Some aspects of social forestry in relation to effective and sustainable landuse in the highlands of Vietnam

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Social forestry encompasses a large scope of land-tree-men relationship. In this paper we deal with only some aspects in which social forestry activities could contribute to sustainable use of land resources in the highland areas of Vietnam.

1. Land and forest resources of the highlands are diverse and limited.

Land resources in the highlands are one of most important components of the agro-ecosystems in the country not only because of their large acreage (3/4 territory) but also due to their high diversity. Developed on a complicated topography, locally fluctuating climate and different exploitation history, highland soils are highly heterogenous including a great number of types, subtypes and variations. In the last decades, studies on these soils were very limited and in certain cases they were simply regrouped in one big unit “forest soil”, “mountainous soil complex” or “abandoned land”.

In our language, the term “abandoned land” or “wild forest” have a very broad and obscure implication. At least, these terms refer to something "strange", "unowned" or "untammed" and useless to the human interest.

For decades, due to food shortage land resources were used mainly for food production, chiefly by growing annual crops at any price on any types of soil including those steep soils which are by nature unsuitable for short term crops. Such an abuse of lands without maintenance made the soils exhausted and loses their productivity.

Simply understanding the highland soils and overemphasizing food production on the sloping land led to misuse of lands in general and forest lands in particular. In the past, most of the highland areas including both agricultural and forest lands, forested lands and bare lands were under management of the state forestry farms. As main function of the forestry sector is to exploit woods but not land management, agricultural lands in its administrative vicinity were under-valuated and in many cases were wrongly used. The policy of compulsory food self-sufficiency in the spot aggravated situation.
In this management system, land shortage became acute only in the agricultural sector but not felt in the forestry sector where land farming actors were waged workers. The limit of land resources was recognized only when the population has been tripled during a half century and forcibly growing annual food crops on sloping lands have apparently exposed its disadvantages.

Nowadays, food security has been attained nationwide. However, it still remains problematic for various highland areas where lands have been drastically deteriorated and difficultly reconstituted.

Therefore, social forestry should focus on enhancing awareness of the users on the limit and diversity of the land resources. Policies and decisions relevant to land management should be refined to fit for the local conditions, highlanders’ demands and esperances to conserve the diversity and appropriate use of land resources.

2. Protecting highland resources are not only for the highland population, but also for the sustainable development of economy, society and environment of the country as a whole.

Massive land opening for growing food crops, abuse of heavy machinery, monoculture of commercial trees made the soil lost from some tons under forested areas to hundreds ton per hectare per year under the newly opened areas. This human-induced loss is disastrous if keeping in mind that in the natural conditions it needs at least some hundreds years for restoring a 1 cm soil surface layer.

Aggravating offside effects of the losses in forest, land and water are more and more evident regarding to the increasing frequencies of floods, land slides, reservoir siltation and rapid decrease of cultivable land in the valleys (0.5-1.0% reduction annually).

In this regard, investment for reforestation, land restoration and sustainable agriculture and forestry in the highland areas not only bring economic benefit but also has social and environmental meanings contributing to setting up the livelihood for more than 50 ethnic minorities, preserving biodiversity and protecting the downstream plains. Therefore, impacts of the policies and effects of the inputs for the highlands should not be accounted only from crop yield and primary production but also from long term benefits such as sustainability of ecosystems, watershed forests and national culture.

3. Land user rights

It can be stated that with five rights (land use, transfer, lease, heritage and morgage) and use duration (50 years and automatically prolonged) farmers in Vietnam have a land tenure similar to that of private land ownership. Where
lands and forests have been located, the impacts of the policies are quite positive. However, the transfer and implementation of these good policies on land and forest management from central level to local level of the highlands are facing a number of difficulties that impede the social forestry activities. In many locations highland farmers are feeling unsafe with their rights on land tenure and the security of profit to be earned from land.

Land allocation and forest contract are going on too slowly. The procedures (land mapping, plot measuring, boundary definition and so on) for issuing "red book" are so complicated that it will take decades for completing the entire allocation. To accelerate the process and ensure the appropriateness of land allocation, it is imperative to decentralize the work calling for better participation of local authorities and farmers. A negotiation among farmer communities and households in framework of the relevant laws seems to be right way to solve the problem.

As land is allocated once for ever, there is no opportunity for the newly formed families to receive land. Worrying about this fact, some localities want to keep part of land as reserve for future. There is a real fact that few wealthy and initiative households have received large areas (from tens to hundreds ha) for at least 50 years whereas poor families who are less initiative, lack of information and short in capital have no more opportunity to assess to land allocation.

Certain land areas placed under community management as reserve for periodical adjustment of land tenure seems to be necessary. Based on this reserve, the community will be able to pace up with the population movement. Community lands and forests are commonly found in the traditional land tenure in the highlands.

