



INTERNATIONAL
LAND CONSERVATION
NETWORK

A report from RECOFTC illustrates the growth and potential of community-based solutions for forest management

*Janalezza Esteban Thuaud, Program Officer, Partnerships and Resource Mobilization, RECOFTC
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The Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) is an international forest-management non-profit based in Thailand. It strives for a future where people live equitably and sustainably in and beside healthy, resilient forests.



The organization takes a long-term, landscape-based, and inclusive approach to supporting local communities in securing land and resource rights, stopping deforestation, finding alternative livelihoods and fostering gender equity. It is the only non-profit organization of its kind in Asia and the Pacific. With more than 30 years of experience working with people and forests, RECOFTC has built trusting relationships with partners at all levels. It has connections with multilateral institutions, governments, private organizations, and local communities. Its work enables countries to foster good forest governance, mitigate and adapt to climate change, and achieve the climate goals set by the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.

RECOFTC is a member of the Peoples Forests Partnership (PFP), which provides leadership for, and amplifies the voices and interests of, Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) within climate- change mitigation initiatives. PFP brings together partners from IPLCs, project developers, and NGOs to build trust around the highest social standards, and to channel climate finance directly to IPLCs. RECOFTC is also a member of the Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest finance (LEAF) Coalition's Stakeholder Engagement Group. In this role, it provides feedback on IPLC and social-safeguard concerns in the developing jurisdictional REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) space. Its work for LEAF has centered around communities in Nepal and Viet Nam.

Elevating community forestry through policy in Cambodia

RECOFTC works on 10 landscapes across seven countries in the Asia-Pacific that are threatened by deforestation, unsustainable practices, and climate change. One of RECOFTC's priority landscapes is the Prey Lang landscape in Cambodia.

Prey Lang's people and biodiversity are threatened by deforestation and resource extraction. Prey Lang is also one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots. Its 900,000 hectares contain Southeast Asia's last remaining lowland evergreen forests, as well as deciduous forests, flooded forests, grasslands, marshes, and freshwater mangroves. This highly diverse landscape harbors many endangered and threatened species.



Community members in the field, Credit: RECOFTC

Prey Lang is home to more than 250,000 people, including the ethnic Kuy who represent 33 percent of the region's population. In the Kuy language, *Prey Lang* means 'our forest'. Prey Lang is the foundation of Kuy culture, traditions, and spirituality.

This threatened landscape is also important on a regional and global scale. Its watershed regulates the flow of water and sediments into Tonle Sap Lake, a UNESCO biosphere reserve, and the Mekong River. Because it prevents floods and droughts downstream, Prey Lang is crucial to the safety and livelihoods of the millions of people who rely on the river for water, fishing, and transportation. Prey Lang's high carbon-sequestration value also makes the landscape a crucial global asset in the fight against climate change.

Empowered local communities must lead the protection and sustainable development of this forested landscape, and RECOFTC uses its vision, skill, relationships, and experience to support their efforts. Since 2006, RECOFTC has helped the people of Prey Lang build capacity, secure land tenure and resource rights, and improve land governance and management.

A formal report echoes on-the-ground testimony about the impact of community-based solutions

A [Special Report](#) published by the RECOFTC in 2021 illustrates how communities are leveraging inclusivity to promote community-based forest management. The report illustrates how government officials, community members, researchers, and other stakeholders have uplifted the once-fringe concept of community management to make it a pillar of Cambodian forest policy.

Despite growing recognition and acceptance of community-based forest management, the framework is still relatively new. Governments have only officially embraced it in policy for about three decades.

RECOFTC's Special Report recounts how a small but persistent group of Cambodians championed the idea, advocated for widespread adoption, and enabled its trajectory from concept to reality.

The report looks at the development of two models of community-based forest management: (1) community forests on land administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and (2) community-protected areas on land administered by the Ministry of Environment.



Khea Sokchea, Credit: RECOFTC

The report also highlights important moments in Cambodia's history of community forestry from development to implementation. It illustrates how community forests were formalized and the potential economic benefits they create for the people who live in and around them. It also underscores the many challenges that community-forestry practitioners have overcome and those that remain.

Evidence and experience show that giving communities the right to manage and benefit from their forest is a viable alternative to the kind of development

that has devastated them in the past. Data from the United Nations Development Programme shows that, even as community forests and community-protected areas began to flourish from 2010 to 2018, forest cover shrank from 57 percent to 47 percent. But while the country's forests were declining, the health of community forests and community-protected areas remained stable and, in some cases, improved.

Khea Sokchea, head of the Romney Commune Community Forest, has witnessed the impact of community forestry on the livelihood of his community and the quality of the forest surrounding it. He said that, once the land near his village was formally designated as a community forest, the military departed, and tree cover began to increase. His community can now gather forest resources, such as resin, bamboo, honey, and vegetables.

Community members are also hopeful that the ecotourism site they have developed will help save the area's forests. Sokchea said that regular tourism generates income that can then be funneled into forest protection. "When I imagine this, it makes me appreciate what I have done," he said.

Despite success stories like Sokchea's, there are still fewer than 1,000 community forests and community-protected areas in Cambodia. These areas cover about 700,000 hectares, just 35 percent of what the government aims to achieve by 2029.

As Cambodia scales up community-led approaches to forest management, many challenges remain. These include weak implementation of laws, the poor quality of forest land allocated to communities, and unequal access to forest benefits. RECOFTC's Special Report offers clarity on how communities, practitioners, and government officials can continue to put policy into practice to ensure that community forestry and community-protected areas meet their full potential.

Read more about RECOFTC's work in Prey Lang [here](#).

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