Dear readers,

The Social Forestry Development Project Song Da (SFDP) is a Technical Co-operation Project supported by the German Technical Co-operation Agency (GTZ) of the Federal Republic of Germany and implemented by the Forestry Development Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam (MARD). The project is now entering the 6th year of implementation and concentrates its activities in two provinces (Son La and Lai Chau) of the Song Da watershed.

During the course of implementation the Project has gained some achievements such as the development of methodologies, technical options and staff training to effectively implement national and externally funded projects. However, there are a lot of difficulties as the Project is working in one of the most difficult regions of Vietnam with poor socio-economic conditions and infrastructure. The main target groups of the Project are the H'mong and the Thai ethnic minorities. One of the first results is the agreement on the so-called "Debt swap" project by the Federal Republic of Germany concerning the financing and application of methodologies, technical options developed by the SFDP, as well as staff training, for natural resources conservation and afforestation in the Song Da watershed.

The "SFDP NEWSLETTER" is issued to provide information and create a forum for exchanging ideas on the achievements, advantages and disadvantages within the SFDP area, but also to provide a forum for other projects, government agencies at different levels, international and national projects and NGOs and experts working in the field of social forestry in Vietnam. The Editorial Board of the "SFDP NEWSLETTER" likes to thank the collaborators for contributing articles, welcomes the readers and invites them to comment on shortcomings in order to increase the quality of the "SFDP NEWSLETTER".

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What is SFDP?

By Paul van der Poel

The Social Forestry Development Project (SFDP) Song Da is a technical cooperation project between the Governments of Vietnam and Germany. It is executed by the Forestry Development Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and supported by GTZ. The overall duration of the project is 12 years: Orientation phase (1993-1995), Implementation Phase I (1995-1998), Implementation Phase II (1999-2001) and a final hand-over Phase (2001-2004). The project area is located in the Song Da (Black River) watershed in the Northwest of Vietnam (2.6 million ha), with pilot areas in predominantly Thai (Yen Chau district-Son La province) and H’mong (Tua Chua district-Lai Chau province) areas. These ethnic groups represent almost 65% of a total population of around 1 million people in the watershed.

What is the project structure?

The SFDP is supervised by a National Steering Committee which meets twice a year and approves the annual plan of operations. It is chaired by the vice-minister of the MARD, with representatives from the Office of the Government, Ministry of Planning and Investment, different branches of the MARD and Son La and Lai Chau provinces. The National Project Director is the director of the Forestry Development Department of the MARD, assisted by the National Project Coordinator. SFDP’s main office is in Hanoi with regional offices in Son La town, Yen Chau and Tua Chua districts. The SFDP staff further consists of 3 international and 6 national long-term experts, 12 support staff and over 12 staff members seconded by the provinces and districts. Internally, the project staff is organized around 3 major units:

a) planning, monitoring and evaluation;

b) community forestry and

c) agro-forestry extension.

The project goal is:

The living conditions of the local population in the Song Da region are improved by applying ecologically and economically sustainable land use systems.

The project purpose is:

The local communities in Son La and Lai Chau sustainably manage their natural resources.

The logic of the project:

In 1997, a total of 40 villages were assisted by the local authorities in the development and implementation of agro/forestry development plans.

The logic behind the project’s approach is that the problem of deforestation can only be solved by addressing the main causes of deforestation: i.e. rural poverty and insufficient food production. Therefore the project follows a 2-way approach which leads to higher food production and cash income in a more sustainable manner and, secondly, to an increased forest cover through natural regeneration, plantation and forest management activities.

What are the expected project results?

a. To develop a methodology for participatory land use planning and land allocation which will lead to a better definition of areas for agro-forestry production and protection, as well as to improved land tenure security for farm households and conditions for community-based management of natural resources.
b. To develop a methodology for participatory village planning in order to strengthen the capacity of local communities to manage their own natural resources as an efficient and cost-effective way to increase agro-forestry production and improve protection and management of their natural resources. Of particular importance are methods to increase the involvement of communities in analyzing existing problems and developing long-term solutions for land use problems and conflicts. Annual planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are tools for identifying activities which local people can do by themselves or for which they need outside assistance by, for example, government institutions.

c. To identify and apply technology options for natural resources management which are suitable for a very diverse mountainous environment for increasing agro-forestry production and protecting forest, soil and water resources.

d. To develop and apply a concept for a needs-oriented agro/forestry extension service, which makes better use of available human resources, supports a 2-way information and learning process, and increases awareness and knowledge of local people with regard to the management of their natural resources.

e. To enhance the capacities of local authorities at district and provincial level to implement and promote landuse planning and land allocation, village development planning, community forestry and extension. This will lead to better targeting, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating of activities which will result in higher agro-forestry production and more sustainable land use. Of particular importance is training of local staff at management and field level to increase the effectiveness and quality of the services provided to the local population.

f. To have an effective management of the project in order to realize the five above-mentioned activities; to assist in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluating; to make available necessary budgets and attract funds for up-scaling of the projects’ activities; to define training needs and programs, to elaborate annual plans of operations and to report to the National Steering Committee.

