

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Rationale

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, most developing countries made encouraging progress in their efforts to achieve the Millennium World Development Goals; however, no country in East and Southeast Asia is likely to achieve the poverty reduction goals set for 2015. Despite the significant support given towards rural development and the reduction of poverty, approximately 170 million rural people in developing countries still live below the poverty line (World Bank, 2007; cited in Van, 2009). As a result, reducing persistent poverty remains a significant challenge throughout the world.

Although economic growth is important and forms part of a dynamic strategy aimed at poverty reduction, it is clear that growth alone is not enough (Carroll, 2001). Even in cases where supporting programs and activities are in place, some households and communities are able to succeed at overcoming poverty, while others are not. The answer to the question as to ‘why’ this is so is generally not understood. Some studies have highlighted the importance of infrastructure, landholdings, child malnutrition and education in relation to the success of poverty reduction efforts, while other studies have emphasized market factors, levels of participation among the poor, and local and national governmental policies. Wanasinghe (2002) argues that poverty alleviation strategies have not been integrated into the mainstream development efforts and therefore do not offer structured solutions to the problems of poverty. Moreover, these strategies overlook many serious issues related to poverty, such as seasonality, the transfer of poverty, cyclical patterns of poverty and the survival strategies of the poor (Wanasinghe, 2002). Clearly, factors that affect the success of poverty reduction efforts vary significantly from community to community, and from region to region.

In addition, household strategies aimed at poverty reduction are considered to be important and do not usually wait for support to be provided or program benefits to accrue. Instead, households proactively adopt a variety of strategies to cope with risk in the context of national policies and economic growth, and in order to raise themselves out of poverty. These household strategies interact with national policies and economic growth to produce various results in terms of poverty reduction. In the case of Sri Lanka, Bandara (2007) found that in the urban slum context, after the unplanned resettlement of a community in Vallangiriya village, the poor suffered the most vulnerability and marginalization as part of the development process, as well as within the social structure of the area. Some inhabitants deal with this kind of struggle by becoming mobile, while the majority has no alternative but to continue to live in-situ. Thus, according to Ellis, “the consequences of national policy cannot be traced without a more accurate picture of how people respond and adapt to national policy... [but] there is ignorance about processes and strategies” (2000: 184).

Similar issues are occurring in Vietnam, where the problem of ineffective poverty reduction efforts among ethnic minorities is significant, and so was examined at the conference entitled ‘Poverty and Poverty Reduction in Vietnam’, held in 2007. Although Vietnam has a variety of policies and programs specifically designed to assist ethnic minorities’ development related to a wide range of socio-economic issues, these groups are still extremely poor and account for a large proportion of those in poverty across the whole country. Forty percent of the poor in 2004 were from the ethnic minorities, and may by now constitute more than half of the poor in Vietnam (Poverty Task Force, 2002). To achieve the target of a 40% reduction in the number of poor households across the country and in order to prioritize the extremely poor households, ethnic minorities should receive particular attention.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

This study seeks to shed light on the complex and ambiguous situation faced by a Khmer community residing in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, plus the causes of poverty and the multiple coping strategies used by them in different circumstances. My study also examines the multiple and shifting dimensions of poverty, and the negotiating or coping activities that have taken place, both forcibly and

spontaneously, within different historical, political, social and economic contexts. I will also look closely at the effects of poverty reduction strategies and of marginality in terms of their everyday practices.

Among the 53 ethnic groups in Vietnam, a large number of Khmer can be found in the Mekong Delta, where they make up 6.49% of the total population (around 1.05 million out of sixteen million); 1.5% of Vietnam's as a whole (roughly 1.3 million out of 85.8 million) (General Statistical Office, 2009). Their poverty levels are higher than the average (32% compared to 23% for the region), and those provinces with the highest poverty rates are those with the largest Khmer populations. In other words, within any province that has a significant Khmer community, poverty rates are substantially higher than in other provinces in the region. It is also harder for the Khmer to escape poverty than the other groups (MPDA, 2004). This difference suggests that changes in poverty alleviation strategies may have caused changes in some ethnic groups' poverty rates. As a result, my research is focused on the Khmer people who live in isolated areas rather than Khmers in other areas. As a result, the Khmer people living in two districts of An Giang Province in the Mekong Delta - Tri Ton and Tinh Bien Districts, those that depend on agricultural activities for their livelihoods and have high rates of poverty, were chosen for this research.

While spending my pre-survey time collecting general information in the field – collecting data on the Khmer households who had received a poverty certificate from the local authorities, it raised in my mind questions as to why they are poor, what their perspectives on poverty are, as well as how they cope. An illustrative example of this is as follows:

.....We do not have agricultural land because it was lost due to the irrigation construction project in 1992 and now we are considered to be poor in our village, having received a poverty certificate. We (a couple) worked previously as seasonal wage labor, earning an income of around 600,000 VND per crop, but now with the harvesting machines being used, are unemployed. Now we can attain subsistence by gleaning rice after the harvest, borrowing money from relatives or receiving food from the temple in our village. In

addition, we are unable to pay the electricity fees, so we also cannot access this.

(Household interview - summer 2009)

The Poverty Task Force (2003) has illustrated and analyzed the vicious circle related to poverty (Poverty Task Force, 2003), noting that effective control over production resources, especially land, is crucial to the rural poor in terms of their capacity to construct a rural livelihood and overcome poverty (Kay and Akram-Lodhi, 2009:1) (see Figure 1.1).

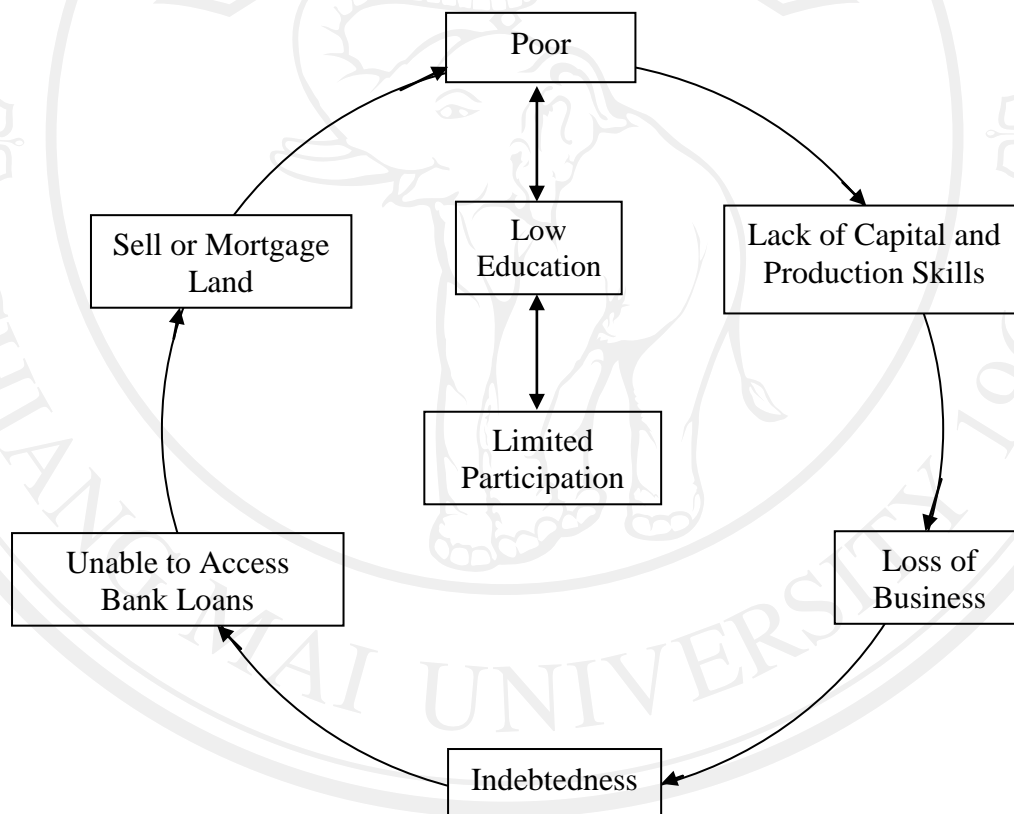


Figure 1.1: Vicious Circle Faced by the Poor in the Mekong Delta (source: Poverty Task Force, 2003)

