



Annual report

Community forestry networks: A force for change for gender equality, inclusive governance and climate action

Annual Report 2021–2022

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Cover photo: Members of community forest users' group harvest fodder grass, Nepal. Photo by RECOFTC

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Welcome to the 2021–2022 annual report



"Among many other things, RECOFTC is increasing awareness of community forestry, the products and services it provides, and the people who make it happen."

Nur Masripatin
Chair, RECOFTC Board of Trustees

It is my privilege to introduce this annual report and reflect on the progress RECOFTC made between October 2021 and September 2022.

With global emissions of greenhouse gases still rising, climate action grows ever more urgent. The Asia-Pacific region has a huge role to play in addressing this challenge, particularly because of its forests. RECOFTC's commitment to driving sustainable practices in the region's forest landscapes has never been more crucial.

Community forestry is a proven solution. But it depends on supporting investments, policies and legal frameworks. As this report shows, RECOFTC is taking community forestry and related approaches to the next level. Our initiatives are strengthening networks, introducing mechanisms for sustainable finance, connecting producers with markets and generating high-quality research.

I urge governments, donors, financial institutions and the private sector to boost investments in all these areas. This will be essential to ensure that community forestry can reach its potential for securing livelihoods, restoring landscapes, addressing climate change and fostering gender equality and social inclusion.

The stories in this report show how, among many other things, RECOFTC is increasing awareness of community forestry, the products and services it provides, and the people who make it happen. This increased visibility is essential to ensure healthy, resilient forests and secure rights for people to live equitably and sustainably besides them.

As Chair of RECOFTC's Board of Trustees, I am grateful to the donors, trustees, partners, communities and staff members whose commitment and hard work lie behind the organization's accomplishments. Thank you for being an integral part of our journey and for your steadfast belief in our vision.

Force for change: Community forestry networks



"We must ensure that forests and communities are at the heart of climate action. Community forestry is a proven nature-based solution."

David Ganz
Executive Director, RECOFTC

Reflecting on a year of remarkable achievements by our dedicated staff and committed partners, I present the RECOFTC annual report for fiscal year 2021-2022.

At the start of the fiscal year, the COP26 climate change conference in Glasgow produced key commitments to protect forests and the communities that depend on them. We must maintain the momentum, ensuring that forests and communities are at the heart of climate action and open climate finance to those who need it most.

Fortunately, community forestry is already a proven nature-based solution being used. Under current targets, the area of community forests in Southeast Asia could reach 30 million hectares by 2030. We have dedicated time and resources to see our government partners make these commitments. This has been a long term endeavor and financial, technical, political and commercial support will be needed to ensure that community forestry continues to play its part in creating climate-resilient green economies.

In this report, you will read about RECOFTC's work through the innovative Partnership for Forestry and Fisheries Communities in Cambodia. It shows what is possible when communities have secure rights to manage and benefit from local forests.

We also share insights from our research on the recognition of customary tenure rights of communities that depend on forests in the Mekong region. We hope to provide a deeper understanding of how laws and customs affect indigenous women's rights to access and manage forest resources.

We describe how hundreds of Thailand's community forests are using a digital map and database to share information about their products and services with potential customers and the wider public.

And we show how production-driven partnerships between communities and the private sector can improve livelihoods and economic development while restoring forest landscapes.

As RECOFTC's successful gender leadership program WAVES closed its first phase, we feature how women leaders continue to advocate for equality and lead gender-equitable programs in their communities and institutions.

We then explain how the Explore research network supports academics and their institutions to receive grants and produce impactful applied research on forest landscape governance.

And we recount how RECOFTC and its partners convened Asia-Pacific experts to assess the implications of COP26 for the region's climate, people and forests.

Finally, we offer a preview of some of RECOFTC's anticipated highlights for the year ahead.

These stories highlight the importance of networks that enable communities to share knowledge, engage with policymakers and advocate for their rights. Sustaining networks and community forestry need greater investments so that forest communities are able to reach their full potential.

As we move forward, we remain committed to our vision: a world where empowered local people are effectively and equitably engaged in the sustainable management of forest landscapes. Together with our donors and partners, we create lasting positive change.



RECOFTC by numbers

RECOFTC's 127 team members based in seven focal countries in the Asia-Pacific region worked with 238 organizations and 15,802 rural community members, government officials and private sector business people in 2021–2022. Through 27 projects, they contributed to the growth of community forest areas. This is a foundation for achieving the Paris Agreement on climate change and many of the Global Goals, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs.

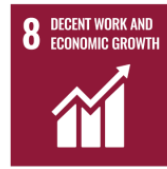
RECOFTC's entry point to sustainable development and climate change solutions is community forestry. Our overarching aim is to help achieve the Global Goals. Our innovations, knowledge and initiatives enable countries to foster good forest governance and to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

The four goals of RECOFTC's Strategic Plan 2018–2023 promote sustainable development and climate change solutions across the Asia-Pacific region.

1. Landscape collaboration in a changing climate
2. Governance, institutions and conflict transformation
3. Private sector engagement and enterprising communities
4. Social inclusion, gender equity and public action

To achieve these goals, we put people at the centre of development. We work to ensure that communities that depend on forests have secure rights and can participate equitably in decisions that affect their lives.

RECOFTC's work to achieve its four Strategic Plan goals links with all 17 Global Goals. They are all ultimately about poverty reduction and increased well-being of humans and the planet. RECOFTC's work in fiscal year 2021–2022 most closely aligned with seven of the Global Goals.



For example, RECOFTC helped 444 communities, representing 68,195 households, gain formal approval of their stewardship over their community forest. RECOFTC directly supported a total of 481,410 hectares of land under community forestry.



