

SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TOWARD A GREEN ECONOMY IN SON LA PROVINCE

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Abstract: *In the context of increasing climate change and resource degradation, sustainable development associated with a green economy has become an inevitable trend for localities, including Son La province. With its competitive advantages in forest resources, land, water sources, and renewable energy potential, Son La has favorable conditions to shift its growth model toward a green economy promoting economic development while protecting the environment. However, this transition still faces challenges, including unsustainable resource exploitation, environmental pollution from agricultural production and agro-processing industries, high poverty rates, and limited infrastructure and human resources.*

This study clarifies the current situation of sustainable development and green economy issues in Son La province, thereby proposing the following groups of solutions: (1) Solutions for institutional and policy improvement; (2) Solutions for agricultural-forestry development, ecological tourism, historical-cultural tourism; (3) Solutions in economics, science, and technology; (4) Solutions for education, communication, and human resource development. These solutions aim to support Son La in achieving sustainable development goals, building a green economy, improving the quality of life, and contributing to national objectives on green growth and climate change adaptation.

Keywords: *Sustainable development; Green economy; Son La.*

1. Introduction

Amid escalating global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion, sustainable development has become an essential trend in socio-economic development for every nation and locality. Vietnam, with its strong commitment to implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is gradually transitioning toward a greener, more efficient, and environmentally friendly growth model.

Son La province, a mountainous locality with significant potential in natural resources, agriculture, and renewable energy, faces an urgent need for innovation in development thinking. Transitioning toward a green economy not only enables the province to utilize its existing advantages effectively but also improves living standards and promotes harmony between economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection. However, the province still faces shortcomings, including unsustainable resource exploitation, localized pollution, limited

green infrastructure, and low dissemination of green economic models.

Based on these issues, this paper analyzes the current situation. It proposes feasible orientations and solutions for Son La to transition effectively to a sustainable green economy aligned with its natural, economic, and social conditions.

2. Research overview

The green economy has emerged as an inevitable global development trend under the pressures of climate change, resource depletion, and environmental pollution. Studies have focused on three main directions. First, theoretical studies clarify the relationships among the green economy, green growth, the circular economy, and sustainable development (Nguyen Hoang Nam et al., 2020). Second, empirical studies analyze the role of the green economy in restructuring Vietnam's economy toward sustainability, proposing solutions in institutions, policies, green finance, and technology (Pham Thi Ngoc Tram, 2013; Vo Dinh Phung et al., 2024). Third, local studies such as the case of Thai

Nguyen province (Dinh Hong Linh & Nguyen Thi Hang, 2021) develop models of six factors affecting green economic development: awareness, technology, investment capital, infrastructure, human resources, and institutional policy.

Overall, Vietnam has made progress in renewable energy, green agriculture, and green buildings, but still faces constraints in financial mechanisms, human resources, and societal awareness.

In recent years, Son La has actively implemented several programs linked to sustainable development, such as:

The national target program on new rural development promotes clean agriculture, organic farming, and greenhouse gas reduction.

The action plan for implementing the green growth strategy for the period 2021 – 2030 of Son La province (issued under the Provincial People’s Committee’s Decision in 2022), which emphasizes the development of renewable energy, forest resource management, ecological environmental protection, and the development of eco-cultural tourism.

Several provincial-level research projects in Son La have made initial investigations into resource management, organic agricultural development, forest protection, and climate change adaptation. However, no study has yet provided a comprehensive systematization of sustainable development solutions to advance a green economy in Son La province, integrating the three pillars: economy, society, and environment.

Existing studies have so far focused only on isolated aspects (such as green agriculture, ecotourism, or renewable energy) and have not clarified the interconnections among these areas within Son La province’s overall sustainable development strategy. This remains a significant concern for scholars today. With the aim of offering new perspectives, the author delves deeper into the topic to provide additional scientific foundations for formulating local development policies oriented toward green growth, environmental protection, and improved quality of life for local communities.

