

**COMMUNITY-BASED EVIDENCE
ABOUT THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IN
RURAL VIETNAM**

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping letters that appear to be 'TT' followed by a flourish.

(Signed)

Tran Tuan

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Thesis Summary

**COMMUNITY-BASED EVIDENCE ABOUT THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM
IN RURAL VIETNAM**

This thesis contributes further evidence for policy-making on health care system reform in Vietnam. The author aims to provide insights into the provincial rural health system ten years after health sector reform was launched, through assessing availability of health care services, patterns of access of health care services when people are ill, and the costs of care and the performance of public and private providers.

The following questions are addressed:

1. Which health care providers, i.e., public or private, are dominant in providing curative services to rural people when they are ill?
2. How much inequality exists between the poor and the non-poor in access to health care services in general, and public health care services in particular, when they are ill? Which factors explain the gap in use of services between the poor and the non-poor?
3. What policy and strategies should Vietnam consider implementing in order to reach the goals of better equity and quality of care for rural populations?

These research questions were addressed using community-based survey data collected in 2001 from Hung Yen province, in which three components of the system -- user, provider, and community context -- are described and linked together in analysis. In addition, a supplementary health care provider survey collected in 1999 in three other provinces (Thai Binh, Binh Thuan, An Giang) is used to provide evidence about the availability of healthcare services in general and of private health care providers.

The thesis is divided into two parts with a total of 9 chapters. Part A (chapters 1-4) provides background for the research questions raised about the commune health care system in rural Vietnam, the framework used in evaluating this health care system, and the data sources used in this thesis. Part B consists of five chapters (chapters 5-9) that

presents research results on various dimensions of the rural health care system. It also provides conclusions on the health care system in rural Vietnam, and proposes policies and strategies for strengthening this system toward equity and efficiency.

Chapter 1 presents the research rationale and objectives. It examines the international context of health system research, the Vietnamese context of health sector reform since the ‘Doi Moi’, and the current trend of health sector reform, and the previous research done so far related to health system reform in Vietnam. The research questions addressed by the thesis are presented at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 2 describes the historical development of rural health care system in Vietnam. It starts with an overview of social changes in rural Vietnam including revolution and wars and both the positive and negative impacts on the health of rural populations. The evolution of the rural health care system is then outlined, from the single national provider system (public) to the reforms of 1989 where a public-private model for rural health care was introduced.

Chapter 3 provides frameworks for analysis of availability, health accessibility, quality and efficiency of the rural health care system, and inequality of healthcare service utilization. It starts with a statement about the concept of health care system used in this thesis. Then five theoretical models for assessing the health care systems (health service utilization model, triangular model, model for improve quality of care, health care services as an open system, and the World Bank’s framework for assessing the performance of the health sector in serving the poor) are presented. The strategy of using these frameworks to assess the rural health system in Vietnam is explained. The link between the research questions and methodology used was described.

Chapter 4 provides detailed descriptions of the two data sources and analysis strategies used to address the thesis research questions. The design and data collection methods of the health care provider surveys and household surveys in the four provinces are presented, followed by the specific strategy of using information from each database for the thesis objectives. The chapter ends with a presentation of the overall strategy of data analysis.

Chapter 5 assesses availability of the commune health care system in rural areas of Vietnam with empirical data from all the four provinces. The findings show that both public and private health care providers are available in rural Vietnam, with a slight dominance of private services. There were commune health centers (CHCs) in all communes with at least one private physician in the majority of the communes. The average number of private providers ranged from 2.7 to 7.7 per 10,000 population in the four provinces. Many of them practiced without formal registration and under limited government supervision.

Chapter 6 estimates perceived need of care by measuring the burden of non-fatal health problems with data from 3,498 people of 900 households randomly selected in Hung Yen province. Compared to the better off, the poor suffered significantly more long-term health ailments (an excess of 78 cases per thousand population) and more short-term morbidity (an excess of 112 cases per thousand population). The study found that the gap in household wealth index contributed approximately 55% of the explained gap in prevalence of long-term health conditions, equivalent to the gap of 60 cases per thousand population, and also 55% of the explained gap in short-term morbidity, equivalent to the gap of 38 cases per thousand population between the two groups based on the Oaxaca decomposition ($D=0$). Gaps in education, gender, health insurance, and occupation played a minor role in explaining the wealth-related inequalities in non-fatal health burden.

