

Multistakeholder participation in organising forest and farm smallholders:

Case study of Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative, Yen Bai Province, Viet Nam

Thi Thanh Thuy Le, Le Y Voan Vu, Jake Brunner, Sophie Grouwels, Ngoc Phuoc Duong, Tai Thang Pham



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Back cover photo: A sawmill workshop of Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative © VNFU

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List of acronyms

ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BMAC	Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative
CPC	Commune People's Committee
DARD	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FFF	Forest and Farm Facility
FFPO	Forest and Farm Producer Organisation
FPD	Forest Protection Department
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
FSC-CoC	FSC-Chain of Custody
FU	Farmer Union
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KfW	German Development Bank
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
NAFOCO	Nam Dinh Forest Products Joint Stock Company
PPC	Provincial People's Committee
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management
SWOT	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (analysis)
	A preliminary form of cooperative whereby a group of people registers
THT	their intention to form a cooperative with the commune government.
	THT is not legally recognised.
VNFOREST	Viet Nam Administration of Forestry
VNFU	Viet Nam Farmer Union

Foreword

The Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a partnership between Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and AgriCord, is a global program that is implemented in ten countries spread over Asia, Africa and Latin America and focuses on the strengthening of forest and farm producer organisations (FFPOs) as primary agents for climate resilience and improved livelihoods. In Viet Nam, the Viet Nam Farmer Union (VNFU) is the main partner implementing FFF in four provinces: Yen Bai, Bac Kan, Hoa Binh and Son La.

Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative (BMAC) in Yen Bai Province was one of the first FFPOs to receive support from FFF and VNFU. This case study of BMAC is a way to share experience with other FFPOs as they grow into sustainable forest businesses and help the government, research agencies, local farmers' organisations and businesses understand the process of organising smallholders, who should be involved, the types of support FFPOs need and success factors to expand the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) timber model. This report also shows the role of VNFU as an apex organisation connecting stakeholders, bringing the voice of FFPOs to policy makers and advocating favourable policies and implementation mechanisms for FFPOs and broader forestry sector development. In line with its mandate, VNFU played a key role in helping cooperatives sign contracts with wooden furniture companies, FSC training and other specialised tasks.

This case study also documents challenges that will need to be overcome if this model is to be replicated at scale.

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Because the case study was completed during Covid-19 lockdown, which limited face-to-face meetings, we look forward to receiving feedback from FFPOs and the broader public.

--VNFU/FFF team

Acknowledgements

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The authors had to rely on the support of Yen Bai Farmer Union at the provincial and communal level to arrange interviews by phone and email with relevant stakeholders. A special thanks to Mr Giang A Cau, chairman of Yen Bai Farmer Union; Mr Hoang Xuan Long, vice chairman of Yen Bai Farmer Union; Ms Ha Thi Lien Phuong, FFF facilitator in Yen Bai; Ms Nguyen Thi Hang, head of Phu Thinh Commune Farmer Union; and Mr Pham Quang Vuong, head of Thinh Hung Commune Farmer Union.

The study could not have been completed without the active participation and willingness to share information from leaders and members of Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative, especially Mr Phung Binh Minh, director of the cooperative. We also would like to thank Yen Bai Forest Protection Department, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Agriculture Extension Center, Yen Binh District forest rangers, Yen Binh District People's Committee, Phu Thinh Commune People's Committee, Yen Bai Bank for Social Policy, Cooperative Alliance, KfW 8 project management unit and Hoa Phat Forestry Joint Stock Company (hereafter, Hoa Phat) for spending time answering our questionnaires and joining in-depth interviews.

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Executive summary

Organising smallholders into producer groups is the key to help successfully commercialise their wood products. Yet sustaining the operation of such organisations is challenging. In Viet Nam in 2016–2018, there were 22,861 cooperatives registered nationwide, but only 61% of them were operational.

Engaging businesses to create value chains is necessary but not sufficient because businesses cannot afford to negotiate with thousands of households, and it takes time for people to build trust with each other.

While cooperatives, associations and other types of forest and farm producer organisations (FFPOs) are setup on a voluntary basis, a global review shows that the establishment of 77% of FFPOs was externally driven by government programs, NGO projects or at the request of business partners to sign contracts with legal bodies.

The case study of Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative (BMAC) in Yen Bai Province in northern Viet Nam shows that external actors in the value chain play important roles in providing market incentives, policy support and capacity building to sustain FFPOs. With such support and strong leadership, a group of 18 farmers in Lem Village, Phu Thinh Commune, Yen Binh District, Yen Bai Province, transformed itself from an informal group into BMAC, a registered cooperative owning a 60- hectare Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified plantation and an FSC Chain of Custody certified sawmill with a capacity of 700 m³/month.

The development of BMAC shows that the top-down approach in forming FFPOs should shift to a fully participatory approach. Only when there is a combination of strong internal governance, clear market incentives, policy support, private sector involvement including investments and/or finance and adequate external resources to give sufficient incubation time, the FFPO business will likely be successful.

I. Introduction

In 2020, Viet Nam ranked the first in ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), second in Asia and fifth in the world for wooden furniture exports with a total value of US\$ 13.23 billion up from US\$ 2.18 billion in 2006 (Long, 2021; Trieu et al., 2020). However, the annual volume of domestic timber is only 20.5 million m³ round wood equivalent (GSO, 2021), which is low given the 3.7 million hectares of planted production forest (MARD, 2021). A review of the Viet Nam Forestry Development Strategy 2006–2020 by Trieu et al. (2020) shows that while the country substantially increased total forest cover, it failed to achieve several forest “quality” targets. The area with sustainable forest management (SFM) certification accounted for only 3.3% of production forest area, while the target was 30%. The wooden furniture industry requires sawn logs above a certain diameter at breast height, but Viet Nam only produces 3–4 million m³ of logs of this size versus a target of 10 million m³. In fact, only 20% of timber is large enough for the wooden furniture sector; 80% is for woodchip processing (Trieu et al., 2020; Quang et al., 2018). The proportion of forestry workers receiving professional training was also very low: 8.54% versus a target of 50% (Trieu et al., 2020).

A major reason for the lack of progress is the fact that the timber supply chain is very fragmented: 1.4 million households manage about 3.15 million hectares of forest (Quang et al., 2018) who supply about 4,500 wood processing companies (Duyen, 2019). For Viet Nam to reduce timber imports and capture a higher proportion of the added value, there is a need to organise households into forest and farm producer organisations (FFPOs).

