



Participatory Forest Land Allocation in Thanh Hoa

Introduction

Vietnam's forest lands are property of the state and have long been under centralized management. However, alarming rates of deforestation and forest degradation in the 1980s made it clear that the system in place lacked the resources for effectively protecting the country's vital forest areas. Gradually the important role of local people in forest management became recognized, which led to the adoption of a policy for allocating forest lands to households in 1994 (Decree 02 of the Land Law).

The rationale behind this policy was that access to forest lands and the rights to make productive use of the land and its natural resources would incentivize sustainable forest management, leading to increased forest cover and enhanced local livelihoods. Although the policy seemed promising, there have been difficulties in the implementation on the ground. Most of the country's production forests have officially been allocated to local households, but often plot delimitation remains unclear, leading to conflicts over user rights and ill-management of the forests.

Based on the shortcomings of the current system, the USAID Vietnam Forests and Deltas Program developed and tested a model for participatory forest land allocation in Thanh Hoa Province. The model focuses on securing land use rights and strong stakeholder engagement as a key means to improve forest management.

Engaging stakeholders

In Thanh Hoa province, over 40% of the population consists of forest-dependent ethnic minority groups, who are largely located in the poorer upland areas. Although deforestation has declined in the province as a whole, this has often happened at the expense of forest quality, due to hunting and unsustainable exploitation of high value non-timber and timber products. The USAID Vietnam Forests and Deltas Program set up a pilot in three upland villages in Trung Ly commune, Muong Lat district, to review the existing forest land allocation situation, in view of improving forest management and enhancing local livelihoods. In conjunction with provincial stakeholders and district and





local authorities, meetings were organized at village level. Efforts were undertaken to involve representatives from every household as well as other relevant stakeholders.

To ensure full stakeholder participation, the meetings were conducted in the local language and led by facilitators who were trained to actively engage everyone. Through open discussions, the participants identified the key land allocation and forest management issues, and brainstormed potential solutions. Many villagers explained that they did not know the limitations of their own plots and some had lost their 'red book', or land use rights certificate. Due to this, conflicts over who had the right to harvest timber and non-timber forest products were common.

To address these issues, it was decided to reallocate the forest lands in a transparent, equitable and participatory way. The villagers received training on the use of GPS devices, after which they went into the field to map out the forest area and clearly demarcate the new plots. Based on this activity, a land use proposal was developed and submitted to the district authority, who approved it and issued new user rights certificates to each of the households.

Towards sustainable forest management

Involving the villagers in all steps – from defining issues and plot demarcation to developing the new proposal – led to a high level of transparency and ownership of the forest land allocation process. Now all villagers are aware of their rights and obligations, which forms a strong basis for investing in sustainable forest management. The USAID Vietnam Forests and Deltas Program currently provides technical support and trainings to the households on managing their forest resources and improving returns on investments. We focus on sustainable forest-based livelihood models, such as agroforestry, harvesting non-timber forest products, bamboo cultivation and lac production, and support access to profitable markets.

The government of Muong Lat has signed an agreement to commit USD 500,000 towards upscaling the model at district level. Guidelines and training courses have been developed to enhance the capacity of district and commune authorities in implementing participatory forest land allocation activities and incentivize sustainable forest management.