Work without name: changing patterns of children's work in a Northern Vietnamese village

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Chapter 2

CHILDREN’S WORK IN A TRANSITIONAL ECONOMY:  
A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

...Viec nha, hoi tre nho
To know what really goes on in the home, ask the children
(Local saying)

Research background

This study examines changing patterns of children's work in response to the shifting from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented one in northern rural Vietnam. These responses suggest changes in types, extent and nature of children's economic activities. From a perspective of socio-economic changes, this study shall raise the following issues: 1. Types and nature of children's economic activities; 2. Socio-cultural constraints of children's work; 3. Relationships between children's work and education.

The study will also deal with questions beyond the household parameters such as distribution of productive resources, relations of production, cultural constraints and social institutions and their changes, which are bound to have effects on children's work. From this broader perspective of change, the research then looks into the household unit, examining intra-household relations, family organization, hierarchies of age and sex, perceptions of norms and values concerning the economic activities of children, the child and childhood, conflict between work and education facing children and their parents in response to new circumstances.

Although I cannot deal at length with all these issues, in this dissertation, I would suggest that the shifting from collective economy to individual household production in rural northern Vietnam has had strong impacts upon the patterns and nature of children's economic activities. I suppose that such economic reforms liberated individuals from formal constraints of the collective regime and opened alternative options for people's life strategy. The increasing entry of children into market employment in recent years, which appear as individual acts, should not be looked at separately from the social environment at large. Therefore, this study will examine children's work in close relation with structural factors, namely the economic system, socio-cultural constraints and public education.

The dissertation's theoretical orientation has been developed on the basis of the limitations of child labour studies so far which often focus on an exclusively economic interpretation, regarding children merely as an economic asset of their parents while
neglecting the socio-economic context within which children's work occurs. In overcoming these shortcomings, I shall try to move beyond a narrative account of the household level and look at children's work from a broader perspective of social transformation in order to understand how changes on a macro level impact on the nature of their work.

**Theoretical perspectives**

Scientific concerns with and discussions of child labour erupted in the early decades of this century when economists and demographers started to mention the "population explosion" in the Third World and raised questions such as why peasant societies have such a high fertility. With a view to offering practical intervention, many demographic studies have formulated the problems and issues in a functionalist and determinist way. Their underlying assumption is that children are economically valuable to their parents, and the value of children could be accurately measured in terms of "costs and benefits". The value-of-children (VOC) approach which links high fertility with child labour was strongly influenced by a fascinating study launched by M. Mamdani, "Myth of Population Control" (1972). Mamdani studied children's economic roles in a village of India and came to suggest that a variety of waged and non-waged tasks performed by children were complementary to those of adults and were necessary for the reproduction of peasant families. According to Mamdani, in the agricultural societies, labour is the most important factor. A large family is an asset and a good strategy for household wealth accumulation. The conclusion from Mamdani's work is that "those who had few resources responded to adversity not by decreasing their number, but by increasing them" (Mamdani 1972:127).

This research trend that links high fertility to child work in the peasant societies has been followed by a number of researchers, among them Hull (1975), Mueller (1976), White (1975, 1976), Nag (1972), Nag and Kak (1984).

White (1975) attempted to measure the economic value of children empirically. He used the method of collecting time allocation budgets to study the relationship between production and reproduction in a Javanese village. His work indicated that by the age of eight, the economic contribution of children to the sustenance of the household was often equal to that of adults (1975:135).

Nag and Kak revisited an Indian village and found that the value of children is at least manifested in three dimensions: 1) a source of labour; 2) a source of old age security; and 3) a source of risk insurance (Nag & Kak 1984).
In terms of VOC analysis, works conducted by Bulatao (1975) and Hull (1977) also provide a similar assumption that children make a substantial contribution to the well-being of the peasant family. These studies however emphasize that having more children is the outcome of a specific interplay of economic, social, cultural and psychological values.

The demographic approach to children's work has caused a fascinating debate on the causal relation between high fertility and the utility of children for the peasant household. Repetto (1978) while commenting on the work by Nag and White, put forth an opposite view, pointing out that economic welfare of the household does not appear to be positively related to the children's labour contribution. Empirical studies conducted in various villages of India, for instance, by Dasgupta (1977) and Vlassoff (1979), who, like White, used the method of making quantitative assessments of children's and adults' work inputs, led to the conclusion that "the common view of young children as "poor man's capital" is not accurate (Vlassoff 1979:428). This finding forced the demographic researchers to rethink their "costs-benefits analysis". White later on re-examined five case studies on children's work in Asian developing countries based on a similar approach, and came to the conclusion that "the associations between fertility, lower labour income and high inputs of child labour, prove only that there is something interesting to explain, and many empirical studies of 'economic value of children' have not progressed much further; discussion tends to centre on the appropriate definition, measurement and valuation of 'costs' and 'benefits' and in the end produces little more than the conclusion that reproductive behaviour reflects these rather obvious realities" (White 1982:605).

The ensuing debate on the determinants of high fertility in peasant societies reveals several weaknesses. First, the cost-benefit analysis of children for the rural poor overlooks the historical, social and cultural roles of children in society (Caldwell 1976, 1982). It fails to consider the symbolic meaning and centrality of children-- the social values that might underpin economic behaviour (Rogers & Standing 1981, Goddard & White 1982). Also the use of the concept of the household as an unproblematic unity, has generally led to the negation of internal contradictions within the family, notably male versus female, seniors versus juniors, etc. On the other hand, focusing quite exclusively on the micro-setting of the peasant household would fail to provide an overall analysis of the wider socio-political parameters in which the actions of its members are embedded (Nieuwenhuyys 1990:5; 1996:241). The mode of explanation of economic utility of children as labour force and insurance has been criticized as an extremely rational and post hoc functionalist. Moreover, by rationalizing the decisions of having or not having more children and the expectations of the parents, "Mamdani, Nag and Kak problemize the relationship between what people think will happen and what actually will happen" because at the time of
making decisions, one did not know how the future would be, unlike the researchers now looking back (Saaval 1997:192).

In developing the VOC approach, Caldwell (1982) suggested a theory of inter-generational wealth flows to analyze the parents-children relationships. He proposed that wealth flows are an aggregate of work, money, expenses, gifts, services and securities. The shifting from an economy based on familial relations to a society where mass education and waged labour are essential has changed the direction of wealth flows in the families. In earlier times, wealth would flow from children to parents. When the society changes, children no longer work for their parents but rather, they derive wealth from their parents for the costs of schooling and upbringing. Consequently, this would lead to a rational choice of having low fertility. This theoretical concept of wealth flows was, however, not tested empirically to measure the wealth flows between generations and did not specify by which mechanism this choice is translated into fertility behaviour.

While the demographic approach concentrates on the linkages between the fertility practice and value of children, the economic theories seek to uncover the routine of children's entry into the labour market and to explain why children do work. Child labour in the course of industrialization of 19th century Europe was a major concerns of Marxist economics. Marx refers to child labour very often in his influential book "Capital", particularly in chapters 8 and 13 of volume 1 (Marx 1976). From Marx's labour theory of value, two major points concerning child labour are drawn, referring to: a/reproduction of labour power and the position of children's labour in the capitalist labour market and b/exploitation of child labour.

According to Marx, the reproduction of labour power is normally organized through households consisting of husbands, wives and children, in which the husband is responsible for earning money and the wife for domestic labour. The male adult's wage is assumed to normally constitute a 'family wage' necessary for the subsistence of the whole household. The development of capitalism with modern machinery put all the family members, regardless of age or gender, under the direct rule of the capitalists. Marx went further by pointing out that when women and children enter the labour market, they would lower the male wages and therefore increase the level of exploitation by capitalists. In Marx's point of view, "it was not however the misuse of parental power that created the direct or indirect exploitation of immature labour power by capital, but rather the opposite, i.e. the capitalist mode of exploitation, by sweeping away the economic foundation which corresponded to parental power, made use of parental power into its misuse" (Marx 1976:620).

