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POLICY BRIEF: 'CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN APPLYING 'SELF-FINANCING' PRINCIPLES TO PROTECTED AREAS IN VIET NAM

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In cooperation with
UNIQUE forestry and land use GmbH

On behalf of the
German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

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This policy brief summarises the findings of a study on protected area finance that was commissioned by the GIZ-Bio project and carried out between May-December 2020. The purpose was to review and inform the operationalisation of policy measures to promote financial self-reliance and autonomy among public non-business units. These require protected areas to become more financially self-sufficient, including decreasing the level of dependence on the state budget, and covering a greater proportion of costs from own-source revenues.

The brief summarises protected area funding status and trends, identifies key financial constraints to effective management, describes what the concept of 'self-financing' means and how it is being implemented, highlights possible challenges and risks in applying these principles to protected areas, and provides concrete recommendations for improving financial self-reliance and sustainability across the protected area network.

The intended target audience for the brief is (in order of priority): policy and decision makers from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural development (MARD) and Viet Nam Forestry Administration (VNForest), Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), Departments of Agriculture and Rural development (DARDs) and Provincial People's Committees (PPCs); Protected Area Management Boards (PAMBs); and other development partners in Viet Nam. The intended objective is to inform policy makers about gaps in PA financing and propose concrete recommendations as to how to address these. Specifically, the aim is for policy makers at national level to better understand the PA financing situation at an aggregated level and to be informed about gaps and concrete recommendations to address these, for PAs and provincial stakeholders to have evidencebased arguments for advocating for certain actions at the national level (e.g. ensuring sufficient state budget for PAs, self-financing should only be an add-on),and for other development partners to have information to enable them to take up the same messages and advocate in the same direction to reach higher impact.

PROTECTED AREA FUNDING HAS INCREASED STEADILY OVER TIME

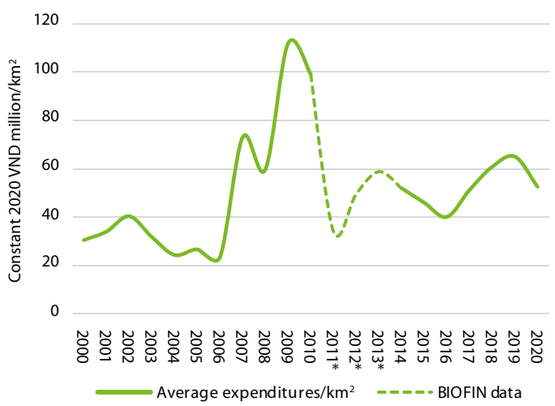
Although **the public budget has long formed the core of conservation funding in Viet Nam, protected areas (PAs) are permitted to mobilise financial resources from a relatively wide range of sources.** As laid out in the Forestry Law 2017 and in Circular 28/2018/TT-BNNPTNT on Sustainable Forest Management, PAs can be funded from investments, contributions, donations, credit and other types of funding provided by domestic and international organisations and individuals, as well as revenues from the lease of forest and forest land, afforestation, payments for forest environmental services, ecotourism, leisure and recreation services, and charges for timber, non-timber forest products and forest carbon reserves. Of course this does not mean that each and every one of these funding sources is available and accessible to all PAs. The actual combination of funding in a given site is determined by that PA's own specific circumstances. As explained below, most PAs actually rely on a fairly narrow financial base, with few self-generated revenues.

Wide range of financial resources

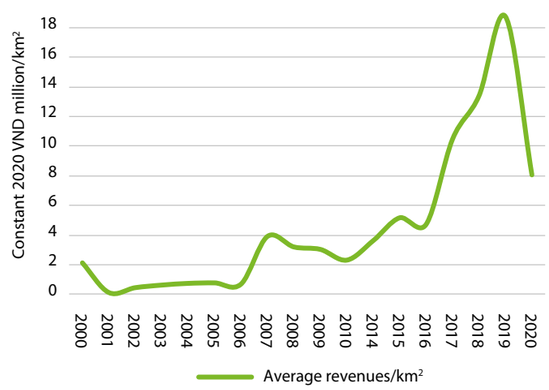
- Investments
- Contributions
- Donations
- Credit
- Funding provided by domestic/intern. organisations
- Revenues from the lease of forest and forest land
- Afforestation
- Payments for forest environmental services
- Ecotourism
- Leisure and recreation services
- Charges for timber, non-timber forest products
- Forest carbon reserves

