NATURAL RESOURCES POLICIES IN THE HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

A Synthesis of NGO Experience

Binh T. Nguyen
The University of Minnesota
Twin Cities, Minnesota, U.S.A.

March 1998

“If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.”
- Anonymous -
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was completed with technical and financial support from the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C. For that I am sincerely grateful to WRI. Specifically, I would like to extend my special thanks to the following people.

First of all, Jake Brunner, whom I met almost incidentally a couple of years ago, but who turned out to be a great friend and colleague of mine. Jake was the one who really brought me to WRI and advanced my relationship with the organization. When I was working for a short time in WRI, I received constant support from Jake, especially in conducting a series of seminars on Vietnam’s highland development policies. A result of those seminars was the suggestion that I conduct this research. More importantly, I recall with fondness our endless talks about Vietnam and its development future when I was staying at Jake’s house at the time I worked at WRI. For all of his professional support and friendship, I want to express my great thanks to Jake.

I want to thank Frances Seymour for her valuable comments on the proposal for this research. Her challenging questions to and sharp and precise notions on the earlier versions of this research proposal forced me to identify what I specifically wanted to look at. This proved to be extremely useful for me. And of course, I should also thank Frances as she was the one who gave me WRI’s administrative green light for this research to go ahead.

During the process of my actual research and report writing, I received tireless and invaluable assistance from Blake Ratner. I owe much of the development of the research methodology and way to present the research findings to Blake’s meticulous comments and close supervision. I appreciate his inputs and commitment, and want to thank him for that.

The person who went with me through all the logistical paddies was Mairi Dupar. I really admire her excellent administrative skills and support which undoubtedly made my research possible. I especially thank Mairi for all of her efficient arrangements for my trip to Vietnam, and timely communications between me and WRI. In addition, Mairi’s long personal hours volunteered for editing my English, and her carefulness, helped make this report grammatically correct and more precise. I want to sincerely thank Mairi for her contribution in this regard.

And of course, the core of this research is all of my interviewees. I am sorry that I can’t list all of their names here, but I do so in the appendix attached at the end of this paper. I also apologize that I can’t mention their individual contributions. However, I would like to assure them that I deeply appreciate their time and invaluable information, for I created this paper entirely from the knowledge and opinions they gave me during the interviews. I want to dedicate this paper to all of my interviewees as my sincere thanks to them. Needless to say, I also thank those whom I did not interview officially, but talked to informally, for many of their ideas and opinions can also be found in my report.

I want to thank my dear friend and academic advisor at The University of Minnesota, Professor Jim Perry, for his continual support of my studies and this particular research. Jim’s attention and numerous research suggestions were exceptionally valuable to me, especially when much of my study program at the university was still unclear.

Lastly, I owe a great debt to my loved ones: my wife, Huong, and my two daughters, Trang and Linh. They are the ones who help me have the mettle to endure the long, lonely days in the US for my studies. More importantly, they are the very ones who made me understand that my heart has no where but my country to long for, and that I should contribute to its future development. My research was founded from, and is for this belief. For making me able to think that way, I thank my wife and my two daughters.
SUMMARY

Vietnam’s highlands are at a crossroads of opening up for economic development and integration into the national modernization and industrialization process, on one hand, and misusing and depleting local natural resources and social infrastructure, on the other. The challenge is to achieve the former, but not at expense of the latter.

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attempt to ease this challenge. This paper provides a synthesis of factors that the NGOs involved consider as constraints to the success of their work. The findings are based on interviews with 22 staff members in 18 international and domestic NGOs, conducted in Hanoi in December 1997.

The paper has four sections. Section 1 introduces the rationale of the paper within the overall context of highlands development and its challenges. Section 2 briefly describes the research process. Section 3 and section 4 make up the body of the paper. They address the activities of two major actors in the uplands: government (through its natural resources-related policies), and NGOs.

The major finding about new governmental policies dealing with natural resources in highlands is that they are many and are being created to serve worthy, overall goals. However, the way these policies are being formulated and implemented shows many shortcomings. Specifically, the government fails to incorporate local physical carrying capacity and social environment into the policies, and enforces the policies weakly at the practical level. The NGO section examines NGO involvement in highland development as an emerging process characterized by two major features. First, they tend to focus on project-like activities. Second, the current interrelationships between the international NGOs and domestic NGOs threaten the creation of an unfair playing field among the latter and a possible loss of their identity, especially at the early stages of their institutional development. In addition, the paper contains 11 boxes. They illustrate examples or present ideas reinforcing or contradicting the ideas in the main text.

This is not a mission-trip or fact-finding report, nor an evaluation. Therefore, it does not provide recommendations, but leaves this part for the readers to interpret and apply themselves. In addition, this paper does not aim to serve a particular organization, but everyone who is interested in the topic and may find this report useful. To make it more widely accessible, this report is written in both English and Vietnamese with exactly the same contents. The author bears full and equal responsibility for both versions.

Finally, despite continual and generous help from many people during the process of research and report writing, there undoubtedly remain some mistakes and shortcomings. I am myself fully responsible for them. In addition, as I am somewhat familiar with both Vietnamese and Western ways of thinking, which often times appear contradictory to each other, I will not be surprised by any possible comments on my paper. I am prepared to give acknowledge any grade ranging from A to F.

I welcome comments. I can be reached at: nguyenb@qusun.georgetown.edu
I. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam’s highlands cover three-fourths of the national geographical area and are home to 24 million people or about one-third of the total population (Forest Protection Department, 1997). In school, every Vietnamese child used to learn that Vietnam had “Golden Forests and Silver Ocean”. Nowadays, this is no longer correct. There is much evidence to show that the highlands are currently experiencing a variety of fundamental and far-reaching changes. The future development of the Vietnamese highlands is being threatened by the possibility that the drive for economic profit in present-day development will override nature and social values. This forms the very core dilemma of highland development in Vietnam today and in the years to come (Donovan, 1997).

First, there is an increasing recognition of the role of the highlands in the country’s development strategies. Having long been perceived as economically poor and socially “backward”, the highland provinces are now being increasingly integrated into the process of national modernization and industrialization. The central government perceives the highland provinces as an important arsenal of natural resources that the country hopes to mobilize for its economic development. This strategic view has encouraged the emergence of a number of new governmental policies and programs dealing with natural resources in the highlands, especially with regard to watersheds, forests, and soil. On one hand, these policies contribute to the overall national wealth-- which is their primary intention-- and they benefit certain groups of people living in the highlands. On the other hand, they are leaving large, long-lasting, and in some cases irreversible, imprints on the natural resources of these provinces. These include the continuous loss of natural resources such as forest cover and biological diversity, the increase of soil erosion and related degradation of watersheds. Nowadays, the remaining forest cover in Vietnam is about 27% (Hoang H.oe, 1997).

Second, the degradation of natural resources in the highlands does not just involve the disruption of natural systems, but also causes declines in agricultural productivity in these areas. Soil erosion and water shortage tend to be the first cause of the reduction of crop yields, and force changes in agricultural practices and livelihoods of local people. This directly threatens food security and sharpens the poverty of the local inhabitants, making their lives more dependent on natural resources that are already limited and deteriorating. In the long run, this means the lives of local people will become more vulnerable, and the economic gap between the highlands and lowlands will increase. This is precisely the opposite picture of the economic integration process being promoted now.

