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Improving Human Capital to Support Ethnic Minority Families: The Case of Thanh Hoa, Vietnam

This study analyses the current situation and solutions for supporting minority ethnic households in Thanh Hoa, Vietnam, in improving their sustainable poverty alleviation capacity, by interviewing 3,400 representatives from poor and poverty-alleviated households of six ethnic minorities (Thai, Tho, Muong, Hmong, Dao, and Khmu) in Thanh Hoa province. The statistical results describe the number of laborers in the households, the educational level of the head of the household, health capacity, skills, labor production experience of the households, capital mobilization capabilities for business, and proposed solutions for enhancing human capital to leverage sustainable poverty. Minority ethnic households need to participate in training and vocational programs to improve their educational level, knowledge, understanding, and skills to enhance their sustainable poverty alleviation capacity.

Keywords: human capital, poverty alleviation capacity, minority ethnic households, Thanh Hoa.

Izboljšanje človeškega kapitala v podporo družinam pripadnikov etničnih manjšin: primer Thanh Hoa v Vietnamu

Prispevek proučuje trenutne razmere in rešitve v podporo gospodinjstvom pripadnikov etničnih manjšin v vietnamski provinci Thanh Hoa za izboljšanje njihove sposobnosti za trajnostno zmanjševanje revščine. Statistični rezultati, pridobljeni na podlagi intervjujev s 3400 predstavniki revnejših gospodinjstev pripadnikov šestih etničnih manjšin (Thai, Tho, Muong, Hmong, Dao in Khmu), vključuje število delovno aktivnih v gospodinjstvu, stopnjo izobrazbe glave družine, zdravstveno stanje, veščine, delovne izkušnje gospodinjstev, sposobnost mobilizacije kapitala za poslovanje ter predlagane rešitve za povečanje človeškega kapitala s ciljem trajnostnega zmanjševanja revščine. Da bi izboljšala svojo izobrazbeno raven, znanje in spretnosti in tako povečala svojo sposobnost za trajnostno zmanjševanje revščine morajo manjšinska gospodinjstva sodelovati v programih usposabljanja in poklicnega izobraževanja.

Ključne besede: človeški kapital, sposobnost zmanjševanja revščine, manjšinska gospodinjstva, Thanh Hoa.

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1. Introduction

Research on development policies for mountainous areas in Vietnam by authors Jamieson et al. (1998), and Paudel et al. (2017) indicates that the underlying cause of their situation stems from a lack of comprehensive understanding of fundamental principles for building sustainable livelihoods. Firstly, it involves the imposition of mechanical perspectives by the Kinh people, along with lowland livelihood models, onto the mountainous regions, without consulting the opinions of indigenous communities. Secondly, it involves a disregard for internal resources, particularly the significance of local knowledge in planning livelihood development policies, which, in reality, is a crucial resource. Poverty can be caused by a lack of access to education, health care, and basic needs (Fuchang et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2004).

In 2005, Joseph Iloabanafor Orji conducted a study evaluating the impact of poverty reduction programs as a development strategy in Niger. The study concluded that for any meaningful poverty reduction program to be successful, it must be implemented well, with the government collaborating with rural residents to facilitate the program's implementation and achieve higher success rates. This, in turn, fosters economic self-reliance, economic growth, and development.

The Asian Development Bank (2009) synthesis report on the Integrated Rural Development Project for ethnic minority areas in the Central region, including Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, presents several key solutions aimed at improving livelihoods and promoting sustainable livelihoods for ethnic minorities. These solutions focus primarily on improving infrastructure systems (physical capital) such as roads, irrigation systems, water supply, sanitation, and markets. A study by authors Michael Cuddy, Liu Hongmei, and Paulos Gutema (2008) examined factors influencing the poverty level of rural households in southern China. The study specifically focused on household income in rural areas and the factors that impact income levels.

The evaluation of human resources among ethnic minority communities is based on three criteria: physical, intellectual, and psychological well-being (Tran Thi Hanh et al. 2010; Tran Thi Minh Chau et al. 2015). The physical well-being of human resources in the ethnic and mountainous regions is assessed based on indicators such as malnutrition rates, child mortality rates, health conditions, and average life expectancy. Results showed that people in these regions often lack mobility and adaptability to the working environment, as well as professional work attitudes and discipline. Several proposals for developing human resources in the ethnic and mountainous regions include focusing on poverty reduction policies, providing social services (healthcare, education, and environmental services), and implementing policies specifically tailored to these regions (Addae-Korankye 2014).

ActionAid International in Vietnam (AAV) and Oxfam (2013) identified the causes of chronic poverty among ethnic minority communities. These causes include difficulties in accessing education, credit, and land, as well as challenges in finding markets and prevailing stereotypes and prejudices held by the majority Kinh population towards ethnic minorities. Also highlighted is that poverty in these mountainous districts stems from limited access to healthcare, education, and social assistance services, weak infrastructure conditions, low-income levels, and passive and underdeveloped production activities (Alkire & Santos 2014).

Most studies, both domestic and international, evaluate and analyze poverty reduction policies in multiple countries, specifically targeting ethnic minority communities in mountainous regions. However, in developing countries like Vietnam, top-down approaches and direct support often result in passive reliance by the poor on government assistance. As a result, despite the existence of various poverty reduction policies, these have either failed to be fully implemented or presented challenges to implement in practice.

Surveys on poverty and its causes at both national and local levels have mainly applied a general model and have not specifically identified the main and unique causes about each ethnic minority group in different areas of settlement. This is the gap that needs to be addressed and the limitation to be overcome in the current poverty reduction efforts for ethnic minority areas. In Thanh Hoa province, there are 6 main ethnic minorities, including Thai, Tho, Muong, Hmong, Dao, and Kho Mu (accounting for 17% of the province's population); the remaining ethnic groups account for a very small percentage. This research contributes to promoting socio-economic development and moving towards the common development of all ethnic minorities in the province (Alkire & Fang 2019).



Map: Thanh Hoa in Vietnam
Source: Wikipedia

2. Analysis Framework

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This study of the poverty escape capacity of households is based on the sustainable livelihoods framework, which identifies several categories of capabilities.¹ According to this framework, the poverty escape capacity of ethnic minority households includes the following capital assets: human capital, natural resource capital, financial capital, physical capital, and social capital.

