



Sustainable Ecological Livelihood and Food Sovereignty

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Indigenous Society and SPERI's Vision and Action

Voice to United Nation Food Sovereignty System 2021

What development in the food and agriculture system of Vietnam do you observe that are threatening for biodiversity, environment and livelihoods of farmers and indigenous communities?

With the globalisation of the market economy in a relentless search for ever-increasing levels of economic growth, the balance of humans and nature is rapidly being destroyed. This is seen nowhere more clearly in Vietnam than in the expansion of industrial agriculture into areas previously preserved in their ecological integrity by rural populations practicing tradition (non-industrial) forms of agriculture. As the new agricultural technologies encroach upon these territories, the traditional rural communities living there are suffering new forms of land dispossession, and cultural and livelihood destruction. Their traditional systems of food production based upon a human-nature balance are rapidly being destroyed. It is SPERI's view that these traditional systems need to be protected, preserved, and strengthened, not only for the populations they support but also for the important lessons they hold for sustainable natural resource management. This is more than an issue of social justice: given the horrendous destruction wrought by industrialization upon biological and cultural diversity it is an matter of species survival.

Traditional ecological systems of agriculture that have lasted for hundreds of years, sustaining not only highland populations but also lowland communities to whose fields the highland ecosystem delivers valuable nutrients in a steady flow of fresh clean water are now under dire threat from the encroachment of industrial forms of agriculture. The latter, aimed at profit making via the forced extraction of bulk agricultural commodities from the soil through the application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, are destroying the life-giving agro-ecological processes that traditional forms of agriculture have preserved and nurtured for centuries. To

find space for industrial enterprises, with their mono-crops, processing factories, and hydropower schemes, vast tracts of natural forest and large areas of slope-land, formerly used to feed local populations, are being turned over to the production of animal feed, biofuels, or intensive systems dairy and meat production now scientifically recognised as the most environmentally damaging and wasteful of all forms of food production.

Case Study: The Threat to Ecological and Social Sustainability in Kon Plong

Kon Plong is a district of the central highland province of Kon Tum in Vietnam. It has a forest cover of more than 80 percent, has many unique natural features (mountains, lakes, streams and waterfalls), with eighty percent of its population composed of indigenous ethnic groups, each with their own distinct traditional practices and cultural identities. The district is seen as having great potential for agricultural development, but the form of agriculture being promoted is industrialized high-tech joint venture projects with foreign (South Korean, Japanese, Australian) corporations, and this is putting indigenous communities with their ecologically sustainable traditional forms of agriculture under increasing pressure. One instance of this is transformation traditional slope-land farming land into industrial plantations for cassava production for biofuel. This is having a devastating effect upon both local natural environments and traditional socio-cultural organization. Formerly preserved forest and traditionally cultivated uplands are rapidly being converted into industrial cassava plantations, and traditional ecological upland farming systems with their associated community solidarity-enhancing ritual practices and voluntary labour exchange arrangements are in sharp decline.

Because of the encroachment of industrial agriculture into indigenous territories in Kon Plong, biodiversity is being lost; rich native rice and cassava varieties are being lost. Local knowledge is being lost. The traditional culture of social solidarity is rapidly being degraded as farmers are driven by rising costs and indebtedness to compete for land and labour time to grow and harvest industrial cassava. Exploitative local traders, acting as informal intermediaries between farmers and cassava processing factories, entrap indigenous farmers into continuous cassava production through a system of cash and material advances. Because of these changes, the indigenous communities are in distress, but are caught in this vicious cycle of debt and dependency because of a perceived lack of any alternative means of income earning.

How SPERI's response to the above situation

Since 1994, SPERI has (via its predecessor organisation TEW¹ (1994) focused on **'SOCIAL CAPITAL'** via Key Farmer Network on Traditional Rotational Farming in Up Land Use Farming towards enriching local knowledge and local native seed system; CHESH² (1999) focused on **'ECOLOGICAL CAPITAL'** via Watershed and Upland Tropical Rainforest diversity Restoration and the natural rights; and CIRD³ (2000) focused on **'TRADITIONAL/LOCAL GRASSROOT POLITICAL CAPITAL'** via Indigenous wisdom, custom and knowledge in community ecological landscape layer researching, recording via seasonality and video, included story telling over localities and identities amongst Mekong Countries. In to 2006, we merged three capitals of three organizations TEW, CHESH and CIRD into SPERI and has been engaged with indigenous ethnic minority communities in the Mekong region of Southeast Asia. Its primary field of activity has been in securing for these communities control over their own land, futures and wellbeing by their own wisdom and knowledge - an outcome defined in terms of five interrelated rights of 'livelihood sovereignty': The right to land, forest and water, clean air and natural landscape; the right to maintain their own religion; the right to live according to their values of happiness and wellbeing within their own natural environment; the right to operate according to their own knowledge and decide what to plant, initiate, create and invent on their own land; and the right to co-manage or co-govern their natural resources with neighbouring communities and local authorities.

