



How have Wars in the Past Affected Food Security in Vietnam Today?

Kassy Jew

Abstract

The effects of past wars have a connection towards food security in Vietnam with most having negative effects towards the quantity and quality of Vietnam's food supply in present-day. These wars have led to struggles such as the country's overall ability to grow food which have negatively affected specifically the quantity of their food supply. This has led to a moderate food crisis in Vietnam, which is defined as a sharp rise in the rates of hunger and malnutrition reaching local, national, or global levels. With specifically the more recent wars having the most effect towards food. Remnants of each war can be seen in the present day. The Vietnam war is a particularly notable one, and while many know of the Vietnam War, they do not dive deeper into the country's history nor know about the food crisis. With this emphasis on this war, arguably the most well-known, there is a lack of attention to past wars that occurred and their lingering effect on Vietnam. To investigate how wars in the past affected the food crisis in Vietnam today, I conducted a literature review researching the impact of various wars on food. While Vietnam is not top ranked in concern for food security that does not mean that the country is completely cured of this problem. By knowing the history of what led to Vietnam's food problem and methods used to combat it, we as people can walk away with new knowledge about the situation and how to help the country further in the present day.

Keywords: Food Insecurity, Famine, Rice Accords, Vietnam War, Global Food Crisis, Vietnam Food Safety Laws, Doi Moi Reform Policies

Introduction

Vietnam has grown from one of the world's poorest countries to a dynamic, middle-income country ("The Current Situation in Vietnam", 2022). Vietnam is currently a one-party communist country located in Southeast Asia, along the eastern coast of the Indochinese Peninsula. Vietnam borders China in the north and Laos and Cambodia in the west ("Vietnam", 2023). The tropical island has seen a rapid growth in the number of tourists visiting in the past few years, with even more to come. It is infamously known for the Vietnam War, occurring from November 1, 1955, to April 30, 1975, which caused Vietnam's economy to suffer for quite some time, especially in the North.

In 1997 the country joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ("Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). ASEAN is a regional organization that brings together disparate neighbors to address economic and security issues. When Vietnam opened its economy, ASEAN provided investments and helped export goods to other nations involved in the organization. Since joining ASEAN, Vietnam has been vital to regional diplomacy and development ("The Current Situation in Vietnam", 2022).

Today, Vietnam's GDP growth rate has maintained a growth of 3.3% during the first quarter of 2023, after a growth of 8.8% in 2022 (Biswas, 2023). Vietnam exports agricultural products worldwide, with the main exports being walnuts, coffee, and rice. In 2021, these products made up agriculture exports of over \$5.7 billion USD (Nguyen, 2023). Despite this success in these market goods, Vietnam faces continued problems with food insecurity. The Oxford Dictionary defines food insecurity as "the condition of not having access to sufficient food, or food of an adequate quality, to meet one's basic needs." ("Oxford Languages", 2023). Food insecurity not only affects Vietnam but also affects the rest of the world. Countries vary in

the intensity of food insecurity. While each country has its own reasons for these issues, they are often very similar.

Regarding Vietnam, there are many factors that contributed to the food crisis, specifically the past wars that Vietnam has experienced, ranging from wars in the 1900s until the present day. The Vietnam War of 1955 took a large toll on Vietnam, but people often neglect to consider the role other wars play in the country’s food crisis. Each of the wars contributed to Vietnam’s food problem in peculiar ways varying in complexity. Knowing what occurred during past wars will help us understand how they affected today’s food crisis.

Food Crisis in Present-day Vietnam Overview

According to the Global Hunger Index with a score of 11.9, Vietnam has a level of hunger that is moderate (“Global Hunger Index”, 2023). It is currently ranked 54th out of 125 countries regarding hunger. Below is a table containing hunger statistics from 2015-2020 from data taken from macro trends.

Vietnam Hunger Statistics

Year	Population	Decline From Previous Year (%)
2020	5.70%	0.5% Decline From 2019
2019	6.20%	0.6% Decline From 2018
2018	6.80%	0.4% Decline From 2017
2017	7.20%	0.6% Decline From 2016
2016	7.80%	0.3% Decline From 2015
2015	8.10%	0.5% Decline From 2014

(“Global Hunger Index”, 2023)

As it states above these statistics were recorded from the years 2015-2020. Though the food crisis is not as severe as in other countries today, that doesn’t mean that Vietnam is completely safe from food insecurities. Approximately 30%–40% of rural households are considered to be food insecure (Vuong et al., 2023). Factors such as natural environmental effects and inflation contributed, but a particularly notable reason for the food crisis is past warfare.

