Revitalizing REDD+ Policy Processes in Vietnam: The Roles of State and Non-State Actors

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Abstract: Vietnam was one of the first countries to introduce the National REDD+ (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) Action Program in 2012. The country has recently revised the Program to aim for a more inclusive 2016–2020 strategy and a vision to 2030. This study explores how Vietnam policy actors view REDD+ policy development and their influence in these processes. The results can contribute to the discussion on how policy actors can effectively influence policy processes in the evolving context of REDD+ and in the types of political arrangements represented in Vietnam. We examined the influence of state and non-state actors on the 2012 National REDD+ Action Program (NRAP) processes, and explored factors that may have shaped this influence, using a combination of document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 81 policy actors. It was found that non-state actors in REDD+ are still on the periphery of decision making, occupying "safe" positions, and have not taken either full advantage of their capacities, or of recent significant changes in the contemporary policy environment, to exert stronger influence on policy. We suggest that REDD+ policy processes in Vietnam need to be revitalized with key actors engaging collectively to promote the possibilities of REDD+ within a broader view of social change that reaches beyond the forestry sector.

Keywords: Vietnam; REDD+ policy; REDD+ governance; non-state actors in REDD+

1. Introduction

Reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) aims to mitigate climate change through the application of conditional incentives for protection and enhancement of the carbon sequestration functions of forests. Adding a plus to become "REDD+", the concept goes beyond deforestation and forest degradation, and includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. Since its inception, REDD+ has been evolving and progressing while serving as a broad platform for a wide range of actors to pursue their own ideas and goals [1]. Currently, there are more than 300 REDD+ initiatives taking place in 47 countries [2]. However, REDD+ implementation at the national level has been slower than expected and political economic factors (i.e., institutions; interests; ideas and information [3]) are perhaps the biggest barriers to implementation [4]. A recent review of multi-national REDD+ studies suggested that REDD+ should further promote and support transformational change [5]. The Paris Agreement in 2015 was considered a major step forward in providing specific reference to the need to invest in efforts to reduce deforestation, sustainably manage forests, and enhance forest carbon stocks. The Agreement is expected to send strong signals to different actors across multiple landscapes and positively stimulate new policies and the provision of finance for REDD+ initiatives and sustainable forest management around the globe [6].

According to Ostrom [7], centralised governance is unlikely to effectively tackle the challenges of climate change, with polycentric forms of governance instead more suited to facilitating the experimental efforts required at multiple levels to successfully address many climate change issues. In the context of REDD+, it was found that while polycentric governance may offer benefits for learning, it has not proven valuable for enabling REDD+ implementation on the ground, in the absence of a binding international agreement [8]. Since REDD+ governance involves a range of actors at different levels in specific and sometimes unique political structures, multilevel governance in REDD+ has been identified as a key challenge [9]. Earlier research suggested that REDD+ progress can be realized if REDD+ policies are consistent with good forest governance [10]. Specifically, high levels of policy inclusiveness and ownership are key elements in ensuring effective and equitable REDD+ policy design and success [11]. It was noted that national circumstances are key to progress in REDD+ readiness (i.e., developing effective national policies, capacity building, and implementing subnational projects). Despite this, there has been little focus on assessment of REDD+ performance in most countries in order to suggest improvements in policies or practice [12].

Since 2009, Vietnam has been at the forefront of REDD+ readiness, having received support from both FCPF (Forest Carbon Partnership Facility of the World Bank) and the joint UN-REDD program (UNDP, United Nations Development Programme; UNEP, United Nations Environment Programme; and FAO, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), with a total financial commitment of over 84 million USD [13]. Vietnam was one of the first countries to introduce a National REDD+ Action Program (NRAP) in 2012. By 2016, ten Provincial REDD+ Action Plans (PRAP) and 35 Site-based REDD+ Implementation Plans (SiRAP) had been developed and approved. These processes put an emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement, including with men and women from forest dependent communities [14]. In July 2016, the Participatory Self-Assessment of the REDD+ Readiness Package in Vietnam found that *"The approved NRAP fails to meet all expectations and requirements set out"* [15]. A number of challenges were identified in this report, including (i) weak inter-sectoral coordination and coordination with the private sector and civil society organizations, (ii) ineffective consultation and communications with ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups, and (iii) an incomplete REDD+ safeguard system. In terms of the sub-national REDD+ planning, PRAPs and SiRAPs have been formulated in the absence of a detailed NRAP, representing a challenge for implementation [14,16]. In November 2016, the country submitted the revised NRAP for the final approval from the Prime Minister. The revised version aims for a more inclusive approach and to provide more guidance on strategy and implementation during 2016–2020 period and a vision to 2030.

Vietnam is considered to have an authoritarian governance and political structure [17]. Due to its limited accessibility, London [17] claimed that *"Vietnam's politics are not widely understood"* and that they are complex and rapidly changing. However, this does not mean that it is not inclusive, and it has been argued that these "internally-inclusive" forms of participation in policy processes such as REDD+ are required for the resolution of the underlying conflicts and tensions amongst stakeholders that are evident in Vietnam [1]. If not managed carefully, the demands of donors and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (focused on a discourse on participation, benefit sharing, and tenure security) could upset this delicate internal balance and potentially undermine the development of Vietnam's national strategies for REDD+ and their implementation. Given the authoritarian structure, the Vietnamese government plays a dominating role in REDD+ discourse and, while this also may show the country's commitment to REDD+ implementation, there is a real need to engage with other political and institutional challenges associated with inclusion [18]. In an assessment of REDD+ Readiness in four countries (including Vietnam), different interpretations of participation between civil society and government were evident [12], and a more recent comparative study [19] (in this issue) indicated that non-state actors in Vietnam have had opportunities to participate actively in shaping REDD+ policy. However, these opportunities have tended to be available to those who can effect change rather than those affected by REDD+ policies.