Chapter 7 describes patterns of use of health care services when people are ill by type of providers, by type of illnesses, and by poverty ranking level. Findings in this chapter reveal a high level of self-medication, greater access to private than public services, and less use of public services or any health care services by the poor in comparison to the better off. Self-funded purchases of drugs for self-medication and use of private curative services were even common in those with health insurance. A single private provider contact for treatment of illness costs on average 2.6% of the total annual expenditure per capita, and self-medication with drugs purchased at private health care facilities costs 1.0% of total annual expenditure per capita, similarly these at district hospitals and commune health centers were similar. Finally, the percentage of ill people with no

access to any health care providers during their illness episode was high, regardless of their wealth or health insurance status.

Chapter 8 compares the quality of private and public health services using a framework proposed by the World Bank for evaluating the quality of health care in developing countries. Results from this chapter show that technical quality of care was poorer in the private sector than among public providers while costs for patients were similar in private and public facilities, and client satisfaction was similar in public and private facilities.

Chapter 9 summarizes the results from Chapters 5-8 to identify the main characteristics of the rural health system with a view to system sustainability and proposes policies and strategies for strengthening the quality of the public health care sector and improving its equity and efficiency. The main features of the current rural health care system in Vietnam identified from the community-based evidence found in this research are: (1) primary health care services are available and there is equality in physical access; (2) financial resources for the CHC system are diversified with Government resources the key contributors; (3) private health care providers for outpatient services, public providers for inpatient services; (4) quality of treatment services is below the national standard; (5) public services are available but under utilized; (6) the rural health care system is not a pro-poor system; (7) direct payment is the main component of total health care expenditure; and (8) the economic relationship of the rural health care system is a user-provider model rather than a health care triangular model.

Nine recommendations to strengthen the rural health care system were then developed based on a critical view of the objectives of the Vietnam health sector reform for the period 2001-2010 supported by evidence found in this research. This chapter ends with a section to remind readers about the limitations of this study and then proposes future research with specific questions covering three main dimensions of health care system reform in Vietnam (accessibility, quality of care, and overall management). A study with a sentinel site approach to follow-up the impact of the social and health sector reform policies is also proposed to help the government make timely adjustments to their policies to protect the poor.

THESIS CONTENTS

PART A. RESEARCH ISSUE AND METHODOLOGY

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND THESIS OBJECTIVES | 3 |
| 1.1. BACKGROUND | 3 |
| 1.1.1. International context of health system research | 3 |
| 1.1.2. Vietnamese context of health care sector reform..... | 5 |
| 1.1.3. Current trends of health care system reform | 10 |
| 1.1.4. Research on health system reform in Vietnam | 12 |
| 1.1.5. Health system reform in Vietnam: research in focus | 16 |
| 1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE THESIS | 17 |
| 1.2.1. Research questions | 17 |
| 1.2.2. Research objectives..... | 17 |
| 1.3. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS | 18 |
| 1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THESIS | 19 |
| 2. CHAPTER TWO: RURAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IN VIETNAM..... | 26 |
| 2.1. RURAL VIETNAM – OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE 20 TH CENTURY | 26 |
| 2.1.1. Revolution and wars..... | 26 |
| 2.1.2. Moving into and out of the cooperative farm economic model | 28 |
| 2.2. RURAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM – FORMATION AND REFORM PROCESS..... | 30 |
| 2.2.1. Nationwide formation of single provider system..... | 30 |
| 2.2.2. Health sector reform 1989 and the rural public-private model for health care | 33 |
| 2.2.2.1. Setting | 33 |
| 2.2.2.2. Rural health care system after 1989 | 35 |

