

Land Policy in Vietnam: Service Land as a Compensation Mechanism

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Abstract

In recent years, land acquisition for industrialization and urbanization in Vietnam has profoundly affected communities. Despite ongoing compensation and support policies to stabilize livelihoods, the land issue remains complex and sensitive. This study examines the emergence and evolution of the service land policy, a national government land compensation approach implemented from 2004 to 2008. An ethnographic study of two peri-urban villages in Hanoi examines the effects of administrative boundary changes on land-use allocation for service purposes and residents' responses to new land management mechanisms. Drawing on long-term fieldwork from 2008 to 2024, along with policy documents, the research uncovers the intricate interplay between state intervention and market forces in Vietnam's land system in the delivery of compensation to impacted communities. The findings highlight its hybrid nature, in which blurred boundaries between the state and the market shape compensation and support policies. While the service land policy is a local government initiative to stabilize displaced farmers' livelihoods, its implementation has faced significant challenges due to overlapping policies and administrative restructuring.

Keywords

Hanoi; land acquisition; service land; urbanization; Vietnam

Introduction

Land plays a crucial role in investment effectiveness, industrialization, and urbanization. Beyond its value as an asset, land is a natural resource, a means of production, and a primary source of livelihood. Thus, land acquisition projects must not only compensate those affected for the land's value but also provide livelihood support to ensure long-term stability.

Vietnam's comprehensive legal framework governing land acquisition, compensation, and support is shaped by various factors, including Communist Party policies, the consistency and evolution of land laws, economic management mechanisms, societal customs, and public awareness (Dong, 2020). Emphasizing the maintenance of state authority in land market regulation, Phan and Spitzer (2022) and Hoang (2024) argued that Vietnam's approach to land expropriation is grounded in the principle that land constitutes public property, managed by the state on behalf of the people. This principle, they noted, is a defining feature of socialist countries such as Vietnam and China (Linh et al., 2018). Vietnam's state policies on land compensation have been progressively developed and adjusted to align with the developing market economy through successive Land Laws (National Assembly of Vietnam, 1987, 1993, 2003, 2013, 2024) and related legal documents since the post-1986 Reform period, to balance practical implementation with scientific rigor to safeguard the rights of land users.

Despite ongoing improvements, the current land acquisition regulations still have significant limitations. Compensation for land acquisition has prioritized quantity over quality (Phong, 2007). Challenges include inconsistent conversion mechanisms, inadequate pricing, and limited livelihood support (Chinh et al., 2013; Suu, 2014; Tuyen et al., 2014a, 2014b; Vu et al., 2017), raising concerns about the sustainability of development policies (Phuc et al., 2015). The impact on affected residents varies significantly. In Hanoi's suburbs, some expressed satisfaction with urban integration (Labbé, 2014, 2015; Suu, 2014), while others experienced declines in quality of life, prolonged land disputes, and various other grievances (Han & Vu, 2008; Phong, 2007; Tuan, 2021).

Case studies on land protests show that forced land acquisition is a significant cause of disputes, with low compensation and delayed payments leading to various reactions from farmers (Binh, 2017; Chau, 2019; Han & Vu, 2008; Kerkvliet, 2009; Phuc et al., 2015). For example, Chau (2019) and Phuc (2023) argued that changes in local government decisions on land do not come from farmers' "everyday forms of resistance", but rather from open resistance through collective action. These analyses suggest that when farmers plan and carry out protests proactively, they always take fluctuations of state power into account when calculating risks and benefits. The perspective differs from Kerkvliet's (2009) conclusion that everyday resistance in Vietnam has affected government policy.

Despite extensive research on land compensation and livelihood impacts in Vietnam, there appears to be a lack of comprehensive examination of the implementation and outcomes of specific land support policies in Hanoi's suburban areas. This gap in the current literature has motivated me to conduct a study specifically on how the land support policy known as *đất dịch vụ* [service land] introduced in the years 2000–2008 amid increasing land-related complaints in the peri-urban area of Hanoi, has been implemented. Legally, the service land policy is primarily regulated by the Government of Vietnam through two decrees issued in 2006 and 2007. Still, its origins can be traced to Vinh Phuc province's 2004 land support

initiative, which later informed the state's land acquisition strategy (Government of Vietnam, 2006, 2007).

In the literature, the concept of service land remains contested. Quang and Kim (2020) defined "service land as a part of the area acquired by the government in the land acquisition process that will be developed into housing land with basic facilities such as roads, pavements, water, and electricity facilities, and will be redistributed to land-lost households as part of the compensation value" (p. 6). By contrast, Fanchette et al. (2018) explained service land – 10% of the land – as land compensation suitable for construction, corresponding to 10% of the expropriated farmland, which those holding it resell, sometimes without title deeds. These differing views indicate that service land cannot be reduced to a single technical definition but reflects competing interpretations of its legal, economic, and social functions.

This lack of conceptual clarity not only reveals disagreement within the academic community but also signals the need for further inquiry into how service land operates in practice and how its meanings are negotiated among different stakeholders. This study adheres to the legal provisions on service land stipulated in Article 48 of "84/2007/ND-CP, which provided that [those] who do not wish to receive compensation in the form of production land, will be compensated with residential land (also known as service land) with land use fees at resettlement areas or locations within residential areas by planning." Grounding the analysis in this legal framework allows for a clear delineation of the study's subjects, scope, and content.

