



Briefing Note

Regional Fellowship Program

Community Forestry and Rural Livelihoods in Myanmar

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Abbreviations

CF	Community Forestry
Ha	Hectare
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products

Table of Contents

List of Figures	i
List of Table	i
1 Introduction	1
2 State and Status of Community Forestry	1
2.1 Trends in forest cover	1
2.2 Causes of deforestation and forest degradation	2
2.3 Situation of Community Forestry	3
3 Impacts of Community Forestry on rural livelihoods	3
4 Policy on Community Forestry	5
5 Conclusion	6
References	Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Figures

Figure 1: Status of Forest Cover in Myanmar	1
Figure 2: Estimated Forest Cover Change	2
Figure 3: Distribution of CF by State	2

List of Table

Table 1: Positive Effects of Community Forestry	3
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1 Introduction

Myanmar forest areas have decreased significantly over the past two decades [2, 3]. Losing forest cover has caused environmental damage such as soil erosion, the degradation of soil fertility and the loss of biodiversity, among other issues [1, 4, 5]. Diminishing forest has also meant the loss of a natural safety net for people who have long been depending on it [6, 7, 8]. The main causes of deforestation are: (1) commercial forest logging; (2) agricultural land expansion; (3) the need for land for human settlement and infrastructure construction; (4) natural disasters such as forest fires; and (5) poverty [6, 9, 10]. To ameliorate the situation, a Forestry Policy aiming to promote sustainable forest management has been implemented since 1995. The objectives of this policy include: (1) the protection of soil, water, wildlife, biodiversity and the environment; (2) the sustainability of forest resource use; (3) the provision of the basic needs of people for fuel, shelter, food and recreation; (4) the efficient use, in a socially and environmentally friendly manner, of the full economic potential of forest resources; (5) the participation of the people in the conservation and use of forests; and (6) the promotion of public awareness about the vital role of forests in the well-being and socio-economic development of the nation. Community Forestry falls under the fifth objective of the policy and is also the first program introduced in order for communities themselves to maintain the forest resources and to alleviate poverty [6, 11]. The objective has been to conserve the forest and to reduce community poverty through the sustainable use of forest resources [12]. As defined by the FAO, Community Forestry (CF) relates to “any situation that intimately involves local people in forest activity”[5].

Using the available secondary data, this paper aims to (1) review the current state and status of Community Forestry in the country, (2) examine the impact of Community Forestry on the community and on household livelihoods and (3) highlight key policies in relation to Community Forestry.

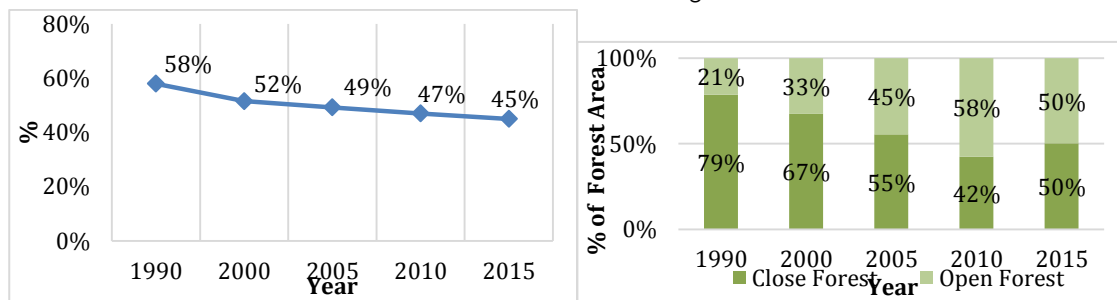
2 State and Status of Community Forestry

2.1 Trends in forest cover

Myanmar’s forest cover has been decreasing (Figure 1). With 1.2 percent of forest lost annually, land under forest has diminished from 58 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 2005 and 45 percent in 2015 – the third highest rate of decrease in the world after Brazil and Indonesia [2, 3]. The total loss has amounted to around 10 million hectares (ha) [13]. It is estimated that 29.1 million ha of

land area remain under forest [2].The highest rate of forest lost has been noted in Magway, Kayah, Kachin, Bago, Ayeyarwady, Mandalay and Sagaing Division [14]. The Ayeyarwady Delta alone has suffered a 12 percent forest loss in the last 10 years [3]. Evidence of deforestation can be seen by the fact that, from 1990 to 2015, the area of dense, close forest has decreased from 79 percent to 50 percent and the open forest has increased to 50 percent from 21 percent of total forest area [13] (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Estimated Forest Cover Change



Source: Nail (2018) [2]

Source: FRA (2015) [13]

2.2 Causes of deforestation and forest degradation

Illegal and legal logging has been the leading cause of forest degradation and has taken place across all of Myanmar's States, most noticeably in Shan and Kachin. From 2001 to 2013, more than 10 million m3 of timber was exported out of the country as unauthorized harvest [15]. Local activities, such as shifting cultivation, the over-harvesting of fuel wood and charcoal, and the over-grazing of livestock, has exacerbated the loss of forest cover [15, 16, 17].

