Introduction

This report deals with issues involving community forest management in the Social Forestry Development Project and recommends strategies for the implementation of community forest management by the project. It is based on a review of project documentation and discussions with project and government staff both in Hanoi and in the project area. The mission visited Vietnam between 9 and 20 April 1997 and the field visit took place in the period 11-18 April.

The Government of Vietnam places great emphasis on forest protection and reforestation in the Song Da region because of its importance as a watershed. At the same time, the poverty of the rural population is a major issue of concern, both from the point of view of human welfare and because population pressure and food shortages contribute to unsustainable land use practices in some parts of the watershed.

Underlying the project philosophy of the SFDP is the recognition that sustainable land use and improvement of economic conditions for the local population are inevitably linked. The Project Goal is that The living conditions of the local population in the Song Da region are improved by applying ecologically and economically sustainable land use systems. In this context, management of forests by local communities is an important component of project philosophy’ and activity.

Community Forestry: Definitions and Themes

As a preliminary to discussing options and strategies for community forestry in the SFDP, it is necessary to define the term in a way that will be useful in the SFDP project area and to identify some key lessons from international experiences in community forestry.
Community Forestry - Scope and Definitions

Community forestry has been defined in a variety of often conflicting ways. The broader definitions would use the term to refer to any activities which involve relationships between people and trees. More narrow definitions focus on the management of forests by local communities for their own benefit. Such definitions allow for collaboration between local people and outsiders (including NGOs and government). In this report we differentiate between community forest management (roughly equating to the more restricted usage of "community forestry") and agroforestry. We believe that the Community Forestry Unit of SFDP has a role in both, but we are mostly concerned with community forest management (defined in the project context as management of protected forest by groups).

It is useful to distinguish between the use of trees directly integrated in agriculture (in agroforestry systems) and the use and management of large numbers of trees not situated on agricultural land. This is important because agriculture is usually managed by individual households while larger areas of forest tend to require a great deal of inter-household cooperation in management. The methods and concepts of community forestry have generally emerged from the latter type of situation whereas agricultural extension approaches tend to have developed in the former. Community forestry is generally concerned with the management of forests by groups.

Further, in the project area much regenerating forest is on land which is part of the fallow cycle for upland agriculture. There is, indeed, considerable confusion as to whether this type of land should be allocated as "forest land" (under government control) or upland agricultural land (with individual rights). Regardless of the merits of this argument, it is clear that these two types of forested land differ both in terms of the purposes for which they are used and whether they are used directly by individuals or groups. To talk about community forest management on land used for upland agriculture weakens the basis for acknowledging its agricultural role in land allocation. It also obscures the differences between the types of intervention appropriate to agriculture and forests.

If community forest management is used to refer to the management of groups of trees by groups of people, then the term identifies a broad approach which can be applied to a land use type for which agricultural extension and technology are not immediately relevant. We wish to emphasise that defining community forest management to exclude trees on agricultural land is suggested in recognition of the different types of tenurial arrangements and management regimes which characterise agricultural and forest land. This is not to deny that agriculture and forest lands are integral parts of a single and complex land use system. Nor is it to deny the great importance of trees on agricultural land. The separation is a strategy which recognises that agriculture and forestry raise different institutional and organisational problems, even though they are complementary parts of a single system. We believe the SFDP must be involved in both community forest management and agroforestry.

Community Forestry: International Experience

Historically, community forestry in many countries has been seen as a program approach by which forest authorities involves local people in the protection of forests, often focusing on motivation and education. In other words, community forestry has been used as a tool to achieve conservation, goals. In such cases the success of community forestry has usually been limited, because the program reflects the priorities of government and forest departments rather than the priorities and concerns of the rural people.

Where community forestry has achieved a high level of local interest and participation, this has been a result of a view of community forestry which sees conservation goals as being compatible with active use of forests to achieve local benefits. Nepal is usually recognised as having a successful community forestry program. In this case it was a shift from the view of community forestry as a tool for achieving conservation to a program which allowed genuine use of forests by local people, that led to the rapid increase in the scale and effectiveness of the program.

Other lessons from the international experience in community forestry include the following:

- Programs are most likely to be successful if they recognise local access rights to forests and identify and build on existing traditional/indigenous arrangements for the regulation of use and access (traditional/indigenous management systems).
- Local participation in forest management is desirable from the earliest stages of planning and decision making through to implementation. Although "participation" has become a "buzz word", almost ritually included in contemporary development projects, the call for participation in forest management is not just a pious platitude. The actions of local people in using forests, and even the absence of actions in cases where pure protection (non-use) is concerned, affect forests negatively or positively. If agencies
outside communities wish to influence local actions, then local participation in planning and decision-making is a practical necessity.

