

How not to cut down a tree:

A comparative study of forest policies, livelihoods and land use in Vietnam

Hvordan ikke hugge ned et tre:

En sammenliknende studie av skogpolitikk, levebrød og arealbruk i Vietnam

Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) Thesis

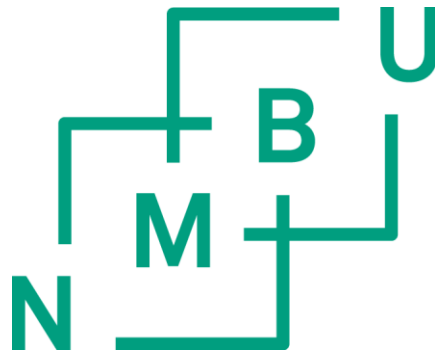
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Summary

This thesis focuses on the role of forests and forest management in providing global environmental and climate services. The study analyzes multiple dimensions of forest-sector policy development, with a special focus on interactions between policies, livelihoods and land-use processes at sub-national levels in Vietnam. The Lam Dong and Bac Kan provinces are considered to be representative of the variations in forest-cover dynamics in the country, namely those of a *frontier* (deforestation) zone, and a *forest mosaic* (reforestation) zone. The study applied interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks, including institutional theory, political ecology and livelihoods theory, to investigate the research objectives. It also used Forest Transition (FT) theory as a narrative framework to understand the trajectories of forest-cover dynamics and policy processes. An interdisciplinary methodological approach was applied to respond to the research objectives of the study. The results may have important implications for emerging forest and environmental policy frameworks such as *payments for environmental services* (PES) and Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+).

The findings reveal that ‘second-generation’ policy approaches, such as PES and REDD+, are unlikely to represent a paradigm shift in the history of forest management in Vietnam. As a result of institutional reproductions and ‘path dependency’, there is a rather high risk of prolonging existing approaches. Larger and more fundamental policy reforms, such as independence, the collectivization processes after the Second World War, and the market liberalization and decentralization reforms from the late 1980s onwards, were identified as fundamental explanatory factors for land-use dynamics in the contemporary history of the country. Furthermore, one-dimensional and reductionist land-use change explanation models, inherent to many of the emerging policy schemes such as PES, REDD+ and forest enhancement, risk overlooking the complexities of land use, livelihoods and underlying dimensions of the drivers of change. Complex institutional factors and the interests of more – or less – powerful actors, in the process of creating institutional bricolages, contribute to modifying and transforming policy programs and schemes into local adaptations.

The thesis presents four individual but interrelated papers that address different aspects and scales of policy development processes and impacts.

Paper 1: Analyzing the transformation of forest PES in Vietnam: Implications for REDD+

The paper analyzes the transformation of market-resembling environmental policy processes, exemplified by the implementation of forest PES in Vietnam. The paper applies a critical institutional path dependency framework to analyze the processes of institutional reproduction in PES encounters with actors and institutions at multiple levels, from the national to the local. PES policies did not enter an institutional vacuum, but instead were transformed through a process of reproducing existing institutional structures. This reflects not only established norms and values about ‘best-ways’ of organizing forest management, but also existing structures of power, tenure and the control by some groups over forest resources. In this sense, from a path dependency perspective, new and ‘innovative’ market-based approaches, such as PES, do not at all represent ‘critical junctures’. The findings of this study may have important implications for the prospects of implementing similar initiatives, such as REDD+, both in Vietnam and beyond. Thus future PES and REDD+ schemes should take into account the limitations and challenges of institutional reproduction, interplay and path dependency, to a higher degree in their planning and implementation.