| | |
|---|----|
| 3. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK..... | 43 |
| 3.1. THE CONCEPT OF HEALTH SYSTEM..... | 43 |
| 3.2. THEORETICAL MODELS FOR ASSESSING THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM | 43 |
| 3.1.1. Framework used to describe access to and use of health care services: Health care services: Health services utilization | 44 |
| 3.1.2. Assessing economic relationship of the system: Triangular model | 47 |
| 3.1.3. Model for improving quality of care..... | 48 |
| 3.1.4. Framework for analysis of sustainability of a health care system: health care services as an open system..... | 49 |
| 3.1.5. The World Bank’s framework for assessing the performance of the health sector in serving the poor | 51 |
| 3.3. STRATEGY OF USING FRAMEWORKS IN ASSESSING THE RURAL HEALTH SYSTEM IN VIETNAM..... | 55 |
| 4. CHAPTER FOUR: DATA SOURCES AND STRATEGY OF USE | 61 |
| 4.1. INTRODUCTION OF THE TWO DATABASES | 61 |
| 4.1.1. Thai Binh, An Giang, and Binh Thuan databases..... | 61 |
| 4.1.1.1.Introduction | 61 |
| 4.1.1.2.Objectives of the surveys | 62 |
| 4.1.1.3.Study design..... | 63 |
| (a) Geographic area | 63 |
| (b) Sampling | 65 |
| (c) Measures | 70 |
| (d) Questionnaire development..... | 71 |
| (e) Fieldwork organization, data cleaning and management..... | 72 |
| 4.1.2. Hung Yen Database..... | 73 |
| 4.1.2.1. Introduction..... | 73 |
| 4.1.2.2. Survey objectives | 74 |
| 4.1.2.3. Study design..... | 75 |
| (a) Sampling..... | 75 |

| | |
|--|----|
| (b) Sample size rationale | 75 |
| (c) Measures | 79 |
| (d) Questionnaire development | 80 |
| (e) Fieldwork organization, data cleaning and management | 82 |
| 4.2. STRATEGY OF USING THE TWO DATABASES TO MEET THE OBJECTIVES OF THE THESIS | 82 |
| 4.2.1. Comparison of the two databases in relation to the thesis objectives | 82 |
| 4.2.2. Strategy for using the two databases | 83 |
| 4.3. DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY | 85 |

