Discussion paper

The role of community forestry in climate change adaptation in the ASEAN region

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This paper summarizes key discussions from the 1st ASEAN-Swiss Partnership on Social Forestry and Climate Change (ASFCC) Learning Group workshop organized by RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests in August 2015. The discussions highlight a number of ways community forestry (CF) can support local communities in adapting to climate change.

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Background

Since its establishment in 2005, the ASEAN[1] Social Forestry Network or ASFN has been working to promote social forestry policy and practices in Southeast Asian region. It contributes to strengthening the goal of food security through sustainable, efficient and effective use of land, forest and water by minimizing adverse impacts of climate change. Together with communities, local governments, civil society organizations as well as private sectors, ASFN helps promotes good policy and practices of social forestry in the region.

Since 2009, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) extended its support for the ASFN through the ASFCC. ASFCC aims to develop and integrate social forestry approaches into the climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies of ASEAN and its Member States, and to generate socio-economic benefits from inclusion of communities, women and vulnerable groups in social forestry and climate change adaptation and mitigation measures.

The ASFCC has three basic components: social forestry policy framework development; knowledge sharing, capacity building and networking; and learning interventions, research and assessment. As part of the activities on knowledge sharing, learning, capacity building and networking, an ASFCC Learning Group has been established. This group provides a platform for social forestry practitioners from ASEAN countries to expand and share their knowledge on social forestry policies and practices, contribute to a greater understanding of the role of social forestry in climate change adaptation, and strengthen regional networks of social forestry 'champions'.

[1]The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is made up of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Viet Nam.

Introduction

The concept of community forestry is widely accepted as a mechanism that allows local people to make use of forest resources to support their livelihoods while also dealing with climate change impacts. There is great opportunity for community forestry to strengthen local, national and regional resilience to climate change.

Community forestry, interchangeably referred to as social forestry, has considerable potentials to contribute to both climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies since forest ecosystem can contribute to provide products and services to local livelihoods while facing the impact of climate change[2].

Clear tenure rights and access to forest resources as part of community forestry principles may influence how local people manage their forests, reduce deforestation and forest degradation and increase carbon stocks[3]. Secure access to forest resources may also increase livelihood options of communities and increase food security. As a result, this may lead to increasing resilience of communities or forest dependent users from the common impact of climate change, such as crop damage caused by climate uncertainty, drought, floods and storm.

To further explore the role of community forestry (CF) in climate change adaptation, ASFCC organized the 1st ASEAN-Swiss Partnership on Social Forestry and Climate Change (ASFCC) Learning Group[4] workshop in Nan Province, northern Thailand in October 2014 using three guiding questions:

1. What role can community forestry play in contributing to climate change adaptation, and is there evidence from the field to demonstrate this?
2. What are the opportunities for community forestry in contributing to climate change adaptation?
3. What are the challenges for community forestry in contributing to climate change adaptation?

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[2] Pandey, S.S., et al. Assessing the roles of community forestry in climate change mitigation and adaptation: A case study from Nepal. Forest Ecol. Manage (2015)

[3] RECOFTC.2014. Current status of social forestry in climate change mitigation and adaptation in the ASEAN region: Situational analysis 2013. Bangkok, RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests

[4] The Learning group participants consist of participants from ASEAN Member State government officials working on social forestry and ASFCC supporting partners.

During the workshop, participants identified a number of ways that community forestry can support climate change adaptation. Particular attention was paid to the role of the community in managing the forests and community forestry as a management system, rather than the role of forests themselves.

Experience from ASEAN countries and beyond, demonstrates that allocation of forest management rights and responsibilities to local people can be an effective strategy for sustainable forest management and can lead to improved outcomes for forest cover, qulaity and local livelihoods [5]. Intact, healthy and biologically diverse forests are more resilient to climate variations and better at adapting to long-term changes in climate[6].

Learning group participants also highlighted that forests can provide a range of supporting, provisioning, regulating and cultural ecosystem services that are essential for human well-being and contribute to climate change adaptation. These include hydrological regulation, maintaining water and soil quality, conserving biodiversity and providing a range of products that local people can use to create more resilient livelihoods or fall back upon during times of need[7].

The roles of community forestry in climate change adaptation were grouped into three categories: 1) bio-physical roles; 2) socio-economic roles; and 3) institutional roles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The role of community forestry in adaptation to climate change

Bio-physical roles	▪ Restore and maintain healthy and diverse forests that are more resilient to climate variations and able to adapt to long-term changes. ▪ Re-establish and maintain forest ecosystem services essential for climate change adaptation. ▪ Re-establish and maintain forests to act as a physical barrier to protect human settlements and crops from damage by severe weather.
Socio-economic roles	▪ Restore and maintain the ability of forests to provide a range of forest products to support diversified livelihoods and increase adaptive capacity. ▪ Maintain the role of community forests as a 'safety net' that provide essential products, such as foods, fibre and construction materials, for household consumption or income generation in times of stress. ▪ Income generated through community forest production and forest protection activities can increase financial assets and adaptive capacity.
Institutional roles	▪ Community forestry institutions can enhance skills and capacities at local level that strengthen communities' adaptive capacities. ▪ Community forestry can empower communities to innovate and experiment with new systems and practices that may be more suitable for changing climatic conditions. ▪ Community forestry can encourage learning and sharing of knowledge on forest management and climate change adaptation.

[5] Dahal et al., 2010; Larson et al., 2010; Sikor and Nguyen 2011; Springate-Baginski et al., 2011

[6] Locatelli et al., 2008

[7] Seppälä, et al., 2009

Challenges

The workshop identified various challenges that can potentially hinder community forestry to contribute to climate change adaptation. In ASEAN countries, many community forests are established in degraded forest areas that have limited capacity to support climate change adaptation of communities especially in the initial stages of CF development and establishment.

