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# WHOSE “MOUNTAIN REALITY”?<sup>1</sup>

## Changing policies in Vietnam’s northern mountain area

Claudia Zingerli, Zurich

### *Abstract*

This article discusses a number of representations of mountains that appear in the international mountain development debate. By adopting a discursive approach, the article analyses the meaning and power of these representations in policy programmes implemented in mountain areas. A case study in Ba Be district in northern Vietnam shows how some representations of mountains appear and become effective in the national and local policy contexts. Following a brief discussion on the room for more inclusive policy frameworks, the article concludes with a call for more reflexivity of dominant representations and a broader scope including the “mountain reality” of those who directly depend on mountain resources.

## 1 Introduction

In 1998, Neil JAMIESON, LE Truong Cuc and Terry RAMBO (1998) published a study on development in Vietnam’s uplands that differs in some respects greatly from other reports on the socio-cultural, economic and environmental problems in mountain areas. Their analysis of the so-called “development crisis” in the uplands of Vietnam sets in at two levels. The first level identifies five interrelated variables which form self-amplifying systems in which worsening of any one variable generates a worsening of the others – a crisis conceptualisation similar to the famous Himalayan Environmental Degradation Theory (ECKHOLM 1975; IVES 1987). The second level of their analysis, on the other hand, focuses on the structural determinants of the “development crisis”. The authors argue that the development process is powerfully shaped by at least four underlying factors, such as the structures of knowledge, the power relations between the elite and common people, the social and political organisation, and Vietnam’s socialist economy. With this focus the study touched on politically sensitive issues such as power relations, policy-making, the political attitudes towards the mountain population, and conflicting world views and ideologies. To date, this

1 This article was peer reviewed in a double blind process. It was accepted April 30<sup>th</sup> 2007.

second level is still under-explored for an analysis of development problems in mountain areas, both in Vietnam and elsewhere. JAMIESON et al. (1998) claimed therefore that a reorientation and more analytical scrutiny in research, planning, implementation, and monitoring of upland development are needed.

This article emerged in the context of a study on the institutional and political organisation of natural resource management in Vietnam's northern mountain area. While it acknowledges that factors such as population growth, environmental degradation, poverty, marginalisation and dependence on non-local markets and political systems contribute to the difficulties of mountain development in Vietnam today, it does not share Jamieson et al.'s notion of a development crisis and self-amplifying systems of mountain degradation in Vietnam's uplands. It argues instead that difficulties of mountain development in Vietnam are not triggered by the mountain conditions alone. A key to a better understanding of development difficulties in mountain areas rather lies in a multi-level analysis of the institutional and political elements that make the nature of upland-lowland relations. This article emphasises the power of both structural and discursive elements in shaping policy in and representation of Vietnam's mountain areas.

The aim of this article is to discuss a number of representations of mountains and to analyse their meanings in the policy context of Vietnam's northern mountain area over a period of about 50 years. The use of a discursive approach is being outlined in section two. Section three shows how the mountain policy frameworks debated at an international policy level reflect at least three dominant representations of mountains and mountain development. Illustrated by a case study in Ba Be district in northern Vietnam section four demonstrates how these representations, over time, appear and become effective in the national and local policy context of Vietnam. Section five discusses the room for more inclusive policy frameworks for Vietnam's mountain areas. The article concludes with a view on the discrepancy of the dominant mountain representations and the livelihood needs of mountain communities.

## 2 A discursive approach

The discursive approach adopted here draws in essence on the work by Arturo ESCOBAR (1995; 1996). Escobar uses discourse, following a Foucaultian post-structuralist perspective (e.g. FOUCAULT 1981), as "the articulation of knowl-

edge and power, of statements and visibilities, of the visible and the expressible” (ESCOBAR 1996:46). In this sense, discourse is the process by which social reality comes into being, and a poststructuralist analysis of discourse can be fruitful for a critical view on the social construction of development and nature. A discursive approach thus helps unravelling not only linguistic and conceptual differentiations but also the implications of social constructions of development. With respect to the evolution of mountain studies, such a social constructivist view means conceptualising mountains beyond their “material reality” and to consider the representations of mountains as social facts. These social facts are assumed to have programmatic power in policy formulation and implementation.

David DEMERRIT (1998) and Noel CASTREE and Bruce BROWN (1998) establish another meaningful analytical scope for the discursive approach I adopt here. They use a poststructural, social constructivist perspective on development and nature to reflect on the formulation and implementation of public policy. Following this connection with regard to mountain development policy, the mountain world is usually considered “real” but intelligible access to that “reality” is constructed and produced, and ultimately incomplete (see section three). In order to be able to communicate about the real and socially constructed facts, thus to tell a story and to establish an influential narrative or representation, it is then inevitable to make judgements about these constructions (LEASE 1995). Such an argument implies that some representations are more powerful and influential than others, and that some of these representations bear important political implications (WHITE 1994; GASPER 1996). When looking at changing policies in Vietnam’s northern mountain area, a discursive approach helps detecting a number of different representations of mountains and identifying the implications of policy intervention and underlying structures of development problems in mountain areas – to make the link back to JAMIESON et al. (1998). Ultimately, it points out the socially constructed nature which develops against various political economic and ideational backgrounds, and that mountains are today placed in dense webs of economic, environmental and societal interests.

For its analysis this article draws, on the one hand, on a comprehensive literature review and policy document analysis. It identifies key issues, standpoints, and concepts that appear in the international mountain development debate in order to come to terms with what is perceived as mountain development problems. This body of knowledge is, on the other hand, contrasted with case study material on Vietnam’s policy frameworks applied in mountain areas. It reflects the policy ideas against the experiences and aspirations of mountain peoples in order to provide insights into the divergences between (inter)national

policy and local needs. Primary data used for this analysis was collected among Tay and Dao people of Ba Be district, Bac Kan province, northern Vietnam, between August 2000 and May 2002. The findings presented here base on seven life histories and 185 unstructured and semi-structured interviews (88.6% with mountain resource users, 11.4% with political authorities, National Park staff, forest, agricultural and rural development officers, and international non-governmental organisation staff). Data collection was carried out by me and my assistant who acted as the facilitator of any form of communication in the mountain villages<sup>2</sup>. We collected data on topics such as mountain livelihoods, environmental change, policy programmes and implementation, and political participation, representation and decision-making (ZINGERLI 2003). The mountain development debate was used as the conceptual framework within which data was subsequently analysed.

