



Insight: Notes from the Field

Issue 1.2006



Foreword

Why “Insight: Notes from the Field”?

Field level practitioners play a key role in shaping the outcomes of community based natural resource management. With a direct connection to the people who manage and depend on natural resources, field practitioners form a crucial link between local communities and other levels of society by providing support to local actors and at the same time relaying information on their community realities.

Most journals and newsletters that served in the 1980s and 1990s as forums for people involved in Community Forestry (CF) or Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) to share their field experiences, such as Forests, Trees and People Newsletter, Rural Development Forestry Network Series, etc., are no longer available. RECOFTC recently commissioned a review to assess knowledge and information needs to support CF/CBNRM in the Asia region. Through this review, as well as the opinions of practitioners we meet across the region, we have found that many field level practitioners feel they have insufficient opportunities to share knowledge and experiences with other practitioners.

Insight: Notes from the Field is a response to this need, and with this publication, we aim to give practitioners a forum to share field level cases and lessons in CF and CBNRM.

In this first issue, we see four inspirational stories from India, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam. We would appreciate your feedback on the idea of continuing the publication of *Insight*, so please feel free to share with us your reactions to this first issue!

Dr. Yam Malla
Executive Director
RECOFTC

Insight: Notes from the Field



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Please send your comments and suggestions!

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Insight: Notes from the Field, Issue 1.2006
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ISSN 1905-6737

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Finding Ways for Community Forestry in Thailand

An interview with the
Thailand Collaborative
Country Support
Programme and
communities they
work in

*By Kenneth Burslem and
Mikaela Rosander*



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Summary

Anyone curious about the practical workings of community forestry should drive four hours north of Bangkok and seek out two small village communities – **Khao Rao Thien Thong** and **Huay Hin Dam**. They are living lessons in how, despite formidable political, legal and social hurdles, rural dwellers can survive while still utilizing and caring for the forest and its natural resources.

The villagers have seen their forest environment heavily logged, their wildlife killed off and large areas of their remaining forestland declared protected areas. Today they're proud of the way in which they've restored the forest following this disruption and devastation, achieving a fulfilling way of life, based on forest support and the appropriate use of forest resources. But they're still under pressure from the continuing need to sustain the all-important forestlands and to protect their right to live there.

This paper presents some of the lessons learned from working with Community Forestry (CF) in Thailand, using interviews with farmers and RECOFTC's Thai Country Programme staff in some of the communities they have worked in.

First some local background.....

In Thailand, tens of millions of villagers who live in or depend on the nation's forestsⁱ, continue to wait for the government to recognize the system under which they survive. Many are among the country's poorest residents. For fifteen years their farming activities have been without legal legitimacy because a *Community Forestry Bill* that would have defined the practice lies in limbo, awaiting Thai parliament's approval. The legislation would recognize "community forests" and allow local dwellers a say in the use of the forest areas, established and managed in cooperation with the Royal Forest Department.

Currently, community forestry is practiced in small or scattered reserves where agreements with the department allow harvesting of forest products under community forestry management, but they represent a mere 1.4 percent of Thailand's forest estate.

A further 15,000 community groups informally manage forest lands in protected areas as they await the Forestry Bill.¹ They endure because both formal and informal community forestry activities are often recognised by governments under other legislation, such as the Decentralization Act.

In 2003, the Bangkok-based international organization, the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (**RECOFTC**) decided to support community forestry in eight sites in Thailand. It set up the **Thailand Collaborative Country Support Programme (ThCCSP)** with the help of Danish funding (DANIDA). The programme was built on the conviction that survival of both Thailand's forests, and the people who depend on them, relied on villagers being given the right to manage their own environment, while retaining some support from increasingly decentralized authorities.

ThCCSP

The Thailand Collaborative Country Support Programme (ThCCSP) is a six year project (2003-2008) with the overall objective to improve the livelihoods of local people in Thailand through greater access to and control over the forest resources on which they depend. ThCCSP does this by:

- a) strengthening collaborative support;*
- b) building capacities and attitudes for support of CF;*
- c) improving the understanding and collaboration for sustainable forest management; and d) scaling-up CF and natural resource management through sharing of experiences and lessons learned.²*

ⁱ Estimated by 20 percent of total Thai rural villagers (60-70 percent of Thai population) who live in forests in or near forests and depend on forests.



Ms Somying Soontornwong is the current manager of ThCCSP. In an interview for this article, she describes the complexities surrounding an apparently simple philosophy – and how her programme is trying to develop and change attitudes and beliefs of villagers, government officers and policy makers. She took us to two of her programme's project sites, Khao Rao Thien Thong and Huay Hin Dam, to hear from the village people for whom forest management means more than just livelihood. Here's a record of our conversation with Somying, with appropriate support from the people she and her RECOFTC colleagues are working to help.



Somying Soontornwong (to the right) in a network meeting in Kao Rao Thien Thong

Khun Somying, how difficult is it to practice community forestry in Thailand under current legislation?

Somying: Since the late 1980's Thailand has actively explored the Community Forest (CF) paradigm and, although a CF Bill has been proposed and deliberated for 15 years, it has not yet been passed by Parliament. With the bill, we would have legal status for the CF organizations and people (users) who depend on and live in the forest. However we still do not have a bill, and we will not just sit around and wait for it. We'll still work with CF organizations and networks to develop and manage our natural resources, including forest, land and water, for better livelihood. We believe community forestry has to continue and be sustained as it's a people's right to access, manage and utilize natural resources.

So just what practical difference would the ratifying of this Bill make to the people of Thailand?

Somying: *The Community Forest Bill* would represent Thailand's first legislative recognition of the customary rights of local communities to use, manage and protect their forests. In practice, it would allow local community participation in decisions concerning the use and management of the forest areas through the legal recognition of "community forests" to be established by rural communities and managed in cooperation with the Royal Forestry Department, Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants, Department of Local Administration, NGOs, partners and civil society groups.

Note from the Field:

By visiting the two RECOFTC project communities, we began to comprehend how complex this land use situation is and why it has led to such an air of insecurity among those who depend on the forest for their livelihoods.

At Huay Hin Dam, the community has practised for decades an agricultural system that's nature-based, culture-based and traditional cut and burn or circulated plantation. Crops are rice and vegetables for household use or for sale. Parts of the community area fall within a national conserved forest, declared in 1998. The government has already moved some small farmers out from the national park, leaving people both inside and outside the park in a state of legal uncertainty.

Somying pointed out three village men in a group at Huay Hin Dam with whom she was sitting: "This man has no land title – his allotment is within the national park; this second man – even though he's the village headman – also has no title to his farmland; and this third man is a legitimate landowner – he has a government certificate to prove it." One of the men explained to us: "The main issues for us are: 1. villagers need land to farm on; and 2. for those who have land, official certification of their occupancy (from the Land Reform Office) is essential." One option, they said, would be to give land outside the national park for those landless who are either working on plots in the park or who have been forced from the park. The village headman summed up their feelings: "We believe it's our nature-given right to work this land. We need recognition, not just a land title. And we need security."





A farmer in Huay Hin Dam on his recently cleared land.

It's now over a year since the latest parliamentary action regarding forest users. What was the result?

Somying: The latest draft in September 2005 ruled out human activities in “special forest zones”, but community forestry proponents plan to be involved in drafting a “special forest zone” definition to ensure that communities living in these areas will not be adversely affected by the decisions.

Khun Somying, what's the general feeling in the community towards community forestry? Is there confusion about who should care for our forests?

Somying: The role of civil society is an important factor in the community forestry movement and the development process of the Bill. The various stakeholders – the Royal Forest Department, local communities, non-governmental organizations and academics – cannot agree on who would be the best caretakers of forest resources. This difference in opinion has caused much conflict, thus making it difficult to advance participatory and collaborative management of natural resources. At the same time, increasing environmental concerns, recreational demands and tourism have become a major focus of current forest sector policies. Unfortunately, governmental approaches to environmental protection sometimes seem to be incompatible with rural communities' interests in sustainable livelihood strategies. Nevertheless, project experience has shown that local communities

and forest user groups have important roles as caretakers of their forest and the natural resources they rely on.

However, the government sector has shown greater acceptance in having local communities and NGOs take an increased role in the management of their own forests and natural resources. And some communities have actively developed a concrete approach in managing natural resources in their own areas despite the absence of law.

Note from the Field:

In the second project community - Khao Rao Thien Thong – we found villagers with more secure rights to land.

A woman who is the chair of the local forest network told us: “There are some community forestry areas here within a forest reserve, but people there actually have land titles. We don’t have a problem with land tenure issues. There are still some people who are landless, but they are in the process of getting land. The TAOⁱⁱ will buy land for landless community families to rent.”

The day we visited Kao Rao Tiengthong, representatives from surrounding hillside communities had gathered for a network meeting to plan a joint conference on lessons learned, called “Community Forest Network Strengthening for Sustainable Khao Rao Thien Thong Community.” The Kao Pao Thien Thong network started in 1998, when three communities decided to collaborate to better protect the surrounding forests from being degraded by extensive tree cutting for farming and charcoal, or being destroyed by wildfire. Since then the network has grown and now consists of 14 communities, all committed to restore their surrounding forests. The network has been successful in including various stakeholders from the communities, such as teachers, youth, and farmers.

Despite this success, we are told that some leaders are still reluctant to let their community members participate in CF activities. “Some leaders are not interested in participating and actually forbid their members to join,” the chair says. “How do we work with this? We go to the level above and inform some district government officials who in turn work to influence the reluctant leaders.”




ⁱⁱ Tambon Administration Organization

You mentioned “civil society” and its role in the CF movement and the Forest Bill. Just who do you mean?

Somying: We call them the “dark green groups” – people and organizations that have a strong conservation approach and think people should stay out of forests altogether. The dark greens have the perception that “most villagers are deforesters and cannot live in forest sensitive areas.”