This paper aims to explore how Vietnam's policy actors view REDD+ policy development and their influence in these processes. We were interested in understanding how the history of decision making in a "command and control" form of governance in Vietnam may affect the dynamics and approaches of different actors. We focused on the NRAP formulation process (2010–2012) at the national level policy domain and on Lam Dong Province as the only pilot province. Within this paper, REDD+ actors will refer to those who are involved in REDD+ policy formulation. It excludes indigenous people and local communities since most REDD+ policy development activities took place at the national level during this period (except for the pilot Free Prior Informed Consent exercise in Lam Dong Province). The study endeavours to develop new insights that could guide REDD+ actors in shaping climate change governance. The paper addresses three key research questions:

1. Who are the actors involved in REDD+ policy and what is their level of influence in the NRAP processes?
2. What are the factors shaping non-state actors' influence in REDD+?
3. What mechanisms and strategies might lead to better outcomes for REDD+ policy?

The paper will begin by providing framing of governance and policy-making. This is followed by a brief introduction to the history and development of civil society organizations in Vietnam and a description of the methods. Results are discussed in the context of concepts of collective action and social learning. The conclusion suggests a revitalization of REDD+ policy processes through changes to the interactions, tactics, and rhetoric of state and non-state actors in Vietnam.

1.1. Governance and Policy-Making

The term governance emerged during the 70s–80s, describing a broader concept that goes beyond actions of governments and states alone [20]. Notably, Foucault made a clear case that "good government" concerns more than just government by the state [21]. As reviewed by Knieling [22], governance therefore has an ambiguous nature, demonstrating the murky boundaries between state and society and its "complex reality". This paper uses Agrawal's definition of environmental governance as a starting point for analysis, in which political actors influence environmental outcomes within a set of regulatory processes, mechanisms, and an architecture of institutions and organizations [23]. Policy outcomes are framed as influence and changes in ideas, understandings, approaches, behaviors, strategies, policies, and legislations [24]. During the 1990s, in the context of globalization, there was considerable discussion about non-state governance, including the role of corporations and the market [25]. It is now widely recognized that governance systems involve the co-existence of, and interactions between, state and non-state actors, and that non-state governance is not independent from the state. Conventional approaches to understanding political outcomes have been challenged, with a new focus on the strong involvement and alternate approaches taken by non-governmental actors [20]. These forms of diversity of perspectives and strategies to handle controversies in policy-making are central in theories on collaborative governance [26] and networked governance [27]. Folke et al. [28] discussed adaptive governance systems in social-ecological systems and highlighted the importance of the processes of participation, collective action, and social learning. Reed et al. [29] defined social learning as a process that must: *"(1) demonstrate that a change in understanding has taken place in the individuals involved; (2) demonstrate that this change goes beyond the individual and becomes situated within wider social units or communities of practice; and (3) occur through social interactions and processes between actors within a social network"*. These key elements of social learning enable development of policies, which could be built upon various knowledge systems and experiences of teams and actor groups.

Policy-making can be seen as a complex and difficult process in which participation represents a powerful theme [30]. Arnstein's ladder of participation distinguishes different levels of participation in relation with power in the form of an eight rung framework. Here, relationships with publics range from consultation, manipulation, to control [31]. Though Arnstein highlights the multitudinous forms

of participation in policy-making, this framework tends to over-simplify the nature of involvement [32] and does not capture the diversity of forms of participation [33], or how participation might be progressed as a collective process among all stakeholders [34].

Since a policy arena is often populated with actors driven by diverse agendas, Mayer and Bass [35] assert that effective policy-making needs to engage with various actors and not just authorities and elites. It has also been observed that the focus of policy-making around particular policy themes may be altered with irregular policymaking patterns when participation of relevant supporting actors declines [36]. There has been great progress in participation in policy processes, with increasing links with actors that were "once, outsiders to policy-making" [30]. The involvement of different interests and actors is a central determinant for achieving consensus or resolving conflict within policy subsystems [37]. However, it could also cause opposition and delay and thus make centralized governance more attractive [38]. Literature on policy has been dominated by focus on "state-centric" analysis [39] but NGOs are now considered a vital part of policy landscape [40] and there is a need for more research on the practical role that NGOs can play in policy-making [41].

Roberts [24] defined policy as a *"set of principles and intentions used to guide decision making"*. However, decision making is also a part of policy-making and there is a dynamic relationship between the two. Decision making often takes place within complex systems and structures. For example, in democracies elected politicians are generally responsible for policy decisions, while policy proposals are typically prepared by civil servants.

Policy-making around REDD+ has encountered no exception to the strong involvement of NGOs. Driven by western liberal democratic principles of inclusiveness and representation in decision making, participation in REDD+ processes is receiving a high level of attention, and programs such as UN-REDD and FCPF have been tailored to enhance participation. Participation is considered necessary for sound REDD+ policies and good governance [42] and the argument has been that the more inclusive REDD+ policies processes are, the more room there should be for considering equity and reducing the risk of conflict among policy actors and stakeholders [11]. Researchers have emphasized the need to engage with REDD+ actors both vertically and horizontally [3,9]. Creating mechanisms and processes for participation of different stakeholders can be complex and resource intensive. On-the-ground experience suggests there is still a high level of variability in the extent and depth of participation in REDD+ processes and highlights the importance of taking national contexts and priorities into account in approaching REDD+ governance [12,43].

