

Ethnic Minority Cultural Preservation in Vietnam: International Cooperation and the Challenges of Globalization

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ABSTRACT: Globalization, modernization, and expanding international development cooperation have significantly transformed ethnic minority regions in Vietnam since the 1990s. Economic integration, migration, tourism, urbanization, and digital media expansion have reshaped cultural practices, communal identity, and intergenerational relationships within many ethnic minority communities. At the same time, international organizations, NGOs, and bilateral development programs increasingly promoted cultural preservation, bilingual education, indigenous knowledge protection, and community-based cultural initiatives as part of sustainable development strategies.

This article analyzes the impacts of globalization and international development cooperation on cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam between 1995 and 2025. Using qualitative analysis, literature review, and a cultural-development approach, the study examines how globalization influences language use, rituals, indigenous knowledge, and communal identity while evaluating the role of development cooperation in supporting cultural sustainability. The findings indicate that international cooperation contributed positively to bilingual education, oral heritage documentation, cultural tourism, community participation, and NGO-supported preservation projects. However, important challenges remain, including language loss, cultural homogenization, commercialization through tourism, and weakened intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. The study argues that development cooperation may simultaneously preserve and commodify culture depending on the level of local participation and community control.

KEYWORDS: Cultural preservation; Cultural sustainability; Development cooperation; Ethnic minorities; Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is widely recognized as one of the most culturally diverse countries in Southeast Asia, with 53 officially recognized ethnic minority groups living alongside the Kinh majority. These communities possess rich linguistic traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, ritual practices, oral heritage, and distinctive forms of social organization that contribute significantly to the cultural diversity of the Vietnamese nation. Ethnic minority groups are primarily concentrated in mountainous, borderland, and highland regions such as the Northern Mountains, Central Highlands, and parts of Central and Southern Vietnam. Over centuries, these communities have developed complex cultural systems closely connected to local ecological conditions, communal structures, and spiritual beliefs (Salemink, 2001). Their languages, rituals, festivals, handicrafts, agricultural practices, and customary knowledge constitute important components of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage.

However, processes of globalization, modernization, and rapid socioeconomic transformation have profoundly reshaped the cultural landscape of ethnic minority regions during recent decades. Since the implementation of the Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms and the acceleration of international integration after the 1990s, ethnic minority communities have increasingly been exposed to market expansion, migration, urbanization, tourism, digital media, and transnational cultural flows. These transformations have generated both opportunities and challenges for cultural preservation. On one hand, improved infrastructure, educational access, and economic integration have expanded opportunities for social mobility and development. On the other hand, rapid social change has intensified concerns regarding language decline, weakening intergenerational transmission, commercialization of traditional rituals, and the gradual erosion of local cultural practices (UNESCO, 2019).

The expansion of international development cooperation after the normalization of Vietnam–United States relations in 1995 further accelerated these processes of transformation. Bilateral and multilateral development programs increasingly targeted ethnic minority regions through initiatives related to education, poverty reduction, sustainable livelihoods, environmental adaptation, and community development. International organizations, NGOs, educational institutions, and development agencies became increasingly involved in projects supporting cultural preservation, bilingual education, community tourism, and indigenous knowledge protection. Organizations such as UNESCO, UNDP, Save the Children, Oxfam, and various NGOs promoted

development approaches emphasizing participation, cultural sustainability, and community resilience in ethnic minority regions (Hines et al., 2015; UNDP, 2018).

At the same time, economic development and modernization have frequently generated tensions between growth-oriented policies and cultural continuity. Existing studies suggest that large-scale development projects, market integration, urban migration, and the spread of global media have altered traditional social structures and weakened communal forms of cultural transmission (Bui, 2019). Younger generations increasingly adopt dominant national and global cultural practices through education systems, digital communication, and labor mobility, while traditional languages and ritual practices face declining participation in many communities. According to the Vietnam Institute of Linguistics, numerous ethnic minority languages are currently considered endangered because of shrinking intergenerational use and the growing dominance of Vietnamese in education and public life (Vietnam Institute of Linguistics, 2018).

Language vulnerability represents one of the most significant cultural challenges in contemporary ethnic minority regions. Many minority languages are no longer widely used among younger generations, particularly in communities experiencing rapid migration and educational integration. UNESCO (2019) notes that language decline often leads to broader cultural erosion because oral traditions, indigenous ecological knowledge, ritual systems, and communal memory are closely embedded within linguistic practices. In this context, cultural preservation has become increasingly connected to broader debates concerning sustainable development, indigenous rights, cultural resilience, and globalization.

Scholars have also emphasized that cultural preservation cannot be understood simply as the passive protection of static traditions. Rather, culture is dynamic and continuously reshaped through interaction with political, economic, and social transformations. Globalization may threaten local identities in some contexts while simultaneously creating new opportunities for cultural revitalization, digital preservation, community tourism, and transnational cultural exchange. Consequently, the relationship between modernization and cultural sustainability remains deeply complex and contested.

This article examines the impacts of globalization and international development cooperation on cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze how globalization and modernization have transformed ethnic minority cultural practices, languages, and social structures; examine the role of international development cooperation in supporting cultural preservation and community resilience; and evaluate the tensions between economic modernization and long-term cultural sustainability. Through this analysis, the article addresses three main research questions: How has globalization affected ethnic minority cultural preservation in Vietnam? What role has international development cooperation played in protecting minority cultures? What challenges remain for sustainable cultural preservation in ethnic minority communities?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to several interconnected academic fields, including cultural sustainability, indigenous studies, globalization studies, and development anthropology. By linking cultural transformation with international development cooperation, the article moves beyond narrowly descriptive approaches to ethnic minority culture and instead situates cultural preservation within broader processes of global integration, policy transformation, and social change. The study also contributes to contemporary debates regarding how development cooperation can support culturally grounded and community-centered sustainability in rapidly changing societies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethnic Minority Cultures and Cultural Diversity in Vietnam

The cultural diversity of Vietnam's ethnic minority communities has long attracted scholarly attention within anthropology, ethnology, cultural studies, and linguistics. Existing studies consistently emphasize that ethnic minority groups in Vietnam possess highly diverse linguistic systems, ritual practices, oral traditions, indigenous knowledge structures, and communal identities that have developed through long historical interactions with local ecological and social environments. These cultural systems not only shape everyday social life but also contribute significantly to Vietnam's broader cultural heritage and national identity.