Apparently, Marx regards the cause of the entry of children into the labour market not as autonomous or as a result of the decision of individual enterprises but rather, as
shaped by the development of the economic system as a whole. In other words, children are pushed into work by the development of the capitalist system.  

As far as exploitation of child labour is concerned, Marx suggests that the employment of children is one way in which the capitalists can increase their exploitation, as he puts it: “machinery, while augmenting the human material that forms the principle object of capital’s exploiting power, at the same time raises the degree of exploitation” (Marx 1976:495).

The Marxist economic approach to child labour is useful while considering the entry of children into market employment and the exploitation of child labour. It is particularly helpful to look at child labour phenomenon in terms of historical evolution of the production system. By pointing out the relationship between capitalist accumulation and child labour exploitation, it advocates openly a political struggle to change the economic realities of workers’ lives. However, this approach leaves some gaps that need to be considered. First, by focusing on the economic system as a whole, it neglects the intra-household relationships by considering the parental power as unproblematic. It regards the economic system a real actor putting children to work rather than individuals. This often causes difficulties while considering the peasant economies because it ignores the role of households in labour organization and production. Secondly, as pointed out by Elson (1982), "the Marxist concepts confuse economic dependence with social dependence" and therefore characterize children as 'supplementary' labour power while empirical studies indicate that children might be de facto 'breadwinners', supporting other members of their family, especially in the absence of a male 'household head'. Thirdly, Marxist economic approach does not take into account the cultural constraints of children's work, which are based on hierarchies of kinship, age, gender and ideology. As I will point out later in this study, cultural constraints play a vital component shaping children's work. For instance, in those societies influenced by Confucianism, filial duty is often a motive encouraging children to earn money to help their parents.

Unlike Marxist economic theory which treats the child labour phenomenon as a consequence of the pressure exerted by capitalist accumulation, the neo-classical economic theory examines issues of child labour in the framework of households. The neo-classical approach is "concerned with the household as an optimizing, rational decision-making unit, in which children are depicted as both consumption and investment 'good' (Rodgers & Standing 1981:26). Using the key concept of 'demand' (capitalist firms' side) and 'supply' (households' side), this approach suggests that the differentiation of children's labour is not imposed by capitalist enterprises but is, on the contrary, the results

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9 Criticism on theoretical frameworks of Marxist economics, neo-classical economics and feminist economics regarding child labor is largely derived from Elson (1982).
of a difference in the labour endowments of children and adults (Elson 1982; Rosenzweig 1981). The neoclassical proponents believe that child labour is essentially a problem of household economics (Nieuwenhuys 1996:24) and therefore "as family incomes rose, child labour declined" (Nardinelli 1990:102). Looking at child labour in terms of household economy has been espoused by a number of studies published under the auspices of national and international agencies such as UNICEF, WHO and ILO (Nieuwenhuys 1996:241).

The neo-classical approach leaves also some questions that remain to be answered. First, the key concept is the exchange between the labour market and the households in which preferences of all household members are taken into account. This is problematic because, as Elson argues, it fails to explain the cases where household members are able to freely enter the labour market and leave the household, assuming that household functions as a firm itself. And in such a case, the neo-classical framework does not provide adequate instruments to analyze the internal relations within the household (Elson 1982:482-3). The second dilemma facing the theory of 'household preference' is that by stressing on household economic behaviour, it obscures the socio-economic system which might have been socially predominant as opposed to the household individual motivations. Another problem is how to use the concept of 'marginal productivity of labour' to analyze the exploitation of child labour. "According to the neoclassical definition, economic exploitation exists when the value of the worker's marginal product (that is, what the worker adds to the revenues of the firm) exceeds the wage rate" (Nardinelli 1990:67-68). While one may agree this is the case of apprentices or trainees (Elson 1982:483), the problem still remains is that "there is no physical measure of the marginal productivity of child labour" and therefore "the question of exploitation of children cannot be resolved through the direct measurement of neoclassical exploitation" (Nardinelli 1990:70-71).

In the search for a comprehensive approach to child labour, some social researchers have found in feminism a new channel to conceptualize children's work (Schildkrout 1980, Elson 1982, De Tray 1983, Wyer 1986, Dube 1988, Reynolds 1991, Nieuwenhuys 1990). Actually, feminist economics does not pay direct attention to child labour in particular. As Elson points out, feminist economics is "an approach which rethinks economic categories themselves, in the light of feminism" (Elson 1982:488). Feminist researchers have argued that economic phenomena, such as skill classifications and wage levels, are not determined by purely economic factors. They are neither 'object' in the sense of deriving simply from the material requirements of the process of production of goods and services, and reproduction of labour power, nor are they the result of purely personal preferences about type of work and hours of leisure. On the contrary, they are structured systematically by the hierarchy of gender-- a hierarchy in which women as a gender are subordinate to men. The feminist economic approach emphasizes that the
forms of authority exercised over women workers in the capitalist labour process are not simply personifications of the power of the capital, they are also personifications of the power of the men. The feminists therefore view the differentiation of women in the capitalist labour market, not simply derived from capitalist enterprises. It is to be understood in terms of the permeation of production by the hierarchy of gender (Elson 1982).

The feminist economic theory has been applied to the field of child labour. Feminist researchers see an analogy between the position of children and that of women. Elson (1982) argues that the differentiation of children's labour in the capitalist labour market cannot be derived from the process of capital accumulation alone. The kind of exploitation to which children are vulnerable cannot be understood only in terms of concepts such as the appropriation of surplus. Based on this starting point, she expounded a new approach to child labour, defined as the seniority system:

Instead of the concept of subordination through parental authority, we might use a concept of the social construction of an age hierarchy, of a system of seniority in which those in junior position are unable to achieve full social status in their own right (Elson 1982:491).

The seniority approach contends that the position of children in the capitalist labour market can be interpreted in terms of the way in which economic relations, though in themselves not ascriptive of seniority, are bearers of seniority, as Elson puts it:

It is not the case that the logic of capitalist accumulation first defines jobs and wage rates for those jobs, and then employers find that children are most suited for some of these jobs. Jobs are designed with the seniority system in mind; wage systems are designed with the seniority system in mind. The seniority system obviously encompasses a range of gradations, not simply the division between children and adults, but children are at the bottom of it (Elson 1982:492-3).

In brief, according to Elson, the seniority is a hierarchical system in which those in junior positions are unable to achieve fully their own right. It is not the nature of what children do that is inferior. Children's work is valued as inferior because it is performed by children.

The different theories mentioned above lay further the basis for efforts to rethink the problems and to search for a comprehensive approach to children's work.

While realizing the limitations of the demographic approach, one cannot completely ignore the relation between low labour-income and child labour in the peasant societies. However, White found that most studies based on cost-benefit analysis are analyses of 'symptoms' rather than 'causes'. This led him to reconsider what needs examining is not a rather trivial question like "when children work, are they valuable" but rather "what are the conditions giving rise to the interrelated phenomena of low labour income and child labour", which is aimed at broadening the analytical framework of the
conditions and relations within which work takes place and is rewarded (White 1982:605-6).

In seeking a new approach to child work, Nieuwenhuys employed the ethnographic approach that the work undertaken by children acquires its meaning from the contextual situation in which it is embedded:

...the work undertaken by these children, however, is shaped in response to economic process, in which children are, with the households to which they belong, but small wheels. The standards by which children's work is valued and, more generally, the way they are subordinated to seniors, reflect patterns of socialization and more in general, attitudes with respect to children's role in society (Nieuwenhuys 1990:267).

