

REDUCING EMISSIONS FROM DEFORESTATION AND FOREST DEGRADATION (REDD¹): IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES FOR LOWER MEKONG SUBREGION

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This essay presents a critical analysis of challenges in implementing REDD program in the Lower Mekong Subregion (LMS). Challenges are examined through field exposures³ and interviews with local actors. REDD issues in Vietnam will explore equity criteria in the Benefits Distribution System (BDS). Examination of equity focuses on its progress undertaken by VN-REDD program towards local indigenous communities⁴. The key arguments are that the progress of addressing equity appears not yet effective due to two critical issues remain unresolved. Distribution of forestland resources remains largely in the hands of State bodies. Land conflicts have increased due to insecure land tenure.

The essay ends with an expectation to call for more attention towards furthering the decentralization of forestland resources to poor individual households and village communities. It also stresses the need for stronger inclusion of local voices in every aspect of REDD program. This is crucial to meet equity criteria set by UN-REDD global framework on its effects towards local indigenous communities.

I. Introduction

The Lower Mekong Sub-Region (LMS) is a region with increasing potential to become fast-growing economy⁵. The LMS is at the same time a region where many challenges have remained such as difficulty in livelihoods, biodiversity loss, and alarming rate of deforestation and forest degradation⁶. In recent years, REDD has been an important program in the LMS. REDD is designed for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation⁷. REDD was proposed as a low-cost mitigation option⁸ and foreseen to potentially contributing towards forest ecosystem conservation. Besides the anticipated benefits, there are concerns of its denial of the rights of local indigenous communities⁹, and escalating conflicts between land users in areas where land tenure remains

¹ REDD+: An enhanced version of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), largely in the developing countries. By nature, it is a program that puts a financial value on carbon stocks and ecosystem services. REDD+ includes five activities such as reduced deforestation, reduced forest degradation, carbon stock enhancement, and conservation of carbon stocks and sustainable management of forests.

² I would like to thank Prof. Rodney J Keenan, Mrs. Thu Ba Huynh, Mr. Stephen Midgley, and many informants during the field course. My thanks also extend to colleagues at SPERI, CODE & CIRUM (three local Vietnamese NGOs who work on land rights issues) whom provide local stories and other data. Thanks too few friends who help reading and editing grammar.

³ Field observations are conducted during the field course 'Forest in the Asia Pacific' in November 2012. Program details, see http://app.lms.unimelb.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D245877_1%26url%3D&tab_group_id=5_1

⁴ Angelsen, A. (ed.) 2008 Moving ahead with REDD: issues, options and implications. In Page 21. Chapter 2. What are the key design issues for REDD and the criteria for assessing options? Arild Angelsen and Sheila Wertz-Kanounnikoff.

⁵ Forests and Forestry in the Greater Mekong Part I and Part II. FAO, Bangkok 2011.

⁶ Boyle 2012. Southeast Asia Forests and REDD+. Presentations during the field course 'Forest in the Asia Pacific' in November 2012.

⁷ 'Decision 2/CP.15' in UNFCCC *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its Fifteenth Session, held in Copenhagen from 7-19 December – Decisions Adopted by the Conference of the Parties*, UN Doc FCCC/CP/2009/11/Add.1 (2009) 6[7].

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⁸ Stern, N 2006, 'Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change', viewed 30 June 2012, <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INDONESIA/Resources/226271-1170911056314/3428109-1174614780539/sternrevieweng.pdf>>

⁹ Santi, M 2012, 'Rio+20: indigenous peoples denounce green economy and REDD+ as privatization of nature', *Indigenous Environmental Network*, viewed 22 June 2012, <<http://indigenous4motherearthrioplus20.org/rio20-indigenous-peoples-denounce-green-economy-and-redd-as-privatization-of-nature/>>

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insecure¹⁰. Vietnam and Lao PDR have indicated interests in participating REDD. The two governments have been in-progress of preparing their institutions and governance ready to respond to REDD¹¹. Lao PDR has estimated the contribution of REDD in the national revenue by 2020 would be about 25\$ million, 3rd largest future sources¹².

Vietnam indicated interests in REDD since 2008¹³. Up to now, REDD has been incorporated in many Social Economic Development and Planning programs. The VN-REDD program has completed its Phase 1 and currently moving into Phase 2¹⁴. Besides its achievements to-date¹⁵, there still are concerns of key constraints.