Furthermore, the seriousness of the landlessness issue among the Khmer community varies according to climate, geographical conditions and the fluctuation in market prices. On the other hand, Lan (2009) has asserted that most Khmer villagers at the research site depend on natural conditions; their farming habits are

underdeveloped and this limits their capacity to apply science and contributes to their poor experiences with agricultural technology. It is difficult to understand the complex causes of landlessness and land distribution issues, as farming and land reallocation systems are not recognized as a necessary tool among poor people (Ausaid, 2003). According to some previous studies, the adjusted Land Laws of 1993<sup>1</sup> and 2003<sup>2</sup> have significantly affected land trading in rural areas in Vietnam, thereby causing a higher proportion of people to sell their land, making them landless. The other reason for the increase in the number of landless people is the recent trend towards the separation of young families from their extended families. Moreover, according to Toan Anh and Cuu Long Giang (2002) in the book 'The Vietnamese - Vietnamese land', the Khmer like to live a simple and spiritual life, and believe this is more important than attaining a material life. By the same token, most of the provincial leaders in the Mekong Delta considered Khmer people to be disproportionately poor because they spend so much of their income on community festivals and pagoda refurbishments.

Landlessness is therefore prevalent in the Mekong Delta, particularly among the Khmers (Taylor, 2010). Some significant figures are that among 8,417 poor Khmer households in An Giang Province, 4,402 households are landless and lack cultivatable land, making up 52.13% of all households. In addition, 1,156 households have had to mortgage their land - nearly 15.7% of all households (Report of Socio-economic Development Plan up to 2010, from An Giang People's Committee, 2009).

As a consequence, landlessness has significantly contributed to the severity of debt and extreme vulnerability experienced, since it has drawn poor people into more difficult situations (Oxfam Great Britain, 1999) and excluded them. This phenomenon is reflected by the temporary sale of their labor as seasonally hired laborers, and their high levels of unemployment during certain parts of the year. Poor Khmer people also

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Law, one could exchange, transfer, lease, inherit and mortgage land use rights. Households were limited to owning 5 ha of land for annual crops in the Mekong Delta

<sup>2</sup> Set out additional condition in relation to land use rights, including the right to re-rent land use rights, the right to grant land use rights and the right to use land use rights as collateral, all of which had previously been the practice even if not formally recognized. Other rights include the right to use land use rights with others to generate capital and the right to be compensated at market prices if land use rights are repossessed by the government (Akram-Lodhi, 2009) (ibid:156)

find it very hard to find other jobs to generate an income, since they are less educated and relatively unskilled (World Bank, 2004).

In terms of the perceptions of poverty among the Khmer ethnic group, a number of reasons have been given as to why the Khmer have a poor socio-economic standing, including their shortage of capital, a heavy reliance on incomes from agricultural production, and high levels of landlessness. However, the poor Khmer view their poverty as being much more than related to income. Low-income people feel that they are excluded from certain formal sector institutions, and this links to an emerging consensus among development professionals in Vietnam that poverty is correlated with being from an ethnic minority due to the low levels of education experienced by these groups, and this can lead to them not entering into business, not knowing how to manage their family finances and not applying for official jobs. Focusing on these economic and social factors, leaders and intellectuals in the Mekong Delta have placed great emphasis on education and training as being ways to exit poverty; however, some local Kinh have expressed exasperation that despite sustained efforts by the more enlightened ethnic Vietnamese to “raise” the Khmer’s intellectual level to on a par with their own, the economic situation among the Khmer group has not improved (Taylor, 2004:246). Discourse analysis will help to understand who the poor are and analyze the ways in which landless households’ inequality makes them subject to economic victimization and exclusion from development projects. The success of negotiation processes in relation to poor Khmer households is also still in question.

Beyond the high rate of poverty within the Khmer community in An Giang Province, the question of how to reduce the poverty situation and improve local people’s living standards is of significant concern to the local government in terms of rural development. Over the past few years, both the local governments and NGOs have carried out a number of programs and projects in the region aimed at improving Khmer people’s livelihoods. Among these have been ‘national program P134’ and ‘resolution 25’ introduced in 2005, as well as an agricultural modernization policy. While the former two projects are aimed at providing land for cultivation and for building houses, plus providing saving credits for husbandry, the latter is aimed at

intensifying crop cultivation and increasing the use of harvesting machines. Many development projects have also been implemented by NGOs, such as CARE International and HEIFER - Vietnam (a branch of HEIFER International – the aim of which is to end hunger and poverty, and care for the earth), aimed to support the provision of financial capital as well as provide training with regard to the raising of livestock and cultivation. Some of these projects have helped reduce poverty across many Khmer communities; however, their results have not been so good, as few Khmer households have escaped poverty, and the poverty rate among the Khmer is still higher than for other groups.

Most of these programs operate using a top-down approach, one that excludes the participation of Khmer people; the ideology of mainstream development which focuses on structures and pays little attention to people, while the poor Khmers become victims, as powerless as objects. According to Taylor (2010), most Khmer villagers in the Mekong Delta readily acknowledge their poverty status and lack of economic power in relation to the supposedly more politically powerful Vietnamese. The Khmers are said by the authorities to be poor because they lack education, awareness, and an inclination to engage the world outside their communities (Taylor, 2010).

Previous studies on development in the Mekong Delta have often failed to pay appropriate attention to local ethnic perceptions regarding governmental development programs, and there has also been little attention paid to the landless and poor Khmer group. As a result, I will here focus on the poverty experienced during the everyday lives of Khmer villagers. I argue that one aspect of poverty may have various views which can be defined and approached differently based upon the different actors involved. My research will also help explain the reasons why some ethnic groups' poverty rates are high as compared to others, by exploring the connections between their differing perceptions of poverty and the poverty alleviation efforts made. Moreover, by identifying problems that emerge during the everyday practices of the landless and poor people, I will also discuss their coping strategies from various viewpoints. My research was undertaken in Trung An and An Thanh villages in Le

Tri Commune, Tri Ton District in An Giang Province, which is located in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

### **1.3. Research Questions and Objectives**

In order to facilitate an appropriate understanding and description of the different perceptions of poverty held among the various actors in the local area, as well as to examine the everyday practices of the landless and poor Khmer people and how they deal with poverty, I will discuss and try to answer the following questions:

1. How have the notions of poverty reduction in Vietnam been constructed by government officials, researchers, NGOs and villagers in terms of the context faced by poor Khmer people, who are dependent on agriculture? What is the role of agricultural development in this respect?
2. What have been the impacts of poverty reduction policies on the marginalized landless and poor Khmer households in the Mekong Delta?
3. What coping strategies and adaptations do the Khmer villagers use as part of their struggle for survival?

By identifying the problems that have emerged within the everyday livelihoods of the Khmer people, I intend to achieve the following:

1. To gain a better understanding of the notion of ‘poverty alleviation’, for which government development policies have been constructed in the Mekong Delta, and the role agricultural development has in terms of poverty reduction;
2. To examine the emergence of poverty alleviation programs, and the marginalization of the poor and landless people as a result of these programs, and
3. To analyze the way in which landless and poor Khmer households have responded to poverty.

