Ensuring social forestry delivers through participatory action research

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Highlights

- The foundations of successful social forestry are based on the effective participation of all stakeholders.

- An additional fundamental is ensuring there is good understanding of social forestry based on quality research, helping to address the challenges and opportunities to ensure social forestry can deliver on its potential. A fundamental prerequisite to this is that government agencies and non-governmental organizations have the capacity to use participatory tools to conduct the research.

- Key stakeholders, including government offices and national and international research organizations, need to mainstream participatory action research in their agendas to address the challenges and opportunities for social forestry development in Southeast Asia.

Opportunities and challenges facing social forestry in Southeast Asia

The management of forest landscapes in Southeast Asia is highly complex. This complexity often results in failures that can have devastating economic, environmental and social impacts, including deforestation and forest degradation, increasing social inequalities and weakening of rights of forest communities. In response, many governments have committed to developing social forestry to increase forest protection and address social issues such as rural poverty, food insecurity and conflict resulting from competing tenure claims.

This commitment is reflected in the ambitious targets of many ASEAN Member States (AMS) to hand over forest lands to local communities under social forestry programs. For example, Viet Nam has a target of ensuring that roughly 30 percent of its forestland will be in the hands of local communities by 2020. The rationale is that full participation of local communities in forest landscape management is necessary to promote buy-in, develop effective and sustainable management strategies, reduce conflict, and share benefits equitably.

There are, however, challenges to achieving the targets and ensuring that social forestry is a success. One issue is that many forest communities are geographically isolated and socially marginalized. As a result, the perceptions, interests and needs of these communities are frequently overlooked or misunderstood in policy development and decision-making processes. The key challenge here is the lack of participatory processes employed in designing, implementing and monitoring the various social forestry programs across the region. This is exacerbated by the low capacity of government institutions and research organizations to conduct research in a participatory manner. An outcome of this is that social forestry programs often fail to effectively address the needs of those living in and around the region's forests

Participatory action research (PAR) as a tool for addressing the challenges and opportunities facing social forestry in ASEAN region

Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach to enquiry that involves researchers and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better. PAR is an invaluable method for incorporating both local traditional knowledge and modern scientific knowledge into research processes. It is also frequently used to shed light on power dynamics within communities or social processes, and to bring the voices of marginalized groups into research and decision-making processes. When designed and implemented effectively, PAR can be an extremely useful approach for strengthening social forestry in the ASEAN region. By placing forest communities at the heart of social forestry design and implementation, PAR can systematically address problems and opportunities with sustainable outcomes.

PAR's role in developing social forestry is based on the recognition that local communities know the forest landscapes the best. They depend on these landscapes the most, have proven to be effective managers of these landscapes and have rights to these landscapes.

Examples from Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand

Few universities in Southeast Asia offer courses on conducting PAR. This is a concern, considering that PAR can be valuable in strengthening social forestry and commitments across the region to develop it. Recognizing this, RECOFTC, with support from the ASEAN-Swiss Partnership on Social Forestry and Climate Change (ASFCC), has been collaborating with several national research and development organizations to develop their capacities to work with forest communities to address the challenges and opportunities for the development of social forestry. Partner countries are Indonesia (University of Hasanuddin), Myanmar (Forest Research Institute and University of Forestry) and Thailand (RaksThai Foundation, Maejo University and Chiang Rai Rajabhat University).

The use of PAR tools in forest communities in the three countries generated a number of valuable insights for the development of social forestry. These include processes for communities getting tenure certificate to their forests, ensuring they are able to meaningfully benefit from their forests and build their capacity to adapt to climate change. The common findings across the three countries include:

▪ Insecure tenure and the inability to prevent illegal logging and encroachment by outsiders reduces the incentives for local people to invest in social forestry.

▪ The process to establish and manage community forests is highly complex and time-consuming, mainly due to burdensome regulations. Most communities are unable to navigate the process without external help. As a result, establishing social forestry is too often driven by external projects. Participation of local people in decision-making processes at the community level is low. This is particularly true for those who are marginalized. In general, women are less able to participate in social forestry decision-making processes than men due to their lower social

status and traditional social norms. Men are frequently engaged in high-value activities such as logging, while women's activities revolve around household needs, such as collecting firewood and non-timber forest products. Female-headed households tend to have more limited livelihood assets available to them than male-headed households.

▪ A number of barriers restrict the commercialization of forest products by local communities. At the research sites, people mainly collect, produce and sell raw materials because they lack the necessary skills, knowledge, resources and equipment to process them into higher value products.

▪ The use of PAR proved to be particularly beneficial in helping identify and address the challenges and opportunities facing the communities. For example, in Myanmar, part of the research process involved local community representatives participating in a national-level, multi-stakeholder workshop that was organized to address identified issues and challenges. This helped improve the legislative environment for social forestry in the country. Examples include the revisions to the Forest Law (2018) and Community Forestry Instructions (2016 and 2019).

The emphasis on inclusivity (participation) and progress (action) by the research teams resulted in mutual learning and understanding among the researchers, community members and participating local government officials. It also led to collective action to pool resources to address the identified challenges and opportunities.

Recommendations for mainstreaming PAR in development of social forestry in Southeast Asia

The PAR studies shed light on the barriers to establishing and developing social forestry and upscaling community-based forest enterprises. It highlighted the challenges of implementing recent national forest policy changes at local level in all three countries.

The process has also demonstrated how PAR can help identify the challenges and opportunities and propose ways forward.

The work emphasized the importance of having a pool of capable researchers and facilitators working at the community level who know how to support local people to engage in, and benefit from, social forestry. PAR can be used to identify and address problems at the community level. It can also be used to promote learning and innovation through partnerships between communities, government

institutions, NGOs, the private sector and other actors. In this way, it has the potential to be a highly effective tool for ensuring the success of social forestry. Recommendations based on the findings are listed below:

▪ Universities in the region need to mainstream PAR methods in curriculums of students studying social forestry. Many of these students will go on to work in the field of forest governance and management and will need these skills to do their job effectively.

▪ National and local government departments in the region should encourage their staff to use participatory processes to address the challenges and opportunities facing social forestry. Investing in decision making processes that use the findings of PAR will reap significant benefits for all social forestry stakeholders, including governments.

▪ International research organizations need to do more to develop the capacity of research organizations in Southeast Asian countries to conduct PAR. This includes raising awareness of the value of PAR, promoting appropriate tools, and communicating the findings to help support the development of social forestry based on participatory principles.

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