### 3 Representations of mountains

Vietnam's mountain areas today experience processes of rapid change in the environmental, socio-economic and socio-political realms that can also be observed in many other mountain areas of the world. As a referential background for further analysis of the Vietnamese case, this section outlines the general discussion about the distinctive characteristics of mountains. It continues by differentiating between several representations of mountains, and discusses the international mountain development discourse and its policy programmes. The section will make clear that today mountain areas are not isolated but part of wider economic, political and social webs of interest.

#### *The distinctiveness of mountains*

The literature of mountain studies and mountain development is marked by a debate of what mountains are and how they can be delineated as geographical landscapes of the earth. The debate makes clear that mountains are a material reality but that they are also socially constructed in reference to the lowlands. Mountains are clearly discernible in a physical sense with special characteristics in climate, pedology and geomorphology (e.g. IVES, MESSERLI, and SPIESS 1997; JENÍK 1997). Mountain regions also contain other specific features such as

2 For a critical discussion on methodology and protocol see ZINGERLI (2003).

restricted accessibility, fragility, marginality, diversity and heterogeneity, specific niche, and human adaptation. These so-called “mountain specificities” (JODHA 1992; PAIN 1996) cannot be attributed to mountains alone but their high degree and significant impact on resource use patterns, nature of production and exchange activities differentiate mountains from other geographical units. Mountain dwellers all over the world deal with the both limiting and enabling circumstances created by mountain specificities. Often they have developed sophisticated patterns of management systems for “sensitive” mountain ecosystems, although the high level of environmental degradation in mountain areas suggests that not all of them have always done well. Nevertheless, there is an immense variety of land use types and products, especially under conditions of subsistence production that usually characterises natural resource use in mountain areas (GRÖTZBACH and STADEL 1997). This has contributed to the fact that mountains host some of the world’s most complex agro-cultural gene pools and traditional management practices that appear as rich cultural landscapes and that are supported by immense environmental knowledge and experiences in habitat adaptations.

The physical delineation of mountains on the world map as well as the processes of land use change in mountain areas have also significant political meaning for development and intervention. From a geopolitical point of view, mountains are highly contested places in which many destructive armed conflicts are carried out (LIBISZEWSKI and BÄCHLER 1997; LUDI 2004). Moreover, mountain areas are home to a great number of minority ethnic groups that are little or not represented in national and international political systems and networks (UNFPA et al. 1996; STONE 1992; FUNNELL and PARISH 2001). They carry the token of “otherness” and are therefore often exposed to civilisatory interventions by lowlanders and majority ethnic groups (MCLEOD 1999; MCKINNON and MICHAUD 2000). Recently, also efforts in biodiversity conservation have become a major political struggle in mountain areas. Today, mountains contain the largest number of environmentally protected areas of any of the world’s major landscape categories. And apart from their importance in terms of biological diversity, mountains are also known for their overarching spirituality, aesthetic, source of myth and legend, and psychological balm for society at large (MOUNTAIN AGENDA 1992).

The physical, social and economic functions which the world’s mountains perform for humankind, such as the supply of water, the provision of mineral

and plant resources as well as space for recreation, religion and tourism<sup>3</sup>, place them in dense webs of interests and make them places of struggle for control. These dense webs of different interests are backed up by numerous representations and notions of mountains, socially constructed truths about environment and development that dominate recent discussions and policies concerning mountain areas.

### *Mountain representations*

Today, most mountain areas are, to varying degrees, economically and politically integrated into larger geographical and political units of nation-states and the world market (FUNNELL and PARISH 2001). They are therefore exposed to numerous needs and claims, many of them originating from outside the mountain areas. The following section detects three powerful mountain representations that shape our understanding of mountain development in different ways.

One of the currently most prominent representations of mountains is the idea that, due to the physical restrictions and socio-cultural otherness, mountain areas are regions with inherent environmental and development problems that affect the lowlands and the global ecosystem. The rationale for this representation grounds in a number of facts and fictions. Unprecedented rates of change in the course of winter sport and mass tourism development or rapid population growth and deforestation nurtured the perception that mountains were caught in downward spirals of degradation and decline leading to a world super-crisis (ECKHOLM 1975; IVES and MESSERLI 1989). Especially adverse effects of unwarranted and irresponsible environmental disruption in adjacent lowlands, such as devastating floods, were linked up with the notion of a crisis in the mountains. The crisis notion in the world's mountains found rapid entrance in popular view on mountains and their environmental and development problems that drew attention to factors such as population growth, poverty, environmental degradation, and marginalisation for explanation (ECKHOLM 1976). However, the notion of crisis in the world's mountains was soon strongly criticised for its reductionism, lack of reliable data and its assumptions based on cause and effect that are still poorly understood and overstated (THOMPSON, WARBURTON, and HATLEY 1986; FORSYTH 1996). It is argued that the crisis narrative particularly serves the needs of those who need to rationalise intervention as well as to attract attention and funding (IVES 1987; FORSYTH 1998; BLAIKIE and SADEQUE 2000). On the other hand, it also helps those who advocate for the recognition of the histori-

3 Between 1992 and 2002 Mountain Agenda has published reports on all of these functions.

cally, socio-culturally, economically and politically distinct mountain population and argue for mountain-specific policy frameworks (RHOADES 2000; MOUNTAIN AGENDA 2002). Overall, the crisis narrative of mountain development – used by JAMIESON et al. (1998) also in the context of Vietnam – continues to shape the debate and has substantially contributed to the fact that mountains have been put on the international environmental and development agenda. It still nurtures the idea that the seemingly inherent mountain development problems require corrective measures in terms of natural resource management, better control of mountain peoples, and policy intervention to avoid any further disruption of upland and lowland regions. Ultimately, the understanding of mountains as problem areas for sustainable development touches on issues of control and autonomy, on political representation and mechanisms of support for peripheral and comparatively disadvantaged regions (IVES 1987; FUNNELL and PARISH 2001).

