Local politics and the withering of collective farming, 1981–88

Introduction

When the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) released Directive No. 100 to officially endorse the product contract system, it hoped the new farming arrangements would create an incentive for the members of collective organisations to produce beyond their contracted quota, which would increase productivity and yields. VCP leaders also expected the product contracts would reduce peasants’ resistance and local cadres’ negativism and strengthen collective organisations.

The product contracts did in fact immediately improve the performance of collectives and boosted agricultural production in both Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng (QN-ĐN) and An Giang for the first few years. After that, however, they lost their momentum and failed to sustain collectives’ performance and deal with local malpractices. The product contracts solved some of the peasants’ concerns, but not the inherent governance challenges of collective farming and the struggle and conflicts of interest between households, collectives and the state.

In QN-ĐN, peasants and many collective leaders did not conform to the product contract guidelines and instead adopted ‘blank contracts’ and other improper variations (nhiều lệch lạc). The number of collectives adopting blank contracts increased, and the collectives’ debts to the state and households’ debts to the collective increased annually. Fed up
with their growing debt, some collective members decided to return all or part of their contracted land to the collectives so they could find off-farm jobs. Despite provincial leaders putting great effort into solidifying collective organisations during the period 1981–88, collective farming increasingly weakened in terms of collective ownership, management and production and tended to collapse, leading to a return to individual farming.

In An Giang, the product contracts aided the completion of collectivisation and land redistribution, but could not improve or strengthen collective farming. Despite several campaigns by the provincial authorities to solidify and upgrade the quality of production units and collectives, many units remained weak and did not operate according to collective principles. The adoption of blank contracts became widespread, and production unit cadres allowed peasants to undertake all phases of farming (*buông trắng cho dân*). In addition, collective cadres often took advantage of their position to embezzle or steal collective resources and oppress the masses. As a result, food production in some production units did not increase; the living conditions of their members were poor and food contributions to the state decreased. In early 1988, An Giang’s leaders began to question the direction of their agrarian policy and shifted to a preference for household farming, which contributed to a major change in provincial policy in 1988.

This chapter will continue to examine local politics, especially the forms and magnitude of QN-DN and An Giang peasants’ and local cadres’ everyday practices during the product contract period (1981–88), and reveals how and why collective farming faced similar problems and comparable practices in both locations. It will show how that behaviour adversely affected collective farming under the product contract system. The chapter also discusses how local politics and ‘illegal’ arrangements contributed to derailing and shifting the Communist Party’s agricultural policy from collective farming to individual farming.
Local politics during 1981–88 in QN-ĐN, Central Coast region

Peasants’ everyday politics

Household economy versus collective economy

Soon after the experiments with product contracts began, the Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper mentioned ‘a tough struggle over bad thoughts’ (cuộc đấu tranh tư tưởng phức tạp) in the countryside, as peasants tried to harmonise their interests with those of the state and the collectives. Local authorities still insisted that, under the product contract system, collective members’ earnings would come mainly from the value of their collective workdays (giá trị ngày công tập thể) and partly from the amount each household produced beyond their quota. In reality, many peasants were dubious about this and expected the opposite. Therefore, many wanted collective organisations to lower the quotas on their contracted fields to increase the income coming from their individual farming efforts.¹

Despite being encouraged by the authorities to care for collective interests, many peasants mainly looked after their own household economy (kinh tế gia đình), where they saw a direct link between their efforts and the rewards. For example, according to the Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper, in the summer–autumn of 1981, when ripe paddy fields in some collectives in northern parts of the province were suddenly flooded, many collective members took advantage of the situation and asked managerial boards to lower their quota. Otherwise, they would refuse to harvest. As a result, many paddy fields were not harvested in time and collectives suffered huge losses.² Likewise, according to a former brigade leader of Bình Lãnh collective, during the product contract period, collective members and cadres continually argued

1 Các hợp tác xã khẩn trương thực hiện thử khoán sản phẩm cuối cùng cho người lao động [Collectives must hurry in implementing the product contract], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 22 April 1981, p. 1; Qua các hợp tác xã nông nghiệp làm thử việc khoán sản phẩm cuối cùng đến người lao động [Results of experimenting with the product contract], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 12 May 1981, p. 2; Nhìn vào đồng ruộng tập thể: Lại chuyện chung và riêng [Looking at collective fields: Collective interest versus individual interest], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 23 May, p. 2.
about categorising contracted land and determining quotas. Peasants wanted to have fields with modest quotas and refused to accept fields on which they were not able to produce more than the quota.³

Villagers in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên recalled that, a few seasons after the implementation of product contracts, many of them lost their enthusiasm for collective farming because they could not produce more than the quota and because the value of collective work-points was low.⁴ Explaining the poor earnings villagers received from collective farming under product contracts, a former chairman of Bình Lạnh collective admitted:

At that time, the quota was set too high. For example, the quota for 1 sào [500 sq m] of the best soil land was about 200 kilograms of paddy [equal to 4 tonnes per hectare] and the quota of work was five workdays per sào. These quotas were stipulated by the district’s authorities and readjusted within five years. In general, collective members received less than 50 per cent of what they produced.⁵

The Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper in March 1983 evaluated the performance of Duy Phước, one of the leading collectives in the province, and revealed that, although paddy production in the collective had increased from 2,981 tonnes in 1978 to 3,577 tonnes in 1982, the living conditions of collective members had not improved much; the value of a workday was still about 2–2.1 kilograms and 2 Vietnamese dong (VND), which was similar to that under the previous system. The reason was the costs of production were huge, accounting for 75–80 per cent of the total product. Only 43.7 per cent of production went to members; therefore, income from the collective sector was far less than peasants’ expectations.⁶

Fed up with the low rewards from collective farming, peasants started to devise their own arrangements. A man in Hiền Lộc village recalled that, after the implementation of contracts, everyone had to do other

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³ Author’s interview, 24 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
⁴ Author’s interviews, October–December 2005, Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên.
⁵ Author’s interview, 24 October 2005, Bình Lạnh.
⁶ Hợp tác xã Duy Phước chặng đường 5 năm của phong trào hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp [Duy Phước collective over the past 5 years], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 5 March 1983, p. 2.
work (làng thêm) outside the collective sector. Some went to collect firewood and rattan to sell, while others reclaimed and worked land abandoned by the collectives.\(^7\) One poor elderly woman remembered:

> At that time, we tried to reclaim any abandoned land on the banks of streams, small ponds, corners of contracted fields, and every little bit of land. In addition, we increased the number of crops on contracted fields. For example, on one-crop-a-year land, we grew two crops; on two-crops-a-year land, we grew three crops.\(^8\)

Many peasants claimed they often stole some of the collective’s resources, such as chemical fertilisers and pesticides, to use in their own household farming (on gardens, 5 per cent land and reclaimed land) rather than on their contracted collective fields. The Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper reported in December 1983 that, in many parts of the province:

> [C]ollective members appropriated collective land for their own farming … they reclaimed new land, cleared the forest for cultivation, evaded paying taxes to the state and disobeyed the management of the collective.\(^9\)

Meanwhile, ‘collective land was cultivated poorly or abandoned’. These problems were severe in some places, especially in midland areas. The article warned that, if collective ownership was not well established soon, the increased expansion of the household economy would significantly harm the collective economy.\(^10\)

Generally speaking, under the product contract system, the household economy expanded rapidly at the expense of collective farming. Although the household economy was officially recognised in late 1979 as an integral part of the collective economy, QN-DN leaders in 1984 expressed their concern about the ‘transgression’ of putting the household economy before the collective economy, especially in weak collectives whose managerial boards were not able to control land,

\(^7\) Author’s interview, 24 October 2004, Hiền Lộc.
\(^8\) Author’s interview, 20 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
\(^9\) Củng cố và xác lập chế độ sở hữu tập thể trong hợp tác xã [Solidifying collective ownership], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 7 December 1983, p. 1.
\(^10\) Ibid., p. 1.
draught animals and labour.\(^{11}\) For example, Tam Ngọc was among the weak collectives in Tam Kỳ district in which ‘the struggle between two paths’—the collective (tập thể) and individuals (cá thể)—was severe. By early 1984, the Tam Ngọc collective controlled and managed only 30 per cent of collectivised land, and all draught animals had been returned to individual households. The collective was unable to control and manage labour, so each worker contributed an average of only 80–90 days of labour per year; they spent the rest of their time on their household economies. Members’ income from the collective was minor, accounting for only 13 per cent of the total. Therefore, ‘they did not care much about the collective economy’.\(^{12}\)

According to a report from the Agricultural Department of the QN-DN Communist Party’s Committee (Ban Nông Nghiệp Tỉnh Ủy), by November 1984, the household economy accounted for 70 per cent of the average farming family’s income, while earnings from their collective work made up only 30 per cent. In large parts of paddy-growing lowland areas of the province where collectives were able to manage and control almost all of the land, the shares of household earnings and collective earnings in a household’s total income were approximately equal. However, in the midlands, where the area of secondary-crop land was large, about 80–95 per cent of peasants’ total income came from the household economy.\(^{13}\) In assessing the development of the household economy during 1981–84, a provincial leader raised his concern:

> Since 1981 thanks to adopting product contracts, the potential of the household economies has been exploited well, in the form of merging [the] collective economy with the household economy. So far, the household economy has been recognised but has been loosely managed [buông lỏng]. So, in many locations the household economy has developed in a spontaneous, unstable and incorrect way and relied largely on free markets; in some areas where the collective economy was weak, the household economy even clashed with and encroached upon the collective economy in terms of land, labour, fertilisers and so on.\(^{14}\)

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11 The VCP had recognised and encouraged the development of the household economy since the sixth plenum of its fourth congress in 1979, and particularly after its fifth plenum in 1982 (see Vũ Nhán Trí, Vietnam’s Economic Policy Since 1975, pp. 130–1).
12 Cuộc đấu tranh giữa hai con đường đang diễn ra ở một hợp tác xã [The struggle between two paths: Cooperative and individual farming in a collective], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 4 January 1984, p. 4.
13 Trần Ngọc Cử-Ban Nông Nghiệp Tỉnh QN-DN (1984), Kinh tế gia đình ở tỉnh ta [The household economy in our province], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 29 November.
14 Ibid.
In response to the uncontrolled expansion of the household economy, QN-DN’s leaders in December 1984 issued Directive No. 53/CT-TV, which, on the one hand, stressed continuing to encourage the development of the household economy, while, on the other, emphasised controlling and guiding the activities of the household economy to bring them in line with the collective economy.\(^\text{15}\)

Despite inadequate support from local authorities, the household economy in QN-DN continued to rise, especially after the VCP launched the ‘Đổi Mới’ economic reforms of 1986, which officially recognised the existence of non-socialist economic sectors, liberalised trading and allowed freer flows of capital and labour that created more job opportunities outside the collectives. A former brigade leader in Thanh Yên village recalled:

> In the late 1980s, especially after Đổi Mới, the many young peasants abandoned or returned part of their contracted land to the collective so that they could earn a living outside the collective. Some went gold digging and some went trading. These people often got higher income than those clinging to the land. Therefore, many wanted to leave collective farming [muốn bỏ chạy ra ngoài].\(^\text{16}\)

Similarly, a former brigade leader in Hiền Lộc village remarked that, when the country’s economy was opened (mở cửa), young people left the village to earn a living elsewhere. Some worked for state enterprises, while some went to Dak Lak province in the Central highlands, where the coffee industry was booming.\(^\text{17}\)

A former building worker (thợ hồ) in a specialised team in Bình Lành collective recalled that, during the later stages of the product contract system, he did not want to work for the collective simply because the value of a workday there was about 1 kilogram of paddy. Meanwhile, working for individuals, he received 3 ang (12–15 kg) of paddy per day.\(^\text{18}\)

A July article from Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper also revealed:

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\(^{15}\) Ban Thường Vụ Tỉnh Ủy QN-DN (1984), Nghị quyết 53/CT-TV về việc tiếp tục khuyến khích phát triển kinh tế gia đình [Provincial Resolution No. 53/CT-TV on Continually Facilitating the Household Economy], 20 December, Tam Kỳ: Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng.

\(^{16}\) Author's interview, 9 December 2005, Thanh Yên.

\(^{17}\) Author's interview, 23 October 2004, Hiền Lộc.

\(^{18}\) Author's interview, 20 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
The biggest problem [the collective faced] was that peasants in Bình Lãnh wanted to escape collective farming [thoát ly hợp tác xã]. By June 1987, at least 160 young people refused to accept contracted land or join specialist teams; this figure was on the rise … The reason was that the value of [a] collective workday in Bình Lãnh collective was about 1.35 kilograms of paddy; the share of the collective economy in [a] collective household’s total income was nearly 30 per cent. The excess beyond the quota was small … [therefore,] there were two trends in peasants’ behaviour. First, peasants wanted to receive less land so that they were able to intensify farming to exceed the quota. This gave them more time to care for their household economies. Second, some people, especially young people, wanted to earn a living in towns and cities because they thought collective farming could not benefit them.\(^\text{19}\)

In short, product contracts reduced the practice of workers simply going through the motions of collective farming to accumulate work-points. They were unable, however, to motivate peasants to maximise their efforts to enhance the performance of collective farming. Rather, peasants were mainly concerned with their own household economies. Therefore, collective farming under the product contract system became a site of struggle between peasants’ and collectives’ interests. Peasants always tried to take advantage of any opportunity or available resources to increase their household economies, which severely harmed the collective economy.

