For the Future: Building Capacity for
Community Forestry in Vietnam (FN 1)

A consultancy report to the Regional Community
Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC)

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Introduction

This report provides an overview of training capacities and needs for social forestry (FN 2) in Vietnam, and offers recommendations about how RECOFTC could support and strengthen training for social forestry in Vietnam. The report incorporates information from RECOFTC experience in Vietnam and from interviews with selected policy and program leaders involved with social forestry in Vietnam. Interviews were conducted in early February 1998 by Bob Fisher, RECOFTC Program Development Director, and Doug Henderson, a consultant to RECOFTC. Individuals interviewed are listed in Appendix 1.

Vietnam is undergoing rapid changes - in population growth, economic development, expansion of international market links, and major policy/institutional re-orientation -- which combined have significant implications and ramifications for the condition and management context of its forests. Developing forest policy and management strategies that achieve forest-related objectives within macro-scale socio-economic conditions (such as projected population growth from 75 to 100 million within the next two decades) poses a daunting challenge to the institutions responsible for managing forests and meeting forest resource needs.

The forests and watersheds of Vietnam have been influenced substantially by agricultural clearance and conversion, plantation establishment (FN 3), forest resource utilisation, and war. Although the Government of Vietnam (GOV) classifies just over half the country as forest land (19 million ha), actual forest cover is estimated to have declined from over 45% in 1945 to under 30% in 1998 (9.3 million ha) -- a decline approaching 50% in four decades (FN 4). Population growth, poverty, and economic development efforts place continuing and increasing pressures on the remaining forest resources and on watersheds. These same pressures, however, raise the value of forest resources and thus improve the potential for economic investment in resource management. Creating and supporting conditions conducive to the investments needed to sustain forest resources for environmental and economic objectives is a major goal of policy and institutional development (FN 5).

Social forestry in Vietnam

The Government of Vietnam (GOV) is actively formulating and adopting policy reforms and programmatic initiatives to improve forest management, and has established ambitious targets for forest management and expansion of Extension services to local communities. The GOV appears increasingly cognizant that conventional 'protection' and 'production' approaches to forest management are impractical and fail to meet broader socio-economic and environmental objectives. The GOV recognises that local people -- living in and near forests -- hold the greatest potential for protecting and managing investments in forests, as well as great potential for damaging forests and investments in forests.

Achieving local participation will require a major re-orientation of forest policies, institutions, and methods toward people-centered approaches to forest management that emphasize local knowledge, values, and meeting high-priority local needs for livelihood security. This re-orientation has begun. During the past several years, a number of major reforms and new directions have been introduced that recognise the critical
importance of gaining the participation of local people in forest management through ensuring that local people have rights to manage (e.g., decision making authority) and to benefit from forests.

In concert with a broad re-orientation in Vietnam toward decentralisation, forest management policies increasingly favour (and programmes facilitate) a shift away from direct control of forests by state organisations toward local and individualised management, including allocation and enforcement of resource tenure rights largely to individual families or businesses. Social forestry development strategies have emphasized more systematic ways of land allocation to rural households (often former employees of state forest enterprises) and subsidized reforestation of lands and forest protection by individual households.

A number of different social forestry projects (FN 6) in Vietnam have been established with support from multilateral donors (FN 7), bilateral donors (FN 8), and IOs/NGOs (FN 9). Several regional projects are also involved in social forestry in Vietnam (FN 10). Social forestry projects vary substantially in terms of objectives, scale of effort, specific methods, and (for pilot projects) geographic locations/target areas. At the present time, there do not appear to be very effective mechanisms for communication or cooperation among social forestry projects in general, although some projects maintain informal communications on a ‘bilateral’ basis and an NGO Resources Center may provide communication about social forestry among some NGOs.

Many of the social forestry projects focus on deforested and degraded forest areas, and on developing resource planning and allocation approaches that are appropriate for this type of situation. Some projects are also attempting to widen the range of social forestry strategies to include common property regimes and appropriate local organizational development, although they often face a constraint in identifying appropriate actors in the planning process, particularly in forested areas in which ethnic minorities are dominant.

