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## Establishing collective organisations, 1978–81

### Introduction

After the war, along with restoring the country's war-torn economy, Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) leaders put great effort into preparing the south for collectivisation. They urged local authorities to carry out collectivisation step by step, moving from a low to a high level and from simple to complicated forms of collective organisations. The party urged local authorities to experiment with pilot collectives before expanding collectives extensively in the south. In 1977, VCP leaders instructed each province in the south to select one district in which to build a pilot collective in the winter–spring season of 1977–78. They were determined to carry out collectivisation and planned to complete it by 1980.<sup>1</sup>

The pilot collectives failed, especially in the Southern Region, and their form and character had to be changed to fit regional conditions. Despite these failures, party leaders praised the success of the pilot collectives in terms of mobilising peasants, collectivising their means of production and increasing productivity and collective members'

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1 Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương [hereinafter BCHTU] (1977), *Chỉ thị 29-CT/TW về chính sách được áp dụng ở các hợp tác xã thí điểm ở Miền Nam* [Directive No. 29-CT/TW on Policy for Pilot Collectives in the South], 26 December, Hà Nội: NXB Nông Nghiệp.

incomes compared with individual farming.<sup>2</sup> After the conference to consolidate agricultural collectives in the south in August 1978, VCP leaders persistently pushed collectivisation to achieve its goals.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the border war with Cambodia and China helped increase the VCP's determination to accomplish collectivisation.

Results varied, however, from region to region, and major problems were encountered, especially in the Mekong Delta. By the end of 1979, collectivisation was essentially complete in the Central Coast region, while it had been achieved for only a modest proportion of land and peasant households in the Mekong Delta.

This chapter examines the process and performance of pilot collectives in the Central Coast and the Mekong Delta and how and why VCP leaders decided to accelerate collectivisation; why collectivisation occurred rapidly in the Central Coast but faced many difficulties in the Mekong Delta; and how local authorities, cadres and peasants in both regions reacted to and influenced the collectivisation process.

## Experiments with collectives in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng (QN-ĐN), Central Coast region

Two years after resolving their postwar problems, QN-ĐN's provincial leaders seemed to trust their ability to meet not only the food subsistence requirements of the province, but also to bring the province's agriculture towards socialist large-scale production.<sup>4</sup> In September 1977, the QN-ĐN party cell released its resolution 'on development and agricultural transformation' (*Nghị quyết về phát triển và cải tạo nông nghiệp*), which scheduled the building of pilot collectives in 1977, their extension in 1978 and accelerating and completing collectivisation by 1980.<sup>5</sup> Provincial leaders argued that establishing collectives in rural areas

2 Nguyễn Thành Thơ (1978), Ra sức tiến hành hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp [Do our best to implement collectivisation], in Võ Chí Công et al. (eds), *Con đường làm ăn tập thể của nông dân* [*The Collective Farmer's Way*], Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, p. 13.

3 Ibid., p. 13. According to Nguyễn Thành Thơ, by August 1978, 132 pilot collectives had been established in the south. However, the majority of these (108) were in the Central Coast region; the Mekong Delta had only two, the South-Eastern region had 12 and the Central Highlands had 18.

4 This statement can be found in *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* (Be victorious in agriculture, 26 April 1977, p. 1).

5 Nghị Quyết hội nghị Ban chấp hành đảng bộ tỉnh (khóa 11) về vấn đề phát triển và cải tạo nông nghiệp [Resolution of the Eleventh Provincial Party Congress on agricultural transformation and improvement], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 7 September 1977, p. 1.

would not only fulfil the aims and ideals of the Communist Party, but would also be the peasants' reward for enduring great losses during the country's wars.<sup>6</sup>

As an initial step, provincial leaders decided to build three pilot collectives in three different districts: a commune-sized pilot collective (Duy Phước collective) in Duy Phước commune, Duy Xuyên district; a half-commune-sized collective (Hòa Tiến 1 collective) in Hòa Tiến commune, Hòa Vang district; and a commune-sized pilot collective (Bình Lãnh collective) in Bình Lãnh commune, Thăng Bình district. While the first two collectives were in lowland areas where land was more fertile and peasants were more prosperous, the third was in an area of undulating, less fertile land.

The main criteria provincial leaders used were that the place had to be an ex-revolutionary base (*cơ sở cách mạng*) and its party cell had to be 'strong' and decisive. For example, Bình Lãnh commune was selected because the area had been a strong revolutionary base and its party cell was loyal to the party's agricultural transformation policy, which would enable it to build a successful pilot collective.<sup>7</sup>

To establish these pilot collectives successfully at the outset, QN-ĐN authorities undertook considerable preparations. They set up a provincial committee responsible for agricultural transformation (*Ban cải tạo nông nghiệp*)<sup>8</sup> and launched a series of campaigns urging local cadres and peasants to study the provincial party committee's resolution.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the authorities opened a collectivisation school (*trường hợp tác hoá*) to train collective cadres. It trained 37 cadres and eight accountants for Duy Phước collective, 17 cadres and six accountants for Bình Lãnh collective and 15 cadres and five accountants for Hòa Tiến collective.<sup>10</sup> A former vice-chairman of Bình

6 This was cited from the speech by Hồ Nghinh, the Communist Party secretary for the province, at the meetings to establish Hòa Tiến 1 pilot collective and Bình Lãnh pilot collective (Mở đại hội xã viên thành lập hợp tác xã nông nghiệp Bình Lãnh và Hòa Tiến [Members' congress held to establish Bình Lãnh and Hòa Tiến collectives], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 5 November 1977, p. 1).

7 Author's interview, 20 October 2004, Bình Lãnh commune.

8 Thành lập Ban cải tạo nông nghiệp [Establishing a committee for agricultural transformation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 4 October 1977, p. 1.

9 Phần khởi nghiên cứu học tập Nghị quyết Tỉnh ủy về phát triển và cải tạo nông nghiệp [Studying the Provincial Party Committee's resolution on agricultural transformation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 10 September 1977, p. 1.

10 Tổng kết xây dựng thí điểm hợp tác xã nông nghiệp [Summing up establishing pilot collectives], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 27 May 1978, p. 1.

Lãnh collective remembered that, before establishing pilot collectives, he and other cadres in Bình Lãnh were sent for four months of training in Đà Nẵng city.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, to prevent peasants from slaughtering and selling draught animals before the collectives were established, the provincial people's committee released a directive forbidding people from buying draught animals. The directive stipulated that

buying draught animals within the commune requires the permission of the local People's Committee [*Ủy ban Nhân dân xã*]; exchange of stocks between two communes requires permission from the district People's Committee; and buying and selling animals between two districts requires permission from the provincial People's Committee.<sup>12</sup>

It also forbade peasants from intentionally injuring, poisoning or slaughtering their draught animals. Each commune also established a committee for mobilising peasants into collectives (*Ban vận động thành lập hợp tác xã*), which were in charge of convincing peasants to join collectives through study meetings or visiting 'difficult' peasant households who were reluctant or refused to join collectives.<sup>13</sup>

Villagers in Bình Lãnh collective recalled that, to establish the pilot collectives there, central, provincial and district authorities provided considerable assistance and resources to the commune. Seven northern cadres, including the chairs of the 'advanced' collectives in Thanh Hóa province, came to stay in the commune for seven months to provide help. They even directly managed the collectives. The district's authorities sent a vice-chairperson of its economic department to work as a chairperson of the Bình Lãnh collective. The central and provincial governments had also invested a great deal in Bình Lãnh collective by providing hundreds of tonnes of cement, lime, fertiliser and other resources.<sup>14</sup>

After a few months of preparation, provincial authorities started to establish the pilot collectives. An October 1977 article in the *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* newspaper reported that 100 per cent of peasant

11 Author's interview, 14 October 2005, Bình Lãnh.

12 Prohibiting private merchants from purchasing and slaughtering livestock, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 24 September 1977, p. 1.

