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# Linking Poverty Reduction with Forest Conservation

## Case Studies from Vietnam

Jason Morris, Le Thi Phi, Andrew Ingles,  
John Raintree and Nguyen Van Duong



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# INTRODUCTION

This document is one of the outputs of the project on Poverty Reduction and Conservation: Linking Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystem Management. Funding for this project was provided by IUCN's 3IC Fund, with additional funding for the publication provided by IUCN's Regional Forest Programme in Asia

## IUCN's 3IC Fund

IUCN has established the 3IC Fund to provide a positive incentive system to help IUCN to adapt to a changing world and guide the course of future institutional programmatic work. The 3IC Fund is designed to:

catalyse	<i>Innovation</i>
promote	<i>Integration</i>
generate	<i>Information</i>
stimulate	<i>Communication</i>

Use of the Fund is based on an integrated approach across IUCN's programmes (including regional, global thematic and commission programmes) and clear outputs that are scientifically credible, that can be readily communicated to key audiences and have strong potential to attract further investment by donors and partners.

In addition to specific results, each project supported by the 3IC Fund is to contribute to:

- Strategy formulation – to identify strategic management options regarding the engagement of IUCN in addressing the given issue.
- Policy/position formulation – to inform the IUCN programme and the Union's constituency by proposing how IUCN could advocate the issue.
- Communication product(s) – to effectively contribute to sharing knowledge and learning on the key issues, in particular beyond the traditional constituency of IUCN.

## Poverty Reduction and Conservation: Linking Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystem Management project

The aim of this project is to strengthen IUCN's ability to incorporate poverty reduction and livelihood considerations into conservation actions.

In recent years there has been increasing discussion about the link between conservation, poverty reduction and human livelihoods, gaining momentum since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. IUCN has intensified its attempts to address questions of ethics, poverty and human livelihoods in its conservation efforts. These efforts have emerged partly out of concerns for the interests of the poor, partly out of recognition that conservation efforts will be more effective if carried out with the participation of rural people, and partly out of a pragmatic recognition that donor funding for conservation is increasingly dependent on demonstrated linkages with livelihoods and poverty reduction. The challenge is to show that poverty directed, pro-poor conservation contributes to poverty reduction in a number of ways, including improving governance, protecting and expanding the poor's asset base, ensuring a more equitable distribution of costs and benefits and safeguarding livelihoods against economic shocks and natural disasters. Therefore, the purpose of the project is to develop a strategy and approach for linking sustainable livelihoods and ecosystem management that is based on lessons learnt from activities being undertaken by IUCN and by linking more effectively with social development organisations.

## The Publication



This publication comprises of two parts:

- **PART 1: LINKING POVERTY REDUCTION WITH FOREST CONSERVATION:** a brief review of policies and programmes in Vietnam.
- **PART 2: CULTIVATING NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS FOR SECURE LIVELIHOODS:** a case study of the impacts of NTFP domestication and agro-forestry on poverty reduction and livelihood improvement in Vietnam.

Both studies were conducted as a learning exercise and the findings will be contributing to improving IUCN's approach to addressing livelihood issues.

A similar publication has been produced for Lao PDR comprising of:

- **PART 1: NATURAL WEALTH** a desk study about the opportunities and challenges to link poverty reduction with forest conservation in Lao PDR to help meet national development goals.
- **PART 2: BITTER BAMBOO AND SWEET LIVING** which describes the impacts of NTFP conservation activities on poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods.



# Linking Poverty Reduction with Forest Conservation: A Brief Review of Policies and Programmes in Vietnam

*Authors: Jason Morris and Andrew Ingles  
January 2003*



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Government of Vietnam (GoV) has placed poverty reduction and forest conservation among its top priorities, aiming to reduce national poverty to less than 10 per cent by 2005 and restore forest cover to 43 per cent by 2010. To achieve these goals, GoV has launched several major programmes and strategies, namely the national Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) programme; the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS); the National Forest Development Strategy (NFDS); and the Five Million Hectare Reforestation Programme (5MHRP). The new multi-sectoral approach driving the forestry sector recognises poverty reduction and upland development among the main goals of the 5MHRP and figures them prominently in the NFDS. The CPRGS has also recognised the importance of forest and environment conservation by identifying forest cover - along with clean air and water - as indicators of poverty. The MARD-IUCN Project for the Sustainable Use of Non-Timber Forest Products has helped to highlight the potential of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in developing practicable links between forestry conservation and poverty reduction.