3. Research methods

The study applies the following methods:

application of the political and theoretical viewpoints of the Communist Party of Vietnam and State policies on the green economy; quantitative methods: collection and processing of socio-economic data from Son La province; data analysis, literature synthesis, and observation of green production models. The collected datasets and materials are systematized and analyzed to assess the current state of the green economy, identify untapped potential, and propose sustainable development solutions to promote socio-economic progress in Son La province.

4. Research results

4.1. Sustainable development and the green economy

Sustainable development is a development process that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. According to the Brundtland Report (1987) of the World Commission on Environment and Development, this development model harmonizes economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection. Its three fundamental pillars include:

Sustainable economy: Ensuring stable and efficient growth, rational use of resources, and improved productivity.

Sustainable society: Promoting social equity, enhancing quality of life, poverty reduction, and human development.

Sustainable environment: Conserving biodiversity, reducing pollution, and ensuring rational use and regeneration of natural resources.

Sustainable development is not only an objective but also a development method that requires changes in awareness, policy, and behaviors of socio-economic actors.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the green economy is defined as: “A green economy is one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”.

Thus, the green economy is an economic development model that ensures sustainable growth, minimizes negative environmental impacts, and enhances human well-being through efficient resource use, reduced carbon emissions, and promotion of clean technologies.

Vietnam's National green growth strategy 2021–2030, Vision 2050 states: "Green growth contributes to economic restructuring associated with innovation in the growth model to achieve economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social equity; toward a green economy, carbon neutrality, and contribution to the global objective of limiting temperature increases." (Prime Minister, 2021).

To promote the green economy and sustainable development in ethnic minority regions, the State has issued policies such as: Creating jobs and income for forest-dependent households; Supporting sustainable agricultural and forestry development, especially under-forest economy linked with forest protection; Preserving and promoting the cultural values of ethnic groups associated with tourism development (Prime Minister, 2021).

These are essential policies underpinning the transition to a green economy for mountainous and ethnic minority regions, including Son La province.

4.2. Relationship between sustainable development and the green economy

The green economy is considered a method and tool to achieve sustainable development. If sustainable development is the ultimate goal, the green economy is the pathway to reach that goal. Green economic development contributes to: (1) Ensuring economic growth coupled with environmental protection; (2) Reducing trade-offs between development and natural resource exploitation; (3) Enhancing resilience to climate change; (4) Promoting green jobs, green consumption, and environmentally friendly lifestyles.

Conversely, sustainable development provides practical foundations and orientations for forming and improving policy frameworks for a green economy ensuring harmony among economic, social, and ecological objectives.

4.3. Current status of sustainable development toward a green economy in Son La province

4.3.1. Current status of sustainable development in Son La

Sustainable development has been a long-term development orientation of Son La province. The province has implemented the action plan for the

sustainable development strategy 2021–2030, integrating green growth, sustainable poverty reduction, and environmental protection. Despite positive outcomes, progress remains uneven across sectors.

Economic pillar: Son La's economy has grown at an average rate of about 7% per year. The economic structure has shifted positively, with agriculture-forestry-fishery accounting for around 28% of GRDP, industry - construction 27%, and services over 45%. Agriculture remains a key sector, oriented toward clean and organic production and green value chains, with VietGAP- and organic - certified areas expanding and several agricultural products accessing international markets. Industrial development focuses on agro-processing and renewable energy, while services prioritize eco-tourism, community-based tourism, and agro-tourism. However, green industry remains limited due to small-scale production and outdated technologies.

Social pillar: The multidimensional poverty rate declined to about 12% in 2024, below the regional average. Access to education and healthcare has improved, with high school attendance and health insurance coverage. The province emphasizes vocational training for ethnic minority labor, though challenges persist, including regional income disparities, a low share of trained workers, and labor migration.

Environmental pillar: Son La has high forest coverage, with forest protection and reforestation programs - especially Payment for Forest Environmental Services - contributing to livelihoods and environmental conservation. Renewable energy development has begun, but environmental challenges remain, including soil erosion, land degradation, localized pollution, and increasing climate-related risks.

Overall, Son La has achieved notable progress in sustainable development; however, stronger integration of economic growth with environmental protection is needed to advance toward green and circular development.