According to Chambers and Conway (1991) and DFID (1999), livelihood is a diverse set of capabilities, assets, and activities individuals possess and utilize to meet their life needs, including personal, family, community, and societal needs.

Chambers and Conway (1991) proposed the concept of sustainable livelihoods as follows:

A livelihood is considered sustainable if it has the adaptive capacity and resilience to withstand shocks during difficult times while maintaining and enhancing resources, assets, and opportunities for sustainable livelihoods for future generations. A sustainable livelihood will have the capacity to support other livelihoods at the local, national, and global levels, both in the short term and the long term.

Based on the definition provided by Chambers and Conway, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) proposed a widely used definition in global research on sustainable livelihoods: "A livelihood is considered sustainable if it has the adaptive capacity and resilience to withstand shocks and difficult times while maintaining and enhancing capabilities and assets in the present and future without depleting the natural resource base" (DFID, 2000).

Therefore, sustainable poverty escape capabilities, according to the livelihoods approach, include the following: the adaptive capacity to cope with difficulties, risks, and hazards caused by both nature and human activities; the ability to sustain and strengthen the resources utilized by households; the ability to generate positive socioeconomic impact within the social environment, ranging from the immediate social environment to broader social contexts, with a holistic nature; and the capacity to exploit, conserve, and harness natural resources.

Human resources play a central role in the livelihood analysis framework, as these are the determining factors in the utilization of other livelihood resources and the implementation of livelihood activities. The quantity and quality of human resources will determine the livelihood outcomes obtained by households. Within the scope of this study, human capital is limited to dimensions such as the number of laborers in the household, specialized skills possessed by individuals within the household, such as educational attainment, occupational skills, business acumen, access to and utilization of new production technologies, and economic management capabilities within the household.

3. Research Methodology

This research and data analysis involves the provincial project Research on factors affecting the ability of ethnic minority households to escape poverty sustainably in Thanh Hoa province, 2020–2022. Sampling method: Listing all poor households of ethnic minorities (Thai, Tho, Muong, Hmong, Dao, Kho Mu) in the selected sample units. Sampling at intervals of 5 yields one sample, taking enough samples at once. Quantitative interviews with 3,400 household representatives from the 6 main ethnic minority groups: Thai ethnic group: 1,200 respondents; Muong ethnic group: 1,200 respondents; Hmong ethnic group: 400 respondents; Tho ethnic group: 200 respondents; Dao ethnic group: 200 respondents; Khmu ethnic group: 200 respondents (survey subjects: poor households and households escaping poverty).

The survey content focused on human capital including the labor force and its characteristics; educational attainment of household heads; health capacity; skills and experience in the production labor of households; capacity to mobilize borrowed capital for business; market search capacity, and product consumption ability.

A Likert scale questionnaire was used to construct the survey questions. The Likert scale values ranged from 1 to 5, as follows:

Table 1: Likert scale values with 5 levels

Scale values	Meaning of scale			Average assessment level	Meaning of assessment level
1	Not good	1.00 – 1.80	Poor	1.00 – 1.80	Poor
2	Partially good	1.81 – 2.60	Weak	1.81 – 2.60	Weak
3	Partially not good	2.61 – 3.40	Moderate	2.61 – 3.40	Moderate
4	Good	3.41 – 4.20	Good	3.41 – 4.20	Good
5	Very good	4.21 – 5.00	Excellent	4.21 – 5.00	Excellent

Source: Author group (2020).

Quantitative information was synthesized, encoded, entered, and analyzed using the specialized statistical software SPSS 22.0. The statistical analyses used in the research report include frequency analysis, correlation analysis between variables, and overall mean testing, etc.

Table 2: The structure of the survey (%)

Characteristic	Sample size	%
1. Gender of household head		
Male	3,158	92.6
Female	242	7.4
Total	3,400	100
2. Poor households/those escaping poverty		
Poor households ²	1,790	52.6
Households escaping poverty ³	1,610	47.4
Total	3,400	100.0
3. Age group of household head		
From 20–30 years old	780	22.9
From 31–40 years old	950	27.9
From 41–50 years old	720	21.1
From 51–60 years old	600	17.6
Over age 60	350	10.2
Total	3,400	100.0
4. Ethnicity		
Muong	1,200	34.2
Thai	1,200	34.2
Hmong	400	11.4
Tho	200	5.7
Dao	200	5.7
Khmu	200	5.7
Total	3,400	100.0
5. Education level		
No school attendance	700	20.5
Graduated from elementary school	1,420	41.7
Graduated from secondary school	1,050	30.8
High school graduation	315	9.2
Graduated from high school, college, university or higher	35	1.0
Total	3,400	100.0
6. Occupation		
Farming	2,763	81.2
Planting forests	273	8.0
Crafts, animal husbandry	71	2.0
Trade	48	1.4
Service	88	2.5
Workers and Employees	2	0.05

Hired workers	102	3.0
Combination of work activities	53	1.5
Total	3,400	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

Table 2 shows some characteristics of the survey sample expressed by gender, age, household characteristics, occupation, education level, and ethnicity. Among 3,400 households, there are 6 ethnic groups including Muong (34.2%), Thai (34.2%), Hmong (11.4%), Dao (5.7%), Tho (5.7%), and Khmu (5.7%). Information on the gender of the household head shows that most of these households are headed by men (accounting for 92.6%), and most of these heads only attended primary school (accounting for 41.7%). Information on educational attainment also shows that poor households still do not go to school, accounting for 20.5%. The main occupation is farming (81.2%); other occupation types account for a small proportion.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Status of the Human Capital of Ethnic Minority Households in Thanh Hoa

4.1.1 Labour Force, Characteristics of the Workforce

Table 3: Percentage of the labor force in poor households by ethnicity (%)

Number of labourers in the household	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households
0	1.3	-	-	-	-	-	0.7	-	4.8	-	-	-
1	10.5	1.4	5.5	1.3	-	6.5	13.6	3.1	14.3	10.8	-	-
2	73.7	62.2	84.9	56.4	86.	67.7	60.9	43.8	57.1	75.7	90.0	57.1
3	7.9	24.3	6.8	17.9	6.8	3.2	5.5	31.3	7.1	10.8	-	28.6
4	3.9	10.8	1.4	16.7	4.5	16.1	9.1	18.8	11.9	2.7	10.0	14.3
5	2.6	-	1.4	5.1	-	3.2	10.1	3.1	4.8	-	-	-
6	-	2.2	-	2.6	2.3	3.2	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

