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Conflicts in Natural Resource Management in Central Vietnam: The Role of Collective Action in Protecting Community Benefits

NGUYEN THI HONG MAI

Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Department of Project and Regional Planning, Germany

Abstract

The rapid growth in Vietnam over the last two decades has put a new face to the country's economy. At the same time, the pressure on the natural resources has been on the rise. Local communities that have been managing their surrounding natural resources for generations are now facing the challenge to maintain their rights and benefits from these resources.

This research presents empirical evidence from a case study in Thua Thien Hue province of Vietnam. The local community has managed an area of natural forest on inland sand area for over 400 years and has developed necessary institutions to protect the resource for community and individual benefits. Nevertheless, their tenure rights to the forest have not been legally recognised. Since the mid 2000s, conflict over this forest has emerged when a sand mining company with a legal license has started working on the community's forest. The conflict escalated when the main water resource of the community was used by the company for its own purposes and when the company encroached its operations into the forest. Without legal rights to the forest, the community was put on the losing end.

One-sample statistics and one sample-tests were used to explore the perception of the local people about the conflict and the impacts of companies on their lives and environment, and roles of actors in conflict management. Findings from the study indicate that the community has stood together to collectively protect their natural resources. Community members organised themselves and sent their request to the company to stop the operation on community's land. They also prepared their appeal to be sent to local authorities.

Our conclusion is that (legal) property rights play a central role in natural resource management, especially when the resource is in conflict. Customary practices, though maybe faded out during a long period of nationalisation of forest resources and economic growth, can still be revitalized to forge collective action to protect the resource for community interests. Economic development policy needs to take into account the rights of local communities in sustainably securing their livelihoods.

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