Note from the Field

At Khao Rao Thien Thong we asked the committee chairperson about harvesting timber. He replied: “We are not allowed to cut timber according to the law. People need to buy wood for housing from the market. And you can’t find big trees here. If a villager wants to cut bamboo for his housing, he needs the committee’s permission. One time some outsiders came and took some small trees from our forest for charcoal. We reported them to the police.”



So tell us more about the ThCCSP and its approach to community forestry in Thailand.

Somying: We take the lead in CF management planning by focusing on involvement at the community level, using the management plan as a guideline for the implementation of forest management and discussion with supporters, and their partners, both government sectors and NGOs. This participatory processing provides an opportunity for communities to become involved in community based natural resource management (CBNRM).

Participatory Monitoring and Assessment (PM&A) is often an important part of our support to the communities. PM&A is simply an investigation of natural resources together with villagers, and looks at the status of the forest, soil, water, biodiversity in the area, etc. It is often conducted both before and after a project, so it gives good evaluation indicators and can be used for their future work plans.

We believe in human capacity, thus we strengthen community and young leaders through capacity building and training. Moreover, we also try to strengthen CF networks and local facilitators to spread CF concepts and CBNRM in their neighborhood communities, and we promote both decentralization and collaborative management in community based natural resource management.

Note from the Field

Villagers from both communities stressed the importance to be involved in PM&A. "It (the PM&A) is quite useful because it gives us means to explain the livelihood in an academic way. We can show that we can take care of and manage the forest. And it is good for a common understanding," says the community head in Huay Hin Dam.

In Khao Rao Thieng Thong, the chair tells us: "We now have a greater technical knowledge," he said. "Before, we knew that we needed to take care of the forest, but we didn't understand what that meant. Now we know more about trees and improvements of the forest, and we keep records of it. This gives feedback to the villagers and to interested outsiders, such as government officers."



Can you tell us more about collaboration with other partners?

Somying: We realized that we could not work alone, that we needed to collaborate and work together with others. When we select a community to work in, one criterion is to have some local partners, like NGOs, that we can collaborate with and that are close to the community. Sometimes it's difficult to work directly with the communities, especially in remote areas.

On an individual level, can it be difficult working with these villagers?

Somying: It can be hard to get participation from disadvantaged people such as women and the poorest. If we look at the very poor villagers for example, because they are poor they need to work harder, so they don't have much time for community activities. Discussions with small groups and user groups are always necessary.

Note from the Field:

At Huay Hin Dam community, the Karen traditional respect for the close ties between humans and natural resources makes forest management a little easier. Religious ceremonies emphasize these feelings of harmony with nature. On a practical level, a community forest committee works to involve women and landless people. The headman told us, "Sometimes there are no volunteers, so we try to explain the importance of this work to women and the landless, and other target groups, to get them involved. We also explain the links between forest and livelihood and how it is important."





A young Karen girl in Huay Hin Dam, wearing a traditional white dress, which is worn until she reaches the age of 15. Then she can dress in full colours.

Khun Somying, how do you first approach communities and encourage their participation in community forestry?


Somying: We never approach the villagers with promises of money or – like officers – forcing them for results, but more like friends, in search of knowledge and collaboration. One of our criteria we have when we select a community is that there are local stakeholders, such as community leaders, teachers and NGOs, that we can work with.

Then how do village people react when you propose community forestry? Do they know what you mean?

Somying: We don't propose any theory they might not understand. First we discuss what they do in their forest and then we link those practices to our ideas of community forestry. In fact, many communities are already familiar with common practice and common property; it's often part of their traditional activities.

Note from the Field:

At Khao Rao Thien Thong a middle aged teacher told us, "When I was young, I grew up with a rich forest, water and natural resources. But because of industrial development in Thailand, the resources declined through practices like mono-cropping; people got sick and the soil became poorer. I realized that humans and resources - like soil, water and forest - need to be in harmony together." So he helped set up a community centre where children could learn about trees and organic farming. "I call this 'calling back'," he said, "I want to create this area to be like a forest when I was young."



It's clear then that though there's a lack of legal support for CF in Thailand, you still seem to have managed to get the support of local government. How have you built that relationship?

Somying: We try to have dialogue with local governments and also to build their capacity through workshops, training sessions, seminars and regular visiting. It's important to keep this regular contact, to keep showing our support.

What have been the main challenges and strengths in the direct work with the communities?

Somying: First, our strengths, and most come from training. Villagers now know how to use their potential and capacity in management, and people have learned to participate in the process of CFM and to improve their livelihoods. They have the skills to become involved in decision making as their knowledge and experience in CBNRM grows. They now understand how to sustain resource management and to utilize their natural human and financial resources. Villagers are learning from the wisdom and experience of others, making it easier to develop their continued capacity.

That does not mean there are still not a lot of challenges, like the time it takes to get a project self-supporting. We are also faced with the challenge of finding sufficient open space for poor people to become involved in CBNRM. Another challenge is to develop methods, approaches and tools appropriate to different communities. We need to involve more stakeholders in the participatory process.

What are the main areas on which ThCCSP will continue to focus?

Somying: It's a long list, beginning with forestry management planning, with a participatory approach. Then there's participatory monitoring and assessment, and decentralization support for community based natural resource management. We will conduct training sessions and a learning centre for partners, stakeholders and communities in CF and CBNRM. Similarly, we will continue to strengthen CF organizations and CF networks through experience sharing and workshops, seminars, round table discussions and so on.

And the challenges?

Somying: Attitudes among government officials and policy makers and the economic development policy of the government. Government officers have the attitude that the forest belongs to the government. In Thailand there is also a strong economic focus, which pushes for plantations, cultivation of mono-crops, instead of supporting the poor. This focus in turn gives a low interest of CF among students – but we are working in a round table discussion with government officials in some units of the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants, and the Royal Forestry Department, to try to involve more young people in training. They're the future.

RECOFTC's Thailand Programme – headed by Somying - is now midway into its second phase and is demonstrating a growing role in influencing formal recognition of community based forestry in Thailand. They are in the process of gradually



withdrawing from the eight communities they started their work in, and are now helping these communities set up alternative funding that could support these people in their important work for the long term. And for Somying and her staff, the struggle for community forestry in Thailand will continue, as they work to support other communities and improve the understanding of the links between sustainable forest management and people.

Note from the Field

In Khao Rao Thien Thong, we had the chance to speak to the youth group, who are closely participating in the local forest network. One of the boys explained to us his commitment to the network, "I wanted to do something useful, so I became a member of the network, and we started this youth group. We are ten in the group now, four girls and six boys. We help the adult group, for example with fire prevention and forest protection. And we try to share our knowledge about the forest to other young people in our communities. We have organized a youth forum and we also train children when the schools have camps. It is important to educate the next generation. And we want to be role models for other youth."



References

¹ RECOFTC Annual Report 2004-2005.

² Thailand Collaborative Country Program Support - Annual Report 2005



Village Forest Councils:

Emerging rural institutions in Tamilnadu state of India

By K.K. Kaushal



Village Forest Councils:

Emerging rural institutions
in Tamilnadu state of India

By K.K. Kaushal

Summary

Tamilnadu, a southern state of India, has embarked upon a community involvement process to restock its forests through an Indian version of community forestry called Joint Forest Management. People's participation is structured through specially established local representative institutions called Village Forest Councils (VFCs). This article seeks to present a full account of the concept, working and effectiveness of the VFCs in Tamilnadu. Based on the author's field experience as District Forest Officer working with the JFM program, it further suggests that VFCs are evolving into important local institutions for empowerment, poverty alleviation and social development of forest communities.

Introduction

Of the 63.72 million hectares actual forest coverⁱ in India, of which almost all is state owned and controlled, over 40 percent is degraded, with a canopy density of less than 0.4. This degradation of forests is mainly ascribed to the rigid state control and the resulting disempowerment and displacement of indigenous tribal and hill communities accompanied by the disintegration of community based resource management.¹ Consequently, the

ⁱ Actual Forest Cover: All lands with a tree canopy density (Indicates the extent to which sunlight is prevented from falling on the ground by the tree crowns. Canopy density of 40 per cent and above is taken as dense forest whereas 10-39 percent is taken as degraded.) of more than 10 percent though they may not be statutorily notified as forest land.

government of India made a major policy shift in 1988 and switched over to Joint Forest Management (JFM) in some forest areas.

JFM is an evolving community forestry programme, which sets out to establish management 'partnerships' between local forest-dependent communities and the state forest department for the sustainable management and joint benefit sharing of public forest land.² To accomplish this, JFM seeks to shift the existing inequitable distribution of management control by directly involving local people and institutions in forest management.³ JFM does not involve the transfer of ownership over forests, but attempts instead to restructure the formal system of access, decision-making, and sharing of benefits to account for the needs of local communities. So far, 22 state governments have issued orders for implementation of JFM and the states have evolved their own mechanisms of involving local communities in conformity with the proclaimed policy. About 36,130 Village Forest Councils are managing a total of 10.25 million hectares of forest area in the country.⁴

a) Tamilnadu State

Tamilnadu, a southern state of India, has a geographic area of 13 million ha which constitutes 3.96 per cent of the nation's land area. The total population of the state is 55.86 million (1991 census), accounting for 6.60 per cent of the country's population. The recorded forest areaⁱⁱ is 2.26 million hectares, which makes 17.40 per cent of the land area of the state. But the *actual forest cover*, as assessed through remote sensing, is only 1.71 million hectares - a mere 13.13 per cent of the land area. In addition, half of this actual forest cover has a crown density of less than 0.40.⁵

There are 15,822 villages in the state, of which 1,405 are forest abutting. The total population of these forest villages is estimated to be 3.11 million, a large percentage of whom constitute the most disadvantaged section of society (based on per capita income, literacy rate, nutritional and health status, and lack of access to social and technical services). Because of its remoteness, modern development and amenities have not yet reached the state's relatively small and scattered population in the forest areas. Nor do these people have political clout, as most are tribal people or scheduled castes. Rigid state control and indiscriminate removal of bamboo and other trees by industries in the past degraded the forests, aggravated poverty of forest communities and jeopardized the ecological and hydrological balance of the area.

b) Background to local governance in India

India is a federal republic divided into 25 states. States are normally subdivided into 20-30 districts. A powerful central administration with authority concentrated in the District Collector was a colonial legacy. In 1993, the Government of India passed a series of constitutional reforms, which were intended to empower and

ⁱⁱ **Recorded forest area:** All lands statutorily notified as forest though they may not necessarily bear tree cover.



democratize India's rural representative bodies – the *Panchayats*ⁱⁱⁱ. The amendment formally recognized a third tier of government at the sub-State level, thereby creating the legal conditions for local self-rule or *Panchayati Raj* and gives village, block and district level bodies a constitutional status under Indian law.

