



Community Forest Management for Whom? Learning from Field Experience in Vietnam

By Nguyen Quang Tan, Yurdi Yasmi, Tran Ngoc Thanh, and Hoang Huy Tuan

Policy Messages:

- Inflexible implementation of state policies at the local level can undermine efforts to advance community forest management (CFM).
- Traditional CFM often addresses local poverty issues more effectively than official CFM, as the former is typically more responsive to local needs and allows for greater flexibility in practice than the latter.
- Support from external agencies is crucial if local communities, particularly those with official CFM arrangements, are to build awareness and capacity around viable legal options.

Introduction

What makes community forest management (CFM) work for forests and livelihoods? And how can policy help? To find out, the Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG) Vietnam undertook a survey in Dak Lak and Thua Thien Hue provinces (see Figure 1) between December 2006 and April 2007. The survey aimed to provide insights into different forms of CFM, the factors influencing successful CFM, and their contribution to poverty alleviation.

Given the history and variety of CFM arrangements in Dak Lak and Thua Thien Hue, the survey focused on communities within these two provinces. Dak Lak is the first province in Vietnam in which forest land allocation (FLA) to local communities took place on a large scale, while Thua Thien Hue has examples of both official (i.e. government-introduced) CFM and traditional CFM systems. Altogether, 11 villages were covered in the survey. The five communities from Dak Lak all have official forms of CFM in place, while in Thua Thien Hue four villages practice official CFM and two have traditional CFM arrangements.

This brief presents some major findings of the survey, focusing on three important issues: (i) the rigidity or lack of flexibility in the implementation of state policies; (ii) factors influencing the contribution of official CFM to poverty alleviation; and (iii) the role of external support in promoting CFM. Concerned stakeholders have already debated the findings in provincial and national workshops.

Inflexible Policy Implementation Discourages Collective Action

Since the completion of forest land allocation program (FLA), people in the villages with official CFM have enjoyed legal recognition of their rights to forest.

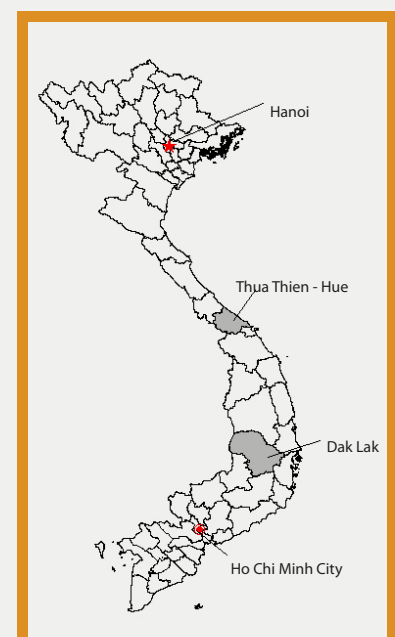


Figure 1: Location of the survey sites

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However, inflexible implementation of state policies at the village level tends to deter local people from engaging in collective action, thereby undermining the advancement of CFM.

One example is the establishment of the village forest protection and development regulation (VFPDR). Following Circular 56 (dated 30 March 1999) from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, VFPDRs are to be set up in all forest villages. A regulation template was set up and applied in all these villages. As a result, little room is available for integration of local practices in the development of VFPDR. The village regulations thus turn out to be products of forestry officials rather than those of local people. As the villagers do not feel a sense of ownership toward these regulations, local forest protection units have to work hard to implement these rules.

In contrast, local people in the two villages practicing traditional CFM have developed their own forest protection regulations without any external intervention



Rules set in stone - in an official CFM village

(see Box 1). The villagers consider the regulations to be their own products and have respected and followed them, even though they have not been legally endorsed by local authorities.

Less Attention to Poverty Alleviation in Official CFM Villages

Pro-poor CFM schemes are evident in only three out of eleven villages surveyed; two of these are the communities practicing forms of traditional CFM. The third is a village with official CFM arrangements, T'Ly village of Dak Lak province (see Box 2). Within the other eight communities, the introduction of CFM has not contributed significantly in alleviating local poverty. The main factors that inhibit poverty reduction in these villages include:

- Lack of pro-poor benefit distribution mechanisms within the village: In general, government decrees do not regulate benefit distribution among community members. Likewise, VFPDRs that are developed as part of FLAs (see discussion above) do not include arrangements that proactively support the poor.
- Poor forest conditions: Forest resources allocated to community members are typically in poor condition. Villagers often have to protect local forests for a long time before they can derive significant livelihood benefits from these resources.
- Poor households lack necessary resources: Even in cases where high value products are readily available, poor households often do not benefit from them because they lack labor and cash - the two major resources that are needed to harvest such products.