War is expensive and has had deleterious effects on the environment, causing difficulty in obtaining produce and high poverty rates. Warfare can have an especially negative impact on food production. Especially if the country does not win the war, which Vietnam had in the past, the after-effects of the violent battle take a large toll on just about everything, and food quantity and availability is one sector that suffers.

History Of Major Events

Vietnam has experienced numerous major events like wars, famines, and the pandemic in the past. One of the earlier wars was the Vietnamese Famine of 1945. In the 1940s, when Vietnam (then French Indochina) was still under French rule, the Japanese military entered Northern Vietnam and reached an agreement with the French that led to the country undergoing dual colonization. This lasted until the Japanese left at the end of World War II (Nguyen, 2023). The effects of the dual colonization led to a famine that lasted from 1944 to late 1945 (Legacy of Atrocities Education", 2021).

In 1940, the French signed the "Rice Accords" with Japan, which called for a large amount of exportation of goods at an alarming rate, about a million tons of rice and thousands of tons of crops were demanded by the Japanese ("Legacy of Atrocities Education," 2021). The rate at which these products were being exported led to hunger (in Vietnam?), especially for the "peasant" citizens, though it did not even spare the well-off people in Vietnam. This lasted for five years, and during that time, Vietnam also experienced terrible natural disasters such as typhoons and floods. These natural disasters, combined with Japan's insistence on food from Vietnam, led to a great famine from 1944 to 1945 (Hunt, 2015). Japan and France did not aid Vietnam during this time, and the country struggled as they had to supply the required rice and other raw materials promised in the Rice Accords while also dealing with the shortage of manufactured articles that Japan provided (Nguyễn Thê, n.d.). The food shortage and lack of needed materials eventually led to the uprising of peasants in Vietnam. On September 2, 1945, Vietnam declared its independence from French rule ("Zinn Education Project," 2023).

A more well-known, particularly notable war is the so-called Vietnam War. From Nov 1, 1955 – Apr 30, 1975, a conflict between the communist North of Vietnam and the South of Vietnam who wanted to escape communism broke out. The United States of America (U.S.) was a significant ally of the South and tried to prevent the spread of communism to the region. However, despite this aid to the South, the North evidently reigned victorious.

A strategy of war that the U.S. enforced against the North was starvation. Deadly herbicides were used to eradicate the food supply, and within a few months in 1966, roughly 70,000 acres of crops were sprayed with a deadly herbicide mixture called "Agent Orange" (Mayer, 1967). Agent White was then used and was intended to kill larger plants, while other substances, such as Agent Blue, had more of a deadly effect against grasses and grains. Along with Agent Orange, Agent White, and Agent Blue, the U.S. used other herbicides such as Agent Purple, Agent Pink, and Agent Green (Exposure, 2011). Named after the color of their containers, a combination of these "agent" herbicides had killed off over 500,000 acres of food crop plants and were embedded in the soil of Vietnam still to this day. Though some of these herbicides were not supposed to kill off crops, they were excessively used to kill vegetation, evidently affecting most, if not all, land that they touched. Today, parts of land exposed to these herbicides are still infected with the chemicals and remain infertile (*What Is Agent Orange?*, n.d.).

Landmines were devices that also had a significant impact on crops, specifically affecting rice paddies. These landmines were scattered over various fields during the war, and when they exploded, they not only did significant damage to the surroundings but also cut off the rice supply. With rice being a staple food in the Vietnamese diet, people had to mix their rice with other foods such as white potatoes, sweet potatoes, and sorghum to fill their stomachs ("City Pass Guid," 2022). Today, citizens of Vietnam are still affected by these explosives, as many

dormant landmines leftover from the war are still being discovered. Experts estimate 12-18% of these landmines remain (“PBS,” 2023). These bombs are especially of concern to the citizens living in the demilitarized zone (DMZ), a zone that had previously divided Northern Vietnam and Southern Vietnam. Starvation is higher in those areas, as farmers are forced to stop tending to their crops to avoid the risk of accidentally activating an unsuspecting mine (“PBS”, 2023).

A combination of herbicides and landmines proved to be particularly deadly during the Vietnam War, and they are still affecting Vietnam today, with some parts of the soil still having herbicide traces and landmines being hidden underneath the fields in the country. It is not an exaggeration to say that the food inflation post-war in Vietnam was greatly influenced by these factors that occurred from 1955 to 1975 (“PBS”, 2023).

