

**REDD+ piloting and wider forest
governance: Meso-level dynamics
in Vietnam**

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Contents

Acronyms	3
Introduction	4
Theoretical framework	4
Methodology	6
Provincial Level Analysis: Lao Cai Province and linkages to national, district and commune level processes	7
Bao Thang Nested Case Study: Interlinkages between Bao Thang District, Ban Cam Commune, Ban Cam and Ban Lot Villages	9
Box 1: REDD+ in Ban Lot Village (in Ban Cam Commune)	12
Box 2: REDD+ in Ban Cam Village (in Ban Cam Commune).....	14
Bao Yen Nested Case Study: Interlinkages between Bao Yen District, Long Khanh Commune and Village 2.....	16
Box 3: REDD+ Livelihood Development in Long Khanh Commune	18
Conclusions	21
References	24

ACRONYMS

BYFC:	Bao Yen Forest Company
CPC:	Commune People's Committee
CSO :	Civil Society Organisation
CF:	Community Forest
CP:	Communist Party
DARD:	Department for Agricultural and Rural Development
DPC:	District People's Committee
FA:	Farmer's Association
FRD:	Forest Ranger Division
FMB:	Forest Management Board
FSC :	Forest sustainability certification
GIS:	Geographic Information System
LUC:	Land Use Certificate
MoE:	Ministry of the Environment
NARP:	National REDD+ Action Plan
NGO:	Non-governmental organization
PARP:	Provincial REDD+ Action Plan
PES:	Payment for Ecosystem Services
PPC:	Provincial People's Committee
PPMU:	Provincial Programme Management Unit
REDD+:	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
SFE:	Social Forestry Enterprise
SiRAP:	Site-specific REDD+ Action Plan
VFLDC:	Village Forest and Livelihood Development Committee
VND:	Vietnamese Dong
VSBP:	Vietnam Bank for Social Policies
UNFCCC:	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UN-REDD:	The United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries
WU:	Women's Union

Introduction

REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) is a climate change mitigation mechanism developed by the UNFCCC to incentivize developing countries to keep their forests standing. In order to join the mechanism, countries are expected to meet certain requirements. In recognition of the importance of forests in supporting the livelihoods of the poor in developing countries, these requirements include the informed and meaningful involvement in REDD+ of all stakeholders and especially forest dependent communities. Accordingly, the UN-REDD Programme assists developing countries wanting to join the mechanism to develop nationally led REDD+ processes. Working towards 'REDD+ readiness' requires countries to develop appropriate forest governance systems including national level mechanisms, meso-level processes and micro-level pilot projects. Whilst national level mechanisms and micro-level pilot projects have been relatively well-studied, there has so far been little attention to meso-level processes around REDD+. This briefing reports on research that investigated meso-level processes developed as part of REDD+ Readiness in Vietnam.

This research was conducted in 2018 as part of a Danida-funded project called 'REDD+: The Greatest Forest Grab of All Time?' (The Forest Grab Project)¹. The Forest Grab Project focused on how REDD+ in Vietnam and Indonesia influenced access and rights to forest resources for local communities. The wider project was led by the University of Copenhagen in Denmark and involved collaboration with Bogor Agricultural University (IPB) and the Department of Forest Resources Conservation, both in Indonesia, the Institute of Cultural Studies (ICS) and the National University of Agriculture (VNUA, both in Vietnam, Roskilde University in Denmark and the University of East Anglia (UEA), in the UK. The component of the research reported here was undertaken by UEA and ICS. It sought to examine how meso-level processes, power relations and politics shaped where and how REDD+ was piloted and what this meant for access to and control over resources.

Theoretical framework

Implementing readiness for REDD+ is shaped amongst many other factors by the interplay between REDD+ and existing systems of forest governance and the historically-specific bricolage of formal and informal rights over forests and/or lands designated as forests by the government (forestland). In Vietnam, as in many contexts, existing forest governance is complex and involves different stakeholders at different levels, including international donors, government bodies (ministries and people's committees at different levels), NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and business sectors (including both forestry and non-forestry companies, as well as the media). The way in which REDD+ processes interact with these tenures and relations of governance impacts on how far REDD+ enables local people to extend their control over increasingly valuable forests or, conversely, how far it allows for elite capture of financial incentives.

¹ <https://ifro.ku.dk/english/research/news/2019/a-critical-evaluation-of-redd/>

Meso-level processes, power relations and politics are central to shaping *where* and *how* REDD+ is piloted/implemented and what this means for this REDD+ works in relation to wider forest governance. These processes centre on the formal institutions of forest governance and their key actors, namely provincial, district and commune structures and their interfaces upwards with national level and downwards with village level authorities. But they also extend outwards to involve other interests and actors, including national security concerns, commercial forestry interests, NGOs and CSOs and ethnic minority land claims.

Existing research on REDD+ pilots in the Vietnamese Highlands confirm the salience of meso-level processes in shaping REDD+ pilot outcomes. Sikor and Hoang's (2016) study of a REDD+ pilot found that negotiations between meso-level actors had concrete implications for village level outcomes and effectively consolidated and extended state authority. In this case, the key actors were a private forest company and local authorities at commune, district and provincial levels, and the outcome arose from their respective needs to avoid politically sensitive alternatives. Central to this was their reluctance to back the claims of the Dao people (an ethnic minority group) about their customary forests but also concern to avoid challenging the Dao's conversion of forest land to cultivation. Phan's (2018) research on a REDD+ pilot village in the central highlands found that: REDD+ resources substituted for payments previously made by the SFE (Social Forestry Enterprise), which was a major owner of forests around the study village; that outcomes were strongly shaped by the SFE rather than at village level; that there were no fundamental changes in the pattern of meso-level forest governance; and that tightly circumscribed 'participation' was locked in at the village level. Hoang et al (2018) studied another REDD+ pilot village in the central highlands in which Lam Dong's Forest Management Board (FMB), its SFE and the provincial and commune authorities were the key actors. They found that the REDD+ pilot was 'piggybacked' on to an existing PES (Payment for Ecosystem Services) scheme and that the FMB's attempt to sidestep disputes between ethnic minorities and Kinh migrants over forest land exacerbated conflict between villagers, the state and the private sector. In this case, the FMB felt that villagers' 'participation' was illegitimate, whilst villagers felt that REDD+ was opposed to their forest claims.

Drawing on these studies, we tentatively theorized that REDD+ introduces new expectations and resources into the interplay of pre-existing forest governance and bricolage of tenures in Vietnam. In the absence of fundamental change in meso-level forest governance this is likely to either shore up existing power relations or to intensify existing tensions. We anticipated that different understandings or interpretations of REDD+ goals by different actors at the meso-level would be used to support negotiations around their respective interests. Grafting REDD+ on to existing channels for delivering PES and CF therefore risks insulating existing meso-level forest governance from change and allowing only restricted 'participation' at village level. Whilst such a strategy might enable local authorities (headmen and CPC) to preserve or enhance their authority, it is unlikely that piloting REDD+ in this way could build effective channels for upwards communication and/or mechanisms for downwards transparency and accountability between the village and the provincial or national levels. Consequently, national/global policy actors' expectations of experimenting with fundamental changes in forest governance through REDD+ piloting may be misplaced. In this sense, the fragmentation of REDD+ piloting - intended to ensure maximum experimentation and learning in the pilot phase - may be concealing how important it is for REDD+ to grasp the underlying conflicts over tenure and forest governance if it is to extend local people's access to and control over forests and forest resources.