4. Gender issues in land and forest management

Commonly, in Vietnamese families men undertake heavy but irregular work such as ploughing, hole digging, transport, cutting trees, carpentry, mason, making house and off-farm job etc., while women do the frequent work that are close to field and housing quarter such as planting, manuring, weeding, harvesting, drying, processing, cooking etc. These work are commonly seen as micellanous operations that do not generate profit and, consequently, do not contribute much to the family income.

In fact, women cover every activities in their family and their role is much more important than it seems to be. Attached daily to the field, women have very deliceted knowledge on soil fertility, crop value, plant growth performance, profitability of farming systems, etc. Taking care of the family food security, expenses and credit, women understand the current status of
family economy better than men. Responsible for purchase and sale they also know well the market changes.

Continuous working and attached to house work make women always busy and have no opportunity to contact, exchange and go out from their families. They receive very little information about what is going on outside.

Equity between men and women in land tenure is officially fixed in Land Law, however this doesn’t mean that the women rights in land use are ensured in practice. By tradition, married women usually live in the husbands’ villages and share the allocated land with the parents in law. The problem arises when women get married far from the village and can not sell the plots allocated for them but no longer cultivated by them. The profit they could earn from the allocated plots is totally depending on arrangement within each family. The voice of daughters in law regarding land tenure is usually not as influent as that of other family members.

The families having many sons are more critical in land whereas those having only daughters possess too large land area. So, beside the law, local tradition seems strongly influence on the women rights in land tenure.

5. Social forestry helps to form new concept on forest resources

People says “Forest is gold and sea is silver” to emphasis the value of forests and waters. Unfortunately, this comparison often leads to wrongly accept land and forest as resources of immense availability and unlimited potential. As highland flora and fauna are seen as wild objects, it is consequent that they should be tamed rather than protected and exploited rather than enriched. Forest for long time is regarded as some threatening forces for the outsiders. So, once approaching to forest the first action of newcomers is to clear vegetation and kill wild lives. This unfriendly attitude is common among the lowland people rather than the highland people and more prevailing in the non-agricultural sectors than in the agricultural sector.

In the land and forestry development programs, attention is usually paid on vegetation cover and timber products, but not on non-timber ones. However, for the highland people, especially the poor families, prioritized targets are those products bringing them immediate income such as bamboo shot, fire wood, medicine, fruit, etc. So, short term profit should be considered in land use planning. Forest lands also serve fodder sources, places for cattle rearing and hunting and medicine sources. A strict prohibition for local people to access to forests, even the protective areas, seems to be unrealistic. Moreover, such as unfriendly action will dampen highlander cooperation in conserving land and forest resources.

6. Development of different forms of social forestry
At present, boundaries between three main kinds of forests, viz. special, protective and productive ones, are not clearly defined on a scientific and practical basis. In many places, the metaphysical division based on geographical boundaries has expelled or isolated local habitants from national parks, special use forests and protective forests. At the commune and village level, it is common that the areas declared as protective and watershed forests are much larger than in reality. These areas are not allocated to villagers and accesses there are forbidden. This attitude places local settlers opposite to the resources to be protected.

It is imperative to make clear as soon as possible what farmers earn from the contracted forests and planted forests in the allocated lands and contracted forests. Unclear profit to be shared between the parties is main concern of highland farmers. When they are not sure about their profit and have to precede complicated procedures to get something from the forests, violence and extortion are unavoidable.

While the Kinh families tend to form individual forestry farms, the ethnic minorities prefer maintaining both individual forests and community forests including special forests. Joint forest management is one of successful models which should be promoted in the highland areas.

In the past, Vietnamese villages were characterized by a number of special features in structure, relationship and tradition. Each village had its own charter, verbal and/or non-verbal regulations, village lands and assets. In parallel to administrative apparatus, there were clan relationships which joint families together and regulate the member behavior. These traditional linkages as well as mass organizations set up by villagers should be encouraged in managing and protecting forest resources.

Plans for land and forest development are often formulated with top-down approach from central level to district level without the duly participation from lower level. The linkages between district development plans and commune plans (the lowest administrative unit) are very weak. To make the plans effective, it is necessary to start planning work from commune, village and household level.

7. Primary produce and market economy

Threatened by continuous food shortage in the past, plan makers usually place food security and production of primary products in top priority in every development plans. Some commercial plants were massively and concentrrally grown in large areas (mangletia, styrax, cinnomom, coffee, plum, etc.). These primary products became rapidly saturated in the local markets and price went down to unacceptable level. The first people to lose in this kind of business are the poor who had borrow loan from the banks. This option is quite opposite to
the highland farmer strategy in which commercial trees are gradually expanded following the market demand. For the mountain areas, product sale can not be solved only with new market opened. To promote agribusiness, it is necessary to help farmers to adapt to market economy just from their production phase. Business promotion should be practiced in every operation of production processes: choosing crops and species highly demanded by local markets, good varieties, enlarged period of harvest, simple stokage, on-farm processing, validation of products, in-time sale etc.

