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5 **Abstract**

6 In Can Tho City area, like much of the Mekong Delta of Southern Vietnam, both the Kinh  
7 and Khmer ethnicity farmers and agricultural wage laborers have had to cope with many  
8 changes due to emerging national agricultural policies, the move to a market economy,  
9 increased labor market competition and new land market policies. Many landholding farmers  
10 lack sufficient labor for intensive rice production and so must rely on seasonal agricultural  
11 wage laborers for their harvests. Seasonal agricultural wage employment provides important  
12 livelihood opportunity for landless and land-poor Khmer ethnicity workers from other parts of  
13 the Mekong Delta, but this work is precarious. The long-term survival of this intensive labor  
14 system is uncertain in the context of current moves towards agricultural mechanization.

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16 **Index terms**— Livelihood, market economy, mechanization.

17 **1 Introduction**

18 Can Tho City plays an important part in the political, cultural and economic development of the Mekong Delta  
19 region of Vietnam, which has in recent years experienced continuous urbanization; this urbanization process has  
20 increased since 2004, when the area was separated from the old Can Tho Province to create the new Can Tho  
21 City area, which is governed by the Vietnamese Central Government.

22 However, Can Tho city area is still mostly made up of a rural population; about 50 percent of its people still  
23 live in rural areas, and their livelihoods are mainly based on agriculture (Dung et al. 2008). Can Tho City  
24 area has been able to transform its agricultural based economy to an industrial and service one in the relatively  
25 short period up to 2008. As long as there is economic development, the urbanization process in the rural areas  
26 around Can Tho City will continue to take place, thus increasing the proportion of urbanized areas in the Can  
27 Tho city area (Dung et al. 2008). For instance, the proportion of the area's GDP from the agriculture, industry  
28 and services sectors in Can Tho City has shifted from 20.76%, 38.40% and 40.82% in 2004 to 16.7%, 38.4% and  
29 44.9% in 2008 1 By 2000, the local farm labor force in this hamlet had shrunk to some extent, but since 2005  
30 the local labor force has decreased considerably (Farmers' Group discussion, 2007). This means that during the  
31 harvesting of the three annual rice crops grown in the area, the local labor force has had to be supplemented  
32 by temporary labor migrants as most of the local young people have moved to the city to work in factories or  
33 businesses, or to other places to work in house construction, which supports the urbanization process taking  
34 place in Can Tho City (Farmers' Group discussion, 2007). According to Viet (2005), labor transference from the  
35 agricultural sector to other sectors has occurred to a significant degree in the Mekong Delta, and this has led to  
36 a shortage of agricultural labor during the peak farming season. This, in turn, has led to an increase in wages  
37 for agricultural laborers 2 II.

38 **2 Research and Methodology**

39 a) Research Site Thoi Thuan B hamlet, located in Thoi Lai district, is about 30 km away from Can Tho  
40 City in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. This hamlet has 455 households, and 28 percent of the total households  
41 are Khmer ethnicity. About 47 percent of households are farm households. An agricultural area of 98 hectares  
42 occupies about 80 percent of the total land. Farm households hold an average of about 0.6 hectares of land.  
43 Households average five members, and there is an average of three income earners per household. Labor is short  
44 during the peak of the rice harvesting times for the three rice crops per year b) Research Methodology Qualitative  
45 and quantitative analyses were applied in my study. The analysis for the larger study from which this paper

## 7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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46 is drawn involved the relations between Kinh and Khmer land-owning households in Thoi Thuan B and poor  
47 Khmer laborers from Soc Trang in their strategies of household livelihood. I picked the study area of Thoi Thuan  
48 B because it has had a large number of Khmer ethnicity people living together with Kinh ethnicity people for  
49 a long time and because farmers in the area experience shortages of local labor in the intensive rice production  
50 which is their main income-earning crop. This intensive production system depends on professional hired laborers  
51 from nearby Soc Trang province who migrate to Thoi Thuan B seasonally for the rice harvests. Kinh and Khmer  
52 land-owning households were interviewed in Thoi Thuan B hamlet, while a number of Khmer ethnicity laborers  
53 from Soc Trang were interviewed in both Thoi Thuan B and Soc Trang.