**Debt**

In the first few years after the implementation of product contracts, the living conditions of collective members and food production in QN-DN had improved somewhat. However, at later stages of the system, collective members’ living conditions stagnated or, even worse, some peasants fell into debt to the collective and the state, which they refused to pay. According to the Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng newspaper, by 1985, most collectives in Thăng Bình district owed the state because members continually postponed paying (dây dưa) or refused to pay what they owed to collectives. Households in the district owed about 800 tonnes of paddy. One reason was that cadres only loosely managed harvests and produce—for example, in 1985, in Ha Lam collective no. 1, each household was allowed to harvest individually. After harvesting, some

\(^{19}\) Suy nghĩ về Bình Lãnh: Sự giàu có còn ở phía trước [Think of Bình Lãnh: Prosperity is still ahead], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 23 July 1987, p. 3.
households used the produce for their own consumption or sold some to meet their other daily needs rather than paying their quota and other obligations to the collective. As a result, 250 of 580 households had debts totalling 130 tonnes of paddy, accounting for 12 per cent of the total collective yield.\textsuperscript{20}

A 1987 investigation (điều tra) found that, despite authorities' increasing investment in agricultural inputs, staple food production and food procurement had not grown accordingly. Meanwhile, members’ debts to collectives and the collectives’ debts to the state had increased. For example, in the period 1984–86, collectives in QN-DN owed the state 25,792 tonnes of paddy equivalent. The total debt in 1986 alone was 11,903 tonnes—equal to about 4.1 per cent of the grain production in the province that year.\textsuperscript{21}

According to accounts in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, there were several reasons for the increased debt. First, cadres classified land and determined quotas irrationally, inaccurately and unfairly. Second, collectives did not fully service some farming phases, such as irrigation, the supply of fertilisers and the application of pesticides. Instead, they made ‘straight contracts’ (khoán thẳng) or ‘package contracts’ (khoán gọn) with collective households. Third, collectives were not able to provide resources and services to members on time, in the right quantity or of adequate quality. Therefore, many households, especially those in areas where irrigation was unreliable, suffered losses that led to them accumulating debts to the collective. Fourth, the supply of state inputs to collectives was hampered by bureaucratic red tape—for example, the level of input for a collective was calculated according to the area of land rather than actual needs. Fifth, the state set the terms of trade between agricultural inputs and agricultural produce to favour the former. Finally, authorities levied dozens of different payments from collective households, such as public bonds in paddy (công trái thóc), savings in paddy (tiết kiệm thóc), funds to help people being affected by storms and floods, paddy for training soldiers (thóc luyện tập quân sự), and so on.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Tại sao tiến độ huy động lương thực ở Thăng Bình chậm? [Why is food procurement in Thăng Bình slow?], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 7 December 1985, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{21} Điều tra nợ lương thực: Vấn đề giải quyết lương thực hiện nay [Investigation of food debt: How to deal with food problems], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 29 October 1987, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{22} Củng cố và hoàn thiện công tác khoán sản phẩm cuối cùng cũng dân lao động trong nông nghiệp [Improving and perfecting the product contract], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 25 October 1986, p. 1.
Villagers in Thanh Yên and Hiền Lộc villages recalled that product contracts did not make their lives much better. Most households owed paddy to the collective. They argued that the quota was often set inaccurately—for example, in areas where production conditions were unfavourable, collective cadres still made contracts with relatively high quotas. On land unsuitable for growing rice, cadres still forced households to grow rice. Therefore, many suffered losses and fell into debt. A former chairman of Bình Lãnh collective asserted that, by the end of the product contract system (mid-1988), households owed 500 tonnes of paddy to the collective and more than 70 per cent of peasant households were in debt to the collective.\(^{23}\) A man in Hiền Lộc village told of his sad experience with product contracts:

My family received 1 mẫu and 5 thước of land [5,166 sq m]. The collective coerced us to accept a large tract. My family had only three people: my mother, my elder sister and me. At that time I was 17 years old. Among the contracted plots was 4 sào of land without irrigation (one crop per year). For this 4-sào land, I could produce only 30 ang [150 kg] of paddy, but had to pay the collective 480 kilograms. I ask you, how could I pay? I had to owe the collective. At that time I often went to do collective work and accumulated a large number of work-points. So, the collective used my work-points to reduce my debts but the remainder was still large. I had to plant sweet potatoes and cassavas to pay the remaining debt. We had a difficult life and always owed the collective. Some households owed tonnes of paddy. I did not understand why the collective set the quota so high. A sào of land without irrigation had a quota of 120 kilograms. How could we produce that amount? We knew that they had suppressed us but we did not know what to do. Some people cried a lot and begged the collective to take back the land but that hardly succeeded.\(^{24}\)

Like their counterparts in Hiền Lộc village, about 90 per cent of the households in Thanh Yên village owed the Bình Định collective. By the late 1980s, the whole village (60 households) owed the collective about 22 tonnes of paddy. Some households owed more than 1 tonne of paddy each.\(^{25}\) Villagers commented that, under contract number 100, paddy productivity was low due to inadequate levels of fertiliser. Collectives set unfair quotas and charged many fees and funds that were converted into paddy, so many households ended up owing tonnes of paddy

\(^{23}\) Author’s interview, 24 October 2004, Bình Lãnh.
\(^{24}\) Author’s interview, 21 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
\(^{25}\) Author’s interview, 9 December 2005, Thanh Yên.
to the collective.²⁶ An elderly man in the village recalled that, under the product contract system, people did not want to receive much contracted land for fear of falling below the quota and because they had to contribute more than 70 per cent of their yield to the collective. The payment for fertilisers (received from the collective) alone was half the yield.²⁷ Similarly, a woman whose family owed 2 tonnes of paddy to the collective—the largest single debt in the village—explained:

> Under product contracts, the collective forced us to accept large amounts of land. My family did not have cattle so we did not use manure to fertilise the fields. We did not have money to buy chemical fertilisers as others did. Moreover, my husband was fed up with collective farming and refused to work. I worked the fields alone. Therefore, we always had bad harvests and were not able to pay our debts.²⁸

In response to the increased debts in the late 1980s, Bình Lãnh and Bình Định hardened their collection procedures. According to a former Bình Định collective cadre, initially, cadres relied on commune police to confiscate debtors’ property (such as cattle and bicycles), but the results of such hardline property seizure were unpleasant. Later, collectives hired district court cadres and police to collect debts by paying them 20 per cent of the value of the debt reclaimed. However, results were unsatisfactory because many debtors had nothing to confiscate. Finally, authorities gave up collecting peasants’ debts.²⁹ A former brigade leader of Bình Lãnh collective lamented:

> Many people owed the collective; they said they did not have enough food to eat so they could not pay. They said that they would pay their debts when human flesh was allowed to sell in the markets [they meant selling their own flesh to pay off debt]. They also watched each other to see if others paid or not; if not, neither did they. They copied each other [nạnh với nhau].³⁰

²⁶ Author’s interview, 12 October 2004, Thanh Yên. Ví is a large bamboo basket that villagers often use to store paddy.
²⁷ Author’s interview, 17 December 2005, Thanh Yên.
²⁸ Author’s interview, 9 November 2005, Thanh Yên.
²⁹ Author’s interview, 9 December 2005, Thanh Yên.
³⁰ Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
A 70-year-old man said that, under product contracts, many people were in debt to the collective. If people were poor, the state failed. It was impossible for the state to kill people if they were not able to pay their debts.31

Abandoning or accepting less contracted land

The Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper reported in late 1984 that many collectives in the province were using agricultural land wastefully and ineffectively. For example, collectives had abandoned large amounts of agricultural land or irrationally converted some of it into non-farming land. As a result, in 1984 alone, QN-DN had lost 5,000 to 10,000 hectares of cultivated land.32

A further investigation in 1985 found that another reason for the decrease in agricultural land was that some peasants had abandoned collective fields. For example, in 1984, peasants in 11 districts of the province had abandoned 13,000 hectares; in some collectives, the abandoned area amounted to hundreds of hectares.33 Peasants abandoned collective fields largely because the costs of cultivating were too high. In November 1986, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng reported that, after adopting product contracts:

Some collectives did not provide collective households with agricultural inputs or services sufficiently or on time, leaving them alone to take care of their crops. If collective households invested more in their contracted fields, the excess beyond the quota would not cover their expenditure … It was worrying that collective members did not want to accept contracted land. Instead they wanted to return it to the collective in order to do outside work, which brought them higher incomes.34

31 Author’s interview, 14 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
32 Chung quanh vấn đề sử dụng đất nông nghiệp [The problem of using agricultural land], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 15 August 1984, p. 2; Hội nghị tổng kết sản xuất nông nghiệp, phát động chiến dịch sản xuất vụ Đông–Xuân [A conference summing up five years of agricultural production and campaigning for the winter–spring crop], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 30 October 1984, p. 1.
33 Hội nghị quản lý ruộng đất của tỉnh sử dụng tài nguyên đất với hiệu quả kinh tế cao nhất, chấm dứt việc cấp đất trái phép, xử lý nghiêm khắc những vụ lấn chiếm đất trái phép của nhà nước và tập thể [Provincial land management conference promotes land resources with the highest economic efficiency, terminates illegal land allocation, strictly handles illegal encroachment on state and collective land], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 25 April 1985, p. 1; Cần quản lý và sử dụng đất nông nghiệp một cách hợp lý [The need to use agricultural land rationally], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 25 April 1985, p. 2.
34 Thực sự coi nông nghiệp là mặt trận hàng đầu [Agricultural sector needs to be regarded as top national priority], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 27 November 1986, p. 1; Improving and perfecting the product contract, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 25 October 1986, p. 1.
An example of the problem was Duy Thành collective, one of the successful collectives in Duy Xuyên district during the work-points system. A few years after adopting product contracts, however, the number of households here producing beyond their quotas significantly decreased. And the more peasants invested in collective fields, the greater the losses they suffered. Therefore, ‘many returned the land or kept some contracted land just as a formality [lấy lệ] so that they could set aside time to do other jobs to earn a living.’ This led to a paradoxical situation in which the collective had a high population density but its land was abandoned. Similarly, in the winter–spring of 1985–86, 30 per cent of peasant households in Điện Nam collective no. 2 in Điện Bàn district decided to return their collective land. In mid-1986, for the same reason, 20 per cent of households in Bình Triệu collective in Thăng Bình district returned their contracted land.

Bình Lãnh and Bình Định collectives in Thăng Bình district faced problems similar to those in other districts of QN-ĐN. The number of peasants who abandoned or returned their contracted land increased annually. For example, according to Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, in 1984, hundreds of households in Bình Lãnh collective decided to accept less contracted land or return some of their poorer land to the collective. As a result, villagers were unwilling to accept contracts on 30 hectares (không có người nhận khoán). According to a former chairman of Bình Lãnh collective, after the Đổi Mới reforms began, the number of households returning land to the collective increased by an average of 40–50 households per year. Some households returned land that was unfavourable for production; others returned it in order to earn a living in the Central Highlands or elsewhere. Some tried to farm on land not controlled by the collective.
Villagers in Hiền Lộc complained that, under product contracts, the collective established many new specialised teams (chuyên khâu) and other non-cultivating industries (chuyên ngành), which recruited many labourers. Therefore, each cultivating labourer in the collective was assigned more land than others. A woman with a disabled husband and young children shared her story:

When authorities distributed land [by drawing lots] to make contracts, I drew a lot [bóc thăm] of 1 mẫu and 7 thước [5,233 sq m]. That was too big for me! My husband was disabled and my children were too young; how could I manage it? I tried my best to work but contributed almost all of the produce to the collective. Thanks go to Mr Linh [Nguyễn Văn Linh], who saw our problems. If collective farming had continued, I guessed that the land would be completely exhausted [because people overexploited land]. If product contracts continued for a few more years, all the people here would refuse to do collective farming.

Similarly, a former brigade leader in Thanh Yên village commented that, after Nguyễn Văn Linh’s ascension to power as general secretary of the Communist Party, people were freed from collective farming. He said if this had not happened, people in his village would have run away from the collective because they worked hard but received little. A former chairman of Bình Định collective said:

Under product contract no. 100, many people wanted to return their contracted land. This would raise a big question to the top leaders of why under the product contracts many people were not able to produce more than the quota; and why they wanted to abandon their collective land. In the past, landlords were thought to exploit peasants, but nobody abandoned their rented land; rather peasants often competed with each other to rent land from landlords. But now why did peasants want to abandon land?

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40 Author’s interviews, October–December 2005, Hiền Lộc.
41 Ordinary people in Vietnam often attributed the Đổi Mới policy to former general secretary of the Communist Party Nguyễn Văn Linh. Recently, some authors have argued that Trường Chinh was the author of Đổi Mới (see Huy Đức, The Winning Side).
42 Author’s interview, 15 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
43 Author’s interview, 5 October 2005, Thanh Yên.
44 Author’s interview, 5 October 2005, Bình Định.
In short, everyday peasant practices such as pursuing their own household economic activities, abandoning land and accepting less collective land reflected not only their low confidence in collective farming, but also their discontent with local cadres’ poor practices and mismanagement of collectives.

Local cadres’ practices in QN-DN

In theory, product contracts diminished cadres’ power and increased peasants’ responsibility over the management of collective farming. Villagers were permitted to do three phases of farmwork on their own and were supposed to work collectively on the remaining five phases. However, the contract system created new opportunities for cadres to benefit at the expense of ordinary collective members. For example, managers were still given considerable power to direct collective farming, but they were not responsible for its performance. They therefore tended to shift their responsibilities on to villagers and embezzled major collective resources over which they had control, such as agricultural inputs, collective property and produce.

Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper warned in November 1981 that it was erroneous to think the adoption of product contracts had solved all the problems of collectives. In reality, cadres in many of the collectives and brigades ‘were not positive about improving management’; they did not look after the land, production tools or farmwork. Many offloaded the tasks of preparing seedlings and fertilising land to collective members without properly monitoring their performance.45 Villagers in Thanh Yên and Hiền Lộc also recalled that cadres often failed to fulfil their duties, such as spraying to prevent insects or watering the fields on time. Therefore, seeing their paddy fields attacked by insects or short of water, villagers often tried to save their fields first rather than wait for a collective response. A former brigade leader of Bình Định collective said:

From the outset of product contracts, the collective had nearly made ‘blank contracts’ with peasants; soon after implementing contract no. 100, the collective returned collective draught animals to households. In fact, the collective was only in charge of delivering fertilisers, spraying insecticides and supplying water. Meanwhile, peasants did

everything else, but they were obliged to the collective, paying tax, agricultural input fees [for fertiliser and insecticide] and irrigation fees and contributing to collective funds.46

According to Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, a few years after the implementation of product contracts, many collectives increased their quotas but did not increase their investment accordingly. Some even tried to reduce production costs by lowering the price paid for manure bought from collective members and the value of a collective workday.47 In some collectives, where cadres were allowed to farm contracted land, cadres lowered the quota to ensure they made a profit at the expense of collective earnings.48

When authorities ordered loans of secondary-crop land to households, collective cadres in some locations saw it as an opportunity to appropriate land for themselves and their families. When authorities wanted these fields farmed collectively again, these cadres tended to delay its return.49 QN-ĐN’s leaders considered the poor management of collectives was a result of local cadres’ weaknesses. Due to inadequate training, local cadres were often incompetent and lacked discipline; some even did things at odds with state and party policies.50

In the period 1983–86, provincial authorities launched several campaigns to improve collectives and train local cadres, but results were below expectations. Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng reported in October 1986 that collective cadres were still incorrectly implementing ‘the five-farming-phase-contracts signed with collective members’ by leaving households alone to do almost all the phases of farmwork; they did not conform to the requirements for managing production, inputs and outputs, which significantly affected the performance of collective farming and diminished the value of the collective workday.51

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46 Author’s interview, 5 November 2005, Thanh Yên.
47 Ban Nông Nghiệp Tỉnh QN-ĐN, The household economy in our province.
48 Summary of three years of implementing the product contract, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 6 July 1985, p. 1.
49 Solidifying collective ownership, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 7 December 1983, p. 1.
50 Phạm Đức Nam: Công tác trước mặt để củng cố và phát triển quan hệ sản xuất mới ở nông thôn [Phạm Đức Nam: Ongoing tasks for solidifying and improving new production relations in rural areas], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 18 June 1983, p. 1.
In addition, in their direction of agricultural production, collective cadres emphasised ‘controlling the end-products but paid scant attention to supplying inputs, credits and technology’.

After the VCP launched the Đổi Mới policy in 1986, the press was given more power to tackle ‘social evils’. Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng began to report on several problems with local cadres, including leaders of collectives. For example, an investigation in Điện Phước collective no. 2 in Điện Bàn district found 16,602 tonnes of stored paddy had disappeared during the period 1983–86; however, collective managers had not taken responsibility for this loss. Instead, they claimed ‘the paddy vanished naturally [tự nhiên biến mất] rather than being pocketed by anyone’. They asked collective members for their understanding (thông cảm), and also intimidated and chastised any member who disagreed or dared to protest.

Investigations also found cadres had used incorrect weight standards, thereby cheating ordinary people. Inspecting 74 scales belonging to several food-related organisations in eight of the largest paddy-producing districts in 1986, authorities discovered that only five met proper standards. The Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng article said that, by weighing incorrectly, staple food officials (ngành lương thực) had embezzled large amounts of food in the province.

Cadres in Thăng Bình district also embezzled inputs and outputs. Explaining the reasons for poor paddy productivity in the winter–spring of 1986–87 (1.6 tonnes per hectare on average, the lowest since 1976), an article in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng revealed that

a large amount of chemical fertilisers [supplied by the state] did not go directly to collective paddy fields but passed through the hands of private merchants and then to the fields [or peasant households].

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52 Agricultural sector needs to be regarded as top national priority, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 27 November 1986, p. 1.

53 Nhìn vào đồng ruộng tập thể: Hai bàn cân ở hợp tác xã Điện Phước 2 [Looking at collective fields: Two different weighing scales at Điện Phước Collective No. 2], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 8 August 1987, p. 2.

54 Trách nhiệm của ngành lương thực trong việc để hao hụt một số khối lượng rất lớn lương thực [State food agencies need to take responsibility for considerable loss of staple food], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 16 August 1986, p. 2.
In addition, many collectives merely ‘fertilised on paper’ (bón phân trên giấy). For example, investigations in five collectives in Bình Tú, Bình Sa and Bình Hải communes found that, in 1986 alone, 120 tonnes of urea fertilisers had ‘flown’ to the free market (bay ra thị trường).\(^{55}\)

In 1987 authorities in QN-DN carried out several inspections and retrieved VND599.4 million and goods worth VND50 million that cadres had embezzled. In agricultural collectives, inspectors found ‘many cases of embezzlement and theft’. For example, ‘a storehouse keeper of Đại Quang collective [Đại Lộc district] embezzled 19 tonnes of paddy ... [and] an interbrigades accountant of Điện Thoại No. 1 [Diễn Bàn district] embezzled 35 tonnes’.\(^ {56}\)

In response to local cadres’ negativism, the lead article in Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng in September 1987 called for the widespread and full implementation of socialist democracy. It also complained:

> Local cadres and party cadres have already forgotten the lesson of 'taking people as the foundation' [lấy dân làm gốc] because they now lacked democratic spirit and were not close to the masses in order to hear their voices. Therefore, there were too many heart-breaking incidents such as violating the master rights of people, embezzlement and bribes which took place widely in many locations, even in some executive committees of local party organisations.\(^ {57}\)

Villagers in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yê also complained that, under the product contract system, collective cadres set high quotas and raised numerous funds but used the income in ambiguous ways. Most funds went into the pockets of key collective cadres. A man in Thanh Yê village commented that ‘people contributed a lot to collective funds but the collective did not do anything to benefit the people. Cadres took it all.’\(^ {58}\)

A former brigade leader revealed that, particularly in later stages of the


\(^{56}\)  Tổ chức thanh tra các cấp tăng cường công tác thanh tra , kiểm tra nhanh chóng phát hiện những vụ tiêu cực [Intensifying investigations of negativism], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 14 November 1987, p. 1.

\(^{57}\)  Xã luận: Thực hiện rõ ràng và đầy đủ nền dân chủ xã hội chủ nghĩa [The editorial: Fully implementing the socialist democracy], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 1 September 1987, p. 1.

\(^{58}\)  Author’s interview, 1 October 2005, Thanh Yê.
product contract system, ‘collective cadres knew that the organisation would sooner or later be dismantled so they gradually turned collective property into their own’. Another former brigade leader confirmed that, after the implementation of product contracts, collective property such as tractors, waterpumps and rice-husking machines gradually disappeared, falling into the hands of collective cadres. People saw the collective property being spirited away (hao mòn) so they no longer wanted to contribute to the collective.

The excessive number of local cadres combined with the levels of embezzlement consumed large amounts of villagers’ produce. Villagers often complained that ‘peasants worked, the cadres enjoyed’ (cội làm cho cội ăn). The apparatus of collective administration consisted of so many cadres they shared among themselves much of the collective’s income. For example, many collectives opened up non-farming industries, which required even more cadres to manage them—animal husbandry, brick kilns, forestry, building, carpentry and so on. All collective cadres and workers in these specialised teams had to be paid in paddy, while the non-farming income went to collective funds. Therefore, collective members’ income was reduced. The collective also had to subsidise many mass organisations, which meant the collective’s income was constantly being drained. A former chairman of Bình Lãnh collective asserted that, under the product contract system, a collective was like a small state. The collective was in charge of all kinds of subsidies for local education, health care and cadre welfare. For example, when having a meeting, the district’s party committee came to ask for a cow to slaughter. We had to give them one. Individual cadres from district offices also asked for help. Because the district authorities directly monitored us, when they asked for something, we had to give it to them. Commune authorities did the same. The Commune People’s Committee still owes the collective about VND30 million.

59 Author’s interviews, October 2005, Thanh Yến. In November 1983, Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng also reported that the privatisation of collective property through forms of ‘illegal liquidation’ (thanh lý trái phép) had begun to take place in some collectives in the province (Xã luận: Cũng cố hợp tác xã vấn đề cấp bách đưa sản xuất nông nghiệp lên một bước [The editorial: Solidifying collectives is an urgent task to advance agriculture], Quảng Nam-Dà Nẵng, 14 November 1983, p. 1).
60 Author’s interview, 5 November 2005, Thanh Yến.
61 Author’s interview, 19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
62 Author’s interview, 8 December 2005, Bình Lãnh.
In short, local cadres’ malpractice and mismanagement contributed significantly to the poor performance of collective farming and the failure of the product contract system in QN-DN.

Local politics in An Giang, 1981–88

Peasants’ everyday politics

Farming poorly and owing debts to production units

In An Giang province, product contracts had a brief positive effect on production units that had performed poorly under the work-points system. Product contracts also helped boost socialist agricultural transformation and bring more land and peasants into collective organisations. However, despite this and earlier land redistribution, peasants’ living conditions and agricultural productivity did not improve for long. The reasons have to do with peasants’ responses to collective farming.

Villagers in Long Điền B commune in Chợ Mới district recalled that land redistribution and the product contract system provided landless and land-poor households with fields to farm; however, many farmed unprofitably and ended up deeply in debt to production units. Meanwhile, some landowners who had lost land to redistribution gave up farming or grew only enough for their own consumption. A former cadre of production unit no. 9 in Long Điền B argued:

Some guys who did not know how to farm were put into the production units to receive land. The production unit was supposed to teach them how to farm. Despite the production unit delivering fertilisers to them in advance, they did not know how to spread it properly. As you know, although the state was concerned about agricultural output, performance was low because many people did not know how to farm, while professional cultivators had lost much of their land.63

He also mentioned that non-farmers accounted for more than half of all land recipients in Long Điền B; most had been small traders, labourers or ran other businesses. Some lived in Cho Moi town, the capital of Chợ Mới district, and Mỹ Lương, another town in Chợ Mới. During

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63 Author’s interview, 5 August 2005, Long Điền B.
collectivisation, these people received land, but they did not know how to farm well or were unenthusiastic about farming. Therefore, after a few seasons, they often transferred, mortgaged or sold their fields to others and resumed their non-farming work. A man whose family had been river traders (nghề ghe) for generations recalled:

My family had long been trading on boats so we were not good at farming. My parents previously had 3 công [3,000 sq m] of land but they lent it to others. At the time [about 1984], we found it difficult to continue trading on the boat because it was extremely difficult to buy fuel. Besides, it was rumoured that anyone who did not have land would be sent to the new economic zones. Therefore, I returned to farming. Because I had 3 công of land from my parents, I did not receive any land from others. But we farmed unproductively. My first three, four harvests were bad. I was not able to pay the fees of the B contracts [hợp đồng B for agricultural inputs]. [Consequently,] because I was not able to pay to the production unit, I was put into custody [bị bắt nhốt] by commune police [in 1986]. At that time, many others also owed to production units because they did not know how to farm. In addition, the production unit provided us with insufficient fertilisers, pesticides and irrigation while we contributed so much to the production units. The contribution accounted for more than half of our harvest.

As well as a lack of knowhow, insufficient supplies of agricultural inputs and poorly functioning production units, many poor peasants complained they could not farm well because they were destitute and lacked capital to invest in their fields. For example, unlike the better-off peasants, poor peasants were unable to buy extra fertilisers and pesticides on the free market; they did not have enough money to hire labourers or machinery from production units to level the land, which was necessary for growing high-yielding rice. Some poor villagers complained that the land redistributed to them was infertile, undulating or located in unfavourable areas. Many suffered losses and fell deeply into debt. Ultimately, some had to transfer or abandon collective land after a few seasons of farming.

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64 In the years 1979–86, at the beginning of each season, authorities (through production units) supplied peasants with agricultural inputs (fertilisers and pesticides) in return for peasants’ paddy after harvest, according to the stipulated exchange rate. This arrangement was called the ‘B contract’.

65 Author’s interview, 12 August 2005, Long Điền B.

66 Author’s interview, 2 August 2005, Long Điền B.

67 Author’s interview, 5 August 2005, Long Điền B.
An investigation in Chợ Mới district in December 1985 found that 70 per cent of peasants lacked capital to invest in their farming and had begun to return land to production units. This problem was widespread in An Giang. In particular, after Đổi Mới, when An Giang abolished some agricultural subsidies and B contracts, poor peasants faced increased difficulties in attaining agricultural inputs to invest in their farms. According to the An Giang newspaper in July 1987, when Châu Phú and Phú Tân districts abolished B contracts, some peasants began to abandon their contracted land because they could not buy fertiliser.

Looking back, some poor villagers in Long Điền B argued that with the few công of land redistributed to them, their families could not live on farming alone. The income from their farming was often less than that from their previous jobs, so they had to supplement their income by doing wage work or small trading. The more time they spent working for wages, the less time they had for their own farming. Moreover, producing high-yielding rice required capital. Most poor households did not have enough capital, and production units supplied inadequate agricultural inputs. Their farming was therefore unprofitable and they ended up in debt. A former chairman of Long Điền B Commune Peasant Association shared his view:

At first, some poor peasants were happy to receive readjusted land but later they felt dissatisfied because their farming had poor results. A poor family with five to seven people received only a few công of land; if all their members clung to farming, they could not survive because they could not do other business. So, they had to rely on doing wage work to supplement their livelihood. As a result, their farming was bad; their paddy productivity was about 10 giạ per công [2 tonnes per hectare; while that of better-off farmers was 4–5 tonnes per hectare]. Because they farmed inefficiently, they transferred and mortgaged [cầm cố] their land to others despite authorities not allowing this.

\[68\] Chợ Mới vào vụ mới [Chợ Mới begins to cultivate a new crop], An Giang, 20 December 1985, p. 2.
\[69\] Xung quanh chuyện đầu tư cho sản xuất nông nghiệp [The problem of agricultural investment], An Giang, 17 July 1987, p. 2.
\[70\] Author’s interview, 9 August 2005, Long Điền B.
He also revealed that, despite the commune authorities encouraging peasants to exchange labour with each other, those in the Southern Region refused to do so, wanting instead to hire labourers rather than exchange labour.\footnote{Author’s interview, 9 August 2005, Long Điền B.} This is why the rice fields of poor households often had more weeds and were unprofitable.

