

PARTICIPATORY MONITORING OF FOREST RESOURCES: CURRENT METHODOLOGIES BEING DEVELOPED IN THAILAND

Joanna Fuller

SUMMARY

This paper outlines some of the issues raised in the first six months of a project working to develop guidelines for the participatory monitoring of community forest resources in Thailand. These include uncertainty about the incentives for motivation, particularly in the face of mistrust between communities and local authorities, and a question mark over the relative merits of 'western' versus 'local' methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

Many communities in Thailand depend upon forest resources for their daily needs, but how sustainable is this use? Is management environmentally responsible, such that ecological functions are maintained?

These questions were raised during the debate surrounding the planned Community Forestry Bill, which revealed that very little is known about the condition of locally managed forest resources. This issue is critical to the debate as local communities want rights to manage and utilise local resources but many people do not trust that such management will be sustainable. This paper gives a brief overview of a project which has been working with local communities to develop participatory techniques for monitoring the state of their

forest resources, an important step if community forestry is to gain credibility.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

When addressing the issue of the sustainability of community forest management, it must be recognised that there are many external factors which can influence management decisions and therefore affect long-term social and ecological sustainability.

Social impacts are well-known – outsiders (e.g. aid projects, NGOs, tourists, businessmen) are often the catalyst for changes in attitudes towards the use of forest resources which can lead to conflicts both within and between communities and outsiders.

The ecological impacts of external influences are, however, sometimes overlooked, with far-reaching consequences. One example is the crop substitution programme aimed at eradicating opium production in Northern Thailand. Due to the need to cultivate crops over more extensive areas than the traditional opium, this inappropriate development policy has led to rapid deforestation of critical headwater forests where streams arise. Dry season drought is now common, and lowland paddies often covered by soil eroded from cultivated slopes above. Whilst upland communities may know how to manage land

sustainably, the incentives to misuse it have been too great.

ASSESSING SUSTAINABILITY

In response to the need to demonstrate the sustainability of community forestry, the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre (RECOFTC) in Bangkok set up a participatory action research project to develop guidelines for the assessment and monitoring of forest resources by local communities. The purpose of the guidelines was to generate reliable data from which current sustainability and future performance could be inferred, and to act as a tool for management.

The project, which started at the end of 1997, aims to empower villagers by involving them in the monitoring process. The idea was to design simple guidelines that would enable them to evaluate the current condition of their forest area and the changes that take place over time. These guidelines would therefore detail methods by which local users could conduct resource surveys and analyse data for use in writing a community forest management plan. Developing such a plan could be used to address certain issues, such as sustainability, and might give credibility to users who are already good stewards of their resources.

LOOKING FOR LOCAL INDICATORS

Preliminary discussions with villagers showed that they regard the condition of vegetation, water resources and wildlife as important indicators of forest health and productivity. In Mae Gahpoo, a Karen village in northern Thailand, for example, villagers explained that

the presence of frogs and crabs in streams indicated good water quality, as did the presence of certain ferns and mosses, whilst an abundance of food plants and the sounds of animals are signs of a healthy forest. The project set out to learn more about these and other indicators and develop a simple, systematic method of using them in an assessment and monitoring process.

Efforts were made to take into account ecological, social, economic and cultural factors as far as possible, in order to develop a process that is both relevant to the needs of local communities and practical according to their situation. By working together with communities, we hoped to learn more about traditional management systems and the knowledge available to evaluate forest condition, as well as discussing the feasibility of methodologies. Further input was sought from scientists and NGOs, both in Thailand and internationally.

In time, we planned to draw up preliminary criteria and indicators based on field experience and research, which could be refined as new experience and information came to light. Recognising the heterogeneity of both forests and communities, the intention was to design a process sensitive to different ecosystems and community needs. This process could be published in the form of monitoring guidelines, for the benefit of communities who develop community forest management plans.

PROGRESS IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

Although some progress has been made towards the original aims of the project, it has

also become clear that a fundamental question remains unanswered, namely *for whom and what are these guidelines really being developed?* Are they for the villagers or the government, for improved management or greater credibility, or a combination of both? Despite repeated attempts to define these objectives, they are still unclear. Part of the problem is that neither villagers nor the government are driving this process, although they are primary stakeholders. Greater efforts are needed to bring all stakeholders together to better understand each other's agendas and, most importantly, to establish a shared goal.

