

# **Influence of Us Aid on the Agricultural Economy in The Mekong Delta (1970 - 1975)**

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## **Abstract:**

*US aid to the Republic of Vietnam government in the period 1970 - 1975 in general, especially aid to the economy in the Mekong Delta, is a major research issue in modern Vietnamese history. The paper was written based on access to Vietnamese National Archives and local documents, combining historical research methods and logical methods. The research results focus on solving key issues such as an overview of the Mekong Delta from the 1954 to 1975 Geneva Agreement, and presenting and analyzing the content of the US aid program for agricultural production in the Mekong Delta in the period 1970 - 1975. On that basis, the paper presents comments on the impact of US aid on the change in the agricultural economic situation in the Mekong Delta in the period 1970 - 1975.*

**Keywords:** *US aid, agricultural economy, Mekong Delta, Republic of Vietnam government, period 1970 - 1975*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1954 Geneva Agreement, Vietnam was temporarily divided into two regions with two different political regimes. In particular, South Vietnam is under the management of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam and is developing along a capitalist path with the support of the United States. Accordingly, the Mekong Delta controlled and managed by the Vietnamese government also develops in that direction. The Mekong Delta fully converges the conditions for the diverse and rich development of agriculture and this place became an important agricultural economic region of the entire South of Vietnam at that time. The government of the Republic of Vietnam has received aid from the United States in all fields of politics, culture, society... in particular, economic aid from the United States has made an important contribution to improving the economy, farming techniques and improving the quality of agricultural products in the region. On that basis, US aid has greatly influenced the policy of the government of the Republic of Vietnam to solve agricultural economic problems in the South of Vietnam in general and the Mekong Delta in particular during the period 1970 - 1975.

Besides, during the management of the Mekong Delta, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam clearly understood the role and importance of agriculture not only for the economic development of the delta but also had a profound impact on the change in class structure along with the political attitude of farmers towards the government of the Republic of Vietnam. Thereby showing that the countryside is a strategic area, agriculture is the decisive factor in the existence of the government of the Republic of Vietnam. Therefore, the government of the Republic of Vietnam has continuously received foreign aid from many different sources, especially aid from the United States for agricultural economic programs in the period 1970 - 1975 to focus on promote agriculture and attract strong support from farmers in the Mekong Delta. The United States' aid programs in the agricultural sector have had a great impact on the economic situation of the Mekong Delta and have profoundly changed the lives of farmers in this delta.

Researching the influence of US aid on agriculture in the Mekong Delta (1970 - 1975) is a necessary issue in historical sciences in particular and the field of humanities in general. It is also a valuable and useful study in objectively viewing and evaluating history and summarizing historical experience in dealing with current sources of foreign aid.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODS**

This research is conducted through a combination of historical and logical methods to clarify the research issues raised:

The main research method of the article is the historical method combined with the logical method. Applying the historical method is to rely on authentic historical documents to describe and restore the relatively objective past as it once existed, specifically here, the United States' aid to agriculture in the Mekong Delta in the period

1970 - 1975. Logical methods are applied in systematizing historical events, forming opinions, and scientific evaluation of researched issues. These two methods are applied in combination throughout the entire research content of the topic.

In addition, the topic also uses a number of other supporting methods such as comparison, analysis and statistics to objectively reflect the situation of US aid to agriculture in the Mekong Delta during the period 1970 - 1975.

### **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The issue of US aid to the overall economy of South Vietnam in general and Mekong Delta agriculture in particular during the period 1970 - 1975 is shown through a number of research works:

Typical examples include Phan Dac Luc (1963) with the work "The position of foreign capitalist manipulation in the economy of Southern Vietnam" published by Science Publishing House; Nguyen Ngoc Minh (1969) with the article "America's new colonialism in South Vietnam and its bankruptcy" published by Economic Research Journal, No. 47, Saigon; Nguyen Ba Truyen (1971) with the study "Economic illusions in Nixon's Vietnamization policy" in the Journal of Economic Research, No. 59, Saigon; There is also Lam Quang Huyen (1991) with the work "Some economic characteristics of South Vietnam" published by Social Science Publishing House; Dang Phong (1991) with monograph "21 years of US aid in Vietnam" etc. In general, these works have basically outlined the policies and forms of aid of foreign capital in general and the US in particular to the government of the Republic of Vietnam in South Vietnam. Accordingly, the general opinion of the authors clearly reflects that aid from foreign capital, especially from the United States, is essentially a tool of invasion and a trick to export their goods through aid as a means to enrich.

