



RECOFTC youth engagement strategy

2026–2031



RECOFTC

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Introduction

In the Asia-Pacific, the triple planetary crisis meets the world's greatest demographic opportunity. The region, which faces accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, is home to a population of 750 million young people aged 10–24, i.e. 60 per cent of the global total¹.

Since 1987, RECOFTC has advanced community forestry in the region as a foundation for sustainable and equitable landscapes. Our work strengthens local rights, governance and capacities to ensure that communities, especially Indigenous Peoples, women and youth, benefit fairly from forest resources. We operate in and beyond our seven focal countries – Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Engaging youth in our work is both a matter of rights and a strategic necessity. Young people are the future stewards of forest landscapes. They inherit the outcomes of today's management decisions. Youth bring diverse strengths: fresh perspectives, digital and technological fluency and the ability to connect local realities to global movements. They are vital bridges between traditional ecological knowledge and contemporary science, ensuring continuity across generations.

Systematic youth engagement accelerates progress toward sustainable forest landscape management, climate resilience and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It deepens participation in governance, improves forest-based livelihoods and strengthens adaptive capacity in the face of uncertainty.

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2010). *Regional overview: Youth in Asia and the Pacific*.

Purpose and scope

We recognize that youth engagement at scale faces persistent barriers. Exclusion remains a major obstacle, with many young people lacking safe, meaningful opportunities to participate and have their voices heard and actioned in conversations that are directly related to them and their futures. Economic barriers are another major obstacle as training and skills development do not always link to viable pathways for employment or enterprise in landscape management.

We also find that sustainable landscape management efforts often do not engage urban youth and those outside traditional forestry communities, limiting broader social participation and support. Where there is engagement, it is fragmented and project-based, and therefore an urgent need for institutional embedding.

The RECOFTC youth engagement strategy (YES) outlines approaches to help establish young people as partners and leaders in shaping resilient forest landscapes – equipped with the skills, networks, space and voice needed to influence decisions, innovate solutions and ensure that forests sustain both people and ecosystems for generations to come. For our purposes, we include those aged between 18 to 35 in the youth category, adapting to the ASEAN definition.

The YES provides a framework to institutionalize youth participation in community-based sustainable forest landscape management. It defines pathways for sustained systematic engagement that treat young people as partners in forest governance and landscape stewardship. It guides RECOFTC staff, partners and stakeholders on designing, mainstreaming and evaluating youth engagement across our projects and programmes.

The strategy is aligned with RECOFTC's Strategic Plan 2023–2028 and our regional and national priorities. It positions youth at the core of our mission by actively engaging young people with climate, governance and livelihood objectives, and contributing to relevant global agendas such as the SDGs, where appropriate.

To ensure organizational alignment, the YES integrates cross-cutting commitments – inclusion and good governance principles; application of Indigenous and local knowledge; digital storytelling and activism; and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) – into all stages of programme design, delivery and impacts.

It supports RECOFTC's efforts to help ensure that youth engagement is inclusive, evidence-based and accountable, with progress tracked through disaggregated indicators and safeguarding standards that reflect our values and strategic priorities.

The YES embeds youth engagement across our work, shifting practice from episodic to sustained engagement – from tokenism to co-leadership and from isolated training to systems that link skills, participation and economic opportunity.

Specifically, the strategy:

- establishes clear entry points and roles for youth in governance and landscape activities
- provides practical guidance for mainstreaming youth engagement into programme design, delivery and impact monitoring
- promotes inclusive approaches that reach marginalized youth and young women
- connects capacity building to livelihood and employment pathways



Youth in forest landscapes

The ASEAN region is home to globally significant tropical forest ecosystems and rich biodiversity. Around 213 million youth aged 15–34 live here², making youth one of the region's most important demographic groups. This population is projected to continue growing in the coming years.

As custodians, future leaders and key stakeholders in these landscapes, young people will play a critical role in shaping how the region responds to forest loss, biodiversity decline, and ecosystem degradation.