One of the most prominent themes in the literature concerns linguistic diversity. Vietnam is home to dozens of distinct languages belonging to several major language families, including Austroasiatic, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Tibeto-Burman, and Austronesian groups. According to the Vietnam Institute of Linguistics (2018), many ethnic minority languages remain central to the preservation of oral traditions, ritual systems, indigenous ecological knowledge, and communal memory. Language therefore functions not merely as a communication tool but also as a foundation of cultural identity and intergenerational continuity. UNESCO (2019) similarly argues that linguistic diversity constitutes a critical dimension of intangible cultural heritage because language loss frequently leads to the erosion of traditional knowledge and cultural practices.

Ritual practices and spiritual systems represent another important focus within the literature on ethnic minority cultures in Vietnam. Ngo (2007) emphasizes that rituals among ethnic minority communities are closely connected to cosmological beliefs, agricultural cycles, ancestor worship, and communal solidarity. Ritual activities often function simultaneously as religious expression, social organization, and mechanisms for maintaining cultural continuity across generations. Studies on the Central Highlands, Northern

Mountains, and other ethnic minority regions further demonstrate that communal festivals and ritual ceremonies play an important role in reinforcing social cohesion and collective identity (Salemink, 2002).

Oral traditions have also been widely recognized as essential components of ethnic minority cultural systems. Folktales, epic narratives, songs, myths, and oral histories serve as mechanisms for transmitting historical memory, moral values, and collective identity within many communities. Nguyen (2009) and Nguyen (2022) argues that oral traditions among ethnic minority groups reflect sophisticated cultural systems deeply rooted in local social organization and environmental adaptation. Such traditions frequently preserve knowledge that is absent from formal historical records and therefore constitute important forms of cultural continuity.

In addition, scholars increasingly highlight the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in ethnic minority communities. Traditional agricultural practices, forest management techniques, medicinal knowledge, and ecological adaptation strategies have developed over centuries through close interaction with local environments. Khoi (2019) notes that indigenous knowledge among ethnic minority groups contributes not only to cultural identity but also to environmental sustainability and community resilience. Existing studies further suggest that many traditional ecological practices remain highly relevant in the context of climate adaptation and sustainable resource management.

Communal identity constitutes another central theme in the literature. Ethnic minority cultural systems are often organized around strong communal relationships involving kinship networks, village structures, customary laws, and collective rituals. Hoang (2023) and Hoang (2025) argues that communal identity remains particularly important in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity under conditions of rapid modernization. At the same time, scholars such as Le (2023) emphasize that communal structures are increasingly affected by migration, market integration, and changing generational values.

Overall, the literature portrays ethnic minority cultures in Vietnam as dynamic and multifaceted systems shaped by linguistic diversity, ritual practices, oral heritage, indigenous knowledge, and communal forms of identity. However, many studies also note that these cultural systems are experiencing significant transformation under the pressures of globalization, modernization, and economic integration.

2.2. Globalization and Cultural Transformation

The relationship between globalization and cultural transformation has become an increasingly important topic within studies of ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Existing scholarship generally agrees that globalization has accelerated processes of modernization, migration, urbanization, media expansion, and digital communication, thereby reshaping cultural practices and social structures in many ethnic minority regions. However, scholars differ regarding whether these transformations primarily represent cultural decline, cultural adaptation, or the emergence of hybrid cultural forms.

Modernization and market integration have contributed significantly to changing social relationships within ethnic minority communities. Economic restructuring, labor migration, and urbanization have altered traditional livelihood systems and communal structures, particularly among younger generations seeking educational and employment opportunities outside their home communities. Vu (2021a; 2021b) argues that migration and urban mobility often weaken traditional forms of intergenerational cultural transmission because younger individuals spend less time participating in communal rituals, local festivals, and indigenous language practices.

Media expansion and internet connectivity have also transformed cultural consumption patterns in ethnic minority regions. The rapid spread of television, smartphones, social media, and digital entertainment has increased exposure to dominant national and global cultural influences. Tran (2021) notes that younger generations increasingly engage with globalized forms of music, fashion, language, and lifestyle through online platforms. While digital connectivity may create opportunities for cultural exchange and online preservation initiatives, it may also contribute to the gradual marginalization of local languages and traditional cultural practices.

The literature frequently discusses these developments through the concept of cultural homogenization, which refers to the increasing dominance of global or national mainstream cultural forms over local traditions. UNESCO (2019) warns that globalization can contribute to the erosion of minority languages, rituals, and cultural identities when local traditions are unable to compete with dominant cultural industries and mass media systems. In many ethnic minority regions, younger generations increasingly prioritize Vietnamese or global cultural practices because of educational pressures, labor mobility, and social aspirations associated with modernization.

At the same time, other scholars emphasize processes of cultural hybridization and glocalization rather than simple cultural disappearance. Bui (2019) argues that ethnic minority communities do not merely passively absorb global influences but actively negotiate and adapt them within local cultural contexts. Through glocalization, local communities selectively integrate external cultural influences while maintaining elements of traditional identity. This process is particularly visible in areas such as tourism, handicraft production, digital media use, and youth cultural expression.

Commercialization represents another important theme within the literature. The expansion of tourism and market-oriented cultural industries has transformed many traditional festivals, rituals, and handicrafts into economic resources. Some scholars argue that commercialization may contribute to cultural preservation by generating income and increasing public recognition of ethnic minority traditions. Others, however, warn that staged performances and tourism-driven cultural production may distort cultural meanings and reduce traditions to commodified spectacles disconnected from their original social and spiritual contexts.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that globalization produces highly complex cultural transformations involving both risk and adaptation. Rather than simply destroying traditional cultures, globalization frequently reshapes cultural practices through processes of negotiation, hybridization, and selective adaptation. Nevertheless, concerns regarding language decline, weakened communal structures, and cultural commodification remain central within existing scholarship.

