



# Community Forest Management in Vietnam

## Recognizing Diversity in Governance Structures

Do Anh Tuan, Nguyen Ba Ngai, Vo Dinh Tuyen, and Le Tuan Anh

### Key message:

Community Forest Management (CFM) structures do not follow a fixed template but are the outcomes of local, adaptive processes in Vietnam. The legal framework of CFM should recognize the effectiveness of these diverse structures in developing forest programs.

### Introduction

With nearly 2.8 million hectares (approximately 30% of the total forestland area) being managed by thousands of local communities, CFM is a key objective in Vietnam. However, evidence from the field shows that CFM outcomes are not uniform.

Several factors influence CFM outcomes and governance structure is one of the most significant. This policy brief analyzes the diversity and characteristics of some key CFM governance structures in Vietnam and gives some policy recommendations for achieving more productive forests. It argues that CFM governance structures do not follow a fixed template but are the outcomes of local, adaptive processes. Therefore, CFM experiences and conditions as well as the participation of local communities should be fully acknowledged in forming and adjusting new CFM models.

Data for the analysis in this brief comes from 31 CFM sites in seven provinces in North, Central and South Vietnam (Figure 1).

### Box 1: Policy Messages for CFM in Vietnam

- CFM is diverse in terms of governance structure, therefore all components should be addressed within a uniform legal framework.
- Forest management by household groups is one of the key governance structures, being adaptive and self-adjusted – it presents an ad hoc movement in CFM.
- There is no single best governance structure for all CFM models. Each CFM model reflects what is appropriate at a certain period of time for forest resources and local communities.

## Governance Structure for CFM: Diversity and Legal Framework

Empirical research and theoretical studies have shown that local communities have been able to manage their forest resources successfully. In recent years, issues related to the governance structures of CFM models have caught the attention of both policy-makers and researchers worldwide. Various governance structures have been identified. In some cases, they have even been institutionalized, like Forest User Groups in Nepal – a CFM model that has group sizes ranging from several households to a whole village or even several villages, in relation to who actually uses a particular area of forest.

In Vietnam, the Government has officially acknowledged the ‘village community’ as a legal entity for forestland management. The Law on Forest Protection and Development 2004 clearly states: “a village community embraces all households living in a village or equivalent unit”. Therefore, from a legal perspective, only one CFM governance structure is recognized in Vietnam – forest management by a whole village (or Village Forest Management [VFM]). It is similar to Village Forestry in Indonesia and Lao PDR.

In reality, CFM models in Vietnam are rather diverse in terms of origin and governance structure, and can be grouped into two major types. The first is VFM, in which all the households of a village belong to a forest management group, as specified in the law. The second is forest management by groups of households (or HHG for short) – a subset of a community. The HHG models are found where village population is dispersed in different settlements; each HHG often manages a patch of forest near the homestead area. In comparison with the VFM model, the HHG model is characterized by its smaller group size and is more homogenous in terms of ethnic composition and/or interest among HHG members. Normally, the group size of an HHG model is not more than 20 households, while the size of a VFM model is as large as the village population size, sometimes exceeding 100 households, for example Tly village in Dak Lak Province. HHG members are often determined on the mutual agreement of all members, and they mainly come from the same ethnic group, with common interests and/or kinship and live together closely.

The result of this study also shows that the HHGs have been able to manage their forests successfully. In some cases, the outcomes of the HHG models are even better than those of the VFM models, as in Cai village, Hoa Binh Province and Village C, Lam Dong Province. The derived forest benefits are significant for each household and the homogeneity of HHG members in terms of kinship and interest are key factors in reducing transaction costs. It also provides for higher capacity in monitoring and enforcement of regulations by HHG members. In practice, despite the fact that the HHG model is not legally recognized by law, it is relatively common in various regions in Vietnam. In some provinces, such as Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa, Dak Lak and Lam Dong, land-use certificates have even been granted for HHG models (on a trial basis).



Figure 1:  
The location of the  
study provinces



## Adaptive Governance Structure in CFM

Both VFM and HHG structures have a long tradition in Vietnam, having been used for common village purposes (such as watershed protection, grazing and as sacred areas) for generations. However, during the period of state forest management (1945 to 1990), communal forest management models were weakened and abandoned. Since the economic reforms in the 1990s, communal forest management has been revised.