### **1.4. Research Methodology**

#### **1.4.1. Research Site**

In An Giang Province, the Khmer ethnic group makes up 75.5% of the total

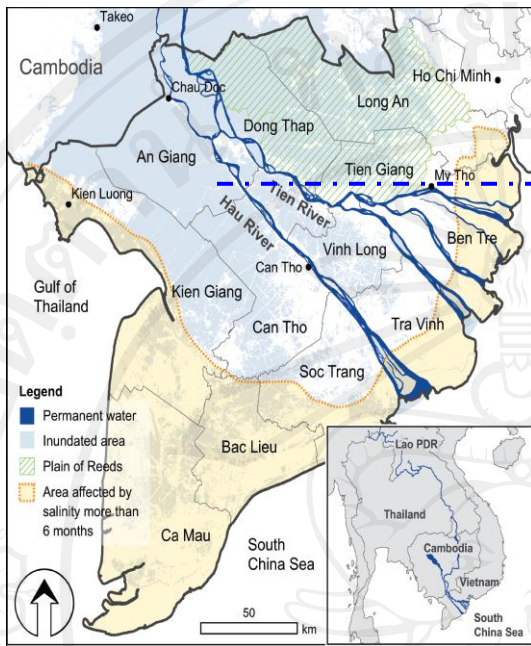


ethnic minority population and accounts for roughly 4% of the total population. Among the three villages of Le Tri Commune in Tri Ton District, An Giang Province, I conducted my study in two villages with a representative population of Kinh and Khmer groups, these being Trung An (a Khmer village) and An Thanh (a Kinh village) (see Figure 1.2) in which 53.2% of the households are Khmer, which is representative of the total commune population (as shown in Table 1.1). The communities in these localities have social establishments and arrangements which are typical of the Khmer, and there were several reasons why I selected them to be my research site. First of all, the living standard of the Khmer people is relatively low, in fact, most of the poor Khmer villagers operate a subsistence livelihood and are relatively unfamiliar with the market economy, as compared to the Kinh in the same area. Second, a number of poverty reduction policies and programs have been implemented by different organizations in order to supply housing and provide credit for the setting up of small businesses, yet the poverty rate in the area has not fallen. Although the Province has acknowledged the close relationship between poverty reduction for the poor Khmer and poverty reduction in general, the specific attributes of the Khmer have not been clearly identified, and not received due attention in the implementation of activities. Third, agricultural wage labor is the Khmer's principal occupation, but the introduction of mechanization into agriculture, replacing manual labor, has been rapid. As a result, these poverty reduction initiatives have been designed with local production and development work in mind, but have not addressed the specific needs of the Khmer. In addition, the Khmer face many kinds of social and economic problems, such as illiteracy and unstable employment conditions, meaning that they have to manage their circumstances in different ways. In recent years, there many young Khmer people have started looking for work the urban areas as unskilled laborers.

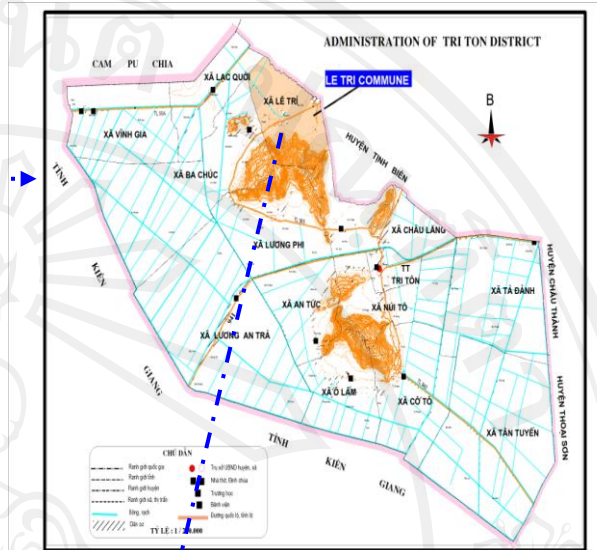
Table 1.1: Number of Khmer People at the Study Sites – 2009

Area	Number of Khmer Households	As Percentage of Total Number of Ethnic Households	As Percentage of Total Number of Households
An Giang Province	18,512	75.54	3.9
Tri Ton District	12,683	100	39.75
Le Tri Commune	821	100	53.21

*Source:* Statistical yearbook in Tri Ton District, An Giang Province, 2009



Map of the Mekong Delta



Administrative Map of Tri Ton District

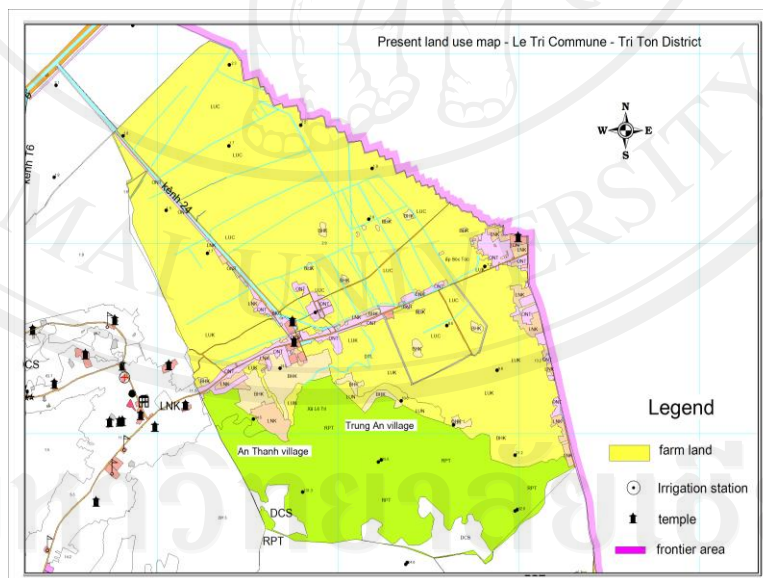


Figure 1.2: Administrative Map of Le Tri Commune

Source of three maps: Le Tri People's Committee

#### **1.4.2. Fieldwork and Data Collection Methods**

My fieldwork was conducted in Le Tri Commune between December 2010 and March 2011, after I had carried out my pre-fieldwork preparation in September 2010. The goal of my fieldwork project was to deepen my involvement with the poor Khmer groups and communities. I chose a participatory method as my methodological framework – to study the perspectives on poverty, and this offered me the opportunity to examine people’s perceptions and activities in my field. Furthermore, I also applied in-depth interviews to explore, explain and “probe”; to analyze local conditions and the history of the community.

##### ***Experience in the field:***

Thorough preparation during my pre-fieldwork phase and the valuable comments provided by my proposal examination committee helped me to run my fieldwork project smoothly between December 2010 and early-March 2011. My survey was constructed in such a way as to provide the data needed to formulate answers to my research questions set out in the previous section of this chapter. Before starting my fieldwork, it was necessary for me to consult with the local government leaders and officials, so that they fully understood the purpose, content and approach of my research, and so that I could use what local resources were required. Local staff provided me with access to different Khmer household groups, and gave me a breakdown of the number of men and women, since they tend to have different perspectives on poverty. The local authorities also allowed me to conduct participant observation, so that I could gather first-hand information about the groups’ dynamics. I then spent almost three months visiting households, attending groups and participating in village meetings organized by the temple or local government, and worked closely with the poverty reduction officers. After a few weeks preliminary observation, I had a list of the poverty criteria provided by the local government. Those with an income of under 400,000 VND per month and a lack of assets at home are considered poor, so I opted to focus my research on three groups: the non-poor, poor, and former poor, with the Kinh majority as my comparative group. This study compares points regarding the notions of poverty and the livelihood diversification methods used by the groups above, so as to understand the Khmer’s situation as part

of the development process. Migrants were included in my research, those returning home from their work locations to enjoy Vietnamese Lunar New Year. Though local staff were good at finding the households I required for my interviews, it is necessary to keep in mind that these households were not randomly selected, but in accordance with the interview criteria.

