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Afforestation and forestry land allocation in Northern Vietnam: analysing the gap between policy intentions and outcomes

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Summary – Many tropical countries have recently implemented similar forest policies including large-scale afforestation programmes and the devolution of land-use rights. Their success in enhancing livelihoods and contributing to improved environmental services has been widely questioned. This paper discusses the impacts of state afforestation efforts and forestry land allocation on farmers' land-use decisions in northern Vietnam. It links policy outcomes with factors located beyond the local level by analysing the decision-making process at the policy implementation stage. Our study suggests that the current national afforestation campaign has not successfully involved households in the forestry sector and that forestry land allocation to households has often disrupted existing land-use systems with little impact on afforestation. These discrepancies between policy intentions and outcomes are partly linked to the relative freedom provinces have to interpret and adapt policies during the implementation stage. In this respect, the political and economic context has played a significant role in providing particular financial and bureaucratic incentives to the former State Forest Enterprises and to civil servants. However, we argue that these actors have been allowed or even encouraged to take advantage of these incentives by national policy-makers thanks to: 1) the lack of clarity or the poor adequacy of the policies designed at the central level, and 2) the blurred character of prevailing national discourses promoting afforestation and community-based forest management. We recommend that national policy-makers allow flexibility in policy implementation but develop mechanisms of accountability and control between the provincial and the central authorities.

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1) Introduction

For the last decade, there has been a pattern of similar forest policies in tropical countries, embodied in afforestation campaigns and in the decentralisation of forest and land management. Championed and supported by international funding agencies and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), these policies have often been considered as a positive move towards environmentally-sound, equitable and participatory approaches to natural resources management. Yet, the success of these afforestation efforts in contributing to environmental protection and in improving livelihoods has been challenged (Toma *et al.*, 2004; Weyerhaeuser *et al.*, 2005). The implementation of decentralised forms of forest management, namely Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM), has also often failed to lead to more effective and equitable management and to achieve its pro-poor objectives (Blaikie, 2006; Ribot *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, in the field of forest policy, there has often been a gap between the rhetoric, intentions, and the observed results in the field (Blaikie and Springate-Baginski, 2007).

Using the case study of northern Vietnam, this paper explores precisely that gap between policy intentions and outcomes. Our analysis focuses on the implementation of two policy decisions – the current national afforestation programme called the Five Million Hectare Reforestation Programme (5MHRP), and the allocation of property rights for forestry land[2] to households and communities – and on their impact on farmers' land-use decisions. These policies are particularly important in Vietnam because of their large spatial and temporal extent: they have been implemented in every administrative unit and have undergone an average 10-year implementation phase. They are also significant in that they have incurred high costs for the state budget, and have been expected to greatly improve both people's livelihoods and the environment. Whereas many studies have documented the impact of forestry land allocation (FLA) on forest and land management at the local level (Dinh Duc Thuan, 2005; Castella *et al.*, 2006; Tran Ngoc Thanh and Sikor, 2006; Jakobsen *et al.*, 2007; Sikor and Tran Ngoc Thanh, 2007), few attempts have been made to identify and analyse drivers affecting final policy outcomes beyond the local level. In addition, very few information is available on the results of the 5MHRP, considered to be one of the cornerstones of the national forestry policy, and its impacts on farmers' decisions.

[2] Forestry land is one of the six land categories as defined by the State in Vietnam. Forestry land is defined in the 1991 Forest Protection and Development (FPD) Law as: i) "Land of forest cover"; and ii) "Land of no forest cover, planned for afforestation, hereinafter called afforestation land. The term "forest land" has been generally used to designate this category in English. We prefer however using "forestry land" which literally corresponds to the Vietnamese term "*đất lâm nghiệp*". The term "forest land" may be confusing as it suggests that the designated land has an existing forest cover.

We adopted a multi-scale and interdisciplinary framework rooted in institutional analysis and political ecology, which allows the simultaneous examination of the influence of institutions, discourses, and the politico-economic context on actors' decisions. Our analysis is based on: i) the results of a previous local level study of the afforestation process observed in three villages of northern Vietnam (Clement and Amezaga, 2008); ii) interviews with civil servants of the provincial state departments in four northern provinces and with different actors interacting with policy-makers at the national level, and; iii) secondary data including provincial reports on the results of forestry land allocation (FLA) and the 5MHRP.

This paper starts by presenting the framework and methodology for data collection and analysis. The next section gives an account of the institutional, political and economic context of the forest policy-making arena[3] in Vietnam. It then briefly reviews the general features of the impacts of the 5MHRP and FLA at the local level and links observed policy outcomes with the decisions taken by policy-makers during the implementation stage. Findings suggest that forest policies have not resulted in the stated objectives because: (1) the rules designed at the central level lack clarity, which has allowed influential actors to interpret and implement policies according to their interests; (2) blurred discourses have generally further facilitated the arbitrary implementation of unclear rules.

2) Method and study sites

(a) A framework for analysis

The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework developed in the 1980s by Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues (Kiser and Ostrom, 1982) provides a useful means to assess the causes of policy gaps as it links multiple governance levels, namely (i) the operational level where decisions made directly affect resources management; (ii) the collective-choice level where decisions made affect the rules-in-use at the operational level, and; (iii) the constitutional level where decisions made affect who decides and how decisions are made in the collective-choice arena (Ostrom, 1999). Institutions are considered in this study as "the prescriptions that humans use to organise all forms of repetitive and structured interactions" (Ostrom, 2005). They thus refer to the "rules of the game" (North, 1990, p. 3) and are distinguished from organisations, which are seen as the "players" of the game who will use the rules in such a way as to win the game (*ibid.*). Institutions do not only encompass written legal documents but also for instance informal rules which have been orally agreed upon. As shown in the overall framework we used for our studies of forest policies in Vietnam (Figure 1), the institutional levels of the IAD framework do not necessarily correspond to

[3] The forest arena refers here to the action arena in which actors participating in forest management interact with different action situations, at all decision-making levels.

administrative levels. For instance, local communities[4] can also operate at the collective-choice or even at the constitutional levels when crafting their own rules or deciding on rule crafting modalities.

Institutional analysis is particularly pertinent because the recent changes in the forest policy-making arena in Vietnam have significantly impacted the set of actors and rules governing land access and land use. Our previous study at the village level indicated that the changes in the local rules resulting from national policies had been an important driver in farmers' land-use decisions (Clement and Amezaga, 2008). FLA has unambiguously impacted on institutions by fixing new rules of land ownership, access and use. In addition to introducing explicit institutional components[5], the 5MHRP relies for its execution on the establishment or enforcement of existing rules on land classification, land ownership and land use.

