

People, Forests and Human Well-being: Managing Forests for People in a Period of Rapid Change

Introduction

The first-ever Asia-Pacific Forestry Week (APFW), held around the 22nd Session of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission (APFC) in Hanoi 21-25 April 2008, brought together individuals from governments, non-government organisations, research institutions, regional and international networks, UN agencies, and the private sector to share perspectives and seek solutions to the most challenging issues facing forests and forestry today. During the week, each day was devoted to a different element of the three pillars of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic. This synthesis captures some of the richness of the debate from the social session focusing on forests and poverty issues, as a way to share the key points and recommendations with a wider audience.

The session, organised by RECOFTC, with the support of the Asia Forest Network (AFN) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), questioned some of our assumptions and deepened both conceptual and practical understanding of fundamental issues affecting people, forests and human well-being. Four presenters examined different aspects of the challenge from a range of perspectives – from the local to the global level. The issues raised were then debated by the audience and five panellists, chosen to represent different interests. In the afternoon, the APFC reflected on the morning's debate as the basis for recommendations for action.

Background

The FAO State of the World's Forests 2007 reports that the relative contribution of the forestry sector to GDP in the Asia-Pacific region has been declining for the past decade. The region is now the biggest net importer of forest products in the world and the largest exporter of non-wood forest products. Variation in the net rate of change in forest area is much more pronounced in the region. Several countries are losing forests at rates exceeding 1.5 percent per year (e.g. Indonesia and Myanmar), among the highest rates of loss in the world. At the same time APEC leaders, in 2007, made a commitment to increase forest cover in the region by 20 million hectares by 2020. Forest conservation and management have now returned to the centre stage of the global debate on environment and development due to the recognition that forest loss and degradation result in more greenhouse gas emissions than the global transport sector.

The social session:

Presenters:

*Thomas Enters
Mary Hobley
Norman Jiwan
Frances Seymour*

Panellists:

*Yati Bun
Marcus Colchester
Modesto Ga-ab
CTS Nair
Rowena Soriaga
Kari Tuomela*

Moderator

David Cassells

Session summariser:

Ken Piddington

The Asia-Pacific region has emerged as the global epicentre of economic growth and change. With this growth, along with increasing regional integration, come increased social mobility, rise to middle-income status and growing inequality (RECOFTC, 2008). Models of development are being challenged and no more so than in the forestry sector.

Little is known about the informal forestry sector, as national statistics on income and employment capture only the formal sector. “We often hear that one billion people are dependent on forests, but the reality is that the statistics and numbers are extremely poor. It is shocking that we are moving into the 21st Century and don’t really know how many people live in forests” (Marcus Colchester). Many studies indicate that the informal sector dwarfs the formal sector. It provides benefits especially for poor people who are the main subject of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, people in the informal sector frequently work in the context of ill-defined rights where there is little incentive – if any – to manage natural resources sustainably. Under these circumstances, the challenge laid down at the social session was to question whether:

Under present and foreseeable economic and social trends in the Asia-Pacific region, can we achieve sustainable forest management and better realise the potential of forests and forestry to contribute to improved human well-being?

At the heart of this question lie the still relevant and important statements made by Jack Westoby, which have shaped much of international debate on forests over the last four decades:

“Forestry is as much about people as it is about trees’.

BUT

‘What has forestry done to improve the lot of the common man, of the peasant?

Precious little.” (Westoby, 1977 & 1989)

“On the whole the development philosophy remains unchanged and we still rely on the ‘trickle-down approach’ to alleviate poverty and improve the environment. Development doesn’t happen through rapid growth and trickle-down” CTS Nair (FAO, Rome).

Six Propositions

For decades, foresters, conservationists, and social activists have been making the case that forests and forestry matter – to national economies, rural development and poverty reduction, environmental and cultural sustainability, biodiversity conservation, flood control, human health, conflict prevention, and most recently, climate change.

And yet forests continue to be degraded and converted to other uses at a rate that implies that they don’t matter very much at all to those with the power to control such processes. We have had numerous overlapping and often contradictory paradigms to making forestry matter (Table 1). All of them have done little to slow the rapacious degradation of resources or to reduce the poverty.