A review of funding across 54 parks and nature reserves presents an encouraging financial picture. As shown in the graphs below, **both expenditures and income have increased substantially in real terms over the last two decades** (although show quite some fluctuation between years). At an average of VND 65 million/km²/year, current funding levels also compare extremely favourably with other ASEAN countries.

Exenditures/ km²

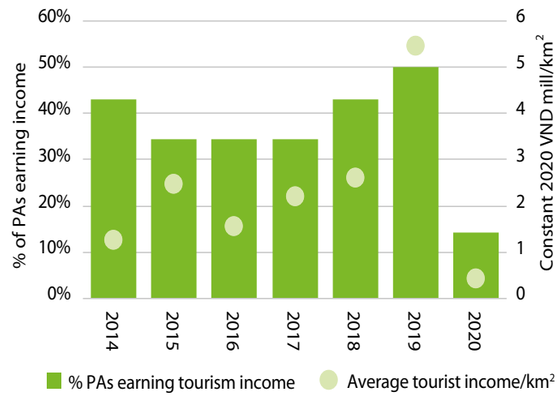


Revenues / km²

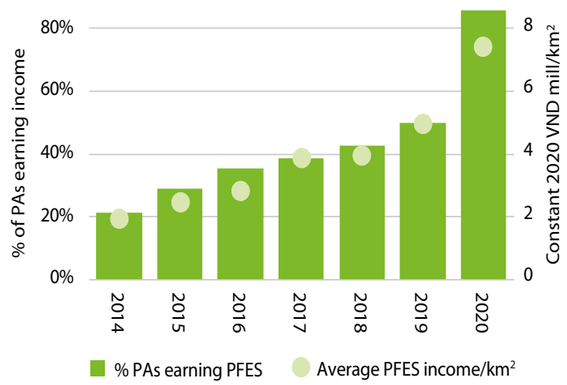


*Based on data provided from 54 PAs (26 national parks and 28 nature reserves). *No expenditure data available for 2011-13, so figures taken from Ha, T. (2018) Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) Viet Nam – Biodiversity Expenditure Review. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Hanoi.*

Income from tourism, 2014-20



Income from PFES, 2014-20



Average annual expenditures in PAs more than doubled in real terms between 2000 and 2019, from VND 30.39 million/km² in 2000 to VND 65.02 million in 2019 (at 2020 prices). Unusually high spending levels of more than VND 75 million/km² were registered in 2007, 2009 and 2010. This was largely due to the large investments made under national target programmes and internationally-funded projects in those years. Self-generated revenues have also risen steadily – from an average of VND 0.83 million/km²/year a year between 2000-05, to VND 2.65 million between 2005-10, and VND 9.19 million since 2014. The last 5 years, in particular, show an impressive upward trend – from an average of VND 5 million km²/year in 2015, to VND 10.5 million in 2018, VND 13.4 million in 2018, and VND 18.7 million in 2019.

Not only have revenues risen, overall, but an increasing number of PAs have been able to diversity their funding base beyond the state budget and internationally-funded projects. The percentage of both national parks (especially) and nature reserves (to a lesser extent) earning income has progressively increased over the past 5 years. A suite of new financing mechanisms have been developed and piloted across the country over the last two decades, for example payments for ecosystem services, tourism fees, carbon and biodiversity offsets, and contributions from the private sector. Two sources of self-generated income stand out: payments for forest environmental services (PFES) and tourism revenues. According to the partial data made available to the current study, in 2019 half of PAs were receiving funds from PFES and a similar proportion were earning income from tourism, as compared to something around 30% between 2014 and 2017.

