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Participatory Survey of Allocated Degraded Land in the Northern Mountains of Viet Nam: The 3:3:3 Pattern

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Abstract

Since 1993, strategies to rehabilitate degraded land in Viet Nam rely on allocating this land to farmers, who should presumably be willing to accept it and capable to reclaim and utilise it according to the specified purposes. The allocation, however, has in general been rather slow, and actual possibilities to monitor the use of such land are only very limited (land census every five years). In this context, an insight into processes and driving forces of land use dynamics at the farm level is important.

In the Northern Mountains, the region most severely affected by degraded “barren hills”, four selected communes, stratified by the presence of rehabilitation projects, represent the regional diversity of ethnic groups and natural conditions (in the provinces Son La and Bac Kan). The participatory survey included 109 households with allocated degraded land. Farmers motives to receive barren land (envisaged incentives from projects and lack of arable land), and perceived reasons for reclamation failures (poor soils, lack of inputs, labour and know-how) do not principally differ among the households. Range, extent, and particularly success of utilisation approaches, however, show a clear effect of the activity of rehabilitation projects.

There is an apparent pattern of using this land. On average, one third of commune land is “barren” (90% due to human activities); a third of barren land is allocated to households. Interestingly, farmers do not at all attempt to reclaim, on average, one third of the allocated land, keeping it rather as a latent asset, counting on subsidies of potential or existing rehabilitation projects in the future. Success rate of the attempted reclamation is less than 50%, so that households can, during the stipulated period of three years upon allocation, actually utilise only up to a third of the allocated land (mostly for establishing plantation forests and upland crops). Longer-term land cover change analysis at commune level shows that barren land has been the most dynamic category, and, upon reclamation, about 40% of it is used for, officially not recognised, shifting cultivation.

Keywords: Barren hills, land allocation, land degradation, land rehabilitation, Viet Nam