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<th>What is the “Debt swap” project?</th>
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<td>The “Debt swap” project (also called the Project on “Nature Conservation and Reforestation in the Song Da Watershed”) is an investment project of 15 billion VND and will last from 1997-2000. It is implemented by the Department of Forestry Development in the same area as the SFDP and applies and expands methodologies and technologies developed by the SFDP, using similar operational structures and staff. Additional support staff (coordinator and administrative staff) has been appointed and located in SFDP's main Office in Hanoi. For further information about the “Dept swap” Project, please contact Mr. Dang Hoi Xuan, Project National Coordinator.</td>
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LAND USE PLANNING AND LAND ALLOCATION IN THE SONG DA WATERSHED

By Pham Quoc Tuan

Son La and Lai Chau provinces are situated in the crucial protection area of the Song Da watershed, accounting for 83% of the total watershed's area (2,605,500 ha) and consisting of 18 districts and over 4,850 villages with a population of 812,000.

According to the 1997 statistics, Son La has 1,034,000 ha of forest land and 240,000 ha of agricultural land out of a total area of 1,405,000 ha. Lai Chau has a total area of 1,336,000 ha including 1,113,000 ha of forest land and 136,000 ha of agricultural land.

Land use planning and land allocation have been implemented since 1993. Up to now, in Son La, 27% of the agricultural and 14% of the forestry land have been allocated to households; whereas these figures in Lai Chau are 18% and 10%. Agricultural land allocation is carried out by the Cadastral Department in co-ordination with the District Cadastral Units. For forestry land allocation, the executing agencies are the Provincial Forest Protection Sub-department and District Forest Protection Units. An assessment of the current situation with regard to land use planning and land allocation in the 2 provinces showed the following limitations: lack of experienced staff and an appropriate approach for the Northwest area of Vietnam. Furthermore, there is a considerable overlap between agricultural and forest land allocation and the land allocation lacks synchronisation and efficiency.

The Social Forestry Development Project Song Da (SFDP) has experimented with a participatory approach of land use planning and land allocation in Yen Chau district (Son La province) and Tua Chua district (Lai Chau province) in the protection area of the Song Da watershed. The goal is to speed up the process of land allocation in the Northwest
mountainous area and to make a contribution to a sustainable management of natural resources. Moreover, the approach makes it easy for the local people to participate in land use planning and land allocation and is feasible in the context of the local financial, human and technical resources.

The method has been tested in 4 communes in Yen Chau district (Chieng Dong, Chieng Khoi, Chieng Sang and Chieng Hac) and 3 communes in Tua Chua district (Sinh Phinh, Trung Thu and Muong Bang). Agricultural land was allocated and land use right certificates were issued in the process. Land which needs to be afforested was allocated to households or groups of households, so that these households can sign contracts for forest plantation. Land with natural forest is annually contracted to households or groups of households by the Forest Protection Sub-department, and the 327 programme.

The land use planning and land allocation methodology developed by SFDP was presented in a workshop held in December 1996 in Son La town with the participation of representatives from relevant institutions of the two provinces. It was completed in 1997 and widely applied within the provinces. On request of the Forest Protection Sub-departments and permission of the Provincial People’s Committees, the Project held three training courses on the techniques and approach of land use planning and land allocation, in which they targeted more than 60 key staff in Son La and Lai Chau. As a result, the local staff and the inhabitants themselves have been able to undertake the activities. Together with land allocation, the Project has assisted farmers in setting up the regulations for the Village Management Board and rules of forest protection and management in order to clarify their benefits and responsibilities. A forestry policy which links the local people’s lives to forest and shifts from a forest management system by the State to one by the local people is expected to be worked out in detail by the Project and agencies at district level.

The strength of this approach is the allocation of the total agricultural and forestry land at one time and within one commune, by the same staff and with considerably reduced costs. This approach provides relevant institutions with training in the skills of land allocation.

The participation of farmers in the process of land use planning and land allocation is a great achievement. It offers farmers a chance to review the current land availability, potentials and difficulties, and to discuss openly and equally among the community.

