

# Community Forestry and REDD+ in Asia: Lessons Learned and Ways Forward Issues Brief



## Introduction

Given concerns about deforestation and hopes that efforts to better manage forests can contribute to climate change mitigation, what can we learn from experience with community forestry?

With considerable effort now being devoted to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+)<sup>1</sup>, it is timely to assess key lessons from decades of community forestry. REDD+ proponents do not need to “start from zero,” and “reinvent the wheel,” but can build on valuable experience and existing systems.

The Forest Carbon, Markets and Communities (FCMC) Program commissioned a series of four reports – three regional and one global synthesis – on *Lessons Learned from Community Forestry and their Relevance for REDD+*. This Issues Brief summarizes key points from the report on Asia.

**The Asia-Pacific Region is characterized by great cultural diversity, great diversity of forest types and diverse approaches to community forestry.** Several countries have large areas of remaining tropical forests, making them particularly relevant to REDD+. Notable among them are Indonesia (especially Sumatra and Borneo, which Indonesia shares with Malaysia and Brunei and New Guinea, including both independent Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Indonesian province of Papua). The Philippines, Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Vietnam, China and Central Asia have smaller absolute areas of forests, but a relatively large proportion of forests compared with land area.

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<sup>1</sup> REDD+ is being developed under the guidance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The “+” (**plus**) in REDD+ (or REDD-plus) refers to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation, plus conservation and sustainable management of forests and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks. Many also understand REDD+ to encompass more than just carbon sequestration benefits, but also other benefits (referred to as multiple benefits or co-benefits), including important social and environmental benefits.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)'s 2010 Forest Resource Assessment, Asia and the Pacific now constitute 783.9 million hectares, or about 19.4 percent, of the world forests.

The many estimates on numbers of forest dependent people in the Asian region are fraught with problems related to defining forest dependence and are often widely inconsistent. Estimates of indigenous peoples living in forests vary widely around 150 million and estimates of forest dependent peoples in Asia vary widely around 500 million.

While many countries have some form of community forestry, there is a great deal of diversity of community forestry programs and approaches within Asia. What most Asian countries have in common is that most forests are formally under state control. While community forestry programs differ widely, they have in common some form of decentralization of responsibility for forest management. Sometimes, but not always, local communities have rights over forests, but, in general, these rights are highly circumscribed.

In most of Asia, forests have been under state control for decades, and, in some cases, centuries. The Pacific is different. In Melanesian countries in particular, customary land ownership, including forest ownership, is legally recognized. But even where state control has long existed in Asia, local institutional arrangements related to community forests often persisted in parallel with official state tenure. Some literature refers to these as "indigenous" systems; other literature refers to them as "traditional" systems, although the word "traditional", with its connotations of antiquity, does not always apply, since many locally initiated systems are relatively new. In the case of Nepal, **new locally initiated systems** emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the lack of effective forest management by the state. **Shifting cultivation systems** in many parts of the region – Indonesia, Lao PDR, Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand and elsewhere – are, in effect, a form of indigenous community forestry.

**In most of Asia, official community forestry is overwhelmingly based on state owned forests with various levels of usufruct rights.** There is very little in the way of recognition of permanent rights.

### **What is Community Forestry?**

Community forestry systems may be initiated by the community or developed as a result of outside intervention by governments or various development partners. Community forestry may include management of natural forests and woodlands, as well as plantations and woodlots. Community forestry may or may not involve government recognition of community rights.

**Official community forestry programs** are now widespread in the region. Community forestry programs emerged in Nepal in the late 1970s and in the Philippines in the 1980s. There were early attempts to involve communities in plantations under the guise of "social forestry" in India and Indonesia. The Joint Forest Management approach with experiments in Haryana that emerged in India in the 1980s has since developed into an enormous nation-wide program. The early examples of community forestry in Asia as a region were documented in many publications. Work on community forestry has also been ongoing in China, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, and other countries in Asia.

