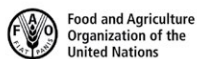




Rapid assessment

Impact of COVID-19 on forest communities in Thailand

FAO - EU FLEGT PROGRAMME



based on a decision of the German Bundestag



**Impact of COVID-19 on forest communities in Thailand:
April 2020 survey results from 30 provinces**

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Cover photograph: Community members of Ban Boon Rueang Wetland Conservation group in their wetland forest, Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai, Thailand, 2020.

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April 2020 survey results from 30 provinces

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Foreword

The coronavirus impacts people from all walks of life. It attacks both rich and poor. But poor and vulnerable communities are far less able to protect themselves from COVID-19 than others and they have the least access to provisions and healthcare. Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups and other vulnerable people, particularly women and youth, are poised to pay a higher price for the pandemic in terms of death, disability and loss of livelihoods and income. This is also true for the other human-made emergency, climate change.

RECOFTC serves these communities in the Asia-Pacific, where more than 450 million people depend on forests to survive. RECOFTC believes in a future where people live equitably and sustainably in and beside healthy, resilient forests. We help communities build their capacity to secure their rights to land and resources, stop deforestation, restore degraded landscapes, overcome poverty and hunger and foster gender equality and social inclusion. Our work lays the foundation for achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.

During the pandemic, we remain fully operational with staff working remotely. We are adapting and improving our projects and programs to continue working safely, efficiently and effectively. We are working closely with governments, donors, civil society and the private sector to ensure that responses to the pandemic and other threats respect the rights, views, wellbeing and aspirations of forest communities.

The survey conducted in Thailand aims to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on forest communities, as well as identify their needs to support them in coping with the crisis. Through this initiative, RECOFTC has strengthened its work to continue to deliver the utmost value to these communities in this most challenging time and beyond.

Warangkana Rattanarat
Director, RECOFTC Thailand

Executive summary

Thailand was the first country outside of China to confirm a case of the novel coronavirus in January 2020.¹ Strict measures were swiftly introduced nationwide to contain the spread of the virus, which has now killed more than 350,000 people globally. But the pandemic is more than just a health crisis. It has significant economic impacts that are affecting everyone but are more seriously felt by poor and vulnerable groups.

In Thailand, COVID-19 has made life harder for these communities, many of which are already facing droughts, stagnant wage growth and rising poverty. Poverty rates had already risen in 2016 and 2018 in Thailand, according to the World Bank.² Now, with large parts of the economy shuttered or slowed because of the crisis, poor families are struggling as incomes vanish.

As part of its response to the pandemic, RECOFTC Thailand conducted an initial survey in April of local communities throughout the country who depend on forests and their products for survival. Many are ethnic and other marginalised groups. They have all been involved in RECOFTC's projects or those of

its partners to strengthen community forestry in Thailand.

The survey showed they have suffered financial and other hardships as a result of the lockdown measures that have closed workplaces and kept people at home. Those interviewed said they faced higher living costs, lost earnings from suspended jobs and other financial difficulties, causing stress and anxiety. Even those in remote highland areas have been impacted, underscoring the reach of the crisis to the far corners of the country. Isolated at home, people said they faced challenges carrying out community forestry work and staying connected to their community networks. Forced to rely heavily on mobile internet rather than face to face contact, they have struggled with unstable connections and unaffordable service costs.

RECOFTC has used the survey results to strengthen strategies to support forest communities in coping with the pandemic. The organisation, with more than 30 years of experience in fostering community forestry in the region, will continue to evolve its operations during the crisis to effectively work to improve lives and landscapes.



Santisuk District, Nan Province, Thailand 2019.

Survey aim and methodology

The rapid assessment survey aims to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on communities in Thailand. The local people surveyed live in and near forest areas and are working with RECOFTC and its partners on strengthening community forestry management. The survey results are assisting RECOFTC Thailand to adapt its programs to ensure it delivers the utmost value in this challenging time.

Conducted across Thailand in April, the survey collected information online and over the phone from 100 local forest users.³ Many of those who took part are small-scale farmers, while others have sustainable, forest-based enterprises.

They were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their lives and those of their families, following workplace closures and other strict lockdown measures introduced nationwide to contain the virus. They were also asked about their capacity to cope with the crisis, given the loss of income facing many communities, and lack of access to their forests during the shutdown.

They ranked the barriers they faced trying to carry out work and community forestry management during the crisis. Lack of access to the internet for example was the main obstacle that prevented them taking part in meetings and consultations now carried out online instead of in person.

Men and women were surveyed, with 59.60 percent of respondents male and 40.40 percent female. Most of those who took part were aged 41-50 years (43 percent), while the youngest age group was 21-30 years (3 percent) and the oldest group was aged over 60 years (11 percent).

The survey questioned people from 30 provinces across Thailand's five regions: Ten provinces in the North, seven in the Northeast, five in the Central, four in the East, and four in the South. Ethnic groups made up about 23 percent of the total number surveyed. The Lua people (19 percent) constituted the largest ethnic group, while members of the Hmong people and the different Karen people (Sgaw, Pwo and sub-ethnic groups) were also represented.

