Policy briefing

Rubber plantations, EIA and people's participation in Vietnam: from policy to practice

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Key findings

- The Dien Bien Rubber Company has planted 1,954 ha of rubber trees in the northwest of Vietnam that has dispossessed swidden fields and forest areas used by local communi-ties.
- The rubber plantations have also not provided the expected economic benefits since the cold temperatures during winter in Vietnam's northwest has stunted crop development and reduced latex production.
- The loss of farmland and forest areas have in particular weakened the daily livelihoods of ethnic women, female-headed households and girls in the local communities, such as their ability to freely collect non-timber forest products.
- Herbicide used in the rubber plantations to remove weeds is seeping into the local streams that have reportedly changed color. The contamination has affected the health of local people and livestock, with cases reported of rashes/itching, stomach aches and cancer symptoms; fish kills in ponds have also been reported.
- There is an urgent need for the government to reevaluate the suitability and effectiveness of the rubber plantation development plans in northwest Vietnam.

Vietnam is currently one of the world's leading exporter of natural rubber latex. However, in the northwest of Vietnam, the low winter temperatures have had adverse impacts on crop growth and latex production of the rubber trees. The expansion of rubber plantations has also encroached on forest areas that are directly used and managed by communities and individual households. The rubber plantations have resulted in the dispossession of their forest lands and swidden fields.

In 2015, 955,700 ha were planted to rubber in Vietnam. Decision No. 750/ QD – TTg of the Government of Vietnam originally intended to expand rubber plantation to another 115,000 ha resulting in rubber's expansion in several provinces. This decision was issued in 2009 and includes a development plan until 2015 and a vision to 2020. Son La and Dien Bien, provinces, respectively targeted 50,000 ha and 10,000 ha to be planted to rubber by 2020.

In the northwest region, in general, and Dien Bien, in particular, rubber development has been promoted from state to local levels (provinces and districts). The Dien Bien Rubber Company is an important actor in the growth of rubber in the

The Dien Bien Company was established in 2007 in Dien Bien Province under the Vietnam Rubber Group. The company is the owner of the project "Investment in 10,000 hectares of rubber development in Dien Bien", which was approved and implemented in 2008. The project area is located in the administrative boundaries of the 16 communes in 5 Dien Bien districts and Dien Bien city. The total land area of the project is 24,400 ha, of which 22,993 ha of land are suitable for rubber plantation, including 12,782 ha of cultivated land and 10,212 ha of productive forests and protect-ed forests.

province. It is involved in buying, processing and marketing of the latex.

The provincial government paid reclamation fees to households who gave land to the Dien Bien Rubber Company. In response, local authorities carried out information campaigns to muster support from local people for the rubber development program. But questions still remain whether the state rubber expansion policy is economically, scientifically and technologically appropriate and most importantly, whether it is environmentally suited for the northwest region. In Dien Bien, after half a decade of rubber plantations, local communities are questioning the rubber crop's suitability to the local climate and ecology, and its social and economic benefits for areas inhabited by ethnic minority people. An evaluation has yet to be undertaken of the yield, quality, and productivity of rubber crops in the northwest region. There is also no latex-processing plant in Dien Bien. Moreover, it is not clear if any of the plantation areas were properly evaluated by an environmental impact assessment (EIA) as stipulated by the Environmental Law of Vietnam.

The loss of land to rubber crops has had adverse impacts on local communities and women in particular. The ethnic women, female-headed households and girls who have been dependent on the swidden fields and forest areas for their livelihoods are becoming more dependent than ever on their husbands and sons who have better opportunities to earn more, since women – due to persistent patriarchal norms at the village level – are virtually excluded from wage labor outside of their community. The loss of the forests and fields are creating serious economic and livelihood impacts for the ethnic minority communities as they were dependent on them for their livelihoods. By surrendering their lands to rubber production, households are to receive a profit share of 10%of the net profit but by 30 November 2016 no contract has been signed yet with the company. Collecting non-timber forest products such as mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and medicinal plants were also disrupted when land was turned over to rubber production as households lost access to forest areas.

