

Traditional versus New Forms of Community Forest Management in Vietnam: Can They Contribute to Poverty Alleviation in Upland Forest Areas?

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Abstract:

In the early 2000s, the legal framework in Vietnam changed toward legal recognition of management of land and forest resources by communities. The change creates a potential for communities to benefit from forest use, and for forests to contribute to poverty reduction.

Examples in various parts of the country show that forest-dependent people have long been able to not only organize themselves to manage their local forest resources for their (daily) use but also to develop an equitable distribution system of the benefits from forests. This paper introduces two concrete cases where local forest resources have been collectively managed by local people in Dak Lak and Thua Thien Hue provinces of Vietnam. While the two cases illustrate significant attention being paid to an equitable distribution of benefits from forest, they also demonstrate two quite different approaches to local forest governance.

The Dak Lak case takes the audience to a village where community forest management has been recently introduced by a donor led development project. People in this village enjoy the legal recognition of their community forestry and commercial logging to timber from the forest. By contrast, the case of Thua Thien Hue introduces a village where local people have managed their forest for generations though no official legal recognition of this community forestry exists. People in the village have even developed concrete plans for management of the forest as well as for distribution of products harvested from this forest.

1 Introduction

Since late 1990s, forest management by groups of households and whole communities/villages has emerged as a new trend in forest management in Vietnam. Forest management by local communities is not a new concept and is, in fact, traditional in many forest villages (Le 2001; Nguyen, Pham, and Nguyen 1999; Pham 2004; Tran 2005). It is estimated that by June 2001, around 86,700 ha of forest were under traditional community forest management (Pham 2004). With the approval of a new Land Law in 2003 and new Forest Protection and Development Law in 2004, community land and forest tenure has been legally recognized in Vietnam. This legal framework creates a potential for communities to benefit from forest use, and for forests to contribute to poverty reduction.

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Examples in various parts of the country show that forest-dependent people have long been able to not only organize themselves to manage their local forest resources for their (daily) use but also to develop an equitable distribution system of the benefits from forests. This paper presents field experiences on community forest management (CFM) in two villages in Thua Thien Hue and Dak Lak provinces. The villages represent two major groups of CFM villages in Vietnam at the current stage. In the first village, local people have managed their forest area for generations following a set of internal regulations, which was developed (readjusted) and recognized by the villagers. In the second village, forest was officially allocated to villagers for community management. The village' rights to forest are legally recognized by state laws. The two villages are of different settings but present a same message that local people (with sufficient decision-making power and legal back-up) may be able to take collective to manage their forest (in a sustainable way) and benefit from it.

The materials presented in this paper come from a CFM survey undertaken by a project entitled 'Forest Governance Learning Group' (FGLG) in Vietnam. The survey took place in Thua Thien Hue and Dak Lak provinces between December 2006 and May 2007.

The paper proceeds as followed: after this introduction, an overview of the community forest management and poverty alleviation situation is provided in Section 2. Section **Error! Reference source not found.** then follow with a short presentation on data collection and analysis. After that, Section 4 presents some background information about the two study villages. Sections 5 and 6 then go into detail on forest management and benefit sharing arrangements in these villages, respectively. Section 7 provides a general discussion on issues concerning forest management and poverty alleviation, based on the lessons from the two study villages. Finally, Section 8 summarizes the major findings and discusses their policy implications.

2 Community forest management and poverty alleviation in Vietnam

2.1. Community forest management trend in Vietnam

Changes in forest policy during the 1990s created a general framework for the involvement of local people and communities in forest management. At national level, a working group on community forest management (CFWG) was set up by Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) in 1998 to advocate community forestry (CF). This working group has tried to put together related documents and manuals into a guideline to facilitate formation and operation of community forestry. Promotion of CFM also comes from international donors through their projects in Vietnam. Examples are German supported project in Son La and Lai Chau provinces, Swedish supported development program in Phu Tho, Tuyen Quang, Yen Bai, Ha Giang and Lao Cai. Dak Lak province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam was among the catalyst provinces in the devolution of forest management to local communities (Nguyen 2006b). With support from a German technical cooperation project, the province has tried out allocating natural forest to individual households, household groups and village communities along with

forestland use title (also known as Red Book certificate or RBC for its color) (Nguyen 2006a; Tran 2005).

Such (pilot) CFM activities at the field contributed to the change in the legal framework in the 2000s. In November 2003, a new Land Law was passed, providing legal recognition of community land tenure. In December 2004, Law on Forest Protection and Development was approved, recognizing the legality of community forest tenure.

