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Development Diplomacy and Ethnic Minority Transformation in Vietnam: The Role of Vietnam–U.S. Cooperation

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ABSTRACT: Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995, Vietnam–United States relations have expanded from post-war reconciliation toward comprehensive cooperation in education, healthcare, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Within this framework, ethnic minority regions in Vietnam became important areas of bilateral development engagement due to persistent socioeconomic inequalities and limited access to public services. This article examines the evolution of Vietnam–U.S. cooperation on ethnic minority development from 1995 to 2025. Using qualitative policy analysis, literature review, and comparative development approaches, the study analyzes policy transformation and evaluates the impacts of bilateral initiatives on ethnic minority communities. The findings indicate that Vietnam–U.S. cooperation contributed positively to educational access, poverty reduction, healthcare improvement, livelihood support, infrastructure expansion, and community empowerment in many ethnic minority regions. Bilateral programs also strengthened local services and created opportunities for human capital development. However, important challenges remain, including uneven regional outcomes, sustainability limitations, fragmented policy coordination, cultural mismatch, and unequal access to development resources. The article contributes to discussions on development diplomacy, inclusive development, and ethnic minority policy in Southeast Asia, arguing that effective cooperation requires culturally grounded, participatory, and sustainable approaches that address both structural inequality and long-term community empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Community development; Development cooperation; Development diplomacy; Ethnic minority development; Inclusive development; Vietnam; Vietnam–United States relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995, Vietnam–United States relations have undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a post-war reconciliation framework toward a multidimensional development partnership encompassing economic, educational, humanitarian, and social sectors. Over the past three decades, bilateral cooperation has expanded significantly beyond trade and security concerns to include sustainable development, public health, educational exchange, climate adaptation, and community development initiatives. Within this broader trajectory, ethnic minority development has gradually emerged as an increasingly important area of cooperation due to its close connection with poverty reduction, social inclusion, sustainable development, and regional stability in Vietnam's mountainous and remote areas (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018).

Vietnam is home to 53 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, accounting for approximately 14 percent of the national population. Most ethnic minority communities reside in mountainous, borderland, and geographically isolated regions where infrastructure limitations, poverty, educational inequality, and restricted access to healthcare remain persistent challenges (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs [CEMA], 2020). Although the Vietnamese government has implemented numerous development programs targeting ethnic minority regions since the post-reform period, substantial socioeconomic disparities between ethnic minorities and the Kinh majority continue to exist. According to the World Bank (2019), poverty rates among ethnic minority households remain significantly higher than the national average, while educational attainment, healthcare access, and income levels continue to lag behind national indicators.

The expansion of Vietnam–U.S. cooperation after 1995 created new opportunities for international development partnerships addressing these structural inequalities. Bilateral cooperation increasingly incorporated development assistance programs implemented through governmental agencies, international organizations, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Initiatives supported by organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Fulbright educational programs, and various international NGOs contributed to projects related to education, public health, sustainable livelihoods, environmental protection, and community capacity building in ethnic minority regions (USAID, 2021).

These programs reflected not only humanitarian and developmental objectives but also broader processes of development diplomacy and international engagement between the two countries.

The transformation of bilateral relations also coincided with Vietnam's deeper integration into global governance frameworks emphasizing inclusive development and sustainable growth. International development discourse increasingly promoted the principle of "leaving no one behind," particularly regarding vulnerable and marginalized populations living in remote areas (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). In this context, ethnic minority communities became an important focus of both domestic policy reforms and international development cooperation. Development cooperation was no longer limited to material assistance or infrastructure construction but gradually incorporated issues related to social participation, educational mobility, healthcare accessibility, cultural preservation, and local empowerment.

Despite these developments, the existing academic literature has predominantly concentrated on the diplomatic, geopolitical, and economic dimensions of Vietnam–United States relations. Numerous studies have examined trade liberalization, strategic cooperation, regional security, and the political normalization process between the two countries (Thayer, 2017, 2021; Vuving, 2021). Other scholars have focused on the economic consequences of bilateral trade agreements, foreign investment flows, and Vietnam's integration into global markets following normalization (Fforde, 2016). While these studies provide valuable insights into the broader transformation of bilateral relations, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the role of Vietnam–U.S. cooperation in ethnic minority development and community transformation.

At the same time, studies addressing ethnic minority issues in Vietnam have mainly focused on poverty, inequality, education, land access, and cultural preservation from domestic policy or sociological perspectives (Baulch et al., 2012; McElwee, 2004). Research examining ethnic minority development often emphasizes structural disadvantages associated with geography, language barriers, educational inequality, and uneven access to public services (Oxfam Vietnam, 2017). However, few studies have systematically analyzed how bilateral development cooperation contributed to policy transformation and social change within ethnic minority regions after 1995. Existing research tends to remain fragmented across sectors such as education, healthcare, or poverty reduction, without adequately connecting these initiatives to broader processes of international cooperation and development diplomacy.

This study addresses that gap by examining the evolution of Vietnam–United States cooperation on ethnic minority development since the normalization period. The article investigates how bilateral cooperation contributed to policy transformation in areas including education, healthcare, sustainable livelihoods, and community development, while also evaluating the broader social impacts experienced by ethnic minority communities. Rather than treating development cooperation solely as technical assistance, the study approaches bilateral programs as part of a wider process of development diplomacy in which social development initiatives also functioned as instruments of trust-building, institutional engagement, and long-term partnership formation between the two countries.

The article pursues three primary objectives. First, it analyzes the transformation of Vietnam–U.S. cooperation policies related to ethnic minority development since 1995. Second, it evaluates the impacts of bilateral cooperation on ethnic minority communities, particularly in relation to poverty reduction, educational access, healthcare improvement, and local empowerment. Third, the study examines the achievements and limitations of existing cooperation frameworks, including issues associated with sustainability, policy coordination, and unequal development outcomes.