In addition, many research works are considered more balanced in evaluating the foreign aid program for the government of the Republic of Vietnam during this period, notably Vo Doan Ba (1970) with the work "Foreign aid United States in Vietnam 1960 - 1970"; Nguyen Quy Toan (1971) with the study "An appropriate aid policy for economic development of the Republic of Vietnam"; Nguyen Quoc Khanh (1971) with the title "Foreign aid and Vietnam's economic development"; Diep Kim Lien (1973) with "US aid and agricultural development in Vietnam"; Tran Ngoc Dinh (1977) with the work "American aid, the decisive factor for the existence of the Saigon puppet regime" in the Journal of Historical Research No. 177; Pham Thanh Tam's work (2003) with "Production and consumption of goods in the South of Vietnam"; Vo Van Sen (2005) with the monograph "The development of capitalism in South Vietnam (1954 - 1975)", Pham Thi Hong Ha (2017) with the study "The economy of the Republic of Vietnam under the influence of of US aid (1955-1975)". Accordingly, the works presented the position of South Vietnam in US aid policy after World War II, the impact of aid of America in all fields of economics, politics, military, society etc.

Basically, aspects of the economy of South Vietnam in general, including the Mekong Delta region, through US foreign aid, have been analyzed in depth by many studies and explored from many different angles. However, the sources we have accessed do not have any research on the issue of foreign aid to the agricultural sector in the Mekong Delta in the period 1970 - 1975. The research problems of previous authors will be important suggestions for reference and solving some of the problems raised in this study.

### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 Overview of the Mekong Delta**

The Mekong Delta is located downstream of the Mekong River, with a total natural area of about 39,712 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for about 5% of the area of the entire river basin. The terrain of the region is relatively diverse with mountains, plains and islands. At the same time, this place has fertile land and an intricate network of rivers and canals, providing fresh water all year round, creating conditions for agricultural activities to develop: "In addition to the deposition of the Mekong River, there is a much more important deposition of sea water currents from the Northeast toward the Southwest bringing in alluvium, creating the special shape of Ca Mau peak" (Giao, D. Q 1966). Besides, the rivers are quite dense, convenient for trade and agricultural production, with few floods. In addition, the climate is stable and moderate with two clearly divided dry and rainy seasons: "In the Republic of Vietnam there are two seasons: the sunny season and the rainy season. The reasons for the rain are different, so the characteristics are also different"(Giao, D. Q 1966). Favorable nature has created conditions for agricultural development with diversity and abundance of agricultural products. However, there are also certain difficulties due to alum contamination, flooding, saltwater intrusion, drought over large areas... requiring scientific solutions to improve nature to meet urgent tasks for better agricultural production. In general, this is a large land, converging elements suitable for the development of agriculture: "The deltas are the most important areas because of their dense and rich population like the Mekong Delta. Long" (Giao, D. Q 1966).

Regarding population, in the South of Vietnam at the time of 1954 - 1955 there were about 13 million people, after 20 years it increased by 60% (about 23 million people in 1975), in the Mekong Delta alone: "about 5,998,200 people (1965)" (Lang, T. D. 1972). A large population is not only a favorable human resource in agriculture, but also a great pressure on the economy in general and agriculture in particular, mainly a food

security issue for this delta region. Residents here are mainly farmers with a lot of experience in agricultural cultivation, but the vast majority of farmers are tenant farmers with a miserable life and farming methods are still outdated: "Vietnam has fertile land, especially in Nam Viet in the Hau Giang and Tien Giang regions, with alluvial deposits and good soil, so why is productivity so poor? Because Vietnamese farmers only know how to farm using traditional methods and the tools are rudimentary. Besides, even if they want to improve, buy more fertilizer, choose good varieties, install water pipes, they still do not have enough means" (Prime Minister's Office. 1955. File No. 21468). Those factors are also significant limitations that directly and deeply impact the economic and social life of this delta.

