

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE SOUTHERN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS TODAY

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Abstract

Sustainable development is a crucial issue that has been particularly emphasized by the Party and the Government of Vietnam, especially in areas with a large population of ethnic minorities. The Southern Central Highlands is currently home to nearly 50 ethnic groups, among which local ethnic minorities such as the Ê Đê, K'ho, and M'ông are striving to develop their economy, culture, and society sustainably. However, this development process faces numerous challenges from both objective and subjective factors, including natural conditions, government development policies, ethnic psychology, and religious factors. At present, Catholicism and Protestantism are the two main religions within the ethnic minority communities of the Southern Central Highlands. Introduced to the region from the late 19th to early 20th century, these two religions flourished in the second half of the 20th century and have become major elements in the spiritual lives of the communities. Religion has had and continues to have significant impacts on the economic, cultural, and social development of local ethnic minorities, contributing positively to the process of sustainable development. This article uses data collected from the community through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and survey questionnaires to analyze the impact of religion on the economic, cultural, environmental, and social aspects of local ethnic minorities in the South Central Highlands in the context of sustainable development.

Keywords: cultural practices, economic activities, environmental issues, local ethnic minorities, social management, sustainable development

1. Introduction

The Southern Central Highlands region currently comprises three provinces: Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong. This expansive plateau is located at the western end of the Truong Son Range in Vietnam. The region features relatively flat terrain with low plains along major rivers, including the Krong No River, the Srepok River, and the upper Dong Nai River. The total natural land area of the Southern Central Highlands is approximately 4.5 million hectares, with Dak Lak covering 1,303,100 hectares, Dak Nong 650,900 hectares, and Lam Dong 978,300 hectares (General Statistics Office, 2020). The majority of the land is composed of fertile basalt red soil, ideal for the cultivation of perennial industrial crops and forestry development. The climate is characterized by a sub-equatorial tropical monsoon, blending the humid tropical plateau climate with the influence of the hot and dry southwest monsoon. This results in two distinct seasons: the rainy season from May to October and the dry season from November to April. The average annual temperature is around 24°C, with highs reaching 35°C and lows dropping to 14°C (Nguyen Duy, 2023).

The Southern Central Highlands is rich in natural resources, including forests (covering about 36% of the natural land area), water resources (with an average annual rainfall of 1,994.3 mm, abundant groundwater, and a dense network of rivers, streams, and lakes), and mineral resources (such as bauxite ores, sapphire, construction materials, and industrial minerals). The region also boasts valuable tourism resources, including scenic spots, historical-cultural relics, and diverse ethnic cultures, with about 45 ethnic groups residing in the area (Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2022; Ton Thi Ngoc Hanh et al., 2020).

The primary economic activities in the region are agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry. In recent years, the industries of construction, trade, services, and tourism have also seen significant growth.

The Southern Central Highlands has long been the traditional homeland of local ethnic minorities such as the Ede, M'nong, and K'ho. It has also attracted other ethnic groups, including the Vietnamese, Hmong, Dao, and Muong, who have migrated to the region to establish livelihoods. According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the population of these local ethnic minorities in the Southern Central Highlands totals 643,864 people, accounting for 17% of the region's total population. Among them, the Ede ethnic group numbers 358,289, primarily residing in Dak Lak; the M'nong group numbers 109,740, concentrated in Dak Nong; and the K'ho group numbers 175,835, mainly in Lam Dong (General Statistics Office, 2020).

These local ethnic minorities predominantly rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, cultivating food crops such as rice, corn, and cassava, as well as industrial crops like sugarcane, peanuts, coffee, cashews, pepper, and rubber. Traditionally, livestock was raised mainly for use in family and community ceremonies (Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2022). However, there has been a shift towards commercial livestock production, with increased investment in barn construction, careful animal husbandry, and the selection of high-quality breeds for better economic returns. In addition to agriculture, these communities engage in various crafts such as knitting, brocade weaving, and making traditional wine (*rượu cần*), as well as tourism-related activities like gong performances, souvenir sales, and offering motorbike taxi rides in tourist areas.

Nevertheless, the sustainable development of these ethnic groups in the Southern Central Highlands is influenced by various factors, including religion. This article examines the religious factors currently impacting the sustainable development of local ethnic minorities in this region.

2. Literature Reviews and Research Methods

2.1. Literature Reviews

Sustainable development has become a central theme in policy formulation and scientific research in Vietnam over the past few decades. This concept, introduced by international organizations such as the IUCN, WCED, UNDP, and the Rio+20 Summit in the 1990s, has laid the groundwork for policy-making and research in Vietnam. This is reflected in the 2005 Law on Environmental Protection, where Chapter 1, Article 3 articulates the view of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, based on a close and harmonious combination of economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection" (Vietnam National Assembly, 2005).

Vietnam has seen rapid development in recent decades since implementing the Doi Moi policy. Research by Mydans (1996, cited in O'Rourke, 2004), has noted that from 1989 to 2000, Vietnam became one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. However, Vietnam's initial development strategy, which focused on export industries and the exploitation of natural resources, faced significant challenges in balancing economic growth with environmental protection and labor rights. This created a tension between industrialization and social and environmental issues during the two decades of economic development from 1990 to 2010 (O'Rourke, 2004).