### 54 3 c) Scope of Study

55 My study is focused on the livelihoods of the different Kinh and Khmer ethnicity land-owning households which  
56 have had to intensify rice farming to improve their incomes, and particularly those who have hired Khmer laborers  
57 from Soc Trang province.

### 58 4 d) Data Collection

59 The data for this paper is part of data from a larger research project. The data for the findings reported here  
60 were gathered from participants (farmers, landless people, local officials), through five focus group meetings and  
61 discussions with a total of 50 farmers (including the different economic household groups of Kinh and Khmer  
62 people, the village elders and hamlet officials), and in-depth interviews with 39 households and individuals  
63 (both farm and landless households and both Kinh and Khmer households are represented). Data was cross-  
64 checked through field observations and secondary information obtained from various local studies and reports.  
65 My fieldwork spanned three years, from April 2007 to March 2010, with an actual total of one and a half years  
66 working in the study site. Overall, my study sample comprised about 20% of the total households in the hamlet.

### 67 5 e) Data Analysis and Interpretation

68 Data on the different kinds of households was collected and analyzed using quantitative methods (using Excel) for  
69 description and comparison of the different labor use in the intensive production system to each period of time.  
70 I also used qualitative methods to capture the livelihood diversification experiences of the Khmer laborers from  
71 Soc Trang in order to reveal the livelihood strategies they use to adapt to the market competition of agricultural  
72 production and pressure of the labor market.

## 73 6 III.

### 74 7 Results and Discussion

75 With respect to the contribution of hired labor to the rice harvest in Thoi Thuan hamlet during the period of  
76 1993 to 2009, both the Kinh and Khmer farm households in the hamlet were using more hired labor to harvest  
77 rice by the end of the period. Hired labor in the hamlet comprised two-thirds of the total labor force in 1993  
78 but three-quarters of the total labor force in 2009; this increase reflects the hamlet's increase in rice growing  
79 frequency from two to three rice crops per year, which resulted from the need for food security and the rice  
80 export demands in the country over recent years.

81 However, both a shortage and a surplus of local labor occurs in the Kinh and Khmer communities, with a  
82 shortage of local labor taking place during harvesting time but a surplus occurring during slack rice growing  
83 periods, leading to underemployment in both on-farm and off-farm activities in the hamlet during non-harvest  
84 seasons. In general, the younger generations of both the Kinh and Khmer households prefer to work at factories  
85 in the industrial and urban areas of Can Tho and Ho Chi Minh City, rather than participate in farming activities  
86 in rural areas (Farmers' Group discussion, 2007). These younger people are pulled into labor markets in the urban  
87 and industrial areas in the region. As a result, the middle-aged and older men and women are left to manage  
88 the farm activities, while the children share the farm work with their parents when they are free. Normally, the  
89 elderly and the children manage the housework and livestock.

90 Industrial activities are expanding in Can Tho City but are still limited in Thoi Lai. Many small and medium  
91 sized rice millers, as well as rice export actors at the local, regional and national levels, such as the Food Processing  
92 Company of Mekong and the Co Do State Farm, are recruiting an increasing portion of the local labor force,  
93 but such organizations typically provide only seasonal and unstable jobs. Jobs available from such employers  
94 compound the situation of labor shortage during and just after rice harvests and underemployment during other  
95 times.

96 During the research period, other types of local seasonal off-farm activities were also unstable due to local  
97 conditions, which may be indirectly influenced by the yields of rice crops in the hamlet, the demand for and  
98 supply of paddy and export rice, and the rice export policies of the state. While these important factors have  
99 had a positive impact, as is apparent with the increasing level of income for farmers from the first rice crop  
100 of the 2007/2008 season, due to the high price of paddy at that time, at other times, however, they also have  
101 had negative impacts, such as the decreasing income of the farmers and hired laborers due to fluctuating paddy  
102 price, unemployment in the rice processing factories in Thoi Thuan B hamlet and the poor third rice crop in the

103 Mekong Delta in 2008. Indeed, the state's rice export policies have had an impact on both employment and the  
104 level of income for the hired laborers, farmers and other social actors.