In the last two decades, many VFM models have been formally set up through various community forestry projects, whereas the formation of HHG models is more diverse and *de facto*, reflecting a process of self-adaptation to local conditions:

- Traditionally, in places where the village population is dispersed, several households (normally those of the same kinship living closely together) form a group to protect and use the nearby forest. This is found in villages Cham A and Cham B (in Dak Lak), and villages 1 and 4 (in Lam Dong Province)
- HHG may be formed through a process of transformation from VFM. Originally a communal forest was managed under VFM. But as time elapsed, local people realized that VFM was not appropriate and adjusted the structure by dividing the village population into several groups, each group being responsible for managing one or more patches of forest. This is the case in Yen Thang commune in Thanh Hoa Province.
- HHG may also be set up by a transformation from individual household management. Through the Forest Land Allocation (FLA) program under Decree 02, many individual households received areas of forest. In some places where forests were too far from home or individual households had insufficient labor for patrolling them, some households jointly formed an HHG to manage their forest. Examples are Cai and Dinh villages of Hoa Binh Province.

These instances indicate that local governance structures in a village at a particular time reflect a stage in an evolutionary process and adaptive changes to communal forest resource management. It is therefore inappropriate to say which model of forest management, VFM or HHG, is the best for community forest management. In other words, governance structures do not only reflect the specific characteristics of the community and forest resources but are also the result of a process of self-adjustment and adaptation in forest management.

Researchers say forest management by household groups should be officially recognized.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The governance structure for CFM in Vietnam is diverse, including both the VFM model and the HHG model. The existence of a CFM governance structure is a result of development in forest management, and it reflects the current characteristics of a local community and its forest resources. It is not unique and static, but rather flexible, as it is the outcome of a process of self-learning and adjustment. In many villages, the existence of the HHG structure is a reality and has been accepted by both local communities and even local authorities. It is considered a locally adaptive governance arrangement, resulting from a process of transformation from VFM or individual households. In many places, the HHG model seems to be successful, especially where social composition and forest resources are rather heterogeneous. However, this CFM governance structure is still not legally recognized in Vietnam, which may make it difficult to implement HHG in the field. The discussion implies:

**The HHG model** needs to be officially recognized in the legal framework for CFM. This will provide the necessary legal background and guidance for HHG models at both policy and implementation levels.

**The HHG governance structure should be considered as an option for forest management in community forest programs and projects.** The intention to impose the VFM model as the best single solution in CFM guidelines and programs should be avoided as the HHGs are also able to manage forests in a sustainable way.

**Local governance structures and forest management experience should be paid adequate respect.**

A local governance structure is the outcome of a change process, reflecting the ability of local communities to adapt and adjust to local conditions. Establishment of a CFM model should be undertaken with careful consideration of local circumstances, especially experience learned from the historical development of forestland management at each locality. Most importantly, FLA should not impose any predetermined model of forest management. Instead, it should create an open space for local-level negotiation and choice over forest governance structure.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the local villagers, authorities, and forest rangers for their collaboration during fieldwork. Many thanks are given to colleagues who contributed to this policy brief, particularly Dr. Thomas Sikor and Dr. Nguyen Quang Tan. This policy brief summarizes the authors' researches conducted in 2003, 2009, and 2010.



**RECOFTC**  
PO Box 1111, Kasetsart Post Office  
Bangkok 10903, Thailand  
Tel: +66 (0)2 940 5700  
Fax: +66 (0)2 561 4880  
Email: [info@recoftc.org](mailto:info@recoftc.org)  
Website: [www.recoftc.org](http://www.recoftc.org)



This brief is produced under the project entitled "Property Reforms and Forest Rights in Vietnam", implemented by RECOFTC – the Center for People and Forests and the School for International Development (DEV) at the University of East Anglia, with financial support from the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and can, under no circumstances, be regarded as reflecting the position of ESRC, RECOFTC, DEV or the organization(s) to which the authors are affiliated.