The implication from Nieuwenhuys's study is that it may be essential to distinguish between the economic valuation of children's work and its meaning for the continuity of social system. Therefore all kinds of activities undertaken by children, which directly or indirectly contribute to income generation should be taken into consideration. Apart from offering new theoretical perspectives, her work can also be seen as a pioneer study in the field, which moves beyond the “conventional socialization” approach to children's work and focuses on children's voices and life worlds.

Recent efforts apparently do not tackle the problem of child labour in terms of pressure of the capitalist economic system alone, nor do they concentrate separately on purely economic reasons and rational weight of the individual peasant households. They rather look instead at the phenomenon in the structural framework of the integrated socio-economic system and cultural environment. The failure of the educational system is also regarded as a crucial factor influencing the entry of children into the labour market at an early age.

Adopting a new approach to children's work, researchers recently tend to view children as active social beings instead of passive recipients. This trend puts emphasis on children’s life-worlds, their own social network, understandings, preferences and life styles (Boyden, Ling and Myers 1998; Woodhead 1999). Such a notion of children’s work stems from the “new anthropology of childhood” which came to the fore front during the 1990s (Jame and Prout 1990; Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995, Stephens 1995; Corsaro 1997, Jenks 1996; Jenks, Prout and James (1998). While this new perspective carries important implications for practical actions in combating child labour in terms of the “empowerment from below” (White 1994), it leaves out some aspects that require critical examinations.

By emphasizing children as active social beings capable of creating and negotiating their own social worlds, relying more on peers rather than on adults in the formation of their understandings, preferences and life styles, one tends to blur out the concept of the child vis-à-vis adults. Traditionally, the child is considered as “young
humanity" who is entitled to protection and should be given reasonable chances for future development (Woodhead 1990:60). Accordingly, childhood is regarded as the realm of innocence and during the process of childhood, the child’s education is of primary concern. In this sense, the new perspective of childhood seems to have moved from one extreme to another.

While approaching children's work as a research subject and listening to children's voices, one should bear in mind that work is, in its nature, a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It does not occur in a vacuum but involves an intricate web of inter-relations between employers and employees, parents and children; between labourers and productive resources, capital and social institutions. By focusing only on children, the researcher may overlook the parts played by other actors, no less vital, who are intimately involved in the work process. Additionally, my own experience with working children shows that they generally strive to maximize their earnings but at such a young age, they may not be well aware of physical dangers and health hazards inherent in the nature of their work. Furthermore, as one may have noticed, most of children’s work takes place in the informal sectors where the primary concern of employers is profit making. For these reasons, information collected from children alone may not reflect the whole picture.

In brief, children's work, as a social reality rather than an abstract economic entity, has been studied from different angles. In the anthropological perspective, it often invokes a requirement of the conceptualization of children's work, its social-cultural meanings and relation between children's work and the socialization process (Reynolds 1991). The different approaches and the criticism outlined here do not constitute an attempt to refute them but merely suggest that the formulation of a universal and all-encompassing theory of child work is very difficult. This difficulty can be explained in two aspects: 1) The phenomenon of working children exists as a social reality but social researchers tend to analyze it through their subjective views, particularly since the problem of child labour is easily influenced by personal emotion of the individual researcher. 2) Child labour has existed through the ages although the historical process differs in time and space. Apart from the rising process of globalization, different societies have their own economic-cultural characteristics as well as their own perception of children's roles in society. These two aspects (subjective views and different social contexts) usually create heated debates among scholars on 'determinants' of children's work.

Perceptions drawn from different theories previously referred to induce this researcher to assume that children's work is to be approached and analyzed in both its economic roles and socio-cultural meanings. It is important that analysis be focused on a particular society and from this, various models of explanation and implications may ensue. This means that the above mentioned theories, in one sense or another, can be used as tools for understanding the problem of child labour and that they should not necessarily exclude one another. For instance, the suggestion derived from Marxist economic theory is significant for this study to look at the child labour issues in the context of the transition
from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented model which is underway in Vietnam.

From such a broad perception, I shall adopt for this study the theoretical suggestion regarding children's work as a social construction raised by Rodgers and Standing. Their comprehensive conceptual framework is proposed as follows:

Among the structural influences on the extent and nature of the economic roles of children in low-income countries, two sets of factors can be identified: first, the mode of production; and second, the associated structure of the labour market (Rodgers & Standing 1981:13).

In addition to structural socio-economic factors, at least two sets of determinants of child work should be considered: (1) the social and cultural framework--attitudes to children and their roles, cultural constraints, and social institutions which govern the process of acculturation and socialization; and (2) the nature of decision-making at the household or other micro unit level, and the employment of children as an outcome of the trade-offs between alternatives in economic behaviour (Rodgers & Standing 1981:23).

This theoretical suggestion allows the researcher to observe directly how changes of the socio-economic system during the transition in Vietnam impact upon children's work. It also opens up some lines to apply for analyzing the intra-societal variation, including comparisons of families, social groups and other economically distinct sectors, particularly the nature of the work done or the setting in which it occurs and the social organization of work. In order to develop this theoretical framework, the following sections will be devoted to analyses of the socio-economic context of transition taking place in Vietnam after economic reforms. By emphasizing the related developments of the mode of production and social issues, I shall indicate how the economic roles of children will vary according to the transition to a market-oriented economy.

The economic context of transition and children's work

As proposed earlier, this research will look at the issues of child labour as a component of the socio-economic structure. This derives from the assumption that there is a coherent set of conditions relating to the external environment of household economy such as resource distribution, technology, production relations, surplus extraction, employment opportunity, etc. to its internal organization such as structure of the family, rigid and hierarchical authority patterns and control of children's work and product (Rodgers &

\[10\] The term of 'transition' (qua do) is often used by Vietnamese Marxist theoreticians to refer to a social transformation from a mode of production to another, for instance, a transition from capitalism to socialism. It is however difficult to judge whether the current transition in Vietnam is oriented to the so-called socialism. To avoid a possible misunderstanding of using such terms with all their inherent political implications, I will use hereafter the term 'social transformation' and 'transition' strictly to describe the process of transformation of the economic system from the collective production into production based on individual households.
Standing 1981). From this assumption, it could be expected that the patterns and nature of economic activities of children will change during the transition of the economic system. In arguing that children's work and children's welfare are heavily influenced by a host of structural factors, it is therefore essential to analyze the theoretically assumed consequences of the socio-economic transition and its potential impacts on the economic role of children in Vietnam. In order to provide some ideas on the changes of the production system, let me first summarize the significant features of these changes by highlighting some sets of contrasts of the two economic models— the model of collective economy previously existing and the model of individual household production currently prevailing in rural northern Vietnam.

**The model of collective economy**  
*before economic reforms*

1. Production activities were organized by co-operatives and work teams.

2. Productive resources (land, draft animals, tools, etc.) were collectivized. Private production (particularly off-farm) was discouraged.

3. The labour market was controlled by the state in two major sectors: state-run and co-operative. Job diversity was strictly limited and education was of crucial importance for rural youngsters to improve their conditions.

4. The division of labour, economic strategies and incomes were pre-determined by co-operatives. The state, with its socialist-oriented ideology and legal system, was against social inequality. The gaps between the rich and poor were minimized.

5. Costs for health services, education, social securities and welfare were wholly or partly subsidized by the collectively-shared system and the state.

**The model of individual household economy**  
*after economic reforms*

1. Production activities are organized by individual peasant households.

2. Productive resources, particularly rice land, are redistributed to peasant households. Private production (farm and off-farm) is highly promoted.

3. A free labour market has emerged, made up of multiple economic sectors. More options and job opportunities have opened up.