II. REDD implementation issues

Hunger for 'growth'

The hunger for growth and ambition of becoming a more-developed nation would be a key constraint for REDD to be successful. Vietnam is increasingly interconnected to the global market, and that inevitably being affected by the processes of globalization, industrialization and international flows of capital, technology and people¹⁶. On one hand, implementation of REDD requires the country to perform long-term commitments. Accordingly, these would require long-term-driven socio-economic development programs. Ground observations have, however, shown that many on-going activities have largely been 'growth-oriented'. Land use practices have favoured commercial crops such as rubber, or resettlement of local indigenous communities to make way for road and hydropower projects.

Hydropower projects to meet electricity demand are already planned throughout Vietnam. Table below provides some large-scale hydropower projects up to 2020¹⁷. These projects are strongly linked with ambition to become a more-developed economy and serving 'modern' lifestyles.

Table 1: Some large scale hydropower projects up to 2020

2011	13 projects
2012	10 projects
2013	3 projects
2014	5 projects (1 in Lao PDR)
2015	4 projects
2016	9 projects (1 with Lao PDR, and 1 with Cambodia)
2017	2 projects

¹⁰ Ghazoul, J, Butler, R, Mateo-Vega, J & Koh, L 2010, 'REDD: a reckoning of environment and development implications', *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, vol. 25, no. 7, pp. 396-402.

¹¹ For Lao PDR, comments from Stephen Midley. For Vietnam, comments from Thu Ba Huynh. 2012.

See further: www.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/2010-082.pdf; [REDD Task Force \(Lao PDR\) | The REDD Desk](#); REDD Readiness Progress Fact Sheet Country: Lao PDR October, 2012.

¹² Phayvanh 2012. Lao Forestry. Department of Forestry, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR. Information made available from the field course. For data on Vietnam, I could not access to information of this type.

¹³ <http://vietnam-redd.org/Web/Default.aspx?Tab=intro&zoneid=106&lang=en-US>

¹⁴ <http://vietnam-redd.org/Web/Default.aspx?Tab=eventdetail&zoneid=107&subzone=158&itemid=606&lang=en-US>, viewed 23 Jan. 13.

¹⁵ Un-REDD Vietnam Programme Phase 1: Key achievements. Closing workshop. Hanoi, 4 Oct, 2012. Dr. Pham Minh Thoa. National Programme Director, UN-REDD Vietnam. VNFOREST – MARD, viewed 21 Dec. 12.

¹⁶ SPERI 2012. Terms of Reference for External Evaluator for the Continued Proposal on Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA) for the period from July 2010 to June 2013.

¹⁷ Annex I of Decision No. 1208 dated 21 July 2011 of Approval of National Electricity Development Plan for period 2011-2020 with consideration to 2030 signed by the Prime Minister (PM).

2018	3 projects (2 with Lao PDR)
2019	4 projects (1 with Lao PDR)
2020	3 projects (1 with Lao PDR)

Besides, there are already areas in Vietnam and Lao PDR that have been dug up mineral resources for exports for national income. The presentation for Lao PDR was though unavailable during the field course. Official information from Vietnam has indicated that since the GoV has passed the Law on Mineral Resources by July 1st 2011, Ministry of Industry and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) have already issued 1,253 extraction licenses including (survey, explore, extract and process)¹⁸. Once extraction took place, this would indeed affect the conservation of carbon.

Expansion of plantations

REDD calls for reducing deforestation and forest degradation largely targeting areas of primary forest; however, expansion of plantation appears so extensive throughout the region to meet market demands. In Lao PDR, corporations such as Oji (Japan), Birla Lao (India), and Stora Enso (Sweden) have all indicated their plans to increasing areas of Acacia plantations if they were able to search for more land and concessions from government of Lao (GoL). Forest Policy in GoL identifies that plantation development targeting in allocated degraded forestland up to 500,000 hectares. In Vietnam, changes in forest plantations have indicated an increase from 93,000 hectares in 1976 to 3,083,000 hectares in 2010¹⁹. Visit to Vijachip in Vietnam signalled that, despite there was not an indicative estimate of how large the company wished to expand, but clearly as the demand from China continues to grow which leads to a continued demand searching for more raw materials/resources²⁰. Other example is a village-scale Acacia sawmill based in Thua Thien Hue province, where demand is so large that the owner struggles to source enough raw materials. The current harvesting practice includes harvesting plantations at younger ages despite the resulting low-quality logs²¹.

