

NTFPs Impact Poverty, National Development and Biodiversity Conservation by Creation of Livelihood Assets



John Raintree, Bui Thi An and Nguyen Thi Nghia
Hanoi, January 2007

The NTFP Sub-sector Support Project in Vietnam seeks to support the use of NTFPs for biodiversity conservation, improved livelihoods of poor people resident in and around forest areas, and national economic development.

In addressing such goals, the international literature gives great prominence to the idea of Sustainable Livelihoods. A key element of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is the concept of “livelihood assets.” Five types of livelihood assets or capital are recognized:¹

Type	Definition
Human Assets	Skills, knowledge, labour and capacity to work, which vary according to household size, skill levels, education, leadership potential, health status, etc. Human capital is a prerequisite for using the other four types of livelihood assets.
Natural Assets	The natural resources upon which people rely for their livelihood, such as land, trees, crops, livestock, genetic resources, natural and agricultural biodiversity.
Social Assets	Social relationships developed through membership, interaction, trust, etc. that increase people’s ability to work together, facilitate cooperation, reduce transaction costs, increase access to information, influence and power, activate formal obligations, and support informal safety nets among the poor.
Financial Assets	Savings, credit, jobs and employment opportunities, and non-earned income used by people to achieve their livelihood objectives and to invest in new livelihood assets.
Physical Assets	Infrastructure, equipment and other physical goods that enhance productivity and income.

This is a widely accepted framework, but what evidence is there that these concepts have practical relevance in Vietnam?

The View from the Village

The results of a recent participatory rapid assessment survey of a sample of villagers participating in the NTFP Sub-Sector Support Project can help answer this question. The purpose of the survey exercise was to obtain the villagers own assessment of the relevance and impact of NTFP models and activities promoted by the project. To do this it used a variety of participatory research techniques including card-sorting and ranking of models and activities, open-ended focus group discussions, supplemented by household and key informant interviews to obtain unbiased information on the villager’s own assessment of the NTFP models and activities.

Although the survey was not specifically designed with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework in mind, the results supply surprisingly strong evidence that the NTFP inputs have had a positive impact on the villagers livelihood assets.

The most explicit evidence of this linkage is seen in

the comments recorded at the end of the focus group sessions when the groups were asked to express their feelings about changes caused by the project.

Of the 103 separate statements expressed by the 16 focus groups in the 8 sample villages, 97% made clear reference to at least one of the asset types. When the statements were broken down into their basic elements and compared systematically with livelihood asset categories, the number and percentage of “hits” were as follows:

Asset Type	# of hits	% of total hits
Human	59	44%
Natural	31	23%
Financial	23	17%
Social	21	16%
Physical	0	0%
Total	134	100%

In the villagers’ assessment the biggest impact was on human assets, followed by natural, financial and social assets. The only asset category not mentioned by the villagers’ was physical assets, which is not surprising since the NTFP project is not an infrastructure project.

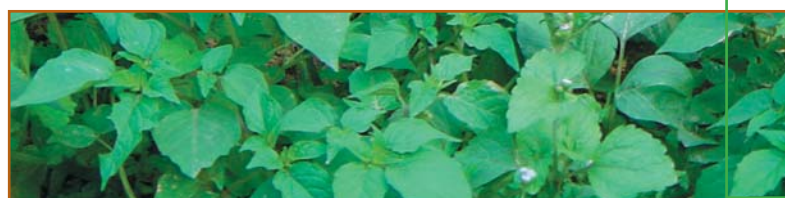
Human Assets

This asset category permeates the villagers feelings about project impacts, which is not surprising since knowledge, skills, and the capacity to work in new ways and make more productive use of household labor are the essence of the NTFP models and training inputs. Since human assets are a prerequisite for use of the other asset types, there is a lot of overlap with comments under the other categories.