Given that control over land is a prerequisite for every other aspect of livelihood sovereignty, a major part of SPERI's work has been acquiring for indigenous ethnic minority communities secure title to their land. However, since the passage of the 2013 Vietnam Land Law, aimed at privatizing land in favour of large business corporations, community access to and control over their land has come under threat. So too has the ecological integrity of that land and the biodiversity it sustains. Where the latter were previously sustained by traditional ecological farming practises, the appropriation of that land for mono-crop industrial plantations is having devastating ecological consequences – soil degradation, contamination of water, erosion and biodiversity loss. In order to protect this land from further encroachment by industrial agriculture, SPERI is working to convince both local and central government authorities of the benefits in terms of biodiversity preservation and environmental protection of keeping that

¹ Toward Ethnic Women

² Centre for Human Ecology Study of Highland

³ Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Research and Development

land under indigenous community management. To achieve this end, they are encouraging the building of sustainable *agro-ecological development* based upon the traditional wisdom, farming knowledge and social organisation of indigenous communities. To this end, on the basis of a acquired understanding of the mountainous landscapes of Southeast Asian highland regions, SPERI had developed a unique ‘3R Development Strategy’ for sustainable agro-ecological developments *specifically designed for highland areas in the Mekong region*.

The ‘3 Rs’ System of Traditional Agriculture in the Mekong Region

‘3R’ is the Vietnamese acronym for Rung (Forest) - Ray (upland farm) - Ruong (valley rice field). It represents the ecological interconnectedness of the three interdependent features of the landscape systems utilized in traditional highland farming. At the peak of the landscape is the forested mountaintops (Rung), source of nutrition (water, nutrients, minerals, etc.) for the lower zones. The lower mountain slopes (Ray) are zones of rotational shifting cultivation. Here, a mosaic of regenerating forest at different stages in the rotational cultivation cycle and seasonally planted plots of diverse crop species combine to preserve and enrich a natural and agricultural biodiversity and the indigenous farming knowledge of generations. In the river valleys (Ruong), the water and nutrients from the mountaintops and mountain slopes is channelled to wet rice fields. Each of these three zones is a rich source of diverse foods and materials that make for a prosperous and ecologically sustainable livelihood. The whole system is understood by its practitioners as a gift from nature to all living things living inter-dependently and harmoniously together.

The ‘3R’ system of traditional agriculture is an indigenous knowledge-based ecological landscape management and governance system that has been maintained sustainably for hundreds of years and passed on from one generation to another. Crucial to the maintenance of this ecological system is a system of kinship-based traditional social arrangements according to which voluntary resource sharing and labour exchanges are organized between village households. Beyond this, village solidarity is maintained by a common commitment to the ecological balance upon which their common livelihood depends - a commitment sustained by an annual cycle of rituals and ceremonies acknowledging the interdependence of human wellbeing and the wellbeing of nature.

What are important milestones towards and ecologically sustainable and socially just food system in Vietnam?

The basis of ecologically sustainable and socially just food systems in the highland regions of Vietnam is preservation of the traditional forms of agriculture pioneered by indigenous ethnic minorities. Important milestones toward preserving these systems are described below.

New theoretical development in ecology. SPERI's '3R Development Strategy' has been developed independently of development strategies elsewhere in the world from SPERI's own first hand observation of highland farming systems. It is, however, supported by recent theoretical developments in the ecological sciences, particularly with regard to debates over biodiversity conservation concerning the relative merits of 'land sharing' and 'land sparing'. 'Land sparing' is the idea that biodiversity conservation can best be achieved by having sharply