[For overviews of community forestry concepts, issues and experiences internationally see Fisher 1995 and IUCN 1996.]

**Project Concept and Design**

The philosophy underlying SFDP is that land use planning needs to be carried out holistically, recognising the complementarity of various types of land use. The reference to social forestry in the project title reflects the GOV's concern with watershed management (and the implied assumption that watershed management depends primarily on forest cover). The project design recognises that forestry is only one part of the land use system and land use needs. The project recognises that watershed protection cannot be treated in isolation from food production and economic development. And, most importantly, the strategy by which this integration is pursued involves the combination of land use planning and land allocation as a single participatory process. Conceptually the project design hangs together very well and provides a sound basis for implementation.

**Comments on Project Activities and Concepts**

**Land Use Planning and Land Allocation**

The main focus and achievement of project activity to date has been the development and testing of a participatory approach to land use planning and land allocation. The process has generated great interest and there is pressure from various administrative levels for the project to expand its activities into other communes and districts. The process clearly is clearly seen by officials concerned with land allocation as being a practical way to achieve the goals of the land allocation process. Apart from the enthusiasm the SFDP approach generates within the government agencies concerned with land allocation, the whole land allocation process presents a window of opportunity for a relatively equitable distribution of land "ownership". The land allocation process present an opportunity for future security of access to agricultural land. The potential benefits of such security of access place some pressures on the project to accelerate the process of land allocation.

There are, however, some risks in moving too quickly. The main difficulty is that moving too quickly could lead to land classifications which work against sound management, either because they do not reflect a realistic view of how land is used, or because they work against existing (local) arrangements for decision-making about land use. A recent review of the land allocation and land use planning process developed by SFDP (final report not yet available) suggests that the process was not always clearly understood by the field staff who have applied it. There is a feeling within the project that the process needs to be refined before any attempt is made to apply it too widely. One particularly important concern is the debate about whether fallow upland agricultural land with regenerating forest cover should be classified as agricultural or forest land. The view within the project is that it should be classified as agricultural land, and we endorse this view. Rushing the process could lead to agricultural land being inappropriately classified. It would be a mistake to allow the desire to accelerate the process to lead to decisions which alienate people from resources. It is precisely for this reason that the connection between participatory land use planning and land allocation is so important.

There are other reasons why land used for upland agriculture presents difficulties for the process. Generally, the locally recognised use rights for irrigated land are fairly clear and legal recognition of these use rights seems to be relatively unproblematic. However, traditional mechanisms for allocating upland plots are not so well understood and not so clear-cut. It seems that plots are usually farmed on an individual basis and that individual households return to plots on a rotating basis (this seems to be true of both the Thai and H'Mong people in the project area). However, it is important not to confuse individual rights of use with unqualified private ownership. Discussions with an H'Mong village leader in Tua Chua suggest that household rights to upland plots have been subject in the past to some degree of review through a process of village level decision-making. The notion that traditional use rights combine individual rights with "collective" review is hardly surprising. The important point is that neither the "traditional" process or the contemporary village-level processes of decision-making about land use and land allocation are well understood. It is highly likely that each village will do these things differently, even if only slightly so.

Formal land allocation and land use planning would be likely to be more acceptable locally. As well as more soundly based if there was better understanding of "traditional" tenure and traditional management practices.
This observation applies to forest land as well as to upland fields.

**Sociological considerations: Appropriate Levels of Intervention**

For a project concerned with intervening in the process of land use planning and management, identifying the appropriate social units for intervention is an important issue. (Questions about this issue were raised several times during the mission.)

As far as the land allocation process is concerned, the project works with commune authorities, but carries out allocation on a village basis. Providing there is room in this process for identifying cross-boundary disputes, this seems appropriate. For agricultural extension, working with farmer interest groups seems to be a sound approach. We will leave this to the agricultural extensionists.

Our concern here is with identifying appropriate units for intervention in community forest management. A major question in community forestry internationally relates to whether it is better to work through formal political/administrative units or with "natural" (informal) forest user groups. The argument for the latter approach is that access to forests is often governed by locally recognised use rights (quite distinct from any legal tenure). The group of people who share such use (access) rights can be described as a "user group". Such use rights tend to be acknowledged by neighbouring people outside the user group. This is not to deny that use rights are contested or ignored by others. If interventions are aimed at a formal administrative unit (such as a commune), the capacity for making decisions about use and management tends to be alienated from those who are most directly affected and whose cooperation is required for effective management.