In this context, Vietnam is an interesting case. The country has a comprehensive set of laws and policies relevant to REDD+ implementation, including the Forest Protection and Development Law, the National Forest Development Strategy for 2006–2020; Decree 99 on Payment for Forest Environmental Services; the National Strategy on Climate Change; the National Green Growth Strategy; the National Strategy on Biodiversity Conservation toward 2020 and vision to 2030; and Decision 83 (Vietnam Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD)) on Sustainable Forest Management and Forest Certification Scheme. In June 2016, Vietnam's Prime Minister announced some significant new policies regarding forest management, targeting timber harvesting in natural forests and forest conversion.

However, Vietnam's political decision-making process is often described as either consensus-based or simply confusing and inexplicable. Officials in Vietnam do not necessarily know how decisions are made and who made them [44]. Participation in political, social, and economic arenas is a constitutional right, enshrined in the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance in 2007, but the political regime remains "solidly authoritarian" [17], with one-party and a highly internalised and autocratic decision making model. In 2013, the country revised its Constitution, which did not take into account calls for reform emerging from both within and outside the Party [17]. Within the REDD+ arena, government representatives dominated the processes, which raised concerns around inclusiveness and representation [45]. A policy analysis in six REDD+ countries found that the dominant REDD+ policy actors in Vietnam do not challenge business-as-usual discourses and the minority policy groups

tend to focus on environmental justice issues and ignore politico-economic drivers of deforestation and degradation [18]. In addition, the structure of REDD+ payments at the national level may create risks for centralization of forest governance and thus limited involvement of different stakeholders, particularly non-state actors and others at the local level [46]. In Vietnam, the REDD+ NRAP formulation process was initiated in 2010 with a consultancy commissioned by UN-REDD. The process was heavily criticised by the government (GOV), and its final product was ultimately considered a background document. The NRAP underwent further consultations and was finally approved by the GOV in 2012. Formulation of the National REDD+ Program was led by state actors, but offered some entry points to non-state actors to engage in determining the policy formulation process, its content and measures.

1.2. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Vietnam

Globalization and the rise of democratic governments are two factors that have triggered the dramatic expansion in size, scope, and capacity of civil society over the past few decades. With the emergence of new civil society actors, the boundaries between government and non-government sectors have become blurred and there has been considerable experimentation with the nature and structures of these organizations. This expansion of activity and the variety of forms of civil society organisations (CSOs) has been accompanied by their growing influence in shaping global public policy [47]. A study by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, evaluating their REDD+ support to CSOs in four countries, found that international NGOs have been directly involved in developing national REDD+ strategies. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, national NGO platforms were instrumental in national REDD+ strategy development [48].

It has been suggested that NGOs in Vietnam are "virtually non-existent" [49]. Others argue that the notion of civil society in Vietnam is based on Marxist-Leninist ideology [50,51] with western liberal concepts of society being of limited value in this context [52]. The country's complex history and regulatory environment mean that it is difficult to clearly define CSOs in Vietnam. A broader understanding of civil society is not yet fully part of mainstream political thinking. While the term "civil society organization" is not found in legal documents, the Vietnamese translation of NGO (*phi chinh phu*) indicates a risk of decreased government control and could potentially provoke suspicion from local authorities. Currently, it could be considered that there are four broad types of CSOs operating in Vietnam: mass organizations, professional associations, Vietnamese NGOs, and community-based organizations (CBOs) [53].

Since the first National Congress of the Communist Party in 1935, much consideration was given to the development of mass organizations [53]. However, CSOs that may have been active during the revolution against the French in 1945 were integrated into the state in 1954 [50]. Consequently, civil society in the context of the one party state system prior to the "Doi Moi" reforms in 1986 was weak and limited. In addition, public administration reform has led to an accountability system within state institutions with a limited role for, or engagement of, non-state actors [54]. Since the 1990s, with normalization of relations with the USA and the presence of international development agencies, CSOs have flourished. By the early 2000s, scholars observed extended discussions on CSOs in the media and less state repression. There has been an increase in the number and diversity of these organizations, with 364 associations registered at the national level, despite incomplete legal structures [53]. Reviewing contemporary literature over the past two decades on Vietnam civil society, particularly the critical areas of environmental governance and anti-China demonstrations, Bui [55] observed a certain level of endorsement and tolerance (of CSOs) by the party state "*to fill a gap in the governance network*". Well-Dang [56] claimed that there lies a "*vibrant reality of civil society*", which exerts significant political influence. It is, however, unclear if influence is achieved either because of, or despite the existing political system [57].

Despite recent changes, there are still limitations on the capacity of CSOs to engage in key areas of policy, and CSOs are still "*deeply entangled with each other and the state*" [50]. CSOs engage in some forms

of advocacy, but within bounds set by state authorities and, according to the 2005–2006 "Civil Society Index" study (CSI), little effort has been channelled to policy advocacy [58]. CSOs are faced with challenges in penetrating policy processes, given the ideological hegemony exercised by the state [55].

Given the distinctive nature and history of Vietnamese CSOs, their entangled relationship with state and constrained engagement in policy advocacy, it is important to study the role that local and international CSOs can play to enhance policy processes and outcomes in the contemporary context of Vietnam.