A second prominent representation of mountains primarily focuses on the vast resource potential in mountain areas and works with the rationale that this should be exploited for increasing economic growth. The potential of hydro-power, timber, and mineral resources found in mountain areas seems to be vital for the modernisation and industrialisation of national and international economies. For many centralist or less developed countries the peripheral mountain regions indeed assume(d) the role as donors of resources. STONE (1992:263) reports, for example, that the hyper-trophied centralisation of planning and the sectoral approach to development in the former Soviet Union seriously harmed the mountain regions of its various peripheral states like Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan. The increased utilisation and depletion of the easily accessible resources of the lowlands caused a continuously expanding invasion of remote mountain areas, sometimes associated with large resettlement programmes (HARDY 2003). In many cases, mountain resources are used as a means to boost the national economy and to increase living standards, especially of a growing urban population in the lowlands. Although modernisation processes and infrastructure development have improved living conditions for those who quickly adapted to the new structures in mountain areas, the process of “internal colonialism” (FUNNELL and PARISH 2001:223) usually created uneven developments between the regions due to unequal terms of trade and exchange.

A third prominent representation of mountains, that characterises the more recent discussions on mountain development, is the perception of mountains as hotspots of biodiversity and cultural diversity (ZINGERLI 2005). The values of mountain biodiversity have been known for centuries to indigenous people

(GRÖTZBACH and STADEL 1997). For preserving the natural and cultural wealth, a growing number of international organisations engage in mountain areas. The Global Environmental Facility (GEF), for example, acts as important and financially powerful facilitator, sponsoring a great number of mountain nature reserves, protected areas and national parks. More recently, other external interest groups, such as pharmaceutical companies, research institutions, and government agencies are increasingly aware of the commercial importance of biodiversity in mountain areas (MOUNTAIN AGENDA 2002). Closely related to the conservation agenda is thus the marketing of biodiversity and mountain culture. The aesthetics of mountains and the distinctness of mountainous livelihoods from urban life in lowland industrial centres make them important destinations for a growing tourism industry. Therefore, conservation efforts go often hand in hand with other commercial activities, such as medicinal plant research or ethno-tourism development.

The representations of mountains regarding development, economic potential and biodiversity and the respective problem complexes attributed to each of them are shared by many national governments and international development agencies. Many of them draw on several of them simultaneously. All of them suggest ways to intervene in mountain areas in order to attain specific objectives, such as sustainable development, economic growth, or conservation of mountain regions. Often, because pursued simultaneously, these representations stand in competition to each other and create conflicts between the development, resource exploitation and conservation agendas in specific places. All of them primarily represent ideas and perceptions of “outsiders”, such as lowlanders, economic leaders, or development and conservation agencies. In all of them, endogenous views on mountain development, economic potentials and preservation needs tend to fall short of attention. Only recently the international mountain development discourse has shown a growing awareness of the need to include alternative views and attempts to become more inclusive (e.g. Bishkek Global Mountain Summit 2002).

#### *Mountains in the international policy discourse*

The physical characteristics as well as the diversity of human adaptation to and perceptions of mountains have contributed to an increased interest and awareness of mountains as important and fragile ecosystems and habitats in the 1990s. Based on these interests and early advocacy work of research networks such as the Mountain Agenda, mountains were put on the international environmental

and development agenda at the Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (UNCED 1992). Research programmes both on the physical materiality as well as on the socio-economic development of mountains followed. However, by the end of the 1990s it turned out that the focus on ecological and socio-economic concerns was not sufficient. Many of the suggested and pursued interventions caused adverse effects and the international mountain development debate begun to stress the importance of policy and legal frameworks. It strongly advocates for the integration of mountain peoples into decision-making processes concerning mountain areas (IVES, MESSERLI, and SPIESS 1997; RHOADES 2000). With the United Nations International Year of Mountains 2002 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002 in Johannesburg (WSSD), the advocacy for sustainable mountain development reached a temporary peak. Among the most recent and probably most important suggestions for mountain areas is the International Partnership for Sustainable Mountain Development (CSD 2003).

As of October 2006 the Mountain Partnership counted 139 members from 47 countries, 14 inter-governmental organisations, and 78 major groups.<sup>4</sup> The intention of the Mountain Partnership is to work in partnership to achieve the mountain-specific goals outlined at WSSD. A major goal of the Mountain Partnership is to develop and strengthen policy initiatives at the international level with the aim of supporting national initiatives and promoting cooperation and partnership between major stakeholders. Therefore, the recent developments in the mountain debate carry a clear political message that stresses the need for mutual respect between uplanders and lowlanders and calls for social contracts between so far unequal partners (FAO, UNEP, and International Year of Mountains Focus Group 2002).<sup>5</sup>

The Oral Testimony Programme of the Panos Institute<sup>6</sup> points in a similar direction. It tries to encounter the divide between outside, lowland and “expert” representations of mountains and views of those at the heart of mountain development. The programme aims at amplifying the voices of mountain people who

4 Source: <http://www.mountainpartnership.org/> (access date: 5.4.2007).

5 The FAO et al. (2002:1) state that “in concrete terms, sustainable management of mountain resources means enabling mountain populations to earn a livelihood, providing protection against natural hazards, enhancing conservation of natural resources, safeguarding social and cultural traditions, and supporting development that takes account of the special features of mountain regions and ensures that the interests of both mountain and lowland populations become equal parts of a fundamental social contract.”

6 The Oral Testimony Programme website: <http://www.mountainvoices.org/> (access date: 5.4.2007).

are disadvantaged by poverty, gender, lack of education and other inequalities. The collection and dissemination of oral testimonies by means of the internet and printed publications shall allow the least vocal and least powerful members of society to speak for themselves on topics such as environment, development, agriculture, social relations, conflicts, and others.<sup>7</sup> Although mountain people speak for themselves and in their own words, the success of the programme largely depends on translations and synthesis, carried out by (lowland) experts writing policy reports and disseminating the message among those in political responsibility and power (e.g. BENNETT 1998). So the diversity of views and statements on mountains and mountain development gets onto the international and national agendas.

