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Forests and trees supporting rural livelihoods: Case studies from Myanmar and Viet Nam



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Forests and trees supporting rural livelihoods: Case studies from Myanmar and Viet Nam

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Photo cover:

Bắc Cạn Province, Viet Nam. Planted forests provide wood, fibre, fuel and non-wood forest products, which other land uses do not provide. They address industrial round wood demand, help communities raise their standard of living and sustain their livelihoods, ensure food security, and contribute to poverty alleviation, often in remote rural areas where no other employment opportunities exist.

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Summary and recommendations

Process. Myanmar and Viet Nam are partner countries of the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), an international partnership for community development between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and AgriCord. In October 2015, within the framework of FFF's capacity-building and learning programme, the FFF team in cooperation with the Vietnamese Farmers' Union (VNFU) and IUCN-Vietnam organized a study trip for 20 government officials, university staff and farmers from Myanmar to visit northern Viet Nam.

Survey. On the occasion of the study trip, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted with Burmese and Vietnamese farmers to ascertain the contribution of forests and trees to rural livelihoods and the protection of natural resources. This report is based on the results of the study trip and the survey. It contributes to Output 2.2.1 of Strategic Objective 2 of FAO and the major area of work Sustainable Food and Agriculture (MAW SFA) by supporting countries to analyse governance issues and options for sustainable agricultural production and natural resource management.

Political framework. In Myanmar and Viet Nam, the political framework is conducive to support for the allocation of forests to farm communities and private households, facilitation of community and farm forestry, and support for the establishment of community forestry user groups and enterprises.

Agriculture and forestry. The main crops planted in both countries are rice and maize. In Myanmar, most crops are used for subsistence purposes, in particular in Chin State. In Viet Nam, about two-thirds of planted crops are sold on the market. In the provinces covered by the survey the agricultural area available for each person was found to be four times larger in Myanmar than in Viet Nam, while the forest area per person was four times smaller. Accordingly, the results of the survey suggest that more than half of peoples' income in Myanmar originates from agriculture, whereas forestry supplies only 8 percent of total family income. Forests and trees are more significant for rural livelihoods in Viet Nam, where a larger proportion of family income originates from forestry, while agriculture supplies less than one-third.

Tree planting. In Myanmar, rural communities plant trees on both communal and individually owned forest land. The most preferred species for planting are hardwoods, namely Teak (*Tectona grandis*) and Pyinkado (*Xylia xylocarpa*), as well as some eucalypts (*Eucalyptus* spp.). Some communities also plant other fast-growing species (*Gmelina*, *Acacia*, *Cassia*). In Viet Nam, many communities possess individual land-use rights for forests in addition to communal woodlots. Farmers plant mainly fast-growing species (*Acacia* spp., *Magnolia conifera*, Bamboo, *Melia azedarach*, *Chukrasia tabularis*) and some trees that produce non-wood forest products (star anise, canarium nuts, cinnamon, styrax resin).

Firewood and NWFP. In both countries, rural communities use forests mainly as a source of firewood, collecting on average 5-6 m³/ha/year. Non-wood forest products (NWFP) gathered in forests are sold mainly on the market, in particular in Viet Nam, and contribute considerably to family income. Common products include honey, mushrooms, medicinal plants, rattan, orchids, resin and tiger grass for broom-making (*Thysanolaena*), and rattan and palm leaves for the manufacture of conical hats.

Environmental functions of forests. All communities in Myanmar and Viet Nam are aware of the protective and environmental functions of forests. They recognize that forests contribute to the

provision of fresh and clean drinking water, fresh air, good microclimates, carbon sequestration, soil protection, the continuous flow of spring water, protection against natural disasters, storms and flooding, and protection against seawater intrusion.

Community needs. The following types of support are needed by communities to increase the contribution of forests and trees to rural livelihoods. In order of importance:

1. Financial support through small grants or subsidies to invest in plantation establishment, silviculture, harvesting and wood processing. This is by far the highest priority in Viet Nam.
2. Technical support and training to raise seedlings, plant trees and harvest wood products including study visits to learn from successful land-use models. This priority is of particular importance in Myanmar.
3. Building of roads and infrastructure to reduce the transport distance to timber markets and improve market access for the marketing of products.