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A rubber plantation in Dien Bien province (Photo: CECAD)

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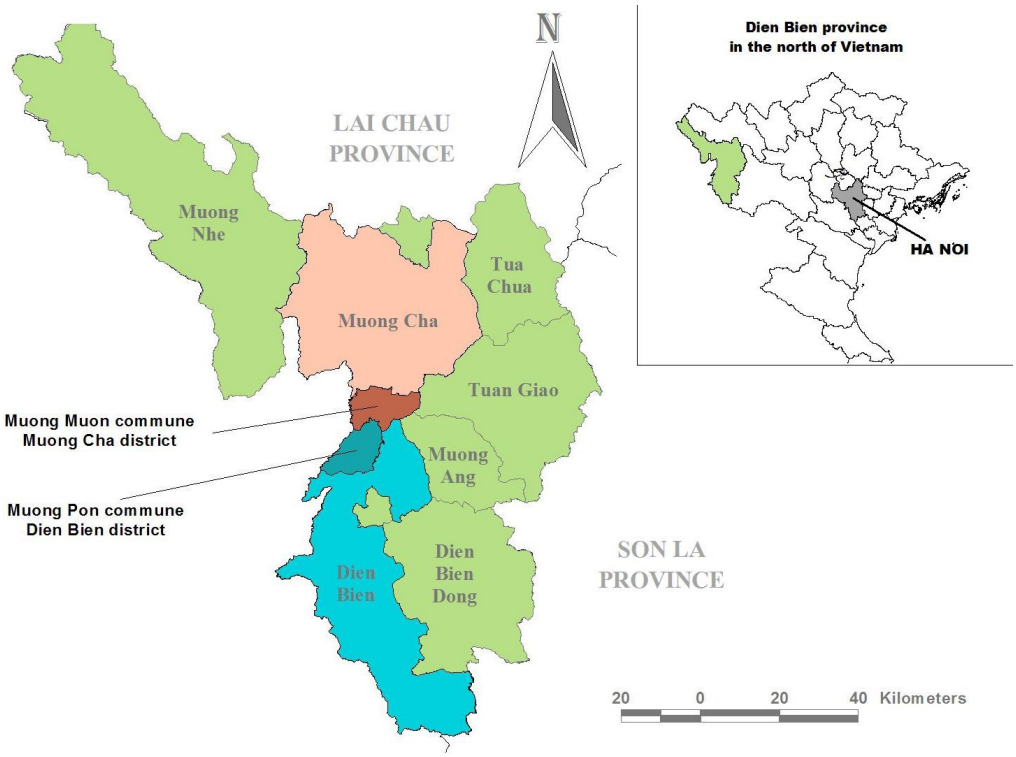
In addition, the influx of migrant labour and shops to support the rubber plantations has also resulted in a rise in prostitution, drugs, and gambling in the northwest region.

The residents of Dien Bien hope that rubber development can offer sustainable livelihoods for the local farmers. However, land continues to be taken away from them for rubber plantations while they do not get much economic benefits from low latex yields and rubber prices. Meanwhile, people are becoming more dependent on the rubber company while the falling market prices reduces their income. There is an urgent need for the government to reevaluate the suitability and effectiveness of the rubber plantation development plans in northwest Vietnam.

Recently, however, latex prices have gone down affecting the returns of rubber production to farmers. This has also created uncertainties about the future of rubber production in the province and whether the company will honor their promises to farmers and whether the government will invest in latex processing facility, an important part in rubber production.

Policy recommendations

- Land compensation should be carried out in a fair and transparent way so that local people, especially ethnic women, female-headed households and girls, do not lose but are able to improve their livelihoods.
- The Dien Bien Rubber Company should reduce its use of herbicides and also take responsibility to clean up the waterways and streams so that the health of local communities and their livestock is not adversely affected.
- Awareness of local people about water quality and water treatment needs to be increased.
- Environmental impact assessments should be carried out in a transparent way and the province's socio-economic plans should be built on development that is suited to the characteristics of the local ecosystem and environment.
- Social issues, such as equity, local participation, gender, and ethnicity should be taken into consideration while developing the state socio-economic policies to minimize adverse impacts on local and especially ethnic communities.



Map of Project Site

This policy brief was written based on the study "The effects of rubber plantation on land dispossession among smallholders in northwest of Vietnam: a case study from Dien Bien Province" conducted by the "Center for Environment and Community Assets Development (CECAD)" with funding from the USAID-Mekong Partnership for the Environment.

The study was carried out in two communes in Dien Bien province, particularly Muong Pon 2, Muong Pon Commune, Dien Bien District and Pung Giat 2, Muong Muon commune, Muong Cha district. These are selected because they are representative of the province. They roughly have the same size and are most dependent on swidden fields as a source of supplementary income. They both have been awarded "concessions". They are also close to the natural forests. The households in these communes were willing to participate in the research and such willingness was an important consideration as the research seeks to understand power dynamics around rubber plantation.





The study conducted key informant interviews with representatives of: Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), the Dien Bien Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE), Dien Bien Rubber Company, Dien Bien and Muong Cha District DARD and DONRE, People's Committees of Muong Pon and Muong Muon communes, village heads and elderly people in the village. It also carried out a survey of randomly selected 50 households.

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