To address this tension, on April 12, 2012, the Prime Minister approved the Vietnam Sustainable Development Strategy for the 2011-2020 period (No. 432/QĐ-TTg), which outlined clear objectives and priority orientations for the country's sustainable development. This strategy established four groups of sustainable development assessment indicators: comprehensive indicators, economic indicators, social indicators, and environmental indicators (Vietnam Government, 2012). Following this, on September 25, 2020, the Government issued Resolution No. 136/NQ-CP on sustainable development through 2030, setting the overarching goal of “maintaining sustainable economic growth in tandem with achieving social progress, justice, and environmental protection” (Vietnam Government, 2020).

Based on these policies and resolutions, scientists in recent decades have concentrated on researching sustainable development in Vietnam (Nguyen Minh Thu, 2013; Do Phu Hiep, 2018; Ngo Thuy Quynh, 2020). These studies emphasize the importance of rigorous management and evaluation of sustainable development efforts at both national and provincial levels, proposing methods for monitoring and analyzing fluctuations in sustainable development indicators (Nguyen Duc Ngu, 2008; Nguyen Danh Son, 2010, Ha Van Su et al., 2021; Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2022). Additionally, factors such as industrialization, modernization, climate change, international integration, and cultural diversity have been scrutinized within the context of sustainable development. The research has proposed a range of solutions to achieve sustainable development in the future, including enhancing education, protecting the environment, and developing appropriate socio-economic policies (Doan Hong Nhung, 2015; Hoang Dieu Thao, 2021; Huynh Ngoc Thu et al., 2022). Thus, sustainable development has been a long-standing focus of research and implementation in Vietnam.

Furthermore, in recent years, many studies have focused on the impact of religion on sustainable economic, cultural, and social development in Vietnam. These studies have deeply analyzed the influence of various religious groups such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam on economic activities. Specifically, religion has promoted positive labor attitudes, applied religious ethics in business, and encouraged values such as diligence, honesty, and respect for health and environmental protection in the economic activities of believers (Ngo Thi Phuong Lan, 2024; Hoang Van Chung, 2018). Additionally, these researches have highlighted that religious values and ethics play a crucial role in shaping social norms, promoting harmony, and fostering community cohesion (Truong Si Hung, 2007). Religious activities often intertwine with the traditional customs of ethnic groups, leading to the preservation and transformation of cultural identities. Religion also significantly influences social dynamics, shaping ideologies and ethical frameworks among believers (Tran Thi Thuy Ngoc et al., 2018). These impacts have played an important role in the sustainable development of ethnic groups.

These provide a crucial foundation for studying the impact of religion on sustainable development in local ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands today of this article.

2.2. Research Methods

To conduct this study, we carried out fieldwork from 2022 to 2023, collecting data directly from the community through methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and questionnaire surveys. Participant observation was conducted throughout our time in the community, focusing on economic, cultural, and religious activities. We engaged in field labor sessions, attended cultural and religious festivals, recorded data in fieldwork diaries, and subsequently compiled and analyzed these observations for research purposes.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 key informants from each community, three of whom were considered particularly significant: a representative of a religious leader (pastor, deacon, or priest, depending on the community's religion), a village elder, and a local official. The informants were men aged between 45 and 65. The interviews focused on their perspectives, operational methods, and approaches to addressing social, religious, cultural, economic, and environmental issues. Conducted in Vietnamese, with the assistance of a local guide, the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted at the informants' homes and were recorded with their consent using a smartphone. The recordings were then transcribed and analyzed.

We also conducted a survey using 300 household questionnaires across three communities of the Ede, K'ho, and M'ngong in the Southern Central Highlands, with 100 questionnaires distributed in each community using the snowball sampling method. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions, focusing on demographic, economic, religious, and social issues. After the survey was completed, the data was processed using licensed SPSS 20.0 software.

Additionally, we referred to secondary data sources, including research studies, books, and scientific articles by both domestic and international authors relevant to this research topic.

3. Results and Discussion

According to 2019 statistics, the Southern Central Highlands region is home to nearly 50 ethnic groups, with significant differences in population size. The Kinh (Việt people) account for more than 68% of the total population, while other ethnic groups make up about 32%. Among these, the Ede ethnic group represents 9.46%, the K'ho 4.64%, and the M'ngong 2.9% of the region's population. Today, the majority of these local ethnic groups follow Catholicism and Protestantism, two religions that have a considerable impact on their sustainable development.

3.1. The Adoption of Catholicism and Protestantism in the Southern Central Highlands

► **The Spread of Catholicism:** During the reign of Emperor Minh Mang, Catholicism was strictly prohibited in Vietnam. Between 1834 and 1840, many places of worship were destroyed, and parishioners were forced to renounce their faith. In response, Catholic missionaries shifted their focus to ethnic minorities in the highlands, including the Central Highlands.

In 1838, Bishop Stephano Quénot Cae sent two missions from Cam Lo (Quang Tri) and Phu Yen to the Central Highlands, but these efforts were unsuccessful. By 1842, missionaries J.C. Miche, Duclos, and 11 teachers made further attempts, but again without success. It wasn't until 1846 that Priest Van and Priest Hoa established a mission center in Buon Don, Buon Ma Thuot. In 1850, Priests Combes, Fontaine, and several preachers began to connect with the Ba Na people in Kon Tum, constructing the first chapel for them (Truyen Tin, 2008).

