

Safeguarding Multifunctional Forest Ecosystems in Viet Nam

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 27(3) : 196-201

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.0920>

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Safeguarding Multifunctional Forest Ecosystems in Viet Nam

Introducing Village-level Community Forest Management (CFM)

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Involving the local population in forest resource management is seen by the Vietnamese authorities as a key concept for reconciling forest use with long-term protection of multifunctional forest ecosystems. For the development of adapted resource management systems, the government closely collaborates with international development projects in the field of participatory forest use. SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Coop-

eration, and the Swiss non-governmental organization Helvetas are involved in the advancement of the community forest management (CFM) approach, which, despite its short history in Viet Nam, has already illustrated that there is legitimate reason for hoping that it will contribute to 2 interlinked objectives: satisfying rural people's forest resource needs, and ensuring long-term conservation of unique multifunctional forest ecosystems.

A new turn: decentralized forest management in Viet Nam

The development Viet Nam has undergone during the last decade is impressive: within a few years, the gross national product experienced a sharp rise, average poverty levels in the country were considerably reduced, and the share of the population involved in agriculture and fisheries is now shrinking at the expense of service-oriented jobs and industry. However, marked disparities in living standards remain: a glance at the spatial distribution of poverty in the country reveals poverty traps in forest-rich mountain regions. In these areas, which are home to a large number of ethnic minorities, forest resources play an important role in meet-

ing a number of daily needs: fuelwood for cooking and heating, timber as the main construction material, and the multiple uses of abundant non-timber forest products—to name just a few (Figure 1). Furthermore, highland forest ecosystems provide a number of environmental services for lowland regions, eg regulation of runoff from the numerous rivers and streams, and biodiversity conservation.

Preserving valuable multifunctional forest ecosystems is a primary concern of the Vietnamese government. The perception that this can only be achieved through decentralized multi-stakeholder forest management that involves the local population in the management of resources (and not in a top-down manner) prevails among decision-makers.

FIGURE 1 Forest resources are an important part of rural people's livelihoods: natural forests in the Pu Luong limestone range, northern Viet Nam. (Photo by Patrick Sieber, 2005)



Moreover, effectiveness of management and improved protection of the resource base requires incorporation of local knowledge into management systems.

The village or community is thus regarded as the most appropriate level to which decentralized forest management tasks can be delegated, as a number of activities can hardly be organized at the individual household level (eg patrolling for forest protection). Legitimization of local community involvement in forest management by means of government recognition and anchoring in respective laws is considered a key step towards long-term viability in community forest management approaches. In this respect, much has taken place recently in this Southeast Asian country.

Tapping the potential of traditional systems in the highlands

Prior to the introduction of centralized state control of forests, community-level management of natural resources was a common practice in remote mountain areas. These indigenous village-based forest management systems were for the most part replaced by state-owned forest enterprises as a result of land reform and the introduction of cooperatives in the 1960s. Local inhabitants were largely excluded from forest management. Only with the launching of the *Đổi Mới* (“change and newness”) reform process in the mid 1980s was dominant state control of forests loosened, with local households again designated as managers of natural forests in Viet Nam. The land law and the forest protection and development law approved in the 1990s allowed allocation of forests to organizations, individuals, and households, making it possible for these entities to gain usufruct rights to forested areas in exchange for management. Village communities, however, were not stipulated as target groups for forest land allocation at that time.

The legislative ‘gap’ with respect to introduction of village-level community forest management was recently filled: both the revised land law of 2003 and the forest protection and development law of 2004 specify that forest area can be allocated to communities for long-term management.

As a novelty, the civil law of 2005 includes the concept of ‘common ownership by the community,’ referring to resources that are managed jointly by the members of a village community. Gradually, the Vietnamese state has acknowledged the value of decentralized collaborative forest management, and actively promotes utilization and conservation of forest ecosystems by combining indigenous knowledge and newly introduced community forest management practices (see Box below).

Community Forest Management (CFM) in Viet Nam

CFM as a participatory approach to forest management in Viet Nam includes the following elements: villages are granted the right to manage land and forest in accordance with the revised Forest Protection and Development Law, which foresees that local villagers carry out all activities related to forest management and protection. Supported by extensionists and foresters, they elaborate a 5-year Forest Management Plan to be implemented by involved households. Locally elaborated Forest Protection and Development Regulations define the rights and obligations of all involved parties. The village launches a Village Forest Management Board (VFMB) that guides the elaboration of benefit-sharing mechanisms and assumes responsibility for monitoring and evaluating implementation of the forest management plan (Figure 2). External knowledge, eg about appropriate silvicultural practices, is sought from forestry staff at district or provincial level.

(Community Forest Management [CFM] Glossary, 2005)

Training key stakeholders from the provincial/district levels

Mandated by the government’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Swiss non-governmental organization Helvetas is supporting reform of the forestry sector in Viet Nam through its Extension and Training Support Project for Forestry and Agriculture in the Uplands (ETSP). In the context of this project, forest management



FIGURE 2 Participation as a key element: these shoes testify to the diversity of participants in a village meeting on benefit-sharing. (Photo by Hans Schaltenbrand, 2006)

and extension approaches are tested in selected partner provinces across the country. Experience gained in pilot implementation is fed into the national policy dialogue, ensuring that local initiatives are backed up by appropriate long-term policies.

