



Tenure rights, the governance of non-timber forest products and gender issues

Info brief



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Context

Women play specific roles and have specific responsibilities in many forestry value chains, which are important for the wellbeing and food and energy security of their households.

In recent years Viet Nam's economic reforms and integration into the global economy have dramatically changed forest policies and regulations governing non-timber forest products. The government is gradually controlling the exploitation of non-timber forest products to avoid overexploitation, decreasing forest biodiversity and other negative impacts. Such top-down approaches have negatively affected livelihoods and changed the lifestyles of communities, especially women and other vulnerable groups.

This research examined these gaps by studying the tenure rights of ethnic minority women and men related to non-timber forest products. The aim was to identify managerial and policy implications to ensure equality in their access to and sustainable use of forest resources.

Research questions

- What are the roles of non-timber forest products in the daily lives and livelihoods of women and men?
- What are the respective tenure rights of women and men in non-timber forest products?
- How have these gender rights and roles changed over time? Why?

- What are the managerial recommendations and policy implications toward more equality in gender and forest sustainability?

Methodology

The study was conducted in the Western Nghe An Biosphere Reserve, which is the sixth recognized World Biosphere Reserve in Viet Nam. A field survey was conducted in two villages, Vang Mon and Phong, Tam Hop Commune. Both villages are located in the buffer zone of Pu Mat National Park.

The data were collected from both secondary documents including annual reports, legal frameworks and formal information from local authorities. Empirical data were obtained from semi-structured questionnaire interviews with 30 local ethnic minority households and 40 respondents representing local authorities, forest owners and forest management boards.

Findings

Approximately 80 percent of surveyed households are poor. Poverty rates in the case study sites are far above the national average of just 2.75 percent in 2021. Moreover, 100 percent of households are ethnic minority groups and have little education. Women have lower levels of education than men.

People in these remote rural areas tend to depend heavily on non-timber forest products from natural forests for sustenance, especially women and the Tay Poong people. On average, annual

household income is extremely low, approximately 42 million Vietnamese dong (US\$1,810) per household, which translates to a monthly income of 781,000 Vietnamese dong (US\$34) per person, compared to Viet Nam's per capita income of 4,249,000 Vietnamese dong (US\$183) per month in 2020.

The Forest Law enables regulations that allow sustainable exploitation that doesn't affect the forest's functions in special-use forests and in protection. However, implementation is still difficult due to the lack of specific and feasible regulations and guidelines.

Women play a particularly important role in household livelihoods, especially crop farming and non-timber forest product activities. Men harvest non-timber forest products for housewares or handmade craft products. Women intensively harvest non-timber forest products for a wide range of uses, especially those that relate to daily food consumption and retail purposes. This implies that non-timber forest products play an important role in women's livelihoods. Therefore, relevant policies that do not allow for the exploitation of non-timber forest products have a negative effect on the livelihoods of women.

Approximately 76.67 percent of heads of household are registered under the husband's name and only 16.67 percent of households are registered under the wife's name. Women's rights over forest land remain less than men's due to the Vietnamese system of household registration requiring a 'household head'. This has resulted in men automatically being named the head of the household except where there are women-headed households as a result of divorce.

A full 100 percent of respondents agree that collecting non-timber forest products in Western Nghe An Biosphere Reserve is illegal but they continue this work as part of their daily practice. When asked about the current trend of non-timber forest products collection compared to in the past, most of the respondents answered that it is more difficult now.

The decline of non-timber forest products makes conservation requirements urgent for state management. However, local women's livelihood needs mean they are willing to go into the forest areas under the management of the National Park and Protection Forest to harvest non-timber forest products. This is also recognized by local authorities who believe that non-timber forest products management policies are still inadequate and not suitable for local practical conditions.

Recommendations

- Close the gap between policy and practice by balancing biodiversity conservation and ensuring livelihoods for communities, especially the livelihoods of women who depend on non-timber forest products.
- Adjust regulations to allow local communities to hold legal rights in sustainable harvest or share benefits of harvesting non-timber forest products in special-use and protection forests.
- Train forest managers to explore more opportunities for communities' livelihoods and incomes.
- Promote the participation of local women and men in forest resource management and sustainable forest exploitation.
- Provide training courses for ethnic minorities on forest legislation and non-timber forest products harvesting regulations and provide technical training courses for women on the non-timber forest products that may be collected and on sustainable collection practices.
- Strengthen alternative livelihoods to reduce dependence on exploitation of non-timber forest products and forest resources.
- Offer diversified job opportunities and incentives for sustainable agricultural and forestry activities.
- Encourage local authorities and private companies to create policy and financial mechanisms and build value chains to promote the development of non-timber forest products in the mountainous area of Western Nghe An Biosphere Reserve. Ensure technical experts on non-timber forest products are available to provide practical guidance to the community.

Funded by



MRLG is a project funded by



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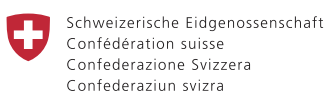
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