



Research on the  
**Roles and Contributions**  
of **Indigenous Women**  
in **Sustainable Forest Management**  
in **Mekong Countries/Asia**

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# **Research on the Roles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Forest Management in Mekong Countries/Asia**

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**2013**

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Written by: Jacqueline K. Cariño, Aye Thiri Kyaw, Mane Yun, and Luong Thi Truong

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# Executive Summary

International standards including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and recent climate change agreements recognize the important role of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, systems and practices in the sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation. Yet, indigenous women's role and contribution to sustainable forest management is often overlooked, thus the need to document good practices of indigenous women as well as the challenges they face in their role as managers of forest natural resources.

The Mekong region is rich in forest resources. However, recent studies reveal that forest conditions in the Mekong countries are on the decline. National legal frameworks on indigenous peoples and forest policies vary in the different countries, giving rise to varying situation of forests and particular problems faced by indigenous peoples and women in relation to sustainable forest management. The Mekong region is culturally diverse, with numerous indigenous cultures or ethnic minorities found within each country. Ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples in the areas covered by the research generally experience marginalization and poorer socio-economic conditions compared to the national figures. Many indigenous households live at a subsistence level, and forest resources are especially important to them for their survival.

The research findings in the indigenous communities of Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar reveal that indigenous peoples attach prime importance to forest resources. Indigenous women depend daily on the forests to supply

the needs of their families for food, water, livelihood, firewood, shelter and health care. They deeply value their forests and care for them through their spirituality and rich indigenous knowledge on forest protection, development and use. Indigenous knowledge contributes to the maintenance and preservation of biodiversity and sustainable forest development. Indigenous women's traditional knowledge and practices have been found to be effective in securing food, conserving their culture and traditions, and contributing to sustainable natural resource management in their community.

Indigenous women view forests as a common wealth of all, within which individual families may use and manage portions of the forest for their needs. All members of the community can enjoy the benefits of forest products in accordance with the customs or rules set by the community. Particular customary laws and practices are applied in managing, protecting and improving forest resources such as in the cultivation of land, identification of forest zones, and proper use and collection of forest products. Classification of forests is particularly important in designating and protecting critical areas that are off-limits to exploitation.

Indigenous women play a very significant role in sustainable forest management and conservation as seen in the important tasks they perform to support their family and the community. These tasks include the living practice and transmission of indigenous cultural values; use and improvement of forests for food, health care and sustainable livelihoods; protection of biodiversity and genetic resources; introduction and sharing of new indigenous knowledge; and participation in advocacy to protect their forests from degradation. At the same time, indigenous women face serious challenges in forest resource management such as insecurity of land tenure and land conflicts with private companies and the government; non-recognition and weakening of the role of women and traditional knowledge in forest management; heavy workloads and absence of women's participation in decision-making; and forest degradation due to logging activities and economic land concessions.

Recommendations to address these challenges include ensuring land tenure rights of indigenous peoples and women within national legal frameworks, promotion of traditional knowledge in forest management, ensuring gender equality and women's participation in decision-making, and addressing forest degradation that poses a serious threat to indigenous peoples rights, livelihoods and traditional knowledge.

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- Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) for South and Southeast Asia, Cambodia
- Spectrum - Sustainable Development Knowledge Network (SDKN), Myanmar

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Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

# Abbreviations

## C

CIYA  
CoDeC  
CSDM

Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association  
Cooperation for Development of Cambodia  
Centre for Sustainable Development in the Mountainous  
Areas

## E

EIA  
ELC

Environmental Impact Assessments  
Economic Land Concessions

## F

FAO

The Food and Agriculture Organization

## G

GDP

Gross Domestic Product

## H

HBF

Heinrich Bold Foundation

**I**

IK

Indigenous knowledge

ILO

International Labor Organization

IRAM

Indigenous Right Activist Members

**M**

MARD

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

MONRE

Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment

**N**

NGOs

Non-Government Organizations

**P**

PES

Payment of Environmental Services

PFES

Policy for Payment of Forest Environmental Services

**R**

REDD+

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, Conservation of carbon stocks, and sustainable management of forests

**U**

UN

United Nations

UNDP

United Nation Development Program

UNDRIP

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

UNREDD

UN Collaborative Programme on REDD

**W**

WWF

World Wide Fund for Nature



The H'Mong Women doing the weaving.  
Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

# Regional Summary Report

by Ms. Jacqueline K. Cariño



Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

## 1. Background: Indigenous Peoples Rights in Sustainable Forest Management

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) lays down the basis for the recognition by States of the important role that indigenous peoples have in sustainable forest management and conservation. In its Preamble, the UNDRIP recognizes that indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contribute to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment. (UNDRIP 2007)

Furthermore, several articles of the Declaration affirm that indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources, which they have traditionally owned, occupied, used or acquired. Thus, States should give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories and resources (Article 26) and ensure that indigenous peoples are not forcibly removed from or dispossessed of their lands, territories or resources (Articles 8 and 10). They have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources (Article 29). (UNDRIP 2007)

Indigenous peoples also have the right to determine their priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources (Article 32), and participate in decision-making in matters that would affect their rights (Article 18). This is in keeping with the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, by virtue of which they freely

determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (Article 3). (UNDRIP 2007)

In addition, indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems or institutions, and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities (Article 20). This includes the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions (Article 31) and to practise and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies (Article 12). Furthermore, they have the right to their traditional medicines and health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals (Article 24). (UNDRIP 2007)

Another international convention that recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional knowledge is the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Several provisions in the CBD refer to traditional knowledge of indigenous and local communities. The Preamble recognizes “The close dependence of many indigenous and local communities on biological resources and the desirability of sharing equitably benefits of traditional knowledge, innovation and practices relevant to the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of its components.” Likewise, Article 8, paragraph (j) of the CBD requires Parties to respect, preserve and maintain traditional knowledge relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. Furthermore, Article 10 (c) calls on Parties to “protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices.” (CBD 1992)