Though called a Village Panchayat, the Panchayat covers a group of villages with a population of 8-10,000. In Tamilnadu, most of the land with potential for agriculture has been cleared of forest. The remaining forest is now in scattered hillocks that are abutted by small habitations or hamlets, which we call forest villages. A forest village generally has a population of not more than 500, often much less. For the purpose of Village Panchayat, they are combined with the neighbouring villages and thus constitute only a small part of it. Because of distance and small numbers, they keep aloof from the *Gram Sabha*^{iv}. Consequently, they do not have any control or say in the Panchayat affairs, leaving them absolutely meek and powerless. In a situation where they don't have any say or role in managing their own affairs - neither in the management of forest nor in local self government – the forest people have often led dejected and isolated lives. But now JFM is making inroads into even the most remote villages.

c) Tamilnadu Forestry Project

Tamilnadu Forestry Project is a Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) funded US\$100 million Joint Forest Management Project being implemented in Tamilnadu state since 1997-98. The project selects degraded forest micro watersheds, along with abutting habitations or hamlets. The forest area is divided into three zones – Lower zone or Utility zone, Middle zone or Asset creation zone and Upper zone or Eco-restoration zone. Normally, the area for all three zones is 250 ha, in which the zone-wise gap planting is taken up.

The uniqueness of the Tamilnadu project is its provision of US\$12,000 for village development to cover buffer zone activities over a period of three years. The aim is to reduce the dependence of villagers on forests by alternate income generation activities. In other states of the country, the financial provision for buffer zone activities is very meager. They take up token community development or income generation activities to arouse enthusiasm in people for cooperation with forest department for joint forest management. In Tamilnadu, the aim is to bring about complete transformation of livelihoods so that woodcutters and grazers take up other viable vocations and need not revert to illicit activities in the forest.

Village Forest Councils

In each of the identified management units, the people's representative body called Village Forest Council (VFC) is formed, which is fully involved in the planning and execution of works, protection, harvesting and benefit sharing in the management

ⁱⁱⁱ *Panchayat Raj*: System of rural local government in India with three tiers- Village Gram panchayat (the lower most tier of local self government in India.), Panchayat Samithi and Zilla parishad.

^{iv} *Gram Sabha*: Village Electorate

unit. One male member and one female member from each household, provided they are willing, are enrolled as its members. Any person who opts out from membership of the council is not entitled to any benefits. The Village Forest Council meets as and when called for, but at least once in three months.

Each Village Forest Council elects an Executive Committee in such a manner that one hamlet elects at least two members; each council elects a minimum of five and maximum of 15 members to the Executive Committee. The local government, Panchayat, also has some members in the management unit that are co-opted as ex-officio members of the Executive Committee (EC). The members of the EC elect its president from the membership. The president of the EC is also president of the VFC. The forest ranger concerned is the member secretary of the Executive Committee. He/she facilitates the election process of the members and president of the EC. The Executive Committee is responsible for day-to-day activities of the council and meets at least once a month.

At least one third of the Executive Committee members must be women. Because the forest villages in Tamilnadu are small and relatively homogenous, the problem of elite capture or marginalization of disadvantaged groups that has been observed in other Indian states has not been observed here.

a) Memorandum of Understanding

A Memorandum of Understanding is signed in the beginning between the District Forest Officer (on behalf of the Forest Department) and the VFC President. This provides the details of the roles and responsibilities of the Forest Department and the VFC – the partners in Joint Forest Management. All the councils are necessarily registered under Societies Registration Act 1975 of the country.

b) VFC Finance

A joint account in the name of the VFC is opened in a bank or post office with the president and member secretary as signatories, who are together responsible and accountable to the VFC for all financial transactions. This is called the Village Forest Development Fund and consists of: (a) membership money; (b) money levied as fines and penalties for grazing, lopping etc., in the JFM area; (c) NTFP^v sales; (d) 25 per cent of timber sale proceeds realized in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding; and (e) recovery of loans and advances given to individuals from the buffer zone fund.

The Village Forest Development Fund created for the VFC is utilized for any contingent or ancillary expenditure, extending loans to members, and organizing income generation training by the Executive Committee. The Member Secretary maintains accounts of the Village Forest Development Fund, which is audited by the District Forest Officer annually.

^v **NTFPs:** Non Timber Forest Products- Goods of biological origin other than wood derived from forests. These include fruits, nuts, tubers, mushrooms, essential oils, medicinal herbs, spices, resins, and gums.



c) Monitoring

The District Forest Officer concerned monitors the functioning of the Executive Committee of the VFC and sends monthly reports to the Conservator of Forests. He also has the authority to disband the committees and order for reconstitution if, in his view, the committees are not discharging their duties properly. The Conservator of Forest is the appellate authority whose decision on the appeals against the District Forest Officer's order is final.

The mandatory meetings of the VFC (once in three months) and Executive Committee (once a month) provide space for downward accountability as the members can question and discuss the commissions and omissions of the officebearers.

Effectiveness of VFCs

In the entire state of Tamilnadu, more than 1000 forest abutting villages have been brought under JFM. The success of the programme has been found to be organically linked with the vibrancy of VFCs, which depends upon the approach and involvement of all the key actors – range forest officer, district administration and the villagers. Since the Executive Committees are generally elected in a democratic and apolitical way, VFCs have emerged as highly effective institutions working at the grass roots level. VFCs have been instrumental in not only forest protection and regeneration, but also in overall development and social awakening of the villages. Some of the more perceptible changes are given below:

a) Forest Protection

VFCs have regulated grazing in plantation areas and they control forest fires. In many places, VFCs have evicted old encroachments.⁶ Forest growth and regeneration have improved tremendously since the formation of VFCs. The latest satellite data show substantial improvement in forest cover and density in the state; the increase is one of the highest in the country.⁷

b) Quality of works execution

The involvement of VFC in micro planning, identification of sites for soil conservation work, choice of species, and its direct involvement in execution and maintenance of accounts have improved tremendously the quality of works being executed in degraded forests. All the works are need based and have been of direct use to neighbouring inhabitants. Another advantage is the transparency, as all the accounts and fund applications are signed by the VFC President and discussed in VFC meetings.⁸

c) Change in outlook

A considerable investment of around US\$60,000 in three years in each micro watershed has provided substantial wage employment, which has improved the life quality of many participants. Coupled with this role comes a sense of

respectability and belonging, which is shaping new ideas and actions amongst such community members.⁹

d) Social awakening

Formation of VFCs, repeated visits and interactions by forest officials and NGOs have caused a social awakening in remote, isolated and sleepy forest villages. Social injustices such as female infanticide and untouchability are gradually changing in such villages.¹⁰

e) Children enrolment in schools

The simple realization that it is easier and more effective to co-manage the forests with literate people, has made the field officials emphasize the importance of education during all the visits and meetings in programme areas. There is improvement in the enrolment of children in schools and also the dropout rate has come down, as can be evidenced from the attendance in schools in forest villages. In some of the villages, VFCs have started their own non-formal schools.¹¹

f) Income generation activities

With the funds available for buffer zone activities, income generation activities like rope making, basket making, weaving and so on, have been adopted by VFC members.¹² Training is given in various vocations and loans are also provided to the members for taking up such activities. There has been a substantial improvement in the living standards of the people, as evidenced through the increase in number of permanent (concrete) houses, people switching over to use of cooking gas from fire wood, number of bicycles and mopeds, etc.¹³

g) Women's development

Women's development has been a main focus. At least one third of Executive Committee members must be women. Women are provided loans to purchase milk cattle and sheep. Training is imparted in tailoring, basket making and embroidering. Two Women's Self Help Groups have been formed in each VFC.¹⁴ This helps the women members to develop the habit of regular and systematic savings. Their own savings and others, such as monthly subscription fees of members and interest on individual savings, form the group fund for their internal loaning and reduce their dependence on local money lenders. Women are also encouraged to take up low-tech and low-risk economic activities individually or collectively.

h) Other Department works

State Government has established District Level Joint Forest Management Committees with District Collector as Chairman, District Forest Officer as Member Secretary, District heads of various development departments and Village Forest Council presidents as members. The Committee meets every two months and discusses the implementation of works like roads, drinking water and other facilities to programme villages on priority basis. This has greatly improved the infrastructure facilities in Joint Forest Management Villages.¹⁵



Growing Importance of Village Forest Councils

a) Unexpected and unintended transition

It is important to note that the government order sanctioning the funds from JBIC soft loan gave the objective of the programme “to increase the tree cover through involvement of people.” But once the programme was launched, it was continuously reviewed, modified, and broadened in consonance with the feedback from people and field officials. It was found that, unless the forest dependents (wood cutters and grazers) are provided opportunities for alternate livelihoods, the social fencing would not get established. The amount for buffer zone people (development of forest dependents) was therefore increased to US\$12,000 from US\$6,000. The individual grants were converted into loans so that VFCs could build up corpus funds and extend loans to the remaining forest dependents for acquiring productive assets. This gave the additional role of the micro finance institutions to VFCs. The VFC President was made joint signatory for withdrawal of funds and submission of accounts.

