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# REDD+ politics in the media: a case study from Vietnam

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## SUMMARY

Reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD+) is an international effort to create financial value for the carbon stored in forests, offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from land uses. Vietnam is engaged in the international REDD+ debate and is a partner to numerous multi- and bilateral agreements. Different actors have diverse interests in the REDD+ agenda, and in Vietnam, even though an authoritarian state, different views exist on what REDD+ should achieve. Through the analysis of media articles this study intends to understand how public debates on REDD+ are framed in the Vietnamese policy domain and how actors use the media to promote their interests. Reporting about a diversity of actors and interests, in particular related to expressions of equity concerns in media frames could reflect a growing inclusive political space. Our findings show that while state actors dominate REDD+ media frames, some limited space is present for non-state actors' interests, but equity issue discussed still reflect predominantly state mediated concerns. However, caution is still required due to the limitations these findings come with.

Keywords: media analysis, PFES, REDD+, Vietnam, media frame, policy analysis, discourse

## Politiques de la REDD+ dans les médias: une étude-cas du Vietnam

T.T. PHAM, M. DI GREGORIO et M. BROCKHAUS

La réduction des émissions provenant de la déforestation et de la dégradation forestière (REDD+) est un effort international visant à créer une valeur financière provenant du carbone emmagasiné dans les forêts, et qui offre des stimulants aux pays en voie de développement pour essayer de réduire les émissions provenant de l'utilisation des terres. Le Vietnam s'est engagé dans le débat international sur la REDD+ et est partenaire de nombreux accords multi et bi-latéraux. Différents acteurs ont des intérêts divers dans l'agenda de la REDD+, et au Vietnam, des points de vue différents existent quant aux résultats que cette dernière devrait obtenir, malgré le fait que le pays est sous un régime autoritaire. Analysant des articles dans les médias, cette étude entend comprendre comment les débats publics sur la REDD+ sont pris en compte dans le domaine politique au Vietnam et combien les acteurs utilisent ce moyen pour promouvoir leurs intérêts. Dresser un rapport sur les divers acteurs et intérêts, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les expressions d'un souci d'équité dans les médias, pourrait indiquer qu'un espace politique inclusif est en croissance. Nos résultats mettent en lumière qu'un espace limité est présent pour les intérêts d'acteurs non-étatiques, bien que les acteurs nationaux dominent les cadres médiatiques de la REDD+. Toutefois, ces deux découvertes-clé pourraient indiquer qu'il y a espoir d'une inclusion d'acteurs non étatiques, comprenant des commerces domestiques et des organisations internationales dans l'expérience REDD+ vietnamienne et par conséquent d'une libération des médias entièrement contrôlés par l'état. Il est cependant nécessaire de procéder avec caution, du fait des limites que ces découvertes ont mises en lumière.

## Política de REDD+ en los medios de comunicación: un estudio de caso de Vietnam

T.T. PHAM, M. DI GREGORIO y M. BROCKHAUS

La Reducción de Emisiones por Deforestación y Degradación Forestal (REDD+) es un esfuerzo internacional para crear valor financiero para el carbono almacenado en los bosques, que ofrece incentivos para que los países en desarrollo reduzcan las emisiones procedentes del uso del suelo. Vietnam participa en el debate internacional sobre REDD+ y es una de las contrapartes de numerosos acuerdos multilaterales y bilaterales. En Vietnam, son varios los actores que tienen intereses diversos en la agenda de REDD+ y, a pesar de ser un estado autoritario, existen diferentes puntos de vista sobre lo que REDD+ debe lograr. Mediante un análisis de artículos de los medios de comunicación, este estudio busca entender cómo se enmarcan los debates públicos sobre REDD+ en el ámbito de la política vietnamita y cómo los actores utilizan los medios de comunicación para promover sus intereses. La presentación de informes sobre una diversidad de actores e intereses, relacionados en particular con expresiones de preocupación por temas de equidad dentro de los marcos de los medios de comunicación, podría reflejar un espacio político cada vez más inclusivo. Nuestros hallazgos muestran que, mientras que los actores estatales dominan los marcos mediáticos

de REDD+, existe un cierto espacio para los intereses de los actores no estatales, aunque la cuestión ya mencionada de la equidad aun refleja predominantemente preocupaciones influidas por el estado. Sin embargo, estos dos hallazgos clave podrían indicar la existencia de posibilidades para la aceptación de actores no estatales, incluyendo empresas nacionales y organizaciones internacionales, en el experimento vietnamita de REDD+ y una separación de unos medios de comunicación completamente controlados por el estado, aunque se requiere precaución en la interpretación debido a las limitaciones que conllevan estos resultados.

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change has significant implications for society, environment and economies, and as such is a key concern for scientists, an increasing area of policy debate, and a subject of media interest. Among others, forest-based approaches to mitigation received considerable attention over the past decade. One possible contribution of developing countries to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions is through a mechanism called REDD+, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation, aimed at avoiding deforestation and including conservation, sustainable management and enhancement of forest carbon stocks (Angelsen *et al.* 2012). In Vietnam, for example, a series of new domestic policies and initiatives related to REDD+ have been developed over the last five years (Pham *et al.* 2014), such as Decree 99 on Payments for Forest Environmental Services (PFES), which was approved in 2010 and Decision 799 on the National REDD+ Action Plan (2011–2020), which was approved in 2012. In 2015, the government also explicitly included REDD+ in its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs).

