

# Advances in Community Forestry in Asia

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## Abstract

*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 system. In other locations, local communities are being seen as legitimate partners for the effective management of forest resources that, 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 user groups, whereas, in Vietnam, forestland is allocated to individual households\*. On the other hand, in Thailand, many community forestry initiatives are happening on the ground without any national framework to legitimise these local efforts. In contrast, the legal framework for community forestry is widely recognised in the Philippines, but it has yet to be translated into a reality that benefits local communities. 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 carried out jointly at the regional level rather than at the individual country level.*

*The most common problems are lack of sustainable and intensive forest management, livelihoods, governance, and institutional and role of stakeholders' issues. The vision of the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) is for local communities in the Asia-Pacific region to become 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 about community forestry and poverty linkages and based on current international commitments to reach the poor.*

*The linkage 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 achieve positive outcomes on a global scale.*

## Community forestry explained

Community forestry as a term means different things to different people, depending upon their background and experiences. The Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific (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,

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

conservation of biodiversity and environment, and 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).

It is an evolving concept which has persisted in natural resource management programming for almost thirty years. Its persistence lies fundamentally in its value as a concept and set of approaches for conservation and 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.

- 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.
- Recognition of the classical role of foresters in the protection and management of the national forest estate, and 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 non-government organisation (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 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, while community forestry has been able to provide significant benefits to communities in many countries, it has not been able to scale up the localised benefits to the poorest of poor people. There is, however, great potential for community forestry to deliver poverty-related outcomes, to scale up approaches for the poorest and, therefore, wide 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 analyse 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 for redressing widespread forest loss and the consequent environmental degradation and negative impact on rural livelihoods (Gilmour et al.2004).

The first 10-15 years of efforts to implement community forestry in countries such as India, Nepal, and the Philippines were spent in developing, testing, and institutionalising approaches aimed at involving rural communities in the active protection and management of forests in an effective manner. 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 been placed on the national agenda only during the past decade. Use of the rehabilitated and regenerated community forests in India and Nepal only commenced during the past decade and in other countries in the region it is barely being considered (Gilmour et al.).

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 it is still in its formative stages. Box 1 provides a summary of the status of community forestry in selected countries in Asia.

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 system. In other locations, local communities are being seen as legitimate partners for the effective management of forest resources that 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 (however a new forestry law will come into effect from April 2005 that will enable forest management through communities). On the other hand, in Thailand, many community forestry initiatives are happening on the ground without any national framework to legitimise these local efforts. In contrast, the legal framework for community forestry is widely recognised in the Philippines, but it has 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 joint forest management committees managing 17 million ha of forest in 27 states, management is plantation rather than natural forest centred and protection oriented. There are green felling bans in many states and restrictions on communities for harvesting 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 programme is aimed at replanting bare areas and on private forestry, although the country already has 72% forest cover.

### Box 1. The Status of Community Forestry with the Asian Protagonists (RECOFTC 2004)

**Nepal: Community Forestry (CF)** – Since 1980 about 1.1 million ha of forest have been handed over to nearly 14,000 community forest user groups (CFUGs). About 1.2 million households are involved. Forests are handed over to FUGs after application to the Forestry Department and joint completion of a management plan. Supportive policies and legislation for community forestry have been adopted. About 25% of the national forest is now managed by more than 35% 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 the community varies from 25-50% – in return for peoples' inputs of labour and time. Policy and laws strengthening the role and rights of communities in forest management and use support these programmes. Extensive re-training in JFM is given to forestry officials.

**Bhutan: Social Forestry** – The Royal Government of Bhutan has been supporting social forestry in the nation since 1979 when His Majesty the King commanded the Department of Forestry to prepare a scheme on social forestry 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 social forestry. The scheme has been implemented on a cautious pilot basis, with a small number of management plans covering mostly plantations and one natural forest site (Yakpugang, in the east).

**Cambodia: Community Forestry (CF)** – Community forestry 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 hectares of timber concession have been cancelled, allowing for alternative forms of management.

**Vietnam: Community Forestry (CF)** – Community forestry has been practised on a pilot scale and its status is recognised. 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 community forestry.

**Lao PDR: Village Forestry** – The government thrusts are to control logging and settle shifting cultivation through decentralisation and partnerships with villages. One hundred and eighty-seven thousand families (30% of the population) still depended on shifting cultivation in the mid 1990s, and it remains a key and complex issue in rural villages. The forest land allocation process provides an entry point for community forestry through village authorities. The 1996 Forest Law provides a legal framework for the non-timber forest product (NTFP) sub-sector to enable rural families 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 community forestry, as early attempts through projects were curtailed.

**Thailand: Community Forestry** – Over 8,000 village groups are de facto managing forestland in protected areas. Furthermore, the Decentralisation Act and the revised Constitution (2000) provide authority to local authorities and village councils for community management of other natural resources.

**China: Collective Forest Management** – Townships, administrative villages, and village household groups under collective forest management account for three-fifths of China's total forest area of 153 million hectares; much of which is concentrated in Yunnan, Sichuan, and 10 southern provinces. There are indigenous management systems in many ethnic minority areas. Extensive reforestation and plantation establishment have taken place.

**The Philippines: Community-based Forest Management** – Social forestry started in the mid-970s. Community-based forest management is a national strategy for management and conservation of forest resources. There are now 4,956 social forestry 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 organisations involving 496,165 households. Management of forests is transferred to these organisations after application is approved and an agreement is issued. They prepare a community resource management framework for their forest. Policies, rules, and regulations to support the practice are in place. A pending Act will institutionalise community-based forest management and strengthen the rights of communities to manage forests.

- **China** – Although 60% of forestland (150 million ha) is 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. Decentralising responsibility to local governments without devolving rights and management to users or user groups is likely to lead to conflicts, especially if the benefits are not shared by local communities.
- **Thailand** – Village groups are managing forestland officially classified as protected areas where use is legally prohibited. Local authorities have allowed neighbouring communities limited access and use in the absence of a national-level community forest policy framework.
- **Philippines** – Although five 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.
- **Nepal** – Even in the regional success story all is not well. The recognition of forest user groups as autonomous managers of forest resources has been the basis for the establishment of over 12,000 forest user groups managing more than one million ha of forest in less than a decade, with more than 75% 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 forest user groups function effectively and manage the resources actively and equitably, while in the remaining three-quarters, 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 in which the battle over contested resources has been decided in favour 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 will become 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 about community forestry and poverty linkages and based on current international commitments to reach the poor.

The linkage 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 significant potential for community forestry to achieve 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 carried out 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 (RECOFTC 2004).

- (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) **Analysing 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 commercialisation?
- (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 practices to support livelihood improvements at commercial and subsistence levels for the poorest?

To implement a strategy to solve 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 development of projects with long time horizons (20 years plus) and graduated measurable milestones that measure 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 come a long way to become a part of 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 a difference in the management of the forest sector as a whole and other natural resource management and rural development sectors has yet to be widely recognised. For this, there is a need to make a deliberate, systematic effort to recognise more widely the importance of community forestry both within and beyond the forest sector, so that successful approaches can be scaled up and have a regional impact on the poorest people. This workshop offers such an opportunity.

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