## What Have We Learned from Community Forestry in Asia?

**Empowerment of Communities:** The importance of clear tenure rights held by communities is widely recognized as crucial to community forestry. Community forest tenure is legally recognized in the Pacific, but rarely in Asia. **With few exceptions, community rights in Asia are based on agreements arising from administrative discretion, not on legal recognition of customary rights.** Community rights rely on and are conditioned by governance.

For community empowerment, the **existence of “effective” rights is most crucial.** Governance constraints limit the effectiveness of community rights, even when those rights appear solid on paper. The discretionary powers of state agencies commonly diminish formally conferred rights. Community forest tenure in Asia is usually only granted on a short or limited term basis. Complex and cumbersome regulations and high levels of oversight often undermine community rights, and these rights tend to be limited to the use of forest products for domestic consumption and sometimes for limited sale.

### Discretionary Rights

In the Philippines, community-based forest management (CBFM) is approved for 25 years, renewable at the discretion of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). In 2006, the Secretary of the DENR issued an order that cancelled all existing CBFM Agreements in the country because of concerns about misuse.

Clear ownership of forests by communities does not necessarily ensure that communities benefit from community forestry, due to restrictive regulations, land grabbing by commercial interests, or most recently, unscrupulous deals made by “carbon cowboys” (carbon dealers) with communities. On the other hand, modest local experiments in informal tenure reform (“tinkering with tenure”) can instill confidence in continued forest access that encourages people to invest time and effort in forestry activities. **Options short of formal tenure reform can benefit community forestry,** and such local arrangements can be useful policy experiments as a basis for scaling up to formal tenure change, simply by demonstrating the effectiveness of community management.

**Governance and Stakeholder Engagement:** In addition to community forestry programs initiated by governments and other external partners, many examples exist of locally initiated community forestry systems. Features of successful self-initiated community institutions are extremely variable. What they hold in common are shared ideas about how forests should be managed and how decisions should be made. Even where self-initiated community forestry does not yet exist, encouraging new groups to self-identify adds to the likelihood of empowerment and success.

Formal community forestry is often gender biased or gender blind. Community forestry groups are formed with minimal consideration of the impacts on gender, including the way women were involved in decision-making about forests prior to the development of official community forestry. Strongly protection-oriented regimes tend to put additional pressure on women for whom routine collection of forest products, especially for domestic consumption, is a standard role.

An issue faced by community forest groups is their relative lack of power vis-à-vis government and other powerful interests. In some countries, activist non-governmental organizations may support communities, and in others, user groups have joined federations to pursue their shared interests.

**Benefits and Incentives:** The most common benefit to communities is improved legal access to forest products for domestic consumption. There have been very few cases in Asia of significant cash income from community forestry and evidence for community forestry contributing to poverty reduction is relatively rare. The harvesting and commercial marketing of timber under community forestry is uncommon. Impacts seem to have been greater in conservation terms than livelihood and poverty reduction terms. Benefits have frequently failed to reach women and the poor.

Even where benefits are discussed in some detail, there are **virtually no attempts to present analysis in terms of costs compared with benefits from the point of view of community members**. The tendency is to refer to income – usually from a single product or a small number of products – without consideration of costs in terms of forgone access to other forest products. Overall, the cash returns from community forestry have generally been modest. Local communities may, however, benefit from improved forest management, and the range of non-monetary social and environmental benefits associated with improved forest management.



**Capacity Building** needs can be broadly categorized into the fields of forest management skills and business and administrative skills. Basic literacy is also important for good governance and for the empowerment of women in particular. Capacity building for forestry departments requires more than just training and the development of new skills. It requires a paradigm shift that must include effective support to field agents from their supervisors and the forest agency itself. Development of new forms of participatory silviculture adapted to community needs and capabilities is needed, but little progress has been made.

**Scaling Up:** Two key conditions for scaling up are successful, proven pilot initiatives and favorable policy and legal frameworks. Good policies for community forestry generally emerge from successful field experience and small “policy experiments” that precede highly formalized national policy. Both of these elements may take a great deal of time to put in place. Another aspect of scaling up is the need to have **user groups, which operate in relatively small areas of forest, link up with other groups to carry out joint functions such as sawmilling or marketing**. This can be done through various cooperatives, structures or networks.

