



6.4 Decentralized forest governance in central Vietnam

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Bach Ma National Park

A major challenge in decentralized forest governance in Vietnam is developing a mechanism that would support both reforestation and poverty reduction among people in rural communities. To help address this challenge, Forest Land Allocation (FLA) policies recognize local communities and individuals as legal recipients of forest and land-use rights. Although forest cover has increased in Vietnam since the implementation of the FLA policies, the forest is of low quality.

It remains uncertain how and to what extent rural people really benefit from these policies. Bach Ma National Park (BMNP) in central Vietnam has gone through the FLA policy process. It provides an interesting case study to evaluate the impact of FLA on forest cover and poverty reduction for everyone by comparing the impact on two different cultural groups, the “Vietnamese” Kinh and the indigenous Co Tu.

This article presents major research findings from four villages in Thua Thien Province, Vietnam. It analyzes whether FLA policies have been able to integrate conservation and poverty reduction among rural communities.

Background

Until the mid-twentieth century Vietnam was covered with vast forests. Various studies show that since then, the country has experienced rapid deforestation; it peaked in the late 1980s. Figures range from a forest cover of 55% in the late 1960s to only 28% in the early 1990s (Sunderlin and Ba 2005; Castella, Nguyen and Novosad 2006).

One important reason for this loss is the over-exploitation of forests by large-scale logging activities of State Forest Enterprises (SFEs). Unsustainable forestry practices and



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slash-and-burn agricultural practices by small-scale farming households are other reasons. “Agent Orange,” a defoliating chemical sprayed by American airplanes during the Vietnam War, caused dramatic damage to Vietnamese forests (and to human health). During the postwar period (i.e., after 1975), infrastructure expansion, the establishment of timber plantations, government resettlement programmes, internal colonization and migration further added to severe deforestation.

The Vietnamese government recognized that top-down, state-controlled forest management had not been effective. Since the late 1980s, under the influence of the Doi Moi¹ policy, a new approach has evolved; it involves decentralized forest management in combination with devolution initiatives. At least five important changes in policy reflected this new approach:

- land classification and rules for forest protection based on the Law(s) on Forest Protection and Development in 1991 and 2004;
- the allocation of land-use rights to private organizations and households, based on the 1993 and 2003 land law(s);
- the recognition of communities as legal recipients of forest and land-use rights in 2004;
- afforestation programmes; and
- the innovative reform of State Forest Enterprises (SFEs), requiring them to become self-financed.

Since 1995, forest area increase exceeded forest loss (mostly due to new plantations), and overall forest cover increased from 28.2 percent in 1995 to 36.7 percent in 2004 (Nguyen Quang Tan 2008).

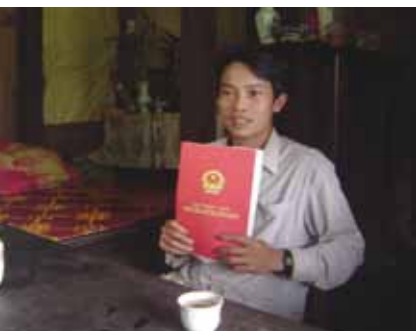
Forest Land Allocation (FLA)

The FLA policies have been especially important to the devolution process. Their objective is to allocate 30% of the total forestland in Vietnam to non-state actors, mainly individual households, groups of households, local organizations, and communities. They become the legal recipients for the use, management, protection and development of the forestland (De Jong, Do and Trieu 2006; Floriane and Jaime 2009; Thi 2009).

This so-called socialization process of forest management is intended to strengthen forest protection and management and integrate forest development (including the rehabilitation of degraded forestlands) with economic development and poverty alleviation (Castella, Nguyen and Novosad 2006; Hoang and Son 2008). The FLA policies have influenced local institutions by establishing new rules of forest ownership, access and use by multiple stakeholders.