Global strategies such as the United Nation's 'Youth 2030'³ and the 'IUCN youth strategy 2022–2030'⁴ emphasize the importance of investing in youth leadership and ensuring meaningful participation in decision-making and governance to advance the Sustainable Development Goals. The YES emphasizes the same specifically for the ASEAN and larger Asia-Pacific regions.

Current status

A preliminary survey with RECOFTC youth staff and partners identified key issues, challenges and opportunities young people face in contributing to community forestry and climate action. Survey data confirm both momentum and barriers to youth engagement.

The key challenges identified include funding limitations, lack of skills, weak institutional policies, and limited recognition in decision-making space. Recommended ways forward include multi-year funding commitments, structured mentorship, intergenerational dialogue and practical skills training. These, it is agreed, can move RECOFTC from sporadic interventions to a systematic and strategic framework that ensures youth are empowered as future leaders and change agents.

Over 70 per cent of the 46 youth respondents are directly involved in forest and community rights initiatives, but most efforts remain small-scale, isolated and localized. Nearly one third of surveyed youth reported receiving either formal support, or unevenness of opportunities and resources across contexts. This gap is especially concerning given that youth identified clear priority areas including, but not limited to, digital access and technology, traditional knowledge documentation, market linkages for forest enterprises and intergenerational dialogue facilitation. If these areas remain unsupported, it risks further detachment of youth from forest landscape governance.

² Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (2017). *First ASEAN Youth Development Index*. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-regional-escap.pdf>

³ United Nations. (2018). *Youth2030: The United Nations youth strategy*. https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/sites/default/files/2024-12/Youth2030_UN%20Youth%20Strategy_EN.pdf

⁴ International Union for Conservation of Nature. (2022). *IUCN youth strategy 2022–2030*. https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/iucn_youth_strategy_23_may_2022_final.pdf

While RECOFTC's existing trust with communities provides a strong foundation for scaling youth participation and leadership, multi-year investment, mentorship and structured learning pathways are lacking. Furthermore, funding insecurity and lack of institutional frameworks

among both RECOFTC and our partners present strong barriers to sustained youth engagement. Youth are still underrepresented in governance and policy processes and ongoing migration to urban areas reduces youth presence and leadership in forest and rural communities.