Despite ambitious aims, actual integrated solutions are still difficult to find. Inclusion of poor and upland communities in the 5MHRP has mostly taken the form of tree-planting and forest protection contracts, which are costly to the State and bring limited revenue to the people. Such programmes can actually transform communities from forest users and managers in their own right to hired labourers of the forestry sector. And although forest cover may have increased in recent years, forest quality has decidedly reduced. Meanwhile, the CPRGS has recognised basic environmental indicators, but is still a long way from comprehensively integrating environmental concerns into national poverty reduction and economic growth strategies. The HEPR programmes make little, if any, reference to the environment. In both directions, it seems that the complex dynamics underpinning poverty and forest conservation are overlooked, perhaps overwhelmed by the drive to reach national and international targets.

This paper provides a brief review of the main policies and programmes in Vietnam relating to, first, poverty reduction and, second, forest conservation. Emphasis is given to NTFPs as a potential opportunity for addressing links between poverty reduction and forest conservation. The final section of the paper discusses how the current policy framework for poverty reduction and forest conservation potentially enable and impede each other.

## 2 POLICY FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Policies for poverty reduction

“Vietnam is considered by the international community to rank among the best-performing countries in terms of poverty reduction” (CPRGS, 2003). By national standards, poverty has decreased by two thirds since 1990. By international standards, it decreased by one half over the same period. Constantly high economic growth rates during the 1990s, averaging around 7.5 per cent annually, and a wide range of economic reforms and sectoral policies may partly, at least, explain the success (CPRGS, 2003). However, Vietnam remains a poor country. In year 2000, the per capita income was around 400 USD and about one third of the population lived in poverty.

In response to the challenge, GoV continues to develop a range of policies and programmes aimed at reducing poverty and improving the national standard of living. They include agriculture and forest land allocation, credit programmes for the poor, investments in infrastructure, sedentarisation and fixed cultivation programmes, reforestation schemes, education and health services, and agriculture and forestry extension services (L.Q. Trung, 2002). However, agriculture and forest land allocation still lag in remote and mountainous areas. Access to credit is still difficult for the poor because they lack collateral and have low risk tolerance. Improvements in infrastructure and services for health, education, extension, transportation, communication and production have been scattered unevenly throughout the country. To target the poor more effectively and better integrate these types of investments,

GoV launched two multi-sectoral national programmes for hunger eradication and poverty reduction in 1998 and, more recently, approved a broad-based national strategy for poverty reduction.

### *2.1.1 National hunger eradication and poverty reduction programmes*

In 1998, GoV initiated two national programmes for poverty reduction, namely Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR - Decision 133) and Poor Communes with Extreme Difficulties in Mountainous and Remote Areas (PCED - Decision 135). Together, they are commonly referred to as the national HEPR programmes. The Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) is the standing agency for Decision 133, while the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA) is the standing agency for Decision 135. The HEPR programmes promote a multi-sectoral approach, aiming at improvements in clean water, educational enrolment, productive capacity, cultural and social knowledge, infrastructure, transportation and communications, training of leaders and access to credit. GoV has specifically named relevant ministries and institutions to support the programmes, such as the Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, Education and Training, and Health.

Decision 133 was enacted for the period of 1998-2000 and has since been taken over by Decision 143 for the period of 2001-2005. The decision applies to extremely poor communes, mountainous areas, borderlands, islands, and remote and scattered communities, based on a national list of 1,715 poor communes. The components of the decision include extension services for income generation through agro-forestry and fisheries, capacity building for poverty reduction in poor communes and support to ethnic minority groups living in extreme conditions. The goal is to reduce the proportion of households living under the national poverty line to less than 10 per cent by 2005. The estimated budget for Decision 133 (Decision No.133/1998/QD-TTg) was 10 trillion VND (approx. 700 million USD) and 22.6 trillion VND (approximately 1.7 billion USD) for Decision 143 (VNA, November 4, 2001).

Decision 135 was enacted for the period of 1998-2005. It targets the 1,000 poorest communes in remote and mountainous areas, otherwise known as “communes in extreme difficulty” (CEDs). Its goal is to reduce the proportion of households living under the national poverty line in CEDs to 25 per cent by 2005. This compares to a current poverty rate of 91 per cent of households in CEDs in the Central Highlands and 73 per cent of households in CEDs in the Northern Region (according to the 1998 Vietnam Living Standards Survey).

Little information is available on the outcomes of the programmes. Anecdotal successes have been hailed in the media for increasing incomes and generating improvements in food security, health, road access, forest cover, and technologies for agriculture and animal husbandry (VNA, November 4, 2000; VNA, April 19, 2001; VNA, November 27, 2001). However, the media has also criticised the programmes for slow rates of capital disbursement, lack of general awareness about the programmes, overlap between projects, hiring of unqualified consultant companies and, ultimately, failing to meet the real needs of poor people (VNA, November 4, 2000; VNA, February 3, 2001, VNA, May 12, 2001).