13 Author's interviews, October–December 2005, Bình Lãnh and Bình Định communes.

14 Author's interviews, October–December 2005, Bình Lãnh.

households in Duy Phước commune, 96 per cent in Bình Lãnh and 95 per cent in Hòa Tiến 1 had ‘voluntarily signed the form to participate in collectives.’ The article urged ‘peasants in the province to follow the path of collective farming of Duy Phước, Bình Lãnh and Hòa Tiến.’<sup>15</sup> In late October 1977, local authorities announced the completion of the three pilot collectives and the establishment of collective members’ congresses (*đại hội xã viên*) to select their managerial boards (*ban quản trị hợp tác xã*). The percentage of peasant households joining collectives increased—to 98.3 per cent in Bình Lãnh collective and 99 per cent in Hòa Tiến 1.<sup>16</sup> Almost all land, draught animals and other means of production were collectivised: ‘One hundred per cent of agricultural land in Duy Phước [704 hectares], 97.7 per cent in Bình Lãnh [562 hectares] and 100 per cent in Hòa Tiến [373 hectares].’ Approximately 87 per cent of draught animals in Duy Phước, 90.1 per cent in Bình Lãnh and 100 per cent in Hòa Tiến 1 were collectivised, as were ‘production tools, machinery and other implements necessary for collectives.’<sup>17</sup>

Although the official documents claimed that most peasants joined pilot collectives voluntarily, few residents recalled being enthusiastic participants. Many peasants in Bình Lãnh claimed they did not like joining the collective but had to do so. They were ‘coerced’ (*bị bắt buộc*) or ‘pressured’ (*bị bắt bí*) and fearful of being isolated (*sợ cô lập*) if they did not join. Some were indifferent and just followed what others did. Some—especially land-poor but labour-rich families—seemed to be more eager than others to join. Some decided to join because they believed the state would take care of them and not let them die of hunger regardless of the collectives’ performance.<sup>18</sup> The provincial newspaper reported that some peasants did not believe in collective farming and, in the first few months, the pilot collectives found it difficult to mobilise members to work in the fields. Moreover, some peasants engaged in obstructive practices such as selling their draught animals before collectivisation, renting land in uncollectivised communes or seeking

15 Bà con nông dân trong tỉnh hãy theo con đường làm ăn tập thể của Duy Phước, Bình Lãnh, Hòa Tiến [Peasants in the province should follow the collective farming paths of Duy Phước, Bình Lãnh and Hòa Tiến people], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 11 October 1977, p. 1.

16 Mở đại hội xã viên thành lập hợp tác xã nông nghiệp Duy Phước [Members’ congress held to establish Duy Phước collective], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 29 October 1977, p. 1; Members’ congress held to establish Bình Lãnh and Hòa Tiến collectives, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 5 November 1977, p. 1.

17 Summing up establishing pilot collectives, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 27 May 1978, p. 1.

18 A woman in Bình Lãnh argued: ‘entering [a] collective means hunger, but the party could not let people die of it’ (Author’s interview, 20 October 2005).

outside jobs to make a living.<sup>19</sup> While the collective transplanted seedlings, many people focused only on growing their subsidiary crops (*màu*) on their '5 per cent land' (the portion of their land they were allowed to retain) or on land the collective had not yet used.<sup>20</sup>

Despite many peasants not liking collective work, the establishment of the three pilot collectives in QN-ĐN did not face difficulties. Local authorities were able to take control of peasants' land and other means of production and mobilise peasants into collective work. As in QN-ĐN, other parts of the Central Coast confronted few difficulties in building their pilot collectives. For example, Nghĩa Bình province, neighbouring QN-ĐN, also succeeded in building pilot collectives, among them one in Nghĩa Lâm commune that 99.9 per cent of peasant households joined.<sup>21</sup>

In May 1978, when the pilot collectives had their first harvest, the *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* newspaper reported 'a victory in the first step' (*thắng lợi bước đầu*). Staple food production and productivity in the three pilot collectives, it said, reached the highest figure ever, and the income of the collectives' members was higher than that of individual farmers.<sup>22</sup>

At a conference to provide a summary of the state of the pilot collectives in May 1978, Hồ Nghinh, the Communist Party Secretary for QN-ĐN, praised the collectives' achievements:

[T]hat victory confirmed the correct ... policies of our party, reflected the superiority of the mode of socialist collective production ... that victory defeated the propaganda and distorted statement of the enemy as well as solved doubts [*hỗ nghi*] and anxiety [*băn khoăn*] of some cadres and peasants.<sup>23</sup>

19 Summing up establishing pilot collectives, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 27 May 27, p. 1.

20 Thắng lợi bước đầu của phong trào Hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp [The first victory steps of collectivisation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 13 May 1978, p. 1.

21 HTX Nghĩa Lâm (1978), Kinh nghiệm xây dựng hợp tác xã Nghĩa Lâm, tỉnh Nghĩa Bình [Experiences from establishing Nghĩa Lâm collective in Nghĩa Bình province], in Võ Chí Công et al. (eds), *Con đường làm ăn tập thể của nông dân [The Collective Farmer's Way]*, Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, p. 147. Nghĩa Bình was the result of the amalgamation of Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định provinces.

22 The first victory steps of collectivisation, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 13 May 1978, p. 1.

23 Hồ Nghinh: Thắng lợi của việc xây dựng thí điểm hợp tác là thắng lợi có ý nghĩa của toàn đảng bộ và nhân dân toàn tỉnh [Hồ Nghinh: The success of pilot collectives is a significant victory for the province's party and people], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 27 May 1978, p. 1.

Peasants in Binh Lanh collective confirmed that, in the first season, the collective had a bumper harvest. Collective members received 3 kilograms of paddy per workday—a level never repeated in later years of collective farming. Many villagers attributed the bumper crop to favourable weather, the huge investment in the pilots and ‘good soil’ because the land had been uncultivated for a long time.<sup>24</sup> Some peasants and former staff of collectives revealed that the high payment per workday the peasants received for the first season was an inflated figure that the authorities used to attract peasants in other places to join collectives. To increase the payment per workday for peasants, leaders of the pilot collectives had transferred some of the peasants’ current work-points to the next season. A former cadre of Binh Lanh collective confirmed this deception:

The payment per workday was actually about 2 kilograms at that time. However, by trickily transferring part of the amount of work-points [*ghế điểm*] to the next season, payment per workday reached 3 kilograms. That’s why we never achieved that figure.<sup>25</sup>

In short, although peasants in QN-ĐN and other parts of the Central Coast were not eager to join collectives, the pilot collectives there faced weaker resistance than in other regions in the south. Local authorities were able to collectivise peasants’ land and their other main means of production and mobilise them to undertake collective work.

## Building pilot collectives in the Mekong Delta

Communist Party leaders anticipated strong peasant resistance to collectivisation in the Southern Region, so they undertook cautious experiments with pilot collectives. Instead of requesting each province to build its own pilot collectives, as in the Central Coast, in the Mekong Delta, party leaders built only one pilot collective for the whole region—in Tân Hội commune, Cai Lậy district, Tiền Giang province—in February 1977. Tân Hội commune was selected because it had been a revolutionary base of the National Liberation Front (NLF).

24 Villagers said the soil was in good condition because it had been left uncultivated for a long time. The collective also used huge volumes of agricultural inputs such as fertiliser, lime and manure.

25 Author’s interview, 20 October 2005, Binh Lanh.

This pilot was a commune-sized collective called Tân Hội collective (*Hợp Tác Xã Tân Hội*), which contained 904 households and 525 hectares of land. To make Tân Hội collective a shining example for the whole region, authorities had to invest considerable resources. For example, the central government sent more than 100 cadres from 'advanced collectives' (*hợp tác xã tiên tiến*) in the north to help. Despite this, the collective faced significant difficulties and many members dropped out. By 1978 only 234 peasant households remained in the collective. To try to save the collective, authorities decided to divide it into two; however, neither collective was able to hold out and both were dismantled (*tan rã*).<sup>26</sup>

With the failure of this large-scale (*qui mô lớn*) collective, party leaders decided to try a smaller-scale pilot. They chose Phú Quới hamlet, Yên Bình commune, in Gò Công district of Tiền Giang province, in which to build a hamlet-sized pilot, called Phú Quới collective. The main criteria for selecting Phú Quới were: 1) the natural conditions were favourable for the adoption of intensive farming (high-yielding rice) and increasing the number of crops per year; 2) peasants in the hamlet had been trained in production solidarity teamwork; and 3) its cadres and mass organisations were strong and capable of building a successful collective.<sup>27</sup>

After one month of preparation, Phú Quới pilot collective was officially established on 17 May 1978. It had 257 households (98.4 per cent of total households), 309.84 hectares of land (97.4 per cent of the total) and nearly 100 per cent of the machinery and draught animals in the hamlet. Unlike the previous experiments, the Phú Quới collective was able to survive beyond a few months of operation and was considered an exemplary example for other provinces.<sup>28</sup> Learning from this experience, some other provinces in the Mekong Delta shifted to experimenting with small-scale pilot collectives and production units (*Tập đoàn sản xuất*).<sup>29</sup>

26 Huỳnh Thị Gấm, Socioeconomic changes in the Mekong Delta, p. 80.

27 Đảng bộ huyện Gò Công (1978), Vận động thành lập hợp tác xã thí điểm ở Gò Công [Mobilising and establishing pilot collectives in Gò Công], in Võ Chí Công et al. (eds), *Con đường làm ăn tập thể của nông dân* [The Collective Farmer's Way], Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, pp. 129–30.