Case Study: The 3R Development Strategy in Kon Plong

In Kon Plong, SPERI is seeking to address the social and ecological threat to indigenous lands and communities posed by the system of industrial agriculture by facilitating the recovery, restoration and revitalization of their traditional ecological land use practices, and building upon these to establish alternative income earning opportunities by proposing a '3R Strategy' as an ecologically sound and economically viable alternative to the socially and environmentally destructive effects of agricultural industrialization. The 3R Development strategy is a local knowledge and customary law-based strategy for ecologically sustainable development. It recognises the ecological interconnectedness of the three landscape zones, Rung (Forest) – Ray (Upland) - Ruong (Valley), that are utilized in traditional highland farming systems and aims to preserve and enhance these by means of agro-ecological developments. Where industrial cassava production has been imposed, the natural interconnections between these landscape zones has been violently disrupted. Non-native (industrial cassava) and chemically dependent mono-crops planted in the upland zone are displacing environmentally adapted native crops, disrupting and polluting (via chemical fertilizer and pesticides) the natural flow of water and nutrients between forest and valley floor. Rapid soil exhaustion cause by mono-crop extraction and chemical poisoning in the upland zone is leading to forest loss as desperate farmers seek to escape indebtedness by opening up new land for industrial cassava planting. SPERI/CODE wish to break this vicious cycle of exploitation of humans and nature by restoring the natural interconnectedness of the 3 Rs (Rung-Ray-Ruong) as the foundation for ecologically sustainable food production and village wellbeing.

separate zones of high-intensity agriculture on the one hand, and isolated nature conservation areas on the other. This view has now been challenged in favour of ‘land sharing,’ (Kremen and Merenlender 2018, Perfecto and Vandermeer 2009).

“land-sharing” is the creation of landscapes managed so that corridors are created between nature areas and the [agricultural] matrix in between in order to connect areas that are supportive to wildlife, along rivers and hedgerows and through areas of agroforestry. [Agricultural] Land managed without use of synthetic inputs are able to sustain many ecosystem services, such as pollination, natural pest control and watershed management that in turn sustain crop production. (Kremen and Merenlender 2018).

Landscapes are frequently seen as fragments of natural habitat surrounded by a ‘sea’ of agriculture. But recent ecological theory shows that the nature of these fragments is not nearly as important for conservation as is the nature of the matrix of agriculture that surrounds them. Local extinctions from conservation fragments are inevitable and must be replaced by migrations if massive extinction is to be avoided. High migration rates only occur in high-quality matrices that are created by agro-ecology techniques, as opposed to the industrial monoculture model of agriculture. (Perfecto and Vandermeer 2009).

The current view is that, rather than concentrating on the creation of isolated nature conservation areas, biodiversity can be supported more sustainably by creating agricultural cultural landscapes with high-quality mosaics of diverse land uses. Such landscapes can satisfy human needs at the same time as supporting high levels of biodiversity. Traditional land use practices produce such heterogeneous landscapes, comprised of different crop species, remnants of pristine native forest, and diverse secondary forests at different stages of regrowth. These working lands provide not only food for human populations, but food, breeding sites and shelter for a myriad of other species. Meanwhile, their remnants of natural habitat act as stepping-stones facilitating the movement of species across the landscape between different protected areas. The total landscape allow for the maintenance of ecosystem services, such as pollination, pest control, and nutrient cycling, that all underlie crop production. Managing the agricultural matrix to maintain biodiversity not only provides for species conservation but also sustainable food production. It seeks to simultaneously improve food production, biodiversity or ecosystem conservation, and rural livelihoods.

Securing title to agricultural land for indigenous ethnic minorities

In their efforts to secure the livelihood of indigenous communities, SPERI has worked to secure for them title to their land. In this they have been remarkably successful. Together with their Livelihood Sovereignty Alliance partners, they have between 1995 and 2017 secured 44,274ha of forestland for 8268 indigenous ethnic minority households and 18,389 ha of forestland for 77 indigenous ethnic minority community organisations.

Legal recognition of customary law-based resource management

Unfortunately, the only form of land title recognised in Vietnam is that of households and organization rather than communities as a whole. To counter the risks of land loss attendant

upon household ownership, SPERI has worked to have customary-law based resource management practices legally recognized for governing allocated forestland.

Legal recognition of ‘spirit forests’ for preservation as ‘special forests’

The struggle to gain community control of allocated forestland has been a long and difficult one with only partial success, due to legislative obstacles. An important milestone in the 24 year history of the Livelihood Sovereignty Alliance, was reached therefore in 2017 with the passing into law by the Vietnam National Assembly of a new Forest Law. This law legalized, at Article 86, community ownership of Spirit Forests. This, together with a further 16 articles containing six important new concepts, were the fruition of constant lobbying by LISO Alliance organizations for legal recognition of the rights of Indigenous Ethnic Minorities to community land ownership and customary law governance of their own natural resources as crucial for their social, economic, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