Scholarly debates highlighted both the potential and limitations of Vietnam's service land policy. While service land allocation helps people transform their livelihood, providing welfare and social insurance for land-losing households (Asian Development Bank, 2007; Chinh et al., 2013; Nghia & Khanh, 2017; Tuyen et al., 2014a, 2014b), it has also been criticized for reinforcing inequality and creating new conflicts (Asian Development Bank, 2007; World Bank, 2009). However, existing studies seem to ignore the specific methods of policy implementation, leaving a gap that this study aims to address.

Against this backdrop, this ethnographic study takes up this challenge by examining the implementation of the service land policy in Thuong and Dua villages. The article situates the analysis within the broader framework of Vietnam's land laws, tracing the origins and evolution of the service land policy and its application in Vinh Phuc province and Hanoi. I argue that service land is not merely a compensation mechanism but a dynamic arena of negotiation, contestation, and administrative transformation. It asks whether the policy effectively reconciles development-driven land acquisition with livelihood protection at both national and local levels, and how changes in administrative boundaries have influenced allocation for service land in the two villages. Before addressing these questions, I first outline the research methodology, evaluate land development policies in Me Linh district, Vinh Phuc province, during the 2000s, and then examine land use changes at the study sites.

Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Thuong and Dua villages at different times, including March to April 2008, July 2012, July 2017, and April 2024, to examine the impacts of industrialization and urbanization on local economic and social life through land acquisition policies. During the 2008, 2012, and 2017 research periods, data collection primarily involved

participant observation and in-depth interviews with residents to understand how compensation and support policies influenced livelihoods. Residents' perspectives on urbanization and Hanoi's administrative merger (August 1, 2008) were also explored. The April 2024 follow-up survey specifically examined ongoing land-related changes, particularly issues surrounding service land.

Supplementary statistical data and official documents from local authorities were collected to strengthen the qualitative analysis. To situate these changes within a broader legal and historical context, I reviewed Vietnam's Land Laws and related policy documents to track the evolution of their content and academic discourse over time. Current information regarding service land policy and its implementation was also gathered and referenced from domestic online sources.

Through this integration of multiple research methods, I aimed to produce a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of economic, social, and political transformations spanning more than two decades. This methodological approach was crucial, if not indispensable, for illuminating the processes that lead to particular outcomes (Hy, 2020). It examined the dynamics of land-related changes, including evolving legal frameworks for land acquisition and compensation mechanisms, as well as residents' responses to land policies.

Fieldwork challenges frequently stemmed from my outsider status in communities undergoing significant change. The same difficulty for researchers has been mentioned by Kerkvliet (2009) and Chau (2019) in their analyses of local responses to contemporary land issues in Vietnam. Sometimes, in my field trips, villagers expressed wariness about my presence. They assumed I was a journalist, even though I provided documentation proving my research role. Conversely, others considered my research an opportunity to voice their concerns, sharing information in the hope that my findings would help them communicate their grievances to local authorities and contribute to resolving land-related issues.

In addition to traditional research methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, this study incorporated AI ChatGPT to assist with translation and textual refinement and to enhance academic rigor. During the Vietnamese-English translation process, AI was employed using specific commands, such as "Translate the following content into academic English" and "Rewrite the following passage for clarity and conciseness." This application demonstrates AI's growing utility for improving the precision and coherence of academic writing. However, this translation is only a preliminary version. Subsequent drafts were edited and proofread by the article's author and supporting expert, thereby ensuring the accuracy and scholarly clarity of the final.

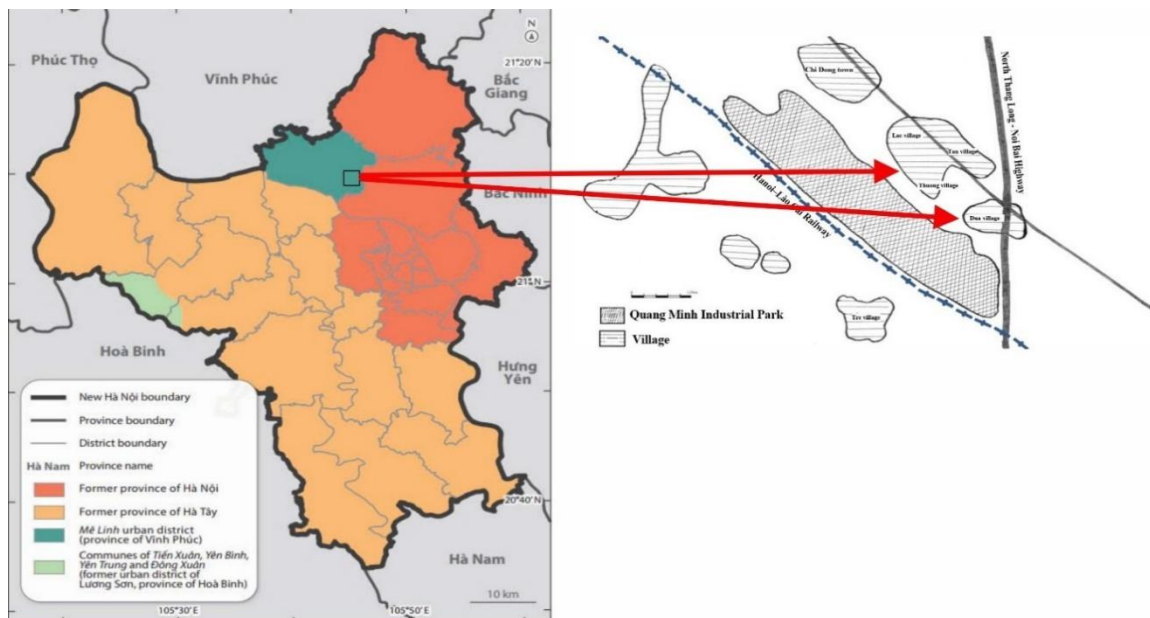
Research ethics

The studies were carried out in accordance with good research practice, meaning that fundamental ethical research principles, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were observed. The research ethics and study protocol were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU (Code number: XHNV-130).