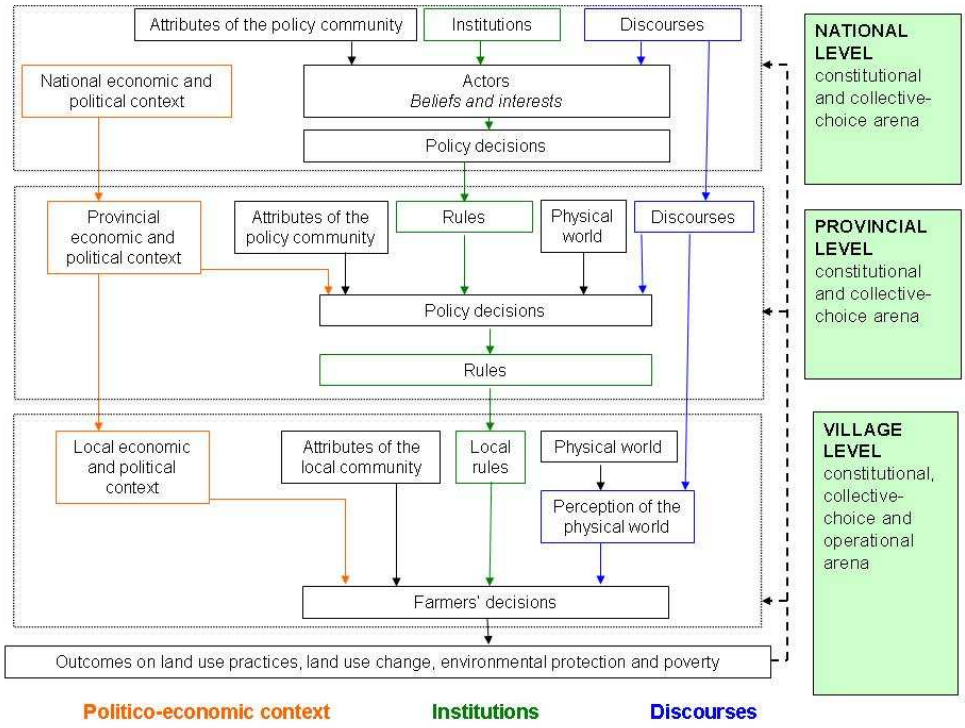

Figure 1. Overall framework used for our series of forest policy studies, adapted from the IAD framework (Ostrom, 1999)

[4] There is no universally shared concept of community. In a generic sense, it is usually understood as a small spatial unit with a distinct social structure and a shared set of norms (Agrawal and Gibson, 2001). As Agrawal and Gibson (ibid) argue, we believe it is more fruitful to examine the role of institutions rather than "community". We use the term "local community" in this paper to refer to a village or group of households. In the IAD framework, we used the term "policy community" to refer to the group of participants who take policy decisions.

[5] E.g. the 5MHRP introduces the benefit sharing principle which for example permits the households who were contracted for forest protection to collect all forest products from thinning. The duty and benefit of households who had been allocated land-use rights were further specified under Decision No. 178/2001/QD-TTg.

Although one major asset of the IAD framework is to link several institutional levels, its use in the field of natural resources management has often been restricted to the operational level. We argue that the IAD would gain analytical power in the study of environmental policy process by introducing some theoretical concepts used in political ecology. Originally rooted in a materialist approach investigating the influence of state and society on the exploitation of natural resources (Blaikie, 1985), political ecology has broadly aimed to link ecological change with political economy (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). Within the various strands that have developed under this research field, the poststructuralist perspective has notably provided fresh insights on the social construction of environmental processes by analysing the historical evolution of environmental discourses (Escobar, 1996). We have integrated elements of both the materialist and constructivist analysis in our approach, ontologically rooted in critical realism[6].

Accordingly, we added two exogenous variables to the original IAD framework (Figure 2). First, we extended the external variables to contextual factors (cf. Edwards and Steins, 1999), and in particular to the politico-economic context. As argued by Ribot (2006), the IAD framework does not explicitly bring power issues to the fore. In the framework, power relationships are framed by and, to some extent, encapsulated within institutions. It is necessary to understand how power is distributed, how political and economic interests drive actors' decisions within a particular set of rules. Then institutional analysis will inform us on how this current set of rules-in-use designed at one level has affected power distribution and what institutional change can lead to more equitable and efficient outcomes. Second, we stressed the role of discourses in the way they shape values, norms and preferences, and position actors (Hajer, 1995). By discourses, we mean "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that is produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995, p. 60). Discourse analysis is not contradictory with institutional analysis (Hajer, 1995). Discourses are linked to institutions not only in how discourses affect institutions but also in how discourses have emerged in a particular institutional and politico-economic context. By following this poststructuralist stance of political ecology, we aim to "assess the political construction of what is considered to be ecological" (Forsyth, 2001, p. 147). In addition, we highlighted the role of beliefs in the internal valuation mechanism that actors use to make decisions. Indeed, a common theme for the failures of community-based management (CBM) of natural resources is the misconceived beliefs that policy-makers have

[6] Critical realism and institutional analysis are compatible in several ways. They have congruent approaches regarding: 1) structure and agency – both distinguish structure and agency while acknowledging their interdependency, and; 2) the model of the actor behaviour. Although the latter is originally rooted in rational choice theory in the IAD framework, E. Ostrom proposes to extend the model of rational choice to bounded rationality where actors do not only follow their self-interest but also norms and values (Ostrom, 1998)

about the capacity of local users to manage natural resources sustainably and on aspects of the natural resources themselves (e.g. their oversimplification of environmental systems) (Nunan, 2006; Wong *et al.*, 2007).

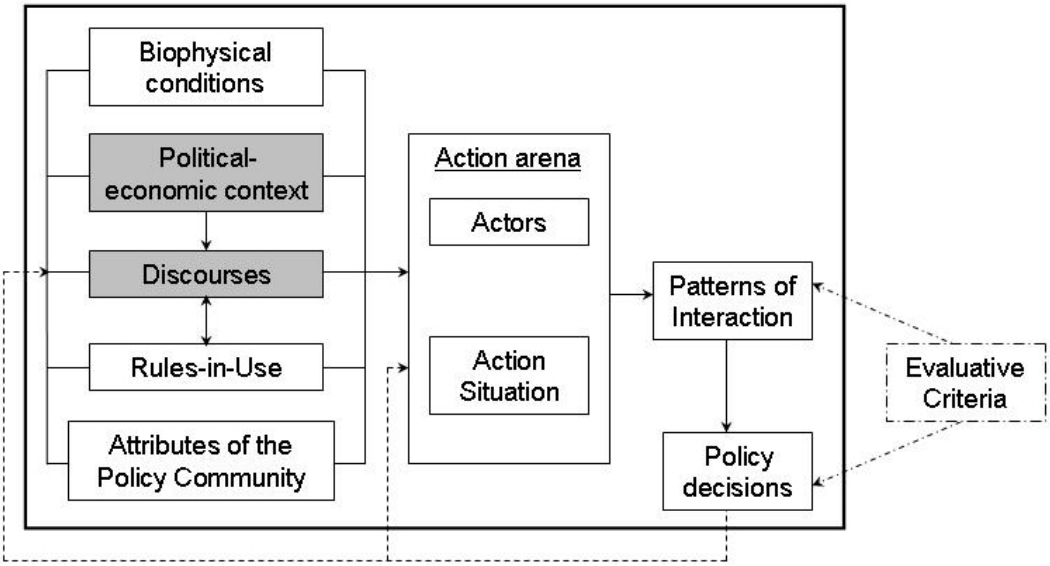

Figure 2. Revised IAD framework for the study of the collective-choice and constitutional levels

Our overall analytical framework (Figure 1) is broad because it has been used for a larger piece of research investigating forestry policies at several institutional levels. However, as the IAD, it can be unpacked in different ways depending on the perspective considered to be the most relevant and illuminating. For instance at the local level, a special attention was given to the rules-in-use for land management. In this paper, we will particularly focus on the role of the rules-in-use and discourses. The framework we adopted (Figure 2) has been used as a way of structuring the analysis and providing a menu of questions to be considered: which incentives and beliefs have driven actors' decisions; and how the past and current institutions, politico-economic contexts and discourses have shaped these incentives and beliefs.