Similar to their counterparts in QN-DN, many poor peasants in An Giang could not afford the cost of agricultural inputs, taxes and other obligations to the production units and ended up in debt. Most commonly, they owed paddy for agricultural inputs (nợ vật tư) or B contract debts (nợ hợp đồng B). According to the An Giang newspaper, some poor peasants, after receiving inputs from production units, sold them on the free market to meet their daily needs rather than using them in their fields. They ended up with poor harvests and were unable to pay their costs. Others adopted the tactic of putting ‘one foot inside and the other foot outside’ the production unit so they could buy state agricultural inputs at low prices to sell on the free market at higher prices.\footnote{Người nông dân đang cần phương thức đầu tư hợp lý phát triển sản xuất nông nghiệp [Peasants need a rational method of agricultural investment], An Giang, 23 October 1987, p. 2; Author’s interviews, June–August 2005, Long Điền B.} Many poor peasants were unable to pay their debts because they farmed unproductively but still had to pay production units a large amount of paddy. One poor man recalled that, during the product contract system, he always had poor harvests. If he paid fees for inputs, irrigation and his contribution to the production unit’s funds, he had almost nothing left for his family. He therefore delayed his payments and was in debt to the production unit. He said: ‘The authorities often came to force us to pay debts but when they saw that we were really poor, [they] finally they gave up.’\footnote{Author’s interview, 6 August 2005, Long Điền B.}

In the time of Mr Lê Duẩn [then Communist Party secretary], it was compulsory to carry out land redistribution. But after redistributing land, because they were poor, many people farmed unproductively. They refused to pay [in paddy] fees for irrigation, fuel, fertiliser and pesticides. It was trouble. The production unit was not able to collect fees from people who had nothing. The better-off households were able to invest in their farming while the poor households just farmed. Farming like that, paddy productivity went down rapidly. The number of households who were not able to pay debts was so numerous that
I could not count them all. Some did not pay a thing for four successive seasons. Most debtors were land recipients who previously had not had any land [không có cục đất chọi chim]. After receiving land, they did not transform or level out the land. They did not know how to farm. So when they grew rice on land that was soaked here but dry there, some of their rice died, some survived. The results of such farming were bad, so they owed the production unit. Meanwhile, professional cultivators knew how to farm and had capital to invest. They levelled out land properly so their crops grew better.74

A former cadre of Long Điền B commune observed that, among debtors, the ‘priority’ families (gia đình chính sách)—such as those with wounded veterans or who had members killed fighting in the war (thương binh liệt sỹ), former soldiers and local poor cadres—had the largest debts. Apart from farming unproductively, these households often took advantage of their position to evade paying the production units.75 To collect arrears and make peasants pay their debts, production unit cadres in Long Điền B threshed peasants’ paddy, especially those who were in debt or had poor harvests. A leader of production unit no. 15 recalled:

The production unit had to control produce. After harvesting and threshing paddy in the fields, each household had to pay [fees, taxes and funds] before carrying paddy home. If a production unit allowed individual households to harvest freely, they would refuse to pay their debts fully. It was common that households with low paddy productivity came to reap and hide paddy at night. So, during the harvest time, production unit cadres had to patrol the fields at night.76

Villagers in Long Điền B recalled that, apart from collecting fees in the fields, production unit cadres and commune police frequently searched debtors’ houses and confiscated their paddy and/or belongings; they even arrested some and held them in custody. However, the results were insignificant. Many debtors continued to refuse to pay their debts, justifying their behaviour by saying they had no means to pay.77 The An Giang newspaper was critical, reporting in July 1988:

74 Author’s interview, 16 August 2005, Long Điền B.
75 Author’s interview, 29 July 2005, Long Điền B. The households of martyrs and wounded soldiers included those who had family members killed or wounded in the line of duty during the country’s wars. In An Giang, most of these were related to conflicts with Cambodia (1978 to mid-1980) and China (late 1970).
76 Author’s interview, 16 August 2005, Long Điền B.
77 Author’s interviews, June–August 2005, Long Điền B.
Over the past years, peasants have not had the right to manage and control their own land and produce. Their fate was determined by others [cadres]. The only right that they had was to labour … It was common that local authorities came to search for peasants’ paddy, confiscated their belongings and took back the land to reduce their debts. It was a daily phenomenon that peasants in debt were arrested and remained behind bars for so-called ‘education’. Many peasants did not have enough food; how could they pay?78

After Đổi Mới started, villagers tended to refuse to fulfil obligations such as contributing collective funds to production units. A former cadre of production unit no. 16 recalled that, in the late 1980s, the number of peasant households which refused to pay production unit funds increased in Chợ Mới district. These households were fed up with unprofitable farming in production units and discontent with cadres’ embezzlement and incompetence. In response, local authorities used harsh measures, such as sending soldiers to search for paddy and belongings in their homes. They even arrested debtors. However, these tactics did not result in significant changes, and dismayed peasants. The cadre concluded, ‘when peasants refused to contribute to funds, the only option was to dismantle the production units.’79

Abandoning, transferring, mortgaging and disputing ownership of land

Instead of cultivating redistributed land, some poor peasants in An Giang transferred and mortgaged it to others because they did not farm or did not have enough capital.80 A former chairman of the farmers’ association in Long Điền B commune said that, after a few seasons of farming, some peasants abandoned, transferred or mortgaged their land so they could take up non-farming work.81 Another man in Long Điền B said it was common for land recipients to transfer or sell their land to others. Some fields had been transferred several times between different landholders.82

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79 Author’s interview, 11 July 2005, Long Điền B.
80 Võ Tòng Xuân and Chu Hữu Quý, KX Account 08-11, p. 35.
81 Author’s interview, 9 August 2005, Long Điền B.
82 Author’s interview, 2 August 2005, Long Điền B.
Villagers and former cadres in Long Điền B argued that transferring land made those who had previously had their land redistributed discontent with the redistribution policy. Moreover, land-givers became more discontented when they saw that some of the local cadres took advantage of their positions and misappropriated the land for themselves and their relatives. However, before the Đổi Mới policy, many landowners did not express their views publicly.

In the spirit of Đổi Mới and in response to the poor performance of agriculture, on 19 February 1987, An Giang people’s committee issued Decision No. 93-UBND, which corrected the mistakes of previous land redistribution efforts. It also allowed households to farm fields in communes other than their own. It advocated retrieving land that had been previously appropriated ‘irrationally and illegally’ by local cadres and state organisations and giving it back to the former landowners according to their capacity to farm or to those who were currently landless or land-poor. The policy triggered a host of claims from households for their former land and led to widespread conflict among peasants and local cadres in rural areas of An Giang.

According to the An Giang newspaper, within the first three months of 1987, authorities in the province had received 2,000 letters from peasants and met 5,000 people who submitted petitions. Most letters complained about land, houses, belongings and agricultural and other machines being appropriated or transformed (cải tạo) in ways that violated people’s mastery rights. Some letters accused local cadres of embezzling collective resources. Further, in May 1987, An Giang reported that, during the implementation of provincial Decision No. 93, a complicated problem had emerged when many former landowners claimed back their land from the new owners. This problem occurred almost everywhere. Regardless of the local authority’s decision, some

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83 Author's interview, 16 August 2005, Long Điền B.
85 Cần hiểu rõ và chấp hành tinh thần quyết định 93 của Ủy ban nhân dân tỉnh [The need to fully understand and abide by the Provincial People’s Committee’s Directive No. 93], An Giang, 22 May 1987, p. 6; Don’t mistake rational reallocation, An Giang, 29 May 1987, p. 1.
86 Phỏng vấn phó bí thư tỉnh ủy An Giang: Nhiệm kỳ tới sẽ cố gắng làm thế nào để góp phần vận dụng nghị quyết VI vào thực tế tỉnh nhà đạt kết quả cụ thể hơn nữa [Interview with Vice-Chairman of An Giang’s Party Committee: The next term will try to contribute to the application of Resolution VI in the province to achieve more concrete results], An Giang, 17 March 1987, p. 1.
peasants claimed their former land by illegally sowing seeds on it or by other means. For example, in 1985, the production unit cadres in Đức Bình ward, Long Xuyên town, redistributed 28 công of surplus land from a Mrs Kiem to seven other households to establish product contracts. In April 1987, however, Mrs Kiem planted seeds on these 28 công, in defiance of previous arrangements. In the end, authorities had to force her to return the land to the seven new land users (chủ mới). Mrs Kiem was not alone; 14 other landowners tried to take back their old land in this area.

To tackle these problems—of previous landowners (chủ cũ) trying to reclaim their redistributed land—authorities issued several announcements stressing ‘the need to understand clearly and conform to the spirit of Decision No. 93’ and accusing former landowners of mistaking (ngộ nhận) the policy of ‘reallocating land rationally’ for one of ‘returning land to previous owners’.

Land disputes were widespread not only in An Giang, but also across the Southern Region. According to researcher Huỳnh Thị Gấm, by August 1988, 59,505 peasants had lodged complaints about land across the whole Southern Region. In many areas, peasants took back their former land or fought against each other, state enterprises and military organisations. There were physical clashes and incidents in which people were wounded and some were killed. For example, seven people died in An Giang and Cửu Long in 1988. Peasants also organised demonstrations. They gathered together, carrying national flags, slogans and pictures of former national chairman Hồ Chí Minh. They marched through government offices at all levels, from the commune, district and provincial to the central, demanding resolution of their land claims.

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87 Mỗi tuần một chuyện: Nhanh chóng giải quyết vấn đề ruộng đất hợp lý [A story each week: Be quick to solve land disputes], An Giang, 22 May 1987, p. 3.
89 The need to fully understand and abide by the Provincial People’s Committee’s Directive No. 93, An Giang, 22 May 1987, p. 6; Don’t mistake rational reallocation of land, An Giang, 29 May 1987, p. 1.
90 Huỳnh Thị Gấm, Socioeconomic changes in the Mekong Delta, p. 89. According to Huỳnh Thị Gấm, by the end of 1988, authorities in An Giang had received 41,000 petition letters from peasants, Đồng Tháp had received 20,000, Minh Hải 18,000 and Cửu Long 10,000.
In response to these disputes, the VCP issued Directive No. 47/CT-TW (31 August 1988), which recognised the shortcomings of previous land redistributions. First, land redistribution, especially under Directive No. 19 (3 May 1983), had equalised (cào bằng) landholdings among households and interrupted and rearranged previous farming systems (xáo canh) in rural areas, which negatively affected agricultural production. Second, it distributed land to non-farming households such as small traders and other non-farm workers who did not know how to farm. Finally, local cadres and state agencies had taken advantage of the policy to use land inappropriately. Now peasants wanted their old land back.91

To boost commodity production, the directive advocated the elimination of the prohibition on non-resident cultivators and the retrieval of land that was farmed poorly or illegally. Retrieved land was to be redistributed to productive landowners or to those who currently had insufficient land. However, the directive called for land disputes to be dealt with cautiously, case by case. It also stipulated that landlords, reactionaries, rich peasants and rural capitalists whose land had been confiscated under the policy to eliminate exploitation did not have the right to reclaim their land.92

To clarify the central government’s Directive No. 47, leaders in An Giang issued Directive No. 303-QD-UB (4 October 1988)—which contained a feature not mentioned in the central directive. It encouraged former landowners and the new users of land to negotiate with each other to determine who should own the land and to decide on the level of any compensation. For example, if a new land user wanted to keep the land, they would have to compensate the former landholders for the cost of land reclamation and transformation (công khai phá và cải tạo ruộng đất), although this would be applicable only to middle peasant households. Otherwise, the former landowner must compensate the new land user for the cost of rehabilitating and transforming the land and the value of the crop on it.93

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92 Ibid., pp. 9–14.
Directive No. 303 triggered a second wave of land disputes in An Giang. One popular rumour was that authorities would return land to its former landowners. Excited by this news, many former landowners in Long Điền B rushed to claim their land. Some met new land users to negotiate the return of their land; some simply brought seeds to sow on their old land regardless of what the authorities said; and some gathered at commune and district offices to strike and demand resolution of their land claims. All of this caused what villagers in Long Điền B called ‘great turmoil’ (đảo lộn) in Chợ Mới district and elsewhere in An Giang during the late 1980s.94 A former vice-chairman of Long Điền B commune shared a story of how one former landowner whose family had two ploughing machines responded to Directive No. 303:

Hearing news of Directive No. 303, before anyone was ready to work the fields, he and his brothers carried long knives and machines to plough his family’s old land. They threatened to kill anyone who dared to block them. So, the new land users did not dare to. Finally, the commune police had to arrest them. At the office, they argued that authorities had redistributed their land to others to do collective farming in production units, but now collective farming in production units did not really exist any more so the authorities had to return the land to them.95

A Long Điền B resident who had lost 6 hectares of land in Long Điền A commune due to the non-resident cultivator prohibition, and who later took that land back, recalled:

Before the reunification, I had 6 hectares of land [in Long Điền A]. After reunification, revolutionary authorities took all my land to redistribute to others. They took my land right out of my hands. The hamlet chief in Long Điền A appropriated much of my land. However, after Mr Linh came to power, I had a chance to take it back. I also sent many letters to claim my land, but authorities rejected them all. So, I decided to break the law. My two brothers and I brought machetes to the field to work; I said that if he [the hamlet chief] came to the field, we would kill him. I said that it was right for the authorities to take abandoned land, but not right to steal land from people. Thanks to the party secretary of Long Điền A commune, who asked the hamlet chief to return the land to me, I was able to get the land back.96

94 Author’s interviews, June–August 2005, Long Điền B.
95 Author’s interview, 29 August 2005, Long Điền B.
96 Author’s interview, 9 August 2005, Long Điền B.
A former cadre of production unit no. 1 who was aware of land conflicts after Directive No. 303 recalled:

Directive No. 303 did not tell the new users of land to return land to the old landowners. It just mentioned that both needed to negotiate with each other in the spirit of mutual concession. But it seemed that the authorities favoured the interests of the old landowners. I did not know what provincial leaders’ opinions were, but I knew that some district and commune cadres implicitly supported returning land to the old landowners [to boost commodity production]. As far as I remember, at the meeting to deal with land disputes in 1988, Mr Chau, a district leader, said that people could not get rich with 2 and 3 công of land. With a few của, people could not produce commodity paddy. So, people should return land to old landowners and find other businesses. Therefore, in land disputes, old landowners had the advantage over new land users. Eventually, most new land users in Long Điền B decided to return land to old landowners.97

As discussed in previous chapters, during land redistribution, authorities in Long Điền B allowed landowners to ‘lend’ (cho mượn) much of their surplus land to their land-poor relatives. Moreover, Long Điền B villagers highly respected the rights of individual landownership and values of justice and religious morality. Therefore, new land users tended to return land to its former owners. A man who lost his land in Đồng Lớn later received 3 công of land from his relative, but, after Directive No. 303, he felt emotional about his relative (tình cảm bà con) so he decided to return the land. He did not want to fight over it because it would bring him a bad reputation (mang tiếng).98 Similarly, a landless man who received a few công from an acquaintance decided to return it to its previous owner. He felt it was odd for him to take another person’s land, and he would rather be poor than steal someone else’s land (giựt đất người khác).99

Some landowners in Long Điền B still complained they were unable to reclaim their land, especially land located in other communes, districts or provinces. Notably, peasants who had land in Đồng Tháp said they could not get it back as the authorities there favoured their own residents. However, landowners who had lost fields in Thoại Sơn and Châu Thành districts in An Giang province were able to take back much of their

97 Author’s interview, 17 August 2005, Long Điền B.
98 Author’s interview, 3 August 2005, Long Điền B.
99 Author’s interview, 16 August 2005, Long Điền B.
Local cadres’ practices in An Giang

Under the product contract system, collectivisation in An Giang accelerated. This required additional local cadres and increased efforts to supervise them. Yet, despite the efforts of An Giang’s leaders to improve the quality of local cadres during the period 1981–88, problems remained and even seemed to worsen. The most common malpractices among local cadres were misappropriation of land and embezzlement of state agricultural inputs (fertilisers, pesticides, fuel and so on).