Organising smallholders in FFPOs has been shown to be a key step in commercialising their wood products (Hintz et al., 2021; FAO, 2017). When farmers form FFPOs, they benefit from economies of scale, increased bargaining power, reduced transaction costs, better market access and a joint voice to influence policy and other actors (Hintz et al., 2021; Forest and Farm Facility, 2020; Cavatassi et al., 2009). It also becomes practical to invest together in forest certification (Macqueen et al., 2014).

A global review of FFPOs by Hintz et al. in 2021 shows that 77% of FFPOs were established with external assistance from government programs, NGO projects or business partners that needed to sign contracts with legal bodies. External assistance is vital to encourage farmers to work together, help them understand the benefits of collective action and facilitate the operation of the FFPO.



Female workers at Binh Minh cooperative ©VNFU, 2019

The Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a partnership among Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Agricorn and implemented in Viet Nam by the Viet Nam Farmer Union (VNFU), is premised on the theory of change that strong, locally controlled FFPOs can influence local forest farm resources rights, market access, technical support, and national and global discourses on development goals. Since 2015, more than 1,000 smallholders have received support to obtain Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification for more than 7,000 hectares of acacia trees in Yen Binh District, Yen Bai Province.

Among FFPOs supported by FFF, Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative (BMAC) is of particular interest. From a spontaneous collective group of acacia growers in Lem Village who met occasionally, and whose members sold timber individually, with FFF and VNFU support, the group is now a registered cooperative with 18 members and owns 60 hectares of plantation forest and an FSC Chain of Custody (CoC) certified sawmill with a capacity of 700 m³/month.

BMAC sheds light on several issues facing Viet Nam's forestry sector, notably how to organise over one million smallholders and how to move from short-rotation acacia for woodchips to long-rotation FSC-certified acacia for furniture-grade timber. While previous studies focused on the linkage among actors in the timber value chain (Quang et al., 2018), this study documents a process of FFPO development and the role of VNFU and other actors who provide important business incubation services.

II. Methodology

This study was commissioned by FFF as part of its internal monitoring, evaluation and learning to better understand FFPOs. Semi-structured questionnaires were prepared for each stakeholder group: government officials, BMAC, farmers, businesses and VNFU. Due to a Covid-19 outbreak in May 2021, the authors could not visit the field sites (although main stakeholders are well known to them) and had to rely on phone interviews. This included a two-hour interview with the BMAC director to understand BMAC's history, current activities and services provided to its members, external support that it has received and the potential for long-rotation plantations.

Fifteen 30-minute interviews were arranged with BMAC members and farmers in Phu Thinh Commune where BMAC is located, and in Thinh Hung Commune, which has received support from FFF and Hoa Phat Company. Questionnaires were sent to 12 government agencies including the Yen Bai Forest Protection Department (FPD), Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Agriculture Extension Center, district forest rangers, Yen Binh District People's Committee, Phu Thinh Commune People's Committee (CPC), Yen Bai Bank for Social Policy, Cooperative Alliance, and Yen Bai provincial and communal farmer unions to get feedback on BMAC performance, prospects to upscale the model and progress implementing SFM and long-rotation timber plantation in the province.

We met representatives of the KfW 8 SFM project and the Bank of Social Policy to understand their roles in promoting the transition from short- to long-rotation acacia plantations. A two-hour meeting took place with the director of the Hoa Phat Forestry Joint Stock Company, an investor in BMAC and the largest buyer of FSC-certified timber in Yen Bai.

The study uses a framework developed by Macqueen et al. (2014) to assess BMAC's organisational development and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to its future development.

III. Binh Minh Agroforestry Cooperative history

BMAC is a cooperative of 18 households in Lem Village, Phu Thinh Commune, Yen Binh District, Yen Bai Province, in northern Viet Nam. Its members own 60 hectares of forest plantation and an FSC-CoC certified sawmill with a processing capacity of 700 m³/month. BMAC is managed by a board comprised of one director (Mr Phung Binh Minh, who has made the largest investment in BMAC), two deputy directors and one controller in line with the 2012 Law of Cooperatives. Its main products include acacia and FSC-certified acacia sawn logs, and the major customers are Hoa Phat (one of the largest timber processing companies in northern Viet Nam) and an IKEA supplier. In 2020, BMAC made a profit of 147.85 million Viet Nam Dong (VND; US\$ 6,406) and created 15–35 jobs for local people with daily wages from VND 230,000–270,000 (US\$ 1–11).

Though it was only registered as a cooperative in July 2017, its predecessor, the Lem Village acacia growers' group, was created in 2008 at the instigation of VNFU. Initially, the group had 15 families as members, including 6 female heads of households, and managed 57 hectares of forest. Members met from time to time to share information but sold timber individually, mostly to



*A meeting among members of Lem group and FFF project
©VNFU, 2016*

intermediaries. The group had no funds to invest in value-added processing, were in a weak bargaining position with the intermediaries and made low profits.

In 2014, FFF started work in Viet Nam with VNFU as the national implementing agency and chose to work with the Lem Village acacia group. Members attended training courses on market analysis and development, acacia plantation, wood processing techniques, facilitation skills and proposal writing. In August 2015, they formalised their group as a *Tổ hợp tác* (THT; collective group according to Decree 151/2007/ND-CP issued in October 2007), visited successful forestry businesses in northern and central Viet Nam, and met commune, district and provincial authorities to discuss their needs.

As a result of this exposure, trust was built, and the members agreed to start a business together. In May 2015, 7 of the 15 households contributed VND 30–200 million each to build an initial

capital of VND 500 million (US\$ 21,663)¹ to invest in a 400 m² sawmill. With the help of FFF's training, business connections and a small grant, the group carried out its own market research and reached out to local customers and big processing companies in Hanoi and elsewhere, including Nam Dinh Forest Products Joint Stock Company (NAFOCO). After five months supplying wood for NAFOCO, the group built its reputation and started receiving larger orders for sawn timber. It bought another sawmill and started to process logs from outside its members' plantations. After seven months of operation, the business had earned VND 720 million (US\$ 33,500). Non-members benefited because the group bought their trees at higher prices than the intermediaries offered.