According to Table 3, the proportion of households with 2 laborers is highest across all 6 ethnic groups (Khmu: 90%; Hmong: 86.4%; Thai: 84.9%; Muong: 73.7%; Dao: 60.9%; Tho: 57.1%). The next group is households with 3 to 4 laborers (Muong: 11.8%; Thai: 8.2%; Hmong: 11.3%; Dao: 14.6%; Tho: 19%; Khmu: 10%). Furthermore, from Table 3, it can be seen that the number of laborers in poverty-escaping households from all 6 ethnic groups (Muong, Thai, Hmong, Dao, Tho, Khmu) falls into three main categories (2 laborers, 3 laborers, and 4 laborers). This is the primary and decisive capacity that helps these households that have escaped poverty achieve a sustainable liberation from poverty. Table 3 shows a clear difference between the poor household and the poverty-escaping household in the category indicating households without laborers.

However, it is notable that the proportion of households without laborers and with only one laborer is not insignificant among four of these ethnic groups (Muong: 11.8%; Thai: 5.5%; Dao: 14.3%; Tho: 19.1%). For households without laborers, escaping poverty becomes impossible, while a household with only one laborer also faces challenges due to its limited workforce for productive activities. Since labor is a crucial factor that decisively affects the poverty-escaping capacity of households, those households with more laborers who are in good health for work have a greater chance of achieving poverty escape and sustainable poverty alleviation. Additionally, one characteristic of agricultural labor is to be labor-intensive, and having laborers in the household will contribute to better participation in the production process. Moreover, if there are multiple workers, some workers can migrate for work and generate a stable income, with fewer risks compared to agricultural work at home. On the other hand, the labor force of ethnic minority households commonly exhibits a high rate of early school dropout, and a lack of vocational training, resulting in limited specialized skills and the inability to meet the demands of using modern machinery.

Table 4 shows that the number of household members enrolled in school from grade 1 and above is high in all six ethnic groups (Muong, Thai, Hmong, Dao, Tho, Khmu), and it is also high in both poor and poverty-escaping households. Various preferential policies and educational support from government authorities for ethnic minority communities have produced favorable conditions for students from impoverished ethnic minority areas to attend school, with nearly 100 % of children being able to go to school.

It is important to note significant differences between the poor and poverty-escaping households in terms of the indicator of students not attending school from grade 1 and above (Muong: poor households 17.1%, poverty-escaping households 51.4%; Thai: poor households 19.2%, poverty-escaping households 56.4%; Hmong: poor households 25.0%, poverty-escaping households 31.9%; Dao: poor households 36.0%, poverty-escaping households 50.0%; Tho: poor households 33.3%, poverty-escaping households 42.4%; Khmu: poor households 20.0%, poverty-escaping households 57.1%).

Table 4: Number of household members enrolled in school from grade 1 and above by ethnicity (%)

Number of members who are studying from grade 1 and above	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households
0	17.1	51.4	19.2	56.4	25.0	31.9	36.4	50.0	33.3	42.4	20.0	57.1
1	27.6	20.3	35.6	11.5	9.1	32.3	18.2	28.1	31.0	21.6	20.0	-
2	46.1	24.3	41.1	29.5	38.6	29.0	27.3	21.9	31.0	30.5	60.0	42.9
3	9.2	4.1	4.1	2.6	25.0	6.9	9.1	-	4.8	2.7	-	-
4	-	-	-	-	2.3	-	-	-	-	2.7	-	-
5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

This difference can partly explain the reasons for poverty since those households with young children of school age require a portion of the family’s income to be allocated for education. Additionally, a higher number of members of school age corresponds to a decrease in the labor force within the household. This is one of the strong pieces of evidence to explain the causes of persistent poverty and the recurrence of poverty within ethnic minority households.

4.1.2 Educational Attainment of Household Heads

Table 5: Educational attainment of household heads (%)

Educational attainment of household heads	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households
No formal education	21.1	19.6	15.1	17.9	45.5	35.2	18.2	6.3	4.8	10.1	50.0	28.6
Elementary school graduation	50.0	31.7	35.6	30.8	28.7	45.0	36.4	53.1	47.6	43.2	38.0	68.4
Secondary school graduation	19.7	28.1	46.6	34.6	12.2	6.8	13.6	15.6	40.5	37.8	12.0	11.0
High school graduation	9.2	20.4	2.7	14.1	13.6	12.8	31.8	25.0	7.1	8.7	0	3.0
Vocational school, College, University, or higher graduation	-	-	-	-	-	0.2	-	-	-	0.2	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

The educational attainment of poor households among ethnic minority groups remains limited, with high rates of non-attendance and elementary school graduation (Muong: 71.1%; Thai: 50.7%; Hmong: 44.2%; Dao: 54.6%; Tho: 52.4%; and Khmu: 88.0%). Next is the group of household heads with maximum educational attainment being secondary school graduation (Muong: 19.6%; Thai: 46.6%; Hmong: 12.2%; Dao: 13.6%; Tho: 40.5%; Khmu: 12.0%), and the group with high school graduation has a modest representation, with the Khmu ethnic group reports no labour force members who graduated from high school or higher educational institutions.

The educational attainment of the poverty-escaping ethnic minority households is high in the two groups of elementary school graduates (Muong: 31.7%; Thai: 30.8%; Hmong: 45.0%; Dao: 31.2%; Tho: 43.2%; Khmu: 68.4%) and secondary school graduates (Muong: 28.1%; Thai: 34.6%; Hmong: 6.8%; Dao: 15.6%; Tho: 37.8%; Khmu: 11.0%). The group with high school graduation among the poverty-escaping group also has a lower representation compared to the non-attendance and elementary school graduation groups, while the educational attainment of vocational school, college, and university graduates is very low and falls within two ethnic groups (Hmong: 0.2%; Dao: 0.2%).

Despite the educational attainment differences between poor and poverty-escaping households, overall, the educational attainment of ethnic minority household heads remains low, significantly impacting their ability to develop economic plans, or acquire scientific and technical knowledge for production, and directly affecting the poverty escape capacity of these households.