28 Ibid., pp. 133–4.

29 Huỳnh Thị Gấm, Socioeconomic changes in the Mekong Delta, p. 80.

## Experimenting with collectives in An Giang

In October 1978, An Giang province began to build pilot collectives. Among them were the Hòa Bình Thạnh commune-sized collective in Châu Thành district, and the Tây Huệ hamlet-sized collective in Long Xuyên town. Despite direct assistance from the provincial government, the building of the Hòa Bình Thạnh collective failed in terms of peasants' participation and performance. A recent official document revealed that

in order to mobilise peasants into joining the collective, policemen had to stand at the edges of the rice fields and request peasants to destroy their vegetable crops in order to give the land to the collective.<sup>30</sup>

Authorities also faced great difficulties convincing peasants to hand over their machinery and tools to collective organisations. The collective had to force peasants to hand over this equipment (*tập thể hoá bằng mọi giá*). Some owners strenuously objected, and 'intentionally removed some machine accessories; some broke the machines' chains or axles before handing them to the collective'. After collectivisation, the machines' new managers lacked the skill and motivation necessary to look after them, so that,

after one season, 100 per cent of machines were broken and had to be put into storage; hundreds of hectares of land were not ploughed in time and left uncultivated.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, the collective's performance was very poor. Peasants received a low income, equal to just one-quarter of their previous income from individual farming.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Hòa Bình Thạnh collapsed.

Meanwhile, the Tây Huệ hamlet-size collective was able to continue despite its poor performance in terms of the quality of peasant work and paddy productivity. When the collective was established, 211 out of 244 households joined, but the collective faced a high dropout rate.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Xuân Thu and Quang Thiện (2005), Đêm trước đổi mới: Công phá 'lũy tre' [On the eve of the renovation: Breaking through the 'bamboo hedges'], *Tuổi trẻ Online*, 14 December, available from: [tuoitre.vn/tin/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/phong-su-ky-su/20051204/dem-truoc-doi-moi-cong-pha-luy-tre/111625.html](http://tuoitre.vn/tin/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/phong-su-ky-su/20051204/dem-truoc-doi-moi-cong-pha-luy-tre/111625.html) (accessed 4 October 2017).

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Hợp tác xã Tây Huệ qua 6 năm làm ăn tập thể [Tây Huệ collective over the past 6 years], *An Giang*, 30 December 1983, p. 2.

In general, pilot collectives were not successful in An Giang and other Mekong Delta provinces. Central and provincial leaders in the delta therefore shifted full collectivisation from collectives to production units, which they now considered a basic form of collectivisation.<sup>34</sup>

## Experimenting with production units

Realising the failure of pilot collectives, many districts in An Giang built the more modest production units instead. The size of these units ranged from 40 to 50 hectares of land and from 50 to 100 households.

In late 1979, Chợ Mới district chose Long Điền B commune in which to build pilot production units.<sup>35</sup> According to a former official of Long Điền B commune, with the direct assistance of some local and northern cadres from the province of Thanh Hóa, they decided to build pilot production unit no. 1 (*tập đoàn sản xuất số 1*) in Long Phú 1 hamlet. Long Phú 1 hamlet was considered to have strong leadership (*chính quyền ấp mạnh*) thanks to the hamlet chief, who was 'powerful' and 'enthusiastic' (*nhiệt tình*) about agricultural transformation. In addition, a large proportion of the population in Long Phú 1 was Catholic, and most of the land in the hamlet had been owned by the local church (*đất ông cha, đất nhà chung*) but rented to peasants, meaning the land there was already considered more like communal than individual land. Authorities believed that when the church leaders agreed to hand the land over to them, such collectivisation would be acceptable to the peasants. Finally, the proportion of landless and land-poor households in Long Phú 1 was relatively high compared with other hamlets, so authorities expected such households would be more eager to farm collectively than better-off households.<sup>36</sup>

Local villagers recalled that the district committee for agricultural transformation undertook a lot of preparation before establishing production unit no. 1, such as selecting good cadres to fill the unit's management board, rezoning land boundaries and mobilising peasants to join. Peasants in the hamlet whose land was within the boundaries

34 Quang Truong, *Agricultural collectivization*, p. 191.

35 BCHDBHCM, *The History of Chợ Mới Party Cell*, p. 175.

36 Author's interview, 29 July 2005, Long Điền B.

of the production unit were preferred members, while landless households in the hamlet or neighbouring hamlets were also invited to join.<sup>37</sup>

Marshalling peasants to join the production unit was not easy. Villagers recalled that, of the 10 households invited, only five or six participated; more poor than better-off households joined; and ‘some better-off households who had more than 30 *công* of land detested [*chê*] collective farming in the production unit, so they ran off to hire land in other places to make a living’. They also recalled that some residents who lost land were so upset they refused to join.<sup>38</sup>

When asked why they joined, many former members of the production unit said it was ‘for fear of the new authorities’ (*sợ chính quyền mới*), ‘fear of being taken to the new economic zones’ (*sợ đưa đi vùng kinh tế mới*), because they were being coerced (*bị ép buộc*) or ‘in order to keep the land’ (*vào để giữ đất*). One man in Long Phú commented:

[O]ut of 100 people, only five who were landless and loved farming were happy to join. The remainder were coerced into joining; if we didn’t participate how could we make a living and keep our land?<sup>39</sup>

Despite such difficulties, 83 households were reported to have joined production unit no. 1, and it began to operate with 55 hectares of land in the summer–autumn of 1979.<sup>40</sup> Unlike a collective, the production unit collectivised land but not machinery, draught animals or other peasant-owned resources. A machinery unit (*tập đoàn máy*) was in charge of the peasants’ farm machinery. Villagers referred to the main unit as the ‘land unit’ (*tập đoàn đất*) to distinguish it from the machinery unit, and both were to become teams or brigades in a future collective. The production unit operated according to a work-points system in which peasants farmed collectively and were rewarded with a number of points. Although official policy encouraged payment for land (*trả hoa lợi ruộng đất*), the leaders of production unit no. 1 did not apply this.

37 Ibid. The production unit’s management board consisted of five staff who were considered to have come from ‘revolutionary tradition–related families’ (*gia đình có truyền thống cách mạng*): the chairperson, one vice-chairperson in charge of labour management, another vice-chairperson in charge of planning, one accountant and one storekeeper.

38 Author’s interviews, 2–30 June 2005, Long Điền B.

39 Author’s interview, 25 September 2004, Long Điền B.

40 The total number of households within the boundaries of the production unit was about 150 (Author’s interview, 17 August 2005, Long Điền B).

Despite considerable assistance from district and northern cadres and significant investment in the pilot production unit, its performance was not good. Many people were reported to have ‘joined the production unit but did not go to work in the fields’ (*vào tập đoàn nhưng không ra đồng*); some sent their children and other ‘subsidiary labour’ (*lao động phụ*) to work while ‘the main labour’ (*lao động chính*) in households made a living in other ways. Villagers also mentioned that peasants did their production unit work unenthusiastically and carelessly, and ‘no-one took care of common property’ (*cha chung không ai khóc*). Moreover, the production unit was unable to mobilise peasants to complete their work on time (*làm không kịp việc*). For example, weeding of the production unit’s rice fields went so slowly that ‘the weeds grew faster than the speed of weeding.’<sup>41</sup> One man outside production unit no. 1 recalled:

I went to see how people in the production unit worked collectively. When I saw the weeds were overgrown, I lost my interest [*thấy mà mất ham*] in collective farming. Meanwhile, in individuals’ rice fields, I could not see any weeds [*không thấy một cọng cỏ*]. At that time I was afraid that collective farming would expand into my hamlet.<sup>42</sup>

(See Chapter 5 for more about peasants’ everyday politics.)

