Participating in curriculum development: Some experiences from five years of SFSP

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The Development Objective of SFSP is to establish social forestry, "in order to have a more effective management of forest lands and renewable natural resources to upgrade the living standards of rural people" (SFSP, 1997). This direction is provided by the Vietnam government, especially through the current elaboration of the Forest Development Strategy (2001-10) (MARD, 2000). SFSP contributes to the effective transition from state-directed protection and exploitation of forests to local level and people-centered forest land management, through the development of social forestry approaches and training activities. Before 1990, Vietnamese State forestry was based mainly on the functions of a network of more than 400 State-owned forestry enterprises. Since 1990, it has been developing in the direction of decentralisation of management to individuals, economic institutions and communities. Forestry has shifted from being based mainly upon timber-exploitation and a forest-use model to one that makes use of different forest products, afforestation, and agro-forestry development as its main activities. At the same time, forest management is shifting from state organisations to farmers. Households are becoming the main forest owners, with an increasing emphasis on enhancement of livelihoods of rural dwellers. Biodiversity conservation has also become a critical issue.

Human resource development and capacity building will undoubtedly play a key role in the Vietnamese forestry sector over the next ten years, in order to address the quantitative and qualitative shortage in the human resource base. In particular, capacity building will be necessary to support the development and implementation of an integrated system of demand-driven research, technology development, extension, education and training.

Following this trend, the objective of the second phase of SFSP (1997-2001) is to develop an effective forestry training capacity which is responsive to the demands of implementing sustainable and participatory forest land management.

In order to support the achievement of this objective by the Working Partners, three key basic principles are recognised: participation, diversity and flexibility. These principles underpin the three specific objectives of SFSP: human resources development, generation of knowledge and information exchange.

The Vietnamese government has recognised that major renovation of the national education system is necessary at all levels; this is reflected in the new Education Law (MoET, 1999) and in a subsequent Governmental Decree which regulates and guides the implementation of some articles of the law (MoET, 2000). Increasing attention is now being paid to many different aspects of the planning and delivery of education and training in all sectors. Curriculum development and the methodology of teaching and learning are seen as critical aspects of this educational renovation process, and so these are also key areas of focus for SFSP.
Recent experiences in forestry education and training, and some key outcomes of a major workshop on Learning and Change in Forestry Education, held in Sa Pa, Vietnam in 2000, suggest that the following perceptions are widely held:

- There is an increasing concern about the lack of relevance and effectiveness of forestry education and training, partly because of a shift in the nature of the forestry profession, and emerging needs and requirements of different beneficiaries.
- Many organisations are paying more attention to the quality of the education programs they offer, in terms of process and outcomes.
- Curriculum development is recognised as a critical element in the success of forestry education.
- Current curriculum development approaches do not seem to lead to effective learning in forestry education.
- Curriculum development and organisational development are strongly interlinked; one cannot be addressed without addressing the other.
- Curriculum development is more likely to be effective if it is undertaken using a participatory approach, a belief which stems from successful experiences of participatory approaches used more widely in rural development, such as PRA/PLA, PTD, etc. Rather than a list of content, curriculum development is a continuous process which aims at guiding all the learning which takes place within a given programme of education or training.

What do we mean by participatory curriculum development?

A participatory curriculum development approach (PCD) aims to develop a curriculum from the interchanges of experience and information between the various stakeholders in an education and training programme. Building on lessons learned from field-based practice, a critical element of PCD is the identification of stakeholders, who may include educationalists, researchers, policy makers, extensionists, foresters and farmers.

Rather than belonging to a small select group of experts, PCD involves a wide range of stakeholders in a meaningful way, drawing upon their experience and insights in a structured approach to curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation (Taylor, 2000). They may contribute to identifying needs for training, setting aims and learning objectives, development of the subject matter being taught, and also participate in delivery and evaluation of the curriculum.

The PCD Process in SFSP

A conscious effort has been made in the SFSP to avoid the temptation of a "quick-fix" adoption of ready-made curricula developed in other contexts. A key focus in SFSP has been support to the building of local capacity in curriculum development. Over the last five years, a wide range of events have taken place, related to the PCD process. (see the PCD timeline below).

