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### Livelihood Transformation of the Chơ-Ro People in Sông Xoài Commune, Phú Mỹ Town, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu Province

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#### Abstract

The Chơ-ro people are an indigenous ethnic minority with a long history of residence in the Southeast region of Vietnam. According to the 2019 socioeconomic survey of 53 ethnic minorities, the Chơ-ro population stands at 29,520 (Committee for Ethnic Minorities, General Statistics Office, 2020: 65), primarily concentrated in Đồng Nai and Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu provinces. In Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, with a population of nearly 9,000, the Chơ-ro rank as the second largest ethnic minority group, following the Hoa people. The Chơ-ro are predominantly located in Châu Đức district (Ngãi Giao town, and the communes of Đá Bạc, Bàu Chinh, Bình Giã, and Bình Ba), Xuyên Mộc district (Tân Lâm and Bàu Lâm communes), Đất Đỏ district (Long Tân commune), and Phú Mỹ town (Hắc Dịch ward, Sông Xoài commune,

and Châu Pha commune). Additionally, a small number of Chơ-ro people reside scattered in Bình Phước, Bình Dương, and Bình Thuận provinces.

This article employs Rational Choice Theory and data collected from ethnographic fieldwork, combined with the synthesis and analysis of secondary sources related to the research area, to elucidate the transformations in the livelihood activities of the Chơ-ro community in Sông Xoài commune, Phú Mỹ town, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province in the current context. The article aims to provide scientific evidence to support the consideration, planning, and proposal of economic development policies suitable for the local conditions.

**Keywords:** Livelihood Transformation, Chơ-ro people, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu

#### 1. Introduction

Sông Xoài is a commune in Phú Mỹ town, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province, bordered by Láng Lớn commune in Châu Đức district to the east, Hắc Dịch ward to the west, Châu Pha commune to the south, and Cù Bị commune to the north, with a total natural area of 2,902 hectares, 84.21% of which is agricultural land. Located in a tropical monsoon climate zone with fertile basalt soil, the area is favorable for agricultural economic development, particularly the cultivation of industrial crops such as pepper, coffee, and rubber, as well as livestock farming.

Historically, the Chơ-ro people lived in low mountainous areas and had a lifestyle closely tied to the forest. Their traditional livelihoods included shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering, while animal husbandry and handicrafts were underdeveloped (Committee for Ethnic Minorities, 2006). Their main crops included upland rice, cassava, sesame, gourds, pumpkins, loofahs, and beans. However, since the 2000s, state support policies (such as electrification for households, provision of goat and cattle breeds, guidance on crop conversion, and implementation of Program 134) have significantly contributed to the livelihood transformation of the Chơ-ro people in Sông Xoài commune, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province. In agriculture, there has been a shift from traditional crops to wet rice cultivation, fruit tree planting, industrial crops, and livestock development. Additionally, more Chơ-ro people are participating in non-agricultural economic activities, including working as laborers, freelancers, and engaging in small-scale businesses.

#### 2. Research Methods

##### 2.1 Research Methods

Ethnographic fieldwork was the primary method used in this study. The author conducted fieldwork in May 2024 in Sông Xoài commune, Phú Mỹ town, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province, as it is one of the two long-standing settlements of the Chơ-ro

community.

This method involved two techniques: Participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation was initially applied to approach and familiarize with the research subjects and area, laying the groundwork for conducting in-depth interviews with local residents. Participant observation was carried out throughout the fieldwork period. The study conducted 10 in-depth interviews to systematically collect detailed information on livelihood changes among local people, including one interview with a village official and the remaining nine with residents of different ages and genders.

In addition to the primary ethnographic fieldwork method, the study also utilized literature review methods to support preparation before fieldwork. The reviewed materials included research topics published in scientific journals, articles on government and Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province's official websites related to the phenomena, issues, subjects, and areas of study. Furthermore, relevant literature on the theoretical framework applied in this research was also examined.

### 3. Research Results and Discussion

The research results indicate significant livelihood transformations among the Chơ-ro people in Sông Xoài commune in the current context. In traditional agricultural activities, short-term crops were the main livelihood, but in recent years, long-term industrial crops have become the primary cultivation, and livestock farming, particularly goat and cattle raising, has grown in scale, providing substantial economic support to the community.

#### 3.1 Research Results

##### 3.1.1 Agricultural Livelihood Transformation

In traditional Chơ-ro agriculture, upland rice cultivation was the primary livelihood activity. However, with the state's policy to replace upland rice cultivation with wet rice, the Chơ-ro gradually transitioned to wet rice farming, a practice that continues today. Initially, when officials encouraged wet rice farming, many were hesitant due to perceived difficulties, but soon found it to be manageable.

For example, Mr. D.B., a Chơ-ro resident born in 1955, noted, "Like me, I had never grown wet rice before, but now I can do it because the rice seeds were provided, the fields were ready, and the water was brought in through canals, so the rest of the work was easy" (Fieldwork notes, Cầu Rì hamlet, Sông Xoài commune, Phú Mỹ town, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province, November 17, 2022).