Under FLA, forests are divided into three categories: production, protection and special-use. Production forests are reserved for exploitation in compliance with approved management and development plans of the forestry agency. They are mostly established on barren or degraded lands and are usually allocated to individual households, who can receive a land-use certificate — the so-called Red Book — for these lands.

Protection forests are designated to protect critical land and water sources. Exploitation is restricted to non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and timber for home consumption. Previously, these forests were assigned to state forest organizations. In 2004–05, however, they were allocated as community forests as part of FLA. Now, village communities or groups of households within a community can receive protection forest areas and manage them communally.



Special-use forests are off limits for exploitation. They are designated as biodiversity conservation areas because of their scientific importance, tourism value or their cultural and historical heritage. Special-use forests remain under state forest control, and are usually designated national parks. BMNP is in this category.

The study area: Bach Ma National Park in Central Vietnam

BMNP was established in 1991 and covers an area of 37,487 hectares (ha). It is located in Thua Thien Hue and Quang Nam provinces of central Vietnam.

BMNP has three zones:

- a core area for the protection of ecosystems, habitats, fauna and flora. This zone is managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD)² through the BMNP Management Board;
- a zone for the ecological restoration and protection of ecosystems, habitats, fauna and flora. These are usually degraded natural forest areas, and are also managed by MARD; and
- a small administration zone where offices of the park's staff and tourism facilities are located, such as hostels, hotels and restaurants. These are jointly managed by MARD and the Provincial Peoples Committee of Thua Thien Hue province.³

The buffer zone

A buffer zone surrounds BMNP. It comprises a combination of various forest types and land uses, which are managed by various stakeholders. At the district level, for example, the Forest Protection Unit (FPU) is responsible for managing forestry activities and enforcing forest protection laws. The FPU participates in management of natural forest and forest fire prevention, and in collaboration with the national park rangers, deals with illegal infringement in the buffer zone and the national park.

Some of the natural forest and planted forests are managed by the Forest Protection Management Board (FPMB)⁴ at the district level; the board depends on the FPU for law enforcement. The remaining natural forests and bare forest land, where trees are lacking or the predominant cover is shrubs and weeds, are managed by the District People's Committee (DPC) and the Commune People's Committee (CPC; Box 1).

Box 1. Commune People's Committees

The CPC is the lowest hierarchical level of administration of the Provincial People Committee (PPC). The commune level can be considered a sub-district level. The commune usually consists of several villages; it is the officially recognized lowest government unit in decision-making. A village headman is the village representative of the government. Headmen are elected and are the lowest-level representatives of the national government. They are important, as villagers apply to them to receive certain types of forestland. Villages of mainly indigenous people also have a traditional leader (the village patriarch) in parallel to government officials.

Approximately 70,000 people (12,000 households) live in the buffer zone of the park; 40% of the households are classified as poor. Most of the people in the communes and villages in and around the national park are Kinh or Co Tu,⁵ who practice agriculture. The Co Tu are the indigenous people who have lived in these forested highlands for centuries. They have always practised forest-derived types of agriculture — namely, shifting cultivation with long fallow periods — and have communally managed surrounding forests to secure NTFPs. The fallow vegetation is important for cattle fodder.

The Kinh, or “Vietnamese,” came from the lowland areas and started to settle in the area at the end of the war with the U.S. Their agricultural system consists mainly of sedentary irrigated rice farming and agricultural cash crop production.

FLA policies in the buffer zone of BMNP

The Forest Land Allocation (FLA) programme was introduced in the buffer zone of BMNP in 2003. It enabled the government — mainly through MARD and PPC — to allocate forestland to organizations, households and individuals for long-term (50-year) use outside the special-use core area of the BMNP.

After forest governance was decentralized in Vietnam, the district governments and SFEs at the district and the commune levels became responsible for managing forestland in the buffer zone. Previously, almost all forests in the buffer zone were production or protection forests, which were managed by the Khe Tre State Forest Enterprise (SFE). The SFE used to perform all tasks, including logging and wood trading; they also managed reforestation and forest restoration tasks after logging.