By 1851, four missionary campuses had been established in the Central Highlands, including Kon Khoxam, Plei Rohai, Kon Trang Monei, and Plei Chu. From this point, Catholicism began to spread in the region. By 1883, there were approximately 1,500 ethnic minority Catholics, primarily among the Ba Na people, a number that grew to 8,000 by 1901 (Chu Van Tuan, 2023).

In the Southern Central Highlands, missionary work began in 1846, and by 1963, the number of believers had reached 51,105 across 41 parishes. The Diocese of Buon Ma Thuot was established in 1967, and by 2000, the number of Catholics had risen to 253,158, including tens of thousands of local ethnic minorities.

The Diocese of Da Lat, founded in 1960, serves the parishioners of Lam Dong province. By 2000, it had a congregation of 250,669, of which 64,261 were ethnic minorities. Currently, the Southern Central Highlands is home to about 1 million Catholics, including 250,000 ethnic minorities, primarily from local ethnic groups.

► **The Spread of Protestantism:** Protestantism was introduced to Vietnam in the early 20th century by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA). Initially, its spread was hindered by the lack of support from the French government. However, after World War II, particularly from 1948 onwards, missionary activities gained momentum, leading to the widespread growth of Protestantism, including in the Central Highlands.

In the Central Highlands, missionary H.A. Jackson and his wife established the first mission headquarters in Da Lat in the early 20th century. In 1934, missionary G.H. Smith set up a base in Buon Ma Thuot, and young missionaries continued to work among ethnic minorities such as the K'ho, Ede, and M'ngong. The mission flourished after 1945 (Mai Minh Nhat, 2019).

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, many Vietnamese missionaries joined the effort. Notable figures include Pastor Pham Van Nam and his wife, who were in charge of Da Lat, and Pastor Nguyen Hau Nhuong and his wife, who oversaw the mission in Buon Ma Thuot. After 1955, Protestantism saw significant growth, with 2,468 people baptized, a number that later increased to 5,978 believers (Nguyen Duc Hiep, 2014).

Following 1975, Protestant activities in the Central Highlands faced restrictions, but since 2001, when the Vietnamese government recognized the legal status of Protestantism, the number of believers has risen sharply. Currently, the Southern Central Highlands has more than 350,000 Protestants, the majority of whom belong to local ethnic minorities.

3.2. Impact of Catholicism and Protestantism on Sustainable Development

The Government's Resolution 136/NQ-CP, issued on September 25, 2020, sets sustainable development goals for 2030, including (1) ending all forms of poverty; (2) eradicating hunger and ensuring food security; and (3) promoting sustainable economic growth. To achieve these goals among the ethnic minorities in the Southern Central Highlands, in addition to state policies and support from local authorities, the efforts of these communities and the influence of various factors, including religion, are very important.

Currently, Catholicism and Protestantism are the predominant religions among the local ethnic minorities in the Southern Central Highlands. The doctrines and canons of these religions require strict adherence, encompassing principles related to economic, cultural, environmental, and social activities.

► ***Impact on the Economy:*** Catholic and Protestant teachings emphasize honesty in economic activities, urging followers to use God-given resources effectively and ethically. Believers are encouraged to avoid harming others and the environment in their pursuit of wealth, demonstrating their faith in God (Ngo Thi Phuong Lan, 2024).

According to surveys, the people of the Southern Central Highlands primarily engage in agricultural activities, cultivating crops like coffee, pepper, cashew, avocado, durian, and bananas. Among these, coffee and durian are the main crops due to their high economic value. Coffee has become increasingly popular due to rising market prices, while durian is also favored for its superior value compared to other fruits.

One resident said: "We used to plant rice, but now we mainly grow coffee because the price is higher. Growing coffee helps us afford to build a house and buy a car." (Quoted from Mr. K.D., Protestant, Mnong, 49 years old, Dak Nong, 2023). Ms. H'D. E. added: "Ri6 and Thai's durians are more valuable than traditional durians, so many families have switched to these varieties to improve their economy."

The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in farming is inevitable. However, due to limited funds and concerns about health and environmental impacts, people tend to minimize their use. One individual shared: "We often save on fertilizers and pesticides because we're unsure about crop yields." (Quoted from Mr. K'S., Catholic, K'ho, 51 years old, Lam Dong, 2023). A Protestant pastor also advised: "Chemicals should be limited to protect health and the environment. Using fewer chemicals aligns with our doctrine."

Besides farming, the community also engages in livestock rearing, primarily raising hybrid wild boars (F1), chickens, cows, and buffaloes. F1 wild boars are raised using traditional methods within fenced areas, with a focus on avoiding industrial feed and growth stimulants. One resident mentioned: "Using homemade feed helps maintain product quality and credibility, in line with God's teachings." (Quoted from Mr. D.T.D., Catholic, K'ho, 54 years old, Lam Dong, 2023).

Additionally, the community's work ethic reflects religious teachings, which emphasize diligence to ensure a stable income for the family. A worker shared: "Working hard is the way to keep a job and provide for the family, which is also encouraged by the Pastor." (Quoted from Ms. H'D. J.E., Catholic, Ede, 34 years old, Dak Lak, 2023).

