Local politics and the performance of collective farming under the work-points system, 1978–81

Introduction

Despite Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) leaders and local authorities putting great effort into establishing and strengthening collective organisations, collective farming had failed to show its superiority over individual farming in southern Vietnam. Similar to what Kerkvliet’s study found for the north, in the south, due to a lack of political conditions conducive to durability, collective farming also became a site for struggle between peasants and local cadres and between local people and higher authorities over the governance of collectives, the means of production (land, labour and other resources) and distribution of produce.¹

Under the work-points system (1978–81), these struggles caused major difficulties not only in the Mekong Delta, but also in the Central Coast region. Villagers in the Mekong Delta tried their best to evade collective farming; it was common for them to join a collective but not actually participate in its work. Meanwhile, although villagers in the Central Coast seemed to comply with the system, they tried their best to maximise their work-points rather than production. In addition, local

cadres in both regions often acted contrary to the expectations of VCP leaders and villagers. They often took advantage of their positions to embezzle resources and mismanage collectives. Despite the authorities’ numerous campaigns to correct and crack down on such ‘bad behaviour’, and even attempts to modify national policies to accommodate local concerns, these problems did not disappear, but seemed to increase.

This chapter will examine local politics and compare the forms and magnitude of peasants’ everyday politics and local cadres’ reactions and malpractice in response to collective farming and other national agrarian policies. It will also examine the extent to which the everyday practices of local cadres and peasants affected the outcome of collectivisation in both regions and how they contributed to the modifications of the VCP’s agrarian policy.

Local politics in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng (QN-ĐN), Central Coast region

Peasants’ everyday politics in QN-ĐN’s collectives

In theory, collectives were established according to the principles of voluntary membership, mutual benefit and democratic management. According to public pronouncements, peasants were the ‘masters of the collective’. During the collectivisation campaigns, local authorities in QN-ĐN often asserted that ‘the collective was the home and its members were the masters’ (hợp tác xã là nhà, xã viên là chủ). However, many peasants claimed they did not join collectives voluntarily, but were coerced into doing so. Most peasants preferred individual farming to pooling their resources. They had doubts about collective farming methods and believed the collectives belonged to the state. Many worried that the collectives were being managed poorly and that much of what the collective produced would be stolen. Therefore, collectives became sites of conflict and struggle between peasants, cadres and the state, and even among peasants themselves. In struggling for their livelihoods, peasants tended to do whatever favoured their own immediate interests, which was often at odds with the interests of the

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2 Vai trò của đảng viên trong đối sản xuất [The role of party members in production brigades], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 28 June 1978, p. 2.
5. LOCAL POLITICS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF COLLECTIVE FARMING

collective and the state. The next section classifies and examines the nature of the peasants’ everyday politics in the collectives in QN-DN during the period of the work-points system (1978–81).

Optimising work-points rather than the quality of production

Peasants in QN-DN were relatively poor and few had any economic options outside the collective, so earning work-points was important to their income. The larger the number of work-points they accrued, the more paddy they were supposed to receive.

Many poor peasants in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên villages claimed they had to fight for work-points (tranh giành công điểm), working as fast as possible to acquire more points. A widow with four small children recalled:

I took advantage of any opportunity to get more work-points. As soon as people harvested, I jumped to hoe the corner of the plot in order to take over ploughing it. If I did not do so, others would. As soon as I had finished, I changed to another plot. My little girl, aged 13, also pulled up rice seedlings to get points. If an adult got 10 points a day, she got five. At that time, I did not have time to rest.3

Similarly, another widow said:

I had to struggle to get work-points [phân đầu để lấy điểm]. I was the only labourer in my family. We lacked labour because of [the] loss of [working-aged] men … due to wars. So, we had to work hard by day and night to get work-points.4

Asked why peasants struggled to get work-points, an elderly man in Thanh Yên village responded:

Today we can seek other jobs in Saigon or Danang city, but at that time, if we did not work, we would die of hunger. So, we even had to do a job that earned only a very few work-points.5

The Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper reported in December 1978 that, despite 90–95 per cent of peasants participating in collective work, many focused only on earning work-points. It called the phenomenon ‘work-point syndrome’ and ‘the doctrine of work-points’ (chủ nghĩa công điểm), which it said had started to ‘encroach on peasants’ awareness

3 Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
4 Ibid.
5 Author’s interview, 31 October 2005, Thanh Yên.
of collective mastery’. For example, when peasants were requested to attend public meetings or do public work, they asked whether such things would bring them any work-points. This made peasants very choosy, and they refused to do tasks that would earn only a few work-points, preferring tasks worth more points. ‘They were only concerned with the work-points … without caring about what the brigade leaders and others did and expected’, the newspaper lamented.6

Villagers in Thanh Yên village remembered doing their collective work carelessly and deceitfully (làm gian làm dối) to earn as many work-points as possible. For example, when ploughing, they would plough one row and skip the next (cày một đàng bỏ đàng). When transplanting, they planted densely at the edges of the plot but sparsely in the centre. Similarly, when weeding, ‘they did it carefully on the edges but carelessly in the centre’ because an inspector could more readily see the edges.7 Peasants could earn work-points by selling their manure to the collective, so, to increase its volume, they mixed manure with other easy-to-find ingredients such as rice stubble, soil and leaves.8 When they were required to carry manure to distant plots, peasants would pour out some of it close to their home or in bushes along the way. In this way, plots close to the village received considerable levels of manure, while more distant plots received little. People also spread the manure unevenly, so that some areas received too much manure while others received nothing (chỗ có chỗ không). In some cases, people did not spread manure at all before ploughing and raking.9 When pulling up seedlings, workers tried to increase the number of seedling bundles by making them smaller than normal in order to maximise their work-points.10

A woman in Hiền Lộc village recalled cadres devising a new method of transplanting: putting seedlings in lines. People resisted, however, because this method was slow. ‘We transplanted only a few rows half a day at a time. We complained a lot because transplanting like that meant fewer work-points. Finally, they [cadres] gave up the technique’, the woman said.11

7 Author’s interview, 5 October 2004, Thanh Yên.
8 Author’s interview, 9 December 2005, Thanh Yên.
9 Author’s interview, 20 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
10 Author’s interview, 17 December 2005, Hiền Lộc.
11 Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
A newspaper report from December 1978 stated:

Some peasants only pursue their own interests, so they do collective work deceitfully and carelessly \( [lảm \ gian \ dội, \ lảm \ áu] \), never ensured work quality, nor did they comply with technical procedures. People preferred to do easy jobs and refused to do hard ones ... they did not harmonise [the] interests of [the] individual, the collective and the state.\(^{12}\)

The article also attributed such problems to inadequate education.

However, when people were asked why they were so careless about their collective work, many responded that it was ‘in order to get as many work-points as possible’ or, as one person summed it up: ‘work honestly, eat gruel; work deceitfully, eat rice \( [lảm \ thật \ ăn \ cháo, \ lảm \ láo \ ăn \ cơm] \).’ People believed that those who tried to do collective work properly and honestly would earn fewer work-points than those who did things carelessly and deceitfully. Such practices in QN-ĐN—aimed at accumulating the maximum number of work-points rather than maximising production—were similar to those in the north, studied by Kerkvliet. For example, an expression similar to the one cited above—‘work well, eat gruel; work deceitfully, eat rice’ \( (lảm \ tốt \ ăn \ cháo, \ lảm \ láo \ ăn \ cơm) \)—was also popular in northern collectives in the late 1970s.\(^{13}\)

One village woman tried to justify people’s behaviour by arguing that

\begin{quote}
everyone had to try and make a living. If you traded, you sought a profit; if you worked for the collective, you had to try to get work-points; so, people did collective work carelessly in order to get as many work-points as possible.\(^{14}\)
\end{quote}

Lack of incentive and ‘neglect of common property’ \( (chá chung \ không \ ai \ khóc) \)

That peasants carried out collective work carelessly and deceitfully reflected not only their strategies to maximise work-points, but also their disillusionment with the governance of collective farming. A man in Hiền Lộc village recalled that people were disappointed because

\(^{12}\) Tổ chức lại sản xuất, phân công lại lao động nhằm phát triển và mở rộng lại ngành nghề sản xuất và kinh tế gia đình trong hợp tác xã nông nghiệp trên địa bàn huyện [Reorganising production and labour to facilitate development of handicrafts and household economy in the district], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 13 December 1978, p. 1.

\(^{13}\) See Kerkvliet, \textit{The Power of Everyday Politics}, p. 163.

\(^{14}\) Author’s interview, 21 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
they received few rewards for their efforts; therefore, they did collective work badly, just going through the motions of working and tried to complete the job as soon as possible in order to go home. He said when collective work was assigned to a group, ‘they often dragged their feet so that, by 7–8 am, they hadn’t even started yet. Those who arrived early did not work until the whole group had come.’