There have also been changes in the way in which PA management boards are permitted to manage and administer funding. **The law now allows for many self-generated revenues to be retained and reinvested in conservation at the site level.** This contrasts with the earlier system, under which most revenues were required to be remitted to the central treasury, and were absorbed into the general budget. The rules vary for different types of income and categories of

PAs. For example, 90% of the entrance fees collected from PAs managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) can be kept and spent on forest management activities. For provincially-managed PAs, the percentage is determined by the relevant provincial people's committee (PPC). There is also the possibility for retained income to be carried over between financial years. PA management boards are authorised to set up four types of funds to absorb any surplus of revenues over expenditures at the end of the year, and to decide how they are spent. These include an administrative operations fund, income supplementation fund, reward fund, and welfare fund.

Four types of funds

Administrative Operations Fund	**Income Supplementation** Fund	**Reward** Fund	**Welfare** Fund

PROTECTED AREAS CONTINUE TO FACE PERSISTENT FINANCING CONSTRAINTS

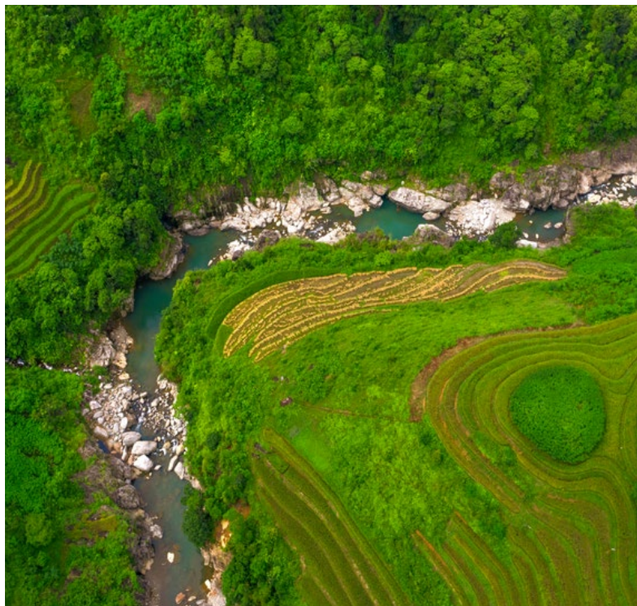
While recent funding trends give some cause for optimism, PAs in Viet Nam continue to face chronic financing constraints. The positive picture at the aggregate, system-wide level masks considerable variation between sites. While a minority of PAs are relatively well-funded, many face severe financing gaps, and are able to afford little more than a bare minimum of management and conservation expenditures.

There tends to be a particular disparity between sites that are centrally-managed by MARD/VNForest and those that come under the jurisdiction of provincial authorities, and between national parks and other categories of PAs. For example, between 2000-19, expenditures in centrally-managed PAs were, at VND 66.93 million/km^2/year, more than twice as high as in provincially-managed PAs (VND 30.21 million). It should be noted that spending per unit of area is only one indicator of financing levels, as conservation expenditure needs vary widely between different PAs, depending on the size, location, level of threat, physical characteristics and so on. However, it presents a useful way – and one of the only means – of comparing spending between different sites. Just five national parks (Ba Bể, Bạch Mã, Cát Tiên, Cúc Phương and Yok Đôn) together accounted for a third of all funding, based on average annual spending rates.

Another financing constraint arises from the way in which budgets are allocated. Staff salaries continue to dominate spending, a point that has already been widely noted elsewhere. The share of staff in recurrent expenditures has been steadily rising over time, from an average of 44% between 2000-05, to 57% between 2006-10, up to 80% for the period 2014-20. This means that **there is often little funding left to cover other essential conservation costs**, for example patrolling, enforcement, research, monitoring, community outreach and the purchase and maintenance of core equipment and facilities. It is also the case that, despite the high levels of payroll spending, short contracts, low salaries and an unrealistic burden of responsibilities also mean that it is difficult to hire and retain qualified and dedicated staffing base for most PAs.