An increasing number of studies focused on national-level REDD+ policy frameworks and the way REDD+ is shaped in developing countries (e.g. Minang *et al.* 2014, Di Gregorio *et al.* 2013, Korhonen-Kurki *et al.* 2015, Brockhaus *et al.* 2016). A number of studies have examined public discourses on REDD+ through the analysis of media frames – the conceptual lenses used by the media to focus attention on certain realities, while shadowing out other realities (Pan and Kosicki 1993, Carvalho 2007, Boykoff and Boykoff 2007, Di Gregorio *et al.* 2015). Discourses can be understood as “specific ensembles of ideas, concepts and categorization that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer 1995: 44). In many contexts, mass media can substantially influence decisions. In the case of Vietnam, as in many authoritarian political systems, the media are likely to reveal and express government moderated views, particularly those that it wants the public to embrace (Vaagan 2011, Eek and Ellström 2007, McKinley 2007). In this paper, we investigate the extent to which a diversity of stakeholders’ interest and their position are expressed in the media. A media-based discourse lens can provide us with insights on what the main public debates on REDD+ are and how they reflect ongoing policy processes in Vietnam.

Using Vietnam as a case study, we will analyse media articles related to REDD+ between 2007 when REDD+ was

first reported in the media till 2013, and investigate the following set of research questions:

- (1) How are REDD+ debates framed in the media?
- (2) Who is represented in the media discussing REDD+ and what concerns and claims do they express?

These will provide an understanding of the diversity in media-based discourses and the extent to which media represents a variety of actors’ voices. Taking into account the Vietnamese authoritarian context and the preferences for particular aspects of REDD+ related policies or programs among the actors expressed in the media, the paper then draw implications on:

- (3) What space is given in the media to the interests of non-state actors on REDD+?

The paper is structured in five main parts. After this introduction, section 2 and 3 provide a brief insight in the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study. This is followed by a presentation of the results in Section 4, the discussion and conclusion are presented in Section 5.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Different social actors negotiate environmental policy decisions, including those on REDD+. These actors often have competing interests and aim to influence the direction that REDD+ takes in terms of policy priorities through discussions and competing argumentations on how environmental problems are defined and how they should be solved (Di Gregorio *et al.* 2013, Boykoff and Boykoff 2007). Media is often used to frame these positions, and depending on the political system might represent the diverse positions of multiple state and non-state actors or emphasise those of more powerful state actors. A media frame brings certain aspects of reality into sharper focus, putting forward a particular interpretation of reality while emphasising particular aspects (Entman 1993, Ardèvol-Abreu 2015). Frames define problems, diagnose causes of problems, make moral judgements, give voice to specific actors while ignoring others or confront actors’ with different positions. In this process, frames define who or what is responsible for causing and for solving problems (Benford and Snow 2000, Di Gregorio *et al.* 2015). Policy actors also use the media to signal their positions to policy opponents as well as to potential allies, to build coalitions and impact policy decisions (Andsager 2000).

Examining how REDD+ is framed and whose voices are represented in the media reveals the different understandings of social actors on REDD+ that can lead to distinct policy proposals and possible policy outcomes (Streck 2010, Gupta 2012, Di Gregorio *et al.* 2015).

Where freedom of the press is limited, the role of the media can be considered as prescriptive, the main function being to cater to the interests of the state, a ruling party, or the authority in place. In other words, under authoritarian regimes the media is much less an independent policy actor, compared to democratic ones (Silverbatt and Zlobin 2004, Djankov *et al.* 2003). In Vietnam media is state-controlled and its role is to spread propaganda about state politics and policies, to promote patriotism and socialist ideology well as to encourage people to follow and support government policies (Eek and Ellström 2007, McKinley 2007, Vaagan 2011). For example, article 88 of the criminal code bans the distribution of ‘anti-government propaganda.’ Decree No 02/2011/ND-CP – on the “Handling of Administrative Violations in Press and Publishing Activities” – penalizes journalists who refuse to reveal their sources. Moreover, the state may censor content which it deems illegal, immoral or unfavourable to the government and likewise regulates any programming related to the media (Price *et al.* 2002). As the result, all foreign news and information TV programs have to be translated into Vietnamese and are subject to government censorship. The Vietnamese government also requires all journalists to become members or be affiliated with the ruling party. Newspaper, television and radio editors are required to be high ranking parliament members and are appointed by the Communist Party. All editors must attend regular meetings with the Communist Party Information Committee in order to receive guidance on which specific topics and debates can be discussed.

Yet, within this state-controlled media, a central question is whether government (and media) gives any, even limited, space for a diversity of voices and allows media to perform its role as mediator among scientists, policy actors and the public? Pham *et al.* (2014) and Wells-Dang (2010) found that although state actors remain the most powerful actor in REDD+ decision making in Vietnam, the governance structure, its institutions, actors and their relations to each others, provide some political space for non-state actors. Media-based discourse analysis provides insights into the REDD+ policy process and the policy proposals put forward, and allows for a discussion and critical reflection of what this could mean in terms of possible REDD+ policy outcomes and participation within.