These impacts have contributed positively to the economic outcomes of the community. The agricultural products they produce are considered organic, high-value products on the market, and are favored by many consumers. This has also helped to improve and stabilize the economic lives of the people. The survey analysis shows that the poverty rate among the local ethnic minority groups in this area is only 3.7% (see Figure 1), lower than the average poverty rate in the Central Highlands region, which is 6.4% (Phuc Minh, 2023).

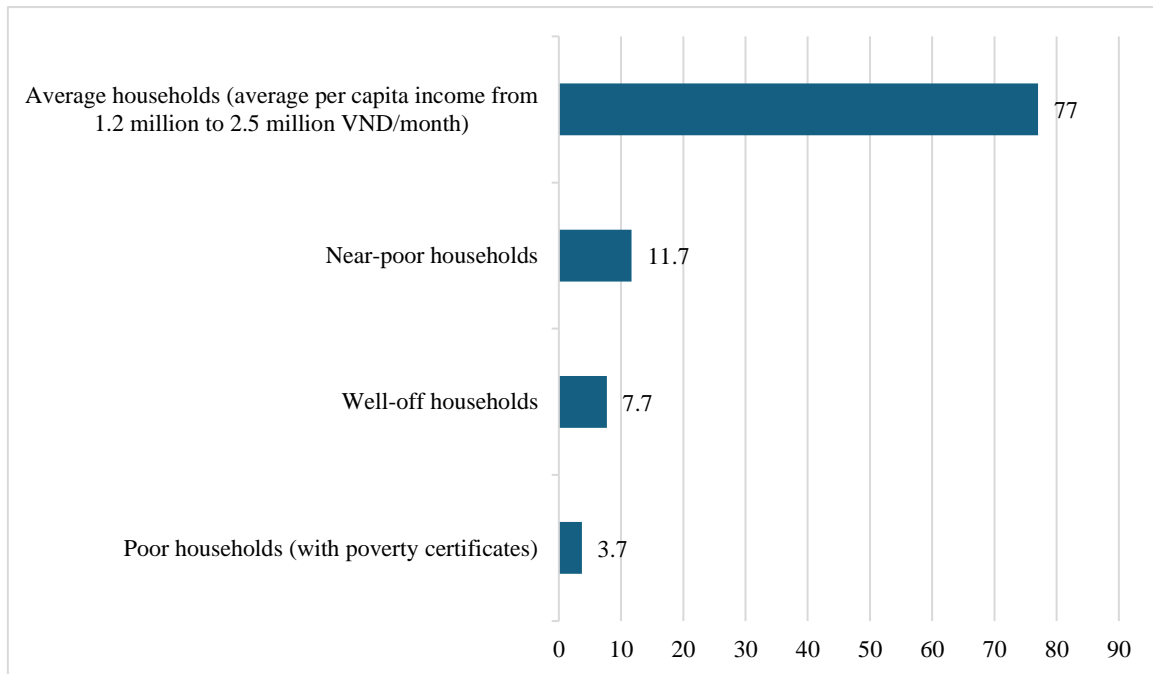


Figure 1. Self-assessed economic status of household heads (Unit: %) (Source: Survey, 2022)

Thus, it can be affirmed that religion has been and continues to play a significant role in the economic development of the local ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands.

In summary, the economic behavior of local minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands is influenced by many factors, including religious teachings. Religious ethics, with principles such as honesty and environmental protection, play a significant role in their sustainable economic development strategy.

► **Impact on Culture:** In the Southern Central Highlands, ethnic minority communities are now predominantly Catholic and Protestant. Although these religions were initially at odds with local traditions, they have gradually been accepted and adapted to harmonize with indigenous culture. Religious leaders have flexibly adjusted canon law and the community adheres to religious regulations within the permissible framework.

Surveys of these ethnic communities reveal efforts to preserve traditional cultural elements within the context of religious practice. This is particularly evident in the preservation of traditional clothing, musical instruments, and rituals.

• **Impact on Traditional Clothing:** The local ethnic minorities have a tradition of wearing hand-woven brocade costumes with distinctive colors and designs. While the new religions did not mandate changes in dress, the community has gradually adopted Kinh-style clothing. Men typically wear shirts, trousers, shoes, and watches for important events, while labor clothing purchased from the market is worn for work. Although women still incorporate traditional elements in their attire, the style and fabric are now mostly market-bought.

The change in clothing is primarily driven by the social context and cultural exchanges between ethnic groups, rather than religious influence. However, traditional elements are being revived through religious activities, especially during ceremonies at religious institutions.

A survey of 300 heads of households showed that 58.3% of respondents still use traditional clothing. Of these, 24% wear fully traditional costumes when attending ceremonies, while 34.3% combine traditional and Kinh attire. This combination is often seen in men wearing shirts and trousers with traditional shirts, and women wearing traditional skirts with modern blouses.

The use of traditional clothing at ceremonies varies by gender and religion. Women are more likely than men to wear fully traditional clothing (17.3% vs. 6.7%), while men are more likely to combine traditional and Kinh attire (26.3% vs. 8.0%). Catholics are also more likely than Protestants to wear traditional clothing (15.7% vs. 8.3%).