Misappropriating collective inputs and funds

An Giang newspaper accounts highlighted numerous cases of local cadres who exploited their positions to misappropriate and embezzle agricultural inputs. For example, a report on 27 June 1982 said that, after receiving state provisions of fertiliser and fuel, a commune cadre in Châu Thành district sold them on the ‘black market’ for a quick profit rather than giving them to peasants, according to the requirements of the B contracts. The commune cadre used his ill-gotten gains to upgrade his house and pigpen and reported to the higher-level authorities that peasants had refused to pay their input debts.102

100 Author’s interview, 18 August 2005, Long Điền B.
101 UBNDTAG, An Giang Province, p. 400.
102 Chuyện to nhỏ: Ông cán bộ xã T [Some issues: Commune cadre], An Giang, 27 June 1982, p. 4.
In March 1983, An Giang reported:

Recently, some peasants complained that local cadres were stealing production unit inputs to sell on the black market for a quick profit or to raise [black] funds. Some cadres even misappropriated inputs worth 15 tonnes of paddy … This made agricultural production in An Giang difficult.\(^{103}\)

In 1984, An Giang put several local cadres on trial for embezzling agricultural inputs, collective paddy and other goods. In July 1984, Tran Van Ba, a Long Xuyên agricultural input station accountant, was put on trial for colluding with leaders of production units and production solidarity teams and misappropriating a large quantity of inputs to sell on the black market.\(^{104}\) In September, an accountant from Binh Long commune's food station was taken to court for writing fake invoices and embezzling 3,027 kilograms of state paddy to sell on the black market.\(^{105}\) In December, the An Giang people's court tried 26 cadres who were staff of the provincial food department. They were accused of increasing the price of cement, which the Ministry of Food used to exchange for paddy with peasants. In addition, they created fake receipts for millions of dong, embezzled, took bribes and stole state inputs. In the end, the court sentenced one of them to death; the head of the provincial Ministry of Food was sentenced to 17 years’ imprisonment and others were sentenced to many years in jail.\(^{106}\)

Despite continuous efforts by the An Giang authorities to tackle cadres’ misbehaviour, problems persisted. On 16 May 1986, An Giang reported that two-thirds of provincial goods used to exchange for peasants’ paddy had fallen into the hands of individual merchants, most of whom were relatives of local cadres.\(^{107}\) Local cadres unilaterally increased the prices of goods and agricultural inputs that peasants had to purchase from state agencies. The cadres then sold considerable amounts of these goods and inputs on the black market, making quick profits. This contributed

\(^{103}\) Chuyện to nhỏ: Nên chấm dứt [Some issues: Stop it], An Giang, 13 March 1983, p. 4.

\(^{104}\) Tòa án nhân dân tỉnh xét xử đầu cơ và hối lộ [Provincial People’s Court adjudication on speculation and bribery], An Giang, 12 July 1984, p. 3.

\(^{105}\) Huyện Châu Phú xét xử bọn tham ô lương thực [Châu Thành District Court tries food thieves], An Giang, 27 September 1984, p. 3.

\(^{106}\) Phạm nhiều tội, 26 bị cáo ra tòa án nhân dân An Giang [26 defendants sentenced for many crimes in An Giang People’s Court], An Giang, 27 December 1984, p. 2.

to inflation in the province and aided the survival of black markets and individual merchants—something the VCP leadership was trying to control and eliminate.108

At the local level, production unit cadres played an intermediary role in economic transactions between the state and peasants, so they had even more opportunities to capture resources. It was common for villagers to send letters to newspapers or the state to accuse cadres of embezzling agricultural inputs and collective property. For example, in 1984, peasants in production unit no. 12 in Kiến Thành commune (Chợ Mới district) sent a letter accusing their production unit cadres of buying things without receipts. They also accused them of stealing agricultural inputs and overcharging members for the costs of production (such as fuel, fertilisers and collective funds).109

Likewise, according to the An Giang newspaper in August 1984, peasants in one production unit were surprised to see the paddy fields of production unit cadres were more luxuriant and had higher productivity than those of ordinary peasants, when all were supposed to be operating under the same conditions. An inspection found that production unit cadres had taken scarce agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers, pesticides and fuels, for themselves, rather than distributing them among households. They also sold some of these products on the black market. This explained why, after a few years of working as cadres, all had newly renovated houses and expensive belongings.110

Villagers in Long Điền B asserted that production unit cadres embezzled a considerable sum of agricultural inputs and collective funds. From 1982 to 1987, inspections discovered many production unit cadres embezzling agricultural inputs and collective paddy. Some were imprisoned—for example, a former production unit head was sentenced to several months in prison in 1986 for embezzling 75 giạ of paddy (according to him), but 16 tonnes of paddy according to his successor.111 A man in production unit no. 9 recalled:

109  Chuyện to nhỏ: Đề nghị giải quyết thỏa đáng [Some issues: The need to solve the problem satisfactorily], An Giang, 28 August 1983, p. 4.
110  Chuyện to nhỏ: Chuyện các ngại trong ban quản lý tập đoàn [Some issues: The problems caused by production unit managerial cadres], An Giang, 8 October 1984, p. 4.
111  Author’s interviews, 9 and 11 August 2005, Long Điền B.
The production unit cadres served people very poorly, but embezzled very well. Their pockets were full from embezzlement. For example, when pumping water to peasant fields, it cost one container of fuel, but they reported three. When raising funds to buy farm machines, instead of charging each production unit member 30 kilograms of paddy per 1 công of their land, they charged 34 kilograms. So, how much would they get for about 1,000 công of land? \(^{112}\)

The inspections in Chợ Mới during the second quarter of 1986 also showed violations in several managerial boards of production units. For example, in Bình Hòa commune, a storekeeper for production unit no. 17 embezzled 3,235 kilograms of paddy; a storekeeper for production unit no. 15 embezzled 6,051 kilograms; and a leader of production unit no. 7 misappropriated 6,244 kilograms of collective grain. \(^{113}\) A former cadre of the Chợ Mới Committee for Agricultural Transformation recalled:

Most production units were not low in quality; they were production units on paper and ghost units [tập đoàn giấy, tập đoàn ma]. When inspecting, we discovered violations in many of them. Because the inspection was to strengthen production units, we did not take them to court [đưa ra pháp luật]. For example, in 1986, the provincial inspection in Mỹ Hội Đông and Mỹ Lương communes uncovered many cases of cadre embezzlement, but they were settled internally [xử lý nội bộ], not in public. \(^{114}\)

In explaining why so many local cadres embezzled, a primary schoolteacher from Long Điền B commented that production unit leaders were selected from revolutionary and pro-revolutionary families; most were poorly educated but were recruited because they readily accepted the posts (while better educated people were reluctant to take on such positions). They had also not been well trained, so they managed the units ambiguously and poorly. The teacher concluded: 'All cadres in production units and interproduction units embezzled collective resources.' \(^{115}\)

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112  Author’s interview, 10 August 2005, Long Điền B.
113  Huyện Chợ Mới tiến hành kiểm tra một số tập đoàn nông nghiệp [Chợ Mới district carried out investigations into some production units], An Giang, 13 June 1986, p. 1.
114  Author’s interview, 17 June 2005, Chợ Mới.
115  Author’s interview, 15 August 2005, Long Điền B.
Cadres’ debts

An Giang newspaper accounts suggest cadres’ improper behaviour continued and even worsened. In November 1984, the provincial food department found that peasants’ debt was small compared with that of local cadres. For example, four communes in Châu Phú district each owed 400 to 500 tonnes of paddy; most debtors were local cadres. In May 1985, many areas of Châu Thành district still had huge debts; some communes owed 600 tonnes of paddy each, according to a provincial Inspection Commission report. And most of the large debtors were cadres. For example, in A. H. commune, the chairman owed 80 tonnes of paddy; the chief and the storekeeper of the commune’s Department of Agricultural Inputs owed 14 and 16 tonnes of paddy, respectively. In Bình Hòa commune, 30 of 36 production units were in debt, much of it due to cadres’ theft. Fearing punishment, some production unit cadres ran away (bỏ trốn).

Commune and district cadres in Châu Thành also had large debts. For example, Duong Van Minh, a district irrigation agent, owed 4 tonnes of paddy, while Vo Van Rang, a district inspection agent, owed 806 kilograms. Such officials, according to a 1987 report, ‘took advantage of their positions and the weakness of loose management to collude and steal state agricultural inputs. Some cadres owed 50–70 tonnes, even more.’

Similar to Châu Thành district was Thoại Sơn. From 1983 to the winter–spring of 1986–87, that district had 21,500 tonnes of paddy debt, of which input (B contract) debt was 15,000 tonnes and unpaid taxes were 6,500 tonnes. According to a manager of the district’s food company, the debts of production unit, commune and district cadres accounted for 70 per cent of the total; ordinary peasants’ debt was only 30 per cent. Moreover, despite commune and district cadres’ families owing large debts, production unit cadres did not dare collect because they ‘feared higher officials’ (tâm lý sợ cấp trên).
Phú Tân district experienced similar circumstances. From the winter–spring of 1986–87 to June 1987, the total debt of 20 party members and 50 production unit cadres reached thousands of tonnes of paddy. Some owed 40–50 tonnes of paddy each. In Hòa Lạc commune (Phú Tân), 24 of 27 commune party cell members owed more than 1 tonne of paddy each.

Local cadres’ debts were large and common in many parts of An Giang. The provincial newspaper in July 1987 said commune, hamlet and production unit cadres in the province owed about 70 per cent of the total B contract debt.

In late 1987, provincial leaders decided to revise the policy on agricultural inputs. Local cadres’ poor management and embezzlement hindered the accurate and timely delivery of inputs, causing difficulties for production and peasants’ livelihoods. From the winter–spring of 1987–88 onwards, An Giang decided to end the delivery of state agricultural inputs to peasants through production units. Instead, state inputs would be sold to peasants directly in exchange for cash or paddy.

Misappropriating peasants’ land
Cadres in many parts of An Giang were accused of misappropriating (chiếm dụng) peasants’ land, accounts of which emerged after Đổi Mới, and especially after the provincial people’s committee issued its Decision No. 93 (19 February 1987). In May 1987, the An Giang newspaper pointed out:

Over the past years, the redistribution of provincial land was irrational. Some cadres have taken advantage of their position to gain good land for themselves and their families. Others did not cultivate the land but took a considerable portion of it. Many state organisations at district and provincial levels took advantage of their collective status to misappropriate land.

122 Ibid.
In July 1988, the *An Giang* newspaper listed the names of several cadres who had used the prohibition against non-resident cultivators to take land for themselves. For example, Cao Hồng Dinh, Tân Lập commune police chief, whose family already had 2 hectares of land, took another 6 hectares; Ba Hương, the commune’s Department of Agriculture head, appropriated over 10 hectares; and Tứ Dũng, the vice-commune chairman, took more than 12 hectares. Some peasants whose fields had been usurped ‘lost their temper’ (*loạn trí*) and went to commune offices, shouting and demanding their land back.\(^\text{125}\)

Several government offices and mass organisations took land for illicit purposes. In Định Mỹ commune in Thoại Sơn district, for instance, such organisations took more than 160 hectares. They tried to justify this by calling the areas ‘self-sufficient land’ (*đất tự túc*) to serve the benefit of the entire organisation. Although annoyed, villagers initially tolerated this behaviour, but certain officials ended up using the land as their own. For example, the commune’s party secretary took 6 hectares of land for himself; the party’s vice-secretary took 12 hectares; the commune’s vice-chairman took 12 hectares; and the chief of the commune police took 6 hectares. One group of cadres claimed a vast 167 hectares, which they classified as unclaimed land (*đất hở*). A Mr Cop, a cadre of the commune’s Department of Agricultural Tax, took (*bao chiếm*) 26 hectares for himself, an act he hid by using the names of seven different landholders. Lê Văn Dũng, the chief of the same department, appropriated 14 hectares and hid the theft under four different names. Mr Tân, the chief of communal police, stole 31 hectares, while Út Hên, the commune vice-chairman, took 31 hectares, using the names of different landholders.\(^\text{126}\)

Land misuse was also severe in Phú Tân district. In 1982, district authorities prohibited non-residents from farming there. Taking advantage of the situation, many local cadres took fields for themselves. For example, Trần Văn Phát, the leader of production unit no. 17 in Long Phú commune, took more than 2.7 hectares; Nguyễn Văn Hảo, the leader of production unit no. 15, took 5.4 hectares; Tô Văn Ba, the chairman of Long Phú commune’s Father Front (a social organisation), took 1 hectare; Út Bình, the former commune chairman, appropriated