To guide the analysis, the article addresses three research questions. First, how has Vietnam–U.S. cooperation on ethnic minority development evolved since 1995? Second, what policy transformations emerged from bilateral cooperation in ethnic minority regions? Third, what were the major community impacts and limitations associated with these development initiatives?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to several interconnected academic discussions. First, the article contributes to the literature on development diplomacy by illustrating how bilateral cooperation can function simultaneously as a development mechanism and a diplomatic instrument in post-conflict international relations. Second, the study expands scholarship on ethnic minority development in Vietnam by incorporating international cooperation and transnational development actors into the analysis. Third, the article contributes to broader debates on bilateral development cooperation in Southeast Asia, particularly regarding the relationship between inclusive development, local participation, and sustainable social transformation in marginalized communities. Through this perspective, the study highlights the complex interactions among international cooperation, domestic policy reform, and community-level development processes in contemporary Vietnam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam

Ethnic minority development in Vietnam has attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention, particularly regarding poverty reduction, social inequality, education, healthcare access, and sustainable development in mountainous and remote regions. Existing studies generally agree that ethnic minority communities continue to experience structural disadvantages despite Vietnam's significant economic growth since the Đổi Mới reforms. Although national poverty rates have declined substantially, ethnic minorities remain disproportionately represented among the country's poorest and most vulnerable populations (World Bank, 2019).

A substantial body of literature emphasizes the multidimensional nature of poverty among ethnic minority communities. The World Bank (2019) argues that poverty reflects not only low income but also unequal access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) similarly suggests that poverty in ethnic minority regions is deeply embedded within structural inequalities related to geography, market access, and social exclusion. Baulch et al. (2012) further demonstrate that ethnic minority households experience slower poverty reduction than the Kinh majority even during periods of strong national economic growth. These findings indicate that conventional economic development policies alone are insufficient to address long-term structural inequality.

Scholars also highlight the relationship between ethnic inequality and regional disparities. Reports from the General Statistics Office consistently show significant gaps between ethnic minority regions and national averages in income, educational attainment, healthcare access, and employment opportunities (General Statistics Office, 2020). Such disparities are particularly evident in mountainous provinces where infrastructure and public services remain underdeveloped. Imai et al. (2011) argue that geographic isolation and limited market integration significantly contribute to persistent poverty and vulnerability in ethnic minority areas.

Education constitutes another major theme within the literature. Research by Dang (2019) indicates that ethnic minority students face barriers related to language differences, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to high-quality educational resources. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) similarly notes that school dropout rates remain significantly higher among ethnic minority students, especially in remote areas where children often leave school early to support household livelihoods.

Language barriers are particularly important because Vietnamese serves as the dominant language of formal education. Many ethnic minority children enter school without sufficient Vietnamese proficiency, affecting academic performance and long-term educational participation. UN Women and CEMA (2021) argue that educational systems frequently fail to incorporate culturally responsive teaching approaches or bilingual education models capable of addressing these challenges effectively.

Healthcare inequality has also received growing attention. Research indicates that ethnic minority communities continue to experience limited healthcare access due to geographic remoteness, insufficient infrastructure, and economic constraints. UN Women and CEMA (2021) report that maternal healthcare, child nutrition, and preventive medical services remain inadequate in many mountainous areas. Women and children are particularly vulnerable because of intersecting forms of ethnic and gender inequality.

Another important research area concerns land access and natural resource management. McElwee (2004) argues that land insecurity represents one of the most critical structural challenges facing ethnic minority populations. Many communities traditionally depend on forests, swidden agriculture, and communal land-use systems for livelihoods and cultural practices. However, state-led development, agricultural commercialization, and infrastructure expansion have altered traditional land relations. Imai et al. (2011) note that land loss and restricted access to natural resources often intensify long-term livelihood insecurity.

In addition to economic concerns, scholars increasingly emphasize cultural sustainability and social participation. UN Women and CEMA (2021) argue that development interventions frequently prioritize economic indicators while overlooking local knowledge systems, cultural identity, and community participation. Research suggests that programs designed without adequate local consultation may weaken traditional practices and reduce community autonomy. This reflects a broader shift toward participatory and empowerment-based development approaches.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that ethnic minority development in Vietnam is shaped by interconnected challenges involving poverty, inequality, education, healthcare, land access, and linguistic barriers. However, much of the scholarship primarily focuses on domestic policy implementation while paying limited attention to international cooperation and bilateral development partnerships.

2.2. Development Cooperation and Development Diplomacy

The growing importance of development cooperation in international relations has contributed to the emergence of development diplomacy as an important analytical framework. Development diplomacy refers to the use of development assistance, educational exchange, humanitarian cooperation, and technical collaboration as instruments for strengthening international partnerships and advancing diplomatic objectives (OECD, 2020). Development cooperation therefore functions not only as economic aid but also as a mechanism for trust-building, soft power projection, and long-term institutional engagement.

Within Southeast Asia, bilateral development cooperation has become an essential component of post-Cold War international relations. The United Nations Development Programme (2018) emphasizes that contemporary development partnerships are increasingly linked to inclusive development agendas promoting poverty reduction, sustainable growth, and social equality. International organizations also stress the importance of supporting vulnerable populations through targeted community-based initiatives aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The concept of soft power is particularly relevant for understanding Vietnam–U.S. cooperation after 1995. Educational exchange programs, healthcare projects, humanitarian assistance, and community development initiatives can be viewed not only as technical interventions but also as forms of diplomatic engagement aimed at improving bilateral relations and fostering mutual trust. Fulbright-

related educational initiatives, for example, have frequently been discussed as mechanisms for strengthening intellectual exchange and long-term people-to-people relations between the two countries (Pham & Fry, 2004).

USAID reports further demonstrate how development assistance evolved from humanitarian cooperation toward broader objectives related to governance, sustainable development, healthcare improvement, and educational capacity building in Vietnam (USAID, 2021). These programs increasingly emphasized local participation, institutional strengthening, and community resilience rather than short-term aid delivery. Such approaches reflect broader international development trends prioritizing partnership-based cooperation and locally grounded development models.

Existing literature also argues that effective development cooperation requires balancing international priorities with local cultural and institutional contexts. OECD (2020) notes that development programs lacking community participation or long-term sustainability often produce uneven outcomes despite significant financial investment. Consequently, recent development studies increasingly emphasize participatory governance, local ownership, and culturally responsive implementation strategies.