According to a former cadre of production unit no. 1, for the first season (summer–autumn 1979), paddy productivity was about 60 per cent of individual farming rates. Because few peasants were working in the fields, the total of peasants’ work-points was small. As a result, payment per workday for peasants was relatively high (about 10 kilograms per workday). Therefore, production unit no. 1 was known as an exemplary case in the Chợ Mới district. Party leaders presented it as a typical case (*đi báo cáo điển hình*) at provincial and central government conferences on pilot collectives in 1979.<sup>43</sup>

In the winter–spring of 1979–80, authorities in Long Điền B commune decided to create another production unit, unit no. 2, in Long Phú 2, at the nearby hamlet of Long Phú 1. Production unit no. 2 faced similar difficulties in mobilising and managing peasants and its performance

41 Author’s interviews, 27–30 June 2005, Long Điền B.

42 Author’s interview, 16 August 2005, Long Điền B.

43 Author’s interview, 17 August 2005, Long Điền B.

was poor from the outset. Although the performance of these two pilot collectives steadily deteriorated, local cadres tried their best to keep them from collapsing.

## Accelerating collectivisation

In April 1978, VCP leaders released Directive No. 43/CT-TW (14 April 1978), which stressed ‘firmly grasping the task of agricultural transformation and speeding it up in the south’.<sup>44</sup> It advocated for local officials in the south to make agricultural transformation their ‘central and regular task’ (*nhiệm vụ trọng tâm và thường xuyên*), which they should carry out in a ‘positive, unhesitant and not overhasty and careless manner’.<sup>45</sup>

At the conference on the consolidation of agricultural collectives in the south in August 1978, party leaders also revealed that the country now faced a ‘new situation’ relating to China ‘inciting’ Cambodia into a border war against Vietnam. The party leaders stressed ‘this new situation requires us to speed up agricultural transformation and try our best to implement it in the south’.<sup>46</sup> They planned to implement a great wave of collectivisation in the south in 1979 to complete the establishment of collectives and production units by 1980.<sup>47</sup> The following sections examine how collectivisation was accelerated in QN-ĐN in the Central Coast and in An Giang in the Mekong Delta.

### QN-ĐN in the Central Coast

Following the three initial pilot collectives, QN-ĐN established four more (*hợp tác xã nông nghiệp*), in the spring–summer of 1978. According to *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* newspaper accounts, by June 1978, the province had established seven pilot collectives, which were reportedly operating well. The provincial leaders attributed the ‘good’ performance of these pilots largely to ‘the correctness of agricultural transformation policy’ and ‘the superiority of new production

44 ĐCSVN, Politburo’s Directive No. 43, pp. 183–91.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, p. 9.

47 Võ Chí Công (1978), *Con đường làm ăn tập thể của nông dân* [The collective farmer’s way], in Võ Chí Công et al. (eds), *Con đường làm ăn tập thể của nông dân* [The Collective Farmer’s Way], Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, p. 71.

relations'.<sup>48</sup> Excited with the performance of pilot collectives and in response to the VCP's Directive No. 43 (14 April 1978), QN-ĐN's leaders called for a rapid and extensive increase in collectivisation for the winter–spring of 1978–79.<sup>49</sup>

By October 1978, QN-ĐN had established 113 collectives involving 46 per cent of the province's peasant households and 35 per cent of its agricultural land.<sup>50</sup> By that time, officials in Duy Xuyên, a key district that had established the first pilot collective in QN-ĐN, announced that collectivisation there was largely complete, making it the first district in QN-ĐN, and the first in the south, to achieve completion.<sup>51</sup> Duy Xuyên had established 19 collectives, which almost all of the peasant households in the district had joined.<sup>52</sup> Inspired by the high speed of collectivisation, provincial leaders decided in October 1978 to shorten by one year the schedule for fulfilling the main targets of their five-year agricultural plan for 1976–80. This meant completing collectivisation and reaching the production target of 500,000 tonnes of staple food by 1979 instead of 1980.<sup>53</sup>

By April 1979, one year after the VCP issued Directive No. 43, QN-ĐN had established 164 collectives, involving 70 per cent of total peasant households. Collectivisation in other Central Coast provinces was also

48 Xã Luận: Xây dựng quan hệ sản xuất mới trong nông nghiệp [The editorial: Building new production relations in agriculture], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 14 June 1978, p. 1. The four new pilot collectives were Hòa Tiến no. 2 collective in Hòa Vang district, Quyết Tiến collective and Tiến Phong collective in Điện Bàn district, and Tam Thành collective in Tam Kỳ district.

49 Tích cực chuẩn bị mở rộng phong trào tổ chức hợp tác xã sản xuất nông nghiệp [Be positive towards the extension of collectivisation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 10 June 1978, p. 1.

50 Thành lập xong 98 hợp tác xã sản xuất nông nghiệp [98 agricultural collectives have been established], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 11 October 1978, p. 3.

51 Đoàn cán bộ Ban cải tạo nông nghiệp Trung ương, các tỉnh Miền Trung và Hội liên hiệp phụ nữ Việt Nam thăm huyện Duy Xuyên [Cadres of the Central Agricultural Transformation Committee, the Central Coast provinces and Vietnam Women's Union visited Duy Xuyên district], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 25 October 1978, p. 1.

52 Duy Xuyên had 28,000 hectares of uncultivated land, 11 communes and 19,462 households. It had 7,000 hectares of agricultural land, including 3,400 hectares of rice-growing land, and the level of land per capita was 1 sào and 11 thước (equal to 867 sq m). Farming households accounted for 81.4 per cent of the population; fishing, 3.4 per cent; handicrafts, 9.4 per cent; traders, 1.4 per cent; and other professions, 4.1 per cent (Duy Xuyên khẩn trương xây dựng huyện để chỉ đạo và quản lý các hợp tác xã [Duy Xuyên district's rush to build capacity to lead collectives], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 25 October 1978, p. 1).

53 Xã luận: Phần đầu hoàn thành những mục tiêu về sản xuất và cải tạo nông nghiệp đữa trong năm 1976–1980 của tỉnh vào năm 1979 [The editorial: Do our best to meet 1976–1980 targets of production and agricultural transformation by 1979], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 21 October 1978, p. 1.

rapid. By April 1979, the Central Coast region had largely completed collectivisation in two forms, collectives and production units (see Table 4.1).<sup>54</sup>

Table 4.1 The number of collectives and the percentage of peasant households joining collectives in five Central Coast provinces by April 1979

Province	Number of collectives	Percentage of total peasant households
Bình Trị Thiên	231	85.5
Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng	164	70.0
Nghĩa Bình	246	57.8
Khánh Hòa	180	80.0
Thuận Hải	183	55.4
Central Coast region	1,004	70.3

Source: Cùng với cả Miền Nam tỉnh ta khẩn trương hoàn thành hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp [Our province, together with southern provinces, hurries to complete collectivisation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 27 June 1979, p. 1.

*Nhân Dân* newspaper reported on 29 April 1980 that, by the end of 1979, the Central Coast had established 1,114 collectives and 1,500 production units, which accounted for 83 per cent of peasant households and 76 per cent of agricultural land. The article praised collective farming for achieving better levels of paddy productivity, staple food production and food contribution to the state than individual farming.<sup>55</sup>

By the end of 1979, QN-ĐN authorities announced the completion of collectivisation in the lowland and midland areas. The province had established 235 collectives involving 18,400 peasant households (nearly 93 per cent of the province's peasant households) and 106,000 hectares of agricultural land (84 per cent of the total land). The remaining peasant households and land were in mountainous areas where ethnic

54 Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng. (1979). Cùng với cả Miền Nam tỉnh ta khẩn trương hoàn thành hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp [Our province, together with southern provinces, hurries to complete collectivisation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 27 June, p. 1.