105 It appears that the rice farmers/companies from Thoi Thuan B are increasingly impacted by global markets  
106 and demand for rice, which impact prices for rice, particularly for rice production. As a result, the farmers in  
107 Thoi Lai, Can Tho and many other provinces in the Mekong Delta have had to use hired labor from outside the  
108 local area, utilizing a labor market network developed between the farmers and the poor landless hired laborers  
109 or farmers who have small landholdings. Soc Trang, a province in the Mekong Delta, has the highest number of  
110 landless and land-limited Khmers and supplies more professional hired laborers than any other province for the  
111 rice harvest seasons that take place throughout the year (Farmers' Group discussion, 2007).

112 Hiring manpower to carry out specific labor tasks has become popular in northern Thai villages (Anan, 1989).  
113 As in the Thai case, since 2005, based on the area's shortage of seasonal agricultural and problems with previous  
114 labor arrangements, Thoi Thuan B hamlet landowners have contracted with Soc Trang workers to harvest their  
115 three annual rice crops. Normally, the landowners make a contract with the local labor group recruiters about  
116 one month after they have sown of the rice crop. These local labor group recruiters are Khmer ethnicity and  
117 have kinship ties with Khmer workers in Soc Trang province. For a small fee, the local labor group recruiters  
118 contact the local owners of the threshing machines as well as the Soc Trang Khmer migrant laborers.

119 According to my research, in 1993, the Khmer ethnicity rice producing households of Thoi Thuan B Hamlet  
120 used 115 hired laborers per hectare of rice production, in comparison with 100 hired laborers per hectare used  
121 by Kinh ethnicity rice producing households. In 2008-2009, the Khmer farm households used 204 hired labors  
122 per hectare, while Kinh farm households used 182 hired laborers per hectare. This increase of hired laborers in  
123 both Kinh and Khmer ethnicity is the result of the loss of local labor to urban areas and the intensification of  
124 rice crops.

125 The Soc Trang Khmer landless laborers have become very professional at harvesting rice because they are  
126 always on the move from one place to another across many provinces in the Mekong Delta, such as Can Tho,  
127 An Giang and others, helping with the three annual rice crops grown in these locations. Soc Trang is a typical  
128 province for agriculture and aquaculture and is about 60 km from Can Tho city. Almost all of the labor-sending  
129 households in Soc Trang had agricultural land in the past, but now those households tend to have extremely  
130 limited or no land due to the combination of population increase and previous sale of their land use rights. The  
131 Soc Trang workers have, however, invested in both mobile and landline phones to carry out their business. It  
132 is interesting that among the 45 Khmer Soc Trang laborers included in the study, two-thirds have a telephone  
133 and/or mobile phone. As a result, the working group recruiters can contact the Soc Trang laborers almost  
134 anytime, anywhere, though they may be working in rice fields at the time. Nowadays, these are the modern  
135 methods used by the hired laborers, both Kinh and Khmer. For the farmers and laborers in the Mekong Delta,  
136 mobile phones serve as an effective means of conveying work information, rather than as a luxury.

137 From their interview responses, the poor landless and land-poor Khmer laborers from Soc Trang Province  
138 appear to be actively seeking alternative ways to cope with the risks they face in terms of survival, including  
139 diversifying their livelihood strategies through taking on harvesting contracts throughout the Mekong Delta.  
140 This seems to me to be similar to the livelihood approach highlighted by Haan and Zoomers (2005), one used by  
141 people in order to adapt to changing economic conditions.

142 Two case studies from my in-depth interviews illustrate this point. The poor landless and land-poor Khmers  
143 in Soc Trang Province work very hard in difficult conditions in the field. The seasonal nature of their rice  
144 harvesting means that if they suffer from an illness or have too much time between harvesting jobs, they may  
145 not earn enough to survive. Their constant migration and poor living and working conditions can easily lead to  
146 illness and disease.

## 147 8 Case 1

148 Mr. Sen first harvested rice for the farmers in Thoi Thuan hamlet 18 years ago, with a group of 30 to 40 Soc  
149 Trang laborers. Mr. Sen, who bought a mobile phone six years ago to assist with his business, acts as a group  
150 leader for the hired laborers. He uses his mobile phone to communicate with the landowners, laborers, car owners,  
151 group leaders and middlemen. According to Mr. Sen, the total time the hired laborers spend harvesting rice  
152 each year ranges from one to seven months.