Supported
444
communities gain approval for their community forests, representing
68,195
households

481,410
total hectares of community forest

in collaboration with
238
partners

RECOFTC supported community forest users' groups in the Asia–Pacific region to build climate change responses into their community forestry management plans. RECOFTC worked directly with 444 approved community forests in 2021–2022. In those community forests, 430 community forest users' groups included climate change mitigation and adaptation interventions in their community forestry management plans. These 430 users' groups continue to manage a total of 293,302 hectares of forest with strategies that can respond to climate change threats.

To enhance public knowledge and raise awareness, RECOFTC published 354 communication and knowledge products about community forestry and climate change on its website and in other public forums. These reached more than 5.1 million people.



430
forest users' groups
293,302
hectares managed with climate change mitigation and adaptation ambitions

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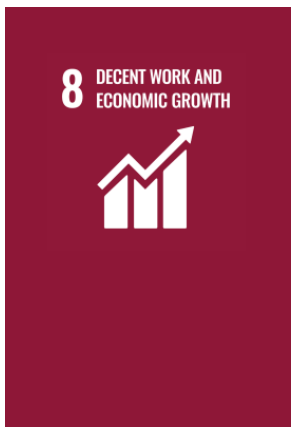
In 2021–2022, about 27 percent of the community forestry management committee members in RECOFTC’s program areas were women. Those community forestry management committees also included people with disabilities and representatives of Indigenous Peoples.



Around 17,682 members of community forest users’ groups participated in policy dialogue and other events organized by RECOFTC and partners. These events gave them the opportunity to voice their concerns related to sustainable natural resource management. They worked to reduce discrimination, marginalization and the exclusion of people living in fragile contexts in RECOFTC’s seven focal countries.



RECOFTC supported 66 individual community enterprises that involved 40 women and 50 men. We also supported 52 group enterprises with a total of 1,469 members, 668 of them women. Of the 30 forest- or landscape-based community business partnership agreements developed by local entrepreneurs and investors, 19 were formal and 11 were informal. They agreements covered partnerships for enterprises such as teak wood production and processing, rattan and bamboo harvesting, plant nurseries, herbal products, weaving, handicrafts and community tourism.



66
RECOFTC-supported individual community-based enterprises, with
40
women of 90 members

52
group community-based enterprises, with
668
women of the 1,459 total group members

30
community business partnership agreements developed by local entrepreneurs and investors

In 2021–2022, RECOFTC trained 2,595 women and men on community forestry and sustainable development topics related to tenure security, climate change, social inclusion and more. And 2,362 women and men accessed one of two e-learning course RECOFTC implemented in the fiscal year. In total, 11 percent of enrollees completed the course. This is considered above the industry average of 7–10 percent for completion of massive open online courses according to a 2021 study by Fu et al [\[1\]](#).



2,404
women and men trained on sustainable and efficient use of natural resources

2,362
women and men enrolled in one of two e-courses

Community forestry is a safeguard for the sustainable use of natural resources. In 2021–2022, RECOFTC trained 2,595 women and men on the sustainable and efficient use of natural resources. Of them, 441 were also trained on sustainable investment and community-based enterprise development.



2,595 women and men trained in sustainable and efficient use of natural resources
441 of them also trained on sustainable investment and community-based enterprise development

Read the detailed report [\[2\]](#) on the links between RECOFTC’s work in 2021–2022 and the Global Goals.



Networks for gender equality make impact in the governance and management of forest landscapes

As RECOFTC's highly successful gender program ends, members of the network it created continue to advocate for equality and lead gender-equitable programs in their communities and institutions

When journalist Madhuri Mahato held a training event on gender issues for women in a rural community in Nepal, the husbands of some of the trainees were upset. Fearful of what talking about women's rights could mean for them as men, they came to the training hall and confronted Mahato.

Such was their fury that she and the trainees had to be locked inside for their own safety until the police intervened. But later, instead of confronting the men, Mahato organized a meeting with them. Through dialogue, she gained their support.

Mahato dealt with the situation by applying techniques she learned through RECOFTC's Weaving Leadership for Gender Equality (WAVES) program, which ran from March 2019 to September 2022. The program created a network of 31 gender leaders from seven Asian countries. It supported them with training, mentoring and funding as they advocated for equality and led gender-mainstreaming programs in their communities and institutions. And while WAVES has ended, the network it created continues to have important and positive results.



Tangible impacts

Gender inequalities and a lack of attention to gender issues are widespread in the forestry sectors of Asian countries. They are present in government policies, academic institutions, the private sector and communities that depend on forests. They range from bias and discrimination against women, to sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

WAVES [☞](#) was based on the idea that stronger leadership and expertise will improve policymaking and investments in ways that promote gender equality. It will also have an impact on social inclusion more broadly, in the governance, management and use of forest landscapes and their resources.

The women and men WAVES supported came from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, businesses, academia and, in Mahato's case, the media. In 2022, RECOFTC published an independent evaluation [☞](#) that concluded that WAVES had transformed the abilities of these leaders to think strategically, shift power dynamics and become resilient to challenges.

More tangible impacts arose as each gender leader implemented the action plan they had designed with WAVES support. Some developed gender-inclusive policies or revised teaching curriculums at universities. Others adapted the WAVES approach to create their own training events and materials.

Indonesian WAVES leader Namira Arsa, from Sulawesi Community Foundation [☞](#), trained numerous women's farmer groups in gender equality and relational leadership. She supported local women's organizations to engage in farming and eco-tourism on customary forest lands.

"I believe my greatest accomplishment is helping local women develop their confidence and leadership skills," she says.



In Lao PDR, WAVES gender leaders held training workshops to promote gender equality in the forestry sector. They conducted surveys that highlighted gender gaps in the Department of Forest Inspection and identified gendered wage inequity in wood-processing companies.

They also provided inputs to the development of Lao PDR's Forest Strategy to 2030. Their proposals included boosting the number of women in decision-making roles; addressing gender equality in village forestry management plans; ensuring the safety and equality of women in wood processing companies; and including gender-inclusive provisions in timber legality definitions and monitoring systems.