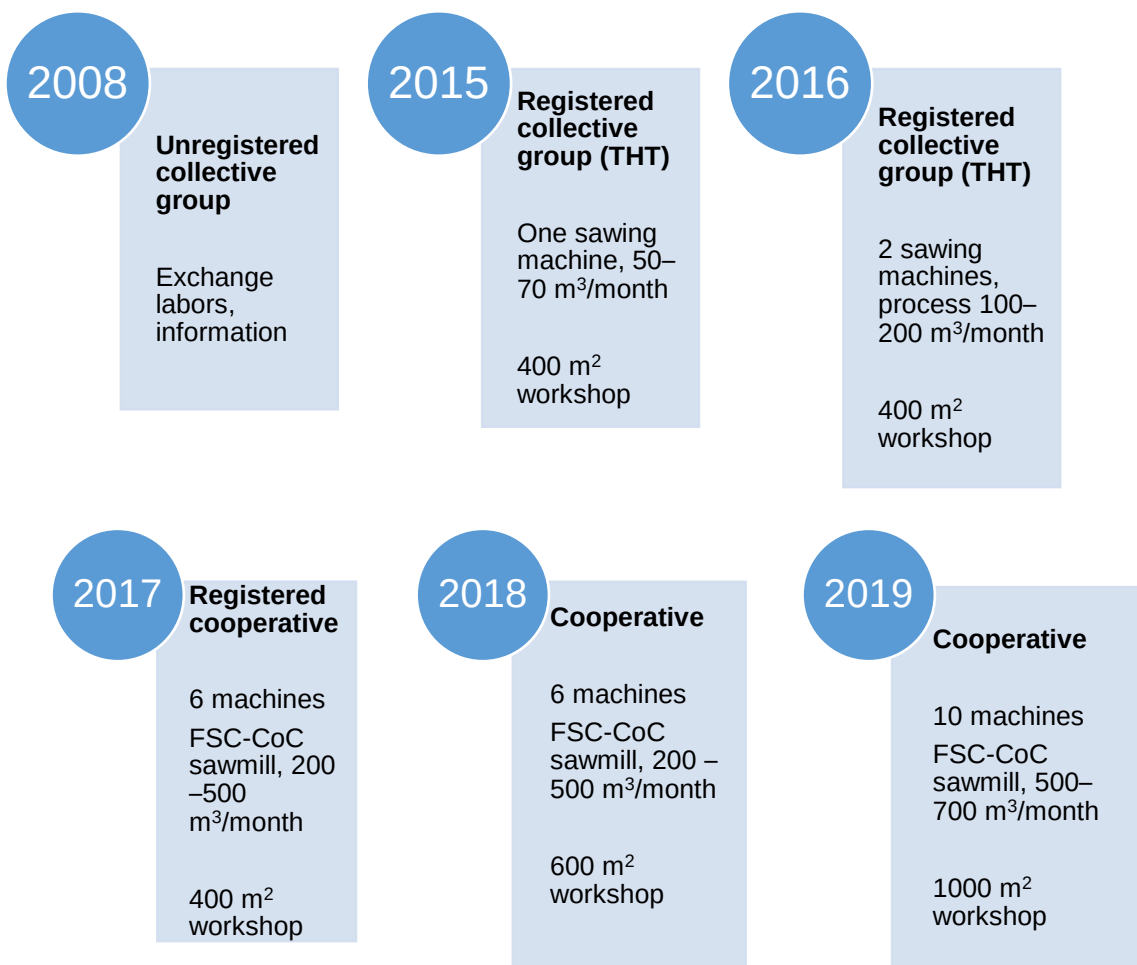
In August 2015, FFF organised a study visit for members of the Lem group and other groups in Yen Bai and Bac Kan provinces, together with staff of the Yen Bai and Bac Kan farmer unions and partners from provincial FPDs to Quang Tri to learn about FSC certification. It was the first time that they heard about FSC, in this case from fellow farmers who were the first smallholder group in Viet Nam to receive FSC certification. The head of the Lem group went home excited about the benefits of FSC in terms of price premium and the opportunity to work with big furniture companies.

After the trip, Yen Bai Farmer Union (FU) recommended to the Yen Bai FPD and the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) to pilot FSC in Yen Binh District. This Committee assigned the Yen Binh District FU to work with other agencies to call for the participation of farmers in FSC groups and asked the private sector (NAFOCO) to cover the FSC fees. The Lem group head encouraged all members to register and participate in the FSC program.

In November 2016, 494 households in Yen Binh District, including all members of Lem group that had visited Quang Tri, received FSC certificates for their forests.

When working with NAFOCO, the Lem group realised the importance of becoming a legal entity so that it could issue official Value-added tax receipts and raise the capital needed to upgrade equipment. Group members decided to establish the BMAC in July 2017 with an initial capital of VND 1 billion (US\$ 43,326). With additional support from NAFOCO and its sub-contractor Hoa Phat, BMAC was then hired by Hoa Phat to buy and process all FSC-certified timber in the area. In 2017–2018, Hoa Phat invested in four more sawmills for BMAC to secure FSC-CoC certification. In 2019, with growing sales, BMAC's members financed the purchase of four more machines and leased further land to expand the sawmill capacity to 700 m³/month.

¹At exchange rate: USD 1 = VND 23,081



First sawmill of the group in 2015 ©VNFU, 2015



FSC-CoC certified sawmill of the cooperative in 2017 ©VNFU, 2017

IV. Internal governance



Mr Phung Binh Minh (on the left), BMAC director ©IUCN, 2017

Macqueen et al. (2014) summarised different stages of FFPO development from unorganised groups to mature, nationally federated organisations. Based on this framework, BMAC is currently at stage 3 whereby it can buy FSC timber from not only its members but also other households in Phu Thinh and four other communes. By 2021, 526 households in the district had signed contracts with BMAC to provide FSC timber for its sawmill. BMAC's leader was also invited to join policy dialogues on value chains for local products, promote FSC implementation and compliance, and encourage long-rotation on acacia plantations. BMAC is the only FSC-CoC sawmill in the district that provides specialised services for processing high-value and FSC-certified products.