Figure 3: Distribution of CF by State



Source: Kyaw Tint(2011)[1]

Shifting cultivation has long been practiced by indigenous people. This practice has been viewed by the government as natural forest degradation [16]. The approximate forest loss every year from shifting cultivation is 15,000 ha [15]. Rising demand for fuel wood and charcoal exacerbates forest loss. The majority of rural households still rely on traditional biomass for cooking and heating given the under-supply of electricity and fuel gas in the country [6, 18].

Agricultural transition has been underway in Myanmar, and agricultural production has shifted towards cash crop production. This has boosted demand for farmland in the country and accelerated forest clearance. Between 2002 and 2014, it is estimated that a million ha of forestland was cleared for rubber and oil palm plantations, and the plan now is to allocate another 2 million ha of forestland for the production of other commercial crops, including paddy, pulses and sugarcane [15]. The loss of forest cover has contributed to rising temperatures, erratic rainfall and more frequent floods, causing huge losses to the national economy [19].

In response to this rapid loss of forest, the Myanmar government has made significant efforts relating to forest rehabilitation. In 2010, about 13.5 million ha of teak forest was planted and in 2014, the export of logs was banned [13, 15]. The government also reserves about 3.2 million ha of primary forest and 24 million ha of other naturally regenerated forest [13]. One aim of these efforts has been to deliver forest and forest revenue to communities under Community Forestry initiatives [20].

2.3 Situation of Community Forestry

Community Forestry initiatives (CFs) are among the key national programs to support sustainable forest management in the country [21]. The establishment of CFs has aimed both to conserve the forest and to reduce local poverty through the sustainable use of community forest resources [1, 22]. The Forest Department has taken the lead in the implementation of CF programs in collaboration with donors and NGOs [23]. The first Community Forestry initiative was established in 1995 and, by 2017, the number had increased to encompass 3,840 community forest user groups throughout the country [12, 24]. CF implementation areas can be mostly found in Shan State, Mandalay, Magway and Ayeyarwady, where forest degradation has been taking place over a long period (Figure 3) [25]. In 2018, CF initiatives were covering about 217,492 ha (18 percent of the total CF proposed area), and benefiting 99,315 households [24, 26]. The process of establishing a CF initiative begins with the formation of a forest user group and the selection of a chairman. Then,

the community needs to request permission for the establishment of the CF from the district forestry office. Once permission has been granted the community needs to prepare the master plan and submit this to the district forestry office for approval [27] .

Among all the established CFs, only half are reported to be working well. Key challenges for the successful implementation of a Community Forestry program can be identified at both national and local level [16]. At the national level, the implementation of CF programs has been hampered by three main challenges: (1) an unclear policy on land tenure and user rights undermine the active participation of local communities in CF activities; (2) the process for obtaining a Community Forestry certificate is difficult; and (3) funding support from NGOs/donors is unsustainable [1, 28]. At the local level, three challenges are encountered: (1) outsider encroachment; (2) tenure security; and (3) management issues within CF such as disagreements about the rules for access and benefit-sharing, as well as the limited capacity of local communities to manage their own forest [7, 16, 29]. Despite all of these issues, some successful CFs have report several positive impacts for CF members and their community.

3 Impacts of Community Forestry on rural livelihoods

The effect of Community Forestry on livelihoods and community wellbeing in general are complex, varying according to household, gender, occupation skills, whether individuals are members or non-members of the CF, the rules relating to access to forest resources, the location of the CF and the state of the forest and the resources of the CF itself [1]. The positive effects for the community are summarized in Table 1 [1].

Table 1: Positive Effects of Community Forestry

	Households	Community	Environment
Effects on	Improved household food access	Enhanced community cohesion	Soil protection and nutrient cycling
	Secured land tenure	Creation of Job opportunities	Protection from natural disasters
	Availability of natural safety net	Promotion of ecotourism	More secure natural water supplies
	Higher income and household consumption	Enhancement of women as decision-makers	

Sources: Author's compilation from various literature sources

The direct benefit of CFs on households is the availability of natural resources for household subsistence use and income generation. The establishment of a CF is associated with tenure security and access to forest resources. A number of studies have confirmed that CF members can acquire more income from selling NTFPs [1, 17, 24, 30]. CF members in the Ayeyarwady Delta earn around 36 percent of their household income from selling small timber/mangrove produce while the non-member households achieve only half of that amount [24]. Similar figures have been reported in Bago Region where, in Taungoo District, income from NTFPs accounts for about 37 percent of non-member household income and 46 percent for CF members [25, 31]. The products collected from the forest are also used for domestic purposes [4]. However, income levels might differ according to the amount of rainfall, forest coverage and type of forest areas [32]. For instance, Community Forestry members along the coastal zone have reported increases in crab catch [24]. Community Forestry tends also to be more important for remote villages, given that the local people there rely more on natural resources for their living [24]. The income from selling products collected from CF sites allows community households to meet basic household consumption needs [19]. This is the case in Kyauk Gyi CF, based in Rakhine State, where the CF members are each able to earn between 100,000 kyats (USD 65.8) and 300,000 kyats (USD 197) per month [29]. As another example, about 60 percent of households in Chin State community were able to collect wild food from the forest for both household consumption and to sell [29].