**Sustainability:** There is a broad consensus that, in Asia, self-initiated forms of community forestry have made significant contributions to the maintenance of healthy forests and that externally initiated community forestry programs have maintained or improved forest quality. Most community forestry programs have benefited from long-term donor support. Therefore, 15-20 years of donor support may be optimal for community forestry to become self-sustaining. REDD+ may provide such support. The key challenge for socio-economic sustainability is to balance the positive benefits of community forestry with the transaction costs and restricted resource access involved in externally promoted programs.

## Recommendations to Support Community Forestry and REDD+

- REDD+ interventions need to focus on communities that have legally enforceable rights to their forests, and they should not be undermined by unnecessary administration and regulation. It is essential that REDD+ interventions minimize the tendency towards external regulation that limits community decision-making. A “minimum standards approach” to meeting government requirements would help address the problem of excessive regulation while maintaining an overall level of responsibility.
- REDD+ interventions should focus, as far as possible, on formalized community forestry groups that previously existed as self-identified groups with shared traditional tenure in informal systems. Even where self-initiated community forestry does not exist, allowing new groups to self-identify rather than being identified by outsiders adds to the likelihood that the groups will feel empowered.
- The process of registering or formalizing rights should be as simple and flexible as possible, since complex administrative processes often override working local arrangements for forest access or decision-making and can disadvantage women and other sub-groups.
- Given the need for economies of scale and improved governance in REDD+ implementation, umbrella groups, such as federations or associations of community forestry user groups, should be formed in a way that does not unduly interfere with rights and decision-making of user groups.
- To succeed in its goals of forest conservation and poverty reduction, REDD+ must avoid reducing access to existing livelihood benefits. If rules imposed to conserve forests result in lost income, REDD+ must provide adequate alternative income as compensation and incentive for REDD+ participation. REDD+ costs and benefits need to be analyzed to see whether and how much REDD+ will contribute to community livelihoods and wellbeing.
- REDD+ implementers must avoid disadvantaging communities as a whole, or individuals and sub-groups, as a result of changed forest management arrangements. To promote positive outcomes and prevent disadvantages for women and other disadvantaged groups, REDD+ requires interventions tailored to these groups. Simply assuming that benefits will “trickle down” is inadequate.
- As carbon credit payments will almost certainly not be adequate incentive, combinations of benefits from other sources will be needed. States will need to consider community rights for commercial harvesting of timber and other innovative ways of meeting needs and generating income.
- To benefit from REDD+ programs, many communities will need financial management, business and bookkeeping training. Training for government and NGO staff should provide participatory extension, community development and social assessment skills rather than skills in technical forestry. Capacity building is most likely to be effective if training includes field-based activities and follow-up mentoring and coaching once implementation has commenced.
- Pilot and demonstration projects are needed to explore models for REDD+ implementation before detailed policy prescriptions are developed. The pilots should provide benefits in the form of carbon credits as soon as possible.
- To enhance social, economic and environmental sustainability, it is vital to provide long-term support to communities. To build and maintain confidence in REDD+, significant benefits to communities in the form of carbon credits should flow as quickly as possible.



## MORE INFORMATION

For more information on the issues raised in this document, consult the full report:

Fisher, Robert J. *Lessons Learned from Community Forestry in Asia and their Relevance for REDD+*. Report prepared for USAID. Forest Carbon, Markets and Communities (FCMC) Program, Arlington, VA. Available at: [www.fcmcglobal.org/resources.html](http://www.fcmcglobal.org/resources.html).

All citations and an extensive list of references are found in the full report. All photos by Robert J. Fisher, except for first photo taken by Paula J. Williams.

This report is one of four reports on *Lessons Learned from Community Forestry and Their Relevance for REDD+*. The series comprises three regional reviews on this topic, prepared for Latin America (by Dr. Janis B. Alcorn), Africa (by Mr. Tom Blomley) and Asia (by Dr. Robert J. Fisher). The global synthesis of the three regional reviews was prepared by Mr. Roy Hagen. All four reports have been reviewed and edited by FCMC. Dr. Paula J. Williams has managed the reviews and served as overall editor.

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