4.3.2. Current status of green economic development in Son La province

Green and organic agricultural production: In recent years, Son La has undergone significant transformation in developing agriculture toward a

green, organic, circular, smart, and clean model. The province emphasizes standardized production areas and value chain linkages based on the “six-party cooperation model”: farmers, the State, enterprises, banks, scientists, distributors. With

diverse economic actors (enterprises, cooperatives, cooperative groups, communities, and households), large specialized farming zones have been established. Below is a summary of key models:

Table 1. Representative models of green, organic, smart, and clean agriculture

No.	Indicator	Tea	Coffee	Fruit trees (longan, mango, plum...)	Notes
1	Area (ha)	5,857	20,782	83,757 (Mango: 19,521; Longan: 19,744; Plum: 12,415)	
2	Output (2024)	23,396 tons	1,300 tons	206,633 tons	
3	Households in cooperatives using high-tech	1,179 households (with Vinatea Moc Chau)	1,555 households (Phuc Sinh + Son La Coffee Co.)	166+ households (custard apple cooperatives); many households in OCOP	
4	Clean products (VietGAP / 4C / UTZ)	20 ha organic; 99 VietGAP-growing facilities (total 2,229.59 ha)	19,270.9 ha certified 4C/UTZ	38 safe vegetable chains (318 ha); 178 safe fruit chains (4,298 ha)	
5	Organic certified products	20 ha, 200 tons	No separate organic area recorded	32 ha organic fruit, 340 tons	
6	High-tech applications	High-tech zones (Moc Chau); greenhouse cooperatives	2 high-tech coffee zones; clean-coffee cooperatives	285 safe agricultural chains; 214 export planting area codes	

Source: Compiled by the author from Report No. 686-BC/TU dated September 4, 2024 of the Son La provincial party committee; Statistical Yearbooks 2022, 2023, and 2024 of the Son La provincial statistics office

From the data, Son La is strongly developing high-tech agricultural zones. Several agricultural products have been granted export planting area codes, including tea, dairy cattle, coffee, and custard apple. The province has the largest certified coffee area following international standards in the region and holds major advantages in fruit production. Its agricultural products (vegetables, tea, coffee, longan, mango, plum, etc.) are exported to global markets. In total, 158,000 tons of agricultural products were exported with a value of over USD 160 million, with 218 planting area codes.

Limitations include: smart agriculture remains small-scale and uneven; value-chain linkages lack stability, especially for specialty upland products; post-harvest infrastructure (processing, cold

storage, logistics) remains insufficient; digital and managerial skills among cooperatives remain weak; many ethnic minority households lack knowledge of organic and green farming and remain dependent on State support.

Remarkable achievements: Son La has rapidly formed large-scale production zones using VietGAP and GlobalGAP standards (coffee, tea, mango, longan, plum, vegetables...), combined with land conversion on steep slopes through agroforestry practices. These efforts reduce soil erosion, protect ecosystems, and make Son La a “bright spot” for green agriculture among northern mountainous provinces. The results have helped local communities access modern farming technologies, create jobs, and contribute to sustainable poverty reduction for ethnic minority

households.

Forest development and ecological protection:

Son La has extensive forest areas with high coverage. According to the Son La provincial party committee (2024): Total forest land: 669,797 ha, forest coverage: 47.5%, Natural forest: 593,268.8 ha, Planted forest: 76,528.2 ha

(including 38,155 ha of fruit trees on sloping land; 5,947 ha converted from scattered trees), Forest tending: 8,905 ha, Forest regeneration: 20,032 ha, Over 560,000 ha allocated to households and 400 community groups, PFES payments (2021–2024): over 800 billion VND.