Background

Scholars have noted that the suburban areas of Hanoi, unlike those of other Vietnamese cities, have continually undergone administrative boundary adjustments and changing policies for economic and social development (Cham & Phuong, 2016; Fanchette, 2018). Consequently, Hanoi's suburban villages offer a unique context for examining transformations in administrative boundaries alongside economic, societal, and cultural changes driven by industrialization and urbanization. The research sites, Thuong and Dua villages, were part of Quang Minh commune in Me Linh district, Vinh Phuc province, before 2008. The names of the villages in the study have been changed to protect the privacy of the informants and the community. With the August 1, 2008, merger of Ha Tay province and Me Linh district into Hanoi city, Quang Minh commune was divided into two towns: Chi Dong and Quang Minh. Thuong village became residential Groups 4 and 5, while Dua village was changed to residential Groups 6 and 7 within Quang Minh town, Me Linh district, Hanoi city (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Location of Two Study Villages (In the space of Hanoi)



Note: Originally designed by MUSIL C., from the Vietnam Ministry of Construction data and adapted from Fanchette (2018).

From 1997 to 2007, before its incorporation into Hanoi, Me Linh district underwent significant land-use changes in line with Vinh Phuc's 1997–2010 industrial development plan. In 2002, the Vinh Phuc provincial government designated Quang Minh commune as a key area for industry, urban services, and socio-economic development in the province's southeastern region. This decision capitalized on its favorable location near the airport and the highway connecting the city to the airport, as well as its land potential.

The provincial government sought to attract investment by promoting industrial zones and newly developed urban areas as symbols of modernization. This initiative reshaped local livelihoods, shifting residents from agricultural work to non-agricultural employment and urbanized lifestyles. Thuong and Dua villages were designated as key areas within what would become Quang Minh Industrial Park, leading to extensive land acquisition for urban, residential, and commercial development (Figure 1). This industrial- and service-oriented

planning transformed the villages into market-town spaces adjacent to the industrial park and urban centers. It facilitated industrial and urban expansion while also serving as support hubs for the industrial park, demonstrating the interdependence between industrial development and surrounding village communities.

Land acquisition in Thuong and Dua villages has always been carried out within national government policy frameworks, further refined in regulations issued by Vinh Phuc province. Acquisition in these villages occurred rapidly and extensively between 2001 and 2005 under a compulsory mechanism that applied uniform compensation rates across all types of land within the acquisition projects (Table 1). From 2006 until the August 2008 merger with Hanoi, land acquisition in the two villages employed a dual compulsory–voluntary approach, with the voluntary mechanism giving residents a voice in negotiating compensation rates and types of land support.

Table 1: Compensation and Support for Grade 1 Agricultural Land in Dua Village in 2005

No.	Compensation and support	Amount (VND/m ²)
1	Land use rights	25,000
2	Compensation for crops (Cultivated land plots)	9,028
3	Career transition support	3,800
4	Livelihood stabilization support	7,851
5	Incentive for rapid land clearance	2,000
6	Other support (Depending on land area)	3,359

Note: Compiled by the author from the Me Linh district land clearance plan; 1 USD = 15,830 VND (August 2005).

Although Vietnam's Land Law granted Vinh Phuc province flexibility in land use conversion across Me Linh district, compensation and land support remained low at 12–18 million VND/sào (360 m²). By contrast, Dong Anh and Soc Son districts of Hanoi, which both share administrative boundaries with Me Linh district, had compensation and support levels of up to 80 million VND /sào. This substantial disparity created significant challenges in Me Linh's land recovery and compensation processes before its incorporation into Hanoi.

From a management perspective, the 2003 Land Law's compensation valuation mechanism was not entirely objective. Compensation and support policies in Thuong and Dua villages depended not only on national land valuation mechanisms but also on decisions made by the provincial People's Committee, which held authority over land value appraisals and expropriation approvals. As agricultural land users, Thuong and Dua villagers consistently occupied a disadvantaged position regarding policy benefits, being excluded from participation in planning, policy development, or decision-making related to land recovery, compensation, and support. This dynamic illustrates the essence of the compulsory land acquisition mechanism.

The emergence and development of the service land

As outlined above, immediately following the redevelopment of Vinh Phuc province in 1997, the provincial leadership prioritized industrialization and service development as primary economic growth objectives. Authorities identified Me Linh district, particularly Quang Minh commune, as a strategically advantageous area to “roll out the red carpet” to attract investment. Flexibility in land use conversion has facilitated the extensive acquisition of

agricultural land in Quang Minh commune. However, compensation rates for residents remained relatively low compared to those in adjacent areas of Hanoi, prompting various forms of resident opposition toward authorities and investors involved in land transactions.