All of the respondents are working with RECOFTC or its partners on community forestry projects throughout Thailand. Some 40.8 percent are involved in the CF-NET project that empowers community forestry networks towards improved forest governance mechanisms. Another

26.9 percent are working with RECOFTC on the European Union's initiative called the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan. Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) aims to reduce illegal logging by promoting sustainable and legal forest management, and promoting trade in legally produced timber. Another 11.5 percent are taking part in FLOURISH, a project that aims to combat climate change through market-driven forest landscape restoration in Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. Some 16.2 percent are involved in Voices for Mekong Forests (V4MF). Funded by the European Union, V4MF is strengthening the role of civil society, Indigenous Peoples, private sector and local community groups in forest governance in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. Almost five percent were involved in other projects, while 17.7 percent were involved in more than one RECOFTC project.

Survey results on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Forest users were asked to rank the pandemic's impact on their lives and those of their families. The overall score given was 3.47 out of a possible 5, showing a high degree of impact.

Asked to rank the problems they are facing, most cited a range of financial pressures that was making life more difficult especially for poorer and more vulnerable communities. Increased expenses such as living costs was number one, scoring 3.23 points out of 5. Stress and anxiety, including about their financial futures, was the second biggest impact, scoring 3.18 points out of 5.

Loss and suspension of work and therefore income was ranked third at 3.07 points, as many faced shuttered workplaces and closed off environments in strict lockdown measures to contain the virus. Health problems for themselves or family members was fourth, with 2.81 points. Inability to access local forests, to harvest crops and forest products and undertake community forestry management, was fifth, with 2.78 points.

Despite the impacts, many remained positive about their capacity to cope with the crisis. Asked to rank their ability to handle the current situation they were facing—from lowest to highest on a scale from 1 to 5—they scored themselves 3.80 out of a possible 5.

Impacts on men and women

Men and women were generally aligned about the overall impact of the crisis on their lives, with men feeling slightly more affected at 3.49 than women at 3.45, with 5 as the highest. Men were slightly more positive about their ability to cope with the crisis at 3.93, while women were less optimistic at 3.60 points.

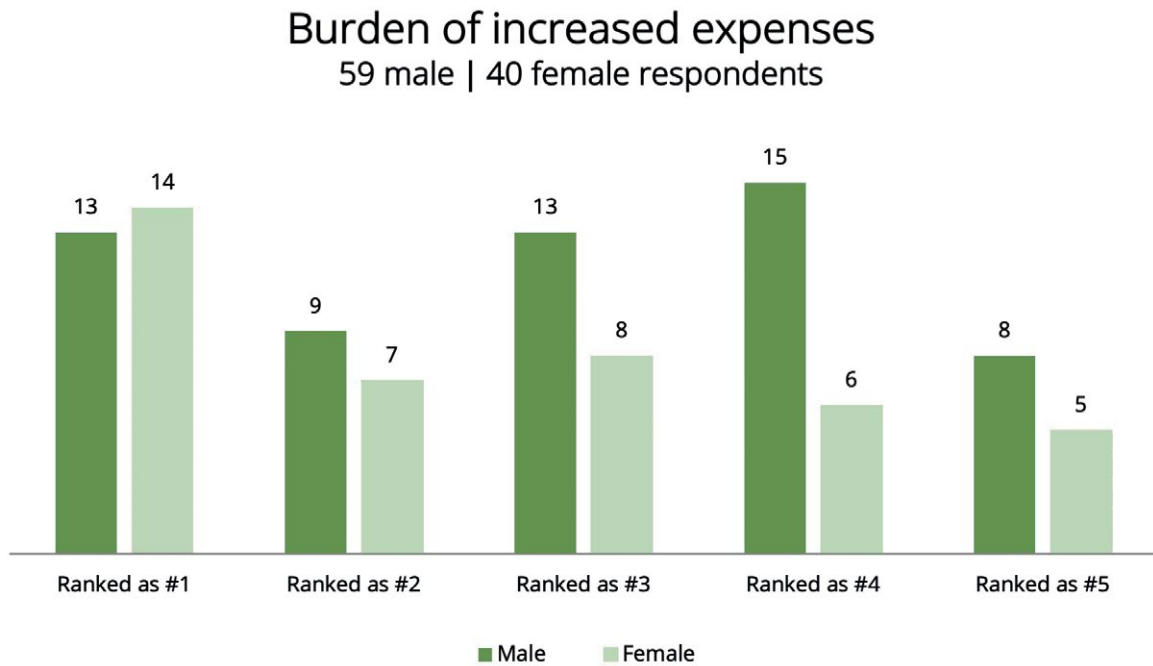
Women, however, ranked the burden of increased living costs higher than men by 13 percent, likely because they manage their household budget and daily expenses such as food purchases for their families. Men ranked stress and anxiety higher than women by 10 percent, perhaps because they are considered the main breadwinners in many households.

Women ranked loss or suspension of work almost nine percent higher than men. With large parts of the economy slowed by the crisis, women may fear they will be unfairly targeted for layoffs in an already competitive labour market.