2.3. Development Cooperation and Cultural Sustainability

The growing involvement of international development organizations and NGOs in ethnic minority regions has generated increasing scholarly interest in the relationship between development cooperation and cultural sustainability. Since the expansion of international cooperation in Vietnam after the 1990s, numerous projects have focused on preserving intangible cultural heritage, supporting bilingual education, promoting community-based tourism, and strengthening local participation in cultural preservation initiatives.

UNDP (2018) emphasizes that culturally grounded development approaches are essential for sustainable community development in ethnically diverse regions. International development agencies increasingly recognize that economic growth alone cannot ensure long-term sustainability if cultural identities, indigenous knowledge systems, and local participation are neglected. Consequently, many development projects have attempted to integrate cultural preservation into broader poverty reduction and community development strategies.

NGO initiatives have played an important role in supporting local cultural preservation efforts. Organizations such as Save the Children, Oxfam, and UNESCO have implemented programs related to bilingual education, cultural documentation, women's participation, and indigenous knowledge preservation in ethnic minority regions. Bilingual education projects are particularly significant because they seek to strengthen both educational inclusion and linguistic preservation among minority children. Existing studies suggest that mother-tongue education can improve learning outcomes while also supporting intergenerational cultural continuity.

Community-based cultural tourism has emerged as another major area of development cooperation. Several projects promote traditional handicrafts, festivals, ecological knowledge, and local cultural experiences as mechanisms for generating sustainable livelihoods. While such initiatives may create economic opportunities and strengthen cultural visibility, scholars caution that tourism-based preservation can also encourage commercialization and selective representation of culture for external audiences.

The literature further highlights the importance of participatory approaches in cultural sustainability projects. NGO reports frequently emphasize that preservation initiatives are more effective when local communities actively participate in project design and implementation. Community participation not only strengthens local ownership but also helps ensure that cultural preservation reflects local priorities rather than externally imposed representations of ethnic identity.

2.4. Research Gap

Although existing studies provide valuable insights into ethnic minority cultures, globalization, and development cooperation in Vietnam, several important gaps remain. First, relatively few studies explicitly connect globalization, international development cooperation, and cultural preservation within a single analytical framework. Most research addresses these issues separately rather than examining how they interact simultaneously in shaping cultural transformation among ethnic minority communities.

Second, much of the existing literature remains fragmented and descriptive. Studies often focus narrowly on individual ethnic groups, specific rituals, tourism projects, or language preservation programs without analyzing broader structural processes linking globalization, policy transformation, and cultural sustainability. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how international development cooperation influences long-term cultural resilience under conditions of rapid social change.

Finally, many existing studies lack long-term socio-cultural analysis. Short-term project evaluations and descriptive ethnographic accounts frequently overlook the cumulative impacts of modernization, migration, digital communication, and development intervention across multiple decades. Given the rapid expansion of globalization and international cooperation in Vietnam since the 1990s, a more integrated and longitudinal perspective on cultural preservation and transformation remains necessary.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework combining cultural sustainability, cultural resilience theory, and globalization. The integration of these perspectives provides a comprehensive approach for analyzing the relationship between globalization, international development cooperation, and cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Rather than treating ethnic minority cultures as static or isolated systems, the framework emphasizes the dynamic interaction

between tradition and modernity, local agency and global influence, as well as preservation and adaptation under conditions of rapid social transformation.

3.1. Cultural Sustainability

The concept of cultural sustainability has become increasingly important within contemporary debates on development, heritage preservation, and indigenous studies. Cultural sustainability refers to the capacity of cultural systems, practices, languages, and identities to survive and adapt across generations while maintaining their essential meanings and social functions (UNESCO, 2019). Within this perspective, cultural preservation does not imply the rigid protection of unchanging traditions but rather the sustainable transmission of cultural knowledge and practices under changing historical conditions.

In the context of ethnic minority communities in Vietnam, cultural sustainability is closely connected to issues of linguistic preservation, ritual continuity, indigenous knowledge systems, and communal identity. Existing studies indicate that rapid modernization, migration, tourism, and digital globalization have transformed many traditional cultural practices, particularly among younger generations. Consequently, cultural sustainability requires not only documentation and symbolic preservation but also the strengthening of community capacity to maintain and reproduce cultural practices within contemporary social life.

The framework also highlights the importance of intangible cultural heritage. According to UNESCO (2019), intangible heritage includes oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, traditional craftsmanship, indigenous ecological knowledge, and communal practices transmitted through intergenerational participation. Such heritage is particularly vulnerable under conditions of globalization because it depends heavily on everyday social interaction and collective memory rather than physical preservation alone. Therefore, cultural sustainability involves protecting the social environments in which cultural transmission occurs.

Community resilience constitutes another central component of this framework. Communities capable of maintaining social cohesion, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and local participation are more likely to sustain cultural continuity despite external pressures. This perspective emphasizes adaptive preservation, meaning that cultural practices may evolve and transform while still preserving core symbolic meanings and communal functions. From this viewpoint, adaptation is not necessarily evidence of cultural decline but may instead represent a strategy for long-term cultural survival.

3.2. Cultural Resilience Theory

Cultural resilience theory provides an additional analytical lens for understanding how ethnic minority communities respond to globalization and modernization. Rather than assuming that traditional cultures inevitably disappear under external pressure, cultural resilience theory argues that communities actively negotiate, reinterpret, and adapt cultural practices in response to changing social conditions. Cultural transformation therefore should not automatically be interpreted as cultural loss.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where ethnic minority communities have historically experienced multiple forms of political, economic, and cultural change. Existing studies demonstrate that many communities selectively preserve rituals, languages, and communal traditions while simultaneously adopting new technologies, educational systems, and economic practices (Salemink, 2002). Cultural resilience theory thus emphasizes agency and adaptation rather than passive decline.