The SFE has now become the Forest Protection Management Board (FPMB), and its focus has shifted more to protection and management rather than exploitation. Because there are few staff members to protect and manage the large forest areas, local people are contracted to fulfil the forest protection objectives of the FPMB.



BMNP officials are not involved in any decision-making in the buffer zone, but they do collaborate with the districts and communes to implement government development programmes in order to reinforce the link between the park and the buffer zone area. Conversations with BMNP staff and representatives from district government agencies made it clear that they considered the buffer zone as an area where park management conducts outreach activities that are aimed at (1) getting local people not to use the park; and (2) diversifying the livelihoods of local people away from forest resources.

FLA policies seem to be quite effective in protecting the forest and keeping people out of the national park (Table 1). People go into the forest (e.g., to harvest forest products) much less frequently; the number of people in the “no entry” category increased from 1% to 20% after FLA was implemented. Most respondents saw the benefits of protection, especially in protecting forest cover to sustain the ecological functions of forests (the regulation of water flows was said to be the most important of these functions).

Table 1. Frequency of forest access to Bach Ma National Park

Frequency of entry	Before FLA		After FLA	
	n	%	n	%
Every day	17	19.5	6	6.9
Every week	18	20.7	12	13.8
Twice per month	27	31.0	19	21.8
Once per month	12	13.8	8	9.2
Once in several months	11	12.6	22	25.3
Once a year	1	1.2	3	3.5
No entry	1	1.2	17	19.5
Total	87	100.0	87	100.0

Source: Field data; n = number of respondents

Figure 1 shows that the limited access to collect NTFPs has seriously affected the Co Tu: almost 70% stated that they were negatively affected, compared to less than 30% of Kinh. The Co Tu have always depended on the forest for specific food items, construction materials for housing, and for grazing their cattle.

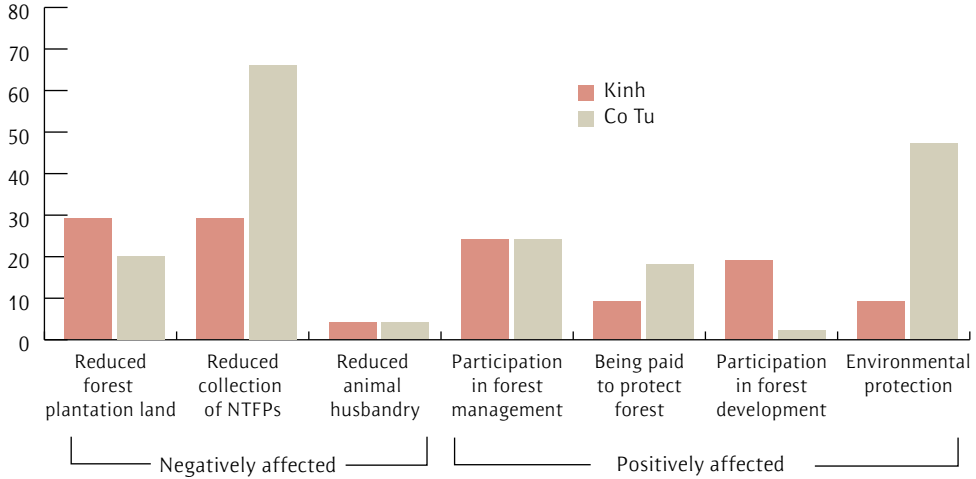
Forest governance and decision-making power

Although the forestry sector in Vietnam has undergone major changes through decentralization, devolution processes have been limited in their scope. Figure 2 shows the result of a participatory Venn diagramme exercise with all major stakeholders in the villages (both government and non-government stakeholders).

It is striking to note that the ultimate beneficiaries, the communities (called “village” in Figure 2), have hardly any negotiating power. It is the executing agency of the Vietnamese

government policies at the local level — the CPC — that has the most decision-making power in how and where FLA is implemented in village territory.

