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INNOVATIVE TRAINING PROCESS ENSURING EQUITY IN FOREST MANAGEMENT



A Lao Regional Learning Group Member hones his facilitation skills at a training session with community members

Photo credit: RECOFTC-The Center for People and Forests

Forests, forest communities and people protected through improved engagement with officials trained on equity

“Strengthening the capacity of sub-national level government is the key to fill in the policy and practice gap.”

March 2015 — *“I can’t imagine Lao without forests. On a daily basis, I see how forest communities depend on them to feed their families and support their livelihoods. The whole country – even the region – benefits from and relies on their long-term health.”* This is how Mr. Bounchanh Lattanavongkot, Deputy Director, Luang Prabang, Provincial Forestry Section, Lao PDR, describes the importance of protecting forests in the Greater Mekong, and he is correct. Without forests, millions would lose access to food and the natural chain would break down.

Key to maintaining these forests are the communities who maintain them. These people know them best, but they are not involved in the decision-making processes, leaving them vulnerable to unfair and inequitable forest management policies and practices, putting everyone at risk. But knowing this alone is not enough to protect the people and the forests. The government needs to engage with them.

Mr. Lattanavongkot pointed out, *“It’s not enough to know these people are an important part of the process. We need to know how to interact with them.”* Indeed, while forestry officials communicate directly with communities at the grassroots level, they often lack the skills to effectively engage.

As a result of this problem, USAID GREEN Mekong and RECOFTC - The Center for People and Forests responded with the launch of the Regional Learning Group (RLG) on Equitable Forest Governance. This initiative has since provided regular training to Mr. Lattanavongkot and 21 other sub-national government forestry officials from Lower Mekong countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia), and the impact has been substantial.

Through a series of four workshops with the same members, the RLG has made sure to respond to real problems identified by RLG members through their training. Mr. Lattanavongkot has experienced the hands-on learning personally, *“From participating in these workshops, we learned how to talk to communities; we then returned home, met with the people and actually collected information about the issues important to them. But we didn’t only meet with the people, we understood how to be equitable in our approach, reaching out to women and other community members with less of a voice.”*

The goal of the RLG is to highlight the importance of equity in decision-making processes, from start to finish, and the extended training has allowed that to happen. Mr. Lattanavongkot continued, *“After we had the information, we returned to the workshop, learned how to analyze the problems and shared our experiences with RLG colleagues from other countries. This information helped to properly address equity issues in forest management.”*

The result of the workshops is a fundamental and important change in forestry governance and policy-making at the local level. Officials now understand better how to engage and understand community members, making their participation more impactful and protecting the forests important to everyone.

Mr. Lattanavongkot’s comments reflect this deepened understanding of equity’s importance and how committed the RLG members have become to advancing it, *“To foster participation is to guarantee their rights of access to natural resources. And, as we guarantee their rights, it brings about equity. And with equity and rights the people benefit and the resources are protected”.*

The three-year project, which began in 2012, aims to improve capacities of policymakers and grassroots stakeholders in the Lower Mekong region to promote equity in forest-based climate change mitigation policy and practice.