

The Agency and Participation of Ethnic Minorities in the Socio-Economic Development of Northwest Vietnam: A Case Study of Son La Province

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the current situation and proposes strategies to enhance the agency and substantive participation of ethnic minority communities (EMCs) in the socio-economic development of Northwest Vietnam, with a focal case study in Son La Province (where ethnic minorities constitute 83% of the population). Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates secondary data analysis (Gross Regional Domestic Product [GRDP] for 2019–2024), field surveys, and in-depth interviews. Findings reveal that per capita GRDP in 2024 is estimated at VND 56.8 million—an increase of VND 16.2 million since 2019—while the annual GRDP growth rate averaged 4.56%. Vocationally trained labor accounts for 61.5% of the workforce, over 85% of whom are ethnic minorities. Multidimensional poverty among ethnic minority households declined from 34.5% in 2015 to 20.4% in 2019, though this remains above the national average. Furthermore, EMCs have increasingly engaged in New Rural Development programs, cultural preservation initiatives, policy oversight mechanisms, and education—82% of enrolled students between 2010 and 2021 were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Nevertheless, disparities in educational attainment persist; the risk of falling back into poverty remains high; access to basic social services (healthcare, education, housing, clean water, information) is constrained; and infrastructure is insufficient. The study concludes by recommending the refinement of ethnic policies toward genuine empowerment, the diversification of development models, increased investment in education and vocational training, and the promotion of sustainable livelihoods, while integrating traditional cultural values with modernization to bolster social welfare and strengthen community-led monitoring.

Keywords: the agency, socio-economic development, ethnic minorities, participation, Son La Province.

Introduction:

Northwest Vietnam, home to over ten million inhabitants—more than 83% of whom belong to various ethnic minority groups—remains a strategic area for national security and cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the region continues to grapple with pronounced socio-economic

disparities, high poverty rates, and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, clean water, and infrastructure. Although ethnic minority policies—exemplified by Resolution 65/NQ-CP (2019) and Resolution 88/2019/QH14—have yielded an average annual GRDP growth of over 4.5% between 2019 and

2024, and reduced multidimensional poverty to approximately 20.4% by 2019, meaningful and equitable participation of ethnic minority communities (EMCs) remains uneven.

Previous studies have primarily examined policy mechanisms and macro-economic outcomes, yet they have insufficiently explored the concept of “agency” among ethnic minorities—a critical determinant of the success of sustainable development initiatives. This lacuna underscores the need for an in-depth analysis of how and under what conditions EMCs can proactively contribute to, oversee, and steer new rural development projects, productive activities, and cultural preservation efforts.

This article draws upon secondary data and field surveys conducted in Son La Province to: (1) assess the current state of ethnic minority agency in socio-economic development; (2) identify barriers related to capacity, infrastructure, and customary practices; and (3) propose solutions to enhance substantive participation through genuine empowerment, diversified development models, and strengthened community capacities. By elucidating the endogenous role of EMCs and expanding the theoretical framework of empowerment in ethnic minority contexts, this research aims to inform more effective policy formulation and to promote sustainable development throughout Northwest Vietnam.

2. Methodology:

2.1. Theoretical and Methodological Foundations:

This study on the agency and participation of ethnic minorities in the socio-economic development of Northwest Vietnam—exemplified by Son La Province—employs dialectical materialism and historical materialism as its primary methodological paradigms. These frameworks underpin the analysis, interpretation, and critique of empirical findings and emerging issues.

The research operationalizes the Party and State’s policies, directives, and legal instruments

concerning socio-economic development, the agency of citizens, and their participation in programmatic and project implementation. Specifically, it draws on:

Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW (2008) of the Tenth Central Committee on agriculture, farmers, and rural areas; Resolution No. 24/2008/NQ-CP of the Government, which outlines the Government’s action plan to implement Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW; Prime Ministerial Decision No. 800/2010/QĐ-TTg, approving the National Target Program for New Rural Development; The Law on Grassroots Democracy; Additional relevant legal and policy documents.

Furthermore, the study integrates key social science theories—including “Agency Theory,” “Participation Theory,” “Theory of the Role of the Masses,” and “Theory of Social Status and Roles”—to frame and interpret the role of ethnic minorities as active agents in development processes.

