4.3 Integrating REDD+ and customary forest management in Vietnam

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Introduction

Many indigenous forest-dependent communities have customary forest management systems and classifications. These natural resource management practices belong to specific indigenous or ethnic groups and are closely intertwined with the social, spiritual, cultural, and political lives of local communities, and with their livelihoods and food production.

Indigenous forest management classifications often recognize areas for exploitation, watershed protection and sacred or taboo areas (Berkes 2008). Furthermore, indigenous forest management systems in tropical forests are often characterized by shifting cultivation practices with long fallow periods; under the right conditions, these are socially and ecologically sound (Posey 1985). Due to the social, ecological and cultural significance of customary forest management systems, they are protected by several international treaties and conventions, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

REDD+ COULD HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON CUSTOMARY FOREST MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS.

A global trend in forest management is decentralization and the increasing involvement of local and indigenous communities in nature conservation and protection. Several scholars have argued, however, that REDD+ could reverse the trend of decentralization (Phelps, Webb and Agrawal 2010; Agrawal, Nepstad and Chhatre 2011). Although the United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD) programme has acknowledged the importance of involving local and indigenous communities, there is still a lack of knowledge on how REDD+ payments for environmental services (PES) and benefit-sharing mechanisms (BSMs) can be incorporated in customary forest management systems and classifications (UN-REDD 2013). Several indigenous peoples' organizations have rejected REDD+ and labelled it as a "new form of climate racism" which leads to the "commodification of life" (Lang 2011).

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In order to comply with several international treaties and conventions, REDD+ implementation must involve local and indigenous people. This is understood by the UN-REDD programme, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility of the World Bank and various NGOs. One way to involve local and indigenous people in REDD+ or other benefit-sharing mechanisms is to integrate their customary forest management systems and classifications.

Vietnam has been involved in forest conservation and rural development programmes since the 1990s and is currently involved in various REDD+, PES and BSM pilot projects. This article draws on two case studies — a REDD+ project in Kon Tum province and a BSM programme in Thua Thien-Hue province — to explore how REDD+ and BSM programmes in central Vietnam have incorporated customary forest management arrangements.

REDD+ and benefit-sharing mechanisms in Vietnam

Starting with the opening up *(Doi Moi)* reforms in 1986, which created a socialist-oriented market economy in the nation, Vietnam has a long tradition of decentralization of forest management. In 1991 the Forest land Allocation (FLA) programme enabled the state to allocate forest land to organizations, households and individuals for long-term use. The *Land Law* of 1993 and the *Law on Forest Protection and Development* of 1994 gave households and groups of households the right, through legal land title ("Red Book"), to inherit, mortgage, transfer, exchange and lease land.

In 1998, the FLA programme was used to meet the objectives of the 661 Programme, which aimed to restore forest cover in Vietnam to 43% by 2012. The main rationale was that devolution would be the most effective way to achieve this. Farmers received barren or degraded natural forest land and were encouraged through subsidies, loans and payments to protect or restore the forests. The revised *Land Law* of 2003 and the *Law on Forest Protection and Development* of 2004 also allowed communities to receive natural forests. Throughout the years, Vietnam has experimented with various BSM and PES arrangements and with community-based forest management in several pilot communes (Sunderlin and Ba 2005; To et al. 2012).

In 2012 Vietnam completed Phase I of REDD+ readiness. Activities in Phase I focused on a REDD+ pilot project in Lam Dong Province, Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) initiatives, and private-sector engagement. The steps taken to be REDD+ ready include the establishment of a National REDD+ Action Programme (NRAP), a National REDD+ Network, a National REDD+ steering committee, and a Vietnam REDD+ office. Vietnam has also been mainstreaming REDD+ into socio-economic development plans and strategies, and has requested its Provincial People's Committees (i.e., provincial governments) to establish inter-agency REDD+ steering committees at the provincial level. The country has also launched many analytical studies in order to increase its REDD+ effectiveness (UN-REDD 2012).