One landmark order came from the state government for involvement of all other line departments like Public Works Department, Electricity, Health, Agriculture Animal Husbandry and Tribal Development, etc., for holistic development of these micro watersheds on priority basis. In addition, the involvement of other departments is monitored and guided by a state level committee headed by the Chief Secretary and at the district level by the Collector. All department heads at state and district level are members of these committees. Thus, a community forestry project has graduated into a comprehensive poverty alleviation and development programme for the forest communities despite the fact that it was never explicitly intended even at later stages.

VFCs are abundantly providing three vital elements of sustainable poverty alleviation: promoting opportunity, facilitating empowerment and enhancing security as advocated by the World Development Report 2001. Poverty alleviation is not the mandated task of the forest department and its responsibility lies with line departments like Rural Development, Tribal Development and Social Welfare, etc. But the success of the programme and emergence of the VFCs have been too strong to be ignored by the government and other line departments. They are now depending on the district level JFM Committee to route their schemes through VFCs to forest villages. Spurred by its success, JBIC has extended the project until 2010-11 by sanctioning Phase 2 for US\$525 million.

b) Institutions of local self-government

The formation of Village Forest Councils has provided a real chance for forest villages and their empowerment. The entire planning, execution and monitoring of the programme is done by the Village Forest Councils, whose day-to-day affairs are looked after by its executive committee headed by an elected president. The annual NTFP revenue for some of the Village Forest Councils has already crossed US\$4,000¹⁶ and, from the initial money of US\$12,000 for buffer zones, some Village

Forest Councils have developed a corpus fund of US\$24,000, as they are charging an interest of one per cent per month from the beneficiaries .

Council presidents are ex-officio members of District Level Joint Forest Management Committee, which is headed by the District collector. This has widened the role and imparted more prestige and glamour to the post of president. The post of VFC President has become so coveted that, in the event of dispute, people move up to High Court to get it. The VFCs control not only all the forest affairs and involvement of line departments, but also serve as a forum for forest people to evolve a common strategy and wield collective bargaining power for assembly and parliamentary elections. Thus, the VFCs have been evolving as vibrant institutions of local self-government for forest villages at the sub-Panchayat level.

Constraints

Tamilnadu Forestry Project is a massive programme and has acquired extensive knowledge and experience in the course of its implementation from the feedback from field officials and others, which has helped to broaden the project. The dedication and approach of field officials, cooperation by district administration and sometimes the interest of villagers, have led to many strong and vibrant VFCs among the 1,118 villages. But not all are so fortunate. In spite of the project's emphasis on micro planning through people's involvement, the top down approach has not been completely eliminated in the project. The extent of forest areas to be treated in each micro watershed is fixed, irrespective of the size of adjoining reserved forests. The number of seedlings to be planted per hectare is also constant as per the project document, irrespective of the field level needs. Similarly, the buffer zone amount for each watershed is US\$12,000, whereas the number of households varies. The planting on the entire 250 hectares is done in the first year and the buffer zone and maintenance completed in three years. Consequently, there is no provision for the creation of alternate employment and assets after three years. The VFC has to plan and execute within the project guidelines, which restrict their flexibility to address local issues fully.

The local range forest officer is the ex-officio member secretary of the VFC who plays the pivotal role of maintaining the accounts and records and calling VFC and EC meetings etc. Therefore, the efficiency and dedication of the range officer becomes the single most important factor controlling the success of VFCs. Wherever the ranger is good, the VFC is also vibrant, but, if he is succeeded by an inefficient person, the VFC also becomes inactive. Hence, it is desirable to implement the project on a limited scale by roping in only the capable and motivated staff, and building strong local ownership.



Conclusion

Joint Forest Management is undeniably the most important step taken since independence for improving management and governance of forests in India. Village Forest Councils have been established as local institutions to entrust greater responsibility to the local communities for the management, protection and development of public forest in partnerships with the forest departments. In areas that have been marginalized by basic development and self-government institutions, the VFCs are emerging as an important mechanism for addressing forest health as well as the well being of forest inhabitants. Because of growing importance and utility of Village Forest Councils, the day is not far when they may be recognized as an integral entity of local self-government, as a subunit of Village Panchayat. But more than anything else, it will require the unflinching will and efforts of forest departments, other government agencies and local participants to further nurture these fledgling institutions and overcome the challenges of adaptability and sustainability raised here.

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Public Hearing and Public Auditing in the Community Forestry User Groups:

A summary of
process, outcomes
and lessons learned
from the SAGUN
Programme in Nepal

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Summary

Although Community Forestry in Nepal has been very successful in improving forest condition and meeting the forest product requirements of user groups, there is a growing concern whether the community forestry programme has been successful in practicing good governance for its equitable and sustainable management, and empowering poor, women and marginalized groups. Taking these issues in view, 'Strengthened Actions for Governance in Utilization of Natural Resources' (SAGUN) Programme is making all its efforts through various interventions to create awareness and build up confidence of user groups to institutionalize good governance in community forestry. Public Hearing and Public Auditing (PHPA) is one of the major interventions carried out in order to promote good governance practices among user groups.

On the whole, the PHPA has been effective in promoting good governance practices at the group level in terms of transparency and accountability among executive committee members as well as general user groups. This has not only helped improve the financial management system in the groups, but has also helped in improving social inclusion in terms of participation and representation of women, Dalits¹ and the poor in the decision making process, including their access to natural resources and equitable sharing of the benefits. More importantly, the PHPA has been very effective in contributing towards an anti-corruption drive at the group level. This paper presents a summary of process, major outcomes and key lessons learned from PHPA as practiced in the SAGUN Programme in Nepal.

¹ Dalits are the 'untouchable' people in the Hindu caste system. The term Dalit refers to "Pani Nachalne" (untouchable) group or caste from whom water is not accepted in Hindu social structure .



Background

Community forestry is a successful programme in common property resource management in Nepal. It has significantly contributed to improving the forest condition and meeting the forest product requirements, such as timber, poles, fuelwood, fodder, non-timber forest products etc., at household and community levels. In addition, community forestry has considerably contributed to local development processes in terms of improved public facilities, like trail improvement, gravelling of community roads, installation of small drinking water and irrigation systems, school support, community hall construction including livelihood improvement of the poor.

All these improvements have been possible with the recognition of Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs) as independent and self-governing local organizations and, above all, government's progressive policies towards the community forestry development programme. As a result, the process of handing over of forests for management by CFUGs is showing a rapid increase. To date, more than 14,000 CFUGs are managing 1.2 million hectares of community forest, which comprises around 25 percent of the total forest area of Nepal, and benefiting more than 1,640,000 households, which constitutes around 35 percent of the total population of Nepal.¹



SAGUN Programme Area

But, in spite of significant contributions, there is growing concern at all corners whether the community forestry programme has been successful in practicing good governance in the user groups. Of the many activities and interventions, Public Hearing and Public Auditing (PHPA) is one of the major interventions carried out in order to promote such good governance practices in the user groups. This paper, therefore, intends to share the concepts of PHPA, its objectives, processes, outcomes and key lessons for wider sharing among CF practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders of CF, like Civil Society Organizations and local NGOs.

SAGUN Programme: A Brief Introduction

Strengthened Actions for Governance in Utilization of Natural Resources (SAGUN) is a four-year programme, which has been in operation since November 18, 2002 and will end on December 31, 2006. The Programme includes four components: (1) Forestry and Buffer Zone, (2) Irrigation, (3) Partnership for Hydropower and (4) Policy Advocacy Campaign. The Policy Advocacy Campaign component has been incorporated into the SAGUN Programme from September 2005.

The SAGUN Programme is implemented in 24 districts, of which the SAGUN (Forestry/Buffer Zone) Programme is being implemented in five districts viz. Banke, Bardia, Kailali, Dhading, Dolpa and some parts of Mugu. CARE Nepal directly implements its programme in the former three districts, while the programme in the latter three districts viz. Dolpa, Mugu and Dhading is being implemented in partnership with WWF Nepal and RIMS Nepal respectively.

The SAGUN (FBZ) Programme is currently working with a total of 780 user groups (734 Community Forestry User Groups and 46 Buffer Zone User Groups) managing 67,336 hectares of community forest, which benefits 120,598 households with a population of 784,484 of which 50 percent are women, 10 percent are Dalits and 31.5 percent are poor.



Public Hearing and Public Auditing (PHPA)

Public hearing is a process of sharing and assessing all activities carried out by CFUGs related to community forest management and social development activities for the technical, organizational and institutional development of the user groups. This is a highly participatory process in which user groups (rights holders) critically discuss, question and assess the duties and responsibilities of the executive committees (duty bearers) in terms of plans they prepared, meetings they held, decisions they made and shared with the user groups and plans and decisions they implemented.

Public auditing is the process of sharing, assessing and auditing all financial transactions, decisions and processes of financial expenses. The resulting information about various community forests and local development activities carried out by executive committees (EC), among general users (rights holders), and EC (duty bearers), is gained through critical and constructive question, answer and discussion sessions. Sometimes it includes field verification of some activities if the user groups demand it. All user group members actively participate and raise their concerns with the duty bearers for clarification of the issues brought in the discussion and agenda.

The PHPA process is specifically the open dialogue and audit of all activities and financial transactions the executive committees carry out over a period of one year, or more in some cases, and makes recommendations for future improvements through an equitable decision making process.

Rationale of Public Hearing and Public Auditing

It is well understood that development processes would be sustainable only if all duty bearers and rights holders internalize good governance individually and collectively and practice it on a regular basis. The Tenth Five Year Plan of Nepal considers good governance as one of the four strategies to achieve poverty reduction, whereas participation, transparency, accountability and predictability are integral parts of good governance².

The main objective of PHPA is to establish a system of sharing all development activities, decisions, processes of implementation and financial transactions that have been carried out by the EC members and the general users. This, as a part of participatory monitoring and evaluation processes, helps all Community Forest User Group (CFUG) members to have access to information and knowledge of what the committee has done during the year. In addition, the system holds both parties, the EC members (duty bearers) and general users (rights holders), accountable to their roles and responsibilities, resulting in a transparent and participatory approach to their decisions making process and actions.