Table 6: Correlation between educational attainment and the group of poor households (%)

Household classification	No formal education	Elementary school graduation	Secondary school graduation	High school graduation	Vocational school, College, University, or higher graduation	Total
Poor households	30.8	23.9	34.2	8.0	0	100
Poverty-escaping households	10.9	30.8	34.6	21.1	2.6	100

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

According to Table 6, there is a significant difference in educational attainment between the household heads of different ethnic minority groups in the poor group and the poverty-escaping group. The proportion of household heads with no formal education or only elementary school graduation is twice as high in the poor group compared to the poverty-escaping group (Chi-square test with a significance level of 0.002, indicating a 99% level of significance, demonstrating that educational attainment is correlated with the poverty escape capacity of ethnic minority households). This difficulty highlights the need for authorities

at all levels to strengthen community organizations and regularly organize basic vocational training or provide opportunities for poor households to participate in effective farming and livestock models in other areas to attract the participation of poor laborers.

Furthermore, according to Table 6, among the group of school non-attendance and elementary school graduates, there is a high proportion (70%) with limited learning capacity and poor business experience (33% for the elementary school graduate group). Limited educational attainment restricts the acquisition of the skills, experience, and knowledge necessary for improving economic conditions and escaping poverty.

4.1.3 Health Capacity

Table 7: Health Capacity for Income-Generating Work (%)

Health	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households
Poor	2.6	1.7	20.5	0.3	4.6	1.2	9.1	2.1	7.1	-	-	-
Partially good	10.5	5.7	11.0	3.6	6.8	-	9.1	10.5	16.7	10.7	10.0	-
Partially poor	14.5	21.0	17.4	29.5	25.0	-	22.7	36.1	35.7	11.1	10.0	-
Good	32.0	45.0	27.4	30.6	22.7	48.2	13.6	26.9	19.1	38.6	60.0	89.0
Very good	39.5	26.6	23.3	36.0	40.9	50.6	45.5	24.4	21.4	39.6	20.0	11.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

According to Table 7, the perception of health among ethnic minority households being good or very good is relatively high, especially among the Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups, where 100% of poverty-escaping households and 80% of poor households consider themselves to have good or very good health. The Muong, Thai, Tho, and Dao ethnic groups also rate their health as good or very good to work, accounting for a fairly high percentage. This is both an advantage and an opportunity for ethnic minority households to lift themselves out of poverty.

The proportion of poor households with poor or only partially good health is significant (Muong 13.1%; Thai 31.5%; Hmong 11.3%; Dao 18.2%; Tho

24.8%; Khmu 10%). Some poverty-escaping households also perceive themselves as having poor or partially good health (The Muong 7.3%; Thai 3.9%; Hmong 1.2%; Dao 12.6%; Tho 10.7%). This reality has an impact on the poverty escape capacity of households since they lack the physical ability to engage in work. These households must often borrow money for medical expenses and require additional labor to care for family members with poor health.

The table also reveals significant differences in health proportions between the poor and poverty-escaping households within each ethnic group and across different ethnic groups. The poverty-escaping households have a much lower proportion of poor or only partially good health compared to the poor households, confirming the initial hypothesis that illness and health issues significantly affect the poverty-escape capacity of households.

Table 8: Number of members with chronic diseases that have not been treated (%)

Value	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households
Yes	10.8	70.8	9.0	59.0	6.5	46.0	6.3	34.0	13.5	54.0	12.9	40.9
No	89.2	29.2	91.0	41.0	93.5	54.0	93.7	66.0	86.5	46.0	87.1	59.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

Difficult economic conditions are among the factors that affect access to healthcare for ethnic minority people. The proportion of individuals who are unable to access healthcare when they are sick or have health problems remains high (Muong: 89.2%; Thai: 91%; Hmong: 93.5%; Dao: 93.7%; Tho: 86.5%; Khmu: 87.9%), while the proportion of those who receive medical treatment is very low.

Comparing healthcare access between poor households and poverty-escaping households shows that a higher proportion of individuals in poverty-escaping households receive medical treatment for chronic illnesses, in contrast to poor households. This reality confirms that the economic factor plays a role in people’s access to and utilization of healthcare services.

4.1.4 Skills and Experience in the Production Labour of Households

Skills and experience refer to the knowledge and expertise that farmers gain through their production processes, as well as learning from family members,

friends, and technical experts. These skills and experiences are related to various aspects of agricultural production, such as selecting quality seedlings, planting techniques, coping with natural disasters and disease, and livestock farming.

Table 9: Learning capacity and entrepreneurial experience of households in ethnic minority areas (%)

Learning capacity and entrepreneurial experience	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor household	Poverty-escaping households
Poor	3.9	2.7	31.5	6.4	29.5	3.2	22.7	6.1	4.8	-	-	-
Partially good	10.5	6.8	20.5	2.6	11.4	-	-	6.3	21.4	-	10.0	-
Partially poor	23.7	16.2	11.0	26.9	25.0	6.5	13.6	31.3	21.4	27.0	20.0	28.6
Good	35.5	55.4	23.3	38.5	15.9	54.8	9.1	37.5	33.3	43.3	70.0	71.4
Very good	26.4	18.9	13.7	25.6	18.2	35.5	54.5	18.8	19.1	29.7	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

According to Table 9, the proportion of poor households with good or very good learning capacity and entrepreneurial experience is relatively high among all six ethnic groups (Muong: 61.8%, Thai: 37.0%, Hmong: 34.1%, Dao: 63.6%, Khmu: 70%). This observation indicates that ethnic minority households have a learning mindset, which is encouraging in helping these groups leverage their capacity to escape poverty. However, a significant proportion of ethnic minority households have poor or only partially good learning capacity and experience (Muong: 24.6%, Thai: 42.5%, Hmong: 54.5%, Dao: 36.3%, Tho: 26.2%, Khmu: 20%).