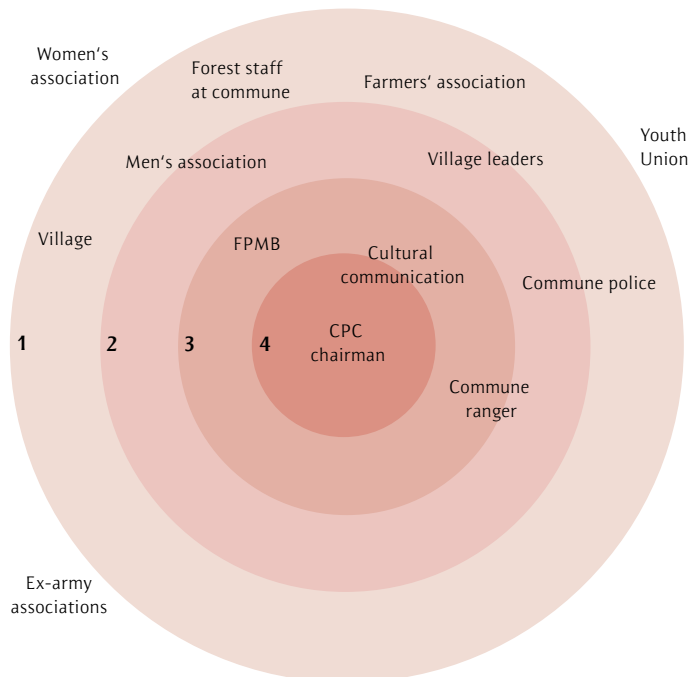
Figure 1. Ethnicity and views on how the national park affects livelihoods



As the lowest level of government decision making on land-use decisions, the CPC has an important role in deciding who will get land-use rights, such as production forest, and who will be allocated communally managed forests, and where these will be located.

Figure 2. Forest management decision-making power by stakeholders in the buffer zone

Note: 1 = low power; 4 = high power



Conflicting land-use rights in community forests

As part of devolution, the FLA policies aim to follow socio-cultural aspects in allocating forestland. Research in the four villages revealed that the indigenous Co Tu are mainly allocated community forest management land, following their traditional communal forest use practices.



The village patriarch used to be crucial in establishing village territories, including village forest areas. Figure 2 shows, however, that the village patriarch is not even mentioned as a stakeholder. Boundaries of allocated community forestland are now set by the government. At the village level, the CPC is responsible for implementing community forest boundaries.

These state-set boundaries regularly conflict with traditional village land boundaries, which have been in place for generations. The state boundaries are set according to ecological criteria, following catchment areas, for instance. These state boundaries regularly cut right through indigenous boundaries of different traditional village-land territories. This causes confusion and increases conflicts among people from different villages, who are not aware of the new boundaries.

When a group of Co Tu villagers is allocated a community forest, people from other villages often continue to enter and use the forest; they claim that the forest and its NTFPs belong to their indigenous village territory. This results in short-term behaviour, rather than long-term management. Various respondents explained that if they did not harvest NTFPs and other useful products in their community forest, outsiders would take these products, leaving them with nothing.

This is aggravated by the fact that most of the allocated community forests comprise degraded forest, where useful products are already scarce. Increased competition from outsiders causes the over-exploitation of timber and NTFPs. Rather than being used for protection, the community forest designation seems to accelerate degradation.

Kinh versus Co Tu: increased social differentiation

Community forests are mainly allocated to Co Tu; individually-held production forests are mainly allocated to the "Vietnamese" Kinh. Kinh are less interested in community management, as they are very individualistic.

Figure 2 shows that they do see positive results from the national park. This has mainly to do with the fact that Kinh mostly participate in forest management as forest guards. In addition, the Kinh have more experience in managing production forestland, and in managing lands individually.

