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“Barren Hills” in Vietnamese Science and Legislation: A Synthesis

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Abstract

With the agricultural flatland already fully exploited, meeting the long-term food demand for the growing population of Viet Nam has to rely on rehabilitation and utilisation of degraded land in the mountainous areas. “Barren hills”, the keyword for land degradation in the uplands, have, over the last decade, been explicitly referred to by two large-scale national programmes and five ambitious international development projects, even by the Vietnamese Land Law. Nevertheless, it is not clear what barren hills are; they do not appear in the official statistics, and the context of their occurrence is insufficiently known.

Available legal, scientific and policy documents were integrated to build a concept of barren hills. Out of the “unused” (after more than three years of being left idle) land from the census data we show that four types (defined by land cover) of barren hills account for 77 % (i.e. 23 % of total land in Viet Nam); only about 11 % of them are deemed non-reclaimable. Appearing almost exclusively in the place of former forests, a quarter of barren hills area is already degraded to sparse herbaceous cover, or even stone outcrops. Forest loss was attributed to six major identified causes with different extents across the country. Interestingly, agricultural activities of the local uplanders have on average caused only 14 % of forest loss; in the most severely degraded Northern Mountains region, more than 40 % has been due to migrations (state-aided more than uncontrolled).

Current policies heavily rely on local farmers to rehabilitate degraded, unused land. However, farmers were willing to receive, in the process of land allocation, only a third of this land, and often failed to reclaim the allocated areas. Policy improvements to increase the participation of farmers in barren hills rehabilitation will have to address the roots of their aversion: poverty and food insecurity, insecurity in user and usufruct rights, and insufficiency of extension support. To provide an effective basis for land use planning, existing land evaluation standards need to be modified, as they currently can not distinguish among barren hills types.

Keywords: Barren hills, land degradation, land management, Viet Nam