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## Whose trees? Vietnam's five million hectare "reforestation" programme

Vietnam has a history of tree plantation programmes dating back to 1956. According to a report by Nguyen Ngoc Lung, Director of Vietnam's Forest Development Department, between 1956 and 1992 an area of over 1 million hectares was planted with trees. However survival rates have been poor and much of the wood produced has been exported as wood chips to Japan or Taiwan.

Yet the Vietnamese government is determined to increase the area of plantations in the country. In 1992, the government introduced Programme 327, aimed at "regreening the barren hills". The state-run Vietnam News Agency reports that between 1988 and 1994, 115,000 hectares per year were planted, a figure that increased to 193,000 hectares per year between 1995 and 1998. The cost to the state was high, and by 1998 Programme 327 had cost the government approximately US\$273 million. Three years earlier the Vietnamese government had unsuccessfully attempted to get World Bank funding for Programme 327.

In 1998, the World Bank hired forestry consultants Fortech to "describe, analyse and evaluate" Programme 327. Fortech's consultant pointed out that under the programme areas of natural forest in Vietnam had continued to decline and that fast-growing tree plantation programmes had largely failed. Among the problems listed by the consultant are a top down bureaucratic approach, land allocation that does not involve local people, poor silvicultural practices, the project was simply imposed on poor households without their input, and Vietnam has little land available for large scale tree plantations.

Perhaps as a result of this failure to secure World Bank funding the government proposed a new and bigger programme to replace Programme 327: the 5 Million Hectare Reforestation Programme (see WRM bulletin 14).

The programme's target is to increase the area of "forest" in the country to 14 million hectares by the year 2010. The target area --five million hectares-- came from French maps of 1943 which indicate that 43 per cent of Vietnam was then forested, five million hectares more than official figures in the mid-1990s when the programme was first dreamed up. The programme is expected to cost somewhere in the region of US\$2.5 billion with around US\$1.5 billion to come from international aid agencies. Of the five million hectares the government plans to designate one million hectares to plantations for pulp production.

Six months after the government approved the project at the 10th National Assembly, bilateral aid agencies agreed to support the programme during the December 1998 Consultative Group meeting in Paris (chaired by the World Bank). A year later, on 10 December 1999, a Memorandum of Agreement was signed between Le Huy Ngo, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and 15 representatives of international aid agencies.

Subsequently a "Joint Partnership Steering Committee" was established consisting of representatives of the Vietnamese government and international aid agencies. At the same time three Task Forces were established, which aim to investigate such things as forest policy, institutions, forest sector

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investment, assistance needs and financing strategy. The impacts of large scale tree monocultures on people and the environment will apparently not form part of the Task Forces' work.

The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) is one of the agencies involved in the discussions with the government about the 5 Million Hectare Reforestation Programme. Rolf Samuelsson, First Secretary at the Swedish Embassy in Hanoi, described SIDA's attitude to the project: "We think it's perhaps a rather squarishly top down plan type of programme, political agenda and so forth. But as Sweden is very much encouraging partnerships and sector-wide programme approaches we think this programme, for all its constraints, is a good starting point for a dialogue with the government on forestry issues."

SIDA has requested that the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in Indonesia gets involved in the negotiating process, on the grounds that there is no "critical mass of experts in Hanoi to help the ministry in working out these documents" according to Samuelsson.

Other agencies involved in the Joint Partnership Steering Committee include the Netherlands, Germany, UNDP and the World Bank. Some of these countries are already involved in funding or are planning other reforestation projects in Vietnam. For example the World Bank lists a US\$75 million project titled "Barren Hills Afforestation" on its May 2000 Monthly Operational Summary. Few details are available although the Bank has listed the project for several months. In March 1997, the Asian Development Bank approved an interest-free US\$33 million loan for a five-year Forestry Sector Project, which involves reforestation in mountainous areas in four provinces in Vietnam. Part of the project includes planting 12,000 hectares with fast-growing species. The consultant for this project is GFA (Gesellschaft für Agrarprojekte mbH) a German agriculture and forestry consulting company based in Hamburg.

While the aid agencies and the Vietnamese government discuss the future funding of projects the government has started planting. In 1999, 206,000 hectares of "forests" were planted, out of a target of 310,000 hectares. Over 5,000 hectares were planted by aerial seeding in the northwestern province of Lai Chau. The target for this year is for 403,000 hectares and a budget of approximately US\$25 million has been allocated.

The logic behind all this seems to be simply that trees are good. There appears to be little analysis about who or what the trees are for. One possibility is the pulp and paper industry, but in August 1999 Vietnam News reported that the Viet Nam National Paper Corporation had 18,000 tonnes of paper stockpiled --because of low consumption. Last year the Vietnam Paper Corporation was the biggest loss maker in the country with nine of its member companies reporting a loss for the year. A year earlier, Vietnam's wood suppliers were forced to stockpile timber because they had more wood than the country's pulp processors could handle (see WRM bulletin 15). In December 1999, the Hanoi-based newspaper Nhan Dan reported that farmers were selling their products as firewood in local markets rather than to the pulp and paper industry because of the lack of transportation and the "low economic value of these long-lasting trees".

While these examples do not give the whole picture, they do indicate that a further one million hectares of plantations to supply the pulp industry would not necessarily benefit either the pulp and paper industry or the farmers on whose land the trees are grown. Ambitious planting targets and the business of attracting funding are in danger of crowding out the potential of increasing the area of native forests and increasing the well-being of the rural population, for example through community forestry.

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Earlier this year the Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development indicated that the area to be planted might be reduced to three million hectares "to correspond to the existing land area suitable for afforestation and the national development plan" according to the Vietnam News Agency. Perhaps this will help free up both political and geographical space needed to involve communities in managing their forests, woodlands, fallows, grazing lands and fields.

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For more detailed analysis on plantations in Vietnam, see "Globalization of the pulp and paper industry" by the same author at

<http://www.wrm.org.uy/english/plantations/material/Vietnam/vietindex.htm>