Some peasants did not want to work hard because they realised that, no matter how much effort they put in, they would not get a significant extra reward. A man in Thanh Yên explained:

The collective took all of what we produced; the collective paid us about 0.5 kilograms a workday [10 work-points] and took all the remainder. So, peasants just went through [the] motions of working.

An elderly man in the village had a similar comment:

No matter how hard you worked, you could only get 10 points a day at maximum. No matter how industriously you worked, the produce belonged to the collective. So, there was not much difference between industrious workers or lazy workers. We worked without any incentive [lambre không có động cơ].

Some peasants were initially eager to fight for work-points but, when they received little reward, they were disappointed and did not want to go to work or laboured unenthusiastically. A brigade leader in Hiền Lộc village commented on the decreased income in the Bình Lành collective:

The living conditions of people went down dramatically. At first, people received 3 kilograms per workday; that went down to 1.5 kilograms [in 1978]. When I called the people to transplant, some refused to work; they complained that they had previously received 3 kilograms but now only 1.5 kilograms per workday and wanted to know why.

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15 Author’s interview, 19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
16 Author’s interview, 5 October 2004, Thanh Yên.
17 Author’s interview, 20 October 2005, Thanh Yên.
18 Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
19 Author’s interview, 14 October 2005, Hiền Lộc. In response to low peasant participation in collective work, Bình Lành collective started to increase sanctions by setting the number of compulsory workdays for peasants and restricting or forbidding peasants from doing non-collective work (Hợp tác xã Bình Lành vượt khó khăn giành thành lợi bước đầu [Bình Lành collective overcame difficulties and gained first good results], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 13 May 1978, p. 2; Chi bộ Bình Lành lãnh đạo xây dựng hợp tác xã nông nghiệp [Bình Lành party cell leads building of the agricultural collective], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 14 June 1978, p. 2).
Another common peasant practice in QN-DN collectives was not caring for collective property. The Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper noted in June 1979 that peasants in Điện Bàn district ‘considered the collective belonged to the managerial board and brigade leaders, so they were not active in protecting collective properties from loss or damage.’ Likewise, an elderly man in Hiền Lộc village said:

Working in the collective, Mr Brigade Leader [Ông đội trưởng] was in charge of everything while we were only concerned with work-points. Today, I have the red book [the certificate of the right to use land] for my land, so I have made the edges of my plots straight and have levelled the surface because I am the owner of the land. But at that time we did not control the land. If I saw edges of the plot broken, at most I might inform the brigade leader. If he gave me some work-points to repair it, I did [so]. Otherwise, I did not. But if that plot was ours, we would do it.

Another man recalled:

Working for the collective, we did not need to think; when finishing work, I went to bed without worrying about tomorrow. We let the brigade leader worry about matters. When he asked me to plough, I ploughed. Only later when I worked for myself did I plan everything.

Interest in the family economy and the plundering of collective resources

In addition to collective farming, peasants were allowed to farm individually on their garden land—known as the ‘5 per cent land’—which the collective set aside for the peasant family economy. In the lowlands and midlands, households were able to retain about 500 square metres for this purpose, while in the highlands, it was about 750–1,000 square metres. Farming on garden land became a central part of peasants’ family economy because there were few economic options outside the collective. Peasants in Bình Định collective no. 2 and Bình Lãnh collective often grew sweet potatoes, cassava and other staple food on their 5 per cent land. Other peasants tried to cultivate land that had been abandoned by the collective.

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20 Kết quả và kinh nghiệm phát huy quyền làm chủ tập thể ở HTX sản xuất nông nghiệp 1 Điện Nam [Result of and experiences from facilitating collective mastery in Điện Nam Collective No. 1], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 27 June 1979, p. 3.
21 Author’s interview, 19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
22 Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
23 Some regulations on establishing collectives, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 26 August 1978, p. 1.
Peasants were supposed to harmonise their family economy with the collective economy; however, peasants tended to favour the former because they could see the direct connection between their efforts and the rewards. They therefore devoted as much of their time and resources as possible to their family economy to supplement the food the collective fell short of supplying. Villagers in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên recalled that, despite limited individual land, the family economy contributed a great part of their livelihoods. A man in Thanh Yên village recalled:

When joining the collective, I retained my garden land as 5 per cent land. [The collective granted 5 per cent land to those who did not have enough garden land.] The land was a great help. During the period of the work-points system, our family received only 90–100 kilograms per season from the collective. This amount was enough for my family to consume within one month. But thanks to our 5 per cent land, we grew sweet potatoes and cassavas, which enabled us to survive.²⁴

Villagers also commented that people made use of any available resources—for example, time, land and inputs—and invested them in their individual farming. For example, they used quality manure for their own sweet potatoes and cassava plots, while they gave the collective poor manure in exchange for work-points.²⁵ Some did their collective work fast and carelessly to have more time to devote to their own work. Some made use of land the collective did not use—for example, reclaiming the uncultivated corners of collective land, lake edges, the banks of streams and forest. As one elderly woman told me: ‘At that time, we reclaimed land anywhere; we reclaimed even a small piece of land to plant sweet potatoes and cassava.’²⁶

Because peasants were concerned with their own interests, there were conflicts between collective and family work. For example, the Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper reported in January 1981 that, in Quế Sơn collective in Quế Sơn district, ‘after transplanting seedlings, the collective leaders were not able to mobilise peasants to weed because they were busy growing cassava in their own gardens’. In response, the collective leaders had to rely on local authorities and mass organisations

²⁴ Author’s interview, 9 November 2005, Thanh Yên.
²⁵ Author’s interview, 21 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
²⁶ Author’s interview, 14 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
to force people to work.\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Quảng Nam-Dài Nằng} reported in February 1981 that instances of peasants practising ‘neglect of common property’ had become prevalent in collectives. This led to a situation in which individual plots were lush, while crops in collective plots were stunted and full of weeds.\textsuperscript{28}

Villagers recalled that people made use of collective resources for their own family economy. For example, when fertilising collective fields, people often hid some in bushes and took it home later for their own plots.\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, when harvesting, carrying, threshing and drying grain, peasants often took some for themselves. Villagers in Thanh Yến recalled children following their parents to glean the rice ears they intentionally dropped when harvesting. When carrying sheaves of grain from the fields to the drying sites, some peasants hid sheaves in the bushes and took them home later. Those who brought kettles of water to the harvesters often returned home with kettles full of grain. When threshing, peasants tried to leave some grain on the stalk so they could thresh it again at home.\textsuperscript{30} A brigade leader in Bình Lãnh collective recalled:

\begin{quote}
Whenever we did not pay enough attention to watching collective grain, peasants stole it. So, at the harvest time, we had to watch day and night. When harvesting, if checkers were absent, people hid grain in the fields. When threshing, if the checkers were negligent, people often hid the grain in the straw they carried home.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

As early as April 1979, \textit{Quảng Nam-Dài Nằng} reported that ‘the phenomena of [peasants] stealing grain and collective property were widespread’.\textsuperscript{32} Another article reported:

\begin{quote}
When harvesting, there were too many rice-gleaners. Those who carried grain to the drying sites of the brigades often dropped by [to hide grain] in collective members’ [relatives’ or friends’] houses. When threshing
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\item \textsuperscript{27} Hợp tác xã Quế Tân I: Xây dựng con người, xây dựng hợp tác xã [Quế Tân Collective No. 1: Training people and building the collective], \textit{Quảng Nam-Dài Nằng}, 21 January 1981, p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Nhìn vào đồng ruộng tập thể: Giống lúa [Looking at collective fields: Rice seeds], \textit{Quảng Nam-Dài Nằng}, 28 February 1981, p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Chống hao hụt mất mát sản phẩm nông nghiệp khi thu hoạch [Preventing loss of collective produce during harvesting], \textit{Quảng Nam-Dài Nằng}, 1 December 1981, p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Author’s interview, 9 November 2005, Thanh Yến.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Author’s interview, 19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Thành lập 32 hợp tác xã trong vụ Hè-Thu toàn tỉnh có 164 hợp tác xã’ [With 32 more collectives established, the province has 164 collectives for the summer–autumn crops], \textit{Quảng Nam-Dài Nằng}, 19 April 1979, p. 1.
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at the brigade’s yards, collective members threshed deceitfully and let straw still retain many grains so that after taking the straw home, they could get more grain from it.33

Villagers also said the economic efficiency of secondary crops such as peanuts, sugarcane and sweet potatoes was even worse than the rice crop because these plants were often stolen at planting and harvest times. A collective leader in Bình Lãnh recalled that, when sowing peanut seeds, peasants planted the flatter ones and put the full-sized ones into their pockets. When harvesting the peanuts, they ate some and hid some, which significantly reduced the quantity of the harvest.34 A woman in Hiền Lộc recalled:

For the peanut crop, the collective leaders did not allow young people to harvest because they feared they would eat too many peanuts. Instead, they used elderly people who were toothless and could not eat much. But they could not keep people from stealing. How can we catch a thief living in our own house? It didn't make sense to keep watching people all the time. They certainly needed to absent themselves. Likewise, when harvesting cassava and sweet potatoes, peasants often hid good ones in the soil and returned to get them later.35

In short, despite peasants being labelled ‘the masters of the collectives’, everyday politics undermined party leaders’ expectations. To secure their livelihoods and survive, peasants deployed strategies such as optimising work-points and stealing the collective’s resources and produce. The main objectives of these practices were to minimise the disadvantages of collectivisation and maximise their livelihoods. In other words, individually, these actions were merely strategies for peasants’ livelihood and survival. However, the aggregate of these individual actions had a powerful political effect because they effectively derailed collectivisation.36 I will discuss this in more detail in the next sections.

