

Conflict mediation in Asia's increasingly pressured forests:

# A tool for getting the positives out of conflicts

RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests holds a unique and important place in the world of forestry. With over 25 years of international experience and a dynamic approach to capacity building – involving research and analysis, demonstration sites, training products and services, and strategic communications – RECOFTC delivers innovative solutions for people and forests.

One key area of RECOFTC's work looks at conflict transformation, using an approach that aims not only to resolve conflict, but also to promote conditions that create long-term cooperative relations. Through trainings and outreach activities, RECOFTC seeks to build the capacity of stakeholders in community forestry and natural resource management to engage effectively in participatory conflict resolution. In addition, RECOFTC carries out research and analysis to develop a sound knowledge basis for the capacity development process, and to inform policy makers, academics, and practitioners on the importance of supporting participatory conflict resolution.

## Why analyze conflict mediation in Asia?

Conflict over forest resources is one of the major challenges in forest management. Researchers have observed that the number and severity of forest conflicts in Asia has increased over time, and that forest conflicts are now widespread across the region. In Cambodia in 2009, 236 community-outsider conflicts were recorded. In Indonesia, 359 incidents of forest-related community-outsider conflict were identified between 1997 and 2003, with numbers increasing over time. This high concentration of forest conflict makes Southeast Asia one of the 'hotspots' of forest conflict in the world. While conflict causes both positive impacts (including stronger collective action and increased awareness of conflict issues) and negative ones, the negative aspects – anxiety and fear, disharmony and division among social groups, economic and social costs, and environmental degradation – predominate. This situation may threaten the lives of many of the 450 million people living in and around Asia's 734 million ha forests.

To minimize the negative (and maximize the positive) impacts of forest conflicts, there is a need to develop and strengthen appropriate conflict management methods, tools, and practices. A RECOFTC study published in 2012 found that the involvement of a mediator who is credible, neutral, and able to develop participatory processes can be fundamental to successful, sustainable conflict management in Asia. Unfortunately, the study also found that mediation capacity and skills in Asia are low, indicating a critical need to train and support additional mediators. Some studies of mediation in Asia show that many communities in this region use different, often unique traditional mediation practices, which could be a more effective alternative to western mediation approach in certain cases. Indeed, there is an overarching need to explore mediation approaches that are culturally appropriate in managing conflict.

## What are we looking at when analyzing conflict mediation in Asia?

In this context, RECOFTC started analyzing conflict mediation practices in Asia with the aim of developing a better understanding of mediation, gaining insight into challenges, and strengthening mediation practices. This research also attempts to capture differing perceptions of the value and success of the mediation process and its outcomes. The final product will present findings on best practices in forest conflict mediation in the region, discuss trends observed through the analysis of various case studies, and propose recommendations for the development and application of conflict mediation in conflict transformation as well as development of policy and capacity building activities for conflict mediation.

## How, where, and when will we analyze conflict mediation?

The research will follow four stages:

1. **A literature review** is currently underway to identify best practices in conflict mediation and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the different theories and their applications. The review, which began in January 2012, primarily focuses on natural resource conflicts, though it will also cover other types of conflict for comparative purposes.
2. **A regional expert workshop** was held in April 2012 with practitioners and experts in natural resource conflict mediation. Workshop participants provided opinions on the research framework and discussed different mediation methods and their strengths and limitations. The workshop, held in Bangkok, involved experts from China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as regional experts from RECOFTC.
3. **National expert workshops** are being planned to draw together experts and practitioners in each of the study countries to elicit their perspective on the findings of the case studies and issues related to forest conflict management, particularly mediation, in their country.
4. **Case studies** will be developed to examine the application of different mediation methods in different contexts. The case studies will not only facilitate the further development of the analytical framework, but also allow the comparison of the theory and its application in the field. Seven countries will be covered: Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, China, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The specific sites, at least two in each country, will be selected based on to-be-determined criteria (e.g., diversity of the conflict, the use of mediation). The work will be divided into two phases, with the first phase conducted in Thailand and Indonesia, starting in June 2012. The second phase will cover the other five countries starting in October 2012.

## How can you support us?

Although the research aims to be comprehensive, there is undoubtedly room for improvement. In this regard, we would invite your critical feedback, information, and any suggestions you may have with respect to:

- The work we are proposing, particularly on the material and methods of the research
- The work you have done on conflict management, particularly on conflict mediation in Asia. This will also feed into the development of a conflict management bibliography and a database of conflict mediators, both of which will be posted to the RECOFTC website (<http://www.recoftc.org>) in the near future.
- Any particular conflict that you know of and/or mediate that may feed into the selection of the case studies

Any queries and feedback can be addressed to **Dr. David Gritten** (Program Officer, Forest Policy & Governance) at RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests via Email: [david.gritten@recoftc.org](mailto:david.gritten@recoftc.org). For further information on our work on forest conflicts, please visit <http://www.recoftc.org/site/Forest-Conflict>.

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