Protestants believe that pastors encourage formal attire, such as white shirts and black trousers, while also allowing a combination with traditional clothing. In contrast, Catholics are often encouraged to wear traditional attire during ceremonies. The survey results show a clear difference in preferences between followers of these two religions (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. The Wearing of Traditional Costumes by Believers When Attending Ceremonies as Requested by Religious Leaders (Source: Survey, 2022)

		The person in charge of the church or place of prayer asks people to wear traditional attire when going to Mass		Total	
		Yes	No		
Religion	Catholicism	N/%	109/36.3	38/12.7	147/49.0
	Protestantism	N/%	89/29.7	64/21.3	153/51.0
	Total	N/%	198/66.0	102/34.0	300/100.0

This distinction is reflected in the percentage of people who believe that religious leaders encourage the wearing of traditional clothing during ceremonies at religious institutions. Consequently, this results in differences in the use of traditional costumes among religious communities in the South Central Highlands today.

• *Impact on Traditional Musical Instruments:* Field surveys reveal significant differences between the two religious communities in the study area. Catholics are encouraged to use traditional musical instruments in ceremonies and other activities, which is evident in the widespread use of these instruments during masses and festive events. In contrast, within the Protestant community, traditional musical instruments are rarely used and are absent from church services. As one Protestant pastor explained, "We don't want people to be nostalgic for rituals associated with past deities. Traditional musical instruments were often used in these rituals. Today, believers only pray to God, so they do not use the sounds from those instruments" (Pastor in Lam Dong, 2023).

Our observations also confirm that Protestants seldom use traditional musical instruments in their daily lives. Meanwhile, Catholics not only incorporate traditional instruments during weekly masses but also during major holidays such as Easter and Christmas. They even form traditional musical instrument clubs to develop tourism products for visitors. Thus, the use of traditional musical instruments differs significantly between the two communities, reflecting the unique characteristics of each religion and its cultural practices.

• *Impact on Rituals in Economic Activities:* The survey indicates that while some rituals related to cultivation and harvesting are still performed, the frequency is low. Specifically, only 5.7% of people conduct rituals on garden land, and 17.3% on rice fields, predominantly among Catholics. We did not receive any comments from Protestants regarding the performance of these rituals.

Catholic rituals in economic activities generally aim to:

1. Pray for a good season.
2. Pray for healthy crop growth.
3. Protect crops from pests and diseases.
4. Thank God and pray for a bountiful harvest in the next season.

These purposes are similar to traditional rituals before the community converted to Catholicism, except for the object of prayer. In the past, people prayed to various deities; now, they pray to God. The ritual form has also shifted from offering sacrifices to the deities to praying at the church.

Notably, Catholics in the South Central Highlands and throughout Vietnam perform the ritual of "Sanctification of Jobs" on the third day of the Lunar New Year, asking God to bless their work in the coming year. Although the ethnic minority communities here do not celebrate the Lunar New Year like the Kinh people, they still observe this ritual at the church under the guidance of their priests.

This difference in the performance of rituals related to economic activities reflects a change in the form and focus of these rituals, while their purpose remains the same. It suggests that despite religious conversion, the community retains a psychological need for spiritual support through rituals or prayer.

In short, while religion has significantly impacted the culture and activities of ethnic minority communities in the South Central Highlands, traditional values are preserved to varying degrees. These ethnic groups continue to maintain their identity while integrating it with their religious beliefs, creating the unique characteristics of each community. This is a crucial factor in the context of global development and contemporary Vietnam, contributing to the sustainable development of ethnic groups in the future.

► **Impact on Environment:** That is observed in two areas: the livelihood environment and the living environment of the ethnic community.

• *Impact on the Natural Environment:* Local ethnic minority communities in the South Central Highlands mainly rely on agriculture, with primary activities including cultivation and animal husbandry. In their economic activities, they emphasize religious integrity and ethical practices, avoiding the overuse of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, stimulants, or growth enhancers, and recognizing the potential harm to people and the environment. This awareness stems not only from agricultural extension and education programs but also from the guidance of religious leaders.

A resident shared, "The priest's sermon at church is considered the word of God. When we believe in God, we follow his teachings because they are always beneficial to the community. He advised us to do good, avoid theft and laziness, and never engage in actions harmful to others" (Quoted from Mr. D.T.D., Catholic, K'ho, 54 years old, Lam Dong, 2023). A Protestant added, "Pastors often emphasize not harming others and the environment by using too many pesticides and chemicals, as this can cause cancer and violates God's laws" (Quoted from Mr. K.D., Protestant, Mnong, 49 years old, Dak Nong, 2023).

Discussions with pastors and deacons in the K'ho community revealed that people did not traditionally use chemicals in their farming. They only adopted these practices from outsiders, so they now need regular warnings to avoid chemical overuse and resulting debt (Quoted from Pastor K.D., K'ho, 57 years old, Lam Dong, 2023).

Although we have yet to verify this concretely, conversations with both community members and religious leaders indicate that religion plays an essential role in encouraging the reduction of chemical use in economic activities, thereby protecting the environment and public health.

• *Impact on the Living Environment:* Our survey found that the living environment in the local ethnic minority communities in the South Central Highlands has consistently maintained a clean and attractive landscape. Village roads have been paved, and houses are now constructed with bricks and corrugated iron roofs, replacing older wooden structures. Modern homes include multiple rooms such as living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and separate toilets.