Emerging opportunities

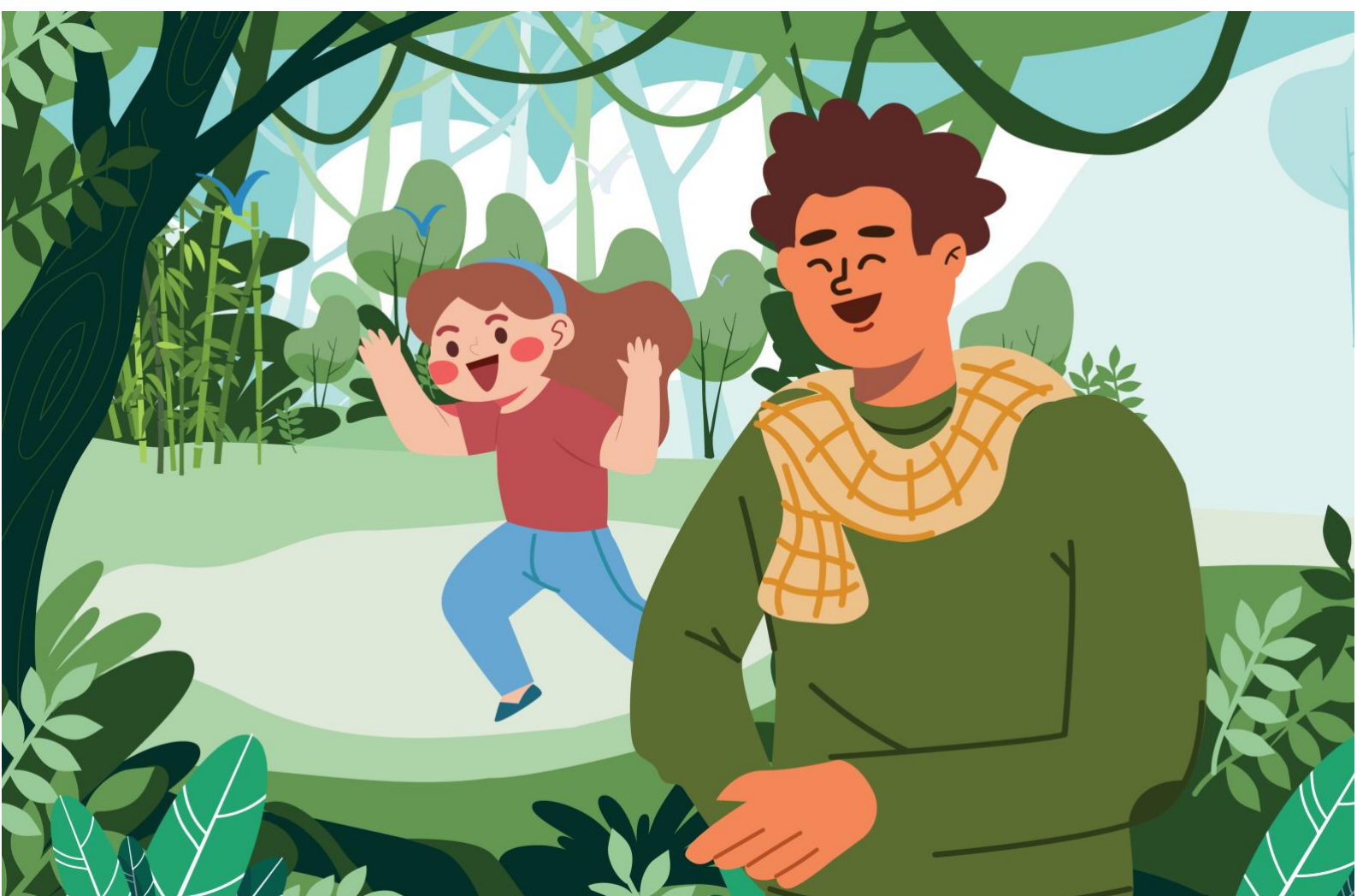
Strengthening mentorship, ensuring consistent funding and expanding decision-making space will help move from short-term engagement to sustained leadership. The YES identifies opportunities in three key areas.

1. **Eco-enterprises and green livelihoods:** Across the Asia-Pacific, there is growing youth interest in forestry, eco-enterprises and nature-based solutions that link sustainable management of natural resources with income generation.
2. **Digital innovation and advocacy:** The ever-expanding use of digital tools and AI for communication, networking and cross-country peer learning are the perfect entry points for youth engagement and leadership.
3. **Intergenerational knowledge exchange:** More than ever before, there is growing recognition of the importance of connecting traditional and Indigenous ecological knowledge with contemporary natural resource management practices. Youths are the key to ensuring continuity across generations.

YES vision and mission

In line with RECOFTC's vision and mission, the YES helps envision a future where forest landscapes are resilient, inclusive and shaped by youth leadership. Young people across rural and urban contexts, genders, Indigenous and different ethnic identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and abilities actively participate in decision-making, secure opportunities in forest management and sustainable livelihoods and collaborate across generations.

To achieve this vision, our mission is to strengthen youth capacities and create inclusive and safe spaces for their voices to shape equitable and sustainable futures for people and forests. By promoting youth engagement, fostering intergenerational collaboration and building practical and organizational foundations, we help empower young people to lead in forest stewardship, bridge urban–rural partnerships and drive innovative, locally relevant actions in forestry and climate resilience.



Strategic framework

Overall goal

Establish youth as key actors in advancing sustainable forest landscape management and green livelihoods, creating pathways for meaningful participation, leadership development and innovative solutions that contribute to resilient communities managing forest landscapes sustainably and equitably in the Asia-Pacific region.

Strategic goals

We have identified four strategic goals to be implemented over a five-year period (2026–2031):

1. Establish an evidence-based approach to inform future youth-driven programmes
2. Institutionalize youth engagement at all programme and project levels
3. Strengthen youth capacity and enterprise development
4. Establish effective learning networks and mentorship systems

We will maintain a youth-centered design emphasizing meaningful youth participation, moving beyond tokenism to genuine leadership and ownership of forest governance processes.