Box 1: Traditional Community Forest Management in Pho Trach Village, Thua Thien Hue

Pho Trach is a village of 465 households located in Phong Dien district, Thua Thien Hue province. The community currently manages around 150 ha of sandy forest. While local people's rights to the forest have not been legally recognized by law, so far these resources have been well protected. The community claims to have been practicing its set of own village forest management regulations for over 500 years.

The forest protects the local water source and also serves as an important source of fuelwood for the villagers. To manage these resources, village regulations divide the forest into four lots, each of which rotates as the site for fuelwood collection every year. Rights to collect fuelwood are granted to all villagers on an equal basis, with each person designated an individual area of 250 square meters. People can also decline or transfer their share of benefits if they wish. Anyone who collects fuelwood has to contribute to the cost of patrolling the forest, which is currently delegated to a forest protection team of five members selected and contracted through a biennial open-bidding process. This arrangement of benefit and cost distribution creates an equal chance for even the poorest of the villagers to benefit from the forest.

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- Forests are important but alone may not be sufficient resources to combat poverty: The notion of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) as a “poverty trap” may still hold. Livelihoods based on NTFPs and even timber products may not provide sufficient income or subsistence benefits for villagers to lift themselves out of poverty. Moreover, FLA processes in themselves do not improve capital scarcity problems; collective forest titles cannot serve as collateral for loans because communities are not recognized as legal entities in Vietnam.

Introduced forms of CFM are likely to fail in meeting the objectives of forest protection and livelihood improvement if no (adequate legal) support is provided to strengthen the capabilities of local people and to sustain the implementation of newly endowed rights and duties. For example, villagers may have trouble in exercising their new rights over other groups of stakeholders who are also interested in the allocated forest. Support from local (forest) authorities would better enable legal forest owners to protect community forests from unauthorized uses.

External Support is Important to Realize Objectives

External support may play an important role in the management of community forests, particularly in the villages with official CFM arrangements. In Dak Lak and Thua Thien Hue, communities were more inclined to engage in forest management and derived greater benefits from local forest resources when government agencies and other external service providers adequately addressed their support needs (see example in Box 3). In contrast, when there is little or no external support, it is difficult for local people to realize their rights to local resources and thus, they become forest owners on paper only.



Timber for a new house like this will still be an important incentive for local people

Box 2: Benefits From Commercial Logging in T’Ly Village, Dak Lak

T’Ly village is located in Dak Lak province. There are currently around 127 households living in the village, of whom 90% are from the Jarai ethnic group. The village is well known in Vietnam as a unique example where commercial logging of timber from natural forest is operated by local people. In August 2006, T’Ly villagers harvested 368 cubic meters of round logs from their allocated forest. The timber was then sold at the price of 616 million VND (around US\$38,500). After the payment of taxes and transaction costs, the village was still left with a net benefit of VND283 million (approximately US\$17,700).

The community used income from the timber sale to pay for the forest patrol and to contribute to the community development fund. Poor households in the village have also been able to benefit from this cash. VND20 million (US\$1,250) have been used as loans to support five poor households; each household received VND4 million for economic development activities.

Box 3: External Support to Forest Management in T’Ly Village, Dak Lak

After the end of forest allocation, a German-funded rural development project has provided support for local governance processes in T’Ly village. Most of the project activities focus on the development and implementation of the village’s forest development and protection regulations. To date, 48 cases of illegal logging and wood trafficking have been seized by the forest protection teams; regular village meetings (once or twice per month) have been organized to discuss forest management issues; and people who carry out activities that are not allowed by the village regulations have been reprimanded. Most recently, the project has assisted local people in obtaining the necessary permission to harvest 368 m³ of round logs, having them certified by local FPU, and freely auctioning them (see Box 2).

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Box 4: The Forest Governance Learning Group in Vietnam: An Overview

The Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG) Vietnam is part of an international project funded by the European Commission, with some supplementary funding from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) coordinates project activities at the international level. The Regional Community Forestry Training Center for the Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) is in charge of the regional coordination for Asia.