1. Introduction

Myanmar and Viet Nam are among the partner countries of the Forest and Farm Facility⁶ (FFF), an international partnership for community development launched in September 2012 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). FFF supports forest and farm producer groups in business training through the establishment and development of forest resources and sustainable wood production schemes under the guidance of national working groups on community forestry (CFNWG). In October 2015, within the framework of FFF's capacity-building and learning programme, the FFF team in cooperation with the Vietnamese Farmers' Union (VNFU) and IUCN-Vietnam organized a study trip for 20 government officials, university staff and farmers from Myanmar to visit northern Viet Nam (Figure 1). The Vietnamese Farmer's Union is the representative organization of Vietnamese farmers from all agriculture sectors. Established in 1930, it currently has more than 10 million members.



Figure 1. The study group in front of the Vietnamese Farmers' Union Headquarters in Hanoi

The study trip programme was designed to help the participants learn from the experience and expertise of Vietnamese farmers in the areas of forestry, agriculture and agroforestry, and to help forest and farm producers from Myanmar improve their livelihoods by showcasing successful examples of business-oriented forestry and agroforestry land use for commercial and subsistence purposes. On the occasion of the study trip, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted with Burmese and Vietnamese farmers to ascertain the contribution of forests and trees to rural livelihoods and the protection of natural resources. This report is based on the results of the study trip and the survey.

⁶ For more details see www.fao.org/partnerships/forest-farm-facility/en/.

2. Methodology and data quality

Questionnaires produced in both the Burmese and Vietnamese languages were distributed to farm producer groups before, during and after the study visit. The four-page questionnaire used quantitative, numerical and open narrative questions to facilitate data collection on the following four areas: (i) the population in the surveyed communities; (ii) general living conditions; (iii) the contribution of forests, trees and agriculture to rural livelihoods; and (iv) the type of support farmers would need to enhance those contributions.

The questionnaires gathered data from ten Burmese communities in the mountainous Chin State (3), Rakhine State (3), Shan State (2), Magway Region (1) and the Ayeyarwady Region (1) occupying the delta region of the Ayeyarwady River west of Yangon. In Northern Viet Nam, data were collected from eight communities in Yen Bai (2), Bac Kan (4) and Phu Tho (2) provinces, all of which account for a large share of forest land. In addition, two communities were surveyed in the densely forested, mountainous A Luoi District in Thua Thien Hue Province, central Viet Nam. The majority of this district (88 percent) is covered by forest land.

The questionnaire was developed in English and subsequently translated into the Burmese and Vietnamese languages. After the farm communities had completed the questionnaires they were re-translated into English for a comparative analysis and evaluation. It is possible that this twofold translation process may have affected the quality of data. In an effort to address this issue, the information presented in the report underwent a data validation and plausibility check. It should also be noted that the farm communities selected for the survey represent a non-random sample and originate from regions in Myanmar and Viet Nam with particular resource endowments. Accordingly, efforts to compare natural conditions across the surveyed communities may be limited.

3. The political framework of community forestry in Myanmar and Viet Nam

In both countries, the political framework is conducive to support for the allocation of forests to farm communities and private households, facilitation of community and farm forestry, and support for the establishment of community forestry user groups and enterprises.

3.1 Myanmar

Although all forest land in Myanmar is state-owned, the Forest Law of 1992 and Myanmar Forest Policy and the Community Forestry Instructions (CFI), published in 1995, set targets for community participation in forest management and provide the conceptual foundation for about 600 community forest management agreements (Macqueen, 2013). Macqueen reports that the intention to promote community forestry originated from fears over future timber supply and the consequent need to create incentives for forest restoration.

In this context, the Myanmar Environment Rehabilitation-Conservation Network (MERN), a local environmental NGO, has put forward a set of civil society recommendations supporting the government's 2001 Forest Master Plan target to establish about 900,000 ha under community forest management by 2030. The Master Plan also aims to source 4.13 million cubic metres of fuelwood from community forests by 2030, which is equivalent to 25 percent of Myanmar's total fuelwood

requirement. As a consequence of the CFI, more than 700 forest user groups (FUGs) had been registered in Myanmar covering more than 40,000 ha of forest area (Macqueen, 2013).