Creating a legacy

The evaluation found that the WAVES leaders have challenged and addressed harmful gender stereotypes. Their activities have normalized and increased institutional support for integrating gender into policies, plans and actions. WAVES also had positive impacts on the gender leaders themselves. They have earned support from their colleagues and are recognized and valued as gender specialists.

“At the start of the WAVES program, I had very little knowledge about gender issues in the workplace,” says Thazin Phyo, a forester working on forest and wildlife conservation in Myanmar. “Now I am considered a gender expert in my professional area.”

Although the WAVES program has ended, the gender leaders continue to advocate for equality and lead gender-equitable programs in their communities and institutions. In Nepal, three WAVES leaders in the Ministry of Environment implemented a leadership acceleration project with support from RECOFTC Nepal. As a result, they transformed a Female Foresters' Network ☐ with only a few members into a 70-strong group of women.

Reetu Deuba, the gender officer at the National Trust for Nature Conservation ☐ (NTNC), was among the women the network trained in 2022. Back at work, she noticed key gaps in her organization's gender policy.

“Although the gender policy was in place, and NTNC considers gender equality and social inclusion as its cross-cutting themes, integrating gender considerations in the organization's conservation work was a low priority,” says Deuba. “NTNC did not have enough gender-specific programs or budget. And the gender policy had a lot of loopholes. The training helped me to see these gaps and realized that I could try to close them.”

Feeling empowered, Deuba proposed and received approval from the organization's board to amend the policy. Through consultation with RECOFTC Nepal's director Shambhu Dangal, she revised the policy and added a gender code of conduct and an action plan. The policy will contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable working environment.

“The Female Foresters' Network has emerged as a force for change by nurturing a new generation of leaders,” says Susmita Satyal, program officer at RECOFTC Nepal. “From advocating for gender equality and raising awareness of discrimination and harassment, to amending policies and initiating organizational changes, these women are having significant impacts.”

Sustaining the momentum

The independent evaluation recommended that the WAVES approach should be a core part of RECOFTC's future work, with adequate financial and technical investments. It said RECOFTC could scale up this approach and build on its achievements by linking with like-minded partners. It recommended replicating, strengthening and expanding gender networks, both within and across institutions and at varying scales, such as provincial and community levels.

“The WAVES package offers a best practice that can deliver deep engagement of both the facilitators and the participants in all stages of a program [...].”

The evaluation linked the good results WAVES achieved to the program's use of participatory action research, which is the co-creation of knowledge, and to its emphasis on learning and change. It said, “the WAVES package offers a best practice that can deliver deep engagement of both the facilitators and the participants in all stages of a program [...]. There is huge value in promoting and replicating the WAVES co-creation approach among development partners.”

The evaluation recommends that any future training should integrate the lessons learned through WAVES. Trainings should also increase the emphasis on hegemonic masculinities, intersectionality and tackling resistance. And they should provide psychosocial support to gender leaders as they deal with inevitable resistance, microaggressions and other challenges.

“Sadly, many barriers to gender equality remain in the forestry sectors of Asian countries,” says Korranat Buranakij, program officer for gender equality and social inclusion at RECOFTC. “Some WAVES leaders have faced resistance when challenging norms, raising uncomfortable issues and calling for change. But they have shown that, with adequate support, they and their networks can have significant impacts.”



Supporting research for inclusive and sustainable forest landscape governance in Southeast Asia

The Explore network is providing funding and expertise to seven teams of academics to help them produce impactful research on forest landscape governance, particularly in relation to gender and social inclusion.

Ho Thi Phuong, a researcher and lecturer at Vinh University in Viet Nam, wants forest landscape governance and climate action to be gender-responsive. She is leading a team of researchers who will study the rights, roles and responsibilities of women and men in forest landscapes in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. They hope the evidence they generate will help to address longstanding gender inequalities.

Explore

Explore is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida. The network is hosted by RECOFTC, in partnership with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR-ICRAF). It collaborates with universities, research institutes, governments, civil society organizations, local communities and the private sector in Southeast Asia. Explore is also supported by a community of practice hosted by the Global Landscapes Forum.

Phuong's team is one of seven that the Explore network awarded research funds in September 2022. But the researchers received more than just money. Unlike most grant-making programs, Explore invested in a year-long effort to strengthen the capacities of its most promising applicants before deciding which to fund. This included helping them develop their proposals and building their skills in terms of research techniques and project management.

“I was thrilled to learn from researchers from around the world experienced in forest landscape governance,” said Phuong at a workshop in July 2022 on how to develop effective communication and advocacy strategies within research proposals. “Their stories inspired me, and I am excited to apply what I am learning.”

Call for concepts

Explore is a research network and community of practice dedicated to expanding and applying knowledge on forest landscape governance in Southeast Asia. Launched in 2020, it takes a transboundary, multi-disciplinary, participatory, inclusive multi-stakeholder approach, emphasizing gender and social inclusion. A key aim of Explore is to build the capacities of researchers in the region to produce high-quality research that can have impacts on policymaking, particularly around gender and social inclusion.



Explore researchers review achievements, challenges and learning from phase 1 of the initiative at a workshop in Bangkok, 15-17 August 2022.

In September 2021, Explore invited researchers to apply for preparatory grants of up to USD 18,000 to enable them to develop full proposals for larger research grants. The Explore Secretariat recruited a panel of experts to review the submitted concept notes, provide feedback and recommend which applicants should advance to next stage.

"Being a member of the review panel was rewarding and exciting," says Ahmad Dhialulhaq, an Indonesian senior researcher at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature [RIH](#) in Kyoto, Japan. "I feel happy to be part of this process of improving capacity of researchers from Southeast Asia and also helping decision-makers to improve forest and land governance."

Dhialulhaq says he benefitted personally. By reviewing the work of others, he says it improved his critical thinking, his proposal writing skills and his ability to provide constructive feedback.