Therefore, our overarching research question was: How do meso-level negotiations impact on piloting REDD+? Within this we addressed three key questions. First, how are norms about REDD+ (its principles, objectives and safeguarding provisions) understood by different meso-level actors in forest governance? Second, what is being piloted by REDD+ at the meso-level: how is REDD+ changing forest governance and its incentives at the meso-level, and what is REDD+ being used for by meso-level actors in forest governance? Third, how does the handling of REDD+ at the meso-level (with attention to issues around information, representation and recognition) influence what happens at the local level and what happens at the national level? Although our research focused on the formal institutions of forest governance and their actors, we were alert to the influence of other interests in *de facto* forest governance, including national security concerns, commercial forestry interests and ethnic minority land claims.

Methodology

We examined the piloting of REDD+ in Vietnam's Lao Cai Province, over half of which is forested and where ethnic minority claims to forest are substantial. We focused on the decisions and actions taken at the provincial, district, and commune levels and our findings are based on 19 interviews with key informants at multiple scales undertaken in January 2018. Our primary research was supported by a review of secondary literature, drawing particularly on new research emerging from The Forest Grab research consortium.

Interviewees were identified with guidance from the REDD+ Provincial Officer in Lao Cai and with permission from each level, including the National REDD+ Office. Though we encouraged breadth in identifying interviewees at all levels, it was officials who introduced us to potential interviewees and, as such, dissenting views may be under-represented. The interviews were semi-structured following an agreed interview guide. Each was conducted by one of the three researchers in Vietnamese, with translation provided for Locke or Few by two experienced research assistants. Notes were taken by the researchers in English, and Locke and Few cross-checked on any confusions with translators shortly afterwards. In several cases, interviews involved multiple interviewees – when local officers or representatives felt that our questions covered different peoples' responsibilities or experiences and preferred a group approach.

Our analysis was informed by ongoing discussion among the team in the field, with emerging themes verified through systematic analysis of transcribed notes. Our findings are exploratory, since they rely on a small number of interviews conducted in relatively formal settings and, in some cases, it was clear that some interviewees were pushing specific agendas.

We begin by analysing how the provincial level of REDD related to the national as well as the district, commune, and village levels. We then analyse inter-relations between district, commune and village pilots through two nested case studies: firstly, Bao Thang District and Ban Cam Commune, where micro-level piloting was going on in Ban Cam and Ban Lot villages; and secondly, Bao Yen District and Long Khanh Commune, where micro-level piloting was going on in settlements known as Villages 1, 2, 4 and 5.

Provincial Level Analysis: Lao Cai Province and linkages to national, district and commune level processes

REDD+ readiness activities had begun in Vietnam in late 2009, with the National REDD+ Action Plan (NARP) being signed off in 2012 and with initial piloting focused on Lam Dong Province. With a national machinery largely in place, UN REDD Vietnam Phase 2 Programme (2013-2018) focused mostly on capacity building for implementation in 6 heavily-forested pilot provinces at commune, district and provincial levels. Lao Cai Province joined REDD+ readiness activities in 2013 as one of these second wave of province-level REDD+ pilots. At the time of our research (January 2018), REDD+ in Vietnam was led by the National REDD+ Steering Committee chaired by the Ministry for Agricultural and Rural Development (MARD) and the Vietnam REDD+ Office in the Vietnam Administration of Forestry. In this section, we summarise how Provincial-level officers responsible for forest governance and rural development understood REDD+ and its linkages to national and local processes.

Mirroring arrangements at the national level, REDD+ in Lao Cai had a Provincial Level Steering Committee that included different agencies and stakeholders and was headed by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). The key stakeholders, according to DARD, were all departments of government, the commune authorities, and 'forest owners'. The 'forest owners' were those with land-use certificates (LUCs) and included forest companies, hydro-electric plants and local people, particularly the ethnic minorities. In addition, there was a smaller Core Group, also led by DARD, that included different agencies responsible for implementing REDD+ in the field. Until 2017 the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in Lao Cai Province had 10 full-time officers supported by 11 other officers under different divisions working for the REDD+ project. However, by the time of our interviews, DARD had only 4 officers working on 'closure of the programme' and there was no expectation of renewed funding. A former senior provincial forest officer told us that the intention was that piloting was to finish in 2018 as they moved to 'full implementation' in 2019, but 'in reality there is no money left' and the project 'is closing'. This winding down of activity was confirmed by a senior provincial officer of the Women's Union (WU): whilst the WU had been members of both the Steering Committee and the Core Group, that they had not been involved at the provincial level for nearly a year.

According to DARD interviewees, Lao Cai was chosen to participate in UN-REDD Phase II because it had a relatively high proportion of forested land area (51.5% at the start of REDD+), relatively less deforestation than other provinces and good existing capacity in governance for forest protection. They stressed the fact that Lao Cai had forest revenues that enabled it to finance activities in advance of results-based payments from REDD+.² DARD interviewees noted that Lao Cai was an important pilot for Vietnam because it represented the forests of the North-West, had a substantial ethnic minority population and high vulnerability to hazards.

² This mirrored the logic that Phan (2018) found for selecting UN-REDD pilots in Lam Dong Province. See Hao Phan (2018) Gendered access to resources and its implications for REDD+: a case study from the central highlands, Vietnam. Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia (available at <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/68198/>).

DARD clearly articulated the expectation that REDD would make a change in how forest management was done. They emphasised that the provincial-level focus had been on training, encouraging co-management and ‘mainstreaming culture’, by which they meant promoting awareness of deforestation through traditional practices and/or cultural events. Lao Cai had announced their Provincial REDD+ Action Plan (PARP) in 2016 and DARD told us that the way in which the PARP was developed ‘changed completely’ with the arrival of REDD. Whilst in the past the PARP was derived top-down from national plans, now, they said, it involved ‘bottom-up planning based on local priorities’. Importantly, ‘local priorities’ according to DARD were priorities that arose from the actual form and causes of deforestation in specific places (such as people clearing the forest to grow cassava in Bao Thang).

A senior provincial forest officer concurred, saying that REDD was different from previous sustainable forestry initiatives because it focused on ‘changing people’s minds’. Rather than banning people from the forest, it sought to raise awareness and knowledge and included a focus on helping people improve their livelihoods, so they did not have to destroy the forest. This was reflected, he told us, in the ‘flow of information’: ‘before government officials passed information one way only to the locals, [but] since REDD+ there is also a reflection of local response to that information’ communicated through public consultations. However, this officer insisted that options for forest management flowed from forest classifications³ and that whatever the government planned ‘the local people have to follow’. He claimed that conflicts were rare but, tellingly, noted that ‘whenever there is conflict, the official will go to the people and ... persuade them to listen to what the government is thinking – government law wins over customary law’. In contrast, the WU viewed REDD+ as being distinctive because it was centrally about reducing local use of the forest and livelihood support to compensate for loss of access to the forests. Nationally, the WU has been influential in linking actions to improve the environment/address climate change with improving economic lives. The WU in Lao Cai thought that REDD was a good opportunity for them because REDD was relatively more interested in the participation of women and ethnic minorities and somewhat better at involving different departments than other province-level projects. Their provincial-level roles in REDD had been to influence the planning process, drawing on their experience and understanding of women and ethnic minorities, and to contribute to implementation as part of the Core REDD+ Group by delivering climate change awareness-raising information with forest rangers in the villages.

