



STUDENT PAPER SERIES

36



**Climbing the Ladder of Participation.** Non-State Stakeholder Involvement in the Negotiation Process of the Vietnam Voluntary Partnership Agreement under the EU FLEGT Action Plan

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**Ann-Kathrin Beck**

Erasmus Mundus Master's in Public Policy  
(Mundus MAPP)

Academic year 2016-2017



INSTITUT  
BARCELONA  
ESTUDIS  
INTERNACIONALS

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes the role non-state stakeholders, namely private and civil society actors, played in the negotiation process of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement with Vietnam under the EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade Action Plan. Employing the Policy Arrangement Approach by Arts et al. (2006) actors and their coalitions, resources, rules of the game, and discourses were examined. The role of non-state actors was assessed using an adapted ladder of participation based on Arnstein (1969). The analysis was based on an extensive literature review as well as expert interviews with relevant stakeholders.

The negotiation process between Vietnam and the EU that carried on from 2010 to 2017 was split up in three distinct phases which constitutes for a qualitative study with a within-case comparison. It was found that the amount of actors and their coalitions as well as the resources they have, increased over time. Particularly important are the creation of the Network of Vietnam Non-Governmental Organizations on the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan and the support of external actors. However, the Vietnamese government retained most of the power over the negotiations and therefore only small changes in the rules of the game and discourses occurred.

Non-state stakeholders were not allowed to play a great role in the negotiation process. Sometimes they acted as consultants, but most often they were only informed about the proceedings. This illustrates the contrast between EU requirements for multi-stakeholder involvement and current practices in Vietnam. However, non-state actors became more knowledgeable and outspoken throughout the negotiation process which can have a positive impact on their future involvement in policy-making. As a previously unstudied case, this work also provides Vietnam as an example for future Voluntary Partnership Agreements with other South East Asian countries, closing a gap in the research.

## **Keywords**

EU; Vietnam; EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan; Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA); Global Forest Governance; Legal Timber; Stakeholder Participation; Policy Arrangement Approach (PAA); Ladder of Participation

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CED	Center for Education and Development
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EFI	European Forestry Institute
EU	European Union
EUTR	European Union Timber Regulation
FLEGT	Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GIZ	German Agency for Development Cooperation
JEM	Joint Expert Meeting
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PAA	Policy Arrangement Approach
TLAS	Timber Legality Assurance System
TWG	Technical Working Group
SME	Small- and medium sized enterprise
SOM	Senior Official Meetings
SRD	Center for Sustainable Rural Development
VIFORES	Vietnam Timber and Forest Product Association
VN	Vietnam
VNFOREST	Vietnam Forest Administration
VNGO-FLEGT Network	Network of Vietnam Non-governmental organizations on the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan
VPA	Voluntary Partnership Agreement

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The ongoing destruction of tropical forests is one of the biggest environmental problems today. Firstly, forests are livelihoods to local communities. In timber producing and processing countries in the Global South, along the Amazonas in South America, the Congo Basin in Central Africa and in the rainforests of South East Asia, the shelter and income they provide is under threat the more forests disappear. Additionally, forest degradation accelerates the loss of biodiversity, increases CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions and reduces carbon storage capacity – the latter drive climate change, which eventually has repercussions on communities across the globe. Furthermore, lucrative trade in wood and timber products from Global South to North creates economic incentives to cut down forests, exacerbating forest loss, and leading to further negative environmental effects. This clearly shows the interdependence between the two hemispheres, as well as timber trade and climate change. Illegal logging is among the most pressing issues, since it promises extra benefits to its traders, but undermines the rights of forest communities, encourages corruption, distorts tax revenues and often accelerates the pace of deforestation, therefore aggravating negative effects on all fronts.

To fight against illegal logging and its threats, a system of timber legality certification emerged in the early 2000s. A center piece to this is the European Union's (EU) Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan that is based on the idea that promoting the trade of legally produced and processed timber can reduce forest degradation. It can also improve the situation for local groups in producing and processing countries, by considering the needs and opinions of all stakeholders affected. In order to reach legally binding provisions on timber, Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPA), which are bilateral trade agreements between the EU and timber exporting countries, are at the core of the Action Plan. Besides governing trade relations, VPAs are supposed to “strengthen effective participation of all stakeholders, notably of non-state actors and indigenous peoples, in policy making and implementation; [...] engage the private sector of the timber producing countries in the efforts to combat illegal logging” (European Council, 2003, p. 1). The EU has already concluded six VPAs fulfilling these requirements.

After more than six years of negotiation, the EU and Vietnam initialed the most recent VPA in May 2017 (European Commission, 2017). This is only the second finalized agreement in Southeast Asia, and the first agreement with a country that is mainly processing timber and has very little tradition in non-state stakeholder involvement. The negotiation process was subject to scholarly debate only to a small extent. There are no comprehensive studies on stakeholders in VPA negotiations in Vietnam so far. This work seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the process in pursuit of the objective to understand what role non-state stakeholders played in the Vietnam VPA negotiation process over time. Particular

attention is given to the involved actors, what resources they used, what the rules of the game were and who determined these, and which discourses accompanied the negotiation process.

The research questions are answered based on a review of key documents as well as expert interviews that make it possible to trace the negotiation process in detail. To analyze the stakeholder involvement over time, the Policy Arrangement Approach (PAA) is used as an analytical tool. Based on the idea that the interaction of actors, resources, rules of the game, and discourses in a certain policy domain account for stability and change, this approach allows the exploration of the Vietnam VPA negotiation process in detail (Arts et al., 2006). The framework was used to study forest governance and VPAs in cases other than Vietnam and is a suitable instrument to investigate which roles non-state stakeholders played in the negotiations. These roles are assessed using an adapted ladder model of participation based on Arnstein (1969).

In the following, I briefly introduce the current literature on forest governance, stakeholder participation and their application to VPA negotiations. Then, I outline the theoretical framework deriving the guiding research questions. I draw upon the different dimensions of the PAA and the EU's ladder of stakeholder participation. In the next step, the research design is presented. Following, the negotiation process of the Vietnam VPA is portrayed by laying out the context and examining the actual negotiations in three stages. Finally, I evaluate the findings against the theoretical framework, show limitations of this study, and draw conclusions as well as recommendations for future research.



## **2 FOREST GOVERNANCE AND FLEGT IN THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE**

There is a vast body of research on forests. From a political science angle authors mostly focus on forest governance beyond command-and-control policy-making that addresses the current challenges of biodiversity conservation, deforestation, and timber trade. In the following I introduce the main trends in research on forest governance, concentrating on the EU FLEGT Action Plan, with particular attention to the VPAs, their negotiation, and the involvement of stakeholders.

### **2.1 Perspectives on Forest Governance**

Growing awareness of environmental degradation drew attention to forest governance starting from the 1970s. Originally there was a lot of research on forests as a commodity, market-based approaches, and other economic concerns (see Arts & Buizer, 2009; Arts et al., 2010). The growing concern for endangered species and deforestation, especially in the aftermath of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, led to research on forest governance as a domain for multi-level governance. In such an arrangement hard law and soft law approaches co-exist and non-state stakeholders play a great role (Humphreys, 2006; McDermott, 2014).

The emergence of first private sector initiatives on timber legality and subsequently unilateral state initiatives caused academic interest (see Cashore & Stone, 2012). The efficiency and effectiveness of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification scheme as well as the expansion of the US Lacey Act, the EU FLEGT Action Plan and the Australian Illegal Logging Prohibition Act were subject to research (Humphreys, 2006; Iben et al., 2014; Overdevest & Zeitlin, 2014a, 2014b). This went along with studies on the set up of global forest governance and its impacts in general (Arts, 2014; McGregor et al., 2015).

Right now, there are two programs stirring the most interest. The first is the United Nations Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, as well as conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks (REDD+) (see for example Corbera et al., 2007; Farris, 2010; Griffiths, 2008; Isyaku et al., 2017; Sikor et al., 2010). The second is the EU FLEGT Action Plan, focused on in this thesis and introduced in the following section.

### **2.2 Research on the EU FLEGT Action Plan and VPAs**

First published by the EU in 2003, the FLEGT Action Plan and especially the VPAs were subject to a considerable academic debate. There are several studies on the overall performance of FLEGT and its effect on democratization and good governance (Lesniewska & McDermott, 2014; Springate-Baginski

et al., 2014), the assessment of impacts of FLEGT VPAs (Tegegne et al., 2014), and their implications for legality and legitimacy (see Nurrochmat et al., 2016).

When it comes to country studies, the implications and perspectives of VPAs on African countries were researched in more detail (Dlamini, 2015; Ochieng et al., 2013; Satyal, 2017). Since Arts et al. (2010) started to explore discourses on forest governance, this approach was applied to VPAs (see Dang et al., 2012), with some studies on Indonesia (Hernawan, 2011; van Heeswijk & Turnhout, 2013), and other ones on African countries (see Oforiwa, 2011).