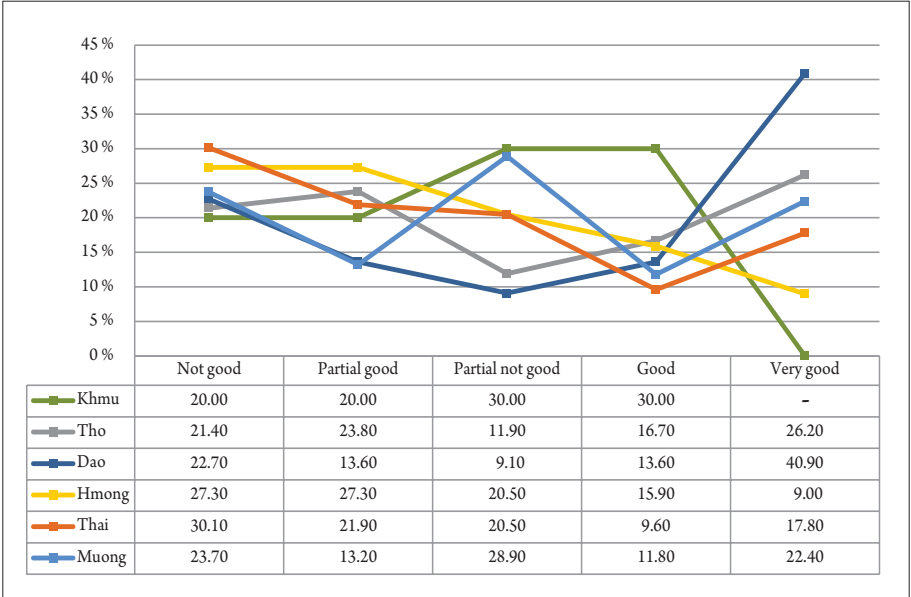
All six ethnic minority groups that have escaped poverty self-assess their learning capacity for poverty alleviation as good and very good, with high proportions (90.3% of Hmong households perceive their entrepreneurial learning capacity as good and very good; 71.4% of Khmu households; 72.9% of Tho households; 74.1% of Muong households; 72.9% of Tho households; 64.1% of Thai households; 56.3% of Dao households).

According to the survey results, households that have escaped poverty in the Khmu, Hmong, Tho, and Muong ethnic groups self-assess a better ability to absorb and learn compared to the Thai and Dao ethnic groups. However, these quantitative findings contradict qualitative observations and research by the study group, which suggest that Dao, Tho, Thai, and Muong households have

better learning capacity and experience in business than Hmong and Khmu households. Hmong and Khmu are two ethnic groups residing in the highland areas of Thanh Hoa province.

4.1.5 Capacity to Mobilize Borrowed Capital for Business

Chart 1: Capacity to mobilize borrowed capital for business among poor households (%)

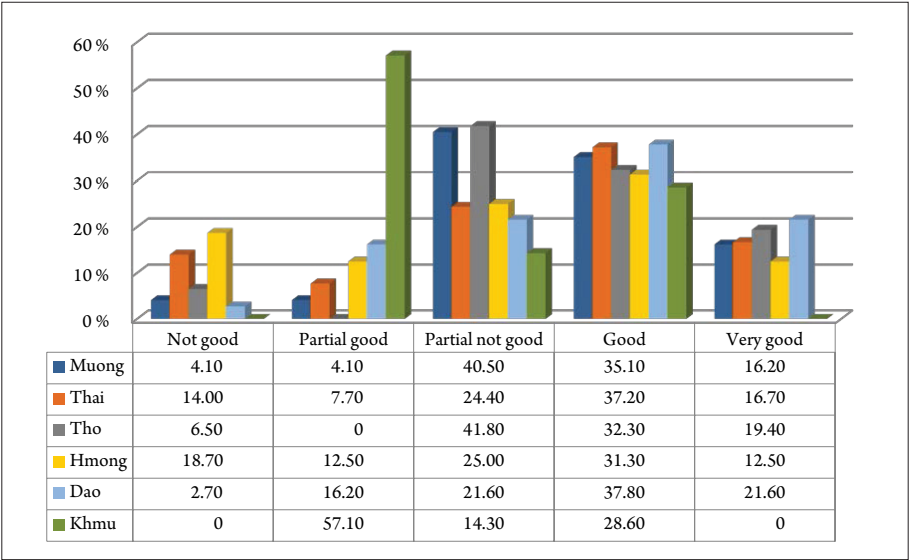


Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

According to Chart 1, the utilization of loan capital by ethnic minority households is still limited. The proportion of ethnic minority households with poor capacity to mobilize loan capital for production and business is high (40% for Khmu, 51.2% for Thai, 54.6% for Hmong, 36.9% for Muong, 36.3% for Dao, 45.2% for Tho). This indicates poor accessibility to loan capital for these households. The proportion of Households with partly poor capacity to mobilize loan capital is relatively significant for the Muong (28.9%), Thai (20.0%), Hmong (20.5%), Dao (9.0%), Tho (11.9%), and Khmu (17%).

The assessment of good or very good capacity to mobilize capital among different groups of ethnic minority households shows apparent differences and modest figures (only 13% for Khmu, 22.4% for Thai, 25.0% for Hmong, etc.). The group of poor households, particularly the Dao ethnic group, self-assesses the highest capacity to mobilize loan capital (54.1% for Dao, 42.9% for Tho, 34.2% for Muong).

Chart 2: Business capital mobilization capacity of poverty escape households (%)

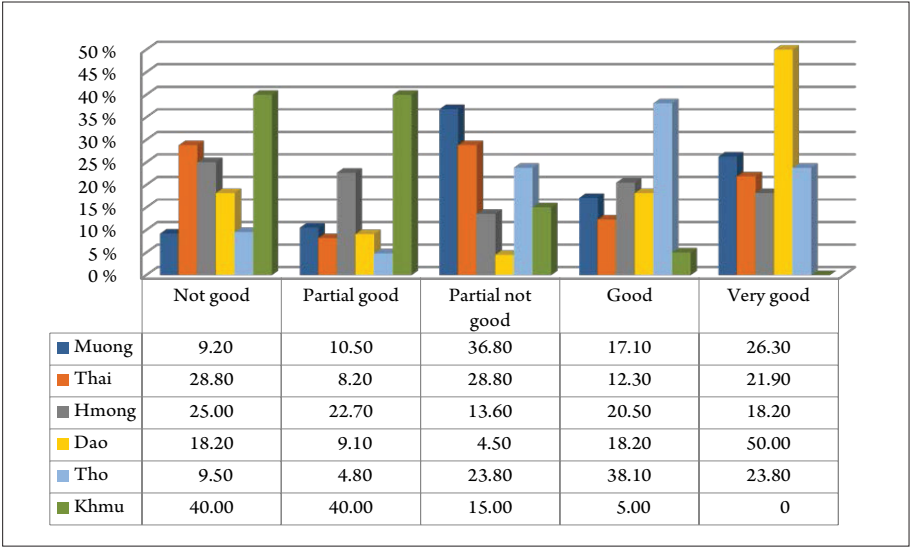


Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

The analysis of Chart 2 shows that the business mobilization capacity of poverty households from ethnic minority groups is partly good and has a high proportion. This is a favourable result and an important skill that helps ensure sustainable poverty escape. However, a significant proportion is still assessed to have poor capacity to mobilize capital, especially among the group that self-assesses their capacity as only partially good (40.5% for Muong, 24.4 % for Thai, 41.9% for Hmong, 25.0% for Dao, 21.6% for Khmu). In reality, these households that have escaped poverty are at risk of falling back into poverty.