Before conducting my structured interviews, I visited five Khmer households from the poor, former poor and non-poor groups, and also pre-tested my questionnaires with them, to make sure that all the questions could be understood and made sense. I noticed that when I interviewed people they would hide some information regarding their incomes and savings, and excluded their perspectives on the poverty alleviation programs implemented in their community, simply because local government staff were with me. Overall, the interviewees here were given the ‘ball’; if they seemed comfortable and interested in expressing their opinions they were asked additional questions in order to elaborate upon their answers. To overcome language difficulties, I used an interpreter during some of the interviews with the Khmer women, which meant there might have been a margin of error due to misunderstandings between the translator, interviewees and interviewer. However, I gradually built a good relationship with the villagers and so was able to re-interview some of the households when they had free time. According to Wong (2007), fieldwork must be of sufficient duration to allow the researcher to get involved with the study people in their own setting and to think reflectively about the ongoing personal and political struggles that take place between the various social actors involved. Therefore, I carried out the above participatory method during my research, as this allowed me to document, observe, describe and analyze the meanings and intensity of social interactions that I encountered.

***Secondary and primary data collection:***

*Secondary data collection:* This included various published and unpublished documents from government agencies, research institutes and universities in An Giang Province, including reports on poverty and poverty reduction at all levels, from provincial to the local, with a focus on programs and policies aimed at poverty reduction. I also took into account comparative data on poverty for the Kinh and

Khmer ethnic groups, plus used annual reports concerning the socio-economic conditions in Trung An and An Thanh villages, as well as Le Tri commune.

*Primary data collection:* I collected data in the field using various methods, including participant observation, group discussions, key informant interviews and semi-structured interviews. Moreover, I also interviewed the migrants who returned home to enjoy Vietnamese Lunar New Year, in order to understand their perceptions about poverty and to know why and how they had migrated.

*Observations:* Having been accepted by the local staff and local Khmer community, I spent some time observing and conversing with people in these communities in order to understand the changes in local livelihood practices that have taken place among the different groups of villagers, especially the poor. In reality, it was very difficult for me to find young Khmer men and women in the village to interview, because they usually go to work early in the morning and return in the evening from the paddy fields, where they work as wage labor. In contrast, some of the poor women and elders stay at home to take care of the children or to carry out home trade activities. However, at the beginning of the study, due to personal matters, I decided it would not be feasible to live full-time at the field site, so decided to stay for several hours at a time, as necessary, to conduct interviews during the day or at night. Moreover, the leader of village was very supportive each time I stayed there; he introduced me to villagers and arranged meetings and discussion groups. During that time, I participated in some of the events organized by the temple and the local government, such as the subsidized rice and money provided for poor Khmer and Kinh households during the Tet holiday. I feel that these observation activities allowed me to see how the different groups express themselves with respect to the local state authorities. When I visited the people, they always respected me and welcomed me, with warmth and hospitality, and I always received this hospitality in the appropriate way. This offered me a sufficiently participatory approach to deal with the nuances of their social reality and to analyze local conditions and the history of the community. This approach involved not only talking to them and asking them questions, but also learning about them by observing, participating in their lives and asking questions related to their daily life experiences.

*Group discussions:* Drawing on the methodology ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (which emerged in the 1980s, building on RRA but adding radical perspectives), six group discussions were organized. I intentionally based these on the government’s criteria, these being income sources, household assets, and experience in agricultural production, so as to classify the participants into three sub-groups: non-poor, former poor and poor, covering five men and two women for every Kinh and Khmer group in Le Tri commune, and with the Kinh as a comparative group (Table 1.2). These meetings addressed questions concerning general information at the village level: perceptions of poverty, income resources and income generating activities, which were discussed in detail. The tools used included direct observation, village mapping, a history timeline, wealth ranking, and a Venn diagram which adapted by Conway (1985).

*In-depth interviews:* Key people with knowledge about the implementation of the poverty reduction programs in An Giang Province were selected and surveyed. One researcher, the head of CARE Organization, and one scholar in An Giang Province were the focus of an open-ended questionnaire survey designed to understand their perceptions on the reasons for poverty existing in the area and those factors affecting the support programs. Furthermore, three household heads for every sub-group (poor, non-poor, and former poor) who participated in the focus group discussions were also interviewed. It was difficult for me when researching this village to find any documentary papers regarding the village’s history, so I tried instead to gather this same information throughout my interviews with the local government staff, villagers and monks.

Therefore, while I conducted the in-depth interviews, I was able to identify and interview four Khmer elders to be key-informants, as they know professionally the history of the village. On the other hand, my life-history interviewees were selected very carefully; nine people from the poor households, four who are non-poor and nine people who have escaped from poverty due to their life histories (Table 1.3). By talking also to the non-poor, I hoped to identify some of the advantages that have protected them from falling into poverty, and in what way the experiences of the severely and persistently poor people have differed from those of the transitory poor.

In-depth interviews with diverse households groups were held in order to understand their notions on poverty and the coping strategies they use when faced with difficult circumstances. The interviewers (in the households' surveys I was assisted by students at An Giang University) could not be inconsiderate, since poverty is a very sensitive matter among the poor. The questions could also not be offensive to them.

Table 1.2: Number of Khmer and Kinh Respondents Selected for Discussion Groups and In-depth Interviews

Sample Groupings	Kinh Group		Khmer Group	
	Group Discussions	In-depth Interviews	Group Discussions	In-depth Interviews
Poor Households	7	6	7	9
Formerly Poor Households	7	3	7	9
Non-poor Households	7	3	7	4

Source: Survey data, 2010

*Semi-structured interviews:* Eighty households from both the Kinh and Khmer communities and from different sub groups across the two research hamlets were selected for the household survey, during which time a structured questionnaire was used (Table 1.3). The selected households were placed into groups, as follows: (i) the first group included the poor, as classified by local staff and based on income per month (less than 400,000 VND) and a lack of valuable assets in their home. These people are able to receive benefits from national poverty reduction programs, (ii) the second group included the former poor with an income above 400,000 VND, and who had overcome poverty, and been able to change their poverty status whilst continuing to receive benefits from the poverty reduction programs, and (iii) the last group was the non-poor group, comprising of sub-groups with different livelihood strategies. The actual process of interviewing generally consisted of walking from house to house in the village, seeing if anyone was home and either conducting the survey there and then or arranging a meeting at a later time/date.



Table 1.3: Sample Selected for Household Interviews

<b>Sample Groupings</b>	<b>Number of Kinh Households</b>	<b>Number of Khmer Households</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Poor Households	24	27	51	63.75
Formerly Poor Households	8	9	17	21.25
Non-poor Households	6	6	12	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source:* Survey data, 2010

### 1.4.3. Data Analysis

In parallel with the collection of data, data analysis focused on data about the poor, and the other comparative groups, and in particular the Kinh, focusing on aspects such as people's notions of poverty and their daily livelihood practices. The analysis process followed the conceptual framework regarding the poverty context in the Khmer communities of Vietnam as a whole. All the data collected and fieldwork observations were classified and reflected upon, and any correlated explanations based on the research questions as well as the research objectives.

Qualitative data is used throughout the study to describe and support ideas related to the Khmer's circumstances in the Mekong Delta, and includes all information collected from the various sources during the in-depth interviews, participatory observations and group discussions. I analyzed the different conceptions of poverty among and within different the social groups in order to understand their opinions regarding how they perceive and identify poverty and its causes. This data, in addition, provided information on local participation rates in the poverty reduction programs implemented by the government, as well on some of the marginalization cases I encountered during the field work process.

Furthermore, the quantitative data also supported gaining a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the livelihoods process among the different actors; that undertaken in order to survive. By calculating the average incomes gained from the different livelihood activities of the different actors, I was able to gain a greater understanding of how local coping strategies are used and why people decide to undertake such livelihood activities, and not others. Pictures and maps are also used here to demonstrate and easily understand the situation.