The state's investment in irrigation works, water channels, and auxiliary equipment (such as pumps and hoses), along with the reorganization of rice-growing areas and technical support from agricultural extension officers, enabled Chơ-ro households to cultivate two rice crops per year, each lasting 4-5 months. Each household's wet rice area ranges from 3-5 sào (a Vietnamese unit of land), yielding about 2-2.5 tons per hectare, depending on natural conditions and other investment factors like fertilizers and pesticides. Most rice is used to meet family food needs, with only a small surplus sold for additional income.

While rice once played a crucial role in the livelihoods of the Chơ-ro community in Sông Xoài, the area dedicated to rice cultivation has decreased in recent years, as many households have sold their rice fields and ceased rice farming. This shift is primarily due to the low economic efficiency of rice cultivation, leading to a transition to other

crops or more economically viable non-agricultural livelihoods.

In addition to rice, short-term crops (such as corn, sweet potatoes, beans, gourds, and pumpkins) were widely grown on multi-crop fields and around homes. These crops primarily served to provide daily food. However, short-term crops require considerable effort and time for care, with low economic returns. Therefore, since 1993, the Chơ-ro have gradually shifted to long-term industrial crops to save labor and time. During this period, the high economic value of harvested long-term industrial crops further accelerated the crop conversion process. Some households followed the "short-term for long-term" strategy (growing both short-term and long-term crops, using proceeds from short-term crop sales to invest in long-term crops), while others converted their entire land area to long-term crops. Currently, most land has been entirely converted to long-term crops.

Long-term industrial crops, such as cashew, coffee, and pepper, have become an important part of the region's economy since 1993. However, in recent years, the prices of these crops have fluctuated negatively, posing challenges for households. Specifically, the price of pepper dropped from 300,000-380,000 VND/kg in 2021 to only 80,000 VND/kg today; similarly, the price of coffee fell from 200,000 VND/kg in 2002 to only 60,000-70,000 VND/kg today. These declining prices over the past decade have made it difficult for farmers to earn sufficient profits to reinvest in their crops. Consequently, crop productivity has been affected, leading to reduced income, while labor costs have risen (the wage for fruit pickers is now 380,000-400,000 VND/day). Additionally, insufficient investment in fertilizers and pesticides has allowed diseases to kill trees, causing significant losses for farmers.

Despite market fluctuations, the shift to long-term industrial crops has brought several benefits. Long-term crops generally require less care and soil preparation, allowing farmers to save time and labor compared to rice or short-term crop farming. Products from long-term crops are sold at higher prices, providing farmers with better income and the potential for individual economic development. These crops also adapt well to local climatic conditions, contributing to agricultural diversification and regional economic growth.

Fruit trees such as avocado, durian, mango, banana, and papaya have become new crops in local cultivation, with about 80% of households growing fruit trees. Fruit trees are typically planted on 1 or 2 rods of land alongside long-term industrial crops. Fruit trees offer economic benefits, especially durians, which have fetched prices as high as 800,000-1,000,000 VND/durian at the beginning of the season.

##### 3.1.2 Livestock Livelihood Transformation

In the past, Chơ-ro families typically raised animals such as pigs and chickens in their gardens for food. Livestock production was small-scale and not widely developed.

However, since 2014, with support from government projects, Chơ-ro households have received goat and cow breeds to raise for income, leading to significant improvements in livestock production. The government also provided technical assistance and allocated pastureland for large livestock development. As a result, livestock production in Sông Xoài commune has expanded, creating a more diversified agricultural economy.

The transition to livestock farming has significantly contributed to the livelihood transformation of the Chơ-ro community, providing a steady income stream and increasing resilience to market fluctuations in crop prices.

### 3.2 Discussion

The livelihood transformation of the Chơ-ro people in Sông Xoài commune reflects a broader trend of rural development and modernization among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. The shift from traditional subsistence farming to more diversified and market-oriented agricultural and non-agricultural activities has enhanced the economic well-being of the Chơ-ro people, allowing them to improve their living standards and participate more fully in the region's economic life.

However, the transformation process also poses challenges, such as market dependence, environmental degradation, and the potential loss of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. Therefore, it is essential to balance economic development with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability in planning future policies for the Chơ-ro community in Sông Xoài commune.

### 4. Conclusion

The livelihood transformation of the Chơ-ro people in Sông Xoài commune, Phú Mỹ town, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province, demonstrates the community's adaptability to changing economic and social conditions. Through government support and individual initiatives, the Chơ-ro people have successfully transitioned from traditional subsistence farming to more diversified and sustainable livelihoods, contributing to their economic development and social integration.

Future policies should focus on enhancing market access, providing technical support, and promoting environmentally sustainable practices while preserving the cultural heritage of the Chơ-ro people. This approach will ensure the continued progress of the Chơ-ro community in Sông Xoài commune and serve as a model for the development of other ethnic minority communities in Vietnam.

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