A comparison of Chart 1 and Chart 2 reveals a significant difference in the business mobilization capacity between the poor households and the poverty escape households from ethnic minority families. There are also significant differences in mobilization capacity among different ethnic groups (16.2% for poverty escape Muong households, 16.7% for Thai, 19.4% for Hmong, 12.5% for Tho, 21.5% for Dao who have assessed their capacity to escape poverty as very good compared to 0% for the Khmu ethnic group). These differences depend on the living conditions in their areas of settlement, the educational level of the household head and labourers, the farming practices, and the perception of poverty among ethnic minority households.

Chart 3: Capital utilization capacity of poor households from ethnic minority groups (%)



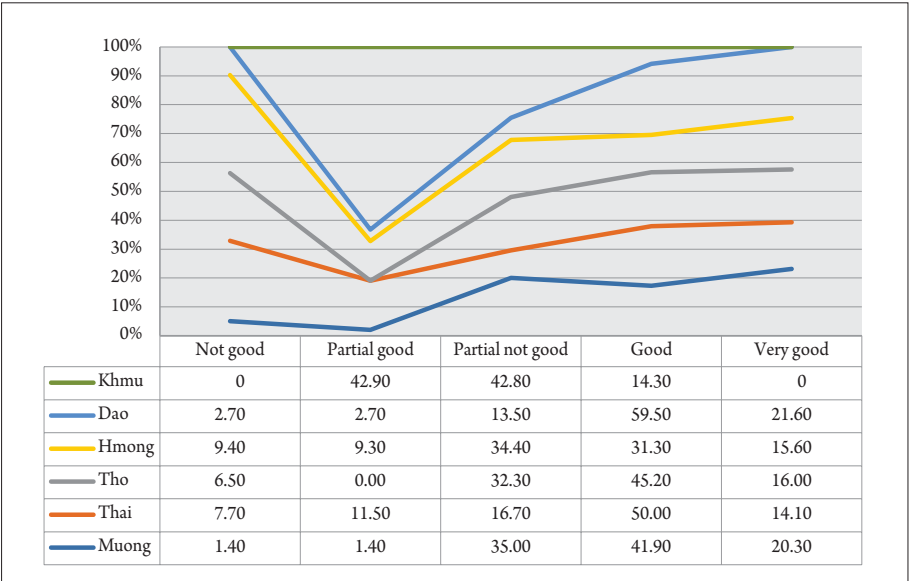
Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

From Chart 3, it is evident that the capital utilization capacity of poor households from ethnic minority groups remains limited (40% for Khmu, 28.8% for Thai, 25.0% for Hmong, etc.), indicating that these households have poor capital utilization capacity. The proportion of households with partially good capital utilization capacity is also relatively high (40.0% for Khmu, 20.7% for Hmong, 10.5% for Dao, etc.). However, there is a relatively high proportion of households that assess their capital utilization capacity as good and very good (68.5% for Dao, 61.9% for Tho, and 38.7% for Hmong etc.), indicating that these households have a strong capital utilization capacity. This is an advantage and a strength that creates favorable conditions for poverty escape.

According to Chart 3, there are also differences in capital utilization capacity among ethnic groups. The explanation for this difference depends on the perspectives and ideologies of each ethnic community. The Dao ethnic group, despite residing in remote and isolated areas, has progressive thinking and has recognized the challenges of agricultural labor from the outset. They encourage their children to pursue education and place a strong emphasis on investing in education and labor migration to other regions. This creates favorable conditions for the Dao ethnic households to transition their occupations and develop their economic status, reducing the risks associated with the agricultural economy. Additionally, Dao households are hardworking and diligent, actively applying new scientific and technical achievements to farming and animal husbandry. These favorable conditions contribute to poverty escape and sustainable poverty reduction for these households.

On the other hand, the Tho ethnic group resides together with the majority Kinh population in low mountainous areas (central communes, near towns) that offer certain advantages in terms of trade exchange and abundant job opportunities. These conditions make it easier for them to learn from and interact with various groups, providing favorable conditions for the Tho ethnic households to enhance their skills and experiences in farming and animal husbandry. They also have more favorable opportunities for occupational transition and sustainable poverty escape.

Chart 4: Capital utilization capacity of poverty escape households from ethnic minority groups (%)



Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

The survey results indicate that poverty-escape households from ethnic minority groups have a relatively good capacity to utilize borrowed capital for economic development. Specifically, a small proportion of these households assess their capital utilization capacity as not good enough, while the highest proportion considers their capital utilization capacity as good among ethnic groups such as the Tho, Thai, Muong, and Hmong. The Khmu ethnic group has a relatively high proportion of households with subpar capital utilization capacity. These favorable conditions enable ethnic minority households to effectively utilize borrowed capital for economic development and escaping poverty. However, there is still a significant proportion of ethnic minority households that partially assess their capital utilization capacity as good. In reality, the use of capital for economic development by these households carries considerable risk, and this group is at high risk of falling back into poverty.

A comparison of Tables 3 and 4 also reveals differences in capital utilization capacity between the poor households and the poverty escape households. Additionally, there are differences in capital utilization capacity among different ethnic minority groups. The reasons for these differences lie in the educational level and skills of the household heads and labor within the households, which significantly impact their capital utilization capacity and overall poverty escape. Furthermore, the differing perspectives and ideologies of each ethnic group play a role. For example, ethnic groups like the Hmong and Khmu may view poverty as normal and even benefit from various government programs and policies (such as healthcare and education), leading them to resist escaping poverty.