Viewed over time, an exponential expansion is occurring in social forestry and watershed management programming, as donors provide rapidly increasing financial support in response to perceived needs and the adoption of favourable government policy. The first initiatives in social forestry were begun in the early 1990s. The largest project to date commenced in January 1998, with a total budget of approximately $45 million over 5 years (FN 12). While the specific amount is not known, it can be guesstimated broadly that total investment in social forestry and watershed management over the next 5 years will exceed $100 million.

The immediate challenge in operationalising such an ambitious expansion in social forestry is developing and testing effective participatory forest management and land use planning strategies as well as appropriately trained, skilled staff who can guide on-going programmatic and institutional evolution and development, replacing conventional centralised management approaches with participatory decentralised approaches. Meeting this challenge will to a large degree depend on quickly developing a capacity to provide appropriate training -- including field based training - for a wide variety of target groups and a large number of participants. Meeting this demand adequately will be critical for policy and operational success in social forestry, and for adequate performance of investments in social forestry and watershed management which is especially crucial in relation to loan-based investments (such as ADB funding).

RECOFTC in Vietnam

RECOFTC (FN 13) has been an important source of training and related development support in social forestry for Vietnam. Vietnam has a pool of approximately fifty RECOFTC alumni in government agencies, NGOs, and international and donor organisations. These alumni are an important component in the national capacity and constituency for social forestry.

RECOFTC support to Vietnam to date has been through its regional training courses, collaborative activities with projects and institutions, technical advice on project design and development, workshops, and conferences. This mix of activities demonstrates that RECOFTC is aware that regional training can only meet a portion of the needs in its constituent countries. The largest and most rapidly expanding need in many countries in Asia (including Vietnam) is for in-country training, in national language(s) and with appropriately adapted training content and materials, capable of reaching large numbers of participants from a variety of target groups at reasonable cost. Assisting countries with meeting this need is an important priority for RECOFTC in coming years, which will require developing approaches in which the regional support is specifically designed to support these national and institutional needs.

RECOFTC is regarded positively by the GOV and by organisations involved in social forestry, as demonstrated by the sizable and expanding alumni group and the progress toward Vietnam becoming a charter member of RECOFTC in its new international status. There was, however, a distinct mix of positive and negative
perceptions of regional short-term training among informants in Vietnam, which RECOFTC should recognise and incorporate in its programme strategy. Positive perceptions reflected awareness of the important contribution of regional training to social forestry development and adoption, and of the value of regional training for staff motivation (FN 14). Negative perceptions related to English language as a barrier to non-English speakers, relatively inappropriate subject content and materials, inappropriate location(s), and relatively high cost. Clearly, broadening and reorienting its regional role toward strengthening in-country (country-level) training would respond to the largest expanding need in Vietnam, and would enable RECOFTC to evolve its regional in a way that would be of great benefit to Vietnam.

Social forestry training needs and capacities

As noted above, favourable policy and large-scale funding are pushing a rapid expansion of social forestry in Vietnam. The major challenge to rapid expansion of social forestry is developing appropriate skills to both support the continuing expansion of social forestry strategies, and to enable social forestry policies and strategies to be further refined. Informants for this study all perceived a major shortage of appropriately skilled people, and equally problematic, a need to reorient many people who hold attitudes and beliefs that inhibit or oppose local participation in forest management. This situation is not surprising given the heritage of non-participatory conventions in forest and watershed management, and of centralised governance in Vietnam at least for the past two decades and possibly much longer. Overcoming the shortage of skilled people will require establishing an extensive training capacity, able to provide appropriate training to a wide range of target groups in central, provincial, and district government, in non-governmental organisations (IOs/NGOs and private sector), and in local communities.

Social forestry projects underway in Vietnam all face the problem of developing appropriate skills in staff and participants, and each project undertakes training within its own parameters. Training needs vary, of course, with the scale and objectives of the project; ranging from small-scale to very large-scale projects. On the upper end of large scale, the recently established ADB Watershed project has a budget allocation of $1.2 million for training with an additional $400,000 for applied research, and the project anticipates these figures underestimate the training investment required for the project. Projects generally recognise the need for a comprehensive training strategy, but project-level training is generally ad hoc rather than with a comprehensive training strategy or plan. A major issue that such projects have to address is how to combine 'strategy development' and 'training' through a combination of field learning processes with strategically planned training efforts. Two projects expressed a desire to conduct training needs assessments and to develop training strategies (FN 15), although it is unclear whether capacity for conducting such assessments and strategies is readily available.