33 Preventing loss of collective produce during harvesting, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 1 December 1981, p. 2.
34 Author's interview, 20 October 2004, Bình Lãnh.
35 Author's interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
Local cadres’ practices

Despite many cadres being loyal to the VCP’s agrarian policies, some in the Central Coast abused their power at the expense of the state’s interests. The Quảng Nam–Đà Nẵng newspaper reported in May 1979:

Some party members were bad learners. Some were opportunistic, corrupt, conservative, and small minded, embezzling and colluding. Some displayed bureaucratic, autocratic, and patriarchal behaviours. They made decisions without consulting the masses.37

In June 1979, Quảng Nam–Đà Nẵng censured its readers:

Because of inadequate awareness of bad thoughts, some party members were corrupt and self-interested; they were not good examples for the masses. Cadres embezzling [collective property] either individually or collectively were prevalent. Many cadres and party members behaved excessively bureaucratically and were autocratic and aloof … they falsified the actual crop productivity, underreported the output [to the state], poorly managed, stole produce and minimised food contributions to the state [tính thiệt hơn với nhà nước].38

At the brigade level, some leaders took advantage of their power over the management of labour, costs, production and produce, assigning tasks and giving out work-points to benefit themselves. Villagers in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên thought of brigade leaders as ‘landlords’ who had ‘power over life and death’ (quyền sinh sát). A man in Hiền Lộc village commented:

The brigade leader was prejudiced [thành kiến]. If he disliked someone, he assigned him difficult work. He also took revenge on those who dared to criticise him in public meetings.39

In an October 1979 article, Quảng Nam–Đà Nẵng reported a typical case of a brigade leader abusing his power in assigning work and giving out work-points. He was accused of stealing the brigade’s inputs, ‘prolonging work and inflating work-points’:

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37 Để đưa phong trào hợp tác xã nông nghiệp tiến lên mạnh mẽ và vững chắc [To speed up collectivisation forcefully and firmly], Quảng Nam–Đà Nẵng, 12 May 1979, p. 1.
38 Tăng cường công tác xây dựng Đảng trong các hợp tác xã nông nghiệp [Intensifying building party organisation in the collectives], Quảng Nam–Đà Nẵng, 6 June 1979, p. 1.
39 Author’s interview, 19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
Regardless of stipulated work norms and work contracts, he gave work-points to collective members at his discretion … if someone gave him a cup of wine, he could increase their tally by 10–20 work-points. He assigned tasks with many work-points to those who were close to him. He also granted five–per cent land to collective members at his discretion. Therefore, many collective members said: 'the brigade leader comes first and the king of heaven second' [Nhất đội, nhì Trời].

Brigade leaders were also in charge of collective produce after harvest, so they had more opportunities than others to pilfer some of the produce. A woman in Thanh Yên village claimed that brigade leaders took a considerable amount of collective produce because it was concentrated in their hands. An elderly man said 'some brigade leaders took as much as they liked. They had a party eating chicken and ducks [very valuable food] every night. The people knew, but did nothing.' A former cadre from Bình Định collective no. 2 admitted he colluded with brigade leaders to share the benefits during harvesting time. For example, they underreported the real crop so they could take the difference for themselves.

Villagers in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên also complained that collective leaders were in their positions because of their revolutionary credentials, not their education or management skills (không có trình độ, Hồng hơn chuyên). They did not know how to manage the collective well, and many were self-interested and corrupt. This led to the leakage (thất thoát) of considerable amounts of collective property. Some villagers claimed such leakage was greater at the collective level than at the brigade level.

A former brigade leader in Thanh Yên said:

Leakage was greatest at the collective level. The collective took 60 per cent of the brigade's output and left 40 per cent for peasants. For example, if the brigade harvested 20 tonnes of paddy, the collective took 12 tonnes and left 8 tonnes to distribute among peasants. Therefore, peasants received too little paddy, so they had to supplement their livelihood with growing sweet potatoes and cassava on their

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40  Xã viên làm chủ phát triển một đối tượng phá hoại hợp tác xã nông nghiệp [Members discover a pilferer in a collective], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 6 October 1979, p. 2.
41  Author's interview, 31 October 2005, Thanh Yên.
42  Ibid.
43  Author's interview, 9 November 2005, Bình Định.
gardens. The collective leaders were supposed to use the produce to buy machines, tractors, fertilisers and to build infrastructure. But they embezzled a great deal through buying these things. For example, when buying a threshing machine, they could embezzle a half of the value by colluding with sellers to write a fake receipt that doubled the actual price. They embezzled ‘legally’, so the people could not sue them. People saw collective property leaking, so they became disappointed and did not want to work anymore. But they had to work because if they did not, they did not have food to eat.44

Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng reported in November 1979 that collectives in Thăng Bình had incorrectly recorded income, expenditure, inputs and outputs. For example, Bình Nguyên no. 2 and Bình Đào collectives had falsified all records of funds, inventories, cash, receipts and expenditure.45

Thanh Yên and Hiền Lộc villagers attributed their low income to the poor quality and great number of collective cadres. They said that, on average, each collective had to feed hundreds of cadres. The salary of each cadre was about 200–300 kilograms of paddy per season, which was much higher than the annual income of the average collective member. Apart from the salary, cadres enjoyed many other benefits, such as attending parties and meetings and buying paddy at low prices (mua lúa điều hoà).46 At that time, the collective spent too much on buying machines and building infrastructure. It subsidised all mass organisations, such as women’s unions, peasant associations, schools, hospitals, irrigation teams, specialised and industrial teams, ‘priority’ families such as those of war martyrs and wounded soldiers, poor peasants and party cells. Even higher-level cadres came to ask for subsidies from the collective.47

44 Author’s interview, 5 November 2005, Thanh Yên.
45 Huyện Thăng Bình tổng kết 2 năm cải tạo nong nghiệp [Thăng Bình district summing up 2 years of agricultural transformation], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 7 November 1979, p. 2.
46 Author’s interview, 5 December 2005, Thanh Yên. According to a former collective cadre in Bình Lãnh, the salary of the collective chairman was 140 per cent of the income of the advanced labourer in the collective. The salaries of both the vice-chairman and the chief accountant were equal to 95 per cent of the chairman’s salary; the salary of other collective cadres was 90 per cent of the chairman’s (Author’s interview, 21 October 2004, Bình Lãnh).
47 Author’s interview, 9 December 2005, Thanh Yên.
A man in Hiền Lộc commented:

The collective produced a great deal of produce but ‘leakage’ was high. Much of the produce was taken to feed a large number of cadres. So, the people often complained: ‘the worn rain-hat [peasants] worked so that the pith helmet [cadres] enjoyed’ [cởi làm cho cởi ăn].

An Giang in the Mekong Delta

Peasants’ everyday politics in An Giang’s production units

Joining production units, but not participating in work

Unlike many peasants in QN-DN, who tended to devote much of their time to collective work to get work-points, many peasants in production units in Long Điền B commune of Chợ Mới district in An Giang were uninterested (thờ ơ) in work-points. Many joined the production units but did not do much collective work. Villagers in Long Điền B recalled that few production unit members were devoted to collective work ‘full-time’; most of the full-time workers were poor and landless peasants. Meanwhile, a large number of better-off peasants refused to work or worked only occasionally for production units because they could make a living by doing jobs outside the units or live from their own wealth. A former team leader of production unit no. 1 in the commune recalled:

Some people joined the production unit simply as a formality [vào hình thức]. They signed up to join but did not go to do collective work, so, at the end of the season, they did not have any work-points to receive paddy. Some families let one or two subsidiary members participate in the production units while the others worked outside [the unit], such as working for wages, fishing or farming elsewhere.