The theory also highlights the negotiation between tradition and modernity. Ethnic minority communities do not simply resist modernization or completely assimilate into dominant national and global cultures. Instead, they frequently combine traditional practices with contemporary influences in ways that reflect local priorities and social realities. Such negotiation is particularly visible in areas such as education, tourism, handicraft production, media use, and youth identity formation. Cultural resilience therefore involves the capacity to maintain cultural continuity while adapting to new economic, technological, and political environments.

3.3. Glocalization

The concept of glocalization further strengthens the analytical framework by explaining how local cultures interact with global influences under globalization. Glocalization refers to the process through which global cultural, economic, and technological influences are selectively adapted and reinterpreted within local contexts rather than simply imposed in a uniform manner. This perspective challenges simplistic assumptions that globalization inevitably produces complete cultural homogenization.

Within ethnic minority regions in Vietnam, glocalization is evident in the ways communities integrate global influences into local cultural practices. Ethnic minority youth, for example, increasingly engage with social media, digital communication, global fashion, and online cultural networks while still participating in certain traditional rituals and communal activities. Similarly, tourism development often combines local cultural performances and handicrafts with global market demands and digital promotion strategies.

Education represents another important example of glocalization. Bilingual education programs and cultural preservation initiatives frequently combine national educational frameworks with local languages, indigenous knowledge, and community participation. Rather than purely resisting globalization, many communities selectively adapt external influences in ways that support both economic participation and cultural continuity.

This framework is particularly useful for understanding the complexity of cultural transformation in contemporary Vietnam. It demonstrates that globalization does not operate solely as a destructive force but also creates opportunities for cultural revitalization, digital preservation, transnational visibility, and new forms of community identity. At the same time, glocalization remains uneven and contested, as not all communities possess equal resources or institutional support for negotiating global influences effectively.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the relationship between globalization, international development cooperation, and cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam between 1995 and 2025. A qualitative framework is particularly appropriate because the research focuses on cultural transformation, community practices, social meaning, and long-term processes of adaptation that cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone. Rather than measuring cultural change statistically, the study seeks to analyze how ethnic minority communities negotiate modernization, preserve cultural identity, and respond to external development influences under conditions of rapid social transformation.

The research primarily utilizes literature review, cultural analysis, and a comparative-historical approach. The literature review method is used to synthesize existing scholarship on ethnic minority cultures, globalization, cultural sustainability, indigenous knowledge, and development cooperation in Vietnam. Through this process, the study identifies major academic debates, dominant theoretical perspectives, and recurring concerns regarding cultural preservation and social change in ethnic minority regions.

Cultural analysis constitutes another important methodological component of the study. This approach enables the examination of symbolic practices, rituals, language use, communal identity, and indigenous knowledge systems within broader social and political contexts. Rather than viewing culture as static heritage, the study analyzes cultural practices as dynamic systems continuously reshaped through interaction with modernization, migration, tourism, media expansion, and development intervention. Particular attention is given to how ethnic minority communities adapt, reinterpret, or selectively preserve cultural traditions in response to globalization.

In addition, the study adopts a comparative-historical approach to trace cultural transformation across the post-1995 period following the expansion of Vietnam's international integration and development cooperation. This approach allows the analysis of continuity and change over time, particularly regarding language preservation, ritual practices, educational transformation, community participation, and cultural sustainability. By examining developments across multiple decades, the study avoids overly narrow or short-term interpretations of cultural change.

The article draws upon approximately 25–30 sources, including UNESCO publications, NGO reports, ethnographic studies, Vietnamese government documents, and academic literature related to ethnic minority cultures and development cooperation. Key materials include reports from UNESCO, UNDP, Oxfam, Save the Children, the Vietnam Institute of Linguistics, and the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, as well as ethnographic and anthropological studies by Vietnamese and international scholars. These sources provide both policy-oriented and socio-cultural perspectives necessary for understanding the complexity of cultural preservation in contemporary Vietnam.

The temporal scope of the study extends from 1995 to 2025, a period characterized by rapid globalization, expanding international cooperation, and accelerated socioeconomic transformation in ethnic minority regions. The analysis focuses specifically on language preservation, rituals, festivals, traditional knowledge systems, and community participation in cultural preservation initiatives. These dimensions were selected because they represent some of the most significant and vulnerable aspects of ethnic minority cultural identity under conditions of modernization and global integration.

5. GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN ETHNIC MINORITY REGIONS

5.1. Language Loss and Linguistic Vulnerability

One of the most significant cultural consequences of globalization and modernization in Vietnam's ethnic minority regions has been the gradual decline in the use of indigenous languages. Language functions not only as a communication system but also as a repository of historical memory, ritual knowledge, oral traditions, and communal identity. Consequently, the weakening of minority languages often signals broader processes of cultural transformation and social restructuring. Existing studies indicate that many ethnic minority languages in Vietnam are increasingly vulnerable because of educational integration, migration, media expansion, and the growing dominance of Vietnamese in public life (Vietnam Institute of Linguistics, 2018).

The decline in mother-tongue usage is particularly visible among younger generations. Educational systems emphasizing Vietnamese-language instruction have expanded access to national education and economic participation, yet they have also contributed to the gradual marginalization of local languages in everyday life. In many ethnic minority communities, children increasingly use Vietnamese at school, online, and in urban labor environments, while indigenous languages become confined to older family members or ceremonial contexts. UNESCO (2019) notes that intergenerational language transmission has weakened significantly in several ethnic minority communities, especially in regions experiencing rapid urbanization and migration.

Youth language shift represents a major dimension of this transformation. Younger individuals often associate Vietnamese and global languages such as English with educational mobility, employment opportunities, and modern social identity. As a result, many ethnic minority languages are no longer viewed as economically valuable in contemporary society. Thanh (2019) argues that linguistic change among ethnic minority youth reflects broader aspirations connected to modernization and social integration. However, this shift also threatens oral traditions, ritual practices, and indigenous ecological knowledge systems that are deeply embedded within local linguistic structures.