Vietnam entered Phase II of UN-REDD in December 2012. Activities in Phase II, which will take three years, will include REDD+ pilot projects in six provinces; the establishment of a

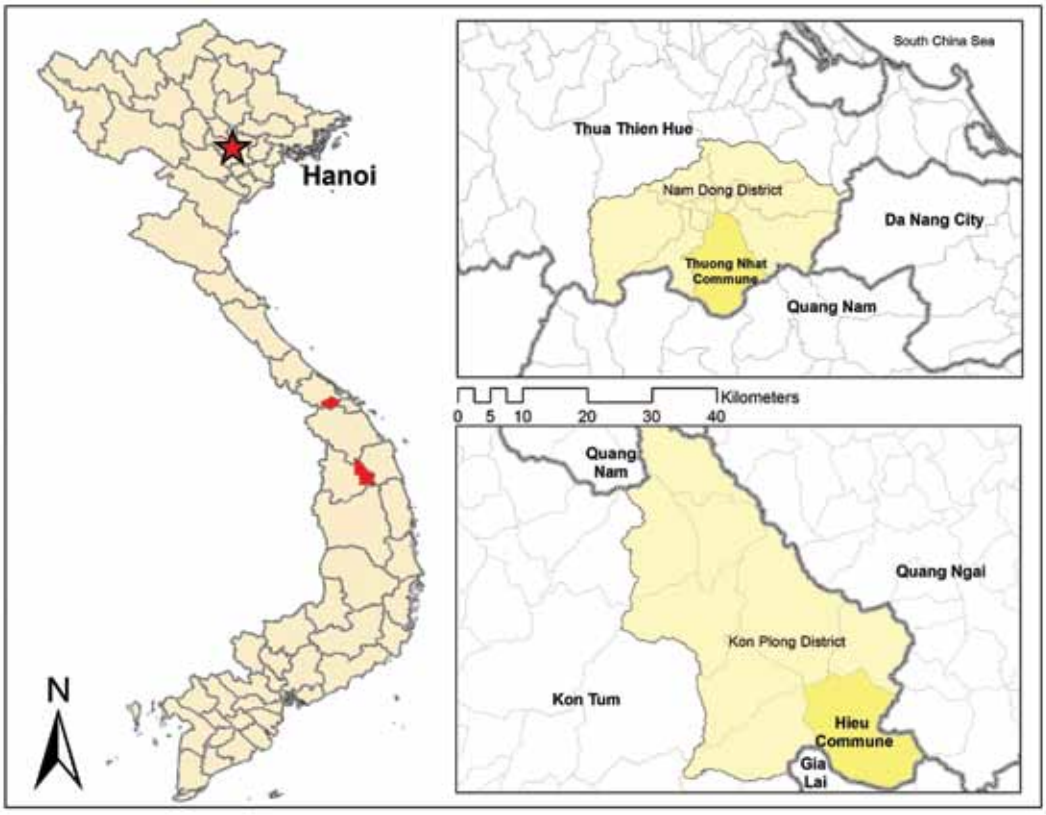
Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV) system; mainstreaming REDD+ into national and regional planning; dialogues with the poor on how to implement and share the benefits of REDD+; and afforestation/reforestation activities. Vietnam will receive US$ 30 million for Phase II.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) will be the National Executing Agency, and MARD's Administration of Forestry, VNForest, will be the Project Owner (UN-REDD 2012). In addition to the government of Vietnam and UN agencies, various NGOs, both domestic and international, are involved in REDD+ pilot projects. At the moment, there are 12 REDD+ projects in Vietnam.