### **1.5. Theoretical Relevance and Literature Review**

In order to understand the perceptions on poverty of and the livelihood strategies used by the respondents, it is helpful to review the issue of poverty based on different theories and concepts. In fact, many scholars and intellectuals have made significant contributions to the research on poverty; hence, here I focus on the conceptualization of poverty, as well as examine how poverty reduction strategies are being applied in the poor ethnic minority communities of the Mekong Delta. In addition to the advantages brought by the above-mentioned poverty alleviation policies, they have resulted in some of the poor Khmer villagers escaping poverty, and others falling back into poverty, with these shifts involving coping strategies used to survive the development process in the region, and particularly in An Giang Province. These early concepts are used as the foundation for my analysis and the discussion of my field data. This section will then describe the conceptual framework I used for my study.

#### **1.5.1. Discourse on Poverty Reduction Strategies in the Shifting Contemporary Context**

##### **1.5.1.1. Conceptualizing Poverty**

Poverty reduction must first be conceptualized. According to Visser et al. (2001), this concept involves defining what is meant by poverty, determining who is poor, discovering the causes of their circumstances and assessing the possible interventions and their impacts. It is stated that poverty is one of the most powerful concepts to have shaped international relations since the emergence of development economics in the 1940s, and it has since impeded a meaningful conceptualization of

the world in different terms (Escobar, 1995 and Rahnema, 1992). Poverty has therefore been constructed by introducing the concept of ‘underdevelopment’ that deprives people of their capacity to define their own interests.

More to the point, Dietz (2001) contends that poverty is a reflection of powerlessness, and the powerful need to be challenged if change is to relieve disadvantage. This is certainly the case if poverty is a direct outcome of “exploitation and theft” by others, or a result of blocked access to assets, which are controlled by small economic minorities (Dietz, 2001: 21). The definition and analysis of poverty in different discourses has proved the existence poverty in a specific place. It should be defined according to people’s construction of poverty discourse worldwide and the changing of their perceptions regarding poverty in modern times.

Starting with the view of Foucault, poverty became an organizing concept and an object of a new problematization being brought into existence with new discourses and practices that shaped the reality to which they referred. In other words, Sachs (1997) explains that Foucault’s perspective on the discourse of poverty may be understood as a myth, a construct and the invention of a particular civilization. In fact, as Diem (2003) points out, the term poverty seems easy to think up, but actually is an abstract word that needs to be defined and measured in multiple ways through time and across space.

The conceptualization of poverty as multi-dimensional is problematic when operationalized. The multi-dimensional conceptualization of poverty reduction frequently becomes so broad that it is very difficult to separate the poor from the non-poor (Stryker; 2001: 76), even when letting the poor define themselves through a participatory process. This section looks at a concept of poverty that can be perceived both through its material definition and using the entitlement approach. The former usually makes use of poverty lines to measure poverty, while the latter looks at improvements in well-being, as well as directs our attention to the role of development programs in enabling people to meet their basic needs.

There are currently two ways of estimating income poverty; the dollar-a-day and the two-dollars per day approaches developed by the World Bank (WB) and used by international agencies. A critique of the WB’s poverty lines has been carried out by

Reddy and Pogge (2008), who criticize the WB methodology with regard to its calculation of the lines used. They believe that the poverty numbers are higher and that poverty is more widespread than as estimated by the WB, and this is due to the limited amount of data WB uses when making the estimations. They point out that these numbers are used by other international agencies and policy makers under the assumption that WB's numbers are correct, and that this can have various impacts on the outcome of poverty reduction efforts. The use of these incorrect numbers may show poverty reduction in a favorable light and as heading in the right direction.

Vietnam's official rhetoric uses the material definition of poverty, including one calculated by the General Statistics Office (GSO), and one calculated by the Ministry of Labor, Invalidity and Social Affairs (MOLISA) (Vietnam Poverty Analysis, 2002). Firstly, the GSOs view estimates both a food poverty and a general poverty line, with the former based upon minimum requirements for calories that ensure good nutritional status, and with the latter based upon the food poverty line but allowing for minimum non-food expenditure. According to Al-serhan (2010), the material definition of poverty is a useful tool if one wishes to disaggregate poor from non-poor households, and is commonly referred to as the international poverty line. The poverty lines employed by MOLISA are relative poverty lines (Vietnam poverty analysis, 2002), providing a detailed picture of where the poor live and what their needs are at the commune level. The current MOLISA (national) poverty line, running from 2010 to 2015, is set at the following: in the rural regions under VND 400,000/person/month, and in the urban areas under VND 500,000/person/month. The main difference between the two approaches is that MOLISA's is based on income to determine poverty levels, while the GSOs household expenditure information is more reliable. I employed the MOLISA criterion to classify the poor groups and other groups for my interviews and the analysis.

As noted earlier, another way of estimating poverty is the entitlement approach. Sen (2000) uses the concept of entitlement to explain poverty as reflecting capability deprivation, not just using income levels alone. However, he does not exclude the income aspects; he recognizes the importance of income in relation to poverty, but disagrees that it is the primary factor in obtaining a "good life". More to

the point, according to Al-Serhan (2010), this approach sets the criteria by which to evaluate various development interventions and policies aimed at poverty alleviation. It directs our attention to examining why a specific group of households are trapped in poverty for a long period and to exploring some of the factors that make households fall into poverty (Al-Serhan, 2010).

By reviewing the above conceptions of poverty, I was able to apply these during my research, in order to understand that the main causes of rural poverty among the Khmer people in the Mekong Delta are structural and related to the effects caused by poverty reduction programs. The sustainability of peasant agriculture and the alleviation of rural poverty depend on wider social and political issues, as well as on a favorable economic context. In this thesis, I will analyze the various notions of poverty reduction from different actors' perspectives.

#### **1.5.1.2. Problematizing Poverty as Development Discourse**

It is not surprising to find that different and contesting views exist regarding the causes and nature of poverty, given the complexity of the problem. Some of these differences arise from ideological and political differences that are not always made explicit. One insight that runs throughout post-development literature is that poverty is not to be taken for granted, as Shiva (1988, cited by Escobar, 1995) points out:

Culturally perceived poverty need not be real material poverty: subsistence economies which serve basic needs through self-provisioning are not poor in the sense of being deprived. Yet the ideology of development declares them so because they do not participate overwhelmingly in the market economy, and do not consume commodities provided for and distributed through the market (Shiva, 1988b:10)

Escobar (1995) uses a discourse analysis to examine development through the institutionalization, knowledge and power perspectives. In this debate he highlights the way to understand development as discourse; it not only looks at the elements but at the systems of relations as well. Thus, Escobar explores both technological practices concerned with the transformation of human beings into subjects and to the

production of a disciplinary society. Foucault also explains the processes of normalization that have been organized by power and knowledge.

By examining these views, I debate different conceptions of several scholars regarding the correlation of poverty and agricultural development in my research. According to Scott (1985), there is little likelihood of the land reform process in Vietnam reversing the fortunes of the poor, given the limited absorptive capacity of the wider economy, the loss of wages to machines and the small plots cultivated by poor people. He indicates that there may be strong political reasons for the government to set the poverty level reasonably high in order to justify certain programs aimed at alleviating poverty. However, from Escobar's (1995) point of view, the politics of poverty rely on the nascent order of capitalism and modernity, the aim of which is not only to create consumers to transform society by turning the poor into objects of knowledge and management. In this sense, poor people remain poor despite double-cropping, despite a dense network of institutions created to serve paddy farmers, and despite government programs committed to eradicating poverty involved in agricultural development. The fundamental problem lies in the inequities in terms of land ownership and farm size that exist at the outset of the scheme.