ETSP and its predecessor project have long been promoting the involvement of the local population in forest management in Viet Nam. To support the government in its endeavor to promote community forest management, and to gradually change from a top-down to a bottom-up system, ETSP conducted a Training of Trainers (ToT) cycle on Community Forest Management (CFM) planning for key stakeholders from provincial and district authorities in 2005 (see Box to the right). During 3 training modules, participants from the partner provinces of Dak Nong (Southern Viet Nam), Thua Thien Hue (Central Viet Nam) and Hoa Binh (Northern Viet Nam) were familiarized with theoretical concepts, procedures and steps necessary for the introduction of village-level CFM. Intensive exchange among participants and reflection on how the CFM methodol-

ogy could be further refined formed an important element of the training concept. All results from the training have been summarized as technical CFM introduction guidelines which are available for interested parties together with all the training materials prepared by the project.

The 3 Community Forest Management training modules (ToT cycle)

First module: Theoretical background about the CFM concept and practical skills, including knowledge about the current legal situation of CFM in the country. To ensure a practical focus, the process leading to the elaboration of a 5-year forest management plan (see Figure 3) was demonstrated in a 3-day field exercise. The main focus was on how to develop multi-stakeholder forest management systems that accommodate different interests justly and promote sustainable forest use and equitable sharing of benefits, while safeguarding the multiple functions of forest ecosystems. Inclusion of all forest service beneficiaries in the elaboration of management plans was considered a key element in sound resource management.

Second module: Consolidation of theoretical knowledge, improvement of practical skills by evaluating experience and looking closely at trainees' performance during the implementation of their own CFM pilot. Improvement of facilitation skills and introduction of participatory conflict management tools for conflict resolution.

Third module: Reflection on the process of getting the 5-year forest management plan approved. Elaboration of CFM technical guidelines, elaboration of CFM silvicultural guidelines, and adoption of CFM glossary. CFM implementation scenarios were elaborated and alternative funding mechanisms such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and timber certification (FSC) were discussed. The training cycle ended with a national CFM workshop to share results with policy-makers and like-minded projects.

During the training period, each provincial group facilitated CFM planning in one village in their area and regularly reported on progress and the problems encountered with CFM introduction. Despite regional differences, similar short-

comings were experienced by the different groups, giving a clear indication about the most pressing shortcomings to be resolved at the national level.

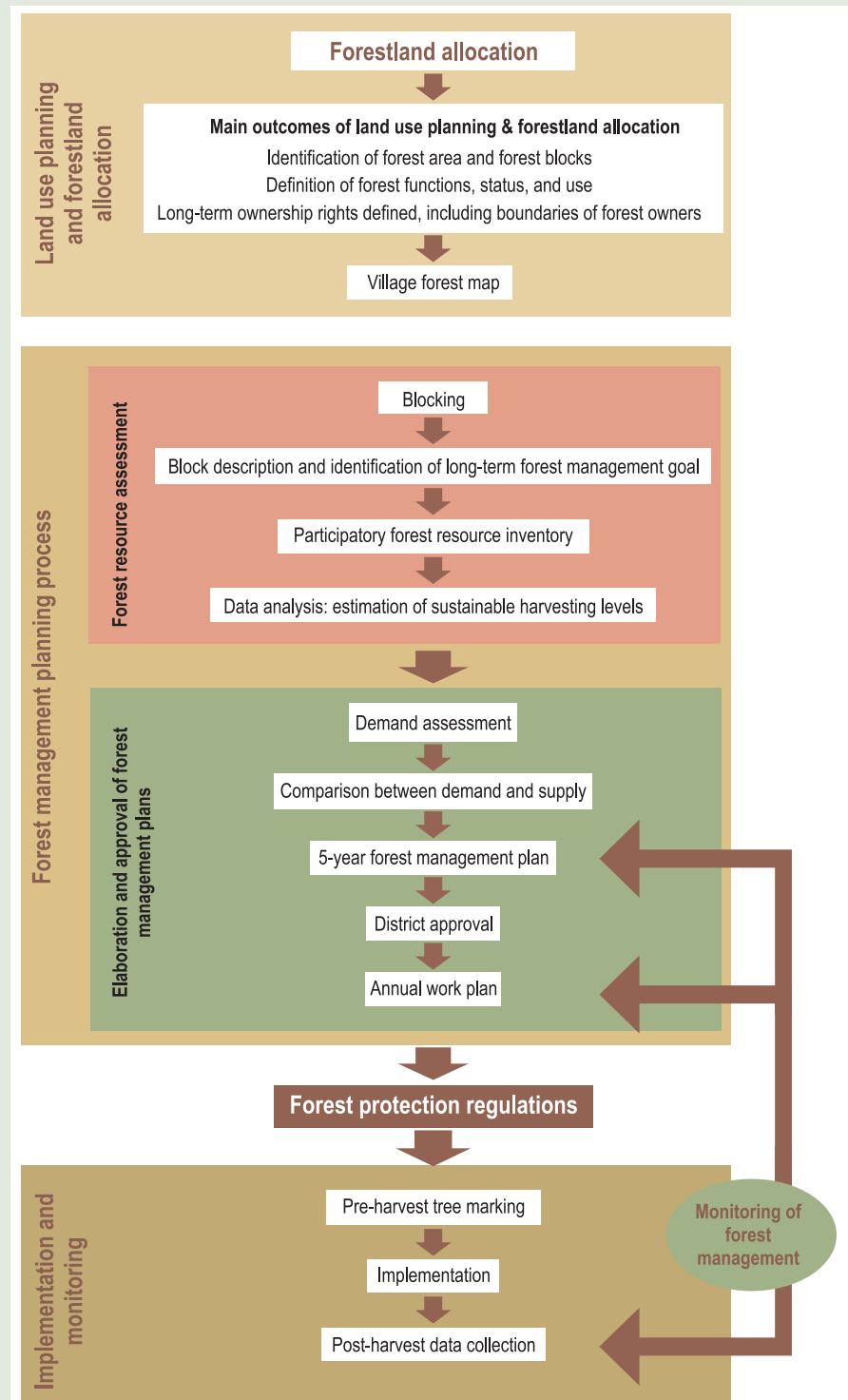
From CFM pilot initiation and planning to pilot implementation with timber-harvesting and benefit-sharing