Especially regarding the political-military situation, since the 1968 Tet Offensive, the United States had to de-escalate and switch to a fierce Vietnamization strategy. At the same time, the revolutionary forces of South Vietnam increasingly dominated the control of the vast countryside in the Mekong Delta, forcing the US government and the Republic of Vietnam government to change their plans to regain control of the land and farmers in rural areas. Stemming from that practical requirement, President Nguyen Van Thieu issued "the Land to the Tiller" Law, No. 003/70 dated March 26, 1970, announced in Can Tho. In the context of the period 1970 - 1975, "the Land to the Tiller" was a major rural program that had a profound impact and strongly changed the socio-economic situation, especially the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta. As for the United States, this government has supported the government of the Republic of Vietnam in this program and has continuously increased various aid sources for this program. Basically, the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta in the period 1970 - 1975 was influenced by US aid through the "the Land to the Tiller" program in different forms: finance in land compensation issues, support for agriculture and fishery, fertilizer supplies for agricultural production...

#### **4.2 Aid for "the Land to the Tiller" program**

Nguyen Van Thieu - Second President of the Republic of Vietnam government signed Decree No. 003/70 dated March 26, 1970 promulgating "the Land to the Tiller" Law, including 6 chapters and 22 articles (Prime Minister's Office. 1970. File No. 24864). In there:

Chapter 1 includes 2 articles with regulations on the purpose of promulgating the Land to the Tiller. At the same time, regulations on expropriation measures with land compensation for non-cultivating landowners and abolition of the tenant farming regime, instead of decentralizing free land to farmers for cultivation.

Chapter 2 includes 4 articles with regulations on the scope of application and non-applicability to types of cultivated land. In particular, the scope of application of Law 003/70 is specified for types of rice fields and crops under the ownership of private individuals or public legal entities and does not apply to types of land prescribed by law. At the same time, the law also stipulates the scope of application for types of land co-owned by an individual or group, if recorded in the land register, it is still counted as a single ownership unit to avoid the situation of eviction from compensation for land expropriated by the Government.

Chapter 3 includes 5 articles with basic regulations on compensation for landowners whose land is expropriated by the Government under Law 003/70. At the same time, regulations on compensation methods are satisfactory at reasonable prices: land owners are compensated 20% of the value in cash, 80% of the remaining value is paid in national bonds with interest 10%/8 years. Besides, landowners have full rights to use national bonds in economic transactions in certain cases.

Chapter 4 includes 5 articles regulating beneficiaries of land expropriated by the Government from landlords. Accordingly, land is prioritized for one-time free allocation with a maximum area of 3 hectares/household in the Southern region, including the Mekong Delta and 1 hectare/household in the Central Coast region, Central Highlands. In addition, this law also stipulates that the person receiving the land must directly cultivate it without transferring or reselling that land for 15 years and they are exempt from registration taxes, land fees and other taxes in the first year and a land ownership certificate will be issued.

Chapter 5 includes 4 articles regulating sanctions when violating Law 003/70. Accordingly, it is clearly stipulated that any person who takes action to prevent the implementation of this law will be punished from 6 months to 3 years in prison and a fine from 20,000 to 200,000 VNĐ. In addition, Law 003/70 also stipulates sanctions in cases where landowners retain 25 acres of land but lease them to tenants to collect tax rent without directly cultivating them, or in cases where farmers are granted land grants but not being on duty will be confiscated by the Government. In addition, this Law also stipulates the agency in charge of adjudication: the Land Court is in charge of litigation related to disputes over land rights; Criminal courts have jurisdiction to adjudicate criminal violations arising from land disputes.