In the field of multi-level forest governance, which the EU FLEGT Action Plan and VPA negotiations take part in, stakeholder participation is seen a crucial element to account for local demands and social pressures (Agrawal et al., 2008; Lemos & Agrawal, 2006). However, to this day there are only a few studies that focus on the participation of stakeholders in VPA negotiation processes (see Bollen & Ozinga, 2013; Ochieng et al., 2013). Lesniewska and McDermott (2014) address different pathways of stakeholder participation in Indonesia and Ghana to a minor extent. Wodschow et al. (2016) classify the public participation in the negotiation process in Cameroon using three ideal types (see Buttoud, 1999; Buttoud & Yunusova, 2002; Kouplevatskaya-Yunusova, 2005; Kouplevatskaya-Yunusova & Buttoud, 2006). Another exception are Mustalahti et al. (2017) who look into the main challenges of the participation of non-state stakeholders in VPA processes adopting the PAA by Arts et al. (2006). This approach and its adaption, the governance capacity framework, were used to study forest governance in several contexts (see Dang, 2014; Dang et al., 2016; Dang et al., 2017; Lindstad, 2016) and is an excellent tool to study VPA processes.

### **2.3 Research on Forest Governance in Vietnam**

While there is a lot of research on forest governance in general, research on Vietnam lacks. Studies on forest governance in Vietnam are very rare with some exceptions: Dang et al. (2012) describe changing forestry discourses in general (also see Dang, 2014). Recent research concentrates mostly on different aspects of REDD+ (Pham et al., 2014; Trædal et al., 2016; Vijge et al., 2016). When it comes to the EU FLEGT Action Plan there seems to be almost no research at all, with the exception of Nathan and Buhmann (2013) looking into the implications of FLEGT on human rights. Additionally, there is a first exploratory research project by Brown (2013) focusing on stakeholder participation in the negotiation process. Other than that there is a large gap in the literature that is addressed by this thesis. This study can be a starting point for studying FLEGT negotiation processes in similar Asian countries and for cross-national comparisons. Additionally, studying Vietnam with its unique characteristics as a one-party, timber-processing country allows to draw important conclusions for policy-making in similar contexts.

### **3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Since this thesis concentrates on the stakeholder involvement in the VPA negotiations of the EU FLEGT Action Plan, theoretical perspectives centering on these issues guide the design of the theoretical framework. Perspectives on different groups of stakeholders and the reasoning behind their inclusion are introduced first, and the models to conceptualize their participation follow. While there are several approaches addressing the latter issue (see Kriesi et al., 1992, on political opportunities; see Fung, 2006, on mechanisms on participation; adapted to VPAs in Brown, 2013), the PAA was chosen as a framework to analyze stakeholder participation since it was proved to be suitable for environmental policies in previous studies. The PAA suggests examining four dimensions and helps to observe stability and change. Finally, the ladder model of participation to assess roles of stakeholders, namely the version of the EU based on Arnstein (1969), will be presented.

#### **3.1 Groups of Stakeholders and Reasoning for Their Involvement**

Various groups of state and non-state actors are involved in policy processes. Those who are directly and indirectly affected by a policy, those who are potentially involved in the policy's implementation, and those who have already stated objectives giving them a direct interest in the policy are generally viewed as stakeholders and need to be considered (Marmon, 2009). Grainger and Konteh (2007) distinguish between state, private and public actors. The former can be central governments, but also line ministries, agencies and local governments. Their policy roles can be executive, bureaucratic, and legislative. Private or market actors are for example business or industry associations who are pursuing their own (economic) interests. It is important to take into account that the private sector of a country may be highly diverse and that small-scale businesses might have different priorities and needs than foreign funded companies. The group of public actors or civil society actors encompasses a wide range of players. For once those can be civil society organizations (CSOs) representing the interests of local communities, but also issue-specific non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and research institutes as well as think tanks (EU FLEGT Facility, 2014). If policies go beyond the national level, the scope of stakeholders widens, too. Supranational organizations, international NGOs, and international private sector associations should be considered.

Stakeholder participation increases legitimacy, justice, transparency, and can enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of a policy (see Mustalahti et al., 2017; Wodschow et al., 2016). Since policies can affect different local, national, and international groups of actors in positive and negative ways that are not automatically foreseeable to decision-makers, additional views and inputs are necessary. On the one hand, stakeholders can provide information that is not available to central actors and increases the quality and efficiency of policy outcomes. On the other hand, stakeholders can advocate for the rights and interests of particular sub-groups, as to maximize benefits across different sets of actors.

Stakeholder participation is viewed as an essential contribution to democratic decision-making (Cashore & Stone, 2012).

### **3.2 The Policy Arrangement Approach (PAA)**

The PAA is a framework suitable for analyzing stability and change of policy arrangements in policy domains. These are configured by the four dimensions; actors, resources, rules of the game, and discourses. With this framework, policies across different fields of research can be explored. It is a mid-range theory (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004) that builds on neo-institutionalism (March & Olsen, 1989), the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier, 1987), network theory (Marsh & Rhodes, 2011), and discourse analysis (Hajer, 1995; see Arts & Buizer, 2009; Dang et al., 2016). It was developed in the late 1990s and refined by Arts et al. (2006). The PAA served originally to explain policy change and is closely linked to the concept of policy modernization. It constitutes a critique on distinguishing policy change as resulting from either purely rational policy cycles or incremental policy network models, and allows for more flexibility (Beeko & Arts, 2010). The PAA has since been used as an analytical tool for numerous studies, especially in the environmental policy domain (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004; Knaepen, 2013), forest governance (see Lindstad, 2016; Ochieng, 2010; Yeang, 2010) and VPA negotiation processes (Beeko & Arts, 2010; Mustalahti et al., 2017).

Arts et al. (2006) see policy arrangements as “the temporary stabilisation of the content and organization of a policy domain” (p. 96). A policy domain can be a certain policy field, a specific policy program or even one step of a policy-making process such as the VPA negotiations. The four dimensions configure the way in which a policy domain is organized in a restricted time-space context (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004). The authors stress that the different dimensions cannot be seen in isolation, but that their mutual relationships and interactions need to be taken into account. Therefore, they all need to be assessed individually and with respect to each other. If their constellation changes, political modernization can occur. The PAA is also concerned with the relationship between different actors, such as state, civil society, and the market and how it can be redefined or shifted. Arts et al. (2006) state that changes in policy arrangements today often result in the increasing share of political power of non-state actors such as private actors and civil society actors. The four dimensions will be explained in more detail below.

#### *a) Actors*

The dimension of actors is defined as the constellation of involved parties and the coalitions they can form in a specific policy domain (Arts et al., 2006). Coalitions are groups of actors that share material resources, but potentially also non-material discourses, and are trying to reach roughly the same policy

goals. Actors are individuals and coalitions from all different fields, such as state, private, and civil society that have formal or informal access to policy-making.

Often stakeholders' constellations consist of a set of key stakeholders that participate particularly actively in a given policy domain (Ochieng, 2010). Actors and their coalitions can either support or challenge the status quo (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004). New coalitions or oppositions between actors may emerge, thus adding a time component is useful to take the development of patterns of interaction into account (Wiering & Arts, 2006). Analyzing this dimension for a policy domain allows finding answers to the question:

Which actors play a role in a policy domain and what are their coalitions?

#### *b) Resources*

By resources the PAA considers actors' political, economic, cultural, and knowledge capacities on the one hand and to which extent they can exert influence over other actors on the other hand. These two sides can be seen as the input and the output dimension of resources. Actors can either receive or provide resources and when providing them exert power over policy-making processes (Dang et al., 2016).

The distribution of resources can be seen as a structural and dispositional phenomenon in social and political systems and not only in absolute terms (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004). In a relational perspective resources can be seen in intransitive and transitive arrangements. Influence, leverage and hence power are determined by how many assets and resources policy actors can mobilize to achieve policy goals. With power it is possible to set up new rules, influence decisions, or reframe discourses relatively easily (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004). Looking into the dimension of resources assesses the question:

Which kind of resources do actors and their coalitions use?

#### *c) Rules of the Game*

Sets of rules that are currently in operation, both in terms of formal rules for political interaction and other informal forms of interaction are referred to as rules of the game. Formal procedures for the pursuit of policy and decision-making are for example legislation and regulations. Informal rules and procedures are for instance cultural practices in a given policy domain (Wiering & Arts, 2006).

Rules of the game are closely linked to power. Actors with greater power can dictate rules and define circumstances of interaction (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004; Yeang, 2010). With respect to actors, rules

can define who participates, how new actors are recruited into the policy process and the procedures for policy-making and allocation of tasks among the different actors. By determining these factors, rules of the game eventually shape the nature of stakeholder participation in policy processes (Ochieng, 2010). For every policy domain the guiding questions are:

Which rules of the game govern stakeholder participation?

Who is setting the rules of the game?

*d) Discourses*

Discourses are the views and narratives of all actors involved. They refer to the prevailing values and norms, existing definitions of problems, and approaches to solutions (Dang et al., 2016). Discourses start as interpretative schemes, as sets of ideas and concepts that are then being produced and transformed into sets of practices. They are a way of giving meaning to social and physical realities. In the case of policy domains, discourses range from popular lines of argumentation to formal policy concepts. They can also express desired states of policy domains and possible strategies to realize these (Ochieng, 2010). In a more formalized way, policy programs are discourses fixed in the specific content of policy documents and measures (Arts et al., 2006).