Viable management of forests as common property (that is, the joint property of a particular group) requires

- recognition of the legitimacy of use rights by neighbouring people outside the user group;
- a mechanism for enforcing agreed use practices within the user group;
- a mechanism for preventing breaches of use rights by people outside the user group.

This implies that it is appropriate to work with the user group in encouraging community forest management. It also suggests that acknowledging de facto use rights can assist effective management. However, there can be a role for larger political administrative units.

In the project area there are good examples of villages protecting forest areas effectively. In Yen Chau District, protection contracts seem to have been working quite effectively in the villages visited. In some cases villages had established local regulations for forest use which seem to be effective. (To what extent these regulations relate to earlier - "traditional" - forest management systems is unclear.) In Tua Chua, the situation is more variable. The forests in Xinh Phinh commune have not been particularly well protected. Reasons include conflict over forest "ownership" with another commune. On the other hand Tapao village has been quite effective in managing (there is controlled utilisation as well as protection) a large forest above the village, despite illegal cutting by people from other villages.

It does seem that villages more or less equate to as user groups in many cases. It should not be assumed that this is always the case. In the case of inter-village disputes about forest access may be that people from both villages originally recognised each others use rights (and were thus part of the same user group). Allocation of forest land to members of one village under protection contracts may have lead to other members of original user groups being dispossessed and may thus be a source of conflict.

It is not particularly clear why some villages are effective in forest protection/management. In the case of Yen Chau, one reason may be that the bilateral kinship system of the Thai people creates networks of reciprocity which encourage cooperation at the village level. However, another important factor is that forest resources are relatively abundant and that there is, consequently, limited conflict over forest resources. In the case of Tapao (Tua Chua District) the presence of a well managed and well protected forest in a general framework of scarcity of forest products requires more explanation. We suggest that the explanation lies in the presence of a coherent user group and effective leadership, but there is a need for much more detailed understanding of the dynamics of the situation.

What is clear, however, is that the successful villages show an ability to act cooperatively within the group. There are threats to management from outside and it may well be that supporting village level efforts against encroaching outsiders may be an important role for the communes. It was suggested by project staff that the commune may be particularly relevant in Tua Chua District. This is probably partly due to the fact that conflicts between villages are more common than in Yen Chau, largely because resources are relatively scarce. The point we want to make here is that it will be useful to distinguish between focusing on the village as the unit of
management and encouraging communes to support village regulations. The need for commune support does not imply that the commune is the appropriate unit for community forest management.

**PRA Methodology**

The PRA methodology which is an intrinsic part of the land use planning and land allocation process has advantages in that it encourages dialogue between officials and rural people. It is also a useful way to obtain factual information and to identify local needs. However PRA does not provide field staff with the conceptual frameworks necessary to achieve an understanding of local tenurial arrangements or decision-making processes. Dealing with these issues requires quite sophisticated understanding of social science concepts. We recommend that the project appoints a consultant to study tenurial and decision-making systems, if this is financially possible and if a suitable person is available. Alternatively, it might be desirable to develop some training materials which encourage greater understanding in these areas.

**Government Programs Related to Forestry**

The GOV has extensive programs to encourage planting of new forests and to encourage villagers to be involved in forest protection.

*Plantation*. The viability of the plantation program seems to be the subject of considerable scepticism both within official circles and the project. While we do not feel qualified to comment on the program in any detail, we would suggest that plantation is unlikely to make a major contribution to increasing watershed protection in the Song Da watershed, simply because plantation on an appropriate scale would be prohibitively expensive.

*Protection Contracts (327 Program)*. The policy of making contracts with individual farmers (or groups of farmers) for the protection of designated sections of forests, has had some success in the project area. It also seems to be attractive to many farmers. This is understandable, since the payments made under the program represent significant income. There is also a concessional tax rate for building timber for contract holders and there is some suggestion that contracts may one day lead to more permanent rights. The limitation of the program is that it is unlikely that this level of subsidy can continue and funds are already inadequate to pay all farmers with contracts.

From the point of view of community forestry, it is important that the program allows farmers to make contracts on a group basis, since these groups may well be a basis for future community forest management activities. The groups in the project area seem generally to be self-selected, usually on the basis of residence. This is advantageous, because self-selected groups are more likely to be able to cooperate than groups established by outside agencies.