Table 2. Representative models of green and responsible forestry development

No.	Indicator	2020	2021	2022	2023	July 2024	Notes
1	Total forest area (ha)	641,144	654,696	666,888	669,797	669,797	
2	Forest coverage (%)	45.4%	46.4%	47.3%	47.5%	~47.5%	
3	Planted forest (ha)	50,308	61,229	72,812	76,528	—	
4	Fruit-tree-based forestry (ha)	14,190	33,069	38,155	43,605	—	
5	Timber harvested (m ³)	17,413	40,727	23,469	25,465	12,468	
6	Scattered trees planted (thousand trees)	935	699	2,606	1,599	160	
7	Regenerated forest (ha)	14,352	32,560	28,924	20,032	20,032	

Source: Compiled by the author from report No. 686-BC/TU dated September 4, 2024 of the Son La provincial party committee; Statistical Yearbooks 2022, 2023, and 2024 of the Son La provincial statistics office

Along with efforts to protect natural forests and expand forest plantations, many households in areas such as Quynh Nhai and Thuan Chau have implemented the model of “developing medicinal plants under forest canopies”, which has proved effective as a livelihood-creating model that increases household income while protecting forest resources and the ecological environment.

Based on the above, the State needs to adopt appropriate policies that can generate dual benefits: creating livelihoods, employment, and higher incomes, while encouraging communities to actively participate in the protection and

development of forest resources.

Development of cultural, historical, ecotourism, smart tourism, and responsible tourism: Son La has vast forests, majestic mountains, and is home to numerous ethnic groups with rich cultural heritage. The province also hosts prominent historical sites such as Son La Prison and Pa Uon relic site, giving Son La significant potential for cultural-historical tourism, experiential tourism, and ecotourism (forests, mountains, and Da River landscapes). Some representative models include:

Table 3. Representative models of green, smart, and responsible tourism

No.	Model	Location	Tourism Type	Key Features
1	Thai Cultural Space – Ang Village	Dong Sang Commune, Moc Chau	Community-based, green tourism	Traditional stilt houses, farming experiences, preservation of Thai culture
2	Son La Prison – Digital Museum	To Hieu Ward, Son La City	Smart, historical tourism	Digital storytelling, history of revolutionary struggle
3	Muong Chien Cultural Village	Quynh Nhai District	Community, responsible tourism	Traditional festivals, preservation of ethnic scripts and language

No.	Model	Location	Tourism Type	Key Features
4	Ta Xua – A Phong Trekking Route	Bac Yen District	Green, adventure tourism	Mountain trekking, forest conservation, revolutionary history
5	Pa Uon Historical Site	Quynh Nhai District	Historical–ecotourism	Heritage preservation linked with hydropower lake tourism
6	Hua Tat Village – homeland of writer To Hoai	Moc Chau District	Cultural storytelling tourism	Mong legends, traditional crafts, local narratives

Source: Compiled by the author from Report No. 701-BC/TU dated October 10, 2024 of the Son La provincial party committee; Statistical Yearbooks 2022, 2023, and 2024 of the Son La provincial statistics office

Achievements: The development of cultural, historical, and ecological tourism with exemplary models such as Hua Tat village in Van Ho district, home to the Mong and Thai ethnic groups, where traditional stilt houses have been renovated into homestays. Visitors can participate in experiences such as brocade weaving, food processing, and traditional festivals. The village also applies renewable energy and practices waste separation at source. Ang village in Moc Chau district, inhabited by the Thai ethnic group, leverages tourism resources such as the pine forest, Ang lake, strawberry farms, and the Xen Ban festival. All tourism activities in the village are closely associated with environmental protection through minimizing the use of plastic bags, preventing littering, and promoting awareness to avoid cutting down forest trees. Initial significant results have been recorded in the application of digital technologies such as VR, QR codes, and digital mapping. There are notable highlights in the development of community-based tourism villages linked with the preservation of ethnic cultures (Mong, Thai, Kho Mu, Dao, etc.) and the diversification of tourism products including community culture, eco-tourism, agricultural tourism, wellness tourism, smart tourism, green tourism, and responsible tourism. Many households have developed tourism businesses and successfully improved their livelihoods.

Limitations: Tourism products remain monotonous, and a fully developed smart tourism ecosystem has not yet been established; the application of digital technology is still fragmented and lacks synchronization. The

distinctive cultural identities of ethnic groups have not been deeply explored. Infrastructure remains inadequate (inter-regional transport connectivity is limited, making it difficult to access remote tourist sites; accommodations and facilities at tourist destinations do not yet meet development requirements). The tourism workforce has weak foreign language skills and limited information technology capacity, and their understanding of history and ethnic minority cultures remains insufficient. Regional and sectoral linkages are not close, and there is a lack of professional tourism coordination. Environmental protection planning is inconsistent, and domestic waste has not been thoroughly treated. There is no strong and effective linkage among the “five stakeholders”: enterprises, scientists, the government, banks, and local communities.