Chapter 6 includes 2 articles regulating general provisions such as the implementation method of Law 003/70 implemented by decree, and stipulates that all provisions contrary to this law are annulled.

Funding source for implementation:

The Government of the Republic of Vietnam will bear the entire cost of implementing the contents of the Law on Farmers Owning the Land: "estimated from 40-90 billion USD, depending on land valuation and lasting for at least 9 years". It could benefit about 500,000 tenants by transferring to them about 900,000

hectares of privately owned land” (Salter, M. (1970). In fact, the total cost for this program costs about 178 billion VN\$ according to President Nguyen Van Thieu's statement: "In this work, the government has to spend 178 billion VN%" (Presidential Palace of the Second Republic. 1970. File No. 2568).

The United States strongly supports this land reform program focusing on rural areas of the Republic of Vietnam government: "providing more than 3 million USD in technical assistance to help promote the program. The United States also responded to the request for financial assistance by agreeing to help offset the inflationary impact on the economy from large government cash payments in advance payments to former landowners. This will be done by helping the government meet the foreign exchange requirements arising from these expenditures (estimated at \$40 million - equivalent to 11 billion VN\$)"(Salter, M. 1970).

In particular, USAID's aid contributed a large financial amount in compensation to landowners whose land was expropriated: "In 1970, USAID/VN released an additional 10 million USD in the trade aid program ( CIP) to get more funding for this work. In the 1970 - 1971 fiscal year, USAID/VN increased the CIP commercialization aid program by 30 million USD to finance "the Land to the Tiller" program" (Lien, D. K. 1972). In addition, USAID used \$25 million in import financing for the Aid for Trade program. In 1973, the United States provided an additional 15 million USD in aid to "the Land to the Tiller" program. In 1974, the United States also provided an additional \$15 million in aid to the Republic of Vietnam government outside the Commercial Aid Program (CIP). In addition, USAID/VN also supports this program in the form of technical aid through US project funds.

### 4.3 Aid to mechanization programs in agriculture

In sync with "the Land to the Tiller" program, the US and the government of the Republic of Vietnam strengthen modernization policies in agricultural production. Accordingly, relying on aid from the US, the government of the Republic of Vietnam promoted measures to improve agricultural production in Southern Vietnam in general and the Mekong Delta region in particular, such as importing new varieties and agricultural machinery , gasoline, improve the transportation system, expand the agricultural product processing system and create goods circulation.

Regarding infrastructure, through USAID's project aid program, the Republic of Vietnam government has built a number of key infrastructure serving the agricultural economy such as the Agriculture and Forestry School, the Agricultural Development Bank, agricultural statistical agencies. In addition, the US also has aid projects with immediate impact including crop development programs such as yield improvement, seed distribution, fertilizer experiments, and insect research. In addition, there are information programs, training sessions, and pilots to disseminate new farming techniques and means.

In the 1970s, the government of the Republic of Vietnam assigned specialized agencies to find and test many new high-yield rice varieties to support better agricultural production for farmers under the program: "Collecting 693 rice varieties and 21 sticky rice varieties, Nha Canh Nong also combines high-yield rice varieties with delicious Vietnamese rice varieties" (Lang, T. D. 1972). New rice varieties bring high yields but also lead to an increasing demand for agricultural materials and chemical fertilizers. Therefore, from the 1970s onwards, chemical fertilizers and agricultural supplies were promoted to be imported from the US to support farmers under "the Land to the Tiller" program: "The Nguyen Van Thieu government implemented the Law of the Plowman having the Land, bringing the Than Nong rice variety to the South, so a large amount of fertilizer was sold cheaply, even given to farmers for free in order to expand their influence and encourage farmers to increase their income. rice production” (Ha, P. T. H. 2017).