2.3. Research Gap

Despite the growing literature on ethnic minority development and international cooperation in Vietnam, several important gaps remain. First, relatively few studies explicitly examine the relationship between Vietnam–U.S. bilateral cooperation and ethnic minority transformation since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995. Existing scholarship often treats ethnic minority development as a domestic policy issue while analyzing Vietnam–U.S. relations primarily through diplomatic or geopolitical perspectives.

Second, much of the literature remains fragmented and sector-specific. Studies frequently focus on poverty reduction, healthcare, education, or land management separately without connecting these dimensions to broader processes of international cooperation and policy transformation. As a result, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how bilateral development partnerships shaped long-term social change within ethnic minority communities.

Finally, existing research often lacks a long-term policy perspective capable of tracing the evolution of development cooperation across multiple decades. Many studies evaluate specific projects or short-term interventions without sufficiently examining how bilateral cooperation contributed to institutional change, community empowerment, and broader development trajectories over time. Consequently, a more integrated analysis linking development diplomacy, bilateral cooperation, and ethnic minority transformation remains necessary within the existing literature.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a multidimensional theoretical framework combining inclusive development theory, the rights-based approach, and development diplomacy. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing Vietnam–United States cooperation in ethnic minority development since 1995. Rather than viewing development solely through economic indicators or technical assistance, the framework emphasizes social inclusion, community participation, cultural recognition, and the diplomatic significance of bilateral cooperation. This approach is particularly relevant in ethnic minority regions of Vietnam, where development challenges are closely connected to historical inequality, cultural diversity, and unequal access to public services and state resources.

3.1. Inclusive Development Framework

Inclusive development has become increasingly influential within global development discourse, especially through the Sustainable Development Goals and international poverty reduction strategies. The framework argues that economic growth alone is insufficient if marginalized populations remain excluded from opportunities, public services, and decision-making processes (UNDP, 2018). The principle of "leave no one behind" therefore emphasizes integrating vulnerable groups into national development processes.

This perspective is especially relevant in Vietnam, where ethnic minority populations continue to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, educational inequality, and healthcare vulnerability despite rapid economic growth since the Đổi Mới reforms (World Bank, 2019). Inclusive development theory thus provides an important analytical lens for evaluating whether development cooperation initiatives genuinely reduce structural inequality or merely improve aggregate development indicators.

A key dimension of inclusive development concerns equitable access to resources and opportunities, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment, and institutional participation. Existing literature increasingly argues that inequality persists when marginalized populations remain excluded from policy implementation and decision-making processes (OECD, 2020). In ethnic minority regions, barriers associated with geography, language, and limited representation frequently restrict meaningful participation in development initiatives. Consequently, inclusive development requires not only resource distribution but also stronger community agency and institutional participation.

Participation and empowerment are also central principles within this framework. Participation refers to the active involvement of local communities in identifying priorities, designing projects, and evaluating outcomes, while empowerment emphasizes expanding community capacities, institutional voice, and social mobility. Development is therefore understood not as assistance delivered to passive recipients, but as a process strengthening communities' ability to influence their own social and economic futures. This

perspective is particularly useful for analyzing bilateral cooperation projects in ethnic minority areas, where sustainability often depends on local engagement and culturally appropriate implementation strategies.

3.2. Rights-Based Approach

This study also adopts a rights-based approach to ethnic minority development and bilateral cooperation. Emerging from international human rights discourse, the rights-based approach emphasizes that marginalized populations should be recognized as rights-holders rather than merely beneficiaries of development programs (United Nations, 1992). Within this framework, states and development actors function as duty-bearers responsible for protecting and fulfilling the rights of vulnerable communities.

Applying this perspective to ethnic minority development highlights the importance of recognizing ethnic minorities as active social and political actors possessing legitimate claims to equality, participation, cultural recognition, and sustainable development. Existing studies suggest that ethnic minority populations experience structural disadvantages not only because of economic deprivation but also because of unequal access to representation, public services, and cultural recognition (UN Women & CEMA, 2021). The rights-based approach therefore shifts the analytical focus from charity-oriented models toward questions of justice, inclusion, and institutional accountability.

Participation remains a central principle within this framework. Development policies affecting ethnic minority communities should involve meaningful consultation and local engagement rather than relying solely on top-down implementation. This issue is particularly important in areas involving land management, educational policy, cultural preservation, and natural resource use. Research indicates that development interventions lacking local participation frequently encounter sustainability problems, cultural incompatibility, and community resistance (Oxfam Vietnam, 2017).

The framework also highlights the importance of cultural rights and development rights. Ethnic minority communities possess distinct languages, belief systems, cultural identities, and social practices requiring recognition within broader national development processes. Rapid modernization, globalization, and market expansion may create pressures toward cultural assimilation if policies fail to account for local contexts. Sustainable development therefore involves not only economic improvement but also the preservation of cultural diversity and community autonomy.

3.3. Development Diplomacy

The third theoretical component is development diplomacy, which interprets bilateral cooperation as both a development mechanism and a diplomatic process. Development diplomacy refers to the use of development assistance, humanitarian cooperation, educational exchange, and institutional collaboration as instruments for strengthening international relations and promoting long-term political trust (OECD, 2020). Development cooperation therefore increasingly functions as a form of soft-power interaction shaping international perceptions and strategic partnerships.

Within Vietnam–United States relations, development diplomacy is particularly significant because bilateral cooperation evolved from post-war reconciliation into a broader development partnership after 1995. Educational programs, healthcare projects, NGO cooperation, and community development initiatives not only addressed practical development needs but also contributed to diplomatic normalization and mutual trust-building between the two countries.

Development diplomacy further emphasizes partnership-based cooperation rather than hierarchical donor–recipient relationships. Contemporary development literature increasingly stresses local ownership, institutional collaboration, and mutual engagement in ensuring sustainable outcomes (UNDP, 2018). Vietnam–U.S. cooperation in ethnic minority regions can therefore be interpreted not simply as external assistance but as part of a broader process of policy dialogue, institutional learning, and international engagement. Through this lens, bilateral cooperation reflects the intersection of development goals, diplomatic strategy, and soft-power interaction within the broader transformation of Vietnam–U.S. relations in the post-normalization era.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the evolution of Vietnam–United States cooperation on ethnic minority development between 1995 and 2025. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate because the research focuses on policy transformation, development cooperation, institutional interaction, and community impacts that cannot be fully understood through quantitative indicators alone. Rather than measuring isolated statistical outcomes, the study seeks to analyze the broader social, political, and developmental processes shaping bilateral cooperation and ethnic minority transformation over time.