4. Labour division, economic strategies and incomes are determined by individual households. Social stratification is acceptable and private wealth accumulation is secured by the legal system. The gap between the rich and poor is widening.

5. Costs for health services, education, social securities and welfare are wholly or partly borne by individual households.

The structural change of production systems from collective to individual household economy as presented above has some implications. It suggests a set of interrelated phenomena following the shifting of economic system: 1) Reversal of social relations of production; 2) Increase of privatization and entrepreneurship in small-scale enterprises and household production; 3) Emergence of a free labour market in which
labour becomes a commodity; 4) Increase in social stratification and polarization; and 5) Increased burden on the individual household budget as social services deteriorate.

Since we assume that the process of transformation leads to changes in the economic role of children, it would be essential to examine the question how such changes affect children’s lives.

**Impacts of horizontal mobility: diversification in economic activities**

Shortly after the land reform which abolished the landlord and rich peasant classes, collectivism in agricultural production was established in rural northern Vietnam. Under the administration of co-operatives, almost all material sources of production were exclusively controlled and managed by the collective system. Family handicrafts and small trading, which had been a part of peasant economy, became targets of being "remoulded" by strict regulations and control because they were regarded as potential seeds of capitalist development (Vien KSNDTC 1965).

In reality, agriculturalization of economic activities with an emphasis on rice monoculture was the overriding feature in rural development during the period of the cooperative regime. Observations of the process of economic transition to the market orientation in the last decade in rural Vietnam on the other hand, indicate a rising diversification and commercialization of production in which non-farm activities have become an important form of work. At the national level, statistics indicate a considerable decrease in industrial employment in the state sector during the 1980s and 1990s and a dramatic increase in industrial employment by the private sector. For instance, in 1984, the annual percentage rate of growth of employment in state-run industries was still 5.9 percent. This rate began to decrease in 1986 at 0.0 per cent and fell to (-)7.1 percent in 1989 due to the retrenchment of a large number of workers and civil servants. Conversely, the annual growth of industrial employment in the private sector increased from 0.7 per cent in 1986 to 27 per cent in 1990 (ILO 1993, table 5).

In sheer numbers, the private sector has shown a dramatic increase in employment, from 3.7 million employees in 1988 to 9.7 million in 1991, a 162 percent addition in only three years (ILO 1993:2). This increase can be attributed to a fast expansion of small scale industries and household enterprises, particularly in the rural areas. For instance, ILO statistics (1993) point out that in 1990, more than 330,000 household and individual enterprises were operating, accounting for 84 percent of employment in private industry.12

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11 In the centrally planned economy, labour was theoretically not regarded a commodity.

12 An other source provided by the UNDP (1994:3) gives a figure of 1,6 million households involved in
The increase of private and household production has led to changes in the composition of the industrial workforce. In 1990, the state and collective enterprises still accounted for 61.3 percent. This rate decreased to 43.9 percent in 1992 while the private and household enterprises increased correspondingly.

Consequently, the composition of industrial output value also changed. During the period between 1990 and 1993, the increase in industrial output value of the state-run and collective sectors was only 3.6 percent while the rate of private and household sector was 32.7 per cent (UNDP 1994). The increase of rural small industries and private enterprises briefly presented here has some theoretical implications regarding children's work.

First, the opportunities to work for wages for rural dwellers have increased. The nature of rural enterprises and cottage industries worldwide is taking advantage of all household labour force, including children. Particularly, since the returns to labour in rice production are extremely low, and not a source of cash incomes, wage work in small industries is most welcomed by all peasant households.

Secondly, the decline of the state-run and collective enterprises and the increase of private sector and household production imply a loosening in the implementation of labour laws, in terms of recruitment, level of wages, working hours, working age and so on, and inspection would hardly occur. This is quite significant when one looks at the increase in recruitment of child workers. Worldwide experience has shown that most working children are not found in large firms but rather in small manufacturing enterprises (Fyfe 1988:4-5; Burra 1995).

Thirdly, the growth of private enterprises and wage labour are more or less associated with capitalist relations of production. In the period of collective system, children mainly worked at home, doing domestic chores and on the farm for their parents. They had little opportunity to take part in market employment. The fast expansion of small industries has created not only more opportunities for wage work but also constitutes an additional form of capital accumulation. From this perspective, child workers are a potential source of labour for their cheap wages and availability, which entails an intensification of child labour exploitation. The history of industrialization of the 19th century Europe has shown that in the long run, the industrial revolution has brought about to a decline in child employment (Nardinelli 1990:102) but in the early stage of capitalist accumulation, extensive employment and exploitation of children were obviously widespread, to the extent that the "employers commonly hired whole families for a "family wage" (Rodgers and Standing 1981:16).

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private manufacturing, of which 550,000 engaged in small scale industries and crafts, 950,000 in trade and services and 140,000 in transport.
By referring to this, it is not my purpose to make a systematic comparison of the present situation of Vietnam to the past of industrialized countries. The nature and scope of children's market employment might be different. This is, however, a good example to show how a social transformation can affect the economic roles of children. Available statistics at national level seem to indicate a rapid increase in number of children at work since the "market oriented economy" was put into effect.

The 1989 census indicates that more than 30 per cent of children aged between 13 and 15 in the country were employed, 91 per cent of which engaged in agriculture (CCC 1991:282-84). In 1992-93, the Living Standards Survey reveals that 56.58 per cent of children at the age group 13-14 were involved in economic activities (SPC & GSO 1994:123). In 1993-94, a survey carried out by the Ministry of Labour (MOLISA) reports a rate of 73.4 per cent of children aged between 13 and 15 taking part in the labour force (MOLISA 1994:123).

It should be noted that these statistics did not regard housework as economic activities and therefore excluded it from tabulation. Although these various sources of statistics may be difficult to compare, they show a consistent trend of working children increasing. But the nature of their work is worth being examined more closely.

**Impacts of vertical mobility: widening of economic gaps**

Most researchers in Vietnam acknowledge that for about one decade now, there has been a process of social stratification in rural areas where the economic gap between rich and poor peasant households is becoming more and more pronounced. However, these researchers offer different views as regards the nature and possible consequence of this process. Some insist that the differentiation between the rich and poor does not signal the emergence of new classes but should be viewed as a redistribution of different occupational groups among the peasants (Hoang Chi Bao 1992). Others suggest that social stratification taking place in rural Vietnam is in fact a transitional phenomenon that will eventually provide the peasantry a closer solidarity (i.e. no social stratification at all!), (Dang Canh Khanh 1991:319-20).

Such interpretations are heavily influenced by ideological considerations, according to which there are no antagonistic classes under socialist regimes, and current developments should be considered of a temporary nature. At this stage, based on

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13 Another data given by *Detailed Analysis of Sample Results* processed from the same source of the 1989 census report the employment rate of children aged 13 and 14 is 33.9 per cent and employment rate of youths aged 15-19 is 70.6 (GSO 1991:143).

14 Details are presented in the annex at the end of this chapter.
available statistics, I shall argue that the social differentiation has been on the rise for several years now, and that this process should be examined in terms of "market adaptability" of different peasant households, taking into account factors such as access to land, income and education. Chances are that the upheavals brought about by the market-oriented economy will cause further social polarization in which a substantial number of the rural population may find it hard to find their way in a vastly fragmented labour market and consequently, economic burden of sustaining families would partly fall on their children.

Actually, the contention that there is no a significant social stratification in the rural areas is based on the fact that The Law on Land (1993) does not allow peasants to use more than 5 hectares per household, with the assurance that every family will have equal access to land. However, official statistics reveal that peasant households with higher income often have access to larger area of land, ranging from 2 to 5 times bigger than the average (MAFI 1993:19). One reason for the poor peasant households to have less land is that they cannot afford to pay tax in time and that therefore a part of their land is taken back by local authorities; most of this land is redistributed to the richer farmers. The proportion of land taken back in this fashion accounts already for 36.5 percent of the total of distributed land. Apart from this, rich peasant households are often given priority to rent public land earlier managed by state organs and military units (MAFI 1993:326). Another important fact is that most of rich peasants gain their wealth from non-farm activities rather than from farming (MAFI 1993).