Social forestry projects have developed some training capacities to meet their internal needs, but these capacities are generally heavily utilised internally by projects and are thus not available to meet needs external to the projects. To date, there is not much communication or collaboration among projects with respect to training, and projects would probably benefit from increased information sharing and possibly collaboration. The training capacities in these projects -- experienced trainers and training methods, content, and materials adapted for Vietnam -- could also be of guidance and possibly training-of-trainers assistance in developing expanded training capacities for other projects, but the potential for stretching project-level capacities beyond their immediate project needs is very limited.

It is generally acknowledged that institutional training capacities for social forestry in Vietnam vary but in general need substantial strengthening. Several forestry training institutions in Vietnam have begun to develop social forestry training capacities. Some institutions (in and outside the forestry sector) have rapidly developed an impressive repertoire of approaches in assessment, planning and training that are greatly contributing to the development of more appropriate participatory forest management strategies. Other forestry training institutions continue to emphasize concepts and methods of conventional forest management. While the curricula of some forestry training institutions includes sociology, rural development, and PRA, these topics are often taught in isolation, unrelated to conventional approaches to resource assessment, silviculture, valuation, harvesting, etc., and it is left to the student to try and integrate social considerations into forest management. Overall, forestry training institutions have substantial catching up to do to respond to national policy and programme emphasis.

Development of social forestry training and research capacities has started, however, at some institutions. Of particular note are initiatives at the College of Agriculture and Forestry of Ho Chi Minh National University, the University of Agriculture and Forestry at Bac Thai, the College of Forestry in Xuan Mai; the Central Highland University (Buon Me Thuot) and Hue University have also started initiatives in social forestry development. RECOFTC has been involved in various ways in the development of these initiatives and assisted in the design
of the Social Forestry Support Project (FN 16) (SFSP), a project that is supporting the development of social forestry curricula and applied research in five key forestry training institutions (and two additional partners). Initially SFSP was based in and focused on the Forestry College in Xuan Mai. Recently broadened, SFSP is now providing technical guidance and strengthening these institutions through improving understanding and skills for social forestry, and through networking for information sharing and collaboration.

The active, constructive relationships under development between SFSP and partner institutions provide a valuable institutional framework for advancing and expanding social forestry training in Vietnam (FN 17). As such, further developing the working relationships with SFSP and its partners would be an effective and strategic means for RECOFTC to support in-country capacity building for social forestry, and would leverage RECOFTC input through coordination and complementarity with SFSP’s efforts. Planning and conducting collaborative activities with these institutions would be an effective way of doing this, because most have collaborated with RECOFTC over the years and are now also involved in SFSP. In particular, RECOFTC could promote and support active links between key training institutions and policy, programming, and field-level efforts -- such as through applied research (especially action research) and the development of appropriate short courses, which would be supportive of ensuring the relevancy of longer-term curricula. Support to key training institutions for TOT in adult learning techniques might also be valuable.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Of the three countries in Indochina, Vietnam is the most advanced in terms of developing in-country institutional training capacities for social forestry. Within the scope of its resources, RECOFTC has contributed significantly to the development of social forestry in Vietnam, including contributing to in-country training capacities through its regional courses as well as other collaborative activities. In view of RECOFTC's increasing resources and capacities, it will be important to build on past experience and to strengthen collaboration with institutions with which collaboration has proven effective.

Demand from Vietnam for regional training and support will shift substantially in coming years, as national institutions develop, programming expands, and in-country training capacities strengthen. RECOFTC can and should provide continuing capacity-building support to Vietnam, particularly in terms of:

- supporting in-country training development (needs assessments, training design and development, institutional development strategies, and TOT in training/learning approaches and methods) that is specifically adapted to the needs and context of Vietnam
- facilitating regional information sharing about training, including new topics and approaches, and about training strategies and institutional development
- providing mid-level and senior-level training (complementary to but beyond that available in Vietnam), including internships
- formalizing long term collaborative arrangements with key training institutions, especially those with which RECOFTC has already established effective relationships, and possibly with some field and capacity-building projects. Collaboration should be carefully planned to support linkages with other training institutions and particularly field activities, as well as possible international linkages, including collaborative support to programs in neighbouring countries.