Stages of FFPO progression. Source: Macqueen, Campbell, & deMarsh (2014)

Interviews with local authorities and communities show that BMAC has the following strengths and weaknesses:



BMAC sawmill in 2021 ©VNFU, 2021

1. Strengths

- BMAC's leader, Minh, is assessed as determined, enthusiastic, trusted and responsible. One reason Hoa Phat agreed to invest in BMAC is because it saw Minh's leadership potential and appreciated his inquiring mind. Minh is an active leader who has shown a strong commitment to develop BMAC for the benefit of its members. Because of Covid-19, Hoa Phat significantly reduced its orders in the first six months of 2020. In response, Minh reached out to domestic markets and signed contracts with seven companies to sell non-FSC sawn logs. As a result, BMAC's profits rose from 2019 to 2020. Minh was trained and recruited by Hoa Phat as a technical officer who visits each household to assess its suitability with FSC and organises trainings and monitoring on behalf of Hoa Phat to ensure household compliance with its requirements.
- BMAC has a clear benefit-sharing mechanism and internal governance system whereby the director has the highest share and voice over BMAC's operations. The profit is paid out as dividends.
- BMAC members are relatives or close neighbors, so solidarity is strong.
- Farmers who sold timber to BMAC appreciated the timely payment, continuous ordering and premium price that it pays for their FSC timber (2–5% higher than normal timber). All interviewees said that helping growers access the market is the most important benefit that BMAC has brought.

- BMAC has provided stable jobs for local people including women, youth and old people, which other sawmills in the commune cannot do. In addition, as part of FSC-CoC requirements, labor safety is always taken into consideration, and personal protective equipment are provided to all workers.
- BMAC has turned into a hub to represent farmers receiving support from government and donor projects such as sapling support programs. Any household who wants to participate in the FSC and long-rotation timber plantation registers with BMAC, and it compiles all requests and coordinates with Hoa Phat and government agencies. Once the saplings are ready, BMAC distributes them to registered households. BMAC is also invited to about 30 meetings a year with people's committees at the commune, district and province levels to discuss the progress of value-chain projects and plans to upscale FSC implementation.
- BMAC created a chat group in the Zalo application to quickly share information on markets, policy and disease control.
- BMAC has created positive environmental impacts such as ensuring legal timber sources and prohibiting most herbicides, pollution and littering.

2. Weaknesses

- Out of 18 members, only 5, belonging to 3 households, contributed money to setup the sawmill. The others contributed some labor costs but did not actively participate. BMAC provides job opportunities and other services to the whole commune so there is very little difference in benefits received by BMAC members who collect no dividends and non-members. As a result, the former have limited interest and voice in BMAC decision-making. When asked, some members do not know who is on BMAC's management board besides Mr Minh. Some are not sure if they are BMAC members. Several members who did not contribute money are working abroad, so currently there are only 10 members living in the commune.
- BMAC's processing of acacia sawn logs still needs improvement according to the director of Hoa Phat. Though workers have improved a lot, they still need more discipline to meet contract deadlines and the strict requirements of FSC-CoC related to reporting and accounting. They need to make better use of raw materials and reduce production waste.
- BMAC should call for more cash contributions from members and expand its membership to have more capital to increase production capacity of the sawmill and diversify products and services.
- BMAC should continue to advocate for policies and organise marketing activities to reach new markets and reduce dependence on one company.

3. Opportunities

- Expanding FSC value chains receives much political support from the provincial government. The Yen Bai Communist Party set targets that by 2025 the province would have 40,000 hectares of long-rotation timber, 100,000 hectares of FSC-certified forest and 65% forest cover. By 2021, the province had 23,500 hectares of FSC-certified forest, so the government will continue to support the expansion of FSC forests to provide BMAC with a reliable supply.
- Long-rotation timber plantations also attract attention from the government and donors as a way to increase forest value for local communities. As a strong organisation, BMAC can tap into this support.
- Hoa Phat is planning to support farmers to plant medicinal plants and other crops under acacia canopy so that they earn short-term income, enabling them to pursue long-rotation timber production. Several organisations have provided trainings on acacia understory crops. This may be an opportunity for BMAC to diversify its products to include medicinal plants and support its members.

4. Threats

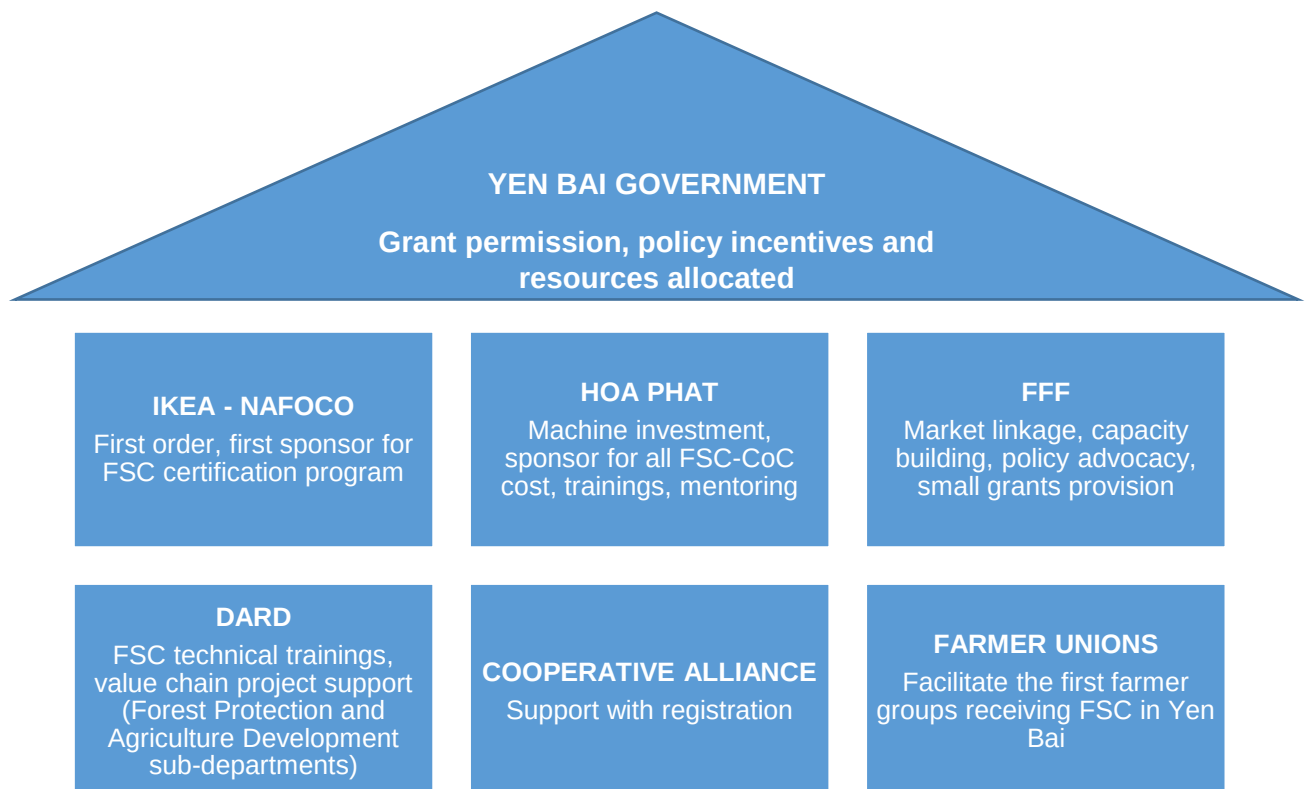
- BMAC can rent the land for only five years, and not all members have land-use certificates. That makes BMAC's shareholders hesitant to invest more in the sawmill and stops them accessing bank loans. The proportion of households without land-use certificates in the district is also high, which hinders FSC upscaling because of conflict risk.
- Covid-19 caused a 60% drop in IKEA sales. International shipping fees also increased significantly. These impacted production of big processing companies. In the first months of 2020, BMAC received no orders from Hoa Phat.
- As a result of reduced FSC timber orders, BMAC had to change its marketing strategy to target the domestic market and the use of non-FSC timber. But with over 100 sawmills in the district, there is growing competition among processors, including BMAC (Dat, 2013).
- Awareness of the benefits of long-rotation timber is limited. Seedling quality is of great concern as it was observed that in some areas, due to poor acacia seedling quality, the trees died after four years. Some farmers are hesitant to join the FSC program because IKEA and Hoa Phat only buy big timber used for furniture, which means that they need to find other customers for the smaller parts of the trees as well as small trees.