2. Research Methods

This study used a combination of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The interviews and surveys were conducted within the framework of the Module 1 (M1) and Module 2 (M2) of the Global Comparative Study (GCS) on REDD+ by the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). M1 has a focus on REDD+ policies and processes analysis. M2 observes and documents the implementation of REDD+ project activities and their impacts.

Analysis of policy documents is an important part of policy study, although it cannot give a complete picture of policy development [35]. The documents used for analysis included government policies, strategic plans, and evaluation reports (from both GOV and non-GOV sources) in the field of sustainable development, forestry, and climate change. The study adopted steps for document analysis by Mayers and Bass [35], investigating the political context where national REDD+ strategies developed and obtaining background information, prior to conducting interviews. The researchers were aware of potential issues from using official documents (i.e., credibility) to construct reality. However, these documents could also be interesting, precisely because of the biases they could reveal [59]. In-depth interviews were conducted with 81 actors, classified as state (including media, research institutes, representatives from provincial, district, and communal governments) and non-state agencies (UN agencies, international and domestic NGOs, and private sector). Seventy percent of the total respondents were state actors and almost half of them were directly involved in policy-making at national and subnational levels. The interview was structured around four sections with 13 questions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min and in person (with the exception of a few conducted via phone calls and follow-up emails). In the first set of questions, the respondents were asked to describe their organizational interests and activities in REDD+. The second section aimed to explore the respondent's perception on key challenges and opportunities for REDD+ implementation in Vietnam. The third section asked the respondents to comment on the NRAP consultation processes. Finally, they were asked to provide policy assessments of REDD+ outcomes (i.e., policy impact including emissions/removals; livelihoods; biodiversity; administrative and technical capacity [45]) in terms of effectiveness, cost-efficiency, equity, and other co-benefits. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis using the NVivo 10 software package (2012) to facilitate the process of coding and identifying data patterns and themes (i.e., challenges around REDD+ consultation processes), and generating theory. Data was also collected via empirical participatory observations in policy events including workshops, meetings, and technical working groups' dialogues over the course of four years (2010–2014). In many cases, the researcher was an overt full member of the event/activity where the status was known. In other cases, the researcher assumed the role of a participating observer.

3. Results

3.1. Who Are the Actors Involved in REDD+ Policy Processes?

The Vietnam REDD+ policy landscape is structured according to three levels of policymaking, coordination, and implementation (Figure 1). The National REDD+ Steering Committee is the ultimate policy-making body chaired by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) Minister and constituted by members from various ministries. Immediately under the REDD+ Committee is the Vietnam REDD+ office overseeing all REDD+ activities. In 2010, a MARD ministerial decision

to establish the REDD+ Network effectively "invited" NGOs to participate in REDD+. In the NRAP in 2012, the language changed: "non-governmental organizations are requested to participate in activities relating to the Program" [60]. The Vietnam REDD+ network started with members from 12 organizations (four government and eight international agencies and NGOs) in 2009, and has expanded to include 200 individuals from 56 organizations. The implementation level is comprised of six sub technical working groups (STWGs) in the areas of governance, private sector engagement, Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV), local implementation, and REDD+ financing benefit distribution system and safeguards, which are chaired by both state and non-state agencies. The composition of STWGs is diverse with participation of new stakeholders, beyond the list provided in the MARD decision for STWGs establishment. According to UN-REDD, REDD+ is the first government programme in Vietnam that has involved civil society organizations and NGOs to such an extent in decision-making processes [61]. The STWGs were active during 2010–2013 and contributed to a number of key technical documents for REDD+ development in Vietnam. In 2014, STWGs were largely inactive due to the unclear objectives and outcomes, and lack of capacity to leverage policy impacts [62]. Recently, concerted efforts to revitalize the STWGs have been observed. Some working groups (i.e., governance) are more active than others (Personal communications with UN-REDD professional staff).
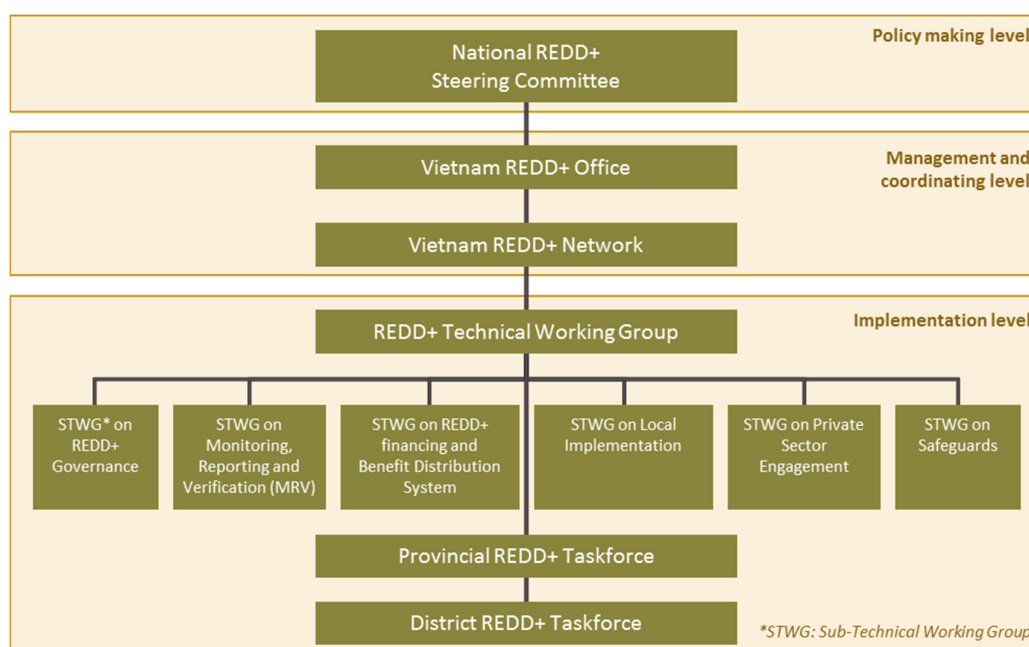