There may be competing discourses in a policy field. However, often there is a hierarchical order with a prevailing discourse that is either contested by emerging discourses, or fostered by the integration of new narratives (Dang et al., 2012). Examining prevalent lines of reasoning and argumentation expressed by actors answers the question:

Which discourses existed in a given policy domain?

*e) The PAA as a Tool for Analysis*

Based on these four dimensions, PAA is primarily used to analyze policy arrangements in a bounded time-space context. However, by tracking changes in each and every dimension over several time periods it is suitable to identify whether a policy is stable or has undergone change. Subsequently, the approach has been used to understand environmental policy domains and in particular to study stakeholder involvement. The framework itself does not provide indicators to assess the arrangement in a policy domain, however, different authors such as Knaepen (2013) and Ochieng (2010) operationalize the dimensions for analyses. Arts et al. (2006) state that all dimensions have to be taken into account and that analyses should start with and focus on discourses in particular. Several authors used simplified versions of the approach in recent years, concentrating only on some of the dimensions (see for example Mustalahti et al., 2017). However, I argue that all four dimensions have to be

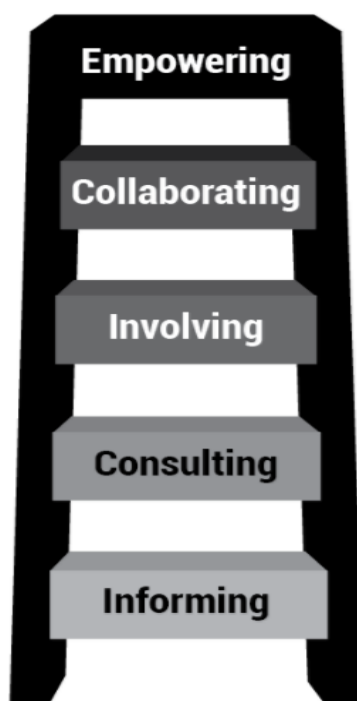
considered. Particularly when looking at change and stability, the existence or non-existence of shifts in every dimension and their interactions are crucial.

### 3.3 Different Roles of Stakeholders

To describe different degrees of participation Arnstein (1969) first developed a ladder that symbolizes different rungs of involvement, as encouraged by public authorities and demanded by non-state actors. From the bottom to the top the original ladder encompasses three categories and eight rungs: manipulation and therapy classify as nonparticipation; informing, consultation and placation classify as different degrees of tokenism; and partnership, delegated power and citizen control are classified as degrees of citizen power. Since then the model has been used on many occasions and was narrowed down and simplified by several authors (see Buttoud, 1999; Luyet et al., 2012; Wodschow et al., 2016). Others use case studies and observations to deduct nuanced rungs that go beyond ideal types (see Mustalahti et al., 2017).

The EU itself uses a simplified model in its FLEGT Action Plan policy documents (see Figure 1). According to the EU the possible roles for stakeholders when participating in negotiations are informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering (EU FLEGT Facility, 2014). This model will be used here and serve as a metric to assess the roles of non-state stakeholders in the negotiation process.

**Figure 3.1 – The Ladder of Participation**



Source: EU FLEGT Facility, 2014

## **4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The general objective of this work is to understand what role non-state stakeholders played in the Vietnam VPA negotiation process over time. A qualitative study of the case was the starting point for a deductive approach. Upon gathering a basic understanding of the process in Vietnam, the PAA was chosen as a theoretical framework. By using four dimensions to investigate the policy arrangement of the VPA negotiations, it is a powerful tool to analyze the development of the process of stakeholder participation. Based on the PAA the particular research questions were formulated. These questions guided the analysis to assess the role of non-state stakeholders and finally locate them on the ladder of participation.

There is only one unit of analysis: the VPA negotiation process in Vietnam. However, in the light of Gerring's (2004) work on case studies, there are three within-unit cases constituted by temporal variation. Three phases of negotiations were identified based on the literature research; they represent three distinct cases that are compared. By looking at only one unit, but three cases, the negotiation process can be traced in-depth and an inter-temporal comparison is possible. Therefore, analyzing one negotiation process provides crucial empirical evidence, underlines the significance of qualitative research, and holds lessons for inference as outlined by King, Keohane, and Verba (1994). In the following the research design is presented in more detail.

### **4.1 Case Selection**

The negotiation process between the EU and Vietnam serves as a case study to close a gap in the research on FLEGT VPAs. Since its establishment the EU FLEGT Action Plan has been subject to the public and scholarly debate. While the VPA implementation processes were reviewed frequently, the negotiations were only considered in some studies (Lesniewska & McDermott, 2014; Mustalahti et al., 2017; Wodschow et al., 2016). For the case of Vietnam, forest governance in general, and the VPA negotiations in particular, have been subject to little research despite negotiations spanning more than six years (for an exception see Brown, 2013). This thesis' contribution is to address this lack of research and lay the foundation for further studies on Vietnam and similar Asian countries. The framework can also easily be adapted for further cross-national comparisons.

Besides the theoretical relevance, studying stakeholder participation in the Vietnam VPA negotiations is relevant because of its significance for policy-making. First, this study explores a new regional context by investigating a case in South East Asia. The regional setting differs from previous, mainly African, VPA countries in terms of religion, cultural set up and geography. This is particularly important since negotiations with countries in the same region, namely Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand have a similar context and are still ongoing. Second, the political context in Vietnam is different. The



rigid single-party system does not allow much room for non-state actors and their participation in policy-processes (Kohnert, 2013). Third, this is the first case in which the EU initials an agreement with a country that is mainly processing timber. As opposed to the other VPA countries, Vietnam does not only produce, but imports, processes and exports timber. This poses serious concerns in relation to the legality of the timber imported and the situation in the countries exporting to Vietnam (EU FLEGT Facility, 2017c). These reasons make Vietnam a path-leading exploratory research topic.

## **4.2 Defining the Scope of the Research**

This thesis focuses on three distinct phases of the VPA negotiation process between the EU and Vietnam. This process includes the official and formal interaction between EU representatives with Vietnamese actors in senior official meetings (SOM), joint expert meetings (JEM) and technical working groups (TWG). Additionally, there are informal venues for interaction with non-state stakeholders for example national consultations and workshops that are taken into account.

The time frame of this study begins with the start of the negotiations in 2010 that carried on with varying intensity throughout the following years. The VPA between Vietnam and EU was initialed on 11 May 2017, which means that the agreement is finalized, but the official ratification by both parties and the implementation are yet to follow (European Commission, 2017). Since then, further steps have been undertaken. The Joint Preparation Committee for the official ratification met first in November 2017 and has amongst others set up a Multi-Stakeholder Implementation Core Group and drafted a Joint Implementation Framework laying out tasks and timelines (Vietnam-EU Joint Preparation Committee, 2017a, 2017b). The ratification of the VPA is expected by end of 2018 (EU FLEGT Facility, 2018). Whilst first reactions on the initialed agreement are considered, the further ratification and implementation process is not within the scope of this study.

Besides the relevant negotiators from the EU side, the focus will mainly be on Vietnamese actors: the government, private and civil society actors, as well as the coalitions and groupings they may have formed. Furthermore, cooperation with similar organizations in other countries as well as the support from external international actors are taken into account.

## **4.3 Methodological Approach**

In line with the qualitative study design the subsequent analysis is based on two main sources of gathering data: first, scientific literature and grey literature were collected and reviewed; and second, expert interviews with stakeholders were conducted. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the EU, supporting organizations, and organizations in Vietnam in order to triangulate the findings.

A profound review of documents provided contextual knowledge and a precise overview of the negotiation process at the same time. The document analysis was mainly based on publicly available grey literature, such as policy documents, legal drafts, press releases, updates and briefings. They were published by actors directly and indirectly involved in VPA negotiations, such as the EU, the Vietnamese government, Vietnamese NGOs and the EU FLEGT Facility. Most of these are available in English. From the EU side, mainly EU FLEGT Briefing Notes were considered because they capture all VPA negotiations and highlight stakeholder participation for every country. From the Vietnamese side non-state stakeholders have published on the VPA negotiation process extensively. Summaries from information workshops and meetings were reviewed as well. Some documents about coalitions, achievements, and feedback were provided by interviewees.

Expert interviews were conducted in order to gain deeper insights on the negotiation process, to triangulate data gathered in the document analysis and to further investigate perceptions and experiences. Purposive sampling was used by contacting experts that were selected by the EU FLEGT Facility (2017b). Based on the first talks more interview partners were identified through referrals. Interviewees were contacted via Email, interviews were conducted via Skype, contents were recorded, and notes were taken. Some respondents preferred to answer questions via Email.