Gender inequalities persist in Thailand, although the country has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, its Optional Protocol in 2000, and endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thailand is heading in the right direction but women earned 16 percent less than men in 2013, according to data from the World Bank.⁴

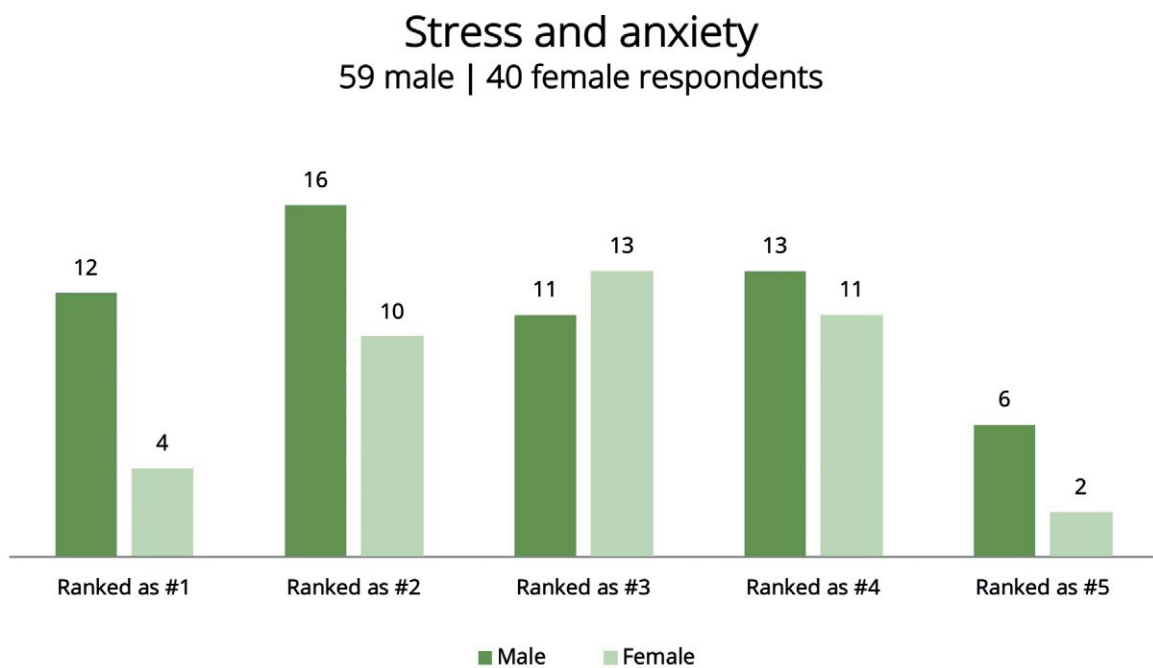
Both men and women gave similar rankings for health problems, and for access to forests for harvesting crops and gathering products.

Figure 2. Men and women rank “burden of increased expenses” as an impact of COVID-19