4.1.6 Market Search Capacity and Product Consumption Ability

The capacity to search for markets and consume products refers to the ability to identify and meet the demands of customers who consume the goods produced. Searching for markets requires strategic vision and the ability to identify and assess the feasibility of meeting the demand for one’s products before starting production.

Table 10: The capacity to search for markets and consume products among EM households (%)

The capacity to search for markets and consume products	Ethnic group											
	Muong		Thai		Hmong		Dao		Tho		Khmu	
	Poor ouseholds	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households	Poor households	Poverty-escaping households
Poor	31.6	14.9	45.2	23.1	52.3	3.2	86.4	34.4	21.4	27.0	60.0	-
Partially poor	34.2	44.5	21.9	30.8	15.9	41.9	9.1	31.3	26.2	11.6	20.0	57.1
Partially good	17.1	8.1	13.7	3.8	11.4	12.9	-	15.6	23.8	31.6	10.0	42.9
Good	13.2	23.0	11.0	21.8	9.0	32.3	4.5	15.6	16.7	16.2	10.0	-
Very good	3.9	9.5	8.2	20.5	11.4	9.7	-	3.1	11.9	13.6	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Results of the topic survey (2020).

According to Table 10, the capacity of ethnic minority households to access markets and consume products still has many limitations. A high percentage of households from ethnic minority groups assess their capacity to access markets as not good or only partially good. This includes 60% of poor households and

57.1% of poverty escape households from the Khmu ethnic group, 95.5% of poor households and 65.7% of Dao ethnic group households, 68.2% of poor households and 45.1% of Hmong ethnic group households, and so on. On the other hand, a modest percentage of ethnic minority households perceive their capacity to access markets as good or very good. This includes 10% of poor households and poverty escape households from the Khmu ethnic group, 4.5% of poor households from the Dao ethnic group, and lower percentages for other ethnic groups compared to the above-mentioned assessments.

Table 10 also highlights differences in two dimensions: First, it reflects variation in the capacity to access markets and consume products among different ethnic minority groups. The Khmu, Dao, and Hmong ethnic groups have very limited capacity to access markets compared to the Tho, Thai, and Muong ethnic groups. Second, it illustrates differences in the capacity to access markets and consume products between the group of poor households and the group of poverty escape households within specific ethnic minority groups. For example, the assessment of poor households from the Muong ethnic group indicates a 31.1% rate of poor capacity to access markets compared to 14.9% for poverty escape households. Similarly, there are differences of 52.3% versus 3.2% for the ethnic group and 86.4% versus 34.4% for the ethnic group, and so on.

4.2. Solutions for Enhancing the Human Capital of Ethnic Minority Households

4.2.1 Principle of Subjectivity in Poverty Reduction

One of the main reasons why poverty reduction activities in ethnic minority mountainous areas have not achieved the desired effectiveness is that they have not paid enough attention to ethnic characteristics. To escape poverty, we need to have faith in the poor and their potential to lift themselves out of poverty, rather than just focusing on the thinking of policymakers or government leaders in poor countries (Narayan et al. 2009).

For poverty reduction efforts among ethnic minority groups to be effective in the context of sustainable development goals, it is necessary to unleash the internal potential of the poor. Instead of just giving fish, the focus should be on providing the fishing rod and teaching them how to fish. It is crucial to focus on enhancing the poverty escape capacity of the poor themselves, in addition to improving the capacity of local officials involved in poverty reduction to evaluate policies/projects. These are areas that have not been adequately addressed and still face limitations in the current poverty reduction efforts for ethnic minority groups.

4.2.2 Classifying Ethnic Minority Households in Poverty to Enhance Poverty Escape Capacity

Among the ethnic minority households in poverty, there are diverse groups with distinct characteristics. To enhance their poverty escape capacity, appropriate and tailored solutions are needed for each group. For example, we can temporarily categorize the following three groups of ethnic minority households in poverty:

Group 1: This group includes households with elderly, weak individuals, sickness, lack of labour, and little to no potential for poverty escape (also known as the chronic poor group). This group represents a small proportion of the six ethnic minority groups in the mountainous areas of Thanh Hoa. They require mobilization and support through social welfare policies to ensure their daily livelihoods. In the long term, this group will likely have the least capacity to escape poverty and will require consistent social welfare support.

Group 2: This group consists of households with an available labour force and a desire to work but which face limitations in terms of knowledge and skills in agriculture, animal husbandry, and lack of production materials, resulting in a lack of employment opportunities. However, overall, they have a progressive spirit and a desire to learn to uplift themselves from poverty. This group has a high potential for poverty escape. To support this group, efforts should focus on enhancing their human capital through vocational training, providing access to credit, supporting production materials, creating employment opportunities, and facilitating labour migration.

Group 3: This group comprises households that are unwilling to work, lazy, and lack knowledge of business operations and organization of daily life. They are also vulnerable to social vices and often rely on government policies and assistance programs for the poor. For this group, it is necessary to promote awareness and encourage mindset change before implementing support policies such as loan assistance and production materials. Without such changes, the effectiveness of support programs will be limited, as people may not know how to utilize the assistance or may sell it for cash without making sustainable improvements, leaving them trapped in poverty.

4.2.3 Supporting Policies and Efforts by the Poor to Enhance Poverty Escape Capacity

Policies for directly or indirectly supporting (facilitating) capacity building for households to reduce and escape poverty:

- Continue to apply policies for poor households that promote effectiveness, such as health insurance policies, support for children of ethnic minorities to attend school, policies on loans for labour export, and support for seedlings.

- Mobilize resources to improve transportation project infrastructure systems, such as electricity, schools, medical stations, household water supply, cultural and sports facilities, and other infrastructure that serves production and livelihoods.
- Study and adjust current land policies to ensure fair land distribution and efficient utilization, which contributes to poverty reduction.
- Strengthen communication and raise awareness about poverty reduction, especially among the third group of poor households mentioned above. Encourage individuals and families to invest in production and business activities to lift themselves out of poverty.
- Support the development of production, business, vocational diversification, and income generation. Promote agricultural and forestry extension models, transfer advanced techniques to poor labourers, and facilitate the replication of successful models.
- Implement projects and vocational training programs linked to employment and technical skills for labourers in agriculture, extraction forestry, animal husbandry, farming, processing, and other sectors. Continue to effectively implement Decision No. 1956/QĐ-TTg (2009) by the Prime Minister on vocational training for rural labourers in Thanh Hoa province until 2020.