Table 1 Changes in Paradigms

1960s 'Trickle-Down'	Forestry for industrial development
1970s 'Basic Needs'	Forestry for local community development (Westoby model), oil crisis, fuelwood crisis
1980s 'Participation'	Social forestry, community forestry
1990s 'Public Sector Reform'	Institutional reform, collaborative, participatory forestry
2000+ 'Good Governance'	Focus on corruption, illegality, decentralisation
2000+ 'MDGs and Poverty'	Poverty, livelihoods
2007+ Renaissance Forestry	Forestry crisis, climate change, dramatic energy and food price spikes

Six propositions underpinned the presentations and shaped the discussion:

1. Forests don't matter.
2. Poverty is not understood.
3. Change is driven from outside the forestry sector.
4. Changes in governance are essential.
5. Forestry and foresters don't matter.
6. Climate change – a moment of opportunity.

Do Forests Matter? The Reality

The significance of forests has been overstated with respect to some objectives and benefits, and underappreciated with respect to others – but the key question is for whom are forests important? As the evidence shows so far – for many people forests don't matter but for some forests matter hugely. They provide a variety of ecosystem goods and services: timber, fuelwood and forage, fruits and vegetables, bushmeat and medicines, materials for handicrafts, hydrological services, pollination services, climate regulation. For those living in or close to forests, dependent on them for a range of livelihood and other services, they are of crucial importance; many urban people may view forests only as a source of timber or a resource ready to be converted to financially more lucrative land uses. Rarely is their importance as a standing source of biomass recognized and appreciated. Forests may even be viewed as a barrier to development.

*"Are forests a sideshow? Direct forest dependence is declining, indirect dependence through services is increasing but it is not until the forests have gone that we realise what we have lost. Only then will we get political and social reaction."*Rod Keenan (University of Melbourne, Australia)

Although we can talk about the effects of deforestation and forest degradation on people, there is nothing more powerful than hearing from one of the people who is directly affected by our actions and decisions. Norman Jiwan is a member of the Dayak Kerambai tribe of West Kalimantan, Indonesia; he illustrated the profound effects on his people of decisions, made in distant places, and changes in political regimes over the last 60 years. The Kerambai's customary lands and forests have been challenged by a succession of logging concessions, rampant illegal activities and the expansion of oil-palm plantations, threatening their social and cultural integrity as well as their livelihood security.

As Norman Jiwan reminds us, for his people, "development without justice is not development, it is exploitation." Their entire cultural, social and economic system depends on the forests; their human and environmental rights bulldozed actually and metaphorically. For them forests matter very much and for all of us forests should matter more than they currently do.

Poverty is not Understood

"Development strategy needs to move beyond the bounds of its present emphasis on economic growth – hundreds of millions of people are born poor and die poor in the midst of increasing wealth. Chronically poor people need more than 'opportunities' to improve their situation. They need targeted support and protection, and political action that confronts exclusion. If policy is to open the door to genuine development for chronically poor people, it must address the inequality, discrimination and exploitation that drive and maintain extreme poverty." CPRC 2005:vi

We have not understood poverty. We do not understand who is poor and why. We have started in the wrong place: with the forests and forestry and trying to justify their 'pro-poorness' or making them more pro-poor. We should have started with people and understanding the conditions that form and reproduce their poverty. Our attempts to place more control at the community-level have often led to increased elite capture of many of these schemes, with a further disenfranchisement of poor people.

One of the major issues about any 'pro-poor' forest policy is the problem of identifying and targeting the poor. This is rarely done; the reasons being both pragmatic (it is very difficult) and also political (it is not usually desired by elites). The word 'poor' is itself a problem covering a multitude of different types of people in different degrees of poverty.