Developing proposals

After reviewing the 73 applications, Explore chose to support 19 research teams as they developed their concept notes into full research proposals. As well as providing preparatory grants, Explore trained these teams in participatory action research, human-rights-based approaches and research methods that foster gender equity and social inclusion. The research teams also learned how to develop communication strategies and influence policymaking.



Explore researchers from the Philippines develop their proposal to enhance resiliency of socio-ecological production landscapes in Southeast Asia.

Each team received support from an expert mentor, who provided guidance as they developed their proposals. The mentors included Siti Kusujarti, an Indonesian professor of sociology at Warren Wilson College [in the United States](#). She says the mentoring process worked because of strong communication, respect, trust, responsibility and commitment.

“When we have strong collaborations based on common understanding, and also commitment, then we are able to work together and have good and open communication,” she says. “We developed all of this through a variety of different workshops. I did several workshops focusing on theories and methodologies so that the group had a common understanding of the goals and outcomes for the research.”

In July 2022, the research teams submitted their full proposals, which a panel of peer reviewers graded against a detailed set of criteria.

“For me, it was the first time that research proposals were revised in such a comprehensive and constructive way,” says Bishnu Hari Poudyal, a forestry expert at the Food and Agriculture Organization in Nepal [who reviewed both concept notes and full proposals](#). “Some concept notes were so ambitious in the first round but later on they were more practical after our peer reviewers’ comments.”

Choosing the winners

A year after launching the process, the Explore Advisory Committee chose seven proposals to fund [with grants of up to USD 190,000](#). The committee’s chair, Kanokwan Manorom, says: “The awards recognize the quality and hard work of the research teams and the urgency of the proposed research.”

“Because gender and social inclusion is a priority for Explore, we got the chance to design projects that promote equity as a core goal,” says grant-winner Muhammad Alif K. Sahide [, head of the forest and society research group at Universitas Hasanuddin in Indonesia](#). His team will study how the conversion of forests to agricultural land affects gender relations, marginalized populations and power dynamics.

The grantees will implement and present their research during Phase 2 of Explore, which runs from October 2022 to September 2027. Phase 2 will also include another call for concept notes, with support to researchers as they develop full proposals.



Data and forests: Putting community forestry on the digital map in Thailand

With RECOFTC’s support, representatives of Thailand’s community forests are sharing information about their forests and the products and services they provide with potential customers and the wider public.

“If no one knows about our community forests, it’s as if our forests don’t exist,” says Thammarat Moonsarn, the youth communication officer for tourism in the Kaeng Lawa Community Forest [\(link in Thai\)](#) in Thailand’s Khon Kaen Province.

Kaeng Lawa is one of several active community forests located on public land that has not yet been recognized formally. At the same time, there are nearly 12,000 community forests that Thailand has formally recognized since 2019, giving local people rights to use and benefit from the forests’ resources.

Combined, these formally recognized areas cover close to a million hectares. But there is a lack of information about either the formally recognized community forests or those that have not been formally recognized. This is preventing this model of forest management from reaching its potential and the formally unrecognized community forests from being acknowledged by the public.

“Thailand’s community forests, whether formally recognized or not, are largely invisible in online platforms,” says Warangkana Rattanarat, director of RECOFTC Thailand. “Very little data from these forests reaches the public, so outsiders are unaware of the goods and services they provide. This means communities are missing opportunities to gain sustainable incomes from their forests.”

That is now changing thanks to a RECOFTC Thailand project called CF-NET that established the Citizens' Forest Network. As well as giving communities greater roles in forest governance processes, it has literally put Thailand's community forests on the digital map. This is enabling the communities managing those areas to connect with each other, with potential customers and partners, and with the public at large.

Legal reforms

The CF-NET project ([link in Thai](#)) began in 2018 amid big changes to forest governance in Thailand. The following year, the government enacted the Community Forest Act and other major laws. Together with their subsidiary regulations, they determine the rights and benefits that communities can receive from forest resources in different types of land

RECOFTC Thailand developed CF-NET to empower civil society to advocate for community rights and priorities as the new laws and forest governance mechanisms emerged. The project ran from March 2018 to July 2022. It was funded largely by the European Union and implemented by RECOFTC Thailand in partnership with the Sustainable Development Foundation [☞](#) (SDF) and the Community Organizations Development Institute [☞](#) (CODI).

Among other things, the project strengthened community forest networks in 38 of Thailand's 77 provinces, as well as national and regional networks. It empowered community representatives to engage with government authorities and influence the development of the regulatory framework.

Mapping the forests

To begin to address the lack of public data about Thailand's community forests, the Citizens' Forest Network launched the website thaicfnet.org [☞](#) ([link in Thai](#)) in July 2022. The website aims to bring information about community forests in Thailand into one place. It includes a digital map [☞](#) of community forests registered with the Royal Forest Department. The map now displays more than 7,000 of the almost 12,000 registered community forests, including only those whose geographic coordinates and relevant information have been checked and approved.

So far, representatives of 432 community forests have uploaded additional information into the website's searchable database [☞](#) ([link in Thai](#)). This includes details of their community forest management plans, key features of the forest, activities such as tree planting, and information on the products and services each forest provides.



Community forest data collection training for Citizens' Forest Network members in Nan Province.

“When our community forest exists in the online world, it boosts trust among customers who buy our community products that those fruits and herbs truly come from our community forest,” says Naparee Techasena, a Citizens' Forest Network member and public relations officer of Sri Boonrueng Village [☞](#) (link in Thai) in Nan Province. “I hope all community forests share information about their forests on thaicfnet.org [☞](#) and that more people discover our products,” she says.

Panich Moonchuea, a Citizens' Forest Network member and leader of the Ban Prao Community Forest [☞](#) (link in Thai) in Sa Kaeo Province, sees a wider benefit of publicizing community forests online. “Increasing public understanding in this way can help urban citizens appreciate community forestry and support the communities working to manage these forests sustainably,” he says.

