

Forest devolution in Vietnam: From rhetoric to performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the performance of forest devolution, the major reform in forestry in developing countries over the last two decades. Although this change in forest governance has been studied by many scholars, the impacts of forest devolution and the various ways to measure them are still under discussion. This paper contributes to this discussion by evaluating the performance of a specific forest devolution policy, namely, forest land allocation (FLA) in Vietnam. The study is based on the policy arrangement approach to operationalize the concept of ‘governance performance,’ and particularly focuses on the local people’s involvement in the policy. Overall, our findings from three regions of Vietnam reveal a medium governance performance for FLA. The main explanation for this performance is the tradeoffs between the two key policy goals: forest rehabilitation and to increase local income. These tradeoffs are shaped by various factors, namely, the strategic use of forest rights by target groups, social learning by state and nonstate actors, and unanticipated effects on the ground.

1. Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, the major reform in forestry in the developing world has been forest devolution (Sikor and Tran, 2007). Although this changing forest governance has been examined in the literature (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001; Shackleton and Campbell, 2001), discussion about its impacts is ongoing (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001; Kauneckis and Andersson, 2008). For example, Edmunds and Wollenberg (2001) define forest devolution performance as the improvement of forest condition, empowerment of local actors, and contribution to local livelihoods. Sikor and Tran (2007) pay more attention to property rights and resource control. Case studies on forest devolution reveal its mixed impacts (Shackleton et al., 2002; Andersson, 2006; Dahal and Adhikari, 2008) and gaps between devolution rhetoric and practice (Fisher, 1999). These theoretical and empirical debates call for more research into the factors underlying forest devolution impacts (Kauneckis and Andersson, 2008).

We contribute to this discussion by evaluating a specific forest devolution policy, namely, forest land allocation in Vietnam. After the country unified in 1975, Vietnam’s government centralized forest management and promoted wood exploitation for economic development. Under this command-and-control system, the forests—severely

degraded during the 1970s and 1980s—became open resources because the government lacked the resources to manage forests (Dang et al., 2012).

Aligned with the country’s socioeconomic renovations (*Doi Moi*) in 1986, Vietnam’s forestry has undergone major reforms. Guided by the new discourse of forestry socialization, Vietnam implemented a policy of forest land allocation (FLA) in 1993: nationalized forest land is allocated to individuals, households, and organizations to establish real forest owners (Dang et al., 2012). By engaging actors in forestry, the government expected to improve the condition of the forest and help local people receive income from forestry activities. However, the FLA literature has depicted a mixed picture of the policy’s performance. For forest condition, government reports attribute the current increase of Vietnam’s forest cover (1993–2010) to FLA and reforestation (MARD, 2005; MARD, 2010; GSRV, 2007b), whereas other studies (Sikor, 2001; Castella et al., 2006; Clement and Amezaga, 2008; Meyfroidt and Lambin, 2008a) cast doubts on this conclusion. Questions also remain regarding the extent to which the policy contributes to the income of local people. Several studies (Sikor, 2001; Castella et al., 2006; Sikor and Nguyen, 2007; Clement and Amezaga, 2008) have asserted that the amount of income the local people receive from forest activities has not significantly increased.

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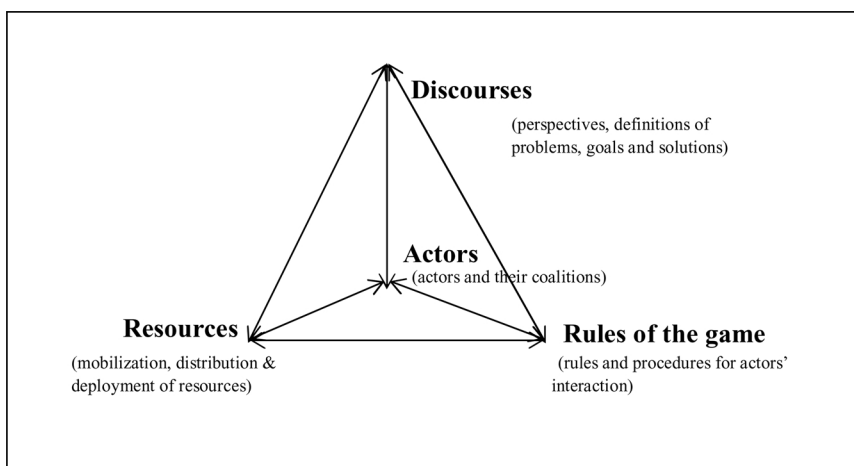