In terms of household incomes, statistics also indicate an increasing gap between the rich and poor.\(^{15}\) A report made by the Agricultural Commission of the CPV said that during the period of 1965-1975, there was not much discrepancy in incomes and living standards among peasants in the North Vietnam, the difference was only from 1.5 to 2 times. This differentiation has sharply increased since 1981, to between 6 and 8 times (Ban NNTU 1991, vol.1:43). In the rice growing provinces of the northern delta, the gap between the rich and poor seems to have widened further during the last few years, varying from 11 to 18 times. The survey conducted by the MOLISA in 1993 estimated that there are about 22.14 per cent of peasant households in the whole country that have fallen into the poverty line (MOLISA 1994::98) with an average monthly income per capita of 27 thousand VN dong (an equivalent to 2.5 US$). Living standards of peasant households according to this report were divided into 5 categories, namely rich, upper middle, middle, lower middle and poor households. If one also takes into account the 23.21 per cent of

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\(^{15}\) Data from the *Vietnam Living Standards Survey* generally indicate that the reported household incomes are lower than the reported expenditures and are therefore difficult to assess. This source of statistics is however important as it is the only one that allows us to look at distribution and composition of income sources at a national scale (SPC&GSO 1994:21).
lower middle peasant households as reported by this survey, the group of poor peasant households should be 45.35 per cent. The Vietnam Living Standards Survey 1992-93 on the other hand indicates that some 90 per cent of the poor live in rural areas with their main source of incomes from agriculture while the largest source of household incomes of well-to-do farmers comes from non farm self-employment (SPC&GSO 1994:218).

Poverty could also be seen from the aspect of access to education. A sample survey by MAFI on 1522 households in 27 rural communes over the country shows that the rate of adult illiteracy among the poor peasant households was 24.3 per cent, with only 1.8 per cent of them having reached the upper secondary level. These rates among the rich peasant households were zero and 26 per cent respectively (MAFI 1993). Furthermore, high school dropout was found mostly among children of the poor. The school enrollment rate by income quintile indicates that at the age group 15-17, only 2.2 per cent of the poor children were attending school while in the age group of 18-24, none attended regular school or vocational education any more (SPC&GSO 1994:18).

Another aspect that should not be overlooked is that the nature of rural poverty nowadays has changed. Under the collective system, almost every peasant household had a similar living standard, all being poor. Today while a considerable number of households no longer live in poverty, others have become actually worse off because their access to land, education, capital, credits and other social services has been curtailed due to the high costs of these services and rising privatization.

The question now arising is: what is the relation between the social stratification and children’s economic activities? As I shall suggest and further analyze in the following chapters, with the changes of social structure, children of the poor are under increasing pressure to engage in earning activities to alleviate their family’s financial burden. Results of various field studies in northern Vietnam tend to support this assumption. First, in terms of nutrition, a sample survey among poor peasant households reveals that 50 per cent of children from these households only had fruits once a month, 63 per cent of them said they had eggs once a month and 40 per cent said they had meat only on special days such as festivities and anniversaries during the year (Ton Thien Chieu 1993:44-52). This investigation apparently suggests severe malnutrition among the poor children. A survey in 1993 by the MAFI found that among the rural poor households, 47.1 per cent were usually short of food for three months a year while over 30 per cent lacked food during 5 months or more. In coping with poverty, these households often take to borrowing (food and cash) as the first remedy to survive.\textsuperscript{16} The report reveals that 56 per cent of them were

\textsuperscript{16} While carrying out the study on the poor in various rural areas of northern Vietnam, Ton Thien Chieu found that among several solutions often used in coping with food shortage, the first priority for the poor was borrowing (46.5% of respondents), followed by a combination of borrowing and working as hired labor (15.9%); only 9.1% of respondents said they hired out their labor for wage while 5.7% cut down their daily
unable to pay back their debts. Because of this, 8.3 per cent of poor households had to send their children to work as servants as a form of debt payment while five per cent had to give away their children to others for adoption because of their being unable to feed them. About 46 per cent of poor parents cut short their children's education because they could not afford school fees (MAFI 1993:334). Three quarters of the poor households could not wait for their paddy until the harvest was due but had to sell the crop while it was still standing to get food for survival. Particularly, 32.4 per cent of poor peasant households often committed themselves to get credits in advance and pay back later by their cheap labour. This survey looked further into Thanh Hoa province especially and found that the situation of poor households there was more desperate: 17.1 per cent of the peasant households had to send their children to work as servants for others as a return of debts and 9.5 per cent of parent had to give away their children for adoption (MAFI 1993).

Young children were often taken away by their mothers to the urban setting to work as beggars instead of schooling (Le Canh Nha c 1994:1&4).

The Living Standards Survey mentioned earlier found a similar relationship between poverty households and the economic role of their children. This survey indicates that in the expenditure quintile I (poor), 73.46 per cent of children aged 13 and 14 and 90.66 per cent of youths aged between 15 and 19 were engaged in economic activities while in the quintile V (rich), these rates were only 37.02 and 64.98 per cent respectively (SPC & GSO 1994:123)

It is obvious that the rising social stratification has serious implications as regards the changing economic role of children: 1. Low household income and unemployment of adults give poor parents no choice but sending their children to work to supplement family incomes; 2. Unequitable access to children's education often forces the parents to choose between investment in schooling for their children or send them to work. More often than not, parents will opt for a "piece-meal" solution rather than a long-term but risky investment in children's education.

**Impacts of the labour market structure: stratification of market employment**

As I shall suggest in this study, the growth of small rural industries and non-farm activities in the private sector and household production since the agricultural co-operatives were abandoned have changed the structure of labour demand and labour utilization. On the one hand, we can see that a part of household labour force previously working on the farm has now moved to non-farm work for wages which consequently shifts farming tasks on the rest of the household members.

ration (Ton Thien Chieu 1993:48). This perhaps suggests that wage work is difficult to find.
On the other hand, the relations of production in non-farm and small industries have also changed. These relations are now governed by the market forces, i.e. capitalist competition and accumulation. The market employment is becoming more segmented. Highly educated people and skilled labourers have better chance to earn a good income while less skilled labourers become more vulnerable in a competitive labour market, bound for low paying jobs or unemployment. In the case of Vietnam where changes are taking place so fast, the 'shock syndrome' would cause more negative responses.

In such a socio-economic environment, children can be affected in various ways. First, with the withdrawal of a part of household labour from farming, usually male adults and heads of households, to wage labour elsewhere, children are likely to be sent to work on the farm to substitute for these absent adults. Secondly, private small enterprises mushrooming in rural areas now find in children a ready source of labour which might allow them to raise more profits by using this cheap and 'sweated' labour. Children's employment in this sector can be found in various forms such as subcontract via the putting-out system, where they work alongside other family members and the payment often goes directly to adults, or in various types of apprenticeships and training in which children's work is not paid or underpaid.

These assumptions need more empirical data which this study will attempt to present. But let me first document briefly some significant features of the changing structure of the labour market in Vietnam to lay out the background of the theoretical orientation.

