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**From Legal Acts to Village Institutions
and Forest Use Practices**

Effects of Devolution in
the Central Highlands of Vietnam

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Abstract

Devolution that transfers authority over forests and forest management responsibility to local communities is often viewed as a promising solution for conservation and alleviation of rural poverty. There are now devolution policies for natural resource management in many countries around the world. Although devolution is on the increase, “*How does devolution work?*” is still a question that gains the interest of researchers.

This study tries to answer the above question by seeking to understand the effects of forest devolution on local forest institutions. The study also responds to the concerns of Vietnamese policy-makers about solutions for an effective forest management. The study approaches the issue of forest devolution in Vietnam’s Central Highland province Dak Lak from a property rights perspective. It examines the change in local property rights and governance structures. In the broader context, it hopes to empirically contribute to the literature on forest devolution. It also provides an approach for understanding community-based natural resource management with respect to forest devolution.

The study results point out that the impacts of devolution have facilitated the changes in local property rights and governance structures. Forest devolution, however, does not simply lead to corresponding changes in actual property rights and forest use practices. In addition, devolution cannot guarantee new governance structures that ensure forest conservation. The discrepancies between local and legal rights have been found as a key problem. A number of factors—including economic interventions, migration, and political issues—are also embedded in property relations. They influence the local communities’ forest use practices.

As regards to the theoretical aspects, effective community-based forest resource management is better understood by looking beyond the boundaries of an actor’s rights. It is more useful to examine property relationships on three distinctive levels: legal acts, village institutions, and forest use practices. Mechanisms of change in local institutions are often varied. Local communities may support changing existing institutions due to sufficiency base (cost-benefit calculation). Local institutional changes may also be determined by local cultures and the bargaining power of actors.