

Too Much Focus on Forest Conservation, Too Little on Food

Nguyen Dinh Tien, Tran Duc Vien, and Nguyen Thanh Lam

Key message:

Proper attention needs to be given to livelihood improvement. Forest protection is an important objective, yet local livelihoods, particularly food security of local people, needs to be taken into account. The goal of forest protection may not be achieved otherwise.

Appropriate land and resource use planning is needed. It is necessary to plan areas of forest conservation and livelihood activities. Where food insecurity is a problem, it is important that local people can use the forestland for food production.

Introduction

For the last two decades, Vietnam has embarked on a radical policy shift to devolve forest management rights to local communities. The program, known as Forestland Allocation (FLA), aims not only to protect and rehabilitate existing forest areas but also to encourage upland communities to improve livelihoods through the use of forest resources. However, in practice, villagers receive very few benefits from forests while having to refrain from cultivating agricultural crops in forestland. In some cases, the FLA program focuses too much on environmental protection and conservation and provides little support to resource-poor local people to improve their livelihoods.

When the Government started allocating forestland, only barren land and plantations were allotted to households and individuals. However, recent policy changes have enabled the allocation of special use and protected forests as well. By the end of 2007, only 62% (8 million hectares) of total forestland had been allocated due to a lack of financial resources and because people were not always interested in receiving degraded or barren forest. The responsibility to protect natural forests thus seems to conflict with the objective of improving local livelihoods. This bottleneck is currently hampering forestland allocation policies. Many local people do not have opportunities to access forest resources even in areas with few livelihood opportunities, so poverty and livelihood improvement remain rarely mentioned in forestry plans.

This brief argues that if the villagers' forest management rights had been strengthened, food security issues could have been solved in these villages. We assert that although FLA has resulted in some positive effects for local people in some villages, food shortages are becoming more frequent at household levels, leading to food insecurity for many villagers. Our assertion is based on findings from two case studies in two poor villages (Bu village in Chau Khe commune and Que village in Binh Chuan commune of Con Cuong District, Nghe An Province) where local livelihoods were mainly based on income from swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture in forests. Data collection took place in 2005 and 2010.



Figure 1:
Location of the Study

Restrictions on Swidden Agriculture and Resulting Food Insecurity

Forestland allocation to households took place from 1999-2000 at both sites. The program affected the villagers' land management and swiddening practices. The total swidden area in both villages decreased after FLA. In Que village, the area was estimated at 92 hectares and 110 hectares for the periods before FLA (1991 and 1998 respectively). After FLA in 1999-2000, the area sharply decreased to 43 hectares in 2003 (of which only 16 hectares were reported to be cultivated annually). The remaining 27 hectares were left fallow for the next cycle. Due to the pressure of population growth, the local authorities allowed the expansion of the swidden area to 101 hectares in 2005 and the area has remained stable since then.

Similarly, access to upland fields by Bu villagers was restricted after FLA. The program started in 1999 and was completed in 2003. Earlier, local people had practiced swidden agriculture and although the total area for cultivation was around 150 hectares in 2005, it is currently only 81 hectares, of which only 7 hectares are cultivated, with the rest left fallow.

The decrease in swidden area was accompanied by the shortening of the fallow period. In 2003, the fallow period for swidden fields was five years while currently (2010) most households (85%) have to cultivate permanently on their fields.

As local livelihoods depend heavily on swidden agriculture (62-70% of local rice production), a decrease in swidden fields and the associated decreased rice production (Figure 2) has led to food insecurity in both villages. The total rice production in Bu village decreased significantly from 160 tons in 1991 to 30 tons in 2010. In Que village, rice production was around 100 tons per year during the periods 1991 and 1998. After FLA, rice production sharply decreased to around 80 tons in 2003 and increased to 110 tons in 2005. Due to drought and extreme weather in 2010, rice production in both villages decreased to less than 40 tons per year.

Households interviewed in both villages confirmed that they currently have less food than they had 10 years ago, mainly due to low swidden yield and reduced cultivated land. For example, less than 23% of interviewed households in Que village lacked rice in 2003 while this figure rose to 40% in 2010. Similarly, the number of Bu villagers suffering from rice deficit has increased since 1998. At present, around 20% of the interviewed households lack rice for more than five months a year and about 52% run short of rice for one to three months.



Box 1: Food Deficit in Que Village

Mrs. Lo Thi Tham in Que village says that in the past, her family had enough food for six people, but complained that 10 years after FLA, they lack food for about eight to nine months of the year due to insufficient land for cultivation and reduced yield from swidden agriculture. In her opinion, the reduced fallow time is the main cause of declining yields. Moreover, drought and extreme weather has also affected upland rice yields in recent years.