Figure 1. Vietnam REDD+ Institutional Arrangement (updated from the Vietnam REDD+ Website [63]). REDD+, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation; STWG, sub technical working group.

REDD+ actors were largely from forestry and development organizations. Almost 47% of non-state actors considered the main reason for their organizations' involvement in REDD+ was to align their organizational goals with REDD+ themes. Another 34% of the respondents considered their REDD+ involvement was initiated due to the possible linkages with their existing operational programs.

The respondents' organizational mandates and their REDD+ objectives were largely compatible and could be divided into three major categories (Figure 2): (i) policy development, (ii) capacity building, and (iii) project implementation (i.e., forestry and development). Approximately 50% of the interviewed non-state organizations were delivering projects/programs. Among the organizations with policy development mandate (i.e., 31% of the total), only a small number of actors mentioned work around improving legal framework and developing new policies. Overall, respondents did

not clearly mention their roles in REDD+ policy development, except for one respondent from a Vietnamese NGO that used the term "*policy advocacy*". The phrase "*we support the government*" was the most frequent reference in the responses to this question. This support was being delivered in the forms of project design, demonstration of best practices, and thematic policy advice. Respondents from the international organizations used terms such as "*behind-the-scene assistance*" with a less assertive position in relation to influence "*we hope . . .* " and putting an emphasis on "*respecting what the GOV wants and supporting the GOV's position*".
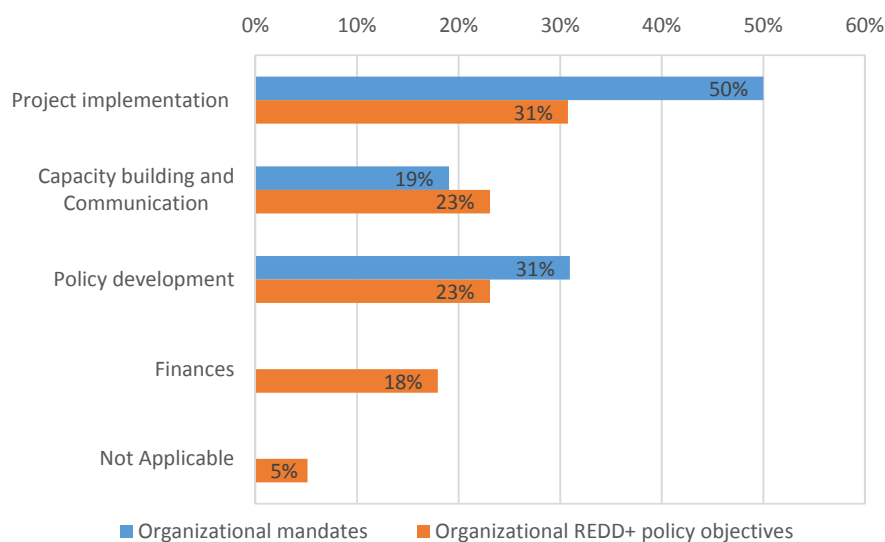

Figure 2. Organizational mandates and REDD+ objectives of non-state organizations.

In summary, REDD+ actors were mainly from the forestry sector or development agencies with a stronger focus on service delivery and implementation than policy development or advocacy. Their involvement in REDD+ activities was driven by the commonality between REDD+ and their existing mandates. Many were seeking opportunities to advance their organizational mandates through influencing the design and implementation of REDD+, and generally framed their organizational objectives for REDD+ around giving support to the government.

### 3.2. How Do Actors View Their Influence in the NRAP Processes?

REDD+ actors' views on the NRAP consultation process were grouped under two categories, negative and positive (Table 1). Views from state and non-state actors were fairly consistent. There were slightly more people in both groups who felt negatively about this process. Since data collection was carried out during the early phase of NRAP formulation, there were some respondents who were not aware of this process (i.e., 22% of state and 17% of non-state actors). A group of respondents did not clearly express a view, but provided general comments towards the process.

Respondents with positive views considered the REDD+ Network as an effective consultation forum and acknowledged the openness of the whole process. Within the negative category, the majority of references (i.e., 76%) remarked on the limited participation, top-down approach, and ineffective mechanisms, indicating the absence of clear goals and poor communication. Key stakeholders from the international REDD+ community were dissatisfied with the limited knowledge about how this formulation and approval processes evolved. Respondents from NGOs were frustrated with the ways UN-REDD "*dominated the consultation process*", and the state's tokenistic effort to seek inputs, claiming that "*asking for comments on already written drafts is not sufficient*". There is also disagreement and discontent among the NGOs over who is more connected and has influence. One respondent expressed: "*Those big NGOs that work closely with the GOV know what the GOV wants and together they determine the themes*".

Table 1. REDD+ actors' views on National REDD+ Action Program (NRAP) consultation processes.