The PCD process began in August 1996 at Xuan Mai with an awareness raising workshop. This included an introduction to the concepts of PCD, and a first stakeholder analysis, performed by a small team who were managing the curriculum development process. It involved the identification of key stakeholders, an assessment of their interests, and the way in which these interests were likely to affect the curriculum development process. This helped to identify appropriate forms of stakeholder participation. The stakeholder analysis also estimated the degree of importance (the priority given to satisfying stakeholders' needs and interests through curriculum development and subsequent training in order for it to be successful) and influence (the power and the extent to which people, groups or organisations are able to persuade or force others into making decisions and taking action) of each stakeholder within the PCD process. Finally, a stakeholder participation matrix was developed where different stakeholders were allocated potential roles and responsibilities. Once this participation matrix had been prepared it was possible to begin planning the different stages of the PCD process. Teachers of Xuan Mai Forestry University then proceeded to develop several subjects using the PCD approach, in line with the changing concept of the "future forester", a person who would need to encompass not only the qualities of technician and manager, but also those of trainer and facilitator (Dang Kim Vui, Dinh Duc Thuan, Hoang Huu Cai and P. Taylor (in press)).
This same "start-up" approach has been refined and adapted for use with other members of the Social Forestry Training Network in Vietnam (as well as with forestry education institutions in China and Cambodia).

From early 1998 to mid-1999, with the expansion of SFSP, a considerable amount of training was provided to the new WPIs. In parallel with this training, each university began to revise and develop curricula with continuous support from SFSP. This process often included a workshop at university level to which a wide range of stakeholders were invited. Most importantly, these workshops were in line with a requirement of the Ministry of Education and Training for each university to review the professional component of its degree courses. A summary of the main areas of training and support to PCD provided within SFSP is presented in the following table.

### Encouraging a collaborative approach.

One drawback observed during 1998-99 was the tendency for each university faculty to develop its own curriculum and teaching materials in isolation, even in basic subjects such as "Introductory Social Forestry". It was agreed between SFSP partners, that it was important to promote a greater degree of collaboration, both in learning about PCD and in applying what had been learned through joint production of educational products (curriculum frameworks, learning materials, detailed content in workbooks, etc.). There were several reasons for this. Firstly, it was clear that many of the concepts and principles were so fundamental that they should be included in the curriculum of each university. Secondly, collaboration could provide an opportunity for stakeholder views and inputs gathered by each WPI through TNAs, field research, workshops and other events to feed into the overall curriculum development process. Thirdly, as a response to the scarcity of experienced social forestry teachers in some universities, collaboration would enhance the sharing of critical human resources.

### PCD training and support provided to WPIs during SFSP:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Training in...</th>
<th>Support provided to...</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Basic concepts and methods in PCD</td>
<td>- Training needs assessments</td>
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<td>- Institutional curriculum development through stake</td>
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<td>- Curriculum evaluation</td>
<td>- PCD collaboration: subject holder participation groups develop, implement and evaluate social forestry curricula jointly</td>
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<td>- Short course development</td>
<td>- Setting objectives in curriculum design</td>
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<td>- Setting objectives in curriculum design</td>
<td>- Learning materials development</td>
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<td>- Learning materials production</td>
<td>- Facilitation skills for rural development</td>
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Universities have been developing and revising curricula with continuous support from SFSP. Photo: SU
During the period 1999-2001, seven subjects have been identified for collaborative curriculum development:

- Introductory social forestry
- Agriculture and forestry extension
- Social forestry project management
- Agroforestry
- Forest planning and management
- Biodiversity conservation
- Non-timber forest products

Of these, the first four have been developed, taught, and are now being evaluated. The others are currently being developed.

Improving the delivery of the curriculum through teaching and learning methods

Another strand of activities within SFSP was support to the development of participatory strategies for teaching and learning, ensuring that the PCD process extended also into the curriculum implementation phase. One major need identified was for teachers and trainers to use more learner-centred teaching methods. Teachers have received training and support in the use of learner-centred teaching methodologies such as group work, visualisation, making presentations, and using case studies and role plays. Learning how to use such methods and actually applying them are two different things, however. Some teachers said that they found it difficult to introduce these alternative methods due to large class sizes, poor facilities and unwillingness by students to cooperate in a style of teaching and learning which might reduce the amount of content dealt with in a lesson. In many cases, however, confidence of the teacher was the most critical factor, and there was a clear need for concentrated, classroom-based follow-up support to teachers as they began to develop and utilise learner-centred teaching methods. Recently, a programme of classroom observation has been initiated, and this will soon be followed by the establishment of teacher “quality groups”, who will provide critical but non-threatening support to innovative practices in the classroom.