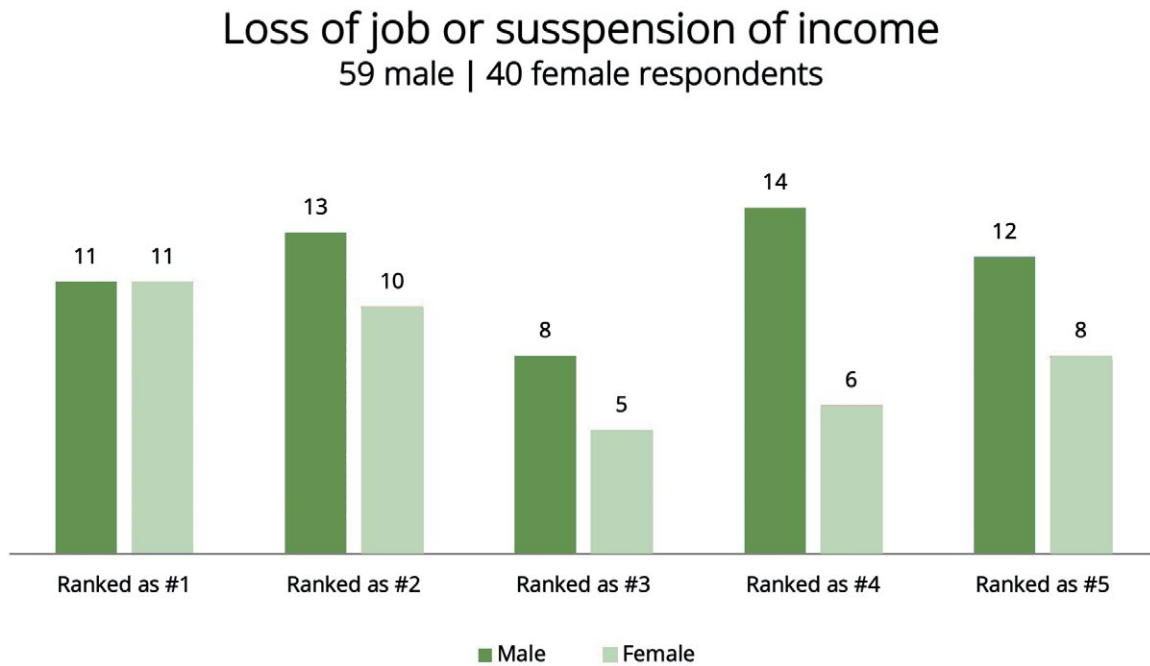


Source: RECOFTC 2020

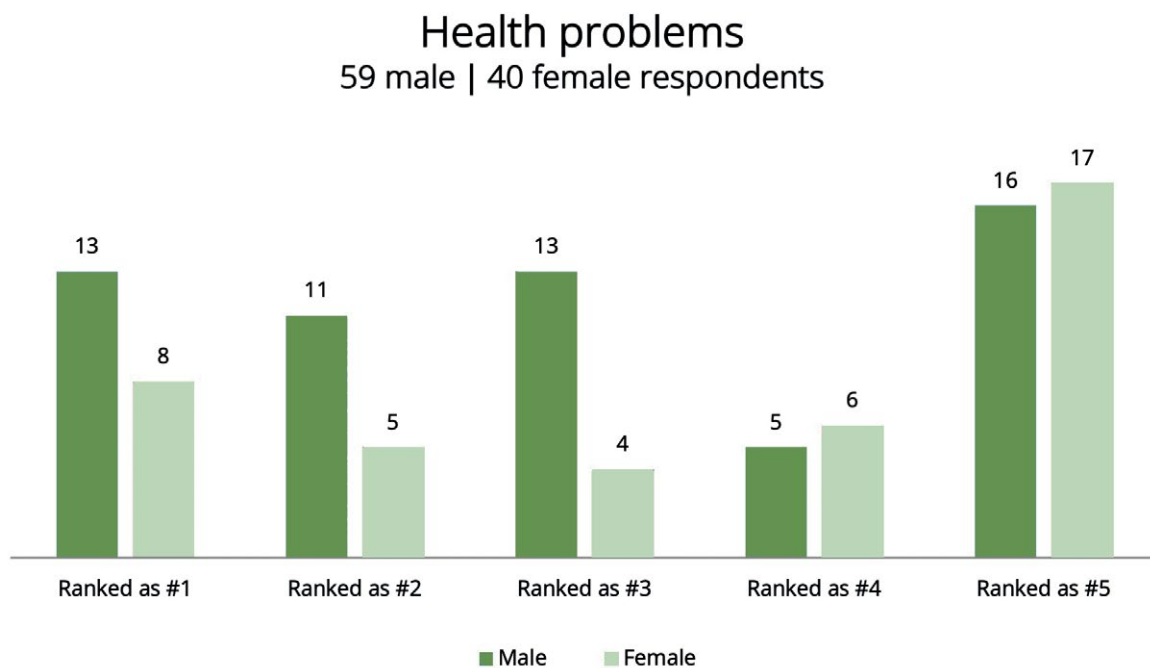
Figure 3. Men and women rank “stress and anxiety” as an impact of COVID-19



Source: RECOFTC 2020

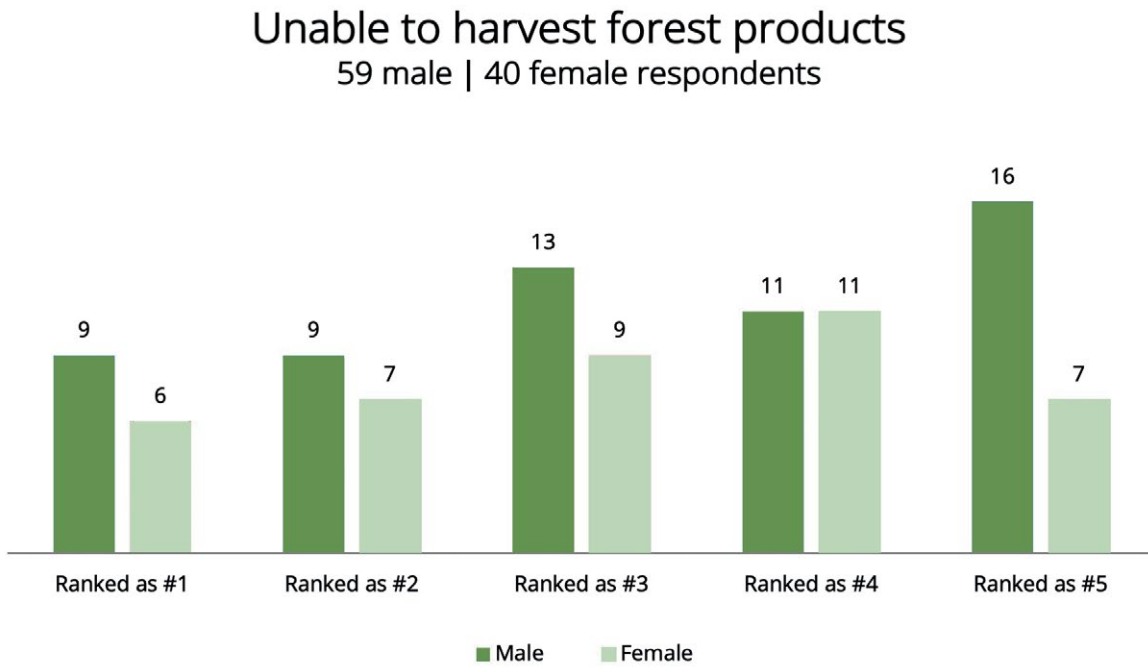
Figure 4. Men and women rank “loss/suspension of job, loss of income” as an impact of COVID-19