This approach is supported by the establishment of the Community Forestry Unit under the Forest Department and the formation of the Community Forestry National Working Group (CFNWG) in 2013, which is supported and facilitated by the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre (RECOFTC) and FAO's Forest and Farm Facility. The CFNWG is a national multi-sectoral working group that consists of representatives from different government departments, national and international civil society organizations, and the private sector.

3.2 Viet Nam

In Viet Nam, forested areas cover 13.95 million ha (2013) and are home to more than 25 million people, including nearly 12 million people of ethnic minority groups (Dien, 2015). The economic reforms initiated in Viet Nam in 1986 with the goal of creating a “socialist-oriented market economy” (*doi-moi*) triggered the passing of new forest and land laws and initiated the devolution of forest use and management rights to non-state actors. Over subsequent years, the area of forest land allocated to rural households has expanded from almost zero to 3.51 million ha, accounting for 26 percent of the total forest area (MARD, 2011).

The Vietnam Forest Development Strategy 2006-2020 (VFDS) seeks to further promote socialization of the forest sector, encouraging non-state actor tenure and resource access. In this context, community forestry is a promising development of particular importance, especially in ethnic minority areas. Initially, donors were the main supporters of such projects; however, from 2006 to 2009, with financial support from the Trust Fund for Forests (TFF), the Department of Forestry has implemented a National Pilot Programme⁷ for community forestry in 40 communes located in ten provinces. In general, smallholder plantings established under this pilot programme are reported to have made a huge positive contribution to rural poor and ethnic minorities, transforming many denuded and barren hills in northern and central Viet Nam into productive forest land (Carle, 2015).

The Land Law 2013 secures household tenure over forest land for 50 years and includes the option of a possible extension after that period. In addition, the government provides forest growers with subsidies (VND 400,000/ha/yr, equivalent to USD 20/ha/yr) to cover forest management and protection costs, including the production of seedlings, labour and tending measures for the establishment of production forests.⁸ Decree No. 75/2015/ND-CP facilitates access to low interest loans for households investing in forest plantations and non-timber product development within 20 years based on tree rotation cycles.

⁷ Based on Decision No. 1641/QĐ/BNN-HTQT of 5 June 2006, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), Decision No. 106/2006/QĐ-BNN of 27 November 2006, MARD, and MARD Circular No. 38/2007/TT-BTT dated 25 April 2007 entitled “Guidance on processes and procedures of the forest allocation, lease and reallocation to organizations, households, individuals and communities”.

⁸ According to Decree No. 75/2015/ND-CP dated 9 September 2015 on the “Mechanism and policy of forest development associated with the policy on sustainable and rapid poverty reduction and assistance to ethnic minorities for the period of 2015–2020”.

4. Results of the survey

4.1 General living conditions

In Myanmar, the size of communities living in agricultural and forestry areas is, on average, considerably larger than in Viet Nam (see Table 1). The main crops planted on agricultural land in Myanmar and Viet Nam are rice and maize. However, farmers in Myanmar also grow peanuts, peas, beans, coffee, sugarcane and tomatoes. The share of crops sold at market in Myanmar amounts to only 36 percent, on average, while in smaller communities in Chin State (with an average population of 32,000) crops are planted for subsistence purposes only and no crops are sold at market. In Viet Nam, the share of crops sold at market is considerably higher at 64 percent.

The agricultural area available for each person in Myanmar is four times larger than in Viet Nam (0.41 ha/person compared to 0.10 ha), while the forest area per person is four times smaller (0.51 ha/person compared to 2.27 ha). Consequently, more than a half (55 percent) of peoples' income in Myanmar originates from agriculture, whereas forestry supplies only 8 percent of total family income. About two-thirds (64 percent) of crops are used for subsistence purposes, while slightly more than one-third are sold at market. While agriculture plays a significant role in family income, only a little more than half (57 percent) of community members have land titles for their agricultural fields, compared to almost all community members in Viet Nam (97 percent).