To persuade peasants to do collective work, production units in Long Điền B did not grant household plots (5 per cent land) to peasants as officially stipulated; however, this policy did not help persuade peasants to undertake collective farming. At first, some landless peasants

48 Author’s interview, 14 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
49 Author’s interview, 27 June 2005, Long Điền B.
were eager to work collectively, but they were later disappointed and dissatisfied with the low rewards and the methods of distribution in the production units. A young formerly landless man recalled:

At first we worked enthusiastically, but later we felt discouraged. In fact, the production unit produced a considerable amount of paddy but production unit cadres took much of it. Therefore, we received almost nothing. My wife and I were both full-time labourers but the income we received from work-points was not enough for us to survive [không đủ sống]. If we worked for wages, we received cash immediately on a daily basis. But for the production unit, we only received paddy at the end of the season. How could the poor live on this? Therefore, some people felt so discouraged that they quit and laboured elsewhere.\textsuperscript{50}

A man whose family had five labourers recalled that the income from collective farming was so small his family received only 4–5 gia (80–100 kg) of paddy for a whole season. Therefore, he decided to pull out of the unit and made a living elsewhere. He added that many other households had done the same. Because collective farming did not supply adequate food, many people had to take extra jobs outside the unit. Production unit cadres often neglected these peasant practices because they were not able to secure the peasants’ livelihoods with collective farming.\textsuperscript{51} Similarly, a landless widow with four young children explained why she worked for a production unit for just one month before quitting:

After reunification, Mr T [the hamlet chief] granted me 4 công of land to make a living. Later, at his suggestion, I put all the land into the production unit. I followed others working in the production unit for almost a month, but I did not receive any cash or paddy. My children at home were hungry, so I had to give up doing collective work and laboured for others to raise my little children.\textsuperscript{52}

Asked why the rate of peasant participation in collective work was low, many villagers claimed that working collectively was unprofitable and lacked flexibility compared with working individually or for wages. Many better-off families were coerced to join farming collectives, but were

\textsuperscript{50} Author’s interview, 17 June 2005, Long Điền B. He meant that the value of a collective farming workday was less than that of a day of wage labour. Local people mentioned that before reunification the value of a day working for wages was about 2 gia (40 kg) of paddy. Meanwhile, the value of a collective farming workday was less than 10 kilograms, and even as low as 2–3 kilograms.

\textsuperscript{51} Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
disappointed (chán nàn) because they lost their land and the income earned from collective farming was small compared with their previous earnings. They had previously owned considerable amounts of land and enjoyed a better life. A former chairman of production unit no. 2 recalled that his unit actually coerced people into joining, but they did not trust collective farming. Some joined but did not work collectively at all and did not receive any work-points for the whole season; some worked for a few days and earned 10–20 points to avoid being labelled anti-government by the authorities. Some worked for production units for just one or two seasons and then were so disappointed they found jobs elsewhere. So, the percentage of peasants who did collective work in the fields was low—about 10 to 20 per cent.53 A full-time member of a production unit whose husband was a production unit cadre recalled:

Others worked only three out of 10 days. We worked 10 out of 10 days. Some better-off people joined but rarely went to work. The production unit had more than 400 công [40 hectares] of land and 100 labourers but only about seven to eight people went to do collective work in the field daily. Therefore, we had to work a lot, working to death [lâm muốn chết].54

‘The outside foot was longer than the inside foot’

It was common for peasants in the Mekong Delta to try to evade collective farming and make a living outside the production unit. Even some production unit cadres were focused on jobs outside the unit. Those who had boats used them to do trading; those who had relatives in places where collective farming had not yet been established borrowed land to make a living there. Because many places had not yet been collectivised, peasants could easily borrow land to avoid joining collective farming.55 A former chairman of production unit no. 1 fits this pattern:

Our production unit was established in 1979. In the first season, the value of work-points was really good [more than 10 kilograms per workday], but after that the value of work-points deteriorated. At the end of 1980, because of the flood, the value of work-points was only 0.7 kilogram. At that time, many peasants left the production unit to

53 Author’s interview, 30 June 2005, Long Điền B
54 Author’s interview, 27 June 2005, Long Điền B.
55 Author’s interview, 30 June 2005, Long Điền B.
do outside jobs. But in the following season many of them came back to the production unit because of the increased value of work-points. The higher the value of work-points peasants received, the larger the number of peasants who participated in the production unit.\textsuperscript{56}

He also admitted that many peasants and cadres, and even his own family, had to 'keep one foot within and another outside the production unit' (giữ chân ngoài chân trong).

This phenomenon was widespread across many collectives in An Giang. The \textit{An Giang} newspaper reported in August 1980 that, when authorities in Mỹ Lương commune in Chợ Mới district established production unit no. 2, many peasants resisted fiercely; some joined but 'kept one foot within and another outside', and the 'outside foot was longer than the inside one' (chân ngoài dài hơn chân trong). The number of labourers doing collective work in the fields was very low—sometimes only 20–30 labourers (out of 113) worked in the fields.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, in production unit no. 1 in Chau Long 4 hamlet, some peasants did not do collective farming properly; they also kept 'the outside foot longer than the inside one'. The rate of peasant participation depended on the performance of the production unit. If the unit's performance was good, many engaged in collective work; but, if it was bad, many would leave and find jobs elsewhere. In some families, only one member worked for the production unit, while the remaining members worked outside it to ensure their livelihoods (xoay số cuộc sống).\textsuperscript{58}

In short, peasants in Long Điền B and An Giang did not devote the majority of their time, energy and resources to collective farming. Because they lacked confidence in collective farming, many peasants kept ‘one foot within and another outside the production unit’. This shows that peasants in An Giang had more options than their counterparts in QN-DN to avoid or minimise the disadvantages of collective farming.

\textsuperscript{56} Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.
\textsuperscript{57} Về thăm tập đoàn số 2 Mỹ Lương [A visit to Production Unit No. 2 in Mỹ Lương], \textit{An Giang}, 7 December 1980, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{58} Tập đoàn sản xuất I, khóm Châu Long 4 vững bước tiến lên [Production Unit No. 1, Chau Long 4 Subcommune is progressing], \textit{An Giang}, 9 August 1981, p. 2.
Careless work and neglect of common property

In addition to low levels of participation in collective work, another common problem in Long Điền B production units was the manner in which the peasants worked. They were unenthusiastic and sluggish (làm không nhiệt tình, làm lê thê); some just went through the motions, waiting for day's end rather than trying to finish their work. They did not want to work as hard or as carefully as they worked in their own plots.59 A better-off man in Long Điền B described the manner of peasants’ collective farming in his production unit:

Collective farming according to work-points was poor. People just went through the motions of working without taking care of collective property. When passing by the collective rice plots, if they saw weeds they would not stop and pull them up, as they would have done for their own plots. They worked with their minds elsewhere. People only worked carefully if they worked for themselves. How could the production unit be profitable? I felt sad that our land was pooled for others to work together. But because they were landless and the land was not theirs, they did not love the land at all; they worked for points, so they did not take care of the land. Working together was certainly impossible. I think that only those like Uncle Hồ and Uncle Tôn Đức Thắng could work collectively, but peasants could not. The central leaders were kind; they thought peasants were like them, but peasants were not; they were selfish and different.60

Looking back on how peasants resisted collective farming in production units under the work-points system, the An Giang newspaper reported, in April 1982:

When preparing rice seeds to sow, nobody cared whether they were too dry or too soaked. When transporting seeds to the fields, people carried the sacks carelessly and dropped many along the road. When the seeds reached their destination, people did not have enough baskets to take them to the fields. Moreover, people just went through the motions of working until the end of day. When the seeds were ready to sow, they were left sitting in the fields. When it rained slightly, the people refused to work. When it was a bit sunny, many people complained of headaches. After weeding for a while, many people grumbled about backache.61

59 Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.
60 Ibid. Uncle Hồ is Hồ Chí Minh, the first President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; Tôn Đức Thắng, born in An Giang, was Hồ Chí Minh’s successor.
61 Vụ lúa khoán ở tập đoàn 3 Tây Khánh B [The results of contracted rice crops in Production Unit No. 3 in Tây Khánh B Commune], An Giang, 18 April 1982, p. 3.
The fact that peasants refused to work or worked unenthusiastically affected the operation of production units. People in Long Điền B recalled that the units were not able to mobilise peasants to complete tasks on time, so some fields were left uncultivated and rice plots remained unweeded. A former chairman of Long Điền B production unit no. 1 admitted that his unit was unable to complete weeding in time because of low levels of peasant participation in work schedules: ‘weeds were often more numerous than rice shoots’ (cỏ thường nhiều hơn lúa).62 A former chairman of production unit no. 2 said:

For individual farming, peasants prepared the soil and weeded carefully, so the fields hardly had any weeds. But under collective farming, the rice fields were full of weeds because of carelessness. If weeds were not pulled out properly, they would flourish.63

Villagers admitted that the collective rice fields were so overgrown with weeds that they looked like a wilderness during the period of collective farming. People in Long Phú hamlet had a popular saying to describe the situation: ‘Please come to Long Phú and see weeds that touch the sky’ (Ai về Long Phú mà xem, âm u cỏ rác phủ xanh rợp trời).64 A former cadre of Chợ Mới district observed:

Because peasants did not see efficiency in collective farming, they did not want to work for production units. They were better off leaving the units and finding jobs elsewhere. Therefore, wherever production units existed, the weeds thrived [tập đoàn đi tới đâu thì cỏ đi tới đó]. At that time, Mr Do Vuong, a northern cadre, criticised us for not allowing peasants to join production units voluntarily. But I argued with him that no matter how much we propagated and educated the peasants, they never volunteered to join, because they considered collective farming as working for the sake of cadres.65