Meanwhile, in relation to international negotiations on climate change, the 16th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2010, adopted the decisions known as the Cancun Agreements. These agreements include a list of safeguards for REDD+,<sup>1</sup> which affirm that the implementation of REDD+ activities should address both social and environmental risks. These safeguards have emphasized the need to respect the rights and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples. In particular: Safeguard 3 requires “respect for the knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities by taking into account relevant international obligations, national circumstances and laws, and noting that the UN General Assembly has adopted the UNDRIP;” and Safeguard 4 calls for “the full and effective participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular indigenous peoples and local communities in REDD+ activities.” (Epple, Dunning, Harvey, 2011)

Having these and other international instruments in place are opportunities for indigenous peoples to promote their rights and traditional knowledge. However, in reality, these international standards do not always translate to the respect of indigenous peoples rights on the ground. For instance, in the Mekong region in Asia, indigenous peoples live in close harmony with the forests and are largely dependent on natural resources from the forests to sustain their livelihoods. Their traditional knowledge is thus highly important in the sustainable management of forest resources. Notably significant is the particular role and contribution of indigenous women in sustainable forest management.

In spite of this, there have been numerous reports of non-recognition and violation of the rights of indigenous peoples to manage, use and benefit from forest resources within their territories. In practice, the contribution of indigenous peoples, and in particular the roles of indigenous women, in forest resources management are only marginally recognized. It is also unfortunate that some countries in the region still consider indigenous livelihood systems as drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. In order to overcome these issues and challenges, proper and adequate documentation of sustainable forest management practices of indigenous peoples and women in the region is needed. It is also necessary to highlight the roles and contribution of indigenous women in sustainable forest management in order for these to be recognized, valued and appreciated.

It is with this objective that Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), together with its partners in Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar, conducted this research on the “Roles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Forest Management in Mekong Countries.”

## 2. Objectives of the Research

The overall objective of this research is to document and advocate for the recognition of indigenous women’s roles and contributions in sustainable natural resources management in Mekong countries.

The specific objectives of the research are:

1. To gather data and information and analyze the good practices and lessons learned relating to the roles and contributions of indigenous women on sustainable forest management in selected Mekong countries, namely: Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar.

2. To study, document and analyze the issues and concerns of indigenous women in relation to their participation in sustainable forest management as well as to their rights, welfare and wellbeing as women and as indigenous peoples;
3. To publish and disseminate the research findings for awareness raising, advocacy and lobbying at different levels to promote the rights and welfare of indigenous women, their roles and contribution to resource management, as well as on the challenges and their key concerns in the exercise of their rights and in ensuring their wellbeing.

### 3. Conduct of the Research

The research was conducted by the following organizations in the 3 countries covered:

1. Vietnam: The Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas (CSDM) conducted the research in Vietnam with a research team composed of four (4) CSDM staff members with rich experience of working with ethnic minorities. CSDM has more than 14 years of experience working with ethnic people and women in Vietnam. It has conducted relevant project and research activities on various topics such as: ethnic minority rights, rights to forest land tenure, indigenous knowledge, shifting cultivation, reproductive health of ethnic minority girls, climate change and community forest management. This research was conducted in provinces where CSDM has implemented its project activities for some years. The areas covered by the research are:
  - Cat Thinh commune, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province
  - Son Thuy commune, Quan Son district, Thanh Hoa province
  - Mai Hich commune, Mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province
  - Chau Thai commune, Quy Hop district, Nghe An province
  - Quan Son, Chi Lang district, Lang Son province
2. Myanmar: Eight (8) field researchers and students enrolled at the Myanmar Institute of Theology were contracted to conduct data-gathering for the research. The students were chosen based on their previous experience in data collection. They conducted the research in ethnic villages in Kachin State, Chin State, Shan state, Ayeyawaddy division and Tanintharyi division where indigenous peoples use the forest for their livelihood.

3. Cambodia: The study team was composed of different groups of people in 12 provinces. The non-government organizations (NGOs) and indigenous peoples groups involved in the process of data collection include: My Villages Organization, Community Legal Education Center, and Indigenous Right Activist Members (IRAM) in Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom and Kratie, and Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA) members, Cooperation for Development of Cambodia (CoDeC), and Ponlork Khmer. The research covered the 12 provinces of Rattanakiri, MondulKiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, PreahVihea, Kampong Thom, Kampong Speu, Kampong Cham, Banteay Mean Chhey, Battambang, Puset, and Oudor Mean Chhey. Focus group discussions were done in the 7 provinces of Kompong-Speu, Kompong Thom, Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, PheahVihear, while phone interviews were done in Samlot district in Battambang Province, Memot district in Kampong Cham province, Veal Veng district, Puset Province and in Samrong district of Oudor Mean Chhey province.

This regional report gives an overview of and summarizes the major findings of the three country-level researches in Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. Regional coordination of the research and writing of the regional summary report was done by Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP). AIPP is a regional advocacy organization for indigenous peoples rights in Asia founded in 1988 by indigenous peoples movements. Through the years, AIPP has sustained its lobby and advocacy on indigenous peoples rights and concerns at various levels and strengthened indigenous leaders and organizations through its capacity-building activities.

Research methods used: Among the methods used for primary data gathering were field visits, key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), community dialogues and observation. Primary data sources were indigenous women and men who served as respondents of interviews and participated in the various research activities conducted. Additional information was collected from existing documents of government and non-government organizations, publications, project reports, newspapers, radio recording of voices of indigenous women and other researches on related topics.

Period of Research: The research was conducted within a period of 3 months from July to September 2013.