Several ethnic minority languages in Vietnam are currently considered endangered or severely vulnerable. Small population size, geographic displacement, migration, and weak institutional support contribute to language decline in many communities. In some cases, younger generations possess only partial fluency in their ancestral language, while daily communication increasingly occurs in Vietnamese. The erosion of language diversity therefore represents not only a linguistic issue but also a broader challenge for cultural sustainability and communal continuity.

Table 1. Endangered Ethnic Minority Languages in Vietnam and Major Causes of Decline

Language group	Main challenges	Consequences
Smaller Mon-Khmer languages	Limited intergenerational transmission	Decline in oral traditions
Hmong-Mien minority languages	Migration and educational assimilation	Reduced daily language use
Tay-Thai local dialects	Media dominance and urbanization	Linguistic homogenization
Central Highlands indigenous languages	Youth language shift and labor mobility	Weakening ritual and communal practices

Source: Author's compilation from UNESCO (2019), Vietnam Institute of Linguistics (2018), and ethnographic studies.

The decline of minority languages also affects communal identity and social cohesion. Oral histories, ceremonial chants, indigenous agricultural knowledge, and kinship traditions are often transmitted through local languages rather than written systems. Consequently, language loss may gradually weaken cultural continuity and alter the symbolic foundations of community life. Existing literature therefore increasingly emphasizes the importance of bilingual education and community-based language preservation programs as mechanisms for supporting long-term cultural sustainability.

5.2. Migration, Urbanization, and Changing Social Structures

Migration and urbanization have further transformed social organization within ethnic minority regions. Since the expansion of market integration and economic modernization after the 1990s, increasing numbers of ethnic minority youth have migrated to urban centers, industrial zones, and tourism areas in search of education and employment opportunities. While migration may improve household income and social mobility, it also contributes to significant changes in communal relationships and traditional social structures.

One major consequence of migration is the weakening of communal ties. Traditional ethnic minority communities in Vietnam have historically been organized around collective village structures, kinship networks, ritual participation, and communal labor systems. However, migration reduces the participation of younger generations in local ceremonies, agricultural activities, and village governance. According to Hoang (2020), the absence of working-age youth in many rural communities has weakened traditional mechanisms of social cohesion and collective cultural transmission.

Urbanization also contributes to changing family structures and social values. In many ethnic minority communities, extended family systems and communal lifestyles are increasingly replaced by more individualized economic and social patterns associated with urban labor markets and modern consumer culture. Exposure to urban lifestyles, wage labor, and formal education has altered generational expectations regarding marriage, occupation, and social identity. Younger generations may prioritize educational mobility and urban employment over traditional communal obligations or customary practices (Hoang & Nguyen, 2025).

At the same time, migration creates new forms of cultural negotiation rather than complete cultural disappearance. Some ethnic minority migrants maintain strong emotional and ritual connections with their home communities through return festivals, kinship obligations, and digital communication. Social media and mobile technology also allow migrant populations to remain connected to local cultural practices despite physical mobility. Nevertheless, the long-term continuity of communal identity becomes increasingly complex under conditions of demographic mobility and urban integration.

5.3. Media, Internet, and Cultural Homogenization

The expansion of digital media and internet connectivity has become one of the most influential drivers of cultural transformation in ethnic minority regions. Over the past two decades, smartphones, television, social media platforms, and online entertainment have rapidly expanded into remote areas previously characterized by limited communication infrastructure. This transformation has significantly increased exposure to national and global cultural influences among ethnic minority populations, particularly youth. Global media influences contribute to changing forms of cultural consumption, language use, and identity formation. Younger generations increasingly engage with mainstream Vietnamese popular culture as well as Korean, Chinese, Western, and

transnational digital media content through online platforms. Tran (2021) argues that digital culture has reshaped aesthetic preferences, social aspirations, and lifestyle practices among ethnic minority youth, especially in regions experiencing rapid tourism and market integration.

The spread of digital culture has also intensified concerns regarding cultural homogenization. Dominant national and global cultural forms often possess greater economic visibility, technological accessibility, and social prestige than local traditions. Consequently, traditional clothing, oral storytelling, ritual participation, and indigenous languages may become less attractive to younger generations seeking integration into broader national or global cultural networks. UNESCO (2019) warns that digital globalization may accelerate the marginalization of minority cultures if preservation mechanisms fail to adapt to changing communication environments.

However, media and internet expansion also create opportunities for cultural revitalization and digital preservation. Some ethnic minority communities increasingly use social media platforms to promote traditional music, handicrafts, festivals, and local languages. Digital technology allows communities to document oral traditions, share ritual performances, and connect with broader audiences beyond local geographic boundaries. In this sense, digital media functions simultaneously as a mechanism of cultural homogenization and a potential tool for cultural resilience.

5.4. Commercialization of Rituals and Festivals

Tourism development and market expansion have significantly transformed ritual practices and cultural festivals in many ethnic minority regions. Traditional ceremonies, handicrafts, and festivals increasingly function not only as communal or spiritual activities but also as economic resources within tourism-oriented development strategies. This process has generated both opportunities and tensions regarding cultural preservation.

Community-based tourism initiatives often provide important livelihood opportunities for ethnic minority households through handicraft production, homestay services, festival tourism, and cultural performances. International organizations and NGOs have frequently supported such initiatives as mechanisms for linking cultural preservation with sustainable economic development. In some cases, tourism has increased public recognition of ethnic minority heritage and encouraged younger generations to maintain traditional artistic practices.

Nevertheless, scholars increasingly warn about the risks of staged authenticity and cultural commodification. Rituals and festivals originally embedded within spiritual and communal contexts may be transformed into commercial performances designed primarily for tourists and external audiences. Salemink (2002) argues that commercialization can alter the symbolic meaning and social function of traditional practices by prioritizing entertainment value over communal significance. As a result, some cultural performances become standardized or simplified to meet market expectations.