Category	Expressed Themes	State Actors (*n* = 56) (%)	Non- State Actors (*n* = 25) (%)
Negative views	Limited participation and top down approach Ineffective mechanisms Lack of coordination and inadequate information sharing Absence of government (GOV) leadership	32	33
Positive views	Awareness raising and interesting debates via numerous workshops Open to various stakeholders REDD+ Network as an effective mechanism for consultation	30	30
Respondents do not know	Not aware of the process	22	17
Other comments	Neutrality is necessary A better mechanism is required Roles of REDD+ network, civil society organisations (CSOs,) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to be strengthened and empowered Clear goals, specific agendas, and creative approach.	16	20

While the NRAP consultation process was subject to a range of criticisms, more than 50% of the respondents in both state and non-state sectors felt that the claims and positions of their organizations were considered seriously during the decision-making process (Figure 3). These respondents appreciate the GOV's "*open-mindedness*" and the fact that "*the GOV listens*". Many among the 20% of the non-state actors and 16% state actors who did not think that their organizations had any influence on REDD+ process cited the absence of effective mechanisms and channels to approach/influence the GOV. Some respondents seriously doubted that their voices were heard, pointing to the GOV's limited capacity and resources to process their recommendations. There was a number of people (i.e., 24% of non-state and 31% of state actors), who did not articulate a view on the influence. It is interesting that there were more state than non-state actors within this category. These respondents may be (i) those who were involved in the process but unsure about the outcomes, (ii) those who were not directly involved in the process, and hence unable to give concrete answers, and (iii) those who did not want to comment.
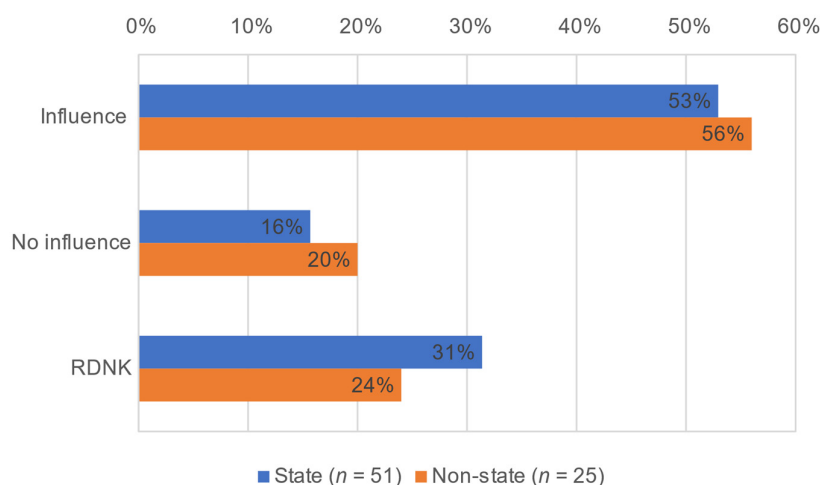
Figure 3. Organizational influence on REDD+ decision making process.

In short, the interviewees indicated that there is a lot of room for improvement around the NRAP formulation process. Both state and non-state actors pointed to the absence of a clear goal and effective mechanisms for consultations, which ultimately led to limited participation. However, a level of increasing openness in REDD+ policy-making was also observed.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. What Are Factors Shaping Non-State Actors' Influence in REDD+ Policy Processes?

From the analysis in this study, there were two factors that hamper Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) effectively influencing REDD+ policy processes: (i) organizational inertia resulting from the long history of entanglement with the state and (ii) limited practical experience in policy work and constrained engagement with policy processes.

Driving and restraining forces that may have shaped REDD+ actors' influence in policy processes were analysed in the context of four factors—namely: (i) strong REDD+ momentum at the global level, which has resulted in the Prime Minister's decision to develop a REDD+ National Program in 2010; (ii) available resources (finances and time) allowed for NRAP formulation; (iii) a shift towards more open policy-making within REDD+; and (iv) the contemporary change of government's views towards CSOs that endorses them as participants in a new form of governance (Figure 4).
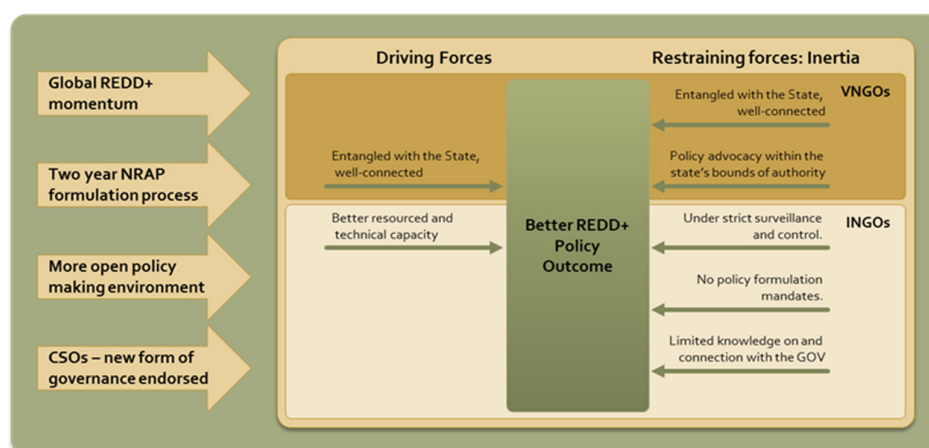

Figure 4. Force Field Analysis of Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs) in Vietnam REDD+ policy arena.