Insecure land tenure and weak recognition of community rights to use and manage forests can inhibit incentives for long-term sustainable forest management[8] and weaken the role that forests can play in climate change adaptation. National policies can also present challenges for community forestry and its role in adaptation. For example, in the Philippines unstable government policies on resource utilisation in the early 2000's resulted in widespread forest destruction[9], and in Cambodia, allocation of Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) frequently includes land claimed or used by local people has led to destruction of community forests and conflicts between concession holders and local communities[10].

In academic and policy circles the role of forests in climate change adaptation is mentioned significantly. However, the linkages between community forestry and climate change adaptation may not appear to be widely known. There is a lack of hard evidence to demonstrate that community forestry can be a valuable forest management approach in contributing to climate change adaptation. At present, community forestry is not a high priority in national or provincial adaptation policies or programmes. As a result, interventions and funding for climate change adaptation at local level tend to focus on rural development, agriculture and alternative livelihoods projects, and rarely support or link up with community forestry initiatives. There are also potential trade-offs between climate change mitigation strategies such as REDD+, and adaptation. Mitigation strategies that prioritize carbon sequestration at the expense of local people's access to and use of forest resources will reduce the ability of forests to support the adaptation of local people. Much will depend upon the site specific measures chosen to implement REDD+, benefit (and cost) sharing mechanisms, and the impact of REDD+ on forest and natural resource governance[11].

[8] FAO, 2006; Robinson et al., 2011

[9] Pulhin, 2005; Pulhin et al., 2008

[10] OHCHR, 2007; Dhiaulhaq et al., 2014; Blomley et al., 2010

[11] Graham, 2011

Ban Huay Sapan Samakee Community Forest (Thailand).

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, opportunities for community forestry to play a greater role in contributing to climate change adaptation were also identified. Considerable evidence and examples already exist on the potential of community forestry to contribute to reforestation, sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction in ASEAN countries.

There is an opportunity to reframe and expand this knowledge base to include climate change adaptation, in order to enhance the awareness and understanding of policy-makers and practitioners, and promote community forestry as part of the climate change adaptation agenda.

There is also potential to utilize existing community forestry networks, the internet and social media, and other locally appropriate communication channels such as radio and street theatre, to disseminate knowledge on community forestry and climate change adaptation more broadly among forest-based communities.

Moreover, many forest communities have in-depth understanding of their natural environment and are highly aware of any variations and changes in their surroundings. This understanding could be utilized to provide valuable data to monitor climate change impacts at local level, in combination with local meteorological and climate modelling data.

In recent years, global concern regarding climate change has increased, leading to the development of new climate change initiatives and greater availability of funding for both mitigation and adaptation. In a number of REDD+ projects, community forestry is a primary management modality. For example, in Seima Protection Forest in Mondulkiri Province, Cambodia, where a REDD+ pilot project implemented by the Forestry Administration and the Wildlife Conservation Society is assisting local indigenous communities to obtain collective land titles and benefit from increased tenure security[12].

The increasing availability of climate change adaptation funds may present new opportunities to strengthen the role of community forestry in climate change adaptation. New funding mechanisms such as the ASFN Strategic Response Fund provide the chance to implement research, analytical studies and study tours to highlight the linkages between community forestry and climate change adaptation.

[12] http://theredddesk.org/countries/initiatives/seima-protection-forest-redd-pilot-project

A female resident getting ready to collect NTFPs in the Ban Huay Sapan Samakee Community Forest (Thailand).

Lessons learned

Various key lessons emerged from the workshop discussions underscored by the need to document and expand the evidence base on the linkages between community forestry and climate change adaptation and promote the role of community forestry within the adaptation agenda.

This need can be achieved by reframing existing knowledge on community forestry through the lens of climate change adaptation, as well as highlighting emerging examples, case studies and lessons learnt from the field. Existing and new knowledge also needs to be disseminated more widely among relevant experts, policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders using appropriate channels.

Collaboration and coordination between government agencies responsible for community forestry, agriculture, and climate change adaptation needs to be strengthened, particularly in regard to allocation of forest land rights to different stakeholders. Coordination across different levels of government also needs to be improved, and community forestry and climate change adaptation integrated into development planning at national, provincial and district levels.

The ASFCC Learning Group members noted that adaptation to climate change needs to take place at multiple levels – regional, national, provincial, district, community, household, and across landscapes. It will require the participation of a wide range of stakeholders including national and sub-national governments, the private sector, academia, land owners, and urban and rural communities.

Different adaptation approaches will be required depending on specific local circumstances and objectives. Community forestry is one of the many approaches that can be used to support climate change adaptation, such as integrated landscape management, ecosystem-based adaptation, agro-forestry, infrastructure developments, and initiatives on private land. Community forestry can best be used in conjunction with other strategies, and will be particularly valuable in situations where forest land is held, managed and utilised on a communal basis, and/or landless people make use of forest resources.

Government and local people (below and right) work together in East Inle Reserved Forest, Mong Hsauk Village Community Forest, Shan State, Myanmar.

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Women of Ban Huay Sapan Samakee Community Forest, Kanchanaburi, Thailand sells preserved and fresh mushrooms, a valuable NTFP in the community.

RECOFTC's mission is to enhance capacities for stronger rights, improved governance and fairer benefits for local people in sustainable forested landscapes in the Asia and the Pacific region.

RECOFTC holds a unique and important place in the world of forestry. It is the only international not-for-profit organization that specializes in capacity development for community forestry. RECOFTC engages in strategic networks and effective partnerships with governments, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, local people and research and educational institutes throughout the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. With over 25 years of international experience and a dynamic approach to capacity development – involving research and analysis, demonstration sites and training products – RECOFTC delivers innovative solutions for people and forests.

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