In total, seven interviews were conducted via Skype: Two interviews were with representatives of facilitating organizations, namely the EU FLEGT Facility and Mandala consulting; two with interview partners at international NGOs; two with executive members of NGOs that are also organized in the VNGO FLEGT network; and one with a representative of the EU delegation to Vietnam. The EU FLEGT Facility, the Vietnamese government and a representative of a timber association sent answers via Email. For Vietnamese NGOs and private sector representatives the language barrier was a major impediment. Potential respondents were reluctant to speak in English.

Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, allowing room for stakeholders' perspectives on the process. Interviewees were first asked to describe the negotiation process from their point of view and to focus on the involvement of non-state stakeholders in more detail. Interviewees were asked specifically to name and describe activities they executed to either involve non-state stakeholders or get involved as non-state stakeholders. They were also asked to identify major achievements and challenges in the negotiation process. Respondents were asked to describe the relationship between the Vietnamese government and stakeholders and its development over time.

Contents from both sources were collected with particular attention to crucial dates, actors and processes. From the interviews perspectives, viewpoints, and opinions were taken as well. The

obtained information was categorized chronologically taking into account the four dimensions of analysis.

#### **4.4 Operationalization**

In order to analyze the Vietnam VPA negotiation process in light of the identified theoretical framework, concepts were operationalized. In the following sections I briefly outline all dimensions relevant to the identified research questions.

##### *a) Stakeholders*

There are five main groups of stakeholders involved in the Vietnam VPA negotiation process: the EU, the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese private sector, Vietnamese civil society and external actors. From the side of the EU, representatives and negotiators are relevant. The group of the Vietnamese government group includes representatives of line ministries, and agencies. Both groups are classified as state stakeholders.

For the analysis, non-state stakeholders are of particular concern. They are private actors, such as companies, enterprises and households involved in timber production, processing and trade, they may be organized in associations. There are also national and local NGOs and CSOs as well as research centers. External actors are for example international organizations supporting Vietnamese actors financially and immaterially. They may be NGOs or think tanks, and may be commissioned or funded by the EU or its member states. Organizations from neighboring countries are considered as external actors, too. Additionally, the EU itself can be viewed as an external actor.

##### *b) The Policy Arrangement Approach*

Arts et al. (2006) clearly outline that their four dimensions are crucial to understanding stability and change of policy arrangements. However, they do not provide indicators to study them. Others such as Knaepen (2013), Yeang (2010) and Ochieng (2010) have sought to operationalize the dimensions, identifying indicators for measurement. I draw upon their work, but develop facets specific to this work that have to be taken into account when analyzing the Vietnam VPA.

The dimension of **actors** refers to actors and groups of actors participating in the negotiation process. This applies to actors who are part of the negotiating team, who are informed or consulted throughout the process, or have any other means to directly or indirectly engage in the negotiations. Of particular interest are any interactions and coalitions formed between actors, as well as change over time.

From an input perspective, the dimension of **resources** is looked upon considering financial, but also immaterial resources, such as, information, knowledge, tools, but also ideas, legitimacy, international networks, and internal and external support that can be of use to actors. From an output perspective, resources will be looked upon as power and the possibility to exert influence over actors, rules and discourses.

In this case the **rules of the game** are mainly relevant in terms of channels of access to the negotiation process. This includes formal rules, such as legal requirements by the EU FLEGT Action Plan and informal rules, such as prevailing political culture and practices. The latter are mostly set by granting or denying access to the negotiations. A fixed seat in the negotiating committee signifies formal access, any procedures of informing and consulting stakeholders signify informal access.

**Discourses** are operationalized as the views, understandings and expectations towards the VPA process held by stakeholders. This study will focus on two main discourses: First, the understanding that non-state stakeholders are beneficial to and an essential part of the VPA process and that their involvement needs to be encouraged – the stakeholder discourse. Second, that the VPA is an intergovernmental agreement that does not require information nor legitimization by non-state actors and that their involvement is a possible but not necessary element of the negotiations – the non-stakeholder discourse.

### *c) Roles of Stakeholders*

Based on the analysis with the PAA dimensions it is possible to assess on which rung of the participation ladder the non-state stakeholders in Vietnam are to be located. Depending on the configuration of all four dimensions mentioned above they can be classified. This will be done utilizing an operationalization based on Arnstein (1969). In this case, *informing* is permitting stakeholders to hear and *consulting* is allowing them to be heard. *Involving* means that stakeholders can advise, but powerholders still have the right to decide. *Collaborating* enables stakeholders to negotiate and to engage in trade-offs. *Empowering* finally gives stakeholders the possibility to gain majorities in decision-making. Of particular interest is the change or stability of roles over time.

## 5 CASE STUDY

To understand the process of the Vietnam VPA negotiation it is crucial to understand the EU FLEGT Action Plan and how it is situated in forest governance in general, therefore this is explained in the following. Additionally, the Vietnamese context in terms of politics and timber is briefly outlined and relevant actors and structures are introduced. Subsequently, the general layout of the VPA negotiation process is presented and the process in Vietnam is described in three distinct phases with particular attention to the four dimensions of the PAA. Since they are interdependent and interconnected the dimensions are often described in relation to each other.

### 5.1 The EU FLEGT Action Plan in Global Forest Governance

To address the multiple problems that arise from accelerated forest degradation a loose system of forest governance evolved since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is based on current forms of governance which are decentralized and oriented towards markets and communities, as opposed to the traditional mode of governing forests by central administrations and top down decision-making of nation states (see Agrawal et al., 2008; Arts et al., 2014). In forest governance today, state, private, and public actors are interdependent. Policies transcend the traditional distinctions between domestic, European and international scale (Humphreys, 2006), the field is therefore marked by multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe, 2004).

Identifying illegal logging as a main driver of deforestation and its negative consequences, private actors such as the FSC developed schemes to certify legal timber. In doing so they established a timber legality regime in the late 1990s (Humphreys, 2006). They sought to fight corruption and unethical practices along the value chain of forest products and to foster sustainable management practices on the ground (Dooley & Ozinga, 2011). These efforts were soon met by unilateral moves by the biggest timber-importing actors worldwide: the USA extended its Lacey Act on endangered species on timber products, and Australia implemented the Illegal Logging Prohibition Act. But first and foremost, the EU as biggest timber-importing economic zone, passed the FLEGT Action Plan (EU Council, 2003; Iben et al., 2014). Whilst the USA and Australia passed laws right away, the EU FLEGT Action Plan requires further legislative action. Laws and legally-binding agreements under the Action Plan are passed after extensive negotiations with affected countries and stakeholders which helps to preempt unintended consequences of unilateral law-making.

The EU FLEGT Action Plan is based on the idea that by fighting illegal timber some of the most pressing problems spurring forest degradation can be addressed: the undermining of the rights of forest communities, encouragement of corruption, distortion of tax revenues for governments, funding of violent armed groups, and encouragement of a rapid pace of deforestation as well as forest degradation

(Fern, 2014). In order to crack down on illegal timber the EU FLEGT Action Plan combines four pillars: EU-government procurement policies, financial due diligence of timber traders, VPAs, and legislation to control timber imports from non-VPA countries – the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) (Overdevest & Zeitlin, 2015).

#### *a) Voluntary Partnership Agreements*

VPAs are bilateral trade agreements between the EU and timber exporting countries outside of the EU. They seek to create mechanisms that ensure that all wood products traded between these two parties originate from legal sources. Additionally, VPAs aim to stop illegal logging by improving forest governance and regulations in partner countries. As suggested by their name, they are voluntary, but once entered into force, they are legally binding for both sides (European Council, 2003).

The timber-producing country has to develop systems to verify that its timber exports are legal and the EU agrees to accept only licensed imports from that country. To ensure this, the term “legal timber” needs to be defined bi-laterally, and a timber-tracing and a controlling system called Timber Legality Assurance System (TLAS) has to be established (Dooley & Ozinga, 2011). VPAs should also be concerned with environmental conservation and social issues and seek to increase participation of non-state stakeholders through multi-stakeholder involvement (van Heeswijk & Turnhout, 2013). They are designed to be flexible and context-specific, formulated considering local circumstances and actors, and need to be renewed regularly, which means that they can be improved on a rolling basis (Overdevest & Zeitlin, 2014).

VPAs are attractive to timber exporting countries, since they promise EU market access in exchange for good forest governance, and therefore political and economic gains (Cashore & Stone, 2012; Schmitz, 2016). So far the EU agreed upon VPAs with six countries: Cameroon, Ghana, Indonesia, Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Liberia. The VPA with Vietnam is initialed, but not ratified yet. Negotiations with eight more countries have started: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Guyana, Honduras, Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand. Beyond that, the EU is in close cooperation with Myanmar, China, and Cambodia. By now it is estimated that 90 per cent of the total value of cross-border trade in tropical timber and timber products to the EU is derived from countries engaged at various stages of the VPA process (Fern, 2017b).