55 Năm năm cải tạo xã hội chủ nghĩa đối với nông nghiệp ở Miền Nam [Five years of socialist reform for agriculture in the south], *Nhân Dân*, 29 April 1980, p. 1. Similar praise for collective farming was found in *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* (Our province, together with southern provinces, 27 June 1979, p. 1); and in Thế Đạt (1981), *Nền nông nghiệp Việt Nam từ sau cách mạng tháng Tám năm 1945* [Vietnamese Agriculture Since the August Revolution 1945], Hà Nội: NXB Nông Nghiệp, pp. 215–16.

minorities lived.<sup>56</sup> The size of collectives ranged from 200 to 700 hectares and among these were 48 collectives the size of a commune (*xã*). On average, each collective had 421 hectares of agricultural land, 1,542 workers and 762 households.<sup>57</sup> The acceleration of collectivisation in QN-ĐN is illustrated in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Seasonal acceleration of collectivisation in QN-ĐN, 1977–79

	Winter– spring 1977–78	Spring– summer 1978	Summer– autumn 1978	Winter– spring 1978–79	Spring– summer 1979	Summer– autumn 1979	End of 1979
No. of collectives	4	4	7	114	132	164	235
Percentage of peasant households	n/a	n/a	n/a	50	57.8	70	92.9

n/a = not available

Sources: Thắng lợi bước đầu của phong trào Hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp [The first victory steps of collectivisation], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 13 May 1978, p. 1; Thành lập xong 98 hợp tác xã sản xuất nông nghiệp [98 agricultural collectives have been established], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 11 October 1978, p. 3; Năm 1979 tỉnh ta căn bản hoàn thành hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp ở các huyện đồng bằng [The midlands of our province have completed collectivisation in 1979], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 17 October 1979, p. 1; Hội nghị Ban cải tạo nông nghiệp tỉnh: Ra sức củng cố HTX để làm tốt vụ sản xuất Đông–Xuân [Provincial Committee for Agricultural Transformation: Strengthening cooperatives to make good in winter–spring production], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 26 December 1979, p. 1.

In Thăng Bình district, as in many other districts in QN-ĐN, collectivisation was rapid and faced no strong peasant resistance. After ‘successfully’ establishing the experimental collective of Bình Lãnh, in mid-1978 the district’s leaders called for the setting up of collectives in other communes. By September 1978, Thăng Bình district had established 10 collectives in five of its 20 communes.<sup>58</sup> By June 1979, Thăng Bình had established 17 collectives in 13 communes, involving 54 per cent of peasant households and 44 per cent of agricultural land; and,

<sup>56</sup> The midlands of our province, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 17 October 1979, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Phong trào hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp: Sự kiện và con số [Overview of collectivisation: Events and figures], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 15 June 1983, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Thăng Bình chuẩn bị xây dựng 10 hợp tác xã [Thăng Bình is about to establish 10 collectives], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 9 September 1978, p. 1.

among these, 10 communes had largely completed collectivisation.<sup>59</sup> By the end of 1979, Thăng Bình's authorities announced the completion of collectivisation, with 36 collectives across its 20 communes.

Bình Định commune in Thăng Bình district completed collectivisation by October 1979, and had two collectives: Bình Định collective no. 1 and Bình Định collective no. 2 (where I did fieldwork and interviews in 2004 and 2005). A former cadre of Bình Định collective no. 2 recalled that, after one month of mobilising peasants, almost all households in the area had joined the collective. Only 20 peasant households declined, most of whose occupants were too old to work.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, by 1979–80, collectives (*hợp tác xã*) were the main farming organisations in QN-ĐN and other provinces of the Central Coast region. A typical collective in QN-ĐN encompassed most or all of a commune and had from 200 to 700 hectares of agricultural land. On average, collectives in QN-ĐN were as large as, or even larger than, typical collectives in the north.<sup>61</sup> For example, the Bình Lãnh commune-sized collective in Thăng Bình district had 1,900 hectares of uncultivated land, 564 hectares of agricultural land and 1,050 households.<sup>62</sup>

QN-ĐN leaders defined collectives as 'socialist agricultural production economic organisations established voluntarily by peasants and under the leadership of the party with the guidance and help of the state'.<sup>63</sup> Peasants over 16 years of age were supposed to do collective work. When participating in the collective, each member had to contribute a share (*cổ phần*) to the collective's assets. Households were allowed to retain part of their land—known as '5 per cent land'—mostly from their garden, for the family economy (*kinh tế gia đình*). All other land and livestock were supposed to be in the collective.<sup>64</sup>

59 Thăng Bình sơ kết hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp, phát động thi đua với HTX Duy Phước, Định Công và Vũ Thăng [A preliminary summing up of collectivisation in Thăng Bình], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 2 June 1979, p. 1.

60 Author's interview, 20 April 2004, Bình Định.

61 Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*, p. 138. The enlarged collectives in the north in 1974 averaged about 200 hectares of land and 350 households.

62 HTX Bình Lãnh từ yếu kém vươn lên tiên tiến [Bình Lãnh collective is moving away from a position of weakness], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 9 June 1979, p. 2.

63 Một số quy định về xây dựng hợp tác xã [Some regulations on establishing collectives], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 26 August 1978, p. 1.

64 Ibid.

QN-ĐN had met the agricultural transformation target set by the VCP's leaders. Collectivisation was completed within one year—even faster than in the north, where collectivisation took two years to complete.<sup>65</sup> In explaining the rapid collectivisation in QN-ĐN, one provincial party leader attributed it to the 'correctness' of the central party's policy, 'the loyalty of local authorities', 'the close relationship between peasants and the party' and the extensive preparations for collectivisation such as organising peasants into labour exchange teams and training a large number of cadres.<sup>66</sup>

My interviews also revealed that local cadres from the provincial to the commune level in QN-ĐN were devoted to the policy. After reunification, provincial cadres were local ex-revolutionaries or returnees from the north. They were familiar with the north's collectivisation model and could apply it to QN-ĐN. People in QN-ĐN had a long history of complying with state policies (*phục tùng nhà nước*); therefore, after reunification, local cadres and residents tended to comply with the VCP's agricultural transformation policy.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, local cadres were considered more 'bolshvist' and 'fascist' than their counterparts in the Southern Region and were willing to use coercive measures to force peasants to join collectives.<sup>68</sup>

A former vice-chairman of Bình Định collective no. 2 admitted that, at that time, he was loyal to the VCP's agricultural transformation policy because he had been taught that socialism was ideal, and the main task of the new authorities was to transform the old economy and build a new one. He believed collectivisation was the only way to prosperity, justice and the elimination of exploitation. He acknowledged that he had at first trusted the VCP's policy. He reasoned:

In the war with America, the north carried out collectivisation and supported the south to win the war. As far as I knew, most of the chairpersons of agricultural collectives in the north were women. So, we men could do it.

65 Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*, p. 69.

66 Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng. (1979). Cuối năm 1978: Ra đời 107 hợp tác xã bao gồm 96,704 nông dân, chiếm 50% số hộ trong tỉnh [By late 1978: 107 cooperatives were established, including 96,704 farmers, accounting for 50 per cent of households in the province], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 2 December, p. 1.

67 Author's interview, 10 October 2004, Tam Kỳ.

68 Author's interviews, 26 December 2005, Thành Phố, Hồ Chí Minh; 6 October 2004, Bình Định.

... [N]orthern cadres kept us in the dark, too. They did not tell us the shortcomings of collectivisation in the north. Even so, some southern returnees did.<sup>69</sup>

With high expectations for collectivisation and loyalty to the VCP, local cadres were keen to bring peasants into collectives. Some former cadres admitted they had to use various tactics, even ‘tricky measures’ (*thủ đoạn*) and harsh sanctions, to force peasants to comply. For example, some threatened peasant households who declined to join. Villagers who refused to join faced obstacles in their individual farming efforts and encountered problems with official paperwork, especially that relating to children’s schooling and access to health care and state goods.<sup>70</sup> These measures were quite similar to those used in the north during 1959–61.<sup>71</sup>

In theory, each collective was built on three principles: voluntary membership, mutual benefit and democratic governance. In reality, peasants were coerced into joining the collective. A former chairman of Binh Lanh collective recalled:

The first principle of collectivisation was coercion. Livestock [*trâu bò*] and land were all collectivised. Right before establishing the collective, application forms were sent to ask peasants to sign. If someone declined to join, his land was replaced with barren land far away so that peasants joined out of fear.<sup>72</sup>

In contrast to previous research suggesting the rapid collectivisation in the Central Coast region was due to peasants living in unfavourable conditions and ‘hoping for a better life’, my interviews show that many peasants joined collectives out of fear.<sup>73</sup> Many villagers who joined recalled ‘being coerced’ (*bị bắt buộc*), ‘fearing isolation’ (*sợ bị cô lập*) and ‘fearing disadvantage’ (*sợ bị thua thiệt*). Some also said they joined out of ‘ignorance’ (*không biết*), because they were ‘just following others’ (*họ vào thì mình vào*) and because ‘being poor together was okay’ (*nghèo thì nghèo chung*).<sup>74</sup> Asked whether he volunteered to participate, one 60-year-old man in Thanh Yên village of Bình Định commune, Thăng Bình district, recalled:

69 Author’s interview, 20 April 2004, Bình Định.

70 Author’s interview, 21 October 2004, Bình Lanh.

71 See Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*, p. 71.

72 Author’s interview, 21 October 2004, Bình Lanh.

73 Quang Truong, *Agricultural collectivization*, p. 207.

74 Author’s interviews, October 2004, Thanh Yên and Hiến Lộc.

If we did not participate, we had to endure a lot of disadvantages; we could not keep our land but were given bad land far away. During the collectivisation campaign, local cadres warned that if we did not join, our cows and buffaloes would not be allowed to graze on, even go through, collective fields. Moreover, if we did not join, we would be isolated from other people; we could not buy goods from the state; our children would not have access to education and other things.<sup>75</sup>

A recent unpublished essay by a well-known journalist in QN-ĐN reported that, when the Bình Lãnh, Duy Xuyên and Hòa Tiến 1 pilot collectives were established, peasants in other areas of QN-ĐN worried (*lo lắng*), doubted (*ngghi ngờ*) and feared (*sợ hãi*) that collectivisation would reach them.

Many explanations and discrediting of rumours that collectivisation in the north had produced bad consequences failed to stop peasants in many areas of QN-ĐN slaughtering or selling their animals before collectivisation, destroying plants and selling their agricultural machinery.<sup>76</sup>

Villagers in Thanh Yên village, Bình Định commune, admitted that many people slaughtered or sold their draught animals to avoid collectivising them.<sup>77</sup> However, although many peasants doubted the benefits of collective farming, most joined.

## The Mekong Delta

As previously mentioned, in 1977, authorities in the Mekong Delta had great trouble establishing experimental commune-sized collectives. Hence, in 1978, they scaled back their expectations and concentrated on setting up hamlet-sized ones and then production units (*tập đoàn sản xuất*) with between 30 and 50 hectares of land. At the conference on agricultural transformation in the south held in Cửu Long province in April 1979, national leaders claimed that production

75 Author's interview, 17 October 2005, Thanh Yên. It was said that peasants who joined collectives received purchasing books (*sổ mua bán*) that enabled them to buy fuel, soap, salt, clothes and other goods in state shops. Non-collective members could not access these goods (Author's interview, 7 October 2005, Thanh Yên).

76 L. K. (1990), *Từ quá khứ đến hiện tại: Mười lăm năm ấy* [From past to present: Over the past 10 years], Unpublished essay. I was given this article when I interviewed the author, a former *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* journalist, on 20 October 2005.

77 Author's interviews, 1–30 October 2005, Bình Định.

units were the most suitable collective organisation for the Southern Region as a whole and for the Mekong Delta in particular. Therefore, they called for the region to accelerate collectivisation in the form of production units instead of through collectives. However, the national leaders still wanted to experiment with collectives and hoped that many more could eventually be set up by consolidating well-established production units.<sup>78</sup>

In 1979, in response to the VCP leaders' policy, An Giang and other provinces in the Southern Region (and in the Mekong Delta and South-Eastern Region) accelerated the formation of production units. According to a report of the Central Committee for Southern Agricultural Transformation (BCTNNMN), by November 1979, the Southern Region had established 13,178 production units and 272 pilot collectives, accounting for 33.5 per cent of peasant households and 26.9 per cent of agricultural land.<sup>79</sup> However, according to the *Nhân Dân* newspaper in April 1980, few of these collectives operated well; many failed to show 'the superiority of new production relations' and failed as 'an appropriate form of collective'.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, only 7,000 production units in the Southern Region actually farmed collectively (*làm ăn chung*), and even these faced many difficulties. The remaining production units had not yet started to farm or had started but failed. Production unit members 'still did not feel secure' (*vẫn chưa an tâm*), even in some of the well-performing units. Some units deviated from their production schedule (*tiêu cực trong sản xuất*), illegally giving 'blank contracts' to households (*khoán trắng cho hộ*), and were verging on collapse (*sắp tan rã*).<sup>81</sup>

78 BCTNNMN (1978), *Thông báo về cuộc họp từ ngày 22–24 tháng 10 năm 1979 của Ban cải tạo nông nghiệp Miền Nam* [Report of Central Committee for Agricultural Transformation in the South on 22–24 October 1979 Meeting], 5 November, Hồ Chí Minh: Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp Miền Nam, p. 8.

79 Ibid.

80 Five years of socialist reform, *Nhân Dân*, 29 April 1980, p. 1. This article also shows that most of the pilot collectives in the Southern Region were in Sông Bé province (152 collectives) and Tiền Giang (70 collectives).

81 BCTNNMN (1979), *Thông tri về việc kịp thời và ra sức củng cố các tập đoàn sản xuất nông nghiệp* [Announcement on Doing the Best to Improve Production Units], 1 November, Hồ Chí Minh: Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp Miền Nam, pp. 1–2.

A typical example is Minh Hải province in the Mekong Delta, where collectivisation accelerated extensively in 1979. Within a year, the province had 1,114 production units, involving 45.8 per cent of households and 36 per cent of agricultural land (see Table 4.3).

Only 300 of 1,114 production units were actually farming collectively (*tập đoàn ăn chia*), and only 130 of these 300 units had socialist qualities (*tập đoàn theo đúng tính chất xã hội chủ nghĩa*)—that is, they produced collectively and distributed their output according to the work-points members earned. The remaining 170 production units only farmed semi-collectively. This means that, while some farming was done collectively, individual households privately cultivated their own land or part of the production unit's land.<sup>82</sup>

Table 4.3 Accelerating collectivisation in Minh Hải province, 1979

Date	Tasks	No. of production units
January 1979	Experimental pilot production units	3
March 1979	Extending pilot production units	12
April 1979	Accelerating collectivisation	100
May 1979	Accelerating collectivisation	500
June 1979	Accelerating collectivisation	800
August 1979	Accelerating collectivisation	1,081
October 1979	Accelerating collectivisation	1,114

Source: Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp Minh Hải (BCTNNMH). (1979). *Dự thảo báo cáo: Nhận định, đánh giá tình hình cải tạo nông nghiệp thời gian qua ở Minh Hải* [A Draft Report: Evaluation of Agricultural Transformation in Minh Hải], 13 November. Minh Hải: Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp tỉnh Minh Hải.

In response to the poor results of collectivisation in the Southern Region, party leaders in November 1979 instructed everyone to 'try their best to strengthen production unit organisations'.<sup>83</sup> The national leaders also lowered their expectations and called for the acceleration of collectivisation in a 'positive and firm way' (*phương châm tích cực và vững chắc*) instead of the 'urgent way' (*khẩn trương*) advocated in

82 Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp Minh Hải (BCTNNMH). (1979). *Dự thảo báo cáo: Nhận định, đánh giá tình hình cải tạo nông nghiệp thời gian qua ở Minh Hải* [A Draft Report: Evaluation of Agricultural Transformation in Minh Hải], 13 November. Minh Hải: Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp tỉnh Minh Hải.

83 BCTNNMH, *Announcement on Doing the Best to Improve Production Units*, pp. 1–2.

previous policies. They also instructed the Southern Region to focus on solidifying (*củng cố*) existing collective organisations rather than accelerating the formation of new ones. In particular, the region was to put much more emphasis on improving the quality of local cadres and creating the ‘necessary conditions’ for them to avoid having to carry out collectivisation in a subjective, hasty and coercive way, which was perceived to be harming production and living standards.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the VCP leaders’ efforts, by early 1980, more than two-thirds of the production units in the Southern Region had collapsed. For example, of the 2,653 production units established in Hậu Giang province in 1979, ‘there were no more than 100’ that could ‘stand firm.’<sup>85</sup> By the end of 1980, there were only 3,729 production units and 137 collectives remaining in the Southern Region.<sup>86</sup> These collective organisations accounted for only 8 per cent of peasant households and 6 per cent of land.<sup>87</sup>

VCP leaders often blamed local cadres for the poor results, accusing those in the Southern Region of being ‘simpleminded’ and ‘hasty’, suggesting they ‘propagandised and mobilised the masses inadequately’ (*thiếu tuyên truyền và vận động quần chúng*), ‘coerced the masses’ and had committed ‘shortcomings’ in management.<sup>88</sup> The BCTNNMN’s report revealed that many local-level cadres in the Southern Region did not grasp fully the content of collectivisation policy and had not studied it thoroughly. They were therefore unable to explain the policy to lower-level cadres and the masses and erred in their instructions, making collectivisation even harder to implement.<sup>89</sup> In evaluating the obstacles to slow collectivisation in the Southern Region, VCP leaders complained that:

84 ĐCSVN (2004), Nghị quyết hội nghị lần thứ 6 Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khóa IV [Resolution of the 6th Plenum of the Fourth Party Central Committee], in ĐCSVN, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập: Tập 40, 1979* [Party Document: Volume 40, 1979], Hà Nội: NXB Chính Trị Quốc Gia, p. 362.