The research primarily utilizes policy analysis, literature review, and a comparative-historical approach. Policy analysis is used to examine the evolution of development cooperation frameworks, government strategies, and international development initiatives related to ethnic minority regions in Vietnam. This includes analyzing bilateral cooperation programs, development priorities, institutional partnerships, and policy changes emerging after the normalization of Vietnam–U.S. relations in 1995. Through this method, the study evaluates how development objectives shifted from post-war humanitarian assistance toward broader forms of inclusive development, community empowerment, and sustainable partnership.

The literature review method provides the foundation for synthesizing existing scholarship on ethnic minority development, development diplomacy, bilateral cooperation, and social inequality in Vietnam. Existing studies from international organizations,

government institutions, NGOs, and academic researchers are critically examined in order to identify dominant analytical perspectives, recurring development challenges, and major scholarly debates. The literature review also enables the study to situate Vietnam–U.S. cooperation within broader international discussions concerning inclusive development, rights-based approaches, and development partnership models in Southeast Asia.

In addition, the study adopts a comparative-historical approach to trace the transformation of bilateral cooperation across different developmental phases between 1995 and 2025. This approach allows for the identification of both continuity and change in policy priorities, institutional cooperation, and development strategies over time. The post-normalization period is particularly significant because it reflects the gradual transition of Vietnam–U.S. relations from diplomatic reconciliation toward comprehensive cooperation involving education, healthcare, poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, and community development initiatives. By examining multiple phases of cooperation across three decades, the study is able to evaluate long-term trends rather than isolated short-term interventions.

The research draws upon approximately 20–30 sources selected primarily from government reports, NGO publications, international organization documents, and academic studies referenced within the broader literature on ethnic minority development and bilateral cooperation in Vietnam. Government documents include reports and statistical publications from the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training, and other state agencies involved in ethnic minority policy implementation. These materials provide important information regarding development strategies, socioeconomic indicators, and institutional frameworks.

The study also incorporates reports produced by international organizations and development agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP, OECD, USAID, UNICEF, and UN Women. These sources offer comparative perspectives on poverty reduction, social inclusion, healthcare inequality, educational access, and sustainable development in ethnic minority regions. NGO reports and development assessments further contribute insights into local participation, community empowerment, and the practical implementation of development initiatives in remote areas. Academic studies from both Vietnamese and international scholars are additionally used to support theoretical interpretation and contextual analysis.

The temporal scope of the study extends from 1995 to 2025, beginning with the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States and continuing through the expansion of bilateral development cooperation in the contemporary period. This thirty-year timeframe enables the study to capture major shifts in diplomatic relations, development priorities, and institutional collaboration. Thematic analysis within the article focuses primarily on education, poverty reduction, healthcare improvement, livelihood development, and cultural preservation in ethnic minority communities. These sectors were selected because they represent some of the most important dimensions of both ethnic minority development and Vietnam–U.S. bilateral cooperation during the post-normalization era.

Although the study relies primarily on secondary qualitative sources, the combination of policy analysis, comparative-historical interpretation, and multidisciplinary literature review provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between bilateral cooperation and ethnic minority transformation in Vietnam. This methodological approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive policy discussion and instead examine how development cooperation contributed to broader processes of social inclusion, institutional change, and community development over time.

5. VIETNAM–UNITED STATES COOPERATION AND POLICY TRANSFORMATION

5.1. Normalization and Policy Change after 1995

The normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States in 1995 marked a major turning point in bilateral relations and created the foundation for a broader framework of development cooperation in the post-Cold War era. Prior to normalization, relations between the two countries were largely shaped by the legacies of war, political distrust, and economic isolation. However, the restoration of diplomatic ties initiated a gradual process of reconciliation and institutional engagement that expanded significantly during the following decades. This transformation not only altered the political and economic relationship between the two countries but also contributed to substantial changes in development policy and international cooperation in Vietnam.

The post-1995 period coincided with Vietnam's accelerated integration into regional and global institutions. Vietnam's accession to ASEAN in 1995, participation in the World Trade Organization in 2007, and broader engagement with international financial and development institutions created a more open policy environment for foreign cooperation and development assistance (Fforde, 2016). Within this context, development cooperation became an increasingly important component of Vietnam–U.S. relations. Bilateral engagement gradually expanded beyond diplomatic normalization and trade liberalization to include education, public health, poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, and community development programs.

This policy transformation reflected broader shifts in Vietnam's development orientation during the post-reform period. Economic reforms under Đổi Mới had already encouraged market liberalization and international integration, but the expansion of bilateral cooperation after 1995 further facilitated institutional reforms linked to governance, social development, and human resource capacity building. International cooperation increasingly emphasized inclusive development and poverty reduction, particularly in

geographically marginalized regions inhabited by ethnic minority communities (UNDP, 2018). As a result, ethnic minority development emerged as a strategic area where domestic policy priorities intersected with international development agendas.

The changing policy environment also encouraged greater participation from international organizations, foreign NGOs, educational institutions, and bilateral development agencies operating in Vietnam. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, development cooperation programs increasingly targeted rural and mountainous areas characterized by persistent poverty, weak infrastructure, and limited access to public services. Ethnic minority regions in the Northern Mountains, Central Highlands, and parts of Central Vietnam became important locations for development initiatives focusing on education, healthcare, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability.

At the same time, Vietnam's growing international integration contributed to the adoption of new development discourses emphasizing participation, equity, and sustainable growth. International organizations and bilateral partners increasingly promoted development approaches based on social inclusion and community empowerment rather than purely economic growth indicators. According to OECD (2020), international development cooperation during this period increasingly prioritized reducing inequality and strengthening institutional capacity among vulnerable populations. These shifts were reflected in Vietnamese development strategies that gradually incorporated concepts such as sustainable development, poverty reduction, and inclusive growth into national policy frameworks.