Strategic goal 1: Evidence-based approach

Outcome 1: Baseline studies conducted across RECOFTC focal countries and disseminated amongst the communities we work with to support sustainable landscape management.

Description: This strategic goal focuses on building knowledge and understanding of youth engagement needs through comprehensive baseline research across RECOFTC focal countries. The primary emphasis is on assessing youth interests and expectations in community forestry while understanding the specific barriers and opportunities that exist across different country contexts. Our projects and programmes can complete baseline studies across all focal countries and disseminate findings among our communities and partners. The data-driven foundation will inform all subsequent strategies. This evidence-based approach ensures that youth engagement efforts are grounded in actual needs and realities rather than assumptions, providing the critical information needed to design effective and contextually appropriate interventions.

Strategic goal 2: Institutional change

Outcome 2: Organizations and institutions in sustainable forest landscape management demonstrate sustained commitment to youth engagement through intergenerational collaboration, resource allocation and systemic integration of intersectional youth voices in governance and decision-making processes.

Description: This strategic goal focuses on creating enabling environments and spaces for sustained youth engagement by fostering intergenerational collaboration and securing organizational and stakeholder buy-in. This strategic focus addresses one of the most significant barriers to meaningful youth participation – the lack of institutional support and intergenerational understanding. The goal emphasizes bridging generational gaps between youth and established practitioners through intergenerational dialogue platforms in multiple countries by 2027. Key activities include securing institutional resource commitments for youth engagement and co-designing action plans that increase youth participation in community forestry. This transformation is essential for moving beyond tokenistic youth involvement to create systemic change that embeds youth voices in organizational culture and decision-making processes.

Strategic goal 3: Integrated youth capacity and enterprise development

Outcome 3: Youth in forest landscapes possess comprehensive technical, business and market navigation capabilities that enable them to develop sustainable forest-based enterprises, create meaningful livelihoods and emerge as effective leaders in community forestry initiatives.

Description: This strategic goal focuses on a comprehensive approach to building technical skills and supporting forest-based livelihoods through holistic capacity development. Rather than addressing skills in isolation, this integrated strategy combines three critical components: (1) enterprise development, focusing on business planning, product development, digital marketing and financial management; (2) market navigation, addressing forest risk commodities regulations, international markets and value chain development and (3) technical knowledge, covering sustainable forestry practices, agroforestry techniques and nature-based solutions. It positions youth capacity development as an investment that strengthens rural economies, reduces poverty and drives innovation in sustainable forestry. This holistic approach recognizes that young people need multifaceted support to succeed as forest entrepreneurs and leaders, requiring both technical forestry knowledge and practical business skills to create sustainable livelihoods while contributing to forest conservation.

Strategic goal 4: Learning networks and mentorship systems

Outcome 4: Youth engaged in forest landscape management are connected through inclusive, robust, multi-level learning networks and mentorship systems that facilitate continuous knowledge exchange, professional development and peer collaboration across communities and countries.

Description: This strategic goal focuses on creating and utilizing comprehensive knowledge exchange and professional development ecosystems that operate on multiple levels. This strategic approach combines three elements: (1) vertical mentorship, pairing experienced forest practitioners with young entrepreneurs for expert-to-youth knowledge transfer; (2) peer learning networks, establishing both national and regional youth-to-youth collaboration systems that engage both rural and urban youth and (3) leadership exchanges, facilitating cross-community learning and successful model replication. The goal emphasizes building sustainable support systems that continue beyond project cycles, recognizing that meaningful youth engagement requires ongoing relationship building and knowledge sharing. This multidimensional approach ensures that young people have access to both the wisdom of experienced practitioners and the innovation and energy of their peers, creating a robust ecosystem for professional development and mutual support.

Partnerships and resource mobilization

Partnerships are more than just funding arrangements. They are built on shared purpose and mutual learning, bringing together different strengths in skills, experience and networks to achieve common goals. Good partnerships connect generations, build skills and help ensure that youth are seen as equal contributors and stakeholders to sustainable forestry.

