

Advances in Community Forestry in Asia

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Vision

Local communities in the Asia-Pacific region are actively involved in the equitable and ecologically sustainable management of forest landscapes.

Mission

To enhance capacities at all levels to assist people of the Asia-Pacific region to develop community forestry and manage forest resources for optimum social, economic and environmental benefits.

RECOFTC is an international organization that works closely with partners to design and facilitate learning processes and systems to support community forestry. It seeks to promote constructive multi-stakeholder dialogues and interactions to ensure equitable and sustainable management of forest resources.

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Acronyms

CBFM	Community-based Forest Management
CF	Community Forestry
CFM	Collective Forest Management
FUG	Forest User Group
ha	hectare
JFM	Joint Forest Management
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NTFP	Non-timber Forest Product
PO	People's Organization
RECOFTC	Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific
SF	Social Forestry
VF	Village Forestry

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INTRODUCTION

Forests are one of the most important natural resources and assets for the rural poor to sustain their livelihoods. Global forest cover, in 2000, was 3.9 billion ha.⁴ Worldwide, some 350 million of the world's poorest people are heavily dependent on the forests for their survival. Another one billion poor people – about 20 percent of world's population – rely on remnant woodlands, homestead and farmland trees for their fuelwood supply, food and other household needs.⁵

The Asia-Pacific countries occupy slightly more than one-fifth of the world's land area but house more than half of the world's population. The region has about 25 percent forest cover, but forest decreased by 10.5 million ha during the 1990s and forest degradation continues to be a serious problem.⁶

Community-owned and administered forest totals at least 377 million ha, or at least 22 percent of all forests in developing countries (around 10 percent of global forests) and about as much global forest as is owned by private landowners.⁷ This figure is expected to reach 540 million ha by 2015 – perhaps representing 45 percent of the developing world's forest estate.⁸ Much of this area will be managed under some form of collaborative arrangement involving sharing decision making between stakeholder groups.⁹

COMMUNITY FORESTRY EXPLAINED

Community forestry as a term means different things to different people, depending on their background and experiences. RECOFTC currently defines it as follows:

Community forestry involves the governance and management of forest resources by communities for commercial and non-commercial purposes, including subsistence, timber production, non-timber forest products, wildlife, conservation of biodiversity and environment, social and religious significance. It also incorporates the practices, art, science, policies, institutions and processes necessary to promote and support all aspects of community based forest management [RECOFTC Strategic Plan, 2004: 11].

¹ Presentation at the Workshop on: Capitalisation and Sharing of Experiences on the Interaction between Forest Policies and Land Use Patterns in Asia. Kathmandu, Nepal. 24-28 January 2005.

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⁴ FAO, 2001. *State of the World's Forests*. FAO, Rome.

⁵ WCFSD, 1999. *Our Forests and Our Future. Report of the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development*. WCFSD, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

⁶ Brown, C. and Durst, P.B., 2003. *State of Forestry in Asia and the Pacific – 2003: Status, Changes and Trends*. RAP Publication 2003/22. FAO, Bangkok.

⁷ Private includes firms. Source: White, A. and Martin, A., 2002. *Who Owns the World's Forests? Forest Tenure and Public Forests in Transition*. Forest Trends, Washington D.C.

⁸ Bull, G. and White, A., 2002. Global Forests in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities. In *Proceedings of Global Perspective on Indigenous Forestry: Linking Communities, Commerce and Conservation*, 4-6 June 2002, Vancouver, Canada.

⁹ Gilmour, D., Malla, M. and Nurse, N., 2004. Linkages between Community Forestry and Poverty. Position paper, RECOFTC, Thailand.

It is an evolving concept, which has persisted in natural resource management programming over almost thirty years. Its persistence lies fundamentally in its value as a concept and set of approaches for development that have evolved as our understanding has grown about the complex reality of forests, farmers, foresters and their respective sustainability and livelihood concerns.

In fact we see community forestry as being present in two distinct aspects in most countries in Asia, looking in particular at the policy context:

- A recognition of the rights of rural communities living adjacent to forests to extract resources and manage forests for their basic livelihood needs. A complementary recognition that indigenous management institutions exist and that there is significant local knowledge about the management of trees and forests.
- A recognition of the classical role of foresters in the protection and management of the national forest estate, that this has needed to change, from foresters as being agents of enforcement and protection to their new role as advisers and extensionists.