The long history of "democratic centralism" under Marxist-Leninist philosophy has shaped Vietnamese decision-making culture. Members of the Communist Party are required to give full attention to effective implementation of decisions and there are potentially significant negative consequences if a person attempts to question and criticize the decisions made [64]. This focus on implementation was partly shaped by the pressure and expectations from REDD+ donors on Vietnam as one of the first UN-REDD and FCPF countries to deliver and set an example for REDD+ globally. Others have identified that consultations on development and implementation of REDD+ in Vietnam have often been inadequate due to pressures (i.e., time, donor's priorities, and cost) on the intermediaries carrying out the consultation [65].

Bui [55] considered that "*Vietnamese NGOs are not as well connected and organized as in many other countries*". This is perhaps true when VNGO's operations are examined from the viewpoints of resource mobilization, partnership building, or connection with local constituencies. However, domestic NGOs in Vietnam are distinctively characterized by their entanglement with the state both on administrative and operational levels, so in effect, they are very well connected. This leads to a lack of autonomy that may be considered inconsistent with western theories of civil society, but which may

actually give them more power and influence within Vietnamese decision making. A small number of newly-established local NGOs have used different channels (personal connections or relationships) to influence policy-making at a higher level, but their contribution is still ad hoc. Hannah [52] cited VNGOs' access to "*political knowledge elite*" with intimate familiarity with the rules, procedures, and relationships with GOV staff as enabling stronger participation in policy. This type of "*mutual colonization*" (between state and VNGOs) is a successful tactic that VNGOs are employing to achieve social and political goals [52], but this process has also bred a level of organizational inertia because of their strong entanglement. For example, VNGOs were well-represented in and sometimes chaired the STWGs. However, this representation did not give them a strong weight in REDD+ decision making. In general, VNGOs are still considered by the government as service providers with little real agency, and thus less influence. For example, a respondent from a VNGO noted: "[the] *GOV has a narrow band of interest in what VNGOs have to say*".

Despite the authoritarian policy environment, consultation for policy formulation is not new in Vietnam's forestry sector. While policy makers may have different ideas on consultation, for example, one key REDD+ policy maker in MARD noted: "*Vietnam cannot conduct consultations in the same way as other countries*", they are also willing to tailor the approach for REDD+. The NRAP formulation process was fully funded by the UN-REDD program and took place over the course of two years. While there was an increasing level of openness with participation of more non-state actors, criticism and dissatisfaction with NRAP processes was also evident. There was very little action to improve the NRAP formulation process, despite the more open policy environment and the resources available for REDD+ policy-making. It was evident that there was a stronger focus on implementation than formulation of policies (Figure 2).

The situation is different for international NGOs (INGOs) and organizations. These are often financially resourced by Western donors, who consider the involvement of civil society organisations as a key ingredient in promoting good governance [66]. These organizations are active in REDD+ and making serious efforts to work in collaboration with the state in the area of policy advocacy. However, this focus and approach to policy advocacy is influenced by their history and operations in Vietnam, which has occurred under cumbersome registration, approval procedures, and relatively strict surveillance. The perception of the political system as monolithic and authoritarian is common and has thus created another type of inertia. While these INGOs are staffed with and sometimes headed by Vietnamese nationals, there seems to be a gap between their notion of CSOs, their perception of political systems, and the dynamic political realities. In a forum for CSO in 2010, a senior GOV representative stated "*INGOs do not understand how GOV works*". This observation was consistent with the views of REDD+ policy makers interviewed for this study.

Ultimately, good policy process is more likely to result in positive policy outcomes. It is important that policy actors understand politics and know how to handle policy processes strategically. In this context, political intelligence can be both a benefit and a disadvantage for both VNGOs and INGOs in different ways. VNGOs have strong state connections that may facilitate their local operations and manoeuvring through the system. INGOs can plead ignorance of internal politics while challenging the state on sensitive issues.

4.2. Mechanisms and Strategies to Enhance REDD+ Policy Processes

Policy revitalisation is "*recognising and unblocking counterproductive patterns in policy processes*", noting that policy actors are caught in and often not aware of these "*stagnated patterns*" [38]. This study shows that REDD+ state and non-state actors are preoccupied with discussions on highly technical issues—finding solutions for their own operational issues and pursuing their own agendas. Similar patterns were found in another study, where Vietnam's REDD+ actors relied extensively on scientific and technical justifications to promote REDD+ discourse [67]. The symptom of policy stagnation here is manifested in the absence of open dialogues on how NRAP formulation process should take place to allow for different views and innovative ideas while seeking common goals and securing

commitments. Neither state nor non-state actors questioned the absence of these open dialogues which, in a way, has undermined their chances to achieve positive outcomes. In conceptualizing the current dynamics in natural resource management, Carr [32] found that "top-down" and "bottom-up" focuses do not hold much value and called for a "middle ground" where vertical and horizontal links are sought. We argue that REDD+ policy processes in Vietnam need to be revitalized, starting with REDD+ actors' recognition of the causes and patterns of policy stagnation, and creation of this "middle ground" to nurture political intelligence, new ideas, linkages, and eventually enhance social learning. Wells-Dang [68] suggested that CSOs in Vietnam need to unite and employ a diversity of strategies and tactics to be effective. In the political context of Vietnam, collective action could offer ways to achieve these.