Commercialization may also create unequal power relationships regarding cultural representation. External tourism agencies, state institutions, or development organizations sometimes influence which cultural practices are promoted and how ethnic identities are presented to outsiders. Consequently, communities may selectively perform certain “marketable” cultural elements while other less visible traditions gradually decline.

Table 2. Major Cultural Changes among Ethnic Minority Communities under Globalization

Cultural dimension	Traditional characteristics	Contemporary transformation
Language use	Strong intergenerational transmission	Increasing dominance of Vietnamese
Ritual participation	Community-centered ceremonies	Reduced youth participation
Social organization	Collective village structures	Increased individual mobility
Cultural expression	Oral and local transmission	Digital and media-based interaction
Festivals	Spiritual and communal functions	Tourism-oriented commercialization

Source: Author’s compilation from UNESCO reports, ethnographic studies, and NGO publications.

6. INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

6.1. NGO and International Organization Initiatives

International development cooperation has played an increasingly important role in supporting cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam since the expansion of global integration and development partnerships after the 1990s. International organizations, NGOs, educational institutions, and bilateral development agencies have implemented numerous projects focusing on language preservation, cultural revitalization, community participation, and indigenous knowledge protection. These initiatives emerged partly from growing international recognition that cultural diversity and intangible heritage constitute essential components of sustainable development rather than secondary concerns separate from economic growth.

UNESCO has been one of the most influential international actors in promoting cultural preservation in Vietnam. Through programs related to intangible cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge documentation, and community-based preservation, UNESCO has emphasized the importance of safeguarding oral traditions, ritual practices, folk arts, and local languages among ethnic minority

communities. UNESCO (2019) argues that cultural heritage should be understood as a living social process requiring active community participation rather than merely the preservation of static cultural objects. Consequently, many preservation projects have focused on strengthening intergenerational transmission and local cultural participation rather than relying exclusively on formal institutional protection.

International NGOs have also contributed significantly to community preservation projects in ethnic minority regions. Organizations such as Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE, and Plan International have implemented programs addressing cultural sustainability alongside poverty reduction and educational development. Many NGO-supported initiatives emphasize local participation, women's involvement, and community empowerment in cultural preservation activities. In several mountainous regions, NGOs have supported projects related to traditional handicrafts, oral history documentation, indigenous music preservation, and local-language educational materials.

Oral heritage documentation has become a particularly important area of international cooperation. Many ethnic minority communities possess rich oral traditions, including epic narratives, ceremonial chants, myths, folktales, and ritual songs that historically existed primarily through spoken transmission rather than written records. However, migration, language decline, and changing generational practices increasingly threaten the continuity of these traditions. As a result, international organizations and researchers have collaborated with local communities to document oral heritage through audio recordings, community archives, educational materials, and digital preservation projects.

At the same time, scholars caution that preservation projects may generate tensions between external institutional priorities and local cultural realities. Some projects emphasize documentation and symbolic representation while paying insufficient attention to the social conditions necessary for long-term cultural continuity. Cultural preservation therefore becomes most sustainable when local communities actively shape the preservation process and maintain control over cultural representation and decision-making.

6.2. Bilingual Education and Cultural Transmission

Bilingual education has emerged as one of the most significant mechanisms linking development cooperation with cultural preservation in ethnic minority regions. Existing studies indicate that language preservation and educational inclusion are closely interconnected because language functions as both a cultural resource and a tool for social participation. International development organizations increasingly recognize that educational systems relying exclusively on dominant national languages may contribute to linguistic assimilation and weaken intergenerational cultural transmission among minority populations.

Several international organizations and NGOs have therefore supported bilingual and mother-tongue education initiatives in Vietnam. These programs aim to improve educational access and learning outcomes while simultaneously preserving local languages and cultural identity. According to UNICEF (2018), children educated initially in their mother tongue often demonstrate stronger classroom participation, improved literacy development, and higher educational retention rates compared to students who enter school without sufficient proficiency in the dominant instructional language.

Mother-tongue education also contributes to broader cultural sustainability by strengthening the transmission of oral traditions, communal values, and indigenous knowledge systems. Local languages often contain culturally specific concepts, ritual terminology, environmental knowledge, and historical memory that are difficult to translate fully into Vietnamese. Consequently, bilingual education supports not only educational inclusion but also the preservation of symbolic and cultural continuity within ethnic minority communities.

Development cooperation projects have additionally supported the incorporation of local cultural content into educational curricula. Cultural curriculum initiatives frequently include traditional stories, folk songs, local history, ecological knowledge, and indigenous artistic practices within educational materials. Such approaches seek to reduce the disconnect between formal schooling and community cultural life. Existing studies suggest that culturally grounded education may strengthen students' sense of identity and encourage greater participation in local cultural activities.

Teacher training represents another important dimension of bilingual education initiatives. In many ethnic minority regions, shortages of qualified teachers familiar with local languages and cultural contexts continue to limit educational effectiveness. International cooperation programs therefore increasingly emphasize culturally responsive pedagogy, local-language teaching capacity, and community participation in educational development. These initiatives reflect broader international discussions concerning culturally inclusive education and indigenous rights.

Nevertheless, bilingual education programs in Vietnam still face significant challenges. Limited financial resources, inconsistent policy implementation, and shortages of local-language teaching materials constrain long-term sustainability. In some regions, educational priorities continue to favor rapid integration into Vietnamese-language systems because of perceived economic advantages associated with national mobility and labor market participation. As a result, tensions remain between educational modernization and minority-language preservation.

6.3. Community-Based Cultural Tourism

Community-based cultural tourism has become another important area where international development cooperation intersects with cultural preservation and livelihood development. Since the early 2000s, many NGOs and international organizations have promoted eco-cultural tourism initiatives in ethnic minority regions as mechanisms for generating income while supporting cultural sustainability. Such projects frequently combine handicraft production, homestay tourism, traditional performances, ecological knowledge, and local food practices within broader community development strategies.