(b) The case study area and data collection

The focus of this study is limited to the northern uplands of Vietnam. Data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with civil servants at the provincial and central level, NGOs, donors, and researchers in Hanoi and in four northern provinces: Hoa Binh, Son La, Thai Nguyen and Yen Bai (Figure 3).

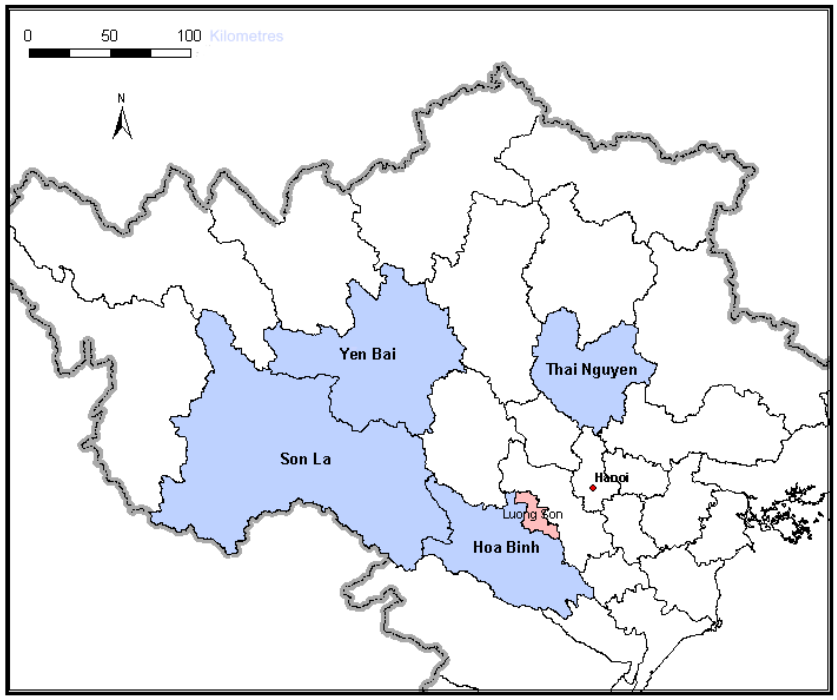

Figure 3. Location of fieldwork in North Vietnam

The provinces were selected according to fieldwork feasibility but also in order to constitute a representative sample of the Vietnam northern region regarding socio-economic (distance to Hanoi, population density, importance of the forestry sector), environmental (area of land classified as forestry land), and political (progress in FLA implementation) variables. These characteristics are presented in Table 1 for each province. This is not an extensive list of all significant variables and data aggregated at the provincial level hide large inter-district variability, but they will give to the reader non familiar with the northern region a grasp of the socio-economic, environmental and political context in the four provinces.

Table 1. Characteristics of the visited provinces (2006 figures)

Provinces	**Hoa Binh**	**Son La**	**Thai Nguyen**	**Yen Bai**
Total area[a] (km2)	4662.5	14055.0	3543.5	6887.8
Population density[b] (person/km2)	174.0	70.0	313.0	106.0
Distance from the provincial capital to Hanoi (km)	76.0	308.0	80.0	183.0
Forest cover[a] (%)	44.2	41.1	46.5	54.7
Percentage of land classified as forestland[a] (%)	69.9	65.6	50.0	76.7
Output value of forestry at constant 1994 prices[b] (billion Vietnam Dongs (VND))	193.6	231.1	67.5	332.7
% of forestland allocated[c]	92.9	99.8	82.3	99.5
% of forestland allocated to communities, villages and Commune People's Committees[c]	11.5	49.1	4.2	24.7
% of forestland allocated or contracted to households[c]	74.9	17.5	47.0	62.0

Sources:
a. Forest Protection Department website, (only available in Vietnamese), http://www.kiemlam.org.vn/Desktop.aspx/News/So-lieu-dien-bien-rung-hang-nam/Nam_2006, last accessed in March 2008
b. General Statistics Office (GSO) of Vietnam website, http://www.gso.gov.vn, last accessed in Feb 2007
c. 2006 reports on land allocation from Forest Protection Departments of the visited provinces

Visits in the provinces consisted of two-hour semi-structured interviews with senior officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and/or the Forestry sub-Department (FD) and the Forest Protection Department (FPD) in the four provinces, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE) in two provinces and the Forest Science Institute of Vietnam in Son La. In total, 12 organisations and 21 persons were interviewed. Implementation at the district level has not been investigated in detail in the present study due to time and capacity constraints. It nonetheless might play an important role as, with the commune authorities, the district state bodies act as the policy implementers on the ground and hold *de facto* relative freedom for adapting and negotiating policies with local people (Kerkvliet, 2004). Furthermore, we will not develop in the present paper the role of other potential influential actors such as donors and NGOs but will focus on the action and decision of the provincial state organisations that act as policy implementers.

At the national level, 36 semi-structured interviews of one hour were conducted with foreign and national researchers, donors, international and national NGOs, consultants and civil servants. The interviews focused on the organisation's activities, networks and links with other actors (particularly policy-makers), on the driving forces for recent policy changes, and explored the beliefs related to forest and land degradation. Lastly, we also used the findings from a previous local level study analysing the drivers for afforestation in three villages of Hoa Binh Province (Clement and Amezaga, 2008). Fieldwork for this study involved 80 semi-structured interviews with farmers and commune authorities.

3) The Setting: the forest arena in Vietnam

(a) The legal context

The forestry sector and forest protection in Vietnam have been subject to many political, economic and legal changes over the last two decades. Forestry land and forest resources management have been defined and revised in more than 100 laws and regulations (an exhaustive list is given on VietnamNet INCOM, 2007). These recent changes have significantly impacted on the set of actors and rules governing land access and land use.

The legal decisions that have particularly affected the forest arena include: (1) land classification and the rules for forest protection defined in the Law on Forest Protection and Development in 1991 and 2004 (National Assembly of Vietnam, 1991, 2004); (2) the devolution of land-use rights to

private organisations and households notably through the 1993 Land Law, decrees 02/CP in 1994 and 163/1999 in 1999; (3) the recognition of communities as legal recipients for forestry land-use rights in 2004 (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2004); (4) afforestation programmes (Programmes 327, 556 and 5MHRP) and; (5) the reform of State Forest Enterprises (SFEs) (Decision 187/QD-TTg). These policy decisions are only the visible manifestations of a much broader political system and the on-going process of policy change. They are nevertheless major "mobilisation factors" in the policy process because they provide the official basis of rights and responsibilities for provincial authorities, as well as a source of funding for provincial action.