Vietnamese history has consistently shown that collective actions have been considered the key elements to success in response to natural disasters or foreign invasions [69]. The Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party in 1986 reaffirmed that "*the government is the tool for the country's socialist collective mastery*". Ensuring high levels of consensus and striving for solidarity and collective action are the fundamental premises in official Communist Party documents and are strongly reflected in decision-making processes.

VNGOs and INGOs in Vietnam's REDD+ arena could overcome inertia associated with their history and close ties to government by forming strong alliances between the groups active within and beyond REDD+ networks. This requires a commitment to seek solutions, the right set of skills to facilitate stronger networking, developing "action maps" to explore dynamics, learning how mutual actions may reinforce each other, and unlocking learning opportunities [70].

As things stand, the prospect of a broad alliance forming via collective action is not promising. The STWGs generally focus on technical issues and the REDD+ focal ministry does not show a great deal of initiative and lacks experience in dealing with external stakeholders (for example, in the private sector). There is also a disconnect between the REDD+ Steering Committee and the STWGs. The feedback loops between these two, which are key to building knowledge and effective policy-making, are absent.

If Vietnam wants to take concrete steps towards implementing REDD+ at a wider scale, both state and non-state actors need to pause from implementation and switch attention to reflect and discuss how to revitalize current policy processes. Specifically, local NGOs and international organizations need to re-evaluate their strategies and consider the possible impact of collective power in order to aim for more fundamental changes. The room to "manoeuver" and improve policy designs may not be as limited as people think. The challenge remains to identify where this room is located and the entry points for policy influence. While MARD may be inclined to employ a limited range of traditional consultation processes, REDD+ can potentially provide new learning opportunities for both state and non-state organisations.

Beutz [71] suggested that a functional democracy for a one-party state may need two elements of (i) accountability and (ii) openness. In Vietnam, vertical accountability has declined and citizen participation at the local level remains limited compared to 2011 [72]. Currently, there is public outcry for a more transparent and accountable political system, manifested via the visible crisis around recent environmental disasters and the demonstrations against Chinese occupation of the South China Sea [73]. Taking this wider political context into account, REDD+ actors need to strive for accountability and legitimacy. This level of increasing openness experienced in the REDD+ policy process may serve as a platform for further pursuing accountability. In addition, the proposed draft NRAP institutional arrangements will position the National REDD+ Steering Committee under the chairmanship of a Deputy Prime Minister, with strengthened mechanisms for accountability. We suggest that both the "policy community" (REDD+ Steering Committee) and "epistemic community" (i.e., a knowledge-based network of experts, including Vietnamese STWGs and members of the REDD+ network that assists policy makers to identify interests, frame the issues, and develop specific policies [74]) needs to enhance their interactions and reinforce their sense of collective accountability

to achieve better policy outcomes. If the state outsources certain functions to escape scrutiny [20], the non-state actors have the chance to work collectively, treating REDD+ policy processes as a social learning process, in which each sector is held accountable by the other.

5. Conclusions

Despite the rhetoric of more open policy-making for REDD+ in Vietnam, this study found that the process is still far from inclusive and does not provide a strong basis for addressing key policy objectives. While REDD+ policy is progressing from the 'readiness' phase to create a more inclusive and dynamic strategy, without revitalization of policy processes there are risks in the coming phase of the NRAP of little substantive policy development and limited incorporation of different interests, resulting in policy that does not clearly address the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation in Vietnam.

Due to their history of development and often close association with the state, non-state actors and organisations are still on the periphery of decision making regarding REDD+, or they occupy "safe" positions that align with current government policies. This results in a high level of policy inertia, with few voices arguing for significant change.

By acting collectively and moving beyond their "comfort zones" as service providers and intermediaries, both Vietnamese and international NGOs could overcome this inertia and push for fundamental changes. These actors can extend beyond a limited thematic focus and aim for incorporating policies to support programs like REDD+ in a broader view of social change. Using their collective political intelligence, building a broad alliance via collective actions, and creating opportunities for social learning, where actors can share knowledge and experience and hold each other accountable, they can operate to bring about greater benefits from REDD+ for wider society and more focused policy on the key drivers of forest loss or restoration.

In the Vietnamese political system, room to "manoeuver" can be opened up with the right tactics. Policy makers in Vietnam are increasingly seeking better information and ideas on best practices from various actors in order to reinforce the ruling party's legitimacy. It is important for policy actors to recognize policy stagnation, understand its patterns and root causes, and find the right tactics for addressing it. REDD+ state actors should seek to expand and build extra-sectoral partnerships across multiple organisational boundaries, including those beyond the forestry sector.

The World Economic Forum claimed in 2013, "*Civil society's time has come*" [47]. Professor Dang Huu, president of the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies said in 2006: "*As the reform process moves forward, unique opportunities are created for Vietnamese policy and lawmakers to promote an enabling environment for the establishment and growth of non-state organizations*". This enabling environment can be created and facilitated through the joint actions of Vietnamese policy makers and non-state policy actors in REDD+ policy processes.

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Abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CIFOR	Center for International Forestry Research
CSI	Civil Society Index
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FCPF	Forest Carbon Partnership Facility of the World Bank
GCS	Global Comparative Study
GOV	Government
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
MARD	Vietnam Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MRV	Measurement, Reporting and Verification
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRAP	National REDD+ Action Program
RDKN	Respondent Does Not Know
REDD	Reducing Emissions From Deforestation and Forest Degradation
STWG	Sub-Technical Working Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
USA	United States of America
USD	US Dollar
VIC	Victoria
VNGO	Vietnam Non-Governmental Organization

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