#### *b) The Role of Stakeholders in the Implementation of the EU FLEGT Action Plan*

Five main groups of stakeholders are involved in the implementation of the EU FLEGT Action Plan via VPAs, namely the EU, the government, private actors, and the civil society of partner countries as well as external actors. As for the non-state stakeholders, the EU actively seeks to engage private

forest governance actors, such as business and timber associations of producers, processors, and traders. They represent groups on different levels, namely household producers, SMEs, national companies, and large foreign funded companies (European Council, 2003). As the EU outlines, civil society actors to be considered encompass NGOs working on environmental, human rights, and societal issues, as well as CSOs that represent the interests of local peoples like forest-dwellers and indigenous peoples. These organizations can be issue-specific and engage in activities such as provision of information, capacity building, advocacy, and community representation (EU FLEGT Facility, 2014). These requirements go in line with the EU's principles and minimum standards for consultation processes in all policy areas. A similar approach is used in the internal EU Forestry Strategy and Forest Action Plan where stakeholder consultation and inclusion are the norm (European Parliament, 2012).

For the VPAs the involvement of non-state actors is foreseen in a formal manner with seats in the negotiation committees to provide for meaningful inputs and ensure legitimacy. Additionally, they should be involved in steering committees for implementation to ensure justice and transparency (see Fern, 2014). Such an arrangement corresponds to the stage of *collaborating*, the second highest rung on the ladder of participation used in this study.

## **5.2 The Context in Vietnam**

As outlined in the justification for the case selection, Vietnam is worth studying since it has an active timber sector that is based on processing wood products. Only to a minor extent timber is sourced directly in Vietnam. Additionally, the political context of a single-party authoritarian state and little tradition of civil society participation distinguishes Vietnam from many other VPA countries. Both aspects of the context in Vietnam are explained in the following.

### *a) The Forest Sector in Vietnam*

Approximately 45% of Vietnam's landmass is covered by forests and there is a trend towards reforestation (LoggingOff, 2016b). The country is both an exporter and importer of timber and timber products. This signifies that Vietnam is active in processing timber and adding value to products. Wood is imported from 80 different countries, mainly from Africa, South America and Asia, as well as from neighboring countries such as Cambodia and Laos (European Commission, 2016). Other main suppliers are Malaysia, China, and the USA (Nguyễn, 2013). The main buyers are the USA, EU and Japan. In total, Vietnam is among the world's top five exporters of timber products. The value of timber trade between the EU and Vietnam was estimated to be worth USD 705 million, and the value of wood and paper exports from Vietnam to the EU was 438 million EUR in 2015 (European Commission, 2016, 2017). The exports to the EU make up approximately 10% of the country's total

exports (EU FLEGT Facility, 2016). Given this scale, timber trade with the EU is crucial to the Vietnamese economy, and provisions like the EUTR and the VPAs create great pressure (EIA, 2017).

*b) The Political Situation and Non-State Actors in Vietnam*

Its colonial past and the legacy of a repressive communist regime is still visible in the political sphere in Vietnam. However, the so called Doi Moi socio-economic reforms adopted in 1986 triggered a process of opening and democratization. A socialist market-oriented economy was established and the country slowly went on its path to an open-door policy with regards to foreign relations (Dang et al., 2016). The reforms also had an impact on forest governance, since new land laws and tenure rights were introduced, constituting a shift to opening up compared to previously centralized forest management (Dang et al., 2012).

Despite the slow opening in the 1990s, Vietnamese politics are still marked by a mono-party political system with extensive state-control over all spheres of political and public life (Sicurelli, 2015). The centralistic and authoritarian government sees itself as the embodiment of the citizens' interests which leaves little room for dissenting opinions (Kohnert, 2013). There is no official definition for civil society and its role in policy-making, nor is there a common legal framework for their operations (Tue, 2017).

In daily practices, the situation for NGOs and CSOs has improved in the last decades; they are tolerated by the government. Sometimes they act as advocates of communities and civil society members in policy debates, even though they cannot legally represent these groups, as interviewees mentioned (Interview 4; Interview 6). Mostly NGOs and CSOs are research, education and development centers providing information and support for civil society groups as well as the government, which effectively makes them service providers. Additionally, their freedoms are cut down if they are perceived as critical or subversive (Kohnert, 2013).

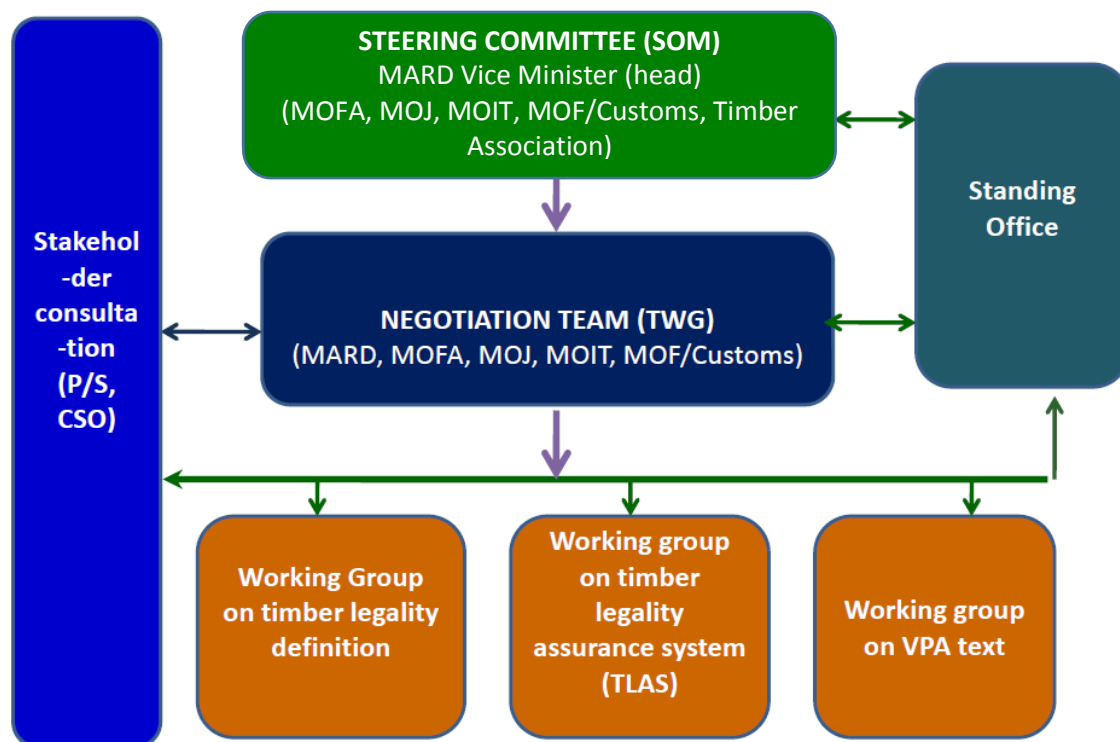
Given these circumstances, civil society representation rarely takes place in an open manner. When required – as in EU negotiations – civil society actors are consulted to some extent. This may seem like a major step ahead, but is often perceived a cosmetic measure to satisfy foreign demand (Kohnert, 2013). The process of democratization in Vietnam creates a situation where the government is opening up, but at the same time it is very selective about which voices are being heard. The same applies to the private sector. However, because of their economic might, timber associations have a more formalized standing. Overall, interaction with non-state stakeholders often remains symbolic (Dang et al., 2012). This setting makes it particularly interesting to study stakeholder participation.



### 5.3 The Vietnam VPA Negotiation Process

The Vietnam VPA is the seventh of its kind, making the EU experienced in setting up the negotiation process and in providing input for the necessary committees. Figure 2 illustrates the organizational structure of Vietnamese parties. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) was in charge of the negotiations, but delegated the responsibility to provide contents and hold technical meetings to the Vietnam Forest Administration (VNFOREST), which set up a standing office on the FLEGT VPA. High-level negotiations took place in SOMs that were joined by a Steering Committee from Vietnam. The work on the content of the VPA and its annexes was done in TWG meetings by the negotiation team from the Vietnamese side, supported by several working groups. As requested by the EU, non-state stakeholder consultation was foreseen, involving the private sector and CSOs.

Figure 5.1- Organizational Structure of Vietnamese Actors to the FLEGT VPA Negotiations



Source: Huy, 2014

In the following the development of the Vietnamese VPA negotiations is tracked highlighting the four PAA dimensions for all three time periods.

#### a) High Levels of State Activity: 2010 – 2012

The EU was already in contact with Vietnam since the early days of the EU FLEGT Action Plan and had mentioned possible VPA negotiations for some time (European Commission, 2009). The official negotiation process for the Vietnam FLEGT VPA finally started in 2010 (European Commission,

2017). A SOM took place in May 2010, was followed by a first JEM in September and the first meeting of the TWG in November, marking the official start of the VPA negotiations (Shanks, 2015). As a member of VNFOREST mentioned, the Vietnam Timber and Forest Product Association (VIFORES) also sent a letter to the Prime Minister with the suggestion to negotiate a VPA earlier that year (Interview 8).

In terms of actors, several interviewees recall the composition of the negotiation team as determined by the Vietnamese government with MARD having the lead of the process. Other line ministries such as the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Finance – especially the Customs Department – Industry and Trade, Natural Resources and Environment, as well as Labor, Social Welfare and Invalids were included. At certain instances the Ministry of Defense and the Police were involved (Interview 1; Interview 3). From the EU side the European Commission's Directorate General for Environment was heading the negotiation, as a representative from the EU Delegation to Vietnam clarified (Interview 3). The lead negotiator was supported by the EU FLEGT Facility at the European Forestry Institute (EFI), and by the EU Delegation to Vietnam.