2.2. Data Collection Methods:

Document Analysis

A comprehensive document analysis was conducted to identify, collect, and examine qualitative and quantitative data pertinent to the agency and participation of ethnic minority communities (EMCs) in Northwest Vietnam—and specifically in Son La Province—in implementing Party and State policies. Sources include: National policy documents (e.g., the National Target Program for New Rural Development; the Law on Grassroots Democracy; ethnic minority policy reports; and other relevant legislative texts). And Reports and statistical data detailing community participation and related metrics.

This method facilitates the systematic extraction of information on ethnic minority involvement in socio-economic development policymaking, program design, and implementation, as well as their role in oversight mechanisms.

2.3. Study Population, Locations, and Duration:

Study Population: (i) Ethnic minority residents (primarily from the Thái, Mông, Dao, and Kho

Mú groups) engaged in economic, cultural, or political activities at the village and commune levels. (ii) Commune- and district-level officials. (iii) Village heads, elder councils, and representatives of mass organizations at the commune level. (iv) Community development experts.

Study locations

Five representative districts within Son La Province—Mộc Châu, Mai Sơn, Quỳnh Nhai, Phù Yên, and Sốp Cộp—were purposively selected to capture diverse topographical, ethnic, and developmental contexts.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques:

Field Surveys:

The research team, in collaboration with commune-level officials, conducted structured household surveys. Enumerators administered questionnaires directly to respondents at their homes, ensuring a representative cross-section of ethnic, gender, income, and service-access profiles.

Semi-structured interviews:

A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants (approximately eight interviews per district), including commune and district officials, village heads, community elders, and development specialists. These interviews were audio-recorded and accompanied by detailed field notes to capture in-depth perspectives on agency, participatory mechanisms, barriers, and best practices.

Secondary data analysis

The study analyzed provincial statistical yearbooks, 10-year ethnopolitical policy review reports (2012–2022), Resolution 65/NQ-CP, Resolution 88/2019/QH14, and the Son La Statistical Yearbook. Additionally, multidimensional poverty reduction reports and socio-economic indicators were examined to contextualize primary data within broader development trends. Collectively, these methodological approaches ensure a robust, multi-

dimensional understanding of how ethnic minority agency and participation manifest in policy implementation and community development within Son La and the broader Northwest region.

3. Results and Discussion:

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Research Theoretical Framework

The Theory of “Agency” in Development Agency denotes the capacity, authority, volition, and initiative of individuals or communities to proactively shape, decide, and transform the developmental processes that surround them (Giddens, 1984). Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach (1999) reinforces this viewpoint by situating human agency—particularly the self-determination of marginalized groups—at the very core of sustainable development. According to Sen, a just society is not solely defined by economic growth but by the substantive expansion of individuals’ real freedoms and choices—i.e., their capacity to “own” and direct their own lives. This principle is especially pertinent to ethnic minority communities.

Within ethnically diverse regions, transitioning from a paradigm of “beneficiaries” to one of “development actors” constitutes a humanitarian imperative and a prerequisite for equitable and inclusive sustainability. When community members become genuine actors, they do not merely receive resources; rather, they participate in the design, implementation, and oversight of development programs, thereby enhancing policy effectiveness and longevity.

The Theory of “Participation” and Grassroots Democracy

“Participation” is variously prefixed—public participation, citizens’ participation, community participation, social participation—to denote the involvement of different sectors of the population in activities, programs, or projects. Yet, fundamentally, all these terminologies refer to the engagement of local populations in decision-making processes. In Vietnamese scholarship, these concepts are collectively rendered as “sự

tham gia của người dân” (“people’s participation”).

Harding et al. (2009) conceptualize participation as a dialogic process between the community and decision-makers—between individuals or organized groups on one side and governmental authorities on the other—concerning environmental decisions. Dovers and Harding likewise emphasize that community participation is indispensable in decision-making and policy formulation, particularly in environmental management and sustainable development (Nguyễn Thị Kim Nhung, 2014). Sherry R. Arnstein (1969) asserts that participation entails a redistribution of power, enabling citizens—historically excluded from political-economic development—to engage in shaping future development. Moreover, meaningful participation necessarily involves power; without it, involvement becomes a mere formality (Cristina Haruta & Bianca Radu, 2010).