Following the Vietnam War, from 2005 to 2008, a global food crisis affected the country. During this crisis, food prices sky-rocketed and caused global panic (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2010). Since the Vietnam War, Vietnam had begun to recover in food security but was not spared from food inflation. Inflation hit rice prices in particular. For example, over several days in April 2008, rice prices in Ho Chi Minh City doubled (“The New York Times,” 2008). This was caused by both hoarding of supplies and an increase in rice exportation at a higher price (Ngan, 2010).

The alarming rise in rice prices in a country where it is a food staple was deeply destabilizing. Inflation affected not only the well-off but also the poor, who were already struggling with food prices. The government responded by imposing a ban on exporting rice to other countries to conserve the grain for Vietnam. With Vietnam being the world’s second biggest country to export rice, this ban caused an increase in rice prices globally, and a rice crisis emerged. This ban was placed to ensure rice for the citizens; however, domestic producers and export companies in Vietnam suffered due to the lack of work. The balance between securing rice and securing work for everyone was difficult to manage. This situation persisted until June 2008, when the rice ban was finally released (Tsukada, n.d.).

Wars, famines, and the pandemic spanning from the 1940s to the early 2000s all had their own unique impact on food in Vietnam. Though the country recovered from these events, traces of each war still linger today. Following the global food crisis of 2005-2008, Vietnam augmented its domestic food security and resilience. However, a new crisis once again emerged, a global pandemic known as Covid 19.

Covid-19

In 2019, the Coronavirus began to spread worldwide, leading to a global quarantine. During this time of isolation, many people had suffered both mentally and financially. Since there was no in-person contact with anyone outside of your household, this caused an increase in poverty as people lost their jobs and businesses went bankrupt. Vietnam had its first two Covid cases on January 23, 2020. The first case was a 70-year-old man hospitalized in Ho Chi Minh City. Even before confirming these cases as the virus, Vietnam responded swiftly by closing its borders (“BBC”, 2020).

Since then, the government has successfully contained the outbreak (“BBC”, 2020). However, despite this victory, food, in particular, was an issue during the quarantine. Throughout the world, food was not as accessible as before the pandemic due to supply chain disruptions. On top of that, instability of food prices increased, and there was a higher demand for cheaper

foods that were not very nutritious (Kakaei et al., 2022). Covid-19 is not just a simple disease, as it attacked countries one by one, it quickly became a pandemic that still affects society today.

When the news of the quarantine was announced, a country-wide panic emerged in Vietnam as people tried to hurriedly buy food in bulk and hoard it for themselves (Long & Khoi, 2020). Despite the reassurance by the government that everyone would have access to food, that did not ease the minds of the citizens. Markets were completely stripped as people hoarded their resources. Due to this, the prices of the food greatly increased (Long & Khoi, 2020). People in poverty who already had a difficult time financially further struggled with this instability of food prices.

In the Asia-Pacific region, quarantine increased poverty rates by roughly 20%, bringing about 150 million additional people into poverty, which evidently led to great concern in global food security (Aaron et al., 2021). Traditional markets had been closed down due to the quarantine regulations, leaving only supermarkets and formal markets open. Traditional markets are markets where fresh produce native to the area is sold and are usually located in an area often frequented by locals (“VISA”, 2023). Regarding their replacement, though supermarkets were a food source for the people of Vietnam, they often carried unaffordable food options or food that was not readily available to people living in urban/rural areas. While these markets were more convenient for those who bought their groceries in bulk, they were unrealistic for people in urban/rural areas who purchased groceries in smaller quantities. The urban/rural citizens in Vietnam simply did not have the money to continuously support the high prices of the supermarkets and formal markets (International Institute for Environment and Development, 2020).

Since access to food had been greatly restricted during the pandemic, many people had resorted to online shopping. Online shopping was a convenient solution to buying food, and many food companies adjusted their services to keep up with this online hype. However, suspicions entered the minds of many as questions of the validity of these sites emerged. Many were unsure whether the sites that they were shopping at were legitimate (Nguyen et al., 2021). Despite this unease, there were many benefits to shopping online. A large number of people supported it and genuinely enjoyed this change. In fact, a survey by the Business Association of High Quality Vietnamese Goods found that 98% of citizens who dealt with buying goods online during this period of time stated that they will continue to do so in the future (“Xinhua Net,” 2020).