Table 1. Key parameters specifying general living conditions in the surveyed communities (mean values)

Parameter	Myanmar (n=10)	Viet Nam (n=10)
Community population	111 400	673
Crops planted on agricultural land	Rice, maize, peanuts, peas, beans, coffee, sugarcane, tomatoes	Rice, maize, tea, cassava
Agricultural sector		
Agricultural area in the community (ha)	45 100	67.5
Agricultural area available for each person (ha)	0.41	0.10
Share of community members with land titles for agricultural fields (%)	57	97
Share of crops sold in the market (%)	36	64
Forestry sector		
Total forest area in the community (ha)	57 100	1 531
Forest area available for each person (ha)	0.51	2.27
Share of community members with land titles for their forests or woodlots (%)	27	61
Sources of income		
Percentage of population with a paid job (%)	38	11
Contribution of sectors to total income (%)		
Agriculture	55	27
Forestry	8	38
Animal husbandry	10	12
Aquaculture	9	9
Paid jobs	11	12
Other	7	2

In Viet Nam, forests and trees are more significant for rural livelihoods than in Myanmar. The forest area available for each person amounts to 2.27 ha and many community members possess land

titles for forests and wood lots (61 percent). Forest areas that have not yet been allocated to communities (39 percent) are subject to particular user rights of state forestry companies or state forest management boards, which are expected to manage these forests for special use and protection purposes.

The bulk of family income (38 percent) originates from forestry with agriculture supplying less than one-third (27 percent). In Viet Nam, the majority of the population are able to make a living from agricultural and forestry land use, with only 11 percent pursuing paid work. The latter share is considerably higher in Myanmar at 38 percent.

However, in both Myanmar and Viet Nam agriculture and forestry are important sources of income that secure livelihoods for rural families. Agricultural land is fragmented into relatively small pieces of land (0.1-0.4 ha), which are available on a per person basis. This emphasizes the need for close collaboration between individual farmers, households and communities to achieve better economies of scale.

4.2 The significance of forests and trees for the community

In Myanmar, communal forests and individually owned woodlots are found in seven out of ten communities. In all cases, trees are planted on both communal and individually owned forest land. The most preferred species for planting are hardwoods, namely Teak (*Tectona grandis*) and Pyinkado (*Xylia xylocarpa*), and eucalypts (*Eucalyptus* spp.). Some communities also plant other fast-growing species (*Gmelina*, *Acacia*, *Cassia*). Only three out of ten communities have established forest nurseries. Most seedlings, in particular those of hardwood species, are provided by state forestry departments. Most communities indicated that they obtained seedlings free of charge, while others reported paying the forestry department for seedlings.

The communities in Myanmar use forests mainly as a source of firewood and non-wood forest products. All but one community in Shan state collect firewood in the forest for cooking and heating. They collect 4.5 tonnes of firewood per year and per household, which corresponds to approximately 6 cubic metres of stacked wood of which 24 percent is sold at market, in particular in Chin State. In Shan State, Magway Region and Ayeyarwady Region, communities use firewood for subsistence purposes only and do not sell at market.

The use of forests as a source of construction timber is not significant. The communities in Myanmar cut on average 20 trees/year to produce construction timber of which 30 percent is sold at market. This number appears very low in view of the number of people living in these communities.

All ten surveyed communities collect non-wood forest products (NWFP) including honey, mushrooms, medicinal plants, rattan, orchids and resin of one-third is sold (33 percent) at market. Most communities (seven out of ten) use forest land for hunting wild pig, deer, wild chicken, rabbits and monkeys. The majority of hunted animals are used for subsistence purposes, with only 7 percent on average sold at market.

In Viet Nam, many communities possess individual land-use rights for forests, in addition to some communal woodlots. In the eight communes surveyed in northern Viet Nam, forests and woodlots are planted forests where farmers raise mainly fast-growing species (*Acacia* spp, *Magnolia conifera*, Bamboo, *Melia azedarach* and *Chukrasia tabularis* in order of importance), as well as some trees that produce non-wood forest products (star anise, canarium nuts, cinnamon, styrax resin). The communal forests in the two surveyed communes of central Viet Nam are mainly degraded remnants of natural forests where farmers plant rattan as a non-wood forest product.

The farmers generally have a good comprehension of the management potential and opportunities of established forest stands. They prefer fast-growing species as they “need money fast” and cannot afford to wait long periods for the income from timber sales. They consider *Acacia* spp. a short rotation species for the production of construction timber, pulpwood and mining poles.

The tree seedlings are provided free of charge by state forest companies, donor-supported projects or are grown in farmer-owned nurseries. In some communities, private nurseries produce forest trees that are paid for by the farmers.