We were repeatedly told that protection groups usually formed on the basis of members living close together. This is interesting. User group membership is usually based on residential proximity to a forest, so there may well be a close relationship between protection group membership and user group membership.

**Institutional and Policy Constraints for Community Forestry**

There are a number of institutional and policy constraints to the implementation of community forest management.

- The policy emphasis is heavily on protection. Both the plantation program and the protection contract program focus on protection rather than utilisation. Benefits to farmers are provided through direct subsidy rather than through providing access to benefits from the harvesting of forest products for sale or use by the farmers themselves. The financial sustainability of the programs is doubtful. Unless policy broadens to allow greater opportunities for sustained use, there is little opportunity for community forest management. Indeed, the removal of subsidies without opening of opportunities for utilisation will greatly reduce the incentives for people to protect forests or regulate forest use.
- There are a number of points where policies are unclear. A particular problem is the status of regenerating upland agricultural plots. The unpredictability of policies is also problematic. What, for example, will ultimately happen to land under protection contracts? There is some expectation that those with contracts will later become owners of the land and some expectation that they will ultimately
be able to harvest timber. These uncertainties work against investment of labour and resources in community forestry activities.

Project Sites

Our visits to the two districts were necessarily brief and involved even briefer visits to a small number of villages in each district. While we did ask questions and discuss issues with a few key informants, the process was necessarily superficial. Most of our understanding of the field situation comes from discussion with project staff. With this qualification, we would like to make some comments about the general situation in each district.

Yen Chau

In Yen Chau, there does not seem to be any great shortage of forest products for local use and consumption, although they may not be always easily accessible. Forest cover for watershed protection is generally reasonably good. This is not to deny room for improvement, but there does not seem to be a crisis from the point of view of watershed management. There does not seem to much opportunity for silvicultural management of forests for timber or fuelwood production, simply because ground cover is generally adequate and local needs are being met. Opportunities for community forest management would seem to be depend on potential for income generation, especially through the sale of NTFPs. Ultimately, if policies restricting timber harvesting in protected forests are changed, there may also be opportunities for income generation through the sale of timber. Remoteness from markets presents barriers to income generation.

Tua Chua

In Tua Chua there are serious problems with the productivity of upland agriculture and with the environmental effects of use of marginal land. While some land used for upland agriculture could be usefully placed under protection, this is unrealistic given the fact that the area already has serious problems with food security and that the rate of population increase is quite high (approx. 3%/per year, which equates to doubling in just over twenty years). In this context, there is little reason why people would wish to become heavily involved in community forestry, as it is unlikely to directly address their key needs.

Strategy for Implementation

Overall, as far as community forest management is concerned, options for community forest management are limited because of a combination of policy constraints (especially the emphasis on protection), the absence of severe shortages of forest products in Yen Chau and the dominance of food security as an issue in Tua Chua. We believe that agriculture (including agroforestry) should be the main point of intervention for the project in the near future. Improved productivity (and sustainability) of agriculture is likely to remain the first priority for farmers and will be a prerequisite for better watershed protection. Community forestry can complement the activities of agricultural extension. There is a need for some immediate activities (in the form of controlled experiments) to provide options.

We assume that increasing local participation in community forest management will require immediate direct benefits. We suggest the following strategy:

- Identify a small number of pilot sites in which activities can be concentrated on a trial basis.
- In the case of Yen Chau the pilot sites should focus on income generation through forest management. During our visit discussions of income generation tended to be pessimistic, evoking comments about distance from markets, consequent costs of transport, low prices etc. We suggest small scale activity concentrating on identifying high value forest products, assessing the market possibilities and initially assisting with making market connections. Possibilities include medicinal plants, rattan and processed bamboo shoots (which have higher prices than fresh shoots).
- In Tua Chua, we suggest a focus on trials which test the social and technical viability of simple silvicultural procedures as a means to provide early benefits to participants and to ensure adequate ground cover for watershed protection purposes. In addition to regenerating upland plots, there are areas of regenerating protection forest in Tua Chua which already provide good ground cover. In some villages people have complained of shortages of accessible fuelwood. Silvicultural trials in Nepal have shown that similar regenerating forest or shrubland can be harvested fairly radically, leaving stumps and
selected stems as a basis for regeneration. In such cases, regeneration (including coppicing) can lead to a rapid recovery of ground cover. The treatment provides a large quantity of small woody material (for fuelwood) and leaf matter (for fodder). This is an incentive for participation, because people receive benefits at the beginning of their involvement in community forest management, not years later when regenerating forests have matured. Conventional forestry tends to assume that only mature forests (with large trees) are suitable for utilisation. This, however, seems to be based on an assumption that forests are primarily useful for timber production. If a coppice with standards treatment is adopted, long term growth of some large trees can be combined with shrublands management.