In 2004, Vinh Phuc Province proposed a significant solution: the Service Land Support Policy to help affected residents stabilize their livelihoods. Resolution 15/2004/NQ-HĐ dated April 25, 2004 stipulated that households whose agricultural land is expropriated for the development of industrial zones and urban services, and who fully comply with regulations on compensation and site clearance, shall be allocated land designated for service use (Vinh Phuc Province, 2004). This policy established service land as partial compensation for agricultural land transferred to development projects. The resolution further specifies that for every sào (equivalent to 360 m²) of agricultural land expropriated, the household is entitled to 10 m² of service land, with a maximum allocation not exceeding 100 m² per household.

Before implementing this policy province-wide, Vinh Phuc issued Decision No. 2502/2004/QĐ-UB (Vinh Phuc Provincial People's Council, 2004), initiating a pilot program for the allocation of service land in Quang Minh commune. This pilot program provided provincial authorities with a foundation for reviewing, refining, and adjusting the policy for broader application across the province.

In Quang Minh commune, the service land policy aimed to assist residents aged 35 or older who were unlikely to secure employment in industrial zones by providing alternative income sources after losing their agricultural land. The policy was further refined through decisions issued in 2006 and 2008, leading to province-wide implementation. By the end of 2007, Vinh Phuc had completed the planning and designation of 31 service land sites throughout the province, including Thuong village, where basic infrastructure had been completed to facilitate land allocation (Me Linh District TN&MT Center, 2007).

However, when Me Linh district ceased to be a part of Vinh Phuc province in 2008, most of the designated service land sites had not yet secured the necessary land resources, making it impossible to allocate service land to affected households. Although Me Linh was the service land policy's pilot district, its incorporation into Hanoi delayed the policy's implementation. As shown in Figure 1, by 2023, Me Linh district had still not completed land allocation, unlike other districts in Vinh Phuc province, which had completed the process (Me Linh District People's Committee, 2023).

After Me Linh's incorporation into Hanoi, the municipal government mandated continued adherence to Vinh Phuc's service land commitments within the district, maintaining the original regulations for identifying eligible beneficiaries, the implementation timeline, and land allocation limits. Under the close supervision of Hanoi's municipal government, Me Linh successfully allocated service land to residents in Thuong village in 2016, eight years after incorporation. However, in several other villages within Quang Minh town, including Dua village, implementation of the policy remains incomplete. The following section examines the underlying causes of these delays.

Service land emerged as an innovative policy tool designed by Vinh Phuc province to facilitate compensation and land clearance while addressing the challenges faced by affected communities transitioning from agricultural livelihoods to industrial, commercial, and service-oriented activities. Que (2008) noted that by implementing the service land allocation policy during land expropriation for industrial development, Vinh Phuc province has provided a valuable lesson in land clearance for the national government. The experience of

implementing the service land policy during land expropriation in Vinh Phuc province was subsequently adopted and expanded nationwide by the national government. Article 4 of Decree 17/2006/ND-CP stipulated that “households and individuals primarily engaged in agriculture whose land is expropriated by more than 30% eligible for career transition and job creation in the form of land allocation.” Allocation decisions are made by the provincial People’s Committee, based on land availability and the extent of each case of expropriation.

Since 2008, Vietnam’s land-related legal framework has not introduced any new regulations or guidelines on the service land policy. This implies that service land support emerged as a specific solution to the 2000–2008 land disputes. However, implementation remained limited, as most regions deemed the approach unsuitable due to substantial agricultural land conversion requirements. As the World Bank (2009) noted, although the above solution appears beneficial, it requires careful planning and integration into land-use frameworks to improve feasibility. Although the legal documents governing the service land policy are no longer effective nationwide, Hanoi continues to address service land allocation in areas annexed during the 2008 expansion.

Service land policy implementation in two villages

As mentioned above, the land acquisition process in Thuong and Dua villages occurred rapidly between 2001 and 2005. Residents of both villages witnessed significant land use changes and faced the challenge of adapting to life without traditional agricultural livelihoods. Their most pressing concern, however, remained land compensation. Villagers commonly perceived that state-regulated compensation prices fell substantially below local market values for land transactions. Additionally, the compensation process exhibited inconsistencies and lacked transparency for households affected by land expropriation.

The July 2004 pilot implementation of the Service Land Policy in Quang Minh commune helped alleviate initial public concerns regarding land expropriation and occupational transition, fostering reassurance and optimism among residents (Mr. Đang, retired local official, Dua village, 2017). Residents of both villages acknowledged the economic potential of service land. As Mr. Mong explained:

Service land refers to a percentage of the land transferred for industrial zone development, designated for residential construction or resale. This land was allocated to favorable locations and granted rights similar to those of residential land. It served as a form of support for workers who are either beyond working age or lack the necessary qualifications to be employed in factories and enterprises.

(Mong, resident, Dua village, 2012)

While the loss of agricultural land significantly disrupted livelihoods in Thuong and Dua villages, the service land policy proved instrumental in shaping residents’ adaptation strategies. By addressing concerns about land expropriation and occupational transition, the policy fostered reassurance and optimism within the community. Residents particularly valued the service land’s economic potential as an alternative source of income. As local authorities continued to implement and adjust the policy over time, residents’ perceptions and livelihood strategies evolved from initial uncertainty to proactive engagement with the opportunities offered by service land allocation.

