the needs and benefits of public taxation; one in which they learn that taxation actually can better their individual and collective standards of living. As such a system progresses, increasing numbers of people will find it more expedient to pay their (school) taxes in piastres than in work and the advantages of monetary taxation will emerge. But to begin with a monetary grass-roots taxation system in an under-developed, low money income country is unrealistic and places an impossible burden on the populace.

No mention has been made of the existing excellent schools program, for it is a "going" program obviously within the means of GVN to support. Having been established in the offices of the Minister of Education, assisted by the best U.S. advice obtainable, this program is setting a realistic and high standard for educational facilities throughout the country. These standards for school construction, teacher selection and training, and teacher salaries should apply equally to schools established by the people themselves. The two programs complement each other: the one by giving GVN direction to the overall effort; and the other by making possible immediate nation-wide implementation. If the principles of community self-help are applied successfully to hamlet elementary schools, U.S. assistance can be concentrated more on much needed primary and secondary schools and teacher training.