DARD asserted that all 9 districts in Lao Cai ‘were included’ in REDD+ and stressed that REDD+ was an umbrella programme under which other donors besides UN-REDD were supporting forest rehabilitation. These included: Norwegian support for rehabilitation of 177.5 ha of forests in 5 communes beside highways; support from provincial funds for replanting 22,000 ha of forest land on which cassava had been grown; and collaboration between the province and a forest enterprise for establishing 3,700 ha of acacia plantations for forest sustainability certification (FSC) leased to individual growers. DARD emphasised that it was important for them to integrate other sources of funding into REDD+ because REDD+ funding was ‘limited’. According to DARD, all 9 districts had ‘supported communes’ to develop forest inventories for the purpose of informing

³ Land designated as forest in Vietnam is officially classified as Production, Protection and Special Use Forests with specific parameters for management that determine the extent of protection and exploitation that is allowed in each classification.

readjustment of the spatial extents of forest classified as special-use, protection, or production forest. This work was done through GIS and by forest rangers updating forest classifications to reflect the ground realities of forest cover (ground-truthing).

DARD said that ‘actual piloting’ for REDD+ had started in 6 communes, beginning initially with 2 in 2014 and later including a further 4 communes. DARD interviewees told us that ‘the commune authorities’ had developed Site-Specific REDD+ Action Plans (SiRAPs) in the first two, whilst ‘the Forest Management Boards (FMBs)’⁴ [at district level] had developed the SiRAPs for the other four communes. Whilst DARD interviewees reported that ‘planning for forest management and protection is done by local people at village level’, they also said that the districts ‘draft’ the plans and then ‘consult’ down to village level with people ‘to double-check it’.

Interestingly, a senior provincial forest officer told us that ‘forest rangers are not the main actors in REDD+. Only the project management board takes change of REDD+ here’. However, he noted that local forest rangers cooperated with REDD+ staff on the ground and participated where they were needed. Whilst the WU had not been involved in REDD+ recently at the provincial level, a senior provincial level officer stressed that they remained involved with specific pilots at the commune level. She said that REDD+ had been beneficial for local women, citing women making good alternative incomes by growing cinnamon with loans offered by the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (VBSP) and improving the survival of the Hmong women’s buffaloes by encouraging the women to bring them lower down the mountain in cold weather. This officer would not be drawn by probing about what women or ethnic minorities desired in terms of access to forests and forest products or on whether they experienced any negative side-effects from REDD+. From the above, it is evident that there were differences of emphasis and interpretation in how different actors at this level understood REDD+, its significance and its priorities. Below we examine how REDD+ had worked in practice relation to existing forest governance in two nested case studies of district-commune-village linkages.

Bao Thang Nested Case Study: Interlinkages between Bao Thang District, Ban Cam Commune, Ban Cam and Ban Lot Villages

Bao Thang District was proud of the fact that that it had the highest level of forest cover in the Province, with 58% of the district (68,506 ha) being designated as forest land, of which around one third was classed as Protection Forests and two-thirds is Production Forests. This level of forest cover, the large number of ethnic minorities, the recognition that cassava fields on forest lands were expanding, and the pre-existence of some good examples of forest protection, were all reasons why this district was chosen for REDD+. Forest classification and the way in which it intersects with forest allocation and/or the granting of LUCs was central to forest governance on the ground. District level interviewees underlined the primacy of forest classifications and state-based tenure arrangements. Both were regarded by district level officers as ‘relatively stable’ in Bao Thang, even though the former was regularly adjusted by the Forest Ranger Division and

⁴ FMBs only exist at district level. They are GoV agencies whose staff get civil servant salaries. In 2015 they were merged with the Forest Rangers and at the time of our research fell under the Forest Ranger Division.

the latter was bureaucratically challenging and historically complex because of customary claims. Claims for LUCs were adjudicated by the Provincial People's Committee and although they could be granted to local people, either households or villages, as well as FMBs, they required the 'proper' mapping of the territory being claimed. Not all FMBs in Lao Cai Province had LUCs for all (or in some cases any) of the Protection Forests that they looked after. This was the case for Bao Thang FMB with respect to the district's Protection Forests, as well as for the 500 ha of Production Forests, that it looked after. However, they had no funding to get it mapped, and could claim none from the provincial level.

At an earlier period, many of the 'genuinely old' forest fields of ethnic minority households had been recognised, classified as Production Forests, and granted household LUCs. Recent attempts to clear the forest were strictly prevented by the rangers and the commune authorities. Although Production Forest could be economically exploited, even those people with LUCs who had planted trees could not fell them without official permission and could only grow tree crops, not rice or cassava. Nevertheless, in 2017, new LUCs were allocated in this district (by the Province) of nearly 300 ha to individual households for Production Forests (where the households had established customary rights). Although provisions for village management of Community Forests (CFs)⁵ had existed since 2004, the only CFs recognized in this district at the time of our research were those that had received support from REDD+. Ban Lot and Tri Quan villagers were already protecting their forests and had asked for their forests to be recognised as CFs. The REDD+ office in Lao Cai had hired an independent consultant to map them as 'demonstration sites' and they had been granted LUCs to their Protection Forests (Ban Lot in 2016 and Tri Quan in 2017). A district level forest officer pointed out that there were trade-offs for communities in whether their CFs were classified as Protected or Production Forests: whilst the former were good quality, they could not be economically exploited; but the latter which could be exploited, were usually poor quality.

Whilst some ethnic minorities may have seen themselves as owners of the forest in the past, a district-level officer of the WU insisted that 'customary law is not acceptable and is not applied and is not recognised' and that ethnic minorities 'have to accept the change'. She stressed that people were 'not banned from the forest' but 'every commune has regulations on protecting the forest' and they 'must follow the regulations'. She said that women in remote areas may be 'slow in understanding', but they know what they should do and can get help from the commune to follow regulations. Probed further on ethnic minority knowledge about the environment, she insisted that lowland people know more about 'the theory' (referring to the science of forest management) and 'we still need to raise their awareness about the environment in order to make them cooperate – they can't stand aside from the system, they have to share in the *ideology* at the commune level". So, how did REDD+ fit into this system of forest governance? District-level DARD officers reported that the REDD+ Provincial team assigned tasks directly to the Forest Rangers and FMBs at the district level and that in carrying out these tasks neither were answerable to the People's Committee or People's Councils or to DARD at district level. District level development authorities were not involved in running the FMB but were consulted and

⁵ Village-level management of community forests were first given legal recognition in Vietnam by the Forest Protection and Development Law of 2004 and this recognition built on small scale experiments with community forestry in various projects from the 1990s onwards.

mobilised for sustainable forest management through a district-level UN-REDD+ Task Force. The Task Force comprised representatives of all divisions and mass organisations, and the District Level Steering Committee of the Programme for the Sustainable Development of Forests in which DARD, the WU and Farmer's Association (FA) were all included⁶.

Nevertheless, a former district-level DARD officer said that 'he was not invited to participate meaningfully in the programme' despite being called on to explain the difference between REDD+ and other forest management programmes during REDD+ activities. He viewed REDD+ in comparison to both Programme 661 (a now defunct national reforestation programme) and Lao Cai's pre-existing PES (Payment for Ecosystem Services) Programme.⁷ When REDD+ came to consult with the district authorities, he said that the objectives were very similar to PES and 'we pointed out that the results-based scheme was very effective and that REDD+ should follow its example'. He claimed that it did so in the communes involved in REDD+ in Bao Thang and Bao Yen Districts, and at the same time these communes were withdrawn from the PES scheme to avoid double-payments.