In the more advanced protagonist countries there is a further recognition that indigenous systems are neither perfect nor static – that many are weakening due to strong external economic and political influences. There is also recognition that the role of government is changing – there are now NGO service providers in some countries for example – and that external support is more about developing good governance and sustainable institutions through capacity building, than it is simply about providing training and extension support.

It is now clear that community forestry, in all its various guises, has much to offer, although there is also room for improvement. A recent analysis has shown that whilst community forestry has been able to provide significant benefits to communities in many countries, it has not been able to scale-up the localized benefits to the poorest of poor people. There is, however, a large potential for community forestry to deliver poverty-related outcomes, to scale-up approaches for the poorest and therefore a broad scope for community forestry to contribute to the Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty by 2015.

This paper will present the current status of community forestry and analyze some of the current issues affecting community forestry policy and forest land use in Asia.

STATUS OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN THE ASIAN REGION

In the late 1970s, it was generally perceived that widespread deforestation had led to environmental degradation, and that governments acting alone were not able to reverse the trends. Community forestry emerged at this time as an approach to address widespread forest loss and its consequent environmental degradation and negative impact on rural livelihoods.¹⁰

The first 10-15 years of effort in implementing community forestry in countries such as India, Nepal and the Philippines was spent in developing, testing and institutionalizing approaches aimed at effectively involving rural communities in the active protection and management of forests. The protection and rehabilitation of degraded forests and the establishment of new forest resources were the major policy and practical objectives. This is still the case for many countries in the Asian region where community forestry (under its various guises) has come onto the national agenda only during the past decade. Utilization of the rehabilitated and regenerated community forests in India and Nepal has only commenced during the past decade and in other countries in the region it is barely being considered.¹¹

¹⁰ Gilmour, D., Malla, Y. and Nurse, N., 2004. Linkages between Community Forestry and Poverty. Position paper, RECOFTC, Thailand.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In some countries, community forestry has moved well beyond the pilot stage to become a mainstream and well accepted form of forestry in its own right. In other countries in the region community forestry is a much more recent policy initiative, and is still in its formative stages. Box 1 provides a summary of the status of community forestry in selected countries in Asia.

Box 1. The Status of Community Forestry with the Asian Protagonists¹²

Nepal – Community Forestry (CF): Since 1980 about 1.1 million ha of forest has been handed over to nearly 14,000 Forest User Groups (FUGs). About 1.2 million households are involved. Forest is handed over to FUGs after application to the Forestry Department and joint completion of a management plan. Supportive policies and legislation for CF have been adopted. About 25 percent of the national forest is now managed by more than 35 percent of the total population. There is evidence of marked improvement in conservation of forests (both increased area and improved density) and enhanced soil and water management, although some poorer groups suffer from less access to forest products than in the past. Retraining of foresters has been carried out to fit them for new roles as community advisors and extensionists.

India – Joint Forest Management (JFM): Over 62,000 village forest communities (approximately 75 million people and 14 million ha of forest) are participating with the Indian Forest Service across 26 states (started 1988). The share of benefits to community varies from 25-50 percent – in return for peoples' inputs of labor and time. Policy and laws strengthening the role and rights of communities in forest management and use support these programs. Extensive re-training of forestry officials in JFM is conducted.

Bhutan – Social Forestry (SF): The Royal Government of Bhutan has been supporting SF since 1979, when His Majesty the King commanded the Department of Forestry to prepare a scheme on SF to involve local people in the management of trees on their own or village lands. The Nature Conservation Act, 1995, provides the legal basis for SF. The scheme has been implemented on a cautious pilot basis, with a small number of management plans covering mostly plantations, with one natural forest site (Yakpugang, in the east).

Cambodia – Community Forestry (CF): CF projects were initiated by donors in 1992. A sub-decree for CF was approved in 2003, following a further decade of emphasis on timber concession management, while CF approaches were being explored by projects. The Forest Administration is now developing a road map for national CF implementation. Four million ha of timber concession have been cancelled, allowing for alternative forms of management.

Vietnam – Community Forestry (CF): CF has been practiced on a pilot scale and its status is recognized. Of these exploratory activities the most promising pilots are the allocation of existing forest and forestland with long-term land use titles (Red Book Certificates) to individual households, groups of households and village communities on a large scale in Dak Lak and Son La provinces. The government has recently promulgated a new law supporting CF.

