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The Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA) was established in May 1993 to support training and research in environmental and resource economics across its 10 member countries: Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Its goal is to strengthen local capacity for the economic analysis of environmental problems so that researchers can provide sound advice to policymakers.

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Managing Vietnam's Forests: What Do Local Communities Think?

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One of the challenges facing forest conservation in Southeast Asia is to develop management systems that deliver environmental sustainability and secure long-term livelihoods for local people. Choosing and developing such systems is a complex task since there are many diverse and often conflicting interests to take into account. A recent study in the northern uplands of Vietnam has shown that a participatory approach can yield results that inform policy-making and empower and involve local communities. →

A summary of EEPSEA Research Report 2001-RR4, *Forest Management Systems in the Uplands of Vietnam: Social, Economic and Environmental Perspectives* by Nguyen Nghia Bien (c/o National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia. (contact: nguyen.bien@anu.edu.au)

Household management works *but benefits are unequal*

→ A research team led by Nguyen Nghia Bien from the Forestry University of Vietnam looked at three different communities. They found a consensus among the local population that they wanted to manage forest resources on a privatized basis.

Vietnam, like most developing countries, suffers from serious environmental problems such as deforestation, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity and unsustainable livelihoods. In the last fifty years, forest cover has dropped from over 43% to less than 28%, leaving more than 13 million hectares of denuded hills. Ineffective institutional arrangements such as inadequate property rights and enforcement, lack of local participation and misguided policies are partly to blame. Indeed, for decades, a top-down approach has been used by lowland policymakers in formulating policies on upland development, without considering local initiatives and interests.

A Variety of Ways to Manage Forests

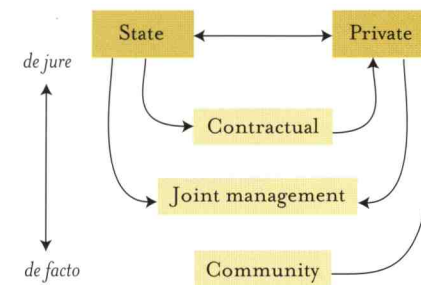
Recently, however, the government has shown interest in a more bottom-up participatory approach to forest management involving

local communities. Forest lands are being turned over to households based on land-use certificates and forest resources are now managed under various schemes including forest enterprises, household, contract-based management, joint management and community-based management. However, while rice output is rising and forest cover is slightly increasing, these changes have resulted in some social inequality; those with capital have gained control over large tracts of hill land, while more disadvantaged households have acquired smaller plots or missed out altogether.

Bien and his team aimed to assess and compare the various forest management regimes against socioeconomic, environmental and institutional attributes to find out what is best in the local context. Moi Hamlet in HoaBinh Province; Village 7 in YenBai Province; and DongVanh Village in BacGiang Province were chosen as study sites. Among them, they represent three human-ecological subregions of the northern uplands; several forest types; and a variety of forest management systems.

A Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was used in the study. PRA is

A continuum of forest management systems



a method for learning about rural conditions from, with and by rural people. In this approach, outsiders act as convenors, catalysts and facilitators who enable local people to undertake and share their own investigation and analysis.

To set the process in motion, Bien's team made preliminary visits to each site to introduce the study to community leaders, to assess the landscape and to confirm the suitability of the sites. These visits were followed by a week-long PRA at each site. The study team usually worked with a group of preselected key informants. Flexibility of approach was needed to account for factors such as the weather (heavy rains were encountered) and the capabilities of the villagers. Some of the PRA tools used were participatory mapping and modelling,

transect walks, matrix scoring, well-being grouping and ranking, institutional diagramming, seasonal calendars, trend and change analysis, and analytical diagramming. All were undertaken by the local people and information gained in the field was subsequently verified during village meetings.

From these visits, a profile of each village and their farming systems was drawn up. For example, in Moi Hamlet it was found that food security is one of the major problems facing the community, with only 12% of households having enough food each year. As a result, the population has dropped from 269 in 1995 to 257 in 1999 as people leave to seek a better life elsewhere. (This is in contrast to the other villages, where population has increased considerably.) In Moi, agricultural land has been allocated to households with a norm of 1000 m² per person. Although these areas have been formally been given legal title, this has not been effective and the hamlet gardens are unproductive. Local residents are instead farming on sloping forest land that is under the management of either the commune or the forest enterprise.