PERFORMANCE OF THE VILLAGE MANAGEMENT BOARDS IN TUA CHUA DISTRICT, LAI CHAU PROVINCE.

By Le Quoc Khanh

73% of the Tua Chua population are H’mong who practice a low productive upland agriculture and suffer from poor infrastructure conditions. However, the community spirit among the H’mong people is very high which facilitates the extension activities. With support of the Project, Village Management Boards were set up with specific tasks given to each member of the Board. The Head of the Village Management Board (who usually is the head of the village) is responsible for overall activities, one member is responsible for agricultural activities, another member is responsible for forestry activities. The Village Management Boards are responsible for preparing together with the villagers annual Village Development Plans and conducting monitoring and evaluation activities. Usually, to initiate any extension activity, the extensionist contacts directly the Village Management Board to discuss the ways for their implementation. Appointed by the villagers, members of the Village Management Board work voluntarily for the benefit of the villagers. The Project has organised training for the Village Management Boards to improve their managerial skills and technical knowledge. The members of the Village Management Boards work as village extensionists who transfer new techniques to the villagers.

In Xinh Phinh commune of Tua Chua district, with permission from the Province and District People’s Committee, the Project has assisted in establishment of a Communal Agro-Forestry Management Board (AFMB). Every Saturday, the AFMB holds a meeting with the Heads of the Village Management Boards, representatives from the District Extension Unit and the Project staff. Heads of the Village Management Boards review the activities of the previous week and receive the plans for the next week.

Thanks to a clear set of operational procedures which was formulated on the needs of the farmers, the Village Management Boards of Tua chua district work effectively. The efficiency and effectiveness of the Village Management Boards have been assessed through the success of the extension programmes and the active participation of the farmers.
WHEN THE FARMERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE.

By Pham Quang Hoa.

In an evening in early May 1998, there was a short report on VTV1 on the livelihood of a Kho Mu ethnic village in the west of the TH. province. 4 years ago, the village of more than 400 persons was threatened with extinction because of hunger, disease, illiteracy and hundreds of other difficulties. A project named Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction was developed for them. The project was so rich that if the project budget had been divided on average each member of the village could have received 5 million vnd. Besides other investment, the project even installed a luxurious antenna, procured electricity generators and colour televisions so that farmers can watch the programmes on the television to improve their "knowledge". After only 4 years, coming back to this piece of land, one sorrowfully recognised that nothing had been improved for the Kho Mu villagers, they even became poorer. The rusty satellite antenna lay on the ground; the generator was broken; the colour television suffered the same fate. The questions arise why the project came and why farmers still destroyed forests? A farmer replied that they know nothing about the project, and the stomach still needs to be filled. That is why we have to go into the forests. What a pity!

Reviewing this report, I do not tend to criticise the ones who had designed the mentioned project. I, on the contrary, believe in their wish to rapidly assist the farmers to escape from poor living conditions and a lack of information. However, based on the experiences gained over the last three years with the Social Forestry Development Project Song Da, I feel very sorry for the willingness of the colleagues of the said project and regret for the inefficiency of the investment of the project. I wish that the colleagues had known how to create chances for the Kho mu villagers to participate in the project activities right from the beginning when the first ideas were formed. If the project activities had been built on the prioritised needs of the villages, on the available local resources. If only..., if only...the project would have been much more effective and the lives of the Kho mu villagers would be much easier. The lessons learnt from the Social Forestry Development Project Song Da helped me to thoroughly understand that it is impossible to improve the living conditions of the mountainous rural people if the project's interventions are not based on the real urgent needs of the people themselves. The Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Project cannot be successful if it is not started, discussed, decided and implemented by the farmers.

One could ask: How does the Social Forestry Development Project Song Da operate?

It is very simple. We start from the farmers and base everything on them. We only assist the H'mong and the Thai villagers to discuss their problems, decide what they should do to improve their lives and support them to implement those decisions. The development path of the villages like a road with good and bad patches. That implies that their lives have had advantages and disadvantages. They understand best about their own lives and this road on which every day they have to strive to make a living. They know best what they should do to build on the advantages and to limit the disadvantages to improve their lives. What we should do is to facilitate them and support them with what they are unable to do.

During the last three years of implementation, the SFDP has applied this philosophy in its activities. We (the project and the local authorities) have started our activities by developing together with the villagers the Village Development Plans. Those plans are the property of the farmers, built by them, based on their own needs to solve their problems and based on the local available resources. The Project Annual Plans of operations are made based on the Village Development Plans. Thus, our plans comprise activities which assist the villagers to implement their plans. We have been successful. Assessments of the local authorities and farmers and evaluations of the Project Progress Review Mission in March are the proof of the achievements.