Paper 2: Sub-national forest transitions in Vietnam

This paper compares forest transitions (FT), policy reforms and forest cover change in the Bac Kan and Lam Dong provinces of Vietnam. The country has seemingly been able to shortcut the perceived FT stages by quickly moving to the reforestation phase, which makes it an interesting case country. Provincial level forest cover and socio-economic trends are, however, not necessarily comparable and compatible within a FT analytical framework. Bac Kan is one of the poorest provinces, but has experienced forest regrowth and expansion of forest cover during the past couple of decades. In contrast, Lam Dong province has both higher GDP and population levels, but has had higher levels of deforestation, particularly linked to the expansion of perennial crops. This is quite contrary to what could be expected from a conventional FT hypothesis. The FT turnaround and land use dynamics were found to be linked to the overall and all-encompassing policy shift related to de-colonization, state-control and collectivization, and the *new shift* of “market-led socialism”, decentralization and land tenure reforms. The findings demonstrate that policies can trump typical FT patterns linked to general development trends. This provides a sense of relief in the way that the FT-trajectory is not unavoidable. Policies can make a difference. Yet, these policies have not primarily been guided by forest conservation concerns, but have rather been a side-effect of economic development and political objectives.

Paper 3: Livelihoods and land uses in environmental policy approaches: The case of PES and REDD+ in the Lam Dong Province of Vietnam

This paper explores assumptions about the drivers of forest cover change in a PES and REDD+ context in the Lam Dong Province in Vietnam. In policy discourses, deforestation is often linked to ‘poor’ and ‘ethnic minority’ households and their unsustainable practices such as the expansion of coffee production (and other agricultural activities) into forest areas. The paper applies a livelihood framework to discuss the links between livelihoods and land use amongst small-scale farmers in two communities. The findings of the livelihood survey demonstrate no clear linkages between poverty levels and unsustainable practices. In fact, the poorest group of households was found to deforest the least. The ways in which current PES and REDD+ approaches are designed do not provide appropriate solutions to address the underlying dimensions of issues at stake. The paper criticizes one-dimensional perspectives of the drivers behind deforestation and forest degradation often found in public policies and discourses. We suggest more comprehensive analyses of underlying factors encompassing the entire coffee production and land use system in this region. Addressing issues of land tenure and the scarcity of productive lands, and generating viable off-farm income alternatives seem to be crucial. Sustainable approaches for reducing deforestation and degradation could be possible through engaging with multiple stakeholders, including the business-oriented households in control of the coffee trade and of land transactions.

Paper 4: Cultivating forests: Exploring the productive values of forest land in a reforestation zone of northern Vietnam

The paper challenges the predominant forest-agriculture dichotomy perception in policy-making and research in Vietnam. Such dichotomies are not endemic to Vietnam, but permeate the whole climate and forest debate globally. This standpoint encompasses a perception that forests are of higher value kept standing and that agricultural practices, forest conservation and the sustainable use of forests are mutually exclusive activities. This study is based on a survey

carried out in the province of Bac Kan in northern Vietnam, and applies a livelihoods framework (LF) to investigate the multiple values of forest lands in household economies. The case demonstrates the complexities of adaptations to forest-sector policies, namely that households in different institutional and agro-ecological locations create and use landscapes differently along a forest-agriculture continuum. The findings on the multipurpose uses of forests may have important implications for climate-related forest policies, such as REDD+ and *reduced emissions from all land uses* (REALU). Policy makers need to engage with people and local communities, their social institutions and agricultural practices, and consider context-specific approaches for integrating the objectives of conserving trees, increasing carbon stocks, and enhancing the total productivity and total outcomes and values of landscapes. The study recommends inter-sectoral and multi-stakeholder policy approaches to integrate and mainstream multiple objectives, including forestry, agriculture, energy, and environmental services such as food production, carbon capture and storage, water provision, and biodiversity conservation.

The study concludes that predominant REDD+ discourses, such as those of *ecological modernization* and *green governmentality*, encompass presumptions and risks of one-dimensional and reductionist explanation models of the drivers of land-use change processes. In other words, there is an inherent logic – and need – to identify actors of change who must to be compensated for refraining from cutting down trees, and supported in planting new ones. In reality, however, developing and implementing forest conservation and enhancement policies are highly complex processes, influenced by multiple sets of institutional and agro-ecological factors. Policy implementation and land-use change linked to livelihood processes are multifaceted and dynamic imperatives, influenced by multiple institutional structures and actors, with different interests and agendas. The need to act for more sustainable management of tropical forests seems to be indisputable; however in order to make REDD+ policies more efficient, effective and equitable, the institutional complexity and interests of multiple stakeholders need to be taken into account.