So if we can't use short hand such as the word poor, how are we going to describe and understand poor people's relations with forests? There are three main ways of understanding poverty:

- Spatial poverty (forest dependence argument)
 - remote rural areas where because of remoteness populations are considered to be poor in opportunity. Remoteness however does not necessarily coexist with poverty.
- Temporal poverty (safety net argument)
 - seasonal & within life-cycle

We should not assume if we give everything to the community it will be good for all." Mary Holey (Mary Holey & Associates)

“The issue is about land tenure – who owns the land. We cooperate with forest farmers and villagers but who are the beneficiaries? It’s the top guys, the poor are not part of the committees, so they don’t benefit. This is the reality of South China.” Kari Tuomela (Stora Enso)

- Structural poverty (transformative argument)
 - social, economic and political exclusion
 - little or no voice (extreme poor, coping, improving, capable)

Policies have to be able to respond to the spatial poverty traps – sites of chronic poverty in remote rural areas. Policies need to respond to the livelihood challenges of those people in remote forested areas who have little other than forests on which to build their livelihoods. In such areas, chronic dependence means that changes in policy that affect forest usage have more profound effects on livelihoods than in those areas with diverse livelihood opportunities. Across all areas there are those who suffer temporal vulnerabilities for whom forests and tree products may provide seasonal and/or life-cycle safety nets. The third level of vulnerability is suffered either by particular groups in society, often indigenous groups, excluded groups (because of caste or ethnicity) or within communities because of gender, caste or life-cycle positioning. The effects of policy change on these groups are again different from others in the same community who are not socially or economically excluded. For some, all three levels of vulnerability are in operation at the same time. Structural vulnerability is the most profoundly difficult to change through policy processes and is particularly resistant to change through technocratic solutions without due political process and clearly defined rights.

Unless we understand the different dimensions of poverty, our policies will continue to reinforce poverty rather than provide the necessary changes to help the poor to lift themselves out of poverty.

The implications of this analysis are three-fold:

1. The importance of understanding poverty in a dynamic and differentiated way and thus the provision of different forms of support for those moving out of poverty to those stuck in poverty.
2. The importance of understanding both formal and informal relations – particularly the complexity of power relations, which affects people’s capacity to obtain access to resources and limit others’ access and the high risks attached to the poor challenging these political spaces in person or through their proxies.
3. The importance of establishing linkages between sectoral policies and those that aim to provide social protection to the poorer groups in policy dialogues; the importance of formulating and implementing pro-poor forest policies taking into account the broader livelihood constraints faced by the rural poor including issues of access to justice, and access to land.

“Where is all the land for this 20 million ha of forest? One of the impediments to increasing forest cover is competitive land uses – lands that have potential for forestry are equally attractive to agriculture and energy production.”
Kari Tuomela (Stora Enso)

“Scarcity and instability – two core drivers of change.” Yam Malla (RECOFTC)

Change is Driven from Outside the Forest Sector

The main drivers of change lie outside the forestry sector and our narrow preoccupations with forestry. Advocates of sustainable forest management (SFM) have erred in focusing their efforts within the forestry profession and on forestry-related institutions, although forestry agencies continue to focus on technical aspects and remain a barrier to change, finding it difficult to recognise and engage with the increasing complexity of forestry and the need to think across sectors.

So why is it that after 60 years of economic change in Indonesia we are still rehearsing the same arguments? If we look further into the region – the debate on the future of forests in Asia and the Pacific held by the forestry community tends to focus on recurring themes and major barriers to bringing about SFM, such as constraints to financing SFM, massive and diffuse corruption and the persistence of outdated and unenforceable laws. We are all familiar with them, perhaps even comfortable, allowing us to continue to bemoan their existence but not propelling us into any action to challenge and change them.