## 4. Summary of Findings

### Overview

Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar are 3 of 5 countries located in the Mekong region of South East Asia. The Mekong region is rich in natural resources, and is home to the Mekong River, which is a vital resource for poor and vulnerable people in the lower Mekong region. Its abundant resources include essential water for agriculture and fisheries, rich forests and mineral resources. The health of the ecosystem is crucial to the future security of the women, men and children, and to the economic development of the countries within the Mekong region. (Oxfam Australia, 2013)

Among the threats that people in the Mekong region face are land grabbing, mining, deforestation and exploitation of resources, including plans to build 12 hydropower dams along the Mekong River. All these threaten to push the Mekong's most vulnerable communities further into poverty. Life is particularly difficult for ethnic minorities and populations in border areas, who have benefited less from the region's economic growth. Many households live at a subsistence level, and fishing and foraging for wild foods in the forest are needed to survive. (Oxfam Australia, 2013)

The Mekong region is culturally diverse. Myanmar has diverse ethnic groups, which constitute 35 to 40% of the national population. There are 8 major ethnic groups (Kachin, Kayar, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Shan), plus over 100 minor ethnic groups, languages and dialects. Ethnic nationalities face a great deal of discrimination and difficulties to preserve their culture as they have been treated as second-class citizens by successive governments.

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with 54 recognized ethnic groups. The Kinh represent the ethnic majority, comprising 87% of the total population. The remaining 53 groups are ethnic minority groups, with an estimated population of 13 million, accounting for around 14% of the country's total population of 90 million. Each ethnic group has its own distinct culture and traditions, contributing to Vietnam's rich cultural diversity.

Cambodia is a multi-ethnic society that includes, aside from the dominant Khmer ethnic group, the Cham, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao minorities, and indigenous peoples groups. The 2008 national census estimated that the number of indigenous peoples is approximately 179,000, or about 1.34% of the national population. Indigenous peoples in Cambodia constitute one

of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the country, owing to their geographic isolation as well as linguistic and cultural marginalization.

Higher levels of poverty, illiteracy, unskilled labor and malnutrition compared to the national figures generally characterize the socio-economic conditions among indigenous peoples in the study areas. Traditionally, indigenous peoples depend almost entirely on the land and natural resources to sustain their livelihoods. Indigenous women often shoulder a great responsibility in the household as caretakers of the family, while also doing much of the production work such as farming, raising animals, gathering forest products and handicraft production. The female is expected to do housework before getting married, thus girl children are used to staying at home to assist in their family's housework and other domestic activities.

Other key factors affecting indigenous women are high poverty incidence, poor health and limited access to health care services. There is also a general perception that indigenous women lack education and leadership capabilities and are often denied the opportunity to participate in decision-making in the community.

Forest condition and natural resource management policies:

According to a report by the Worldwide Fund for Nature, Southeast Asia's Lower Mekong region is set to lose a third of its natural forests in the next two decades. Forestry experts blame the current pace of deforestation on governments' undervaluing forestry resources. The Worldwide Fund for Nature report, entitled "Ecosystems in the Greater Mekong," said that between 1973 and 2009, lower Mekong countries chopped down almost a third of their forests for timber and to clear land for agriculture. Burma and Laos lost 24 percent of their forest cover. Cambodia lost 22 percent of their forests, while Thailand and Vietnam cleared 43 percent of their trees. The conservation group also said the pace of deforestation is accelerating, and countries risk losing a third of their remaining trees by 2030. (Voice of America, 2013)

The conditions of forests in the 3 countries described in the research study vary. For instance, it is said that Myanmar's forest is now facing the most challenging situation in its history according to the forest department. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has marked Myanmar as among the countries with the highest deforestation rates in the world.

In contrast, Vietnam has taken great efforts in recent years to green barren lands, protect natural forests, reform management mechanisms, and

establish the rights of local people to use forest resources. As a result, government figures show that forest coverage in Vietnam has been increasing every year since 1995.

This contrasting situation of forests arises from the varying national legal frameworks and forest policies existing in the different countries. Vietnam has issued many relevant acts and policies and implemented different programs to benefit households, communities and private enterprises that participate directly in forest protection and forest plantation. From an earlier period when forests were managed by villages using customary laws and later by people's communes, forest resources were then allocated to households and the community for protection. Villages now mostly apply the laws issued by the Government to manage and protect allocated forests. However, law enforcement is weak leading to ineffective forest protection. Illegal logging in watersheds of some localities still remains. As a result, forest quality has declined, although the rate of decline is still lower than that of earlier periods.

On the other hand, Myanmar forests are seen as an important natural resource since it not only produces world-class teak but also provides livelihood for the people and supports the country's economy. Myanmar has been striving for systematic management of the forest sector through the years. To this end, amendments were made in the country's strategies for forest sustainability, leading towards decentralization and giving space for community participation in forest management. Even so, Myanmar's forests are under threat because of various factors including disorganized shifting cultivation, illegal logging, policy inconsistency between the forest sector and other sectors, and conflict of interest between sustainability and income.

Meanwhile, the government of Cambodia has adopted several laws and policies that recognize indigenous peoples' collective land rights and customary rights over natural resources and traditional livelihoods. The 2001 Land Law recognizes the right of indigenous communities in Cambodia to collective ownership of land through community land registration in order to strengthen sustainable management of land, forests and other natural resources. However, the research found that a major challenge that indigenous peoples face is the limited enforcement of pertinent laws and policies. This is compounded by the rapid commercialization of land as seen in the trend of converting land used for shifting cultivation into industrial plantations or modern farms. They are also especially threatened by the granting of land by the government to private companies for large-scale

economic land concessions (ELC) and mining.

Role of indigenous women in sustainable forest management:

1. Importance of forests to indigenous peoples and women

The research found out that in the 3 countries, forests are an indispensable natural resource for indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples mostly live near or in the forests and are highly dependent on forest natural resources for their survival. Indigenous women are especially dependent on the forests because they are the ones who collect non-timber forest products such as honey, wild vegetables, fruits and traditional medicine from the forest in order to provide food and daily needs for the consumption of the family. They also sell forest products as an additional source of income, aside from engaging in agriculture and other livelihood activities. The men usually do hunting and timber extraction in the forest. Indigenous peoples make their living from forest resources and thus they cannot imagine their lives without the forest.