A third challenge is that, in practice, **only a small proportion of the funding sources permitted by law are actually being captured**. As a result, very few PAs are able to earn significant revenues. Still, the majority of PAs depend on the state budget, supplemented by internationally-funded projects. A far higher proportion of national parks than nature reserves earn revenues, generating higher average earnings (almost VND 21 million/km^2 in 2019, as compared to just under VND 2.5 million). This means that PA management boards in national parks are also generally able to cover a substantially higher proportion of their expenditures from self-generated revenues – on average more than a third in 2019, as compared to just 2.7% for nature reserves.

As a final point, it is important to note that PA financing constraints extend far beyond a simple lack of funds. **Various other structural factors also undermine the financial sustainability of PAs, and limit the effectiveness and impact of spending**. For example, one common challenge is that there remains a serious disconnect between financial planning and forest management planning. Annual budgets (and funding allocations) do not always reflect the highest conservation priorities or target the most critical on-the-ground management needs. Other issues include the continued reliance on a very narrow (and thus risky and potentially insecure) financial portfolio, delays in receiving funds, outdated and sometimes inaccurate cost norms, as well as weaknesses and gaps in the institutional, policy and planning frameworks that determine how revenues are generated and how financial resources are requested, allocated, administered and used.



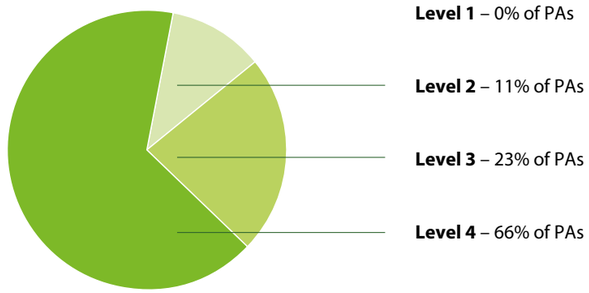
PROTECTED AREAS ARE REQUIRED TO BECOME PROGRESSIVELY MORE FINANCIAL SELF-RELIANT

The last decade and a half has seen a gradual shift in the way in which public non-business units As defined in Article 9 of the 2010 Law on Public Employees (such as PA management boards) are expected to fund their operations. **The emphasis is on achieving greater financial self-reliance.** This involves reducing the level of dependence on the state budget, decreasing the number of permanent staff on the payroll, covering a higher proportion of capital and recurrent costs from own-source revenues, at the same time as achieving greater 'socialisation' of public services through engaging with the private sector and mobilising user fees and charges.

As public non-business units achieve this transition, so a progressively greater degree of autonomy in management and operations, organisational arrangements, personnel, financial planning and management is granted – including decisions over spending and income, as well as pricing of services according to market mechanisms. Four levels of financial self-reliance (and corresponding degrees of autonomy) are specified: units that self-finance both capital and operating expenses, those that self-finance recurrent expenses, those that partially self-finance recurrent expenses, and those that are fully state-subsidised.

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Units that self-finance both capital and operating expenses	Units that self-finance reccurent expenses	Units that partially self-finance reccurent expenses	Units that are fully state-subsidised

Status as of mind-2019



In early 2018, MARD issued Resolution 465-NQ/BCSĐ to steer implementation of the government's national action plan and targets for reform, in response to calls for the efficiency of public non-business units in the agriculture and rural development sector to be improved and for MARD and PPCs to 'review, rearrange and consolidate protection forest management boards in a streamlined and effective manner'. **However, as yet, few PAs have progressed towards any significant level of financial self-sufficiency.** According to a recent study carried out by GIZ and VNForest, as of mid-2019 no PAs had achieved level 1 self-reliance, just 11% had reached level 2, 23% were at level 3, while the majority (66%) remained at level 4 and were completely dependent on the state budget. Statistics from VNForest show that only a very small minority of PAs have been able to achieve even partial financial autonomy, such as Ba Vì National Park (80% autonomy) and Cát Tiên National Park (60% autonomy).