Unlike the case with community forests, Red Books (land ownership certificates) are provided for production forestland. With a Red Book, owners can receive a loan from the bank and get support in cultivating economically valuable tree crops, although this is mostly limited to planting acacia and rubber trees. This allows owners to improve their socio-economic position considerably, and explains why they are more concerned than the Co Tu about the loss of possible production land due to the establishment of the national park.

Red Books cannot be obtained for community forests. This limits the benefits that can be received from community forests. In the research villages, various Co Tu community forest management groups had drafted a forest management plan for their community forest, which included enrichment planting of useful NTFP species, such as bamboo and rattan. However, the lack of a Red Book and their limited financial resources restrict them from obtaining a loan from the bank or investing in enrichment planting.

Figure 2 clearly shows that the Co Tu are negatively affected by the national park in terms of NTFP collection. Providing an alternative source, through enrichment planting in the community forest, could help overcome this problem. In discussion, villagers explained that their allocated community forest was degraded, and would need at least ten years of rehabilitation before any products could be harvested. With the severe competition from surrounding villages to exploit the forest and its products, any benefits in the short run seem highly unlikely.

Conclusion

Vietnam has taken up the enormous challenge of forest governance reform through decentralization and devolution, recognizing the central position of local communities in managing forests. Forest Land Allocation (FLA) policies are meant to facilitate the devolution process. So far, however, the implementation of FLA policies remains rather top-down. Although communities and individual households are recognized as legal recipients of forestland, they cannot actively engage in decisions about how to use and manage the forestland and the forest; government bodies make these decisions.

Decision-making on how to manage and use the forestlands in and around BMNP has been decentralized to as low as the commune level. Although this has had positive effects in the case of production forests, it is less successful in relation to community forest management. If FLA policies set the right conditions, particularly for the Co Tu, they could enable the protection and sustainable use of the communally managed protection forests. The forest management plans that the Co Tu developed themselves could strike a balance between environmental protection and poverty reduction.



Enriching the forest with economically valuable (non-timber) forest species provides a more diverse forest cover, while allowing people to receive short-term benefits from harvesting NTFPs. Planting also serves important objectives by demonstrating a type of forest ownership to outsiders. This could potentially reduce the number of conflicts among villages.

The demarcation of community forests should first aim to integrate the existing traditional village territories into the government-based delineation of community forests. This would require scaling up and coordinating activities among different villages to strike a balance between indigenous boundaries and ecological borders.

The Kinh are quite individualistic, which hampers their willingness to communally manage the forest, other than being paid as forest guards. This job, often taken up by them, does provide them with a way to participate in forest management.

Decentralized forest governance structures should allow further devolution through more active participation by the local communities, the legal recipients of forest and land-use rights. In this way, Vietnam can move forward with achieving both sustainable forest management and poverty reduction.

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Endnotes

1. The Doi Moi (“renovation”) policy was implemented in 1986 to enable economic reforms; its goal was to create a “socialist-oriented market economy.” The most dramatic changes included decentralized economic management and allowing privately owned enterprises in commodity production.
2. MARD is responsible for forest management and for the management of national parks.
3. The Peoples Committee is the executive arm of the provincial government. It is responsible for formulating and implementing policies, including FLA policies.
4. FPMB at the district level is an administrative unit. It administers all the protection forest areas in the district and its objectives are to manage, protect and develop this forest type. FPMB reports to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development at the provincial level about the forest activity status on its territory and to the DPC.
5. Kinh and Co Tu are two of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam from five different ethno-linguistic families. Viet (Kinh) people account for 87% of the country’s population and mainly inhabit the Red River Delta, the central coastal delta, the Mekong Delta and major cities. In the process of economic development, Kinh people were encouraged to resettle to resource-abundant areas in the uplands. Co Tu people mainly live in the mountainous areas of Quang Nam Province and Thua Thien-Hue in central Vietnam, along the Laos border.

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