PART B. RESEARCH RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

| | |
|---|-----|
| 5. CHAPTER FIVE: AVAILABILITY OF THE COMMUNE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IN RURAL AREA OF VIETNAM | 93 |
| 5.1. INTRODUCTION | 93 |
| 5.2. RESEARCH METHODS | 96 |
| 5.2.1. Database | 96 |
| 5.2.2. Measuring availability of health care services | 96 |
| 5.2.3. Predictors of availability of private health care providers | 98 |
| 5.2.4. Data analysis | 101 |
| 5.3. RESULTS | 102 |
| 5.3.1. Main differences among the four provinces | 102 |
| 5.3.2. Availability of public health care services across provinces | 106 |
| 5.3.3. Availability of private health care providers relative to commune health centre resources | 107 |
| 5.3.4. Factors predicting the availability of private providers in rural areas | 111 |
| 5.4. DISCUSSION | 114 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 6. CHAPTER SIX: NON-FATAL HEALTH BURDEN IN RURAL PEOPLE | 121 |
| 6.1. INTRODUCTION | 121 |
| 6.2. METHODS | 122 |
| 6.2.1. Database | 122 |
| 6.2.1.1. Perceived health problems..... | 122 |
| 6.2.1.2. Study factors..... | 123 |
| 6.2.2. Data analysis | 124 |
| 6.2.2.1. Measuring burden of non-fatal health outcome | 125 |
| 6.2.2.2. Measuring inequality in non-fatal health outcomes between the poor and the better off | 126 |
| 6.2.2.3. Explaining inequality in non-fatal health outcomes: The Oaxaca decomposition approach..... | 131 |
| 6.3. RESULTS | 134 |
| 6.3.1. Main characteristics of the study population | 134 |
| 6.3.2. Burden of non-fatal health problems..... | 137 |
| 6.3.2.1. Bivariate analysis | 137 |
| 6.3.2.2. Multivariate analysis of predictors of burden of non- fatal health problems | 147 |
| 6.3.2.3. Inequality in non-fatal health burden between the poor and the better off | 153 |
| 6.4. DISCUSSION | 160 |
| 6.4.1. The study sample | 160 |
| 6.4.2. Non-fatal health burden..... | 161 |
| 6.4.2.1. What is the non-fatal health burden in Hung Yen? | 163 |
| 6.4.2.2. What were the main predictors of non-fatal health burden in Hung Yen? | 165 |
| 6.4.2.3. How much inequality exists in non-fatal health outcomes between the poor and the better off? | 169 |
| 6.4.2.4. What were the main factors that contributed to the explained gap in non-fatal health outcomes between the poor and the better off?..... | 171 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 6.5. CONCLUSIONS..... | 173 |
| 6.5.1. Non-fatal health outcome indicators | 173 |
| 6.5.2. Predictors of non-fatal health outcomes..... | 173 |
| 6.5.3. Factors contributing to inequalities in non-fatal health burden between the poor and the better off | 174 |
| 7. CHAPTER SEVEN: HEALTH-CARE SEEKING AND EXPENDITURE BY RURAL PEOPLE | 183 |
| 7.1. INTRODUCTION | 183 |
| 7.2. METHODS | 184 |
| 7.2.1. Database | 184 |
| 7.2.1.1. Outcome variables: health service utilization and costs of care | 184 |
| 7.2.1.2. Study factors..... | 185 |
| 7.2.2. Data analysis | 186 |
| 7.2.2.1. Health service utilization indicators | 186 |
| 7.2.2.2. Costs of care analysis | 188 |
| 7.2.2.3. Multivariate analysis to determine predictors of health service utilization..... | 189 |
| 7.2.2.4. Inequality in use of health care services between the poor and the better off | 189 |
| 7.3. RESULTS | 189 |
| 7.3.1. Pattern of utilization of health care services when people are ill..... | 189 |
| 7.3.1.1. General pattern of use of healthcare services | 190 |
| 7.3.1.2. Inequality in use of health care services when people are ill..... | 197 |
| 7.3.1.3. Predictors of use of outpatient public healthcare services and Oaxaca decomposition for causes of gaps in public service utilization | 204 |
| 7.3.2. Costs of care..... | 211 |
| 7.3.2.1. General characteristics of costs data..... | 212 |
| 7.3.2.2. Structure of expenditure | 213 |
| 7.3.2.3. Expenditure by type of providers | 216 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 7.3.3. Pattern of utilization of health services and costs of care among ill people with health insurance | 219 |
| 7.4. DISCUSSION | 222 |
| 7.4.1. Self-medication | 223 |
| 7.4.2. Relative role of public and private sectors in rural health care..... | 224 |
| 7.4.3. Poor access less to health care services including public health care services..... | 225 |
| 7.4.4. Costs of care..... | 228 |
| 7.4.5. No access to any healthcare services when people are ill..... | 229 |
| 7.5. CONCLUSIONS..... | 230 |
| 8. CHAPTER EIGHT: QUALITY OF COMMUNITY HEALTH CARE SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS..... | 236 |
| 8.1. INTRODUCTION | |
| 8.2. RESEARCH METHODS | 238 |
| 8.2.1. Study design..... | 238 |
| 8.2.2. Definition of study variables and measurements | 239 |
| 8.2.2.1. Private providers..... | 239 |
| 8.2.2.2. Health system structural indicators | 239 |
| 8.2.2.3. Health system process indicators | 241 |
| 8.2.2.4. Outcome indicators..... | 241 |
| 8.2.3. Data analysis | 242 |
| 8.2.3.1. Categorizing private providers | 242 |
| 8.2.3.2. Assessing health care providers' knowledge and clinical practice..... | 242 |
| 8.2.3.3. Estimating income for private providers | 243 |
| 8.3. RESULTS | 245 |
| 8.3.1. Health system human resources | 245 |
| 8.3.2. Infrastructure characteristics, availability of drugs and medical equipment, and funding for health care facilities | 248 |
| 8.3.2.1. Facility hygiene and availability of drugs and medical equipment | 248 |