Process

The SAGUN (Forestry/Buffer Zone) Programme developed guidelines for PHPA in its initial year and field tested it to consolidate and refine the process and circulated it widely to major stakeholders at the central and district levels. Following are the steps adopted to conduct PHPA in CFUGs:

Preparation before PHPA

- The Programme staff and facilitators inform EC members and general users about PHPA, its rationale, objectives, importance and far reaching effects and encourage them to conduct PHPA.
- Hold discussion with EC members on the implementation process and steps to conduct PHPA. Orient them on the probable questions that would be raised by the general users and the ways to respond to the issues in a dignified manner. Ask EC to acknowledge mistakes and weaknesses, if any, without reservation and hesitation.
- Fix date, venue and time and formally invite (through letter) all general users and major stakeholders (see Box 1). Ensure participation of women, Dalits and poor users.
- Study in detail the constitution and Forest Operational Plan (FOP) of CFUGs, the minutes of meetings and general assemblies, inventory records, records on collection and distribution of forest products, financial transactions, audit report, annual plan, and progress report, and prepare notes.

Box 1 Major Participants in PHPA

- District Forest Office
- National Park Office
- Representatives of neighboring CFUGs
- Federation of Community Forest Users, Nepal (FECOFUN)
- Local level Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
- The representatives of other projects who are working in the field of community forestry.
- Persons/organizations with whom the group has linkages/ coordination on financial transactions or other development supports
- The donors of the group
- Local journalists



Conducting PHPA in CFUGs

The EC members and the general users sit face-to-face. Likewise, the facilitator(s), the invited guests and observers also sit in the same position as shown in diagram-1.

- At first, the facilitator briefs on the importance of PHPA and its process. Then, the EC representative welcomes all participants to the event and explains its objectives. The facilitator has an important role to facilitate the PHPA in a participatory and interactive manner (see Box 2).
- Assign one or two persons in a participatory manner to take participants' attendance and notes/minutes of the issues raised and the recommendations made in the PHPA.
- Usually, PHPA is conducted in two phases: first, Public Hearing, and then Public Auditing. However, considering the subject matter, both can be conducted simultaneously. In Public Hearing, begin the discussion by raising the matter on the provisions of monthly EC meetings in a year, how many meetings were held within a year, and what the reasons were if less numbers of meetings were held. Encourage EC members to respond honestly.
- Present all decisions made in the EC meetings one-by-one, ensuring that all general users are listening, and encourage them to ask and discuss whether the decisions comply with the constitution, FOP and the annual work plan; how the decisions were shared and what the implementation status of the decisions and the reasons behind less or under achievement are, if any, etc.
- Likewise, facilitate discussion on the decisions made in general assemblies and the implementation status of annual plan, FOP, institutional and community development activities, whether those decisions were effectively implemented by maintaining expected quality and standard, and find out major reasons for under implementation. This is a brief example of how the Public Hearing is generally conducted.

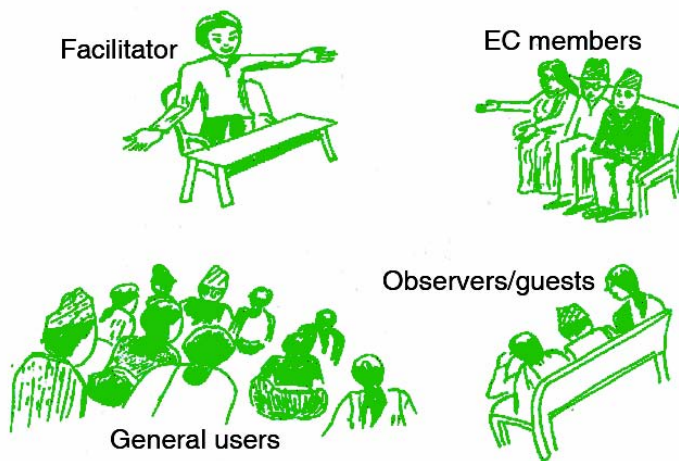


Diagram 1: Seating Arrangement

Box 2 Role of a Facilitator

- As PHPA is a very sensitive process, the facilitator should articulate and use simple and polite language during the whole process.
- Facilitate the discussion in an impartial manner. Do not take sides. Handle conflicting opinions tactfully for logical conclusions.
- Encourage women, *Dalits* and the poor to express their opinions. Give special attention to the issues they raise, with adequate time allocated for discussion.
- The executive committee should be encouraged/facilitated to provide subject centered and precise responses to the queries raised by the users, instead of theoretical responses.
- The trend of discussion and debate may likely become negative revolving only around the problems. In such cases, the facilitator should encourage the participants to provide solutions or options to address the problems.
- The facilitator should encourage questions like whether the interventions /activities/ are designed and implemented focusing on women, *Dalits* and poor or not; whether programme planning, its implementation, equitable costs and benefits sharing, etc., are appropriately implemented or not; and whether the group worked for increasing the active participation of women, *Dalits* and poor in both capacity building and decision making positions or not. If not, the facilitator should motivate the assembly to prepare the action plan to address these issues.

It will be advisable to take a 15 to 20 minute break/interval after completing Public Hearing before Public Auditing begins.

- In Public Auditing, share item wise income and expenditure from the financial records, ensuring that all general users are listening and paying attention. Focus the discussion on the rationale and basis of the expenditure and the process of making entry of income and expenses (maintaining financial records).
- While discussing sale and distribution of the forest products, community development and construction activities, allow relevant stakeholders (contractors, laborer, carpenter, masons, vendors etc.) to express their concerns. Then, sort out the details on the income and expenditure mentioned in the register.



- Discuss clearly the grants and loans provided to individuals from the group fund and their recovery status. Misuse of loan is a sensitive issue, therefore, individuals who have taken a loan and have not returned for a very long time should be given enough time to explain his/her views and justifications based on which, the user groups should make appropriate decision either to recover the money or exempt it.
- Encourage/facilitate users to prepare an action plan to address the issues and recommendations. Read out loudly the minutes of the meeting and correct, if necessary, the points through consensus of all the participants. Allow representatives of each stakeholder to express their views and give vote of thanks to all participants at the end.

Follow Up after PHPA

Regular follow up and monitoring by the concerned CFUGs members, facilitators or programme/partner field staff are highly essential to ensure implementation of action plan or commitments made in the PHPA. The progress towards an action plan should be monitored carefully and documented systematically. Usually, the CFUGs are reluctant to fulfill their commitments made in PHPA if a proper system of follow up action is not in place.

PHPA in SAGUN (FBZ) Programme

During the fiscal year (FY) 2006, 248 CFUGs conducted PHPA, in which a total of 22,332 users representing 73.6 percent (25,029) user households participated. Of the total participants, 46.2 percent were women, 10.8 percent Dalits and 38.6 percent poor. In addition, 1,891 representatives from neighboring CFUGs, NGOs/CBOs and District Forest Office (DFOs/ National Park Office (NPOs) attended as invitees in the PHPA.

SAGUN (FBZ) Programme has initiated PHPA from its inception phase. Every passing year, the number of PHPA events is on a rapid increase. This can be attributed to the increased awareness, knowledge and accountability of CFUGs due to various capacity building and empowerment programmes conducted over the past three years. The following table shows the trend of PHPA conducted in the SAGUN Forestry and Buffer Zone districts:

Table 1: PHPA in SAGUN (FBZ) Programme, as of 2006

SN	District	Number of CFUGs that conducted the PHPA			
		1st year (2003)	2nd year (2004)	3rd year (2005)	4th Year (as of June 2006)
1	Banke	0	25	49	53
2	Bardia	1	32	74	92
3	Kailali	3	22	41	49
4	Dhading	0	20	75	52
5	Dolpa	0	0	6	4
	Total	4	99	245	248

Source: SAGUN Programme, 2006

Outcomes

Based on the experiences to date, PHPA has been found to be an effective participatory tool to internalize the good governance practices in the CFUGs. The users have increasingly raised their issues and concerns during PHPA in their groups (see Box 3) and significant results have been observed in the CFUGs following the PHPA. Following sections illustrate the major outcomes of PHPA:

- Quick and increased awareness and accountability of the roles and responsibilities of both CFUGs and EC members.
- Increased effective communication between ordinary CFUG members and EC members and improved access to important information by all user group members.
- Increased concerns of ordinary CFUG members with EC members on the financial matters - particularly on the investment in local development, community forestry (CF) and buffer zone (BZ) development activities.
- Increased reshuffling of weaker ECs with induction of women, Dalits and poor as EC members. In 2006, 60 CFUGs reshuffled their ECs resulting in increased representation of women from 45 to 49 percent, *Dalits* 9 to 10 percent and poor from 16 to 24 percent.
- Improved financial record keeping system.
- Increased mobilization of group fund to support pro-poor programmes like income generation through NTFPs.
- Improved frequency of meetings held by ECs and sharing of major decisions through watchmen and public places.
- Increased demand from neighboring CFUGs to help them conduct PHPA in their groups.



- District Forest Offices and National Park Offices (DFOs/NPOs) are highly impressed with PHPA and its results and supportive of it by way of incorporating PHPA in the constitutions of CFUGs.

On the whole, the PHPA has made significant contributions towards anti-corruption drives in the community forestry development programme. The details of misuse of group funds, recovery status and commitment for recovery by user group members made in FY 2005 and 2006 are given in Table 2. It shows that the amount of fund recovery in FY 2006 is increasing due to PHPA.