As in Myanmar, the use of forests as a source of construction timber is not significant. The communities report cutting 5-10 trees/ha/year for construction timber, the majority of which (61 percent) is sold at market. However, all communities use forests for collecting firewood and NWFPs. The volume of firewood collected varies significantly from 1 m³ to 20 m³/ha/year with a mean value of 5 m³/ha/year. While three communities sell between 20-70 percent of collected firewood at market, the rest use the majority of the firewood for subsistence purposes.

All ten surveyed communities in Viet Nam collect NWFPs including honey, medicinal plants, mushrooms, tiger grass for broom-making (*Thysanolaena*), and rattan and palm leaves for the manufacture of conical hats. Most of these NWFPs (50-100 percent) are sold at market. Unlike Myanmar, farmers do not hunt in Viet Nam as the practice is forbidden by law.

In both countries, all communities are aware of the protective and environmental functions of forests. They confirm that forests contribute to the provision of fresh and clean drinking water, fresh air, good microclimates, carbon sequestration, soil protection, continuous flow of spring water, protection against natural disasters, storms and flooding, and protection against seawater intrusion.

4.3 What the communities need to increase the contribution of forests to rural livelihoods

In the last open question of the questionnaire, the farm communities were asked to identify the type of support they would need to increase the contribution of forests and trees to their livelihoods. Most communities provided a number of answers that were arranged according to ten categories (see Table 2).

Table 2. Type of support the communities would need to increase the contribution of forests to rural livelihoods (in decreasing order of importance according to the total percentage)

Type of support needed	Myanmar % (n=10)	Viet Nam % (n=10)	Total % (n=20)
1. Financial support (e.g. through small grants or subsidies) to invest in plantation establishment, silviculture, harvesting and wood processing	80	90	8
2. Technical support and training to raise seedlings, plant trees and harvest wood products including study visits to learn from successful models	90	50	70
3. Building of roads and infrastructure to improve market access for product marketing	60	50	55
4. Support of the protective functions of forests, including payment for environmental services (PES) and reduction in deforestation to maintain/increase forest areas	40	60	50
5. Training to develop income-generating activities and product marketing including information on market prices	50	10	30
6. Support for production and marketing of non-wood forest products	30	–	15
7. Reform of land ownership to secure land tenure	30	–	15
8. Better cooperation with government authorities and neighbouring communities	20	–	10
9. Sustainable supply of seedlings	–	20	10
10. Improvement of the agricultural extension service	20	–	10

Most communities reported that they would need financial support through small grants or subsidies to invest in plantation establishment, silviculture, harvesting and wood processing. This is by far the highest priority in Viet Nam. The second-ranked preference was technical support and training to raise seedlings, plant trees and harvest wood products including study visits to learn from successful land-use models. This priority was particularly pronounced in Myanmar.

The third-ranked priority was reported to be the building of roads and infrastructure to improve market access for product marketing. Plantation sites often have only limited or no access roads, while transport distances to the timber markets are significant. The transportation of logs to the nearest access road is therefore very labour intensive and time consuming. The lack of an adequate road network thus results in high transaction costs and represents a significant obstacle to timely silviculture operations. In addition, forest roads facilitate forest protection against fire, diseases and encroachment.

In this context, it is noteworthy that half of the communities assign a high significance to supporting the protective functions of forests, including the establishment of payment schemes for environmental services and the conservation or increase of the available forest area.

Although farmers are in general knowledgeable about the management potential and opportunities of established forest stands, they lack knowledge about timber markets, transport options and prices. This priority was assigned medium significance in Myanmar, but is less important in Viet Nam.

The communities assigned only minor importance to support for the production and marketing of NWFPs, the reform of land ownership to secure land tenure, better cooperation with government authorities and neighbouring communities, a sustainable supply of seedlings and the strengthening of an agricultural extension service.

One community also expressed a wish for reallocating forest land from state forest enterprises to local households. In this context, it should be mentioned that state forest enterprises have been prioritized in the allocation of land use rights. About 2.2 million of forest land has been allocated to 148 state forest enterprises (To Xuan Phuc and Tran Huu Nghi, 2015). Some rural communities claim that certain forest areas allocated to state forest enterprises are poorly managed, while local communities lack suitable land for agro-forestry production systems to meet their livelihood needs. The ongoing restructuring programme in the forestry sector is trying to address this issue.

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