Developing learning materials

A second important need for university forestry teachers was the capacity to develop and effectively utilise appropriate teaching and learning materials. A participatory approach was adopted within SFSP for the development of a range of teaching and learning materials which have, until recently, mainly taken the form of rather rigid “text-books”, often outdated since their revision had been time-consuming and subject to a costly complex bureaucratic process. Examples of innovative learning materials now being produced include teaching notes, case studies, project outlines, guidebooks and manuals, all of which will need to be used in combination with alternative strategies for teaching and learning. The intention is to encourage collaboration...
by teachers from different universities and external persons who have relevant academic and practical experience in specific subject areas in the production of these materials. In certain cases, support has also been given by SFSP to improve teaching facilities which will enable teachers to introduce new methods and materials more easily and effectively.

Monitoring and evaluation for PCD

Evaluating educational change is never easy, especially when it comes to setting and verifying indicators which aim to measure impact. In the past, curriculum evaluation at the universities has usually meant reviewing a textbook and suggesting amendments. SFSP has provided training in a systematic approach to curriculum evaluation, using the CIPP (context, input, process and product) approach. Once again, a range of stakeholders such as teachers from different universities, past and present students, and field staff have been involved. Results of the first evaluations carried out were used to feed back into the curriculum development process. This feedback, coupled with the elaboration of a system of participatory impact evaluation which monitors qualitative changes and improvements, as well as quantitative results, should contribute to the creation of a dynamic and open-ended system of educational improvement. An initial set of criteria and indicators has been developed, and this will continue to evolve over the coming months.

Lessons learned from using PCD in SFSP

A sustainable improvement in the quality of education is, potentially, a major benefit from the PCD approach. In Vietnam, PCD has provided a means for intervention at both organisational and individual level. During a "PCD reflection retreat" at Tam Dao in February 2001, a number of beneficial outcomes of PCD were highlighted. These included:

- new or revised workbooks
- sets of learning materials
- some application of learner-centred teaching methods
- draft evaluation system for curricula
- a dynamic and continuous system of curriculum development.
- increased capacity of teachers to develop and teach social forestry training programmes
- interest from other organisations and requests for consultancy support from university teachers.

Although there are benefits, PCD does place an increased demand on time and other resources compared with more traditional, systematic approaches to curriculum development. Many stakeholders are separated geographically and communication is difficult, sometimes because of technical difficulties, and sometimes because of insufficient incentives to share and exchange information. Another limitation is the difficulty of maintaining the interest and commitment of different stakeholders, and the adverse impact caused by personnel experienced in PCD moving on to other unrelated institutions or positions. Some course developers may feel quite genuinely that they can do their job well without engaging with other stakeholders, while farmers may feel that developing training courses is something best left completely to the "experts". Building partnerships which are based not only on a range of stakeholders, but also have adequate representation from each group of stakeholders (some of which, like farmers, are very diverse), is often a difficult task. It is also not easy to ensure that teachers not only learn from the field, but integrate what they learn into the curriculum. These limitations and constraints have potentially serious implications. If a PCD approach is only possible when time and resources, both human and financial, are virtually unlimited, then it will become unsustainable, and hence have little applicability in most contexts. Attempts have been made in SFSP, therefore, to respond to the constraints and limitations described above. Three strategies in particular are worthy of mention.

a) Building capacity in application of PCD methods and approaches

Human resource development has been a key element of the programme and, in order to build up institutional capacity in university forestry faculties, an effort has been made to work with the core teams of teachers over an extended period of time. Training has been provided in the development of HRD strategies which have a foundation in institutional realities, rather than basing them on false optimism about what individuals may be able to achieve alone. Teachers have been made aware of the PCD approach, and then provided with concrete training in basic knowledge and skills in the PCD process. Considerable attention has also been paid to attitudinal development.
b) Managing stakeholder involvement

In order to increase the chance of institutionalising the PCD approach, stakeholder involvement has been encouraged from many different levels of the WPIs and other organisations, leading to a wide awareness of the PCD process and identification of key resource persons. Overall, stakeholder participation has been high, although there is still some improvement to be made in the implementation and evaluation steps. Increased stakeholder involvement has sometimes resulted in the introduction of different agendas and interests which may actually reduce efficiency or effectiveness. An effort has often been made in SFSP activities to ensure that stakeholder expectations are clarified at the beginning of any engagement. Not all hidden agendas are revealed, but a real effort is made to ensure that discussions are as open as possible. Activities are also monitored and evaluated in an attempt to gauge whether these expectations have been met.