In the meantime, emerging drivers of change and new realities have made the headlines, sometimes hardly noticed by those deliberating the removal of old barriers. These new drivers already have had a significant impact on the fate of forests, and some of them will have even more so in the future. There is great urgency to take their potential implications seriously. Examples of new drivers include:

- **Demand and commodity price increases:** Steeply rising demand for and prices of commodities (not just forest products) and increased consumption are increasing pressure on all types of forests and triggering conversion to other land uses (e.g. oil-palm plantation). Increasing levels of food insecurity and associated civil unrest will change land-use policy priorities.
- **Energy price hike:** Surging energy prices have increased interest in bio-energy plantations. In the region, energy self-sufficiency is expected to fall from 77% (1992) to 38% in 2030.
- **Rural transformation and urbanization:** Declining relative importance of agriculture in national economies as people find better employment opportunity in the services and industry sectors. Remittances from more than 50 million migrants (around US\$114 billion in 2006 to countries in the Asia-Pacific region) play a greater role in poverty reduction than forests and forestry. More options are available for young people to turn their backs on forests and agriculture. Between 2006 and 2015 employment in agriculture is projected to contract by 160 million.
- **Market changes:** Shifts in markets and trading patterns are reshaping political influence and business practices. New investors, new values and new rules of the game have repercussions for markets, investment, financial systems and natural resources, particularly the financing of processing capacity – where the ‘hungry mills’ drive an unsustainable demand for timber products to feed them. Chinese imports of logs and wood products have increased by 250% between 1997 and 2003.

If there is going to be change we need to focus on tenure, rights, access to justice, acceptance of customary laws. We need to be respectful of people's cultures and traditions. We need a rights-based approach to forestry, where rights are central and taken seriously." Marcus Colchester (Forest Peoples Programme)

- **Water scarcity:** Populations and areas under absolute and economic water scarcity will increase considerably. This will stoke the debate on the role of forests on water supply.
- **Changes in global financing:** New sources of funds are also currently driving different types of investment choices. Analysts put current sovereign wealth fund assets in the range of US\$1.5 trillion to US\$2.5 trillion. This amount is projected to grow sevenfold to US\$15 trillion in the next 10 years. However, these funds tend to seek out opportunities to invest in forestry where the political regime is stable, where there is strong security of land tenure and an independent judiciary to protect investor rights. In this region, there are very few countries where such conditions prevail.
- **Climate change:** Increasing attention to the role of forests for climate change adaptation/mitigation significantly influences the forest agenda. Payment for environmental services and carbon credit schemes (e.g. CDM, REDD) will shape international discourses on forests and forestry in the coming years.

Changes in Governance are Essential

Fundamental changes in governance – including both substantive and procedural rights related to forests – will be necessary for people to whom forest matter most. Indigenous peoples have limited protection against external forces that determine ownership and use of their land. Despite the large amounts of money and attention that has been devoted to public sector reforms, policy development and implementation continue to be weak, plagued by the persistence of unenforceable regulations.

In Asia and the Pacific, the forest area actively managed by tens of millions of people exceeds 25 million hectares and is increasing. Decentralized bureaucracies are often weak and politicized, and unable to address the real needs of local communities. Their decision making may also be less far-sighted and increase the speed of deforestation and forest degradation. Some of the current attempts to recentralise and to further bureaucratise forestry may lead to further disenfranchisement of those populations whose livelihoods rely on forest access. At the same time, it will have negative impacts on forest conditions. There is still need to reorient and reform national forestry agencies and policies. Capacity building initiatives at all levels are required for foresters to facilitate the engagement of local people in forest governance and management. This is not an easy task as evidence shows that the huge effort that has been underway for years to do just this had relatively limited success to date.

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*Institutional silos –
foresters always meet
with foresters but
decisions are made by
others!” Thomas Enters
(RECOFTC)*

*“REDD money may
finally come from trees
left standing – an
opportunity to change
the political economy of
forestry.” Frances
Seymour (CIFOR)*

Forestry and Foresters Don't Matter

Clearly they do but only if the governance structures are changed and foresters and forestry becomes part of the wider institutional framework. Although foresters cannot change the direction of the emerging drivers of development, continuing to neglect taking them seriously and focusing on conventional barriers only, means that deliberations on how to bring about SFM will remain stuck in a blind alley. We should also question how much forestry has been part of the structures that sustain social exclusion – marginalising people and reinforcing the structures that exclude (Marcus Colchester). Moving on from this, the words of Westoby (1968) are as relevant today as they were 40 years ago and remind us forcefully of our moral responsibilities: “foresters are agents of change – social and economic.” We have a responsibility to recognise the importance of human well-being, as well as the well-being of forests.