*The six important new legal concepts incorporated into the Forest Law 2017 are as follows: ‘**existence space**’ – natural landscapes within which 16 million IEM people can practice their own culture and livelihood; ‘**community sacred forest**’ – areas of forest inhabited by nature spirit guardians of IEM communities and essential to their spiritual wellbeing, now given equal status for protection as government categorized ‘Special Forests’; ‘**customary law**’ – the laws of IEM peoples by which they govern their own communities’ and natural resources (Sacred Forests, Traditional Watershed Forests, Natural Resources Forests) for daily livelihood, now legally recognized; ‘**native species**’ – native forest species that must now be recovered on whatever category of forest land; ‘**community ownership**’ of sacred forests, watershed forests and production forests; ‘**border forests**’ with a strong watershed function, now to be strictly preserved with no transfer of ownership or selling.*

The strategic importance of this achievement is that the Forest Law 2017 now stands a springboard for a new series of actions on behalf of indigenous ethnic minority in Vietnam which will have full backing of the law. This greatly strengthens the hand of LISO organization and indigenous ethnic minority farmers to act openly in pursuit of their cultural, religious and livelihood rights. In terms of action on behalf of indigenous ethnic minority people’s livelihood and wellbeing, this has been ‘a game changer’. Indigenous ethnic minority people will now be able to maintain their own value systems and governance logics of voluntarism, solidarity, and

community ownership with no selling of land and forest. This is the most effective measure of risk management for vulnerable populations and natural environments. It also restores trust between indigenous ethnic minorities and the government, providing an indigenous solution to the problems caused by earlier misguided ‘poverty alleviation’ programs.

Who would be important actors in establishing an ecologically sustainable and socially just food system in Vietnam?

The argument in this paper is that the basis for ecologically sustainable and socially just food systems in the highland regions of Vietnam is preservation of the traditional forms of agriculture pioneered by indigenous ethnic minorities. The most important actors in establishing such systems in the highlands are, therefore, the indigenous ethnic communities living there. Other important actors in this process are unregulated free traders, agricultural commodity processors, government agricultural extension workers, local authorities, central government policy makers and civil society organisation. Some of these actors play a negative role, other a positive role. Yet others currently play a negative role but have the potential to change that role to positive. The respective roles of these actor, both positive and negative, can be best illustrated through a case study from Kon Plong district, home of around 21,529 people of the H’re, M’nam, Se Dong, Ca Dong indigenous ethnic groups, in Kon Tum province of the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Definition of the problem

The livelihood of H’re in Po E Commune, Kon Plong district, is dependent upon the sustainable management of natural forests, but the government of Vietnam has contradictory policies regarding forest management. One policy is for the preservation of primary forests and biodiversity; the other is for the extension of industrial agriculture to highland forest areas. Under the first set of policies, sustainable community management of forest by indigenous people is supported; under the second set, it is undermined. Unfortunately, for the future of primary forest preservation and community forest management by indigenous people, the second set of policies dominates the first. The policy of opening up of land and forest for international corporations in order to maximize ‘national economic growth – GPD’, means large areas primary forest will be displaced by industrial agriculture. What follows is a systematic analysis of the roles of various actors in the deforestation of land in Kon Plong district.

Agricultural commodity processing companies

The government policy of industrializing agriculture is encouraging the production of industrial cassava as an export crop and this has led to the establishment of the Quang Ngai Cassava Company seeking supplies⁴ of industrial cassava from farmers in their surrounding area. In this they are aided by unregistered ‘free traders’ and the jointly government and privately owned Agriculture Extension Centre.

The role of free traders

In Po E, small traders are working in collaboration with the local cassava factory to encouraging the consumption by villagers of poor quality industrial commodities in return for the supply of industrial cassava and natural forest products. This trader-induced demand for cheap and poor quality commercial products is producing a hunger for money with which to buy them, and to obtain this money farmers are committing themselves to ecologically destructive farming practices such as the clearing of forests for growing industrial cassava, including the heavy use of herbicides and chemical fertilizers. These actions are poisoning the environment, creating soil erosion, and resulting in severe biodiversity loss.

The role of the Agriculture Extension Centre

The Agriculture Extension Centre is a government agency, but functioning under contract with big privately owned agriculture companies. Farmer have to follow whatever the government agency requires, but *de facto*, the Centre is the right hand of the company and plays a key function in enforcing indigenous farmers to plant hybrid seeds dependent on chemical fertilizer and pesticide. With the *de facto* dominance of exploitative commercial interests over the *de jure* government policy of preserving primary forests, biodiversity and sustainable forest management is becoming increasing vulnerable.