2. Rich indigenous knowledge on forest protection, development and use

The case studies also revealed that indigenous women possess rich indigenous knowledge in protecting, developing and using forest resources. Indigenous knowledge contributes to the maintenance and preservation of biodiversity and sustainable forest development. Indigenous women's traditional knowledge and practices have been found to be a suitable way to secure food, conserve their culture and traditions, and contribute to sustainable natural resource management in their community. Indigenous knowledge on forest management has proven to be applicable and appropriate to local conditions. It is comprehensive because it has been developed over a long period of time and can be easily applied as a basis for solutions to local problems.

3. Views and perspectives of indigenous women on forests

The research revealed some common views and perspectives of indigenous women in relation to forests. Forest and forestland are seen foremost as a common wealth of all, within which individuals and families can claim a certain area to use and manage to meet their needs. This cosmo-vision of forests allows the community to make rules and decisions regarding the use of the land by all mem-

bers within their territory. All members of the community can enjoy the benefits of forest products in accordance with the customs or rules set by the community.

In some communities, the right to ownership and use of the forest belongs to those who claim an area on a first-come first-served basis. Customs ensure fairness and equality with respect to forest management and sustainability for the community. Customs include regulations on ownership, protection and use of forest resources, respect for god and for nature. In the customs of many indigenous groups, the people pray to the god to seek permission whenever they want to use the forest, trees or water sources. The community and village leaders monitor the application of customs and evaluate the behavior of its members in relation to customary resource use.

#### 4. Particular customary laws and practices on forest management and use

Customary laws and practices have been applied in managing, protecting and improving forest resources such as in the cultivation of land, identification of forest zones, and proper use and collection of forest products. We can cite some particular practices from the different countries, which came up during the research.

*Classification of forests:* Indigenous peoples in Vietnam follow a strict forest use classification as a means to protect sacred sites, prevent over-exploitation and conserve the biodiversity in the forest area. For instance, the Thai people in Vietnam classify the forest into holy forest, old forest and cultivation forest. The holy forest is a place for worship where all exploitation activities are prohibited. Old forest is the watershed area or the forest along the river, which is needed to preserve the water source. This forest is strictly protected. The last type is community forest, which can be used for exploitation of timber, wood, bamboo or bamboo shoots. The designation of holy forest and old watershed forest has helped the people protect their natural resources. Likewise, in Cambodia, indigenous peoples have designated some areas as spirit forest where it is prohibited to cut trees and where only collection of non-timber products is allowed because this is a sacred area that needs to be preserved for praying.

*Collecting timber for house construction:* In Vietnam, Dao people have rules that require people to ask permission from the god and

worship the soul of the tree before exploiting timber from big trees. The Thai people have rules that people can only exploit old trees, while the Muong people do not allow people to cut down or step on young trees, and that they must not cut down a whole bunch of trees.

*Collecting firewood:* In Cambodia, indigenous women teach the people to save the rubber in the forest, not to cut down big trees but only small ones, and not to burn the forest as it will affect the bees and animals that may exist in the forest. There are also efforts to replace trees that they cut down. In Myanmar, the women realize that their use of firewood for cooking will eventually lead to forest degradation. Thus replanting of trees is a habit that is common among all indigenous women.

*Collecting bamboo shoots:* In Vietnam, people must only take bamboo shoots in the sunset side and only take the bamboo shoots during the second season of the year so that the bamboo tree can grow again. They can take only 1/3 of the shoot, and not the whole one. They must not use a spade to dig the root of the bamboo tree. They must not destroy or let the cattle destroy the bamboo trees.

*Collecting medicinal plants:* People must respect forest flowers and herbal medicine, while keeping the belief that it can help cure the disease when picking the plant. In Vietnam, medicinal plants should be taken in the morning and afternoon only, and prayer must be done beforehand to ask permission. They must not take the whole tree or the young branches, but only take the mature branches. Only the top, trunk or part of the roots of medicinal plants may be taken, without digging up the roots in order to preserve them. Sometimes, they transfer and grow plants from the forest in their garden, which they can then sell in the market. In this way, they don't need to get forest plants quite as often and they can preserve the forest.

*Catching animals and fish:* There are seasons when people should avoid hunting or fishing, usually during their breeding season. In order to prevent extinction of wildlife, plants that are food for animals are grown. In this way, wildlife animals will not die from food shortage.

*Rotational farming:* Rotational farming refers to the techniques of clearing the land, cutting bushes and trees, letting the debris dry

for a couple of months and then burning so that the land is clear for sowing. Shifting cultivators do not cut big or all trees and bushes but leave numerous wild plants, which are known to provide sustenance. The ashes from burning provide important nutrients to the soil. The traditional way of doing shifting cultivation is to do it in two places for many times. They wait for one mountain to gain good quality soil, while they cultivate in another mountain. In Cambodia, cultivation of field plots is rotated after 3 to 5 years depending on the quality of the soil in order to let the soil rest for regeneration of nutrients. After the soil regeneration of nutrients, normally the cultivator rotates back to their former plot for a continuous rotational farming.

*Upland rice cultivation:* The forest patches with good soil are selected for upland rice farming. In cultivating upland rice, indigenous women play the main role. They are the ones who choose the seeds, sow, take care of the plants and harvest the rice. In Vietnam, the period for planting upland rice in a site lasts from 5-6 years, after which the land will be abandoned for recovery within a period of 10-12 years before being re-used. This method is believed to prevent forest degradation. It also produces successful paddy. Another good practice in Myanmar is using natural fertilizers when they do cultivation.

#### 5. Role of indigenous women in forest management

Indigenous women play a very significant role in sustainable forest management and conservation. Indigenous women are highly appreciated by the community for their role in the protection of forests, and in providing a harmonious village life. This role is seen in the important tasks that indigenous women perform in the home, as well as in the community, among which are the following:

*Indigenous women preserve the cultural values of the community.* Traditionally, indigenous women play an important role in the family and in community affairs. They are the ones who keep the cultural traits of the community alive by practicing them as they go about their daily lives. Women's participation in sustainable forest management is significant since women are the primary forest users and their daily activities are closely linked with the forest. The forest provides firewood for cooking, vegetables and fruits for nutrition, herbal plants and trees for medicinal uses. The women get nutrition from fruits and vegetables and earn cash income from selling forest

products such as flowers, vegetables. They protect biodiversity and genetic resources in the forest and rivers and share new knowledge and experiences in protecting and improving the forest.