Cattle and poultry farming is now conducted in barns or designated areas, rather than allowing animals to roam freely in residential areas. This improvement results from the efforts of local governments, state support through rural development programs, and the contributions of each family and community.

While this issue may not seem directly related to religion, infrastructure development, and sanitation maintenance are carried out under the principle of "the state and the people working together." However, our research suggests that religious leaders also play a vital role in mobilizing people to

participate in environmental protection activities. A resident stated, "During ceremonies, the parish priest often emphasizes the importance of maintaining community hygiene to prevent pollution and disease, such as dengue fever" (Quoted from Mr. K'S., Catholic, K'ho, 51 years old, Lam Dong, 2023). A Protestant deacon similarly shared, "We frequently collaborate with the village chief to promote hygiene, especially proper garbage disposal and mosquito eradication" (Quoted from Mr. K.H, 47 years old, K'ho, Lam Dong, 2023).

In short, religion has both direct and indirect impacts on environmental protection. The teachings and involvement of religious leaders have positively contributed to maintaining a cleaner and more sustainable living environment for the community.

► **Impact on Society:** Religion influences society in three main areas: health, education, and community management.

- **Health Issues:** Field surveys indicate that the government has prioritized the development of healthcare services in ethnic minority areas of the Southern Central Highlands over the past few decades. Most communes are equipped with health stations staffed by 3-5 nurses and doctors, along with the necessary facilities and medications to meet the healthcare needs of the local population. One resident noted, "Whenever we get sick, we go to the commune health station for a check-up and medicine, free of charge thanks to insurance" (Quoted from Mr. C.P., Catholic, K'ho, 55 years old, Lam Dong, 2023). Another person added, "If it's serious, we're transferred to the provincial hospital; if it's mild, we go to the commune health station for treatment" (Quoted from Ms. H' D.E., Protestant, Ede, 49 years old, Dak Lak, 2023).

The survey reveals that over 90% of ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands have health insurance, allowing them to access free medical services at health centers and hospitals within the province. This underscores the government's commitment to providing healthcare for all, particularly ethnic minority communities.

In addition to the state's healthcare system, religious institutions also play a vital role in public health, especially among their congregations. Catholic and Protestant churches frequently organize free medical programs, including eye surgeries, heart surgeries for the elderly and poor, and cleft lip and palate repairs for children. These programs are funded through external donations.

A resident shared, "The church often organizes free eye surgery programs and medical check-ups for the community" (Quoted from Mrs. H'W.N., Catholic, Ede, 47 years old, Dak Lak, 2023). Religious leaders also regularly advise their followers to protect the environment and avoid superstitious practices for healing, contributing to greater public health awareness.

Feedback from the community on public health consistently highlighted the positive impact of the government's healthcare system, while also emphasizing the crucial role of religious leaders in organizing medical charity groups and promoting environmental hygiene.

Thus, in addition to government initiatives, religious activities play a significant role in ensuring public health, contributing to the sustainable development of ethnic communities in the future.

- **Education:** A survey of 300 households, representing 1,442 ethnic minorities, showed that the majority have received education up to primary and secondary levels, though the illiteracy rate remains above 9%. Encouragingly, nearly 4% of the population has attained intermediate, college, university, or postgraduate degrees, signaling positive educational progress. We anticipate that education in these areas will continue to improve, supported by substantial investments in education for remote and ethnic minority regions in recent years.

Currently, most communes in the Southern Central Highlands have primary schools, while districts and towns have middle and high schools. The region is also home to universities like the University of the Central Highlands and the University of Da Lat. Ethnic minority children benefit from tuition exemptions, fostering favorable conditions for learning and future educational advancement. The percentage of ethnic minority children who are of school age and are attending school is relatively high, reinforcing confidence in the community's educational development.

Survey results indicate that 33.4% of the 1,442 surveyed population are currently attending or have attended school. With continued investment, the education levels of local ethnic minorities in the Southern Central Highlands are likely to improve significantly. However, alongside state investment, the local community must also strive to achieve this goal.

Over the years, the community’s dedication to education has been evident, with individuals achieving intermediate, college, university, and graduate degrees. This commitment to education is often intertwined with religious beliefs, reflected in parents’ aspirations during ceremonies at home and religious institutions (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Prayers made during worship at religious sites (Source: Survey, 2022)

Things believers pray for	Percentage (%)
Praying for health for themselves and their family	100
Praying for success in business	90.7
Praying for good education and success for their children and grandchildren	63.0
Praying for ancestors to return to God	39.7
Praying for wealth for the community/village	35.7
Praying for other things (forgiveness, family unity, harmony...)	33.3
Praying for a bountiful harvest	25.0
Praying for a prosperous and wealthy family	21.3
Praying to escape the current poverty	20.3
Praying to have enough money to pay off debts	9.0

Furthermore, families place a strong emphasis on investing in their children’s education, as evidenced by the monthly expenditure patterns observed in our survey (see Figure 2).