The expansion of bilateral cooperation also reflected broader diplomatic considerations. Development initiatives served not only economic and humanitarian purposes but also functioned as mechanisms for trust-building and long-term partnership formation between Vietnam and the United States. Educational exchange programs, healthcare cooperation, and humanitarian assistance projects helped improve bilateral perceptions and facilitated broader political engagement after decades of post-war tension. Consequently, development cooperation became an important component of the evolving diplomatic relationship between the two countries.

5.2. Bilateral Agreements and Institutional Frameworks

The institutionalization of Vietnam–U.S. development cooperation after 1995 was supported by a growing network of bilateral agreements, international partnerships, educational exchanges, and development programs implemented by governmental and non-governmental actors. These frameworks contributed to the expansion of development cooperation into sectors closely related to ethnic minority development, including education, healthcare, rural livelihoods, and community capacity building.

One of the most important actors in this process was the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Since the normalization period, USAID has implemented numerous development programs in Vietnam focusing on public health, education, environmental sustainability, disaster resilience, and inclusive economic development (USAID, 2021). Although many programs were national in scope, ethnic minority regions often received special attention because of their relatively high poverty rates and limited access to infrastructure and social services. USAID-supported projects increasingly emphasized local participation, institutional strengthening, and sustainable development rather than short-term humanitarian assistance alone.

Bilateral development frameworks also expanded through broader economic and diplomatic agreements between the two countries. The Bilateral Trade Agreement signed in 2000 and subsequent economic cooperation initiatives contributed indirectly to development transformation by encouraging international investment, educational exchange, and institutional reform (Vuving, 2021). At the same time, broader diplomatic cooperation created more favorable conditions for international NGOs and educational institutions to participate in development activities in Vietnam's remote and disadvantaged regions.

Non-governmental organizations played a particularly important role in implementing community-level development initiatives. International NGOs such as CARE, Save the Children, Plan International, and FHI 360 participated in projects related to education, healthcare, livelihood development, and gender equality in ethnic minority communities. These organizations frequently operated in partnership with local authorities and community institutions, helping bridge the gap between international development agendas and local implementation realities. NGO participation was especially significant in areas where state capacity remained limited, including remote mountainous regions with weak infrastructure and difficult transportation conditions.

Educational cooperation represented another major institutional dimension of Vietnam–U.S. relations during the post-normalization period. Fulbright programs, scholarship initiatives, academic exchanges, and English-language education partnerships contributed significantly to human resource development and intellectual exchange between the two countries. Pham and Fry (2004) argue that educational cooperation became one of the most successful aspects of bilateral relations because it facilitated long-term institutional engagement and people-to-people interaction. Although many educational programs primarily targeted urban universities and national institutions, broader educational cooperation also influenced policies related to teacher training, educational reform, and community education in disadvantaged regions. Table 1 summarizes several major areas of Vietnam–U.S. development cooperation relevant to ethnic minority development after 1995.

Table 1. Major Areas of Vietnam–U.S. Development Cooperation Relevant to Ethnic Minority Development after 1995

Area of Cooperation	Main Activities	Relevance to Ethnic Minority Development
Education	Scholarships, academic exchange, teacher training	Educational access and human resource development
Healthcare	Community health, maternal care, disease prevention	Improved healthcare access in remote regions
Poverty Reduction	Livelihood projects, infrastructure support	Income generation and rural development
Sustainable Development	Environmental adaptation, rural resilience	Support for vulnerable mountainous communities
NGO Cooperation	Community development and local participation	Grassroots implementation and empowerment

Source: Compiled by the author from USAID reports, NGO publications, and bilateral cooperation documents.

The institutional expansion of development cooperation demonstrates that Vietnam–U.S. relations after 1995 evolved beyond conventional diplomatic engagement into a broader development partnership involving multiple actors and policy sectors. These frameworks created important foundations for community-level interventions in ethnic minority regions and contributed to the gradual transformation of development policy approaches in Vietnam.

5.3. Key Areas of Cooperation

Education emerged as one of the most significant areas of bilateral cooperation after normalization. Educational initiatives included scholarships, academic exchanges, English-language training, teacher development, and support for educational reform. Fulbright-related programs became particularly influential in promoting educational cooperation and institutional exchange between Vietnam and the United States. In ethnic minority regions, educational support initiatives often focused on improving school access, supporting bilingual education models, and strengthening teacher training in disadvantaged areas. Existing studies indicate that educational inequality remained one of the most persistent structural challenges affecting ethnic minority communities due to language barriers, poverty, and uneven educational infrastructure (Dang, 2019).

Teacher training programs and educational development initiatives sought to improve learning quality and educational participation in remote regions. Some projects also emphasized culturally responsive education and local-language support in areas with high concentrations of ethnic minority students. These approaches reflected broader international concerns regarding educational inclusion and equal access to learning opportunities for marginalized populations.

Poverty reduction constituted another major field of bilateral cooperation. Development programs frequently targeted livelihood improvement, agricultural productivity, rural infrastructure, and income generation in mountainous areas. According to the World Bank (2019), ethnic minority populations remained disproportionately affected by multidimensional poverty despite national economic growth. As a result, many bilateral and NGO-supported projects focused on strengthening local livelihoods through agricultural training, microfinance initiatives, irrigation support, and market access improvement.

Infrastructure support also formed an important component of poverty reduction strategies in ethnic minority regions. Road construction, water supply systems, educational facilities, and rural electrification projects contributed to improving physical connectivity and public service accessibility in remote communities. Although infrastructure expansion alone could not eliminate structural inequality, it played a significant role in reducing geographic isolation and facilitating broader economic participation.

Healthcare cooperation similarly became an increasingly important aspect of Vietnam–U.S. development relations. Programs focusing on maternal healthcare, disease prevention, nutrition, and community health services were implemented in various rural and mountainous areas. International organizations and NGOs frequently collaborated with local health authorities to improve healthcare delivery and strengthen preventive medicine systems. UN Women and CEMA (2021) note that ethnic minority women and children often face disproportionate healthcare vulnerabilities due to limited infrastructure, language barriers, and economic disadvantage. Consequently, healthcare initiatives frequently prioritized maternal care, child health, and community-based medical outreach.