Source: RECOFTC 2020

Figure 5. Men and women rank “health problems” as an impact of COVID-19

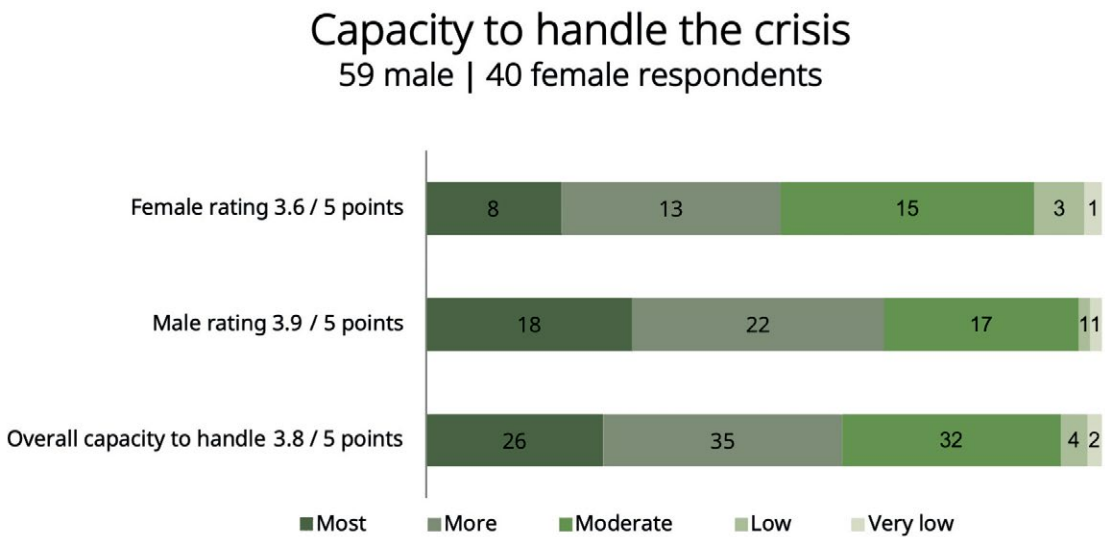
Source: RECOFTC 2020

Figure 6. Men and women rank “unable to harvest forest products” as an impact of COVID-19



Source: RECOFTC 2020

Figure 7. Forest users rated their capacity to handle the crisis, with 5 points the highest



Source: RECOFTC 2020

Barriers to undertaking community forestry work

Local people face barriers as they try to continue their community forestry work during the crisis. With workplaces closed and physical gatherings banned, they are forced to rely more heavily on the internet for meetings and to stay connected. But these communities, poor and some living in remote areas, are often unable to use such technology because of unstable connections and the high cost of accessing it. Some also lack knowledge about the online tools available.

Asked to rank obstacles to undertaking community forestry and other work, they cited inability to access the internet as the biggest barrier, with 3.31 points out of 5. Lack of online communication tools was second, with 3.07 points, while unable to receive news and updates from community forestry networks was third at 2.98 points. Inability to conduct or attend community forestry activities was fourth at 2.93 points, although women ranked this significantly higher than men. With lockdown restrictions still in place, some were also unable to undertake monitoring and surveying of forests, which was ranked fifth at 2.69 points.

Poor internet coverage was the most pressing issue for those facing technical and infrastructure problems. Although many forest users own smartphones, they are often only used for basic communication. Now forced to rely on mobile internet to undertake meetings and other work during the crisis, 61.6 percent said they were struggling with an unstable signal.

Half of those surveyed cited high service charges for 3G and 4G networks as an issue. Lack of knowledge about online meetings and other related tools was ranked third at 24.2 percent. Nearly 20 percent said they didn't have any signal. Moreover, 37.4 percent faced more than two problems at the same time.

The results raise concerns about the ability of local people to stay connected with their community forestry networks and to carry out projects, as the months-long crisis continues. The results raise particular concerns for communities living in remote and highland regions, and underscore the pervasive nature of the crisis.