This former district-level DARD officer saw REDD+ as 'the same' as PES but with 'a few advantages'. Whilst PES was only available to households who had LUCs (or 'Red Books') for at least 0.5 ha of cleared Production Forest, REDD+ was open to those with only 0.3 ha, meaning that some poorer households could be included. Also, REDD+ enabled participating households to access 'livelihood loans' for livestock production of 10M VND over one year. The district-level forest officer saw REDD+ as aimed at increasing people's knowledge and awareness of the environment. He described it as being implemented only in 2 communes in the district and involving some financial incentives. He stressed that the FMB did not get extra resources from REDD+ but channelled the funds from the Province to the pilot Communes (and in this sense the FMB did not have a financial interest in REDD+). The process of planning reforestation was otherwise the same and from the district's perspective 'just as complex' bureaucratically⁸.

The Bao Thang WU also saw their participation in REDD+ as 'following on' from a similar climate change programme (Women's Participation in Environmental Protection and Climate Change) but said that REDD+ was run more professionally. However, she stressed that REDD+ brought minimal new funds to the district: when REDD+ came it just added 'some more flavour'. Similarly, a district-level officer of the Farmer's Association (FA) said that REDD+ had potential but that it only covered small areas for a short time and so was not very significant, despite being successful.

⁶ We were unable to get an interview with the FMB in Bao Thang but were able to interview at the district-level forest officers, former and current DARD officers, a WU officer, and a FA officer.

⁷ PES offered results-based payments for growing trees on land classified as Production Forest in three districts, Bao Thang, Bao Yen and Van Ban

⁸ Whilst individual households, as private owners of Production Forests, did not need to submit plans to plant trees, the FMBs and Community Forests (CFs) had to do so to be eligible for results-payments. The plans of FMBs needed approval by the District People's Committee (DPC) and those of Community Forests needed approval at the Commune People's Committee (CPC) and the DPC. Both were then sent to the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) where they were normally accepted without revision. However, he stressed that in comparison, private logging companies working on Production Forests were required to submit plans that had to be approved at all three levels (CPC, DPC and PCP), indicating relatively more autonomy for districts in relation to FMBs and CFs than for private logging companies plans.

Bao Thang District ran two REDD+ pilots, one of which was in Ban Cam Commune. The commune has 13 ethnic minority groups (comprising 72% of the population in 2016), with Dao, Giay, Nung and Hmong the most numerous, and more than half its area is designated as forest land⁹. Over 40% of households in its 6 villages were classed as 'poor' in 2016. All the Protected Forests in this commune, except for Ban Lot CF since 2016, belonged to the FMB, but other Production Forest land belonged to individual households for which they now had LUCs. A commune-level officer for the WU noted that before REDD+ came the commune was already active in forest protection, tree planting and channeling funds to help people raise livestock through the 661 Programme. Other commune-level interviewees were also clear that Ban Cam Commune had been selected to participate in REDD+ because it was already very good in forest protection and because Ban Lot was already protecting the forest they wished to claim for the community (see box 1).

BOX 1: REDD+ IN BAN LOT VILLAGE (IN BAN CAM COMMUNE)

Ban Lot village was made up of ethnic minority people, mostly Dao but also Giay, Hmong and Nung. The village was allocated LUCs for the 286 ha of Protected Forest in its administrative area as Community Forest for co-management in 2016 and also included Production Forests to which some individual households had LUCs. Whilst a village-level officer of the Communist Party, a Dao man, said that the village was already patrolling the forest and had asked for it to be recognised as community forest before REDD+ came, a district-level DARD officer credits REDD+ with triggering co-management. The former argued that 'REDD+ see the green of the forest and come': whilst the motivation for co-management in Ban Lot predated REDD+, the process of mapping the CF and applying for the LUC financed by REDD+ made it a reality and REDD+'s awareness-raising, tree-planting incentives and loans-for-livelihoods supported and energised co-management. In contrast to the government's classifications, the Dao recognised three kinds of forest: 'watershed forest', 'old forest' and 'new forest'. The Dao, who had been here for at least 100 years, believed that trees have spirits and worshiped at a shrine in the forest. The Provincial Authorities granted the LUC in 2016 and the district-level DARD officer said that whilst the land 'is still classed as Protected Forest, the law says that the forest should be owned by someone who can protect it well' and in this case the community had the better claim. The 'watershed forest' in Ban Lot was transferred to the villagers collectively as CF and they could harvest 20% of the NTFPs but not cut trees. Whilst some villagers had been paid for patrolling when the FMB managed the forest, once it was CF they no longer received payments for protection. The Dao leader of the village CP made contradictory statements about the cutting of trees in the CF suggesting that some low level cutting by villagers (but not outsiders) for subsistence needs may still have been tolerated. However, the practice of clearing forest for cultivation had been ended. A former district-level DARD officer insisted that 'the fact that it is their own land matters and even without a project they will be motivated to protect and invest in it' and the Dao leader of the village CP confirmed that the LUC mattered to the villagers because 'once you have the LUC then nobody can take the forest away from the village'. The latter said that there is 'no need to train Dao about the forest. They know all about protecting the forest' and that 'it is not as if REDD+ came and we changed'.

⁹ 2,475 ha of forest land out of total land area of 4,185 ha.

The Dao leader of the village CP said that the main benefit of REDD+ in Ban Lot was the one-off payment for growing trees, mostly pineapple and cinnamon, on the 'old forest'. Different families had long-established customary rights to forest fields in the 'old forest' where they grew cassava and hill rice. When REDD+ came and mapped the forest, they were granted LUCs for it as Production Forest, provided they only grow tree crops. (For example, he planted 1 ha of cinnamon on his Production Forest land and got 2.5M VND because 80% of the trees were still alive after one year). REDD+ also brought a revolving fund for livelihood support to Ban Lot villagers. The village decided to allocate the 100M VND to 10 'poor' households to grow lemongrass and ginger. The one-year loan was administered by the Village Head (who collects the funds from the Commune) and 2% interest was paid to generate a management fee. Only 10 households out of 184 had been able to get these loans, demonstrating to the Dao village cadre that 'REDD+ is a small thing'.

The WU was involved in REDD pilot at the level of Ban Cam Commune from the outset, by 'doing propaganda' and 'giving an opinion' during consultations. In contrast to what we had been told at Provincial level, but confirming what others told us at district level, the commune-level WU officer told us that the SiRAP process was 'nothing to do with REDD+ and it happens everywhere in the same way'. According to her, the only difference in SiRAP once REDD+ came was that the commune had to separate out how many hectares of these household production forest plots with LUCs were for REDD+ and how many were for other things (presumably such as PES or 661).

The understanding of REDD+'s purpose at commune level, as compared to district and provincial levels, placed much greater emphasis on livelihood support. Commune-level officers were clear that REDD+ aimed to 'develop a new livelihood model' so people did not have to depend on or degrade the forest. In comparison with other sustainable forest development initiatives, a commune-level WU officer said REDD+ was more detailed and more effective, with better policy promotion that really convinced people. Again, we were told that 'we have to do awareness-raising many more times than for other ethnic groups as it takes them longer to get it' and the Hmong 'are very slow in understanding'. These views, expressed by Kinh officers, were starkly contradicted in Ban Lot village by the Dao leader of the village CP (see box 1).

REDD+ was launched in the commune in 2014 but started in 2015 and commune level officers concurred that all the mass organisations participated. Around 10 people from the commune (mostly local authorities, village heads and representatives from Ban Lot) went to Lao Cai for training about planting and protecting trees, about why it was important to protect the forest, and discussed how to deal with problems in the forest using hypothetical scenarios (such as people coming to cut trees). On their return they organised meetings in each of the 6 villages and shared what they had learnt.