While the directive to increase financial self-reliance is a powerful one, it should be emphasised that this does not imply that there is no role for the public budget in funding PAs. The law makes a clear distinction between 'public services funded by the state budget' (services for which all expenses are covered by the government, where full cost-recovery is not possible from charges and fees, and/or are subsidised by the state budget) and 'public services not funded by the state budget' (those that are suitable for private sector involvement, have high potential for socialisation, are not subsidised by the government, and/or which are priced according to market mechanisms).

Public services funded by the state budget	Public services not funded by the state budget
Services for which all expenses are covered by the government, where full cost-recovery is not possible from charges and fees, and/or are subsidised by the state budget	Those that are suitable for private sector involvement, have high potential for socialisation, are not subsidised by the government, and/or which are priced according to market mechanisms

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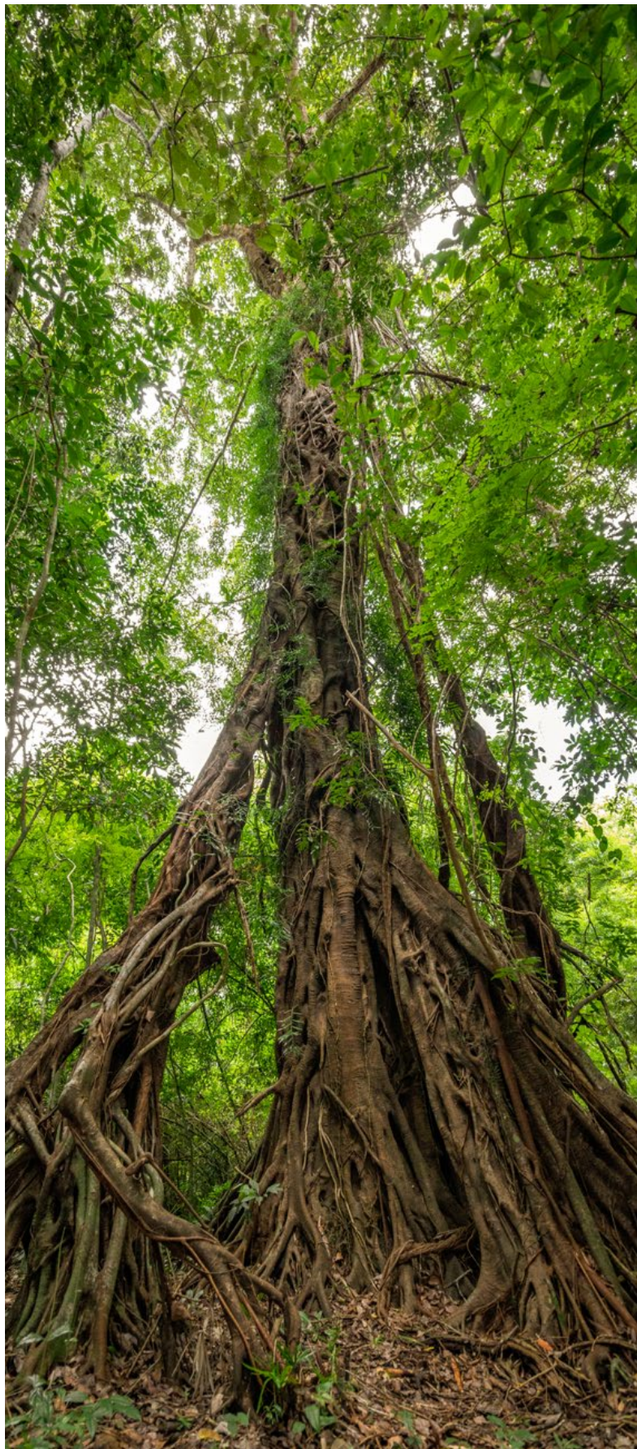
forest protection and development; conservation, rescue, restoration of ecology and forest natural resources; forest inventory and planning; forest sector statistics and monitoring; and forestry museums and specimen collections. Chapter VI of Decree 156/2019, Chapter VI on Investment in Forest Protection and Development also lists a number of operational items to be invested in by the state.