85 Phan Quang, *The Mekong Delta*, p. 83.

86 Vũ Oanh (1984), *Hoàn thành điều chỉnh ruộng đất, đẩy mạnh cải tạo xã hội chủ nghĩa đối với nông nghiệp các tỉnh Nam Bộ* [Completing Land Redistribution and Speeding Up Agricultural Transformation in the Southern Region], Hà Nội: NXB Sự Thật, p. 11.

87 Lê Thanh Nghị (1981), *Cải tiến công tác khoán sản phẩm để thúc đẩy sản xuất, củng cố HTX nông nghiệp* [Improving the Product Contract to Solidify Collectives], Hà Nội: NXB Sự Thật, p. 33.

88 Ngô Vinh Long, Some aspects of cooperativization in the Mekong Delta, p. 166; BCTNNMN, *Announcement on Doing the Best to Improve Production Units*, p. 2.

89 BCTNNMN, *Report of Central Committee for Agricultural Transformation*, p. 6.

Local cadres and party members including key cadres have not yet sympathised with the agricultural transformation revolution [*chưa cảm tình với cách mạng cải tạo nông nghiệp*]. They still neglect [*thờ ơ*] and do not support it. They stand outside and leave the task of collectivisation to other specialised departments. Besides this, some negative cadres who were pursuing their own interests did not want to implement collectivisation. When it went smoothly, they were silent but when collectivisation went badly, they criticised it by amplifying its shortcomings and exacerbating the situation. They tolerated 'bad elements' who harmed the process.<sup>90</sup>

### An Giang province

After reunification, local authorities in many parts of An Giang province faced numerous difficulties in consolidating their power, with a crucial problem being a shortage of cadres to fill positions of local authority. Additionally, southerners returning from the north seldom worked at the local level. So, to find new cadres, local authorities had to recruit people who were not familiar and did not have any experience with the VCP's agrarian policies, especially collectivisation.

Despite these difficulties, by the end of 1979, An Giang had established 308 production units, six pilot collectives and 55 machinery units (*tập đoàn máy*); collective organisations accounted for about 5 per cent of agricultural land and 7 per cent of peasant households.<sup>91</sup> However, the majority of these production units were classified as weak and of inadequate quality (*chưa đúng tính chất*). For example, Phú Tân district had established six production units in 1979 but only two were involved in collective farming. Likewise, only nine of 94 production units in Châu Thành district had 'socialist characteristics'.<sup>92</sup> Some production units faced difficulties due to peasants' resistance and were dismantled a few months after being established. In some districts where a majority of people were of Khmer ethnicity, such as Tịnh Biên and Tri Tôn, no production units had been established.<sup>93</sup>

90 Ibid., p. 5.

91 An Giang vững vàng đi tới [An Giang is doing well], *An Giang*, 6 January 1980, p. 1. The proportions of land and peasant households belonging to collective organisations are based on my own calculations.

92 Collectivisation continues to progress, *An Giang*, 7 June 1981, p. 2.

93 Author's interviews with provincial cadres, 31 May 2005. An Giang's local archives remained almost silent on this matter so I cannot know exactly how many production units were dismantled in 1979.

Faced with great difficulties in extending the number of production units and making them function as collectives, An Giang's leaders in 1980–81 put more effort into consolidating existing production units rather than rapidly creating more (see more detail in the next section). As a result, collectivisation during this period stagnated. At the end of 1980, An Giang had 317 production units, six collectives, 1,584 production solidarity teams and 64 machinery units.<sup>94</sup> By the end of 1981, An Giang still had only six collectives, while the number of production units had risen by 40 to 357. These collective organisations occupied about 20,675 hectares of agricultural land, a mere 8.5 per cent of the total, and involved 10 per cent of peasant households.

In Chợ Mới district in An Giang, as well as experimenting with pilot production units, authorities cautiously extended their number. By the end of 1979, the district had 19 production units; however, most were weak and 'infirm' (*không vững chắc*) and the cadres managing them were described as 'confused' (*lúng túng*).<sup>95</sup> According to a former Chợ Mới official, because of difficulties in extending the production units, authorities emphasised solidifying existing units, meaning that, in 1980, collectivisation stagnated.<sup>96</sup> Only a few units were established in the district in 1980.<sup>97</sup> Thus, by the end of 1980, Chợ Mới had established only 21 production units, which accounted for about 5.7 per cent of peasant households and 4.7 per cent of agricultural land.<sup>98</sup> By 1981, the district had established 19 additional production units. Therefore, during 1979–81, Chợ Mới district established 40 production units, which accounted for only 10 per cent of the peasant households and 8.5 per cent of agricultural land.<sup>99</sup>

94 Trong tháng 12, 1980 tỉnh phát triển thêm được 14 tập đoàn sản xuất [In December 1980, the province established 14 more production units], *An Giang*, 11 January 1981, p. 2.

95 Phong trào hợp tác nông nghiệp ở An Giang từng bước được củng cố đi lên [Collectivisation in An Giang has progressed], *An Giang*, 18 November 1981, p. 1; BCHDBHCM, *The History of Chợ Mới Party Cell*, pp. 174–5.

96 Author's interview, 17 August 2005, Long Điền B.

97 Report from a conference announcing the completion of collectivisation in Chợ Mới, *An Giang*, 15 April 1985, p. 1.

98 My calculation is based on figures reported in *An Giang* (ibid.); and in Chi Cục Thống Kê huyện Chợ Mới [hereinafter CCTKCM] (1984), *Niên giám thống kê 1976–1984 huyện Chợ Mới tỉnh An Giang* [*Chợ Mới District, An Giang Province Statistical Year Book, 1976–1984*], Chợ Mới: Chi Cục Thống Kê huyện Chợ Mới, p. 43.

99 CCTKCM, *Chợ Mới District, An Giang Province Statistical Year Book*.

In Long Điền B in 1980, after establishing two pilot production units in 1979, and with help from district leaders, authorities established two more production units, located near the previous ones. District and commune officials strove to make these four production units work properly and act as exemplary cases. A former Long Điền B commune official claimed that, because of such efforts, commune authorities did not extend collectivisation further. Therefore, between 1979 and 1981, Long Điền B established only four production units, which accounted for a modest proportion of both agricultural land and peasant households in the commune.

In general, collectivisation in An Giang and other provinces in the Mekong Delta met with substantial difficulty and proceeded very slowly. Regional collectivisation accounted for only a small proportion of land and peasants (less than 10 per cent), which fell far short of the VCP's target of completing collectivisation by 1980. The VCP leaders attributed the slow collectivisation in the Southern Region to local cadres, who, they claimed, were 'hesitant [*do dự*], tentative [*chần chừ*] and undetermined [*thiếu kiên quyết*] in carrying out collectivisation, and too relaxed about agricultural transformation [*buông lỏng cải tạo*]. Some were accused of manipulating the VCP's 'positive and firm principles' to delay collectivisation.<sup>100</sup>

Similarly, when collectivisation was slow and difficult in An Giang in 1980 and early 1981, provincial leaders shifted all blame to lower-level local cadres. They said the local authorities, especially in the communes, lacked 'determined, integrated and concerted leadership'. 'Some local leaders were lax about agricultural transformation'; local cadres were 'inadequate and weak' (*thiếu và yếu*), so

the capacity of local agricultural transformation bodies did not match with their function and obligations.

... [S]ome cadres had not grasped or intentionally misunderstood the content of the VCP's policy on agricultural transformation.

... They resorted to the VCP's principle of firm collectivisation and voluntary membership to maintain individual farming.