The Commune had three REDD+ committees: a monitoring and implementation committee, monitoring taskforce and implementation taskforce (each of 2 - 5 people) and additional implementation teams at the hamlet/village level. All 6 hamlets in Ban Cam were included in REDD+ and included in conservation of the Protection Forests (from 2015), were planting trees on Production Forests for which individual households had LUCs (phase 1) and had received a one-off revolving fund for supporting raising livestock (in phase 2). The week before our interviews, all 3 committees had met with the Provincial REDD+ officer who came to the commune to review the work: reviews happened annually but this was a three-year review in which they were informed that REDD+ was closing and

they would get no more funds. The head of the commune Implementation team said there had been no incidences of corruption in the commune related to REDD+.

The commune authorities reported that REDD+ changed the way in which the forest was protected in this commune. Prior to REDD+, the FMB had contracted small teams of men from villages near the forest to make daily patrols of the Protected Forest using Programme 661 funds. The men for the teams had been identified with help and approval from the local authorities¹⁰. In phase 1 of REDD+, groups were set up by the commune in each village to patrol the forests and they had patrolled since 2015. Each village had a forest protection group selected from those who were interested and who volunteered, subject to the village head's approval: they were not paid but were given special clothing, shoes, hat and *pho* (noodle soup)¹¹. The commune authorities reported that all villages were equally good at patrolling, following the rules set up by the CPC and that problems that had been experienced before 2015 with people clearing forests had stopped. Rather than perceiving that REDD+ had triggered a change in forest governance, a village-level officer for Ban Cam stressed that REDD+ had reinforced existing forest management (see box 2).

BOX 2: REDD+ IN BAN CAM VILLAGE (IN BAN CAM COMMUNE)

Ban Cam village was mostly made up of ethnic minority households (204 households, mostly Giay, some Nuy and Hmong and only 11 Kinh). The village had no Production Forest and was adjacent to a large Protected Forest (around 10,000 ha), part of which covered the east of Ban Cam Commune. This was managed by the Bao Thang FMB through the 661 Programme. A former village-level officer in Ban Cam told us that the villagers had no management or ownership rights to any forest land. There was no longer any hunting or cultivation in the forest: there was nothing left to hunt, cultivation was no longer tolerated on forest hills and since villagers had been able to access fertiliser they no longer needed to practice shifting cultivation. Villagers no longer got timber or firewood from the forest but instead bought it from people in other villages who owned Production Forest land.

Another village-level officer was clear that REDD+ had reinforced this existing forest management. When REDD+ came, they set up 6 unpaid volunteer patrol teams in different villages beside the forest. They got clothing and equipment from the state but did not patrol regularly. They were called if there was a fire or other incident and had a 'sense of responsibility' because they had been selected by the villagers for this task. The FMB's team of rangers' coordination with the volunteer teams had, according to this interviewee, improved forest protection and reduced deforestation. Although villagers got no direct livelihood benefits from the Protection Forest, they understood that protecting the forest protects their water and their environment.

The former village-level officer told us 'the idea of this benefit did not come in just two years of REDD+ - we know this from a long time ago'. He stressed that there was nothing specific in SiRAP related to REDD+ but that REDD+ did supplement the existing systems

¹⁰ Aside from these paid patrol teams, other local members of the mass organisations have always played a role in forest protection, for example a team selected by the village head are mobilised when there are forest incidents and the pioneers are mobilised when there are forest fires.

¹¹ The number in the patrol group depends on the area of forest – ranging from 7/8 people up to 15/16.

of anti-poverty loans by setting up a small revolving fund for livelihood development and promoted better care for livestock. He managed this fund but stressed that a one-year revolving fund offering short-term loans was not enough in relation to villagers' needs.

The first phase of REDD+ also focused on reforestation and encouraged households to plant economically useful trees, supplied by REDD+, such as cinnamon, *lat* or *muo*, on their own Production Forest lands. People 'who joined' REDD+ 'must have LUCs' for a minimum amount of Production Forest land to get the targeted 'support for investment' and if 80% of the seedlings were still alive 6 months later, as verified by the ranger and a commune official, then the households got a one-off payment from REDD+ of 3M VND per ha (see box 1). After that, the households owned the trees and could harvest them or use them to produce spice when they matured. Cinnamon had not been very economical for households to grow in the past since it took 7 years until bark could be harvested for sale: however, at the time of our research, there was a market for selling leaves for oil which provided better incentives whilst waiting for trees to mature. In the meantime, LUC holders could also grow secondary crops under the canopy like cassava, maize, pineapple and banana which improved the benefits they got from this land. The commune had also set up a cooperative to market lemon grass with some support from REDD+. By the end of 2016 REDD+ had helped reforest 100 ha but REDD+ involvement in these activities had finished at the time of our interviews.

In phase 2 the commune had also given some modest financial support to establish revolving funds in each village for livestock raising, mostly chickens and pigs. They only had 600 M VND for 6 villages (around £20,000) so they had divided the funds amongst the villages in relation to their population. Within each village, 5-10 households deemed to be 'poor' could borrow between 2 or 3 and 10 M VND for one year, depending on what the village decided to do. Whilst the commune 'advised' the villages, the village heads managed the loans and key decisions were made at village meetings. For example, in one village they initially set up a group of households for raising chickens with a loan given at 5M VND per household; however, the farmers said that this was too little for livestock investment and so they raised this to 10M VND per household and offered it to half as many households per year. Full repayment was expected after a year but some rescheduling was possible and many found that the recent decline in the market price of pigs and chicken had caused unexpected losses. Although loans were welcomed, the commune official responsible for monitoring REDD+ stated that they needed larger loans, over longer periods, and more loans so that more households could have joined in.

Though all were clear that REDD+ had finished and was 'closing', the commune intended to carry forward what it could in the absence of further funds. A commune-level WU officer said that degradation in the commune had declined by 90% in recent years, not just whilst REDD+ was being implemented, and this was benefitting the villagers by preserving the forests and the water sources and reducing floods and landslides. Commune-level interviewees were convinced that REDD+ had brought a change in rural people's participation in decision-making processes. Despite these positive feelings, doubts were expressed about the significance of REDD+. A commune officer responsible for monitoring REDD+ noted that it was only one of several reforestation programmes and that local people really needed to get better revenue from selling trees to sustain their motivation. The WU officer also stressed the importance of developing markets and revenues for exporting lemon grass. The commune authorities were determined to maintain their forest protection/reforestation activities if they could. They had proposed to the UNREDD PPMU that the CPC should retain a loan fund for households to regrow trees and they intend that in the future the village's revolving livelihood support funds from

REDD+ be administered by the WU at commune level (because they argued that they lacked the resources to support the villages to manage these directly). Although repayment levels were good at the time of our research, this would not address the larger concerns about the small number of households involved, issues around scaling out, and ensuring that the scheme reaches the poorest.

Bao Yen Nested Case Study: Interlinkages between Bao Yen District, Long Khanh Commune and Village 2

Most of the forests in Bao Yen district were regenerating natural forests. Although some historical deforestation had been due to ethnic minorities clearing for their customary forest fields, the government decree to cut the forests to feed the people in the face of famine after the 1979/80 border war with China was more significant cause of deforestation. The district had no Special Use Forests or Community Forests and as well as the Bao Yen FMB, the Bao Yen Forest Company operated in the district. A senior officer of Bao Yen FMB was keen to be interviewed, to structure our access to other interviewees, and to articulate his strong negative opinions about REDD+. He demonstrated his personal wealth and connections to powerful players at the provincial level, including the PCP Chairman. He maintained that: 'REDD+, or any other project, is just spending money', that REDD+ had 'no impact, nothing' and that provincial-level UNREDD+ officers 'can't provide good advice to the PPC/DARD' and he was actively promoting an alternative approach to forest management. However, we also interviewed a deputy officer of the FMB who gave a very different set of opinions: he was generally well-disposed towards REDD+ and enthusiastic about the co-management it was promoting.