Similar to Scott, Das (2002) examines the effects of green revolution technology on poverty, both conceptually and empirically. Das argues that the Vietnamese state could not rely on the green revolution for poverty reduction and thus started a "direct attack" on poverty through these policies; this is an indirect indicator of the limited impact of the green revolution. More generally, technology is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for poverty reduction. The evidence in some studies indicates that the advent of new technology, in the form of bio-chemical innovations, was associated with reductions in rural poverty; the proportion of the poor among the cultivating households declined and so did the severity of the poverty of those households which remained poor. At the same time, Xuan (1998) claims that some of the poor became poorer and suffered, and that some of the non-poor were pushed below the poverty line. Since smallholders are impeded by restricted credit markets, input supply problems, limited access to extension services and tenure insecurity, the benefits of the new technology tended to accrue mainly to large

landholders (Xuan, 1998). Scott (1985) states that a substantial increase in output resulting from modern agricultural technology requires more labor inputs in threshing, storage and transport. However, in a number of countries, modernization has meant a tendency toward the displacement of labor by agricultural machinery such as tractors (Scott, 1985).

Moreover, Bahiigwa et al. (2005) examine Vietnam's rural poverty and the effectiveness of the Plan for Modernization of Agriculture (PMA) as a mechanism to reduce rural poverty through improving agricultural productivity and market outputs among poorer farming households. They argue that while there appears to be few better choices of 'target' for the PMA than to improve the incomes of the rural poor through increased agricultural productivity, the emphasis on decentralization as a mechanism for poverty reduction is misplaced in the current political plan.

In addition, Hickey (2005) claims that despite the success of Uganda's poverty reduction recently, which has been significantly related to "getting the politics right", there are concerns that the poorest may not have benefited from this form of poverty reduction or the types of politics that have helped shape it. Employing the analytical framework of political space, he reveals that although some of the poorest groups are represented within the political system, political discourse reveals a strong bias toward the 'economically active', leaving the poorest excluded from poverty programs. The notion of "political space" developed by Webster and Engberg-Pedersen (2002 - cited by Hickey, 2005) seeks to incorporate a sense of the power relations that shape the complex relationships between politics, poverty, and poverty reduction. Contrary to the neo-liberal versions of political analysis within international development, the political space approach is embedded in Gramscian and Foucauldian understandings of power. This approach concerns dimensions of political discourse and of social and political practices of the poor, which may be a basis for influencing decision making, agendas, policy, and program implementation (Hickey, 2005).

Based on the above arguments from a variety of scholars, I examine the problematization of poverty, in my case of a Khmer community in Vietnam. According to the government, this ethnic group stays poor because of the south-west

war or the border war remnants in 1978 with respects to homelessness, landlessness consequences, low levels of education, the persistence of backward customs, and having to live in difficult geographical conditions. This group is therefore vulnerable to poverty due to its inaccessibility, fragility, marginality and diversity (Ellis, 1999), and when compared to the Kinh community - the majority group in Vietnam. The spaces available to the Khmer and Kinh people can be further distanced in terms of participation levels and decision-making power within the poverty reduction programs introduced at the local level. In addition, I would like to analyze whether or not the poor have become involved in these programs in order to escape their poverty circumstances.

### **1.5.2 Marginalization of the Ethnic Minority**

The terms ‘marginalization’ and ‘marginality’ connote powerlessness and exclusion from the mainstream. Beyond dictionary definitions, academics use the concept of marginality in relation to the dynamic socio-economic, political, physical and environmental sphere and/or processes under which some people, communities, or territories might be subjects (Gurung and Kollmair, 2005:10-11). In other words, this concept can be related to the meaning of ‘vulnerabilities’ through the experience of a complex condition of disadvantage which may arise from unequal or inequitable environmental, ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic factors (Nshimbi, 2009).

Following this line of thinking, the concept of marginality can be seen in relation to poverty, to describe a situation that people want to escape from or turn into opportunities. It is important to understand that the root causes of poverty such as inequality, vulnerability and exclusion, are closely linked with spatial and societal marginality. Therefore, the reasons behind poverty understood as a lack of access to resources, are examined through a conceptual framework of marginality, and so the issue of marginality emerges whenever poverty is investigated and vice versa. This research is therefore explores marginality, which has been an important concern in the recent discussions on poverty discourse within the ethnic communities in Vietnam.



According to Davies and Young (1996), poor people living in remote areas are normally seen to be marginalized from access to services and infrastructures, and with respect to ethnic minorities, they tend to face many more social and economic dimensions of marginalization. By the same token, Scott (1985) claims that marginalization is a consequence of unequal economic growth among class relations. He argues that the introduction of new technology, mechanization and intensified fertilizer use widens the gap between the rich/landlord and the poor/landless. When the rich/landlords have capital to invest in production and mechanization, the poor/landless villagers find themselves “cut adrift and marginalized” (Scott, 1985: 77). The overall picture of these cases of indirect impacts of agricultural development on wage labor may prove more damaging. Mechanization, by promoting large-scale farming, increases the potential for small-scale tenants and landless to be excluded, leading to transformation of local social relations. This is because the political economic pressure changes the ecological situation and the poor do not have enough means to adapt to the changes.

Similarly, Blaikie and Brookfield (1985) consider the case of soil erosion, arguing that it is due to the impacts of political and social conditions. The role of the state is critical in this process, as it commonly tends to give power to dominant groups through taxation, food and land tenure policies and through the allocation of resources, leading local people to lose both physical and social space for their survival. Escobar (1995) claims that the marginalization of the poor can be seen as a consequence of new development discourse. Following this, Hieu (2010) analyzes the process of displacement following a residential cluster program in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This program has disrupted the social relations of poor and landless people under the terms of patronage between landless villagers and landowners, such as renting land for rice cultivation or labor in the agricultural sector, and between wage laborers working together as agricultural wage labor teams.

Another aspect of marginalization, as pointed out by Tsing (1993), regards the cultural and political construction of marginality as a process in which people are marginalized. Throughout her case study of Dayak shifting cultivators in the rainforests of the Meratus Mountains of South Kalimantan in Indonesia, Tsing claims

that the state has constructed the marginality of indigenous Meratus people through indirectly administrating them, and by using Banjar people in the towns. In other words, Tsing's research explores the issue of ethnic contrasts, identifying the Meratus as distinct from the Banjar in terms of language, religion and national-political economy. Banjar proprietors develop a great deal of power as they inform the Meratus on links between authority, administration, wealth and culture. Furthermore, contradictions in terms of gender differentiation are also mentioned as part of marginalization; thus, marginality in this sense can be seen as complex, so that the state, the Meratus and Banjar people, plus genders, all construct marginalization through their power relations.

Diem (2003) examines marginality as it affects the culture of the Mekong people who live in Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park, Vietnam, focusing on indigenous knowledge aspects. According to Diem, the marginalization occurring here, is that local people have been excluded from accessing the forest and from their traditional way of life due to the application of scientific forest management knowledge and discourses that paint local people as forest destroyers. The exercising of state power over the forest has led to the marginalization of local people from their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices. Thus, this finding is effective evidence that demonstrates another approach to cultural marginalization.

When discussing the impact of marginalization on local people in the development process, the above studies apply different dimensions that are abstract and alternative in different circumstances. In reality, these groups are not only in *de facto* conditions of poverty, but are also vulnerable to economic competition and represent the weaker side of the social and political processes. As mentioned above, these findings will be used to support my research concerning marginalization, for here I will focus on how the landless/poor people have been marginalized from both the local authorities and the rich, plus will highlight how their access to resources has declined and how they have been excluded from making decisions about resource distribution aimed at poverty reduction.

### 1.5.3. Adaptation of Poverty Reduction Strategies as Everyday Practices

The poor are normally victimized, powerless and humanized, and most often excluded from society. Thus, they usually face many problems and try to look for ways to escape from poverty by coping and also negotiating for their survival. The concept of coping is identified in connection with the vulnerability of people to livelihood collapse in the face of natural disasters as well as social vulnerability. Living in a rural space, households are embedded in socio-economic, political and cultural settings.

