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Conflicts over Land and Forest Induced by Reforestation Project in Lao Cai Province of Viet Nam

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Abstract

In parallel with land devolution the government of Viet Nam has launched reforestation programs aiming to increase the forest cover and to improve the living conditions of local population. In this context, conflicts between state forest institutions and local people over land and forest have been entailed. It is assumed that this situation depends on the lack of understanding of land and forest use of local people and their involvement in the development processes.

This research aims at harmonising local land and forest use and customary tenure with governmental reforestation programme and legal framework. The current use of land and forest of the ethnic minority group of Hmong is diagnosed. The procedure and outcome of reforestation projects are analysed. Furthermore, the study examines the conflicts over land and forest associated with the reforestation, and provides a scenario for harmonising local land use and tenure with legal framework and state forest programs. The “Human Ecosystem Model” is adapted as the conceptual framework of the research. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, such as Rapid Rural Appraisal, Land Use Inventory, Forest Inventory and Household Survey, is employed for data collection in three study villages.

The results uncover the systems of land and forest use and customary tenure of Hmong people. Main uses of land and forest are to meet basic needs of local population such as food, shelter, fuel, etc. Little surplus production is commercialised. The reforestation project has followed top-down approach not taking into account the local reality. It has brought about no tangible benefit to the villagers in terms of cash income, forest products, and rights over land and forest. Conflicts between state forest institutions and Hmong villagers over land and forest which are critical for the villagers’ livelihood have been found in all villages under study. Resulting data of the empirical research are integrated in the Human Ecosystem Model that in turn provides a platform for a scenario to harmonise local pattern of land and forest use and land tenure with governmental reforestation programs and relevant legal framework.

Keywords: Customary tenure, Hmong, human ecosystem model, land/forest use, natural resources conflict