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Environmental and Social Index for Provincial REDD+ Planning and Implementation in Vietnam

The REDD+ Environmental and Social Index (RESI) is one of the first efforts to assess, measure, and compare local readiness for REDD+ implementation. Utilizing specific criteria and indicators, the RESI provides an accurate overview of local environmental, social, legal, and institutional conditions, and identifies advantages, challenges, and risks for REDD+ implementation in specific contexts. Moreover, the RESI was designed and developed as a REDD+ safeguard. Depending on assessment period (pre, during or post-REDD+ interventions), the RESI is especially useful for investors (governments, non-governmental organizations, donors, or private enterprises) when surveying and determining the best locations for REDD+ implementation, developing and integrating safeguards to reduce risks, as well as assessing future impacts of REDD+ interventions in Vietnam.



Introduction

Reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) is an international initiative emphasizing the role of forests in mitigating climate change. It aims to generate environmental and social benefits, including sustainable forest management, increase in forest carbon sequestration, and improvement of local livelihoods. However, many studies and discussions have demonstrated that REDD+ may also have potential risks due to changes in land use planning and the right to access resources; therefore, it may negatively affect local livelihoods, especially forest-dependent ethnic minority groups. During REDD+ implementation, the Cancun Principles and/or other voluntary standards guide the REDD+ process as well as the application of social and environmental safeguards. In Vietnam, in order to implement the National REDD+ Action Plan, the government requires that all provinces develop a Provincial REDD+ Action Plan (PRAP). However, there are no specific guidelines on identifying advantages or risks involved in the processes of choosing a location, planning, implementing, and monitoring. Therefore, a tool measuring local readiness in terms of policy and institutional setting, environmental and social advantages, as well as constraints in the forestry sector would assist policy makers and authorities in making more suitable and realistic REDD+ interventions.

In this context, the Provincial REDD+ Environmental and Social Index (RESI) was developed by the by People and Nature Reconciliation (PanNature) in collaboration with the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (CRES, Vietnam National University in Hanoi), and Tropenbos International in Vietnam (TBI), with technical support from Dr. Pamela McElwee (Rutgers University, USA). Developed from 2012 to 2015, this index assesses local **environmental and social conditions** and highlights particular advantages and potential risks in implementing REDD+ at the provincial level. Moreover, the RESI measures and compares a province's readiness in implementing eventual REDD+ projects and activities. Understanding a province's **readiness** is especially important for investors (governments, non-governmental organizations, or private companies) when surveying and determining the best locations to implement REDD+ as well as integrating safeguards to minimize potential risks.

For more details about RESI, please visit: www.nature.org.vn/resi

Participatory approach to RESI development

The RESI results from a participatory approach that included stakeholder consultations and field pilot projects. Based on general understandings of potential REDD+ risks, environmental and social safeguard principles in REDD+ implementation, as well as Vietnam's National REDD+ Action Plan, the RESI includes four components to measure provincial readiness for REDD+ implementation: local legislative and policy system; institutional setting for forestry activities; environmental condition; and social condition for REDD+ implementation. One of the first steps of creating the RESI was organizing a technical training to provide researchers with knowledge about assessment and monitoring indices, such as PCI (the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI)'s Provincial Competitiveness Index), PAPI (UNDP's Public Administration Performance Index), PGA (UN-REDD Program's Participatory Governance Assessments), and Quang Tri Provincial Sustainable Development Index. Next, a draft indicator framework was developed with details for each component, and approximately 40 experts and representatives from central and local forestry agencies, non-governmental organizations, and REDD+ projects provided feedback on the draft indicator framework during consultation workshops. The Vietnam REDD+ Network's Sub-Technical Working Group on Governance also commented on the draft. Based on the final, agreed upon indicator framework, the researchers developed questionnaires to collect data. The questionnaires were then tested in Lam Dong province by PanNature, CRES, TBI, Dr. Pamela McElwee, consulting provincial agencies (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Planning and Investment, Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Department of Forest Protection, Department of Forestry, Forest Protection and Development Fund, Department of Ethnic Minority Affairs, Women's Union, and Farmers' Union), district agencies (forest managing agencies, sub-department of forest protection), communal agencies (People's Committees), and village communities. Based on the testing results, a RESI toolkit – including an Indicator Framework and Questionnaires – was finalized and piloted in the four provinces of Dien Bien, Kon Tum, Son La, and Kien Giang.