*Indigenous women teach indigenous knowledge and values on forest conservation to the next generation.* An important part of the women's role in sustainable forest management is done in the home where they teach environmental awareness to their children. Indigenous women actively participate in using their traditional practices to motivate and educate their children and family members to take care of the natural resources. They train the younger generation to protect the forest and forest resources so that these can be used for many more years to come. Women also explain to the children the negative consequences of forest degradation and deforestation. Since women and children interact easily, the role of women is central in developing good habits in the future generation for forest conservation.

Indigenous women also teach the younger generations about performing traditional dances and ceremonies as concrete ways of preserving culture and traditional rituals. Another way is to educate young generations about spiritual offerings, which is a sign of respect for the forest that helps them survive through the use of its natural resources. It is by showing respect and gratitude to the forest that they are able to survive.

*Indigenous women are the ones who protect biodiversity and genetic resources of the forest and river.* Women collect only the products they need from forest. They know that the forest, river and natural resources are a common wealth that should not be destroyed or over-exploited. They collect forest products and do fishing in an environment-friendly way. By doing so, forest products are not used up but some are left for other people. The women protect the genes of medicinal plants from being lost or over-exploited. The women take good care of medicinal plants in the community forest and in their household forest.

*Indigenous women are constantly improving the forest.* Women often decide which tree should not be cut and which tree should be planted in the forest. They go to the forest early in the morning to pick medicinal plants and find food. They often recognize problems when they see them that may cause danger to the forest such as forest fires, harmful insects and tree diseases. In the forest allocat-

ed to them, they know each kind of precious timber and medicinal plant and can find them easily when needed. They always have a knife to clear up trees that are not useful. They are the ones who remind their family to regularly clean the forest such as cutting grass or cutting down dead trees. They also discuss with their neighbors about the situation of their forest and find solutions together.

*Indigenous women know how to use forests for food and sustainable livelihood.* The forest provides vegetables, fruits and animals for nutrition, firewood for cooking, herbal plants and trees for medicinal uses and handicrafts, and timber for building houses. Women know how to use these resources well to provide for their families. Aside from collecting forest products, indigenous peoples also cultivate in the upland areas. Women know very well what kinds of plants are suitable for their land, and what they should plant rotationally to diversify their fields. They decide what kind of plants to cultivate in the next crop. They take care of their crop and harvest it. They are the ones who select seedlings and preserve them for the next crop.

*Indigenous women provide first aid to their own family and community using herbal medicine.* Indigenous women know several medicinal plants and use them to treat different kinds of diseases. They are family medical doctors who take care of the health of their family and community using herbal medicine from the forest. Women in the countryside know that medicinal plants can cure common illnesses or symptoms such as fever, cold, stomachache, etc. In the forest and especially in the garden of the family, popular medicinal plants such as lemongrass and ginger are planted and cared for by the women for use in case of need. The women often teach herbal medicine prescriptions to their daughters and daughters-in-law. In addition, they often tell each other how to plant scarce medicinal plants in their forest garden.

*Indigenous women introduce new indigenous knowledge and experiences in protecting and developing the forest.* Most indigenous knowledge and experiences are passed on verbally. During events such as festivals, weddings, funerals, or during their free time, women often share information and experiences in taking care of the forest, and planting trees in the forest. Women sometimes participate in trainings and meetings where they learn more knowledge, which they also share with others. They tell stories about their experiences, failures and successes when applying this knowledge or when planting new kinds of trees. Whenever they find new seed-

lings while travelling, they bring them home to plant in their garden or forest or share the new seedlings with their friends.

*Indigenous women lead and participate in advocacy to protect their forests against illegal logging and degradation.* To maintain the forest in good condition, indigenous women in Cambodia participate in patrolling the forest by taking turns going into the forest to guard and protect the trees from being cut down illegally and to arrest outsiders who cut trees within their protected areas. They maintain their traditional practices of forest protection and negotiate with private companies in order to get back the land that was taken away from them. They try to involve the commune councilors in order to raise their voices to the local authorities. They believe that natural resource management is very important for women, as they have been actively involved in the management of those resources.

## Challenges of indigenous women in forest resource management

1. Insecurity of land tenure and land conflicts with private companies and the government

Indigenous women face serious challenges in relation to forest land tenure. The rights to the land and to use the forest are not ensured for indigenous peoples in general, and for women in particular. The rights of indigenous women are not mentioned in most government regulations and policies on forest and forest land.

2. Insufficient land allocation

The Government, particularly in Vietnam, has made policies on allocating forests and its benefits to communities and households. However, the area of forests allocated to ethnic minorities is not sufficient for their sustainable livelihood and income generation. Thus, the people are not motivated to protect the whole forest because only a small portion has been allocated for them to use.

3. Non-recognition and weakening role of women and traditional knowledge in forest management

Because of the lack of recognition of indigenous knowledge and the fading away of traditional knowledge which indigenous women are good at, the women's role in managing and protecting the for-

est is becoming less important. Traditional customs of indigenous peoples are forgotten because the communities were not permitted to practice these for years. For example, several ceremonies and rituals of the Dao people are getting lost or are celebrated in a less extensive way. Some also view indigenous culture as backward or inferior to the dominant culture. Such long-lasting prejudice causes indigenous peoples to lose confidence in their traditional knowledge passed on by their ancestors through generations. Gradually they forget their knowledge as a result of feeling inferior.

4. Absence of women's participation in decision-making

Indigenous women are the primary forest users of the natural forest. However, they are among the most vulnerable and marginalized because they are perceived to have low education and lacking in knowledge. They are often absent from or lack effective participation in decision-making, which often leads to gender-blind policies with regards to forest management. Although there are now collective struggles to achieve indigenous peoples' inclusion in forest management, gender issues are often ignored. The complicated system of forest classification and administrative management of forests by the government has also caused difficulties for indigenous peoples, especially the women, in dealing with policies, programs, projects, investment and credit policies of the government.