Table 2: Funds misused, recovered, committed in PHPA events during FY 2005 and 2006

In the Fiscal Year 2005					
SN	District	No. of UGs	Fund misused	Fund recovered (Rs)	Fund committed for recovery (Rs)
1	Banke	9	310,854	94,602	181,224
2	Bardia-CF	67	1,473,811	31,559	1,209,857
	Bardia-BZ	7	27,262	0	27,262
3	Kailali	41	82,990	1,420	78,635
4	Dhading	75	308,654	176,104	134,650
5	Dolpa	2	2,140	0	2,140
Total		201	2,205,711	303,685	1,633,768
In the Fiscal Year 2006					
6	Banke	53	627,738	202,011	406,530
7	Bardia-CF	84	1,663,922	790,289	779,298
8	Bardia-BZ	6	27,262	23,000	0
9	Kailali	49	715,966	57,537	709,872
10	Dhading	52	129,487	25,632	104,755
11	Dolpa	4	30,800	30,800	0
Total		248	3,195,175	1,129,269	2,000,455

Source: SAGUN Program, 2006



*The process of raising issues and concerns during PHPA by women and ordinary members has made the executive committees more accountable to the user groups resulting in improved governance practices in the CFUGs
(Public Hearing and Public Auditing held in Janashrit CFUG, Naubasta, Banke)
Photo by: SAGUN Team, 2005*

Issues and challenges

- It is difficult to motivate and conduct PHPA in a group where misuse of money is significant because the ECs or the persons who have misused the group fund are afraid of being questioned and exposed in public.
- It is difficult to facilitate PHPA in groups having a large number of households because it is hard to control and manage the big groups with so many questions to address properly and in time.
- Elite and EC members with vested interests are against the PHPA because the ECs or the persons who have misused the group fund are afraid of being questioned and exposed in public, due to issues of prestige.

**Box 3****Major concerns of UG members raised in the PHPA**

- Meetings and assemblies not regularly held by the executive members.
- Important decisions made only by EC members and not regularly shared. Also some major decisions not implemented or followed properly.
- Advance and outstanding dues not settled by some executive members and users.
- Trend of generalizing income and expenditure items without specifying the reasons in the record.
- FOP not properly and timely implemented.
- Lack of good leadership in some CFUGs. Costs and benefits of forest products and income not shared on an equitable basis.

Lessons Learned

- PHPA has become a quick and effective tool in internalizing and initiating good governance practices at user group level, as it makes user groups and EC members aware of and accountable for their duties and responsibilities.
- It is an effective tool as part of participatory monitoring and evaluation of CFUG and their overall activities/functions and improves access to information and communication between ordinary CFUG members and EC members.
- PHPA is a sensitive process, which requires good facilitation skills. The facilitator should be well aware of the objective of conducting the PHPA and its processes and be very articulate. The facilitator should make the essence clear to the CFUG members to avoid misunderstanding and to bring the user groups to consensus decisions.
- The programme and District Forest Office/National Park Office staff and the Local Resource Persons are appropriate to facilitate the PHPA, as they are well acquainted with the groups and their socioeconomic conditions.
- At the end of the PHPA facilitation, a written commitment on the issues to be improved/addressed by the group or committee will help develop the sense of responsibility and commitment for active participation and the implementation of commitments.
- It is appropriate to conduct PHPA annually within a month or two of the completion of the Nepali fiscal year (in mid- July) and before the financial audit is done by the registered auditors.

- PHPA can be made effective if agendas for discussion are collected from each hamlet (*tole*) of the user groups, and the annual programme, the process of conducting PHPA and the financial transactions are posted or made public prior to conducting it.
- While conducting the PHPA, it would be better to start from a relatively small group having less financial transactions, gain the experience from that, and gradually proceed to big groups having more/larger financial transactions. PHPA in large and complex CFUGs is challenging and sensitive where resources are misappropriated.
- It is highly essential to ensure the continuity of PHPA in order to institutionalize good governance practices in the user groups. For this, PHPA should be made mandatory in the FOP and constitutions in both new and renewal of FOPs.
- Another possible way to institutionalize the PHPA would be to conduct it as part of a general assembly. This would not only improve the quality of the general assembly but also ensure its continuity as a regular event in the community forestry programme.

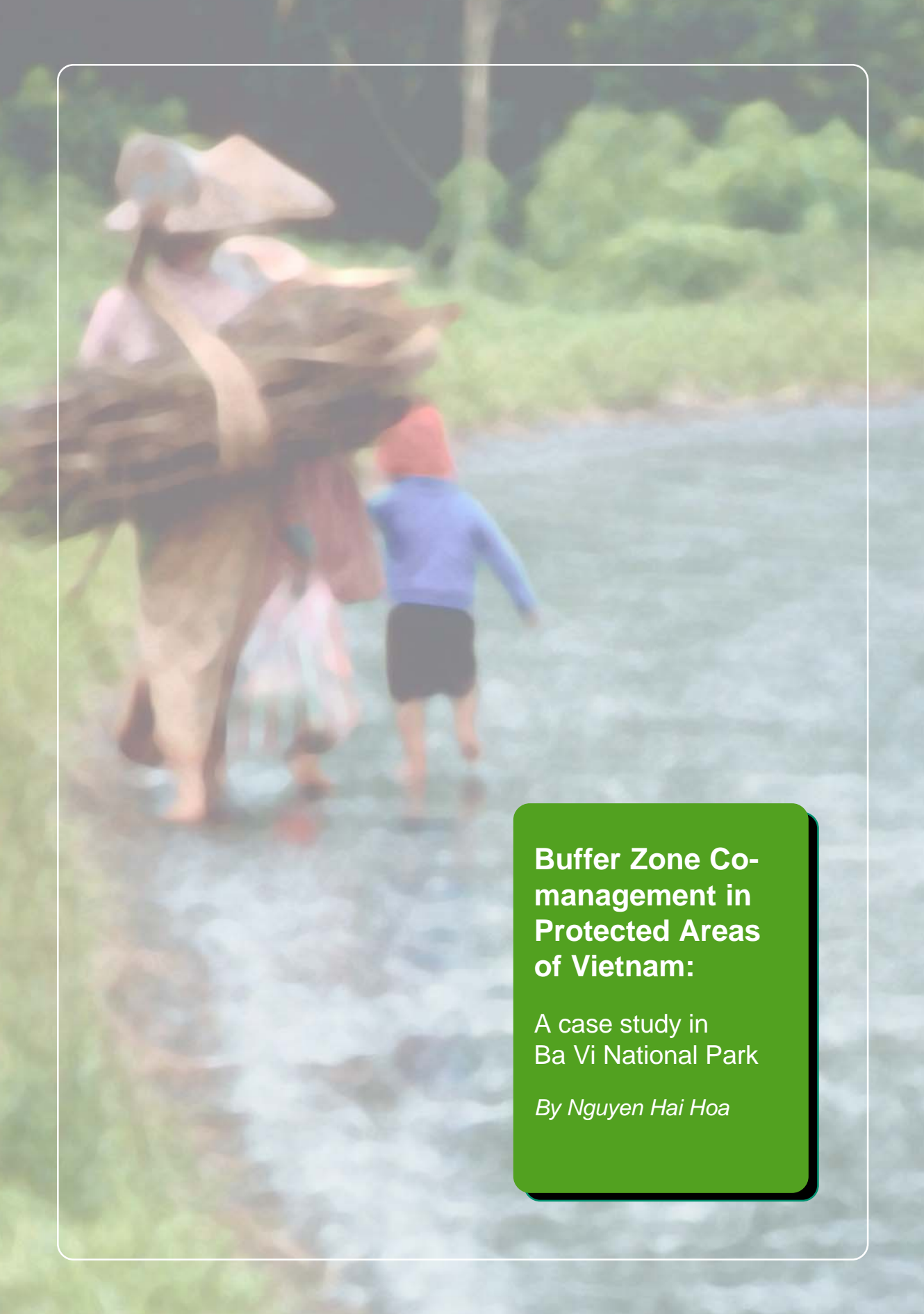
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**Buffer Zone Co-
management in
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A case study in
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Summary

A major threat to declared protected areas (PAs) in Vietnam arises from the encroachment of people living near or around them. The government's answer to how these pressures can be reduced has been to set up buffer zones (BZs) adjoining the protected areas. These are intended to not only limit human intrusion, but to also improve the villagers' living standards while integrating their activities with the conservation of the protected areas. A problem with such programmes is that there is little experience in how to establish and manage the buffer zones that could help improve and conserve protected forest areas.

This paper examines issues of BZ establishment and co-management with a focus on coordination and cooperation between relevant stakeholders, as well as their relationship to the quality of protected areas. The study critically reviews and analyses the current situation of the Ba Vi BZ and its adjoining national park (NP) in Vietnam, which was conducted selectively as a case study for evaluating existing policies and institutions related to BZs and PAs.

The findings show that effective BZ co-management is dependent on many factors. These include clear and specific rules and regulations, and close cooperation and coordination between national and local government agencies, NP management boards and local people in BZs.



1. Introduction

Vietnam is a small country of 33 million hectares, widely recognised all over the world for its rich biodiversity of species. Recognising the importance of biodiversity conservation, the Vietnamese government has, since 1962, established a network of 124 protected areas (PAs) consisting of 27 national parks (NPs), 60 nature conservation areas and 37 cultural/historical relics and environment sites.¹

However, like other developing countries, Vietnam has been faced with the twin challenges of population growth and lack of arable land for agriculture.² Nearly 80 per cent of the population (more than 80 million people) lives in the mountainous forested areas, where PAs are being established.³ Therefore, PAs are under great pressure from population growth, human activities, conflict between NP managers and local people, and conflict between development and conservation objectives. Access by local people to natural resources in NPs is restricted or even excluded, and their agricultural crops have been destroyed by wildlife from NPs.⁴ On the other hand, local people have encroached on the NPs for their livelihood, causing loss of biodiversity and forest degradation.