Despite this political turn in the international mountain development debate, the recognition of mountain peoples' voices and the handling of the politics of mountain development remain difficult. In many ways, the mountain development debate is still characterised by de-politicised natural and technical science topics and tends to side-step important political measures needed for more equal relations and more adequate recognition of mountain people. Moreover, many national governments still do not recognise mountain areas as specific geographical and cultural regions and are reluctant to give greater attention to minority mountain populations. Especially in transitional economies and nation states with weak democratic structures the support of partnership initiatives is missing, often because of underlying political and social reasons relating to national politics. Therefore, the goal to recognise local needs and to empower mountain communities in order to establish social contracts and to form concerted action is still far from the political reality in many national contexts (FAO, UNEP, and International Year of Mountains Focus Group 2002). In Southeast Asia, for example, only Indonesia has signed the Mountain Partnership Initiative<sup>8</sup> although mountain areas have significant shares of the territories of mainland Southeast Asian countries. So far, the international discourse for sustainable mountain development has become a direct driving force for change of policy and politics in and for mountain areas only in a few national contexts, especially during the International Year of Mountains 2002 (e.g. FAO Vietnam 2002). The consequences of the internationally motivated mountain development

7 The Panos Institute published all oral testimonies of mountain people both in printed form as well as on the internet. In the end of 2004, a collection of 10 booklets was completed.

8 Source: [http://www.mountainpartnership.org/members/members\\_en.asp](http://www.mountainpartnership.org/members/members_en.asp) (access date: 5.4.2007).

are, however, rather modest. Nevertheless, the processes of change in mountain areas continue to be triggered by economic rationales and increasingly by (international) policy frameworks, most of them developed in the lowland political centres.

The next section is going to contrast the representations of mountains prominent in the international discourse with the national policy frameworks applied in the mountain areas of Vietnam. It will be shown that many of the discussed representations implicitly shape policy frameworks but that it would require strategic conceptual changes in the policy arena to create policies that work more for mountain peoples.

## 4 Policy in Vietnam's Mountains

### *Geographical and socio-cultural delineations*

Mountains make up two thirds of Vietnam's national territory and host biodiversity resources of international significance (IUCN 1999). The mountain areas stand in sharp contrast to the economically prosperous delta areas of the Red River in the north and the Mekong River in the south of Vietnam. In the process of comprehensive economic reforms, the economic and social discrepancies between the uplands and the lowlands in Vietnam have grown rapidly. Many aspects of the socialist economy have been liberalised, economic models have been diversified, decentralisation processes have devolved authority and budgets to the provinces, and policies and programmes of 10-year economic plans have become more qualified according to sectors and geographical regions.<sup>9</sup> But as LILJESTRÖM et al. (1998:247) remark, there are winners and losers in Vietnam's “dismantled revolution”. Vietnam's mountain regions face the difficulties of a persistent poverty rate that is, in contrast to the lowland areas, still growing (WORLD BANK 2001). Despite better infrastructure and market networks, the economic marginalisation of mountain peoples continues.

9 A vast body of literature, providing analysis of the economic and political performance, has emerged in the last two decades since Vietnam adopted its *doi moi* reform programme. In this respect, DANG Phong and BERESFORD (1998), ABUZA (2001) and MCCARGO (2004) were of particular importance to my work.

