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USAID PROGRAM DRIVES INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES IN LOWER MEKONG, BRINGS EQUITY IN FOREST GOVERNANCE



Two Thai RLG members discuss the concept of equity with an ethnic Karen forest community

Photo credit: Thailand Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation

Government-targeted capacity building improves engagement between officials and forest communities

“Strengthening the capacity of sub-national level governments is essential for closing the policy and practice gaps.”

September 2015 — *“We need to engage with forest communities to better understand them and help them. When we do that, we protect the forests and the livelihoods of the people who live in them.”* This statement, from Ms. Ratana Lakanawarakul, Director of Forest Environment Division in the Forest Conservation and Plant Research office at the Thailand Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP) hits at the heart of USAID GREEN Mekong’s mission: if we create a more equitable process with improved engagement, everyone wins.

As such, when the Regional Learning Group (RLG) on Equitable Forest Governance began its work with government officials across the Lower Mekong region, the aim was to fill in the policy and practice gaps; the program expected training to improve the ability of sub-national level officials to engage with forest communities. However, the results have exceeded these expectations.

This program, implemented by RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests, trained 20 sub-national government forestry officials from Lower Mekong countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia), preparing them to better engage with communities.

Through a series of four workshops with the same members, the RLG accomplished this initial goal, providing them with new tools and knowledge aiming to improve equity when they engage communities. But members took the initiative further on their own, and integrated equity concept and principles into their work. According to Ms. Lakanawarakul, *“the equity training had a big impact on our program. We changed our entire approach.”*

These institutional changes included initiatives such as training over 100 staff members from the DNP on equity, as well as training forest communities to empower them, to improve their internal processes towards equity, and to better prepare them to engage with the government. Since the program began, seven pilot sites have been set up across the country with workshops being held regularly. In addition, the DNP produced a 10-minute video covering the importance of equity in forest management and explaining the steps to achieve it. The video, which will be released in both Thai and Karen languages, accompanies additional knowledge products that will ensure accessibility by a wide audience.

Likewise, other RLG members are producing content appropriate for their local context, including an equity cartoon in Lao PDR and equity policy briefs in Vietnam. The reason for this uptake is simple says Ms. Lakanawarakul, *“We integrated the equity concept into our programming because it can be applied in reality to help the forest communities improve forest management. It’s sustainable. It leads to good policy and fair laws.”*

The feedback from Thailand’s efforts has already been positive, Ms. Lakanawarakul continued, *“After the training, we saw communities improve their organization, encouraging women and youth participation. They understood the concepts, saw what they were lacking and made a change.”* While the USAID GREEN Mekong program is wrapping up, the concept of equity have caught on and will continue to impact the region’s forestry institutions, improving forest management and protecting the rights and livelihoods of forest communities.

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.