\(^{125}\) Nỗi oan trái của bà con nông dân Tân Lập [The grievances of peasants in Tân Lập], *An Giang*, 1 July and 8 July 1988, p. 3.  
\(^{126}\) Những người bao chiếm đất [Land misusers], *An Giang*, 5 August and 19 August 1988, p. 2.
5 hectares; Chau Ngoc Chao, the commune chairman, appropriated 5 hectares; and Nguyen Van Thai, the commune’s party secretary, appropriated 4.5 hectares. By August 1988, hamlet and production unit cadres had taken 78 hectares from non-resident farmers.127

Cadres also misused land in Chợ Mới. A man in Long Điền B admitted that local cadres misappropriated land everywhere, and it was common for cadres to have more land than ordinary people.128 Another man said compared with land appropriation elsewhere, in Chợ Mới it was less severe.129 However, in some Chợ Mới communes, according to accounts in the An Giang newspaper, land appropriation was just as bad as elsewhere. For example, in Tân Mỹ commune in Chợ Mới district, many cadres took peasant land, concealing their action under different names. Some even resold the land to make a quick profit. Cadres delayed or, in the worst cases, avoided implementing state policy on returning land to the previous landowners. So, nearly two years after Decision No. 93 (19 February 1987) had been issued, authorities in Tân Mỹ commune had not settled any peasants’ land claims.130

Other bad practices

An Giang villagers often accused cadres of monopolising and overcharging for farming services to production units. As discussed earlier in this chapter, households in most production units in An Giang did almost all phases of farmwork themselves.131 Production unit cadres, however, controlled certain farming resources and services, such as irrigation and equipment for ploughing, raking and threshing. Often cadres and the specialised teams responsible for providing or using these resources were inefficient or unfair in how they provided services. A man in Long Điền B recalled how irrigation was done in his fields:

128 Author’s interview, 29 August 2005, Long Điền B.
129 Author’s interview, 27 July 2005, Long Điền B.
130 Đất: Tiếng kêu từ phía nông dân [Land problem: A cry from peasants], An Giang, 18 November 1988, p. 3.
131 Chuyện to nhỏ: Ông tập đoàn trưởng [Some issues: Production unit leader], An Giang, 13 June 1982, p. 4.
Production unit, my goodness! Production unit members had to compete with each other to have their land watered. We had to draw lots to determine who was served first. If we were first, we had to spend days and nights guarding the water. Within two days, if we hadn't finished watering, we had to give the water to others and waited for another turn.132

A woman from Long Điền B added: ‘The production unit teams irrigated for some people and not for others. When irrigating fields, some places got too much water, others nothing.’133 A man in production unit no. 9 in Long Điền B remembered problems getting his fields ploughed:

We contributed paddy to the production unit to buy ploughing and threshing machines but we still had to pay for ploughing and threshing. They were not free of charge. Moreover, the guys controlling the machinery served their relatives first rather than the rest of us. In order to have our land ploughed, we had to entreat [năn nỉ] them five or 10 times and always carry cash to pay them right away. Otherwise, they would not plough our land.134

In April 1983, the An Giang newspaper reported that, in a certain district, only a few collective ploughing machines operated even at peak times of land preparation. Moreover, their ploughing capacity was extremely low. The reason, according to the article, was that operators of the collective machines were waiting for ‘special fuel’ (bribes) from peasants, which was ‘necessary for machines to run fast’.135

In July 1986, the newspaper reported that peasants in one interproduction unit had criticised cadres for poor ploughing services:

When ploughing, equipment operators just ploughed around the plot, leaving the centre untouched … [and] often the tractors ran like a racehorse [chạy như ngựa đua] and raked like a mouse scratching the land [xới như chuột cào].136

132 Author’s interview, 2 August 2005, Long Điền B.
133 Author’s interview, 12 August 2005, Long Điền B.
134 Author’s interview, 5 August 2005, Long Điền B.
135 Lệ Làng [Village customs], An Giang, 24 April 1983, p. 4.
136 Tư phê bình và phê bình: Ý kiến từ một cuộc họp [Criticism and self-criticism: Opinion from a meeting], An Giang, 4 July 1986, p. 3.
As a result, the fields were poorly prepared. In addition, the interproduction unit cadres often rented out tractors to other areas instead of fulfilling their obligations to members of their own interproduction unit.137

A former cadre of Long Điền B commune complained about the performance of disease prevention teams (đội bảo vệ thực vật):

During that time [of production units], peasants complained a lot about these teams because they performed very poorly. They called the crop protection team đội bảo vệ thực vật [the ‘duck meat protection team’] because only by giving the teams duck meat did they work well. Otherwise, they worked badly. In the end, we let peasants receive pesticides and spray their own crops.138

One of the most annoying things for villagers in Long Điền B was that production unit cadres monopolised the threshing service for peasants’ paddy. One man recalled:

The production unit took over threshing our paddy without allowing others [other production units or individuals] to do the job, regardless of whether it was raining or not. They also overcharged us.139

Similarly, another man recalled the way his interproduction unit threshed:

The interproduction unit [including four production units] had four threshing machines, so each production unit had one machine. How could they thresh people's paddy in time? They did not allow people to hire outside threshing services. When it rained, people's paddy got wet and rotted. Seeing their paddy going to ruin, some people got so angry that they lay down on the road where cadres passed their threshing machines and shouted, ‘Thresh my paddy or kill me!’140

Local cadres’ malpractice contributed to the derailment of national and provincial agrarian policies. By capturing such a large proportion of state and collective resources and serving farmers poorly, local cadres exacerbated the poor performance of collective organisations, and of agriculture in the south as a whole. While one of the original aims

137 Ibid., p. 3.
138 Author's interview, 29 August 2005, Long Điền B.
139 Author's interview, 27 July 2005, Long Điền B.
140 Author's interview, 16 August 2005, Long Điền B.
of the VCP’s agrarian reforms was to eliminate exploiting classes, in many areas, rural cadres became a new class of exploiters. The An Giang newspaper reflected critically that, 12 years after the country’s reunification, peasants should have escaped poverty and backwardness. However, having just escaped from the darkness of landlordism, peasants were exploited by ‘new landlords’ (địa chủ mới) masked in the name of production units. The following cartoons (Figures 7.1–7.4) from the An Giang newspaper depict cadres’ other misdemeanours in An Giang during the period of product contracts.

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**Figure 7.1 Internal funds**

Behind the accountant of a production unit were several types of ‘internal funds’ (quỹ nội bộ) used only by cadres themselves.


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141 Những điều nghe thấy từ thực tế [Some issues learned from reality], An Giang, 4 March 1988, p. 3.
Figure 7.2 Red tape
A peasant who submits his petition to the boss in a state office must go through several gates. The first gatekeeper asks, ‘Do you have permission papers?’ The second gatekeeper asks, ‘Do you want to meet the boss? Wait here.’ After considering the form, the secretary replies: ‘Approved, come and pick up the results in a few days.’ But the cadre behind the secretary says: ‘Finished, come and pick up the result in a few months.’ Flooded with piles of petition letters, the boss shouts: ‘Go back home! I will sign later after studying it.’ Finally, the peasant wonders: ‘But we are told that red tape has been eliminated!’

Figure 7.3 Prohibiting the use of cameras
While preparing a lavish party, the boss orders a staff member to post a big sign prohibiting the use of cameras so that, the boss says, ‘We need not fear being photographed by journalists!’
Figure 7.4 Heart problem

After examining a cadre who has benefited from bureaucratic red tape and embezzlement, the doctor says: ‘You have a heart problem!’ The cadre ponders: ‘Probably I have had this problem since the appearance of NVL.’

Source: Drawn by Van Thanh, published in An Giang, 4 September 1987, p. 7.

142 NVL is the abbreviation of the name of the Communist Party General Secretary, Nguyễn Văn Linh, who initiated the Đổi Mới policy and cracked down on corruption. ‘NVL’ was often also interpreted as ‘Nói và Làm’ (‘speaking and doing’).
A return to household farming

QN-ĐN in the Central Coast

According to QN-ĐN government statistics, in the first few years of the product contract system, staple food production in the province increased from 460,000 tonnes in 1980 to 500,000 tonnes in 1981 and 525,000 tonnes in 1982. However, from 1983 to 1985, staple food production stagnated, and then decreased to 510,000 tonnes in 1983. It increased slightly in 1984 (to 522,000 tonnes) and in 1985 (to 540,000 tonnes), but fell short of the expected targets for those years—535,000 tonnes for 1984 and 545,000 tonnes for 1985. Therefore, from 1981 to 1985, the annual growth rate of the food yield in QN-ĐN was about only 1.4 per cent.

Despite a slight increase in QN-ĐN’s staple food production from 1981 to 1985, collective members’ incomes from the collective sector deteriorated because many households could not produce more than the quota and the value of their collective workdays was low. For example, in Bình Lành collective (Thằng Bình district), staple food production increased slightly, from 2,300 tonnes in 1982 to 2,400 tonnes in 1983 and 2,600 tonnes in 1984, but the value of a workday decreased, from 2 kilograms of paddy in 1982 to 1.3 kilograms in 1983 and about 1.4 kilograms in 1984. Similarly, in Duy An collective no. 1 (Duy Xuyên district), staple food production increased 20 per cent during 1982–84, but the value of a workday deceased from 2.7 kilograms in 1982 to 2.2 kilograms in 1984.

143 Vietnamese statistics are often flattering for political and propaganda purposes; however, the numbers can be useful for comparison (Paddy production over the past years, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 14 September 1983, p. 1).
146 The product contract, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 8 November 1984, p. 1.
147 Ibid.
According to Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng newspaper accounts, one reason for the decreased value of a workday in the period 1981–85 was an increase in the state’s staple food procurement from the collective sector and unfair terms of trade between agricultural inputs and agricultural outputs, which favoured the former.148 For example, in QN-DN, state food procurement increased from 61,227 tonnes in 1980 to 110,000 tonnes in 1984 and to 120,877 tonnes in 1985, accounting for about 22 per cent of total yield.149 Another report showed that collective staple food obligations had increased 2.41 times between 1980 and 1984.150 Meanwhile, the price of paddy was low but the prices of agricultural inputs and other industrial goods were high during 1982–85. Many households therefore could not farm profitably and ‘were afraid to invest and expand their production’.151

Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng reports in late 1983 revealed several cases of weak collectives across various districts of the province. For example, an investigation in June 1983 discovered that many collectives in Tam Kỳ district were weak and had veered from party directives. In these collectives, ‘blank contracts’ were popular at both the collective and the brigade levels. Draught animals had not been fully collectivised, so collectives could not use them. Land and labour were loosely managed, so collective members’ earnings from the sector made up only a minor proportion of their total income.152 A close investigation of Tam Phước collective, one of the weak collectives in Tam Kỳ district, showed that, after adopting product contracts, its collective relations of production weakened. The collective had 1,257 hectares of rice land and 563 hectares of secondary-crop land; however, only half the rice land was used for collective farming. The remainder, especially the secondary-

148 Ibid.
149 Quán triệt nghị quyết hội nghị lần thứ 7 Ban chấp hành trung ương đảng: Ban chấp hành đảng bộ tỉnh quy định phương hướng nhiệm vụ năm 1985 [Full resolution of the 7th Plenum of the Provincial Party Committee: Plans for the year 1985], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 2 February 1985, p. 1; Năm năm phát triển sản xuất nông nghiệp [Five years of agricultural production], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 1 February 1986, p. 2.
150 Summary of three years of implementing the product contract, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 6 July 1985, p. 1; Ban Kinh Tế Tỉnh Ủy QN-DN (1985), Tốc độ khôi phục kinh tế và phát triển xã hội của tỉnh gần 10 năm giải phóng, [QN-DN’s Economic Performance over the Past 10 Years], 16 February, Tam Kỳ: Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng.
151 Summary of three years of implementing the product contract, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 6 July 1985, p. 1. The price ratio of urea fertiliser to paddy in 1983–84 was about 1:2.
152 Củng cố và đưa các hợp tác xã nông nghiệp của huyện Tam Kỳ tiếp tục tiến lên [Solidifying and advancing collectives in Tam Kỳ district], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 4 June 1983, p. 3.
crop land, was used by landowners for their household economy. Therefore, a large proportion of collective members’ income came from their own household economic activities.\textsuperscript{153}

Collective organisations also suffered losses. According to An Giang’s Provincial Committee of Agriculture (\textit{Ban Nông Nghiệp Tỉnh Ủy}), the economic efficiency of collective activities during 1982–84 was so low that many could not even cover their costs. (For example, in 1984, 24 of 40 collectives in Thăng Bình district suffered a loss.) To reduce such losses, collectives in QN-DN increased their quotas and the price of agricultural inputs sold to peasants. They also reduced household investment and lowered the value of a collective workday, which is why collectives in the province paid their members low rates for a workday—less than 1 kilogram of paddy.\textsuperscript{154}

In November 1984, an investigation into eight collectives in different areas of QN-DN found that members in Bình Nguyên’s collectives in Thăng Bình district suffered an average loss of 200 kilograms of paddy per hectare. Those in Đại Phước collective in Đại Lộc district lost 400 kilograms per hectare. Members in Tam Nghia collective in Tam Kỳ district lost 123 kilograms per hectare, while Tam Thái collective no. 1 in Tam Kỳ district lost 123 kilograms; Đại Hiệp collective no. 2 in Đại Lộc district lost 148 kilograms; and Bình Lãnh collective in Thăng Bình district lost 210 kilograms. Only in Đại Phước collective no. 1 in Đại Lộc district did collective members show an average profit, of 54 kilograms of paddy per hectare.\textsuperscript{155}

After \textit{Đổi Mới} officially began in 1986, the performance of agriculture and collective farming in QN-DN dropped alarmingly. The province’s staple food production fell from 540,000 tonnes in 1985 to 463,000 tonnes in 1987.\textsuperscript{156} For paddy and corn, in particular, production dropped between 1985 and 1988 (see Table 7.1). At a meeting about ‘solidifying and strengthening agricultural production relations’ in

\textsuperscript{153} Tam Phước củng cố hợp tác xã nông nghiệp [Tam Phuoc solidifies collectives], \textit{Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng}, 9 July 1983, p. 3. The article did not mention how the other half of rice land had been used. It seems this land was largely under the control of landowners.