Forestry land allocation (FLA) (embodied in decisions (2) and (3) above) has directly impacted on local institutions by fixing new rules of land ownership, access and use. Long-term land-use rights have been devolved to individuals and households, and state organisations. Communities (e.g. groups of households and villages) were recognised as legal recipients of land-use rights only since the revision of the Land Law in 2003 and the Law of Forest Protection and Development in 2004. In practice, allocation to communities has been very limited, often restricted to pilot studies supported by donors and NGOs. Generally, FLA has followed a much slower implementation pace than agricultural land allocation, especially in the region of the Central Highlands. Sunderlin and Huynh (2005) report that, although 61 per cent of the land has been allocated, only 10 per cent has been actually allocated to households and communities. According to the 2006 figures from the Forest Protection Department (www.kiemlam.org.vn), households own use rights to 24 per cent of forestry land.

Following the Law on Forest Protection and Development (1991), forest and forestry land have been classified into three categories according to their intended uses:

1) special-use forest with an intended use for nature conservation (biodiversity preservation) and landscape protection (including historical and cultural heritage);
2) protection forest with an intended use for water resources and soil protection; and,
3) production forest with an intended use for commercial activities: exploitation of timber or non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

The definition of forestry land does not necessarily mean the presence of forest cover. Production forestry land can be covered by natural forest and special-use forestry land can be much degraded with a very poor forest cover. Forest and land classification has implications for land management (e.g. special-use forest is managed by the State but production forest can be allocated to private organisations and individuals), and determines the rights and responsibilities of all state and private land-use rights recipients over land use.

National afforestation programmes started in northern Vietnam in the mid 1950s (De Jong et al., 2006). The afforestation effort has been particularly strengthened since the 1990s, with two major state initiatives, called "Greening the Barren Hills Programme" (or Programme 327) and the Five Million Hectare Reforestation Programme (5MHRP). The 5MHRP (also called Programme 661 from

the name of the Decision 661/QD-TTg) replaced Programme 327 in 1998. It is now running until 2010 in its third and last stage. Although the 5MHRP encompasses social and economic goals, the first primary goal stated in the Decision 661 is environmental (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 1998) : "to increase the forest cover to 43% of the national territory, protect the environment, decrease the severity of natural disasters, increase water availability (…), protect biodiversity." The objectives are to protect existing forest and to plant 5 million hectares (ha) of forest, including 2 million ha of protection and special-use forest. Notably, the state investment funds allocated to the 5MHRP are almost[7] exclusively directed to establishment and conservation of protection and special-use forest (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 1999). Plantation of production forest is subsidised through a loan scheme, the Development Support Fund which was established to provide concessionary loans to priority activities defined by the government.

There have been substantial discrepancies among provinces in the way forest policies have been implemented. This is related to an essential characteristic of the rules designed at the national level: the relative freedom that is provided to provinces to implement national policies within their administrative boundaries. It is linked to a long Vietnamese historical tradition of provincial autonomy (Grossheim, 2004), which has been reinforced by the recent decentralisation process that accompanied the Đổi Mới ("renovation"), the process of economic liberalisation initiated in 1986. The devolution of power has been uneven. On the one hand, decentralisation has been restricted to the delegation of administrative tasks and has not encompassed the devolution of decision-making power (Dupar and Badenoch, 2002), thus taking the form of deconcentration. On the other hand, Vietnam government is often described as weak (Fforde, 1997 in McCarty, 2002). Central authorities have a limited ability to impose their will upon lower levels and there is great room for interpretation of central laws at the provincial level (Dupar and Badenoch, 2002; McCarty, 2002) and for negotiation at the local level (Kerkvliet, 2003; Sikor, 2004). There might also be a deliberate will from the central state to accommodate local interests. The land policy area accounts for the largest number of reported "fence-breaking[8]" incidents in the daily newspapers between 1990 and 2000 (Malesky, 2004). For instance, disparities in FLA have ranged from deliberately slow implementation, slight adaptations, and amendments – e.g. Son La Province amended the 1993 Land Law in 1994 (Decision No. 109/QD-UB) to allocate land to communities rather than to households – to non implementation – e.g. Hoa Binh Province has not implemented Decree 163/1999 yet). The Party 'closes its eyes' as long as it does not clash with its strategic orientations. When it does, some provinces have been sanctioned.

[7] The state investment funds that concern production forest are only for the establishment of "forest with rare and precious tree species with a production cycle of 30 years or more" (Prime Minister of Government of Vietnam, 1999)

[8] Fence-breaking is used here to describe acts of autonomy (Malesky, 2004).

Yet, some provincial initiatives that were initially criticised have since been taken as models and have led to a law revision[9] (Malesky, 2004).

(b) The actors

Actors can simultaneously be involved in several institutional arenas. A cadre from the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) might also be a member of the Central Communist Party and thus acts both at the collective-choice and constitutional level in his province and at the national level. Table 2 clarifies which actors intervene at which institutional level during policy-implementation.

[9] For example, the use of land-use certificates as collateral for bank loans by private companies in a few provinces was first criticised by the central government but then integrated in the Land Law of 1999 (Malesky, 2004).

Table 2. Legal actors involved in rules implementation at the three institutional levels[10]

Actors	Institutional level			Geographic area
	Operational situation	**Collective-choice situation**	**Constitutional situation**	
Central government (Prime minister, ministries and other state agencies)		*De jure*: Designs implementing decrees, resolutions, decisions, directives, circulars *De facto*: Also designs laws	*De facto*: Decides on who implements and how are implemented legal documents (e.g. defines the degree of freedom that provincial authorities have to implement)	National
Provincial cell of the Communist Party[a] / Provincial People's Council / Provincial People's Committee (PPC)		The PPC implements rules for forest and land management (e.g. classifies land and allocates protection forest and forestry land)	Decide provincial resolutions and directives on how policies are implemented and which department implements them	Province
Provincial technical Departments		Control and enforce land use regulations	Supervise the implementation of provincial guidelines	Province
District People's Committee and technical Departments		The District People's Committee implements rules for forest and land management (e.g. allocates production forest and forestry land). Control and enforce land use regulations	Implement the provincial guidelines with relative freedom	District
Commune People's Committee		Implements the district guidelines with relative freedom. Control and enforce land use regulations		Commune
SFEs	Forest and land use (e.g. forest plantation, protection, enrichment, exploitation and processing)	Might implement national guidelines on special-use forests and FLA		Owned area
Communities / Households / Individuals		Might craft their own community rules	Might define who crafts and how community rules are crafted	

Notes: a. The Communist Party is not formally part of the State's legal system but has still a central role in the political and legal life of Vietnam. It designs the national strategic orientations and guidelines for the government to follow, and appraises policies. For instance, the Doi Moi policy, which is considered as the most important political-economic reform of the last decades in Vietnam, stems from a resolution of the Party National Congress.

b. The People's Council and Committee are officially the legislative and executive bodies at the province, district, commune levels. Yet, as underlined in Shanks *et al.* (2004), power is unevenly balanced between these two organisations to the benefit of the People's Committee, which holds both budgetary and administrative power.