| | | |
|----------|---|-----|
| 8.3.2.2. | Financial sources for the community health care providers | 250 |
| 8.3.3. | Support training, inspecting private services, clinical performance and skills of community health care providers | 252 |
| 8.3.3.1. | Supporting training | 252 |
| 8.3.3.2. | Supervision and inspecting private services..... | 253 |
| 8.3.3.3. | Clinical performance and skills of community health care providers | 254 |
| 8.3.4. | Costs of care and patient satisfaction with health care services provided by CHC and private providers..... | 256 |
| 8.4. | DISCUSSION | 258 |
| 9. | CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... | 270 |
| 9.1. | METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES | 270 |
| 9.1.1. | A vision of rural health care system in Vietnam..... | 270 |
| 9.1.2. | Reviewing the system under various research frameworks | 271 |
| 9.1.3. | Measuring equality in health and health care..... | 272 |
| 9.1.4. | From case studies to the rural health care systems in other provinces..... | 274 |
| 9.2. | MAIN FEATURES OF THE RURAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM..... | 276 |
| 9.2.1. | Summary of evidence on rural health care system..... | 276 |
| 9.2.2. | Main features of the rural health care system | 281 |
| 9.2.2.1. | Primary care services are available and there is equality in physical access | 281 |
| 9.2.2.2. | Financial resources for the CHC system were diversified with Government resources the key contributors..... | 281 |
| 9.2.2.3. | Private health care providers for outpatient services, public providers for inpatient services | 281 |
| 9.2.2.4. | Quality of treatment services is below the national standard | 281 |
| 9.2.2.5. | Public service are available but under utilized | 282 |
| 9.2.2.6. | The rural health care system is not a pro-poor system | 282 |

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| 9.2.2.7. | Direct payment is the main component of total health care expenditure | 282 |
| 9.2.2.8. | Health care economic relation model: limitations of the user providers direct payment model..... | 283 |
| 9.3. | POLICY-ORIENTED IMPELICATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE RURAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM..... | 284 |
| 9.3.1. | Vietnamese objectives for health sector reform 2001-2010 | 284 |
| 9.3.2. | Selected health care strategies related to the rural health care system and recommendations | 286 |
| 9.3.2.1. | Renovating the health insurance system to regulate the financial relationships between the users and the providers | 289 |
| 9.3.2.2. | New approaches are needs to strengthen the quality and efficiency of the commune curative care services | 290 |
| 9.4. | RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND PROPOSED RESEARCH FOR THE FUTURE | 294 |
| 9.4.1. | Research limitations | 294 |
| 9.4.1.1. | Study design | 294 |
| 9.4.1.2. | Data analysis..... | 295 |
| 9.4.2. | Proposed future research | 295 |

REFERENCES

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Chapter 1 | 20 |
| Chapter 2 | 40 |
| Chapter 3 | 57 |
| Chapter 4 | 88 |
| Chapter 5 | 117 |
| Chapter 6 | 176 |
| Chapter 7 | 231 |
| Chapter 8 | 265 |
| Chapter 9 | 298 |