Building on success

“By establishing the Citizens' Forest Network, the project has strengthened cooperation among communities and provincial and national authorities,” says Rattanarat. “It has also empowered marginalized members of community forests and greatly improved the flow of information from community forests to other stakeholders. These gains provide a firm foundation for future development.”

Increasing the quality and quantity of information on the Citizens' Forest Network's database is essential to enable the government to monitor and assess community forests. It is also an important resource for people living there to access markets and investment.

"The information in the Citizens' Forest Database is easy to access, easy to understand, and not too scholarly," says Thammarat Moonsarn from the Kaeng Lawa Community Forest. "I encourage community forest members to share their community forest- and resource-related information in the database."



Knowledge, networks and sustainable finance are key to defending forests and rights

Since 2014, an important partnership has been strengthening knowledge, networks and flows of finance to boost community based natural resource management in Cambodia.

Thida Horn is one of 16 villagers in Cambodia's Kratie Province who formed the Koh Samseb ecotourism group, which offers services to tourists visiting islands in the Mekong River.

"I am glad to work with ecotourism," says Horn. "My livelihood has improved a lot and I can now provide for my two children who are studying in Phnom Penh."

Koh Samseb was established by members of local community forests and fisheries. It is supported by the Partnership for Forestry and Fisheries Communities in Cambodia (PaFF), which RECOFTC Cambodia is leading in its third and final phase.

In June 2022, the ecotourism group adopted a five-year development plan with guidance from PaFF, in collaboration with local government, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector. The plan covers training in hospitality, waste management and financial management. It includes strategic actions to boost tourism through partnerships with tour operators and new activities to attract visitors.

"The plan gives us vision," says Khut Samol, chief of the ecotourism group. "We know our priorities and what we can do, and what support we need from others to help us to grow and attract tourists."



Aerial view of Koh Samseab

Horn and Khut are just two of the tens of thousands of rural Cambodians who are benefitting from PaFF. The partnership is helping communities claim and exercise their rights to sustainably manage natural resources by implementing one of Cambodia’s three models of community forestry. It is strengthening capacities, improving livelihoods, increasing forest protection, boosting supportive networks and introducing mechanisms for sustainable finance.

Network power

Recognizing the importance of collective power, PaFF is supporting 21 networks for members of community forests, community fisheries and community-protected areas. These include networks at the commune, district and provincial levels, as well as three networks specifically for women. PaFF also supports eight multistakeholder platforms through which network representatives can advocate for stronger rights and supportive policy reforms and hold government actors accountable to fulfil their duties.

In 2021, for example, two men who are members of community forests in Kampong Thom Province were falsely accused of violence [☞](#) by a businessperson who was trying to grab part of the O’Plovlok Community Forest. When the men were jailed, other community members raised the alarm, informing the commune council, the Forest Administration and the provincial community forestry network.

Keo Vanna, chief of that network, alerted government ministries, the provincial governor, members of the National Assembly and representatives of local authorities. Her quick action, and the power of networks, contributed to the men’s release after nine days of uncertainty.



Keo Vanna sits at her desk writing a plan for 2022 community forestry activities.

One of the arrested men, Khiev Koy, says more must be done to defend community forests.

“For this to be sustainable, we need more support to make community forestry profitable,” he says. “That’s the best way to ensure the forest is defended.”

Sustaining success

PaFF recognizes this need for financial sustainability. Between October 2021 and September 2022, the partnership set up dozens of credit schemes and mini-trust funds for community forests, fisheries and protected areas. These and the ones that PaFF established in previous years now generate a total of around USD 6,500 each month in interest.

““The interest from credit scheme and trust funds, together with PaFF-provided training, is increasing community-led patrolling and reporting of crimes relating to land and natural resources.” – Tol Sokchea, RECOFTC Cambodia

Communities use this money to implement management plans for their areas or to increase the capital in their credit schemes. Borrowers use their loans to start small businesses, pay for their children’s education or buy fertilizers and other agricultural inputs. As they repay loans with interest, the schemes grow.

“The interest from credit scheme and trust funds, together with PaFF-provided training, is increasing community-led patrolling and reporting of crimes relating to land and natural resources,” says Tol Sokchea, RECOFTC Cambodia’s program manager for Phase 3 of PaFF. “Between 2021 and 2022, PaFF-supported communities raised 482 cases of illegal logging, land encroachment and related illegalities with the authorities.”

Community-based enterprises, like the Koh Samseb ecotourism group in Kratie Province, are another source of income. PaFF has established 11 of these enterprises and provides ongoing training and other forms of support. A business selling honey from the Prasat Teuk Khmao Community Forest in Kratie Province pays five percent of its profits to the community forest management committee. Between 2021 and 2022, it generated more than USD 700 that the committee could use to cover the costs of forest patrols or other activities in its community forest management plan.



O Taneung Community Forest members collect honey in their community forest.

With PaFF’s support, communities managing community forests, fisheries and protected areas are finding ways to sustain their activities. As PaFF enters its final year, RECOFTC will focus on documenting lessons from the experience and working with communities and government actors to ensure that the partnership’s impacts continue.



FLOURISH helps communities restore forests and improve livelihoods in Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam

Production-driven partnerships between forest communities and the private sector can improve livelihoods and economic development while restoring forest landscapes.

Villagers in Chau Thang Commune, in Viet Nam's mountainous Nghe An Province, used to recklessly harvest Lung bamboo from local forests to sell to traders and processors. They wasted almost half of all they cut, and harvested so much young bamboo that the forests were struggling to regenerate. The rapid depletion of the bamboo forests threatened the biggest source of household incomes.

But now, villagers are harvesting bamboo sustainably. They are using nearly all of what they take and are earning more through a partnership with a local company that makes handicrafts. The bamboo forests are recovering.