Building on this we argue that an analysis of the coverage of REDD+ compared to other issues in the media, the way REDD+ is framed with regard to REDD+ themes discussed and the attention given to particular level of governance, will help us to generate an overall understanding of the perception of REDD+ in the public domain in Vietnam. Investigating our next set of research questions, namely which actors are given voice or not, and the diversity of interests presented in the media, will help us understand to which degree the media in Vietnam facilitates inclusiveness in REDD+ debates. Di

Gregorio *et al.* (2013, 2015) studied REDD+ frames in 7 countries, including Vietnam, and found that state actors often focus on effectiveness of REDD+, while civil society actors often focus on equity issues. Our findings on actors’ positions on equity support the argument that, even in an authoritarian and state controlled media, some non-state actors behind these interests have been successful in putting them forward to the public and consequently might have the opportunity to influence future policies to some extent. Hence, investigating to which degree the focus is on effectiveness, efficiency, or equity in the media can tell us about the quality of the participation. Together, all these questions will provide insights to which degree REDD+ coverage in the media in Vietnam is more than just a government playing field.

## METHODS

The analysis focuses on printed news articles from three national Vietnamese newspapers between December 2005 and December 2013. The selected newspapers have the highest national circulation and reflect a broad spectrum of political positions in Vietnam. They are *Nhan Dan*, *Tuoi Tre*, and *Nong Nghiep Vietnam*, and their daily circulation is 220 000, 420 000, and 70 000 copies respectively. *Tuoi Tre*’s mandate is to focus on new and general topics. In contrast, *Nhan Dan* has a specific mandate to undertake propaganda for general government policies such as national security, political and economic development, and foreign affairs. All policy makers in Vietnam receive a copy of *Nhan Dan* and are expected to read it every day. *Nong Nghiep Vietnam*, specialises on disseminating information related to government policy on agricultural and rural development.

Article selection was based on nine key phrases in Vietnamese (derived from six key phrases in English): ‘climate change’, ‘climate change and forests’, ‘reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation’, and its acronym, ‘REDD’, ‘payments for environmental services’, and its acronym, ‘PES’, and ‘payments for forest environmental services’ and its acronym ‘PFES’. We consider articles that discuss REDD+, i.e. those resulting from the ‘REDD’ or ‘reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation’ or ‘avoided deforestation’ (in total 41 articles), or PES and PFES keyword searches (64). These totaled 95 articles (as 4 articles mention both PES and PFES, and 8 articles mention both PFES and REDD+). Among these, 14 mentioned REDD+ without any further elaboration, which left 81 selected to be fully coded.

The content of the selected 81 articles was analyzed using content analysis based on a predefined codebook that utilizes different levels of analysis (Di Gregorio *et al.* 2012). Level 1 captured descriptive variables of the article as a whole, including date and author, the length of the article.

The second level of coding characterizes the media frames. The concept of frame has been widely discussed in the field of political studies (Entman 1993). McCombs (2006: 173) sees a frame as “a very special case of attributes” that “forms a dominant point of view on an object, influencing the public

TABLE 1 *Themes of the Media Frames*

Theme	Explanation
Ecology of REDD+	Frames referring to ecological aspects of REDD+ such as deforestation, carbon sinks, impacts on biodiversity etc.
Economics and markets	Frames discussing REDD+ as a market mechanism or with reference to economic benefits or impacts
Politics and policy making	Frames discussing REDD+ policy formulation, implementation, or claims of political actors
Civil society	Frames discussing the rights, campaigns, or other actions of civil society
Governance	Frames discussing the REDD+ institutional architecture, including enforcement, monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV), transparency and corruption etc.
Science	Frames discussing new scientific knowledge about REDD+, scientific reports etc.
Culture	Frames discussing REDD+ issues related to lifestyles of individuals or communities

perception of this object and the understanding of the social world in general” (Ardèvol-Abreu 2015: 436). Bennett (2002: 42) defined frame as “a broad organising theme for selecting, emphasising, and linking the elements of a story such as the scenes, the characters, their actions, and supporting documentation”. Following Boykoff and Mansfield (2008) we identified the frames in each article based on the salience of the main elements discussed, the key messages contained and whose opinions were included. This level of coding identified a number of characteristics of up to two frames in each article: a primary frame, which provides the dominant way in which REDD+ was portrayed, and where applicable, a secondary frame. The primary frame is almost always found in the most prominent elements of a text: headline, subheading and lead paragraph. While many articles provide a single frame – or interpretation of a central REDD+ issue – longer articles might have two or more frames (Boykoff and Mansfield 2008), which then were analysed separately. Identifying more than one frame, where appropriate, provided a more detailed representation of how REDD+ is understood. In the 81 articles, 105 media frames (81 primary and 24 secondary frames) were identified and analysed. The analysis presented in this paper focuses on two characteristics of the media frames that were coded. The first characteristic of the frame is the main theme, which refers to the main way in which REDD+ is discussed and understood (Table 1).

The second characteristic of the frame to be assessed was the governance level at which the REDD+ was discussed (issues related to the ‘international’ REDD+ framework, such as global debates on REDD+ between developed and developing countries or UNFCCC COP meetings; ‘national’ level REDD+ issues, or ‘provincial’ and ‘local’ level issues). The coders also identified any mention of REDD+ policy events, which can also be classified by level of governance. A policy event was defined as ‘a critical, temporally located decision point in a collective decision-making sequence that must occur in order for a policy option to be finally selected’ (Laumann and Knoke 1987: 251).