APPENDICES

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction..... | 300 |
| Appendix I- Household questionnaire | A1 – A32 |
| Appendix I- Health care provider survey..... | A33 – A42 |
| Appendix II- Concentration index and Oaxaca decomposition: Stata-do file...B1–B3 | |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 2.1. Socio-economic data of Vietnam 1985-1999..... | 29 |
| Table 4-1. Sample size determination for household survey on health services utilization in Thai Binh, An Giang, and Binh Thuan..... | 69 |
| Table 4-2. Main information from Thai Binh health system survey 1999 used to calculate the sample size for the household survey in Hung Yen 2001..... | 78 |
| Table 4.3. Structure of questionnaires used in the Hung Yen survey 2001 | 81 |
| Table 5.1. List of the explanatory variables used in predicting the availability of private health care providers in rural Vietnam | 100 |
| Table 5.2. Distribution of community environmental characteristics by province, June-August 1999 | 103 |
| Table 5.3. Distribution of community morbidity, pattern of use of curative services when people are ill, and preventive health program outputs by provinces | 105 |
| Table 5.4. Availability of healthcare services, drugs, and adequacy of facilities at commune health centers (CHC) of the four provinces through the Health System Development Survey 1999 and 2001..... | 106 |
| Table 5.5. Availability of public and private providers at 94 communes in Thai Binh, Binh Thuan, An Giang (1999) and Hung Yen (2001) | 109 |
| Table 5.6. Poisson regression estimates of predictors of availability of private health care providers in Thai Binh, Binh Thuan, and An Giang provinces, June-August 1999 (N= 64 communes)..... | 112 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 5.7. Poisson regression estimates of predictors of availability of private healthcare providers in Hung Yen province in Vietnam, July 2001 (N=30 communes)..... | 113 |
| Table 6.1. Study variables in analyzing access to and utilization of health care services in rural areas of Vietnam by Anderson's model | 124 |
| Table 6.2. Household asset items used in constructing household wealth index using principal component analysis | 128 |
| Table 6.3. Main characteristics of 3498 persons by quintile groups in Hung Yen, 2001 | 135 |
| Table 6.4. Comparison of the main characteristics of the poor (lowest 40% household wealth index percentiles) and the better off (highest 60% household wealth index percentiles) in Hung Yen, 2001 | 137 |
| Table 6.5. Prevalence of long-term health consequences, disability, and chronic illnesses by selected background characteristics in Hung Yen, 2001 | 138 |
| Table 6.6. Prevalence of acute illnesses, acute exacerbation of chronic illnesses, and morbidity during the four-week reference period in Hung Yen, 2001 | 142 |
| Table 6.7. Distribution of illness episodes in the four weeks before the survey by level of restriction of normal activities in Hung Yen, 2001..... | 145 |
| Table 6.8. Distribution of hospitalization rate by predisposing and enabling factors in Hung Yen, 2001 | 146 |
| Table 6.9. Logistic regression estimates of predictors of long-term health prevalence in Hung Yen, 2001..... | 149 |
| Table 6.10. Logistic regression estimates of predictors of morbidity in the four-week reference period in Hung Yen, 2001..... | 151 |
| Table 6.11. Logistic regression estimates of predictors of hospitalization among 3498 persons in the year prior to the survey in Hung Yen, 2001 | 152 |
| Table 6.12. Concentration index for the long-term health conditions and four-week morbidity in Hung Yen, July 2001 calculated by group data method | 154 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 6.13. Concentration index for the hospitalization of the poor and the better off (group method) in Hung Yen, 2001 | 156 |
| Table 6.14. Decomposition of the difference in prevalence of health problems between the poor and the better off group by type of health problems..... | 157 |
| Table 6.15. The explained and unexplained portions of the outcome gap by the decomposition used and by type of health burden | 157 |
| Table 6.16. Role of each factor in contributing to the health-burden gap between the poor and the better off identified through Oaxaca decomposition by the type of health problems | 159 |
| Table 6.17. Comparison between Hung Yen study population and 1998 VLSS for basic demographic and social variables | 160 |
| Table 6.18. Key findings on non-fatal health burden in Hung Yen..... | 162 |
| Table 6.19. Comparison in morbidity between the Hung Yen and the 1998 VLSS | 164 |
| Table 6.20. Concentration indices from various health outcome studies | 170 |
| Table 7.1. Pattern of access to health services by type of health problem from 1210 persons with 1563 illness episodes during the 4 weeks prior to the survey | 191 |
| Table 7.2. Pattern of use of health care services by level of restriction of normal activity (N=1563)..... | 192 |
| Table 7.3. Pattern of access to health service by household wealth status among 1563 illness episodes in the 4-week reference period | 194 |
| Table 7.4. Annualized health service contact rate by providers and wealth index (N=1563) | 195 |
| Table 7.5. Reasons of not accessing and health care services when people were ill during the four-week reference period ill by type of illnesses | 196 |
| Table 7.6. Concentration index for use of any health care services and use of public health services among 1563 cases during the four-week reference period..... | 200 |