As well as doing their collective work sloppily and slowly, peasants in Long Điền B were accused by local officials of not caring for and even sabotaging collective property. A former production team leader recalled that floods in 1980 affected the rice fields, so cadres called on

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62 Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.
63 Author’s interview, 30 June 2005, Long Điền B.
64 Author’s interview, 27 June 2005, Long Điền B. Long Phú was a hamlet in Long Điền B, Chợ Mới district, An Giang.
65 Author’s interview, 22 August 2005, Long Điền B. Châu Thành was one of the districts in An Giang with a low population density. Peasants here had greater economic options to evade collective farming, so the performance of collective farming here was much worse than in other parts of An Giang, such as Chợ Mới district.
people to harvest the crops as soon as possible. No-one responded. People said the rice was not theirs; it belonged to the production unit. He added:

People were so negative that they even ate sugarcane seedlings [during transplanting] and said anyone who did not eat them was stupid. That was annoying because the production unit had to buy those seedlings. Moreover, when people worked in the fields, they saw broken paddy walls; they should have fixed them. But they did not. They said: ‘Why should we when it was not ours?’ I ask you, how could the rice survive? A few people had a good attitude but those who had a bad attitude were numerous. Working collectively was certainly impossible.66

Similarly, a woman in the production unit recalled: ‘We tried to plant sugarcane and corn, but when the crops were ready to harvest, people snitched or destroyed them all.’ The production unit then gave up planting secondary crops.67 A former chairman of production unit no. 2 admitted that secondary crops were a financial failure because of careless cultivation and peasant sabotage. Therefore, in 1980, he decided to give the secondary-crop land to peasants to cultivate individually—similar to what happened in QN-DN. In return, peasants paid tax to the state via the production unit.68

In summary, unlike their counterparts in QN-DN, who tried to strike a compromise with collective farming and pursue work-points, peasants in Long Điền B and An Giang tended to evade collective farming altogether. Some joined the production units but worked infrequently; some worked sluggishly and unenthusiastically and did not care about collective property. These practices significantly affected the performance of collective farming, which will be discussed in the next section.

Local cadres’ practices in An Giang

Party leaders accused local cadres in the Mekong Delta of being unenthusiastic about agricultural transformation, having ‘weak, messy and slack management of labour, finance, production and distribution of produce’ and committing embezzlement. All these factors made

66 Author’s interview, 27 June 2005, Long Điền B.
67 Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.
68 Author’s interview, 30 June 2005, Long Điền B. He argued that his production unit granted secondary-crop land to peasants without the consent of higher authorities. Each household received about 0.5 công (500 sq m) of land to farm individually.
collectivisation in the region difficult. Provincial authorities accused local cadres in An Giang of displaying ‘negative practices such as stealing collective property, materials, cash and peasants’ work-points, appropriating illegally peasants’ land and belongings and bullying the masses’ (ức hiếp quần chúng).

Peasants in Long Điền B complained that production unit cadres behaved badly. One man in the commune recalled:

At that time, cadres enjoyed a comfortable life. They controlled everything such as work-points, materials, cash and paddy; the unit members did not know anything about those things. After harvesting, they controlled all paddy and only distributed part of it to each person according to the amount of work-points. We did not know exactly how they used the remaining.

Some argued that cadres did not make public (công khai) the production unit’s income and expenses. They only released one financial report a year, and this was often a ‘ghost’ (fake) report (báo cáo ma).

The An Giang newspaper describes many cases of embezzlement in production units. For example, 27 inspections in May 1980 found 40 cadres had been embezzling collective property. Authorities received 361 complaints from peasants—most about cadres stealing and bullying. In 1981, Chợ Mới district inspectors discovered that the managerial board of production units in Long Điền B had embezzled collective property. As a result, some production unit cadres were sentenced to a few months’ imprisonment. Informants complained that, although some cadres were sacked or imprisoned, authorities were not able to entirely eliminate corruption among the cadres. New cadres might be better behaved initially, but eventually, they committed the same wrongdoings. Some attributed the cadres’ problems to policy mechanisms (do cơ chế chính sách) that gave considerable power to cadres in terms of controlling and managing production units.

69 BCTNNMN, Report of Central Committee for Agricultural Transformation, p. 4.
70 Tăng cường chỉ đạo công tác chống tiêu cực [Intensifying the fight against negativism], An Giang, 8 June 1980, p. 2.
71 Author’s interview, 29 June 2005, Long Điền B.
72 Author’s interview, 20 June 2005, Long Điền B.
73 An Giang đẩy mạnh công tác chống tiêu cực [An Giang speeds up the fight against negativism], An Giang, 8 June 1980, p. 2.
74 Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.
75 Author’s interviews, June–August 2005, Long Điền B.
A poor man who at first supported the new authorities and worked enthusiastically for the production unit shared his story:

At that time, the authorities told us that, from now on, people had to join production units to work collectively because individual farming was not allowed. We obeyed and joined to work for the production unit. But the authorities cheated people [chính quyền lừa dối dân]. We conformed to the policy while many production unit cadres, even higher officials, left to work individually … Most cadres were self-interested; they stole collective property with no conscience pangs. It was common that production unit cadres stole collective paddy and were caught by members. As far as I remember, Mr Ba Truc at the Hat Giang School of Agricultural Transformation said that, if a production unit operated according to socialist principles, it was a heaven on earth for poor households. But if it went wrong, it was much worse and crueller than [life under] previous landlords. He explained that the landlords forced peasants to fill their storehouses full of paddy but people could borrow it back when they needed some. Meanwhile, production unit cadres only focused on [chỉ có biết] stealing, pilfering and embezzling collective property without caring about their members. All of these certainly made collective farming go to ruin and peasants suffer starvation.76

Some Long Điền B peasants also complained that cadres showed favouritism when assigning work tasks and grading work-points. A poor man whose family joined a production unit but infrequently went to work said production unit cadres showed favouritism to their relatives and friends. These people often received many points because the unit assigned them light tasks worth numerous points and those who were not close to the cadres got less work-points, even though they worked harder. Many therefore wanted to quit and rely on outside jobs to make a living.77 In other production units, cadres gave the same points to everyone, undermining any incentive people might have to work well. A team leader of production unit no. 1 recalled:

At first, I was a production unit member. Because I worked hard, I was elected team leader in charge of grading points for the whole team. It was impossible to follow the grading regulations because I feared hurting others’ feelings [sợ mất lòng]. For example, according to the regulation, if someone came to work one hour late, I had to subtract his

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76 Author's interview, 30 June 2005, Long Điền B.
77 Author's interview, 29 June 2005, Long Điền B.
work-points. The regulation said so, but in practice, we were afraid of hurting others’ feelings so we distributed work-points to people evenly [cào bảng]. At first, some peasants worked enthusiastically but later lost their incentive because there was no difference between those who worked hard and those who worked sloppily.\textsuperscript{78}

Local cadres too often mismanaged state resources and did not serve the people responsibly. During the work-points period, the \emph{An Giang} newspaper reported numerous cases of problem cadres. For example, a November 1980 article accused cadres of ‘snitching’ (ăn xén) fertiliser from bags sold to peasants in a state trading shop in Châu Phú district. A bag of fertiliser should have weighed 50 kilograms, but in this district many bags weighed only 46 or 47 kilograms. Peasants also discovered salt and other ingredients had been mixed with the fertiliser.\textsuperscript{79}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5.1.png}
\caption{Rice production unit}
\end{figure}

A worm says to his wife, ‘Do not be afraid of moving here, we’ll be safe because the production unit manager has already sold all of the pesticides on the black market!’

Source: Drawn by Văn Thành, published in \emph{An Giang}, 22 March 1981.

\textsuperscript{78} Author’s interview, 27 June 2005, Long Điền B.
\textsuperscript{79} Chuyên to nhỏ: Ăn xén của dân [Pilfering people’s resources], \emph{An Giang}, 23 November 1980, p. 3.
Similarly, in the winter–spring of 1980–81, cadres in charge of storehouses in Thoại Sơn district embezzled 310 tonnes of paddy, which they simply reported as missing. Cadres colluded with private merchants buying paddy so that both gained financial benefits at the expense of the state and food supplies.80

Figure 5.2 Food procurement station
At the food procurement station, a man who sells rice bribes the official so he will ignore the water and sand mixed into his rice. He ponders: ‘In life, sometimes a word can increase the weight!’