\textsuperscript{154} Ban Nông Nghiệp Tỉnh Ủy QN-DN (1984), \textit{Những vấn đề cần giải quyết để phát huy động lực của chế độ khoán mới trong hợp tác xã sản xuất nông nghiệp} [Some Ideas to Facilitate the Incentives for Product Contracts], 24 November, Tam Kỳ: Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.

June 1987—and in the spirit of ‘looking the truth straight in the eye’ (*nhìn thẳng sự thật*), inspired by the Đổi Mới policy—provincial leaders recognised ‘some problems and weaknesses’ with the product contract system. They admitted that weak collectives were still numerous. Of 270 collectives in the province, 78 were weak (28.9 per cent), 103 were average (38.1 per cent) and 89 were good or advanced (33 per cent). In the midland area, weak collectives accounted for 45.2 per cent of the total.157 Collectivisation in Thăng Bình district was in an even worse situation: 36 per cent of its collectives were classified as weak, while only 19 per cent were considered good.158

*Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng* newspaper reports noted several reasons for the decrease in collective farming’s performance and peasants’ living conditions between 1986 and 1987. First, unfavourable weather affected crop yields. Second was the negative effect of the central government’s ‘price–wage–currency’ reforms in September 1985. In particular, from late 1985, prices across the board in QN-ĐN increased sharply. The price of agricultural inputs increased faster than that of agricultural produce, leading to agricultural produce being sold below cost.159 Third, the quantity, quality and variety of agricultural inputs were inadequate. In the two price systems (state and free market prices), enterprises serving state farms often sold agricultural inputs on the free market to make a quick profit at the expense of collectives. Meanwhile, collective organisations still lacked economic autonomy.160 Finally, cadres embezzled, stole collective resources and ‘prolonged work and inflated work-points’ for non-farming activities.161

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157 Hội nghị cùng cỏ và tăng cường quan hệ sản xuất trong nông nghiệp kết thúc tốt đẹp [The conference on solidifying agricultural production relations produced good results], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 16 June 1987, p. 1.
158 Thăng Binh mở rộng hội nghị cùng cỏ phong trào hợp tác hóa [Thang Binh held a conference on solidifying collectives], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 18 August 1987, p. 3.
160 Tỉnh Ủy Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, Provincial Party Committee’s resolution on continuing to solidify production relations; Preliminary summing up of 1987 agricultural production, *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 17 September 1987, p. 1.
161 Hoàn thiện cơ chế khoán sản phẩm trong nong nghiệp [Perfecting the product contract system], *Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng*, 1 March 1988, p. 1.
Table 7.1 Grain production (including paddy and corn) in QN-DN, 1976–88

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grain production (tonnes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>154,386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>181,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>235,387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>282,441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>285,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>293,504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>330,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>328,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>332,863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>358,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>287,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>307,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>299,774</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cục Thống Kê tỉnh Quảng Nam (CTKQN) (2005), Quảng Nam 30 Năm Xây Dựng và Phát triển [Quang Nam’s Socioeconomic Development over the Past 30 Years], Tam Kỳ: Cục Thống Kê tỉnh Quảng Nam, p. 95.

Villagers in Hiền Lộc and Thanh Yên gave several reasons for the low performance of collective farming under the product contract system. One was a decrease in state investment in collective farming, which meant households did not have adequate chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Peasants’ inadequate care of fields led to low paddy productivity and, due to a lack of ownership rights, land was overexploited and degraded over time. In addition, the rice seeds were of poor quality—coming from stock people had planted again and again.162

Return to household farming

In response to peasants’ resistance and the poor performance of collective farming, from late 1986 to 1987, some collectives in QN-DN began to experiment with new farming arrangements. For example, when a large number of households returned their contracted land, the managerial board of Bình Tú collective no. 1 in Tháng Bình district decided to implement ‘package contracts’ (khoản gọn) for peasants in the winter–spring of 1986–87. Under this arrangement, the work-

162 Author’s interviews, 4–19 October 2005, Hiền Lộc.
points system was eliminated and the board announced in advance the cost of inputs, taxes and other fees. After paying these items, peasants were allowed to keep whatever was left. The board faced criticism from higher-level authorities about derailing and destroying socialist production relations; however, the new contracts resulted in peasants who had returned land asking for it back.163

Similarly, in Điện Nam collective no. 2 in Điện Bàn district, after falling 117 tonnes below its paddy production quota and 30 per cent of peasant households returning their land, leaders searched for a better farming arrangement in the winter–spring of 1986–87. To encourage peasants to retain their contracted land, the board decided to reward each household by lending it 1.3 sào of land for its own use if it also continued farming on its contracted land. Moreover, the collective cadres decided to implement contract no. 100 for only two farming seasons per year and to use ‘straight contracts’ (khoán thẳng) for the third season. Under the straight contracts, peasants knew in advance what they would have to pay the collective. The remainder of their harvest belonged to them, which produced an ‘enthusiastic’ (phấn khởi) response.164

Other collectives, such as Hòa Sơn collective in Hòa Vang district and Điện Phước collective no. 1 in Điện Bàn district, also brought in new farming arrangements. A former chairman of Bình Lãnh collective admitted that his collective in the mid-1980s made ‘package contracts’ with peasants for infertile land they had returned or refused to farm under product contracts.165 The names of the new arrangements differed from one collective to another, but included ‘household contracts’ (khoán hộ), ‘package contracts’ (khoán gọn) and ‘agreement contracts’ (khoán hợp đồng).166

In general, collectives experimenting with new farming arrangements achieved improved results, which came to the attention of provincial authorities. In June 1987, QN-DN’s leaders held a conference

163 Sự thật về cách khoán mới ở Bình Tú 1 [The true story of new contract arrangements in Bình Tú Collective No. 1], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 23 June 1988, p. 4; Chuyển động ruộng cuối năm [Collective farming at the end of the year], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 31 December 1987, p. 3.
164 New farming arrangements created new incentives, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 24 December 1987, p. 2.
165 Author’s interview, 24 October 2004, Bình Lãnh.
166 Qua một năm cải tiến công tác khoán sản phẩm trong sản xuất nông nghiệp [An evaluation after one year of improving the product contract system], Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 30 August 1988, p. 2.
'on solidifying and strengthening agricultural production relations'\textsuperscript{167} at which they authorised new farming arrangements by releasing Directive No. 03 (22 June 1987), stressing ‘solidifying and strengthening production relations and perfecting the product contract in agriculture’. The directive called for an increase in the economic autonomy of collectives and advocated new farming arrangements in them called the ‘agreement contract according to price unit’ (\textit{khoản hợp đồng theo đơn giá}). Under these new contracts, collectives had to inform members of their obligations and benefits up front and eliminate widespread subsidies. In addition, under the terms of the new contract, collective members were allowed and even encouraged to buy their own means of production, such as draught animals and small farm machines.\textsuperscript{168} The new contracts spread to many collectives in QN-ĐN and, by the winter–spring of 1987, they had been officially adopted by 34 collectives in the province.\textsuperscript{169}

Kerkvliet’s study on northern Vietnam showed that farming arrangements other than product contracts also prevailed there in many collectives in 1986 and 1987, and some northern provinces, such as Hà Sơn Bình and Vĩnh Phú, approved new farming arrangements in 1987.\textsuperscript{170}

**An Giang in the Mekong Delta**

Like their counterparts in QN-ĐN, many production units in An Giang saw their farming performance improve in the first few seasons of the product contract system. An Giang’s staple food production grew from 691,561 tonnes in 1981 to 835,000 tonnes in 1982.\textsuperscript{171} However, from 1983 to 1985, when An Giang’s authorities pushed the process of ‘socialist transformation’, the province’s staple food production stagnated, and then declined. Table 7.2 shows how paddy production and the amount of cultivated land increased in the early 1980s, but then dropped considerably in 1983 and 1984. Due to a large amount of

\textsuperscript{167} The conference on solidifying agricultural production relations, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 16 June 1987, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{168} Nghị quyết số 03/NQ-TU: Tiếp tục củng cố và tăng cường quan hệ sản xuất, hòa thiện cơ chế sản phẩm trong nông nghiệp [Resolution No. 03/NQ-TU: Continue to improve and perfect the product contract], Tỉnh Ủy Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 22 June 1987.

\textsuperscript{169} Collective farming at the end of the year, Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng, 31 December 1987, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{170} Kerkvliet, The Power of Everyday Politics, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{171} Con số niềm tin [The figures and faith], An Giang, 20 March 1983, p. 2.
abandoned land and flooding, An Giang’s paddy production fell from 820,952 tonnes in 1982 to 792,486 tonnes in 1983 and 725,392 tonnes in 1984.\textsuperscript{172}

Table 7.2 Cultivated area of crops and paddy production in An Giang, 1975–88

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cultivated area of annual crops (ha)</th>
<th>Cultivated area of rice paddy (ha)</th>
<th>Paddy productivity (tonnes/ha)</th>
<th>Annual production of paddy (tonnes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>236,594</td>
<td>217,629</td>
<td>2.157</td>
<td>469,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>255,743</td>
<td>220,670</td>
<td>2.249</td>
<td>496,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>278,559</td>
<td>241,593</td>
<td>1.972</td>
<td>476,421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>275,980</td>
<td>233,513</td>
<td>1.555</td>
<td>363,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>263,389</td>
<td>231,568</td>
<td>2.271</td>
<td>525,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>329,321</td>
<td>292,374</td>
<td>2.524</td>
<td>737,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>335,092</td>
<td>296,016</td>
<td>2.336</td>
<td>691,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>324,064</td>
<td>283,772</td>
<td>2.893</td>
<td>820,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>325,303</td>
<td>278,652</td>
<td>2.844</td>
<td>792,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>308,153</td>
<td>257,963</td>
<td>2.812</td>
<td>725,392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>300,705</td>
<td>263,214</td>
<td>3.451</td>
<td>908,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>312,389</td>
<td>258,805</td>
<td>3.277</td>
<td>848,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>317,139</td>
<td>261,090</td>
<td>3.389</td>
<td>884,834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>324,148</td>
<td>262,930</td>
<td>3.729</td>
<td>980,466</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to An Giang’s Department of Agriculture, the province’s staple food production increased to 923,000 tonnes in 1985; however, this was still short of the target. This increase resulted mainly from an increase in the number of crops per year and the extensive adoption of high-yielding rice. In particular, An Giang expanded the area of land planting two crops per year with high-yielding rice from 34,000 hectares

in 1976 to 180,000 hectares in 1985.\textsuperscript{173} Therefore, despite the decrease in An Giang’s cultivated area of more than 20,000 hectares from 1982 to 1985, better paddy productivity increased production from 820,952 tonnes in 1982 to 908,352 tonnes in 1985. Therefore, the average growth rate of paddy production in An Giang from 1982 to 1985 was about 3.5 per cent.\textsuperscript{174} In assessing agricultural conditions, a 1986 report by An Giang’s party executive committee revealed widespread problems:

In general, agricultural production developed slowly and unevenly. Investment in agriculture did not meet requirements; the price of agricultural produce was still fixed low [gò ép] and was not attractive [to peasants]. Due to agrarian policy shortcomings, some cultivated land was used inefficiently or abandoned. Furthermore, the number of new agricultural machines could not compensate for the damage and loss of old machines.\textsuperscript{175}

As in QN-DN, despite food production in An Giang increasing slightly during 1982–85 (staple food per person increased from 515 kilograms per year in 1982 to 530 kilograms in 1985), peasants’ living conditions did not improve.\textsuperscript{176} There were at least three reasons for this. First, the terms of trade between agricultural produce and industrial products (including agricultural inputs) had deteriorated at the expense of the latter. For example, in 1975, 1 kilogram of paddy was worth 1 kilogram of urea or 1.5 litres of fuel. In 1985, 4 kilograms of paddy could buy only 1 kilogram of urea or 1 litre of fuel. Second, the state’s food procurement increased considerably between 1982 and 1985. During the period 1983–85 alone, An Giang authorities took 851,000 tonnes of grain (nearly the entire annual output), 30,000 tonnes of beans and sesame, 18,400 tonnes of pork and 21,200 tonnes of fish. Food procurement in 1982–85 increased 28.1 per cent compared with the previous period, 1980–82.\textsuperscript{177} Finally, local cadres’ embezzlement, theft and poor management (discussed above) and high payments to production units negatively affected peasants’ incomes.