100 ĐCSVN (2005), Chỉ thị của Ban bí thư số 93/CT-TW (ngày 30 tháng 6 năm 1980) [Directive of the Secretariat No. 93/CT-TW (30 June 1980)], in ĐCSVN, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập: Tập 41, 1980* [Party Document: Volume 41, 1980], Hà Nội: NXB Chỉ Trì Quốc Gia, p. 204.

Finally, at the production unit level,

negativism occurred in some management boards.

... Some production units achieved poor outcomes so [people's] living conditions had not been improved.

... [All of which] raised doubts and undermined peasants' confidence in VCP's agricultural transformation policy.<sup>101</sup>

A former cadre of An Giang's Committee for Agricultural Transformation (Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp, or BCTNN) admitted that, despite trying to secure their positions, local cadres were less devoted to collectivisation because 'the policy was at odds with peasants' sentiments' (*không hợp lòng dân*). Some cadres therefore 'let the process of agricultural transformation drift'.<sup>102</sup>

Sharing a similar view, another cadre of An Giang's BCTNN added:

Implementing collectivisation in the Mekong Delta seemed less harsh than in the Central Coast because local authorities tended to use persuasion and less coercion to force peasants to participate in collective organisations. Therefore, agricultural transformation in the Mekong Delta had not been carried out completely [*không triệt để*]. Collectivisation went slowly because of peasants' strong reaction and cadres' hesitance.<sup>103</sup>

Many villagers in Long Điền B recalled that before collectivisation they were relatively well off and had enjoyed sufficient livelihoods (*sung túc*). Even agricultural workers had been able to lead a comfortable life (*sống thoải mái*). This explains why most peasants, even those who were poor, did not want to join production units with work-points systems in which they would earn only a little (*không có ăn*). Some said they did not like collective farming because it constrained the freedom (*bị gò bó*) they had previously enjoyed under individual farming.<sup>104</sup> One man in Long Điền B commune commented:

People in the Central Coast and in the north were used to living in poverty [*sống kham khổ quen rồi*], so they could accept collectives, but people in this region had become used to enjoying a sufficient and free

101 Collectivisation continues to progress, *An Giang*, 7 June 1982, p. 2.

102 Author's interview, 6 June 2005, Long Xuyên.

103 Ibid.

104 Author's interviews, June–July and 5 August 2005, Long Điền B.

life. They did not like life in the collectives with little freedom. Peasants could not be like factory workers—the bell rings and they march off to work. Peasants here wanted more time to enjoy breakfast, coffee or to take care of their children and animals. Moreover, peasants here did not like joining production units because they did not see any immediate and visible benefit in collective farming [*không thấy lợi trước mắt*].

Some landless and land-poor households in Long Điền B also refused to join production units. One landless man in the commune argued that earnings from collective farming were less than the income from wage labour. In addition, people in production units received their produce at the end of the season, while independent labourers received wages on a daily basis.<sup>105</sup> Another landless man who had previously sympathised with the revolution but who refused to undertake collective farming recalled production unit cadres inviting him to join the unit in his hamlet. If he did not join, the cadre warned, and if later he faced hunger, the production unit would not lend him rice, and there would be no land on which to bury his body when he died. Regardless of what cadres threatened, the man refused to join. He reasoned that under collective farming he would earn much less than from his current job raising pigs, gleaning leftover paddy in the fields and labouring for wages. He laughed and added, ‘ultimately, not me but members of production units came to borrow my rice.’<sup>106</sup>

Peasants in the Mekong Delta tended to resist collectivisation more strongly than their counterparts in the Central Coast. In some parts of the delta peasants boycotted or organised strikes against collective farming and even threatened to assassinate—and, in some cases, actually did assassinate—officials. According to Vo Nhan Tri, peasants in some parts of the Mekong Delta ‘refused to harvest crops in time, abandoned large stretches of land, slaughtered livestock, destroyed fruit trees, sold machines and farm implements before joining the production units.’<sup>107</sup> Similarly, a report from the BCTNNMN revealed:

In some locations in Long An province collectivisation was so stressful that peasants, incited by the enemy, formed groups to demand their departure from production units, protested against collective farming and rallied support for individual farming [*chống đối làm ăn chung, ủng*

105 Author’s interview, 17 August 2005, Long Điền B.

106 Author’s interview, 23 June 2005, Long Điền B.

107 Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam’s Economic Policy Since 1975*, p. 79.

*hộ làm ăn riêng lẻ*] ... [Moreover,] taking advantage of the difficulties of collectivisation, counter-revolutionaries and bad elements conducted sabotage activities. They carried out psychological warfare such as distorting agricultural transformation policy, sabotaging production, assassinating local key cadres and inciting the masses to strike against the government, destroying production units' seed stores, beating local cadres and harvesting collective rice illegally. Some tried to enter the managerial boards of production units and collectives and so on.<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

After the country's reunification in 1975, VCP leaders put great effort into imposing the north's collective models on the south and aimed to complete collectivisation there by 1980. However, the project encountered difficulties, especially in the Mekong Delta. Authorities in QN-ĐN achieved the central government's target to collectivise farming in that province by 1980, but, in contrast, authorities in An Giang and elsewhere in the Mekong Delta did not. Collectivisation in the delta accounted for less than 10 per cent of land and peasant households in 1980. Only in the mid-1980s was collectivisation deemed accomplished, thanks in part to policy modifications to accommodate villagers' concerns.

There were two major reasons for the differences in the outcome of collectivisation between these two places. First, the capacity of local authorities was greater in QN-ĐN than in An Giang. Local authorities in QN-ĐN had more experience with the VCP's northern collectivisation and were more loyal to its policy of socialist transformation of agriculture than their counterparts in An Giang. Provincial authorities in QN-ĐN therefore carried out collectivisation more aggressively; they used stronger coercive measures—similar to those used in the north in the early 1960s—to force villagers into collectives. They collectivised all land, draught animals and other peasant means of production simultaneously, tightly restricted private farming and handicapped non-members. They even used strict preemptive measures to prevent peasants from slaughtering animals or restricting villagers' mobility before collectivisation. In contrast, local cadres in An Giang had weaker commitment to agricultural transformation. To secure their

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108 BCTNNMN, *Report of Central Committee for Agricultural Transformation*, p. 4.

positions, many had to comply with national policies, but they did so unenthusiastically. In general, when faced with strong peasant resistance, many local cadres were reluctant to force policy compliance; often they modified policies or let the process drift to accommodate peasants' concerns.

Second, peasants' noncompliance was stronger in An Giang in the Mekong Delta than in QN-ĐN in the Central Coast. The consequences of war in QN-ĐN had been so severe they rendered most villagers poor. These villagers' main concerns were to do with subsistence and survival. They were living in extremely difficult conditions within corporate communities and had few outside employment opportunities.<sup>109</sup> Their behaviour was focused on securing their own safety, subsistence and survival. The strong local authorities who were insisting on implementing state policies were ready to impose heavy sanctions on those who did not comply. To avoid suffering disadvantages, many peasants decided to join collectives even though they did not believe in the benefits of collective farming. Authorities in QN-ĐN had earned a fair degree of legitimacy thanks to ending the war and carrying out previous land reforms, which made peasants more inclined to comply with official policy. Thus, authorities in QN-ĐN were able to complete collectivisation within a year—even faster than collectivisation in the north in the early 1960s. In contrast to previous scholars who attributed swift collectivisation in the Central Coast region to peasants' preference for collective farming as a means of coping with their difficult lives, I found that many villagers in Thanh Yen and Hien Loc initially disliked and did not trust such farming methods, but they decided to join collectives to avoid the disadvantages of not belonging.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, peasants in An Giang were better off than those in QN-ĐN and lived in diverse socioeconomic structures. Moreover, weaker and less legitimate local authorities who were hesitant about and incompetent in forcefully carrying out socialist agricultural transformation enlarged the scope for villagers to evade the state's policies. In such conditions, An Giang villagers were able to resist or evade agrarian projects that

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109 Scott, J. C. (1977), *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

110 See Quang Truong, Agricultural collectivization.

they considered were unattractive or unprofitable. They had more economic power and more options to resist collective farming, which they saw as inferior to their previous farming method.

In short, collectivisation in An Giang and the wider Mekong Delta faced more difficulties than in QN-ĐN in the Central Coast region because of stronger peasant resistance and weaker capacity and commitment of local cadres. In other words, the extent of collectivisation depended largely on the political and socioeconomic conditions of each region.

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