Handicrafts represent one of the most visible dimensions of cultural tourism initiatives. Traditional weaving, embroidery, wood carving, musical instrument production, and textile arts are often promoted as both cultural heritage and economic resources. International development projects frequently provide training, marketing support, and cooperative organization aimed at strengthening local handicraft economies. In some communities, such initiatives have increased women's economic participation while encouraging the continuation of traditional artistic knowledge.

Eco-cultural tourism programs also seek to integrate environmental sustainability with cultural preservation. Many ethnic minority communities possess long-standing ecological knowledge related to forest management, agriculture, water systems, and biodiversity conservation. Development cooperation initiatives increasingly promote tourism models emphasizing local environmental knowledge, traditional agricultural practices, and sustainable resource use. These projects attempt to create alternative livelihood opportunities while reducing dependence on environmentally destructive economic activities.

Importantly, community-based tourism may contribute to cultural revitalization when local communities maintain substantial control over tourism management and cultural representation. Participation in tourism projects can strengthen local pride, increase public recognition of minority cultures, and encourage younger generations to engage with traditional practices. In some regions, festivals, music performances, and handicraft traditions have gained renewed visibility through tourism-related cultural initiatives. However, scholars also emphasize that tourism-driven preservation contains important contradictions. Commercial pressures may encourage staged authenticity, selective representation, and the simplification of cultural practices for external audiences. Salemkink (2002) argues that tourism can transform rituals and communal traditions into market-oriented performances detached from their original social and spiritual contexts. Consequently, the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism depends heavily on community participation, equitable benefit distribution, and culturally sensitive management practices.

6.4. Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Development

International development cooperation increasingly recognizes the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in sustainable development and environmental adaptation. Ethnic minority communities in Vietnam possess extensive ecological knowledge developed through long historical interaction with mountainous, forested, and environmentally complex regions. Traditional agricultural systems, forest-management practices, medicinal knowledge, and water-management techniques often reflect highly adaptive relationships between communities and local ecosystems.

UNDP (2018) emphasizes that indigenous knowledge contributes significantly to biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, and sustainable resource management. In many ethnic minority regions, traditional agricultural practices involve crop diversity, rotational cultivation, forest protection, and ecological adaptation strategies that support environmental resilience. International development projects have therefore increasingly incorporated indigenous knowledge into sustainable development initiatives related to agriculture, conservation, and climate adaptation.

Traditional forest-management systems represent a particularly important example of indigenous ecological knowledge. Many ethnic minority communities maintain customary rules governing sacred forests, watershed protection, hunting restrictions, and communal resource use. Existing studies suggest that these customary systems frequently contribute to local environmental sustainability more effectively than externally imposed management models lacking community participation.

International cooperation programs have also supported projects documenting traditional medicinal knowledge and indigenous environmental practices. Such initiatives attempt to preserve ecological knowledge while promoting community participation in environmental governance and sustainable development planning. In some cases, development organizations collaborate directly with local elders, farmers, and community leaders to integrate traditional knowledge into climate adaptation and rural development programs.

Table 3. Major International Cooperation Programs Supporting Cultural Preservation in Ethnic Minority Regions

Program/Organization	Main activities	Cultural impacts
UNESCO cultural heritage programs	Intangible heritage preservation and documentation	Strengthened cultural visibility and preservation
Save the Children bilingual education projects	Mother-tongue education and cultural curriculum	Improved language preservation and educational inclusion
Oxfam community development initiatives	Handicrafts and women's participation	Enhanced community empowerment and cultural continuity

Ethnic Minority Cultural Preservation in Vietnam: International Cooperation and the Challenges of Globalization

UNDP sustainable development programs	Indigenous knowledge and environmental adaptation	Support for ecological sustainability and local resilience
NGO-supported eco-cultural tourism	Community tourism and traditional craft promotion	Increased livelihood opportunities and cultural revitalization

Source: Author's compilation from UNESCO, UNDP, NGO reports, and development literature.

7. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the growing involvement of international development cooperation in cultural preservation initiatives, ethnic minority communities in Vietnam continue to face numerous challenges and limitations affecting the long-term sustainability of cultural continuity. While globalization and development programs have created new opportunities for cultural revitalization, they have also generated new forms of cultural pressure, inequality, and institutional dependency. These tensions demonstrate that cultural preservation is not simply a technical process of documentation or promotion but a complex social and political issue shaped by power relations, economic pressures, and changing generational identities.

One major challenge concerns cultural commodification associated with tourism expansion and market-oriented preservation strategies. Community-based tourism projects and cultural festivals often generate important livelihood opportunities and increase public recognition of ethnic minority heritage. However, tourism-driven development may also encourage the simplification, commercialization, or staged reproduction of cultural practices for external audiences. Rituals and festivals originally embedded within spiritual and communal contexts can become transformed into scheduled performances designed primarily for tourists rather than local cultural participation. Salemink (2002) argues that such staged authenticity may gradually alter the symbolic meaning and social function of traditional practices by prioritizing visual spectacle and market appeal over communal significance.

Commercialization may also contribute to selective representation of ethnic minority identities. External tourism agencies, media institutions, or development organizations sometimes promote only the most visually attractive or marketable cultural elements while neglecting less visible but socially important aspects of community life. Consequently, certain traditions become over-commercialized while others decline because they lack economic value within tourism-oriented development models.

Uneven participation constitutes another important limitation. Although many international development organizations emphasize participatory approaches, local communities do not always possess equal influence over project design, implementation, or cultural representation. In some cases, preservation initiatives remain heavily shaped by governmental agencies, external experts, or donor priorities rather than local decision-making processes. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) notes that top-down preservation projects may weaken community ownership when local populations are treated primarily as beneficiaries instead of active cultural actors. This problem is particularly significant in projects involving heritage documentation, tourism planning, and educational programming where external institutions may define cultural priorities according to administrative or commercial objectives.

Generational gaps further complicate long-term cultural preservation. Younger generations in many ethnic minority communities increasingly engage with urban lifestyles, digital culture, formal education systems, and labor migration opportunities that reduce participation in traditional rituals, communal festivals, and local-language practices. According to UNESCO (2019), declining intergenerational transmission represents one of the greatest risks facing intangible cultural heritage globally. In Vietnam, many ethnic minority elders continue to possess extensive ritual knowledge, oral traditions, and indigenous ecological understanding, yet younger individuals may have limited interest or opportunity to inherit these practices under conditions of modernization and migration.