Third, the emergence of new market forces in the highland provinces, prompted primarily by the nation’s economic renewal policy, has begun to shake the structure of social institutions in these provinces. For instance, institutional and individual relationships formed traditionally on the basis of local cultures and customs with limited governmental intervention, are being replaced by new relations with a primarily economic basis. The loss of social relationships that place neighborhoods and community reciprocal help in the center, compounded with declining food production due to environmental degradation, further exacerbates the vulnerability of local people who are eking out their daily living and not able to adapt to new livelihoods. In the long run, this sharpens the differentiation in social wealth among local people. In addition, the sudden departure of former community institutions and regulations without a proper replacement has left a dangerous gap in highland social structures: old structures are no longer functioning, but new ones are not yet in place.

Myriad actors are involved in addressing these environmental and social challenges. At the present stage of Vietnam’s development, the non-governmental community-- comprised of both international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and nascent domestic quasi-non-governmental organizations (DNGOs)-- is one very important constituency. In contrast to governmental policies and programs, the strongest advantage of such civil independent organizations lies in their direct contact with the local people whom they serve at the grassroots level.

Although the emergence of the INGOs and DNGOs in Vietnam is relatively recent, and the scope of their activities is still rather limited compared to the needs, they nevertheless begin to suggest a possible alternative development paradigm for the highland area. That paradigm is a community development focused on
local social and environmental conditions, i.e., the kind of development that seeks a compromise between available local natural and social resources and human economic needs in a long-term perspective. The NGO community has gained and is promoting this message mainly through various grassroots development programs targeting poverty alleviation, community-based natural resource management and natural conservation. In a few cases, NGOs help local people articulate their views, or are themselves involved in activities advocating more environmentally and socially sound long-term development strategies.

The NGO's approach seems to further the possibility for wise, sustainable development in the Vietnamese highlands, especially when there is evidence of its being otherwise. The highland areas definitely need to be integrated into national development plans and should not be excluded from the journey toward material prosperity. However, on this long road, local people need to retain their values, both for their sake and for the sake of the country as a whole.

Natural resources, such as water, forests, soil, and biological resources, need to be used in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly manner, while economic and material benefits generated from them should be commensurate with the environment's carrying capacity. It is vital that local livelihoods, traditions and social customs be incorporated into land use and watershed planning, and conservation projects. At the same time, programs targeting natural resources should guarantee a social platform in which local livelihoods, cultures and social institutions are reasonably preserved and allowed to develop appropriately.

The NGO community has yet to achieve what it seeks. The obvious question that emerges is: What are the forces that constrain the NGO community from achieving their ultimate goal? This paper aims to suggest some possible answers to this question.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

To illuminate the obstacles to NGO's progress in promoting ecologically and socially sustainable highland development, it is necessary to analyze two main sectors: (1) the governmental sector, especially Vietnamese government policies affecting natural resources in the highlands, and (2) the NGO sector. This paper is based on an analysis of these sectors, including a study of the experience of international and domestic NGOs working in the highland provinces in Vietnam.

Over almost three weeks in December 1997, the author interviewed 18 international and domestic NGOs in Hanoi. Some groups were interviewed twice with different staff at different times. Twenty-two individuals were interviewed in all. Their names are listed in the appendix to this paper. NGOs were selected for interview based on the following criteria:

1. Natural resources work. The selected NGOs had programs related to natural resources management in the highlands, both directly and indirectly. Their key activities included: promotion of sustainable land use through various kinds of low external-input agriculture and forestry practices, environmental conservation, agricultural and forestry extension services, research and networking, and advocacy programs.

2. A relatively balanced representation of different professional sectors. The selected NGOs came from a range of sectors, including environmental conservation, rural development, and poverty alleviation.

3. A relatively balanced geographic representation. The NGOs interviewed worked in almost every part of the country, but focused primarily on two major areas: the northern and the central mountainous provinces.

4. A diverse representation of NGOs in terms of the organizations' size and resources. A range of large, medium and small NGOs was chosen, according to their annual financial resources, number of staff, and the scope of work and the geographical areas covered. Included in the interviews were organizations which had the public reputation for "success" and "failure."

5. An international and domestic balance. Although, the number of Vietnamese quasi-NGOs is slim, and their activities are relatively few, these NGOs were given considerable
Box 1:

There is a general agreement that Vietnam has a fairly sophisticated system of educational and research institutions with well-trained staff in agriculture, forestry and relevant sciences. These include: three major agricultural and forestry universities, the Forest Inventory and Planning Institute, Forest Science Institute, Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources, and a network of forest centers from the central level to the provinces. Thousands of staff working in these organizations have Masters degrees, PhDs or post-doctoral qualifications.

There is also a general notion that these institutions and personnel tend to focus on, and do rather well at, specific technical tasks. A very small proportion of them, if any, tackle issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability in a truly complex, multidisciplinary manner.

Despite the emergence of new policies in Vietnam, many of which obviously require a new work approach, the country’s educational and research orientation remains virtually unchanged.

attention during the interviews, to ensure the incorporation of a Vietnamese perspective on development trends in the highlands.

It also is necessary to mention that beside these official interviews, the researcher conducted many unofficial talks with a variety of NGO staff and other independent researchers during the study period. When appropriate, ideas and views obtained in these informal conversations were also included in this report. Furthermore, the report also draws on some of the researcher’s four-year experience of working in uplands development with an international NGO in Vietnam.

III. HIGHLANDS NATURAL RESOURCES POLICIES – MAIN TRAITS

1. A Boom of New Policies and Organizations

A little discussed fact, which nonetheless garners attention when raised, is that a number of government policies dealing in one way or other with highlands was issued from the early to mid-1990s. Some of the most notable ones are: the Land Allocation and Forest Lease Policy (usually referred to as Land Allocation Program); National Program on Restoration of Barren Lands and Denuded Hills (usually called Program 327); Agriculture and Forestry Extension Policy; Price Policy; Science and Technology Policy; Rural Mountainous Development Program; and Biodiversity Action Plan.

The professional scope and geographical target areas covered by these policies and programs vary. Some of them have activities touching almost every aspect of livelihoods in the highlands, and are spread out in all mountainous provinces. Some of them are more focused. For instance, Program 327 is being implemented in every mountainous province from the north to the south, and involves a wide range of activities related to resettlement, sedentarization, and community development (Sikor, 1995). In the same way, the Land Allocation Program aims to allocate both agricultural and forestry lands to individual households and organizations in every part of the country. Meanwhile, the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) has projects targeting primarily protected areas, natural reserves and buffer zones (Biodiversity Action Plan for Vietnam, 1994).

Accompanying the emergence of these policies and programs was the creation of several new authorities ¾ administrative and professional departments at the center, province and district levels. In some cases, the line extends to the villages, as is the case with agriculture and forestry extension. There is a hierarchy of extension departments and stations from the central level to the villages within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). This extension system basically recruits staff by switching people from other departments within MARD, and it operates professionally in accordance with MARD’s orders. Another example is the Land Cadastral Department (LCD). This department was established recently in MARD, and extends from the central offices down to the districts. The main function of LCD is to implement the Land Allocation Program. At the district level usually the staff of the Agriculture and Forestry Department (AFD) carry out this function in addition to whatever they are already performing. Along the same lines as the new policies and organizational restructurings is the upgrading of the Committee for Ethnic
Box 2: BirdLife International is a British international environmental NGO. It has worked in Vietnam for almost a decade, and focuses on wildlife habitat protection, such as nature reserves and protected areas. Recently, when BirdLife was collecting data necessary for a proposal that the Chu Yang Sin area in Daklak province be designated a nature reserve, it encountered some administrative confusion with the local authorities. The NGO’s representative sent a letter directly to the country’s Prime Minister reporting the situation and seeking support. After that everything became very smooth, and now the Chu Yang Sin area is about to get formal status as a nature reserve.

