

Productivity in Peace, Diversity in Dialogue

by Tran Thi Lanh

Vietnam is perhaps one of Southeast Asia's most politically resilient countries, having survived poverty and war while struggling for self-sufficiency and diversity. The country has significantly risen from the debris of the Vietnam War and the difficulties from the trade embargoes, becoming the world's leading producer of products such as rice and coffee.

Struggle in Settling in. The Bo Ngoi valley was assigned to the Xinh Mun people, who were displaced by development projects. But their resettlement was not easy. Not only was the terrain unfamiliar but the communities and developments surrounding the valley. Re-building their confidence was far more difficult than scaling up the mountain.

Photo courtesy of Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI).

However, Vietnam has yet to truly open the space for civil society and the media, which on several occasions proved to be effective instruments towards people's exercise of their human rights and access to resources, including land and culture.

The Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI) is among the many organisations who have managed to make some breakthroughs in community development, notwithstanding the rather limited and unclear parameters for non-government organisations.

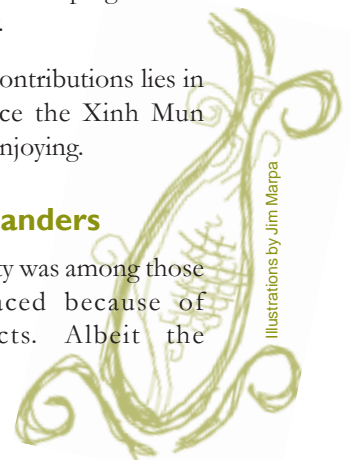
Mainly involved in policy lobbying, SPERI has been advocating equal rights to resource use and management; security of social

relations to avoid conflicts; and sustainability in resource use and secured living environmental quality. It has had a special focus on ethnic minorities, who have been asserting their claim over their ancestral lands in 16 highland provinces and coping with an expanding cash economy.

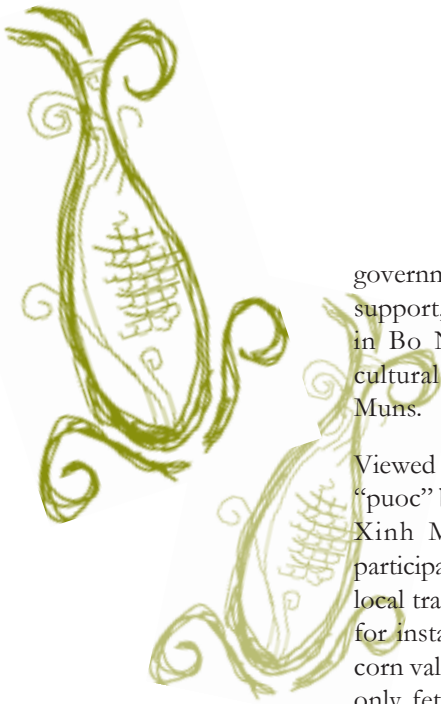
Among SPERI's lasting contributions lies in the peace and abundance the Xinh Mun community is currently enjoying.

Lowering the highlanders

The Xinh Mun community was among those who had been displaced because of developmental projects. Albeit the



Illustrations by Jim Marpa



government provided resettlement plans and support, it appears that the local commune in Bo Ngoi village was unaware of the cultural values and practices of the Xinh Muns.

Viewed as a backward people, referred to as “puoc” by the surrounding communities, the Xinh Muns had very limited political participation and became vulnerable to unfair local trade. In one of their barter exchanges for instance, the Xinh Muns’ 50 kg bag of corn valued at VND 40,000 (US\$2.34) could only fetch a small bag of glutamate which only cost VND 8,000 (US\$0.47). Such market behaviour further pushed the Xinh Mun people to exploit the forest.

Unschoolled in the laws of the lowlands, the 30-hectare land assigned for the Xinh Muns was soon occupied by Kinh households and farms. Although official resettlement documents declare the Xinh Mun community as the legal occupant of the valley, the people lacked the Land Use Rights Certificates (LURCs) which truly bestowed ownership. The situation later became ripe for conflicts.

Landing for dialogue

SPERI worked on major challenges, whose solution began with clear land policies and genuine multi-stakeholder dialogue.

By choosing the Xinh Mun community as an implementer of SPERI’s live-pilot on sustainable use and management of forestland resource in the Bo Ngoi village, the project demonstrated the community’s capacity as stewards of the environment and their rich and even progressive cultural heritage.

But the experience was also a learning process for SPERI. We did not only learn the language, tradition, customs and beliefs

of the Xinh Mun community but we actually practiced them.

Recognising the Xinh Mun’s community structure, we cooperated closely with the village elders and leaders while laying the ground for a fair future forum for all stakeholders: Xinh Mun, the local government and the Kinh.

SPERI also sought to build on the strengths of the Xinh Mun culture, one of these rests on the decisive role it accords to women. SPERI’s lobbying process started with Xinh Mun elderly woman, Vi Thi Dong, who eventually facilitated the community meetings which also revisited and recognised the skills, values and culture of the Xinh Muns. She also led the community’s application of skills that she acquired from outside, including those trainings on gardening, fencing, land use planning and household management. She became the community’s soul, leading the gradual improvement of the community structure, and thus, enhancing the feelings of self- confidence.

Wisdom of the Years.
The elder Vi Thi Dzong is the spiritual leader of the Xinh Mun community in Bo Ngoi village.

Photo courtesy of SPERI.



SPERI also sought to build on the strengths of the Xinh Mun culture, one of these rests on the decisive role it accords to women.

SPERI facilitated the dialogues with around 16 Kinh households which were occupying the land of the Xinh Mun people. Many compromises including financial compensations were made with the Kinh households, taking into account the crops they planted and grew.

Much later, the local government was invited in the project activities and saw for itself, the urgency of supporting the Xinh Mun community in legally reclaiming their land and reconsidering the development projects such as the hydroelectric dams planned for the valley.

Prejudice among the general public and policy makers on issues relating ethnic minority has also changed. The role of gender in resource use and management was also recognised.

Nursing the Land

A cinnamon nursery being looked after by Xinh Mun women.

Photo courtesy of SPERI



Liaising with civil society

SPERI's engagement in Bo Ngoi village has also formed part of the growing documentation of civil society's important role in community and political development. It reinforced the fact that the mandates of NGOs must be grounded in the community, rather than informed by the NGO's perceived needs of communities. It was a two-way process in learning to understand each other, effecting equality between ethnic minorities and the majority in the process of policy-making and implementation.

In the end, the Xinh Mun community was able to obtain their rights on land use and management for the whole Bo Ngoi valley. This development immediately affected eight other Xinh Mun and minority communities and their struggles for their land.

During the land titling, the names of Xinh Mun women were included in the LURCs, a move that soon brought greater self-confidence and respect within the women's households and community. This also paved the way for their better access to opportunities for self-development, especially those building on their local knowledge in using and managing natural resources. ■

Aside from founding SPERI, **Tran Thi Lanh** is among the pioneers of other Vietnam-based NGOs such as *Towards Ethnic Women*, *Centre for Human Ecology Studies of Highlands*, and the *Indigenous Knowledge Research and Development Centre*. She finished her doctorate in *Human Ecology* at Hanoi National University.

This article is based on her paper, "Sustainable Natural Resource Management for Xinh Mun Minority, Yen Chau District, Son La Province" (2007).