In community development—especially at the grassroots level among ethnic minorities—grassroots democracy is foundational. It ensures that communities are not only heard but also directly engaged in policy formulation, project implementation, and performance monitoring. Properly operationalized participatory mechanisms increase transparency, bolster accountability, and consolidate social consensus, thereby laying the groundwork for stable and inclusive development.

The Communist Party and the State of Vietnam’s Perspective

Vietnam’s legal and policy framework concretizes the principle that ethnic minorities are principal actors in development:

Article 5, 2013 Constitution: Affirms that “ethnic minority peoples are subjects of the process of social development.; Law on Grassroots Democracy (2022): Establishes mechanisms to guarantee citizens’ rights to participate in enacting development policies; Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW (2009), Resolution No. 65/NQ-CP (2019), and

Resolution No. 88/2019/QH14: Emphasize co-creation between authorities and ethnic minority communities throughout planning, implementation, and monitoring of development programs.

These documents concurrently underscore that cultural preservation and equitable access to social services—education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure—must proceed in tandem to enhance endogenous capacity and safeguard community agency.

Sociodemographic and Contextual Characteristics of Son La Province

Son La is a mountainous, border province in Northwest Vietnam, where over 83 percent of the population belongs to ethnic minority groups (principally the Thái, Mông, Dao, Khơ Mú, and Xinh Mun). Its twelve ethnic groups predominantly inhabit highland communes and border localities. Although its terrain is rugged and socio-economic conditions remain challenging, ethnic minority populations play a central role in local development, contributing significantly to national security, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. To transform ethnic minorities from “beneficiaries” into “development agents,” Son La has implemented several policies: (1) New Rural Development Program: Community members voluntarily donate land, contribute labor and financial resources, and oversee implementation. (2) Multidimensional Poverty Reduction Project: Utilizes composite poverty indices to identify impoverished households and encourages culturally appropriate local solutions. (3) Education and Vocational Training Policy: Over 61 percent of the workforce has received vocational training, thereby reinforcing capacity building.

Despite notable economic advances and poverty alleviation, the full realization of agency and participation continues to face obstacles: uneven local governance capacity, limited infrastructure, and socio-cultural and linguistic barriers. These empirical realities underscore the need for a robust

theoretical framework to analyze the enabling and constraining factors affecting ethnic minority agency, thereby informing contextually appropriate solutions.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in integrating agency and participatory theories with Vietnam's legal framework and the lived experiences in Son La. This approach aims to propose mechanisms for genuine empowerment, strengthen community governance capacity, and enhance policy monitoring, all in pursuit of just and sustainable development in Northwest Vietnam's ethnic minority regions.

3.1.2. Empirical Findings on Ethnic Minority Agency and Participation in Son La Province's Socio-Economic Development

Participation in Policy Formulation, Implementation, and Monitoring
Ethnic minority groups in Son La have gradually shifted from passive “beneficiaries” to proactive participants in policy formulation, project implementation, and program oversight. According to the Five-Year Report on Resolution No. 65, over 95 percent of communes and villages have community-crafted regulations and customary practices. Ethnic minority residents actively contribute feedback to draft policies, development programs (e.g., New Rural Development), and agricultural production initiatives. Regular grassroots democratic forums—village and commune-level assemblies—provide channels for community deliberation, decision-making, and supervision of local policies and projects.

Moreover, ethnic minorities in Son La exhibit unwavering trust in the Party and State leadership. They contribute substantively by identifying policy deficiencies, suggesting contextually relevant amendments, monitoring implementation fidelity, and ensuring accountability of local officials. Their oversight extends to anti-corruption efforts and the denunciation of negative phenomena, thereby reinforcing governance quality at the grassroots.

Engagement in Agricultural Production, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Livelihoods, Ethnic minority communities have become principal drivers of commercial agriculture, cooperatives, and production linkages. From 2015 to 2023, Son La established over 700 agricultural cooperatives, with ethnic minority members comprising the majority of participants (Son La Ethnic Policy 10-Year Report, 2012–2022). Indigenous high-value fruit cultivation, cattle rearing, river-based aquaculture, and native medicinal herb farming have substantially improved household incomes and livelihoods.

Overall poverty rates in the province fell from 26.8 percent in 2015 to 11.98 percent in 2023, with ethnic minority communities experiencing faster poverty reduction than the provincial average—testament to their active and innovative participation. Particularly in the New Rural Development Program, community members voluntarily contributed over 560,000 m² of land and more than 750,000 labor-days for roads, schools, healthcare centers, and public facilities.