This example delivers a double message: the central government is cooperative, and the top-down approach is useful in some cases.

There are several reasons why the government has recently become more attentive to development of mountainous areas. One set of good assumptions has roots in the country’s new macro-economic policies introduced in 1986.

Market forces have quickly begun to show their flip sides: the country’s two topographically different areas -- the lowlands and the highlands -- have become even more economically disparate as they develop. The lowland provinces with their more sophisticated human and physical infrastructures have adapted quickly and enjoyed rapid economic growth, while the highland provinces, with their much less developed human and physical resources, are still unable to take advantage of the market mechanism. Furthermore, as market forces have expanded in a region with weak institutional structures, their negative effects have been magnified. The highland provinces have increasingly suffered from ongoing environmental degradation and the continuous loss of the natural resources, such as the severe reduction in forest cover and the rapid increase of soil erosion.

As there has not been any comprehensive evaluation, many things remain unclear about the impact and outcomes of the new governmental programs and restructuring. The following three sections will help crystallize some of the observations from an NGO point of view. These observations are presented as: (1) the government’s highland development policies from an overall point of view, and (2) how the policies are formulated and implemented on ground. The information used to develop this analysis was taken directly from the interviews, and from literature listed in the appendix. While many issues mentioned in these three concern natural resources development policies in the highlands in general, a substantial number of them were drawn from the experience of the Land Allocation Program. This should not diminish the general sense of the analysis; to some extent it is an advantage, because the Land Allocation Program is one of the government’s hottest concerns and key focal points.

2. Good Will - The Ace of Spades

Vietnamese respondents approached the issue of the government’s intentions in the highlands differently than did their foreign colleagues; but overall, NGOs signalled that they thought the government’s highland development policies were created through good will and with sincere goals. What a pleasant surprise by way of NGO compliment to the government!

The Vietnamese government is aware of the possibility that the highlands may lag far behind the lowlands in the economic development race (which has begun to happen already), and it intends to do something to avoid this. Although each new policy and program has its own objectives, one feature they all share is that they are part of a very ambitious, strategic goal of the Vietnamese government: that is to promote further economic development in the mountainous provinces and integrate them into the national development plans.

The government aims to convert these provinces from what has long been perceived as a “backward” area into an economically productive one. The way the government believes it can make this commitment possible is to encourage the highland provinces to increase their participation in the modernization and industrialization process, bringing to bear their comparative advan-
tage in natural resources. Hence, much of the governmental effort has been directed at the use of land, forests and water, and has resulted in the policies mentioned above.

There are many positive signs in these policies, too. For example, in addition to protecting forests, the Forest Land Allocation Program aims to allocate lands to all farmers as a means to promote and strengthen household economies. The government now places households at the center of the engine of development. This is an amazing change in perspective compared to the previous cooperative practice. The guidelines for implementation of this program stipulate that lands should be allocated in accordance to the farmers’ desires first, and then according to logical rationale (Nguyen Cat Giao, 1997). Priority is given to the households’ wishes. Along the same lines, the agricultural and forestry extension system was established to help farmers adapt to new market practices in the rural areas. The system aims to provide farmers with knowledge and skills necessary for the new situation, as the cooperatives that once supported them no longer exist. One can also find merits in one of the vaguest policies, Program 327. The resettlement and sedentarization component of that program, despite its controversy (the interviewees for this paper differed intensely when they were asked about this issue), intends to ease population pressures in the lowlands and eliminate deforestation resulting from slash and burn agricultural practices in the highlands.

Another important feature of the Vietnamese government, agreed by a substantial majority of interviewees, is that governmental organizations dealing with highlands are quite cooperative and well-intentioned.

In general, the Vietnamese Government has a good commitment to alleviating poverty in rural areas. It runs a national-wide program called Hunger Eradication and Poverty Alleviation (HEPA) that has earned a good reputation. The government has also established a number of mass organizations to help the marginalized, such as the Women’s Union, Farmer’s Union, Bank for the Poor, etc. NGO programs that aim directly at poverty alleviation are usually welcomed. Program that address less urgent problems, such as wildlife and nature conservation, seem to be received less enthusiastically. Much research is usually perceived as something the least busy people do. There is a tendency to consider advocacy programs to be confrontational or oppositional and these are not advised; at least, they are not advised before the message and method of delivery have been thoroughly studied.

However, NGOs’ overall perception is that governmental organizations are cooperative. This is something that gets blurred in the immense logistical paddies one might easily fall into while trying to work in the highlands, and which is therefore easily forgotten. People also seem to take this cooperation for granted, forgetting that it is really the Ace of Spades that one can rely on to build a strong hand. Nevertheless, respondents acknowledged that this advantage can only be mobilized if they continue to press for it.

Interviewees repeated many times that the authorities may not understand what you are talking about in the beginning, and therefore do not seem to be active, but once they understand, they are very supportive. The local authorities usually appoint somebody in their office to take care of the project and to smooth things out. In some cases, favorable conditions are arranged. Some interviewees revealed that the red tape in Vietnam sometimes turns out to be helpful, as the command line from the center to the provinces seems to be very powerful. This is especially true with environmental projects dealing with nature reserves or wildlife conservation, which seem nebulous to the local authorities at the district or even provincial levels.

There are a number of social, economic and political factors contributing to this. A proper analysis of these factors requires a thorough study and is far beyond the scope of this paper. The following is an attempt to summarize what was heard during the course of the interviews.

First, the government is not just one organization or one person. One can always find good people in the authorities who understand and are supportive, and these people help make things happen. Second, culture is also involved. Every Vietnamese, including high-ranked governmental officers, has two faces, an official face and a real face, or what Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet calls
In 1995, a group of Oxfam branches intended to organize an advocacy workshop on Mekong River Sustainable Development. The workshop never received permission from the Vietnamese organization in charge of international NGOs. The organizers of the planned workshop never knew the real reasons for their failing to obtain permission. Nevertheless, after a series of explorations, the following emerged as likely answers:

1. Advocacy is a sensitive activity in Vietnam, in general, and in the sector of hydropower, in particular.
2. There was bad communication between the workshop organizers and the Vietnamese organizations, especially with the ones in charge. The fault was on the NGOs’ side. After the Vietnamese organizations discovered the purposes of the workshop, they expressed their desire for it to take place. It was felt that they were sincere.
3. There was no attempt at the NGO side to invite any Vietnamese organization as a co-organizer of the workshop. This made it feel like a purely international intervention, and therefore the event seemed to be doubly sensitive.

Now, what interferes, in reality, with that overall good will? When asked about the reality of the government’s natural resources policies in highlands, interviewees tended to divide into two groups. One group addressed the practical situation as a result from the policies, and said that if the practice is bad it is because the policies themselves are bad, or vice versa. The other group approached it from an operational level and referred to practical matters, such as management capacity, financial and technical resources, etc. They are both right, and perhaps both approaches deserve to be analyzed. The following two sections highlight some issues that the NGO community considers as constraints from those two perspectives; namely: (1) How policies are being formed, and (2) How they are actually being implemented on the ground.

3. The Policy Formulation Process – Cooking That Needs a New Recipe

A Technique-Based Approach

The first important notion about the policy and program-formulating process regarding natural resources development in highlands in Vietnam is that this is a highly technique-based process, and fails to incorporate local natural conditions and social concerns. In other words, local ecological resources (water, forests, and soil) and local livelihoods (both slash and burn-based as practiced by ethnic minorities, and wet-rice based as practiced by the Kinh) are merely pronounced in the current policies.