Level 3 coding identified policy actors whose opinions about REDD+ were reported in the media frames. This included quotes, paraphrases or reference to opinions on

REDD+ attributed to specific, named, policy actors. We coded the opinion statements and assessed three variables. The type of policy actor, which included national level state or bureaucratic actors, intergovernmental organizations, international NGOs, foreign governments (donor organizations), domestic businesses and business associations, domestic research centre/academic institutions, and some individuals for which no institutional affiliation was mentioned or known. The second characteristic coded referred to the outlook that policy actors held towards REDD+. We coded whether policy actors had an ‘optimistic’ outlook towards REDD+ and portrayed REDD+ policies and schemes as positive and useful, or had a ‘pessimistic’ outlook and were sceptical about REDD+ or underlined possible negative implications. Mixed outlooks, were coded as ‘neutral’ and where actors were not explicit about their outlook the statements were labelled as ‘no outlook’. The last characteristic of policy actors opinions that was coded referred to whether policy actors were primarily concerned with REDD+ ‘effectiveness’ – the reduction of carbon emissions –, or ‘efficiency’ – low cost REDD+ solutions – or ‘equity’ – referring to the distribution of carbon or other co-benefits, poverty reduction, protection of rights, and distribution of possible costs across social groups. Three coders were trained to code the articles using the code book.

To complement the coding process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine selected journalists that had reported about REDD+. The criteria for selection were: having an interest in environmental issues and REDD+; having written articles on REDD+; work in different geographical areas of Vietnam; work for the most popular newspaper in Vietnam. Since television and radio are important tool of communications to the public in Vietnam, we interviewed also two national television and radio journalists. Two of the journalists also worked for international news and one was a member of local NGOs. The aim of these interviews was to understand operational principles of the media in Vietnam, discuss the actors that influence REDD+ media debates and the sources of information that journalists used. The analysis of these interviews is presented along that of the media coding and is used to support the interpretation of coding. The interviews were conducted between 2010–2014.

## FINDINGS

**Media coverage on REDD+**

According to all interviewees, for the Vietnamese government REDD+ remains of margin interest compared to the broader theme of climate change. This is also quite well reflected in the media analysis. The keyword 'climate change' was found in 1606 articles (Table 2), less than 15% of which (n = 244) resulted from the 'climate change and forest' search. Much less attention was given to PES (Payments for Environmental Services) and REDD+. A search for 'PFES (Payments for Forest Environmental Services)' resulted in 56 articles, 7 times higher than the more general term 'PES' and only 41 articles referred to REDD+. REDD+ started to be reported in *Tuoi Tre* in 2007 in *Nhan Dan* in 2008 and in *Nong Nghiep Vietnam* in 2009. According to an interviewee from *Tuoi Tre*, when REDD+ first appeared in the paper, the text was written by a foreign expert who is working for UNDP and the UN-REDD Programme who wanted to publicise REDD+. The article was in a side section called 'Reader's Voice', where letter from readers are published.

Interviewees from *Nhan Dan* also claimed that since the newspaper was a government instrument, it only publishes articles showing the positive impact of government policies and programmes. Thus, until a policy like REDD+ has been successful according to the government or confirmed to be moving in 'the right direction', the newspaper will not discuss it. Similarly, the interviewee from *Nong Nghiep Vietnam* asserted that although the newspaper represents the agriculture and forestry sector it was late in covering REDD+ because its management agency, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), was only assigned as a focal point for REDD+ in 2009. REDD+ started to be discussed in newspapers only after the government introduced PFES and referred to REDD+ as a type of environmental service. The interviewed journalists suggested that the government sees PFES as the breakthrough forestry policy and newspapers are required to provide propaganda on the achievements of this policy.

The position of the government on REDD+ has gradually changed since 2005. During 2005–2010, the majority of the articles discussed sea-level rise, flood and storm control, and new agricultural crop species that can adapt to climate change.

During the period of 2011–2013, these topics were still covered, but articles also included reporting on deforestation and degradation of forests due to construction of large-scale hydropower plants and made a few references to insecure land tenure and land-use conflicts in the forestry sector. By 2010, REDD+ appeared in all three newspapers. Coverage of 'REDD+', 'PES', and 'PFES' although low, increased over time from 2005–2010. In *Nhan Dan* and *Tuoi Tre*, articles on PFES increased significantly during 2011–2013, while there was a drop in featuring this topic in *Tuoi Tre* newspaper (Figure 1). After the government introduced PFES in 2008, the number of articles containing the keyword increased rapidly, and the term remained more frequently used than PES. Interviewees explained the increase in references to REDD+ during 2005–2011 partly as the result of an increased understanding amongst journalists and partly as results of the government being active in several international initiatives related to climate change. The number of articles featuring REDD+ dropped in 2011–2013 in all three newspapers. Most of the interviewees highlighted that the uncertainty around the international agreement on REDD+ and carbon markets led to a decrease in interest on the part of the government and consequently on the part of the newspapers to feature REDD+. Moreover, all interviewed journalists also said that the limited number of articles on REDD+ was also due to the fact that their main information sources on REDD+ were government agencies, but they had difficulties in arranging meetings with policy makers in charge of national REDD+ programmes.