Previously, farmers and even some project staff were confused with this method. Some even doubted about the effectiveness of the method. They wondered why the method spends so much time on training, preparation, discussion and travelling etc. It is different now. Every year, when September and October come, the Village Management Boards can organise village meetings, review the achievements and shortcomings and prepare the development plans for the next year. The farmers actively participate in discussions as they know that the project and the local authorities strive to create favourable conditions for them to implement those development plans.

HOW DO AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES SUPPLEMENT SFDP FORESTRY ACTIVITIES?
Elke Foerster

Economically and environmentally sustainable land use requires efforts in both agriculture and forestry. Two issues are of particular concern to us: First of all, the agricultural production potential of marginal upland areas needs to be stabilized, if they are essential for food production and cannot be taken out of production. Stabilization of the production potential includes all measures aiming at erosion control and maintenance or, even better, increase of soil fertility.

Secondly we are concerned with an increase in productivity of farm household activities. This productivity increase compensates for the loss of marginal areas which have been taken out of agricultural production. In the long run the productivity increase must also cover rising food demands of an increased population, and it must provide an increase in household income and thus an improvement in the living conditions of the farmers.

Which soil conservation methods is SFDP promoting?

The main soil conservation measure of the project continues is the promotion of hedgerows with several species such as tephrosia, pigeon pea, leucaena, elephant grass and sugar cane. A detailed evaluation in 1997 concluded that currently farmers prefer leucaena (in Yen Chau used for fire wood, feed and soil improvement) and elephant grass (in Tua Chua used for animal feed). Further dissemination by provision of seed is very successful. In addition, legumes like Calliandra and Flemingia, and grasses like Paspalum are being tested on a small scale for diversification of hedgerow species.

A method for creating micro-terraces and incorporating large amounts of green manure into upland soils was introduced in 1997 as an alternative to hedgerows. In farmer training courses in Yen Chau the new technology was received with great enthusiasm, and many farmers are currently trying it out in their fields. Consequently a more detailed assessment of labour requirements and productivity increases on different soils will be available at the end of this year.

Further activities included the introduction of cover crops for soil improvement in tea and under fruit trees (stylos) and for animal feed (guinea grass), and the expansion of the traditional relay cropping of beans and maize, and improved fallow management. Their performance will be assessed during 1998 on the basis of any increase in soil water retention, seed productivity, competition against weeds and green matter.

SFPD and extension are involved in productivity increase

Currently the productivity of commonly used varieties is low thus new introductions bring higher yield increases, e.g. for paddy rice from the statistical quote of 2 t/ha for the ‘common’ variety in Tua Chua to 5.5 t for the variety D36-1. Productivity increases thus provide fast recognizable success and can therefore act as a door-opener for less obvious, long-lasting improvements with regard to forestry and soil protection. Productivity increases are supplemented by product diversification (fruit trees, potatoes, peanuts and animal husbandry techniques).

SFPD has established close cooperation mechanisms with the local extension system whose activities are focused on productivity increase. The District Extension Unit is implementing a contract with SFPD to make seed provision more effective and efficient by determining needs (through land use planning, village development plans), and applying adequate operational planning, monitoring, and extension methodology. This cooperation leads to strengthening capacities of project partners and developing a replicable needs-oriented extension service to be expanded to other districts.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN THE SFPD

Ulrich Apel

The project started in 1996 with activities in the field of community forestry after completing the land-use planning and land allocation in two communes of Yen Chau and Tua Chua districts. SFPD's community forestry activities have gradually expanded from forest protection activities such as forming of forest protection groups and formulation of village forest protection regulations to developing experiment and demonstration plots on other components of local forests and potential silvicultural practices. At present, the Project supports local people to:

- protect degraded natural forest stands and deforested land to facilitate natural regeneration;
- manage young naturally regenerated stands with simple silvicultural practices such as thinning, singling and pruning, including first trials of standard coppice systems;
- manage natural forest, including first trials with silvicultural practices such as improvement thinnings and cutting down selected trees for timber production;
establish village woodlots with fast growing species to satisfy local needs for fuelwood;
plan fruit and multipurpose trees under diverse arrangements to diversify diets and incomes, including nursery establishment;
harvest and market bamboo culms and shoots from existing bamboo plantations and plant bamboo on degraded land;
improve traditional bee keeping as an income source from the forest.

The community forest management strategy of the SFDP is structured according to the different types of forest land which are classified during the land use planning and land allocation process. The management options are related to the tenurial arrangements which come out after the forest land allocation and to the type of forest and the local socio-economic context.