In his interview, Dr. Le Trong Cuc, director of the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (CRES), aptly expressed, “They [the planners] do not take into account the human ecology aspects [i.e. local customs and livelihoods in conjunction with ecological resources] while planning”. An example of forest policies formulated in this way is the reforestation program funded by the World Food Program, which people call the PAM program. Acknowledging the deforestation problem, this program aims chiefly at replanting trees, and pays farmers to do so. There is virtually no measure designated to address problems embedded in local livelihoods and no provision of alternatives.

In a very similar way, the “shut down forest doors” decree issued in the early 1990s by the then Ministry of Forestry (now merged into MARD) was put in force to stop logging. Forest Pro-
The only journal that seemed to deal with forests and natural resources in a more or less interdisciplinary manner I could collect during the interviewing process was “Journal of Ecological Economy” produced by the Institute of Ecological Economy, a Vietnamese environmental NGO, ECO-ECO. However, a substantial part of this journal is devoted to stipulating governmental rules and regulations. There are a very few short articles about natural resources, nature conservation, and the like, usually written with basic, old-fashioned natural resources management language. Insightful analytical critiques in a visionary manner are virtually absent.

The agriculture and forestry extension services are another example. Set up from the ministerial level to the districts, the entire system is driven by the notion that more advanced farming techniques should be used and a means found to transfer them to farmers. These techniques are often exotic and require high inputs, such as hybrid corn, super-meat ducks, fast-growing pigs, etc. An example is the maize cultivation systems in the northern mountainous provinces described in Shanks’s paper presented at the National Seminar on Agriculture and Forestry Extension organized by MARD in November 1997. This paper asserted that despite the diverse farming conditions in those highland provinces, the maize cultivation systems were introduced uniformly (Shanks, 1997). Moreover, the extension system was created and is being managed in such a way so that it is supply-driven (as opposed to demand-driven as it should be) and does not provide a pluralistic platform for negotiation (Christoplos, 1997).

The policies formed on the basis of hard techniques have proved not to be a good recipe. They do not correspond well with local environmental and social conditions, and are therefore unlikely to be sustainable. The most obvious example is the poor results and frequent failures of the resettlement and sedentarization programs, which used to be the core of Program 327. These failures are increasingly recognized publicly in research papers and documents of the Vietnamese government (Sikor, 1995). The enormous social and environmental consequences of the Hoa Binh Dam (Hirsch, 1992) is another example of how a technique-based natural resources utilization is not a good solution for long-term sustainable development. A number of upcoming national programs dealing with natural resources in the highlands is now under governmental consideration, and will likely go ahead despite controversial debates on whether or not it is worth doing them. Ta Pu Dam in Son La province, which is to generate 3.6 MW and will likely displace more than 100,000 local residents (Lang, 1995) is a clear message of how the central government wants and plans to use natural resources as a means supported by hard techniques to push for industrialization and economic modernization.

If there were one simple reason for using the technique-based approach, there would be no need to worry. However, no one can offer a clear-cut explanation, only a set of possible assumptions. First, it seems policy-makers lack earnest accountability and responsiveness. Because they deal with such an uncertain and changing physical and social environment in the highlands, the technique-based approach appears to better guarantee measurable outcomes. These straightforward solutions are chosen because they are much simpler and require much less input than solutions derived from the alternative approach that is based on careful analyses and incorporation of complex data on social structures, cultures, livelihoods, and available resources. This is especially true because there seem to be no incentives for policy-makers to pursue such a complex pattern, or a mechanism to provide such incentives.

Second, there is probably a link with education. Vietnam’s public education system has earned a fairly high reputation (although it is deteriorating now), which may be more rhetorical than real. A graduate from an agriculture and forestry university would normally specialize in a particular field of science. Subjects such as human ecology, natural resources anthropology, social forestry and the like have only recently been introduced into the syllabi of those universities. Although it is changing, the old education system has had enough time to leave its long-lasting imprints in the society. As a result, there is currently little human capacity to deal with multidisciplinary matters.

Third, information is another contributing factor. Informa-
information flow has two aspects: what is available and how what is available is being shared. There is very little information on natural resources available in the Vietnamese language, especially analytical and critical work in cross-disciplinary subjects as an alternative to ordinary technical material. People do not tend to share widely what information they have. Marr has described it as a system where “Vietnam’s intellectuals have unfortunately been restricted by severe financial constraints, ideological straitjackets, bureaucratic interference, and the legacy of wartime secrecy based on the military principle of limiting the flow of information to those with a proven “need to know.”” (Marr, 1988, p. 8). These two interwoven facts exacerbate each other, and damage the entire information process. This helps create an environment in which people lose their reading habit and ability to challenge things.

Traditional Top-Down Version

The second feature characterizing the natural resource policy and program formulation process is that this is a centralized and top-down decision-making process that places economic development purposes as the highest priority and fails to encourage local participation. In a softer fashion, Houghton aptly summarized the current trends in the evolution of Vietnam’s forestry policies, “Increasingly some forestry professionals view forestry as a component of rural development in which technical concerns take second place to issues of food security, sustainable farming systems and environmental protection. This change of focus has already created space for development of more participatory methods of resource management and land use planning in Vietnam – but development priorities and centralized decision-making present obstacles to the translation of progressive forest policies into local practice.” (Houghton, 1995, p.38).

This one-way traffic can be seen in different guises. First, lack of public consultation and information disclosure is one of these guises, especially with regard to land development and water use programs. Development of golf courses and construction of hydropower systems are good examples. Driven by the economic promises of such projects, which are implemented mainly through foreign investments and increasingly in the form of fashionable BOOT (Build, Owe, Operate, and Transfer), the government tends to underestimate their environmental and social costs on the local people. The government’s failure to cooperate with local people increases these costs, and goes far beyond the official calculations. Some recent, noisy farmer uprisings in hilly and mountainous development sites show very clearly how the government has not taken farmers’ interests into account. One decade after the completion of the Hoa Binh dam, there are still more than ten thousand farmers, mainly from the Muong and Tay minority groups, suffering from the loss of their farmlands to the dam’s reservoir. Interestingly enough, the majority of these people do not have access to the electricity that is generated and transmitted nearby.

Second, policies and programs fail to provide tools, mechanisms and platforms by and through which participation of the local people can take place. This was mentioned in a paper by Vu Van Me and Claude Desloges presented at the National Workshop on Participatory Land Use Planning and Forest Land Allocation organized by MARD in December 1997. It posed the question: “what structure, mechanisms and tools will facilitate the participation of local populations in the decision making process regarding sustainable use of forest lands, and in implementing them?” (Vu Van Me, 1997, p. 9). Third, at the same time, highland development policies in general and forest land allocation in particular tend to be “governed by numerous legal documents, policies, laws, decrees, regulations, decisions and technical guidelines. They are often ambiguous and show gaps and overlaps, which leaves the door open for a wide range of interpretations. These policies and legal instruments are poorly known and understood at the field level.” (Vu Van Me, 1997, p. 7).