**Main REDD+ themes in the Vietnamese media**

The most prominent REDD+ themes in the media frames were politics and policy-making issues (82 out of 105 frames – Table 3). These related to the international discussions on the importance of REDD+ to reduce emissions and conserve natural forests, and national themes on effective implementation and enforcement national forestry policies such as Decision 380/Decree 99 on national PES program. There was a peak in 2013 with 37 total frames of which 35 are on politics and policy making. This increase is due to the approval of National REDD+ action plan and the National Climate Change and Vietnam Green Growth strategy in 2012 and the acceleration of national payment for forest environmental

TABLE 2 Number of articles from the keyword search about climate change and forests from 2005–2013

Keywords	<i>Tuoi Tre</i>	<i>Nhan Dan</i>	<i>Nong Nghiep Vietnam</i>	Total
Climate change	716	645	245	1606
Climate change and forest	108	81	55	244
PES	3	3	2	8
PFES	10	22	24	56
REDD, 'reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation', 'avoided deforestation'	16	11	14	41

FIGURE 1 Frequency of articles referring to 'REDD+', 'PES', or 'PFES' by year, 2005–2013

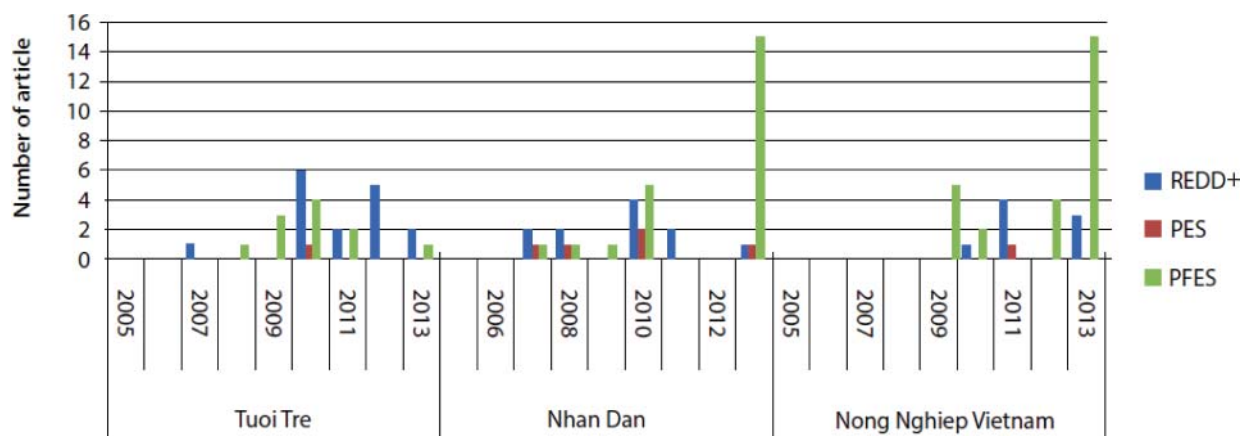


TABLE 3 Themes of REDD+ media frames

Time	Ecology	Economics and markets	Politics and policymaking	Governance context	Science	Culture	Other	Total
2007		1						1
2008			2					2
2009	1	1	8				1	11
2010	1	6	17				2	26
2011	2	1	10	2	2			17
2012	1		10					11
2013			35	2				37
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>105</b>

services implementation throughout the country. According to a journalist interviewed “Decree 99 was first implemented in 2009 and 2012 is a good time for highlighting its impacts. The new policy such as national REDD+ program should also be received public support through our propaganda”.

Over a third of 82 politics and policy making frames urged for better implementation of payments for forest protection and discussed the challenges in scaling-up PFES and REDD+ across the country. Nine frames related to economics and markets and discussed potential funding for forest protection from various international sources and the impact of PFES/REDD+ on business operations, particularly hydropower plants in Vietnam. Economic concerns were more prominent in 2010 than in earlier years and referred to PES and REDD+ providing payments as potential pathways to address poverty reduction and improve the livelihoods of local people.

Only 5 frames related to ecology. In 2009 and 2010, these frames discussed deforestation, the definition of ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ forest, the importance of conserving biodiversity in Vietnam and the ecological definition of environmental services. In 2011 and 2012, the discussion shifted towards the negative impacts that can be caused by large-scale hydro-power plant construction across the country on ecological systems, ecological services and biodiversity.

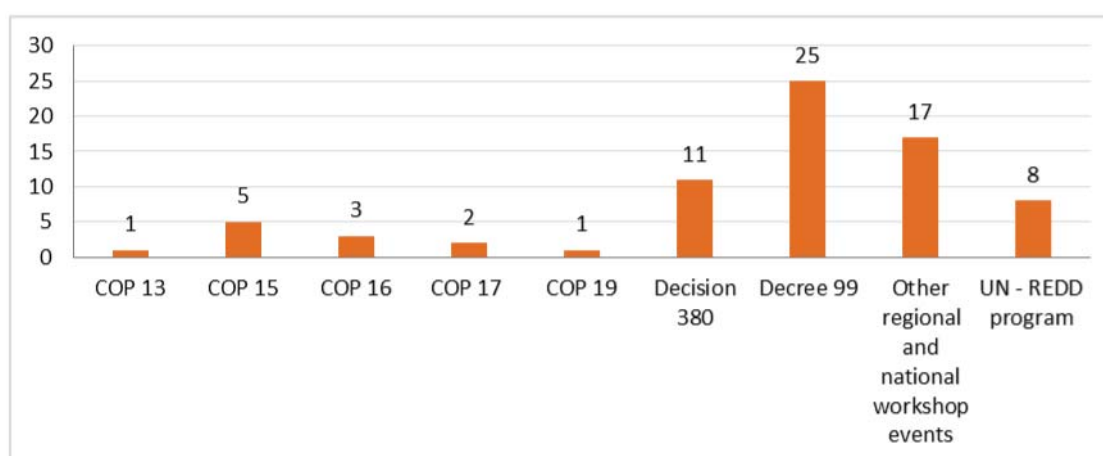
### The governance level of REDD+ coverage

Our analysis of the governance level of REDD+ media frames, whether international, national or provincial, provided insights into the importance of international news in national REDD+ debates versus national REDD+ issues. The majority of REDD+ frames addressed national level REDD+ issues, followed by provincial and international issues. Local REDD+ issues were not discussed at all in the media. The focus shifted over time, from an exclusively international focus in 2007 to a more extensive and diversified range of domestic coverage since 2009.