The RESI measures local readiness and suitability of environmental and social conditions for REDD+ implementation based on the following four components:

- **Legislation and policy:** including indicators to assess the readiness of the legislative and policy foundation to support REDD+ implementation at the local level.

- **Institutional setting:** including indicators to assess the capability and readiness of the local institutional setting for forest protection and management for REDD+ implementation.
- **Environmental condition:** including indicators to *assess the* suitability of local environmental factors for REDD+ implementation.
- **Social condition:** including indicators to *assess the potential risks* of local social factors that could impact or result from REDD+ implementation.

The RESI toolkit consists of four components, 21 criteria, 72 indicators, and an assessment tool with 149 questions. Each answer is given a value between 0 and 100. All answers are counted to the final RESI provincial score, with the final score reflecting the average of all answer values.

Based on the final score, the local readiness for REDD+ implementation is categorized into to one of three groups:

1

Ready (final score: 100 – 67): the provinces in this group have relatively comprehensive conditions for REDD+ implementation in terms of legislation, policy, institution, organizational capacity, environment, and society.

2

Partially ready (final score: 66 – 34): the provinces in this group have some particular suitability but also limitations in legislative, policy, institutional, environmental, and social conditions for REDD+ implementation.

3

Not ready (final score: 33 – 0): the provinces in this group rank lowest because they do not yet possess the essential conditions for REDD+ implementation.



Pilot RESI assessment in Vietnam: Key results

The RESI and the assessment tool were tested in Lam Dong province, and then piloted in four provinces: Dien Bien, Kon Tum, Son La, and Kien Giang in July 2014.

The RESI **assessment results** reveal that:

- All of the four provinces **rank very low at partial ready or nearly not ready** for effective REDD+ implementation due to multiple limitations and potential risks, regardless of having no experience with REDD+ or PFES (Kien Giang), having experience with REDD+ implementation (Son La), having some experience with REDD+ (Kon Tum), or having a PRAP (Dien Bien).
- The biggest advantage of these four provinces for REDD+ implementation is the abundance of natural forests in each of the provinces. All of the pilot provinces have significant forest cover (Kon Tum: 65.15 percent, Son La: 44.6 percent, and Dien Bien: 40.2 percent), of which 90 percent is natural forests. Among the provinces, Kien Giang has a large area of mangrove forests, which are considered the forest type with the highest potential of carbon sequestration in tropical areas, and therefore, is a more competitive location for REDD+ selection. .
- The detailed assessment points out various strengths and weaknesses for each of the provinces. However, the most significant challenges for REDD+ implementation for all of the provinces include: the weak role of the forest economy; incomplete forest monitoring system; lack of transparency in information sharing and accountability; unclear and complicated system of rights to own, access, and benefit from the forest resource; and issues with full and meaningful participation of all stakeholders.