Hoarding, online shopping, and the availability of markets during the pandemic were all factors that increased concern about food access among the people of Vietnam. Food prices rose during the time of the pandemic due to these factors and concerned many, especially those who earned less income. All in all, these three elements share something in common: they all relate to the financial accessibility of food. Food security has significantly affected Vietnam, and this is partly due to the pandemic known as the Coronavirus of 2019.

Food Security

Vietnam has enforced various policies over the years to help ensure the protection of food security in the country. They range from policies relating to agriculture to trade exportations. Specifically, on July 1, 2011, the Vietnam Food Safety Law (FSL) was passed by the Vietnamese National Assembly, this law prioritizes the safety in food expirations, trade, importation, and exportation. This law also covers food advertisement, labeling, testing, and risk

analysis (*Food Product and Safety Regulation | Vietnam | Asia Pacific Food Law Guide | Baker McKenzie Resource Hub*, 2023). As the name states, the FSL essentially oversees the overall safety of food in the country and helps with international relations regarding food. This law and many others regarding food all work together to improve food security in Vietnam. The way that the government accomplishes this goal focuses on maintaining the production of rice.

A resource that makes up a large part of food security is rice. Rice is a particularly abundant grain in the country; in fact, Vietnam is one of the biggest rice producers and exporters in the world, with 42.7 million metric tons of rice paddies being produced in 2022 (Statista Research Department, 2023). It accounts for 90% of domestic food production and takes up 78% of agricultural cropland. This is about half of the overall agricultural production in the country. (Ryan, 2002). Needless to say, rice is an incredibly important resource and would drastically affect food security if depleted. That is why there have been many regulations regarding rice to maintain its growth. 3.8 million hectares of land are being preserved for rice production through the Vietnamese government, with 3.2 million hectares being prioritized for the growth of wet rice specifically, making up 10% of the total land area in Vietnam (*Rice, Irrigation Policy and the Need for Improved Water Management in Vietnam*, 2023).

On the corporate side, rice exportation regulations have been put in place in order to regulate the amount of rice being sold with policies to restrict the exportation if needed. Furthermore, rice paddy farmers are being supported by the government to maintain the quantity of rice being produced (*Food Security Policies of Vietnam*, 2014). These are just a few methods out of many more policies regarding rice that have been passed. Though each is different, in the end, they all share the same goal: the protection of rice in Vietnam.

With many policies working around rice in particular, the country of Vietnam has been able to sustain itself both on the agricultural side of security and in the corporate side. To Vietnam, rice is not just any simple grain, it is sacred. This is not a surprise considering how much of an impact rice makes on the economy in the country, and how it is a staple in the average Vietnamese person's diet ("EthnoMed", 2001). Besides the current policies imputed regarding food security, the topic of food modernization has been large for quite some time.

Food Modernization

In order to further ensure food security, the Vietnamese government implemented an initiative to modernize the food system in the country in 1986 (Pham and Dinh, 2022). This was developed not only for the sake of improving food security but also to modernize the country itself. It is being implemented through the focus on food markets. However, this method may not be completely necessary, as the issue with food security is not as extreme as some might think. The implementation of supermarkets has had some negative effects on Vietnam's lower-income residents. While this method may benefit Vietnam's food security in the long run, at the moment, these methods can be expensive and do not accommodate those with a lower income (Béné, 2020).

In order to push food modernization, supermarkets have been more intensely advertised, and as a result, many traditional markets have shut down (Béné, 2020). The traditional markets were labeled as unhygienic, and the government stated that they did not meet food safety protocol and, therefore, should be removed (*The Trouble with Modernization*, 2015). This especially posed a problem for residents with lower incomes who had depended on these older markets for their main source of food. The supermarkets that were implemented were more

expensive compared to the cheaper traditional markets where haggling was a common practice (Figuíe et al., 2019).

Another reason why traditional markets were more popular is because of diet. Older residents in urban/rural areas were not used to the more westernized options that came with the modernized food system and much preferred the traditional foods that they grew up knowing (Nguyen-Minh et al., 2023). On top of that, traditional markets provided less processed food than supermarkets since their produce consisted of local goods. As well as being a source of food for urban/rural residents, traditional markets were also a source of culture (*The Trouble with Modernization*, 2015). Elderly merchants depend on these traditional markets as a source of income. With health factors heavily restricting them, trading at their stalls in many cases has been the only occupation that they can do and keep. However, with supermarkets, the shiny modernized way of shopping has caught the attention of many and less people have been coming to the traditional ones. This loss of customers has left many elderly traders struggling to make ends meet since there are not many people to sell their goods to. The decrease in income bleeds into factors such as not being able to pay for taxes, or other daily necessities (“Vietnam.vn” 2023). That is why food modernization led to more supermarkets being implemented and though these stores are beneficial to some people, it is inconvenient for the lower-income residents in urban/rural areas.