I will first conceptualize the coping and adaptive strategies of poor Khmer people in their everyday livelihood practices. Coping strategies are complex and involve several sequenced mechanisms for obtaining the resources needed to combat adversity. According to Blaikie (1994), one of the most important precautionary strategies for coping with food shortages is the diversification of production strategies. Farming people are often regarded as risk-averse, as they use mixed cropping or intercropping in their production activities. On the other hand, in the same vein as Hann's (2000) work, households, in the face of shocks, can also reallocate their resources to cope with income fluctuations, or reallocate their household labor force. When a crop fails, poor households may increase waged labor incomes to compensate for the loss of income on their farms. Such a strategy may also involve pulling children out of school and sending them to work on the labor market. Furthermore, these temporary coping mechanisms may develop into more permanent adaptive strategies over time.

As Scott (1985) contends, "everyday practices" or "hidden transcripts" play a crucial role in constructing people's resistance and negotiation strategies in order to deal with the situation they face. He makes it clear that representation of every subordinate group creates a hidden transcript as a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant. Similarly, Kerkvliet (1995) argues that bottom-up pressures from the everyday politics of local people have significantly affected national economies, state ideologies and state policies. In this sense, the term 'everyday practices' can be understood in different ways; it may be seen as the ways in which people interact with each other to cope with and adapt to internal and external

influences. As Wenger mentions, a practice includes both the explicit and the tacit; includes what is said and what is left unsaid, what is represented and what is assumed (Wenger 2000). Based on this, poor people seek not just survival, but also the maintenance of other human needs such as respect, dignity and the maintenance of family, household and community cohesion.

Moser (1998) discusses the debates about more sustainable local level poverty reduction strategies that strengthen people's own inventive solutions, rather than substitute for, block or undermine them. Moser seeks to identify what the poor have rather than what they do not have, and in so doing focuses on their assets. Ellis (2000) presents a framework on livelihoods consisting of five main assets: natural, physical, financial, human and social capital, saying that landless poor households may not be able to cope with poverty if their assets are poor. According to Chambers (1997), poverty is static in the sense that some people will experience deprivations throughout their entire lives. However, poverty is also dynamic, in the sense that the causes of poverty change, the consequences of poverty change, and the lives of poor people, change throughout their lives, based on new opportunities that arise and the development of new coping strategies (Chambers, 1997). Some of these processes are initiated by the poor themselves, as part of their coping strategies; however, other processes are beyond their control.

In this sense, my study attempts to understand household coping mechanisms, focusing on an examination of whether the coping strategies of landless poor people in adapting to risk and vulnerability have shifted their livelihood strategies, and whether these shifts are sustainable. In the uncertain circumstances surrounding their poverty, I will examine how poor people have been able to survive, adapt and make a living.

### **1.6. Conceptual Framework**

Interest in poverty reduction strategies has increased in recent years, with a focus on the analysis and critique of the differences in internal and external mechanisms operating under different local processes regarding the political, social and economic circumstances. Based on the literature review and in the context of the

Mekong Delta as a contextual background, I developed the following conceptual framework in order to help analyze the implementation of poverty reduction strategies in Vietnam (Figure 1.3).

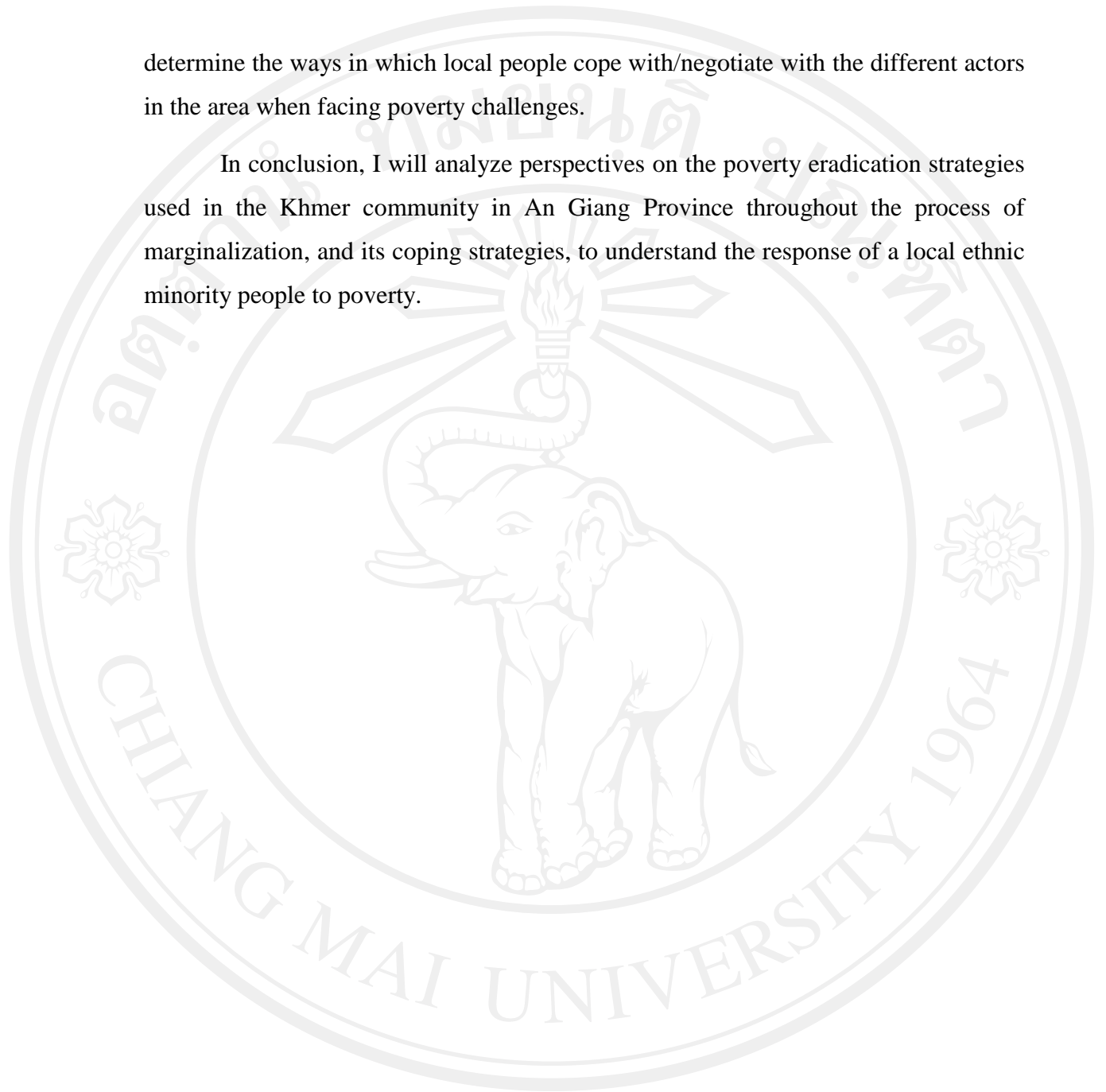
From this framework, it can be stated that different poverty perspectives focus on poverty eradication. In doing so, the discourse of poverty as a political space approach is embedded in Gramscian and Foucauldian understandings of power, with key dimensions considered in order to reveal the social and political practices of the poor (Hickey, 2005). I here investigate whether or not development ideology has been dominant within the model of modernization in the third world, plus will examine and compare the relationship between agricultural intensification and poverty reduction. I will also assess the structure of poor people's thinking, and the strategy which emphasizes decentralization as a mechanism for poverty reduction, that which may have displaced the ethnic community in the local context of the Mekong Delta. Therefore, some of the programs implemented at my research site will be looked at in order to view the articulation of national policies and development programs related to poverty reduction.

Second, my objective is to analyze how the poor/landless people are viewed, as marginalized actors in society and as part of the development process, and because of their powerlessness in terms of access to resources. In addition, I will explore the various difficulties the poor Khmer people face when trying to find a job in their uncertain circumstances. They are also excluded from developing further by the language barrier (Khmer/Vietnamese). Examining local poverty eradication policies will help me to explore and understand the emergence of inequality among the different actors in this agricultural, ethnic minority community – including the marginalization of the poor Khmers in their social space, and also the question of power relations and an embedded social structure.