Changing approaches to work

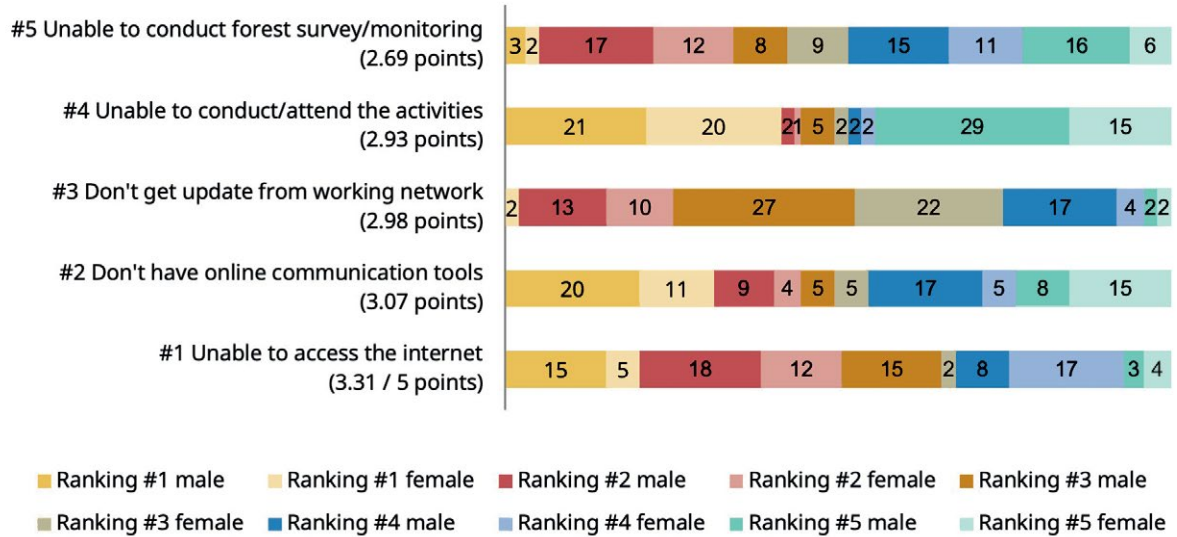
Many communities are adapting their way of working in response to lockdown restrictions and to ensure health and safety. Almost 70 percent said they were suspending project work and assessing the situation carefully. Almost 60

percent said they were adjusting work plans and projects, while almost half said they were changing to online meetings. Forty percent cited a switch to small group meetings. Another 13 percent said they were cancelling plans or projects. More than 35 percent were planning multiple or integrated approaches.

With so many projects suspended, there is a risk that communities will be pushed into precarious jobs in order to continue to provide for their families. Half of Thai savings accounts have a balance below 3,124 Thai Baht (less than US\$100) and one third have a balance below 500 Thai Baht (US\$15), according to the Puey Ungphakorn Institute for Economic Research (Pier).⁵

Figure 8. Forest users ranked problems carrying out community forestry work. Number one was unable to access the internet

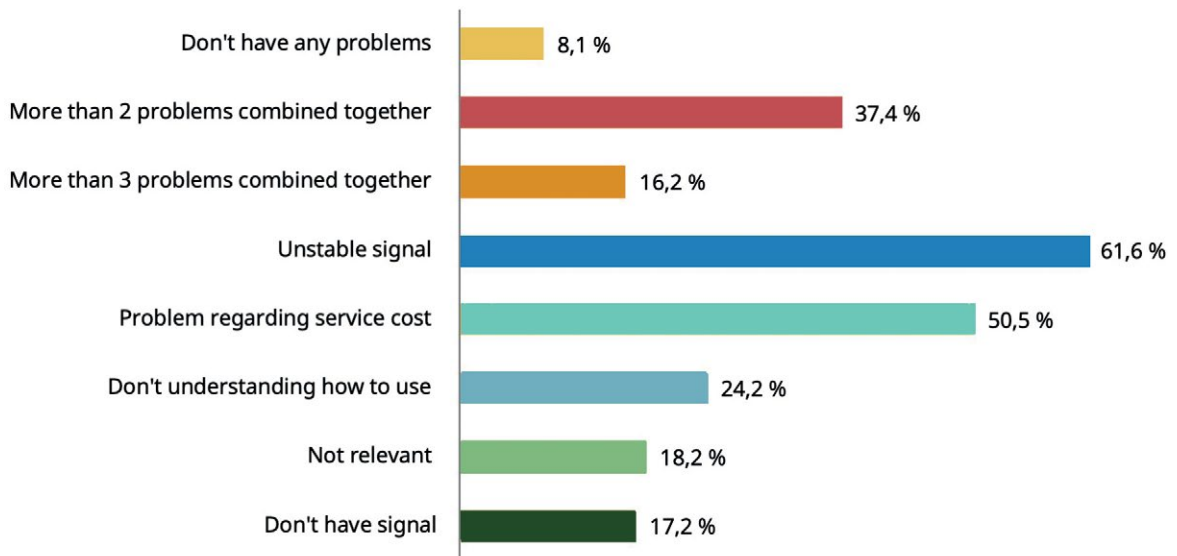
Obstacles to carrying out community forest related work



