Bridging the information gap for ethnic minority households in remote areas: A pathway to sustainable poverty reduction in Phu Tho province

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Abstract:

This article explores how unequal access to information continues to affect poverty reduction efforts among ethnic minority communities in Phu Tho province, Vietnam. Although the province has achieved significant progress in reducing multidimensional poverty, many poor ethnic minority households in remote and mountainous areas still face difficulties in accessing timely, reliable, and relevant information. Limited connectivity, low digital literacy, reliance on traditional communication channels, and unequal access to public information restrict their ability to benefit from livelihood opportunities and government support programmes. The article argues that information should be viewed not only as a communication tool but also as a development resource that enables people to improve their livelihoods and participate more effectively in society. Bridging the information gap is therefore essential for achieving more inclusive and sustainable poverty reduction in the province.

The context of Phu Tho: Progress amid disparities

Located in Vietnam's Northern Midlands and Mountainous region, Phu Tho province is home to 34 ethnic groups, with ethnic minorities accounting for approximately 17 percent of the province's population. The major ethnic minority communities include the Muong, Dao, Hmong, and Cao Lan peoples, who primarily reside in remote and mountainous districts such as Tan Son, Thanh Son, Yen Lap. These areas often face multiple development challenges, including limited infrastructure, lower educational attainment, fewer employment opportunities, and reduced access to public services.

In recent years, the province has achieved notable progress in poverty reduction. However, these achievements have not been distributed evenly across the province. Significant disparities persist between urban and rural areas, as well as between lowland and mountainous districts. While the poverty rate in urban areas remains relatively low at around 0.8% , the corresponding figure in rural areas is substantially higher at 4.42%. Poverty is particularly concentrated among ethnic minority households living in remote communities, where access to development resources and economic opportunities remains limited.

Beyond income disparities, another less visible challenge persists in many poor ethnic minority communities: unequal access to information. While information has become an increasingly important resource in the digital age, not all households benefit equally from expanding communication technologies and public information systems. This information divide is particularly evident among poor ethnic minority households living in remote areas of Phu Tho province.

Why information matters for poverty reduction

Information is more than a tool for communication. It is a critical resource that shapes people's ability to improve their livelihoods and participate in development processes. For poor households, access to timely, accurate, and relevant information can open pathways to education, employment, public services, and economic opportunities. Conversely, limited access to information can deepen existing disadvantages and reinforce cycles of poverty.

In Phu Tho Province, many poor ethnic minority households continue to face difficulties in obtaining information on market prices, agricultural techniques, vocational training programmes, job opportunities, and government support policies. Without access to such information, households are less able to make informed decisions about production, investment, and livelihood diversification. They may struggle to identify profitable crops, adopt new technologies, or respond effectively to changes in market demand.

Limited access to information also reduces the effectiveness of poverty reduction programmes. When households are unaware of available support schemes, eligibility criteria, or application procedures, they may fail to benefit from social assistance, concessional credit, healthcare services, or vocational training opportunities. As a result, the intended impact of public policies may not fully reach the people who need them most.

The relationship between information access and poverty is mutually reinforcing. Low income constrains households' ability to invest in digital devices, internet services, and digital skills, while inadequate access to information limits their opportunities to increase income and improve their living standards. This cycle is particularly evident among ethnic minority communities in remote areas, where geographic isolation, lower educational attainment, and limited digital literacy further restrict access to information.

Bridging the information gap is therefore essential for achieving sustainable poverty reduction. Ensuring that poor households can access and effectively use information is not only a matter of digital inclusion but also a means of expanding capabilities, strengthening resilience, and creating more equitable opportunities for development.

The information gap: Current situation

Although access to information has improved considerably in recent years, significant gaps remain among poor ethnic minority households in Phu Tho Province, particularly those living in remote and mountainous areas. For many ethnic minority communities, access to timely, reliable, and relevant information continues to be constrained by a combination of geographic, economic, technological, and educational barriers.

One of the most persistent challenges is the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure. While telecommunications networks and internet services have expanded across the province, connectivity remains unstable in many mountainous districts. Weak mobile signals, limited broadband coverage, and unreliable electricity supplies reduce the ability of households to access information consistently and benefit from digital services.

In addition, for many ethnic minority households, traditional channels remain the primary sources of information. Television, commune loudspeaker systems, village meetings, and information shared through family members, neighbours, and local officials continue to play a central role in daily communication. These channels are often perceived as more accessible and trustworthy than digital platforms, particularly among older residents and individuals with limited educational backgrounds. However, information obtained through word-of-mouth networks, relatives, or acquaintances may not always be accurate, complete, or up to date, increasing the risk of misinformation and misunderstanding.

The effectiveness of official communication channels also varies considerably. Commune loudspeaker systems, printed materials, and local information campaigns continue to play an important role, but they often suffer from irregular operation, outdated content, and limited coverage. Information on poverty reduction programmes, social assistance, vocational training, and livelihood opportunities is not always communicated in a timely, accessible, or user-friendly manner.

Economic constraints further widen the information divide. Many poor households cannot afford smartphones, computers, or stable internet subscriptions. Even when digital devices are available, they are often used primarily for basic communication rather than for accessing information related to livelihoods, education, healthcare, or government support programmes. Rising living costs mean that expenditures on digital connectivity are frequently considered less urgent than other essential needs.

At the same time, digital literacy remains limited, especially among older adults, women. Many people lack the skills needed to search for, evaluate, and apply information effectively. Accessing online public services, using digital learning platforms, or obtaining market information remains challenging for households with low levels of education and limited experience with digital technologies.

What is being done to bridge the information gap?

Recognising the importance of information access in poverty reduction, both the Vietnamese government and local authorities in Phu Tho province have implemented a range of initiatives to expand connectivity and promote digital inclusion among vulnerable communities.

In recent years, investments in telecommunications infrastructure have contributed to broader 3G and 4G network coverage across rural and mountainous areas. Public funding and universal telecommunications policies have helped improve internet access, while ongoing digital transformation programmes aim to enhance the availability of online public services and strengthen digital governance at the local level.

The province has also participated in the Public Telecommunications Service Programme, which provides financial support for telecommunications services to poor and near-poor households. Subsidies for mobile and internet services have reduced some of the financial barriers to connectivity, enabling thousands of low-income households to access essential communication services. At the same time, community digital technology groups have been established in many communes to assist residents in using smartphones, accessing online public services, and developing basic digital skills.

Traditional communication channels continue to play an important role alongside digital platforms. Commune loudspeaker systems, local meetings, and the active involvement of village leaders, mass organisations, and local officials remain essential for disseminating information on poverty reduction policies, healthcare, education, vocational training, and livelihood support programmes. Increasingly, social media platforms and community-based Zalo groups are being used to deliver information more quickly and interactively.

Conclusion

For many poor ethnic minority households in remote areas of Phu Tho province, poverty is not only a matter of limited income but also limited access to information. As Vietnam advances its digital transformation agenda, ensuring that vulnerable communities can access and use information effectively must become a development priority. Bridging the information gap will not solve poverty overnight, but it can empower people to seize opportunities, access essential services, and build more sustainable livelihoods. To achieve truly inclusive development, no one should be left behind in the information age.