In line with these provisions, retained revenues are intended to be allocated for spending on items and activities that are not funded by the public budget. This, too, is clearly laid out in the law. For example, PFES management fees are to be used for forest management, including silvicultural items, forest protection and development facilities, patrolling and law enforcement, purchase and maintenance of forest protection equipment, technical research and monitoring, salaries and wages for persons who are not paid from the state budget, and PFES-related training, awareness and communications. A quarter of ecotourism revenues is intended to replace the state budget for non-business capital expenditures and forest management activities in the core and buffer zone of the PA in which they are earned. The remaining 75% can be spent on salary increases for management board officials and employees, provided as support to buffer zone community development activities, be re-invested in ecotourism activities, or used to set up funds in accordance with government regulations (as described above).



THE CONCEPT OF SELF-RELIANCE MUST BE TAILORED TO PROTECTED AREA NEEDS & CHARACTERISTICS

As described above, it is clear that PA management boards currently face two, related, financing challenges. One is to respond to the directive from central government to become more financially self-sufficient. The other is to address the funding shortages and financial constraints that continue to jeopardise their operations. It remains a major concern to ensure that these processes are mutually reinforcing, and act to strengthen the financial sustainability of PAs, rather than serving in any way to contradict or undermine each other.

While there is an obvious need to diversify funding and to reduce dependence on the state budget, it is important to recognise that many PAs cannot – and should not be expected to – become fully or even partially self-reliant.

One important consideration is that PA management boards have a unique mandate and role which is fundamentally different from many other public non-business units. This is to safeguard public assets (PAs) that the state is responsible for managing in trust on behalf of the Vietnamese people, in order to secure essential public services (biodiversity, ecosystem services and cultural heritage) that would not otherwise be adequately or fairly provided by the market. It follows that relatively few PA services meet the criteria of 'public services not funded by the state budget', in the sense of being amenable to private sector involvement, having high potential for socialisation, or being able to be priced according to market mechanisms.

A second, linked, point is that not every PA has the potential to generate income. There is a limited range of goods and services that PAs are legally empowered or physically able to sell. Even where markets exist in principle (for example for tourism, recreation, or certain types of forest products), many PAs are located in remote areas, with difficult terrain, poor access, and undeveloped infrastructure. The cost of investing the time, effort, expertise and funds that are required to access these markets or to develop new funding mechanisms is often prohibitive. In many cases, there is simply not the market demand or physical conditions to make these enterprises viable in business terms in the first place.

Another critical feature of PA services is that almost all, by definition, are tied to landscapes with extremely high biodiversity values, which are often also occupied and/or used by ethnic or local communities and other vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. **There is always a critical need to consider possible environmental and social risks and impacts when accessing funding sources. Profit maximisation can on no account be the sole, or even the principal, goal driving PA income generating activities.**

For these reasons, it is both reasonable and realistic to interpret and apply 'financial self-reliance' more flexibly in relation to PAs. Both the concept and the process should be understood to encompass a spectrum of goals and outcomes which are centred around improving financial sustainability at a broader and more systemic level. While it is highly desirable, if not essential, that PAs should seek to improve their funding and revenue base, this does not automatically equate to a need to? achieve full cost-recovery, become entirely financially self-reliant, or 'socialise' the provision of all services. In fact there are many risks to unthinkingly applying these principles across the PA network, and it is unrealistic to think that it will ever be possible (or desirable) for all PAs to transition to self-financed, business-oriented units.

In this sense, self-reliance can be understood to be a core part of any strategy to strengthen the financial sustainability of PAs – but should in no way be seen as the sole aim or intended outcome of the process. Rather, it is a means to an end. The main motivation is to set in place the financial conditions that are required to enable, encourage and support effective PA management. Generating new funding is of course a key component of this, and it remains a reality that the state budget is under heavy pressure, and will likely not be sufficient to cover all PA costs over the long-term. Own-source revenues should however not be seen as a replacement for the core public budget support that is required for PAs to fulfil their public service mandate, but rather as a supplement that should be used to further strengthen and benefit PA management.