"Our communities have realized that Lung bamboo and other non-timber forest products will be degraded in the next five years if they don't protect and sustainably harvest these resources," says Sam Van Hung, the chairman of Chau Thang Commune.

This transformation came about through an initiative called FLOURISH, which RECOFTC implemented in Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam between 2018 and 2022.

It has shown that, with government support, production-driven partnerships between forest communities and the private sector can improve livelihoods and economic development while restoring forest landscapes.

Bamboo boost

Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam all have ambitious targets for increasing forest cover. Smallholders who sustainably manage and restore forest land could play key roles while benefiting economically from forest products. But they are deterred from doing so because they lack secure rights, have knowledge and skills gaps, and have limited power in trading relationships.

RECOFTC established FLOURISH [☑](#) to test solutions to these challenges. In each case, ensuring that community members had secure rights to manage and use forest resources was key.

In Viet Nam, the team worked with the local government's Nghe An Forest Protection and Development Fund and the International Bamboo and Rattan Organization. They helped 241 households secure land-use and forest-use certificates that give 50-year tenure rights. This incentivized farmers to manage bamboo forests sustainably by giving them legal rights to plant, harvest and use the bamboo.

“Long ago, we dreamed of having our forest land-use certificate,” says Phi Nga, who chairs Chau Thang commune’s Women Union. “We love the forest, we care about the forest, we invest in the forest when the forest is our own. We have many ideas for developing forestry start-up businesses after receiving our forest land-use certificates.”



Villagers practice forest location mapping and identification of forest boundaries to prepare applications for forest land allocation and forest title certification.

FLOURISH also provided training on forest management and developed partnership agreements between groups of bamboo harvesters and a private company. The company has committed to buying bamboo at an agreed price and is supporting the villagers to manage and protect their bamboo forests. This has increased incomes, improved supplies of raw materials and expanded the quality and area of Lung bamboo.

Tenure and teak

FLOURISH had similar success in Lao PDR, where cash crops, infrastructure and other land uses are replacing teak plantations. FLOURISH enabled 267 smallholder households in Bokeo and Xayaboury provinces to survey, document and register their teak plantations and to acquire the tree certificates they need to sell timber legally. “I want to sell the trees in the future and use the income to expand my plantation,” says Xiengchanh, one of the smallholders FLOURISH supported in Xayaboury.

FLOURISH also provided training on silviculture and facilitated partnership agreements between groups of teak growers and private sawmills. Smallholders are now earning more for their timber. With local government support, the project has promoted sustainable forest management, improved supplies of legal timber for the private sector, reduced conflict over land use and incentivized tree planting. In one of the project sites, Koklouang Village, smallholders have planted more than 11,000 teak trees.



Lao farmer maintains teak plantation plot. Photo by RECOFTC

In Thailand, smallholders are reluctant to plant teak trees as they cannot be sure they will benefit from them after 25 years of growth. Challenges include the slow allocation of public land to farmers and communities and the complex and unclear legal requirements for tree planting, timber harvesting, transport and trade.

Working with communities in Nan province, FLOURISH piloted approaches for demonstrating the legality and controlling the supply chains of teak grown by smallholders on public land.

In August 2022, the team published a policy brief describing how policymakers can support smallholders who want to grow and sell teak legally and sustainably. Implementing the recommendations would encourage smallholders to plant trees and manage forests sustainably. It would also enable people to develop community-based enterprises and improve supplies of legal teak for the private sector.

Looking ahead

An independent evaluation in 2022 concluded that FLOURISH largely achieved its intended outcome.

“With its focus on landscape-level training and capacity building, FLOURISH is likely to lead to long-term impact,” it said. The evaluation said that equitable, production-driven partnerships of the kind FLOURISH facilitated should be further supported and prioritized.

“By helping people secure livelihoods from productive forests, we can actually set up a dynamic where healthy forests produce improved income and well-being,” says former FLOURISH project coordinator Trang Thu Hoang. “And the whole thing is fuelled by market dynamics rather than grants, loans or subsidies. We want to address the root causes of deforestation and degradation, which is mainly poverty.”



Researching customary tenure recognition and women's rights in the Mekong region

RECOFTC conducted research on the recognition of customary tenure rights of communities that depend on forests in the Mekong region. We also studied how laws and customs affect indigenous women's rights to access and manage forest resources there.

The minority ethnic Karen community of Huay I Khang Village in Thailand's Chiang Mai Province uses a customary system of land tenure. It is based on collective rights, traditional knowledge and territorial management practices. Women traditionally enjoy strong rights to access, use and manage agricultural and forest land.

But the community lacks formal recognition of their collective rights. National parks and conservation areas overlap with ancestral land, eroding the community's access to that land and threatening food sovereignty.

"The forest officials come and tell us what to do based on their own ideas, but their ideas are in conflict with our way of life," says Chi No, one of the women in the community. "We know what to do and how to live."

The situation she describes is detailed in one of two reports relating to customary tenure that RECOFTC produced in 2022 through the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) [project](#).

Recognizing customary tenure

The residents of Huay I Khang Village are among about two billion people worldwide who live under a customary system of tenure and rights governing the use of forests, land and other natural resources. These systems are crucial to people's livelihoods, food security and culture, as well as to forest protection, biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation.

Customary tenure has long been insecure, and in many places it is under growing pressure. But it is also increasingly recognized through a variety of mechanisms, both formal and informal.

The first of RECOFTC's reports for the MRLG project focuses on the recognition of customary tenure in forest landscapes in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam. It identifies three main pathways for recognizing customary tenure: self-recognition by communities; joint recognition by communities and others; and formal recognition in legal frameworks. Ten case studies illustrate different approaches, often a mix of formal and informal mechanisms.

The report introduces a conceptual framework for assessing these mechanisms in relation to rights, livelihoods, governance, gender equity and social inclusion, customary and traditional practices and dispute resolution. It assesses the extent to which legal frameworks recognize or restrict customary tenure rights and identifies gaps and inconsistencies in legal frameworks. It also recommends ways of improving the recognition of customary tenure in each country and at the regional level.