Successful implementation in Thuong village

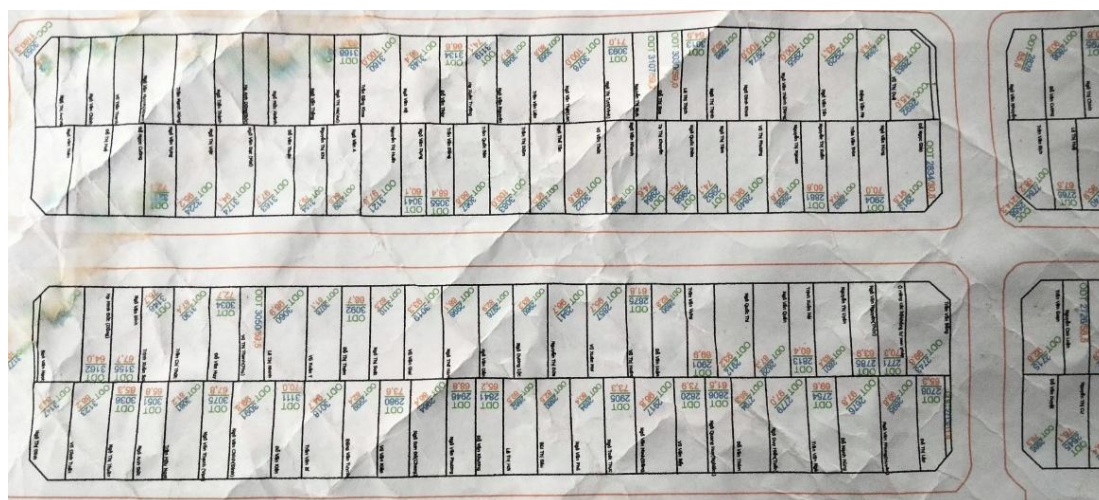
During the land recovery process for the construction of the Quang Minh Industrial Park, most households in Thuong village lost over 80% of their agricultural land, leaving many families landless with fragmented, scattered remaining plots. According to Vinh Phuc Provincial People's Committee's Document No. 2502/2004 on the pilot implementation of the service land support policy in Quang Minh commune, 276 Thuong village households were eligible for compensation (Vinh Phuc Provincial People's Council, 2004). The designated service land site opposite Quang Minh Industrial Park (Figure 1) was approximately 80% cleared, with previous owners compensated before Thuong village was incorporated into Hanoi. Following the incorporation, Hanoi authorities systematically reviewed and verified the data while gradually transferring service land to residents in accordance with Vinh Phuc province's original regulations.

A rigorous legal process was established to allocate service land to residents of Thuong village, involving the formation of relevant stakeholders, a multi-step evaluation process, and public disclosure of the land selection procedures for individual households. By 2016, the implementation of the service land support policy in Thuong village was completed. Each household was issued a land use certificate, known as a "Pink Book" [*Sổ hồng*], with the following information:

- + Use type: Shared use (for two households sharing a single plot)
- + Duration of use: Permanent
- + Purpose of use: Service land

Figure 2 shows part of the service land in Thuong village, illustrating two service land areas, each consisting of multiple plots of varying sizes. According to Resolution 15/2004/NQ-HĐ issued by Vinh Phuc province in 2004, each service land plot must have a minimum area of 60 m² and a maximum of 100 m². If a household is allocated a service land plot smaller than 60 m², it must be merged with another household's plot to meet the required size; consequently, many Pink Books list joint ownership, requiring mutual consent for purchases or transfers.

Figure 2: Map of Service Land Allocation in Thuong Village



Note: This map has been distributed to local officials as a basis for reviewing, verifying, allocating, and distributing service land to households in Thuong village in 2016. Compiled by the author from interviews with Thuong village officials, 2024.

Furthermore, regulations explicitly state that service land was designated solely for business and commercial purposes. Since most households in Thuong village had no business needs, many chose to transfer or sell their service land to others. As a result, the area rapidly evolved into a dynamic real estate market, generating economic opportunities and potential benefits for local households.

Depending on the location, land prices range from 7.5 to 12 million VND/m², with prime locations at 40-55 million VND/m². Field research conducted in 2017 and 2024 indicates that this site transformed from a rice field into a new residential zone featuring various types of modern housing during those years. A wide range of business and service activities has emerged to cater directly to the dining and entertainment needs of industrial workers and residents from neighboring villages. However, not all service land plots offer households the same potential or real estate value. This was anticipated by the Asian Development Bank as early as 2007, when this policy was being effectively implemented across various regions of Vinh Phuc province and former Ha Tay province.

Service land in Dua village: 20 years of waiting

Dua village presents a contrasting case of service land policy implementation (Table 2). Although it is geographically proximate to Quang Minh Industrial Park, like Thuong village, its service land was initially planned to be adjacent to residential and commercial areas, which are key components of Quang Minh town's spatial development as articulated by Vinh Phuc province since 2004. This designated area lies approximately one kilometer east of Quang Minh Industrial Park.

The 2007 development plan outlined 17 residential zones, with supporting infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals, spanning 83,563 m² and intended to accommodate around 900 households. Dua village's land allocation was scheduled for October 2007. However, Dua village's incorporation into Hanoi in 2008 led to the suspension of the plan and its associated policies. This caused multiple delays, directly affecting residents like Tuyen, whose family lost 3,099.2 m² (78.8%) of land during the construction of the Industrial Park in 2003–2004. Although entitled to 100 m² of service land, by 2017, his family had yet to receive information about its location, preventing them from using it for business purposes (Tuyen, 65 years old, 2017).