[10] These actors are grouped according to their official administrative tasks, but as developed later in the paper, it does not imply that they have congruent preferences and pursue similar objectives.

Responsibilities for forest management are divided in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) between the Forest Protection Department (FPD) and the Forestry Department (FD). Land management (land administration) is placed under the authority of the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE).

At the provincial level, the Party and the People's Committee issue guidelines defining the implementation of national decisions in their territory. The provincial departments are the executing arms of the Provincial People's Committee (PPC). They are in charge of "state management" which means that they apply policies and control their implementation. They delegate most implementation to and coordinate the actions of the district authorities in the field. Lastly, they also have a role as advisor and knowledge base to the PPC.

The provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is more particularly in charge of forestry planning. At the provincial level, the FD is a sub-department of the DARD and is responsible for the implementation of the 5MHRP, coordinating local programme management committees at the district level and controlling the implementation of the programme by State Forest Enterprises (SFEs). Although the FPD is a Department of the MARD at the central level, it is often located directly under the authority of the PPC, and has thus a position equivalent to the DARD at the provincial level. The provincial FPD supervises the actions of local forest protection officers who are in charge of forest protection on the field. In some provinces, it has been in charge of FLA. The FPD has recently been entitled the task of forest monitoring and evaluation. It receives and compiles the changes in forest reported by all forest owners at the local level. The Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE) is in charge of land planning and administration (e.g. issuing land certificates). It has also been in charge of implementing land allocation in some provinces. The provincial departments are *de jure* accountable both to the PPC (for human resources and budget) and to the Ministry (for technical aspects). *De facto* they are much more accountable to the PPC as the latter decides on budget, recruitment and individual promotion. Districts and communes act as the policy implementers on the ground and have in practice relative freedom for adapting and negotiating policies with local people (Kerkvliet, 2004).

Actors responsible for forest management at the operational level are multiple. Although this study focuses on how decisions taken at the provincial level have impacted on household decisions and livelihoods, it is important to consider the role of SFEs. Presently the largest recipient for forestry land-use rights in Vietnam (Nguyen Quang Tan, 2006), they still control most of the forestry land area[1]. The activities of these organisations have dramatically changed over the last 10 years. First established by the socialist State as logging companies, their management was then decentralised from the central government to provincial and district authorities in 1991. From 1994, their economic

[1] In 2005, according to the MARD database, 362 SFEs still controlled 40 per cent of forestry land in Vietnam (Rural Development & Natural Resources East Asia & Pacific Region (EASRD), 2005).

activities have been seriously affected by the logging ban of natural forest. Since 1997, a reform has been initiated to transform them into commercially viable and autonomous business units. Because of the slow pace of the reform process, privatisation was further reaffirmed in 2004 (Decree 200/2004/ND-CP). Non-viable SFEs should either be dissolved or transformed into a Protection Forest State Management Board. SFEs currently act as implementing units of the 5MHRP by contracting with households for forest protection, regeneration and plantation. They also provide farmers with seedlings.

According to the law, every household is entitled to receive land-use rights as long as it has the human and financial capacity to use land according to state regulations (GoV, 1999). In practice, because of the discretionary power of local authorities, the implementation of FLA has often been captured by the local elite (Sowerwine, 2004). To receive land, a household must make a request to commune authorities who then pass on the request to the district people's committee that will make the final decision. In practice, land allocation has often been implemented with little participation of villagers. In the past, many households refused to claim land because they feared higher taxes and did not see the benefits of receiving land-use rights for land that they had been using freely for generations (Clement and Amezaga, 2008). Most land allocated to households is barren land, land with forest cover still under the control of SFEs (Sikor and Tran Ngoc Thanh, 2007).

4) The 5MHRP: reforesting, but for whom and for what?

(a) Prominent outcomes

(i) Smallholder forestry

Although the forestry sector was of critical economic importance during the war, today it only contributes around one per cent of the Gross Domestic Product[2] (MARD, 2005). However, the wood processing industry in Vietnam is undergoing a dynamic expansion, national timber needs being largely covered by importations (Barney, 2005). Despite of a strong domestic demand for timber, our interviews and previous scientific studies (Fortech, 1998; Roda and Rathi, 2005) highlighted difficulties in strengthening the role of timber production in the national economy and as a financially viable option for farmers[3].

The 5MHRP has provided few incentives to make forestry an attractive option for farmers and thus to impact on the incomes of the poor (Dinh Duc Thuan, 2005). Surprisingly, the 5MHRP investment funds have indeed been almost exclusively directed to protection forest where establishment and exploitation have to follow strict state planning schemes. Loans for production

[2] Its economic importance might nonetheless be substantial in some provinces, for instance in Central Vietnam where large SFEs are engaged in timber trade with Laos.

[3] Difficulties mentioned are the low productivity of plantations and the high transportation costs due to tree plantation scattering and low accessibility.

forest are in practice difficult to access for most farmers (MARD and 5MHRP Partnership Secretariat, 2001) and their interest rate is too high to provide sufficient economic incentives (DARD Thai Nguyen, 2006). The poor capacity of the 5MHRP to foster smallholder tree plantations and improve livelihoods has been acknowledged in several studies (Ohlsson *et al.*, 2005; Clement and Amezaga, 2008) and was openly recognised by the authorities of Thai Nguyen Province, who have decided to develop their own afforestation scheme, specifically directed to households, in parallel to the 5MHRP.

(ii) Forestry land classification

Forestry land classification is not a recent policy decision, but its implementation is still on-going. It has notably been boosted by the 5MHRP, which requires that a plan for land use shall be established for open land and bare hills and that the new forests are equally balanced between special-use, protection and production forests (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 1998).

According to interviews with provincial officers, the area of land classified as protection forestry land has significantly increased for the last decade, under the implementation of the Programme 327 and then under the 5MHRP. This has been confirmed by national figures (Table 3) and official statements (Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 2005). The area of protection forestry land reported by local authorities to the MARD reached over 9 million ha in 2005, far beyond the 6 million ha that had been planned by the government in the National Forestry Development Strategy 2001-2010[4].

Table 3. Evolution of the land area classified under the three categories of forestry land

Category of forestry land	Area in million hectares (ha) in 1999[a]	Area in million hectares (ha) in 2005[b]
Special-use forestry land	0.9	2.4
Protection forestry land	5.7	9.5
Production forestry land	12.4	7.1
Total forestry land	19.0	19.0

Sources:
a. Nguyen Xuan Nguyen et al., 1999
b. FPD, 2007 on www.kiemlam.org.vn

The increase of protection forestry land has several important social and economic implications. On the one hand, it decreases the area of land available for crop cultivation, grazing or, if forested, timber exploitation (Dinh Duc Thuan, 2005). On the other hand, it increases the area under state control. The conjunction of both factors (decreased land area for economic production and inadequate means of control) has favoured corruption and activities now considered illegal.