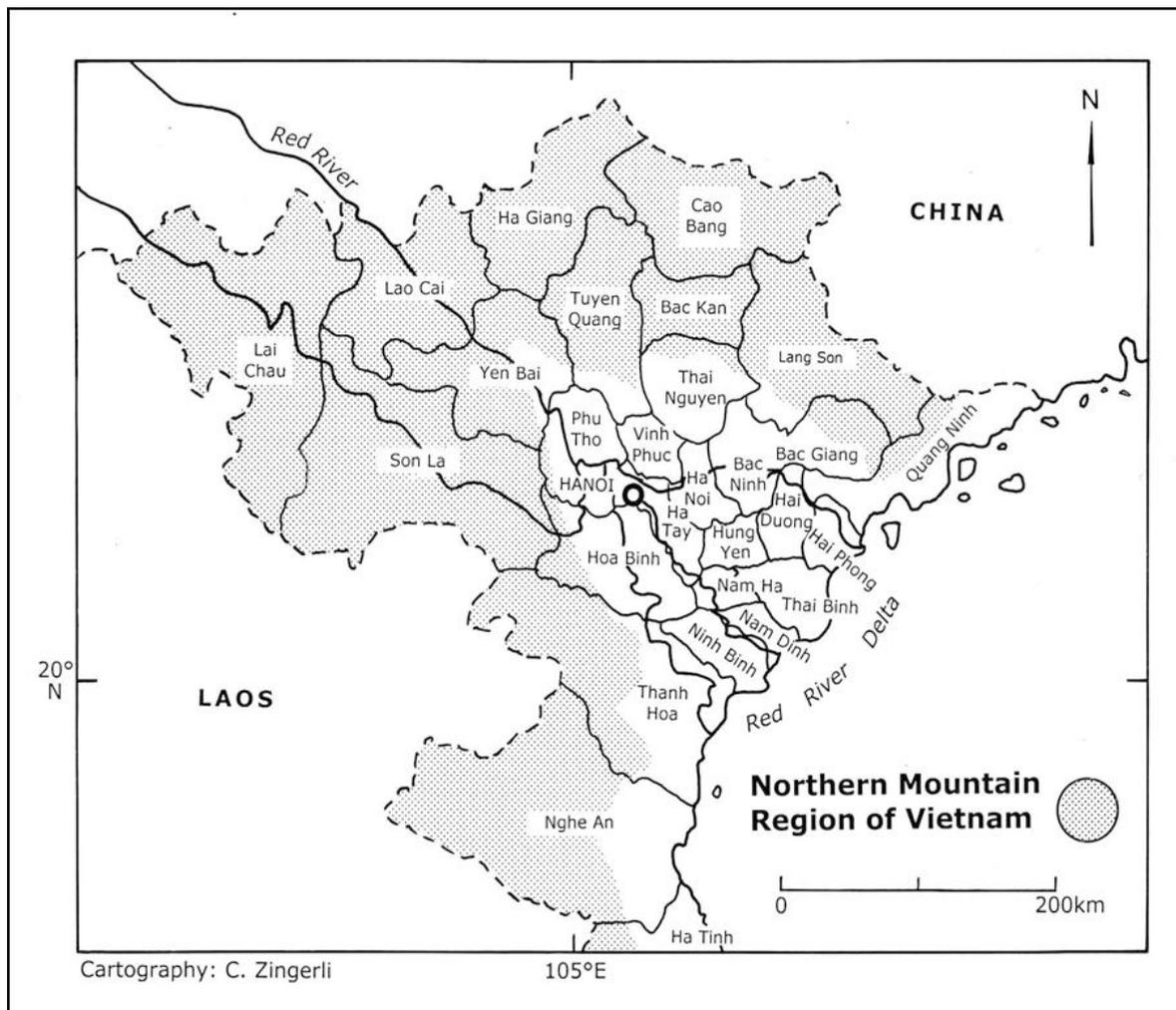


Figure 1: Northern mountain area of Vietnam (Source: after JAMIESON et al. 1998).

Mountains in Vietnam are not only discernible in a physical and economic sense. Taking a historical perspective there are also ethnic and socio-cultural distinctions that play an important role for various representations. Until the late 19th century, the ethnic Vietnamese (or Kinh people) considered mountain areas as relatively uninteresting places that were difficult to access and to live in (MCLEOD 1999). The mountains were thus left to the highland peoples with different origins and cultural traditions. As a result of this segregated settlement pattern, Vietnamese imperial power was traditionally strongest in the lowlands and weakest in the uplands. This changed when France decided to accelerate the colonisation of Vietnam in the end of the 19th century. According to MCLEOD (1999:362) the mountain peoples played an in-between role in the process of power change. MCLEOD (ibid.) notes that their feelings toward the French colonial regime were ambivalent, some seeing it as just another form of lowlander

domination, others viewing it as necessary bulwark against Kinh penetration. Only in the 1950s, a strategic move of the Indochina Communist Party towards the mountain peoples, promising them the right of citizenship and of “self-determination” in an independent Indochina, convinced some of the ethnic groups to fight together with the Kinh for independence and national unification.

In line with many other authors and my Tay and Dao informants, NGUYEN Khac Vien (1999:247) recalls that the success of the Socialist Revolution in Vietnam was the result of a strong national unity that won the masses and gave them self-confidence and determination for further steps towards independence. In their articles written towards the end of the “American War”, LA Van Lo (1975) and BE Viet Dang (1975) emphasise the historic unification of the majority of Vietnamese citizens during the common struggle against foreign colonisers and intruders. Many of the minority ethnic groups, such as the Tay and Dao, joined the resistance movement and contributed to the defeat over the foreign enemies. Others, for example in the Central Highlands, got involved in a crusade against Vietnamese nationalism and Communism (CHRISTIE 1996; SALEMINK 2000; HARDY 2003). CHRISTIE (1996:105) notes that the ethnic mountain population of the Central Highlands represent a classic and exceptionally tragic example of a people in a peripheral region in the pre-colonial order of things who were ruthlessly exploited in the era of decolonialisation and the subsequent era of the Cold War confrontation. In the case of the Central Highlands of Vietnam, there are tensions not only because of historical legacies but also because of resettlement and economic programmes that hit this mountain area particularly strong (SALEMINK 2000). The changes in the Central Highlands reflect the representation of mountains that highlight their vast resource potential. In the process of resettlement and government and World Bank supported development programmes the natural environment and the social relations changed dramatically (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH 2002; HARDY 2003).<sup>10</sup> The formerly peripheral area, used by autochthonous peoples for traditional, mostly subsistent agricultural production experienced rapid transformation into one of the fastest growing regions of coffee and other cash crop production. Tensions between majority and

10 The case of the Central Highlands of Vietnam reveals many of the adverse effects expected by poorly designed policy and economic intervention in mountain areas. Due to its complexity, rapid change and the difficulty to conduct research in this politically contested area the case of the Central Highlands remains ambiguous and blurry. Although I have not conducted research in that area, I like to consider it as an example of internal colonialism and resource exploitation at the expense of social equality and integrity of upland peoples.

minority population as well as between the north and the south of Vietnam continue to exist.

Development processes in Vietnam's mountain areas are thus clearly bound to wider questions of politics, economics and ethnicity and, related to that, the combination of minority and economic policy of the Communist Party and the central government. More recently, environmental policy frameworks, including protected areas systems, were added to the list of policies that are effective in Vietnam's mountain areas. The next section shows how concrete policy frameworks applied in mountain areas are shaped by different representations and how their implementation changes in the course of diverging agendas reflecting international, national and local interests.

### *Resource policy in Ba Be district*

This article draws on the empirical case of the northern mountain district of Ba Be, situated in Bac Kan province in north-eastern Vietnam. It has a total area of 115,173 hectares and is inhabited by around 70,000 people, mostly belonging to the ethnic groups of Tay, Dao, H'mong and Kinh (STATISTICAL OFFICE OF BA BE DISTRICT 2002). Tay, Dao and H'mong are among the biggest so-called ethnic minority groups of Vietnam, and especially the Tay and Dao have long established contacts with Kinh people in the district town as well as in the villages where some of them have intermarried. Their livelihoods primarily base on mountain agriculture. Additional income is generated from non-farm sources, such as transport, tourism, teaching, carpentry, or jobs in the commune administration. Today, Ba Be district is well accessible by road and has become a popular tourist destination. It hosts the only natural mountain lake of Vietnam, a spectacular natural feature embedded between steep limestone mountains covered with old grown forests. In 1977, the area around the lake was declared a protected area which was upgraded to the status of a National Park in 1992. The current mountain development context of Ba Be is shaped by overlapping policy frameworks and diverse underlying representations and agendas. It cannot be understood without a short look in the past that explains some of the characteristics of socio-economic development today.