- This proposal envisages treatment of a number of plots (say one hectare each) on a three or four year cycle. The treatments would be planned with protection groups with contracts for the relevant area (allowing them to decide which species are to be favoured).
- There are technical considerations. Selected plots need to be on areas of moderate slope (to avoid the effects of splash erosion during the early stages of regeneration) and species with capacity for coppicing need to be present.
- This is not a conventional forest? option. But it is important to recognise that the key objective for the government is watershed protection. Reforestation (mature forest) is one way to achieve this, but not the only way. Shrubland can have similar effects.
- This option is presented as a trial in order to demonstrate both technically and socially that there are silvicultural options which can meet watershed protection and local economic needs. At present the policies related to protection of watershed forests would preclude large scale implementation of such an approach. However, such trials appear to be very much within the project mandate and demonstrated success on a trial basis might influence changes in policy and would certainly be a good start for wider application if policies do change.
- There are other forms of silviculture appropriate to community forest management (such as thinning to provide small poles). There has been some documentation of "silviculture for community forestry" in Nepal. We will endeavour to obtain copies for SFDP. There is also a film on the Nepal trials (NAFP 1990).

- The possibilities of income generation from protected forests should also be explored in Tua Chua.

The Role of the Community Forestry Unit

We recommend that the following be the basis of the terms of reference of the community forestry unit within the project. The community forestry unit:

- will be concerned with community forest management (that is in protected forest areas managed collaboratively by groups of farmers) and will also be involved in forestry or agroforestry activities on agricultural land (including regenerating upland plots);
- will explore silvicultural and social arrangements for forest protection and regulated utilisation;
- will carry out trials to test the social and technical viability of community forest management systems;
- will examine and document existing (indigenous/local) systems for regulated forest use;
- will assist communities at various levels (commune, village, user group, protection contract group) to develop local regulations for forest protection and management;
- support the process of land allocation and land use planning with regard to community forests and trees on agricultural land;
- will provide advice about appropriate tree species and silviculture on agricultural land.

The community forestry advisor will:

- lead the community forestry unit;
- determine criteria/indicators for assessing the impacts (social, economic and technical) of community forestry activities;
- develop ongoing monitoring and evaluation procedures for community forestry activities in order to provide prompt feedback and to assist a learning process approach;
- ensure that the activities of the community forestry group are adequately documented and reported;
- assist in developing training programs for community forestry purposes;
- assist in organising and conducting seminars and workshops on community forest management.
Training Needs

Implementation of the strategy outlined above implies a number of training needs for the staff of the project and associated government staff. Some suggestions for course development are:

- training in participatory forest assessment and planning (as a complement to existing training on land allocation and land use planning);
- training in marketing of forest products (including non-timber forest products);
- training of foresters in the project and associated government staff to make them aware of simple silvicultural alternatives for community forest management.

There is also a need for some generic training in concepts and experiences of community forestry. This could be done in combination with some of the courses proposed above.

During the mission discussions have been held to explore possible arrangements between RECOFTC (the Regional community Forestry Training Center) and the project for development and implementation of training courses in Vietnam. These courses would be based on courses already developed at RECOFTC and adapted/translated for in-country training in Vietnam. Attempts would be made to collaborate with other projects and institutions in Vietnam to spread the costs and influence of the training.

Research and Monitoring and Evaluation

There is a need for a monitoring and evaluation system which is carried out as a routine part of community forestry work in order that modifications can be made promptly. Such a "learning process" approach is already well entrenched in the project philosophy. It would also be useful to implement case studies to examine the effects (including the "unintended consequences") of project activities on a village basis. Such case studies also assist in developing an understanding of the processes of decision-making about land use at the local level. (For a discussion of such as case study approach to "ongoing" evaluation see Fisher et al 1996.)

There are needs for research on some specific topics:

Research on silvicultural options.

- Trials on the social and technical viability of alternative silvicultural treatments (as discussed above).
- Trials on bamboo shoot production in forest land to establish guidelines on the intensity of cutting of bamboo for shoot production.


- Decision-making about forest use;
- Tenure;
- Traditional systems of forest management and protection.

Research on Marketing and Identification of Potential for Income Generation

The project has already carried out an extensive marketing study. In order to start income generation in specific pilot sites, there is a need for further work to identify products with potential in each of those sites and to develop an appropriate business plan.

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