Both FMB officers emphasised that forest classification was the primary instrument for strategically managing the forest. The senior officer emphasised its 'stability' here: old forest fields had previously been adjudicated on, with those considered genuine in Production Forests being given LUCs; newer forest clearances were not tolerated; and, smaller adjustments tended to bring more Production forests inside the Protection Forest. Notably, no LUCs were transferred in Bao Yen District but various parties were contracted to patrol, protect and exploit the forests in relation to specified exploitation plans. Licenses from local households were only granted for a year at a time. According to the senior officer, this was a requirement from Decree 168 that only authorised the FMB to allocate contracts to patrol Protection Forests for a year at a time. He said 'it would be better' to have longer contracts and to grant LUCs to the local communities because this would incentivise them to invest in looking after the forest, and added that Lao Cai Province had lobbied for this since 2013.

Before the FMB was created, the forests in Bao Yen had been managed by the State Forest Enterprise (SFE). The deputy officer of the FMB had joined the SFE in 2005. The SFE had been mainly concerned with economic exploitation of the forests and a change in national policy to prioritise forest protections led to its replacement by two separate bodies: the FMB and the Forest Company¹². The Bao Yen Forest Company (BYFC)

¹² The SFC 'belongs to the government' rather than private businesspeople (Bao Yen FMB Vice-Head) and was a one-member one-liability company. The salaried officers were chosen from state cadres and paid by the Provincial People's Committee. They were not involved in REDD+ and got FSC recognition in 2017.

continued these economic roles whilst the FMB was charged with the 'previously neglected function' of forest protection. The FMB was largely funded from the provincial and national levels via the Programme to Protect and Develop the Forest, which succeeded from Programme 661, but also received some (smaller) PES revenues (from 2012). Most of the Production Forests in Bao Yen were under the management of the BYFC. The senior officer believed that the forest company in Bao Yen should be 'socialised' since it was not protecting the forest it had been allocated: 'everyone knows that they cut the trees but there is someone up there [pulling strings]'.

The FMB primarily managed Protection Forests, but also some Production Forests, and contracted small groups of households, usually 5-10 households but in some cases as many as 20-30, to protect specified areas. The households were selected in consultation with villages (not communes) using 3 criteria: priority was given to villagers living near the forest in question; villagers selected must be able to assist in protection (ascertained in a village level meeting); and priority was given to 'poor' households (as long as they were healthy enough and had enough spare labour to be able to do the protection work effectively). The maximum payment for patrolling Protected Forests in the Province was 200,000 VND per ha per year. The payment for protecting Production Forests depended on PES revenues and in practice, the FMB combined the funds it had at its disposal and set the rate accordingly, usually somewhere between 150,000 - 200,000 VND per ha per year. If the contracted households did not perform well, their contracts were not renewed. The system was only different in this district in Long Khanh Commune where REDD+ had implemented a new system of forest protection (described below).

How does REDD+ fit into forest governance in Bao Yen? According to the senior officer of Bao Yen FMB, REDD+ was implemented by the provincial level REDD+ team with assistance at district level initially from the Forest Rangers, but since 2017, from the FMB. Before this, the FMB had come under the New Rural Development Programme of DARD. At the time of our research, the FMB came under the Forest Ranger Division (FRD) at Provincial level, they were responsible for, and reported to the Provincial People's Committee, on REDD+. Consequently, the FMB felt it did not need to engage DARD in its work and that they and the mass organisations 'know nothing about forest issues'. Other authorities and mass organisations were not involved in REDD+ at the district-level, even though they had occasionally invited some people from DARD to participate: instead, the provincial-level REDD+ team worked directly with the Commune.

As with Bao Thang District, REDD+ was piloted in only 2 communes, Long Khanh and Xuan Hoa. The 2 pilot communes were selected for REDD+ because they had large natural forests – around 1,900 ha of Protected Forests in total. In contrast to Bao Thang District, SiRAP in Bao Yen was undertaken at district level, by a taskforce within the FMB/FRD concerned with management of Production forests. The senior FMB officer said that SiRAP meant site-specific or 'local level' planning and could be done at either district or commune level¹³. He told us that SiRAP in Bao Yen was done at district-level because it was 'only about forest protection', apart from in the 2 communes piloting REDD+, Long Khanh and Xuan Hoa, where 'forest protection is associated with benefit sharing' and some other activities. However, it emerged later in discussion with the deputy FMB officer that piloting of 'co-management' was confined to just 4 villages in Long Khanh (as

¹³ In Vietnamese this is *Ke hoạch hanh dong cap co so* in which *co so* means 'local' and it is open to interpretation at which bureaucratic level at which it is defined.

described below). In other words, REDD+ 'piloting' had not involved any change in forest management but had only been directed at supporting livelihood development in Xuan Hoa Commune and in two of the four villages 'included in the pilot' in Long Khanh¹⁴. The senior officer said that 'the FMB only wants to pilot co-management in one Commune at first'. He conceded that co-management cannot be extended without FMB approval and that 'the FRD want to follow their own model of forest management following their own views'. The senior officer felt that if the forest belonged to the whole community then nobody would be responsible for it, illustrating this with reference to a proverb¹⁵. He insisted that REDD+ 'was not very effective' and that it 'mainly focused on communication and only on the officers, it has not reached to the people who conduct forest protection'.

REDD+ provided funds for forest protection in Long Khanh, which the senior FMB officer understood as a fee for storing carbon, according to a fixed formula. Aside from 'co-management' in 4 villages in Long Khanh Commune, 'piloting' involved some small community infrastructure and development activities that varied according to village needs (such as renovation of cultural houses, furniture for the cultural house, support for energy-saving kitchens, rubbish-burning machines, a small dam across a stream or irrigation to rice), and some communication activities. This livelihood development was very much in line with the New Rural Programme (developing the cultural house and modernising the village) but simply utilised REDD+ funds (see box 3 for livelihood development activities in 2 villages in Long Khanh Commune). REDD+ payments per year for both communes came to a little under 1 B VND so 'a relatively small amount of money'. He stressed that REDD+ was one of 3 sources of funding for forest protection in this district: in comparison to money from the 661 Programme and PES, he said REDD+ money 'is nothing'. Interestingly, this interviewee emphasised that 'all the [REDD+] money ran to' the PPC level, specifically to the UNREDD+ office, when 'instead all the money should come to the 'local' level' (by which he means district-level, as with SiRAP). The FMB Head was adamant that: 'A pilot means a small activity, not an overall change, it is a kind of experiment'. Later he told us: 'Just like any other pilot of small experiment, it didn't make any change, only gave trainings. I was upset. I threw the document in the rubbish bin. It will not be effective. I have said so in front of the PPC chairman. The head of the forest rangers at provincial level is also not happy with REDD+'.

BOX 3: REDD+ LIVELIHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN LONG KHANH COMMUNE

Only villages 1 and 2 in Long Khanh Commune were involved in livelihood development activities, because the funds were insufficient to do so in all four villages. Here the villagers welcomed REDD+ because they have no other funds that they could use for doing public works. They were also growing 2 types of traditional medicinal plants under the forest canopy for sale on the free market. There was a pharmacy company that was trying to develop herbal cultivation in Lao Cai as well as many Chinese businessmen interested in selling herbs, so villagers saw a potential market and stable market prices. The seedlings for these herbs were provided by the district to households in villages 1 and 2 for planting in their own Production Forest lands (for which they have LUCs). It would be 4 years before they were ready for harvest but, a commune-level officer felt that, if grown

¹⁴ Long Khanh has 9 villages in total, only 4 of which were 'included' in the pilot.