RESI assessment results

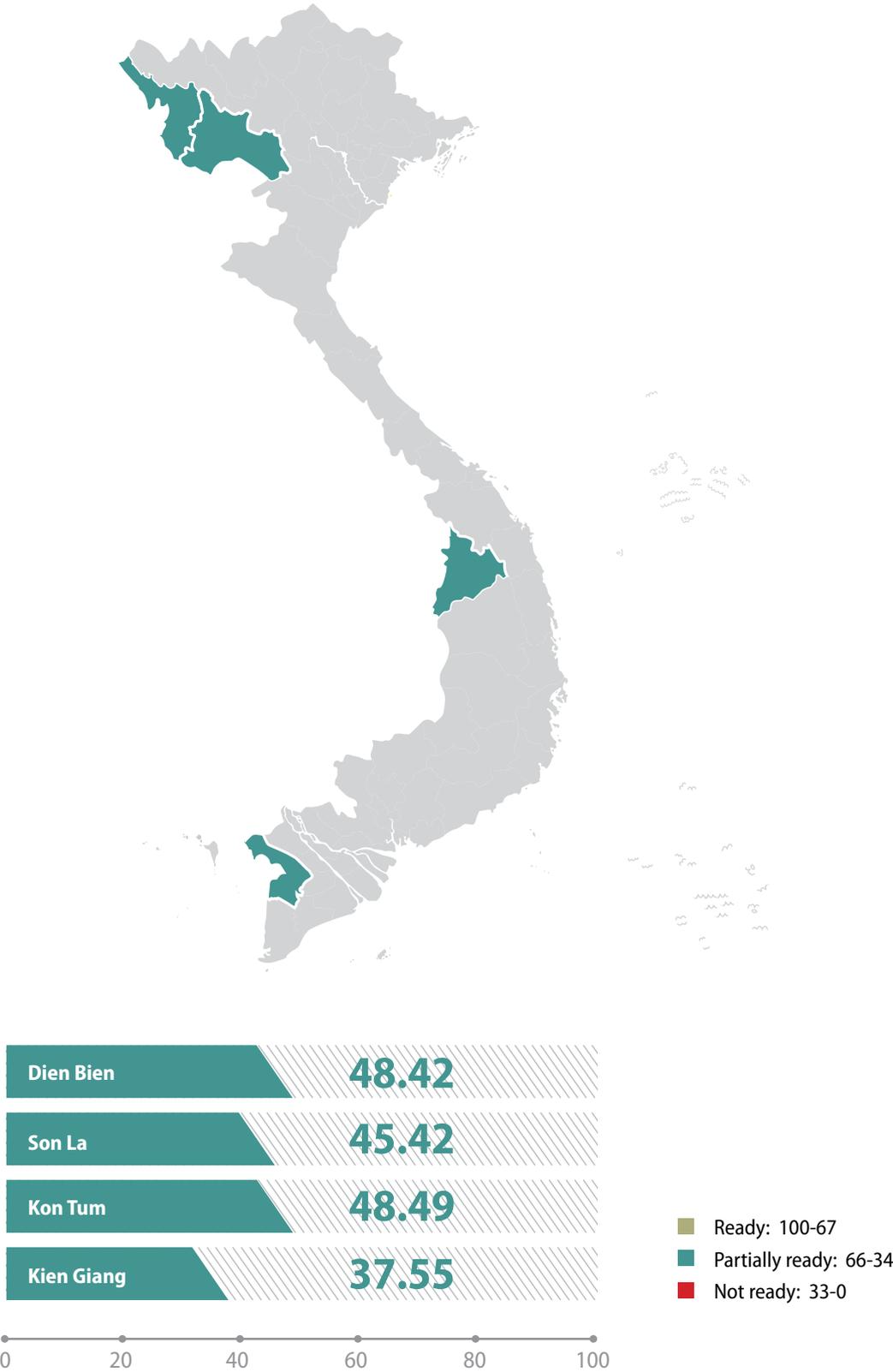


Figure 1 – Final provincial RESI scores



Figure 2 – Provincial RESI component scores



RESI: Practical implications and further development

The experience of developing, testing, and piloting the RESI has demonstrated various applications of this tool, as followed:

- Policy makers can consult the RESI assessment results when making decisions, forecasts, and plans to monitor and evaluate the prospects of REDD+ implementation at the local level.
- The process of the RESI assessment can help systematize information and provide useful inputs for developing a REDD+ action plan at the provincial level as well as develop safeguards that are suitable to a particular local context before implementing any REDD+ projects and activities.
- Based on the RESI assessment results, investors (international donors, governments, non-governmental organizations, or private investor) can compare the advantages of different provinces in order to choose those with the lowest opportunity costs and risks.

Furthermore, the detailed questionnaires that collect data for the designed criteria and indicators can identify and clarify specific advantages and disadvantages in implementing REDD+ at the provincial level. The assessment results can suggest changes, and ideas for capacity building in an effort to make the province more ready for REDD+ implementation.

In the specific context of Vietnam, the RESI is promising in actively contributing to the development of provincial REDD+ action plans, as part of the National REDD+ Action Plan during period 2016 – 2020. In addition, the RESI can help provide a REDD+ database to enhance technical capacity for local officials (and develop information as well as monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure environmental and social safety as expected in the National REDD+ Action Plan during period 2011 – 2020 (*Decision 799/2011/QĐ-TTg, date 27/06/2011*)).





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