The establishment of a CF initiative provides a strong incentive for tenure security and equity in resource utilisation. The communities with CF certificates have a legal right to equity and justice and can limit the illegal practices of outsiders [24, 33]. Ethnic groups can protect their lands through securing CF certificates. They can grow more trees and use their forest resources in accordance with their CF management plan. Other social impacts from CF implementation include capacity building for local community members to manage and use their resources. CF committee members have their management capacity improved through participation in community programs. They have been able to use the funds collected from registration and membership fees to support social activities and to invest further in CF activities [29]. Two CFs in the Ayeyarwady region have responded to water scarcity by collecting rainwater and organizing a water committee to facilitate the rules relating to access to water [19]. Participation in CF activities has also enhanced the role of women in community decision-making in Chin State [33]. By using profits made from selling products collected from the CF, saving groups have been formed in some CFs in Rakhine State. These can act as financial safety nets for the poor and vulnerable in their communities [29].

Equality in profit-sharing has become an issue in some CFs. For instance, in the Kachin User Groups and Mandalay User Groups, the better-off households have secured better benefits than the poor households have. In Shan, the nature of benefit-sharing depends on individual land ownership [12]. It has been noted that women tend to participate less than men in CF activities, and leadership roles usually fall to men [25, 34]. The poor and landless tend to rely more on forest resources [34]. Improved ecosystem services are the main environmental benefit from the implementation of CFs. Studies have revealed the relationship between forests and the supply of natural fresh water, and an improvement in soil nutrition. These factors can reduce the negative effects natural disasters have on forests [34]. For some CFs in coastal regions, regenerated mangroves have been minimizing the impact from natural disasters such as Cyclone Nargis in 2008 [1, 32]. Biodiversity is reported to have been increasing in some Forestry Community initiatives, while others - in Shan State, for example - have been benefiting to a greater extent from ecotourism due to the regeneration of different kinds of forest and the existence of more wildlife species since establishment of their CFs [35].

4 Policy on Community Forestry

The first policy document related to Community Forestry was embedded in the 1995 Myanmar Forest Policy. The aim was to sustainably manage forests without undermining production capacity to meet social and community needs [14, 20]. This sectoral policy led to the creation of the Community Forestry Instruction for participatory forest management [13, 34]. The National Forest Master Plan 2001-2030 gave more emphasis to the role of Community Forestry in the management of the country's forest resources. The action plan aimed to allocate 0.919 million ha or 1.36 percent of the country to CF initiatives. Under this policy framework, the Community Forestry Instruction was updated in 2016 in order to give communities control over their customary and traditional land and to be able to sell their forest products [13].

The Forest Department is the main government institution in charge of implementing Community Forestry programs. A number of NGOs also support the CF programs at the field level. The major donors to CF programs are the United Nations Development Program, Pyoe Pin Programme funded by Department for International Development and Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association [1].

5 Conclusion

The last two decades have seen a sharp reduction in the country's forest cover mainly due to logging and other related national development activities. However, the Myanmar government has been making significant efforts to rehabilitate the country's forest areas. Major activity has been seen in terms of large-scale reforestation, a logging ban and the conservation of the remaining forests for the benefit of the communities who depend on them. Community Forestry – a sound, inclusive forest conservation initiative – has been implemented since 1995. An increasing number of CFs in the country and in the individual States indicates a strong level of commitment to forest conservation among both local communities and the authorities. The implementation of CFs has, however, been hampered by several factors, primarily relating to difficulties in the process of certifying Community Forestry initiatives, and in encroachment by outsiders. Nonetheless, more than half of the CFs have currently been successful.

For those that have been succeeding, impacts are generally positive, though they can vary according to household situations, the condition of the forest, its location, and how well the community has been able to manage their forest. Member households are reported to receive higher income from selling poles and NTFPs, which has been leading to increases in livelihoods and in the general well-being of the people involved. Community solidarity and social cohesion have improved. The most remarkable social impact has been tenure security over land and community forests. The long-term implementation of CF initiatives has improved ecosystem services including better soil quality, reduced soil degradation, and the regeneration of biodiversity.

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