

Changing the rules of the game: Forest management in the mountain district of Ba Be, Vietnam

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During the second half of the 20th century, Vietnam's forest cover diminished from 43% in 1943 to 29% in 1997. According to the official land use plans, land designated as forest area is, however, more than 17.6 million hectares or 54% of the country. The government's aim is to increase the forest cover by five million hectares to 14 million hectares until the year 2010. Forest policy in Vietnam is legally established through government decisions and decrees for forestland allocation or programmes such as the Five Million Hectares Afforestation Programme. Land tenure reforms and forest development programmes represent the government's and international donor agencies' latest attempts to come to terms with progressing deforestation in Vietnam's mountain areas. They are currently being implemented throughout the country. Their policy processes are characterised by confusion, conflicts, and collision of interests as the new policies have thoroughly changed the rules of the game. The period when forestland in the mountain areas could be appropriated freely and was used for agricultural purposes has come to an end. Stricter rules and obligations are now enforced. Since the ratification of the two Decrees no. 02/1994 and 163/1999 on "Forest Land Allocation and Leases for Long Term and Permanent Use by Organisations, Households and Individuals Aiming to Develop Forestry Production" the forests have been classified in three types which determine the use and prospects of the respective forests. The classification types are as follows: 1) special-use forests, set aside from agricultural and forestry production for the protection of floral and faunal genetic resources; 2) protection forests, allocated to households and organisation with the obligation to protect the medium critical and less critical watershed forests; 3) production forests, allocated to households and organisations for reforestation and agroforestry production. These classification exercises were predominantly carried out at the central state level and cause controversies and conflicts when implemented in the mountain localities.

Ba Be district serves as an example for changing rules in forest management in a situation of livelihood struggle and social marginalisation in Vietnam's northern mountain regions. The district lies in the northern mountain province of Bac Kan and hosts Ba Be National Park, which is considered as one of the hotspots of biodiversity of Vietnam. The National Park represents an example of the tropical evergreen broadleaf forest on limestone mountain and is one of few shelters for some of the last populations of two highly endangered species of primates. The total area of its core and buffer zone is 23,000 ha. Prior to its establishment in 1992 it was declared a protected area in 1979, but the economic difficulties and food shortage during the late 1970s and 1980s outweighed any attempts to protecting the forests. Forestland was transformed into rice terraces or upland fields. Between 1983 and 1998, the forest cover was reduced from 84% to 65% of the total core zone area. This trend is now tried to be reversed, largely at the expense of livelihood security of local residents. With the new forest management guidelines forest policing in the National Park area has become more rigorous. The National Park management board obliges the local people to carry out protection services without compensating them adequately. Moreover, with the new forest classification system some of the local residents' fields and

bamboo plantations came to lie in zones classified as special-use forest, meant to be set aside for conservation, research and tourism purposes of which they hardly benefit. Numerous households have herewith lost their legitimate right and command over the forest area they have been cultivating with upland crops or fruit and forest trees for decades. The changing rules in forest management in Ba Be district has caused a situation of great uncertainty for a large share of the local population of the ethnic groups of Tay, Dao and H'mong. They are left in ambiguity whether they are allowed to benefit from the investment in the land in the future or not. This is problematic because some of them depend almost entirely on the forest for their livelihoods. As a consequence, they seek new cultivation areas in marginal places hidden from sight. Some of them get criminalised by the new rules of the game. Social marginalisation is progressing. In sum, the new policy regulations were not able to reduce the pressure on the remaining mountain forest. They have increased the struggle over resources in the mountain areas in the absence of limited assistance and alternatives to upland farming.

There is little scope for the mountain communities of Vietnam to express their interests and to be consulted as equal partners in the policy process. On the contrary, the current policy frameworks rather identify them as the villains solely responsible for forest degradation. Their struggle of livelihood security is identified as being confined to mountain areas alone. There is little attempt to taking into account the difficulties caused by ongoing political-economic changes and the historically tense relationships between policy-makers situated and the ethnically distinct mountain population. The problem of progressing deforestation in Vietnam's mountain areas is far from being solved. It reveals shortcomings of the policy frameworks, such as controversial problem definitions, inadequate consultation with the forest resource users, and insufficient compensation payments. The struggle in sustainable forest management in Vietnam reflects not only technical and bureaucratic flaws but results also from restricted political participation and under-representation of the interests of direct resource users struggling for their livelihood security in mountain areas.

This article is an extract from the author's doctoral thesis entitled "Vietnam's Mountain Problematique: Debating Development, Policy and Politics in Mountain Areas". Empirical data for the thesis was gathered between August 2000 and July 2001 in three mountain villages of Ba Be district. The study of mountain forest management was part of a broader research question concerning the relationship between people and the mountain environment in a period of rapid policy and economic change. The thesis explores the discursive plurality of mountain development problems and how they get translated into policy frameworks for sustainable mountain development.

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