The overall aim of the project is to address the challenge of how to put the right leadership, institutions, policy decisions and practical systems in place. In Vietnam, the project has an objective to promote the learning and sharing of experiences on poverty alleviation through community forestry among all stakeholders. It also expects to bring empirical evidence on community forestry from the field to contribute to the refinement of the Community Forestry guideline, which is being tested by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

FGLG Vietnam started in September 2006 and is divided into three phases. The first phase (09/2006 - 08/2007) focused on setting up the project structure and understanding the CFM situation in the project sites. The second phase (09/2007 - 08/2008) emphasizes the learning and sharing of experiences among stakeholders. In the last phase (09/2008 - 01/2009), lessons learned from the field are documented and policy recommendations are elaborated and disseminated.

Another common issue is that often local people do not have sufficient knowledge of the mandatory legal procedures they are required to undertake. Support aimed at clarifying necessary legal provisions and processes would enable communities to better realize the potential benefits "promised" by FLAs and CFM. Yet, external support should also remain flexible so that there is adequate room for local people's participation in decision-making processes.

It is important to note that external support does not necessarily mean international support (as in the case of T'Ly village illustrated in Box 3). Support may be derived from the national or provincial government, or from private companies working in the local area. In fact, the external support from international project in T'Ly would not be successful without cooperation and support from local (forest) authorities.

Summary of Lessons Learned and Next Steps for FGLG Vietnam

Findings from the survey clearly indicate that when local people have the necessary rights and support in CFM arrangements, they are more likely to take collective action to manage local forests, benefit from these resources, and adequately address the needs of the poor. In contrast, when communities have little ownership within decision-making processes due to inflexible policies (see the case of VFPDR above), the implementation of these processes is likely to fail.

With the provision of forest titles and use rights to local communities, the foundation is set for the scaling up of CFM in Vietnam. However, the legal framework and more

importantly its rigid implementation at the local level have not been able to promote effective management of allocated forest resources nor have they contributed significantly to poverty reduction. For official CFM to realize these objectives, it is important that adequate external support is provided after the completion of FLAs so that communities can fully use and apply their rights.

Learning from the survey findings, FGLG Vietnam (see Box 4) will try to address the following three key areas in its future work:

1. Legality of CFM: assessing the benefits of forest land use titling for local communities.
2. Allocation of forests for community management: identifying appropriate management regimes for different types of forests. This includes identifying the necessary community infrastructures for effective CFM.
3. Forest management and benefit sharing: exploring the following issues: (i) governance structures for good CFM; (ii) pro-poor benefit sharing arrangements; (iii) sustainable forest composition models; and (iv) the extent and type of external support needed to back up local communities.

Data and information needed to address these concerns will be mainly collected through exchange visits and study tours to villages. Supplementary data collection will be carried out if needed. In-depth data analysis will then be done and lessons drawn from that analysis. FGLG Vietnam will then prepare a report documenting findings and lessons learned along with policy recommendations.

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Local people in a discussion with FGLG members in Thua Thien Hue province

Recommendations

FGLG Vietnam's experience shows that a number of critical issues and challenges remain in the implementation of CFM in the country. While CFM and FLA continue to be important political discourses in Vietnam and perhaps elsewhere in the region, a number of policy recommendations can be drawn based on the conducted survey. These include but are not limited to the following:

1. For CFM policies to be effective, they need to be flexible and responsive to local needs. Rigid policies that do not take local practices into account have a high likelihood of failure. In order to produce flexible and responsive policies, appropriate stakeholder involvement at various levels is required through processes such as public hearings and stakeholder consultation.
2. To contribute to poverty alleviation, CFM policies need to be designed in such a way that clear benefit sharing mechanisms are articulated. Pro-poor policies are required 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.
3. 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.

FGLG Vietnam **Policy** Brief No.1, April 2008**Further Reading**

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For more information about FGLG Vietnam, please contact Dr. Nguyen Quang Tan - the Convener of FGLG Vietnam - at tananh@hn.vnn.vn

Information on FGLG global project can be found at <http://www.iied.org/NR/forestry/projects/forest.html>

To learn more about community forestry, please contact RECOFTC or visit its Website: <http://www.recoftc.org>; E-mail: info@recoftc.org

Partners**About the authors**

Dr. Nguyen Quang Tan is an independent researcher and convener of FGLG Vietnam. E-mail: tananh@hn.vnn.vn

Dr. Yurdi Yasmi is a program officer at the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC), Bangkok. E-mail: yurdi@recoftc.org

Dr. Tran Ngoc Thanh is a staff at Dak Lak Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. E-mail: mekongdl@dng.vnn.vn

Mr. Hoang Huy Tuan is a lecturer of Hue Agro-Forestry University. E-mail: hoanghuytuan69@yahoo.com