In order to prevent or minimise the negative impacts of local people on protected areas, the government has declared (in decision 08/2001/QĐ-TTg) that areas surrounding NPs and conservation areas are to be designated buffer zones (BZs).⁵ These are defined as forest areas or areas occupied by local people bordering NPs or PAs, created in order to reduce negative impacts on strictly protected forest.⁶ This is the first time BZs have been recognised at the national level in Vietnam. A BZ has two main objectives: (1) to protect from or reduce encroachment into PAs by improving local living standards, and (2) to contribute towards the conservation objectives of PAs. However, buffer zone declaration - in the absence of specific institutions to deal with BZ management and development - has restricted the effective protection of national parks. Therefore, the establishment of a legal and institutional framework is the first step for effective BZ development and management. Enhancing cooperation and coordination among different stakeholders in protected areas will further assist BZs to achieve sustainable management objectives.⁷

2. Ba Vi National Park and its buffer zones

2.1. Biophysical features

Ba Vi national park is located in Ba Vi District, Ha Tay province, about 50 kilometres north-west of Hanoi, and covers an area of 7,377 hectares.⁸ Although primary forest covers only 2,000 hectares, it is diverse and interesting in comparison with other PAs in Vietnam.⁹

2.2. Socioeconomic background of Ba Vi BZ

Seven communes located adjacent to and surrounding Ba Vi NP are considered as buffer zones: Ba Trai, Ba Vi, Tan Linh, Khanh Thuong, Minh Quang, Van Hoa and Yen Bai.¹⁰ This is an area of “degraded, undulating low hills, rising above marshy bottom valleys with small and intermittent springs.”¹¹ The BZ consists of 13,151.48 hectares which is divided into four main categories: cultivated land (2,285.88 hectares), forestry land (7,693.5 hectares), special use land (1,584.01 hectares) and residential and non-used land (1,588.09 hectares).

The total population in Ba Vi BZ stood at 48,311 in 2002, not including a local army base, accounting for 19.8 per cent of the total population of Ba Vi district. There are three ethnic groups - the Muong, Dao and Kinh - living in the BZ (*Table 01*). Muong and Kinh are indigenous inhabitants in Ba Vi NP, while Dao migrated to the area in the 1920s, settling above 600 metres elevation where they practise shifting cultivation. However, the three distinctive ethnic groups are distributed differently in the seven communes in Ba Vi BZ.

Table 01. Population distribution in seven communes in Ba Vi BZ

Commune	Households	Population	Labour force	Ethnic groups
Khanh Thuong	1,634	7,112	3,094	Kinh and Muong
Minh Quang	2,068	10,214	4,259	Kinh and Muong
Ba Trai	1,761	8,262	3,021	Kinh and Muong
Tan Linh	1,868	9,134	3,823	Kinh and Muong
Van Hoa	1,737	6,914	2,885	Kinh and Muong
Yen Bai	722	3,248	1,327	Kinh and Muong
Ba Vi	335	1,663	675	Dao and Kinh
Total	10,125	46,547	19,084	

Source: Ba Vi National Park, 1999.

Table 01 shows that local people living in Ba Vi BZ are mainly Kinh and Muong groups. There is often one ethnic group dominant in each zone. For example, there are a larger number of people from the Muong ethnic group (4,017 people) in Khanh Thuong village compared to other villages.



Reports say the economy of the people in Ba Vi BZ is not well developed and that living conditions are very difficult.¹² The main income is derived from agricultural production and the yields are very low, with rice yields reaching an average of only 1.5 tonnes per hectare, which is equivalent to 130 kg of paddy rice per capita per year.¹³

People living around Ba Vi national park are very poor, with a low level of education. Thirty percent of households are identified as poor or very poor, with living standards well below the national average. Their lives are still heavily dependent on agricultural activities, and the land for agricultural cultivation is limited and less fertile and productive. To sustain their livelihoods, they have to exploit forest resources within Ba Vi NP. Consequently, Ba Vi's natural resources are under great threat due to illegal logging of timber for domestic use, collection of firewood, slash and burn for cultivation, hunting, and illegal harvesting of other forest and non-forest products.¹⁴

Since Ba Vi NP has been established, local living standards of households have significantly declined due to a reduction of income from forest exploitation. State investment is very low and filtered through many levels, so very little reaches the communes and farmers. There has been neither a master plan for socioeconomic development nor specific policies and efficient solutions for local people undertaken in the BZ so far. The main critical issue for local people in the BZ is food security.¹⁵

There have been a number of Ba Vi NP development projects associated with conservation since the declaration of the park, although there is no specific project dealing with BZ management in Ba Vi. For example, between 1992 and 1995, a total VND 11,647 billion was spent on infrastructure, silvicultural restoration, forest protection, forest plantation, fire control, and land allocation. There is no external support from international organisations for park activities so far, although several NGOs are conducting projects in the BZ.¹⁶

2.3. Current status of land use in Ba Vi buffer zones

The total area of BZ communes accounts for 13,151.48 hectares, of which Ba Vi NP directly manages 5,792 hectares of forest area above 100 metres elevation (44 per cent of total park area)ⁱ (*Table 02*).

Table 02 indicates that the total area of agricultural cultivation (21.01 ha) is smaller than the area of forest in Ba Vi NP and the level of dependence on land resources is very high. This table also indicates that total land area is differently and unequally distributed across seven BZ communes.

ⁱ Areas under enterprise or company management are not included in this figure

Table 02. Current status of land use of seven communes in the BZ, Ba Vi NP

Communes	Total areas	Land for agricultural activities		Land for forest activities		Residential land	Land for special use
		Wet rice	Farm products	Village management	NP management		
Tan Linh	1,286.03	271.85	207.58	83.90		4.82	157.25
Van Hoa	2,198.28	303.23	21.09	566.17	946.01	50.00	311.78
Yen Bai	2,022.16	312.40	90.46	255.74	1,099.95	172.20	91.41
K. Thuong	2,882.43	263.10	37.70	686.50	1,206.40	310.90	377.83
M. Quang	2,057.54	372.89		200.00	709.04	441.43	334.18
Ba Trai	1,232.21	316.45	67.12	108.98	61.00	455.15	223.51
Ba Vi	2,032.46	21.01			1,769.81	153.59	88.05
Total	13,151.48	1,861.93	423.95	1,901.29	5,792.21	1,588.09	1,584.01

Source: Ba Vi National Park, 1999.

Unit: hectare

3. Stakeholder involvement in Ba Vi buffer zone management

Buffer zone co-management in this context can be understood as “a situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and guarantee among themselves a fair sharing of management functions, entitlements and responsibilities for a given territory or set of natural resources.”¹⁷ In theory, the relationships and cooperation between the NP and BZ authorities or local authorities and the local people, as well as their responsibilities, have been addressed in administrative regulations in Ba Vi BZ. However, in practice, these cooperations and management functions on different levels have not been developed appropriately. Local people’s involvement in BZ management and NP protection activities, therefore, has not been fully achieved.

Like many other PAs in Vietnam, where state-owned forest companies are present, local communities in Ba Vi are directly or indirectly involved in various activities in BZ management and development. The relevant stakeholders associated with Ba Vi BZ are local communities and government agencies at different levels that are responsible for BZ establishment and management. Local communities are encouraged to participate in all activities by their involvement in various organisations such as the Farmers’ Association, the Women’s Union, Veterans’ Association, the Youth Union and Gardeners’ Association.

Government stakeholders are spread across national, provincial, district and communal levels. In theory, government agencies at the provincial level are the



most relevant to BZ establishment and management (*Table 03*), including the Provincial People's Committee, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Ethnic Minorities and Mountain Affairs, the Planning and Investment Department, the Land Administration Department, Trade and Tourism, and the Forest Protection Sub-department.

Table 03. Cooperation between NPs and other local authorities in Ba Vi NP

Relevant authorities	Role
Provincial level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provincial People's Committee Forest Protection Sub-department Department of Trade and Tourism Police Department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit and approve programmes Division of Forest Protection of the NP gets professional guidance Cooperate in tourism management Cooperate in dealing with Forest Law violation cases
Commune People's Committee	Regular cooperation in association with conservation and development issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop conservation regulations To disseminate various documents To deal with administrative violations To check forest contracts To attend regular meetings of commune councils To share information
District People's Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequent cooperation to guide and deal with emerging issues related to policies Monthly attendance joint meetings

Source: Ba Vi National Park, 1999; Gilmour and Nguyen Van San, 1999

In practice, the district and communal levels of government are more important because the success of BZ management significantly depends on their effective performance. At the district level, government agencies include the District People's Committee and subordinates of the above agencies. At the communal level, the Communal People's Committee is the lowest government administrative agency but it is the most important for direct communication with local communities. It is responsible for delivery of all policies, regulations and programmes to local people and reflects the local people's desires and aspirations to higher government agencies in the administrative hierarchy. Additionally, at the national level, such ministries as the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development, and the Ministry

of Science, Technology and Environment, are responsible for developing policies, regulations and guidelines regarding BZ establishment and management.

3.1 Changes in management systems for protected areas

In Vietnam, management systems for PAs differ. According to the Vietnamese Government's regulation on management of special use forest, protection forest and production forest (2001b), the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development (MARD) directly manages NPs which are considered very important in terms of ecological systems and are located in more than one province. At present, nine of 27 NPs are under MARD management. The Ministry of Culture and Information is responsible for directly managing PAs considered as cultural/historical relics or environmental sites. The remaining PAs are under the management of provincial committees. However, the management system of PAs in Vietnam has changed several times between the national and provincial levels, with a lack of specific policies and clear guidelines for BZ management. This had led to some BZ managers in PAs being puzzled about implementation.

Although the legal situation and institutions in Ba Vi NP are similar to other NPs in Vietnam, Ba Vi has different biological, socioeconomic, cultural and political conditions which affect the feasible application of forest policies and regulations in Ba Vi NP and its BZ. In the past, NP management had poor relationships with local authorities and local people due to unclear management responsibilities over benefits of forest resources and tourism activities.

3.2 Local participation

Local participation in resource management and protection has been prioritised in various policies and programmes recently in Vietnam.¹⁸ However, local people have been in the habit of accepting government authority. It therefore takes time to change government staff habits of giving top-down instructions at all levels and having local people passively receive these instructions. It is also worth noting that local involvement in planning and managing natural resources is restricted by physical constraints, and human and financial resource constraints in remote areas in Vietnam. Therefore, the success of this process substantially relies on the capacity of local officials.