### *2.1.2 Comprehensive Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy*

In April 2002, the Prime Minister approved the Comprehensive Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (CPRGS). The CPRGS is the Vietnamese Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) prepared for and supported by the World Bank. The CPRGS is a guiding document for economic growth and poverty reduction objectives in Vietnam and “translates the Government’s Ten-Year Socio-Economic Development Strategy, Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan, as well as other sectoral policies into specific and concrete measures with well-defined road maps for implementation” (CPRGS, 2003). A main objective of the CPRGS was to formulate a set of evaluation indicators in line with the Millennium Development Goals.

The CPRGS takes a broad-based approach to poverty reduction and has formulated specific indicators for:

- 1) poverty reduction;
- 2) provision of essential infrastructure to extremely disadvantaged groups;
- 3) job creation;
- 4) universalisation of education;
- 5) reduced birth, child mortality and child malnutrition rates;
- 6) reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, epidemics and other social disease;
- 7) development of culture and information and improvement of the spiritual life of the people;
- 8) improvement of living standards and cultural preservation and development for ethnic minority groups;
- 9) environment protection and sustainability;
- 10) reduction of vulnerability for the poor;
- 11) gender equity and women's empowerment; and
- 12) good governance for poverty reduction.

(CPRGS, Annex B, 2003)

The CPRGS's broad-based approach to poverty reduction reflects the many diverse factors underpinning poverty. However, the push to articulate these complex dynamics through simple, quantifiable and universal indicators risks over-simplifying the task. A case in point is the use of forest cover as an indicator. Although deforestation can have severe impacts on the poor communities who depend on them, simply increasing forest cover can be as likely to impoverish these communities as enrich them, especially if protecting forests means restricting access of the poor. At this level, the link between forest conservation and poverty reduction is uncertain and insecure.

## 2.2 Policies for forestry and forest conservation

The evolution of forestry related policies and programmes dates back to the 1950s when agricultural land and most forestland was nationalised and put under the management of cooperatives and State owned enterprises. Major reforms in agriculture and forestry began in the mid 1980s when GoV

initiated a process to move from a centrally planned to a market driven economy. In the early 1990s, a National Forestry Action Plan (NFAP) was developed. A large number of laws, decrees, decisions, regulations and circulars have since been issued to support the implementation of the NFAP. Currently, the three main categories of forest are: special use, protection, and production forests. These categories generally reflect the dominant management objectives for forest and biodiversity conservation, environmental protection and forestry production, respectively.

While forestland remains the property of the State, forests are being progressively allocated to economic units such as State Forest Enterprises (SFEs), cooperatives, households, and other private organisations and social groups. During the implementation of the land allocation programme, several additional policies, directives, and regulations<sup>1</sup> were circulated to address issues arising during implementation. Since 1996, a revised system for land allocation has been applied, allowing farmers to use allocated forestland for agroforestry purposes. Land allocation processes are advancing slowly and underpin the transformation of State forestry into social forestry. In addition, guidelines have been issued for restructuring SFEs<sup>2</sup> as commercial enterprises, public service organisations, or Special Forest management boards. Overall, the role of SFEs is to be diminished in the forest sector and private investment is to be encouraged.

Among these policies and programmes, the following are noteworthy:

### *2.2.1 Partial ban on timber harvesting from natural forests*

Enacted in 1992, this has been one of the most important changes in forestry policy. The ban is being implemented gradually to limit timber exploitation

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<sup>1</sup> Decree 02/CP on forestland allocation for forestry purposes, issued 1994; Decision 202/CP on contractual forest management and reforestation, issued 1994; Decree No 1/CP on contractual allocation of land to the SFEs for agriculture, forestry and aquaculture; Decision 245/TTG on state management of forests (with recognition of the role of communities).

<sup>2</sup> Decision 90/TTg issued in 1994

from natural forests. The current quota is about 300,000 m<sup>3</sup> per year. The ban has increased the importance of NTFPs as potential sources of revenue, especially for the local communities and SFEs who have been directly affected by it.

### *2.2.2 Programme 327 for greening the barren lands and denuded hills*

Programme 327 was a major reforestation initiative<sup>3</sup> taking place from 1992-1996. The programme aimed at establishing forests for environmental protection and improving the livelihoods of rural populations. The content and targets of the programme<sup>4</sup> were adjusted in 1996 so that reforestation activities were also directed to the protection and establishment of forests for watershed protection and the rehabilitation of special use forests. The main achievements of the programme were:

- forest protection contracts issued to cover 1.6 million hectares of forests, involving more than 466,000 households;
- natural regeneration achieved on 299,000 hectares of forests; and
- new plantations established on 397,000 hectares.