The dominant focus at the domestic level was confirmed by the number of policy events coded that related to REDD+. The majority of policy events referred to were linked to Decree 99 (25 mentions), Decision 380 (11), the UN-REDD Programme in Vietnam (8), and in second instance to international policy events such as annual COP meetings (12). Decree 99 on national PFES program and the importance to enforce this decree was by far the most salient newsworthy event discussed between 2010 and 2013 (Figure 2).

The absence of any mention of other REDD+ policy events is also worth noting. For example, although the

FIGURE 2 Number of REDD+ events mentioned



government put significant effort into revising the Readiness Plan Idea Note (R-PIN) and The Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) for submission to the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility in 2009 and 2010, neither document (nor its process of formulation and design) was mentioned in the media during this period. The launch of the National REDD+ Program was also considered a key event in 2012, but the media coverage did not refer to it.

### Opinions of policy actors on REDD+

As we would expect in a country with state controlled media the vast majority of policy actors' opinions reported in the media are those of national-level state actors (74 out of 112). Yet, around 34% of policy actors' views are attributed to non-state or foreign actors. Intergovernmental organisations' views were represented in 12% of references (13 out of 112). This was followed by domestic business statements, foreign government organizations and international NGOs and domestic research institutes (Table 4).

Most of the actors expressed optimistic views about the future of REDD+ (57 out of 112). National level state actors and intergovernmental actors were most optimistic about the

future of REDD+ (Table 4). Interviews with journalists indicated that common reasons for their optimistic view towards REDD+ were a belief that REDD+ could improve the environment, reduce the burden of the forestry sector on the state, and improve local livelihoods. However, despite the optimistic views, some state actors also expressed their concern about the slow progress of REDD+ at the international level and whether REDD+ will bring actual benefits for local people. Four out of nine journalists interviewed claimed that these concerns were raised and used by state actors as a strong justification for moving away from international policy events to focus on, and strengthen, domestic policies, which are considered to be more stable and controllable. Most intergovernmental organizations (8 out of 13) also expressed their optimistic views about the future of REDD+. These actors expressed that REDD+ will help to improve forest governance and benefit generated from REDD+ can improve local livelihoods. Yet, a small number of intergovernmental organizations also expressed their pessimistic view towards REDD+, mainly due to the potential negative impact REDD+ could also bring to local communities such as land grabbing.

The view of domestic businesses was reported in only five articles, yet it appeared that the private sector's response

TABLE 4 Policy actors' outlook on future of REDD+

Actor type	Optimistic	Pessimistic	Neutral	No outlook	Total
National level state and bureaucratic actors	37	7	11	19	74
Intergovernmental Organizations	8	2	1	2	13
Domestic business	7	0	2	0	9
Foreign government and bureaucratic actors	3	1	0	0	4
International NGOs	0	3	0	0	3
National research centre/think tank/ educational institution	0	0	0	3	3
Individual	2	0	1	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>112</b>



toward the PES policy has also changed over time. During 2008–2010, hydropower plants and the state-run company Electricity Vietnam expressed concerns about the impact that Decision 380 and Decree 99 would have on their interests. They suggested that as they already pay a tax on natural resource use, additional payments for PFES would present an excessive burden. In 2011–2013, these companies recognized their role and responsibility in environmental and forest protection and promised to comply with the national law, although other state agencies and local communities complained about the slow progress with actual payments. No domestic civil society organisation was represented in REDD+ media coverage.

During 2007–2010, no frames were associated with national research institutions. During 2011–2013, the opinion of national research institutes and academia was reported on three times. In particular, scientists and academia (e.g. Can Tho University) led the discussion on drivers of deforestation and degradation and ecological loss in forests due to massive infrastructure development (especially hydropower development) and poor water resource management. However, these actors did not provide any specific outlook on REDD+ in their discussion.

#### Policy actors' concerns with effectiveness, efficiency and equity of REDD+

With respect to the three potential aims of REDD+ to deliver emissions reduction (effectiveness), to do it in the most cost effective way (efficiency) and to ensure justice outcomes (equity), the dominant concern of policy actors was with effectiveness (66%), followed by concerns over equity (21%) (Table 5).

Actors' concern on REDD+s' effectiveness referred to how effectively Decree 99 and REDD+ can address deforestation, illegal logging and poverty reduction and, at the international level, how REDD+ policies can potentially save remaining forests and reduce emissions. Actors' concern over equity had both international (payments from developed to

developing countries) and national dimensions (payments to the poor). National state actors expressed concern about the responsibilities of hydropower plants, water supply companies, and tourist companies to pay upland people who protect the forests while international NGOs and government agencies discussed the beneficiaries of REDD+ payments and the need for equitable benefit-sharing from PES and REDD+ to reward local people. Both state and international NGO actors emphasized that PES could contribute to REDD+, but warned that scaling up implementation of both PFES and REDD+ to the national level will be difficult because the benefit-sharing mechanism is unclear and potential negative impacts such as land use conflicts and unclear tenure rights may result. These actors also discussed the possible contribution of REDD+ and PFES in poverty reduction as expected by the government through the National REDD+ Program and PFES policy.