V. Multistakeholder support



One roundtable discussion funded by FFF @VNFU, 2021

The transformation of BMAC from an informal group to a registered cooperative was facilitated by many actors.



1. Local government

Local government in Yen Bai Province has played an important role in directing the forestry industry toward higher values through FSC and value-chain improvements. But experience shows that it takes time to build trust and confidence.

“In other provinces, we covered all machinery costs for cooperatives, but we lost the money due to the very limited involvement of local authorities. Farmers are always skeptical about our intentions,” said Ms Nguyen Thi Thuong, director of Hoa Phat.

Given this, government can play a vital facilitation and confidence-boosting role.

In 2017, Yen Bai DARD issued a decision to support FSC in the province and approved a pilot in Yen Binh District with BMAC, NAFOCO, and Hoa Phat. It was a turning point for many members when they saw a great business opportunity and understood that getting organised would let them take advantage of FSC as well as the partnership with NAFOCO and Hoa Phat.

In 2016–2017, Phu Thinh Commune was preparing to be recognised as the “New Rural,” a national program to improve the rural economy. A requirement of this program is to have at least one cooperative in the commune. At the time, the commune had only one potential cooperative, BMAC, so the commune supported BMAC’s registration. In Thinh Hung Commune (the reference site), there is one timber group whose members are eager to turn it into a cooperative after joining FFF and Hoa Phat committed to buy their timber. However, Thinh Hung achieved “New Rural” status in 2017, and the commune already has two agricultural cooperatives, so one interviewee said, “Setting up a cooperative is not really urgent for the locality at the moment.” That might explain the slower progress of the timber collective group in this commune.

In December 2020, Yen Bai People’s Council issued Resolution 69 on policies to support the development of agriculture, forestry and aquaculture in 2021–2025. To receive a subsidy, people need to join a cooperative. The resolution identifies the FSC certification program as a priority, and forest growers can receive up to VND 2 million per household for seedlings if they are members of a cooperative, collective group or household with a contract with a private company. This has encouraged people to cooperate and motivated them to invest in sustainable forestry.

Following Resolution 69, the provincial government carried out a project on value-chain development to connect producers and market for five products as part of the National Target Program on New Countryside 2018–2020. Plywood and wood pellets are target products to help farmers in Yen Binh District to sell eucalyptus and byproducts of acacia processing. The project provides free fertilizer and technical assistance to 156 households in the district, and BMAC was one hub to receive and distribute this support to other farmers.

2. NAFOCO

NAFOCO is one of the biggest timber processing companies in northern Viet Nam with the most modern processing technology. Its services include selling imported high-quality timber from Malaysia, Indonesia, Laos and countries in Africa; producing furniture, mainly outdoor chairs, tables and wardrobes from Viet Nameese plantation wood; and exporting to big international companies like IKEA (80%), Arena, Butlers and ICA. The value of its IKEA contract rose from US\$ 7 million in 2008, to US\$ 30 million in 2016, to US\$ 40 million in 2017 and was projected to reach US\$ 50 million in 2020. In 2015, IKEA required 20% of the timber it buys to be FSC certified, 50% in 2016 and 100% in 2017.

NAFOCO is one of the first companies to apply IKEA's IWAY code of conduct for responsible business. It has four factories that employ 2,000 people and consume 20,000 m³ RWE per month to produce about 8,500 m³ of sawn timber. It sources wood from Hoa Binh, Quang Ninh, Lao Cai, Yen Bai and Thanh Hoa Provinces. It is a member of WWF Global Forest & Trade Network.

The first contract between NAFOCO and the Lem cooperative was in May 2015 when the group was asked to supply 18 m³ of timber per week and had to pay for the logs upfront. After five months working together, trust was built, and in early 2016 orders started to increase in size and value. On average, Lem's sawmill produces 100–200 m³/month of sawn timber. Through NAFOCO's quality assurance, farmers learned new processing techniques and how to work with big companies.

In April 2016, at the request of the province, NAFOCO agreed to pay VND 1.6 billion (US\$ 71,586) for the initial FSC assessments in five communes in Yen Binh District. In November 2016, The GFA Certification GmbH issued an FSC certificate for the Yen Binh Association of Smallholder Forest Certification Group (managed by the Yen Binh FU) with 494 households managing 1,737 hectares. NAFOCO contributed VND 120 million (US\$ 5,286) to the association's office costs and agreed to buy from and advance cash to FSC-certified households if they keep their trees for more than six years.