This generational transformation does not necessarily imply total cultural rejection, but it does alter the forms through which cultural identity is expressed and transmitted. In some communities, traditional practices survive symbolically during festivals or tourism events while losing their deeper everyday social functions. Consequently, preservation efforts focusing only on public performance may fail to sustain broader systems of communal knowledge and cultural participation.

Sustainability problems also remain a major concern within international development cooperation projects. Many preservation initiatives depend heavily on donor funding, NGO support, or short-term project cycles. When external funding decreases or projects conclude, local communities often face difficulties maintaining activities because of limited institutional capacity and financial resources. UNDP (2018) emphasizes that sustainable cultural preservation requires long-term community engagement and locally grounded institutional support rather than temporary intervention models.

Furthermore, donor dependency may unintentionally limit community autonomy if local preservation priorities become shaped primarily by funding availability rather than community needs. Some projects emphasize measurable outputs such as tourism promotion, documentation, or public events without adequately supporting long-term language transmission, youth participation, or everyday cultural practice. As a result, preservation initiatives may produce visible short-term achievements while remaining institutionally fragile over time.

Table 4. Main Challenges to Cultural Preservation among Ethnic Minority Communities

Challenge	Main causes	Long-term risks
Cultural commodification	Tourism commercialization and market pressures	Loss of symbolic meaning and staged authenticity
Uneven participation	Top-down project implementation	Weak community ownership
Generational gaps	Migration, modernization, digital culture	Declining intergenerational transmission
Sustainability problems	Donor dependency and short-term funding	Fragile long-term preservation outcomes

Source: Author's compilation from UNESCO reports, NGO publications, and ethnographic studies.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities should not be understood as the attempt to freeze tradition in an unchanged form. Culture is dynamic, historically situated, and continuously reinterpreted through social interaction. In ethnic minority regions of Vietnam, rituals, languages, festivals, and indigenous knowledge systems have never been entirely static; rather, they have evolved through long-term contact with state policies, migration, market exchange, education, and interethnic interaction. Therefore, cultural change should not automatically be equated with cultural loss. The central question is not whether culture changes, but whether communities retain agency in shaping the direction and meaning of that change.

From this perspective, globalization operates as a dual process. On the one hand, it generates serious threats to cultural continuity through language decline, youth migration, media-driven homogenization, and the commercialization of rituals. On the other hand, globalization also creates new opportunities for cultural revitalization through digital documentation, community tourism, transnational visibility, educational reform, and international heritage cooperation. The same digital platforms that expose ethnic minority youth to global popular culture may also be used to circulate traditional songs, promote local crafts, or reconnect migrant youth with village festivals. Globalization therefore should be analyzed not only as an external force of erosion but also as a field of negotiation in which communities selectively adopt, resist, and reinterpret external influences.

International development cooperation occupies an equally ambivalent position. Programs supported by UNESCO, UNDP, NGOs, and bilateral development actors have contributed to bilingual education, oral heritage documentation, cultural tourism, community empowerment, and indigenous knowledge preservation. These interventions can strengthen cultural sustainability when they are locally grounded and participatory. However, development cooperation can also unintentionally contribute to cultural commodification when preservation is reduced to festivals, performances, tourism products, or externally defined heritage categories. In such cases, culture may become visible to outsiders while losing its deeper social and spiritual functions within the community.

This analysis contributes to broader debates on cultural sustainability and indigenous resilience. Sustainable cultural preservation requires more than conserving selected cultural symbols. It depends on living transmission, community participation, local language use, and intergenerational relationships. Indigenous resilience is therefore not simply the ability to preserve the past but the capacity to adapt cultural practices while maintaining meaningful continuity. This perspective also connects with participatory development theory, which emphasizes that communities should not be passive objects of preservation but active agents in defining what should be protected, transformed, or renewed.

Consequently, effective cultural preservation in ethnic minority regions requires a shift from externally managed preservation toward community-led cultural sustainability. Development actors should support local capacities, respect indigenous knowledge, strengthen mother-tongue education, and create spaces for youth participation. Only through such culturally grounded and participatory approaches can cultural preservation move beyond symbolic display and become a sustainable process of community resilience.

9. CONCLUSION

This article examined the relationship between globalization, international development cooperation, and cultural preservation among ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. It argued that globalization has profoundly reshaped ethnic minority cultures through language shift, migration, urbanization, digital media, tourism, and changing generational values. These processes have created serious challenges for linguistic diversity, ritual continuity, oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, and communal identity. At the same time, globalization has also opened new possibilities for cultural revitalization, digital preservation, broader cultural visibility, and community-based economic development.

The study also showed that international development cooperation has generated both opportunities and limitations. Programs implemented by international organizations, NGOs, and development agencies have supported bilingual education, cultural documentation, community-based tourism, traditional craft promotion, and indigenous knowledge preservation. These initiatives have contributed to cultural visibility and community empowerment in several ethnic minority regions. However, they have also

faced problems related to cultural commodification, uneven participation, donor dependency, short-term funding, and limited local ownership.

The central argument of the article is that cultural preservation cannot be reduced to the protection of static traditions or the public display of ethnic heritage. Sustainable preservation requires community agency, local participation, intergenerational transmission, and long-term policy support. Languages, rituals, festivals, and indigenous knowledge systems can survive only when they remain embedded in everyday social life and are actively transmitted across generations.

Future development cooperation should therefore move beyond symbolic preservation toward culturally grounded and community-led sustainability models. Rather than treating ethnic minority cultures as heritage objects to be documented or promoted, development programs should recognize communities as active cultural subjects capable of defining their own priorities. Such an approach can strengthen cultural resilience, support inclusive development, and contribute to more sustainable forms of cultural preservation in contemporary Vietnam.

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