In explaining the increased prices of paddy in An Giang, a local newspaper reported that some of the cadres responsible for controlling free markets and extending socialist markets were actually corrupt and colluded with private rice merchants, creating favourable conditions for an illicit rice trade. At the same time, cadres ‘blocked transport and prohibited markets’ (ngăn sông cấm chợ) for ordinary labourers.81 A man in Long Điền B recalled that he went to harvest rice crops for wages (cắt lúa mướn) in Thoại Sơn district and took home a few giọ of paddy,

80 Vài nét về những kho chứa lúa ở Thoại Sơn [Some problems with rice stores in Thoại Sơn], An Giang, 23 August 1981, p. 3.
but cadres from a food purchasing station stopped him and told him to surrender his paddy to them. Meanwhile, rice merchants who colluded with the cadres passed through easily.82 Another man commented:

Policies said that peasants were not allowed to cultivate and transfer paddy across borders. But if you had money to bribe the cadres you could do this without any difficulty.83

Long Điển B peasants and the An Giang newspaper accused local cadres of misusing common property. They said cadres frequently organised meetings and parties (nhậu nhẹt), wasting time and other resources, which made the state’s organisations function poorly and significantly affected people’s social and economic activities. The following cartoons help us understand these problems (Figures 5.3–5.6).

Figure 5.3 A farmer and a merchant at a food procurement station
A local officer in charge of preventing private trading points his left hand at a farmer who has two chickens and shouts, ‘Hand them over!’ Meanwhile, in his right hand, he receives a bribe from a merchant with many bags of rice and beans. She says, ‘Here are my permission papers to transport goods.’


82 Author’s interview, 9 August 2005, Long Điển B.
83 Author’s interview, 30 June 2005, Long Điển B.
Figure 5.4 Drinking at work
A farmer comes to a local office at 2 pm, showing a form to an official, and shyly says, ‘Sir, please consider my form.’ The officer, who is in the middle of a drinking session, shouts at him, ‘Don’t you see we are busy with our meeting?’

Figure 5.5 Tet (New Year) gifts
An officer submits a form to a higher official on New Year without including a ‘gift’, and is criticised for not behaving properly (like the man on the right).
The performance of collective organisations under the work-points system

QN-ĐT in the Central Coast region

In the first years after reunification, staple food production in QN-ĐT reportedly increased rapidly, from 149,062 tonnes in 1975 to 380,000 tonnes in 1978. Inspired by this achievement, QN-ĐT officials believed that, under their close leadership, the province could produce 550,000 tonnes of staple food by the end of the 1976–80 five-year plan. They believed that only collectivisation with ‘three revolutions’ would enable agriculture to meet that target.84

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However, in contrast to their expectations, when collectivisation in the province was extended, food production stagnated and did not match the increases in the area under cultivation and in agricultural investment. A leading article in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng in September 1979, titled ‘Some urgent measures to increase food production’, reported: ‘The rice productivity of the spring-summer of 1979 is low while the coming summer-autumn is under the threat of drought and flood. Starvation has occurred in some locations.’ The article argued that, in addition to bad weather, the poor performance of staple food production was because local authorities mismanaged and underutilised agricultural land (especially secondary-crop land) and labour. To improve food production, the article urged collectives to temporarily lend secondary-crop land to collective members for three years.\footnote{Các biện pháp cấp bách đẩy mạnh sản xuất lương thực, thực phẩm ổn định đời sống nhân dân [Some urgent measures to increase food production], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 15 September 1979, p. 1.} Similarly, the chairman of the provincial Committee for Agricultural Transformation admitted that the area and yield of secondary crops had decreased compared with pre-collectivisation times, and he urged collectives to lend secondary land to their members.\footnote{Nhận thức đúng đắn và thi hành nghiêm chỉnh việc tạm giao đất chuyên trồng màu cho xã viên sản xuất [Understanding well and seriously implementing a temporary redistribution of secondary land to members], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 19 September 1979, p. 1.} Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên also recalled secondary crops doing badly because of peasants pilfering produce. Finally, in 1980, collective leaders decided to temporarily redistribute secondary-crop land to households.\footnote{Author’s interviews, October–December 2005, Thanh Yên.}

Accounts in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng showed that the province continued to have bad harvests in the winter–spring of 1979–80; average rice productivity was about 2.5 tonnes per hectare compared with 2.92 in the previous winter–spring, of 1978–79. Thousands of hectares of rice yielded no crop (mất trắng). For example, Tam Kỳ district suffered failed rice crops across 557 hectares, while Quế Sơn district had 188 hectares producing no harvest.\footnote{Vụ Đông–Xuân 1980–1981 được mùa cả lúa và màu [Good rice and secondary crops harvested in winter–spring of 1980–1981], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 23 May 1981, p. 1.} Similarly, of Thăng Bình district’s 4,500 hectares of rice in the winter–spring of 1979–80, 800 hectares yielded no crop and 1,600 hectares returned poor yields. The average rice productivity in Thăng Bình district fell to 1.47 tonnes per hectare.\footnote{Huyện Thăng Bình phấn đấu đạt 65000 tấn lương thực năm 1981 [Thăng Bình is striving to produce 65,000 tonnes of food], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 9 September 1981, p. 2.
As a result of the efforts of QN-ĐN authorities to expand irrigation and agricultural land, and increase the number of crops per year and the use of chemical fertilisers, by 1980, the province’s staple food production was expected to reach 460,000 tonnes of paddy. However, according to a recent report from the Quảng Nam Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Sở Nông Nghiệp Phát Triển Nông Thôn Quảng Nam, or SNNPTNTQN) QN-ĐN’s grain production (including rice and corn) in 1980 was just 285,426 tonnes of paddy equivalent—falling short of the target.

Many other provinces in the Central Coast region faced similar food production shortfalls. In assessing the effects of collectivisation on the Central Coast’s agriculture, one study found:

The Central Coast was the region in which collectivization occurred most quickly and thoroughly and was most like the northern models. In this region, all peasants’ means of production became collective property; labor was tightly controlled by centralized leadership; household economy is highly restricted and even prohibited (so, they generated only a little staple food). Therefore, during the peak period [of] collectivization, the region faced a severe problem of staple food production. For example, thousands of hectares of secondary crop land in Thăng Binh district of QN-DN were abandoned in 1978.

Thanh Yến and Hiền Lộc villagers recalled their living conditions dramatically deteriorating during the work-points period. At the beginning of collective farming, the value of a workday in Bình Định collective no. 2 was 0.5 kilograms of paddy; later, it fell to 0.3 kilograms. Bình Lãnh collective faced a similar situation: the value of a workday fell from 3 kilograms of paddy in 1977 to 2 kilograms in 1978, 1.5 kilograms in 1979 and 0.5 kilogram in 1980.

An elderly man in Thanh Yến village recalled that collective farming caused hunger, and the value of a workday—0.3 to 0.5 kilogram of paddy—was not enough to ‘feed a rooster’, let alone a person. According to a former brigade leader of Bình Định collective no. 2:

91 CTKQN, Quảng Nam’s Socioeconomic Development.
92 Nguyên Sinh Cúc, Agricultural and Rural Development in Vietnam, p. 32.
93 Author’s interview, 9 December 2005, Thanh Yến.
94 Author’s interview, 31 October 2005, Thanh Yến.
The value of a workday during the first harvest of the collective [in the summer–autumn of 1979] was 0.5 kilogram of paddy. In the following season, the winter–spring of 1979–1980, the collective had such a bad harvest that collective cadres had to go elsewhere to buy food for their families. The value of a workday in that season was less than 0.3 kilogram of paddy. In the summer–autumn of 1980 season, the harvest was also bad. In the winter–spring of 1980–1981, the collective enjoyed a good harvest but the district’s authorities took a large quantity of collective paddy, so the value of a workday never reached 0.5 kilogram of paddy during the work-points system.95

Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên villagers often resorted to sarcasm to describe their living conditions during the work-points period. For example, I recorded statements such as: ‘collective farming produced so little rice that, when eating, people had to lick rice clinging to their chopsticks’ (lúa điểm là liếm đũa); ‘working for the collective, there were no clothes to cover one’s privates’ (hợp tác hợp te không có miếng vải che cái lớn); ‘in the evening, people had dinner with sweet potatoes to sleep; in the morning, people had breakfast with sweet potatoes to work; at noon, people opened their mouth to chew sweet potatoes again’ (tối ăn khoai đi ngủ, sáng ăn củ đi làm, trưa về hàm hàm nhai khoai); and ‘farmers work and cadres enjoy’ (cội làm cho cối ăn).96

Villagers recalled people living on sweet potatoes and cassava. An elderly man in Hiền Lộc told me his family did not have enough rice so they had two meals of cassava a day and one of rice mixed with cassava.97 An elderly man in Thanh Yên shared a similar story:

At that time, we substituted sweet potatoes for rice. Sweet potatoes were our main staple food. During one season of working for the collective, my family received only 20 kilograms of paddy. How could we live? The collective took much of what we produced.98

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95 Author’s interviews, 22 and 23 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
96 Lúa điểm là liếm đũa is a kind of backwards slang: lúa điểm is the amount of rice peasants received according to their work-points; liếm đũa literally means ‘licking chopsticks’, implying rice was so scarce that, after meals, people were still hungry. Hợp tác hợp te không có miếng vải che cái lớn is a modified version of the government slogan ‘working for collectives, few people went on foot; many went by bus’ (hợp tác hợp te đi bộ thì ít đi xe thì nhiều).
97 Author’s interview, 22 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
98 Author’s interview, 31 October 2005, Thanh Yên.
Villagers believed the poor performance of collective farming (its low productivity), high levels of leakage (thất thoát) and the wasting of collective resources (lãng phí) were the main reasons for their deteriorating living conditions. According to villagers, collective farming always produced poor harvests because people did not do collective work as carefully as they did private work and merely went through the motions of working; they did not take care of collective fields, and the ploughing, spreading of manure and weeding were done carelessly and unevenly. Some plots produced good harvests while neighbouring ones were bad. A man in Thanh Yên commented:

If collective farming had continued, land would become unsuitable for ploughing and transplanting any more because the soil would become harder and suffer degradation. Moreover, for years of collective farming, the collective plots would significantly decrease in size because people did not plough the soil properly; they did not hoe the corners and clear the edges properly.