People commented on the knowledge and capacities which they especially valued. Comments about knowledge range from the specific: “Knowledge of planting and grafting tram,” “Learned the experience of planting rattan and huong bai,” “Know how to prevent disease of NTFP species;” to the general: “Knowledge of agroforestry production,” “Knowledge on conservation & development of NTFPs,” “Know how to earn, change the cropping system,” “Improved understanding due to use of technical books”. Acquired capacities include “Increased capacity for use of land and expansion of land area for NTFP growing,” “Increased capacity for procurement of assets for the household,” and “Increased working capacity of the commune and village cadres.”

Of special interest are the comments indicating adoption and spread of the new knowledge (“All HHs made a work plan to plant rattan as a fence around their forest hill garden”), impact on preservation of indigenous knowledge (“Recovery of knowledge on use of medicinal plants”) and impacts on children and the value of knowledge (“Children are also interested in NTFPs.” “The rate of children dropping out of school is reduced. Now 100% children go to school.”) All of these comments are spontaneous and unsolicited.

¹ Adapted from the Sustainable Livelihoods Glossary http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance_sheets_rfs/sect8glo.rtf





Natural Assets

All eight villages commented on impacts on natural assets. Some of the comments were about creation of new assets (e.g. "Project supplies seedlings & techniques to grow rattan & huong bai") or changes in the quality of natural assets through replacement of existing crops by higher value NTFPs ("Rattan and huong bai can replace poorly producing crops like tre hop bamboo and cassava") described as "land saving" because they return a higher value per unit of land.

A surprising 84% of the natural assets hits are about impacts on forest conservation made possible by the NTFP models and activities. This finding might seem "too good to be true" if it were not for the fact that the content of comments from widely separated sources triangulate well with other types of data, make sense, and have an internal consistency that give them the ring of truth."

The comments acknowledged impacts from the whole gamut of conservation measures, from awareness raising ("The water source exhausted, and Tau timber is heavily exploited, resulting in landslides. That is why it is necessary to protect people's livelihoods.") to classical protected area exclusion measures ("Protected area established, resulting in forbidden forest destruction") to in-situ conservation ("Local people are changing their awareness in sustainable exploitation of NTFPs in natural forest" and "Forest enrichment counteracts natural forest destruction and preserves natural forests for next generation through long term economic management") to ex-situ domestication ("Grow huong bai and rattan instead of going to the forest to collect" and "Can conserve some NTFP species that are scarce in natural forest such as rattan and boi loi" to livelihood substitution measures ("Women have learnt new techniques of NTFP planting so they spend their time on gardening and reduce the time collecting NTFPs in the natural forest")

Comments about reduced visits to the natural forest was a dominant theme, and many different reasons were cited. Perhaps the most succinct summary of project impact on conservation was the statement that "Time spent on the models results in reduced visits to the forest."

Others gave more elaborate explanations, such as this one on the impact of high-efficiency cook stoves: "Before the NTFP project, women had to collect firewood ten times a month. Now they only spend one time for collecting firewood in the forest and they can invest

NTFP Project has built new knowledge, skills, and practices for local forest dependent farmers that helped enhance their livelihood assets:

1. Rattan processing in Cam Xuyen District, Ha Tinh Province
2. Edible and medicinal mushroom cultivation in Van Don District, Quang Ninh Province
3. Joss-stick processing in Son Dong District, Bac Giang Province
4. Fuel-wood economic cook stove introduced in Dakrong District, Quang Tri Province
5. Forest enrichment with *Canarium Album* in Hoanh Bo District, Quang Ninh Province

their time in gardening of fruits and for selling in local markets.”

Other comments helped put the NTFP-related conservation measures into proper historical perspective with respect to wider development changes: “Ten years ago charcoal making was an important activity in livelihood, but now there are only three households that do charcoal because of increased enforcement in the protected area and because young men can get higher paying jobs in the south (e.g. in dam construction) and they are not interested in charcoal making.”