| | | |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Table 7.7 | Concentration index for use of any health care services and of public health services among 1201 ill persons during the four-week reference period..... | 201 |
| Table 7.8. | Concentration indices for use of public services and use of any health care services in the four-week reference period by difference approach used (i.e. illness episodes of ill persons) | 203 |
| Table 7.9. | Utilization of public health services by ‘predisposing’, ‘enabling’ and ‘need’ factors | 205 |
| Table 7.10. | Logistic regression of predictors of use of public health care services for people ill during the 4 weeks before the survey | 207 |
| Table 7.11. | Decomposition of the difference in prevalence of use of public services between the poor (bottom 40% quintiles) and the better off group (top 60% quintiles) (N= 1563 illness episodes)..... | 208 |
| Table 7.12. | The explained and unexplained portions of the gap in use of public healthcare services between the better of and the poor by the decomposition method | 209 |
| Table 7.13. | Decomposition results for the variables in the explained portion of use of public health care services..... | 210 |
| Table 7.14. | Relative role of each factor in contributing to the use of public services in each group | 211 |
| Table 7.15. | Summary statistics fro the distribution of costs of care by expenditure components | 213 |
| Table 7.16. | Ratios of relative expenditure of cost components to total costs of care | 214 |
| Table 7.17. | Distribution of total costs of care by level of expenditure..... | 215 |
| Table 7.18. | Distance traveled to providers for curative services and or purchase of drugs for self-medication..... | 216 |
| Table 7.19. | Mean of costs of care by type of health care providers and costs of care as a percentage of mean household expenditure per capita per year from the VLSS 1998 for the Red River delta rural communities | 218 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 7.20. Pattern of access to healthcare services by type of health problems among 253 ill persons with health insurance during the four weeks before the survey | 211 |
| Table 7.21. Distribution of 34 ill cases with health insurance and who accessed outpatient services for illness treatment by actual level of reimbursement for expenditure for care paid by the health insurance company and by type of health care providers | 222 |
| Table 8.1. Professional background training of CHC staff and private providers..... | 246 |
| Table 8.2. Private practice among CHC staff in the 30 surveyed communes of Hung Yen province, July 2001 | 246 |
| Table 8.3. Main characteristics of private providers in the 30 surveyed communes | 247 |
| Table 8.4. Comparison of available medial equipment and supplies between private and CHC systems, Hung Yen | 249 |
| Table 8.5. Distribution of one-year income by sources of income for the 30 communes health centers of Hung Yen | 250 |
| Table 8.6. CHC's expenditure for non-salary items during 12 months before the survey from the 30 surveyed CHCs in Hung Yen..... | 251 |
| Table 8.7. Monthly and annual income from health care services per private provider compared to average salary of CHC staff in rural areas of Hung Yen | 252 |
| Table 8.8. Percentage of private providers received inspecting visits during the last 12 months by type of private providers | 254 |
| Table 8.9. Comparison of clinical performance and skills between the 182 private care providers who provide childcare services and CHC staff who responsible for the treatment of acute respiratory infectious and diarrhoea in children..... | 255 |
| Table 8.10. Costs of care at communal level by type of providers among 143 outpatients | 257 |
| Table 8.11. Mean scores of patient satisfaction with outpatient services by type of healthcare facility (N=143) | 257 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Table 9.1. Summary of the similarity between Hung Yen and other provinces on availability of health care services, community morbidity, pattern of use of curative services when people are ill, and preventive health program outputs | 275 |
| Table 9.2. Community-based evidence for the health care system in rural areas | 276 |
| Table 9.3. Recommendations to strengthen the rural health care system | 286 |
| Table 9.4 Specific research questions derived from the thesis findings | 296 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 1-1. Chronology of policy and strategies implemented during the first 10 years of health sector reform in Vietnam (1989-1999)..... | 7 |
| Figure 2-1. The impact of the 1954-1975 war on Vietnam | 27 |
| Figure 2-2. Structure of health service system North Vietnam 1954-1975 and Vietnam 1975-1989..... | 32 |