In the opinion of many villagers, the poor productivity of collective farming was largely a result of people’s everyday politics and survival strategies. They also considered the ‘leakage’ from and waste in collectives, caused by cadres, as other major reasons for their low income. The leakage, villagers said, resulted not only from peasants’ theft and cadres’ embezzlement, but also from extraction by other individuals, mass organisations and the state. They argued that, because a large amount of collective produce was extracted to support cadres, subsidise mass organisations and pay state taxes and obligations, collective members received little income. Despite the fact that members were supposed to share more than 60 per cent of collective produce, leakage and waste meant they received less than half of this. This problem was not confined to Bình Lân and Bình Định collectives, but was common in many Central Coast collectives. According to a report by the Committee for Southern Agricultural Transformation in November 1979:

In some Central Coast locations, the state’s share in collective food distribution was about 30 to 40 per cent, together with collective funds and supplies for local guerillas, local cadres, party and mass organisations which meant that collective members received less than 60 per cent of

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99 Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
100 Author’s interviews, 10 October 2004; 5 October 2005, Thanh Yên.
101 Author’s interviews, October–December 2005, Thanh Yên and Hiền Lộc.
total produce, as regulated. Even in some locations collective members received only 40–50 per cent of produce. Meanwhile, peasants' secondary crops produced a bad harvest. So, the living standards of collective members were very low; many households faced difficulties in earning enough to live. Starvation occurred in some places such as Tam Ka district, QN-DN.102

Another problem was poor governance, especially the inefficient management of collective resources. Villagers argued that collectives were too large and cadres could not control resources (such as agricultural inputs, land and labour), production and output. Since a collective was unable to utilise all of the available agricultural land and labour, some land was left uncultivated or was cultivated too late. Moreover, under collective farming, workers were not able to weed, care for fields or dry produce as efficiently as under individual farming. A Hiền Lộc villager recalled delivering grain to the brigade’s house and then to the collective’s storehouse. Even though the grain had not dried properly, it was still put into storage. Later much of this produce rotted—an example of how collective farming wasted a lot of resources.103 Another man argued that 'the state thought that centralised leadership and management made agriculture stronger, but it failed to do so. I thought that individual farming was much more efficient than collective farming.’104

An Giang in the Mekong Delta

As discussed in the previous section, peasants from Long Điện B often expressed their objections to collective farming by rarely undertaking collective work or doing it unenthusiastically. Combined with local cadres’ mismanagement, this led to poor performance for collective farming.

Long Điện B peasants said the work-points system was terribly poor compared with their individual farming methods. The common reasons they gave were that ‘people did collective work unenthusiastically and sluggishly’, ‘no-one took care of common property’, ‘production unit cadres embezzled collective resources’ and ‘management of the

103 Author's interview, 19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
104 Author's interview, 20 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
production units was slack. As a result, peasants’ incomes were even worse than those of tenants in the period of landlords. An elderly man argued:

In the French time, the tenants who did not have land could farm on the landlord’s; the rent was not too much and tenants could make a living. Furthermore, at that time, wild fish were still numerous, which enabled people to make a living easily [để sinh sống]. When joining the production unit, people worked miserably and results were low. Because people did not want to work collectively, they did collective work sloppily [lạm khởi khởi] and weeded carelessly, so weeds overgrew. Therefore, at that time, peasants’ income was less than previously.105

A former chairperson of production unit no. 1 in Long Điền B recalled that, initially, a collective workday was valued at more than 10 kilograms, but this later decreased. At the end of 1980, after heavy floods, the value of a workday was only 0.7 kilogram (the same as in QN-DN). Peasants were disappointed and wanted to quit collective farming.106 A landless man who worked full-time for production units recalled that he and his wife received about only 20 gia of paddy (400 kg) for a whole season—not enough to feed his family and much less than his previous income from wage labour.107

The low value of a workday was not limited to collective farming in Long Điền B, but occurred across many parts of An Giang. Production unit no. 3 of Tây Khánh B commune in Long Xuyên faced the same situation. A full-time and hardworking member received only 10 gia (200 kg) of paddy per season. Here again, the reason for the low income was that people did not participate in collective farming wholeheartedly, but tried to make a living outside the production unit.108 A Chợ Mới district official who had experience of collectivisation in the period 1979–81 observed:

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105 Author’s interview, 20 June 2005, Long Điền B.
106 Author’s interview, 28 June 2005, Long Điền B.
107 Author’s interview, 23 June 2005, Long Điền B.
The living conditions of peasants in collective farming production units deteriorated. Where local authorities carried out collectivisation exactly according to the state policy, peasants faced many more difficulties in making a living. But where local authorities loosely applied the policy of collectivisation, peasants found it easier to make a living.\footnote{Author’s interview, 23 June 2005, Chợ Mới.} 

An Giang provincial Resolution No. 017/NQ-TU (26 November 1981) admitted that, ‘in many production units and collectives, production had not increased, it had even decreased; the living conditions of production unit members have not improved’.\footnote{Võ Tòng Xuân and Chu Hữu Quý, \textit{KX Account 08-11}, p. 33.} 

In June 1981, the \textit{An Giang} newspaper reported that rice productivity in the Tây Huế collective in the winter–spring of 1979–80 was about 1.5 tonnes per hectare (compared with the 4–5 tonnes per hectare achieved under individual farming). Moreover, leakage (thất thoát) and cadre embezzlement accounted for 50 per cent of this produce. The living conditions of collective members therefore had worsened.\footnote{Chuyển biến mới ở HTX Tây Huế [Good progress in Tây Huế collective], \textit{An Giang}, 7 June 1981, p. 2.} Another example was Phú Quý production unit in Phú An commune in Châu Phú district, whose land was assessed as fertile and, before collectivisation, had achieved average rice productivity of about 5–6 tonnes of paddy per hectare. However, after collectivisation, rice productivity fell to 1–2 tonnes of paddy per hectare.\footnote{Vài nét về một tập đoàn yếu kém [Some portraits of a weak production unit], \textit{An Giang}, 6 September 1981, p. 2.}

By 1981, collectivisation in An Giang involved less than 10 per cent of agricultural land and peasant households, and the effect of collectivisation policy on the province’s agricultural production was minor compared with that in QN-ĐN in the Central Coast. However, the combined effects of agricultural transformation—including collectivisation, prohibition of non-resident cultivators, land redistribution, conversion to double cropping, the low prices paid for grain procurement and free market restrictions—significantly hindered the development of An Giang’s agricultural sector. For example, the low prices paid for grain procurement discouraged peasants from increasing production. Instead, they produced only enough grain for their own family’s consumption. The prohibition of non-resident cultivators limited the productive capacity of peasants who previously
enjoyed relative freedom in choosing where to live and selecting their own businesses. According to Nguyễn Minh Nhị, a former An Giang party secretary, from 1976 to 1979, food production in the province stagnated at about 500,000 tonnes of paddy equivalent per annum. Due to heavy floods in 1978, An Giang's food production fell to less than 400,000 tonnes and starvation occurred in some places. From 1979 to 1980, the collapse of the majority of production units, which released peasants and land from collective farming, contributed to a slight increase in food production and productivity in 1980 and 1981. In general, despite much effort to modernise, food production and productivity during 1975–81 did not increase as much as expected (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 An Giang’s cultivated area, food yield and rice productivity, 1975–81

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area of annual</td>
<td>224,572</td>
<td>232,174</td>
<td>254,648</td>
<td>250,402</td>
<td>252,111</td>
<td>303,882</td>
<td>301,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food crops</td>
<td>hectares</td>
<td>hectares</td>
<td>hectares</td>
<td>hectares</td>
<td>hectares</td>
<td>hectares</td>
<td>hectares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food production</td>
<td>465,465</td>
<td>496,286</td>
<td>476,500</td>
<td>363,192</td>
<td>525,814</td>
<td>737,874</td>
<td>691,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(tonnes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice productivity</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(tonnes per</td>
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<td>hectare)</td>
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The stagnation of food production occurred not only in An Giang, but also across the whole Mekong Delta region. According to Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, before 1975, the Mekong Delta was one of the largest commodity rice-producing regions. However, after reunification, in the period 1976–80, despite peaceful times, the region’s staple food production did not increase, but fluctuated. In particular, rice production in the region fell between 1976 and 1978 and increased slightly between 1979 and

113 Nguyễn Minh Nhị, An Giang, p. 1. Some provincial officials explained that, apart from collectivisation and other policies, at that time, cheap prices for food discouraged peasants from increasing their own food production. They produced only enough for their own consumption (Author’s interview, 6 June 2005, Long Xuyên).
1980 (Tables 5.2–5.4). Nguyễn Sinh Cúc argued that, apart from bad weather, the fall in rice production was closely linked to the expansion of collectivisation. Moreover, he attributed the slight increase in rice production in 1979–80 largely to the collapse of a large number of production units, which released peasants and considerable amounts of land from collective farming.\footnote{Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, Agricultural and Rural Development in Vietnam, pp. 31, 32.}

In general, food production in the region fell short of the VCP leaders’ expectations, and aggravated the severe food shortage across the country in the early 1980s.