The top-down nature of the policy formulation process may be a result of many interwoven political, economic and cultural factors. It may take a long time and a broad-based, enabling environment to change it. Used to living in a centrally planned economy with tight governmental control over nearly every aspect of life, the Vietnamese people have developed a strange kind of habit. On one hand, government officials generally believe they can do their jobs well, if not optimally, without consulting or involving the people affected by their policies. On the other hand, people do not try to influence the government, because they believe it is either impossible to do so, or that the effort requires a great
deal of trouble for few results. This old-school thinking is still very predominant in Vietnam. This tendency, along with the lack of democratic tradition in the society, translates into an association between democracy and chaos, and a general disbelief in the value of democracy. Second, Vietnamese society is something of a monolith, governed unilaterally by a strong governmental system from the center down to the communes. The whole purpose of this governance structure is to help deliver governmental policies but not to receive messages from the bottom. In addition, the country’s ruling party is afraid of losing their power by allowing people more room in decision-making.

4. Implementation – A House Not Yet in Order

Most literature and comments—official and unofficial—on current natural resources development in Vietnam’s highlands focus on the practical implementation of policies. As usual, these comments are often critical. The following summarizes some of the major critiques.

First, interviewees felt strongly that policies are always interpreted differently at the grassroots level. This could be because policies are ambiguous, overlapping, and leave the door open for different possible interpretations, as cited in Vu Van Me and Claude Desloges above. It may also be because policies are improperly enforced at the field level. It is normal in Vietnam for the implementing officers to receive brief training on a particular policy before it is actually launched. This overall idea is very sound. But, normally the training activities are not thorough enough, and trainees leave the class without a complete understanding of the concepts. Moreover, policies are changed to incorporate local conditions. Again, this is a good development, but it happens arbitrarily and depends on the interpretation and will of the officers concerned. To make it even more complicated, the government also changes its policies quite frequently.

Second, interviewees mentioned repeatedly the weak management and implementation capacity of the practitioners. This is true for both managers and technical staff at the implementation level. Specifically, interviewees mentioned poor planning, lack of vision, bad managerial skills, and so forth. This is a very serious issue, and can damage the intent of the policies. The government and the Vietnamese people in general openly acknowledge this problem, and are willing to address it. One of the papers presented by MARD officials at the National Workshop on Land Use Planning and Forest Land Allocation in December 1997 took on this issue in a very straightforward manner. The statement read, “There is still a gap between the legal framework of policies and laws regarding agricultural land use and forest land, on the one hand, and actual practice, on the other.” (Nguyen Cat Giao, 1997 p. 5). In fact, nearly all programs financed by domestic and international sources include a capacity building component designed to improve local partners’ management skills, especially those of local governmental officials. The most common activities are training in agriculture and forestry extension, project design and management, needs assessment skills, study tours, and farmer-to-farmer exchange visits. On rare occasions, training courses with an explicit focus on social forestry, human ecology, natural resources and anthropology are also provided, but mainly to those with higher education. How these training activities contribute to changing the trainees’ work performance and natural resources management practice in general remains unknown, and deserves further research.

The third major issue is that the implementation of forest

Box 5:

An interesting observation is that in informal situations, the Vietnamese seem surprisingly frank in expressing themselves. It is more obvious in the countryside, but does not exclude offices in Hanoi. For example, more than half of my foreign interviewees indicated that they would not like their names to be mentioned in the report, while none of their Vietnamese colleagues did so. My experience in the Mekong Delta showed that a very poor woman deep in a remote village could easily and abruptly stop a district chairman or other official passing by, complaining (usually very loudly) about a land use plan that man was advocating. This may be less frequent and obvious in the mountainous provinces in the north, but not completely unheard of.

How this kind of “casual participation” influences the policies is not known, but clearly it should be taken into account.
An example of an unclear interpretation of land use policy is the case of Oxfam UK and Ireland. This NGO has an environmental project in a district in Ha Tinh province. One component of that project is to help teachers and school children plant trees in the plots of land allocated to their schools. Each of those plots was about 20 - 30 ha.

Despite a lot of support from the district and provincial authorities, the land allocation process was erratic over several years. Not until the middle of the fourth year of implementation did it become clear who was to grant the Land Use Certificates to those schools. When the research for this paper was underway, it wasn’t clear if the schools had really received their certificates.

and other resources policies tend to overly “emphasize quantitative targets” (Nguyen Cat Giao, 1997, p. 2). There are two controversial opinions on the pace of land allocation programs. One asserts that the programs are being implemented too fast, while the other says exactly the opposite. Those in the former group criticize the quality of the programs’ performance, especially the land use plans and their sustainability. Those in the latter faction probably base their comments on the urgent need and seemingly endless mess in reality. In fact, both sides are right, and a combined conclusion of their views shows that the current land allocation process is being implemented badly to meet quantitative, rather than qualitative, targets. The quantitative bias appears not only in the actual field work, but in a variety of other products, too. For example, almost every report (whether progress reports for administrative purposes or analytical reports to evaluate lessons learned, whether written by local technician cadres and managers, researchers or academics) is disproportionately dominated by factual documentation of regulations, guidelines and numeric achievements or shortcomings. It is hardly possible to find anything resembling a policy analysis, that digs deep under the symptoms and finds root causes based on broad perspectives, let alone any analysis that criticizes and challenges. It appears that the mainstream strategy is safe but not capable of accepting and managing for uncertainties. In fact, as Meffe argues, it is very important for natural resource managers to be able to manage uncertainty (Meffe, 1997, p. 400). The end result is a “Hammer Syndrome”: if the only tool one has is a hammer, everything is treated as a nail.

Finally, there is a group of constraints to policy implementation that concern practical matters. Interviewees most frequently referred to the remoteness of certain areas, the inadequate supply of human, technical and financial resources (i.e. number of staff, equipment, and vehicles), and the non-emergency character of given issues. Ultimately, these constraints are very significant, and greatly influence the success of the upland policies. In fact, there is a contrast between the speed of implementation of the agricultural land allocation and forest land allocation programs. Interviewees generally agreed that the former program is progressing faster, primarily because of the more accessible location, greater urgency and financial resources associated with agricultural land, and the various logistical difficulties associated with forest lands. Nguyen Cat Giao also mentioned this phenomenon in his article. A few times, the interviewees also mentioned the discomfort caused by administrative formalities, especially for foreign staff. Aside from being a political issue, to some extent, this has a lot to do with cultural and customs, as discussed earlier.

IV. THE NGO REALM

The open policy of Vietnam’s government has aroused attraction to the international community. The country’s image is gradually changing from the one accompanied by wars, battlefields, regional conflicts, international isolation and endless poverty to the one that is seeking regional and international integration and striving for economic prosperity. This has helped bring into the country an influx of foreigners with different interests. Some are motivated by hopes for future business success, and some have come with a philanthropic wish to help the country, generally speaking, to ease out of its poverty.

To some extent, Vietnam has enjoyed the status of a new, undiscovered, and therefore somewhat fashionable destination for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from all over the world. According to Vietnam NGO directory of 1997 - 1998, there are about 400 NGOs, mainly from the North, currently working with and without offices in Vietnam. The appearance of international development NGOs has helped words such as “Development”
Box 7:
Among 18 NGOs interviewed (13 International, 5 Vietnamese) that have work in the highlands, there were only 5 NGOs (3 and 2) whose programs focused on natural resources. The remaining 13 NGOs carry out all kinds of activities perceived as necessary for poverty alleviation in the highlands. The most frequently stated activities are: credit and savings, animal husbandry, agroforestry, land allocation, training on agricultural extension.

and “NGO” evolve from their previous definition as western concepts into more or less common language among the Vietnamese. These days, it takes relatively little time to explain the meaning of these words to the average Vietnamese person, compared with five or ten years ago. Furthermore, the existence of international NGOs and their work in Vietnam has enabled the emergence of a small, basic group of domestic NGOs in the country.