Methods and context

Two communes with predominantly forest-dependent indigenous communities were chosen for this research: Hieu commune in Kon Plong district and Thuong Nhat commune in Nam Dong district (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of research sites



Hieu commune is involved in a pilot project of the REDD+ Community Carbon Pools programme. The programme is managed by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) working in close partnership with the NTFP-Exchange Programme and PanNature. In order to gather information about FFI's approach to REDD+ and community involvement the authors interviewed the National Coordinator of the REDD+ project and analyzed several policy documents and newsletters of the programme, which are available online (REDD+ Community Carbon Pools programme 2013). Since the project is still in its preliminary phase, it is important to note that future research needs to address whether the REDD+ project successfully takes into account the local communities' customary forest management systems and classifications. It needs to coordinate FFI's views with direct observations of and discussions with villagers in the commune. This article reflects only an analysis and interpretation of FFI's approach to REDD+ in Hieu commune.

In Thuong Nhat, where BSM arrangements have been implemented, the authors interviewed several villagers and village headmen involved in benefit sharing. In addition, several focus group discussions were carried out with government officials, forest rangers, villagers and community forest management boards.

REDD+ in Hieu commune

Within the REDD+ Community Carbon Pools programme, FFI is undertaking pilot activities focusing on forest land allocations to communities, and is supporting the development of REDD+ community carbon pools in Kon Plong district. The targeted forest area covers approximately 6,000 hectares (ha) at an altitude of 1,000 metres ASL. The project started in 2011 and will last until 2014. Its main aim is to comply with the Climate, Community and Biodiversity (CCB) and Verified Carbon Standards (VCS); see Box 1.

Box 1. The Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standard and the Verified Carbon Standard

The Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standard (CCB) and the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) are quality guidelines for the voluntary carbon offset industry. The standards create criteria for the validation, verification, measurement and monitoring of carbon offset projects such as REDD+. VCS is mainly concerned with carbon offsets; CCB also evaluates the social and environmental impacts of a project.

Hieu commune consists of seven villages.[1] These villages are primarily inhabited by indigenous communities belonging to the Xe Dang and Mo Nam ethnic groups.[2] The communities in the villages practice shifting cultivation, but also raise cash crops. They use the forests to collect non-timber forest products (NTFPs), firewood and timber for housing. They have customary ways to manage the natural forests, including maintaining sacred forests and watershed protection forests. Illegal logging by the villagers and by people outside the village is considered to be a big problem in the commune.

Vi Chon Ring village in Hieu commune has a community Red Book right to the natural forest land. In 2007, the village received forest land covering 808 ha. In total, approximately 4,000 ha of natural forest land will be allocated to the villages in the commune. However, the customary boundaries of the villagers in the commune cover approximately 6,000 ha of natural forest land. The additional 2,000 ha of natural forest land is now being managed by the Watershed Management Board, an agency of the provincial government, and by the State Forest Enterprise.

The discrepancy between formal and customary forest boundaries could cause conflicts between the communities and the other stakeholders who manage the natural forests. Therefore, the first step of the REDD+ project was to demarcate the boundaries in compliance with the communities' customary use. The villagers mapped and demarcated the customary forest area of 6,000 ha using GPS and have requested the local authorities to formally allocate the remaining 2000 ha to the villages through community Red Books. This is an ongoing negotiation process between the villagers, Kon Plong district, the Watershed Management Board and the State Forest Enterprise.

In addition to customary land demarcation, the project has several other main components:

- policies dealing with the carbon rights of communities and benefit-sharing mechanisms;
- guidelines/procedures to implement REDD+;
- community-based forest management (CBFM);
- biodiversity assessment and planning; and
- the Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the local communities.

Free Prior and Informed Consent

What do local communities think about REDD+? The first phase of FPIC has been finished, but FPIC should be applied throughout the life cycle of the project. If a villager agrees to be involved in a REDD+ project, he or she might wonder the following things: "What do I have to do? What am I now allowed to do? What are the benefits and what are the risks?" The FPIC process dealt with the potential risks that the villagers could face in a REDD+ scheme.