153 Mr. Sin, who finished only primary school, is the younger brother of Mr. Sen and also a group leader for hired  
154 laborers in Soc Trang. Mr. Sin's wife is illiterate and of Khmer and Chinese descent. Mr. Sin's daughter finished  
155 only primary school; she lives with her husband who left secondary school. Mr. Sin's older son left primary  
156 school and now lives with his wife, who is also illiterate. His youngest child is still in secondary school. Mr. Sin's  
157 son and daughter both got married in their teens.

158 Mr. Sin's father originally had one hectare of farmland and seven children, but he gave 0.7 hectares to his sons  
159 and daughters in 1986. He sold 0.3 hectares for 1.5 ounce 3 In 1991, Mr. Sin sold 0.1 hectares of land for half an  
160 ounce of gold and asked his relative for a loan to pay a debt due to a failure in his duck farming activities, after  
161 which he had to work as a rice harvester to repay of gold to help pay for treatment when he was ill. He passed  
162 away in 1993. Mr. Sin harvests rice in Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, Vinh Long, Can Tho and An Giang Provinces. In  
163 2006, he had more family members available for harvesting rice, obtaining an income of ten million dong per rice  
164 crop; therefore, his total family income was 30 million dong for harvesting three rice crops per year, and, after

## 11 IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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165 subtracting costs, he was able to save ten million dong for his family. By 2007, his family was harvesting three  
166 rice crops for a total income of 35 million dong, and after his costs, he was able to save 20 million dong. However,  
167 in 2008 his daughter got married; because of a loss of her labor, that year his family only gained a profit of six  
168 million dong. After living expenses, this was not enough money to repay his family debt. At the beginning of  
169 2009 his son married, and now he lives only with his wife and youngest son. When I visited him on March 11 th  
170 2009, I heard that he and his two other family members had harvested only 0.13 hectares of rice as agricultural  
171 wage laborers, with an income of only 140,000 dong (In-depth Interview, March 2009).

### 172 9 Global

173 This case reflects the precarious livelihood of many Khmer ethnicity agricultural wage laborers. In this case,  
174 Mr. Sin's limited land holdings are a result of land fragmentation as generations of parents divide limited land  
175 holdings among large numbers of offspring. Moreover, the neoliberal policies which have commoditized land in  
176 Vietnam since the country's 1993 Land Law have meant that poor families like Mr. Sin's can sell the long-term  
177 use rights of their land to raise money in case of illness or other disasters. While such sales may be helpful in the  
178 short term, in the long term the families are left without access to sufficient land for survival. While seasonal  
179 agricultural wage employment provides an important source of income for such families, unless the family has  
180 sufficient adult laborers pooling income, the income may not be sufficient for their survival.

### 181 10 Case 2

182 One poor Khmer group of 150 members from Soc Trang Province harvests rice in Thoi Thuan B hamlet. This  
183 group includes children as well as adult men and women, including, when I visited, about six elderly members  
184 and a pregnant woman who prepared food for others. They face many livelihood difficulties, and their survival  
185 is at high risk because their number of working days each year has recently decreased with the development of  
186 agricultural mechanized technology (such as the use of a combine harvester) in the Mekong Delta. Their incomes  
187 are now extremely low. Their drinking water comes from the local canals, they live in temporary houses and  
188 tents, and many are malnourished and/or suffering from various diseases. On March 11 th 2009, I saw one family  
189 with seven members, including the husband, wife, son, son-in-law, daughter and daughter-in-law. After cutting  
190 the rice in the morning, all of them had a lunch without rice -just one dish of small boiled snails with salt.  
191 They had collected these snails in the canal early in the morning, before cutting the rice. (Interviews and field  
192 observation, March 2009)

193 As with the family in Case 1, the families in the second case also have had to cope with many difficulties  
194 due to changes in national economic policies and the move towards a globalized, neo-liberalist economic strategy.  
195 Their loss of farming land has propelled them to new forms of subsistence-seasonal agricultural wage labor in  
196 Thoi Thuan B and other areas of the Mekong Delta. But, their subsistence appears even more precarious than  
197 the extended family described in Case 1 and may not be sustainable in the long run, particularly as more and  
198 more farmers in areas such as Thoi Thuan B hamlet begin to adopt new agricultural technologies such as combine  
199 harvesters.