Approved 5-year forest management plans defining objectives and concrete silvicultural operations (forest enrichment, thinning, and timber harvesting) for village community forests were the output of the multi-stakeholder CFM planning. The holistic view of forest ecosystems that forms part of the CFM approach ensures that the various functions forests provide are reflected in the overall management scheme, which incorporates principles of sustainability and aims at long-term protection of the resource base (Figure 4).

As a follow-up of the pilot initiation in 2005, a pilot CFM implementation process started in 2006. Very promising experience continues to be gained in 2 villages in Dak Nong Province (Bu Nor Village in Quang Tam Commune, Me Ra and Bu Dung Village in Dak R'Tih Commune), where initial CFM timber-harvesting operations under the lead of the villagers are currently taking place. Following low-impact logging rules, selective cutting that combines thinning and harvesting of mature trees is being done by the villagers. Prior to the start of harvesting operations, the rules relating to sharing forest product benefits were decided jointly by the villagers in village meetings. After deducting all harvesting costs and remuneration for the villagers involved in the harvesting operations, the benefits of timber harvesting will be shared equally among all the households in the village. Part of the revenue will flow into a village development fund to support public interest projects that face difficulties obtaining funding from state budgets.

The main difficulties encountered in CFM pilot implementation so far have been related to the lack of clearly defined responsibilities for all stakeholders involved, causing a number of delays in

FIGURE 3 Introduction process for Community Forest Management (CFM).



implementation. It is therefore necessary to further institutionalize the concept of CFM and approve simple procedures for all levels involved.

FIGURE 4 Collaboration as a key element: a villager and district forestry staff member carry out a joint forest resource assessment as a basis for defining sustainable forest management options. (Photo courtesy of ETSP, 2005)



Locally adapted solutions rather than blueprint procedures

Despite the difficulties encountered, the successful pilot processes supported by ETSP are showing authorities at different levels the feasibility of the CFM concept and giving them confidence to continue developing this approach in the coming years. One aspect has proven decisive: to ensure high motivation for community forest management, a reasonable cost-ben-

efit ratio for the villagers involved must be ensured. Investments in time and labor need to be covered by high enough benefits from forest products (timber and non-timber forest products) to make it worthwhile for people to become involved. This is possible in areas where rich forests have been allocated to communities, for example in Dak Nong province or many areas of the Vietnamese central highlands. In other regions, the majority of the forests allocated to communities so far are poor

and degraded; thus short-term economic sustainability is questionable without external financial support.

One important lesson from pilot implementation processes to date is that the variety of conditions found in the country—which are manifest in the multitude of ecosystems and diverse ethnic composition—require flexible procedures for the introduction and setup of CFM at the village level. Each resource management system needs to be tailored to local conditions and must combine elements of newly introduced CFM models with reactivated elements from former traditional community resource management systems.

International development projects such as ETSP, which focus on sustainable resource use and target forest-dependent small-scale farmers in mountainous upland regions, will continue to support the development of community forest management as a contribution to the two interlinked objectives of protecting multi-functional forest ecosystems and improving local livelihoods (Figure 5). Only a

FIGURE 5 Fieldwork is an integral part of the training modules for hands-on experience, using methods learned in the field. (Photo by Patrick Sieber, 2005)



substantial reduction of rural poverty in highland areas will make it possible to ensure the long-term protection of Vietnamese mountain forests and to safeguard their multiple functions, which provide services and benefits that range far beyond the local level.

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