The suspension of service land allocation in Dua village has prompted persistent and organized resident responses through community meetings, voter engagement sessions, and local events. A collective of concerned residents engaged in peaceful, lawful advocacy to assert their rights and entitlements, drawing notable media attention (Ngoc, 2023), with news outlets characterizing the unresolved land policy as a "difficult puzzle," "knotty problem," and "as tangled as chopped chives" (Hoa, 2012; Nghia & Khanh, 2017). In response, authorities at both district and municipal levels revised related policies between 2013 and 2023. These changes aimed to address residents' grievances while adapting to evolving land use conditions, reflecting a broader shift in governance strategies and the refinement of service land policies across all administrative levels.

In late April 2023, Dua's villagers were abuzz with news that the national government and the Hanoi municipal authorities had issued an official document approving the reallocation of service land to the residents of nine communes and townships in Me Linh district. Official documents announcing and overseeing the implementation of the service land support policy have been continuously issued by municipal and district authorities.

The everyday conversations of Dua villagers during communal gatherings shifted from discussing complaint letters or debating the economic value of service land in Thuong village to anticipating their own allocation timelines and processes:

After nearly 20 years of waiting for service land allocation – one-third of a lifetime – we acknowledge that the process cannot be immediate. However, recent decisive policy directives at various levels of government inspire confidence that the issue will now be resolved.

(Giang, cadre, Dua village, 2024)

On August 11, 2023, Me Linh District issued Project No. 15-ĐA/HU regarding the allocation of service land to households and individuals. The project attributed the delays in land distribution to policy inconsistencies between Hanoi and Vinh Phuc province following Me Linh's incorporation into the capital. It highlights the district authorities' ongoing efforts to secure a special mechanism for addressing service land issues from Vinh Phuc's re-establishment in 1997 to Me Linh's integration into Hanoi in 2008. To implement the project, Me Linh district held conferences to disseminate information across multiple villages, engaging all local government authorities.

By September 2023, Project No. 15-ĐA/HU restructured Dua village's service land site and relocated it to a site adjacent to Thuong village's service land site. This adjustment improved location, infrastructure, and connectivity with Thuong's existing development while enhancing the local real estate market. By 2024, site clearance was completed, and roads and electrical systems were installed.

Project No. 15-ĐA/HU explicitly states that the allocation of service land to residents of Dua village will be carried out in phases. In 2024, site review, adjustments, and basic infrastructure construction will be completed. From 2025 onward, infrastructure development will continue, followed by organized land allocation to residents.

According to Project No. 15, before individuals and households in Dua village receive service land, they must fulfill all financial obligations, including infrastructure investments, as stipulated by current legal regulations. Upon satisfying these requirements, they will be granted on-site land parcels and issued Land Use Rights Certificates ("Pink Books"). This land will be classified as residential service land [*đất dân cư dịch vụ*], designated for long-term combined residential and service-related use. Although numerous administrative procedures remain under review, villagers have expressed their willingness to comply with financial obligations when requested by local authorities.

A notable aspect of Project No. 15 was the expansion of the original service land [*đất dịch vụ*] concept to residential service land [*đất dân cư dịch vụ*]. Previous regulations issued by Vinh Phuc province and Government of Vietnam decrees from 2006 and 2007 defined service land as small land parcels allocated to households that had lost access to agricultural land, enabling them to establish small-scale commercial enterprises or build rental housing – an economic

safety net particularly crucial for elderly, landless households transitioning from agriculture to non-agricultural activities in Hanoi's suburbs (Tuyen et al., 2014a).

However, a key limitation of service land is that it is designated for business and service activities, but permanent housing construction is not permitted. This explains why Thuong village's service land site, despite some multi-story tube houses, predominantly features temporary structures intended for commercial use. In-depth interviews conducted in 2024 revealed that some individuals and households have exploited legal loopholes to obtain informal permanent housing construction permits from local authorities, not only for residential purposes but also for commercial residential use.

Project No. 15 in Me Linh District eliminates this restriction, permitting both business operations and permanent housing under the expanded residential service land designation. Dua villagers view this policy positively, given its success in neighboring Thuong village, and consider it both socially responsive and aligned with their aspirations.

After nearly 20 years of land disputes and policy changes, many elderly farmers never benefited from eventual land allocations, as they had aged or passed away. While Dua villagers remain unsure of the exact locations of their designated service land parcels, they acknowledge the authorities' renewed commitment and express cautious optimism about the practical implementation of the revised land policy.

Table 2: Summary of Main Problems Identified in the Two Case Studies

Background/ Timescale	Dua Village	Thuong Village
1990s	The village, situated within the administrative boundaries of Me Linh district in Vinh Phuc province, was characterized as a traditional agricultural settlement.	The village shares a similar socio-cultural and historical context with Dua village.
From 1997 to 2000	A part of the village's agricultural land was expropriated for the construction of the Bac Thang Long - Noi Bai Expressway.	
From 2001 to 2008	Between 2001 and 2008, about 85% of agricultural land was officially taken away for industrial, urban, and commercial development. This triggered widespread petitions and protests, marking a turning point in both livelihood transformation and state-society dynamics. Since 2004, the locality has been designated by Vinh Phuc province as a pilot site for implementing the service land support policy. The planned service land is near residential areas and villa compounds, approximately one kilometer east of the village center.	Approximately 80% of the total agricultural land was expropriated to establish an industrial zone as part of the broader process of industrialization and urban development. Thuong village's service land has been planned on the village's periphery, directly adjacent to the industrial zone.