5. Heavy workload of women

In general, indigenous women have to work very hard to overcome the many challenges that they face, both inside the family and in the community. Most indigenous women bear heavy household responsibilities because by tradition, indigenous women are expected to work hard for the family. They do household chores, care for the children and the husband, fetch water, care for the health and education needs of the family. At the same time, they are also expected to gather food in the forest, do agricultural work and contribute towards providing food for the family. This heavy burden of women limits the time available for them to participate in meetings and community affairs. Meanwhile, in the community, indigenous women face many problems related to limited education and knowledge, sometimes making them shy or afraid to speak out in public.

6. Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination can be seen in the preference of boy over girl children. Boys are given the advantage in inheritance division. Men are considered to be the family breadwinners and decision-makers, while views of housework as a wife's duty and child rearing as a woman's job still persist. Trafficking of ethnic minority women and children as housewives or for prostitution to neighboring countries is also mentioned as a common problem in Vietnam.

#### 7. Forest degradation due to logging activities

Because they are the ones who collect forest resources for their families, indigenous women are the first to be affected and are the most disadvantaged by environmental degradation of forests and limited access to natural forest resources. It is understandable that their concerns about forest degradation are increasing as logging activities are going on at an enormous scale in their places. Women also become vulnerable to exploitation once displaced from the forest and their traditional livelihoods because they are usually not skilled to do other jobs.

#### 8. Economic Land Concessions

In Cambodia, indigenous women are especially threatened by the development trend of the government of granting land to private companies for large-scale economic land concessions (ELC) and mining. Because of this, indigenous women face the threat of food insecurity, loss of their traditional occupations and negative impacts of natural resource extraction. Indigenous women usually bear the costs of economic development, environmental destruction and social inequities. They rarely share in the benefits, as the living conditions in indigenous communities become more and more difficult.

## 5. Recommendations

Recommendations are included in each of the country-level researches to address the particular context and challenges faced by indigenous women in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The following are common and general recommendations for consideration in relation to the role and contributions of indigenous women in sustainable forest management as a whole:

1. Land tenure security needs to be ensured for indigenous peoples

and women living near or in forest areas in order to ensure the sustainability of their livelihoods. This can be done by reviewing, reforming or formulating national laws and policies on land and forest resources in order to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples in compliance with international conventions and standards. Allocation of forest lands to indigenous communities for their collective ownership and management using traditional sustainable practices should be encouraged.

2. Traditional knowledge of indigenous women on forest management needs to be recognized, strengthened and supported as a positive contribution to sustainable forest management. The role of indigenous women in keeping alive and transmitting the customs, values and indigenous knowledge on sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation should be promoted. Indigenous women's initiatives in forest conservation and management should be given greater support.
3. Indigenous women should be provided more opportunities for full, equal and effective participation in decision-making and community affairs. Efforts should be taken to eliminate ethnic and gender discrimination and indigenous women should be provided empowerment activities that promote their economic independence and enhance their capacities, skills, technology and self-confidence. Projects aimed at addressing indigenous women's particular needs and alleviating their heavy responsibilities in the home and in the community should be conceptualized and implemented, with their full participation.
4. Programs and projects that result in forest degradation and deprivation or displacement of indigenous peoples from their land, territories and resources such as economic land concessions, large-scale mining and allocation of forests to private companies for exploitation and commercialization should be prevented.
5. Implementation of REDD+ projects in indigenous peoples areas should always ensure the recognition of indigenous peoples rights and include the participation of indigenous women in decision-making and management. A gender perspective should be integrated into any REDD+ program to address gender equality concerns and take into consideration the particular needs, knowledge and experiences of indigenous women in forest resource management.

## Endnote

1 REDD+ is short for: measures related to reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries; and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries.

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Photo credit: Ms. Mane Yun

# Roles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Forest Management in Cambodia

by Ms. Mane Yun



Photo credit: Ms. Phok Hong

## Executive Summary

This research on the “Roles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Forest Management in Cambodia”, covered the 12 provinces of Rattanakiri, MondulKiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, PreahVihea, Kampong Thom, Kampong Speu, Kampong Cham, Banteay Mean Chhey, Battambang, Pursat, and Oudor Mean Chhey. Focus group discussions were done in the 7 provinces of KompongSpeu, Kompong Thom, Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie, Stung Treng, PheahVihear, while phone interviews were done in Samlot district in Battambang Province, Memot district in Kampong Cham province, Veal Veng district, Pusat Province and in Samrongdistirct of Oudor Mean Chhey province.

The research found out that in practice, indigenous peoples, especially women, play a very significant role in sustainable forest management and conservation. Indigenous women are closely linked to their natural resources because they collect non-timber forest products such as honey, wild vegetables, fruits and traditional medicine in order to provide food for the daily consumption for the family. Indigenous women have found that their practice is a sustainable way to secure their food, conserve their culture and traditions, and contribute to sustainable natural resource management in their community, thereby preventing deforestation and climate change. The government of Cambodia also recognized these in their law and policies.

However, in general, indigenous women have to work very hard to overcome the many challenges that they face, both inside the family and in the community. Most indigenous women bear heavy household responsibilities because by tradition, indigenous women always need to work hard for the family. Meanwhile, in the community, indigenous women face many problems related to limited education and knowledge, being shy and not having the courage to speak out in the public. They are especially threatened by challenges due the development trend of the government of granting land to private companies for large-scale economic land concessions (ELC) and mining. Indigenous women face the threat of food insecurity, loss of their traditional occupations and negative impacts of natural resource extraction. Indigenous women usually bear the costs of economic development, environmental destruction and social inequities. They rarely share in the benefits, as the living conditions in indigenous communities are becoming more and more difficult.

