

Strengthening Voices for Better Choices in Vietnam

Supporting the national dialogue on forest law enforcement, governance and trade

Forest governance in Vietnam

Over the past ten years, a growing body of studies and assessments has identified weak forest governance as a leading cause behind deforestation, degradation and illegal logging. Weak governance manifests itself in various ways, including a lack of links between forest policy and legislation, or between legislation and enforcement. In many countries, over-extensive or confusing regulatory frameworks raise the costs of compliance and provide opportunities for administrative corruption. Unclear or conflicting forest tenure arrangements also open the way to unregulated and unsustainable forest use, as does the exclusion of rural communities and other groups from the decision-making process for forest resources.

To a greater or lesser extent Vietnam, like other countries in Southeast Asia, has experienced many of these problems. And, in recent years, a new challenge has arisen as the wider impact of Vietnam's rising timber consumption has come under intense scrutiny. For various reasons, including limited domestic supply and growing demand from its construction and furniture industries, Vietnam depends heavily on imports. For example, the country's furniture export industry (at US\$2.4 billion the fifth-largest export earner), depends on imports for 80% of its roundwood supply. Efforts are being made under Vietnam's Forestry Development Strategy (2006–20) to reduce this dependence through plantations. Nevertheless, by 2020 Vietnam still expects to import 20% of its large roundwood demand.

Growing questions about the legality and sustainability of Vietnam's timber imports,



Mapping community forest resources with villagers in Hue province. Photo © IUCN Vietnam.

whether for domestic use or export, pose a risk to the overseas image and growth of its important furniture industry. Increasingly, consumer countries in Europe, North America and East Asia are taking measures to filter out illegal or suspicious timber imports from their markets. If Vietnam's furniture industry is to continue its strong growth, it must take steps to guarantee the legality of its raw material supply.

Strengthening voices for better choices

In response to these forest governance challenges, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched Strengthening Voices for Better Choices (SVBC). This global project, financed by the European

Union (EU), aims to promote the development and implementation of improved forest governance arrangements that facilitate sustainable and equitable forest conservation and management. Vietnam, one of six SVBC project countries, is pursuing this goal primarily at the national level, using lessons drawn from participatory research at the field and community level.

Nationally, SVBC aims to increase awareness and capacity to implement forest law enforcement, governance and trade (FLEGT) measures stemming from regional and international initiatives. SVBC is contributing in particular to raising awareness of FLEGT processes and their implications for Vietnam. In the past year (2008), the project has

launched a series of multistakeholder round tables in support of Vietnam's nascent Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) process under the EU's FLEGT Action Plan. The Plan aims, amongst other things, to develop a licensing system for legal timber through a series of VPAs between the EU and major timber-producing countries.

At the local level, SVBC is supporting participatory assessments of key governance issues designed to inform ongoing national dialogues. In central and northern Vietnam, SVBC is partnering with *Livelihoods and Landscapes*, another IUCN project, to assess community forestry systems and identify policy improvements for the national framework regulating community forestry. The project has also just launched a study of national forest governance indicators aimed at building understanding and consensus on governance definitions and information needs. By identifying some of the key governance elements and needs of local-level forest management, the project is not only helping to improve governance and reduce illegality locally, but also generating knowledge and lessons that can be incorporated into national dialogues.

Besides supporting the national FLEGT process and related assessments, SVBC is also building the capacity of stakeholders in government, industry and civil society to participate in and implement forest governance reforms more effectively.

SVBC is partnering with a wide range of Vietnamese and international organizations to realize its goals. It is working closely with the International Cooperation Department of Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) to support the nascent VPA process and related knowledge-building activities. The project's international partners include the World Bank, Tropenbos International and the Netherlands Develop-

ment Organization (SNV). In civil society its main partners include WWF Vietnam and IIED's national Forest Governance Learning Group.

SVBC's achievements

National forest governance assessment

Together with its partners in Vietnam, SVBC has made slow but sure progress towards its goals. As a first step, the project commissioned an assessment of the state of forest governance in Vietnam. This focused in particular on the role and governance implications of statutory and customary forest law. The assessment, which drew input from government, industry and civil society stakeholders, was based on participatory fieldwork in the central province of Hue. The report of the assessment is being finalized and will serve as a baseline for future governance reforms.

Building awareness and capacity for FLEGT-related actions

At the national level, SVBC has worked closely with the government of Vietnam and other stakeholders to build awareness and understanding of FLEGT processes. In late 2007 the project organized a meeting of key FLEGT stakeholders to review and document governance-related interests and initiatives in Vietnam. This was followed by a national FLEGT briefing session in early 2008.

Subsequently the European Commission (EC) and government of Vietnam asked SVBC to facilitate a national multistakeholder round table on FLEGT. This meeting, held in Hanoi in April 2008, gave stakeholders the opportunity to learn about changing timber market trends and their implications, and to explore ways of meeting demands for legal and sustainable timber products. More than 60 participants from government, the forest industry and national and international NGOs

Vietnam recognizes that forest resources play a vital role in its sustainable development, and is deeply concerned about the adverse impact of illegal logging and its associated trade on those resources. Since the 2001 FLEG ministerial conference in Bali, Vietnam has been taking steps to strengthen forest law enforcement and governance, both nationally and in collaboration with its trading partners in Asia and further afield. We see IUCN as an important partner in these efforts, and the SVBC project has been providing valuable support to building the awareness and capacity of civil society, government and private sector stakeholders.