Financial Assets

Positive comments about impact on financial assets were volunteered by 7 of the 8 villages. 11 out of the 23 hits were direct statements that the project had created or increased income or employment opportunities. Early benefits were highlighted in the comment that “Beekeeping yields immediate economic benefits,” while several others emphasized the stable, long term nature of the employment opportunities created by NTFPs. Villagers in Kim Trung linked this to conservation benefits in saying that long term income from rattan planting would allow the local people to reduce logging in the future (the rattan had not yet reached harvestable age). Linkage of gains in Financial assets to the use of labor (a Human asset) were flagged in the comments “Busy but income increased” and “Landless households will have opportunity to sell labor” (the latter also implies creation of new Social assets). A more global kind of impact was highlighted in the terse comment from Am village citing “Improved management and utilization of cash for household economic development.”

Not all comments were positive. Someone from Kim Trung, the poorest village in the sample commented that the investment from the project was too small, which made it difficult for some households to select a model. This highlights the fact that the poorest villagers may in the short term lack sufficient cash, land, labor and other assets to allow them to develop the long term Financial assets of NTFPs. A positive response to this dilemma was suggested by a woman in Dai Lang whose hope was that the project would support handicraft manufacture in the next phase. NTFP processing does not require land but it creates domestic employment opportunities compatible with child care and other household responsibilities.

Social Assets

All villages had something to say about project impacts on social assets. Most of the recorded comments identified positive impacts on social relationships in the households, in the immediate community, and in the wider national community. Comments about the *household* were mainly about improved gender relations: “Increased awareness about gender equality,” “Gender division of labor in the family is more reasonable,” “Create employment, solidarity in the family, better labor arrangement in the household,” and from an ethnic community knows for its gender imbalances, “The husband changed his behavior in supporting his wife to attend literacy class.”

The gender theme expanded at the *community* level with

comments such as “Role and voice of women in the HH and community increased” and “Women are interested in literacy class and have more self-confidence when they attend village meetings or go outside the village,” indicating the general empowerment of women.

Another major theme at the *community* level was increased interaction and cooperation between households in sharing experience about the models: “Local people are very happy, they feel more friendly in sharing experiences of planting NTFPs with each other. We always ask each other ‘Why is your model is growing better than others?’” “HHs who have no models can copy models from HHs with a model,” “Non-supported HHs can learn from experience of supported HHs. Up till now now 90% of households have planted *khoai mai*” (even though only 28% of village households officially participated in this project model). This last comment is indicative of the rapid adoption and spread of this particular model through social interaction at the community level. Even households who are not able to adopt the models needn’t be left out because, as one person commented, “Landless households will have opportunity to sell labor.”

A generalized impact on social assets at the *community* level was also acknowledged in the comment that “Villagers participate in village meetings more readily” and the observation pertaining to “Increased working capacity of the commune and village cadres.” Comments relating to the wider *national community* were: “Study tour to learn experience from other localities,” indicating and expanded network of relationships beyond the local community, and from an ethnic minority village, “Local people are happy and believe in the NTFP project because implementing activities acted on what we were told” (this is about credibility and trust).

Not all of the comments about social assets were so positive, however. Some participants from Group 2, “Poor and Forest Dependent Households,” and even some from Group 1, “High Access Households” in villages with an extremely inequitable land distribution, called attention to social disparities in benefits from the project: “No equity between households who have forest land and households who have no forest land” and “The project does not support all households, resulting in conflict between supported and non-supported households. Many households don’t know about the project.” The land disparity obviously was not caused by the project, but the livelihood opportunities presented by the project certainly increased the awareness and significance of it.

One participant suggested a solution to the problem of favoritism in the distribution of project opportunities: “Many households don’t know about the project. It is proposed that villagers should be informed through the loudspeaker system.”

References

- DFID. 1999. *Sustainable Livelihood Guidance Sheets*. Dept. for Int’l Development. London.
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