The role of Central Government Policy-Makers

The top-down New Rural Development policy of the Central Government contains 19 criteria⁵ defining what it means by ‘rural development’. None of these criteria, however, refer to the local identity or cultural-based and local knowledge-based livelihoods that are the foundation for many local indigenous communities in Kon Plong district, and which would make them feel proud to engage in and make a contribution to rural development in Kon Plong. This is a continuing concern. Income growth and the search for more money is the driving force under

⁴ 72 tons per day/processing. In only Violak village, our evidence certified 100 ha of Up-Land Traditional Rotational Farming with abundance and diversity of local native seed variety associates with local knowledge in farming is displaced by industrial Cassava over the 5 years

⁵ 19 criteria is top down mind set from Central Fatherland Front which is interfering into the traditional kinship based order of IP society in Kon Plong unconsciously, which lead to the undermine customary law and the core value of Hre society

these policies and schemes, but this is at the costs of further clearing of trees, and the making of spaces for welcoming business investment. This is a high-level challenge to the sustainability of cultural and biological diversity in Kon Plong.

The role of local authorities

The major factor leading to the dominance of commercial interest over the government's environment and cultural preservation interests is the lack of understanding on the part of local authorities of the negative impacts of unconstrained market economic activity upon environmental conservation and cultural preservation. Local authorities lack the awareness, experience, and capacity to deal with negative impact of the market economy upon the natural environment and indigenous societies and cultures. This lack of awareness and capacity highlights the need for raising the awareness and capacity of local authorities so they can lead their province, districts or communes toward a more sustainable future.

Civil Society Organisations

SPERI wants the value of indigenous people's way of life, in which they view land as sacred, to be properly understood. In this way of life, the view of land is completely different from that of the mainstream society that sees land as private property and simply as a resource for generating money income. Over the generations, indigenous peoples have inherited land from their ancestors and have initiated their own social, cultural and economic institutions for governing that land and the livelihood they gain from it, seen as a gift from the spirits of nature. As part of their governance structure, they have institutionalized rituals and ceremonies for every month of the agricultural calendar to give thanks to the spirits for allowing them to produce through their upland and rice valley farming. These rituals and ceremonies require the whole community to act in solidarity, and this cooperation forms the basis of their social, economic and spiritual wellbeing that is expressed daily in their voluntary attitude toward helping each other.

The aim is to give Local Authorities opportunities to recognize the value of the beliefs and ritual practices of indigenous people for biodiversity preservation and sustainable agricultural development. By observing H're society directly, they can see for themselves the effectiveness of having that land managed by the local community attuned to its unique landscape characteristics. This form of direct observation and experience has a far greater capacity for opening the minds of people to the value of indigenous beliefs and practices regarding the preservation of nature and biodiversity than does attendance at conferences or the reading of scientific papers.

In this respect, three issues need to be addressed:

1. Local Authorities need to be helped to recognise that indigenous peoples' knowledge, wisdom and customary laws are very important to biodiversity preservation by demonstrating through pilot projects how indigenous farming methods contribute to environmental and agricultural sustainability through their ecological farming practices and natural resource governance.
2. Local Authorities need to be provided with opportunities to learn and understand about the negative consequences of an unregulated market economy for the survival of indigenous farming practices and hence their sustainable natural resource management system.
3. Local Authorities need to be made aware of the lose-lose consequences for biodiversity and cultural preservation of an unregulated market economy, and the win-win opportunities provided by local community economies.

What does Indigenous Society living in High Landscape expect from the outcome of the UN Food Systems Summit?

We expect from the outcome of the UN Food System Summit full recognition and acknowledgement of the following key messages of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems:

1. That today's food and farming system are generating negative outcomes on multiple fronts: widespread degradation of land, water and ecosystems; high GHG emissions; biodiversity losses; persistent hunger and micro-nutrient deficiencies; livelihood stresses for farmers around the world.
2. That these problems are linked to industrial agriculture with its in-put intensive crop monocultures and their reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides
3. That what is required is a fundamentally different model of agriculture based on diversifying farms and landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods, i.e. 'diversified agro-ecological systems'.

In addition, we expect

1. Full support for a global transition from industrial agriculture to agro-ecology.

2. Full commitment to the preservation of currently existing farming systems whose ecological integrity is being maintained by rural populations practicing their tradition (non-industrial) forms of agriculture.
3. Sanction-backed prohibitions upon the encroachment of environmentally and socially damaging form of industrial agriculture into areas preserved in their ecological integrity by rural populations practicing their tradition (non-industrial) forms of agriculture.
4. Financial and political support for the restoration of ecological farming in territories of indigenous peoples where these have been replaced or damaged by the encroachment of industrial agriculture./.