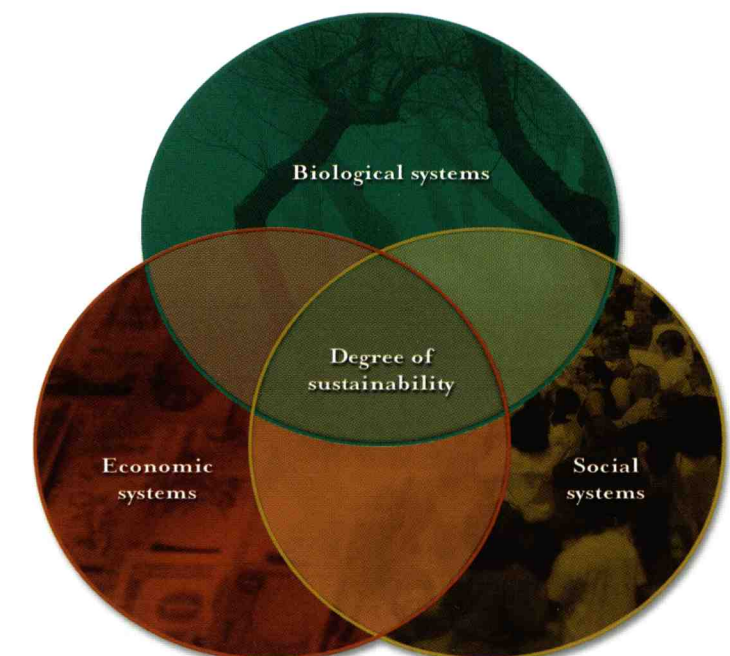
Selecting Success Criteria

Once the existing forest management approaches had been delineated, the researchers assessed them using a series of criteria and indicators (C&Is) for sustainable forestry. Various C&Is have recently been formulated in major international arrangements such as the Montreal Process of 1994. A comprehensive and thorough study of C&Is of sustainable forestry has also been carried out by CIFOR. During the PRA process, various C&Is were tested in the field and a final set selected. Through this assessment process, the number of C&Is

dropped from an initial 113 to 52 and finally to 10. These covered ecology, institutions and policy, social context, economics and finance and sustainable production. Two scenarios were used to compare the different forest management schemes against these C&Is. The first assumed that all the criteria had the same importance. The other ranked the criteria depending on their level of importance in each study site and gave relevant weighting to each.

TopDec multicriteria decision-making software was used to undertake the final, in-depth assessment.

Overlapping goals for sustainable development: biological systems, economic systems, and social systems



TopDec is one of the recently developed computerized programs that can be used to assess different institutional structures against sets of selected C&Is. The results of this multicriteria analysis showed that "household" was the preferred option in all three sites, regardless of the different ratings of C&Is used. "Forest enterprise" was also an important option, particularly for protection forests.

Food Security Helps Forest Conservation

In general, Bien and his team found that levels of deforestation do not depend on the proximity of communities to forests or infrastructure. In fact, they found that deforestation is increasing in remote areas rather than close to villages. They also found that food

security translates directly into better forest conservation.

These findings are consistent with what is happening on the ground. For example, in Dong-Vanh, the result reflects the fact that a large area of forest land has been handed over to households for long-term management and has improved in both quantity and quality.

These findings have practical implications for policymakers. Although household-based management was shown to be preferable for both the community and the environment, it has some disadvantages compared with forest enterprise, for example. Households do not have as the same level of training and education as forest enterprises. Bien feels that if the household management is going to achieve its

potential, the government should pay more attention to human resource development, in particular technical education for farmers.

The researchers also recommend measures to improve food security in upland areas; the creation of markets for locally produced commodities and the legalization of land tenure for local people.

Overall, Bien concludes that the research approach his team used was effective. He emphasises that it is a process that can be generated and verified by local people – an important result, given the continual development of community participation in forest management.

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