Background/ Timescale	Dua Village	Thuong Village
On August 1, 2008, both Thuong and Dua villages were administratively incorporated into the capital city of Hanoi, with their status transformed from villages to urban residential quarters (<i>tổ dân phố</i>), marking a significant step in the broader process of urbanization.		
From 2009 to 2022	The implementation of the service land support policy remained stalled, resulting in prolonged petitions and grievances among residents	Thuong village completed the allocation of service land to residents in 2016, after which the area rapidly transformed into a vibrant residential quarter with an active real estate market.
From 2023 to 2025	The Hanoi municipal government revised the planning of Dua village's service land, relocating it adjacent to the service land of Thuong village. The area is currently undergoing infrastructure construction and a review of eligible beneficiaries for land allocation.	

Note: Authors' fieldwork data

Factors affecting the implementation of the service land policy

Fieldwork in Thuong and Dua villages provided valuable insights into the gap between design and implementation of the service land policy in Me Linh district since Hanoi's expansion in 2008. Several key factors have affected the implementation of this policy:

Administrative changes

The merger with Hanoi created policy overlaps and delays in implementing the service land policy. Differing interpretations by the Me Linh district and the Hanoi municipal government, coupled with their failure to reach a consensus, further complicated implementation. Me Linh district authorities confirmed that after the merger, the Hanoi municipal government allocated service land only to households in Quang Minh town whose agricultural land was acquired before Vinh Phuc's Decision No. 2502/2004/QĐ-UB took effect. The policy was not extended to subsequent cases until Decree 17/2006/ND-CP amended land regulations. To address this gap, Me Linh District People's Committee proposed integrating Vinh Phuc and national service land policies through a specialized mechanism for households affected during this period. This proposal underwent years of review and leadership changes before receiving approval from the national and Hanoi municipal governments in 2023, formalized as Project No. 15-ĐA/HU.

Hanoi municipal authorities previously rejected Me Linh district's justification for the shortfall, attributing the challenges in policy implementation to inconsistencies between Vinh Phuc and Hanoi's policies, criteria, and beneficiary definitions. Initially, Vinh Phuc allocated service land as supplementary support for households whose agricultural land was acquired for major state and infrastructure projects. Over time, eligibility expanded to include acquisitions for urban development and commercial purposes. However, after Me Linh's merger with Hanoi in 2008, specific service land sites – such as Dua village – were suspended for reevaluation due to conflicts with Hanoi's general construction plan, leading to inconsistent service land implementation with the original provincial plan.

Policy inconsistency

Regulatory changes to the service land policy, along with differing interpretations by the Me Linh district and Hanoi municipal authorities, created uncertainty over land allocation. Some villages, like Thuong, implemented the policy before 2008, while others, such as Dua, followed new municipal guidelines after incorporation into Hanoi. Although Vinh Phuc's flexible service land policy offered valuable insights for Vietnam's central government, its local implementation revealed limitations, leading to inconsistencies in interpretation, application, and enforcement across Me Linh district (Me Linh District TN&MT Center, 2007).

Many of the real estate projects initiated by private enterprises in Dua village since 2004 have failed to yield investment returns. The presence of incomplete residential and villa complexes, abandoned for nearly two decades, highlights the prolonged stagnation of the local real estate market. This underscores the inconsistencies and feasibility issues with the service land policy at the regional level and raises concerns about its effectiveness in promoting sustainable urban development.

The availability of the land fund

Another critical factor influencing the effectiveness of the service land policy implementation in the two case studies is the availability of the land fund. In the case of Dua village, the land fund for service land development was initially planned near areas designated for high-end housing projects and newly established urban zones. However, the stagnation of the local real estate market, which stalled these housing projects, emerged as an unforeseen latent factor that policymakers, local authorities, and residents alike could not anticipate. After more than a decade, together with shifts in administrative boundaries and policy adjustments, the service land area of Dua village had to be relocated to another site.

The fluctuations in land prices

In the study sites, rising land prices were driven by market demand, changes in administrative boundaries, and expectations of future investment. These dynamics produced a substantial gap between state-prescribed and market values, fueling disputes over compensation, grievances, and resident resistance. Between 2004 and 2008, when prices remained relatively stable, the service land policy was piloted, despite persistent shortcomings in planning and allocation. After 2008, administrative mergers and rapid urban expansion in Quang Minh commune, Me Linh district, triggered sharp price increases. Local authorities then faced mounting financial pressures in securing service land funds while also navigating the influence of real estate speculation and development.

As a consequence, implementing the service land policy was delayed. In Dua village, the relocation of the service land site from its original plan further undermined locals' perceptions of fairness. Moreover, wide disparities in the value of allocated plots created unequal benefits within the community, increasing social tensions.

Local negotiations

The factors mentioned above were not the only causes of prolonged delays and dissatisfaction with the land support policy in Thuong and Dua villages. It is not my intention to attribute these challenges in formulating or implementing land policies to the responsibility of

government agencies. Instead, I seek to clarify the genuine intentions of all stakeholders involved. Authorities perceive themselves as committed implementers of state directives, facilitating local urbanization and industrialization while remaining receptive to residents' resistance. Meanwhile, residents have sought fairer compensation, including financial and land support, to improve their livelihoods. Their experiences of waiting for service land allocation and engaging in land transactions have highlighted the considerable interplay between national and local governments in addressing land policies. The success of land policies depends on effectively balancing state directives, local governance, and community needs.