Rubber plantation is another example. Throughout the Lao PDR, rubber plantations have been expanded and are even considered to be included as an official 'forest species' in the national forest coverage²². In Vietnam the trend is similar, Son La province in the North-western and Ha Tinh province in Northern central previously had no rubber plantations and are now being introduced this crop. Along the bordering area between Vietnam and China in the northern part (e.g. Lao Cai province) there are areas that have been converted to rubber plantations. Vietnamese companies even expanding rubber plantations into Lao PDR²³. As market continues to demand for more rubber, paper, board products, and palm oil; carbon stocks in the forest in the Region appears declining. The Region is losing carbon²⁴, and this is a challenge for implementing REDD.

Role of local villagers in the Monitoring Review & Valuation (MRV)

Implementing REDD program, specifically the MRV, would be very difficult without the role of local villagers. Setting up a comprehensive MRV system to account for carbon, given the density and

¹⁸ Page 23. Bao cao ve viec thuc hien chinh sach, phap luat ve quan ly, khai thac khoang san gan voi bao ve moi truong. Hanoi, thang 6 nam 2012. Chinh phu Vietnam.

¹⁹ Ha Huy 2012. Forests and Forestry in Vietnam. Presentations during the field course.

²⁰ Field informant 2012. Visit during the field course.

²¹ Field informant 2012. Visit during the field course.

²² Phayvanh 2012. Lao Forestry. Department of Forestry, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR. Information made available from the field course.

²³ Area of palm oil was not elaborated too clearly during the field course. However, there are already individual farmers converted their previous land use to palm oil, and from interview, they expected outputs to be sold for domestic consumption

²⁴ Boyle 2012. Southeast Asia Forests and REDD+. Presentations during the field course 'Forest in the Asia Pacific' in November 2012.

diversity of all tropical forest species is already identified as a challenge²⁵. Nevertheless, most of the technical resources currently available on MRV are only made for a select group of scientists and technical experts. While getting the MRV comprehensively operational is about the time and staffing costs. The domestic conventional thinking still largely viewing local villagers, especially the minority, are backward and uneducated²⁶.

'If poor people lack rights, it limits their power to negotiate for outcomes suitable to their interests, and they also suffer from their inability to defend the rights they do have'²⁷. Ensuring local villagers in the MRV would respect the moral judgments proposed in the UN-REDD global framework²⁸. Engaging local villagers in the MRV would empower them with capacity and respecting the rights of local indigenous peoples as the GoV signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. Involving local villagers in the MRV would help resolving time and staffing issues.

Land tenure and equity

Issues concerning land tenure and equity over land resources allocated to different land users (hereafter meant forestland) remains most critical. "The key constraint to increasing rural incomes through sustainable forestry has been the insecurity of property rights of many of the forest dependent poor"²⁹. As observed by international experts, 'the proportion of forestlands designated for use (or ownership) by communities and indigenous peoples is only modest, while most of the forest in countries participate in a global REDD regime remain in the hands of governments'³⁰. In the compliant BDS for Vietnam, it admits that 'despite the recent restructuring of State-owned companies (SOCs) to open up forests management to other stakeholders, SOCs still play an important role. In many provinces, particularly in the central and southern parts, SOCs not only manage the forest allocated to them but also control the forest they used to manage'³¹.

III. Progress towards addressing equity criteria by VN-REDD

Equity examined from current distribution of forestland

Most current official figures still indicate forestland areas are largely in the hands of State-owned bodies. Figure 1³² presents areas of forestland allocated to governmental organizations is 4,536,056 hectares, to Economic entities (i.e. also State owned companies) is 2,234,577 hectares and to communal peoples' committees is 142,449 hectares. Together the total is much higher than the area of forestland allocated to village communities and individual households.

Figure 1. Areas of forestland to be allocated to different users (unit: hectares)

25 UN-REDD programme. Allometric Equation Development for Biomass Estimation in Vietnam. Dang Thinh Trieu, Vu Tan Phuong, The Vietnamese Academy of Forest Sciences (VAFS). Hanoi, 31 August 2012.

26 SPERI 2012. Terms of Reference for External Evaluator for the Continued Proposal on Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA) for the period from July 2010 to June 2013.