1. International NGOs: A “Safety” Policy

Although there is a small group of NGOs whose programs target primarily urban issues, an overwhelming majority of NGOs deliver services in rural areas. More than a hundred NGOs (Vietnam NGO Directory, 1997-1998) have set up their programs in three major highlands areas: Northern provinces (Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Ha Giang, Son La, Yen Bai, Tuyen Quang, etc.), Central coastal mountainous provinces (Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Ninh Binh, etc.), and Central highlands (Dak Lak, Gialai-Kontum, Lam Dong, Dong Nai, etc.). This report primarily concerns NGOs with worked related to national resource management in those provinces.

Depending on their main concerns and/or professional orientation, the scope of NGO work in the highlands varies widely between organizations. Common NRM-related activities include credit and savings for the poor, handicrafts for ethnic minority groups, agriculture and forestry, primary education, construction of small scale infrastructure and community irrigation schemes. The majority of NGOs working in the highlands tend toward initiatives that promote higher agricultural productivity and restoration of forest cover. These programs are seen both as a means to help overcome food shortage and alleviate poverty, and, to a lesser extent, to address the issue of sustainable land use. Examples of this kind of program are: sloping agricultural land techniques (SALT), low external input agroforestry, and reforestation. These programs are usually implemented with a common extension approach, that is: a small number of relatively “progressive” families are chosen to carry out field trials with financial and technical support from the leading NGO; farmers from the surrounding areas are invited to visit the field trials and learn from the demonstrators; technical training and financial resources, usually in form of credit and savings, are made available to the families willing to apply the lessons and techniques learned. From time to time, special training on practical extension matters and relevant management skills, visits to other provinces or even trips abroad (very occasionally) are also organized for the agricultural extension staff and local authorities.

A small number of environmental NGOs form a minority group within the NGO community. The most prominent members of this group are WWF, BirdLife International, Frontier, IUCN (The International Conservation Union), and CRES (the Center for Natural Resource and Environmental Studies at the National University of Hanoi). Although from a professional point of view, the concrete interests and fields of expertise of these organizations remain diverse, the spectrum of their concerns is far narrower than that of the larger NGO community. Their work centers primarily around issues of natural resources and environmental protection.

The group carries out programs such as: strengthening the national system of nature reserves and national parks, promoting protected area status, conserving biodiversity and endangered species, introducing community forestry into buffer zones, reinforcing environmental laws, raising environmental awareness among the domestic media, and calling international attention to the “hot spots” or “hot issues” of biological conservation. From time to time, the NGOs also undertake natural resources research -- primarily forest inventory, human ecology studies, social forestry training and the like. In exceptional cases, some members of this group are also involved in helping outstanding Vietnamese researchers and managers go to Western universities for professional training or higher education in environmental management and nature conservation.
Yet, the very important feature of NGOs that work in the highlands in Vietnam is that with few exceptions, a disproportionately large number of the NGOs limit their work to project activities that guarantee concrete and tangible outcomes at the grassroots level. They intentionally avoid any engagement in work at a higher levels that might produce larger impact but might not give them concrete products. These NGOs may be referred to as “operational” (service-delivering) as opposed to those whose primary intention is to influence policy. Indicators most often used to measure program success are numbers of farmers undertaking the promoted agriculture practices, numbers of cows or pigs raised, numbers of hectares of forests replanted, numbers of forest areas received the status of protected areas, what endangered species are under control, numbers of training activities organized, and so on. The link between these numbers and what might result from them from the point of view of sustainable or long-term development does not emerge clearly in NGOs’ current programs. A very tiny, but slowly growing, group of NGOs is carrying out activities aimed at influencing the policy-making process. Of course the question remaining to be answered, as often by K. Eberhardt, Representative of World Neighbors, is: “So what?”

It is hard to imagine that more NGOs do not see or believe in the pursuit of longer term sustainable development goals. Some tentative assumptions about the underlying rationale for NGOs’ short-term focus are:

1. They are fulfilling their current missions, so why should they care about policies? The groups deserve appropriate credit for pursuing their current missions and goals. However, if one looks at the NGO community’s work as a whole, one may question the long-term viability of this approach. One may go one step further and ask: are the missions of foreign NGOs set before they arrive in Vietnam and are they are unable to be amended?

2. They lack necessary capacity, either human or financial or both, to do otherwise. This argument takes capacity as a fixed entity, and begs further questions. For instance, why limit to the capacity they already have? Why not maintain high goals, using existing capacity as a start? There is a whole range of possible activities that require different levels of human and financial commitment, and it is impossible that NGOs’ current capacity does not fit anywhere in that range.

3. They are not addressing policy because their current projects are not only possible and do not hurt anybody, but they address the immediate needs of the beneficiaries. Although this argument sounds less institution-driven than the first one, it raises the very same question. And of course, the contrary argument is that nobody gets hurt, except the very idea of development.

4. There is no need to address policies directly, and what they do is an alternative way. They hope that through grassroots development activities, they can empower local people, and that one day common people will take on policy issues by themselves. This argument is very strong as it is based on the very advantage of operational NGOs, that is, their linkages to the community at the grassroots level. However, it cannot answer the question of whether or not their activities really empower local people. Many activities and terminology that many NGOs like, such as local participation, PRA, etc. do not seem to accommodate well the cultural and social conditions in Vietnam.

5. It is impossible to address policy right now in Vietnam. This seems to be the argument of every group that avoids policy. It is also necessary to mention the echo effect of this argument. Since it has been used so often, it has created a bias inside the

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**Box 8:**

Mr. Khoi’s (Population and Development International) experience with the PRA exercise is that it generates a lot of papers which end up in office drawers. It appears to consist of a huge group of people from Hanoi, including both Vietnamese and foreigners, who drive in large cars and carry lots of flip-charts, markers, and the like. This group of people asks many questions and writes a lot. It looks like something serious is going on, and leads the villagers to hope for some significant assistance, soon. Oftentimes, it ends itself, and projects keep being generated without regard to the findings.

It is like, as one person said, big fireworks burst and then go away.
Box 9: From my personal experience after almost four years working in an NGO, I learned that many international NGO staff seem unhappy with the Vietnamese government’s development policies. The matters that attract most serious criticism from them are rather similar to the matters mentioned in the previous chapter. Somehow, however, this personal dissatisfaction is not revealed in their work at the institutional level.

At the institutional level, it is as if NGOs see the problem but choose to ignore it, to avoid anger or any other unpleasant reaction or treatment from the Vietnamese government. This constitutes a compromise of their values for the sake of their organizations’ safety. Happiness created this way is called “Di Hoa Vi Quy” in Vietnamese — which in English literally means “Love-all is the best”.

2. Domestic NGOs: Stage of Institutional Development

There is not yet a legislative foundation for national NGOs to be established and operate in Vietnam. However, there is a group of Vietnamese organizations that the international NGO community refers to as quasi-NGOs. These organizations are sometimes registered under a governmental umbrella but operate like NGOs: they are not financed by, and are only loosely governed by the sponsoring governmental agency. During the course of the research, five such quasi-NGOs were interviewed. 1. The Rural Development Services Center (RDSC), founded in 1994 by a former staff member of the Mennonite Central Committee and registered under the Hanoi Department for Science, Technology and the Environment. 2. The Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (CRES), founded in 1985 by a group of outstanding teachers and researchers as a research and training offshoot of the Hanoi National University.