Climate Change – a Moment of Opportunity

The international community's new appreciation of the role of forests in mitigating climate change provides an historic opportunity to shift the political economy of forests. Debate at the international level, in forums where forests are never usually discussed, is now dominated by the role of forests in climate change and its mitigation. New mechanisms and aid architecture are being put in place to finance sustainable forest management – an opportunity indeed to ensure that the lessons learnt from 40 years of practice can inform these debates held among people that have not been intimately involved in forestry practice and learning. Critically it is a moment to ensure that the social dimensions of carbon financing for forestry are carefully understood to prevent negative effects on the poor. A particular issue concerns the protection and assertion of the rights of local people as the sellers of carbon.

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*"We should see
ourselves as
accompanying others
and respecting the
integrity of human
culture. Where people
are treated with
respect and
recognition, it makes a
big difference."
Rowena Soriaga (Asia
Forest Network)*

*"Forests in Nepal are
regenerating but the
truth is that people's
well-being still has far
to go. In Nepal we are
only part way there."
Jagdish Baral (Nepal)*

Improving What We Do – Making it Possible to Combine SFM and Improved Human Well-being

If we accept these six propositions and the complex arena of drivers of change, it is clear that we have much to do to change the nature of the debate and the outcomes both for improved human well-being and SFM. The current global debate on climate change provides an important moment of opportunity to influence the course of policy and practice. Based on what we have learnt there are seven areas where we have to improve our understanding and practice:

1. **Start with the poor** – understand their different interests and livelihoods, don't impose our understanding. In our desire to reduce complexity we constantly seek for "the" single solution. We need to accept that there can be no 'one-size fits all' package and change is not amenable to single agency solutions. Responses must be:

- Politically differentiated – determined by political regimes
- Socially differentiated – determined by social structures, hierarchies and power relations
- Spatially differentiated – adapting to levels of remoteness, connectedness to markets, and alternative employment opportunities
- Resource-base differentiated – dependent on the nature and quality of the resource, i.e. forests, forest-agriculture mosaic, agricultural landscapes with trees

If we are going to make any difference at all we must invest in understanding what makes people poor and traps them in poverty. We should put poor people and their vulnerabilities at the centre and not the forests. We must understand the complexity of power relations that affect people's capacity to secure access to resources. We must also recognise the high risks attached to the poor challenging the power relations that threaten their livelihoods and rights to forest resources. Above all, we need to accept and implement wider livelihood-based approaches linked to governance arrangements that promote structural transformation (at local, national and international levels).

2. **Understand and work with the limitations of forests and forestry** – accept and understand where forests make a difference:

- For the capable poor and the well-off – yes!
- For people with some assets – maybe!
- For the extreme poor – rarely mainly no!

3. **Provide broader livelihood options** – the region is changing fast; migration and remittances are playing an ever-increasing role in rural people's livelihoods, shifting the relationships between people and the rural environment. So, we must accept that working **outside the 'forestry sector'** may lead to greater poverty reduction e.g. working for land policy and reform; creating attractive non-farm and off-farm employment options; strengthening social service

*"We need a public
that cares about
forests to get the
political will that we
need." Rod Keenan
(University of
Melbourne, Australia)*

provisions, developing social protection processes that prevent decline into poverty, protect people and help promote them out of poverty.