Lack of Alternative Income and Livelihood Sources

While local people had to refrain from swidden agriculture in both villages, their only choice was to produce rice through wet rice fields. Even so, the production of paddy rice was also limited due to the unavailability of suitable land and water supplies. In Que village, local people made efforts to adopt Rù'ng, Vu'ò'n, Ao, Chùông (RVAC) practices – fruit trees, gardens, fishponds and livestock. However, without sufficient land and water resources, they were unable to implement the RVAC model successfully.

In 2010, the total income of households in Bu and Que villages was VND11.7 million and VND13.9 million, respectively (equivalent to US\$585 and US\$695). The collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which was also an important part of local livelihoods in the past, has also declined in recent years due to restrictions imposed after FLA. In 2003, forest products were primarily collected for selling, especially Broom grass (*bông chít*) for making brooms, which played an important role (15% to 20%) in household incomes. The amount of NTFPs is decreasing due to the decline in the fallow area as a result of the restriction on swidden agriculture. As of 2010, forest products contributed only 4% of the total income in Bu village and 6% in Que village.

Other income sources for local people in both villages include livestock, plantation, and off-farm activities. Livestock production played a significant role in household income in the past. In the period 1999-2003, cattle were left to roam freely in the fields. On average, each household had four to five cattle. Livestock contributed approximately 50% of household incomes in both villages. After FLA, villagers had to cultivate fixed areas. To protect crops from livestock, cattle were not allowed to wander freely in the fields. With the lack of grassland for cattle-raising, the number of cattle has decreased. By 2010, livestock production contributed only about 18% to 29% of total household incomes in Bu and Que village, respectively.

Due to restrictions on swidden cultivation, and decreasing income from NTFPs and livestock, villagers have to engage in off-farm employment. Income from this source has been increasing in recent years, particularly in Bu village where the swidden area per household is very low. However, this work is unstable and the salaries are low as local people are considered unskilled. Interviewed households confirmed that even where income of a household is higher than the period before FLA, they still lack food, which was not the case in the past. They now have to buy rice from the market and cash is not always available.

Access to Support Services

To address the food insecurity problem, the Government has been providing rice for needy households in the two villages at 4 kilograms per head twice a year – during the Tet holiday and during the off-harvest season. However, according to villagers, this program only helps them address short-term problems and they have to wait for a long time to access food from this program.

After FLA, the Government introduced various programs for households, including agricultural expansion. However, these programs have not worked well so far, especially in Bu village, as the infrastructure is poor. Poor access to markets for agricultural products and high transportation costs are leading to the failure of agricultural extension efforts in Que and Bu villages.

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this brief indicates that when FLA focuses too much on the conservation of forest resources and pays little attention to the livelihoods of local people, life becomes difficult for forest-dependent people. This is especially true where alternative livelihoods are limited, market conditions are underdeveloped, and access to external support is poor.

In both villages discussed in this brief, it is obvious that FLA has not been able to improve the livelihoods of local people. In fact, the strict conservation policy has contributed to worsening food insecurity.

Findings from the two cases have important policy implications:

Livelihood improvement needs proper attention in the FLA program: The swidden area in both villages sharply decreased after FLA and while forest protection and development are important objectives, local livelihoods, particularly the food security of local people, need to be taken into account. Without this, the objectives of forest protection and development may not be realized in the long-term.

Appropriate land-/resource-use planning: Local people should be involved in deciding what area of forest should be conserved, cultivated, or set aside for other forest income-generating activities. In food-insecure areas, people need the possibility of using some forestland for the cultivation of food crops. This means that villagers and forest protection officials should conduct participatory forest management planning every three to five years, determining the amount and location of land for cultivation and amount/kind of timber products to be harvested.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the farmers in the study villages who were willing to collaborate and share their experiences. They also wish to thank the local officials, practitioners, and colleagues who have contributed a great deal to the completion of this policy brief. We particularly would like to thank Dr. Nguyen Quang Tan and Dr. Thomas Sikor for their constructive comments and support.

References

World Bank. (2008). *Forest Governance in Vietnam: A Review of the Current Situation and Recommendations for Reform*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank. (2010). *Forest Governance in Vietnam: A Review of the Current Situation and Recommendations for Reform*. Washington, DC: World Bank.



RECOFTC
PO Box 1111, Kasetsart Post Office
Bangkok 10903, Thailand
Tel: +66 (0)2 940 5700
Fax: +66 (0)2 561 4880
Email: info@recoftc.org
Website: www.recoftc.org



This brief is produced under the project entitled "Property Reforms and Forest Rights in Vietnam", implemented by RECOFTC – the Center for People and Forests and the School for International Development (DEV) at the University of East Anglia, with financial support from the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and can, under no circumstances, be regarded as reflecting the position of ESRC, RECOFTC, DEV or the organization(s) to which the authors are affiliated.