

# MMSEA overview and profile



At the beginning of the workshop, a set of overview presentations and area profiles helped to set the stage by highlighting critical dimensions and perspectives within MMSEA.

## Spatial Overview and Macro-Micro Linkages

Dr David Thomas, of ICRAF-Chiang Mai, presented a spatial overview including characteristics of the MMSEA domain, and introduced the relevance of and linkages between the three workshop themes of land use change; local livelihoods, markets, and trade; and resource governance.

As mentioned above, the MMSEA domain is defined as areas that are between 0.3 to 3 km above sea level and located within a river basin that overlaps with at least one nation state of mainland Southeast Asia. These areas have distinct characteristics that differentiate them from the lowland areas, which contain the majority of the region's population, both urban and rural.

The major characteristics of the MMSEA region include decreasing forest cover, increasing population, high incidence of poverty, and in some areas, shifting cultivation. Government policies, population growth, opium crop substitution, and economic development are the main drivers of land use change within MMSEA.

In most of northern Thailand, shifting cultivation has been transformed into permanent agricultural fields. The agro-biodiversity of MMSEA's mosaic landscapes often includes forest and 'forest-like' niches developed and managed by local farmers and communities. Roads are seen as providing new market opportunities. There is a growing consensus across MMSEA that local institutions are best placed to manage resources to meet local needs and build on local knowledge.

Stakeholders, from local to downstream to global levels, also want assurance that their needs will be met. The challenge is how to promote localised management of natural resources in the major basins and nations of MMSEA. In doing so, the following questions need to be addressed:

- What natural resource management decisions are most appropriate at each level?
- Which stakeholders play a role at each level?
- How can each level be more effective and equitable?



**Interview with shifting cultivators in the upland watersheds of Chiang Mai**

## **Community-based Perspectives and Issues in MMSEA**

In his presentation, Professor Xu focused on community-based perspectives and issues, and highlighted cultural perceptions of landscapes, land use practices, natural resource management, and local institutional arrangements in MMSEA.

Within communities there is much variation in local knowledge, interests, livelihood strategies, demographics, networks with which they interact, and the nature of their interaction with ecosystems. The political approaches used to interpret, identify, and define 'community', land use, and cultural identity also determine the relationships between people and nature. For example, in many countries large sections of the population are not recognised legally as citizens; similarly areas that have been used for agriculture for generations, but in the form of shifting cultivation, are defined as protected 'forestland'.

Peripheral people and communities are connected and linked to political centres and to market places in various ways – both visible and invisible. In the past, caravans served extensively as market structures and formed a socio-cultural network among mountain, lowland, and even urban communities. Factors related to economic development such as road construction, market development and related policies are the major drivers of land use change and changes in interactions within ecosystems and socio-cultural networks.

The great challenges brought forth by climate change and economic globalisation call for new institutional arrangements to ensure more equitable power relationships and partnerships between local communities, state and non-state actors (particularly the private sector), as well as non-government organisations (NGOs).

One key to ensuring community participation is to develop community-based science. This requires the participation of research professionals, development practitioners, and local NGOs in supporting local communities to develop their local knowledge, practices and innovations to adopt and adapt to global influences in order to improve their own livelihoods. However, local people must base such development on their own culture and identity. This process includes appreciating local knowledge; strengthening common property rights and collective actions; rewarding communities; negotiating new power relationships between the community and other (state and non-state) institutions; and representation of the community in decision-making.

## Area Profiles: Yunnan, Northern Laos and Northern Thailand

Brief profiles were presented on Yunnan (by Ms Su Yufang), northern Laos (by Mr Houmchitsavath Sodarak), and northern Thailand (by Ms Pornwilai Saipothong) to introduce the participants to the areas through which the mobile workshop would traverse.

### Yunnan

Yunnan is the 'roof' of MMSEA, and has a very diverse geography and landscape along with different ethnic groups and resource users. It is rich in water resources, ethnic and cultural diversity. Most of the land use types in Yunnan are forest categories, and there are many government policies and programmes in place. Local livelihood activities include intensive agriculture, cash crop plantation, upland farming (e.g., shifting cultivation), terraced paddy farming, rangeland and grazing, as well as tourism, which is very important for the provincial economy. There is a lot of ongoing trade with neighbouring countries.

The following points were clarified during the discussions:

- 74% of the forest land is collectively owned and 26% is state-owned
- local communities contribute to biodiversity protection at the village level
- commodities such as NTFPs are traded between Laos and Yunnan

### Northern Laos

The northern portion of Laos is characterised by mountainous terrain, difficult road access, low population density, high-ethnic diversity, and swidden-based production systems. Most of the land is covered by forests, which are largely secondary vegetation.

Major development strategies adopted for this area are

- transformation from 'land-locked' to 'land-linked';
- transformation from subsistence-based natural economy to commercial production/market economy; and
- development of physical infrastructure such as economic corridors and institutional foundations such as laws on trade and commerce.

The Lao team worked hard to collect land use data for the workshop. There were queries on the general understanding of the Lao policy regarding shifting cultivation. It was understood that the policy is intended to eventually stop shifting cultivation and replace it with more ecologically and economically sustainable alternatives.

## Northern Thailand

Many minority groups exist in northern Thailand, mainly as a result of migration from neighbouring countries. Two major changes are visible in cultivation practices; firstly, opium cultivation has been largely replaced by other forms of cultivation; and secondly, there is a transition happening from shifting cultivation to permanent agriculture.

Conflicts between upland and lowland communities have become a hot issue in this area. Logging is effectively banned in Thailand. This ban together with watershed conservation, were imposed by the government. The major problem faced by communities is water use for agriculture, especially in the dry season.

Participants were briefed about the field visits in northern Thailand to the highland zone of the Mae Chaem watershed and sites in the lowland area in Chiang Mai valley.

## Transboundary Perspectives and Issues in MMSEA

Based on his own experiences working in Yunnan and northern Laos, Professor Chen Jin of XBTG presented some pertinent transboundary perspectives and issues.

The China-Laos-Vietnam transboundary area has eight national protected areas, which in total cover more than one million hectares. There are many problems associated with biodiversity conservation in the border areas. These include market-oriented deforestation, wildlife trade, conflict between conservation and development, and different policy frameworks in bordering countries.

Despite these problems great opportunities also exist as a result of the similar political systems, improved accessibility, similarities in natural and cultural environments, increasing environmental concern, and resource complementarity.



Checkpoint at the border between Laos and China



**Participatory mapping by Laotian farmers**

Cross-border visits between farmers, technicians and local officials in Laos and China have proved to be the most effective approach for capacity building in conservation and development. The Great Green Triangle Plan (including Xishuangbanna, northern Laos and northwest Vietnam) has been developed to integrate conservation with development, as well as to emphasise the participation of the people.

Professor Chen Jin concluded by mentioning the following points:

- working together we can make a difference
- when conservation brings direct benefits, then local people will be motivated to conserve
- transboundary farmer-to-farmer training is promising, and practical co-management of protected areas is not just a strategy, but a basic philosophy