Participation in New Rural Infrastructure and Community Governance

Ethnic minority residents have proactively donated land, contributed labor, and participated in the construction of rural infrastructure, including schools, healthcare stations, and small-scale irrigation works. By 2023, 78 communes in Son La met national new rural standards, many of which are predominantly ethnic minority, reflecting high levels of community initiative and self-management.

Participation in Education and Human Capital Development

In the educational sector, ethnic minority communities have spearheaded student enrollment campaigns and contributed to the construction of ethnically oriented boarding and semi-boarding schools. From 2011 to 2021, over 98 percent of minority-ethnic children in primary and lower secondary grades attended school, surpassing the average for comparable highland regions. An

increasing number of ethnic minority educators and school administrators have significantly elevated literacy rates and sustained enrollment in remote communities.

Participation in Cultural Preservation and Promotion

Ethnic minority participation in cultural preservation is evident in their stewardship of traditional festivals, languages, scripts, and folk knowledge. Activities such as the Xên Bản and Xên Mường festivals, Thái Xòe dance, Mông khèn performances, culinary competitions, and folk games are organized and conducted primarily by community members, ensuring intergenerational transmission of intangible heritage. The community actively engages in the promotion of “new cultural lifestyles,” the eradication of harmful customs, and the cultivation of civilized social norms (Son La Ethnic Policy 10-Year Report, 2012–2022).

Formation of Community Associations, Self-Governance, and Political Representation

Over 70 percent of commune- and district-level People's Council delegates in Son La's 2021–2026 term are ethnic minority representatives. Community leaders—including village heads, elders, and heads of farmers', women's, youth, and Fatherland Front associations—have played pivotal roles in guiding and mobilizing their communities to engage across political, economic, and social spheres (Son La Ethnic Policy 10-Year Report, 2012–2022).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate a fundamental shift: ethnic minority groups in Son La have transitioned from passive recipients to proactive architects of local development. However, the degree of empowerment remains uneven across ethnic groups and locales. Constraints in community governance capacity, resource access, educational attainment, and socio-economic autonomy persist in certain areas. These realities necessitate continued policy refinement, enhanced capacity building, and reinforcement of community agency to achieve truly sustainable and inclusive development.

3.1.3. Barriers and Constraints to Ethnic Minority Agency and Participation in Son La Province's Socio-Economic Development

Despite notable progress, the engagement of ethnic minority populations in Son La continues to confront multiple impediments:

First, disparities in educational attainment and skill levels.

Although significant investments in education have been made, overall literacy and competency levels among ethnic minority communities remain uneven across districts and ethnic groups. A considerable segment of the population—particularly in remote, highland, and frontier hamlets—still lacks full access to educational opportunities. Empirical data indicate that illiteracy rates in certain highland communes persist at 5–10 percent, and dropout rates among ethnic minority pupils in some areas exceed the provincial average. Such deficiencies directly undermine individuals' capacity to assimilate policy information, develop strategic planning and administrative skills, and actively participate in development programs.

Second, deficiencies in socio-economic infrastructure and basic services.

The infrastructure that supports both livelihood and production for ethnic minorities remains fragmented and inadequate. According to the Five-Year Report on Resolution 65/NQ-CP, many highland and deeply remote communes suffer from poor road networks, insufficient educational facilities, under-resourced healthcare stations, limited access to clean water, and substandard housing—conditions exacerbated during natural disasters and monsoonal floods. The absence or dilapidation of essential infrastructure significantly hampers community connectivity, market integration, access to public services, and overall quality of life (Ten-Year Ethnic Policy Report, 2012–2022).

Third, constraints in economic resources and sustainable livelihoods.

While the poverty rate has declined sharply—from 26.8 percent in 2015 to 11.98 percent in

2023—per capita incomes among ethnic minority households remain markedly below the provincial average. Access to credit, land tenure security, technical assistance, and product marketing channels is often severely restricted, especially for households in the most isolated communes. Numerous ethnic minority cooperatives and production models are still nascent, lacking robust linkages and thus remaining highly vulnerable to market volatility and environmental perturbations (Ten-Year Ethnic Policy Report, 2012–2022).

