

The Struggle for Community Spirit Forests over decades

During the 20th Century, Vietnam overcame some tremendous struggles: first in 1945, for National Independence against French Colonialism; and second in 1975, for National Self-Determination against American Imperialism. Now, in the 21st Century Vietnam has become part of the Global Capitalist Economy and faces the biggest struggle of all – the struggle against Consumerism, Over Consumption, and the Destruction of Nature. Just as in the struggles of the 20th century, Vietnam has needed to call upon the cultural and spiritual strengths of its indigenous ethnic minorities, now in the 21st Century it has had to do the same. Having preserved for centuries the natural forests that were their home, the indigenous ethnic minorities of Vietnam are now showing the way to preserve Nature for the benefit of the Vietnamese nation as a whole.

The strength of the indigenous people of Vietnam is that they have retained their spiritual relation toward Nature. Being animist in religion, they believe in Spirits of Nature and worship those spirits as residing in various landscape features such as forests, mountains, rivers and rock formations. Where these spirits reside the landscape is protected from human exploitation and therefore preserved in all their rich biodiversity. The effect is that, voluntarily, large areas of precious forest and landscape are permanently preserved as sacred areas.

Before now, the Vietnamese government did not recognise the value of indigenous ethnic minority beliefs. The beliefs of Vietnam's indigenous peoples were seen as 'superstitious' and 'backward' and subject to eradication. Now, things have changed. In the recent review of the Vietnam Forest Law, the indigenous category of 'Community Spiritual Forest' has been legally recognized and forest so designated have been accepted as deserving total protection. This legislation puts Vietnam at the forefront of the struggle for cultural and natural preservation, at least in South East Asia, and has drawn attention from all over the world. How was it achieved, people are asking.

It has come about as a result of a struggle of more than 20 years, inspired by the indigenous people themselves. The key to this struggle has been the engagement by a group of civil society organisations called the Livelihood Sovereignty Alliance (LISO) of indigenous farmers in national wide networking and land rights action.

The Livelihood Sovereignty Alliance (LISO) is an alliance of grassroots-based local NGOs working together to achieve livelihood rights for indigenous ethnic minorities in the Mekong region. It has a history going back over 20 years to the founding of one of the first NGOs in Vietnam, Toward Ethnic Women (TEW) in 1995. Since the late 1990s, a succession of ‘daughter and sister’ organizations (CHESH, CIRD, SPERI, CODE, CIRUM, CHESH-Lao, and CENDI) have been set up to deal with specialized objectives and strategies and to adapt to changing socio-economic and political ecology circumstances.

According to LISO, the central challenge facing indigenous ethnic minority peoples today is preserving their spiritual beliefs and values that are embedded in their relationship to their traditional lands, and which govern their land use practices. This is particularly challenging today, as these beliefs, values and practices are totally different from those that are being promoted globally by large transnational corporations, international financial organizations and nation-states. But as the devastating environmental, social and political consequences of unbridled capitalist development becomes clear to everyone, the search for an alternative set of values for relating to both humans and nature becoming increasingly urgent.

Land and forest are vital to the cultures, livelihoods and identities of indigenous ethnic minority communities in the Mekong region, especially in the uplands. But up to 2012, across Vietnam, about 65% of indigenous ethnic minority households had not been granted forestland titles. Moreover, their spirit forests and lands, that are essential to their core beliefs and values, and which play a vital role in maintaining their spiritual cultural identity and general wellbeing, have not until now been recognized by Vietnam’s laws. But in November this year, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed an amendment to the Forest Law recognizing the category of ‘Community Spiritual Forest’ as forest to be preserved and protected from all forms of exploitation.

This change has come about as a result of over 20 years of advocating and lobbying on behalf of indigenous ethnic minorities by LISO Alliance organizations. The defining aspect of this work has been the careful step-by-step learning from indigenous peoples by engaging them in the process of forestland allocation and legalization of customary laws on forest and land governance. This was a process designed to maximize local people’s knowledge, wisdom and experience in the peaceful resolving of land conflicts. The outcome has been the achievement of ‘Livelihood Sovereignty’ defined in terms of five fundamental and interrelated rights: 1) the

right to land, forest and water ; 2) the right to maintain one's own religion; 3) the right to live according to one's own culture; 4) the right to practice one's livelihood according to one's own knowledge and decide what to plant, initiate, create and invent on one's own land; and 5) the right to co-manage natural resources with neighbouring communities and local authorities.

Since 1995, as a result of LISO's work, 73,673 hectares of forestland has been allocated to indigenous ethnic minority households and community organization in Vietnam and Laos, and the other 17,000 ha in Kuang Xy and 3,600 ha in Dak Nen commune will be allocated by the end of 2018. Totally up to the end of 2018 will be 93, 700 ha. Now, those areas of forestland that are designated by these communities as 'Community Spiritual Forest' are protected by law at the Article. 86. for the preservation of their spiritual and natural value.

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