| Figure 2-3. Structure of rural healthcare system within the national healthcare system since 1989 | 37 |
| Figure 3-1. Andersen's behavioral model (Andersen 1968)..... | 45 |
| Figure 3-3. The health care triangle model (Christiansen 2002) | 47 |
| Figure 3-4. Quality of care model (Geyndt 1995) | 48 |
| Figure 3-5. Framework for analyzing sustainability of health care services as an open system (Adapted from (Olsen 1998) | 50 |
| Figure 3-6. Summary of 10 dimensions of evaluating a health system's ability to effectively cover the poor and generate good health outcomes (Levine and Soucat 2002) | 52 |
| Figure 4-1. Study areas: Thai Binh, Binh Thuan, An Giang (1999), and Hung Yen (2001) | 64 |
| Figure 5-1. Survey samples in Thai Binh, Binh Thuan, An Giang (1999) and Hung Yen | |
| Figure 6-1. Survey approach in measuring perceived health problems and need of care in Hung Yen survey, 2001 | 123 |
| Figure 6-2. Concept of concentration curve..... | 130 |
| Figure 6-3. Oaxaca decomposition | 132 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 6-4. Distribution of long-term health prevalence ratios and four-week morbidity ratios by age groups of 5 year intervals in Hung Yen, 2001 | 142 |
| Figure 6-5. Concentration curves of long-term health prevalence ratios and four-week morbidity in Hung Yen, 2001 | 154 |
| Figure 6-6. Concentration curves of hospitalization in Hung Yen, July 2001 (Total population: N= 3498; Total annual hospital admissions:160) | 155 |
| Figure 7-1. Framework for investigation of health services utilization and costs of care in Hung Yen survey July 2001 | 185 |
| Figure 7-2. Odds ratio of use of services by type of providers and illness severity level among 1563 illness episodes | 193 |
| Figure 7-3. Financial constraints as the reason for not accessing any health care providers among 581 ill persons without use of any services by household wealth index quintile | 197 |
| Figure 7-4. Concentration curves for four-week illness rate and use of health care services and use of public health care services among illness cases (i.e. the first approach) during the four weeks before the survey (Total population $N=3498$; total illness episode cases $n1A=1563$, total use of health services $n2A=219$, and total use of public services $n3A= 113$) | 199 |
| Figure 7-5. Concentration curves for four-week morbidity and use of any health care services and use of public health care services among ill persons (i.e. the second approach) during the four weeks before the survey (Total population $N=3498$; total ill persons $n1B=1201$, total use of any health services $n2B=181$, and total use of public services $n3B= 99$) | 201 |
| Figure 7-6. Comparison between concentration curves built with the first approach (A based on total illness cases 1563) and the second approach (B based on 1201 ill persons) for inequalities in health burden, use of any health care services, and use of public healthcare services during the four weeks prior to the survey | 202 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 7-7. Ratios of mean and median total expenditure for a curative service contact at various types of health care facilities in comparison to costs at the CHC..... | 217 |
| Figure 7-8. Comparison of access to curative care services by type of providers between groups with and without current health insurance among 1563 persons who reported illnesses during the four weeks before the survey in Hung Yen, July 2001 | 219 |
| Figure 7-9. Comparison of patterns of utilization of health care services by health insurance status among 1563 persons who reported ill during the 4 weeks before the survey..... | 220 |
| Figure 8-1. Framework for investigating quality of health care in Hung Yen 2001 | 239 |
| Figure 8-2. Comparison of hygiene in CHCs and private facilities with percent and 95% confidence intervals for each group with clean clinics, toilets and water | 248 |
| Figure 8-3. Relative contribution to annual income of the 30 CHCs by income sources | 251 |
| Figure 8-4. Support training in the past three years among 182 private health care providers in the 30 Hung Yen CHCs | 253 |
| Figure 8-6. Percentage of being inspected for private activities during 12 months before the survey among 234 private providers by background of medical training | 254 |
| Figure 8-7. Comparison of the correct answers identified by private only, public-private, and CHC staff who is responsible for internal medicine (percentage and 95% confidence intervals), about what questions should be asked of a 58 year old patient with suspected hypertension | 256 |
| Figure 9-1. The economic relationship of the rural health care system: User-provider model rather than a health care triangular model | 283 |