Fourth, entrenched customs, archaic practices, and socio-cultural barriers

Certain traditional practices—such as shifting cultivation, consanguineous marriage, patriarchal norms, cultural reticence, and a pervasive reluctance toward public engagement—continue to persist within segments of the community. Gender inequalities and the marginalization of women and youth within ethnic minority societies further curtail opportunities for those groups to participate proactively and creatively in communal affairs and development initiatives (Fifteen-Year Ethnic Affairs Report).

Fifth, linguistic obstacles and limited access to information and technology.

Although programs to promote Vietnamese language proficiency have been implemented, in many hamlets standard Vietnamese has yet to become the lingua franca. This linguistic divide inhibits the community's capacity to comprehend policy directives, assimilate scientific and technical knowledge, and engage in dialogue with government authorities, development organizations, and market actors. Moreover, ethnic minority households' access to modern information and communication technologies remains significantly lower than the provincial average, compounding information asymmetries.

Sixth, dependency mentality and limited representational capacity.

A segment of the ethnic minority populace continues to exhibit a reliance on state assistance rather than exercising autonomous agency. Formal mechanisms for political representation and

leadership by ethnic minority members often remain perfunctory; local cadres and tribal elders frequently lack the experience and skills necessary to effectively guide and mobilize their communities, thus failing to serve as genuine catalysts for development (Ten-Year Ethnic Policy Report, 2012–2022).

These multifaceted constraints continue to impede the realization of authentic agency and participation among ethnic minority populations in Son La. Addressing these challenges necessitates the formulation of tailored policies that prioritize educational advancement, infrastructure development, and sustainable poverty reduction; the promotion of community governance innovation; the provision of targeted support to marginalized subgroups; enhancement of representational skills; and the strengthening of information dissemination, legal awareness, and community-driven innovation.

Collectively, such measures will create a more enabling environment in which ethnic minority communities can fully exercise their agency, thereby contributing to more inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development in Son La Province.

3.1.4. Strategies to Enhance Ethnic Minority Agency and Participation in Socio-Economic Development in Son La Province

Firstly, refine institutional frameworks, policies, and substantively empower ethnic minority communities.

Continued concretisation of Party and State directives regarding ethnic minority agency is imperative, ensuring that local development programs grant genuine participation and decision-making rights to ethnic minority constituencies (e.g., Resolution 88/2019/QH14; Resolution 65/NQ-CP). Concurrently, the policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring processes must be reformed to elevate transparency, accountability, and democratic engagement. Specifically, all development initiatives should incorporate authentic

community input from initial conceptualisation through planning, execution, and impact assessment (Ten-Year Ethnic Policy Review 2012–2022).

Secondly, accelerate livelihood development, production support, and sustainable poverty reduction.

Provision of tailored financial services, technical assistance, and market linkages is crucial to enable ethnic minority households to access preferential credit, agricultural extension services, and technical know-how. Fostering the establishment of modern cooperatives, producer organisations, and value-chain networks for priority agricultural commodities—supported by appropriate technologies—will enhance productivity and resilience. Additionally, expanding labour export schemes (e.g., assisting 1,200–1,500 ethnic minority workers annually to find employment overseas) can bolster household incomes and contribute to poverty reduction (Son La Human Resources Resolution 09, 2021–2025, oriented toward 2030). Emphasis should also be placed on promoting environmentally sustainable production models that adapt to climate change and advance green and circular economy principles.

Thirdly, intensify investment in human capital and education.

Robust investment in ethnic minority education is essential—this includes constructing and upgrading boarding and semi-boarding ethnic schools, expanding high-quality school networks, universalising early childhood and primary education, and strengthening bilingual instruction to preserve indigenous languages while promoting Vietnamese proficiency. Vocational training must be diversified and linked directly to local labour market demands: by 2023, 61.47 percent of the workforce had received vocational training, of whom 85 percent were ethnic minorities (Son La Human Resources Resolution 09). Training curricula must therefore focus on skills aligned with the province's socio-economic context. Simultaneously, capacity-building programs for

ethnic minority cadres—village chiefs, community leaders, and civil society representatives—will cultivate leadership competencies and inspire community self-mobilisation.

Fourthly, enhance the effectiveness of community organisations, mass organisations, and the valorisation of cultural heritage.