### *2.2.3 Five Million Hectare Reforestation Programme (5MHRP)*

Following on from the 327 programme, the 5MHRP was approved<sup>5</sup> in 1998 and remains the single most dominant programme of the forest sector. It envisages the establishment of five million hectares of forest by 2010, which would increase forest cover from 28 per cent to the 1945 level of 43 per cent of Vietnam's total land area. One significant change is the targeting of one million hectares for rehabilitation by natural regeneration. The five million hectares also includes the establishment of some 450,000 hectares of NTFP plantations for products such as cinnamon, star anise, pine resin, other essential oils, and bamboo.

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<sup>3</sup> Decision No 327, dated 15 September 1992

<sup>4</sup> Prime Ministerial Decision No 556/TTg, 1996

<sup>5</sup> National Assembly Resolution No 8/1997/QH10 and Decision 661/QD-TTg dated July 29, 1998

The 5MHRP has multiple aims relating to:

- conserving biodiversity and protecting soil and water resources;
- creating raw materials for forest-based industries and for satisfying domestic and export demands;
- contributing to sustainable development in mountainous regions, with special attention to ethnic minorities and upland communities practising shifting cultivation; and
- supporting national programmes on hunger eradication and poverty reduction.

The 5MHRP has high ambitions for income generation through forestry and NTFPs. But a common question directed at the 5MHRP is where does it intend to reforest its five million hectares? The “barren hills” of Vietnam are commonly promoted as the target areas for reforestation. The epithet suggests that these lands are unoccupied and useless, but they are often important fallow lands in crop rotation systems and common access shrublands for NTFPs, especially for poor communities. These NTFPs can provide vital supplies of fuel, construction materials, foodstuffs, medicines, fodder and supplementary income, especially in periods of food shortage or sudden illness.

#### *2.2.4 National Forestry Development Strategy*

In 2001, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) approved the National Forestry Development Strategy (NFDS), which is now under revision and will be submitted to GoV for approval. It identifies key orientations in sustainable forest resource management and forestry development for Vietnam during the period 2001-2010. These new directions reflect a shift from a resource exploitation-based forestry to a people-based forestry that focuses on:

- forest protection;
- rehabilitation and development;
- biodiversity conservation;
- protection of precious and rare forest fauna and flora;

- promotion of small and medium forest product processing;
- contribution to hunger eradication and poverty reduction;
- improved livelihood of people in mountainous areas;
- socialisation of forestry; and
- improved role of and contribution to the forestry sector in national socio-economic development.

The role of NTFPs in this process is specifically recognised in six key forestry development programmes of the FDS, namely the 5MHRP Sustainable Forest Management and Development Programme; Timber and Forest Product Processing Programme; Forest Resources Inventory; Assessment and Monitoring Programme; Forest Tree Seedling Programme; and Human Resources Development Programme.

The people-based focus of the FDS and its multi-sectoral approach offer much promise for integrating poverty and forest conservation, but it is still at an early stage of development and its practical successes have yet to be proven.

#### *2.2.5 Forest Sector Support Partnership*

Adopted by GoV in November 2001, the Forest Sector Support Partnership (FSSP) aims to better guide and manage support activities in the forest sector during the period 2001-2010. The FSSP is considered by the GoV and supporting international organisations as a tool of the NFDS, as well as to support GoV in implementation of the 5MHRP.

Government attention to NTFPs was also revealed in the national forestry research agenda that was recently revised and published in the proceedings of the “Forest Sector Support Partnership Workshop: Setting Research Priorities for Vietnam’s Five Million Hectare Reforestation Programme,” which was held in Dalat, 20 to 22 November 2001.

### 2.2.6 National system of protected areas

In 2002, Vietnam's system of protected areas consisted of 17 National Parks, 60 Nature Reserves and 18 Landscape Conservation Areas (ICEM, 2003). A special category for Species/Habitat Conservation Area has recently (Decision 08/2001) been introduced, but no sites have been established yet. The protected area system is 2,123,354 hectares, while MARD has proposed to increase the number of sites to 109 and expand total area to 2,629,188 hectares (ICEM, 2003).