Basically, every aspect of villagers' relationship with the forest — such as conducting shifting cultivation, collecting NTFPs and firewood, and cutting wood for housing — needs to be reconsidered. The benefits of REDD+ have also been pointed out to the villagers. They will have a stronger case to local authorities to be able to own their customary forest land and to have land-use rights. They can receive carbon revenues and they have the right to protect the forest. Furthermore, if villagers are extensively involved in the REDD+ project, they can reorganize their forest management systems in a culturally appropriate and sustainable way.

The next phase of the FPIC process will try to avoid the negative impacts of REDD+ on livelihoods: in a REDD+ scheme there are always trade-offs. The REDD+ project could

revive the communities' customary forest boundaries through formal forest land allocation. However, other customary practices, such as shifting cultivation, need to be reconsidered and several issues need to be resolved.

- land tenure conflicts between local communities, the Watershed Management Board and the State Forest Enterprise; e.g., through re-demarcating the forest land according to customary classifications;
- the possibility that REDD+ will threaten land used for cultivation; e.g., shifting cultivation could be banned and reforestation activities could put more pressure on cultivation land; and
- ensuring that people can still make use of the forest, e.g., through collecting NTFPs.

CBFM could be a good way to preserve some customary forest management practices. However, it remains to be seen whether the financial benefits of carbon credits and formal rights to customary forest land can make up for restrictions on the use of the forest. It also remains a question whether villagers really have the option to refuse to participate in a REDD+ scheme.

Benefit sharing in Thuong Nhat commune

Thuong Nhat commune is home to 500 households, who belong to the indigenous Co Tu group. They mainly earn their living from growing rubber, acacia and other cash crops. Shifting cultivation has been banned almost completely in the commune and people depend on wet-rice cultivation, livestock rearing and collecting NTFPs for their food security. The villagers have a village headman and a village patriarch. Some villagers in Thuong Nhat, though not all, believe in their sacred forests, which are described as ghost forests.

In Thuong Nhat commune, the total forest land area covers 11,377 ha, including natural forest land (8,146 ha), rubber plantations (350 ha) and acacia plantations (700 ha). Seedlings for acacia trees are subsidized, and in order to prevent people from practising shifting cultivation, poor households receive 15 kg of rice every month and subsidies to plant cassava. Of the total area, 7,701 ha of natural forest is managed by Bach Ma National Park (BMNP) and 2,755 ha of natural forest is managed by the Commune People's Committee (CPC), which is responsible for allocating the forest land to the communities. The natural forests of the commune are of poor quality and are highly degraded.

Benefit-sharing mechanisms in Thuong Nhat take two forms. First, each village has a community forest and a community forest management board (CFMB). Most of the households are represented on the CFBM; a few households are chosen by the village headman to monitor the forest on a monthly basis for a small fee. Village No. 6 in Thuong Nhat, for example, owns 88.8 ha of natural forest, and its CFMB consists of five households, representing 50 households in the village. The CFMB is responsible for reporting

any violators to the forest rangers of the district. The forest rangers are responsible for catching and fining the violators. The villagers are allowed to collect NTFPs in the community forest and are allowed to cut wood for housing. However, since the community forest is heavily degraded, they reap few benefits. In 2012, the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), a Netherlands-based NGO, supported villagers to plant native Hopea species to enrich and demarcate the community forests and bamboo trees to generate alternative income.

Second, in 2012 BMNP and the local authorities decided to set up regulations for local people concerning their use of the forest in the park. For instance, the people of village No. 6 have access to 1,100 ha within the park. They are allowed to collect seven types of NTFPs (rattan, honey, bamboo, snails, mushroom, Malva nuts and wild pigs), but they need to apply for permission beforehand. They also need to ask for permission to enter the park. Logging timber is strictly prohibited. To have access to the natural forest, the village needs to assign five households who do not belong to the CFMB to patrol and monitor the natural forest in the park, which they do together with the BMNP staff and forest rangers. The BSMs of Thuong Nhat are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Two forms of benefit-sharing mechanisms in Thuong Nhat commune