Promoting inclusive forest governance through ASEAN

In late 2021 and early 2022, RECOFTC worked with ClientEarth to support the ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry develop guiding principles for effective social forestry legal frameworks. The Working Group endorsed the principles in June 2022. The principles should help to strengthen national social forestry laws, policies and regulations, and their implementation, in ASEAN Member States. In 2022–2023, RECOFTC will explore opportunities to pilot the principles in Viet Nam and other countries.

“Respecting the rights of forest communities by ending the gap between the legal recognition and the protection of customary land in practice can help secure the way of life for local people,” says Nathalie Faure, senior program officer at RECOFTC, and lead author of the report. “It can also help mitigate climate change, protect ecosystems and accelerate progress towards inclusive and sustainable development.”

“The research supported by MRLG aligns with RECOFTC's wider work on inclusive forest governance,” says Faure. “This includes our engagement with governments and decision-makers at the level of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). We are supporting efforts to strengthen legal and policy frameworks to enhance communities' rights across the region. This is key to ensuring that communities can sustainably manage and benefit equitably from local forest resources.”

Focusing on women's experiences

The second MRLG-supported report focuses on gender, tenure and customary practices in forest landscapes [↗](#). The report and its associated informational briefs [↗](#), were based on 10 studies carried out in 18 sites in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Each study documented the legal frameworks and customary practices that affect indigenous women's rights to access and manage forest resources. As well as producing this knowledge, RECOFTC also built the capacities of researchers in the seven countries to conduct the studies.

The research provided unique perspectives into customary and statutory tenure and how the two models interact. It showed how traditional gender roles influence women's customary tenure rights in ways that are common to several of the countries. The report makes recommendations in six areas: education and literacy; training; empowerment; community forest management; legal reforms; and further research.



Researchers in Viet Nam conducted interviews to study tenure rights of ethnic minority women and men related to non-timber forest products among communities in the Western Nghe An Biosphere Reserve.

“The studies showed that the factors influencing how women participate in forest governance and contribute to their families’ livelihoods vary among indigenous groups,” says Ei Ei Htwe, former senior program officer for gender equality and social inclusion at RECOFTC who oversaw the research. “This underlines the fact that each country’s approach to acceptance and recognition of customary tenure rights must be nuanced and flexible.”



Assessing prospects for accelerating climate action in the Asia-Pacific region

RECOFTC and partners gathered experts to assess the implications of the COP26 UN climate change conference for the region's climate, people and forests.

Forests and the communities that depend on them featured prominently in the outcomes of COP26. The 26th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) took place in Glasgow in November 2021.

But climate policy has long suffered from huge gaps between words and actions. RECOFTC and partners wanted to assess what COP26's outcomes really mean for climate change and the forest and land-use sectors in the Asia-Pacific region. They held a consultation in March 2022 with UNFCCC negotiators and other experts from the region to explore the topic.

Consultation organizers

The consultation was organized by RECOFTC, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, the FAO Koronivia-Plus project, the ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry, the ASEAN Working Group on Forests and Climate Change, the Climate and Clean Air Coalition to Reduce Short-Lived Climate Pollutants and the ASEAN Climate Resilience Network and its ASEAN Negotiating Group for Agriculture.

The aim was to map key issues and identify entry points for accelerating regional climate action that contributes to the goals of the UNFCCC’s Paris Agreement on climate change. In June 2022, RECOFTC summarized the discussion in a Special Report [↗](#).

The participants discussed negotiated outcomes in the Glasgow Climate Pact [↗](#) and other COP decisions, as well as initiatives launched outside of the main UNFCCC negotiations. These included the Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use [↗](#); corporate commitments on forest-risk commodities; and pledges of USD 1.7 billion [↗](#) to support Indigenous Peoples and local communities and strengthen their forest tenure rights. The experts also discussed the roles that countries in the region played at COP26 and the extent of their ambitions.

“Asian nations must be willing to demonstrate leadership in keeping the global heating target of 1.5°C degrees within reach,” says Regan Pairojmahakij, senior program officer at RECOFTC. “Yet the ambition expressed in the revised nationally determined contributions among countries in Asia has been marginal, especially in the forest and land use sectors. With its high climate vulnerability, Asia does not help itself by demonstrating low climate ambition.”

Workshop participants discussed the potential for accelerated climate action after COP26 negotiators finalized the Paris Agreement’s rulebook, particularly Article 6 on carbon markets.

They also assessed what COP26 means for agriculture in the region, and the implications for commodity producing countries in the context of a growing focus on supply chain accountability.



The key area of work for countries in the Asia-Pacific region is to prepare accessible policy infrastructure, landscape management systems and tools for verification and certification that will ensure deforestation-free supply chains. – Akiko Inoguchi, forestry officer at FAO and lead for the UN-REDD Sustainable Forest Trade in the Lower Mekong Region Initiative

Prospects for forest communities

COP26 emphasized the rights and roles of Indigenous Peoples and local communities like never before, said experts including Pasang Dolma Sherpa, executive director of the Center for Indigenous Peoples’ Research and Development [↗](#) in Nepal.

“At COP26, for the first time, we, elders and leaders of indigenous communities were able to show to the whole world how indigenous people, with our customary institutions, governance systems, cultural practices, knowledge and values, are contributing to climate change resilience and sustainable management of resources and biodiversity,” she said. “I consider this a key outcome of COP26.”

This emphasis, together with funding pledges and an increased focus on integrated, cross-sectoral approaches, bodes well for the land-use sector in the region.



“ We need to identify best practices on the ground, distil lessons learned and conduct research to demonstrate that nature-based solutions really are viable approaches to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing adaptability. – Suchitra Chantragoon, independent expert on nature conservation from Thailand

RECOFTC’s experiences show that one such approach, community or social forestry, can play a significant role as a solution to climate change, poverty and biodiversity loss.