[4] Recently, the Government of Vietnam asked provinces to convert back protection forestry land to production forestry land. This shift was reflected in the National Forestry Strategy 2006-2020 (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 2007, p. 57). The less critical sub-category of the protection forestry land (around 3 million ha) will be converted into production forestry land.

(b) Linking outcomes with external variables

Having reviewed the major outcomes of the 5MHRP, we now examine: 1) to which extent these outcomes have been linked to decisions taken by provincial authorities; 2) which range of incentives, interests and beliefs has influenced the latter, and; 3) how external variables have affected the interests and beliefs of provincial bureaucrats.

(i) Politico-economic context

One can wonder why the 5MHRP has such a marked focus on protection forest whilst defined objectives for new plantations in Decision 661 entail 60 per cent for production/industrial forest. In the context of a strong government commitment to economic development and an increasing need for timber, one would expect the state support to be focused on developing forestry. Our findings suggest that the state has actually supported the forestry sector under the 5MHRP. Yet, it has not been achieved by fostering household economy, but by helping SFEs to survive.

During fieldwork in Hoa Binh Province, an officer of the Luong Son District FPD unit reported that "*in 2004, the government decided to extend some of the protection forestry land to protect water springs*." As suggested in the previous section, doubts can be raised about the extent to which environmental concern has driven the increase of protection forestry land. Beyond environmentally-oriented discourses lies a range of political and economic interests. Part of the 5MHRP state funding goes to SFEs to cover the programme administration costs. Many SFEs, which are now supposed to run as autonomous businesses, lack capital (Rural Development & Natural Resources East Asia & Pacific Region (EASRD), 2005) and rely on the 5MHRP funds to survive (source: interviews, 2006). Because the 5MHRP state funds are directed to protection forest and forestry land, a MARD cadre acknowledged that during the Programme 327: "*provinces increased protection forest to benefit from state budget*." According to interviewed donors and NGOs, the same reason prevailed under the 5MHRP: provinces have increased the protection forestry land area to receive more state funds (see also Nguyen Xuan Nguyen *et al.*, 1999; MARD (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) and 5MHRP Partnership Secretariat, 2001; De Jong *et al.*, 2006). It was also officially acknowledged by the Deputy Prime Minister at a review workshop on the 5MHRP held in Hanoi (2005).

The fact that a MARD official recognised that under the Programme 327 provinces had increased protection forestry land area to receive state funds suggests that the government was already aware of this bias by the time the 5MHRP was designed. However, by allocating all funds to protection forest, the government unambiguously encouraged the same process under the 5MHRP. There are indeed several strong political and economic interests that suggest that it was a deliberate decision. First, the increase of protection forestry land enables the state to keep control of forestry activities and forestry land under state-linked organisations. Second, it is in the interest of central and provincial authorities to help SFEs to survive. SFEs form an important employer in several provinces and still retain significant areas of forestry land. Furthermore, there is a tight relationship between the forestry sector

and the policy arena at the provincial and national level. Forestry was a substantial source of revenues for the Communist Party in the Southern and Central provinces of Vietnam (Bangkok Post 1993 in McElwee, 2004). Because many senior provincial and national cadres come from the forestry sector, foresters are still influential in the policy arena. Predominant drivers for the increase in protection forestry land area lie in the politico-economic context. Yet, we argue that the politico-economic context was significant precisely because the rules-in-use designed at the central level have provided further incentives for provincial actors to pursue their interests.

(ii) Rules-in-use

Centrally-designed rules have encouraged the bias in forestry land classification and state funds diversion in several ways. First, the rules on land classification lack clarity and consistency (Sowerwine, 2004; Ohlsson et al., 2005). The classification under the three categories remains controversial (MARD, 2000; MARD and 5MHRP Partnership Secretariat, 2001), and the criteria for land classification and the boundaries between protection and production forest are unclear. This lack of clarity was reinforced by the fact that definitions have greatly changed over the past 10 years. Second, SFEs are by law autonomous business units but they have been nonetheless also entitled by the same law (Decree 200/2004/ND-CP) to keep up to 5000 ha of protection forest, which induces the possibility to mix public service and private business activities. Lastly, there has been a lack of monitoring on the 5MHRP implementation by the central level. The recent state audit on the 5MHRP reported malversations of civil servants and state organisations resulting in a misappropriation of the programme investment funds amounting to 135 billion Dong[5] (VND) (Cong An Nhan Dan (*Công An Nhân Dân) (*People's Police) newspaper, 2007).

(iii) Discourses

Blurred discourses have also facilitated the arbitrary implementation of blurred rules on forest classification. There is some "fuzziness" in official communications around what is the major focus of the 5MHRP. For instance, although the first stated goal in Decision 661 is environmental protection, a study recently published by the MARD says: "compared with the previous 327 program which mainly focused on protection forest, the 661 project considered timber production from plantations as the major strategy of the afforestation" (Dinh Duc Thuan, 2005). In public discourses, the environmental function of production forest comes first, prior to production objectives: "Plantation of the production forest is to contribute to the environmental and ecological protection while increasing incomes of those relying on forestry activities" (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 2007a).

What is more, the difference between the characteristics of protection and production forest is not clear, as illustrated by this quote from a senior official from the Forestry Department of the MARD:

[5] This is equivalent to approximately 6.6 million Euros / 8.7 million USD.

"*Production forest is also protection forest. All forests can play this role*" (source: interview, 2006). Interestingly, the opposite, i.e. the fact that protection forest can fulfil productive purposes is far less clear in discourses. But a close scrutiny of Decision 661 indicates that the characteristics defined for protection forest do not necessarily meet requirements for the provision of environmental services. In Decision 661, technical guidelines for watershed protection forests specify: "in the areas where the conditions so permit, the use of species with high economic value should be encouraged" (Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 1998, Article 4). Most planted tree species under the 5MHRP are indeed fast-growing trees adapted to the needs of the pulp and paper industry, of which actual contribution to watershed protection is questionable. In one province, a cadre from the Forestry Department explained:

> Before 2003, we were planting *Chukrasia Tabularis* and teak (*Tectona grandis*). Since 2004, we have replaced them by acacia, pine and eucalyptus for economic reasons. For *Chukrasia tabularis*, we need to wait for 30-50 years to exploit, for pine it is only 15 years. After the 15th year, pine trees give resin and wood for pulp.

It would be simplistic and only partly true to conclude that central policy-makers have purposely mixed environmental and economic goals in their discourses to pursue vested interests. Genuine environmental concerns have also guided the formulation of forest policies in Vietnam. But forest is imagined and depicted by policy-makers as an environmental panacea, a universal remedy against landslides, floods and water shortages. Although forests do provide environmental benefits, some links between forests and hydrology have been exaggerated and highly depend on sites and tree species (e.g. Calder, 1998; Bruijnzeel *et al.*, 2005). However, oversimplified narratives on forests and floods or forests and water flows are still vivid on the international scene and in Vietnam (e.g. MARD and 5MHRP Secretariat, 2001, p. 4). In Vietnam, afforestation efforts have aimed at establishing a "green cover"[6], regardless of tree species and forest quality. The need for re-greening what are called barren hills still holds; for instance, a senior staff of a Vietnamese research institute commented forest increase in Vietnam stating: "*The quality of forest is poor but it is very green*" (source: interview, 2006). The first objectives of the 5MHRP recently re-stated by the Deputy Prime Minister in a workshop were "speed up forest plantation; re-green bare land" (Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam, 2005). At the provincial level, the same narrative also prevails, as illustrated by this quote from a senior cadre of the sub-Department of Forestry of one visited province "*from 2004, we have planted acacias, pines and eucalyptus saplings; with these, it is very easy to cover the land*" (source: interview, 2006).