One of the recommendations arising from the research is that the government should implement and enforce the law recognizing the traditional ways and good practices of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples' rights over their lands and natural resources should be respected and their role in the sustainable management of the forests that they have traditionally used should be recognized. The capacity of indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women and youth, must be strongly promoted, so that they are able to participate more effectively to address their issues and claim their traditional rights to preserve the natural resources.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Specific Topic of the Research

This research aims to gather information on the natural resource management practices of indigenous women in Cambodia and the challenges they face in the access and use of these resources in their communities. The research focuses on the concepts of indigenous women in relation to forest management, the benefits they get from the forest, their understanding of their rights in relation to natural resources management and some good practices of how indigenous women are involved in natural resources management. At the same time, the research also looks into the challenges indigenous women face in dealing with private companies and outsiders who have come to exploit their resources, leading to recommendations on

how to meet their needs and address their problems.

The research was conducted from July to August 2013 through desk review, focus group discussions, individual interviews and observation during the field visits.

## 1.2. Study team

The study team was composed of different groups of people in 12 provinces. Many organizations were involved in the process of data collection and recording of the ideas and concerns raised by the indigenous women in relation to natural resource management. The non-government organizations (NGOs) and indigenous peoples groups involved include: My Villages Organization, Community Legal Education Center, and Indigenous Right Activist Members (IRAM) in Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom and Kratie, and Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA) members, Cooperation for Development of Cambodia (CoDeC), and Ponlork Khmer. (Please refer to the Annex 1 for the list of NGOs in the target provinces)

## 1.3. Research Methodology

The research methodology included desk review of literature, focus group discussions, individual interviews, community dialogues and observation. Additional information was collected from existing documents, publications, project reports, newspapers (Cambodia Daily), and radio recording of voices of indigenous women.

During the focus group discussions, the indigenous women were asked about their common concerns and problems related to the general situation of indigenous women, the development trend in the government of giving economic land concessions, their traditional practices and innovations, as well as challenges and lessons learned towards arriving at recommendations for the improvement and sustainability of natural resource management in the future.

Data from the researches of other organizations such as International Labor Organization (ILO), Heinrich Bold Foundation (HBF), United Nation Development Program (UNDP), NGOForum, Oxfam Great Britain, and others were also used.



Focus group discussion with an indigenous Bunong women activist, from five different villages, in Mondulakiri Province. Photo Credit: Ms. Mane Yun

## 2. Introduction

Cambodia is a multi-ethnic society that includes, aside from the dominant Khmer ethnic group, the Cham, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao minorities, and indigenous peoples groups. The Cambodia land law of 2001 and policy state that indigenous peoples are a group of peoples that reside in the territory of the Kingdom of Cambodia whose members manifest ethnic social, cultural and economic unity, who practice a traditional lifestyle, and who cultivate the lands in their possession according to customary rules of collective use. The 2008 national census estimated that the number of indigenous peoples is approximately 179,000, or about 1.34 per cent of the national population. Indigenous peoples in Cambodia constitute one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the country, owing to their geographic isolation as well as linguistic and cultural marginalization. Twenty-four different indigenous groups (R'ong, Soch, Sui, Kachak, Thmon, Mil, Kraol, Kavet, Lun, Khaonh, Bunong, Ke', Samre', Kreung, Jarai, Tumpuon, Stieng, Kui, Khmer Chourng, Kavet, Rade', Pou, Broa and Spong)<sup>1</sup> are spread across 15 provinces<sup>2</sup> and 455 communities.<sup>3</sup> Most of indigenous peoples have historically inhabited sparsely populated upland and forested areas in the North and

Northeast of Cambodia, particularly in Ratanakiri and Mondulhiri, both of which still have a majority indigenous population.

There are no official statistics or disaggregated data that identify the exact indigenous population distribution numbers in Cambodia, but recent estimates from the Ministry of Rural Development suggest that the population may indeed be much higher than what was reported in the 2008 census. Indigenous peoples are considered to be the traditional managers of over 4 million hectares of Cambodia's forest lands and ecosystems, and have been responsible for preserving stable environmental conditions in many other parts of the country (e.g. through forest conservation to support flood mitigation and maintenance of the supply of river and stream water during the dry seasons).<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, indigenous peoples depend almost entirely on the land and natural resources to sustain their livelihoods. In this connection, indigenous women in Cambodia carry a great responsibility in the family as caretakers of their children and husband. In practice indigenous women do a lot of work including housework, farming, raising animals, weaving bags and mats, etc. In addition, indigenous women also have the main task of collecting food from the forest for their household such as wild vegetables and fruit, honey, resin tree and hunting in order to provide supplementary food during shortages to ensure food security. They especially participate in and contribute to sustainable forest management and conservation in the community.

However, in general, indigenous women have very limited access to education and are unable to participate in community development work. Up to date, very few indigenous women are able to work with government officials and civil society. There is thus the need to further support indigenous women to play a more significant role in community development.

Before 2005, most indigenous women were generally not brave enough to challenge issues due to discrimination in society. But after 2005 when there were a lot of land problems, many women received training through the support of NGOs, which changed their attitudes toward being involved in development work. They started to get involved in activities such as meetings with NGOs, or participate as members of the forestry committee, talking with village and commune leaders and councilors in order to share their problems and concerns related to land and forestry issues. Some positive changes are now seen among the women such as having the courage to share ideas and express their concerns over natural resource management

in the community.

## 2.1. General Description of the Participation of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Management of Natural Resources in the Country

Based on the results of the research, it was found that most indigenous women are not well educated in general education. However, indigenous women have been participating actively for many generations until the present especially in natural resources management. They take care of the forest in sustainable ways because they fully depend on these resources within the community to support their daily needs. Depending on the natural resources means that women have an important role in collecting non-timber products such as honey, resin tree, firewood, fishing, rattan, tradition medicine, vegetables, and raw materials for making instruments in order to meet the needs of the family and to earn some income to buy rice, medicines and school materials for their children.

Indigenous women understand very well that in collecting non-timber products, they should not cut the small trees because this will affect the preservation of the forest in the long term. They do not dig the roots of fruit trees, do not burn the forest, and do not use explosives for catching fish. They especially do not cut the trees in the spirit forest and only collect non-timber products because this is a sacred area that needs to be preserved for praying. When doing agricultural cultivation, women always participate together with the men and the elderly in praying to the spirits, whom they believe are the ones who take care of the people. They need to choose an appropriate location for planting that will not affect other people's land or the neighbor's land, especially the spirit forest.