Vietnam’s economic renovation entails vast changes in the structure of employment and incomes. At the first glance, various sources of data suggest an increase of adult unemployment and a drop of real wages over the last decade. These are actually related to both external and internal factors facing the country. The breakdown of former socialist countries in the Eastern Europe has led to more than 100 thousand Vietnamese workers being sent home during 1990-1992. At the same period, the armed forces had demobilized a large number of service personnel while the state-owned enterprises dismissed 25 per cent of workers and 20 per cent of civil servants, which were regarded a surplus to requirements. According to the ILO, the total of employees retrenched from the state-run sectors was more than two million during the period 1989-1992 (ILO 1994:18). For sure, these numbers only put extra pressure on the structural unemployment in the economic system of Vietnam. The MOLISA statistics give an estimate of 7.49 per cent of the labour force unemployed in 1993 (MOLISA 1994:126), an equivalent of 2.5 million

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17 Together with the redundancy of a large number of workers formerly employed in state-owned sectors, the abandonment of the subsidy system in which, housing, health care and social security are no longer secured by the state, caused the real incomes of workers to drop dramatically.
persons. But these statistics do not seem to reflect the real unemployment in rural areas. The lack of reliable data make the assessment of rural unemployment extremely difficult. The ILO estimated underemployment in agriculture at about 27 per cent of the agricultural labour force, or the equivalent of 6.5 million persons in 1992 (ILO 1993) while another source estimates the number of unemployed persons in rural areas to be about 30 percent of the rural labour force (Pforde 1993:54).¹⁸

Rural unemployment under the collective agriculture had been disguised by the work-sharing system. Decollectivisation and redistribution of small pieces of rice land to individual households lay bare this fact: almost half of the household labour force now cannot find enough work on the farm. A consequence of this development is the intensification of seasonal migration from rural to urban areas in search of work. My own observations indicate that in large cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, the visible 'labour markets' where peasants hang around looking for jobs have rapidly increased over the last few years. These seasonal workers often make up about 3 per cent of the total city population (Nguyen Van Chinh 1997). In Hanoi, the bulk of rural seasonal workers are males who search for heavy tasks in construction and transportation. Because labour demand is lower than supply for simple work, seasonal workers in the city are rather vulnerable in terms of work bargaining. Female seasonal workers in the city are estimated at about 19 per cent of the total of rural migrants. Most of them aged between 15 and 30, and mainly work in the service sectors, street vending and garbage picking.

Not only adults but a large number of rural children have also found their way into urban areas to earn their living. A government report estimates that one-third of the people with no fixed residence in Hanoi are children under 16 years old (Su That 1992:54). These children are engaged in a variety of jobs: selling newspapers, cleaning cars and motorbikes, picking garbage, running odd jobs for restaurants and various domestic services. Some survive as beggars, thieves and prostitutes. The number of street children has risen steadily, creating a social malaise in the eyes of city authorities. Quite often these children are picked up and sent back to their villages but this measure soon turns out to be ineffective (Vi Tre Tho 1993:3). Children earn money not only for themselves but they also send remittances home to support their parents. Some entrepreneurial persons in the city organize them into 'work teams' peddling newspapers, cards, maps and souvenirs to rising numbers of tourists and take a share of the profits of their sales (Binh Trang Nguyen 1993:4-5).

¹⁸ The term 'rural unemployment' used in different studies is relatively flexible. It should be taken into account the fact that in rural areas, there is not total unemployment but rather underemployment because of the existence of a large source of secondary economy with low productivity or low returns.
"Labour markets" can also be observed in many villages where small industries and manufacturing enterprises are operating. Job seekers waiting to be hired in these rural labour markets are expected to do all kinds of work, ranging from farming, gardening, house chores to simple tasks in family workshops.

Wages in these types of work are extremely low, varying from about 10 $US to 20 US$ per month, depending on workers' skill and ability. However, jobs are not always available. A report by MOLISA estimates that 15 per cent of job seekers in "labour markets" cannot find work on a given day (Hoang Huu Tien 1992).

The low incomes in rural areas and high costs of education make it difficult for poor children to continue with their schooling. Educational statistics indicate that the average school drop-out rate of children aged 10-14 in rural areas is 17 per cent compared to 10 per cent in urban areas. More particularly, this source of statistics also points out that one-fifth of the rural girls aged 10-14 already dropped out of school and in the age group of 15-19, only one-sixth were still going to school (GSO 1991:60). Indeed, drop-out at an early age to get low jobs is the popular trend in rural areas where family-based workshops use child workers for a part or the entire length of the production process. The MOLISA survey reports that children under 16 years of age take up about 15 per cent of the workforce at family workshops in Ha Tay province (Huu Duc 1992:7) while my own survey in a village of Hai Hung indicates that some 40 per cent of the workforce in the wood sector are children under 16 (Nguyen Van Chinh 1997:19). Some child workers attend school half a day and spend the rest of the day at work while a number of them are already full-time workers. They work 10 hours daily, sometimes well into the evening at extremely low wages, about 2,500 dong to 6,000 dong on daily basis (about 0.25 to 0.6 $US). In these family enterprises, the MOLISA's investigation reports that there are no regulations with regard to minimum wages, working hours, age limits, health risk and insurance. Children who take part in work as apprentices often express their willingness to work since they do not have to pay training fees as required by formal education. Moreover, they are promised waged work after two or three years of learning. From a different perspective, the researchers report that local authorities appreciate the social aspects of this development which helps to create jobs for children while enhancing political security and social order (Huu Duc 1992:7-8). Child work in this type is viewed as a positive development rather than a negative illness.

In brief, the observations obtained from a macro perspective tend to suggest an association between the structure of labour market-- rising unemployment in agriculture, labour absorption in rural small industries, increasing seasonal migration and low wages and the intensive employment of rural children. This suggestion will be taken into account while considering the economic activities of children at the village level.

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The social context of transition and children's work

Adopting the analytical framework of child work as a social construction, this study proposes that children's work is not only a reflection of the economic process but also reveals a set of socio-cultural determinants, among them the normative attitudes towards children, the values by which their activities are judged and the nature of socialization processes. It is thus important to examine the process of social change in Vietnam and how this change influences children's work. In this respect, three major aspects will be examined: 1) The reverse development of social values connected with the economic transition; 2) The decline of children's social welfare during the transition; 3) The dilemma of the socialist state in enforcing legislation on children's issues.

By emphasizing the process of social transformation and the contradictions facing society today, I would submit that these changes affect the economic behaviour at the household level that shapes children's work.

Revival of traditional social values

Kerkvliet has analyzed the dilemma of socialist development in Vietnam during the mid 1990s following the economic reforms. This fascinating study points out that while economic liberalization has achieved high growth which in turn improves general living standards, this success has put pressure on political system that the regime's leaders are struggling to cope with (Kerkvliet 1994:5). This remark is helpful when one looks at the process of social transformation in Vietnam.

Regarding the educational system in Vietnam, Marxism-Leninism has been used exclusively as a spiritual force behind the educational development in this country for several decades. This doctrine helps educators to explain the complex phenomena of the natural and social worlds. It has been taught not only as a science of politics but an all-purpose subject that appears in all school text-books. But the official Party's line in textbooks and in teaching practices faces a dilemma in the light of the recent collapse of world communism. The fall of the central economy based on Marxist-Leninist theory has created a crisis of confidence in the system of social values among people who had been taught that the centrally-planned economy is the key to achieve prosperity. While this model of economy has disappeared and the ideology of socialist society has collapsed, an educational system that is still based on social values dating from the collective phase of development makes little sense. The educational policy under the centrally-planned economy tended to emphasize quantity and diplomas rather than quality of knowledge. The widespread corruption under the current education system contributes to the erosion
of the position of formal education in society. Education as the safeguard of social values has begun to lose its credibility in the eyes of many.