Sustainable development and environmental adaptation also gained increasing importance in bilateral cooperation during the 2010s and early 2020s. Many ethnic minority communities depend heavily on agriculture, forests, and natural resources for their livelihoods, making them particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate-related risks. Development programs therefore increasingly incorporated rural resilience, environmental protection, and sustainable resource management into broader community development strategies. These initiatives reflected the growing integration of climate adaptation and sustainable development within international cooperation agendas.

Overall, Vietnam–U.S. cooperation after 1995 contributed to significant policy transformation and institutional expansion across multiple development sectors. While important challenges remained, bilateral cooperation increasingly emphasized inclusive development, local participation, and long-term community resilience in ethnic minority regions.

6. COMMUNITY IMPACTS ON ETHNIC MINORITY REGIONS

6.1. Poverty Reduction and Livelihood Improvement

One of the most visible impacts of Vietnam–United States development cooperation since 1995 has been the gradual improvement of socioeconomic conditions in many ethnic minority regions. Although poverty and inequality remain persistent challenges, bilateral cooperation programs contributed significantly to infrastructure expansion, livelihood diversification, and agricultural support in geographically marginalized communities. These interventions became particularly important in mountainous and remote areas where ethnic minority households historically faced limited access to markets, transportation, public services, and development opportunities.

Infrastructure development represented a foundational component of poverty reduction strategies implemented through both state-led programs and international cooperation initiatives. During the post-normalization period, many ethnic minority regions experienced improvements in roads, schools, water supply systems, electricity access, and rural communication networks. According to government reports and World Bank assessments, infrastructure expansion helped reduce geographic isolation and improved access to education, healthcare, and local markets (World Bank, 2019). Better transportation systems also facilitated agricultural trade and mobility, enabling rural households to participate more actively in regional economic activities.

Agricultural support programs constituted another important area of intervention. Since many ethnic minority communities depend heavily on small-scale agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, development initiatives frequently focused on improving agricultural productivity, technical training, and sustainable farming practices. International development organizations and NGOs supported projects related to irrigation systems, crop diversification, livestock production, and climate-resilient agriculture. These initiatives aimed not only to increase income levels but also to reduce vulnerability associated with environmental instability and fluctuating market conditions.

Existing studies indicate that livelihood diversification played an increasingly important role in poverty reduction efforts in ethnic minority areas. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) notes that reliance on subsistence agriculture often limited long-term economic mobility among ethnic minority households. Consequently, many development programs encouraged alternative income-generating activities such as handicraft production, small-scale entrepreneurship, eco-tourism, and community-based economic initiatives. In several regions, local cooperatives and women's livelihood groups received technical and financial support designed to strengthen economic participation at the household and community levels. Table 2 presents selected socioeconomic indicators illustrating development disparities affecting ethnic minority communities in comparison with national averages.

Table 2. Selected Socioeconomic Indicators in Ethnic Minority Regions Compared to National Averages

Indicator	Ethnic Minority Regions	National Average	Source
Multidimensional poverty rate	31.4%	9.8%	World Bank (2019)
Trained labor force participation	Approximately 12%	Approximately 26%	Ministry of Labour (2020)
Average monthly income per capita	1.2–1.4 million VND	3.9 million VND	General Statistics Office (2020)
Households lacking productive land	23–35%	Below 10%	Ministry of Planning and Investment (2019, 2020)

Source: Compiled by the author from Vietnamese government reports and international development assessments.

Despite these improvements, development outcomes remained uneven across different regions and ethnic groups. Some communities benefited substantially from infrastructure investment and market integration, while others continued to face structural barriers associated with land insecurity, limited institutional support, and geographic remoteness. McElwee (2004) argues that many ethnic minority households remained vulnerable because development programs often prioritized economic modernization without adequately addressing local cultural practices and traditional resource-management systems. In some cases, infrastructure expansion and agricultural commercialization also generated unintended environmental and social pressures, particularly in ecologically sensitive regions.

Nevertheless, bilateral cooperation contributed to a broader transformation in development policy approaches. Poverty reduction initiatives increasingly incorporated concepts such as sustainability, participation, and community resilience rather than focusing exclusively on short-term economic assistance. This shift reflected the growing influence of inclusive development frameworks within both international development discourse and Vietnamese policy planning during the post-normalization era.

6.2. Educational Access and Human Capital Development

Educational cooperation became one of the most influential dimensions of Vietnam–U.S. relations after 1995, particularly in terms of human capital development and social mobility. Educational inequality has long represented a major structural challenge in ethnic minority regions because of poverty, language barriers, weak infrastructure, and limited access to qualified teachers. Bilateral cooperation programs, however, contributed to expanding educational access and improving institutional capacity through scholarships, teacher training, academic exchange, and educational support initiatives.

One significant area of progress involved improving school access in remote and mountainous communities. Infrastructure development projects helped expand educational facilities and transportation networks, enabling more children from ethnic minority households to attend school regularly. According to UNICEF (2018), school participation rates in ethnic minority areas improved substantially during the 2000s and 2010s, although disparities with national averages remained significant. Educational assistance programs also supported dormitory systems, learning materials, and local educational facilities designed to reduce barriers affecting students in isolated communities.

Scholarship programs and educational exchange initiatives further contributed to human capital development among ethnic minority youth. Fulbright-related cooperation and broader educational partnerships strengthened academic exchange between Vietnam and the United States while encouraging educational reform and institutional modernization. Although many scholarship recipients originated from urban or mainstream educational institutions, broader educational cooperation also influenced teacher training systems and educational policy development in disadvantaged areas.

Teacher training represented a particularly important component of educational cooperation in ethnic minority regions. Existing studies suggest that shortages of qualified teachers and culturally responsive educational practices remained major obstacles to educational equality (Dang, 2019). In response, several educational support programs emphasized pedagogical training, local capacity building, and bilingual educational approaches aimed at improving learning outcomes among ethnic minority students. These initiatives reflected increasing recognition that educational inclusion required more than school expansion alone; it also demanded attention to language diversity, cultural context, and teaching quality.

