The impact of hydropower dam construction on local governance and livelihood change:
The case study of a Katu ethnic village in Central Vietnam

水力発電ダム建設による地域ガバナンスと生業の変化
－中部ベトナムのカトゥ少数民族集落を事例に－

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1. Introduction

The indigenous Katu people, who mainly live in Central Vietnam and belong to one of the officially recognized ethnic minorities in Vietnam, remains heavily dependent on natural resources. Surging electricity demand has fueled massive natural forest destruction of ethnic community under hydropower dam construction projects, leaving the community unable to practice their traditional livelihoods and pushing them further into many vulnerabilities. This research aims to explore the adverse livelihoods and local governance of Katu ethnic minority, who have been impacted by the hydropower development and forced to be resettled in a nearby village.

2. Methodology

Bo Hon village the resettlement area for displaced people due to inundation by the Binh Dien hydropower dam project in Binh Thanh Commune, Thua Thien Hue province since 2006, was selected as the research site. Participatory methods including the focus group discussion, in-depth interviews with the 28 households, and consultations with the government representatives were carried out mainly in 2012 and 2013.

3. Results and discussion

The Katu in the current resettlement village of Bo Hon were originally from Lac village, Huong Nguyen commune in A Luoi district. In 1995, 36 households in Lac village has voluntarily migrated to natural forest area belongs to Binh Thanh commune to gain more land for their livelihoods and given the name Bo Hon retrieved from a famous tree species growing in this area. Even though, this area is formally administrated by Commune People’s Committee of Huong Binh, the communities still laid down the function and powers of Katu traditional governance which natural resource were controlled by the village or community under the leadership of a village patriarch. Households were able to reclaim new lands, to access to natural forests and river resources as much as they needed, but these plots should belong to the village’s common property. Each family could cultivate 4.3 hectares in average for residence and production in which they planted bamboo, dry rice, cassava and so on. Main income sources of this community heavily depend on natural forest resources.

However, in 2006, due to the involuntary resettlement for the Binh Dien dam construction, the government did not calculate for the land of old Bo Hon village based on the local customary law, not having legal ownership. As a result, the community had lost traditional ownership on their lands, while a small plot of residential land was allocated to each household under the government ownership system. Furthermore, people in Bo Hon village have lost their right to access to the natural forest, where has been now strictly controlled by the government. This run directly counter to the customary governance system of the village. In fact, the village patriarch has played less important role because no longer exits the common properties of the village such as swidden lands, which used to be allocated by a patriarch. On the other hand, the new local governance system was introduced by the Commune’s People Committee, the village patriarch has to compete with the village headman. The duties of village head are to form the connection between the government at commune level as a representative of the communist party and the villagers in this community.

Likewise, the livelihoods in the resettled village have simultaneously changed. Land holding in this village is too small to generate enough income to sustain the lives of household members. The average size of landholdings among the households is just 0.07 hectares, sharply decrease 3.61 hectares in comparison with their original landholdings before resettlement. The livelihood sources have changed from heavily depend on natural forest to intensive agriculture, however, the households’ monthly income has significantly declined, which increased impoverishment livelihoods in Bo Hon village.

In conclusion, the implementation of Binh Dien hydropower dam construction project has not paid proper attention to traditional local system as well as the entitlement to forest land and other common resources which have notable impacts on the local governance and livelihoods. The result of this study implies that non-recognition of ethnic minorities’ customary rights to land and traditional governance can make substantial impoverishment of the local livelihoods.