As I shall further analyze children’s education in chapter 8, the crisis of formal education in Vietnam during the transition period 1980-1995 could be traced back to the role of the state and politics. Before the economic reforms, the state sought to collectivize all sources of production through public rather than private ownership in an effort to change society into a non-exploitative, highly productive and eventually classless, one. The state assumed a central role in determining the direction of social transformation in which education was regarded as a crucial vehicle to achieve this goal. Marxist-Leninist education was indeed seen as a force to change history. The entire population was mobilized to achieve universal literacy as children were put into the school system. The state rather than the family took full responsibility in children’s education with a belief that the next generation would be prepared to carry out the revolution that society expects of them. The reverse development of the economic system after reforms negates these ideals. In other words, the economy is no longer the material ground of social ideology as before. While at school, educators are still teaching children in the old fashion, the state no longer bears the brunt of the costs for children’s education, which now becomes more and more a matter for individual households to handle.

This development has created a new socio-economic environment which constantly affects the thinking of the common people. The decline of belief in socialist ideology, skepticism in the so-called “market socialism” and the crisis of formal education give rise to an the intensive revival of traditional social values and practices in rituals, life cycle ceremonies and Confucian ethics, which were previously condemned by the socialist state as social evils. One may also observe that only after a short time since the economic reforms, more and more temples, pagodas, churches and other places of worship have been restored and opened again. Traditional folk festivals and processions are held and historical and mythical figures are openly worshipped. In the realm of relationships, visits to relatives and friends as well as taking part in banquets, festivities, weddings, funerals are common place. Ancestor worship and patrilineal consolidation are strengthened with ceremonies such as commemorations of death anniversaries of ancestors, reconstruction of ancestral halls and regular visits to ancestors’ tombs. The strong revival of the traditional social values, as pointed out by various studies (Luong Van Hy 1993; Kleinen 1999) reflects the flexibility of ideological control of the state but also shows the resilience of age-old traditions. As the state loosens its grip on educational and cultural activities, the revived traditional values will play an increasingly important role in shaping children’s life. The Confucian ethics that “prefers” boys to girls---- that demands filial obedience, that emphasizes family, lineal and other ties, all these will have some impact on children’s thinking and actions. The consolidation of family relations and old traditions may lead to a
reassertion of parental authority over children and an unequal treatment of women and girls in daily practice.

Decline of children's welfare

It is undeniable that the economic reforms in Vietnam have opened up new opportunities for development. In part, this can be seen through the way people evaluate their lives since 1990. The 1993 survey by MOLISA reports that 51.7 per cent of respondents said they felt better than before, 17.5 per cent said their lives were worse while 30.7 per cent said they did not see any change (MOLISA 1994:97). However, together with the success of economic reforms, more problems facing the country have also emerged, among them the decline of social security and children's welfare. In the long run, stable economic growth may well foster the people's welfare but at present, the transition has had a negative impact on the well-being of children and at least half of the population are living near or below the poverty line. I will take into account several factors of change in household income and savings, social benefits and state's expenditure on health, education and child care to explain this.

Despite the recent economic growth, Vietnam remains one of the 20 poorest countries in the world. However, the poverty level varies considerably from region to region. North Central, Northern Mountainous Areas and Central High-Lands are among the poorest where the poverty rate ranges from 50 per cent to 71 per cent (SPC&GSO 1994). In the regions where the poverty rate is relatively low, statistics tend to show high discrepancies of income as reflected in the Gini-coefficients (Dao The Tuan 1993:16; World Bank 1995). Thus an increase in income gaps occurs not only from region to region but also among the peasant households of the same region. These discrepancies are likely to intensify if we look at the access to social services available to rural people.

In terms of household incomes, statistics indicate a slow increase between the two periods before and after economic reforms. In the period 1976-80, average income per capita was 17,600 VND. This income increased to 19,596 VND over the period 1981-87 and 21,428 VND in 1989 (at constant 1989 prices; Ban NNTU 1991:208). While the income per capita increases slowly, growth fluctuating between one and two per cent annually, household expenditures have become bigger since the subsidy system, and particularly since the social services previously provided by the state have suddenly disappeared. The fact is that real household income has dropped while many people have has no savings at all. According to the VLSS 1992-93, more than 50 per cent of households have no savings, except the high income groups (SPC&GSO 1994:233).
In terms of social security, under the centrally-planned economy, families in difficulty could receive benefits transferred to them through the social policy system which balanced household incomes between advantaged and disadvantaged families. The economic reforms which abandoned this 'harmonizing policy' are in fact cutting off a source of security for the poor. The distribution of the state budget on social security at present mainly benefits civil servants, pensioners and war invalids-- the majority of them from the high income groups (World Bank 1995:107). The erosion of social transfers has accentuated the decline of household income as well.

In the domain of education, state budget for this sector has declined sharply since the reforms. The central government now covers only one-fourth of educational expenditures while the bulk is passed down to local levels. In actual fact, the state could pay only 51 per cent of its own budget expenditures (World Bank 1995:82). These statistics not only point out a serious decline of state budget for public education, they also imply that poor children now have less access to formal education than before since they can not afford the rising costs even when they attend public schools. Moreover, various sources indicate that the enrollment rate increases together by quintile of income level where children from higher income groups have better chance to benefit from public expenditures for their education. This means that the financial support for education from public sources benefits mainly the rich children.

A similar situation also occurs in public health services. An overriding feature of health care during the transition is the drastic decline of public services and the rapid growth of private health centers. This decline of public health services suggests rising costs for health care for the people. In reality, the state now covers only 16 per cent of total of expenditures for health services (World Bank 1995:94). The report by the World Bank also found that most poor people often use private health centers with low quality. In rural areas, poor peasants come to the commune clinic or private health practitioners while the rich prefer go directly to the big provincial hospitals. Since the abandonment of the subsidy system, local clinics are provided with little financial support while most government money goes to the big hospitals. So the rich people who often use the big hospitals have better access to public health services than the poor.

The reforms no doubt have brought prosperity to large segments of the population. But for those who could not make it, their position has worsened in particular because they had little or no access to the most basic social services. The economic reforms bring to the fore an apparent contradiction: economic growth on the one hand and intensification of poverty and inequality on the other.
The child and the state

It would be inadequate to approach the changing roles of children in a transitional economy without considering the relationships between the child and the state. This section will offer a brief overview on the child-state relationships in the context of social change in Vietnam, where the state foundation and the socialization of children are closely related. The socialist state, which is based on a centrally-planned economy, strives at creating new generations for the socialist society and therefore takes full responsibility in taking care of and educating children. The problem arises when the economic system the economic system has shifted into the market-oriented model, the state's social policy regarding children remains practically unchanged.

Indeed, through out its history, the state and its social ideological foundation played a significant role in shaping normative attitudes towards the process of child socialization. From the 15th century until early 20th century, during which Confucianism firmly established itself as the corner-stone of the cultural and educational life of the feudal state, the legal system was geared towards Confucian ideals in which the principle 'nam ton nu ty" (veneration for men and disregard for women) was followed. All feudal laws, from the Le dynasty under Le Thanh Tong in the 15th century to Gia Long and Minh Mang under the Nguyen dynasty in the 19th century, upheld the absolute authority of the father over his children and affirmed children's dependence on the parental power. These laws empowed parents with full right to punish their children and legally force them to work (Dao Duy Anh 1938; Phan Dai Doan 1992).

Perhaps for the first time in history of Vietnam, a labour code was passed by the colonial regime in December 1936 forbidding the employment of children under 13 years old and women in harmful work (Article 62, Lao Dong 1946:4). However, this regulation was only applied in the industrial and service sectors. In rural areas, old customs still allowed parents to hire out their children's labour, regardless of age, sex and nature of work.