At present, extension activities are incline to transfer of new techniques from outside, while the indigenous knowledge and local resources are not fully evaluated and brought about (local crops/animals farming systems, varieties, techniques etc.). In many cases, new but inappropriate techniques led to loss for farmers. Appropriateness of new varieties, species and techniques introduced into highland areas should be evaluated though the local farmers feedback. In the highlands, farmers' adaptation and adoption of new options are quite different from place to place depending on their education level, technical skill, input capacity, local tradition, ethnic origine, etc. These features should be taken into account in land use planning and extension activities.

High diversity of the highland settlements in terms of natural conditions, socio-economic status and cultural life requires respective diversification of production structure, crop and animal farming systems. Beside technical transfer, a number of non-technical factors should be considered (capital, rural credit, landuse planning in household level, human resources, labour arrangement and so on).

8. Farmer participation

Role of the people in the social revolutions has been appreciated by competent thinkers and revolutioners. For example:

"Boat rower are people and boat sinker are also people" (Kung Fuxian).

"Without people a difficulty can not be overcome, with people every problem can be addresed" (Ho Chi Minh).

The degradation of forest and land resources in the centralized management before and the success of new policies on land and forest development in Vietnam once again state that farmer participation is a prerequisite condition for any development project.

Extending the participatory approach in the mountain areas may encounter various constraints that social forestry activities should address:
- For many years, farmer participation was practiced only in a limited scope such as providing information, introducing policies, discussion in meeting, involving farmers in some mass activities and emphasizing their responsibility... rather than strengthening their capacity, enhancing decision rights and sharing profits;

- Priority is placed on large programs/projects with targets already made from central level and based on the generalized information. These general objectives are not necessarily coincised with the priorities of local communities and farmer households (for example: establishment of paper raw material zones, sugarcane areas, high yielding rice varieties, lean porc for export etc.). In some cases, national projects are welcome by farmers not because their appropriateness, but because of subsidies.

- Due to lack of farmer participation and decision from the lower level, development projects tend to describe expected goals rather than to provide guidelines and measures for implementation. Many projects are not feasible since they do not fit for the farmers’ capacity (financial capacity, technical level, access to market, etc.).

- Unlike in the lowland, the technical packages already made from research centers and introduced into the highlands showed much lower effect due to higher risks. In the worse cases, replacement of traditional farming systems by monoculture of commercial crops led to deterioration of farmer immediate income. Their daily lives become unsustainable and their enthusiasm in participation is perishing.

- Local authorities still hesitate in handing over rights and sharing profit with farmers. In fact, preventing local farmers from regulation violence is much simpler than controlling the outsiders who illegally attack forests and smuggling timber. Therefore, community forest should be managed by the forest protection groups of the villages/communes rather than the forest inspection units of the government.

- Participation of farmers is not yet stipulated in official documents. It should be clearly recognized in the legislative documents with specified definitions on rights in decision making, profit sharing and responsibility commitment.

- There is lack of suitable ways to involve farmers in participatory development. Social forestry activists are not well equipped with the key tools such as RRA, PRA, TOT, farmer training methods, group building, etc. Some of participatory methods are too complicated and expensive. It is imperative to modify the method procedures and techniques to fit for the local staff who are working in thousands villages over the country.
9. **Local extension network**

Weakness of the grass root structure and organization from district to commune and village level is most critical for social activities in the highlands. So, organizational development in the grass root levels should be strengthened. In fact, in rural areas of the highland regions there are certain traditional structure and mass organizations already established by villagers. Social forestry should rely on them, building their capacity and guiding them toward the activities meeting the farmers’ demands. They include:

- Government extension can only spread to district level and is not able to extend the activities down to village level. It is imperative to establish village extension network which coordinate different forms of voluntary extension (extension teams, groups, clubs etc.);

- Credit groups and credit cooperatives;

- Farmer interest groups or cooperatives of new type;

- Traditional structure (mutual groups of same clan, “village old leader”, hamlet head, etc.);

- Mass organizations (Youth union, Farmer associations, Women association, Veteran association, Gardener associations, Party organizations…);

- Government administrative organizations serve a very strong support structure for carry out social forestry.

10. **Some suggestions on social forestry research**

- Methods of land allocation
  * rapid, accepted by commune and village
  * land allocated to households, household groups and communities.

- Methods of forest management:
  * Combination production and protection purpose
  * Forest management teams/groups in commune/village or hamlets
  * Delivery forest management fund/budget directly to village

- Factors deciding the farmer adoption of new options:
  * Technical options
  * Commercial crops/animals
  * Indigenous species used in reforestation
  * Different sources of rural credit

- Different ways to bring about the farmer participation
  * Interest group
  * Credit group
* Water use group
* Mode of activities of mass organizations fit for social forestry
* Extension club activities

-Farmer strategies for sustainable use of land:
  * Gradual but sustainable expanding new solution (cropping systems..)
  * Diversifying farming systems in accordance with farmer capacity
  * Market issues are solved during production phase
  * Agro-forestry models suit for poor households

- Models of social forestry involving women participation
  * Strengthening role of women association
  * Involvement of women in training activities
  * Include women participation in different activities.