The mountain district of Ba Be was affected by external intervention and changing policy frameworks in different intensities. From 1957 to the late 1980s agricultural production was managed by cooperatives, in which the Tay joined earlier than the Dao. The H'mong were not involved in collective work for the cooperatives at all. For Tay and Dao people the establishment of the coopera-

tives had enormous influence on their livelihoods conditions. Access to and control over resources were solely regulated by the management board of the cooperatives. Tay labour force was reorganised, not allowing or limiting labour allocation for private cultivation. Dao people were convinced to settle in permanent villages, under the premise that the cooperative management would provide them access to lowland and terraced fields. A Tay village elder recalled the collective period by saying that “when the cooperative was set up people worked well during the first three years; but then they were completely exhausted and lacked food”<sup>11</sup>. A former Dao village leader reported that “the cooperative, in general, had positive and negative things. Some people worked very slowly, some showed their envy of other people, and sometimes some people came earlier than others. They had to wait for other people too long and [...] so they could not work well”<sup>12</sup>.

Agricultural productivity in Ba Be district during the collective period was generally low. Nutrition needs of the local population were hardly met. The collective memory of village elders of this period reveals painful experiences with prevalent hunger, daunting working point systems, inequalities between cooperative leaders and members, exhaustion and resistance. The low productivity and rigid control over the allocation of labour force seem, on the other hand, to have prevented excessive over-exploitation of natural resources, especially forest. The representation of mountains as resource providers exploited to feed into the national economy and the lowland industries does therefore not apply for this period in Ba Be district. The increasing pressure on the mountain resources set in only after decollectivisation around 1987 and was primarily driven by the fact that each family aimed at achieving food security and improving livelihood conditions as quickly as possible.

The dissolving of the cooperatives began in the early 1980s in the three villages. Official edicts such as Directive No. 100 (1981) and Resolution No. 10 (1988) restored the link between the farming households and the land (BERGERET 1995; NGO Thi Meh 1995). People in Ba Be reported, on the one hand, that they felt encouraged to expand and intensify lowland field cultivation and had better access to improved crop varieties. On the other hand, the new regulations enabled some of them to reclaim inherited land and to appropriate new upland fields for private cultivation. The issue of land tenure is vital in the discussions about development prospects of mountain areas in the reform era.

11 Excerpt of life history of a Tay woman, age 79, 3.3.2001.

12 Excerpt of life history of a Dao man, age 59, 29.3.2001.

Whereas land was theoretically distributed according to plans of equity (cf. LE Trong Cuc, SIKOR, and RUCKER 1996; LUONG Van Hy and UNGER 1998; KERKVLiet and SELDEN 1998), the land allocation process in the studied mountain communes looked somewhat different. Immediately after the collapse of the cooperative the Tay people reclaimed the land they used to own before collectivisation. This meant that the Dao people as well as a few Kinh people lost their legitimate access to lowland, which was formerly enabled and secured by the cooperative. Some Kinh people returned to the lowland plains or to the district town while Dao people stayed in their now permanent settlements. One of the Dao village elders reported that “Tay people said that they gave us these fields but when the cooperative collapsed they took all the fields back and we do not have fields to cultivate. [...] We do not know what to do. Now we do not have enough lowland fields”<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the Dao people and those who could not reclaim land began to rely more on cultivation in upland fields. Some of the Tay people had more land after reclamation than they were actually able to cultivate. They started to rent or sell some of their fields. Many landless households were not able to purchase land from their fellow villagers because they experienced severe financial and livelihood difficulties at that time. As a consequence, they began to rely more on the forest resources. Until today, the majority of the villagers considers the cultivation in upland fields as means to generate income for buying lowland fields. However, this attitude towards the forest resources had adverse effects on the forest cover, which diminished between 12 to 17% in the period from 1983 to 1998 (ZINGERLI et al. 2002).

Today, 20% of the farming households in the three research sites live in good conditions and are integrated in market, administrative and political networks. Up to 80%, however, are participating little in the market system and live primarily from subsistence agriculture. This reflects the development and poverty situation in the northern mountain areas, summarised at an aggregated level by international development agencies (WORLD BANK 2001; UNDP Viet Nam 2004). Until 2002, two of the studied villages in Ba Be were supported by a locally well accepted agricultural development project funded by a Swiss development organisation. After the project ended in 2002, the support for agricultural experiments, farmers field schools and experiments was not replaced.

In sum, the changing socio-economic conditions during the collective and decollectivisation period have changed both land use practices and attitudes towards the natural environment. Moreover, they have pronounced the socio-

13 Excerpt of life history of Dao man, age 66, 30.3.2001.

economic differentiation both within and among the villages and ethnic groups. However, the representation of mountains as resource provider for the national economy triggered by the political and economic centres in the lowlands, as described before, cannot be validated for Ba Be until the 1990s. But also during the last decade, environmental change and resource exploitation was rather triggered from endogenous demand than from outside economic intervention. An important characteristic of the described situation in Ba Be, for example, is the uncertainty due to transition periods, accompanied with changing policy frameworks and diverse modes of implementation. These changing conditions have placed Vietnamese citizens, and farmers in particular, in situations of great uncertainty (FFORDE 1990). Thus, for at least three decades the population in rural and mountain areas has been subject to distant and arbitrary policy changes of the centre. In consequence, people frequently developed a fatalist stance towards central policy-making. They have become used to being uncertain and expect that policy will move in any particular direction which might require another change of rural social and economic organisation. The understanding that would best describe and summarise the situation in Ba Be is the idea of mountain communities that do variably well in the use and management of the fragile mountain environment (cp. JODHA 1997).

### *Changing objectives*

As representations and understandings of mountain development change over time, some of the above outlined characteristics of the local mountain development context are today viewed from a completely different angle. Under the influence of global environmental regimes, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, and international obligations Vietnam has recently given more attention to its biodiversity wealth and significance. The MINISTRY OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT and the NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY (1999) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN 1999) emphasise that the maintenance of biodiversity is essential for the well-being of the ecosystems which has immediate implications for economic and social well-being. They state that the gene pool is of great economic value and has the potential to make an economic contribution through research and the production of medicines and essential oils derived from plants. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development pursues a strategy of ecotourism development, closely linked with the creation of a protected area system. During the last decade, the number of Vietnam's national protected areas has grown to 167, out of

which 13 are National Parks (VIETNAM NEWS AGENCY 2001)<sup>14</sup>. They have become important tourist destinations for both international as well as increasing numbers of Vietnamese travellers. Thus, in the late 1990s, combined with the arrival of an internationally funded conservation project, the representation of mountains as hotspots of biodiversity has become a dominant theme in Ba Be that shapes the local policy and development context considerably.