Youth leadership will be integrated into RECOFTC programmes and projects, creating spaces for dialogue with senior representatives and sharing lessons from our landscapes. Broader engagement with universities, civil society, the private sector and youth organizations can open new opportunities for learning, innovation and joint action, helping create champions in climate change and biodiversity conservation.

RECOFTC's resource mobilization efforts should prioritize long-term and reliable support that allows youth to plan and lead with confidence. Establishing dedicated budgets for capacity building, mentorship and youth-led initiatives will help sustain engagement beyond individual projects. Building a strong evidence base on youth participation and skills will also make fundraising efforts more strategic and credible.

The Youth Committee, along with relevant technical teams and country offices, can help guide funding priorities and track how resources are used to ensure they remain transparent and relevant. Capacitating youth in the relevant skills needed to access and manage funding directly to encourage sustainability beyond external project funding and grant cycles. By aligning financial support with ongoing mentorship and intergenerational collaboration, RECOFTC can create conditions for youth leadership to grow and endure across forest landscapes.



MEL framework

Youth involvement in MEL has so far been indirect and top-down, with young people mostly counted rather than actively shaping or leading evaluation processes. The YES offers an opportunity for youth to co-design indicators, be trained in MEL tools and translate results into meaningful, accessible knowledge.

A youth-centered MEL framework is needed to move beyond numbers, combining quantitative data with stories of agency, intergenerational trust, leadership growth and community change, including through digital tools and media. This approach will strengthen accountability while ensuring that learning feeds back into strategy and that youth are recognized as co-creators of knowledge and drivers of transformation.

To ensure that youth engagement in RECOFTC is measured, understood and strengthened not only through numbers (outputs) but also through meanings, stories and transformations, the YES proposes a MEL framework that centers youth as co-designers, co-evaluators and storytellers of impact.

Levels of MEL

Level	Key questions	Methods/tools
Inputs/outputs (participation and reach)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ How many youth are engaged?▪ What activities are implemented?▪ Are there any examples – of learning networks, trainings, baseline studies or systems facilitating intergenerational knowledge exchange and peer to peer collaboration – are recorded?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Attendance sheets▪ Disaggregated participant database – event reports

Level	Key questions	Methods/tools
Outcomes (learning and agency)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How have youth applied what they know – their knowledge and skills – in their work or communities? ▪ How has their role changed in terms of leadership? ▪ How are youth engaged in the decision-making process? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre/post surveys ▪ Mentorship feedback forms ▪ Focus group discussions ▪ Story-of-change collection
Shifts/transformation (relationships and systems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What stories, changes or shifts are happening in communities or institutions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outcome harvesting ▪ Most significant change stories ▪ Key informant interviews (elders, leaders) ▪ Media and policy tracking
Learning and adaptation (reflection and improvement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How is learning integrated? ▪ What is improved next? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ After action reviews ▪ Youth-led reflection circles ▪ Learning briefs and infographics

Youth roles in MEL

Youth Committee

- Co-design indicators, ensuring youth perspectives are captured
- Lead youth-to-youth data collection (peer surveys, story collection)
- Organize reflection sessions and document lessons

RECOFTC MEL and programme staff

- Provide technical guidance and ensure integration with organizational MEL
- Support data analysis and credibility
- Ensure accessibility and dissemination of results

Youth network

- Share experiences, stories, and reflections
- Engage as peer evaluators in participatory assessments

MEL cycle

4. Baseline: Youth study on interests, needs and existing involvement (already planned)
5. Ongoing tracking: Simple tools (surveys, FGDs, mentorship logs, social media storytelling)
6. Reflection and learning: Bi-annual youth reflection sessions and after-action reviews
7. Synthesis: Combined quantitative and qualitative results.
8. Sharing back: Youth-friendly outputs (videos, infographics, podcasts, social media content)
9. Adaptation: Adjust programmes and strategies based on findings



Scaling and replication

We recognize that sustainable impact requires moving beyond individual projects to create systemic change that can be replicated and adapted across diverse contexts while maintaining local relevance and ownership.