As a formal rule, the EU FLEGT Action Plan foresees the inclusion of non-state stakeholders. Members of the private sector and a supporting institution recalled this as the reason why the Vietnamese government included VIFORES to represent private interests (Interview 7; Interview 10). Corresponding to the ladder of participation the Vietnamese government therefore *involved* private non-state stakeholders into the negotiation process. The EU also pushed for the inclusion of civil society representatives and non-governmental actors. Several interviewees stated that the Vietnamese government included the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) into the negotiation team as an international NGO instead of opting for a local organization (Interview 2; Interview 6). Besides that, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and independent consultants with the mandate to represent civil society interests were included. However, one expert suspected that they were in fact close to the government and were involved only to foster and legitimize the government's position (Interview 6).

The rules of the game at this point were set by the EU and the Vietnamese government. The latter decided whom to invite to negotiations from the Vietnamese side and decided about the channels of access for all actors involved. They transformed the EU request for stakeholder participation into informal channels of access and the first of three national consultation workshops on the Vietnam FLEGT VPA was held in 2011. This allowed the inclusion of new actors, namely non-state stakeholders, since more than 150 participants from the government, private sector, and civil society attended (EFI, 2011; Nguyễn, 2013). Further pursuing informal channels of access, the government commissioned analyses of stakeholders and the legality definition, and a study on domestic and

imported timber flows (Ozinga & Riesco, 2011). Those were mechanisms for seeking input and information from non-state actors, but no formal inclusion into the official meetings and discussions took place. Therefore, civil society players first moved up to the rung of *informing* on the ladder of participation. Overall, non-state actors gained in resources that they could transform into power to a very small extent since they were providing information to the government. However, it was the Vietnamese government that retained power over the negotiations.

JEM and TWG meetings continued throughout 2011 and 2012, and the government established working groups for the different parts of the VPA. First drafts for the crucial annexes were written, namely on the TLAS and the legality definition (Shanks, 2015). These were made available to non-state stakeholders as well. NGOs began to organize themselves starting from 2011. As one of their representatives outlined, the European NGO Fern that was already active in several other VPA negotiation processes had reached out to Vietnamese NGOs and started to raise awareness about the VPA (Interview 6). Well aware of the EU requirement to give civil society groups a voice in the negotiations, Fern provided Vietnamese actors with knowledge and tools for information dissemination. Eventually, the Center for Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) took the lead in setting up the VNGO-FLEGT Network in January 2012 – a main stepping stone: support and information from an external NGO were input resources that, in combination with the newly formed civil society coalition, gave them some power. This constitutes first moves towards a soon to come *consulting* role of these actors.

The aim of the VNGO-FLEGT Network was and is to contribute to the implementation of FLEGT activities in Vietnam and to promote mechanisms and policies that support sustainable and equitable benefits for Vietnamese forest-dependent communities (VNGO-FLEGT Network, 2014). As a facilitator to the negotiations mentioned, the network was originally made up of 30 organizations from all over Vietnam (Interview 1). In terms of resources, an executive of SRD mentioned that the network benefitted greatly from a similar network on climate change that had already existed since 2009. According to the interviewee this network was also concerned with forest related issues to some extent and therefore was a great resource in terms of identifying potential partner NGOs, contacts in the forest sector, and offices all over Vietnam (Interview 2). An additional external actor strengthening civil society in Vietnam at that stage was the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) that funded workshops on forest governance that included many non-state stakeholders and raised awareness (FAO, 2012). Beyond the national level, CSOs in Vietnam also created regional links to similar organizations in Laos and Indonesia (LoggingOff, 2013).

The VNGO-FLEGT Network started to provide resources to the negotiation process. They conducted workshops, developed guidelines for community consultations on the legality definitions, and

established these consultations in six provinces in timber-hotspots in Vietnam (LoggingOff, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). The Vietnamese government and the official parties to the VPA negotiations were originally very reluctant in considering stakeholder input and the discourse was clearly that a state-centered negotiation would suffice. However, due to pressure from the EU and the increased activity by NGOs they started to show signs of welcome (LoggingOff, 2012a). Despite this opening, European NGOs raised concerns if the negotiation processes in Vietnam was really inclusive, consensus-based and marked by multi-stakeholder processes (LoggingOff, 2012a). This shows that the Vietnamese government's discourse still differed from the stakeholder discourse in the EU.

In terms of the official negotiations a JEM and a TWG took place in Brussels in November 2012. Even though the parties expressed their willingness to conclude negotiations by September 2013 there were great concerns about the timber legality definition, mainly because imports from the neighboring Laos and Cambodia were hard to monitor. The EU made this a major point in the meetings and insisted on clarifying the import problem before high-level negotiations could continue (LoggingOff, 2013). Because of this unresolved issue the talks between EU and Vietnam came to a still stand. There were no further official meetings or discussions for almost two years.

#### *b) Non-State Stakeholders' High-Time: 2013 – 2015*

Since the formal negotiations had cooled down over discussions on the legality definition and imports of timber from neighboring countries, the civil society started to claim their space, mainly through the VNGO-FLEGT Network. They conducted numerous meetings and workshops on information distribution and capacity building, shared results of their community consultations and sent recommendations related to the draft VPA annexes to the government. The network rolled out a livelihood impact assessment in March 2013, clearly recognizing the role and vulnerability of actors on the household, individual, and community level (VNGO-FLEGT Network, 2013a). Two further rounds of livelihood impact assessments were planned and conducted in 2013 (VNGO-FLEGT Network, 2013b). This shows that non-state stakeholders were not only more active, but also increased their resources.

However, the channels of access of NGOs and CSOs to decision-making and high-level negotiation remained limited and informal. VNFOREST eventually showed some interest in the findings of the network, but did not fully welcome and embrace the presence nor the inputs given by non-state actors. Members of the VNGO-FLEGT Network provided a detailed list with comments on the draft annexes of the VPA and also met with VNFOREST in late 2013, but comments were only considered to a minor extent and no real feedback was given (EU FLEGT Facility, 2013). Looking at the ladder of participation, civil society non-state stakeholders were now *informed* about the negotiation process and made further attempts to climb to the rung of *consulting*. However, the rules of the game were still

set by the Vietnamese government and the discourse it used did not really promote stakeholder involvement, which kept them on the lower rungs of the ladder.

In the absence of formal inclusion into TWG meetings with Vietnamese state agencies, civil society actors received increasing support from external actors. The EU made further funding available, and FAO engaged in more projects in Vietnam. Several experts interviewed mentioned this external influence that was a helpful resource for NGOs, but increasingly also private actors, mainly SMEs (Interview 2; Interview 4; Interview 9). Several international organizations such as EU member states' agencies for development cooperation, and international NGOs, such as NEPCon, a non-profit working on sustainable land use and climate-friendly solutions, supported capacity building and community dialogue in small grants projects on the ground (see GIZ, 2014; NEPCon, 2014a, 2014b; Interview 10). These were mostly implemented with the help of the VNGO-FLEGT Network.

At the same time, NEPCon and the Vietnamese Center for Education and Development (CED) engaged in dialogue and information sessions with SMEs (NEPCon, 2014c). The necessity to inform different private sector entities that were not directly represented by VIFORES was also highlighted by an employee working for a Vietnamese NGO (Interview 9). Civil society actors in Vietnam were profiting from increased communication amongst each other and with similar groups from Laos (LoggingOff, 2014). Increasingly, communication and interaction between civil society and private actors was sought, as a member of an international NGO mentioned (Interview 10) which shows growth in coalitions and resources for non-state stakeholders.

As members from VNFOREST mention, the Vietnamese government was slowly respecting the requirements of the EU to include non-state actors (LoggingOff, 2015a). Additionally, they were used as a resource to acquire information from and about local communities (Interview 8). Subsequently, government agencies organized a couple of consultation workshops with private and civil society actors (Shanks, 2015). Even though this fostered their *consulting* role, this did not result in formal inclusion. A Fern report mentions that civil society actors were still struggling to find their place in the VPA negotiation process. Not only did they lack access to the respective negotiation and steering committees, they were also requesting better access to information, as well as recognition and consideration of their comments and suggestions (Fern, 2014; LoggingOff, 2014). Overall, non-state actors did gain some resources, but mainly from the input side. Given external pressures, the Vietnamese government shifted towards the stakeholder discourse to a very small extent, but did not change the rules of the game.

In October 2014, a JEM and a TWG meeting took place for the first time after almost two years and civil society actors were invited to a debrief on the last day. A couple of TWG meetings happened in

the subsequent months and throughout 2015, indicating work on technical details of the VPA and its annexes (Shanks, 2015). Still, civil society was not granted a formal channel of access to those meetings and not even an observer role. Nevertheless, supported by international agencies and with confidence taken thereof the VNGO-FLEGT network and SRD were more vocal, publishing concept notes, policy recommendations, and reports wherein they highlighted shortcomings of current processes, and draft documents, and asked for CSO-led monitoring in negotiations and the implementation of the VPA (LoggingOff, 2015a; VNGO-FLEGT Network, 2015a, 2015b), therefore further trying to strengthen their position as *consulting* actors in the negotiation process.