**Protected areas in Vietnam approximate to IUCN's categorisation as follows:**

Special use forest category	Equivalent IUCN category
National Park	II
Nature Reserve	I
Species/Habitat Conservation Area	IV
Landscape Conservation Areas	III & IV

Source: ICEM, 2003

Notably, none of the Vietnamese categories correspond to IUCN Category V (Protected Landscapes/Seascapes) and Category VI (Managed Resource Use Area), which "allow for a substantial role for people and the sustainable use of resources . . . [and] would enable protected area managers to encourage a gradient of human intervention and use over the protected areas system as a whole" (ICEM, 2003).

As in most of mainland Southeast Asia, protected areas in Vietnam are threatened from a range of sources, including infrastructure development (e.g. roads, dams, reservoirs, tourism construction), agricultural encroachment, illegal trade of timber and wildlife, and unsustainable exploitation of NTFPs. While extra-local economic interests and environmentally unfriendly development policy arguably drive these threats, the livelihoods of

the poor are, in many instances, located on the front lines of the conservation-development conflicts. In Vietnam, 85 per cent of protected areas are located in areas of “medium” and “high” poverty (ICEM, 2003). Hence, a better understanding and integration of poverty issues with protected area conservation is essential in Vietnam.

### 2.2.7 *International treaties*

Vietnam has ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). It has also adopted a range of national conservation policies and objectives for the forest sector. However, there is insufficient knowledge about NTFPs to plan and implement comprehensive actions to fully achieve all of these obligations and objectives. Critical knowledge gaps include:

- the distribution, value, conservation status, threats and appropriate management regimes for important NTFP species<sup>6</sup>;
- the range of feasible technical opportunities and appropriate social arrangements for the protection, regeneration and sustainable development of NTFPs in different categories of forests;
- the role within different poverty reduction, conservation and reforestation programmes; and
- the actual conservation impact of government regulatory systems and development programmes related to NTFPs.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, some 3,800 species of medicinal plants have so far been identified by the Institute of Medicinal Materials, of which 114 species are classified as endangered. Less is known about other types of NTFPs in Vietnam.

## 3 LINKING POVERTY REDUCTION WITH FOREST CONSERVATION

GoV's recognition of important links between poverty reduction and forest conservation is reflected in national strategies and programmes. The NFDS and 5MHRP have attempted to address these issues by promoting poverty reduction and upland development through forestry-based income schemes, notably in tree-planting and protection contracts for the 5MHRP. The CPRGS and national HEPR programmes give only a superficial treatment of environmental conservation issues, if at all. However, the links are complex. Continuing challenges in Vietnam are ensuring quality of natural forests (especially biodiversity of species and eco-systems) and addressing issues of access to forests and forest products for the poor.

Forest plantation programmes risk restricting and disenfranchising poor and marginalised communities from forests and turning them into hired laborers of the forestry sector. Policies for protected areas (i.e. special use forests) generally prohibit local communities from accessing forests and extracting forest products, regardless of levels of impact and long-standing use or claims over those lands. Reforestation programmes can have the same impact when they occupy important areas for agriculture, fallows and NTFP collection. In some cases, this can create conflict between the newly recognised forest owner or manager (as in a forest protection contract) and a wider community of not uncommonly poor families that depend on common access to those lands for basic livelihoods.

Despite NTFPs being hailed as a promising link between forests and the poor, international experience has shown how commercialisation without attention to issues of equity and local empowerment can lead to increased indebtedness and exploitation of collectors as well as disentanglement of poor from land and forest resources (Neumann & Hirsch, 2000). Disenfranchisement of poor women from NTFP markets is a special concern, especially as

labour returns increase, technologies become more sophisticated and processing facilities are more centralised (Neumann & Hirsch, 2000). National experiences in the MARD-IUCN NTFP Project showed how NTFP domestication activities favoured wealthier households with land, labour and capital, while also creating risk for poor households, women and children who depended on common access to shrublands and naturally regenerating forests for NTFP collection (Morris, B.T. An, N.T. Nghia & V.D. Quang, 2002).

Poverty reduction in Vietnam is closely linked with - and not always adequately distinguished from - the national struggle to modernise and industrialise. Much attention to large-scale infrastructure, notably roads, hydro-electric dams and irrigation systems, has usually been without adequate attention to impacts on the environment and the local communities that directly depend on those environments. The CPRGS has recognised the importance of environment to the poor, but exactly how these concerns will translate into poverty reduction is still vague and uncertain. Attention to environmental concerns in the cross-sectoral work of poverty reduction is nearly absent in the CPRGS and the national HEPR programmes. Employing “forest cover” alone as an indicator is not only insufficient for reducing poverty, but inadequately addresses forest biodiversity and other qualities. Additionally, there is a need to understand more specifically how different levels of economic attainment link with different types of forest use, dependence and quality. Much research and piloting on these issues is still required to provide the basis for effective policy making.

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