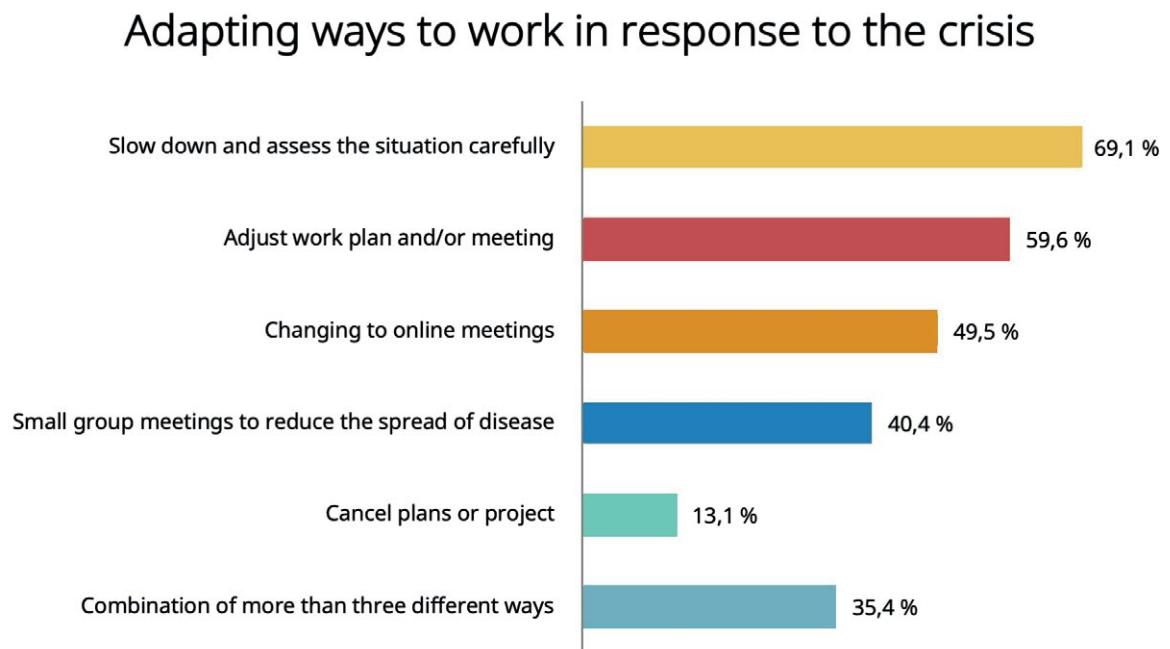
Source: RECOFTC 2020

Figure 9. Forest users ranked their technology and infrastructure problems for work

Infrastructure and technology problems to conduct work



Source: RECOFTC 2020

Figure 10. Forest users are adapting their way of working in response to the crisis

Source: RECOFTC 2020

Recommendations

Thai communities living in and near forests face many financial and other hardships. They also fear poor internet access will hinder meaningful participation with the government about decisions that concern their future and the future of their forest at a critical time. Laws affecting their use of forests that they depend on are currently under consultation and review.

Although accessing the internet is a problem communities face during the COVID-19 emergency, so too is a lack of knowledge and skills about using online communication tools. RECOFTC should therefore work with communities to determine how best to communicate and collaborate remotely using accessible technologies. While internet connectivity and technology access will continue to be a challenge, RECOFTC can provide remote training to communities on how to use online collaboration and communication tools such as Skype, Zoom and Google Hangout.

“The findings helped us to consider actions to support local people and our network members, including providing training on using online meeting tools and communicating with relevant government agencies about the challenges facing forest users in accessing information online.”

Warangkana Rattanasat, Director, RECOFTC Thailand

The lockdown restrictions also raise concerns that locals will not be able to complete ground surveys required for management plans, ahead of a government deadline of 22 July 2020 as part of the National Parks Act and the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act of 2019. Many organisations and networks have sent letters expressing their concerns and have asked for an extension because the survey and plans are mandatory for government approval of community forestry areas.

While the government held a virtual public hearing in April, many people in forest areas with limited connectivity were not able to access the internet and share their opinions. There are almost 4,000 households in national park areas in Thailand that could be facing this challenge during the crisis. Thailand's Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation has said it will organize other kinds of consultations besides online methods to gain more opinions from different sectors about the National Parks Act and Wildlife Protection Act.

In addition to the digital divide that puts forest communities at a disadvantage, gender inequities could increase because of the pandemic. Gender discrimination could be a reason why female

respondents of the survey indicated lower optimism in coping with the crisis.

Communities have requested that RECOFTC more frequently communicate with them during the COVID-19 emergency, not only to provide updates about the pandemic but also on project and community forestry network information. RECOFTC already has many existing online communication channels, such as LINE chat groups, and will look to expand these to share more regular updates.

This initial survey is the first among many actions that RECOFTC plans to undertake to deepen understanding of the impact of the crisis on forestry communities. The survey will strengthen RECOFTC's efforts to support communities as they endeavour to continue their forestry management, networking and communication under lockdown and during the COVID-19 crisis. RECOFTC plans to conduct additional surveys and continues to monitor developments closely. It is maintaining close connections with local communities living in and near forests in the challenging times ahead.

Endnotes

- ¹ COVID-19 Thailand. Open Development Thailand. 16 May, 2020.
<https://thailand.opendevelopmentmekong.net/topics/pandemics-covid-19/>
- ² Taking the Pulse of Poverty and Inequality in Thailand. World Bank. March 5, 2020.
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/publication/taking-the-pulse-of-poverty-and-inequality-in-thailand>
- ³ A hundred interviews were conducted but one was considered unsuccessful and discarded.
- ⁴ Getting Back on Track: Reviving Growth and Securing Prosperity for All, World Bank, 7 November 2016, pp. 80.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/855161479736248522/pdf/110396-REVISED-v1-4-26-WB-TH-SCD-REPORT-BOOKLET-159PAGE-RevisedApr26.pdf>
- ⁵ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1820999/bot-thai-deposits-woefully-meagre>.