Certain Vietnamese stakeholders have proved more difficult to engage with than others, especially those at a higher level in the system, for example from Ministries, or senior managers in universities. Engaging with policy-related stakeholders is critical. In general in Vietnam, national government policy (for example education and forestry policy) is seen as supportive by universities, thus enabling the development of forestry education programmes. Policy can change, however, and there is a need to ensure a continued match between the PCD approach and the policy environment. This may necessitate shifts in the overall PCD strategy, but also universities may have an important advocacy role in influencing the development of relevant policy, especially as they become more involved in field-based research which yields reliable and quality data and information.

c) Strategies for planning & evaluation

An important aspect of SFSP has been to encourage sensible and realistic planning by the WPIs, particularly in regard to available resources. Much of this planning has been participatory and process-led. As a result, the "version" of PCD that has emerged does seem to be well suited to the cultural environment of Vietnamese universities. This could be one of the most important reasons why PCD will continue to adapt and evolve successfully over the coming years.

Future PCD activities in SFSP

Although continuity of external support can never be guaranteed, it is likely that SFSP will continue supporting the development of forestry education and training in Vietnam, and that PCD will continue to be an important approach. There has been interest from other institutions in the South East Asia (SEA) region in introducing PCD, and first steps have begun in China and Cambodia. Close links with RECOFTC (Regional Community Forestry Training Centre) and SEANAFE (SEA Network for Agroforestry Education) have been particularly useful in establishing regional linkages. The most important focus is still, of course, the Vietnamese context, and so a number of activities are already planned for 2001 and 2002. The most significant events (although many additional PCD-related activities will also be carried out by the WPIs) are as follows:

Activity flow for main education and training related activities in SFSP 2001 - 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Description</th>
<th>Expected Results</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Workshop to evaluate 3 subjects</td>
<td>• Agreed set of revisions to be made for 3 collaborative subjects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Draft set of principles/criteria and indicators as basis for education M&amp;E system</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Agreement on strategy to address improvement of application of LCTM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Develop M&amp;E system for education and training</td>
<td>• Universities test out first version of M&amp;E system</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. LCTM</td>
<td>• Teachers of forestry faculties develop and apply LCTM and problem-based learning approaches with large and small sized classes</td>
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<td>4. Editorial revision of 3 workbooks</td>
<td>• 3 workbooks are revised, according to recommendations from the evaluation process.</td>
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### References


| 5. Workshop to continue development of 3 new collaborative subjects, and follow-up curriculum development                                                                                       | - Layout is improved, incorporating illustrations.  
|                                                                                                                         | - Detailed curriculum frameworks for 3 new subjects are agreed.  
|                                                                                                                         | - Main content is elaborated  
|                                                                                                                         | - Teaching and learning materials are identified and first drafts agreed upon |
| 6. SFTN workshop, to discuss:                                                                                                                                       | - Findings of initial testing of M&E system are shared  
| - M&E system                                                                                                                                  | - M&E system is revised and agreed upon by each university  
| - SFTN setup                                                                                                                                            | - Participants agree on the initial concept of the SFTN  
| - Local networking                                                                                                                                   | - Each university outlines its first concept of a local network, including stakeholder analysis  
| - Preparation for PCD dissemination workshop, 2002                                                                                                  | - Initial concept note for PCD DW  
| 7. Annual PCD review workshop                                                                                                                                  | - PCD process and products during 2001 is reviewed  
|                                                                                                                         | - Action plan for PCD in 2002 is agreed  
|                                                                                                                         | - Plan is made for Organisation of writeshop |
| 8. Writeshop                                                                                                                                                | - Production of 3 good quality workbooks, with revised text, illustration and layout.  
| 9. PCD Dissemination workshop                                                                                                                                 | - Experience of PCD in SFSP shared with a wider audience from Vietnam and the region  
|                                                                                                                         | - Information product (publication?)  
| 10. Annual PCD review workshop                                                                                                                                  | - PCD process and products during 2002/SFSP2 is reviewed  
|                                                                                                                         | - Action plan for PCD in 2003 is agreed (if required) |