Following the promulgation of these two laws, the Forest Department (FD) under MARD is currently implementing a CFM Pilot Program to try out the implementation of CFM in 40 communes in ten provinces. The program started in 2006 and will last until 2009. It expects to develop and test (in the project sites) legal documents and regulations on appropriate technical and financial systems for CFM. Lessons from the Pilot Program will later be used as inputs to the future government decree(s) on CFM, which will be applied in the whole country.

2.2. Forest and poverty alleviation

Over the last 15 years, Vietnam has made an important step in reducing the number of people living under poverty. Between 1993 and 2004, for example, poverty rate went down from 58.2% in 1993 to 19.5% in 2004, which implied a reduction of more than half of the population living in poverty in 11 years. Nevertheless, up to now it is still unclear to what extent forestry can contribute to lift poor people out of poverty (Dinh 2005; Nguyen 2006b). Despite the significant achievement in poverty reduction at the national level, poverty rate remains high in the upland areas where ethnic people are residing (Mueller, Epprecht, and Sunderlin 2006; Sunderlin and Huynh 2005). In fact, poverty reduction has been much slower in the ethnic minorities compared to the mainstream Vietnamese (Kinh) group, and the poverty gap between the former and the latter tends to grow wider (Swinkels and Turk 2006; World Bank 2003).

In general, some important challenges ahead for poverty reduction in Vietnam will concern the forestry sector. So far, poverty reduction approach has worked out with the lowlander and mainstream Vietnamese. Such approach may not be appropriate for ethnic minorities in upland forest environment due to the differences in cultural, socio-economic, and physical contexts. A major challenge for forestry sector, as outlined by MARD Vice Minister (Hua 2006), is “to identify ways in which forests and forest resources can be used to bring benefit to these [ethnic minority] people and to contribute to the national efforts on reducing poverty” (p. 1).

In a recently completed study, (Nguyen 2006b) indicates that community forest management appears to better address the issue of poverty alleviation than other forms of forest tenure. Nevertheless, several conditions need to be in place for CFM to be able to contribute to poverty alleviation. Among them are clarity of rights and responsibilities for the community members, back-up from the state for community to realize these rights and responsibilities, and certain level of autonomy given to the community in decision-making (e.g. on distribution of benefits and exclusion of outsiders).

3 Data collection and analysis

Both primary and secondary data were collected and used for this paper. Primary data were collected through 1) interviews with related bodies, programs and projects working in the respective provinces; and 2) survey of the two villages, using rapid rural appraisal tools. Furthermore, secondary data were collected from scientific reports, evaluation reports, summing-up reports of research bodies, forestry management units, programs and projects, etc.

The collected data were then analyzed mainly using qualitative approach. Some limited quantitative data analysis was also done to complement the qualitative discussion.

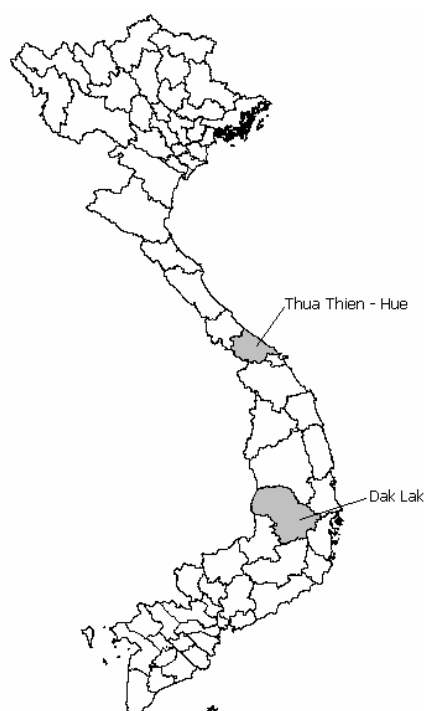
4 Study sites

Two study villages are located in Thua Thien Hue and Dak Lak provinces in the North Central Coastal and Central Highlands Regions, respectively (see Figure 1). Pho Trach village is located in the Northern district of Phong Dien of Thua Thien Hue province. It is around 32km from the provincial capital and 7km from the district center. Access to the village is of good quality around the year. As of 2007, there are around 110 households in the village. All of them are Kinh people, the mainstream Vietnamese, who have been living in the village for generations.

