

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to Myanmar

Myanmar is a small country located between 9° 58' and 28° 29' N and 92° 10' and 101° 10E. It has a total land area of 676,577 sq.km. and a population of 46.4 million (69 people per sq.km.).

The country can be loosely divided into three main areas, the coastal regions, the central dry zone, and the northern mountains. The elevation of the land surface ranges from sea level along the coastal lines to about 6,000 masl in the mountains of the north.

Forests cover some 51 per cent of the total land area (16% reserved forest, 35% 'other forest area'). This figure includes both closed and degraded forests. Myanmar is known to have about 7,000 plant species, of which 1,071 are endemic. The recorded species in the natural forests include 1,347 species of big trees, 741 species of small trees, 96 species of bamboo, 1,696 species of shrubs, 36 species of rattan, and 841 species of orchid. The forests contain an estimated 2.2 billion cubic metres of standing growth stock of timber.

1.2 Forest Resources

Forest products are life-support resources for all of us on this planet. Thus ensuring long-term utilisation and stability of forest resources with minimal environmental degradation is of paramount importance for a nation's economy and its people's livelihood. However, these resources are dwindling at a rapid rate as a

result of ecologically unstable farming practices, increasing population, and ever-rising demand for forest lands and products. The failure of custodial state-adopted measures to protect and manage natural resources has lent urgency to the search for alternative development strategies and has led to the emergence of people-centred participatory management of resources. The participatory aspect of integrated forest resource management has proved to be an approach with significant potential for addressing problems and issues related to natural resources' depletion in different parts of the world, in general, and in tropical areas of Asia in particular.

Myanmar is a country endowed with a great wealth of forests and other natural resources. In Myanmar, the people-centred approach is mainly practised in three areas: watershed areas, dry zone areas, and mangrove areas. The Myanmar Forest Department (MFD) is facing new challenges emerging out of changes in policy and practice. This paper highlights the implications for policy and human resource development, which are the two areas most crucial to the successful implementation of the approach.

Traditionally, in most parts of Myanmar, a close relationship exists between farming communities and forests. About 78 per cent of the population of Myanmar are rural, and they rely on forests for many of their subsistence needs. Farmers are dependent on forest resources for their household food security and environmental stability around their farms. As a strategy for

survival, communities in different parts of Myanmar have developed diverse sets of traditional rights and indigenous management systems to manage and use natural resources.

In recent years, uncontrolled use of natural resources has been reported in several parts of Myanmar mainly as a result of population growth. Food security is being threatened in once environmentally stable villages, and the production base of natural resources is deteriorating rapidly. Demands for forest products are increasing in line with accelerated population growth. As a result, forest degradation around villages is accelerating, and this is contributing further to environmental degradation.

While it might be possible to arrest forest degradation and to ensure supplies of forest products to communities through a massive government-funded programme, this would be very expensive and would require a large forestry administration to manage the forest resources effectively. At present, there are some resource constraints as a result of the Government's other overriding development priorities. The present forest service is already over-stretched and it does not have the capacity to intervene with a massive government-funded programme. Therefore, it has become imperative that participatory forest management is implemented by the small forestry administration.