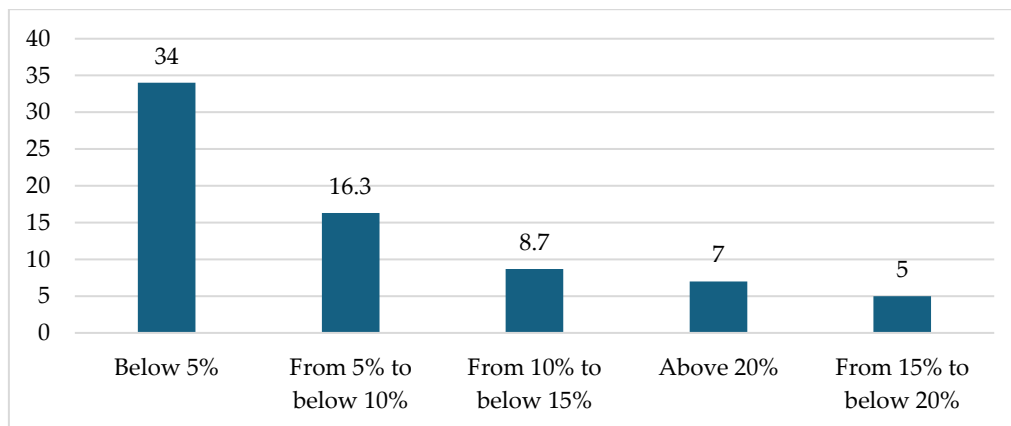


Figure 2. Percentage of Monthly Expenditure on Children’s Education in the Family (Members: %) (Source: Survey, 2022)

This indicates that all families with school-aged children allocate some portion of their monthly budget to education, with many families dedicating more than 20% of their total monthly spending to this purpose. Additionally, religious leaders in the community actively promote education by awarding scholarships to outstanding students during holidays and consistently encouraging families to invest in education for a brighter future.

As a result, the education of children in local ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands has consistently been a priority, supported by the government, mass organizations, families, communities, and religious institutions. Religion plays a significant role in enhancing educational attainment, contributing positively to the sustainable development of these ethnic groups in the future.

• *Charitable activities and community support* are also considered among the important duties regularly carried out by Protestant and Catholic clergy. Through their extensive and positive relationships with religious communities in other regions across the country, these clergy members frequently call for

external support for the local ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands. As a result, people in difficult circumstances within these communities often receive valuable gifts, helping them to overcome challenging times and reducing the burden on local authorities.

- *Community Management:* In traditional societies, the village elder typically holds the primary responsibility for community management. Village elders, deeply knowledgeable about customs and highly trusted by the community, manage based on customary law. Alongside them, the shaman—believed to possess "transcendent abilities" and a connection to the gods—wields considerable influence. The shaman not only conducts healing rituals but also oversees sacrifices, offerings of gratitude to the gods, and the resolution of customary law violations, which often involve punitive offerings of valuable items like buffaloes or pigs.

Today, surveys show that state officials, religious dignitaries, and village councils all play crucial roles in managing ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands. When asked, "Who is the most prestigious person in the community?", over 55% of respondents identified religious leaders (priests, pastors, deacons) as the most respected, followed by government officials, village elders, and heads of families (see Figure 3).

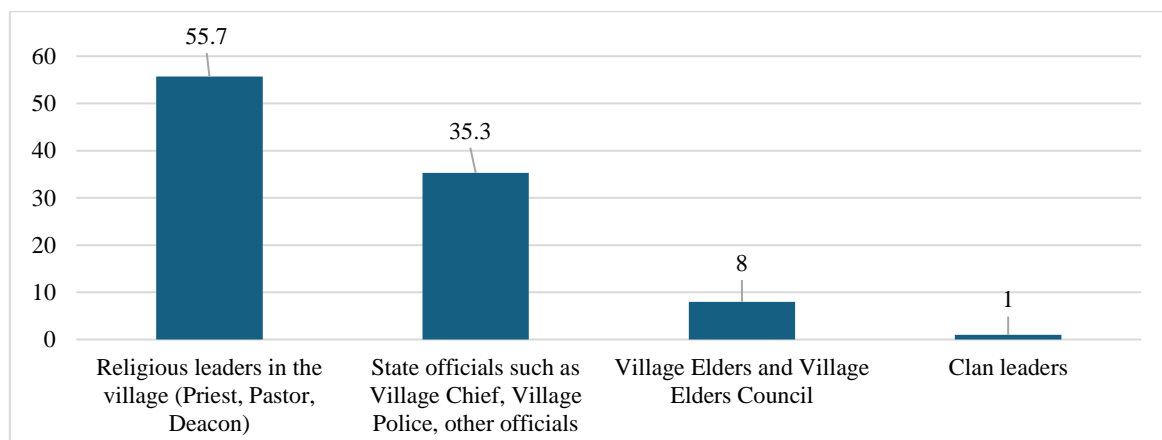


Figure 3. The Prestige of Various Forms of Authority in the Community (Members: %) (Source: Survey, 2022)

Community members expressed their appreciation for religious leaders, such as: "The pastor here is very attentive to our lives. He frequently encourages us to engage in positive activities like working hard, avoiding alcohol and smoking, and steering clear of laziness, which has improved our lives. He also visits homes to conduct ceremonies for significant events such as housewarmings, weddings, and funerals, and he seeks financial support to help children attend school. Consequently, we hold him in high regard" (Quoted from Mr. H.N., Protestant, Mnong, 51 years old, Dak Nong, 2023).