WAYS FORWARD & NEXT STEPS IN STRENGTHENING PROTECTED AREA FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Against this backdrop of intensifying needs to take action to secure the funding base of PAs into the future, ten key policy directions emerge. These seek to advance the process of financial self-reliance across the PA network, within the broader context of improving long-term financial sustainability and management effectiveness.

An important point to note is that these actions are not the responsibility of PA management boards alone. There is an urgent need to ensure that PA management boards are provided with the necessary technical, investment and policy support to enable and empower them to do this. This, in turn, requires the active assistance and backing of a number of other agencies and stakeholders, including both state and non-state actors.

Criteria for selecting PAs to develop self-financing and business-oriented models

CATEGORY A	CATEGORY B	CATEGORY C
PAs that have the ability to transition to level 1 or 2 PNBUs on the basis of existing income sources	**PAs that demonstrate the potential to progress towards level 2 or 3 by expanding current funding and revenue base**	**PAs that are likely to remain fully state-funded PNBUs for the foreseeable future because they do not have any significant options to generate income**
generate sufficient income to cover >50% of annual expenditures and have demonstrated opportunities to increase and/or diversity income and investments	generate sufficient income to cover <50% of annual expenditures, but are deemed to have potential to expand income from ecotourism, PFES and/or other sources	earn no self-generated income at all, and are considered to have few immediate prospects to do so
prepare **full plan for self-financing** that lays out a framework for socialisation and transition to a business-oriented model	prepare **sustainable financing strategy** oriented towards increasing funding, revenue-generation and financial self-reliance	prepare **financial status review and scoping study**, to see whether there is additional untapped potential to supplement state budget funding

1

1. Maintain core state budget allocations at an adequate level to allow the effective management of PAs as public assets which provide essential public services. The Ministry of Finance, MARD and provincial authorities should commit to ring fence and maintain these areas of core budget support. To facilitate this, the activities and expenditures required to deliver PA public interest functions should be accurately costed, and reflected in annual budget requests. This also responds to the direction from central government that MARD, VNForest and PPCs should work with PA management boards to review and update as necessary the list of state budget-funded PA services, as well as to develop guidelines, norms and pricing frameworks for budget-funded activities, and establish appropriate criteria, standards, economic norms and technical guidance for the provision and pricing of these services.

2

2. Set criteria for determining which PAs have the potential to transition towards increased financial self-reliance, and those that are not able to do so. This exercise should be led by central planning and policy-making agencies (such as the Ministry of Finance, MARD/VNForest, provincial authorities and others), with inputs from PA management boards. A tripartite system is recommended which differentiates between PAs that have the ability to transition to level 1 or 2 public non-business units on the basis of existing income sources (category A), those that demonstrate the potential to progress towards level 2 or 3 by expanding their current funding and revenue base (category B), and those are likely to remain fully state-funded for the foreseeable future because they do not have any significant options to generate income (category C). By applying these criteria, it should be possible to come up with a realistic set of targets for operationalising financial self-reliance and autonomy principles across the PA network.

3

3. Establish a roadmap of actions to achieve these targets, and to support and facilitate PA management boards to improve financial self-reliance and sustainability over the next five years. This should be done for the PA network as a whole, led by MARD/VNForest, with active participation and inputs from provincial authorities, PA management boards and other relevant agencies. The roadmap would interpret and operationalise the government's regulatory requirements on autonomy and self-responsibility for public non-business units in line with PA needs and circumstances, support site-level strategic financial planning processes, develop the financial and business capacities of PA staff, and set in place enabling frameworks and incentives to remove barriers to sustainable financing, investment and the development of new funding and income streams. These components are further elaborated below.