4.4. Solutions for sustainable development toward a green economy

4.4.1. Institutional reform and policy breakthroughs

Son La should translate the national strategies on sustainable development and green growth into concrete provincial socio-economic plans and policies, with a focus on:

- Advancing high-quality, organic, green, circular, and smart agriculture linked to integrated provincial value chains.

- Strengthening forest planning and management (protection, production, regenerated, and community forests), with pilot initiatives for forest-based carbon credit trading.

- Improving tourism planning by connecting cultural heritage, historical sites, and destinations;

enhancing linkages among businesses, communities, and Northwest provinces (Dien Bien, Lai Chau).

- Accelerating digital transformation in tourism, including digital tourism maps, full digitization of relic sites and community tourism villages, and joint promotion linked to major national holidays and regional festivals.

- Promoting regional cooperation and developing inter-provincial green tourism value chains (Son La – Dien Bien – Lai Chau), while supporting communities' market access through smart and responsible tourism.

- Expanding export markets through the approval of planting-area codes for key agricultural products.

- Introducing incentives on tax, land, and credit for investment in clean production, renewable energy, organic agriculture, and eco-tourism.

- Developing criteria for green cities, green enterprises, and green communities suited to Son La's mountainous context.

4.4.2. *Developing sustainable agricultural models toward a green economy*

Expand and replicate sustainable agricultural models based on organic production, focusing on fruit trees and medicinal plants. Form large specialized farming zones and promote marketing of organic and clean agricultural products.

Strengthen agricultural experience tourism, providing activities such as fruit-picking, harvesting experiences, and farm tours. This approach offers dual benefits: promoting local agricultural products; providing attractive activities for visitors and increasing tourist arrivals.

4.4.3. *Strengthening forest allocation for sustainable forest resource protection toward a green economy*

Son La's vast forest area is home to many ethnic minority communities living within the "core zones" of natural forests, protection forests, production forests, plantations, and natural heritage areas. This represents untapped potential for forest carbon credit trading. Vietnam has piloted forest carbon credit sales in six provinces: Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Tri (including Quang Binh and Quang Tri), and Thua Thien Hue. Under the pilot, the World Bank (WB)

has disbursed payments for natural forest protection, protection forests, and reforestation. If Son La applies similar models, the province may achieve dual benefits: (1) Create livelihoods and increase income for ethnic minority communities; (2) Strengthen forest protection and environmental sustainability. This requires supportive policies and strong institutional commitment.

4.4.4. *Developing cultural, historical, ecological, smart, and responsible tourism*

Ethnic minority communities in core heritage areas are key custodians of Son La's cultural heritage and an important resource for socio-economic development. Tourism development should create sustainable livelihoods for local people while preserving and promoting cultural values, in line with smart, green, and responsible tourism.

Priority should be given to developing responsible tourism criteria and environmentally friendly cultural tourism value chains based on green, sharing, and circular economy principles. This includes promoting eco-friendly transport, replacing single-use plastics with sustainable materials, and encouraging environmentally responsible tourism services.

Awareness-raising and capacity-building activities for tourism stakeholders—enterprises, cooperatives, households, and communities—should be strengthened to enhance understanding of sustainable tourism, cultural preservation, environmental protection, and efficient use of resources toward a green economy.

4.4.5. *Attracting investment, international cooperation, science technology application, and innovation*

Invest in research and technology transfer in biotechnology, clean technology, and recycled materials.

Support enterprises in upgrading technologies, enhancing productivity, and reducing emissions. Strengthen partnerships between universities, research institutes, and local agencies in agriculture, energy, and green tourism.

Build the image of Son La as a green, safe, and environmentally friendly investment destination.

Attract ODA, FDI, and green finance for sustainable development projects.

Enhance collaboration with international organizations for human resource training, knowledge exchange, and green technology development.