Issues related to other co-benefits such as biodiversity and (cost) efficiency emerged less frequently (efficiency, 3.6%; other co-benefits, 7.2%), and were the main concern of national research institutes and academia. These actors were concerned about biodiversity loss caused by massive infrastructure development and also the high operational costs anticipated for REDD+ and PFES payment distribution.

#### DISCUSSION

We draw some conclusions on what the results tell us about how REDD+ is framed and whose political agenda is represented in the media, and finally, what the potential consequences for policy processes and outcomes for non-state actors' interests in the REDD+ are in Vietnam.

#### REDD+ for poverty reduction

First, our study shows that limited coverage of REDD+ exists in the main print media in Vietnam, which indicates that REDD+ is not at the centre of public debates on climate change. Pham *et al.* (2014) found that climate change policies

TABLE 5 Policy actors' concerns with REDD+ effectiveness, efficiency and equity

	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Equity	Other co-benefits	Others	Total
National level state and bureaucratic actors	52	2	13	3	0	70
Intergovernmental Organization and Bodies	7	0	1	3	0	11
International NGOs	2	0	8	0	0	10
Domestic business	4	0	2	0	0	6
Business association	2	0	1	1	0	4
Foreign government and bureaucratic actors	2	2	0	0	0	4
National research centre/think tank/ educational institution	1	0		0	2	3
Individual	4	0	0	1	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>112</b>

in Vietnam focus primarily on adaptation as opposed to mitigation and are mainly associated with rising sea levels and overlook forests related climate change issues. Yet, the increase in the number of articles and range of REDD+-related issues covered over time shows that policy makers and the media have paid increasing attention to REDD+ and have explored different topics related to REDD+ from a variety of perspectives.

What has not been reported about REDD+ in Vietnam in the media is also interesting. The print media focuses on major domestic policy events, especially those deemed important by the Vietnam's government. They did not, however, report on policy developments related to the fulfilment of international requirements to access REDD+ funding, such as the submission of R-PIN and R-PP to the FCPF or to the formulation of the National REDD+ Program.

This suggests that the government's efforts have been primarily to use the print media to increase popular support for domestic policies, such as Decision 380 and Decree 99. This domestic, as opposed to international, REDD+ policy focus differs markedly from other developing countries media studies, which all have a major focus on global REDD+ issues (Cronin *et al.* 2015, May *et al.* 2011, Pham 2011). REDD+ discourse in Vietnam is greatly influenced by the central government's control over the media with articles portraying the government's main REDD+ direction in Vietnam's overall national policy framework: the development of REDD+ as well as domestically funded (forest-based) payments for ecosystem services in order to contribute to national development objectives of poverty reduction.

### Media as the voice of the government

In terms of representation of actors in the media, our findings confirm that media frames report the position of the government. In many developing countries, journalists often obtain information on climate change from international news agencies, science magazines, and nongovernmental organisations and the dominant voices in news frames are those of foreign rather than local scientists (Harbinson 2006, Shanahan 2009). In contrast, in Vietnam, government agencies are the main, and almost exclusively sources of information for journalists' on climate change and REDD+. Our findings are similar to what Tolen (2007) found in China where the main sources of information for journalists are government departments and state news agencies. However, while in China, the climate change coverage focuses on international news and events such as global climate change conferences (Tolen 2007), in Vietnam the government seems to have stronger ownership of the REDD+ arena, and reporting focuses on domestic events related to REDD+.

The dominance of government agencies in the REDD+ media articles is evident and leaves limited political space for domestic non-state actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs) or domestic business. While CSOs are relatively involved in REDD+ media debates in other REDD+ countries, for example Indonesia and Brazil (May *et al.* 2011,

Cronin *et al.* 2015), CSOs are completely absent in the REDD+ media coverage in Vietnam. This is partly because CSOs in Vietnam are formed under government agencies and have to follow strictly government control (Pham *et al.* 2010). Moreover, although a number of domestic businesses in Vietnam are sceptical about PFES and are reluctant to pay for PFES and REDD+ (Pham *et al.* 2013), no critique from domestic businesses was expressed in the media. Stakeholders with views that differ from those of the government have limited room to express their opinions. This suggests that the social groups have limited ability to influence REDD+ policies. The reluctance of the business sector to pay for REDD+-related PFES might though impact future effectiveness of these policies. It also suggests that awareness raising and pro-active efforts to involve the business sector in REDD+ policy processes will be critical for success. Pham *et al.* (2014) suggest that ensuring a more inclusive decision making processes in Vietnam is a precondition for REDD+ success and thus would require a shift in current governance from traditional top-down approaches to a more participatory form of decision making.

In democracies, the media is expected to be a useful channel for all stakeholders in society to express its views on particular issues. However, the way climate change is reported depends on the economic, cultural and socio-political characteristics of a country (Carvalho 2007, Boykoff and Mansfield 2008). Results from this study show that media coverage in Vietnam largely represents the Communist Party and the government's perceptions and assessment of REDD+. This supports the argument that mass media in Vietnam serve to publicize government policies and rally public support for them.