*c) Concluding Phase of Negotiations: 2016 – 2017*

The EU and Vietnam concluded a Free Trade Agreement in December 2015 which was a main achievement for both parties (European Commission, 2015). At the same time, this was crucial to the VPA process since the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Union and the Prime Minister of Vietnam jointly declared to pursue and conclude the FLEGT VPA negotiations in the upcoming months (LoggingOff, 2015b). Experts from coordinating institutions saw this as turning point in the negotiation process that led to an extremely dynamic phase, including several high-level negotiation rounds (Interview 3; Interview 4). The joint session on the Vietnam VPA in Brussels in April 2016 was perceived as a major breakthrough (EU FLEGT Facility, 2016).

However, the rules of the game did not change. The newly found activism did not open new channels for civil society to participate. Their further absence in the formal process and the fact that there was also no role for them foreseen in subsequent implementation processes led to serious concerns about the inclusiveness, credibility and legitimacy of the negotiations from NGO and EU-side (LoggingOff, 2015b). Also, the VNGO-FLEGT Network itself called upon the EU and its member states to prioritize CSO participation (VNGO-FLEGT Network, 2015c). EU representatives in Vietnam were aware of this problem (Interview 3).

Using informal channels, non-state stakeholders continued their vivid activities and found new resources and new room for cooperation and interaction. CED continued to promote the private sector, which was already involved in the FLEGT negotiations, but at this point had difficulties to make their voice heard and actually act as a *consultant*. CED also encouraged knowledge sharing with neighboring countries such as Indonesia (CED, 2016, 2017). Similarly, civil society groups were more and more engaged in periodic workshops on regional level, such as a platform with Indonesia in late December 2015. These workshops also triggered bi-lateral discussions with Laos and Myanmar (EU FLEGT Facility, 2017a). Workshops were funded by the EU, facilitated by Fern and conducted until early 2017 (SRD, 2017). Fern also organized a joint policy brief by civil society groups from all VPA countries highlighting concerns and considerations for the future (Fern, 2017b).

A JEM in Brussels in July 2016 included a briefing by stakeholders that further called upon the negotiating parties to consider civil society actors (LoggingOff, 2016a). However, the Vietnamese partners did not further consider non-state actors, actively pushing against their role as *consulting* actors. Additionally, interim draft documents and proposal were no longer made available. With the increasing pace of negotiations, and new developments non-state actors were no longer granted access to information (LoggingOff, 2016a) and therefore moved back on the ladder of participation to barely being *informed* about the process. They continued to be deprived of access to the formal negotiations.

The situation changed slightly in October 2016, when the Vietnamese government called upon the third and final national consultation workshop, where draft documents were made public (SRD, 2016). However, those were only available in Vietnamese and in hard copy, which made it impossible for some of the key stakeholders to access, analyze and react to them (Hợp & Kohnert, 2017). Thus, not only formal, but also informal access to the negotiation process was cut off. The government did not wait for the supportive and informative role of non-state stakeholders, but instead proceeded without them. Neither the EU nor the Vietnamese government pushed for stakeholder inclusion at that time. They barely could sustain their standing on the *informing* rung of the ladder.

Only one month later the EU Environment Commissioner and the Vietnamese Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development announced that they had reached an agreement on the conclusion of the VPA negotiations (EU External Action Service, 2016). They agreed in principle to work together towards reducing illegal logging and promoting trade in legally produced timber between the two parties. The VPA was perceived to be ambitious (European Commission, 2016). Subsequently, on 11 May 2017, the EU and Vietnam initialed the VPA, formally declaring the conclusion of negotiations. Before the agreement can enter into force, legal review on both sides, translation into official languages other than English and the procedures of signature and ratification still have to take place, (EU FLEGT Facility, 2017c). Official documents from the EU conclude that non-state stakeholders were consulted and invited to provide written comments, and that regular meetings with industry associations and enterprises took place to discuss feedback which furthers the EU's discourse on stakeholder inclusion (European Commission, 2017).

## 6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When analyzing the Vietnam VPA negotiation process particular attention was given to actors, resources, rules of the game, discourses, and their interactions. Table 1 summarizes the main findings in light of the PAA dimensions by Arts et al. (2006). To examine interactions and constellations and how those influenced the policy arrangement over time a short discussion is provided. The roles stakeholders were holding throughout the process will be assessed using the adapted version of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation.

**Table 6.1 – Findings From the Case Study in Light of the Four PAA Dimensions**

	Phase 1: 2010 – 2012	Phase 2: 2013 – 2015	Phase 3: 2016 – 2017
Actors	<p>EU, VN government, VIFORES, WWF</p> <p>Some NGOs and CSOs, first establishment of VNGO-FLEGT Network</p> <p>Some external actors</p>	<p>Same as before</p> <p>More NGOs and CSOs, more private sector</p> <p>More external actors</p>	<p>Same as before</p> <p>Same as before</p> <p>Same as before</p>
Resources	<p>Input resources provided to non-state actors to a minor extent</p> <p>Input resources provided by non-state actors to a minor extent</p> <p>Power (= output resource) exerted by the VN government and the EU</p>	<p>Input resources provided to non-state actors by the VN government and external actors</p> <p>More input resources provided by non-state actors</p> <p>Same as before</p>	<p>Decrease in supply of input resources to non-state actors</p> <p>Input resources provided by non-state actors, but not considered</p> <p>Same as before for VN government, decreasing for the EU</p>
Rules of the game	<p>Formal inclusion of EU, VN government, VN private sector, WWF</p> <p>Informal inclusion of non-state actors to a minor extent</p>	<p>Same as before</p> <p>Increase</p>	<p>Same as before</p> <p>Decrease</p>
Discourses	<p>Stakeholder discourse used by the EU and non-state actors</p> <p>Non-stakeholder discourse used by VN government</p>	<p>Same as before used by VN government to minor extent</p> <p>Small decrease in use</p>	<p>Same as in Phase 1</p> <p>Same as in Phase 1</p>



## **6.1 Actors**

The five main groups of actors of this study were: the EU, the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese private sector, Vietnamese civil society and external actors. Their involvement and coalitions changed considerably over time. EU and Vietnamese government representatives, including one party from the private sector, VIFORES and the international NGO WWF, were official parties to the negotiation. This stayed the same over all three periods.

Activities of non-state stakeholders developed beyond the negotiation table. The most crucial development was the creation of the VNGO-FLEGT Network supported by the international NGO Fern. The network grew from 30 to almost 60 members and helped to form and foster coalitions across the country, especially in the second phase. Other international organizations, mainly CED and Forest Trends, supported the private sector beyond the timber association VIFORES, such as SMEs and household producers and processors. Private sector actors also started working more closely with the VNGO-FLEGT network. Overall, more non-state stakeholders became involved in the policy domain over time.

Particularly important was the emerging support and funding from external actors. FAO and international NGOs implemented supporting projects on the ground in Vietnam, often funded by the EU and its member states. These projects enabled non-state stakeholders and promoted their role. Additionally, the formation of coalitions amongst NGOs and CSOs, with the private sector and on the international level is remarkable.

## **6.2 Resources**

Resources were looked upon from an input and an output perspective. From an input perspective both, financial and nonmaterial resources were relevant. From an output perspective power over rules of the game and discourses were taken into account.

The EU had both forms of resources. They provided inputs to the Vietnamese government and non-state actors in particular, and additionally they had power over the negotiation process as a formal and pivotal party. The Vietnamese government mostly exerted power over the negotiations, and provided only little information. The input resources related to non-state actors changed over time. In the first phase there was only some information available to them, mostly provided by external actors, including the EU. In the second phase there was a two-fold increase: On the one hand, non-state actors were offered more resources. The government at times informed them on contents and progress of the negotiation process. External actors provided funding and support, which equipped Vietnamese NGOs, CSOs, and private sector entities with greater knowledge and tools to engage in the negotiation

process. On the other hand, non-state actors started to provide knowledge and insights to the government. They gathered information that was useful for and demanded by the government. By providing information in the second phase they had power to a minor extent.

With the negotiations picking up in speed in the third phase, it was again mainly the Vietnamese government exerting power over the other actors and pushing the negotiations through. The flow of input resources became more imbalanced. While non-state actors still received information from external actors and gathered information in further workshops, they were neither informed by the government, nor did the government really consider their inputs. Even the EU did not manage to use their power resources to change this pattern.

However, an overall increase in input resources is seen over the course of the Vietnam VPA negotiation process. The Vietnamese government, private and civil society actors gained in knowledge, insights and tools. Power on the other hand seems to be more of a zero sum game and mostly remained with the government.

