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Livelihood Strategies of Vulnerable Households under Resource Scarcity — Insights from Northern Viet Nam

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Abstract

Poor and vulnerable rural households in the mountainous regions of Northern Viet Nam are exposed to various risks, crises and shocks, which threaten their livelihoods and have long-term effects on risk management strategies. Following the Sustainable Livelihood Framework of the British Department for International Development, people have access to five forms of capital, i.e. social, financial, human, physical and natural assets. Being one form of natural asset, grazing land is considered a common-pool resource in the agricultural systems of ethnic minorities in Northern Viet Nam.

This paper intends to explain the interaction between grazing land and livelihood strategies, and searches for the reasons and consequences of the recent dynamics of this interaction. Quantitative and qualitative research, including individual as well as group interviews and participant observation, were carried out in 14 villages, with 300 respondent farm-households in mountainous Northern Viet Nam.

During the last 20 years, the population of Son La province has doubled. At the same time, agricultural production was significantly intensified and tenure policies with a strong focus on individualisation of resource rights were gradually implemented. As a consequence, grazing areas were diminished or even disappeared, limiting the opportunity for livestock production. Raising livestock and selling it in case of a livelihood emergency is one of the most popular risk management strategies of the Vietnamese rural poor. Formal insurance schemes or other organised security networks do not yet exist, and people still have to rely on traditional coping strategies. Although providing protection in the short run, these strategies often limit the poor people's long-term prospects of escaping poverty.

Results suggest that due to insufficient land availability and tenure individualisation, farmers were forced to reduce their livestock and thus limit their livelihood strategies. Suggestions are given to counteract the gradual trend of the already existing downward spiral of livestock production. To assure sustainable development for ethnic minority farmers, a bundle of alternative strategies has to be initiated. Different actors will have to focus on locally specific strategies, the basis of these being the possibility to access the different forms of capital assets outlined in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.

Keywords: Grazing land, livelihood strategies, natural resource management, Viet Nam