**Social aspects of forest restoration—stakeholders, motivation and collaboration**

**Working with Communities**

Very few forest areas in Southeast Asia are unaffected by human activities. Even forests in protected areas have been damaged in the past and degradation continues in many of them. Forest restoration is therefore needed to counterbalance ongoing degradation. Therefore, human aspects of forest restoration are equally as important as scientific aspects. These include the participation, motivation and resourcefulness of local people and the co-operation of central government and local government agencies. Without understanding social realities, the most scientifically valid restoration techniques may fail.

**Motivation is Fundamental**

Motivation is the perceived or real benefit gained from any activity. For successful forest restoration, strong community motivation over several years is essential. Local people recognize a broad range of incentives. Direct exploitation of forest resources for subsistence or income-generation is, perhaps, the most obvious one, but it may not be the primary motivation. Environmental, cultural and even political considerations are often put forward as more compelling reasons for community participation in forest restoration.

**Economic motives**

Communities may receive money through government departments, NGO’s or private companies for their participation, e.g., as labour for tree planting, to maintain tree plots or prevent/suppress fires. In addition, eco-tourism may generate income. Extractive benefits, especially in less wealthy communities, may provide significant incentives. However, access to such forest resources may be restricted in protected areas.

**Environmental motives**

Most communities are acutely aware of the environmental impacts of deforestation. More often than not, this awareness stems from realization of a reduction or loss of agricultural productivity and reduced quality of lifestyle, due to degradation or depletion of water resources. A community’s motivation to restore forest areas is often related to reducing these impacts. However, watershed protection is a “public good” – with downstream benefits far beyond the local community. So those restoring forests for watershed services should be rewarded from payment from national tax revenue.

**Cultural motives**

Forests and forest products are important in many cultural practices and often play significant roles in cultural ceremonies, or as components of spiritual belief. Many communities have tree ceremonies at the beginning of the New Year, including the Lahu, Karen, Lisu and Akha peoples. Similarly, many forest products are still important in traditional medicine.

# Political motives

Political considerations are sometimes the most compelling reason for the participation of communities in forest restoration – with the strengthening of land tenure rights being the primary incentive. Land-use practices, such as reforestation, are viewed favorably by government officials and may strengthen the rights of communities to reside in protected areas.

# How can motivation be sustained?

Motivation at the community level can be sustained when stewardship of the project remains with the community. That is, the community is the lead interest group in decision-making. Additionally, being publicly credited for the project success enhances community motivation. Communities that develop their own activities (such as, education programs) and enforce their own laws, to aid the sustainable use of their forest areas (e.g. restrictions on hunting and gathering activities), are more likely to sustain long-term project outcomes.

# Collaboration is Crucial

Close collaboration ensures that resources are not wasted and prevents confusion and misunderstandings as to the roles of different organizations involved in the project.

**Who are the “stakeholders”?**

“Stake-holders” include individuals or groups that have any interest in the area of land to be restored or may influence the long-term success of restoration. They should all have some involvement in decision making and project implementation e.g. government forestry departments, village headman or administrators elected by the community, supportive NGOs, funders and those providing technical support.

Poor information flow among stakeholders can cause failure of restoration attempts. Visions of what a forest should be used for, and whose interest it serves may differ among stakeholders. There may also be uncertainty about the roles of different stakeholders. It is therefore essential that the roles and responsibilities of everyone are clearly defined and communicated among stakeholders is established early during project development.

**How can collaboration be encouraged?**

Different interest groups come with different issues, however common goals can usually be identified and used to draw groups together to create joint working strategies. Each interest group can maintain an individual role, though to define these roles from the onset is important. Collaboration is enhanced if the interest groups are prepared to share their motives. A neutral person or organization that is familiar with the stakeholders and who is not seen as authoritarian or gaining any direct benefit from their involvement can be influential in ensuring collaboration. A knowledge of village social structure, committee members and disagreements within a community may be beneficial. This neutral authority can act as a ‘go between’ to diplomatically introduce or transfer ideas to a larger group forum, through sound facilitation techniques. It is often difficult to achieve complete consensus between interest groups, but working in this manner with those who support the project will promote productive outcomes.

Collaboration is maintained when the interest groups believe that their involvement is beneficial to the success of the restoration project and their capacity to direct the restoration project and achieve worthwhile outcomes is sustained. Collaboration among government organisations and local communities on forest restoration projects provides opportunities to build new relationships and improve existing ones.

**Local Skills and Resources are Invaluable**

Utilization of existing community skills and resources can save time and money, which may ultimately determine project success. Indigenous knowledge and skills should be identified and used during planning and implementation. For example, cheap house-building techniques can be applied to nursery construction. Natural materials and implements, sourced locally, can be also be used as media etc. during nursery operations and tree planting. Many villagers may already have plant-propagation skills. Villagers may also have knowledge of where seed trees grow and the economic uses of proposed framework tree species. This knowledge might include optimum seed collection times and techniques. Fire prevention and control is also old knowledge in many communities that can be easily applied to protect young restoration sites.

# … but not all local practices are beneficial to restoration

Some local practices are harmful to restoration, however. A common mistake occurs when preparing a restoration site, when villagers completely clear a site of all vegetation (as they would for agriculture) – including regenerating trees. This reduces the potential for practicing ANR, increases the need for tree planting and greatly increases restoration costs.

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