Lao PDR – Village Forestry (VF): Thrusts of government are to control logging and settle shifting cultivation through decentralization and partnership with villages. 187,000 families (30 percent of the population) still depended on shifting cultivation in the mid-1990s and it remains a key and complex issue in rural villages. The forestland allocation process provides an entry point for CF, through village authorities. The 1996 Forest Law provides a legal framework for the NTFP sub-sector, for rural families to be able to satisfy their 'family economic necessity', including collection of NTFPs for sale. There is evidence of substantive devolution of authority to the village level for NTFP management and use in recognition of the basic needs of rural communities. Timber management, however, remains an elusive goal through CF, as early attempts through projects were curtailed.

Thailand – Community Forestry (CF): Over 8,000 village groups are *de facto* managing forestland in protected areas. Furthermore, the Decentralization Act and the revised Constitution (1997) provide rights to local authorities and village councils for community management of other natural resources.

China – Collective Forest Management (CFM): Townships, administrative villages and village household groups under CFM account for three-fifths of China's total forest area of 153 million ha, concentrated in Yunnan, Sichuan and 10 southern provinces. There are indigenous management systems in many ethnic minority areas. Extensive reforestation and plantation establishment has taken place.

Philippines – Community-based Forest Management (CBFM): SF started in the mid-1970s. CBFM is a national strategy for management and conservation of forest resources. There are now 4,956 SF project sites, covering 5.7 million ha. Tenurial changes have been issued for 4.4 million ha of this land. The beneficiaries are 2,182 People's Organizations (POs) involving 496,165 households. Management of forest is transferred to POs after application is approved and a CBFM Agreement is issued. POs prepare a Community Resource Management Framework for their forest. Policies, rules and regulations to support CBFM are in place. A pending Act will institutionalize CBFM and strengthen rights of communities to manage forests.

¹² Sources: Gilmour, D., Malla, Y. and Nurse, N., 2004. Linkages between Community Forestry and Poverty. Position paper, RECOFTC, Thailand; Outcome of a RECOFTC Board of Trustees Meeting, 2 November, 2004. Unpublished, RECOFTC, Thailand.

Over the years, one thing that has become increasingly evident is that there can be no single model for community forestry. Countries in the region have different historical, political, social and economic settings, and this has given rise to a variety of community forestry modalities. In some areas, rural communities living in or near forestland may use forest resources according to some form of indigenous management systems. In other locations, local communities are being seen as legitimate partners for the effective management of forest resources, which until recently have been managed by government forestry authorities.

Approaches taken vary from country to country. For example, in Nepal, access and use rights to forests are given to forest users, whereas in Vietnam, forestland is allocated to individual households.¹³ On the other hand, in Thailand, many community forestry initiatives are happening on the ground without any national framework to legitimize these local efforts. In contrast, the legal framework for community forestry is widely recognized in the Philippines, but it is yet to be translated into a reality that benefits the local communities.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the advances gained from these emerging community forestry modalities in Asia, problems still exist:

- **India:** Despite the emergence of 84,000 JFM committees managing 17 million ha of forests in 27 states, management is plantation-, rather than natural forest-, centered and protection-oriented. There are green felling bans in many states and restrictions on communities for harvesting of NTFPs for sale. There are also disputes over customary ownership in tribal areas, particularly where grazing is a predominant land use.
- **Bhutan:** Despite having advanced production forestry management systems, the social forestry scheme lacks momentum due to perceived equity issues. The current program is aimed at replanting bare areas and on private forestry, although the country already has 72 percent forest cover.
- **China:** Although 60 percent of forestland (150 million ha) are nominally 'owned' by local communities, in reality, environmental and other concerns severely constrain their rights to manage these 'community' assets.
- **Indonesia:** The national government has transferred responsibility for managing natural resources, including forests, to local authorities. However, most forests remain under central control. Decentralizing responsibility to local governments without devolving rights and management to users or user groups is likely to lead to potential conflicts, especially if the benefits are not shared by local communities.
- **Thailand:** Village groups are managing forestland officially classified as Conservation Forest, though all use is legally prohibited. Local authorities have allowed limited access and use to forests classified as National Reserve Forest, in the absence of a national-level community forestry policy framework.
- **Philippines:** Although 5 million ha of forestland reportedly have been handed over to communities supported by local government units, the use of and benefits from the resources remain limited.
- Even in the regional success story, **Nepal**, not all is well. The recognition of FUGs as autonomous managers of forest resources has been the basis for the establishment of over 12,000 FUGs managing more than 1 million ha of forest in less than a decade, with more than 75 percent of the groups forming the national Federation of Community Forestry Users. Unfortunately, this progress is not mirrored in the more richly forested areas of the Terai. There are further indications that only one-fourth of all FUGs function

¹³ A new forestry law will come into effect from April 2005 that will enable forest management through communities.

effectively and manage the resources actively and equitably, while in the remaining three-fourths, the poorest and most dependent members, may actually be worse off.