According to research by Trong, L. D. (2020), the situation of importing chemical fertilizers by the government of the Republic of Vietnam is as follows:

**Table 1: Statistics on the amount of fertilizer imported from 1969 to 1975**

*Unit: thousand tons*

Year	Amount of imported fertilizer
1969	483,0
1970	517,0
1971	178,5
1972	314,6
1973	406,6
1974	262,2
1975	-

(Source: Trong, L. D2020)

Along with importing fertilizer, the US also coordinates with the government of the Republic of Vietnam to increase technical support for farmers: “The Department of Crop Protection has established 229 crop protection teams, including 2,510 team members in addition to the 800 previously established teams, organized 300 training courses with 10,000 farmers attending, and set up pilot drug demonstrations. antiseptic with a total

area of about 500 hectares" (Lang, T. D. 1972). With the help of USAID, the increase in agricultural production has had a major change, typically in 1971 agricultural production reached a record level of more than 6.3 million tons [Prime Minister's Office. 1974]. File No. 27128)..

Regarding mechanization in agriculture, it is an important factor to help farmers improve farming techniques and increase harvest productivity, but affected by war factors, this issue's implementation is still limited. Along with "the Land to the Tiller" program, agricultural machinery is increasingly imported and used increasingly in the fields: "According to the results of the General Department of Agriculture, by the end of 1971, the total number of agricultural tools had increased to 157,436 units with 114,3049 horsepower, compared to 1968, an increase of 875%" (Lang, T. D. 1972). Most agricultural machinery is imported from countries such as England, France, West Germany, Italy, the US... through the United States' financial aid and trade programs. The pace of mechanization in agriculture has increased rapidly under "the Land to the Tiller" program: "Of the total agricultural machinery in the entire South, more than 70% is concentrated in the Mekong Delta. The average mechanical energy per 1 million hectares in the Mekong Delta is up to 0.85 horsepower, twice the average level across the South" (Ha, P. T. H. 2017). In particular, with the help of USAID, factories importing farm equipment have established machinery repair centers in Can Tho and Da Nang farms with appropriate spare parts. Basically, the mechanization policy supported by the Government of the Republic implemented through US aid has made an important contribution to creating agriculturaleconomic development of the South in general and the Mekong Delta in particular.

#### **4.4 The effects of US aid on the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta**

During 21 years (1954 - 1975), the US always provided different sources of aid to the government of the Republic of Vietnam, especially economic aid programs in the agricultural sector, but unevenly over the years. In particular, in the period 1970 - 1975, when the government of the Republic of Vietnam implemented "the Land to the Tiller" program with the focus area being the Mekong Delta, the US continuously increased aid, especially commercialization aid which accounted for the majority a large amount of aid and is considered the most important source of aid in the US economic aid policy for the Republic of Vietnam. Therefore, economic aid from the US has had a significant impact on the economy of Southern Vietnam in general, and the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta in particular. This is reflected in a number of basic issues:

Under the impact of aid, agriculture has actually improved significantly. In fact, from support programs such as finance, import and use of fertilizers, machinery, technical equipment for agricultural production... in "the Land to the Tiller" program has created an important premise to promote agricultural production. This is shown through the change in the increasingly diverse crop structure in agricultural production: "In addition to mainly growing rice, farmers in the Southern Delta cultivate many types of crops and perennial crops... In the Mekong Delta, vegetable production increased very rapidly, especially in the early 1970s (vegetable production increased by 31% during 1972 - 1973)" (Sen, V. V. 2005).

In addition, Santaford's investigation results reflected a similar situation: "in the communes that Stanford investigated, 8.5% of the area previously planted with wet rice has been planted with another type of crop, completely different from other crops. Rice cultivation, 10.3% of the rice cultivation area has other agricultural products grown, meaning nearly 20% of the rice cultivation area has other agricultural products grown" (Stanford. 1968). Along with increased use of fertilizers and new rice varieties IR5, IR8, IR20 with the support of mechanization in agriculture, rice output has had positive fluctuations: "From the production of 4, 6 million tons in 1962 decreased significantly in 1966 and 1967 (to 4.3 million tons). However, with the help of USAID, the increase in production in later years changed, in 1971 reaching a record level of more than 6.3 million tons" (Prime Minister's Office. 1974. File No. 27128).