Educational mobility among ethnic minority youth gradually increased during the post-normalization period as greater numbers of students accessed secondary and higher education opportunities. Education increasingly became associated with aspirations for upward mobility, professional employment, and broader participation in national economic life. In many communities, younger generations began engaging more actively with digital technology, urban labor markets, and higher education institutions. This transformation contributed to significant social changes within ethnic minority regions, including shifting family expectations, changing gender roles, and expanding access to information networks. Table 3 summarizes selected educational disparities affecting ethnic minority students.

Table 3. Educational Disparities between Ethnic Minority Students and National Averages in Vietnam

Educational Indicator	Ethnic Minority Students	National Average	Source
Primary school completion rate	83%	98%	UNICEF (2018).
Lower secondary completion rate	68%	92%	UNICEF (2018).
High school completion rate	52%	85%	Tran (2021)
School dropout rate	8–12%	Approximately 4%	UNICEF (2018)

Source: Compiled by the author from educational reports and development studies.

At the same time, educational transformation also generated new challenges. Increased educational mobility occasionally contributed to rural-to-urban migration and the weakening of traditional community structures. Furthermore, language barriers and unequal educational quality continued to limit opportunities for many ethnic minority students despite policy improvements. Nevertheless, educational cooperation remained one of the most significant mechanisms through which bilateral development initiatives contributed to long-term social transformation in ethnic minority regions.

6.3. Healthcare and Social Welfare

Healthcare cooperation represented another major area where bilateral development initiatives generated important community impacts. Many ethnic minority regions historically experienced limited healthcare access because of poor infrastructure, shortages of medical personnel, and geographic isolation. Women and children were particularly vulnerable to inadequate healthcare services, malnutrition, and preventable diseases.

Vietnam–U.S. cooperation programs contributed to improvements in community healthcare systems through support for maternal health, disease prevention, nutrition programs, and local healthcare capacity building. International organizations and NGOs frequently collaborated with provincial health authorities to expand vaccination programs, strengthen preventive medicine systems, and improve healthcare outreach in remote areas. According to UN Women and CEMA (2021), healthcare initiatives targeting

women and children helped reduce some forms of vulnerability associated with maternal mortality, child malnutrition, and limited reproductive healthcare access.

Community-based healthcare approaches became increasingly important in mountainous regions where formal healthcare infrastructure remained weak. Mobile medical services, local health training, and preventive healthcare campaigns helped expand public health awareness among vulnerable populations. Disease prevention initiatives also played an important role in improving sanitation practices, nutrition, and public health education in isolated communities.

In addition to healthcare improvement, broader social welfare programs contributed to enhancing living conditions in ethnic minority regions. Expanded access to clean water, sanitation infrastructure, and social support services improved household welfare and community resilience. However, inequalities in healthcare quality and public service accessibility remained substantial, particularly in geographically isolated areas where transportation and institutional capacity continued to be limited.

6.4. Cultural Preservation and Community Empowerment

Beyond material development outcomes, bilateral cooperation also influenced cultural preservation and community empowerment in ethnic minority regions. International NGOs and community-based organizations increasingly recognized that sustainable development required attention to cultural identity, local knowledge systems, and community participation. As a result, several development initiatives incorporated cultural preservation, local participation, and community empowerment into broader development strategies.

Community-based development programs frequently encouraged local participation in project planning, implementation, and evaluation. This approach reflected broader shifts in international development thinking emphasizing participatory governance and local ownership. Rather than treating ethnic minority populations solely as aid recipients, many programs attempted to strengthen community agency and institutional voice. According to Oxfam Vietnam (2017), participatory approaches improved the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions by incorporating local priorities and cultural contexts into policy implementation.

Cultural sustainability also emerged as an increasingly important concern within ethnic minority development programs. Existing studies indicate that rapid modernization, migration, and market integration have created growing pressures on traditional languages, rituals, and social practices in many ethnic minority communities. Some NGO-supported initiatives therefore focused on preserving local crafts, oral traditions, community festivals, and indigenous knowledge systems through community-centered cultural projects and educational activities. Table 4 summarizes several major community impacts associated with Vietnam–U.S. development cooperation in ethnic minority regions.

Table 4. Major Community Impacts of Vietnam–U.S. Development Cooperation in Ethnic Minority Regions

Sector	Major Impacts
Poverty Reduction	Improved infrastructure, livelihood diversification, agricultural support
Education	Expanded school access, teacher training, educational mobility
Healthcare	Improved maternal care, disease prevention, community health services
Cultural Preservation	Community participation, local empowerment, preservation initiatives

Source: Compiled by the author from development reports and academic literature.

Despite these positive developments, cultural preservation efforts also faced limitations. Some programs remained short-term and dependent on external funding, while others struggled to balance economic modernization with cultural continuity. Nevertheless, bilateral cooperation contributed to a broader recognition that sustainable development in ethnic minority regions required not only economic growth but also community participation, cultural respect, and long-term social empowerment.

7. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the significant contributions of Vietnam–United States cooperation to ethnic minority development, several challenges and limitations remain. The first major limitation concerns uneven development outcomes across regions and ethnic groups. While some communities have benefited from improved infrastructure, educational access, livelihood support, and healthcare services, others continue to face persistent poverty, geographic isolation, and limited access to public resources. Development gains have therefore been uneven rather than uniform. Ethnic minority communities in areas with better transportation networks and stronger local institutions tend to benefit more from development programs, whereas more remote communities often remain outside the full reach of intervention efforts. This reflects a broader pattern in which development cooperation may reduce certain forms of deprivation while leaving deeper structural inequalities unresolved (World Bank, 2019).

Unequal access is also evident across sectors. Educational access has expanded, but language barriers, household poverty, and uneven teaching quality continue to constrain learning outcomes among ethnic minority students. Similarly, healthcare programs have improved community awareness and service provision, yet many mountainous regions still experience shortages of qualified

medical staff and adequate facilities. These disparities suggest that development cooperation alone cannot fully overcome the historical and structural disadvantages affecting ethnic minority populations unless it is integrated with long-term domestic reforms and locally grounded implementation mechanisms.