Strengthening community self-governance structures—such as village councils, elders' councils, lineage chiefs, and production cooperatives—will institutionalise local participation in development planning and security management. Gender equality and youth empowerment should be actively promoted; traditional barriers to women's leadership must be dismantled, and ethnic minority youth encouraged to innovate. Preserving and revitalising traditional cultural values (e.g., supporting festivals, indigenous language instruction, folk arts) in tandem with fostering modern cultural norms and denouncing regressive practices will reinforce ethnic pride and social cohesion.

Fifthly, raise awareness, expand communication, and develop endogenous community capacities.

Organising targeted training and extension programs on citizen agency, participatory governance, dialogue facilitation, and community oversight will equip ethnic minority populations with the skills necessary for active engagement. Celebrating exemplary individuals and scaling up successful community-driven models will further galvanise participation. Leveraging the influence of village chiefs, clan elders, and respected figures to foster self-reliance and confidence will accelerate community empowerment. Transparent dissemination of policy information, clarifying citizens' rights and responsibilities, is likewise essential to build consensus and trust.

Sixthly, strengthen infrastructure, basic services, and technology access.

Priority investments should be directed toward completing transportation networks, educational facilities, healthcare stations, clean water systems,

and electrification in remote areas, thereby narrowing development disparities. Concurrently, accelerating the deployment of information and communication technologies will facilitate ethnic minority access to policy information, scientific and technical knowledge, and e-government services, thus enhancing digital literacy and community digital transformation.

Seventhly, coordinate and synchronise all interventions, placing ethnic minorities at the centre of development.

The foregoing strategies must be implemented in an integrated, flexible, and innovative manner, ensuring that ethnic minority communities assume genuine centrality in development processes. Empowering ethnic minorities and amplifying their participation in governance will not only underpin sustainable socio-economic advancement in Son La but will also foster equity, democratic inclusion, and inter-ethnic solidarity—contributing to the successful realisation of national sustainable development objectives.

3.2. Discussion:

3.2.1. Evaluating Ethnic Minority Agency and Participation – A Substantive Advancement. The findings indicate that ethnic minority (EM) agency and participation in Son La have undergone marked and substantive transformations, transcending mere policy “beneficiary” status to become endogenous drivers of development. Community members now contribute actively at every stage: from formulating resolutions, organizing and supervising development programs, to donating land, providing labor for New Rural Development infrastructure, initiating household-level economic ventures, and safeguarding and promoting indigenous cultural heritage. Collectively, these engagements have reshaped the socioeconomic landscape of the Northwest region.

This progress is corroborated by impressive indicators: the poverty rate in Son La plummeted from 26.8 percent in 2015 to below 12 percent in 2023; the number of communes attaining New

Rural Development standards has surged; and as of 2023, 61.47 percent of the workforce had completed vocational training, with 85 percent of those trainees belonging to EM groups (Son La Human Resources Resolution 09, 2021–2025, orientation to 2030). Moreover, over 98 percent of EM-background children attend school at the appropriate age, and an increasing array of community-driven agricultural and cultural preservation initiatives reflect robust local innovation.

3.2.2. Comparative Analysis and Practical Lessons

Among the Northwest provinces, Son La stands out for the proactive spirit of its EM communities in shaping policy and driving socioeconomic advancement. The success of agricultural cooperatives, producer collectives, labour export schemes, boarding schools tailored to EM students, and village self-management models validate the principle that when EM populations receive genuine empowerment and enabling conditions, they will fully actualize their potential and creativity, delivering contextually relevant innovations.

Nonetheless, persistent impediments remain, including inter-regional disparities, uneven educational attainment, insufficient socioeconomic infrastructure, gender inequality, entrenched customary practices, linguistic barriers, and a residual dependency mindset among some community segments (Ten-Year Ethnic Policy Review 2012–2022). Additionally, the increasing frequency of natural disasters, climate change impacts, and migratory pressures necessitate continuous innovation in community governance and sustainable development approaches.

3.2.3. The Role of Policy, Community Organisations, and Multi-Sector Linkages

Our analysis confirms that policies prioritizing EM regions—ensuring EM agency, participation rights, and access to essential resources (education, healthcare, infrastructure)—constitute the linchpin for fostering community initiative and

self-reliance. The political system, mass organisations, village chiefs, elders, and respected figures function as vital intermediaries between authorities and local populations, enhancing cohesion, trust, and communal solidarity.

