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## Identifying powerful actors in community forestry for effective sustainable forest management: A case study in Son La province

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### Abstract

Forest management is an essential aspect of sustainable forest use and conservation, ensuring that forests continue to provide essential ecosystem services and products that meet human needs while also maintaining ecological integrity. Community forestry, as a form of sustainable forest management, has been increasingly adopted in various countries, including Vietnam. However, the success of community forestry depends on the dynamics of social interactions among relevant actors and the context of political processes. Communities are vulnerable to the influence of powerful relevant actors. This study identifies 13 relevant actors involved in community forestry activities in the research site and applies the Actor-Centered Power theory to calculate the power elements of these actors, including Coercion, Incentive/disincentive, and Dominant information. Identification of the stakeholders involving in community forestry is based on the complete survey by doing interviews with selected user groups. The power elements are also examined through quantitative measurements. The calculation of the power elements is relied on the four-point ordinal scale, each stakeholder is asked and labeled respective values based on the received information. The calculation results are cross-checked to ensure the credibility and validity of the results. The results indicate that political actors, particularly state agencies, are the most powerful actors steering community forestry process in all cases. This suggests that there is a need to improve the effect of community forestry activities by recognising the reality of communities managing their forests, strengthening stakeholder cooperation, and building beneficial mechanisms for communities participating in forest management. These solutions are important not only for sustainable forest management but also for promoting sustainable production and consumption into a circular economy approach, as forests play a crucial role in providing ecosystem services and resources for local communities and contributing to the global efforts in addressing climate change and biodiversity loss, supporting support the well-being of both people and the planet.

**Keywords:** Community forestry, Vietnam