Table 5.2 Rice crop area, paddy production and rice productivity in the Mekong Delta, 1976–80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Area of rice crop (thousand hectares)</th>
<th>Paddy production (thousand tonnes)</th>
<th>Rice productivity (tonnes per hectare)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>2,062</td>
<td>4,206</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>2,099</td>
<td>3,478</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>2,062</td>
<td>3,565</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>2,086</td>
<td>4,650</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2,096</td>
<td>4,835</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Performance of Vietnam’s agriculture in 1976–80 and modification of the national agrarian policy

According to Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, from 1976 to 1980, land redistribution and collectivisation had a negative effect on the south’s agriculture. He argued that peasants’ negative practices resisting collectivisation (such as abandoning their land and neglecting to care for rice fields), egalitarian land redistribution and cadres’ corruption contributed significantly to the poor performance of agriculture in the south. In particular, paddy productivity and yield stagnated during 1976–80 (see Table 5.3).
Table 5.3 Area, productivity and output of rice crops in southern Vietnam, 1976–80

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area of rice (thousand hectares)</td>
<td>2,909</td>
<td>3,034</td>
<td>3,010</td>
<td>3,011</td>
<td>3,236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output (thousand tonnes)</td>
<td>6,346</td>
<td>5,887</td>
<td>5,014</td>
<td>6,431</td>
<td>7,207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity (tonnes per hectare)</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Ben Kerkvliet’s study of northern Vietnam showed that, due to everyday politics regarding land, labour and harvesting, staple food production there decreased between 1974 and 1980. In particular, paddy production fell by 20 per cent, while staple food per capita decreased from 276 kilograms in 1974 to 215 kilograms in 1980. Moreover, the performance of collective organisations deteriorated during the period 1976–80 and many could not meet tax and other obligations to state agencies.115

In general, Vietnam’s agriculture and staple food production stagnated in the period 1976–80. The country could not meet many of the targets in the government’s 1976–80 five-year plan. Staple food production, for example, reached only 68.5 per cent of the target. Food production could not meet the needs of consumption and inputs for industry. Vietnam had to increase its food imports from 1.2 million tonnes in 1976 to 2.2 million tonnes in 1979.116

Table 5.4 Vietnam’s staple food production, 1976–80

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staple food production (thousand tonnes)</td>
<td>13,400</td>
<td>12,579</td>
<td>12,255</td>
<td>13,986</td>
<td>14,382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staple food per capita (kilograms per person)</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddy production (thousand tonnes)</td>
<td>11,828</td>
<td>10,576</td>
<td>9,789</td>
<td>11,362</td>
<td>11,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddy productivity (tonnes per hectare)</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Vietnam in the late 1970s faced persistent food shortages and widespread hunger that alarmed national leaders. Other aspects of the economy also were in bad shape. The growth rate of gross domestic product in industry was –4.7 per cent in 1979 and –10.3 per cent in 1980. Additionally, from late 1978, Vietnam was at war with Cambodia and, from early 1979, it endured armed conflict with China, which consumed high levels of the country’s resources.

From 1979 to 1981, VCP leaders released a series of directives and instructions urging local authorities to strengthen collective farming and crack down on local negativism. However, the formation of collective farming had not improved and local malpractices had not disappeared, but increased over time. For example, in QN-ĐN, despite several campaigns to improve collectives and correct cadres’ and peasants’ negativism, progress was modest, and some problems were only temporarily corrected. The success of these campaigns was uneven and, in general, lower than expected. Many collectives in QN-ĐN were unable to adopt in full the northern model of collectivisation, despite the best efforts of the authorities. With inadequate capacity and poor governance, collectives tended to allow more room for local practices, policy modification such as ‘hidden contracts’ (khoán chui) or return of some collective land to peasants. Collectives became sites of perennial conflict between cadres, the state and peasants.

In An Giang, despite the government campaigns, the quality and performance of most production units did not improve as much as provincial leaders had expected. By mid-1981, only 40 per cent of production units and collectives in the province farmed collectively and the remainder farmed individually or under other illegal arrangements. By the end of 1981, An Giang had 357 production units and six collectives, but only 35 of the units were ‘advanced’. The lead article of the An Giang newspaper in September 1981 reported that collectivisation in the province had been uneven and was not extensive. The number of strong production units and collectives was

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120 Đẩy mạnh công tác cải tạo nông nghiệp [Speeding up agricultural transformation], An Giang, 7 June 1981, p. 1.
small. Some policies—such as those relating to land compensation, the family economy and the non-resident cultivator prohibition—had not been implemented correctly or seriously. Another article reported that, despite the efforts of the central and provincial governments, the ‘phenomenon of negativism’ (hiện tượng tiêu cực) remained severe. Negativism included widespread embezzlement and the theft of collective property, wages and work-points.

In response to the food crisis, the poor performance of collective organisations and widespread local use of ‘illegal contracts’ (khoán chui) in collectives across Vietnam, the VCP released Directive No. 100 in January 1981, calling for the expansion of new farming arrangements called ‘the product contract to individual workers or groups of workers’ (khoán sản phẩm đến nhóm và người lao động). These arrangements largely approved local practices and marked a significant modification of Vietnam’s agrarian policies.

Under the new system, each peasant household was allocated several small fields and a quota (mức khoán) for how much each field should produce. Frequently the quota was 10–15 per cent more than the average production during the previous three to five years. Collective leaders also determined which phases of farmwork should be done collectively and which individually. Farmwork was often divided into eight major phases, with individuals responsible for the three that most closely affected the end product (sản phẩm cuối cùng): planting (trồng), tending (chăm sóc) and harvesting (thu hoạch). The remaining phases—considered ‘technically complicated’—were preparing the land, providing seeds, irrigation, fertilisation and preventing and controlling disease. Specialised teams and brigades undertook these tasks collectively. The income of collective members was supposed to come from two main sources: work-points earned in collective work and income from the amount each household produced beyond their quota.

122 Intensifying the fight against negativism, An Giang, 8 June 1980, p. 1.
Conclusion

As in the north, in both QN-DN and An Giang provinces, everyday peasant politics during 1977–81 significantly affected the performance of collective farming. It is true that collective organisations in both provinces became sites of struggle between peasants, collectives and the state over production, distribution and the balancing of different interests. Like their counterparts in northern collectives, peasants in QN-DN tried to maximise the number of work-points they earned rather than production. Meanwhile, peasants in An Giang tended to evade collective farming and focused more on jobs outside the collective to make a living. Local cadres in both provinces also committed various wrongdoings and often took advantage of their power to benefit themselves rather than collectives and the state. While QN-DN cadres seemed to strictly control peasants’ economic activities and did not allow them to conduct businesses outside the collective, their counterparts in An Giang seemed to be slack in their management and allowed peasants to ‘put one foot inside and the other foot outside’ the collective. The latter were, however, engaged in higher levels of embezzlement and other negative practices. For example, they frequently organised drinking sessions (nhậu nhẹt), stole collective inputs and resources and wasted time. Despite authorities in both provinces putting great effort into correcting peasants’ and cadres’ ‘negative practices’, those behaviours increased over time. As a result, collective farming performed poorly in both QN-DN and An Giang and food production fell short of local and VCP leaders’ expectations.

At the national level, too, despite several campaigns by the VCP to improve collective organisations across the country, performance fell short of expectations. Faced with a crisis in staple food production and stagnation in the agricultural sector, national leaders finally abandoned the work-points system in early 1981 and approved previously ‘illegal’ local farming arrangements, called the product contract system. The VCP leadership believed that, by using the economic incentive of producing beyond quotas, the new system would motivate peasants to work enthusiastically and efficiently and increase productivity, thereby strengthening and perfecting collective farming.

However, the product contracts merely marked a new phase in Vietnam’s agriculture in which collective farming again gradually departed from the VCP’s original intentions. This will be discussed in the next chapters.