### 200 11 IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

201 This study indicates that the Khmer ethnicity laborers from Soc Trang Province contribute a considerable amount  
202 to the rice harvests in Thoi Lai, Can Tho Province. In fact, Khmer farm households in the hamlet use 1.4 times  
203 more local hired laborers than the Kinh households for their rice production activities. Soc Trang landless  
204 laborers supplied 85 man-days of hired labor for the Kinh in 2008-2009, which is 1.3 times higher than for the  
205 Khmer households in Thoi Thuan B hamlet for the same time period.

206 The landless labor force in Soc Trang province supplied at least 20 percent of the labor for rice production  
207 in Thoi Thuan B Hamlet during 2008-2009 and an astounding 70 percent of the total hired labor for harvesting  
208 rice during 2008 to 2009. This is largely due to the migration of local laborers to other places in search of work,  
209 which decreased local labor available for the rice harvests.

210 While they provide valuable seasonal wage labor for farmers throughout the Mekong Delta, the Khmer  
211 ethnicity wage laborers from Soc Trang face many difficulties. While providing agricultural wage labor may be  
212 a short-term livelihood strategy, as more and more farmers in places like Thoi Thuan B begin to move towards  
213 mechanized rice harvesting through the use of combine harvesters, the demand of seasonal wage labor will  
214 likely decrease. This would mean that the precarious lives of Soc Trang agricultural wage workers may become  
215 unsustainable, possibly driving such workers to urban areas in search of adequate livelihoods.

216 One strategy to improve the lives of both farm families and seasonal agricultural workers would be the  
217 development of secondary livelihood activities which can be done in non-harvest seasons. The government Year  
218 should invest in developing such activities as well as finding markets for goods produced. That will help keep  
219 more people in rural areas and/or reduce rural seasonal underemployment and help keep workers in rural areas.

220 In the long run, while mechanization of agricultural harvesting may be appealing both to the state, as a  
221 reflection of modernization and "development," and to farmers such as those in Thoi Thuan B facing seasonal  
222 labor shortages, the likely impacts of such mechanization on poor agricultural wage laborers such as those from  
223 Soc Trang must be considered fully prior to implementation. If further mechanization of agriculture is pursued,

224 then the government should invest in improving the lives and opportunities of landless agricultural workers who  
225 will be put out of work by such mechanization. Such workers could be trained for new positions, possibly in the  
226 urban labor force. In addition, educational opportunities could be extended to the children of such families so  
227 that in the future, the younger generation can take advantage of better economic opportunities, enabling them  
228 to support older generations.

229 **12 Global**

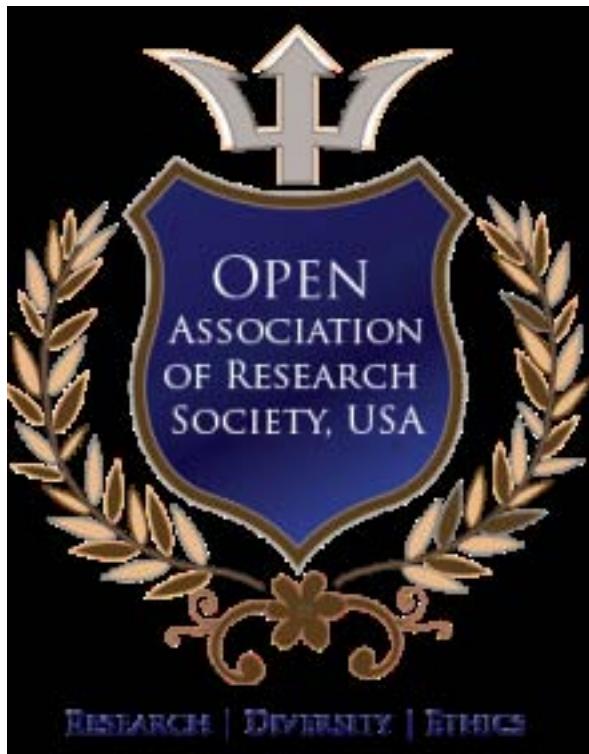


Figure 1:

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<sup>2</sup>In 1986, one ounce of gold was equivalent to three million dong.

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<sup>6</sup>Year



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