4

4. Develop sustainable finance strategies and plans, in line with each PA's needs, opportunities and potentials as regards financial self-reliance and ustainability (see categories A, B and C above). This should be undertaken by each PA management board, with the support of VNForest and other technical agencies. Guidelines for PA sustainable finance planning have already been developed under the GIZ-Bio project, which can assist in this process. As the prescribed content for sustainable forest management plans does not refer to sustainable financing, it is necessary to update forest management planning guidelines and formats to incorporate these aspects. The main responsibility for doing this lies with VNForest and MARD.

5

5. Identify, develop and implement new sources of self-generated PA revenues and investment flows. Financing needs and opportunities are not universal, and do apply equally to all PAs. Site-specific guidance and solutions should therefore be provided. A first step would be to review and categorise the entire PA system to identify the potential for income generation, overall and for specific sites. This is the primary responsibility of the Ministry of Finance, MARD/VNForest and provincial authorities, working closely with PA management boards. Valuable lessons learned can also be gained from non-state actors, international organisations and projects that have experience in implementing these types of funding mechanisms.

6

6. Investigate novel public funding mechanisms for PAs that can be used to supplement core annual budget allocatio. A variety of extra-budgetary public funding mechanisms are already enabled and used in Viet Nam to mobilise and allocate funding for particular sectors and purposes, including national programmes, as well as instruments such as fiscal earmarking, ecological-fiscal transfers, and bonds. These may have potential to be used in support of PAs. The primary responsibility lies with the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning and Investment, working together with MARD and provincial authorities. Valuable guidance and lessons learned can also be gained from non-state actors, international organisations and projects that have experience in supporting these types of funding mechanisms.

7

7. Adopt a more 'business-like' approach to PA financial management, which seeks to improve how existing funds are managed and spent. This includes promoting greater efficiency and cost savings, applying cost recovery principles, and emphasising financial accountability, transparency and integrity. While PA management boards must take the operational lead on this, it is important that the necessary support, guidance and – where required – enforcement is provided by the Ministry of Finance, MARD/VNForest and provincial authorities.

8

8. Ensure that adequate incentives are set in place to encourage PAs to generate income. It is important that any effort to increase or diversity self-generated revenues translates into clear and direct financial gains at the site level. This requires changes at the policy and regulatory level, to formalize additional provisions for allowing for more self-generated PA income (both a greater range of revenue sources and a higher percentage of the revenues collected) to be retained by the PAMB, and reinvested in strengthen the PA system, capacity, as well as forest protection and development. In line with the principles of financial self-autonomy, PAMBs should be accorded greater decision-making power to determine how these revenues should be spent, in line with approved PA conservation goals and management plan activities.

9

9. Allocate sufficient funding and technical support to the investments that are required to improve PA funding and income. This encompasses both 'hard' investments (e.g. in the infrastructure and facilities that are needed to establish revenue-generating enterprises and attract external investment and funding), and 'soft' investments (e.g. building PA staff capacities in financial and business skills, providing communications and marketing support, developing sustainable financial plans). This requires action from MARD/VNForest, in collaboration with provincial authorities. Where appropriate and useful, external support – from both international organisations and the private sector – can also be sought.

10

10. Invest in developing the staff capacities and skillsets that are required to improve financial self-reliance and sustainability efforts. Even though PA staff are increasingly expected to take on financial and business planning roles, they are not typically trained to undertake these tasks, and are rarely recruited on the basis of such qualifications and experience. The process of capacity development should be led by MARD/VNForest and provincial authorities, working with other agencies and external experts as required.

11

11. Address the structural constraints that hinder progress towards PA financial self-reliance and sustainability. Importantly, this requires the development of legal, economic and fiscal incentives to attract private investors and facilitate market-based approaches to PA service generation. These include regulatory and policy instruments to allow for partnerships and profit-sharing, joint rights to manage and use facilities and services, and the granting of tax privileges, preferential credit and other incentives. The primary responsibility lies with MARD, the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning and Investment, working together with other sectors and agencies as required.

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