RECOFTC will work to expand successful interventions and systematizing knowledge transfer across multiple levels – from pilot projects to institutional embedding. We envision operating across four key dimensions: (1) pilot-to-regional scaling, developing regional youth-led entrepreneur projects that span multiple countries; (2) best practice documentation, systematically capturing successful approaches for replication; (3) institutional embedding, integrating proven approaches into RECOFTC's core programming and extending to partner organizations and (4) outreach and communication, sharing youth-led stories and lessons through multi-level platforms to increase visibility and recognition of youth innovations and contributions.

YES execution

The YES will be executed through a series of activities from 2026 to 2030, moving from foundational evidence and pilots to multi-country implementation and regional scaling. The three components may be overlapping and will include: (1) Baseline studies, pilot mentorship and peer networks, and initial technical support; (2) Multi-country programme expansion, youth leadership exchanges and investment dialogues; and (3) Regional scaling, forestry campaigns and full integration into RECOFTC programming.

Cross-cutting commitments such as gender equality and social inclusion, Indigenous and local knowledge, digital storytelling and activism, MEL integration and youth wellbeing are embedded throughout.

Country offices can apply the same standards while adapting to local regulatory, cultural, infrastructure and ecosystem contexts. The result is a sequenced, evidence-driven plan that keeps youth leadership at the center while delivering measurable change across different strategic goals.

Baseline, pilot mentorship and peer networks, initial technical support

Purpose

Establish an evidence-based foundation and core support systems; begin targeted technical assistance.

Milestones

- Complete country baselines on youth needs and opportunities; publish country briefs and a regional synthesis
- Pilot mentorship (vertical) and peer learning networks (national prototypes) with a code of conduct and safeguarding pack
- Launch initial technical support for youth enterprises and market navigation (e.g. permits and compliance coaching)

Cross-cutting

Inclusive sampling and accessible events; Indigenous protocols (FPIC) in data work; youth-safe consent and data privacy; digital story bank in local languages; anonymous feedback channels

Evaluation

Use baseline and pilot learning to finalize expansion targets by country

Multi-country expansion, youth leadership exchange programmes, investment dialogues

Purpose

Move from pilots to multi-country implementation; strengthen intergenerational platforms and resource commitments.

Milestones

- Scale peer learning networks to all focal countries and establish a regional network
- Run youth leadership exchange programmes across communities and themes (e.g., fire, tenure, agroforestry, peatland)
- Establish youth-inclusion investment dialogues with micro-granting and public dashboards

Cross-cutting

Institutional change with youth seats in decision-making spaces and budget lines for youth work; live-streamed dialogues, video pitches and community radio with safe moderation; travel bursaries, accessible itineraries, workload pacing for youth

Evaluation

Select models and countries for regional scaling; finalize agroforestry campaign plan

Regional scaling, forestry campaigns, full integration

Purpose: Consolidate proven models; scale regionally; embed in RECOFTC programming and partner systems.

Milestones

- Launch regional scaling of at least one youth-led entrepreneur model and produce best-practice packages. Identify and appoint a youth champion in each focal country (via an open volunteer process) to serve as a focal point for mobilization, mentoring and communication
- Run forestry awareness campaigns tied to planting/harvest cycles with multilingual media and demo plots
- Mobilize university students for intergenerational cooperation, urban-rural exchange, collaboration and cross-learning between university students and youth in forest communities

Cross-cutting

Do-no-harm and data privacy embedded into documentation and scaling packages; Indigenous data governance for local adaptations; peer support and participatory forest assessment practices; celebrate youth leadership (possible regional event)



RECOFTC is an international nonprofit organization working towards a future where resilient communities with respected rights thrive in forest landscapes that they manage sustainably and equitably. We take a long-term, landscape-based and inclusive approach in supporting local communities to secure their land and resource rights, stop deforestation, find alternative livelihoods and foster gender equality. With more than 37 years of experience, we have built trusting relationships with partners from communities, governments, businesses, academia and civil society organizations. Our innovations, knowledge and initiatives enable countries to foster good forest governance, mitigate and adapt to climate change and achieve the UN Global Goals.

We operate in the Asia-Pacific region, with country offices in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Viet Nam.

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