As in innumerable other places in the world, the creation of a protected area and the implementation of a biodiversity conservation management regime increases difficulties among local farming households to meet subsistence needs and nurtures conflicts between different groups of actors and stakeholders (BRECHIN et al. 2003; MULONGOY and CHAPE 2004; VERMEULEN 2004). This is also the case in Ba Be. From the viewpoint of those who put biodiversity conservation top on the agenda, the environmental changes in the Ba Be National Park area of the late 1980s and 1990s go completely against the protection and conservation idea, introduced in Ba Be as early as 1977 and more so in 1992, when the lake Ba Be and its surroundings were declared a protected area and later a National Park. To reverse this trend, natural resource management, control and policing have become more rigorous in the last few years in the Ba Be National Park area, often with adverse effects on the poorest households which depend on marginal production areas for their livelihoods. Unfortunately, a joint conservation project, although designed as an integrated conservation and development project, puts little effort in socio-economic assistance during the transition phase from one dominant policy agenda to the next. It rather considers socio-economic development as only important when biodiversity resources are directly at threat (PARC BA BE/NA HANG 1999). It places emphasis mostly on conservation priorities, such as protecting globally rare species and habitats. In this sense, the farming communities are also advised to plant endemic fruit and forest tree species in their upland fields, from which they cannot derive direct benefit or profit. A village headman reported that “local people prefer to produce what suits the marketability within the locality. [...] As long as the market structures are so weak people don’t want to grow other products in upland fields as alternatives to maize and dry rice. When they grow rice and maize they can at

14 According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Fishery, Vietnam today has 128 Special-use forests, 28 National Parks, 62 Conservation Areas, 38 Landscape Protected Areas, and 15 (proposed) Marine Protected Areas (Source: IUCN Vietnam [http://www.iucn.org/places/vietnam/our\\_work/ecosystems/protected\\_areas.htm](http://www.iucn.org/places/vietnam/our_work/ecosystems/protected_areas.htm); access date: 5.4.2007).

least eat that”<sup>15</sup>. Locally relevant aspects of biodiversity, such as for example the diversified agricultural production systems of the Tay, Dao and H’mong people, find little attention in the project design and implementation.

Instead, the establishment of an infrastructure for eco- and ethno-tourism is pursued as an important socio-economic strategy. Experiments with the production of cultural artefacts, such as weaving products and naturally dyed cloth and blankets are ongoing. However, my investigation shows that with this socio-economic strategy the beneficiary group is among the 20% of the best-off households only that have sufficient means and contacts to make investments and to start a tourism business. Thus, both the representation of mountains as biodiversity hotspots as well as of new tourism destinations for an ever growing community of travellers seeking new recreational ground tend to exclude those who depend most on the mountain resources for their livelihoods. Without adequate means to bridge the gap between different interests, policy agendas and rationales for intervention in mountain areas the marginalisation of mountain communities of Ba Be continues to increase.

The case of Ba Be district makes clear that policy contexts of mountain development in northern Vietnam are quite complex. Overall, a number of strategies, programmes and individual decrees, some of which are mentioned in Table 1, have been emerging since the beginning of Vietnam’s transition period in the 1980s. Although they emerged in a particular national context that opened up rather slowly and in a step-wise approach towards international economic influence and environmental regimes, the Vietnamese policies and programmes reflect the dominant mountain representations.

15 Interview with village headman, 11.12.2000.

*Table 1: Vietnamese policy programmes reflecting international mountain representations and their application in Ba Be district.*

<i>Mountain Representation</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Programmes and Plans</i>	<i>Effective in Ba Be</i>
Resource Potential	Agricultural intensification	“Decollectivisation” (Decree No. 100 (1981))	✓
	Forest protection and reforestation (timber, forest products, ecological services)	Forestland Allocation (Decrees No. 02 (1994) and No. 163 (1999))	✓
	Hydropower Development	National Hydropower Plan <sup>16</sup>	✗
Hotspots of Biodiversity	Biodiversity Conservation	Biodiversity Action Plan (1995)	✓
Cultural Diversity	Ethno-/Eco-tourism	Tourism Master Plan (2001–2010) <sup>17</sup>	✓
Persistent Poverty	Infrastructure Development and Poverty Alleviation	Programme 175 and CPRGS (2001–2010) <sup>18</sup>	✓

The current policy context in Vietnam’s mountain areas bears the risk of overlap of representations and policy programmes as well as claims on the mountain areas by lowland industries, tourists, and, of course, mountain people. A stronger involvement in the mountain development discourse, especially by considering its “political turn”, could help coordinating interests in mountain resources better and to create mechanisms that benefit also the resource-dependent mountain peoples.

16 A National Hydropower Plan is being developed as part of the Power Development Plan (2001–2010). A recent overview shows that existing and planned hydropower plants are located in the northern mountain area and the Central Highlands of Vietnam (NGUYEN Anh Tuan 2003). Large-scale hydropower plants are not an issue in Ba Be district. However, in the adjacent Na Hang nature reserve a dam is currently under construction, threatening habitats of high biodiversity value.

17 The Tourism Master Plan is part of the Socio-economic Development Strategy (2001–2010) of Vietnam.

18 CPRGS stands for Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy.

## 5 Room for more inclusive policy frameworks in Vietnam’s mountains?

This last section reflects briefly on the possibilities for more inclusive policy frameworks. It herewith refers back to the initial concern of the discursive and effective power to influence policy processes (ESCOBAR 1996; CASTREE and BRAUN 1998; DEMERITT 1998) and touches on the question whose “reality” of mountain development has the power to programmatically influence wider political, economic, and social frameworks.

The case of Ba Be district so far shows that the implemented policy frameworks emerged in the general national policy developments of the reform era without particular mountain-specific motivation. Only recently, the mountain communities have received a certain degree of decision-making power regarding specific policy realms, such as aspects of natural resource management and local development, with the so-called Grassroots Democracy Decree No. 29 (GOVERNMENT OF THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM 1998).<sup>19</sup> These recent political developments have allowed us to discuss at length with the local political leaders in the communes of Ba Be district on mountain development issues and the improvements of livelihoods and civil rights of ethnic minority peoples. Our findings do not support the idea that the mountain people themselves would automatically formulate policies with mountain-specific foci. This has two main reasons.

