

BRIEF SERIES: VIET NAM

# Inter-provincial collaboration in Viet Nam: Plugging loopholes in forest law enforcement



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While Viet Nam's forest area has increased steadily over the last 30 years, forest degradation and deforestation in hotspots continue. The direct and indirect causes of these trends are diverse and complex. One indirect cause that until recently attracted little attention is weak inter-provincial coordination and collaboration. Transboundary forests are administered by departments based in two, three or more neighboring provinces. As provincial boundaries mark the territorial limits of administration, they can present loopholes that prevent law enforcement staff from following up on forest violations, such as illegal logging or forest conversion to agriculture. Tackling these loopholes requires inter-provincial collaboration to ensure seamless coverage of forest law enforcement efforts and thus enhance forest management and protection. Such collaboration also requires dedicated funding, which is rarely acknowledged.

To develop government capacity to reduce deforestation and forest degradation, the UN-REDD Viet Nam Phase II Programme strengthened inter-provincial cooperation between provincial Forest Protection offices to tackle law enforcement issues of a transboundary nature and to plug persistent loopholes.

Located in remote areas with difficult access, natural forest areas – often with high biodiversity values – make attractive targets for illegal actors with the resources to exploit them, because of the difficulty and expense of law enforcement. The front line actors are not always organized criminal gangs. Often, they are local villagers from neighboring areas. Local people are mainly solicited to cut trees and use vehicles disguised as agricultural equipment to smuggle logs across provincial borders to their buyers.

Most forest provinces have developed cooperation agreements and institutional arrangements with neighboring provinces,

predating the UN-REDD Programme. The provincial authorities of these provinces have entered into bilateral or trilateral memoranda of understanding (MoUs) to formalize collaboration among law enforcement agencies, led by provincial Forest Protection offices and to encourage participation of the police and the army at district and/or commune levels. The MoUs are signed by Provincial People's Committees and provide a basis for provinces to jointly implement activities such as forest patrolling, awareness raising and investigations of forest crimes. However, practical implementation often encounters challenges including resource constraints, the lack of systematic communications channels, or challenges in joint planning and budgeting.



## Pilot interventions strengthening coordination and collaboration

Through the pilots implemented under the UN-REDD Programme, Bac Kan province was able not just to involve the counterpart Forest Protection offices from neighboring Lang Son and Cao Bang provinces in the mountains of northern Viet Nam, but also to have strategic-level agreements (endorsing the MoUs) – at the level of the provincial Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) offices. These offices are of a higher administrative level than provincial Forest Protection offices and thus allow deeper inter-provincial collaboration. The MoUs also engage the local authorities of border communes, which proved to be a critical node in the previously weak communication links.

In Ca Mau, another UN-REDD Programme pilot province, located in the country's south, cooperation was pursued with neighboring Kien Giang and Bac Lieu provinces in 2016 and 2017. The three provinces jointly identified key hotspots along their boundaries and agreed on implementing 18 joint awareness-raising events on forest policies and regulations for border communities. They also organized joint patrols to detect and investigate forest violations, which involved participants from law enforcement agencies (i.e. forest rangers, police officers and representatives of the armed forces). Emergency hotlines were set up among the provinces to mobilize multi-agency taskforces. The inter-provincial cooperation generated a common understanding not only of forest law enforcement, but also of forest fire control and wildlife conservation.

In Binh Thuan and Lam Dong provinces – both UN-REDD Programme pilot provinces in the Central Highlands – Inter-district Forest Management and Protection Stations were established to jointly protect hotspots in transboundary forest areas. This approach was viewed very positively and replicated in other districts. Established in 2014, the stations in the districts of Bac Binh (Binh Thuan province) and Duc Trong (Lam Dong province) are staffed with officers of district-level Forest Protection units, police and army units and state-owned forest management entities to respond more quickly to inter-provincial concerns. Since then, the stations have conducted regular and *ad-hoc* forest patrolling missions. Most promising, joint investigations have led to the confiscation of illegally converted vehicles.



Inter-district station on forest protection of Bac Binh - Duc Trong district, Lam Dong province.

Between 2015 and 2018, more than 30 annual provincial conferences and district-level meetings were organized. In addition, various joint-patrolling activities were implemented in pilot provinces of the UN-REDD Programme to assist them in implementing their MoUs. The Inter-district Forest Management Stations in Bac Binh and Duc Trong funded activities using revenue from the government's Payment for Forest Environmental Services (PFES) Programme and from the state budget. Crucially, forest owners (many of whom are State organizations in these provinces) are aware of the inter-provincial and district-level cooperation mechanisms and their activities. The forest owners' mandate includes forest protection and management, but they have no role in law enforcement, which is covered by the Forest Protection offices. The MoUs have now opened opportunities for joint efforts between these forest owners and the Forest Protection offices to settle forest violation cases in transboundary areas.



## The way forward

Forest violations are rarely straightforward. Law enforcement efforts need to address the complexities of inter-provincial coordination and collaboration. For example, the Inter-district Forest Management and Protection Stations, enabled traffic police to confiscate illegally-converted vehicles used to smuggle timber across administrative boundaries.

The pilot activities provided an important impetus to tackle forest crimes more effectively. This has contributed to efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. But institutionalizing cross-provincial (and inter-district) coordination and collaboration requires secure long-term funding.

With the provincial commitments, PFES may be a source of funding to maintain, enhance and replicate cooperation of inter-provincial forest law enforcement. Additional funds have to be provided by the State through regular budgets. This may then also enable the testing and establishment of the near real-time monitoring of forest cover loss (e.g. [Terra-I](#)) combined with on-the-ground forest monitoring by forest law enforcement bodies in partnership with local communities, to detect illegal activities.



*Forest patrolling in action in Ha Tinh province.*



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