27 Khan 2006.

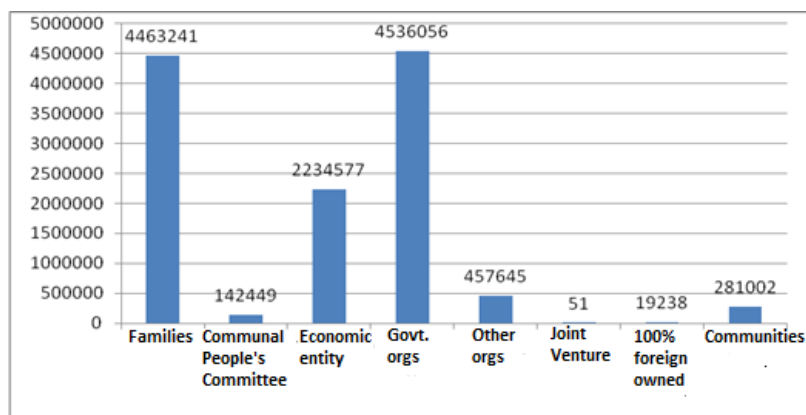
28 Angelsen, A. (ed.) 2008 Moving ahead with REDD: issues, options and implications. In Chapter 11. How do we achieve REDD co-benefits and avoid doing harm? David Brown, Frances Seymour and Leo Peskett.

29 Chapter 11: How do we achieve REDD co-benefits and avoid doing harm? David Brown, Frances Seymour and Leo Peskett.

30 Sunderlin et al. 2008.

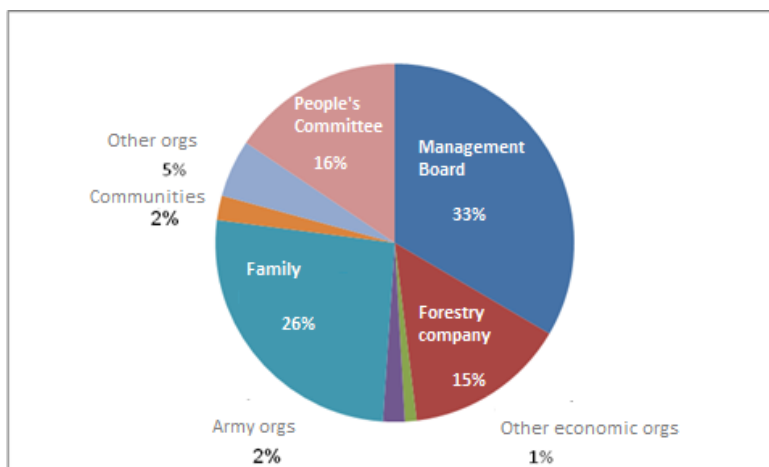
31 Consideration for Designing of a REDD-Compliant Benefit Distribution System for Vietnam: Executive Summary; UNREDD programme 2009.

32 Figure 1 indicates areas of forestland of which including barren land, degraded land, or unproductive forestland.



Reference: Decision 1482, MONRE, 2012

Figure 2. Areas of forest allocated by different forest 'owners' (unit: percentage (%))



Reference: Decision 2089 of MARD, 2012.

Figure 2³³ shows that 33% of the total forests in Vietnam belong to Management Boards. People's Committees manage 16% of total forests; and State owned companies manage 15%. Village communities and individual households only manage 28% = 2% + 26% of total forests. These figures raise a concern of how would we ensure benefits to be distributed to poor households and remote communities through BDS. Assumingly BDS would have to make judgments based upon the results produced from MRV and that would have to refer to figures available from governmental offices. This may make it easy for MRV to be conducted; however, when connecting this with BDS – whether the benefits would tend to be distributed towards State bodies in the future. These figures further stressing the actual context in which indicating much have not yet done towards decentralizing more forestland resources to individual households and village communities to ensure livelihoods.

Equity examined from tenure insecurity and land conflicts

Tenure insecurity including overlaps remains one of the most critical issues facing small landholders. While many individual households and village communities have been allocated with poor forest, low-quality forest areas, other examples indicate that many households lacking land rights (access, use, management, and make decisions). The recent report after piloting the BDS conducted by Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) confirms that 'an assessment of existing tenure

³³ Figure 2 indicates areas of forest (i.e. only forested land); and that areas that are not covered by forests would not count.

arrangements will be a fundamental precondition to identifying beneficiaries and, as such, a key foundation for durable conditional benefit sharing systems³⁴. The two story boxes below illustrate actual stories that occurred in remote villages where local villagers lack land and consequently caused conflicts with SOC located in the same area.

Tan Thanh and Thien Ky are the two communes of 'Zone-3' of Huu Lung district, Lang Son province. They are home to the 80% of Nung and Cao Lan ethnic minorities in the district. Poverty rate remains high (45% in Thien Ky and 21% in Tan Thanh). The two communes have large forestland areas; but most of forestland areas have been managed by Dong Bac Company (i.e. about 75% of the total land area of the two communes). Cultivable land accounts very small, i.e. only 0.7 ha/household in Thien Ky and 0.3 ha/household in Tan Thanh.