Fig. 1. A policy arrangement. Adapted from Arts and Goverde (2006)

The location of these case studies is their common element: the northern midlands and central highlands of Vietnam. Although these regions are the most-forested areas in the country, neglecting less-forested areas might have concealed factors that would influence the assessment of the policy’s performance. In response to these lacunae, we evaluate the performance of the FLA policy in different regions of Vietnam. Based on the policy arrangement approach, the evaluation encompasses this policy’s processes and impacts. The main research question is, “What has been the performance of the FLA policy in different regions of Vietnam? and What factors have determined this performance?”

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 explains the theoretical concept of governance performance and the analytical framework. Sections 3 and 4 describe the research methods and results, respectively. Section 5 discusses the policy’s impacts and their determining factors. Section 6 presents conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Analytical framework

2.1. Governance performance

Governance performance has become a catchword in the growing literature on public administration (Amirkhanyan et al., 2014). This multidimensional concept (Brignall and Modell, 2000) refers to the capability of governing bodies to act, and the context within which that action occurs (Nelissen, 2002). Dang et al. (2016) relate the concept of governance performance to governance capacity, defined as “an actor’s ability to cooperate to solve collective problems”. These authors argue governance capacity includes institutional capacity (institutional arrangements for collective problem solving) and governance performance (process and impacts of collective problem solving). The governance performance of a public policy, thus, is the actual performance of its governance capacity, including both the policy process and policy impacts. The concept of governance performance has been operationalized in different ways (Wholey et al., 2007). Boyne and Walker (2005) identify sixteen dimensions of performance in public organizations and group them into five themes: outputs, efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness, and democratic outcomes. Nelissen (2002) and Arts and Goverde (2006) emphasize three main clusters of evaluation criteria: juridical, economic, and political-societal (e.g., legality, efficiency, and democracy, respectively). In general, the measurement of governance performance in public administration has emphasized efficiency and effectiveness (Smith, 1995; Provan and Milward, 2001; Heinrich, 2002). However, scholars are paying increasingly more

attention to governance processes (Ehler, 2003), such as stakeholder participation and policy learning (Dang et al., 2016; Kooiman, 1999; Schacter, 2009). Moreover, governance performance is considered context-dependent because it is shaped by socioeconomic conditions (Boyne and Walker, 2005).

2.2. The governance capacity framework

To evaluate the FLA governance performance, we use the governance capacity framework (Dang et al., 2016) because it considers the organizational and substantive aspects of governance performance. Furthermore, by considering the effects of larger socioeconomic contexts (e.g., expansion of cash crops, household economy, and ethnic composition of the population), the framework improves the understanding of external factors, which could influence the policy’s effects.

The governance capacity framework is based on the policy arrangement approach (PAA), which emphasizes policy content and governance practices (Arts and Goverde, 2006). A policy arrangement refers to the shaping of a specific policy field in terms of its actors, discourses, rules of the game, and resources (Arts et al., 2006). These four dimensions are interconnected in the functioning of the policy arrangement (Fig. 1).

To fully operationalize all four dimensions of a policy arrangement is a complex task; thus, the PAA can be operationalized with one dimension as the starting point, from which to cover the three others (Lieverink, 2006). The governance capacity framework departs from the actor dimension because capacity resides in actors (Bebbington et al., 2006) and governance denotes cooperation among actors. From this entry point, the other three dimensions are conceptualized into the following three elements (Table 1): (1) enabling rules of the game for actor involvement; (2) converging discourses of various actor coalitions; and (3) facilitating resource mobilization for actor commitment (Dang et al., 2016). These three elements then guide the formulation of

Table 1 Framework for assessing FLA governance performance (Adapted from Dang et al., 2016).

	Elements	Criteria
FLA governance performance	-Enabling rules of the game	-Practicing property rights
	-Converging discourses	-Social learning (adjustments of goals and solutions)
	-Facilitating resource mobilization	-Forest condition -Recipients’ income from FLA

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