Similarly, a priest at Dung K'noh Church is also deeply respected by the community: "The parish priest is highly esteemed. He has served for over 15 years and has become an integral part of our community. He is fluent in the national language, not only leading ceremonies but also teaching us to perform well and seeking sponsorship to assist disadvantaged families" (Quoted from Mr. D.T.D., Catholic, K'ho, 54 years old, Lam Dong, 2023).

Thus, religious dignitaries occupy important roles and are highly valued within the community, holding the highest level of respect. Individuals working in state agencies are also respected for their roles in social management, security, and community development support. While village councils are respected, their influence is generally less pronounced compared to that of religious leaders and state officials, as their primary function is to advise and assist the government in resolving conflicts.

When asked, "Who do you usually turn to for resolving family and community conflicts?", the survey results revealed that most people rely on government officials (52.3%), followed by religious leaders (30%), with village councils being consulted less frequently (9.7%) (see Figure 4).

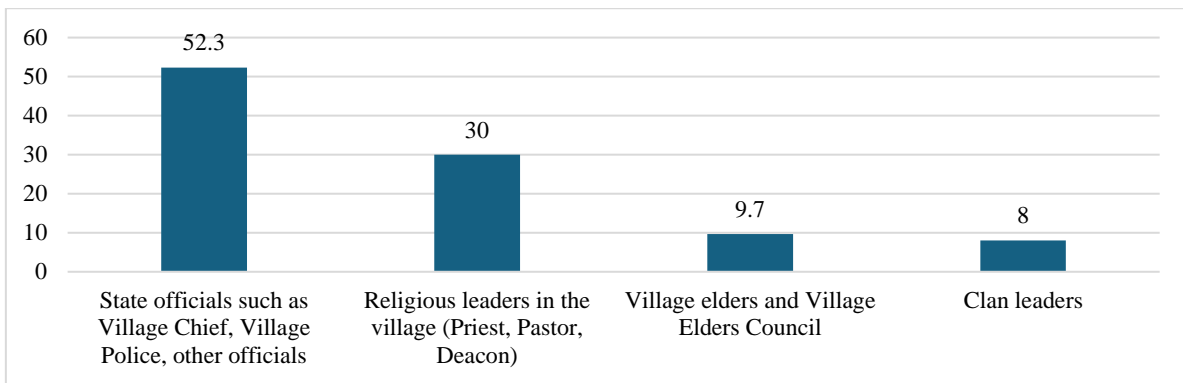


Figure 4. Preferred Individuals for Conflict Resolution (Members: %) (Source: Survey, 2022)

Members of local ethnic minority communities indicate that they seek assistance from individuals with specific roles depending on the nature of the issue. For conflicts involving land disputes, theft, or brawls, state officials are often consulted due to the legal nature of these problems. In contrast, disputes related to personal relationships within a community, family, or clan are typically addressed by religious dignitaries, owing to their credibility and persuasive influence.

While some individuals do turn to village elders and village councils, this is less common because these figures are perceived as lacking the authority to resolve conflicts effectively.

Thus, the management of ethnic minority communities has evolved significantly from traditional practices. Today, village-level administration is handled by a team of officials, including village heads, village police, and representatives from various mass organizations. They are crucial in overseeing security, managing general affairs, and addressing the economic, cultural, and social needs of the community. Their responsibilities include implementing state policies, maintaining order, promoting social security, combating poverty, supporting modern lifestyles, family planning, and ensuring legal compliance.

Additionally, religious dignitaries such as priests, pastors, and deacons not only conduct religious ceremonies but also play a significant role in the social management of their communities. They are involved in settling disputes and are highly respected, with their guidance followed both in religious practices and social matters. Consequently, religion continues to play a vital role in the management and influence of ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands.

5. Conclusion

The ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands are currently predominantly adherents of Catholicism and Protestantism. Although these religions faced many challenges in their missionary efforts within these ethnic communities, the persistent efforts of missionaries, combined with favorable external conditions, led to successful evangelization. Today, Catholicism and Protestantism have a significant impact on the economic, cultural, and social life of the local ethnic minority communities specifically, as well as other ethnic groups in the Southern Central Highlands more broadly.

The analysis of the impact of religion on the economic, cultural, environmental, and social aspects of ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands reveals that religious teachings, doctrines, and beliefs serve as guiding principles in their activities. Economically, ethnic minorities adhere to religious moral values, prioritizing community and environmental well-being over personal gain, despite the persistent issue of poverty. They demonstrate diligence, proactive behavior, and responsible use of science and technology, focusing on community and environmental protection. Culturally and environmentally, although there are differences between Catholics and Protestants, both groups aim to uphold values of truthfulness, goodness, and beauty, promoting progress rather than regression and encouraging civilization and humanity. Socially, religion significantly influences

health, education, charitable activities, community support, and community management, with religious leaders regarded as authoritative figures whose teachings are trusted and followed by the community. These have deeply impacted the lives of ethnic minority communities in the Southern Central Highlands and contributed to helping them improve their economic, cultural, environmental, and social lives, creating an important driving force to support ethnic sustainable development goals in the future. Therefore, local authorities should seek to harness and promote the exploitation of religious values and make better use of the support from religious leaders in implementing the region's sustainable development strategy through 2030.

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Conflict of Interest and Data Availability Statement

The authors state no conflict of interest and there is no data associated with this article.

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