To date, we have concentrated on fieldwork with local communities, asking about the management and use of forest resources and how monitoring might be useful. Given that monitoring requires effort and commitment, communities are unlikely to be interested unless there are clear benefits. Each village visited so far has different circumstances and problems, a different knowledge base and belief system regarding the forest, and different objectives. As yet, too little is known about local perceptions to understand fully the possible incentives for developing a monitoring system. Common to all villages, however, is the desire to maintain or improve the local forest resources and access to them.

Building trust

Ultimately this requires that government authorities recognise a community's efforts. The project hopes that the enthusiasm for working with local communities already demonstrated by a few individuals within the Royal Forest Department (RFD), will become more widespread and institutionalised within both the RFD and the Local Administrative

Organisation (LAO). Perhaps the most important issue to address is whether the authorities are open to the idea of working with local people for sustainable forest management and willing to accept the outcome. If they are, then progress can be made. If not, it may still be possible to continue in the hope that the authorities will change their stance, but progress may be slower.

At the heart of the problem is the lack of trust that often exists between the RFD and villagers. The general feeling is that the RFD does not trust local people to manage their resources well. At the same time, many villagers have suffered the negative consequences of relocation or exclusion from forest areas they once used and know the RFD only as forest police.

Significant changes in attitudes on both sides are needed in order to build up trust and a good working relationship. Field staff are well placed to help build linkages, and this could be one of their most important roles, although it may be a time-consuming one. For example in Romphong village, eastern Thailand, where most people were resettled to the area about seven years ago from a newly designated Wildlife Sanctuary, it has taken a RECOFTC researcher over a year to develop trust. Many villagers are understandably suspicious of outsiders and reluctant to talk about their perception and use of the local forest.

A different scenario can be found in Huay Hin Dam, a Karen village in the West of Thailand. Many people are keen, knowledgeable about the forest and aware of the need to

demonstrate their management capabilities. Furthermore, good working relationships have been developed with the local forest officer, who is both cooperative and enthusiastic, as well as with the RECOFTC researcher, who has gained trust and respect in the village.

Further complications may arise from conflicts of interest within and between villages. For example, in both Huay Hin Dam and Rompothong, a lack of respect or understanding of regulations regarding the use of fire has destroyed regeneration in the community forests.

'Western' or 'local' methodologies?

This project is still in its early stages, thus much learning and groundwork has yet to be done. The dilemma of how scientific the monitoring should be continues to be the focus of much thought and debate; in particular whether western 'scientific' methods are appropriate and useful or whether local methodologies should be developed.

The argument against using western methods cites problems with the time and effort required, difficulties of obtaining accurate data at regular intervals, the level of knowledge needed for both measuring, analysis and use of the data acquired, and doubt over what data are actually necessary. On the other hand, people like Khun Payong, who lives in Huay Hin Dam and runs a small NGO, believe that using the western methods accepted by the RFD is the way forward for villagers, as it facilitates negotiations with the RFD. Although the older members of the Community Forest Committee found such methods difficult, there was sufficient interest from the younger generation to suggest that

they could be applied. Thus, if a major objective of the monitoring process is to facilitate negotiation with authority, the relative merits of developing local methodologies rather than using more accepted western methods must be carefully assessed.

CONCLUSION

In raising the above issues the last six months have been very useful. We have recognised that our objectives were not sufficiently clear, all partners have not yet been fully involved in the process and the benefits to local communities are undefined. The underlying political context, particularly surrounding rights of access to forest resources, is hampering progress, which is further compounded by lack of trust between villagers and authority. As for the future, given the current circumstances, further negotiation and planning are required to determine the direction of the project.

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ACRONYMS

LAO	Local Administrative Organisation
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
RECOFTC	Regional Community Forestry Training Centre (Bangkok)
RFD	Royal Forest Department

Please send comments on this paper to:

Rural Development Forestry Network
Overseas Development Institute
Portland House
Stag Place
London SW1E 5DP
United Kingdom
Email: forestry@odi.org.uk

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Rural Development Forestry Network
Overseas Development Institute
Portland House
Stag Place
London SW1E 5DP

Tel: +44 (0) 171 393 1600

Fax: +44 (0) 171 393 1699

Email: forestry@odi.org.uk

Website: www.oneworld.org/odi/

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