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SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM EMPOWERS LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS TO PROTECT THEIR OWN COMMUNITY



Community members in Rattanakiri participate in a village committee meeting and share their concerns about the local forests

Photo credit: Chum Chhean, NTFP-Cambodia, Cambodia

Reaching forest communities and people at the grassroots level through local CSOs protects livelihoods

“Local communities, especially women are now realizing their role and responsibility in natural resource management.”

March 2015 — “When the forests are destroyed, women are the first to feel the impacts; because women collect timber for cooking and food from the forests, they see the daily changes. So, it has been vital for women to participate in village committees and talk with local authorities to create and implement forest monitoring plans,” according to Mr. Chum Chhean from NTFP-Cambodia. “Without women participating, there is no equity and plans do not function.”

But, while an essential part of development, effectively reaching people to improve equity at the grassroots level is a frequent obstacle. Even when fair policies are in place, communities and people may not understand a process or how it affects them. Forest communities and people, particularly women, are vulnerable to this problem, resulting in inequitable practices in forest management.

To solve this problem, after working with representatives from 20 local civil society organizations (CSOs) throughout the Lower Mekong, USAID through RECOFTC - The Center for People and Forests launched the GREEN Mekong Challenge Fund to empower the CSOs who can reach these vulnerable groups. Following a regional workshop where the CSOs developed action plans, USAID GREEN Mekong set up a fund to implement their plans on the basis that CSOs could put their newly learned skills to use while taking advantage of their unique positioning to reach the communities.

Since the launch of the fund, CSOs from Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam have received funding for their proposals. Each organization has demonstrated a local understanding of reaching the targeted forest communities. In Cambodia, one winning proposal came from the CSO NGO Forum, which has multiple initiatives in line with USAID GREEN Mekong's goals, including the Forestry Rights Project. NGO Forum's proposal included training members of their network on equity principles in forest management.

Their training has been especially effective because it amplified USAID GREEN Mekong training of CSO members, reaching NGO Forum's members who work across the country with communities. Feedback has already been overwhelmingly positive with immediate results. Mr. Chhean commented, *"After the training, the community forestry meetings in Yarkpoy and Kachoun in Rattanakiri province had more women participating in the meetings because we trained them on the principles of equity to encourage female participation. Now women are actively reporting on illegal logging and educating the community on problems they face when deforestation has led to a lack of cooking timber or wild vegetables. This protects the entire community."*

Ms. Rithiny Teng, NGO Forum's CSO representative to USAID GREEN Mekong noted that while there is much progress that needs to be made, *"Local communities, especially women are now realizing their role and responsibility in natural resource management and social activities"* as a result of the training. As these activities continue, the GREEN Mekong Challenge Fund will continue to reach a larger audience and ensure the principles of equity in forest management can be integrated into practice to protect more people and their communities.

The three-year project, which began in 2012, aims to improve capacities of policymakers and grassroots stakeholders in the Lower Mekong region to promote equity in forest-based climate change mitigation policy and practice.