3. The Institute for Ecological Economy (Eco-Eco), founded in 1990 by a group of retired forestry and biology researchers and professionals, the majority of whom completed their education and started their careers during the French time. They are registered under a national professional society called the Vietnam Society of Science and Technology. 4. The Center for Resources Development and Environment (REDEEN), founded in 1995 by a group of retired and not-yet retired researchers and teachers from different institutes and colleges. 5. The National Association of Vietnamese Gardeners, a farmer support organization known widely as VACVINA. As their names reveal and except for RDSC and VACVINA, who work as general rural development organizations, the other three are focused on natural resources, especially soil, water and forests.

The emergence of such organizations is an encouraging factor, especially in the context of a country where the concept of civil society is still much under debate. Although many of the young Vietnamese domestic NGOs (D NGOs) are still struggling to confirm their existence, the fact that they all continue to deliver their services and that their reputations keep growing among the general public and government authorities, indicates a promising beginning of an alternative social development. Despite many financial, social, and political uncertainties and the lack of capable human and technical resources, this community has shown stable institutional growth. The interviews for this research revealed that the scope and the geographical area covered by the interviewed NGOs have grown significantly over the last couple years. Some
of them have even begun national or regional networks to scale-up and widen their services. Indeed, some of them have succeeded surprisingly well in their work, and have become respected NGOs in the region.

However, the NGOs have one very important trait which merits discussion; that is, the level of institutional development of these organizations is still primitive. It is common for the NGOs to work in sub-contract style. They obtain contracts and run projects initiated and sponsored mainly by international organizations, primarily NGOs, foundations, or embassies. Many of them offer immediate development-related services, such as training, needs assessments, evaluations, project design, technical research, and the like as a means to finance and thereby to maintain their existence. Very occasionally, a few of them conduct analytical research requested by funding agencies. During the course of research for this paper, a number of documents produced by various NGOs were collected. One finding from the reading of those collected papers was that except for the ones that were written with large contributions of foreign researchers, the remaining ones hardly provided any analytical challenge or insight, but were rather straightforward reports or training manuals.

In addition, it seems that NGOs’ policies are pretty straightforward and lack a level of sophisticated strategies. Very little is heard about how what they are doing contributes to their field of specialization within the larger development picture of Vietnam. Long-term visions, such as what institutional development pattern they are going to take (i.e. how they are going to transfer what has been built to next generations within their organizations, what are the long-term fund-raising strategies), how they are going to mobilize or influence the domestic public so that their beliefs take root in the community, what civil society development route they hope to contribute to, etc. are almost unheard. Discussion of immediate management concerns and institutional building issues, such as accountability, financial and human resources management, planning, professional networks, etc. is not heard either.

The lack of a level of sophisticated thinking in the NGOs could be explained by a combination of various factors. First, the Vietnamese have long lived in a command system whereas almost every aspect of life was directed by the central government. The societal structures and the education system were intentionally designed to support governmental control. Over time, an ingrained habit developed among people not to challenge the wisdom of the development path underway. This has effectively prevented them from thinking about alternatives. Second, the very concept of non-governmental organizations itself is still relatively new in Vietnam. People have only recently become acquainted to the idea of self-development as opposed to the top-down approach. The foundation for independent critical thinking and analysis is still very weak. And, lastly, there is a huge lack of up-to-date information, resulting from weak linkages to the outside world and the lack of necessary technical and financial support. At the moment there seems to be much more information on development being channeled to Vietnam by the community of international organizations and by the increased number of Vietnamese traveling abroad. Even so, the

**Box 10:**

During the interview process, I confirmed my bias about the difficulty of getting information from Vietnamese colleagues. When I set up my meetings with them, I was repeatedly asked if my research was to collect information for my own thesis. I needed to repeat many times very clearly that there was nothing to do with my thesis, and that I didn’t even know what my thesis was going to be at the time. I needed also to state very clearly that the purpose of the research was not to collect information from them for somebody or something outside Vietnam but hopefully to draw some kind of general synthesis based on the experience of many NGOs in Vietnam so that all involved could share. During the actual interviewing process, I also learned that I could hardly get any paper from them without long and tedious explanations about why I would need their papers. I developed a strong sense that there is an environment whereas every piece of information seems to be very important, and the idea of giving information freely and allowing it to flow is unfamiliar.

In contrast, I didn’t have any problem with my foreign interviewees. Instead, I was always welcome immediately, and was generously provided with their publications without a single question.

The behavioral difference of the two groups suggests that much more information should be made available so that an information-sharing habit can develop, and people realize the power of information for the common good, as opposed to for personal gain.
During my time working for an international development NGO, I learned two practical lessons on how international support might affect a Vietnamese organization.

My organization was providing continual support to two Vietnamese research organizations, one in the north and one in the south. Our support was helpful to them at the beginning. After a while, I learned that they both had become very famous and attractive to other international donor organizations. The final outcome was that they both became very busy with large projects and refused small ones — the very thing that had helped them stand straight!

Information available in Vietnam now seems to be like a piece of salt in the ocean.

3. Fame and Identity: A Possible Consequence

At the moment, Vietnam’s government is still working on an NGO law. People are still debating the various definitions of “NGO,” NGOs’ roles in society, and how the government can control them once their numbers mushroom. People have different ways of categorizing the same organization, and there is no estimate yet of how many NGOs are currently operating. The most confusion has emerged around mass organizations such as the Vietnam Women’s Union, Vietnam Farmers’ Union and Vietnam Youth Union. These organizations were created, and are being guided and partly funded directly by the central government. They have very sophisticated national networks from the central to the village levels. They are referred to as NGOs by many groups of both Vietnamese and foreign analysts, despite their legislative status as governmental offspring. It seems any statistic effort to be undertaken soon will give misleading results. However, the true fact is that the number of quasi-NGOs publicly known in Vietnam is very small compared to development needs of the country. If these mass organizations and their provincial affiliates are discounted, the number of non-governmental-like organizations is reduced to about ten.

Even though the NGO community is so small, a dangerous tendency is evolving within it: the NGOs are being polarized, in large part due to international support. Although there are no official statistics, and unlikely to be any soon, about what kind and what volume of international support each organization receives, the differences can, however, be judged by the number and scale of internationally-supported projects that each recipient organization is undertaking. In some cases, the amount of international support can also be assessed based on the presence of foreign personnel.

Even the five interviewed NGOs confirmed this observation. On one side of the line stand those with the maximum possible foreign support, shown in the number of foreign personnel present, and their large and long-promised financial assistance worth several hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. On the other side of the line are those who receive tiny or basically no international financial and technical support. If it is so different among these five interviewed NGOs, which are highly well-recognized among the general public, one can draw conclusions about what kind of international support other, less well-known NGOs receive.

The uneven distribution of support is natural, and can be explained by a number of factors on both donor and recipient sides. The most significant contributing factors from the recipient side include: types of organization, missions and philosophies, human and technical capacities, work directions and approaches, quality of job performance, the reciprocities between the sponsoring and the receiving agencies, or just simply luck. It is important to examine why the differences exist, but due to the lack of information it is impossible to do so properly. However, it is more important to highlight some already-observed far-reaching impacts of such differences, especially at their early stage of evolution.

First, international support exacerbates the differences in institutional development between NGOs, threatening the creation of an unfair playing field. The amount of money and other kinds of assistance committed by international organizations provides a means for projects and other activities to take place in the recipient organizations. Of course, there must be some preconditions before such commitments are made; but once they have been
made, they help generate more and more opportunities for those recipients. And this is where the disparity between the receiving and non-receiving organizations is magnified. The surprise here is that DNGOs seem not particularly concerned about this magnification. One possible answer was mentioned in a previous section of this paper: the majority of DNGOs are more concerned about the struggle with their own immediate existence and are busier running their own projects than thinking broadly. The disparity has been reflected even more in the perspectives of the sponsoring community, making its members more focused on the already-receiving DNGOs, and thereby providing them with more money and more commitments.