In Vietnam most social forestry projects currently focus on efforts related to heavily deforested and degraded areas. RECOFTC should consider bringing increased attention to participatory management of existing forests, including strengthening collaboration with institutions working on this.

There are many training institutions, organisations, and projects involved in social forestry in Vietnam, posing a challenge in the selection of key institutions, i.e. institutions that have a demonstrated capacity to combine learning and training and have effective linkages and collaborative operations with other key players. Programming issues to be kept in mind are:

- Links between training institutions and 'field' activities ('learning and training') should be further promoted, to ensure that training institutions are fully aware of contemporary issues and approaches in social forestry. Valuable forms for such links are engaging trainers/faculty members and students in applied research (action research) and in comparative or diagnostic research, and ensuring that research outputs are shared broadly within the social forestry interest group, in Vietnam and
internationally. RECOFTC could provide training for applied/action research and could collaborate in sharing research outputs.

- RECOFTC could collaborate with its partner institutions on training needs assessments (such as for projects with recognised needs, or possibly on a broader ‘multilateral’ assessment), training course and curricula design, and TOT on training methods (especially methods appropriate for adult learning). Collaborating with SFSP to help partner training institutions respond to the demand for training created by the expansion in social forestry programming would be a major accomplishment and a service to the organisations/projects. This training demand will need to be met largely by short courses developed and adapted to particular target groups and contexts, by study tours, and by workshops and publications. Partner institutions have potential for leadership in such training activities, but will undoubtedly need training support from SFSP and RECOFTC for responding to the opportunities.

- RECOFTC could facilitate information sharing and regional networking among social forestry trainers, from Vietnam and from other countries, about training topics, techniques, and strategies.

In coordination with the special programmes under development by RECOFTC with Cambodia and Laos, the following activities are suggested for initiating this programme with Vietnam:

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<th>Mar - May</th>
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<td>Consult with GOV, SFSP, SDC, GTZ-SFDP, ADB Watershed, and other key organisations/projects regarding recommendations; develop collaborative framework with partner institutions and coordinate with SFSP team</td>
<td>Possible topical short course (EXT) and/or action research course for 2-3 selected staff from partner institutions</td>
<td>Short course (at RECOFTC) for selected lead trainers on training course design and planning</td>
<td>Organisation and implementation (in Vietnam) of training courses on priority topics</td>
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**Appendix 1: Contact names and addresses**

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Footnotes

1. Prepared by Doug Henderson, a community forestry specialist based in Cambodia, and Cor Veer, regional coordinator of FAO Forest Trees and People Programme based at RECOFTC.

2. A variety of terms of terms are used in Asia to denote an approach to forest management in which local communities have significant and sometimes primary responsibility, including community forestry, social forestry, joint forest management, village forestry, and participatory forest management. In Vietnam, social forestry is the predominant term, so it is used in this report. The term participatory forest management is used where the most generic term is preferred, because it does not carry associations to specific programmes.

3. Refers to non-natural forests, including plantations of timber species, rubber, coconut, coffee, tea, and fruit trees.


5. In this report, forest resources and watersheds are treated as nearly synonymous because forest management is considered to be a primary component of watershed management. The authors recognise the inaccuracies that result from such a lumping, but do so because maintaining the distinction throughout the report would add substantial bulk without adding significant value.

6. Including watershed management projects, which emphasise maintenance of forest cover.

7. Including ADB, UNDP, FAO, IFAD, EC.

8. SIDA, SDC, and others.

9. IUCN, CARE, OXFAM, HELVETAS, and others.
10. Such as the GTZ/MRC Sustainable Management of Resources in the Lower Mekong Basin project

11. GTZ/MRC,

12. ADB Watershed project

13. Regional Community Forestry Training Center

14. It was perceived as having motivation value as a highly valued perk.

15. GTZ/MARD Social Forestry Development Project and ADB Watershed project

16. Implemented by HELVETAS with funding from SDC

17. SFSP has substantial commonalties with highly effective programming by the Ford Foundation for social forestry development in a number of Asian countries. SFSP is unique in Indochina and could provide a model for institutional strengthening for social forestry training in other countries.