

POLICY BRIEF

ASSESSING THE RESILIENCE OF LIVELIHOODS IN THE UPLANDS OF CENTRAL VIETNAM

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has achieved remarkable results in poverty alleviation. The percentage of the population living in acute poverty declined from 57% in the 1980s to 7% in 2005 (Vien et al. 2006). However, most of these improvements in living standards have occurred in lowland areas while mountainous areas have lagged behind. The midland and upland areas of Vietnam contain the bulk of the country's forest resources and have been heavily exploited by State Forest Enterprises from post-war period until the 1990s when the *Đổi Mới* renovation policies started to take effect.

The government of Vietnam has recognized and, since the 1990s, acted to reverse the loss of forest cover which accompanied the country's development from the post-war years until the 1990s. The promotion of forest plantations has been an important part of this agenda. Large-scale national forestry programs have been implemented in midland- and upland areas of the country in order to encourage replanting and protection of forests, improve land utilization, raise living standards, facilitate poverty reduction, eradicate hunger and to prevent soil erosion. The programs form part of the government's dual purpose policies of ensuring environmental sustainability while promoting socio-economic development in the uplands.

Forest programmes have converged with other large-scale development and infrastructure programmes to fundamentally transform upland areas. However, forest programs have been criticized for a) by restricting access of the poorest and most forest-dependent households to areas subsequently demarcated and allocated through the forest programmes and b) excluding the poor from the allocation process (McElwee 2009) while infrastructure programs have been criticized for not taking environmental impacts into account (World Wildlife Fund for Nature, 2003)

The PhD project 'Assessing livelihood resilience under changing natural and socio-economic conditions in the uplands of Núi Thành district' examines how the implementation of these policies and associated programs have impacted the local environment and altered the livelihoods of local people in an upland commune in central Vietnam. Furthermore, the project assesses the extent to which these planned interventions have achieved desired outcomes and/or produced unintended results. The following key findings emerged from the research:

- There are clear winners and losers that have emerged in the aftermath of the implementation of these national programs in the commune.
- The number of households whose members do not have a stable income is high and if their situation becomes more precarious there is a real threat to the sustainability of the natural resource base and community resilience as people are forced to cut down trees in protected areas and natural forests to make ends meet.
- There are stark differences between different ethnic groups in terms of their access to various forms of capital and the implementation of development projects in the commune has played a significant part in making these differences stand out.

- If natural disasters or other shock events become more frequent, people who engage in non-diversified livelihoods will be most at risk while people who receive stable incomes and have managed to diversify their portfolio of livelihood activities will be able to adapt.
- Illegal logging, which is partly an outcome of the implemented programs, will in the long-run off-set the positive impacts of reforestation and can have a substantial impact on forest quality, access to forest products, and environmental services.
- Since the introduction of fast-growing plantation species through forest programs, a significant number of households have started to rely on casual labour as an income source and to provide this labour on the forest plantations of wealthier households. With very few other sources of income, casual labourers are the most vulnerable in the case of future shock events.
- The most vulnerable households are those of the landless and ethnic minorities, both of which depend on short-term income from casual labour.
- A growing concentration of landholdings, coupled with a commune economy based on monoculture plantations, threatens resilience and could potentially constrain future government development interventions.

BACKGROUND

The research for the project was structured around the collection and triangulation of secondary data, primary qualitative data and primary quantitative data. The bulk of the data collected was qualitative and derived from a set of household-level case studies within one sub-district level location. One location, rather than two, was chosen to allow for a comprehensive and in-depth study of the impacts on livelihoods of several external factors both social (government programmes) and natural (typhoons and drought).

Field work was carried out in two stages. The first stage, in 2010, was carried out over the course of three months in the field and was an exploratory study focusing on the livelihood strategies and exposure to shocks of households. The second stage, which was carried out in 2011 over the course of seven months, involved a more comprehensive study in all eight wards in the commune of issues pertaining to vulnerability, social inequality, tension between ethnic groups, processes of deforestation and land issues.

Extensive field work was carried out in Hanoi and in Quảng Nam province over the course of 2010-2011 with the support of the Institute of Geography, Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology in Hanoi. The bulk of the field work was carried out in the upland commune Tam Trà, which is located in Núi Thành district (huyện Núi Thành) in Quảng Nam province. The project also included a comparative study which necessitated the collection of data in Trà Tân commune, which is located in Bắc Trà My, a nearby mountainous district in Quảng Nam.

RESULTS

The project has shown that there are a number of unintended consequences of the promotion of reforestation and infrastructure development policies. These include the reinforcement of social inequality, the replacement of natural forest with fast-growing forest plantations, a widening wealth gap between different ethnic groups, the encroachment of illegal loggers as a result of improved road access and lax enforcement of forest regulations. The promotion of monoculture forest plantations, without the promotion of alternative

livelihoods, is risky since the forest plantations are highly vulnerable to market shocks and natural hazards, such as typhoons.

CONCLUSIONS

The results point to the need for the following policy changes which are also relevant to other areas in which similar policies have been implemented:

- Greater inclusion of local people in decision-making processes concerning the use of natural resources
- Greater attention to the land use history and relations between various ethnic groups
- Strengthening the enforcement of forest regulations for the use of protected and natural forests by proving more decision-making and responsibilities to local people
- Fostering and ensuring clarity on the exact rules and regulations concerning the use and management of protected and natural forests
- Promoting more diverse types of forest systems, e.g. agro-forestry systems, which can food, fuel, fiber, animal feed and other products and services required by local people as well as being more climate resilient than mono-culture forest plantations or industrial *Acacia*-cassava systems.

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