After receiving FSC, the first household harvested its nine-year-old FSC-certified acacia trees and sold them to NAFOCO. They received a premium of VND 150,000/m³ (10.7% increase over market price of VND 1.4 million/m³) plus VND 100,000/m³ to cover transportation (Quang et al., 2018).

3. Hoa Phat

NAFOCO used to work directly with smallholders' groups but now sub-contracts the work to companies that can organise farmers, invest in processing and monitor production.

In September 2017, NAFOCO transferred the whole FSC project in Yen Bai to Hoa Phat. Now, Hoa Phat is responsible for paying the annual auditing fees and new assessment costs. NAFOCO still buys sawn timber from Hoa Phat, which Hoa Phat agrees to sell at a favorable price.

To reduce transport costs by building an on-site processing facility, Hoa Phat spent VND 400 million getting a CoC for the BMAC sawmill. This covered CoC certification (VND 200 million), 10-year land lease (VND 120 million) and workshop construction. Hoa Phat plans to open another factory in Tran Yen District to produce wood pellets for export to Japan. After selling sawn timber to NAFOCO, the remaining wood Hoa Phat collects will be used for wood pellets and furniture for domestic markets.

Every year, Hoa Phat covers the cost of auditing and activities to meet FSC-CoC requirements for BMAC such as fire-prevention training. In the last certification reassessment, due to personnel changes in Yen Binh District FU, Hoa Phat was named the owner of the FSC certificate instead of Yen Binh District FU.



Hoa Phat invested in modern machinery for the cooperative ©VNFU, 2017

Hoa Phat signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with VNFU to collaborate in raising awareness and capacity building for farmers in Yen Bai and other provinces to expand FSC-certified timber plantation areas. It also planned to help farmers grow medicinal plants under forest canopy so that forest growers have short-term income.

4. Forest and Farm Facility and Farmer Unions

“If it was not because of FFF, people in Yen Bai would have never known about NAFOCO,” said Phung Binh Minh, director of BMAC. Connecting FFPOs to investors and the market, as perceived by the BMAC director and members is the most important outcome that FFF has brought for BMAC as without a clear economic benefit, it was very hard to persuade people to work together. FFF also introduced FSC to farmers at the time when there was only one farmer

group in the country that had received FSC certification. The visit to Quang Tri organised by FFF connected the Yen Binh District FU, Lem collective group, and Yen Bai FPD to start the FSC program in Yen Binh District.

FFF organised trainings on market analysis and development and organisational management for the group. It also provided small grants to hold technical trainings on FSC requirements for the cooperative members and other farmer groups in the commune.

Through FFF, VNFU facilitated roundtable discussions at commune, district and province levels to connect FFPOs with scientists, the private sector and decision-makers and called for favorable policies to support cooperatives and collective groups following Resolution 69.

FFF and Yen Bai provincial FU also called for collaboration and support from Yen Bai Cooperative Alliance and other government agencies, like the Department of Industry and Trade, to help the Lem collective group register as a cooperative in line with the 2021 Cooperative Law.



FFF and representatives from Sweden's government agency for development cooperation visited BMAC ©VNFU, 2019

VI. Success factors

1. Strong leadership

When asked about the development of BMAC over time, people pointed out several factors including the strong capacity of the leader, the solidarity and capital availability of BMAC members, the presence of big companies, the stable development of the wood products market and support from governments and donor projects.

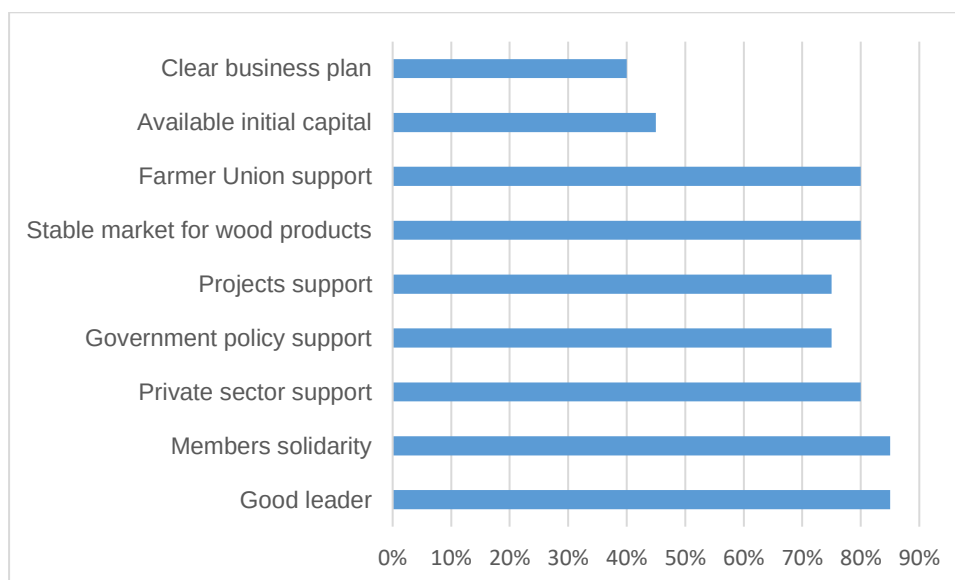


Figure 1: Success factors leading to the development of the cooperative

Source: stakeholder interviews (2021)

Of these factors, 50% of the interviewees agreed that the strong leadership of BMAC is the most important factor. Of the remaining interviewees, 33% assessed that the engagement of Hoa Phat was the most important factor, while 17% thought that policy support was the most important.