T'Ly village is located in Northern district of Ea H'leo of Dak Lak province, Central Highlands of Vietnam. It is around 100km to the North of the provincial capital and 20km from the district center. Access to the village is relatively good during dry season (October to April) but difficult during the rainy season (May to September). As of 2007, there are 127 households living in the village, of whom 90% are Jarai people, a local ethnic group in the Central Highlands. The remainders are Kinh migrated to the village over the last two decades.

Cropping is the main source of livelihood for local people. Maize and upland rice are the mostly cultivated for home consumption while pepper and coffee are for cash income. Livestock raising, particularly cattle, is also common in the village.

Figure 1: Location of Thua Thien Hue and Dak Lak provinces



5 Forest management and uses in Pho Trach village

Pho Trach villagers have managed around 150 ha of sandy forest for generations. The forest protects the water source that provides water for the whole village. Local people have developed their own village forest management regulation in written format, which has been agreed and complied accordingly for around 500 years.

Forest management in Pho Trach is not legally recognized by law, thus it remains an informal system recognized by only local villagers. Nevertheless, the forest has been well protected so far. Currently, the forest patrolling is done by a forest protection team of five members. The team is selected and contracted based on open bidding process organized every two years.

The team is responsible to keeping the forest well protected. They have to organize forest patrol on regular basis. Violations are treated in accordance with village forest management regulation. Members of forest protection team are entitled to 80% the value of fine paid by violator for each case they detect. An additional remuneration for the team is an amount of two tons of rice per year. The rice comes from the community fund and contribution by all villagers who benefit from the fuelwood collected during the year.

Beside the environmental benefit of water source protection, the forest also provides fuelwood for Pho Trach villagers. Collection of fuelwood is regulated by the traditional village forest management regulations. Accordingly, the whole forest is divided into four lots and one lot can be used for fuelwood collection per year. Rights to collect fuelwood are granted to all villagers on equal basis. Currently, each person is entitled to harvest fuelwood from 250 square meters of forest. People can also decline or transfer their

share of benefit if they don't need it. Anyone who collects fuelwood also has to contribute to the cost of patrolling of the forest.

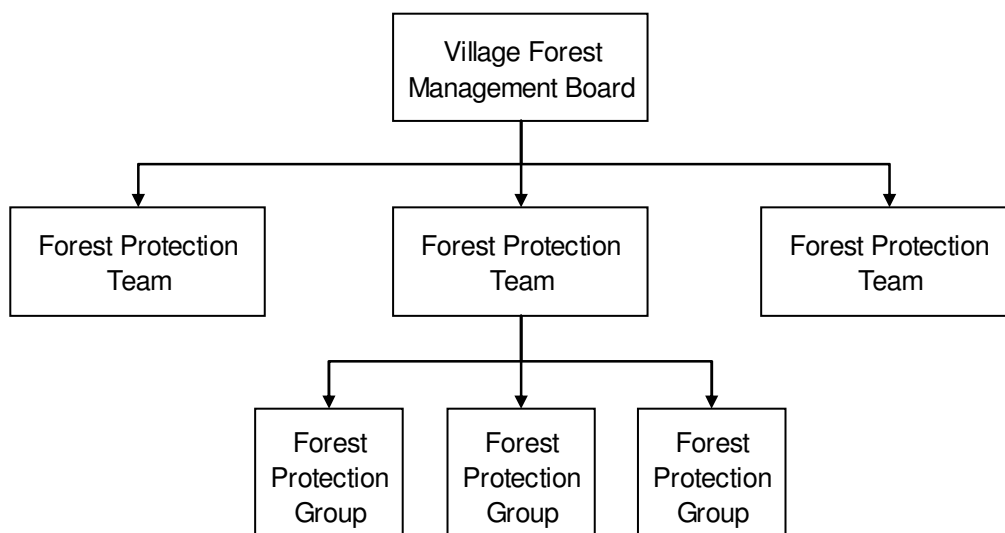
6 Forest management and uses in T'Ly village

Unlike Pho Trach village, rights to forest by T'Ly villagers have been officially allocated to them. Forest land allocation (FLA) started in T'Ly in mid 1998 and was completed by early 2000. Nine households in the village were selected to receive a total of 139.1 ha of forest. Forestland use title (also known as Red Book Certificate or RBC for its color page) was given to local forest recipients in March 2000. However, two major issues arose with the outcome of this FLA program in T'Ly. First, legal access to forest was given to only less than 10% of total number of households in the village, which did not seem to represent the whole village. Second, management of forest by individual households was not a customary practice that local Jarai people applied as they were more accustomed to forest management on communal basis. Allocation to individual households was an idea coming from outside (Nguyen 2006a; Tran 2005)

As a consequence, local people demanded a more equitable way of forest management. Local authority responded to this request. With support from a German funded Rural Development project (RDDL), reallocation of forest took place in 2003 in T'Ly village. A total number of 1,127.5 ha of forest (including the 139.1 ha forest originally allocated to nine households) were allocated to the whole T'Ly village.