[6] The goal of covering the land is explicit in the name of the Program 327: "Greening the barren hills".

5) Forestry land allocation and land use

(a) Prominent outcomes

(i) Impact on land management

Before FLA, people in the northern uplands of Vietnam usually practiced different forms of shifting cultivation, including nomadic cultivation. For national policy-makers, FLA aimed to fix cultivation, to encourage swiddeners to adopt "more sustainable" (or more intensive) land-use practices, and thereby to halt deforestation. As intended, FLA, combined with settlement policies, has significantly hindered shifting land-use systems. Once land was allocated, it was not possible to open up new fields and the small size of individual plots did not usually enable crop fallowing. But the move to fixed cultivation and land management under individual property rights also caused a range of unintended consequences, including nutrient depletion (Mellac, 2000; Nguyen Thanh Lam *et al.*, 2004; Castella *et al.*, 2006; Jakobsen *et al.*, 2007), the disruption of collective land-use systems (Clement and Amezaga, 2008), conflicts over Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) and grazing land (Gomiero *et al.*, 2000; Hager, 2006). Although FLA might have had positive effects, individual property rights has been observed in many instances to be ill-adapted to upland biophysical conditions and cultural characteristics (Do Dinh Sam, 1994; Castella *et al.*, 2002; Dupar and Badenoch, 2002).

The recent legal recognition of community forestry in the revision of the Land Law (2003) and the Law on Forest Protection and Development (2004) is a remarkable shift in the institutional framework for forest and land management. However, according to interviewed consultants and donors in Hanoi involved in forestry at the national level, few provinces have officially recognised the rights of communities to manage valuable forest. Visited provinces exhibit disparities in their application of Community Based Forest Management (CBFM). Son La Province was an exception in its early FLA to communities in 1994-1996[7]. It has today allocated a relatively high proportion of forestry land to communities compared to other visited provinces (Table 1). But, when commenting FLA figures, the Deputy Director of Son La FPD specified: "*We allocated land to communities because we didn't have time to create a management committee to allocate to groups of households, but it will change*." "Community" has often actually meant the Commune People's Committee. The underlying rationales and incentives that have influenced the provinces' decisions to support community forestry are explored in the next section.

(ii) Impact on afforestation

There has not been any comprehensive national study assessing the impact of FLA on afforestation so far. However, several sources of evidence suggest that FLA has had little impact on households'

[7] FLA to communities was however limited to seven communes of Yen Chau District.

decisions to plant trees, including interviews with provincial authorities, several local level studies[8] (Sikor, 2001; Dinh Duc Thuan, 2005; Sunderlin and Huynh Thu Ba, 2005; Castella *et al.*, 2006) and spatial analyses (Meyfroidt and Lambin, 2008; Clement *et al.*, In preparation).

(b) Linking outcomes with external variables

(i) FLA and land management

As depicted previously, the unintended outcomes of FLA to households on land-use systems are rooted in its poor suitability to upland biophysical conditions and its incompatibility with land-use systems managed under collective rules-in-use. The roots for the shortcomings of FLA to households in respect to land management outcomes are thus related to policy design rather than policy implementation and are outside the scope of this paper. We will focus instead on the implementation of CBFM, recently encouraged by the central government through the recognition of communities as legal recipients of land-use rights in the 2003 Land Law and 2004 FPD Law.

Son La Province was far ahead these recent decisions of the central government when allocating land-use rights to villages in 1994-1996. Though it is not possible to ascertain which factors drove this decision of Son La People's Committee, we can nonetheless identify the main interests and incentives that might have pushed it forward. According to Sikor (2004), there was a real concern in the mid 1990s among Son La Province's authorities on deforestation and more specifically on the related risks of sedimentation in the reservoir feeding the hydro-electric dam of Hoa Binh[9], located downstream. According to our interview with the FPD deputy director, FLA was indeed the rational solution to deforestation: "*Before forests didn't have owners, it was a public good that belonged to the state, thus people destroyed it. This is why we decided to allocate forest and forestry land*". The choice of allocating land to "communities" rather than to households was also justified by environmental arguments: "*If we devolve land-use rights to the community, its awareness is raised. Forest is a public good so an individual does not damage it. Furthermore, villages have rules to protect the forest.*" Finally, from 2000 the German development agency *Gesellschaft für Technische*

[8] Contrary to this assertion, the socio-economic assessment report of Bai Bang paper mill, commanded by the Swedish International Development cooperation Agency (SIDA), argues that FLA has provided strong incentives to farmers of the Bai Bang mill neighbouring areas to engage in forestry. It recognises however that afforestation would probably not have sustained without the unique commercial opportunities offered by the proximity of the mill (Blower *et al*., 1999, p.158).

[9] This is the largest dam in Vietnam and still today provides a significant part of the electricity to the country. Because of a high sedimentation rate in the reservoir, the life expectancy of the dam was threatened to be reduced from an estimated range of 100-300 years to 50 years (Poffenberger and Nguyen, 1998)

Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) played a great role in expanding and further developing the "experiment" initiated by the Province People's Committee with the Song Da River Project[10].

Behind these rational arguments lie also bureaucratic and economic interests. For provincial authorities, land allocation to local communities eases the overwhelming and costly process of allocating land parcels to individual households. As explained by the FPD in one visited province: "*It is easier to allocate land to communities. We only discuss with the head of the village, no need to discuss with all villagers*". Bureaucratic or economic reasons are not less valuable than ideological ones, but they are likely to lead to distinct outcomes as objectives of administrative efficiency or reduction in state budget expenses become prominent over sustainable resource management and livelihood improvement. For instances, when the rationale for CBFM is based on administrative factors, no matter whether land-property rights are actually devolved to groups of households or transferred to the Commune People's Committee.

As in the case of the 5MHRP, the ability of the provincial administration to pursue their interests has been allowed and facilitated by centrally designed rules. Firstly, the revised FPD Law is unclear on the legal rights of communities. Although it includes a section on forest allocation to village communities, communities are not recognised as legal forest owners (Articles 3 and 5 in National Assembly of Vietnam, 2004). Secondly, the allocation of forest and land to communities is not really encouraged: it is recommended either when forest is already managed or used "efficiently" by the community or when forest "cannot be assigned to organisations, households or individuals" (Article 29 in National Assembly of Vietnam, 2004). It tacitly suggests that the allocation of forest to households is preferable to the allocation to communities.