An important issue is to identify the appropriate levels for intervention in community forest management. Emphasis of the SFDP is to work mainly with the local forest user groups rather than to work through administrative units. Nonetheless, close co-operation with the district forest protection units is an imperative precondition for any forest management activity. To a certain extent, the forest protection groups established during forest land allocation are representing local forest user groups. In the Hmong dominated areas (Tua Chua district) formal forest protection groups correspond to informal user groups. In the Thai dominated areas (Yen Chau district), where the forest protection groups do not (yet) represent local user groups, interventions are mainly aimed at the village level, starting with activities in the forest contracted to the whole village.

The community forestry activities of the SFDP are still in an experimental stage. The project expects these activities to yield a wide range of viable community forestry management options for the Song Da watershed. Demonstrated success in the pilot areas will definitely be a good start for wider application.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR ACTIVITIES IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 1998

By Nguyen Quang Tan

- **Land use planning and land allocation (LUP-LA):** By the end of 1997 LUP-LA had been finalized in 25 villages in Yen Chau and Tua Chua districts (Land Use Certificates given to all farmers in 13 villages). Since Nov 1997 SFDP’s LUP-LA methodology has been gradually transferred to the district Forest Protection Units (FPU) on contractual basis through the work in 15 villages (9 in Yen Chau and 6 in Tua Chua). Also in the first six months of the year SFDP has invited two international consultants working in the field of LUP-LA in order to improve the process.

- **Technological options:** In the first six months SFDP continues with its goal to try out different options in agriculture production as well as in forest protection and management. Different agricultural crops and varieties have been tried by the project in different locations and under different conditions to provide site-specific recommendations to farmers. In forestry, beside the trials of different silvicultural measures, local know-how has been well combined with technical knowledge in setting up a community based forest management system. However, it is still obvious that the existing village forest protection regulations should also include forest use regulations to create benefit for the local population.

- **Training:** Training is given high priority in a technical project like SFDP and is a cross-cutting issue in all fields of activity. In the first six months of 1998 over 50 technical training courses for farmers and for staff have been conducted by SFDP, focusing on the commune and village levels. To assist local staff and partners in better outlining and conducting training in April 1998 a Training of Trainers course was organized in Son La with the participation of both SFDP staff and project partners. In SFDP, most of the staff can start to function as trainer in his/ her own field.

- **Planning:** The Project Progress Review mission for the current phase was conducted from mid Feb to mid Mar 1998 including a Planning Workshop (ZOPP 5) for the coming phase. This was the most important event in the first six months of the year as it decided the future of the project. The results of the missions were very positive and another implementation phase of 3 years (1/ 1999 - 12/ 2001) has been proposed by the mission.

BRIEF OUTLINE OF MAIN ACTIVITIES IN THE SECOND HALF OF 1998

By Nguyen Quang Tan
- **Land use planning and Land allocation**: The existing LUP-LA contacts are to be finalized in the third quarter. It is a good time then for SFDP to discuss and make necessary modifications and adjustments to its methodology before the next contracts start. Modifications will mainly be based on the recommendations of short term consultants and the PPR mission as well as field experience. Changes will be documented and the final version of LUP-LA methodology developed by SFDP will be available for distribution.

- **Technological options**: In forestry SFDP is continuing with its community based forest management and utilization. It is believed that forest cannot be protected without the assistance of the local communities and that local communities can only live with forest once they can get access to forest. In the second quarter SFDP has proposed to the local forestry administration and local authorities for an improvement of village forest protection regulations toward forest utilization and management. In agriculture, trials of the Autumn and Winter crops will continue together with fruit tree, bee keeping and livestock assistance activities.

- **Preparation of the plan of operations**: Parallel with the proposal for the next phase of the project SFDP will also be preparing the overall plan of operations for the coming phase. This plan of operations will serve as the framework for annual operational planning in the coming phase. As usual, September and October are mainly given to village development planning. It is planned this year to cover 60 villages (34 in Yen chau and 26 in Tua chua) with village planning. This will be followed by the operational planning at different levels. The SFDP Song Da Annual Plan of Operations for 1999 is planned to be ready by December 1998 for submission to the National Steering Committee.

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**Funny stories.**

The great comfort of turning 49 is the realization that you are too old to die young.

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*Is the computer male or female?*

- **Reasons to believe computers female**
  - Even your smallest mistakes are stored in long-term memory for later retrieval.
  - As soon as you make a commitment to one, you find yourself spending half your paycheck on accessories for it.

- **Reasons to believe computers male**
  - As soon as you commit to one you realize that, if you had waited a little longer, you could have obtained a better model.
  - They are supposed to help you solve problems, but half the time they ARE the problem.