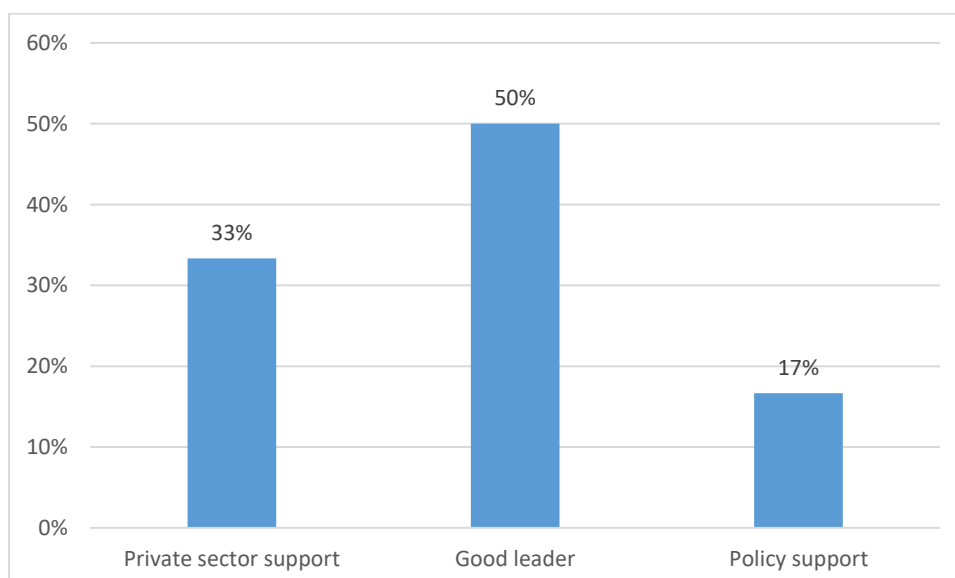


Figure 2: The most important factors based on interviewees' assessment

Source: stakeholder interviews (2021)

2. Private sector engagement

Globally, FFPOs are transforming from politically and socially oriented bodies to market-oriented bodies focused more on their members' economic benefits (Bijman, 2016). Thus, while the traditional government-led top-down approach forced the establishment of broad-based cooperatives, new FFPOs are more exclusive and work for the benefit of their members first and foremost (Bijman, 2016; Onumah et al., 2010). As a result, support for FFPOs should focus on strengthening the market position of FFPOs and facilitate collaboration among actors in the value chain. Members of Lem collective only started investing together and registered as a cooperative once they received stable orders from NAFOCO and Hoa Phat . Simply put, economics, not politics, should drive FFPO formation.

3. Policy support for sustainable forest management

In 2016, FSC was very new in Yen Bai with only 1,737 hectares of certified forest. Many people were skeptical. Yet by 2021, after just four years, 23,500 hectares were certified, a 13-fold increase. Resolution 69 of Yen Bai People's Council set a target of 100,000 hectares of FSC forest by 2025. The whole government system from province to commune was asked to expand FSC with resources mobilised from the private sector, donors and the provincial budget. BMAC benefited from this support and smallholders saw the advantages of getting organised in groups and cooperatives to connect with processing companies and other actors along the value chains.

4. Multistakeholder approach

While promoting collective action is a way to increase value added for Viet Nam's forestry sector, sustaining FFPOs is challenging. In 2016–2018, there were 22,861 cooperatives registered nationwide, but only 61% of them are operational (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2020).

The government encourages smallholders to work with processing companies. In 2014, the Viet Nam Administration of Forestry (VNFOREST) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) issued plan 1391/KH-BNN-TCLN to promote the development of a cooperative economy and linkages along the forestry supply chain. The plan aims to improve product quality, efficiency and the competitiveness of the forestry sector. It sets a target that by 2020, 100% of all collective groups and cooperatives will be integrated into the value chain with processors. It proposes investments to improve seedling quality, silvicultural practices and road access to source areas.

However, these interventions alone are inadequate to address key bottlenecks. First, businesses cannot afford to negotiate with thousands of households. And the high fixed costs of certification

make it impractical for small areas. Second, building trust is the foundation of lasting smallholder-business partnerships. But it takes time to build trust. Farmers often complain that they do not have market information or know how to contact big companies. And when companies do offer help, farmers may hesitate to collaborate because they have been cheated in the past by intermediaries and companies. Conversely, there are examples of households breaking contracts with processing companies. Some households cut down trees after four years (for low-value wood chips) or when they receive higher price offers from Chinese traders or paper mills. High transaction costs and the lack of contract security result in a large gap between the supply of and demand for legal timber.

Third, growing FFPOs have weak bargaining power, and their internal governance is often poorly developed so that risk- and benefit-sharing among members is inadequate. Typically, only the leadership has all the information about a business deal, while the broader membership is neither informed nor empowered to participate in important decisions.

Fourth, wooden furniture companies are under pressure from international markets that require FSC or some other form of legality assurance. That pressure drives companies to collaborate with smallholders and expand the area of FSC-certified plantations. But if the price of imported FSC timber falls, under free trade agreements companies may abandon their agreements. Farmers are motivated because of the FSC price premium and market access. As the number of FSC smallholders increases, competition intensifies, and prices may drop. In fact, NAFOCO must reduce its prices to IKEA by 2%/year, which forces the company to reduce the price it pays to smallholders. In this case study, NAFOCO paid the accreditation and audit fees. If these are the responsibility of smallholders, the price premium will become less attractive, leading to possible withdrawal of smallholders from the legal supply chain.

Fifth, not all forest growers and processing companies can take part in the value chain. The profit margin that companies receive from IKEA is only 4–5%, and IKEA requires them to meet high standards in terms of business administration, technology and cost control (Vinh et al., 2017). So only companies with adequate financial and human resources are able to contract with IKEA. And not all farmers have the financial and technical capacity to comply with FSC requirements.

Finally, land tenure is a barrier for smallholder participation. While some state-owned forest enterprises hold large areas of forest, many smallholders lack access to well-stocked forest. The process of issuing land-use right certificates is slow and because having such a certificate is an FSC requirement, smallholders may be blocked from participating in high added-value forestry production.

As such, efforts of a single party, either company or government, is probably not enough to build an operational FFPO. The case of BMAC has shown how much external support is needed to

transform a collective group into a cooperative. No matter how big the organisation is, a policy platform is important to help FFPOs access government services and create an enabling policy environment for FFPOs to achieve their full potential (Macqueen et al., 2014).

5. Role of the apex organisation and the need for forest business incubation services

While multistakeholder involvement is essential, there is always a need for coordination among parties (Quang et al., 2018). At business start-up, people need support in terms of skills development, physical facilities, market information, policies, technology and law, so business incubation services are essential (Macqueen, 2019). Macqueen (2019) identified building incubator capacity into larger FFPOs or apex organisations is the most effective strategy in remote areas.

In the case of BMAC, VNFU played a key role raising awareness, building trust, assisting market analysis, organising management, connecting farmers with technicians and business for technology transfer, and advocating policy.