The Revolution of August 1945 led to a new Labour Law approved in March 1946 by the new regime. That this law prohibited apprenticeship to children under 12 years of age suggests that exploitation of young trainees was widespread in this period. The 1946 Labour Law raised the age of employment in harmful jobs to 15 instead of 13 as regulated by the 1936 Law (articles 130-131:40). In reality, this labour law was only used as a political tool to fight against capitalist/colonialist employers and attack attitudes abusing child labour. It was hardly referred to during the period of socialist transformation until the official 1994 Labour Code was approved.

Even during a period lasting 40 years without written labour laws, the socialist state of Vietnam tried hard to change social attitudes towards the roles of children. Based
on socialist ideology, the state banned the old feudal laws which allowed parents to hire out their children's labour. It fought for the abolition of discrimination against women and facilitated the access to formal education for children regardless of gender. The cause of 'cultivating the people' aimed at creating new generations to serve socialism was of primary importance for the revolutionary state. The state and the Party, not the family, regarded education of children as their natural task to which great commitment was made (Pham Van Dong 1995:2).

As early as 1945, the country leadership called for the liberation of children from "feudalist constraints". In May 1961 a state committee for children and youth was established the main tasks of which were to propagate the movement of caring for and educating of children. Ho Chi Minh, the father of the revolutionary regime, particularly emphasized the work of 'cultivating the people' (*su nghiep trong nguoii*), as he put it: "For the benefit of ten years, we should plant trees; for the benefit of a hundred years, we should bring up our children". However, while political discourse was talking loudly about the enhancement of the children's roles in society, there were no official laws or legal regulations to ensure this 'commitment'. Only in 1979, on the occasion of International Year of the Child, the socialist state of Vietnam for the first time approved the "Ordinance on the Protection, Care and Education of Children", setting the stage for promulgating various laws on children's rights a decade later.

It is no coincidence that a series of laws, ordinances, regulations and directives concerning the issues of the child came into effect only after the economic reforms, when the state felt itself vulnerable in controlling non-state economic sectors, which have been expanding very fast. In 1990, Vietnam signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ratified it without reservations. In 1991, the Law on Universalization of Primary Education and the Law on the Protection, Care and Education of Children were passed on the same day (12.8.1991) by the National Assembly. In 1994, the Labour Law with specific provisions regarding child labour was approved. A year later, MOLISA issued a list of jobs where children's employment was prohibited. In addition, numerous government directives and regulations regarding child issues were issued in a short period from 1986 to 1994 (SRV 1994). There is a recognition of the need to protect children under the conditions of a market-oriented economy. However, in reality there exists a wide gap between rhetoric, political ideology and actual facts. In the centrally-planned economy, the state in carrying out its social policy, tends to weaken the role of the family in child socialization and education. When the economic system shifts to market orientation, the state's role becomes weaker in its attempts to impose its ideology on the people.
Discussion and conclusion

I have attempted to analyze the structural changes of socio-economic system in Vietnam in order to arrive at an integrated explanation to changing patterns of children's work since the Doi Moi policy (renovation) was implemented in the mid 1980s. The analysis is based on the assumption that the economic system and the social and cultural framework are among essential factors for examining the extent and nature of children's work in the transitional economy taking place in Vietnam.

As far as theoretical orientation is concerned, a good deal of previous child labour studies, instead of looking at children as agents of change, often focused on external factors such as capitalist exploitation, adults' authority, parental abuses, the neglect of state protection, inadequate legal system, and so on. Anthropological approaches today tend to look at the question at the grass-roots level, focusing on the children themselves, their voices and attitudes, the significance and meaning of their work. In a sense, the different theoretical perspectives reviewed in this chapter, together with their strengths and weaknesses, play an important role from which a relevant approach is formulated. Adopting the suggestions by Rodgers and Standing (1981), my study examines children's work at two levels: the broader context of society and the individual determinants. As I see it, children's work is but a component of social construction. Any study that looks at child work as separate from the cultural-social environment and economic system within which the child is born and brought up would be of little relevance. This means that children's work should not be understood in terms of economic values only. Further emphasis is also to be placed on the local perception of the child, of childhood and child education. During the past decades most attention has been given to the children's place in the school, not at the workplace, and childhood is generally viewed as a realm of innocence while child work is looked upon as a social evil to be eliminated. A number of researchers in the field recently suggest a rethinking of the concept of childhood, which should encompass both work and school in children's lives, and some even advocate that children's rights are to be heard. The fundamental question has been raised with regard to children's education at a turning point: working or schooling? This poses indeed a formidable challenge to our current understanding of the issues of child labour. However, empirical studies dealing with these problem at the grass-roots level remain rather meagre and rarely move into the centre of the debate.

As previously pointed out, this study does not intend to dwell on the type of work conventionally labeled as "child labour" nor does it seek to present practical solutions to the problem it entails. Rather my work attempts to analyze the patterns of children's work in relation to the social-economic changes based on empirical observations. And in doing so, my approach tends to regard children's work as a complex phenomenon, taking into account the broader context of children's life and viewing childhood as a social construction. In this regard, I wish to shed some new light on the on-going debate on the work performed by children, particularly in the Vietnamese context against the backdrop of social, cultural and economic changes.
Annex to chapter two

I am aware that the statistics presented below may not cover adequately and accurately all forms of child labour in Vietnam, for instance, domestic work and particularly, work in the “informal sectors”. Most Vietnamese sources of statistics do not take into account the work of children below the age of 13. Different sources of statistics sometimes contradict one another, suggesting that the criteria applied for investigation may vary. Moreover, the terms of reference also differ: Some say “employment”, others refer to “economic activities”. These statistics are, however, useful to form a rough impression about the development trend of child labour in Vietnam over the last decade. For such reasons, I present here some statistical data which enable the readers to have an overview of the situation of children and their work before going into more details on the nature of children’s work in the village under this study.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMR</td>
<td>IMR per 1,000 live births</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under 5 MR per 1,000 live births</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMR</td>
<td>MMR per 100,000 births</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malnutrition</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in percentage)</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very severe</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean water</td>
<td>Percentage of population access to clean water:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- urban</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- rural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>Percentage of children attending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>- creche</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- kindergarten</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis education</td>
<td>Net primary enrollment</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school drop-out rate</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school repeat rate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult literacy</td>
<td>Adult aged 15 or more literacy rate:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>87.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>85.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Committee for Protection and Care of Children, Hanoi 1992:8

Note: IMR: Infant mortality rate
MMR: Maternal mortality rate
Table 2.2. Children’s employment by age group 13-15 and work sector, Vietnam 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work sector</th>
<th>Number (person)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>1 227 011</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>22 365</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>12 991</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction &amp; manufacturing</td>
<td>13 788</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>4 121</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>68 776</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total children employed</td>
<td>1 349 052</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total children aged 13-15</td>
<td>4 382 570</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Central Committee for Census 1991, Table 5.2:282-4.*

Table 2.3. Percentage of children at work by age, sex and areas in Vietnam 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Whole country:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rural areas:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Urban areas:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: General Statistical Office 1991; Table 7.1:143.*

Table 2.4. Percentage of children at work by age group and expenditure quintile in Vietnam 1992/93

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>1 (poorest)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (richest)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 - 14</td>
<td>73.46</td>
<td>62.93</td>
<td>54.16</td>
<td>46.39</td>
<td>37.02</td>
<td>56.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 19</td>
<td>90.66</td>
<td>83.19</td>
<td>82.95</td>
<td>76.04</td>
<td>64.98</td>
<td>78.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.5. Percentage of children in the age group 6-15 that are economically active in Vietnam, 1993-94

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.90</td>
<td>7.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.65</td>
<td>16.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>25.93</td>
<td>16.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>32.72</td>
<td>35.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>32.68</td>
<td>42.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>49.77</td>
<td>50.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>63.44</td>
<td>60.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>68.83</td>
<td>78.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>83.18</td>
<td>86.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36.47</td>
<td>38.47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MOLISA 1994:123