Developing the human capital of ethnic minorities to reduce poverty:

- For poor people and households, especially in the second group, it is necessary to focus on analysing the 5 sources of capital according to a sustainable livelihood diagram: natural capital, financial capital, social capital, institutional capital, and human capital. For ethnic minorities, human capital is the decisive capital source (as well as their weakest link) in poverty reduction.
- To enhance human capital within ethnic minority households, the following approaches are recommended: learning, experimentation, and practical experience to build skills and lessons that gradually increase income and sustainably reduce poverty. It is essential to address psychological barriers such as laziness, lack of self-confidence, fear of hard work, and risk aversion.
- Access to services and production materials (such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides) can be facilitated through borrowing or purchasing on credit with repayment after harvest.
- Poor households should be gathered together to learn and enhance production and business skills.

In terms of policy, to improve both the quantity and quality of Human Capital, there is a need for State and social intervention to improve the capacity of ethnic minorities from the mountainous regions of Thanh Hoa:

- Develop and implement a long-term program to improve people's knowledge in ethnic minority communities. This program is interdisciplinary, and

- synchronous and needs direction and management at the highest provincial level;
- Continue to support and encourage ethnic minority children to go to school at a higher general education level and learn vocational skills. The State has some policies in this direction; the province needs to set specific goals, make a roadmap, and set aside appropriate funds for implementation. For example: In the next 10 years, lower secondary school must be universalized for all school-age children; vocational training with practicing certificates for at least 50% of young people aged 16–18;
 - Conduct research on piloting bilingual teaching (national and ethnic languages) for kindergarten and primary school children, to quickly improve the understanding and social integration ability of ethnic minority children;
 - Restore the Adult Literacy Program, so that within 5–10 years, the illiteracy status of all citizens in the province will be completely eradicated;
 - Increase the duration and quality of mass communication programs (television, radio) in ethnic languages to provide diverse information to ethnic minorities in the province;
 - Integrate development programs and projects in the province to increase the diversity and duration of, and funding for vocational training projects and business administration capacity training for ethnic minorities;
 - Coordinate with sectors and organizations to encourage businesses, cooperatives, farm owners, and social organizations to participate in training, sponsoring, and attracting ethnic minorities into production chains to bring higher income and improve production and business skills among these people;
 - Promote a solidarity movement in the community, where households unite to help each other develop, such as rich households help poor households, Kinh households help poor ethnic minority households in production and business, cultivation, animal husbandry, etc.;
 - Guide and encourage ethnic minorities to diversify jobs, and seek opportunities to develop non-agricultural activities, such as handicraft production, combining agricultural production with tourism services in places with convenient conditions;
 - Develop and implement a special plan on improving the capacity for economic management and social organization among grassroots cadres in ethnic minority areas, including rejuvenating and local solutions and cadres at a grassroots level.

5. Conclusion

Human capital is indeed a decisive factor (as well as the weakest link) in poverty reduction. Only when this capital is developed will it be able to use opportuni

ties for other capital sources (financial, land, social, material, and institutional). The limited education, skills, and production experience among poor ethnic minority households in the mountainous regions of Thanh Hoa province have direct implications on their ability to absorb new knowledge and skills through training sessions for practical application in production. The results surveys indicate that, among ethnic minority households in the mountainous regions of Thanh Hoa province, individuals who receive training on knowledge and skills for poverty reduction are not necessarily directly involved in production. This is because not everyone in the local ethnic minority community has a firm grasp of the Vietnamese language. Typically, men participate in training sessions while women are the ones directly engaged in production. This is a significant barrier to the application of scientific and technical knowledge in the production practices of these poor households. Therefore, to achieve sustainable poverty eradication, it is crucial to enhance the level of awareness from multiple perspectives for the poor, and creating conditions for them to improve their education is an important step.

Based on these research findings regarding the current situation and the capacity to utilize human capital among poor ethnic minority households in the mountainous regions, it becomes clear that they must participate in training and vocational education programs organized by local authorities and/or associations. In the process of enhancing awareness, knowledge, labor skills, and attitudes among these poor ethnic minority households, besides the formal solutions that provide modern knowledge and skills by experts in agriculture, livestock farming, business, etc., informal solutions from the social work sector, such as “community education,” linked to the nature and characteristics of each community, play a decisive role. In other words, starting from the strengths, knowledge, and local experience of each ethnic minority group in the mountains, the “community education” approach, based on continuous sharing and mutual support, yields high efficacy because of the similarities between communities. Regarding formal solutions to improve the education level, knowledge, understanding, and skills of poor ethnic minority households in mountainous regions for sustainable livelihood development, support from government and socio-political organizations, as well as social-professional organizations, in assessing and analyzing needs, as well as building training and education plans, will eliminate the sense of insecurity and enhance a confident, open, proactive, and committed attitude to participation in poverty reduction projects.

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Notes

- ¹ The sustainable livelihoods framework developed by Chambers and Conway (1992) has been applied worldwide.
- ² According to the Decision, the poverty line for the period 2016–2020 of the Vietnamese government, a poor household is a household with an average income per capita/month from the policy poverty line or below, or with an average income per capita/month higher than the standard policy poverty but lower than the minimum standard of living in terms of deprivation of 1/3 of the total deprivation point of access to basic social services or more (Decision No. 289-QĐ/TU ..., 2020); Decision No. 291-QĐ/TU ..., 2020).
- ³ According to the Decision, poverty line for the period 2016–2020 of the Vietnamese government, households escaping poverty need to meet the following criteria: the average living standard per capita meets the national poverty line: the national poverty line is adjusted according to each year. The current period (2024) is 2.3 million VND/person/month in rural areas and 2.8 million VND/person/month in urban areas; not eligible for support policies for poor households: including support policies on housing, health care, education, training, running water, electricity, transportation, postal service, and telecommunications.
- ⁴ According to the Decision, poverty line for the period 2016–2020 of the Vietnamese government, near-poor households are households with average income per capita/month higher than the policy poverty line but lower than the minimum living standard, and lacking less than 1/3 of the total score lacks access to basic social services.

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