\textsuperscript{173} Nguyễn Vũ: Tiếp tục đưa nhịp độ phát triển nông nghiệp lên nhanh hơn [Nguyễn Vũ: Continue to speed up agricultural production], An Giang, 24 October 1986, p. 1. Nguyễn Vũ was manager of An Giang’s Department of Agriculture.
\textsuperscript{174} CTKAG, An Giang Statistical Year Book, pp. 61–75.
\textsuperscript{175} Báo cáo chính trị của Ban chấp hành đảng bộ tỉnh An Giang [The political report of Executive Committee of An Giang Provincial Party Committee], An Giang, 24 October 1988, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., p. 10.
After the completion of collectivisation in 1985, agricultural production in An Giang did not improve. In assessing the province’s economic performance in 1986, provincial resolution No. 1/NQ-TU (29 November 1986) revealed:

The provincial socioeconomic situation was more difficult and complicated than in 1985 due to price–wage–currency adjustments. Some targets were not met; food production fell compared to 1985; more than 10,000 hectares of land were abandoned; farm machines were seriously damaged and lost … economic and social evils, violations of labourers’ mastery rights and oppression of the masses become widespread. Especially at the local level, managerial boards of production units committed many serious wrongdoings.\(^178\)

A chairman of An Giang province reflected:

From 1980 to 1986, due to the consequences of socialist agricultural transformation, forced collectivisation and bureaucratic red tape, food production [in An Giang] stagnated, increasing only slightly, from 741,000 tonnes in 1980 to 855,000 tonnes in 1986. In general, over 10 years after reunification, despite the party organisation and people concentrating on staple food production, it increased only 400,000 tonnes. So, the average annual increase in staple food production was about 40,000 tonnes … In addition, during that time, more than 30,000 hectares of land was abandoned.\(^179\)

A former cadre of An Giang’s Committee for Agricultural Transformation listed three reasons for the poor performance of agriculture in the mid-1980s. First, the prices paid for food procurement were low, which discouraged peasants from increasing their production. Second, the state’s supply of inputs was inadequate and delivered late, so peasants often ‘sowed seeds only’ (sạ chay), without using fertilisers, irrigation and other inputs. Finally, the combination of these and other factors meant peasants were not interested in farming (không thiết tha với ruộng đất).\(^180\)

From late 1986 onwards, in the new political atmosphere inspired by the VCP’s Đổi Mới policies, moves to strengthen collective organisations in An Giang faced even more challenges. Many peasants took advantage of the spirit of Đổi Mới, which gave the people more freedom to speak,


\(^{180}\) Author’s interview, 27 June 2005, Long Xuyên.
and sent petitions to ask for return of their former land and machinery and to complain about cadres’ embezzlement of collective resources, theft of land and oppression of the masses. Also in the spirit of Đổi Mới, An Giang’s journalists were given more power to fight ‘social evils’. During 1987, journalists exposed many cases of local cadres’ misbehaviour, such as embezzling resources, misappropriating peasant land, mismanaging collective funds and oppressing the masses (ức hiếp quần chúng). Many production units were also criticised for their poor performance and large debts. By the end of 1987, the total debt of collective organisations in An Giang had reached 10,000 tonnes of paddy.181

Assessing collective organisations in September 1987, the chairman of An Giang’s agriculture department concluded that weak production units and cadres’ malpractices were still widespread. This hindered agricultural production and made peasants feel insecure and discontent. He attributed these problems to hasty collectivisation and a lack of well-trained cadres. He also considered bureaucratic red tape and subsidy mechanisms (cơ chế quan liêu bao cấp) harmful to agriculture and especially to collective farming.182

The performance of production units continued to deteriorate in the late 1980s along with peasants’ living conditions. The An Giang newspaper reported in August 1987 that 50 per cent of peasant households had to rely on buying paddy on credit and could pay for it only after the harvest. The article listed three reasons for the fall in peasants’ living conditions: first, much of what peasants produced was extracted by state agencies, while agricultural inputs (such as fuel, fertilisers and pesticides) arrived late, were inadequate or were not what was needed. For example, even months after planting paddy, some peasants had not received their agricultural inputs. Second, paddy productivity was severely reduced due to insufficient supplies of agricultural inputs and irrigation. However, peasants were still required to pay for these provisions and to contribute to collective funds. In addition, they had to pay the debts of local cadres and party members. Finally, prices paid

182 Phỏng vấn Nguyễn Vũ: Nhất định khắc phục những yếu kém đưa tập đoàn sản xuất tiến lên một bước [Interview with Nguyễn Vũ: Be certain in correcting shortcomings to advance production units], An Giang, 18 September 1987, p. 2. Nguyễn Vũ was the chairman of An Giang’s agriculture department.
for paddy were set much lower than those in the free market while the prices of state goods sold to peasants were relatively high. In addition, agricultural taxes were disadvantageous for peasants.\textsuperscript{183}

An investigation into peasants’ earnings in August 1987 showed that production unit members received an average of 2 gia (40 kg) of paddy per hectare. Peasants complained their costs were illogical. They had to pay input costs (the B contract), quotas, transport costs for inputs, support for invalid and martyr families and for irrigation, threshing of paddy, ink and paper and so on.\textsuperscript{184} Table 7.3 shows that, because of this cost burden, what remained for each production unit member at the end of a harvest was only 30.2 kilograms of paddy.\textsuperscript{185}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Results and distribution in the average production unit in An Giang in the summer–autumn of 1987}
\begin{tabular}{l|l}
\hline
1. Total number of households & 115 \\
2. Total number of people & 856 \\
3. Total number of workers & 459 \\
4. Area of land (hectares) & 49.4 \\
5. Output of paddy (kilograms) & 123,500 \\
6. Expenditure (kilograms of paddy) & \\
& \begin{tabular}{l|l}
Land preparation & 9,580 \\
Irrigation & 2,559 \\
Urea & 33,509 \\
Fuel & 2,500 \\
Lubricating oil & 400 \\
Pesticide & 6,420 \\
Paddy seeds & 14,820 \\
Fee for pumping water & 8,860 \\
NPK fertiliser & 8,401 \\
Diesel & 4,762 \\
Threshing of paddy & 1,880 \\
Managerial fees & 617 \\
\end{tabular}
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{183} Giá cả thu mua, chính sách thuế nông nghiệp ảnh hưởng đến đời sống của nông dân [Procurement prices and agricultural taxes affect peasants’ living standards], An Giang, 28 August 1987, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{184} Mỗi tuần một chuyện: Chuyện ở tập đoàn sản xuất [A story each week: Production unit story], An Giang, 28 August 1987, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
According to villagers in Long Điền B, during the time of production units, farming achieved poor results and generated low incomes. A formerly landless man in the village recalled:

In the past [before 1975], a wage earner could get 2–3 kilograms of paddy per day, but farming under the production unit, we got less than 1 kilogram of paddy per day. Before reunification, it was easy to make a living, but after reunification [and until decollectivisation], we worked hard but did not have any surplus; our lives were difficult. The state forced us to accept land but we did not feel happy because farming did not give us good earnings.\textsuperscript{186}

Similarly, a former production unit leader in the commune commented:

After collectivisation, all households here became poor; no-one was able to get rich. Before reunification, people in the Southern Region lived in a market economy so they had comfortable lives. When implementing land redistribution, some households who traded and engaged in non-farming work also accepted land because they feared going to new economic zones ... The state saw the failure of collectivisation and changed their policy because they saw that, nine to 10 years after reunification, living conditions of people had been set back \textit{[di thụt lùi]}.\textsuperscript{187}

The return to household farming

After An Giang completed its socialist agricultural transformation, agricultural production faced even more difficulties. Paradoxically, some agrarian policies resulted in outcomes in An Giang that differed from what the VCP and provincial leaders wanted. Land redistribution was aimed at giving land to landless and land-poor households and boosting collectivisation and agricultural production, but, in reality, it benefited

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textit{Fee for indirect labour} & 517 \\
\hline
\textit{Other} & 2,785 \\
\hline
7. Total expenditure (kilograms of paddy) & 97,610 \\
\hline
8. Remainder for production unit’s members (kilograms of paddy) & 25,890 \\
\hline
9. Paddy income per công (0.1 hectare) of land (kilograms of paddy) & 52.4 \\
\hline
10. Income per person (kilograms of paddy) & 30.2 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}


\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{186} Author’s interview, 3 August 2005, Long Điện B.
\item \textsuperscript{187} Author’s interview, 5 August 2005, Long Điện B.
\end{itemize}
local cadres’ families and relatives, angered former landowners and caused agricultural stagnation. The non-resident cultivator prohibition and collectivisation had similar consequences. As a result, a large amount of land was abandoned, misused or misappropriated by cadres and government organisations; collectivised farm machines were damaged; and, more importantly, food production deteriorated alarmingly.

In late 1986, An Giang’s leaders started to acknowledge and tried to correct these shortcomings of the agrarian policies. To utilise abandoned land and boost agricultural production, provincial leaders decided to cancel the non-resident cultivator prohibition and to grant more land to households who had greater farming capacity. On 19 February 1987, provincial leaders issued Decision No. 93-NQUB, aimed at correcting the shortcomings of previous land redistributions. To protect agricultural machines from further damage, they discontinued the collectivisation of peasants’ machines and urged collective organisations to return machines to their previous owners. These policies were mainly aimed at improving agricultural performance, but they triggered peasants’ moves to reclaim their land and machines.

Despite land conflicts disrupting agricultural production in rural areas, in 1987, production recovered thanks to the corrective measures. Inspired by these positive effects and finding that most production units in the province were, in fact, problematic, in early 1988, An Giang’s leaders started to question the direction of collective organisations. In January 1988, Võ Quang Liêm, the vice-secretary of An Giang’s party committee, admitted:

> Collective organisations are now unsuitable because they are inefficient in terms of production and their managerial bodies are bulky and unnecessary. Collective organisations manage poorly and commit numerous wrongdoings, which hinder agricultural production and negatively affect the living conditions of peasants.

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189 In collectivising peasants’ farm machines, production units paid the owners in instalments the remaining value of the machines; however, production units often delayed or evaded these payments (Củng cố và cải tạo máy nông nghiệp, xay xát [Improving and renovating the management of agricultural machines], *An Giang*, 22 December 1986, p. 2).
190 Võ Tòng Xuân and Chu Hữu Quý, *KX Account 08-11*, p. 47.
191 Võ Quang Liêm: Vấn đề củng cố, nâng chất các tập đoàn sản xuất [Võ Quang Liêm: The matter of solidifying and upgrading production units], *An Giang*, 15 January 1988, p. 1. Võ Quang Liêm was the vice-secretary of An Giang’s party committee.
He also argued that, given current production conditions in which farming required a lot of manual work, it was necessary to consider households as basic units. Authorities should grant long-term land use for households and reduce staff on managerial boards to only one or two cadres. Peasants should be allowed to select freely the best farming services available. The provincial resolution of March 1988 called for a redefinition of the objectives of agricultural transformation. It argued that the main objective of the transformation was to facilitate production; however, in the past, An Giang’s authorities had misunderstood this objective and ‘coerced peasants into joining collective organisations even though it was supposed to be voluntary’. As a result, ‘production stagnated; living conditions of peasants were difficult … [and a] new class of oppressors and exploiters had appeared’—local cadres, mainly of collective organisations.

It is worth noting that the debate about the shift in agrarian policy in An Giang took place before the VCP released Resolution No. 10 (5 April 1988), which officially endorsed the reallocation of land to peasant households to use for 15 years and fixing the quota for five years.

### The shift in national policy and the return to household farming

Under the product contract system, especially in the later stages, the deterioration in agricultural production and the performance of collective organisations occurred in almost all provinces of Vietnam. According to a VCP report, product contracts only slightly boosted agricultural production in the period 1981–85, while after 1986, contracts lost their positive effect and food production stagnated (see Table 7.4).

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192 Ibid.
193 Xác định lại mục đích cải tạo nông nghiệp [Redefining the objectives of agricultural transformation], An Giang, 4 March 1988, p. 1.
Table 7.4 Vietnam's staple food production, 1981–87

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staple food production (millions of tonnes, paddy equivalent)</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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According to researcher Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, a decrease of 0.8 million tonnes of food in 1987 compared with 1986, accompanied by a population increase of 1.5 million, caused a sharp decrease in staple food per capita, from 300.8 kilograms per year in 1986 to 280 kilograms per year in 1987—the lowest figure since 1981. In collective organisations, peasants’ income accounted for about 20 per cent of the quota. In 21 Vietnamese provinces (from Bình Trị Thiên province northward), 39.7 per cent of rural people suffered severe hunger between harvests (nạn đói giáp hạt).\footnote{Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, Agricultural and Rural Development in Vietnam, p. 47.}

Faced with falling living conditions like their counterparts in QN-DN and An Giang, peasants elsewhere in Vietnam were fed up with collective farming. Even in ‘good’ collectives, peasants began to return contracted land. As a result, land in widespread locations was abandoned and peasants’ debts increased over time. In response to the situation, some collectives tried to experiment with ‘package contracts’, which some local authorities authorised.\footnote{Bộ Nông Nghiệp, A Draft Summing Up, p. 1.} Despite criticism by party officials and analysts, ‘package contracts’ or ‘household contracts’ gradually gained the approval of authorities. According to Ben Kerkvliet, by September 1987, farming arrangements other than product contracts prevailed in more than 70 per cent of the collectives in Vietnam. Finally, in April 1988, the party’s political bureau released Resolution No. 10, stressing ‘the renovation of agricultural economic management’, which implicitly endorsed previous practices and marked the beginning of decollectivisation in Vietnam.\footnote{Kerkvliet, The Power of Everyday Politics, pp. 224, 227.}

Resolution No. 10 was aimed at unleashing the production capacity of agriculture and shifting it to commodity production, by giving collective organisations and peasant households more autonomy in
production. To encourage peasant households to increase production, land was allocated to them for longer-term use (15 years) and quotas were fixed for five years.\(^{199}\)

VCP leaders did not intend to dismantle collective organisations; however, in the context of a market-oriented economy, after implementation of Resolution No. 10, peasants gradually became independent of collective organisations and they gradually lost their purpose and were dismantled or were changed to farming-service organisations in the early 1990s. The peasant household finally became the basic production unit in rural areas of Vietnam.

**Conclusion**

In an effort to save collective organisations and improve their performance, in 1981, the VCP released Directive No. 100. The hope was to reduce peasants and local cadres’ problems and to strengthen collective organisations. Even though product contracts immediately improved the performance of collectives and boosted agricultural production, they did not solve the long-term struggle between peasants and local cadres over land, labour and other resources.

Although there were many campaigns to correct cadres’ problems, both in QN-DN and in An Giang, performance did not improve. Local cadres often took advantage of their position to steal state, collective and peasant resources. Land redistribution, the non-resident cultivator prohibition and collectivisation in An Giang were all aimed at eliminating the old exploitative class, but, in reality, the policies created a new exploitative class—namely, local cadres.

During the product contract system, collective farming essentially replaced commercial farming and the diverse rural economy of An Giang. This is why villagers in An Giang displayed behaviour comparable with their counterparts in QN-DN. Villagers in both places tried their best to minimise the disadvantages of collective farming to enhance their own survival and livelihoods. For example, while villagers in QN-DN tried their best to enlarge their household economies by capturing collective resources, land and labour, villagers

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in An Giang tried their best to ensure their livelihoods by doing wage work and using collective resources for their daily needs. Both tried to avoid paying debts and fulfilling their obligations to the collective; they returned land or abandoned it when they saw that collective farming was unprofitable. All of these behaviours had a huge adverse effect on the survival of collective organisations.

The combined effect of the peasants’ and local cadres’ practices significantly contributed to the poor performance of collective farming and the failure of the product contract system, which the VCP had expected to improve collective farming. The output of staple food decreased alarmingly after mid-1985 and, in response, local cadres and authorities in QN-ĐN, An Giang and elsewhere experimented with new farming arrangements. When Vietnam faced a food crisis in the late 1980s, the VCP finally gave up on the official system and endorsed new local arrangements, which marked the beginning of decollectivisation and a return to household farming in Vietnam.