After the completion of second FLA in the village, a structure of forest protection (see Figure 2) and village forest protection and development regulations were set up with the support from RDDL. The whole village was divided into three forest protection teams. Each team is then divided into three forest protection groups. Group members include representatives from all households. On top of the forest protection teams is a village forest management board, whose tasks are to steer the forest management work in the village. The board is advised by state elected village headman and traditional village head.

Figure 2: Structure of forest management in T'Ly village



Forest protection is done regularly. To date, 48 cases of illegal logging and wood trafficking have been seized by the villagers. Village meetings have been organized once or twice per month to discuss forest management issues. In addition, people who do activities that are not allowed by the village regulations have been reprimanded.

Not only with protection of allocated forest, T'Ly is also well known in Vietnam for its unique example of commercial logging of timber from natural forest by local people. With the support of RDDDL, T'Ly village developed a sustainable forest composition (SFC) plan for their allocated forest⁴, based on the results of forest resource assessment. With the permission from provincial authorities, the village SFC plan was then used as the basis for calculation of the quantity of timber to be extracted. In August 2006, the villagers harvested 368 cubic meters of round logs from its allocated forest. The timber was certified by the local Forest Protection Unit and then sold at an open auction. The timber sales were 616 million VND, which brought a net benefit of 283 million VND after deducting all the related costs and levies (see Table 1).

The cash from timber sale was used to pay for the forest patrol by the villagers and to contribute to community development fund. Poor households in the village have also been able to benefit from this cash. Twenty million VND (1.25 thousand US\$) have been used as loan to support five poor households (four million VND or 250US\$ each) in the village for household economic development activities.

In addition to benefits from timber logging, T'Ly villagers have also been able to benefit from forest in terms of livestock development under forest canopy, collection of timber for domestic use, use of non forestland for cultivation purpose and collection of non timber forest products.

Table 1: Costs and benefits from timber logging T'Ly

	Amount in thousand VND	Amount in US\$
1. Total from timber sales	616,000	38,500
2. Taxes and levies	192,600	12,038
3. Harvesting costs	140,440	8,775
<i>Value after costs (1-2-3):</i>	<i>282,960</i>	<i>17,687</i>
Fund allocation:		
▪ Forest protection	113,184	7,075
▪ Forest development	28,296	1,769
▪ Village development	141,480	8,843

Source: Appeltofft (2006)

⁴ SFC specifies the number trees needed per diameter range per ha of forest for sustainable growth. Any trees above this number can be extracted.

7 Discussion: Success factors for community forestry

7.1. Flexibility and responsiveness to local needs

7.2. Rights to make decision

7.3. Adequate back-up

7.4. Pro-poor benefit sharing arrangements

8 Summary and policy implications

This paper presented two cases of CFM in Thua Thien Hue and Dak Lak provinces of Vietnam. Although of different biophysical settings, the two villages illustrate a similar fact that when local people have the right to make their own decision on forest resources, they are more likely to take collective action to manage the local forest, benefit from it, and take care of the local needs. Findings also show important policy implications for CFM. Firstly, effective CFM policies are often the ones that are flexible and responsive to local needs. Rigid policies that do not take local practices into account have a high likelihood of failure. Secondly, external support to build up local capacity (including knowledge of legal procedures) is instrumental in securing the success of CFM and be made available for CFM initiatives. However, inappropriate external support may be detrimental in CFM processes and could potentially create situations of “dependency.” External support to CFM should therefore be directed towards building local capacities so that communities remain the owners and drivers of CFM implementation. Thirdly, to contribute to poverty alleviation, clear benefit sharing mechanisms are needed. Pro-poor CFM (policy) needs to address “poverty trap” issues. Necessary economic infrastructure, such as credit schemes and adequate access channels to markets, must be made available to local communities.

Acknowledgements

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To be completed

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