For good DNGOs who are able to absorb new commitments in accordance to the limits of their capacity, the flow of international commitments is a genuinely golden opportunity for them to further develop their organizations. But for less capable DNGOs, the possible consequence is that they will fall into an endless chain of projects, and fail to maintain their quality. In such cases, the international community not only provides assistance to the wrong organizations, but also unintentionally creates images of those DNGOs which they do not deserve. Although this might not have yet happened among the frequent recipient Vietnamese DNGOs, it is something to watch out for.

Second, this research found that some non-receiving DNGOs deserve more support than what they currently receive. It is painful to mention that some of the frequent recipient DNGOs do not always appear to own ideas, and mobilize financial and human resources to realize those ideas, but instead they follow or even implement ideas initiated by funding agencies. Meanwhile, some of the DNGOs that receive funds less frequently try to start with their own ideas, and implement them without much international support. It seems that well-established DNGOs, with good English language ability and therefore good ability for international communication, are the ones that usually receive more international support. In contrast, the ones that are more indigenous, more self-reliant, and rich in identity are often times left out. Of course, there must be other reasons for this, and likely they similar to the points mentioned two paragraphs earlier. However, the fact is that the ones that are already well-functioning and seem certain on their feet are having somewhat better opportunities. A similar notion can be found in Gram’s report (Gram, 1998, p. 6).

This discussion begs further questions. First, who needs and deserves more international assistance? Second, how should the NGO community develop their partnerships so that a fair playing field is maintained on one hand, and vendorism is avoided and the identity of DNGOs is preserved, on the other? The type of the interrelationships between DNGOs and INGOs that has evolved so far best be characterized as the sponsor-agency linkages described by Oliver (Oliver, 1990). The best answer is that both sides, DNGOs and INGOs, should seek a better way of working. The DNGOs should think and do more about institutional development as mentioned in the previous section. A possible answer for the international NGO community is that it should find a new platform for collaboration characterized by more thorough relationships between them and the DNGOs. More soft assistance, such as institutional building, education and training for staff of DNGOs, information exchange and publication of local journals, etc., are needed. In other words, the INGOs should be working more from behind the scenes. This will certainly be good for the DNGOs to carry out their activities while still maintaining their own autonomy and identity. But, nevertheless, it may not be certainly easy for some funding agencies. The problem is that the funding agencies also need recognition, and are accountable to their donating constituencies which, unfortunately, usually prefer tangible outcomes. Because there are so few DNGOs, especially ones that seem to promise a reasonably good quality of work, an alternative is to widen the domestic NGO community.

The very challenge is that the new way of thinking and the new approach of working require each side find ways to overcome their own self-interests and move in the direction of genuine development.
Quasi-non-governmental organizations are registered under a governmental umbrella institution, but are not financed or managed directly by government.

A cadastre is a public record of the value, extent and ownership of land as a basis for taxation.

The Land Allocation Program allocates land leases to individual households.

Robert Chamber’s book “Rural Development: Putting the poor first”, …., provides a very interesting view on development. Much of that view can be found in present Vietnam NGO work, though the book does not touch Vietnam particularly.

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ACRONYMS

BAP Biodiversity Action Plan
CEMMA Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas
Decree 327 National Program on Restoration of Barren Lands and Denuded Hills
Ha Hectare
HEPA Hunger Eradication and Poverty Alleviation
LCD Land Cadastral Department
MARD Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
NGO Non-Governmental Organization
NRM Natural Resources Management
PRA Participatory Rural Appraisal
MRDP Mountainous Rural Development Program
VACVINA National Association of Vietnamese Gardeners
VBVP Vietnam Bank for the Poor
Resources Policy Support Initiative

The Resources Policy Support Initiative (REPSI) is a project to improve the basis for decision-making on development and natural resource use in the uplands of mainland Southeast Asia. REPSI aims to provide policy-makers with timely options for sustainable upland management, and to strengthen local organizations’ capacity for providing such analysis, through independent research, outreach and regional exchange.

REPSI is a collaboration between the World Resources Institute and many local and international organizations. The project focuses on Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Yunnan, China, and has recently expanded its research into Cambodia. REPSI has a field-based manager in Chiang Mai, Thailand and a project manager in Washington, D.C.

About the Working Paper Series

This paper is one of a series of REPSI “working papers” that seeks to illuminate the cutting-edge issues, challenges and opportunities of natural resource management in the region’s uplands. The working papers are written by researchers in and outside of the region—and often represent collaborations between the two. It is hoped these papers will promote discussions among government decision-makers, researchers and non-governmental organizations about sustainable development options in the coming decade.

Upcoming releases in the working paper series will address the three themes listed above. We welcome papers or small research proposals from organizations in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Yunnan for possible inclusion in the series. If you are undertaking research that relates closely to REPSI’s activities, please contact our regional office in Chiang Mai or our Washington, D.C. headquarters for more information. We also look forward to receiving your feedback on the papers themselves.

Mairi Dupar
Project Manager
World Resources Institute
10 G Street N E, Suite 800
Washington, DC, 20002, USA
Tel: (1) 202 729 7600
Email: mairid@wri.org
http://www.wri.org/repsi

Nathan Badenoch
Project Manager
International Center for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF)
Forest Resources Department
Faculty of Agriculture
Chiang Mai University
Chiang Mai, 50202, THAILAND
Tel: (66) 53 3579 81
Email: badenoch@loxinfo.co.th

In REPSI’s current phase (1999-2001), the project is focusing its policy analysis, regional exchange, and dialogue activities on three major themes:

Local institutions, livelihoods and resource management: How can governments achieve the best fit between the level of government authority for resource management and the various scales of resource competition. How can they allow the strengths of indigenous natural management regimes to flourish, while accommodating the weaknesses?

Regional dynamics and transboundary issues: How are key investment decisions made about the development of the Mekong River basin? How can institutional mechanisms and processes for regional development be improved to achieve more equitable and environmentally sustainable outcomes?

A third set of activities under REPSI aims to improve the data platforms needed to understand environmental change in the region. Typically, GIS analysis and collection of existing biophysical data is undertaken in tandem with the institutional and political economy analyses described above.
ABOUT WRI

The World Resources Institute's (WRI's) mission is to move human society to live in ways that protect Earth's environment and its capacity to provide for the needs and aspirations of current and future generations. Because people are inspired by ideas, empowered by knowledge, and moved to change by greater understanding, WRI provides and helps other institutions provide objective information and practical proposals for policy and institutional change that will foster environmentally sound, socially equitable development.

WRI's particular concerns are with globally significant environmental problems and their interaction with economic development and social equity at all levels. WRI focuses on: the global commons, where the cumulative weight of human activities is undermining the integrity of environmental systems; U.S. policies, since the United States is the world's largest producer, consumer, and polluter, as well as a trend-setter for many nations; and developing countries, where natural resource deterioration is dimming development prospects and swelling the ranks of the poor and hungry.

The REPSI project falls under WRI's Institutions and Governance Program (IGP). This program addresses the social and political dimensions of environmental challenges, and explores the equity implications of alternative environmental management regimes.

IGP is founded on the premise that to identify fair and feasible environmental management strategies, policy-makers must move beyond technical and market-oriented solutions. They must design decision-making processes that involve those affected by environmental policies, and create the institutions to support those policies with adequate monitoring, enforcement, finance, and accountability.

For more information please visit http://www.wri.org/governance.