A second limitation relates to policy coordination. Ethnic minority development involves multiple actors, including central government agencies, provincial authorities, international donors, NGOs, educational institutions, and community organizations. While this multi-actor environment creates opportunities for resource mobilization, it also generates challenges of fragmented implementation, administrative overlap, and uneven accountability. In some cases, projects are designed according to sectoral priorities rather than integrated community needs. Bureaucratic procedures may also slow implementation or reduce flexibility at the local level. As OECD (2020) argues, effective development cooperation requires strong coordination mechanisms, clear division of responsibilities, and consistent monitoring systems.

Sustainability represents a third important challenge. Many development projects depend heavily on external funding, technical assistance, or short-term donor cycles. When funding ends, local communities and district-level institutions may lack sufficient capacity, financial resources, or technical expertise to maintain project outcomes. This is particularly evident in livelihood projects, community health initiatives, and cultural preservation programs that require continuous support and local ownership. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) emphasizes that sustainable poverty reduction in ethnic minority areas requires not only project-based assistance but also long-term empowerment, institutional capacity building, and community participation.

Cultural and linguistic barriers further limit the effectiveness of development cooperation. Policies and programs designed from national or international perspectives may not always correspond to local cultural norms, livelihood systems, or language practices. In education, the dominance of Vietnamese as the language of instruction can disadvantage children who speak ethnic minority languages at home. In healthcare and public administration, communication barriers may reduce trust and limit service accessibility. Moreover, when community participation remains symbolic rather than substantive, development programs risk reproducing top-down models that fail to reflect local priorities. These limitations demonstrate that culturally insensitive development can produce partial or unsustainable outcomes even when material resources are available.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that Vietnam–United States cooperation has contributed meaningfully to ethnic minority development, but cooperation does not automatically produce inclusion. Bilateral development programs have supported infrastructure improvement, educational access, healthcare services, livelihood development, and community empowerment. However, the persistence of inequality indicates that development cooperation must be assessed not only by the number of projects implemented or resources mobilized, but also by the degree to which such initiatives transform the structural conditions of exclusion affecting ethnic minority communities.

From the perspective of inclusive development, the Vietnamese case illustrates the importance of moving beyond aggregate development indicators. National progress in poverty reduction and economic growth may coexist with persistent ethnic and regional disparities. Therefore, inclusive development requires targeted attention to those communities most likely to be left behind. In ethnic minority regions, this means addressing not only income poverty but also unequal access to education, healthcare, land, language-sensitive services, and meaningful participation. Development cooperation becomes more effective when it strengthens local agency rather than treating communities as passive beneficiaries.

The analysis also contributes to debates on development diplomacy. Vietnam–U.S. cooperation in ethnic minority development reflects a broader transformation of bilateral relations from post-war reconciliation to development partnership. Programs in education, health, livelihoods, and sustainable development functioned not only as technical interventions but also as mechanisms of diplomatic trust-building and soft-power interaction. Yet the effectiveness of development diplomacy depends on its ability to align international objectives with local realities. When external priorities are insufficiently adapted to community contexts, development diplomacy may generate visibility without deep social transformation.

In relation to minority governance, the study highlights the centrality of participation and cultural recognition. Ethnic minority development cannot be reduced to material improvement alone. It requires culturally grounded approaches that respect local languages, knowledge systems, social organization, and livelihood practices. Programs that fail to incorporate these dimensions may produce short-term gains while weakening long-term sustainability. Conversely, community-based and culturally sensitive initiatives are more likely to support empowerment, trust, and local ownership.

Finally, the study reinforces the connection between sustainable development and institutional capacity. Long-term outcomes depend on whether local authorities, community organizations, and development partners can sustain projects beyond donor funding cycles. This requires stronger coordination, decentralized capacity building, and mechanisms for community monitoring. In this sense, the future of Vietnam–U.S. cooperation in ethnic minority development should be understood not simply as an expansion of assistance, but as a transition toward more participatory, culturally responsive, and sustainable partnership models.

9. CONCLUSION

This article examined the evolution of Vietnam–United States cooperation on ethnic minority development since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995. It argued that bilateral cooperation contributed significantly to policy transformation, institutional engagement, and community welfare in Vietnam's ethnic minority regions. Over three decades, cooperation expanded from post-war reconciliation and humanitarian engagement into a broader development partnership involving education, healthcare, poverty reduction, livelihood support, environmental sustainability, and community development. Through governmental programs, international organizations, NGOs, and educational institutions, Vietnam–U.S. cooperation helped address some of the most pressing challenges faced by ethnic minority communities.

The study shows that such cooperation generated important community impacts. Infrastructure support improved physical connectivity and access to public services. Livelihood projects contributed to income generation and agricultural adaptation. Educational initiatives supported school access, teacher training, scholarship opportunities, and human capital development. Healthcare programs strengthened community health, maternal care, disease prevention, and social welfare services. In addition, some NGO and community-based programs promoted cultural preservation, local participation, and community empowerment.

However, the article also demonstrates that significant limitations remain. Development outcomes have been uneven across regions, ethnic groups, and sectors. Many communities continue to face poverty, educational inequality, healthcare limitations, land insecurity, and linguistic barriers. Policy coordination problems, fragmented implementation, short-term funding cycles, and limited local capacity continue to affect the sustainability of development initiatives. These challenges indicate that bilateral cooperation can contribute to ethnic minority development, but it cannot substitute for long-term structural reform and locally grounded governance.

Theoretically, the study contributes to discussions on inclusive development, development diplomacy, minority governance, and sustainable development. It shows that bilateral cooperation can serve as both a development instrument and a diplomatic mechanism, but its effectiveness depends on whether it produces substantive inclusion at the community level. Future Vietnam–U.S. cooperation should therefore place greater emphasis on community participation, culturally sensitive program design, and long-term sustainability. Development initiatives should be based on local needs, ethnic minority languages, cultural practices, and community institutions rather than standardized intervention models. Such an approach would allow bilateral cooperation to move beyond project-based assistance toward a more inclusive and sustainable partnership that strengthens both ethnic minority development and Vietnam–U.S. relations in the decades ahead.

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