“Some of the new funding announced at COP26 could help Asian countries achieve their social forestry targets by accelerating their recognition of community rights to local forests,” says RECOFTC’s executive director David Ganz. “Countries must give Indigenous Peoples and local communities a seat at the table when designing their policies and actions on forests and climate change. They must also give them a prominent role in implementation, as well as financial and other forms of support.”

RECOFTC is supporting action for global climate finance to reach Indigenous Peoples, traditional owners and local communities through its membership of the Peoples Forests Partnership [☞](#). The Partnership launched at COP26. By 2030, the initiative aims to channel USD 20 billion of private finance a year to Indigenous Peoples and local communities for forest conservation and restoration.



RECOFTC looks ahead to 2022–2023

Enjoy reading about some of RECOFTC's anticipated highlights for the year ahead.

The financial year 2022-2023 will be the final year covered by RECOFTC's 2018-2023 strategic plan. Among other activities, RECOFTC will implement new and continuing initiatives. They include projects to support research on inclusive forest landscape governance, promote community-based fire management, advance gender equality and social inclusion, and improve systems for managing data on community forestry.

Scaling-up community-based fire management to protect health, livelihoods and forests

Wildfires have had devastating impacts on health, economies and ecosystems in Asia in recent years. The economic costs in northern Thailand exceeded USD 413 million in January 2020 alone. By releasing greenhouse gases, wildfires are fuelling climate change leading to more intense and frequent wildfires.

“The high-tech solutions and no-fire policies that governments have been using are failing,” says David Ganz, executive director of RECOFTC. “Community forestry’s people-centred and multistakeholder approaches are the answer.”

That’s why RECOFTC will be partnering with the United States Forest Service [↗](#), governments and communities in high-risk landscapes to scale up community-based fire management. Our new project, launching in October 2022, will harness the approaches and institutions of community forestry [↗](#) to accelerate a shift from fighting wildfires to preventing them.

The project will support communities in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. It will help them develop and implement fire management plans, monitor their forests and relay information about fire risks to the authorities. It will work with governments to ensure that laws and policies promote inclusive forms of forest management such as community forestry. These types of models can provide a strong foundation for community-based fire management.

Campaign works to ensure women and men can participate as equals in managing Cambodia's natural resources

In Cambodia, community forests and community-protected areas are key government-mandated approaches for reducing rural poverty, promoting sustainable use of natural resources and providing equitable benefit sharing.

Women need to be full partners in managing these areas. But they routinely face resistance from their families and communities when they try to participate. They face harassment, physical and psychological stress, and sexual assault. To address this, a new project called Rise Up! [↗](#) will train and support members of women's community forest and community protected areas networks to lead campaigns for positive change.



“The project will encourage men, women, families and communities to acknowledge women as essential and equal partners in community-based management of natural resources,” says Kalyan Hou, director at RECOFTC Cambodia. “It will focus on preventing harmful power dynamics and gender-based violence by changing attitudes and behaviours at the individual, interpersonal and community levels.”

Rise Up! activities will take place in three community forests and five community-protected areas in Pursat and Kampong Chhnang provinces. The project team will share their experiences with national, regional and international audiences.

RECOFTC will lead Rise Up! in collaboration with the non-profit Gender and Development for Cambodia [☞](#) (GADC), the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries [☞](#), the Ministry of Environment [☞](#), the Ministry of Women's Affairs [☞](#) and the Youth Leadership Lab for Gender Equality.

The project was one of five winners of the 2022 Resilient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Environments (RISE) awards. It was funded by the United States Agency for International Development and managed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Strengthening systems for managing data on community forestry

In recent years, millions of people across South-East Asia have been empowered to manage local forests. But as countries in the region continue to expand various forms of community forestry, they risk operating in the dark. This is because of limitations in their systems for collecting and accessing data about the progress, effectiveness and sustainability of community forestry programs.

As a result, community forestry programs are not often integrated into development goals. These include National Economic and Social Development Plans and the Nationally Determined Contributions that countries have pledged under the Paris Agreement on climate change.

“The lack of strong information systems across the ASEAN region is hindering efforts to achieve climate change targets as well as the Sustainable Development Goals that depend on strong forests,” says David Ganz, RECOFTC’s executive director.

To help address this situation, RECOFTC and the Asian Forest Cooperation Organization [☞](#) will be partnering with the Korea International Cooperation Agency [☞](#). Together, they will help ASEAN Member States improve the collection and availability of high-quality data on community forestry.

After assessing the status of existing information management systems, RECOFTC will support forestry officials from the region to improve their systems or develop new ones. The aim is to ensure that ASEAN Member States can collect, update, analyze and share data on community forestry in ways that better serve decision-makers and the public.

Providing ongoing support to researchers exploring inclusive forest landscape governance

The Explore research network hosted by RECOFTC in partnership with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) will enter its second phase, which runs from October 2022 to September 2027.

“ Close to 300 researchers in seven teams will be implementing projects that won grants during Explore’s first phase.

Explore will continue to focus on supporting research on forest landscape governance and on building the capacities of researchers to undertake such work. Close to 300 researchers in seven teams will be implementing projects that won grants during Explore’s first phase.

RECOFTC will also announce a new call for proposals and will provide training and other support to researchers as they develop concept notes into fundable proposals.

“The Explore team learned important lessons during Phase 1 of the project that we will be applying in Phase 2,” says Sirichai Saencharnchai, Explore’s interim manager at RECOFTC. “We will be scaling-up the capacity development program, adding more workshops on financial and project management, and increasing the number of interactions between research groups and their mentors.”

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RECOFTC

P.O. Box 1111 | Kasetsart Post Office | Bangkok 10903 | Thailand

T +66 (0)2 940 5700 | F +66 (0)2 561 4880

info@recoftc.org | www.recoftc.org