Founded in 1930, VNFU is a mass organisation under the Communist Party with affiliates from the central government to the grassroots level. Following the constitution, VNFU is an authorised agency to represent farmers in all sectors including agriculture, forestry, salt making, handicrafts, industry services and other fields in rural development. With over 10 million farmers as members, this apex organisation has substantial convening power. Through FFF, VNFU staff at the local level were trained to become local facilitators. Trained VNFU staff can promptly provide supporting services to farmer groups, facilitate the cooperation among FFPOs and private companies, scientists and local authorities to solve problems. Even when the project terminates, the project outcomes can still be sustained as the network of facilitators still operate through VNFU regular activities.

VII. Recommendations

1. Government and bank system should accelerate the transition to long-rotation plantations to minimise imports of high-risk timber and increase domestic value-added forests

The transition from short-term acacia into long-term timber production and native species introduction is a priority forest landscape restoration option given its economic and environmental benefits (Rizzeti et al., 2018; Pistorius et al., 2016). However, the greatest challenge is that farmers will have to wait for a long time to break even (Rizzeti et al., 2018). As such, long-rotation timber production from households is still very low compared to the national target: 3–4 million m³ versus 10 million m³.

Helping farmers access favorable credit to overcome short-term cash shortages is necessary. Yet, in the interview with Bank of Social Policy, there is no government policy in place to promote this transition. This bank has a program to lend to extremely poor people over 10 years without collateral, so if the government resourced a smallholder support policy, the bank could start to lend to accelerate the transition to long-rotation timber.

Above all, forest land allocation to households should be accelerated. About 2.7 million hectares of forest are under commune people's committee management. Much of this is low quality, open access forest that would benefit from being allocated to households. Additionally, local governments intervene to enforce contracts between companies and farmers. A company director said that if the government forbade premature harvesting, no one would dare cut down a tree and violate a contract, and farmers would know where to file a complaint if a company did not fulfill its contractual obligation. These are all potential areas of FFF intervention.

2. MARD should establish formal cooperation with VNFU to support FFPO development

MARD should recognise VNFU as a key partner in working with smallholders to achieve sustainable forest management and the targets set by the new Viet Nam Forestry Development Strategy. Although there is an MoU signed by the two parties, collaboration between MARD and VNFU should be rooted at the local level and cover all aspects of agricultural and rural development including forestry. More regular information exchange, dialogues and joint field visits are needed.

3. VNFU should build the business incubation capacity of provincial FUs

The Yen Bai FU was set a target to help form five new cooperatives every year. Hoa Phat planned to form a new cooperative named Hoa Phat Forestry Cooperative in collaboration with farmers in Tan Phong Village, Tan Nguyen Commune, Yen Binh District, following the model of BMAC.

They reached out to Yen Bai FU for help to connect farmers. This is another opportunity for VNFU to strengthen its role as an incubator.

However, provincial FUs often lack the skills, resources and technical information to effectively support FFPOs. As such, building business incubation capacity of provincial FUs should be an important VNFU and FFF goal. Specifically, provincial FUs need to be able to:

- Create networks of businesses that can provide support and mentoring above and beyond what the provincial FUs can provide;
- Raise funds from public and private grants besides the government budget;
- Provide working space for new start-ups;
- Maintain a list of potential FFPOs; and
- Connect farmers with government decision-makers through regular discussions.

4. BMAC should improve governance and expand business scale

To reduce its dependence on a few customers, it is important for BMAC to diversify its products and improve the quality of its services. The cooperative had a plan to build a nursery garden to be a distribution hub for high-quality seedlings of a variety of species from timber to fruit trees. It could sell honey and fruits, which almost all farmers grow already. It could also expand the services it provides its members such as vocational training, more advanced market analysis and even financing. Setting up an internal fund to help members overcome cashflow shortages to pursue long-rotation timber would have many positive social and environmental outcomes.

To expand its services, BMAC needs much more capital, so expanding membership and calling for cash contributions is crucial to its next phase of development. BMAC should continue to advocate for policies so that it can rent land for longer and access favorable bank loans and grants from banks or the province's cooperative development fund, farmer supporting fund and other aids.

Competition in buying inputs can be reduced by connecting BMAC with smaller collective groups in other districts and provinces. To do that, FFF can organise more networking events through VNFU.

BMAC leadership would benefit from mentoring and coaching in financial and human resource management and organisational development.

Given Covid-19 impacts on global business prospects, BMAC should pay more attention to risk management and continue to diversify their products to target domestic markets.

5. FFF should continue to support FFPOs in prioritised value chains

Resolution 69 included 16 policies to develop value chains for various agricultural and forestry products including tea, fruits, mulberry silkworm, medicinal plants, organic cinnamon, FSC timber, *Crataegus cuneate* and Taiwan giant bamboo shoot (*Dendrocalamuls latiflorus*). This opens the door to FFF cooperation with government and businesses to promote collective action along these value chains.

The Viet Nam Forestry Development Strategy 2021–2030 approved by the Prime Minister in 2021 set the goal that by 2050 the forestry sector would become a modern, effective and highly competitive economic-technical sector, and Viet Nam would become one of the world's leading manufacturing and trading centers for wood products. The strategy emphasizes several measures for production forest including promoting long-rotation timber business, increase in planting tree species to provide sawn logs and non-timber forest products, effective use of probiotics and techniques for intensive tree plantings to increase the forest productivity, application of high technology in harvesting and processing, and proactively responding to climate change. These can be potential fields for VNFU/FFF to work on with research institutions and academia to deliver on-the-ground models led by FFPOs.

VIII. Conclusion

There is enormous potential to bring smallholders into the supply chain of legal timber. Doing so requires addressing a range of technical, financial, institutional and policy barriers. The greatest challenge is to organise smallholders into cooperatives so that they can collectively negotiate contracts with wood-processing companies. This will require enhanced cooperation among civil society, farmers' organisations, mass organisations, businesses, finance institutions and government, all of whom play complementary roles. To facilitate such a multistakeholder endeavour in support of smallholder organisations during their start-up phase, it is necessary to have an agency to connect the parties and provide the necessary business incubation services for FFPOs. Investing in FFPO apex organisations such as Farmer Unions and building up their incubator capacity can be game-changing in this regard.

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