3.3 Stakeholders in Ba Vi National Park

The main issues different stakeholders in Ba Vi national park and its buffer zone are assessed below regarding roles and participation in natural resource management.¹⁹

National Park officials

According to NP officials, effective management and protection of the park is challenging. It is very difficult to clearly identify boundaries on the ground, and local people living close to the park or in adjacent districts often go to forests inside the park to illegally and intentionally collect forest products. The Park Management Board has made great efforts to protect the forests by coordinating and working with district police involved in dealing with illegal forest resource



exploitation. Moreover, commune police have committed to deliver information about forest protection to local people. In principle, Ba Vi BZ is administered by the district, and the park staff are not involved in decision making regarding buffer zone activities. However, the park staff is willing to consult with and support the district in BZ management and protection activities.

District officials

Although Ba Vi BZ communes are under district management, there is no management committee responsible for socioeconomic development so far. There have been neither specific government projects nor specific policies for buffer zone communes. District officials are often stressed by a financial shortage so that the investment for BZ development is too low to improve the economic situation for local people living there. However, the district officials have perceived the buffer zone's importance for the remaining natural resources of the park, and have adopted resolutions on forest fire fighting, shifting cultivation control, and forest exploitation in collaboration with the Park Management Board, the district Forest Protection Station and police. Commune officials must report monthly to the District on forest exploitation, shifting cultivation and hunting activities, and attend regular meetings with the National Park Management Board.

Community members

Community leaders have direct responsibility of managing and stimulating BZ activities at the village level. According to their views, local living standards of households have significantly declined due to a reduction of income from forest overexploitation since Ba Vi NP has been established. As previously mentioned, state investment is very low and filtered through many levels,²⁰ so very little reaches the communes and farmers. There has been neither a master plan for socioeconomic development nor specific policies and efficient solutions for local people undertaken in the BZ so far.

Local people who live too far from the park and never use forest products, such as those in Ba Trai commune, have no views on the BZ and impacts of the park on their subsistence.²¹ In contrast, people who are heavily dependent on forest collection and shifting cultivation practice, such as the Dao people in Ba Vi Commune and the Muong people in Khanh Thuong Commune, have perceived the full concept of the park and the BZ. However, they are very poor and have no other additional income than that derived from illegally exploiting and selling forest products. In other words, local people currently have no alternatives but to go to the forest.

There has been close cooperation with other relevant local authorities at different levels, as shown in *Table 03*. This kind of co-operation and coordination has contributed considerably to the improvement of NP management and protection. However, the relationship between the NP or local authorities and the local people has not been addressed appropriately. There are no incentives for local people to be involved in BZ management and NP protection activities.

4. Institutional arrangements for BZ management

Two emerging institutional issues in Ba Vi BZ include the boundaries of the park and land tenure.

4.1. Boundaries

The boundary of Ba Vi NP is defined by a 100m contour, but it has not been clearly marked on the ground. Therefore, it is difficult to manage and establish regulations for development. Moreover, local people who have received forest and forestland allocation in the BZ have expressed concern over the status of their land holdings when the boundary between different land holders is not clearly identified in the fields, leading to their reluctance to invest human and finance resources in agro-forestry and agricultural activities. These unclear boundaries and reluctance to invest have prevented maximising outcomes from the BZ activities and improving local living standards. They also block the effectiveness of reducing the threats to the natural forest of the park.

4.2. Land tenure

Like other provinces in Vietnam, the issues of land tenure in Ba Vi NP in relation to land allocation insecurity have drawn the attention of local authorities. Land allocation has been implemented slowly in Ba Vi district, which has hindered management and protection of Ba Vi NP.²² Land use rights have been transferred to households and organisations, although land zoning of the BZ has not been undertaken. Rights and responsibilities of land users have not been clearly identified. Land use disputes and unallocated land still remain.

4.3. Relevant legislation and policies in Vietnam

Like many developing countries, Vietnam has paid much attention to economic development in mountainous areas, particularly in NPs. Therefore, many different institutions have been issued with protected area development.²³ Numerous laws and directives have been promulgated with a focus on facilitating the development of the uplands and protected areas, and improving the livelihoods of ethnic minority peoples.²⁴ However, these policies have still caused problems and are not sufficient to develop BZs with the dual objectives of: (1) contribution to NP protection and (2) BZ development itself.²⁵

Legislation for local participation

The Vietnamese Government issued the Regulation on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes in 1998, promoting local participation in the decision making process regarding commune affairs.²⁶ This regulation is known as the Grassroots Democracy Decree. Although there is no assessment of its effects so far, this decree is proposed to create a stimulating environment conducive to participatory development.²⁷

However, although the Government has attempted to improve the participatory process, there are still many problems associated with the development of an institution for the uplands. Firstly, the Government has applied models to the uplands



which are successful in the lowlands, without consideration of characteristics specific to each area, such as social and cultural aspects. According to Jamieson *et al.* (1998:19), few policymakers have an accurate and empathetic understanding of upland peoples and environment. For example, policymakers understand well the life in lowland King groups, but this lowland knowledge can lead to decision making that is inappropriate for upland circumstances.

Although there have been a large number of policies and programmes undertaken to facilitate the upland development, they have failed to provide tools and mechanisms which support local participation. Moreover, although there are numerous legal documents, policies, laws, decrees, regulations, decisions and technical guidelines, they are often ambitious and overlap, which has created a wide range of understanding.

Lack of coordination at national and local levels

Coordination between sectors is not well developed in some cases, such as information sharing between ministries. Therefore, decisions and directives and circulars from different ministries possibly contradict each other.²⁸ For instance, land classification is constrained by the use of at least two systems that are not consistent. MARD has classified land for its intended or potential use while the General Department for Land Administration has classified types of land according to their existing use.

In Ba Vi NP, there are many state farms, economic units, military bases, and tourist companies located in the BZ communes. However, there is little coordination, no information exchange and little understanding of the park objectives as a result. The budget for socioeconomic programmes in BZ communes should be directly allocated to and managed by the Management Board of the National Park in close cooperation with local authorities to use the financial efficiencies rather than under the control of central government or provincial authority.

There are no specific policies or programmes supporting the poor people in the BZ who are primarily dependent users of forest resources in the park. Therefore, specific programmes targeting those individuals and groups in the community, such as the Dao people in Ba Vi Commune and Muong people in Khanh Thuong Commune, should be implemented to reduce threats to the park. The current government decision declaring a BZ and assigning the local authorities to manage BZs is a good example of the decentralisation process. It reflects the tendency of the government to devolve the BZ management responsibility to the local level. However, in the absence of appropriate funding, strategies, instruments, and skills required to make decisions, and to design relevant rules, regulations and policies to guide, constrain and facilitate local level actions, local authorities are unable to translate the policies into a reality. Providing mechanisms for interaction and consensus building among all affected parties will become more important elements of policymaking.²⁹

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The establishment of a buffer zone surrounding Ba Vi NP aims to integrate biodiversity conservation objectives of the park with development activities in the BZ, improve local living standards, and reduce population pressure on the national park. However, achieving BZ objectives requires intensive and adequate attention, not only to legal and economic aspects, but also to the relevant institutions in BZ establishment and management. Only ensuring adequate institutions can promote participation by stakeholders in BZ management activities, contributing to biodiversity conservation activities of the park. Having relevant institutions also assists stakeholders in being clear about their responsibilities to and benefits from the BZ development, and knowing how to cooperate in investing their limited resources in BZ management with support from the Central Government.

To maximise benefits of BZ establishment together with their intensive contributions to biodiversity conservation activities within the park, there are some recommendations arising from the discussion presented in this paper:

+ *Policies encouraging local participation in biodiversity conservation should be given in combination with the creation of job opportunities and income generation for participants.* To draw the attention and participation from local people in conservation activities, education and raising people's awareness activities should be well implemented in close association with participants' rights and responsibilities. Improving local living standards in the BZ with more support for BZ projects or programmes from both the government and international donors is another important step contributing to conservation of the NP. This step must be undertaken in combination with raising local people's awareness, education and law enforcement.

+ *Improved coordination and co-operation at all levels.* Coordination and cooperation among stakeholders from different levels need to be strengthened by sharing information and lessons learned, to avoid overlapping BZ management and taking advantage of the strengths of each programme to perfect other programmes. Improving cooperation will also help to prevent overloading activities on local authorities and different agencies, optimising restricted resources allocated to NP protection. A regular biophysical monitoring programme should be designed, undertaken and documented as soon as possible.

+ *Designing and applying agro-forestry models with highly productive and income species in BZs.* Ba Vi home gardens include low productive species and just meet households' needs and demands. If some highly valued and productive species are introduced and planted in home gardens, household incomes will be higher and more stable and local dependence in accessing forest resource will decrease.



+ **Promoting a process of forest and forestland allocation.** At present, only one per cent of total households located in BZs has been given allocated forest and forestland. In order to better protect and manage forest, the process of forestland allocation should be applied faster and expanded to everyone with clear instruction and explanation of allocated forest holders' rights and responsibilities.

+ **Establishment of community forests in Ba Vi BZs.** In reality, forest management based community regulations have many advantages, such as maximising the strengths of communities and minimising negative impacts on forest resources by giving community regulations, principles, consensus and agreements. To raise responsibilities of forest management, Ba Vi NP should allocate some forest areas to local communities living near national parks, establishing and issuing agreed regulations on responsibilities and rights of forest management based communities.

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The Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) is an international not-for-profit organization based in Bangkok, Thailand, that works closely with partners to design and facilitate learning processes and systems to support community forestry and community based natural resource management. Through strategic partnerships and collaboration with governmental and non-governmental institutions, programmes, projects and networks, RECOFTC aims to enhance capacity at all levels and promote constructive multi-stakeholder dialogues and interactions to ensure equitable and sustainable management of forest and natural resources.



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