Effectiveness of the service land policy

While the service land policy has had a positive impact overall, its sustainability has been uncertain due to rapid shifts in state policy and real estate volatility. As indicated above, service land allocation in Thuong and Dua villages was shaped by overlapping policies, with the 2008 administrative boundary changes significantly affecting implementation and residents' livelihoods. These two villages were among the first in Vinh Phuc—and in Vietnam—to pilot the policy, showcasing the province's pioneering role in land expropriation compensation. The Asian Development Bank recognized Vinh Phuc's model as having broader applicability than resettlement approaches in Binh Duong and Da Nang (Asian Development Bank, 2007; Tuyen et al., 2014b).

Research by Chinh et al. (2013) and Tuyen et al. (2014a, 2014b) in several of Hanoi's suburban villages analyzed post-expropriation livelihood restoration strategies, highlighting the role of service land in improving household livelihoods. These studies identified the policy's "land-for-land" approach as particularly valuable, providing both assets and livelihood opportunities through business ventures or property leasing. The World Bank (2009) and subsequent studies emphasized how the strategic placement of service lands near industrial zones, coupled with planned infrastructure, facilitated non-agricultural economic activities (Dien et al., 2010; Quang & Kim, 2020).

Documented successes extend beyond the study area. Chau's (2017) research in Thai Binh province's Xuan village showed that households receiving service land parcels near industrial zones after losing over 30% of their farmland experienced significant land value appreciation, benefiting both residents and investors. Similarly, Thuong village's real estate growth and service sector development demonstrate the policy's effectiveness and popularity among residents.

However, implementation challenges persist, as discussed above. While service land allocation has been successful in Thuong village, its effectiveness in Dua village remains contested due to administrative changes, shifting policies, and inadequate planning. Dua's originally designated service land near high-end housing projects remained undeveloped due to real estate stagnation, requiring relocation over a decade later. These findings corroborate the concerns of the Asian Development Bank (2007) and World Bank (2009) about the policy's variable feasibility across regions due to overlapping land regulations.

Delays in service land allocation have exacerbated conflicts and inequalities. Some households received land in prime locations (such as corner plots), gaining advantages in property transfers and business operations, while others received less favorable plots. These trends are

consistent with findings on peri-urban land policies in Hanoi (Tuan & Hegedüs, 2022; Tuyen et al., 2014a).

Thuong and Dua villages represent distinct stages in the implementation of the service land policy within the context of industrialization and urbanization in Me Linh district. Despite shared resources and policies, environmental and land factors have critically influenced policy outcomes (Table 2). This is reflected in their differing service land allocation timelines: Thuong completed allocations between 2014 and 2016, while Dua's process remains ongoing, with allocations expected between 2023 and 2025 or later. The study discloses that administrative changes, rather than local contextual differences, have shaped land policy implementation and residents' responses in Hanoi's peri-urban areas.

Conclusion

This study has examined changes in Vietnam's Land Law and policy implementation by tracing the evolution of land management regulations since the Doi Moi reforms, with particular focus on the service land support policy from its inception (2004–2008) to its broader application (2008–2024). Through case studies of two villages in northern Hanoi experiencing shifting administrative boundaries, the research demonstrates that decentralized policy implementation has been ineffective despite formal recognition and integration into national guidelines. Although the policy was designed to balance social development with stability, inconsistencies in its implementation have undermined its core objective of safeguarding livelihoods affected by land expropriation.

Findings from Thuong and Dua villages reveal significant disparities: Thuong benefited from stable administration and effective negotiation, whereas Dua encountered delays and inefficiencies due to systemic inconsistencies. These challenges reflect broader issues in Me Linh district, where overlapping policies and changing boundaries hinder effective land development and may pose potential risks.

The 2004 pilot in Quang Minh commune illustrated local authorities' prioritization of fiscal returns over fair land distribution, as land expropriations frequently occurred at below-market compensation rates. This approach, driven by state and elite interests, spurred resident resistance and complicated investment.

Nationally, service land policy has evolved into a negotiated process involving multiple government levels and stakeholders. In Hanoi, post-2008 adjustments highlight the city's reliance on the Capital Master Plan and the need for cohesive governance. Nevertheless, administrative restructuring and regulatory ambiguities continue to fuel conflicts over compensation and expropriation, reflecting the complex transformation of rural communities amid urbanization.

By documenting the service land's complex and shifting dynamics in the two case studies, this article makes three contributions to the scholarly literature on land compensation policy in contemporary Vietnam. Firstly, such an in-depth analysis helps unpack the institutional complexity of land governance in a socialist market economy, offering insights that cannot be captured through simplified summaries. Secondly, the service land policy represents a distinctive mechanism for compensation and livelihood security, shedding light on how transitional economies balance state authority, market dynamics, and social welfare. Finally,

the Vietnamese case has broader comparative value: it illustrates how locally initiated policies can evolve into national strategies. Moving beyond previous scholarship, this study advances the field by systematically evaluating the methods used to implement service land support policy, including timelines, processes, and outcomes.

Future research should conduct cross-regional analyses, particularly in Hanoi's peri-urban areas and other rapidly urbanizing zones, to capture the varied dynamics of land policy implementation. Such comparative work remains essential for developing informed, context-sensitive strategies for managing industrialization and urban expansion while protecting community interests.

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