Issue	Community forest	Natural forest in BMNP
allowed to enter	yes	yes, but only after getting permission from the BMNP forest station
allowed to collect NTFPs	yes	yes, but only after getting permission from the CPC chairman and the Director of BMNP; plus, villagers have to register the NTFPS they collect and pay a fee to the local authorities
allowed to cut timber	only for housing and after getting a permit from the CPC	no
monitoring and fines	CFMB (only monitoring), and forest rangers (also fines)	CFMB (only monitoring), and BMNP forest rangers (also fines)
legal title/Red Book	yes, to the community	no
major stakeholders	community, CPC, Forest Protection Unit (FPU), ICCO and other NGOs	community, CPC, FPU, BMNP
size	approximately 50–100 ha	approximately 1,000 ha
biodiversity	low	high
number of NTFPs	low	moderate – high

The BSM programme offers a reason for local communities to invest in sustainable forest management, since they reap multiple benefits. These benefits include formal forest land allocation and financial compensation for forest patrols. Local communities are also involved in reforestation activities in the community forests, which allow them to selectively log wood for housing and participate in bamboo and rattan production.

Formal institutions pay little attention to the relevant customary forest arrangements, however. Local communities are "educated" instead of listened to. Customary forest management systems have not been incorporated in either form of BSM. For example, even though the Co Tu people's ghost forests are located in BMNP, formal agencies do not include them in their forest management arrangements. Utilizing ghost forests in BSMs not only benefits conservation, it also strengthens and preserves the socio-cultural aspects and values of the Co Tu communities. Furthermore, in the BSM process the village headman was in charge; the village patriarch, although still being respected, was completely left out. The village patriarch traditionally played a very important role in customary forest management systems and classifications of the Co Tu people. However, local authorities often prefer to negotiate with the village headman, who is the formal representative of the village.

Future steps

The REDD+ project in Hieu commune is founded on restoring the communities' customary boundaries. Therefore, REDD+ could have a positive impact on the affected communities' customary forest management arrangements. REDD+ is being piloted in Vietnam, and it is essential that policy-makers pay attention to people's customary forest arrangements, such as sacred forests, watershed protection forests and shifting cultivation. Utilizing customary laws and formal laws could contribute to better forest governance, and to carbon stock enhancement and conservation. The question should not be only whether REDD+ is economically viable, but also whether it will harm people's overall relationship with their forests.

Future research should focus on the following topics:

- Linking research in the field with remote sensing and GIS. Seeing what is happening on the ground and from above are important ways to study REDD+, community involvement and climate change adaptation more thoroughly. For example, research needs to systematically address whether the maintenance of customary forest classifications, such as sacred forests, contributes to biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration. Participatory rural methods such as participatory mapping could be combined with remote sensing.
- Studying the importance of CBFM in relation to REDD+, PES and BSMs. How can CBFM ensure that the REDD+ benefits from a community forest are shared in an equitable manner?
- Studying the conditions in which CBFM can make a positive contribution to customary forest management systems.

- Developing a comprehensive framework for REDD+, CBFM, customary forest management systems and carbon sequestration. REDD+ will involve many formal and informal stakeholders, forest regimes and land tenure systems. A framework is needed that addresses the trade-offs to be made in relation to customary forest management systems, carbon sequestration and CBFM.

Acknowledgements

This research has been supported by the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) Research Development Fund. The authors offer their sincere thanks to Thanh Liem Dang, Tore Langhelle, Soojin Kim and To Xuan Phuc. They also thank Le Van An, Lawal M. Marafa and Dominick Spracklen. Furthermore, they thank the people of Thuong Nhat commune. Last but not least, they would like to thank the staff and student-helpers of Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry.

Endnotes

1. The lowest administrative entity in Vietnam is a commune. Communes that belong to a district usually consist of several villages.
2. Vietnam officially recognizes 54 ethnic groups. Although some of the groups are indigenous to the area, such as the communities in this research, they are named according to their formal ethnic label.

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