Lastly, my study will focus on the strategy, as implemented in a rural village, and will also determine how the poor/landless Khmer people deal with poverty, based on their coping strategies in support of their everyday subsistence practices. For example, such strategies may include social redistribution such as temple support, or migrating to other areas to seek alternative employment. It is my intention to

determine the ways in which local people cope with/negotiate with the different actors in the area when facing poverty challenges.

In conclusion, I will analyze perspectives on the poverty eradication strategies used in the Khmer community in An Giang Province throughout the process of marginalization, and its coping strategies, to understand the response of a local ethnic minority people to poverty.



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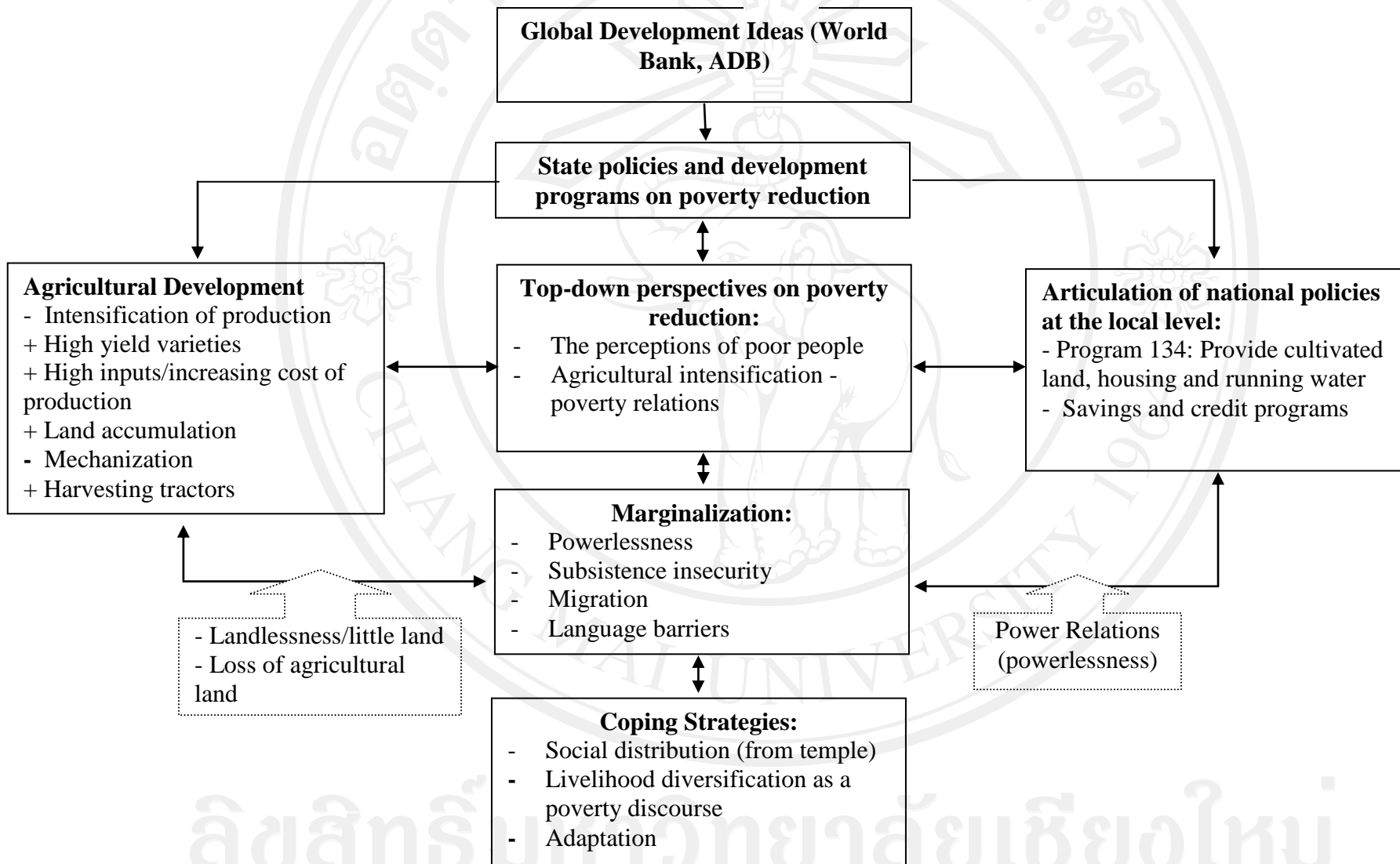


Figure 1.3: Conceptual Framework of the Study

### **1.7. Thesis Organization**

This thesis is organized as follows. The first chapter starts with an introduction to the study including the research problem, research questions and objectives. The remainder of this chapter provides more detail about the methodology adopted during the research and addresses some of the common problems I encountered while studying ethnic poverty at the village level. Ethnography is used to highlight and explore the poverty circumstances encountered by the ethnic community, and I discuss the research methodology, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews in detail. The subsequent section includes the theoretical debates central to this study, and the three main concepts related to my research concerns, these being: (1) conceptualizing poverty, (2) marginalization of ethnic minorities, and (3) the adaptation to poverty reduction strategies through everyday practices, and I will use these concepts as the foundation for my analysis and my discussion of the field data and literature. I conclude by discussing the conceptual framework of the study.

Chapter 2 sets out the national poverty alleviation interventions that have taken place based on the history, cultural and social background of the Khmer ethnic group in the Mekong Delta, and will focus on how the Khmer people were the pioneers of the Delta and how the changing of policies that occurred during the feudal-colonial period changed their lives. I argue that the consequences of different government poverty reduction policies have been significant in terms of affecting the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta in general and the Khmer people in particular, in terms of their social practices, cultural values and political economy. In the later sections, I examine the poverty reduction programs and their impact upon the poor ethnic communities in recent years, encompassing three aspects: a discussion of different approaches to and measurements of poverty, the main achievements and challenges faced when implementing government policies and their impacts upon the poor. Here I will explain the roles of non-government organizations (NGOs) in fighting poverty, in order to give a comprehensive view of the poverty context among the Khmer ethnicity in the Mekong Delta.



Chapters 3, 4 and 5 address the core findings of my thesis, and the focus here is placed on an examination of the perceptions of poverty held among the different actors, the affect of marginalization patterns on the poor Khmer community in An Giang Province and exploring the capital accumulation strategies employed in the study village. I will also acknowledge the overlapping and interacting theoretical debates that have taken place and what currently exists at a practical level.

Chapter 3 in particular provides a critique of the different self-generated meanings of poverty that exist among the various actors, by examining their perceptions about Khmer impoverishment. This will help explain why some ethnic groups' poverty rates stay high when compared to others.

Chapter 4 focuses on some specific cases among the Khmer villagers, the difficulties they face and the high level of poverty, issues that have been the target of national poverty reduction programs. This chapter also aims to analyze the marginalization experienced by local people as a consequence of state interventions and the implementation process. However, I also highlight the fact that the poor Khmer people do not sit passively by, but attempt to deal with their circumstances.

Chapter 5 clarifies the coping strategies used by the poor Khmer households when trying to combat poverty, showing that given the social vulnerability created by the state structure, they are not totally passive and have used a variety of coping strategies to overcome their impoverishment and maintain their livelihoods.

The concluding chapter pulls together the analysis from the three previous chapters to present a summary of the key findings, with a reflection on the theories and concepts discussed. I first conclude what has been discussed in the previous chapters, with an emphasis placed upon the main findings made during my fieldwork in Le Tri commune. I also highlight the significance of the findings for future research, and make recommendations regarding the government's poverty alleviation programs.