4. **Harness politics and power** to build active citizenship – this requires significant attention to the role of local governance, and an acceptance that participation alone without an accompanying structural change in relationships doesn't necessarily benefit poor people; attention only to the poor without understanding their relationships with the elites will not lead to sustained change.
5. **Understand the role of the state** – policy, regulatory functions, service delivery and relationships with civil and political society all have major effects on how decisions are taken, and by whom and for whom they are taken. Attention to all these aspects are necessary to ensure that local people who depend on forests are not made further insecure by decisions taken at international, national or local levels.
6. **Role of the market and enterprise** and potential for growth. There is persuasive evidence of the importance of building pro-poor enterprises but equally caution at promoting these forms of growth as the panacea for poverty reduction. Growth and poverty have recently become key focuses in forestry with increasing attention being paid to ways in which to commercialise forest production for pro-poor benefits. The increasing demands for socially responsible forestry by investors and consumers are driving a top-end change in corporate behaviours (e.g. Sumalindo's recent revision of their corporate vision to include the words 'socially responsible'). At the local level, changes include supporting community-based commercial logging, trade in NTFPs, state asset transfer through allocation of plantations and natural forests to communities. Equitable distribution of benefits remains a key issue that needs serious attention. Also commercialization can turn out to be a threat to natural resources. Hence, concerted efforts need to be made to balance commercialization, with the intention of generating additional income, and resource conservation, critical for obtaining the income in the long term.
7. **Global geo-politics** and effects on local-level livelihoods. Currently the major drivers at the local level are coming from international pressure to change national practice with respect to forests and forestry. Climate change may offer a serious opportunity to influence the direction of policy and practice. However, necessary changes are likely to have profound effects on local people, where pressure to reduce forest degradation and deforestation at the local level will increase national incentives to enforce forest protection. Local people may be prevented from using forests for their livelihood needs, or using forest land to farm (often an important route out of poverty). Although the new financing instruments may mean that 'trees will grow on money' there is a real risk that this money will go to the wrong people.

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“Success cannot be measured by sustainability in an unsustainable world. We need to look at sustaining people, before we talk about sustaining forests” Pedro Walpole (Asia Forest Network)

The response of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission to the social session:

“The Commission requested FAO to continue providing support for (i) enhancing community-based forest management and forestry initiatives that help reduce poverty; and (ii) effective implementation of national forest programmes

The Commission requested FAO to: (i) assist countries in developing effective mechanisms, as appropriate, to collect and equitably distribute payments for environmental services; and (ii) develop guidelines to assist countries in developing policies and practices relating to social aspects of sustainable forest management and poverty alleviation” (FAO 2008)

Hope for the future?

As the recent food and oil price hikes have illustrated, globally poverty and food security challenges will not go away in the near future. The importance of engaging in current debates and making good use of the rich forestry development experiences is essential to ensure that those who are already threatened by our global actions are not further driven into poverty and insecurity. We must take these lessons and apply them in a way that is morally responsible and sensitive to the context of individuals and their rights.

What is clear from the discussion and debate is that it will be a difficult and contentious process to increase forest cover in the region by 20 million hectares, as proposed by APEC; in particular when we still continue to disagree on the definition of ‘forests’. As Marcus Colchester asked “does it include oil-palm, large timber estates? The target can be achieved but people will be massively marginalised in the process.” The importance of local determination was emphasized during the debate by Yati Bun and Modesto Ga-ab. Rather than signing-up to other people’s targets, each country should determine its own targets based on an understanding of local and national needs and contexts. Honesty about what is possible should underpin the approach to future forest development: “it doesn’t work to adopt other people’s targets; we should know what can work in our own country and start from within. We need to have decent processes of consultation that really bring communities into the debate” (Yati Bun).

Returning to our opening challenge is it possible to combine SFM and human well-being? Yes it is, but only with a major effort to restructure the way we work. Most importantly, we need to take seriously our moral responsibility for ensuring people’s rights.

Without attention to recognizing and acting on the complex reality illustrated in the seven areas of work, it is clear that we will continue to reproduce the concluding statement made by Ken Piddington:

“My painful conclusion is that the preconditions for sustainable forest management simply do not exist at the present time, with the exception of isolated cases where circumstances have combined with political will to create effective insulation from the pressure of commercial interests.”

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Acknowledgements

This synthesis, written by Mary Hobley with inputs from Thomas Enters, and Yurdi Yasmi, draws on the presentations, subsequent debate and questions from the audience.

Interested to know more?

If you would like to know more about the 'People, Forests, and Human Well-Being' session at the Asia Pacific Forestry Week in Hanoi, to obtain copies of the presentations or to learn more about RECOFTC, please send a message to info@recoftc.org or visit the RECOFTC website at www.recoftc.org.