Annex 1: Survey questionnaire

Letter to the survey respondents

Dear Community Forestry Network coordinator, Community Forestry Network members, and related parties.

This survey is conducted by RECOFTC Thailand. It aims to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on you and your Community Forestry Network regarding work in “Community Forest Management” areas. We will use the survey results to adapt our projects in order to continue our work together during the pandemic.

Therefore, your opinion is valuable and important in helping us to overcome any obstacles together during this time. RECOFTC sincerely hopes for your cooperation in answering the survey quickly and honestly for the benefit of all. RECOFTC Thailand and RECOFTC appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

Best regards,
RECOFTC Thailand.

Please respond to the survey by 13 April 2020.

Demographic data of the respondents

- (Multiple Choices) Gender
- (Multiple Choices) Age range
- (Open-ended question) The district where you live
- (Open-ended question) The province where you live
- (Open-ended question) The community forest you are involved with (manage, use, work)
- (Checkboxes) Which RECOFTC projects are you involved in?

Information on the impact of the COVID-19 situation

How are you and your family affected by the COVID-19 situation?

Rank the options below from most (1st) to least (5th), and please rank all options:

- (A) Health problems of you or your family members
- (B) Burden from increased expenses

- (C) Terminated or suspended from your job, or reduced income
- (D) Unable to collect forest items (edible plants, etc.)
- (E) Stress and anxiety

Have you and your family been affected by issues other than those listed in the previous question? Please provide additional information.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, what obstacles are you facing related to carrying out your work and community forestry management?

Rank the obstacles below from most (1st) to least (5th), and please rank all options:

- (A) Cannot organize or participate in activities
- (B) No online communication tools
- (C) Unable to access the internet
- (D) Unable to conduct CF data collection
- (E) Not receiving update from the CF Network and members

Are there any other obstacles related to work/management which are not listed in the previous question? Please provide additional information.

In general, how much has your work and your CF Network been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

(Likert scale rating 1 to 5, least to most).

In general, how much do you think you and/or your network can handle the difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic?

(Likert scale rating 1 to 5, least to most).

What communication tools can you access and use?

There are 3 options: less accessible, moderately accessible, most accessible:

- (A) Basic mobile phone (not a smartphone)
- (B) Smartphone that can connect to the internet
- (C) Computer with internet access
- (D) Private internet (at home)
- (E) Public internet (e.g. at community hall, school, etc.)

What basic infrastructure and technology do you use for your work?

There are 3 options: less use, moderate use, most use:

- (A) Use a mobile phone for basic conversations and coordination
- (B) Use mobile phones for official meetings through various applications including accessing the internet and working online
- (C) Use the home-based internet for official meetings through various applications including accessing the internet and working online
- (D) Public internet for official meetings through various applications including accessing the internet and working online
- (E) Use courier service (such as FedEx, Kerry, etc.) to send important work documents

How much problem are you experiencing with infrastructure and technology (listed below) for work?

There are 3 options: few problems, moderate problems, tons of problems:

- (A) Using a mobile phone for basic conversations and coordination
- (B) Using a mobile phone for official meetings through various applications including accessing the internet and working online
- (C) Using home-based internet for official meetings through various applications including accessing the internet and working online
- (D) Using public internet for official meetings through various applications including accessing the internet and working online
- (E) Using courier service (such as FedEx, Kerry, etc.) to send important work documents

What type of problems/obstacles are you facing regarding infrastructure and technology for your work?

- (A) No signal
- (B) Unstable signal
- (C) Cost issues
- (D) Do not understand how to use
- (E) People you have to work with aren't interested in using these tools for work

In general, how do you rate your infrastructure and technology readiness?

(Likert scale rating 1 to 5, least to most).

What are your plans for adapting your work and management given the current situation?

- (A) Suspend activities and assess the situation
- (B) Call a team meeting to adjust our work plan together
- (C) Adapt by organizing small group meetings to adhere to social distancing
- (D) Adapt by organizing meetings online
- (E) Cancel plan or project

Do you have any suggestions for the CF Network and its members to manage their work more efficiently in the current situation?

Do you have any suggestions for RECOFTC to manage its work more efficiently in the current situation?



At RECOFTC, we believe in a future where people live equitably and sustainably in and beside healthy, resilient forests. We take a long-term, landscape-based and inclusive approach to supporting local communities to secure their land and resource rights, stop deforestation, find alternative livelihoods and foster gender equity. We are the only non-profit organization of our kind in Asia and the Pacific. We have more than 30 years of experience working with people and forests, and have built trusting relationships with partners at all levels. Our influence and partnerships extend from multilateral institutions to governments, private sector and local communities. Our innovations, knowledge and initiatives enable countries to foster good forest governance, mitigate and adapt to climate change, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda.



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