4.4.6. Education, communication, and human resource development

Enhance public awareness of green development through environmental education, green consumption, and energy efficiency, supported by initiatives such as green schools, green offices and enterprises, and green villages – clean communities.

Strengthen human resource development for the green transition by providing training in environmental management, organic agriculture, renewable energy, and the circular economy; fostering partnerships with universities and research institutions; supporting green start-ups and innovation among youth, women, and ethnic minority groups; and promoting community participation in reforestation, watershed protection, and community-based ecotourism.

5. Discussion

Achievements. Awareness of the green economy and sustainable development has improved among government agencies, businesses, and communities. Son La's economic structure is gradually shifting toward services and clean industries, with steady growth in organic and clean agriculture. Environmental quality has improved, particularly in rural and ethnic minority areas, contributing to higher material and spiritual living standards.

Challenges. The transition to a green economy remains slow and uneven across districts. Investment in clean technologies and environmental infrastructure is limited, while waste management, wastewater treatment, and watershed forest management still face

constraints. Large-scale circular economy models are scarce, and incentives for green enterprises remain weak.

Underlying causes. Subjective factors include limited awareness and insufficient communication on green development. Objective constraints stem from mountainous terrain, an agriculture-dependent economy, and weak attraction of green investment. Institutional challenges relate to policies that lack detail, coordination, and strong incentives for green production and consumption.

General observation. People-centered development is the core principle. Effective policies tailored to Son La's natural, economic, and socio-cultural conditions are essential to enable sustainable development aligned with national progress.

6. Conclusion

Green and sustainable development is an inevitable pathway for mountainous provinces like Son La to achieve balanced economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection. Son La has made notable progress in green restructuring through organic agriculture, renewable energy, ecological tourism, increased forest coverage, and emerging sustainable production–consumption models. However, challenges remain in investment, technology, and policy support.

To achieve comprehensive sustainability, Son La must further accelerate its green transition, integrating economic growth with environmental improvement and social welfare. This requires joint efforts from government, businesses, and communities, contributing to Viet Nam's commitments under COP26 toward net-zero emissions by 2050.

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GIẢI PHÁP PHÁT TRIỂN BỀN VỮNG HƯỚNG ĐẾN NỀN KINH TẾ XANH Ở TỈNH SƠN LA

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Tóm tắt: Trong bối cảnh biến đổi khí hậu và suy thoái tài nguyên ngày càng gia tăng, phát triển bền vững gắn với kinh tế xanh trở thành xu hướng tất yếu đối với các địa phương, trong đó có tỉnh Sơn La. Với lợi thế vượt trội so với một số địa phương khác về tài nguyên rừng, đất đai, nguồn nước và tiềm năng năng lượng tái tạo, Sơn La có điều kiện để chuyển đổi mô hình tăng trưởng theo hướng kinh tế xanh, vừa phát triển kinh tế, vừa bảo vệ môi trường. Tuy nhiên, quá trình này vẫn đang phải đối mặt với nhiều thách thức như: khai thác tài nguyên chưa bền vững, ô nhiễm môi trường từ sản xuất nông nghiệp và công nghiệp chế biến, tỷ lệ nghèo còn cao, hạ tầng và nguồn nhân lực hạn chế.

Nghiên cứu này tập trung làm rõ thực trạng phát triển bền vững và những vấn đề đặt ra về phát triển kinh tế xanh đối với tỉnh Sơn La, từ đó đưa ra các nhóm giải pháp: (1) Nhóm giải pháp hoàn thiện về thể chế, chính sách; (2) Nhóm giải pháp phát triển nông lâm nghiệp; du lịch sinh thái, du lịch lịch sử, văn hóa; (3) Nhóm giải pháp về kinh tế, khoa học công nghệ; (4) Nhóm giải pháp về giáo dục, truyền thông và phát triển nguồn nhân lực nhằm góp phần giúp Sơn La đạt được mục tiêu phát triển bền vững, xây dựng nền kinh tế xanh, nâng cao chất lượng cuộc sống của người dân, đồng thời đóng góp vào mục tiêu quốc gia về tăng trưởng xanh và ứng phó biến đổi khí hậu.

Từ khóa: Phát triển bền vững; Kinh tế xanh; Sơn La.