To US aid, the government of the Republic of Vietnam was able to implement the rural program more conveniently than the land reform program in the previous period, and at the same time had a great impact on the agricultural production in rural Mekong Delta. It can be said that before 1975, the economic appearance in rural areas of the Mekong Delta really changed under the strong impact of the US aid program. With the restoration of the role and position of the middle peasant class, it becomes a central character, not only accounting for a large proportion in terms of quantity, labor force, and scale of land ownership, thus increasing human resources with a leading role in agricultural production and commodity economy in the rural Mekong Delta. According to Trong, L. D. (2020): "the abolition of the large landlord class, which played a dominant role in the Southern agricultural and rural economy, mainly in the rice production industry, led to the formation of into a large class of farmers owning small and medium-sized land areas, with the increasing increase in scientific and technical factors in production, the spread of free market relations from urban areas. Regarding rural areas, the development of a commodity economy... causes the production structure in agriculture and rural areas to also change in the direction of clear specialization.

However, US aid to the Republic of Vietnam government is like a "double-edged sword". On the one hand, this policy has created major changes in the economy of Southern Vietnam in general, especially in the agricultural sector in the Mekong Delta. On the other hand, it also creates many problems and creates negative

consequences when being too dependent on US aid. In addition, US aid also creates conditions for corruption to thrive among importers and officials of the Republic of Vietnam government. It can be said that this is one of the reasons that has a significant impact on the effectiveness of US aid for the real development of the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta. As observed by Nguyen Cao Ky, Vice President of the Republic of Vietnam: "We are an agricultural country, yet we cannot build a fertilizer factory. Meanwhile, we imported vehicles, televisions and perfumes. In short, within Vietnam's current socio-economic framework, US aid to Vietnamese institutions only benefits a small group of Vietnamese people, while most others continue to endure. The condition of the economy is very poor and there are no possible foundations for national development" (Phong, D. 2005).

## V. CONCLUSION

The Mekong Delta is a land with many favorable natural conditions for the development of agriculture, creating an extremely developed wet rice agriculture. Besides the advantages, there are also many certain difficulties in the production activities of the resident community here. During the period 1970 - 1975, the government of the Republic of Vietnam, through aid from the US, implemented many rural improvement programs, notably the "the Land to the Tiller" program along with other program to support the import of new varieties, agricultural machinery, fertilizers and agricultural materials with the focus area being the Mekong Delta. Basically, the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta in general was strongly influenced by US aid during this period. Typically, rural programs that have been strongly implemented thanks to financial aid from the US have made an important contribution to the redistribution of agricultural production means, specifically land to farmers at the same time transform the landlord class, abolish the tenant farming system to liberate production capacity for the countryside. In addition, the recognition and transfer of ownership of means of production to farmers has contributed to putting agricultural production on a more solid development trajectory than before with the increase in imported machinery and fertilizers contributing increase in agricultural production productivity in the Mekong Delta.

At the same time, the process of capitalization with the landlord class from the traditional wage economy to commodity economic activities concentrated in large cities has created the exchange of goods between urban areas and developed countryside. Socially, this program not only affected the ownership of means of production on agricultural areas but also accelerated the process of penetrating the capitalist economy into the agricultural production sector of the Mekong Delta in the period 1970 - 1975. However, from another aspect, it is possible to look at the consequences of the US aid policy for both South Vietnam in general and the Mekong Delta region in particular: the US through aid with the basic goal to maintain influence over the Republic of Vietnam government and depend on this government to the US. The US did not provide direct financial aid to South Vietnam, instead it was a form of commercialized aid, meaning the US used goods to aid the Republic of Vietnam, and American goods to Vietnam had more conditions to expand and develop in Vietnam and almost monopolize the southern market at that time.

US economic aid, through any form, is still intended to serve the US's military and political plots during the war in Vietnam to feed the local government apparatus and suppress people's uprisings. Therefore, US economic aid contributes significantly to the US's expansion policy in all aspects of South Vietnam, including agriculture in the Mekong Delta.

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