Discourse analysis confirms that the benefits and pertinence of CBFM is actually unclear in the policy-making arena. Most respondents at the provincial and central level depicted CBFM as "good" – generally meaning "fostering or enabling forest protection". However, interviews indicate that this belief rather comes from the conformance to politically correct discourse than to a genuine conviction. No respondents specified why or under which conditions community forestry might be suitable. There was also often in the discussion a general confusion between open-access and common-property regimes. For instance, shortly after asserting that community forestry was "good", a forestry expert working for a cooperation agency stated: "*Before land allocation, forest was owned by many people at the same time, and thus was destroyed*" (source: interview, 2006), thereby sustaining Hardin's view of the Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin, 1968). Lastly, the rationale for CBFM most often quoted by respondents is that CBFM is a "traditional way of land management". However, the traditional character of a practice *per se* does not guarantee sustainability, equity or efficiency.

[10] This project ran from 1990 to 2004 and led to the experimentation of pilot community forestry schemes in 3000 villages of Son La Province.

As suggested previously, CBFM certainly holds many assets which suit particular conditions of the uplands. But its use as a black-box concept is problematic. First, because the suitability of CBFM for forest protection requires an examination of local institutions, culture and biophysical conditions (Thomson and Schoonmaker Freudenberger, 1997; Gibson *et al.*, 2000). Second, because a clear argumentation on CBFM benefits is necessary to change the beliefs on the ability of ethnic minority groups to manage forest and land which still prevail among provincial bureaucrats.

(ii) FLA impact on afforestation

Although the economic context is largely responsible for the lack of interest of farmers for the establishment of tree plantations (several studies and our interviews with provincial public servants stressed the difficulty for farmers in making a living from forestry under the current market conditions), the little impact of FLA on afforestation is also rooted in the mismatch of individual property rights with upland biophysical conditions. Large upland areas – forestry land makes up as much as 80 per cent of the territory in the visited provinces – with low accessibility makes enforcement and monitoring difficult. Adding to the lack of human resources is the difficulty to make accurate maps, which in turn impacts not only on FLA implementation and forest cover assessment, but also on control and enforcement. Furthermore, these conditions affect the motivation of public servants to perform their tasks dutifully. Along with low salary, it results in little enthusiasm for what is felt to be a top-down programme with uncertain benefits. Rules for accountability are also determinant; commune authorities are *de facto* often more accountable to local people than to district or provincial authorities because of strong kinship ties (Sikor, 2001; Dupar and Badenoch, 2002). The recent increase of land area classified as protection forestry land has augmented the area officially under state control, accentuating the inadequacy of means for control and enforcement. But this is not an issue of concern for the DARD and the FD, which implement the 5MHRP and receive state funds, since forest protection is under the responsibility of the FPD. The implementation of the 5HMRP and forest protection is led by two different departments that have no incentive to collaborate.

6) Conclusion

To the eyes of an outsider, forest policies in Vietnam might appear relatively successful. Vietnam stands out in the last Global Forest Resources Assessment (FAO, 2005) as one of the few countries in the world where forest cover has increased more than 0.50 per cent per year between 2000 and 2005. Furthermore, the government's commitment to the devolution of long term forestry land-use rights to households and communities has generally been touted by the international community as a significant step towards more effective, equitable and sustainable land management.

However, notwithstanding that the official statistics of forest cover increase are questionable (Sunderlin and Huynh Thu Ba, 2005), significant discrepancies between policy intentions and outcomes are hidden behind these achievements: 1) the national afforestation programme, the

5MHRP, has not successfully involved households in the forestry sector and has not contributed to poverty reduction or to economic development; 2) its implementation has encouraged a bias in forestry land classification – namely an over-classification into the protection category; 3) Forestry land allocation (FLA) to households has often disrupted existing land-use systems, leading to unintended outcomes; 4) there is a great disparity in how community-based management has been implemented among provinces, and; 5) FLA has hitherto had little impact on afforestation. Multiple roots for these discrepancies have been identified:

The poor success of the 5MHRP in contributing to poor household incomes in northern uplands is of course strongly related to the current economic and market conditions. But the incentives – or rather the lack of incentives – provided by the 5MHRP to involve households in the forestry sector have also been essential. Like its predecessor Programme 327, the programme has deliberately focused on protection and special-use forest and central subsidies have been exclusively directed to the provincial forest administration and State Forest Enterprise (SFEs).

Although the interest of provincial authorities to increase protection forestry land have been related to the political-economic context (the need to support SFEs in the current reform context), the bias in land classification has been allowed and even encouraged by centrally defined rules, namely the rules for central budget allocation and an unclear definition of forest categories. It has been further facilitated by unclear discourses from the Party-State. These discourses have been ambiguous on the actual objectives of the 5MHRP, promoting afforestation as a goal *per se*, and have been equivocal about the characteristics of the protection and production forest and land categories.

The negative outcomes of FLA to households on land management primarily stem from its unsuitability with the biophysical characteristics of upland areas and the customary collective rules-in-use. The underlying drivers for these outcomes thus rather arise from the design of FLA than its implementation. The legal recognition of CBFM might be a promising opening towards a higher diversity of institutional arrangements and a greater adaptation to local conditions. However, this promise might not yield expected outcomes. On the one hand, its execution might have been largely driven by bureaucratic and economic interests. Provincial authorities have seen CBFM as a means to speed up the overwhelming land allocation process to households. On the other hand, the FPD Law and public discourses have not really encouraged its application by providing a clear rationale on its benefits. Like afforestation, CBFM has been black-boxed and promoted as inherently good. This lack of clarity does not favour a sound adaptation of institutional arrangements to local conditions. Nor does it help dismissing prevailing beliefs on the ability of local people to organise themselves to manage land sustainably.

Lastly, the limited impact of FLA to households on afforestation is largely related with the low attractiveness of forestry and the biophysical characteristics of upland areas. The low accessibility and large extent of forestry land have greatly hindered law enforcement over land use. The increase of the protection forestry land area has accentuated the inadequacy between the task and the capacity of

forest protection officers to enforce state regulations. This problem results to some extent from the lack of co-operation between the two provincial departments in charge of land classification and forest protection.

Therefore, though the decisions taken by provincial bureaucrats have greatly contributed to the gaps between intentions and outcomes regarding forest and land policies in Vietnam, these decisions have been allowed or encouraged by the rules designed by the central government and discourses stemming from the Party-State at the central level. The general or vague feature of many legal documents in Vietnam permits certain flexibility in policy interpretation and implementation at lower governance levels. On the one hand, it allows policies to be adapted to local specificities, different "policy models[11]" to be tested and eventually new lessons for policy improvements to arise. On the other hand, the "policy models" created at the provincial or lower level are not necessarily based on sound arguments, i.e. on a will to improve policies or make these better fit to the local context. For better models to arise, flexibility must be linked with responsibility and control by increasing the accountability of the provincial departments to the Ministries, and implementing reliable policy monitoring and evaluation systems. It is noteworthy that the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) stands out as one of the leading ministries moving forward along this direction by its commitment to monitor and evaluate all new policies (source: interviews, 2006).

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[11] We refer here to "policy models" because policy design in Vietnam has often relied on model testing, validation and extension.

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