However, despite the issues regarding supermarkets in lower-income areas, there are also some benefits. Modern supermarkets have been known to be more efficient than traditional markets and have more reliable products (*Supermarkets in Vietnam*, 2023). They also improve trade between foreign countries as supermarkets provide better access to foreign goods; this not only strengthens relations with other countries but also boosts Vietnam’s economy (Tran, 2023). Supermarkets are in a way, helping with food modernization but it seems to benefit the younger generation more than older generations.

Though food insecurity has not been completely solved, some progress has been made to improve the situation. Food modernization measures can be beneficial to the country; however, the promotion of supermarkets has mixed benefits. Lower-income residents have been negatively affected by the transition, and this will likely not change for a while, but we should also not disregard the positive benefits that supermarkets can have to the economy.

Food Policy Progress

What has been done or is in the process of improving food security in Vietnam? One policy is the Doi Moi Policy, which has been a big factor in helping the food situation in the country after the Vietnam War. The Doi Moi Reform Policies of 1986 sought to transition Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy (Le, 2022). The agricultural sector thrived after the Vietnam War due to this policy, essentially leading to the country’s rice success.

The Doi Moi Reform Policies, also known as the open-door policy, was mandated in December 1986 following the Vietnam War in 1975 (*The Doi Moi Policy and Its Impact on the Poor | Social Watch*, n.d.). Translating to the word “renovation,” the purpose of these policies was to ensure Vietnam’s survival (*The Myth of Doi Moi in Vietnam*, 2023), (*Doi Moi and the Remaking of Vietnam*, 2016). These reforms essentially focused on the attraction of foreign countries for investment and as a result, the agriculture sector of Vietnam was greatly impacted,

with improvements in land reform and trade relations being two prime policies that contributed to the economic boost (Le, 2022; *Doi Moi and the Remaking of Vietnam*, n.d.).

The quantity of crops being produced and distributed subsequently increased following the enactment of this policy. Rice in particular was a crop that was greatly impacted by these policies, and because of them, Vietnam is now known as one of the world's top rice exporters. Vietnam continued to improve in the years to come, and a country once plagued by the aftereffects of war flourished economically thanks to the help of the Doi Moi Reform Policies of 1986.

Besides the Doi Moi Reform Policies, food outreach programs have provided aid in food insecurity and hunger. These are volunteer programs that are active today that people can apply to in order to directly help the country. Through "International Volunteer HQ," a person can travel abroad and not only gain a new appreciation of the culture but also help the hungry at the same time. Most of the volunteer opportunities are mainly focused in or around Ho Chi Minh City and focus on those who do not have much money to pay for food (*Volunteer in Food Outreach in Vietnam*, 2023). The "International Volunteer HQ" is not the only food outreach program out there and there are many more programs that exist today, with a little research people can find many more and continue to provide aid in food insecurity/hunger in Vietnam.

Both old and newer methods have helped improve the state of Vietnam's food security. The country has made a large improvement since the war and that is thanks to policies and programs that have helped. With new policies built on the old ones and more programs being introduced to society, Vietnam will continue to thrive and protect the concept of food.

Conclusion

Food insecurity in Vietnam did not become a problem instantly, nor has it been suddenly resolved. Past wars, famines and the pandemic specifically were large contributors to this problem. Food security in Vietnam has not been as concerning as people may think, but that does not erase the fact that it still exists. Events in the past such as the Vietnamese Famine of 1945 significantly impacted food in the past, but the Vietnam War of 1975, the Global Food Crisis of 2005-2008, and Covid 19 have caused the most damage towards present-day food insecurity. Thankfully, the effects of food policies and laws that have been passed helped the situation and even helped lead to economic success. With food modernization contributing to further advancement in the country and its food with the use of supermarkets, they are controversial since both negative and positive factors come with it. Finally, with policies and programs helping the country today, the food situation is continuing to improve as the years go on. Wars, famines, and the pandemic in the past have affected Vietnam's food but the improvements made after them have led to Vietnam becoming a dynamic middle-income country that has continued to persevere in food security today.

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