¹⁵ *Cha chung khong ai khoc* meaning 'nobody cries for the common father'.

at scale and in a minimum of 1 ha per household, they had real potential to improve livelihoods.

In contrast to the FMB Head, the deputy told us that REDD+ had made a real difference in the pilot communes and that the key difference between REDD+ and other forest protection initiatives was the emphasis on raising awareness and on consultations. He said: 'before we were just implementing instructions from the upper levels – we were just following the plan. In this new model, REDD+ leads on design and invites others to their consultations, then they hand over the implementation to the FMB'. He praised the quality of the awareness-raising promotion and stressed the value of REDD+'s local consultations: 'They worked closely with the people and found out what local needs really are and this was very important'. The deputy officer also asserted that 'the FMB at district level does have the authority to make a decision to expand the co-management model if they feel it is working well and they want to replicate it throughout the district', though he acknowledged that they would have to consult with FRD (since the FMB 'belongs to' FRD now). His only complaint about REDD+ was that 'the limited funds are not enough – they are too small when local needs are huge'. A key obstacle, though, would be the opposition of his senior officer. He felt that villagers were not aware about REDD+ ('they know nothing') and that REDD+ payments were insufficient to motivate protection: 'this is only 100,000VND a month [per household] and it is not enough to maintain their lives. They 'protect' the forest area and cut the trees to sell. So, we have arrested many people'¹⁶.

The senior officer's alternative plan was based on his belief that: 'If we want someone to protect the forest then it should become like 'his garden'. In order to do so, we need to direct people and teach them how to develop the forest in the short-term and in the long-term to provide income.' He developed and initiated an alternative approach in 2017 with approval from the Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee and the Ministry of the Environment (MoE). His approach envisaged households being contracted by the FMB to manage 50 ha of natural forest with one member from each household to attend an 18-month vocational forest management training at a district level school. He had been allocated some funds by the Provincial People's Committee and initiated some training in December 2017. However, his plan required 54 billion VND to get started properly and he was fund raising for this, including from a private factory that makes oil from forest products including cinnamon and lemon grass. He emphasised that he had been encouraging people to plant cinnamon in their Production Forest land since 1987, adding that cinnamon from Bao Yen was top quality with each tree being worth 5M VND from selling bark, timber and now leaves. He also worked closely with a local factory and other contacts to develop oils (cinnamon and others), trees/plants for Chinese medicine and rose breeding and he appeared to have a (personal) commercial interest in most of these ventures.

Turning to Long Khanh Commune specifically, only four villages out of nine were included in the pilot because they were the only villages with Protection Forest that was under FMB control¹⁷. Older customary claims to forest fields had been earlier recognised in this commune and had been allocated to individual households with LUCs as Production

¹⁶ He calculated this on the basis of a household looking after 5 ha of forest would get paid 2m VND per year.

¹⁷ Of the other five villages, two contained large forests under the BYFC control and three had only Production Forests which are managed under 661 (whereas REDD+'s focus is on Protection Forests).

Forest. Aside from the 114ha directly under FMB control, the remaining Protection Forests in this commune had been contracted to the BYFC. The 4 villages involved in 'co-management' were predominantly ethnic minority: 3 were mainly Tay and one mainly Dao. Very few households had Production Forests, with an average of 0.6 ha Production Forests per household, and fewer had agricultural land, so most young people migrated for work and sent back remittances¹⁸. Over 38% of households were 'poor' and the commune had just been classified as 'zone 3' meaning that it was extremely poor¹⁹.

The 'co-management' arrangements initiated by REDD+ meant that contracts for forest protection had been issued to each of the four villages collectively. The deputy officer of the FMB said that co-management was particularly attractive and appropriate for ethnic minority villages which tended to more homogeneous, even when they contained a number of different ethnic minority groupings. He remembered learning about social safeguards in REDD+ training: whilst he emphasised respecting customary law and customary beliefs, it was clear that this was within the narrow window permitted by national law and the often prejudicial assumptions common in Kinh perceptions. This was evident in his contradictory statements that 'earlier the ethnic minorities did not know how to protect the forest - before the state arrived, they were just slash and burning the forest' and in his clarity that 'customary law was illegal'. While he acknowledged that there had been conflicts when Programme 32720 and Programme 661 first came, he stressed that these tensions were in the past and that 'villagers know that the forest belongs to the FMB so they don't try to claim it now'.

Though there was no contemporary conflict over the Protected Forest managed by the FMB, a commune-level officer revealed a dispute that was ongoing between villagers and the BYFC in the commune: the land allocated to BYFC had been mapped in the 1980s and they erected a boundary which included land that some villagers claimed as forest fields. The villagers sought the return of this 'overlap' land of more than 100 ha to them as Production Forest and the commune recognised and supported their claim. We were told by the deputy FMB officer that 'REDD+ was not involved in this conflict and REDD+ would only engage in places where tenure had been stable for at least the last 10 years'. In this way, the REDD+ pilot on the Protected Forest was compartmentalised as having nothing to do with the dispute over part of the Production Forest.

Under 'co-management', each village head signed their village's (one-year) contract for forest protection as their representative²¹. The deputy FMB officer said 'this model is

¹⁸ The Commune had only 140 ha of wet rice land out of a total land area of 5,640 ha. Most land (4,168.83 ha) was forested, with natural forests on 3,316 ha and plantations on 778.84 ha. The Protection forest totalled 1,302 ha (of which 1,114 ha belonged to the FMB) and the Production Forest totalled 2,795 ha (of which the FC controlled 2,000 ha). (There was also 72.53 ha in 'non-forest land').

¹⁹ Nationally there are around 3,000 communes identified as zone 3 at any one time. Every household will get special support and investment including free medical insurance for everyone, lower school fees for everyone and some support in the form of equipment for children going to school. The teachers and commune staff will also get larger allowances.

²⁰ Programme 327 was the 'Greening the Bare Hills Program'.

²¹ Within each village the forest for protection was sub-divided into several plots, typically 3, and specific clusters of households were responsible for each plot. Each cluster of households had a leader who signs a sub-contract with the village head. This mirrored the FMB's regular form of forest protection but in this case all households could be involved if they want to be.

better than the other model because it gives local people more decision-making power. The village head signs the contract and all households can get involved'. This was important 'because all share the benefits then all are motivated and take responsibility for forest protection'. Village Forests and Livelihood Development Committees (VFLDCs)²² decided with the rest of the village on the rules for protecting the forest and how payments should be split between management fee (for the VFLDC), community development and patrollers²³. The FMB gave them some guidelines but each village made its own rules and decisions. The deputy reported that REDD+ worked very directly with the pilot villages, albeit with the support of the district-level forest officers but that since the number of REDD+ officers declined 'the villagers have had no visits from REDD+'. However, the local Forest Ranger still visited. The interviewee distinguished 'co-management' from the previous contracting arrangements because actions were taken 'together' whereas before the contracted households had simply followed the FMB contract.