Furthermore, optimising the performance of producer collectives, modern cooperatives, social enterprises, and alliances between farmers, agribusinesses, and research institutions is opening avenues toward a more resilient, collective-oriented economic model. Such multi-sectoral partnerships bolster the competitiveness of local products and contribute to sustainable value creation.

3.2.4. Emerging Issues and Recommended Innovations

Despite a rising proportion of EM individuals receiving vocational training, critical gaps remain in training quality, technological mastery, foreign language proficiency, and soft skills—necessitating curricular reforms and expanded avenues for acquiring new knowledge. Moreover, gender disparities and limited opportunities for EM women and youth persist. A significant segment of EM women and younger cohorts have yet to be fully empowered for leadership, policy formulation, and innovative roles. Promoting gender equity and nurturing initiatives from historically marginalised groups is essential. Additionally, labour migration, urbanisation, natural disasters, and public health crises pose novel challenges to cultural preservation, livelihood stability, and sustainable community development in highland areas.

This article affirms that in Son La—a prototypical Northwest province where over 83 percent of residents are EM—genuine community agency and participation are crucial to sustainable socioeconomic development. Analysis of data from 2019 to 2024 reveals an average annual GRDP growth rate of 4.56 percent, per capita GRDP rising to 56.8 million VND, vocationally trained labour reaching 61.5 percent, and multidimensional poverty falling from 34.5

percent to 20.4 percent. Alongside economic gains, EM engagement in New Rural Development, production enhancement, cultural conservation, policy oversight, and education has elevated both the effectiveness and sustainability of development efforts.

Nonetheless, the study also highlights ongoing challenges: persistent disparities in educational attainment, a high risk of poverty recurrence, limited access to basic services, inadequate infrastructure, and linguistic and cultural obstacles. These factors undermine empowerment and the capacity for self-determination, resulting in superficial forms of participation in certain localities.

Accordingly, the article proposes seven core recommendations: (1) Refine institutional frameworks and enact genuine power-sharing for EM communities; (2) Promote sustainable livelihoods through financial, technical, and value-chain support. (3) Make substantial investments in education, vocational training, and EM human resources development. (4) Strengthen community institutions, promote gender equality, and empower youth leadership. (5) Enhance communication, amplify endogenous capacities by showcasing model successes. (6) Develop infrastructure and expand access to information and communication technology. (7) Foster multi-sectoral linkages and public-private partnerships.

These recommendations are not only pertinent to Son La but can also serve as a transferable model for the entire Northwest region, underpinning grassroots equality, democratic governance, and inclusive development for EM communities, thereby advancing Vietnam's national sustainable development objectives.

4. Conclusion:

Son La—representative of Northwest Vietnam, where over 83 percent of inhabitants belong to ethnic minority communities—demonstrates that genuine agency and substantive participation of these communities are pivotal for sustainable socioeconomic development. Analysis of data

from 2019 to 2024 reveals an average annual GRDP growth of 4.56 percent, a rise in per capita GRDP to 56.8 million VND, a vocational training rate of 61.5 percent among the workforce, and a reduction in multidimensional poverty from 34.5 percent to 20.4 percent. Parallel to these economic advances, ethnic minority engagement in New Rural Development initiatives, production enhancement, cultural preservation, policy oversight, and educational programs has elevated both the quality and longevity of development interventions.

Nonetheless, persistent challenges remain: uneven educational attainment, a significant risk of poverty recurrence, limited access to basic services, inadequate infrastructure, and impediments stemming from linguistic and traditional barriers. These obstacles undermine empowerment and the capacity for autonomous decision-making, resulting in symbolic participation in certain locales.

Accordingly, this article proposes seven core strategies: (1) strengthen institutional frameworks and provide genuine empowerment to ethnic minority communities; (2) promote sustainable livelihoods through access to credit, appropriate technologies, and value-chain integration; (3) make robust investments in education, vocational training, and ethnic minority human capital development; (4) reinforce community organizations, promote gender equality, and empower youth leadership; (5) enhance communication and leverage local capacities by recognizing exemplary models; (6) develop infrastructure and expand access to information and communication technologies; and (7) foster intersectoral collaborations and public-private partnerships.

These recommendations are not only tailored to support Son La but may also serve as a transferable model across the entire Northwest region, contributing to grassroots equality, democratic governance, and inclusive development for ethnic minority communities in

pursuit of Vietnam's national sustainable development goals.

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