### **6.3 Rules of the Game**

Defined as rules governing the channels of access, the rules of the game are crucial to understand the given policy domain. They were mainly set by the EU and the Vietnamese government, and were divided into formal and informal inclusion into the negotiation process. While the EU demanded formal inclusion of non-state stakeholders, the government only included them informally. The Vietnamese government granted formal access only to EU and state actors, VIFORES, and the WWF. Despite several attempts by non-state stakeholders to change this, this set up stayed the same throughout all three phases. Private sector actors were in a slightly better position, because they could increase coordination with VIFORES that in fact was represented at the negotiation table.

Informal channels of access were not foreseen and only existed to a minor extent in the beginning. However, with NGOs and CSOs getting more vocal and positioning themselves as providers of information, they were granted more access in informal meetings and consultation sessions. This was particularly important in the second phase when high-level negotiations slowed down. Non-state actors made vivid use of informal channels and became very engaged in VPA processes. However, despite the newly found vigor in the negotiations in the third phase. It seems channels of informal access were cut down again since the government was rushing to conclude the negotiations. It is important to note that throughout the whole process it was mainly the Vietnamese government and to a minor extent the EU defining the channels of access.

## **6.4 Discourses**

The discourses used by different actors did not change much over time. The EU was consistently using the stakeholder discourse, advocating for the understanding that non-state stakeholders are an essential part of the process and need to be included formally. Non-state actors adopted this discourse and used it to demand more rights and channels of access throughout the negotiations.

The Vietnamese government stuck to the idea that a VPA is an intergovernmental agreement that does not require stakeholder involvement. There was an opening in the second phase, when the Vietnamese government increasingly informed and consulted stakeholders, but the main discourse never changed. In the third phase there was a renewed narrative of closed government negotiations, and the EU was willing to cut back on its interpretative scheme of having stakeholders included. The discourses also influenced the rules of the game since the channels of access that were opened in some instances mirror the periodical appreciation of non-state actors.

## **6.5 Discussion and Assessment of Stakeholder Roles**

Taking all dimensions into account, there was some change, but mostly stability. With regards to actors and resources change was observed. More actors and new coalitions were engaged in the policy domain. The resources available to all actors increased considerably. At the same time non-state actors became a source of information to the government. This was mainly due to inputs such as financing and information by external actors. These played a great role in increasing the capability and standing of non-state actors in Vietnam. The ability to exert power over others mostly remained with the Vietnamese government and to some extent the EU.

Despite the pressure by the EU, the Vietnamese government set the rules of the game and therefore the channels of access in their own terms and civil society actors were only included informally. Formal inclusion into the negotiation groups never occurred. However, NGOs managed to carve out their own spaces as information providers in the process. This is connected to the non-stakeholder discourse of the Vietnamese government. They considered including stakeholders unnecessary and set the rules of the game accordingly.

The findings indicate that the policy arrangement in the policy domain of Vietnam VPA negotiations remained relatively stable over time. Since only two of the dimensions changed, the whole configuration did not vary greatly. However, this stability largely depended on the rules of the game that were in turn influenced by prevailing discourses. Changing them can possibly shift the course of stakeholder involvement in the VPA implementations to come. This could alter the policy arrangement in the Vietnam VPA domain to a more inclusive one in the future.

The objective of this work was to understand what role non-state stakeholders played in the Vietnam VPA negotiation process over time, assessed on the ladder of participation. I conclude that non-state stakeholders mostly remained on the lower rungs, namely *informing* and *consulting*. Civil society actors actually started from below the ladder; In the beginning it was hard for them to even be *informed* about the negotiations. They improved their standing and took on a *consulting* role in the second phase of the negotiations when they provided a lot of input to the Vietnamese government. Their insights and feedback was considered to some extent. However, in the last phase they went back to being only *informed*, since the Vietnamese government was rushing the conclusion of the negotiations and did not leave room for their inputs. This is contrary to the EU's basic expectations that non-state stakeholders should be actively *involved* and even *collaborate* in the negotiation process.

As for the private sector the situation is a little different, since VIFORES was engaged in the official negotiations from the beginning and was heard as a consultant and provider of information and inputs, therefore being *involved* according to the ladder of participation. Other private actors had an even slower start, but rose up to being *informed* and *consulting* in the second phase, by partnering with VIFORES. In the end they also went back to the lowest rung of the ladder, being only *informed* by the government. Overall, all non-state actors only played a minor role in the Vietnam VPA negotiation process and did not get to the stage of *collaborating* as envisioned by the EU.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis analyzed the involvement of non-state stakeholders in the Vietnam VPA negotiation process that went on from 2010 to 2017. As a previously unstudied case, this work closes a gap in the research and provides Vietnam as an example for future VPAs with other South East Asian countries. Employing a qualitative study with the Vietnam VPA negotiation process as unit of analysis and three phases as within-unit temporal cases, the role of different stakeholders was traced in detail. For the analysis the PAA approach by Arts et al. (2006) was used to examine actors, resources, rules of the game, and discourses involved. The roles of actors were finally assessed on the EU's ladder of stakeholder participation based on Arnstein (1969).

There are some limitations to this study. For example, discourses could not be traced extensively and were narrowed down to two main narratives. An in-depth discourse analysis as suggested by Arts et al. (2006) would address this. Another caveat is that it was difficult to obtain first hand insights on the negotiation process from Vietnamese actors. While facilitating organizations and international NGOs were willing to share their experiences, local NGOs and especially private sector representatives were rather reluctant. The language barrier was a big problem, which is quite symbolic, since some of the problems encountered in the VPA negotiation process were also influenced by language barriers. Investigating discourses and the experiences of Vietnamese actors in more detail are areas for further research.

The findings derived from the analysis done in this work hold important lessons. They indicate that the number of actors and their coalitions increased over time. Besides EU and Vietnamese government actors, more private and civil society actors became involved. An important factor was the support from external actors, such as EU agencies and international NGOs. They helped to increase the resources available to all actors over time. The rules of the game were mostly set by the Vietnamese government and were connected to their discourse that non-state stakeholder involvement is unnecessary. To counter this the EU kept advocating for stakeholder inclusion. Rules with requirements to involve non-state actors are formulated in the EU FLEGT Action Plan. Indeed, there was an opening in the second phase of negotiations, but the situation changed back to the status quo in the third phase. Therefore, the policy arrangement remained stable.

Over the whole process, non-state actors remained on the lower rungs of the participation ladder. At times, especially in the second phase of negotiations they had a *consulting* role, but were mostly only *informed* by the government without further discussion. Hereby, private stakeholders held a more powerful position. Given the fact that Vietnam is a very centralistic state that has no tradition of civil society organization and multi-stakeholder consultation, these results may not seem very surprising.

However, they show that there is room for stakeholder inclusion. It requires a change in discourse, more willingness and actual commitment by the government to implement this.

The support of external actors such as the EU and issue-specific NGOs can be an important lever for further stakeholder involvement. The fact that non-state actors provided meaningful and important contents in this case helped to improve their standing. This has implications beyond the scope of this study: Civil society actors hope to be formally included into the VPA implementation in Vietnam (Fern, 2017a; Høp & Kohnert, 2017; Interview 2; Interview 6). In fact, a Multi-Stakeholder Implementation Core Group under participation of all groups of non-state stakeholders has been formed and a representative VNGO-FLEGT was part of the First Meeting of the Joint Preparation Committee (Vietnam-EU Joint Preparation Committee, 2017a). The multi-stakeholder group will continue to be involved in the implementation process. Possibly, there is also a positive effect on stakeholder participation in other policy domains. Finally, the case of Vietnamese non-state actors serves as an example for future VPAs with other South East Asian countries. Going forward representatives of non-state stakeholders in all countries can share learnings and support in common meetings, continuing the exchange that already exists with counterparts in Myanmar, Laos and Indonesia as well as international NGOs.

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## ANNEX

### List of interviews and interview methodology

No.	Organisation	Source	Category	Status	Format	Recording
1	EFI, EU FLEGT Facility	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	Coordinating Organisation	Answers via E-Mail on 29 May 2017	structured	Written answer
2	Center for Sustainable Rural Development (SRD)	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	Civil society organisation	Conducted via Skype on 6 June 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes
3	Delegation of the European Union to Vietnam	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	EU	Conducted via Skype on 9 June 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes
4	Mandala Consulting	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	Coordinating Organisation	Conducted via Skype on 15 June 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes
5	EFI, EU FLEGT Facility	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	Coordinating Organisation	Conducted via Skype on 16 June 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes
6	Fern	Author of various publications	EU NGO Civil Society involvement	Conducted via Skype on 16 June 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes
7	Vietnam Timber and Product Association (VIFORES)	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	Private sector	Answers via E-Mail on 19 June 2017	structured	Written answer
8	Viet Nam Administration of Forestry (VNFOREST)	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	Government Actor	Answers via E-Mail on 27 June 2017	structured	Written answer
9	Center for Education and Development (CED)	EU FLEGT Facility Media Room	NGO (private sector involvement)	Conducted via Skype on 30 June 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes
10	ANU/Forest Trends	Referred by EU FLEGT Facility	NGO (private sector involvement)	Conducted via Skype on 3 July 2017	semi-structured	Audio recording, concurrent notes