Conflicts over land between Dong Bac Company and individual households happen at every commune and villages. According to the Company, the total land area over-ridden by individual households is 17,095 hectares, i.e. about 78.3% of total land area currently managing by Company. In Cot Coi village, Tan Thanh commune where the Company manages 400 hectares; the area that is over-ridden by individual households are 272 hectares; and disputed land is about 70 hectares.

Story box 1: Land conflicts at Dong Bac Forestry Company, Lang Son province (CIRUM).

Almost all forestland areas of the Truong Son commune, Quang Ninh district, Quang Binh province have been managed by State-owned Company and Management Board for Protection Forest with more than 70,000 hectares (i.e. 96.4% of total land area of Truong Son commune). About 60% of the population in the area is Van Kieu ethnic minority. About 100 Van Kieu households in Khe Cat village have recorded seriously lack cultivable land. On average each family has 0.4 ha. In the village, more than 50% of the total families are not yet allocated with forestland. Poverty rate in most Van Kieu families is higher than 80%. Every year the Government has to provide rice.

Conflicts between State Company and local villagers happen in all 15 villages in the commune. According to Company, total disputed land is about 42 hectares and area of land acquisition is 20 hectares. In Truong Son commune, however, disputed land between Company and the Communal People's Committee is reported 164 hectares. This area used to be asked to return to the CPC but the Company still uses it to grow forest. In Khe Cat village, disputed land between households and Company is about 56 hectares. Villagers do not allow the Company to further growing forest after the Company's previous harvest on villagers' land. Villagers over-riding access to forestland near their houses to grow cassava.

Story box 2: Land conflicts between Long Dai company and villagers in Truong Son commune (RDPR).

The story boxes³⁵ provided contrasting information from the Company's perspective i.e. their lands are being over-ridden by local villagers. The nature of this is that it has rooted from fully lack of land resources and also land rights (access, use and management) for households so that villagers would have no choice other than pushed to use the land nearby for livelihoods. Regardless the district intends to pursue REDD or not, many forestland areas contain serious unresolved land disputes and that further questioning the current distribution of forestland resources and land rights issues for individual households. These local situations should alert authorities at all levels to seriously address land tenure in link to REDD.

The recent national reports on evaluating the status of implementing policies and laws in residential and cultivating lands for ethnic minorities in Vietnam, in the period from 2002-2008, nation-wide recorded 421,000 households without residential and cultivating land. And these figures were

³⁴ Page 2. An approach to Designing Pro-poor local REDD+ benefit distribution systems: lessons from Vietnam. A Enright, R McNally, T Sikor November 2012.

³⁵ Local situation 1: re-cited in CODE-VNFOREST-Forest Trends 'Quan ly, su dung dat cua Cong ty Lam nghiep va nguoi dan dia phuong' (January, 2013). Local situation 2: re-cited in CODE-VNFOREST-Forest Trends 'Quan ly, su dung dat cua Cong ty Lam nghiep va nguoi dan dia phuong' (January, 2013).

foreseen increase for the period from 2009-2011, already reached more than 347,000 cases³⁶. In the MONRE statistics, land acquisition increases with estimated tens of thousands cases annually³⁷. Conflicts between State forest enterprises and local villagers have also increased.

Equity examined from lack of local representation in the VN-REDD discussion

Observations have shown that discussion about the criteria for selecting the beneficiary unit did not indicate any representatives from local communes or villages. Design of BDS in Vietnam should not just be consulted with very few NGOs representatives³⁸. VN-REDD program appears to indicate little attention to issues concerning the lack of land and land rights faced by many smallholders³⁹. Issues are focusing more on who manages the Fund and how the funds are to be channelled⁴⁰. Vietnam REDD web-link appears not yet including land tenure issue as one of their seven REDD Technical Working groups⁴¹.

IV. Conclusion

REDD is an important initiative that the global community aimed to act upon reducing climate change impacts. It is also crucial to realize the challenges from practical contexts that are happening in Vietnam and Lao PDR. By contributing perspectives on challenges as well as identifying gaps in addressing equity in the BDS in the VN-REDD program, the essay hopes to call for more attention towards addressing forestland resources and land rights for small forest-dependent communities. Better inclusion of local voices especially at the village-scale should be attempted in every aspect of REDD program in Phase 2. It is very important to ensure equity and justice whilst meeting our moral dignity from this important initiative.

Word count: 3185 words.

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