— Mr Pham Ngoc Mau
Deputy Director, Bilateral Cooperation
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Department, MARD

reviewed and discussed possible responses to changing market demands, focusing on those that Vietnam and the EC could jointly undertake within the framework of the FLEGT Action Plan.

To build on the interest and momentum created by the first round table, SVBC and MARD are organizing a second meeting in Ho Chi Minh City in October 2008. This is targeted specifically at Vietnam's forestry industry, and will aim to inform companies about the challenges and opportunities presented by changing markets and initiatives such as the FLEGT Action Plan.

Ultimately the purpose of this and the previous round table, and SVBC's support to multistakeholder dialogues in general, is to improve engagement by Vietnam's forest stakeholders in international initiatives to curb illegal logging and trade. This goal has been given added impetus and urgency by the recent decision of Vietnam's government to pursue cooperation with the EC aimed at developing a VPA to prevent illegal forest products entering the European Union from Vietnam. SVBC's experience with a similar VPA process in Ghana, and IUCN's wide FLEGT-related experience in general, put the project in a strong position to support and facilitate future dialogue.

Community forestry experiences and needs

SVBC is extending its work on community forestry — begun under the earlier national governance assessment — through further appraisals in Hue province and the northern province of Bac Kan (see map opposite). Together with the



Vietnam-EC round table on meeting market demands for legal and sustainable wood products, April 2008. Photo © IUCN Vietnam.

Land cover map of Vietnam showing SVBC pilot areas. Land cover is based on the map of South and Southeast Asia, prepared under the Global Land Cover 2000 Project (<http://www-gem.jrc.it/glc2000/>).

IUCN project *Livelihoods and Landscapes*, SVBC is supporting the analysis and identification of practical improvements for community forestry, especially in areas of high dependence on forests. This is a collaborative initiative with the provincial forest protection departments, the Vietnam Forest Science Technology Association and, in Hue, the Green Corridor Project of WWF Vietnam.

The improvements identified by this work will be targeted at the guidelines and standard operating procedures for community forestry being developed by MARD. A recent review of MARD's pilot community forestry programme found that the current guidelines need simplifying if they are to be used successfully by villagers, rangers and commune officials. The guidelines focus heavily on technical issues, omitting social, institutional and economic aspects of community forestry. Income generation in particular has been overlooked, and capacity building of all partners is also badly needed. This is a clear example of complicated, confusing and potentially inequitable legislation that must be improved through more nuanced assessments of the needs and interests of forest-dependent communities.

Capacity building and information exchange

Weak capacity and a lack of information are critical constraints to improving forest governance in Vietnam. Recognizing that capacity building will be vital to sustaining its achievements, SVBC has supported two participatory assessments of capacity needs for forest governance reforms. These have identified two areas where SVBC is targeting resources at training key individuals: policy analysis and formulation, and FLEGT processes and actions.

The project is also supporting the translation and dissemination of key FLEGT-related documents, for example the FLEGT briefing notes produced by the European Commission. On several occasions the project's forest governance officer has also provided advice and support to Vietnamese government officials at key FLEGT-related meetings, most recently the third round of Chatham House dialogues on illegal logging in Beijing in June 2008.








Future activities of SVBC

SVBC's priorities for the remaining months of the project are, firstly, to continue supporting Vietnam's emerging FLEGT/VPA dialogue. Besides the industry round table planned for October 2008, SVBC will seek support and partners for a third national meeting in 2009 targeted at Vietnam's civil society organizations.

Secondly, the project will feed the lessons from its assessment of community forestry ex-



LEGEND

 SVBC pilot area	 Evergreen montane forest (>1000 m)	 Grassland on plains and slopes
 International boundary	 Evergreen lowland forest (<1000 m)	 Mosaic of cropping and regrowth
 Provincial boundary	 Mixed deciduous and dry deciduous forest	 Mixed cropland and cashcrop plantations
 River	 Mangrove forest	 Cropland
 National capital	 Forest mosaics and degraded forest	 Cropland, irrigated, inundated or flooded
 Provincial capital	 Evergreen shrubland and regrowth	 Waterbodies
	 Mosaic of deciduous shrubcover and cropping	 Settlements

periences into the government's pilot community forestry programme, ensuring the programme can fully realize its potential to improve governance and livelihoods.

Thirdly, the project will support a scoping study of forest governance indicators aimed at assessing experience internationally and identifying options for developing such indicators in Vietnam. Depending on the outcomes of this study, SVBC will plan a consultative process for identifying, assessing and, if time allows, selecting and testing potential indicators in 2008–09.

Lastly SVBC will continue delivery of its capacity-building and information compo-

nents, and will seek to share ideas and lessons with an international audience so that a wider group of stakeholders can benefit from Vietnam's experiences.

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Natural forest behind Khe Tranh village, Hue province.
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