These examples do not belittle the considerable efforts of governments and citizens in Asia to improve conditions for the management of rich resources by poor people. They should, however, remind us that there are few domains where the battle over contested resources has been decided in favor of those with the greatest need.

Such divergent perspectives illustrate the complexities involved, cutting across a multitude of political, cultural, social, economic and environmental premises. Analysis of these multi-faceted issues can help to increase the knowledge needed to derive appropriate alternatives and solutions. Developing and building capacities and skills to address and balance the demands from sometimes-conflicting approaches are just as critical.

Implications

RECOFTC's vision is that local communities in the Asia-Pacific region are actively involved in the equitable and ecologically sustainable management of forest landscapes. The implementation of this vision must be undertaken in the context of current international evidence on community forestry and poverty linkages, and on current international commitments to reaching the poor.

The linking of forestry development with poverty is a logical one. The evidence shows that community forestry intervention has provided positive outcomes for communities in developing countries, including the poorest people. This evidence (with examples from policy, strategic and operational levels in at least one country, Nepal) provides a basis for suggesting that there is a significant potential for community forestry to do this on a global scale.

Common problems can mean common opportunities

At present most community forestry activities are planned and implemented within the individual country context (social, economic, political and environmental). While this is important, many of the problems facing any one country in promoting community forestry are also common to other countries. Analysis of these issues and strategies to address them will be more effective if it is done jointly at the regional level rather than at the individual country level. Some of the thematic issues that seem to be affecting the development of community forestry in different parts of Asia include, but are not limited to, the following:¹⁴

- i. **Issues of governance and institutional structures in the forestry sector and the role of community forestry and its stakeholders:** How do we strengthen the role of international initiatives? How do we link them to the livelihoods of local poor communities or even to national-level policies? What are the emerging roles for government and civil society in community forestry?
- ii. **Analyzing the impact of community forestry on livelihoods and the local environment:** How do we measure poverty and its impact? How do we scale-up the impact of community forestry to reach the poorest within countries and across sectors?
- iii. **Active management of community forests:** Do we know how to develop sustainable forest management systems for commercial and subsistence use? Should we encourage timber and NTFP commercialization?

¹⁴ Sources: *Program Completion Report*. RECOFTC Program 2001-2004. RECOFTC, Thailand. 11 October, 2004; Outcome of a RECOFTC Board of Trustees Meeting, 2 November, 2004. Unpublished, RECOFTC, Thailand.

- iv. **The role of local communities in the management of protected areas:** How do we manage protected areas with communities? How do we undertake an ecosystem approach to scale-up community forestry across landscapes?
- v. **Examining and supporting the livelihoods of the poorest through community forestry:** How do we develop appropriate policies and practice to support livelihood improvements at commercial and subsistence levels for the poorest?

To implement this strategy for solving key regional issues effectively, requires commitment from governments (to support lessons learned with good policies); donors (for sustained partnership and long-term funding), and communities (to be willing to assist poorer community members).

It also requires developing projects with long-time horizons (20 years plus) and graduated measurable milestones that monitor and assess process (is the intervention likely to lead to equitable and poverty-focused outcomes?) and products (using indicators related to forest production, ecology, institutional robustness and assets).

VALIDATION AND SCALING-UP OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Compared to the situation two decades ago, community forestry has no doubt have come a long way to become a part of the mainstream forestry in some countries. However, community forestry is still too narrowly viewed and most activities to date have remained confined to degraded forest sites, working mostly at the local community level. Therefore, the potential that community forestry has to make the difference in the management of forest sector as a whole and other natural resource management and rural development is yet to be widely recognized. For this, there is a need to make a deliberate, systematic effort to recognize more widely the importance of community forestry both within and beyond the forest sector so that successful approaches can be scaled-up and have regional impact on the poorest people.