Abstract

In Vietnam, the upland and the lowland regions have long been characterised by not only the differences in topographic conditions but also the differences in state policies. Over the last decade, while the agricultural land tenure has been among the major concerns of the lowlands, forest land tenure has been in the centre of interest for upland region policy. Among various efforts being taken with regard to the upland development, forest devolution policy has been tried in different places. While how far forest devolution policy has contributed to the development process in the uplands is yet to be answered, an important question that arises is what effects the implementation of forest devolution policy has on the differentiation in the upland rural area. Put it differently, it is important to know if the implementation of this policy at the local level contributed to widen the (existing) differentiation among local households or whether it reduced this differentiation.

This paper subjects this question to empirical research on the effects of forest devolution in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In this paper, I discuss the major processes through which forest endowments and entitlements were differentiated or undifferentiated among local households. I also discuss the connection between differentiation in benefits from forest devolution among local households and the process of agrarian change. Findings from the paper are interesting. Empirical analysis shows that there existed processes that widened the differentiation in benefits from forest devolution at the same time with those that alleviated this differentiation. More interestingly, it is shown that the processes of benefit differentiation were not fixed but changing through different stages of time, instead. Furthermore, the paper shows that political power had various effects on the household’s derivation of benefits from devolved forest. Forest devolution programme accentuated an interesting relationship between the state and households with political power through which both parties tried to pursue their long term goals.

Keywords: Differentiation, forest devolution, forest endowments, forest entitlements, Vietnam

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