Under co-management, the villagers got 190,000 VND per ha from the 661 Programme and PES funds and 170,000 VND from REDD+, making a total of 360,000 VND per ha. Following Decision 5539, the FMB's initial payment was 50% of what was due because REDD+ was results-based and the villagers were to get the other 50% at the end of June. However, the FMB deputy stressed that they were 'only doing a pilot' in Long Khanh but if it proved successful when reviewed (at the end of 2018), he was keen to continue it and even to expand it to other areas. Interestingly, he stressed that this was the case even if (when) REDD+ finance ended: 'If the results of the co-management pilot are good we will extend it to other places even if there is no REDD+ in the future'. In this case, the FMB could only pay villagers 190,000 VND per ha²⁴. The FMB deputy felt that people would still be sufficiently motivated to carry on protecting: 'People won't care much about the decreased amount. The main thing is that they feel happy about the programme'. Crucially, he clarified that 'the villagers themselves prefer the new co-management model – this is what villagers themselves proposed should happen and the commune authorities are in agreement with them'. A commune-level officer in Long Khanh confirmed this: 'we proposed this model a long time ago to the FMB but there was no support from the FMB to implement and the FMB did not accept it at that time. Until REDD+ came along there was no movement on this proposal.'

Conclusions

So, to return to our overarching question, how did meso-level negotiations impact on piloting REDD+ in this context?

Despite the intentions of UNREDD+ Phase II, our findings suggest that there had been little change in forest governance at the meso-level in Lao Cai. The arrangements for implementing Phase II resulted in a short period of activity in which a temporary task force

²² The composition varied but it usually comprised the village head, the traditional leader and the village accountant and an elected member to administer the contract.

²³ Typically, the split was 10% management fee (for the VFLDC), 30% for small community development works and 60% for the forest patrolling team.

²⁴ This was 190,000 rather than the 200,000 VND per hectare mentioned by the senior FMB officer, because the FMB deducted 10,000 per hectare to meet the administration costs of the FMB.

of province level officers worked intensively and directly with a small number of specific villages, and to a lesser extent their communes. In this sense, there was no institutionalisation of meso-level arrangements for REDD+ and piloting was 'contained' at the micro-level. For the most part, REDD+ seems to have been grafted on to existing channels for delivering payment for ecosystem services (PES) and community forestry (CF) and there was a lack of clarity about what (if anything) was being piloted at meso-level in REDD+ Readiness. The requirement for REDD+ to focus on areas with stable tenure arrangements seems to have precluded more meaningful changes in the involvement and effective incentivisation of local people in keeping forests standing.

In spite of a clear articulation of REDD+ norms, in practice there was an absence of substantive or meaningful change in forest governance at the meso-level. The levels of financing and their flows were not sustained enough nor sufficient to be significant in either livelihood development, tree planting or forest protection even at the micro-level. Despite claims that REDD+ had changed how planning for forest management was done across the province, 'local priorities' for forests were interpreted technically as ground-truthing assessments of forest cover and condition. Both SiRAP and 'co-management' processes were very largely structured by existing forest governance with only marginal space for village discretion over seedling choice and benefit sharing in REDD+ pilot villages/communes. Despite REDD+ social safeguards and an emphasis in provincial training on 'mainstreaming', pre-existing assumptions about ethnic minorities and their ignorance, including about environmental management, were largely unquestioned. Sikor and Hoang (2016)²⁵ concluded that 'actual practices differ from general ideas about REDD+ due to ongoing conflict over forest, and... contestations over the meaning of justice are a core element in negotiations over REDD+'. Our evidence shows that there is also considerable (re)negotiation over what REDD+ means in practice without there being any overt 'contestation'. Much negotiation is only partially visible to researchers, but comparing the narratives that different actors offer about REDD+/ forest governance and by examining the out-workings of REDD+, we can infer and make more visible important meso-level politics around REDD+.

The differences between Bao Thang and Bao Yen suggest that the leadership of the district FMB may be critical in shaping the space for REDD+ at the micro-level: the senior FMB officer actively opposed REDD+ and had been able to effectively 'contain' its implications for disrupting existing forest governance. Consequently, the 'new' arrangements for forest protection in 4 villages in Long Khanh Commune largely mirrored its wider annual contracting arrangements even though they did extend participation in patrolling contracts from a few to all households and enabled a proportion of funds to be retained for community works. The lack of clarity about what was being piloted at meso-level had allowed 'business as usual' in terms of meso-level forest governance, thus preserving the existing balance of power between state and private interests around forests and forest resources.

The differences between the nested case studies also showed that ownership in the form of LUCs for households or communities significantly had shifted micro-level forest governance in a way that one-year contracts for forest protection could not. These shifts in Ban Cam Commune, Bao Thang District, rested on long-standing customary claims to

²⁵ Sikor, Thomas, and Hoàng Cầm. "REDD+ on the Rocks? Conflict over Forest and Politics of Justice in Vietnam." *Human Ecology* 44.2 (2016): 217-227.

forests that were not initiated by REDD+ support. Nevertheless, REDD+ financing of the small 'demonstration' mapping of these claims/forests had enabled recognition for 2 villages of their CFs as well as enabling some villagers to get LUCs for their forest fields as Production Forests. This meso-level intervention to officialise established claims was built on pre-existing demands by local people for control over forests and had been instrumental in ensuring a degree of legitimisation of villagers' entitlements to forests at the micro-level. However, this was tightly circumscribed by the logics of the forest bureaucracy – whilst symbolically valued by the villagers, the state remained the arbiter of what must be done and what must not be done on Protected or Production Forests – and by the one-off financing of the 'demonstration'. Such action was not embedded within a sustainable strategy for developing meso-level capacity to map local claims in ways that were legible to provincial authorities.

The Bao Thang case study also underlined the importance of commune-level processes and capacity in supporting and sustaining gains in forest protection when funding ends and illustrated that 'participation' in REDD+ was largely locked in at the village level (with no effective channels for upwards communication or mechanisms to hold higher-levels to account). In both nested case studies, district-level authorities were largely bypassed, but there was clear micro-level appetite, particularly amongst ethnic minority communities, for more involvement in forest governance and sustainable forest development. This further highlights the strategic importance for REDD+ of developing a much clearer vision of the kind of meso-level changes that are required in forest governance if it is to create meaningful space to extend local people's access to and control over forests. Certainly in Lao Cai, REDD+'s focus on areas of forest with 'stable tenure', its micro-level approach to piloting, and its refusal to step outside existing frameworks for forest management effectively depoliticized questions of forest tenure and agrarian transformation of ethnic minority way of life. This finding supports McCall's (2016) call for a shift towards 'territorialization' in which much more attention is paid in REDD+ to asking 'whose territory' this is and following through on this in a much deeper way to consider the implications for environmentally just forest governance for forest peoples.

To conclude, we found that REDD+ pilot actions on the ground did not disrupt ongoing meso-level negotiations around forest governance and there was no clarity about what, if anything, was being piloted at the meso-level. Contextual realities, institutionalised interests and emerging priorities in the levels below the Province affected how directives were translated into action. Our findings concur with Bruun's (2018) study of UN-REDD+ in Lao Cai in which he concludes that REDD+ pilots were 'unable to alter the crucial conditions of social organization or governance' and that 'context tend[ed] to overrule the intent of the project' (2018:515). Bruun points out that the implementation of REDD+ pilots had continued the agenda of longer-term government interventions for transforming the highlands post-1975, especially the Vietnamisation of its ethnic minorities (2018:515). The fragmentation of REDD+ piloting and its focus on specific tracts of forest land with stable tenure arrangements meant that REDD+ Readiness in Lao Cai had effectively side-stepped underlying conflicts over tenure and forest governance: as a result, it had largely been unable to extend local people's access to and control over forests and forest resources. Whilst global architects intended that REDD+ create an opportunity for ethnic minority people to extend their control over and access to forests in ways that resonated with their customary livelihoods, its piloting in Lao Cai had been subsumed seamlessly into the ongoing incorporation of ethnic minorities into market socialism.

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