First, among the political leaders at the commune level there is a tendency to negate the distinctiveness of mountain areas (see also section three), such as ecological fragility, marginality, specific niche, and cultural heterogeneity and difference. With respect to the last point, some of the local political leaders of the two studied communes emphasise that “ethnic people only differ in terms of language, customs and habits. They are all Vietnamese citizens, meaning that they have to carry out the responsibility of constructing and protecting Vietnamese socialism”<sup>20</sup>. By referring to the equal rights and obligations of citizens in Vietnamese socialism, most of the international mountain development dis-

19 It is not the place here to delve deeper into the political organisation and culture of Vietnam, although this may provide another interesting referential background for a mountain policy analysis. In another article, I discuss the concept of grassroots democracy and its implications for mountain communes (ZINGERLI 2004).

20 Interview with a Chairman of the Commune People’s Council, 3.3.2001; phrased similarly in an interview with a village leader, 22.3.2001.

course about specificities and the call for specific, locally embedded policy and development frameworks seems meaningless. In such an environment concerted action for a specific mountain development is difficult as mountain peoples do not automatically express their “own” voice.

A second reason that speaks against the formulation of specific mountain policies lies in the manifold practices of policy implementation in Vietnam’s mountain areas today. Here, one could argue that this is precisely an expression of a great awareness of difference. One of the chairmen of the People’s Committee of the communes points out that “in village and commune meetings the local political leaders have to find solutions which fit with the local customs and habits. Law in Vietnam is made, where possible, in accordance with customs and habits respecting the social morality in the locality”<sup>21</sup>. Local customs and habits are well respected in conflict resolution strategies by the Groups of Reconciliation in the communes. However, this is only one side of the medal. Conflicts emerging from a mismatch between, for example, national environmental protection policy, livelihood needs, and traditional access rights to resources are rarely resolved on the basis of diverse customs and habits. The national policy then outweighs all other mechanisms of natural resource management. Sanctions are nonetheless rare because those who disregard national policy for immediate livelihood needs are often sheltered by the commune leaders. Although the current policy frameworks are not specifically made for diverse ethnical and ecological contexts, their implementation is eventually adapted to them.

Overall, the current situation described for Ba Be district does not support concerted action for formulating policies in the interest of mountain people. Politically, they are represented by cadres who officially deny difference but allow heterogeneous policy implementation. Socio-economically, the individual aspirations of improving livelihood conditions are currently too important to defer for the benefit of the communities. Apart from the common concern for livelihood security, it was therefore very difficult to find alternative representations and perceptions of life in mountain areas among my informants that could inform policy to become more applicable and meaningful for the local context. The study shows that the immediacy of basic livelihood interests and dependence on mountain resources stands at odds with some of the representations of mountains outlined in the international context, such as hotspots of biodiversity or water towers of the world. However, in the described context, strengthening the mountain voices, as suggested by the political turn of the

21 Interview with a Chairman of Commune People’s Committee, 10.5.2001.

mountain development debate, is still a rather difficult and ambiguous project in the case of Vietnam.

## 6 Conclusions

In this paper, I discussed the topic of mountain development as it is being debated in the international policy arena and contrasted it with development processes in a Vietnamese mountain district. I showed that there are at least three dominant representations of mountains that all tend to essentialise mountains for their seemingly inherent development and environmental problems, their economic potential, and their biodiversity wealth. These representations are not linked with wider political economic contexts and usually lack self-reflexivity that would elucidate their evolution and narrative power. They represent understandings mostly shared by lowlanders and do not include alternative views on mountains and mountain development from within the mountain areas. In the case of Ba Be district, most of these representations appear in recent policy frameworks as well as economic and political interventions in mountain areas. Whereas until the 1990s the modernisation paradigm was dominant, it is now the idea of environmental managerialism that guides numerous interventions for conservation, resource rehabilitation and ecological sustainability in Vietnam's and other mountain areas. A guiding rationale behind all of them may be that the seemingly inherent problems of mountain areas at local, national and global scale can be encountered by good social engineering and management.

However, experience shows that many of these interventions have not spurred the rehabilitation of the environmental resources and that the betterment of the well-being of mountain communities that depend on mountain resources for their subsistence agriculture shows only modest results (JAMIESON, LE Trong Cuc, and RAMBO 1998). Despite the fact that many of them still face severe livelihoods insecurity, the new policy imperatives, such as biodiversity conservation, on the contrary, ascribe new roles to them in the attempt to protect “global public goods” of internationally significant species and habitats (VERMEULEN 2004). None of these representations thus include the views of those who live from mountain resources.

Although there seems to be a political turn in the international mountain development agenda, there is still a long way from claiming more voice for mountain peoples to giving them more voice in those arenas where decisions

about their livelihoods are being made. Advocacy work for more inclusiveness and equity is continuing, though, by a growing network of mountain scholars, development institutes, NGOs, and national governments. Projects such as the Oral Testimony Programme have a global outreach. However, these strands of the mountain debate find relatively little attention in the Southeast Asian region. None of the mountainous Southeast Asian countries has signed the International Mountain Partnership or takes initiative for sub-partnerships for sustainable and equitable development in mountain areas. It may be for political reasons that concepts such as the International Partnership for Sustainable Mountain Development with its strong drive towards more inclusiveness, equity and social justice are not put on the political agenda. It may increase the pressure to fulfil international obligations in the social sector, which tends to be politically even more sensitive than to respond to the imperatives of global environmental regimes, considerably linked with the production of capital and economic development. Although there is no guarantee that with the ratification of such a Partnership concept things would improve for the uplands and uplanders of Southeast Asia and Vietnam in particular, it could create at least a space for debate and discussion, not only of the current premises that underlie policy interventions but also for alternative views of mountain development in times of rapid economic and political change. It remains a task for researchers and advocacy groups to examine the endogenous views of mountain development and to bring them to the fore of current debates in mountain studies as well as in the international and national development and environment policy arenas.

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