



Mowing the leaves of chit, a plant for making brooms. In Viet Nam, the livelihoods of about 30 percent of the population depend on natural resources.

## Building a Society that Coexists with the Forest



Dien Bien Province. Across the river, one can see mountains where the soil is exposed due to slash-and-burn agriculture.



**V**iet Nam focuses on forest rehabilitation as a national policy. However, they must pay attention to the lives of people who depend on forest resources. Therefore, Viet Nam has advanced projects to realize forestry management as well as improve livelihoods.

### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Viet Nam, which is located in the eastern part of the Indochinese Peninsula, has much in common with Japan. For example, they are both stretched out from north to south and rice farming flourishes in both countries. Furthermore, much of the land is covered by forests and both countries have a variety of climates and natural features, and diverse ecosystems. However, management of the rich Vietnamese nature, which has been Viet Nam's national pride, has largely become a cause of worry in recent years.

The forest area in Viet Nam had decreased to 28 percent of the country in 1995, due to converting forest land into agriculture and illegal logging. Although the forested land has recovered to over 40 percent today thanks to policies including tree-planting programs, much remains in order to achieve the government goal of recovering the rate to 45 percent by 2020.

One place needing urgent response is Dien Bien Province, which is located in northwestern Viet Nam. "There has been severe degradation and reduction of forests here; about 90 percent has been caused by slash-and-burn agriculture, according to a survey. A large amount of wood is used for food, income, houses and cooking," explained Baku Takahashi, a JICA expert who has been involved in environmental conservation in Viet Nam for a long time. People's

lives being excessively dependent on forest resource has become a major issue in promoting conservation, which is why Japan was asked to help. Takahashi said, "As seen in the *Satoyama* landscape, Japan has knowledge for protecting forests while the community makes good use of its resources. This knowledge can be used by the Vietnamese people." Then, the forest management project with community participation started in 2010 in cooperation with JICA.

The project has two important challenges. The first is improving the forest management. To start with this issue, the project clarified who had the responsibility in utilizing the forest which had been free for anyone before, by dividing the forest for each village. Furthermore, they established community-based patrol teams in each village to organize a system to regularly monitor the forest. Takahashi said, "We established a system that notifies the Forest Rangers of Dien Bien Province and enables the Rangers to investigate immediately when anyone notices any changes in the forest while they are on patrol. We introduced tablet PCs which have functions including GPS receivers and cameras in order to efficiently undertake the monitoring." The tablet PCs enable more accurate measurement with less omission, and cost reduction is also expected with no need of purchasing GPS receivers and cameras separately.

### TO ESCAPE FROM EXCESSIVE DEPENDENCY

The second challenge is to introduce alternative livelihood improvement method that replaces the work and activities of the past so that the local residents will be free of negative effects. The project introduced various means of livelihood such as livestock-raising and cultivation of mushrooms, vegetables and fruit trees. The project also introduced new facilities including biogas generators using livestock manure and improved cooking stoves.

Private companies in Japan also support this initiative. Hirotaka Sato of Sumitomo Forestry Co., Ltd., one such Japanese company, is facing difficulties while he strives to establish a business model with initiatives leading to forest conservation. Sato said, "I examined establishing a business combining planting fast growing trees and wood processing. However, I found that realizing such a business is difficult concerning cost-effectiveness. Now, I am focusing on



Administrative officers discussing with local residents and deciding the distribution of the forest to clarify the management.

coffee; how we market coffee as a product will be important."

Such initiatives have gradually produced results. In addition to having achieved the goal of the forest cover rate, a survey result also shows an increase in income from livestock-raising. Introducing biogas that can be used for cooking and improved stoves led to reducing the firewood used and has been effective for livelihood improvement and forest conservation. Dang Thi Thu Hien of the Sub-Department of Forestry, Dien Bien Province, who has promoted the initiative together since the beginning of the project development said, "It was hard for us to repeatedly explain the necessity of forestry management. However, our efforts were rewarded as local residents started to have awareness to protect the forest on their own."

Today, a new initiative has started to expand the experience in Dien Bien Province to other provinces in northwestern Viet Nam. "The forest in northwestern Viet Nam is extremely important as the country's watershed protection forest. It is important to establish a system that enables the local residents and the government administration to cooperate and promote sustainable forestry management," Takahashi said. Their challenge to recover the rich nature in Viet Nam has now reached a crucial moment.



**Left:** Planting projects at slash-and-burn agriculture sites where productivity had decreased.

**Right:** Terraced rice fields spread out in the forest; adequate management is also required to protect beautiful scenery.