### Dissent and REDD+ equity concerns in the media

We find more nuance in the findings if we look at who shares a common view on REDD+. Most actors in the media shared an optimistic view, as for example the government's view in reference to mainstreaming REDD+ into the national agenda for climate change mitigation. An optimistic outlook was also found among international actors, suggesting the international and national mitigation agendas are quite well aligned. A critical evaluation of this finding may infer that international actors self-censor or that only views that reflect those of government are published. Media representations of REDD+ in Vietnam are indeed extremely optimistic, not covering the sorts of controversial and critical issues related to REDD+ that have been raised often in the international media, such as leakage or indigenous rights issues (Di Gregorio *et al.* 2015), a fact that is likely traceable, again, to government control of the media. However, some state actors and international organisations expressed relatively more pessimistic views, mainly related to the future of REDD+. In Vietnam such conflicting views are expressed by only a small number of government actors and international NGOs, while in countries such as Brazil, Nepal or PNG conflicting views occur across different actor groups and mainly include civil society (Brockhaus *et al.* 2014).

With respect to concerns with effectiveness, efficiency and equity, we found that the primary focus on REDD+ effectiveness as opposed to equity or efficiency is also a common trend amongst policy actors' opinions reported in the media in other REDD+ countries such as Brazil and Indonesia (May *et al.* 2011, Cronin *et al.* 2015, Di Gregorio *et al.* 2015). In the Vietnamese governance context, effectiveness in REDD+ is discussed by policy actors nearly exclusively as depending on better law enforcement, and hence reflecting traditional command and control planning modalities.

Equity, however, was a concern often put forward by state actors, but also by international environmental organizations and in fewer instances also by the business sector. In total 20% of policy actors' opinions discussed equity issues. Thus, REDD+ equity concerns are taken into account by the government and are discussed in the media. This equity discourse, pursued by the government of Vietnam, is rooted in the strong interest of the government to link PFES and REDD+ to poverty reduction policies and outcomes in Vietnam and serves as a political tool to argue for additional foreign funding to support Vietnam. This discourse, however, does not reflect equity concerns one would expect to hear from NGOs and CSOs. For example, Di Gregorio *et al.* (2013) found, that across seven REDD+ countries the main equity concerns were related to benefit sharing mechanisms between actors and between levels of governance.

The media in Vietnam disseminate the government's views on REDD+. Yet, some limited voice is given to a number of other actors, as long that they avoid confrontation with the dominant government position. Equity discourses seem to reflect mainly the interest and position of the state, and no room is given yet in the media to domestic civil society and grassroot organisations and their concerns. However, the reflection of equity issues and the limited space given to the interests of some non-state actors suggested for a more participatory decision making on REDD+ in Vietnam, as for example Wells-Dang (2010) suggested. Tolen (2007) finds a similar pattern in China, which has a similar political regime to Vietnam, where the government has become more open and allows state-controlled media to report on and interpret climate change issues more freely. Influential political actors can use media as a political tool to significantly influence the media, and in authoritarian states it is always the state actors that dominate the media (Azhgikhina 2007, Carvalho 2007, Boykoff and Mansfield 2008, Vaagan 2011). Those who control the media have the power to silence debate, suppress issues and decide what can or should not be published (Anderson 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Our findings on changes in the government stances also indicate that Vietnam has moved from an early honeymoon period towards a more contested situation with some actors providing less positive assessments on REDD+. This finding is confirmed by a global comparative study on REDD+ progress, where similar features have been observed in other countries

as well (Brockhaus *et al.* 2016). However, in the case of Vietnam, these conflicting views are expressed by actors of the same organizational type, namely government, while in other countries conflicting views occur across different actor groups and mainly include civil society (Brockhaus *et al.* 2014). REDD+ policy processes and media frames in Vietnam differ from those in other developing countries working to create and implement national REDD+ strategies. REDD+ discourse here is greatly influenced by central government control over the media (with articles portraying the government's strategies) and the close link between payments for ecosystem services, poverty reduction and REDD+ in Vietnam's national policy framework.

In the media, REDD+ is mainly framed around the enforcement and implementation of the national PFES and REDD+ policies. This reflects traditional command and control planning modalities, as well as equity concerns that reflect Vietnam's priorities on poverty reduction and, to a lesser degree, concerns about effectiveness of REDD+ policies. Efficiency is not widely discussed in the media, and this could represent a weakness for future implementation. Additionally, the findings highlight that media have been overly optimistic, not covering the sorts of controversial and critical issues related to REDD+ that have been raised often in the international media (such as leakage and involvement of indigenous groups), a fact that is likely traceable, again, to government control of media discourses.

Our paper highlights that in an authoritarian regime, such as Vietnam, the media represents mainly the stance of the government with regard to REDD+. The perspectives of business are less represented, and the voices of national NGOs, civil society and marginalized groups are absent. This has a number of implications for the interpretation of media analysis on climate change in the REDD+ arena in authoritarian countries. It also calls for a stronger effort from scientists and journalists to disseminate and inform not only key stakeholders, but also the wider public about REDD+ in Vietnam and its potential impact on the forestry and other sectors.

Our findings also show that while state actors dominate REDD+ media frames, some limited space is present for some non-state actors' interests, but only domestic business and international organisations discussing equity issues are represented. Yet, other domestic non-state actors, seem not to have access to the print media in the REDD+ domain at the moment. While the print newspapers in Vietnam are always controlled by the state, public and social actors have recently gained more space to express their views on government policies through social media and the internet. It remains to be seen whether these developments can help to democratize the media landscape on REDD+, as well as other issues, in the future.

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