Indigenous peoples strongly believe that illegal logging or cutting down trees or damaging the spirit forest will cause many problems such as getting lost in the forest, having diseases, wild animals coming out, or pregnant women having miscarriage and other misfortunes. Spiritual beliefs are an important part of indigenous practices in taking care of natural resources and protecting the forest for sustainable management. Besides, indigenous women play a leading and active role in protecting and preserving natural resources through informal education within the family. They enjoin family members such as the husband and children to protect and care for the forest to help prevent floods and storms. They also warn them not to burn down the forest because it provides a place for animals and humans to live.



Indigenous Krung woman weaving bamboo veil for fencing the house. Photo Credit: Ms. Mane Yun

The research also found that indigenous women have actively participated in advocacy by bravely confronting private companies and illegal loggers on several occasions in indigenous communities. In many different ways, women educate their community members to understand about the forest for the sake of the people themselves and for future generations. They motivate women in the community to attend meetings at the local, national and international levels and to raise issues or concerns in relation with the destruction of natural resources, land, forests. They mobilize the people in the community to patrol the forest, take care of the natural resources and prevent illegal logging by private companies and rich and powerful people. They especially lead in gathering the people for advocacy, negotiations and filing complaints against the private company, businessmen and government representatives towards arriving at peaceful solution to the problem.

For instance, KoaDontey village in Trapaing Chhor, Oral district, Kampong Speu province is a village of indigenous Souy people that earns their living by collecting non-timber products, rice farming and orchard. However from 2004 to 2007, the indigenous community was confronted with the agro-in-

dustrial land concession, HLH group limited and Thai Fong Company, which had destroyed their spirit forests and farming plots to make way for a corn plantation. At that time, the community through their leader, Ms. VenSamin, actively complained against the private companies. Ms. VenSamin, an indigenous Souy woman, led a group of old and young women and men to meet with the private company at the place where the companies had cleared the forest for the corn plantation. This is an area south of Phnom Te mountainous area and east of Lok Ta KrahamKor where the indigenous people pay respect to their spirits.

After that, the indigenous community submitted a complaint to the local authorities at all levels from the commune, district and provincial levels then to the ministry of environment. As a result, the indigenous community got their land back on September 18, 2007. In addition, Ms. VenSamin and other indigenous women have been in the lead when confronting illegal logging, grabbing the wood while being transported, and withdrawing materials taken illegally. Indigenous women (Souy) are admired by their own community, neighboring villages, local, provincial and national authorities and NGOs for their courage in protecting the forest.

Indigenous women are interested in taking care of the natural resources and favor this job more than men, because then they can find more vegetables in the forest to meet their daily needs. If they don't have access to the forest or if a private company destroyed the forest, the women are unable to get what they need for the family and they have to go very far from home to collect water, firewood and vegetables. As a result of losing the forest, most indigenous women have to sell their labor at a very low rate of US\$125 per month for doing such jobs as clearing the grass or collecting rubber for the private company. Whenever they get paid, the company deducts some part of their money, using various reasons not to pay the promised full amount. With this situation, indigenous women are not able to complain or advocate due to limited knowledge and education. They dare not do anything to claim for their rights because they think that they are not well educated and just remain silent because they are afraid of losing their jobs. Another problem they face is getting paid very late in the day or at nighttime so that there is not enough time for them to complain.

## 2.2. Brief Description of National Forest and Natural Resource Management Policies and Data on the Forest Condition

The government of Cambodia has already adapted many laws and policies that support indigenous peoples with respect to the recognition of their collective land rights and customary rights over natural resources and traditional livelihoods. Among these laws and policies are the following:

Article 3 of the Cambodian Constitution, which guarantees all Cambodians the same rights regardless of race, color, language and religious belief:

1. Ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), which is an international legally binding treaty;
2. Forestry Law (2002), which recognizes the practice of shifting cultivation within registered lands and protects traditional land uses through the Community Forestry Management Plan;
3. Policy and Sub-Decree on the Registration and Right to Use the Land of Indigenous Community in Cambodia, and National Policy for Development on Indigenous Peoples;
4. The UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the government of Cambodia voted in favor of adoption by the UN General Assembly in 2007; and
5. Land Law (2001), which recognizes the rights of Indigenous communities to collective ownership of their lands; includes interim measures for the protection of Indigenous lands until formal land titling is in place; and recognizes the practice of shifting cultivation.
6. Protected Areas Law (2008), which affirms State recognition of the secure access to traditional uses, local customs, beliefs and religions of local communities and indigenous ethnic minority groups residing within and adjacent to protected areas.<sup>5</sup>
7. The Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Management<sup>6</sup> requires environmental impact assessments (EIA) to be carried out on all development projects, whether they are implemented by the state or a private entity. It states that concerned ministries should consult with the Ministry of Environment before issuing a decision or undertaking activities related to the preservation, development or management of natural resources.<sup>7</sup> The Sub-Decree on the Environmental Impact Assessment Process<sup>8</sup> includes a list of all the types of projects that require an EIA, which

includes wood and paper production, agriculture, mining, hydro-power, power plants, tourism and infrastructure projects.

The 2001 Land Law recognizes the rights of indigenous communities in Cambodia to possess and use land as their collective ownership (article 26). The Interim Paper on the strategy of land policy framework 2002 refers to the particular social/spatial characteristics of the use of land and natural resources belonging to indigenous peoples, and the frequency of disputes concerning land where they live. The law specifically states that no outside authority may acquire any rights to land that belong to indigenous communities and that, in the case of collective ownership, the land can only be sold or transferred only with the agreement of the entire community. Once registered with the Ministry of Interior as legal entities, indigenous communities can apply for registration of collective land title; and until official issuance of collective land titles, communities are allowed to continue to manage their community lands in accordance with their traditional customs.<sup>9</sup>

Such provisions on the protection of IP lands are progressive when compared with other land laws in the region, and are intended to reflect the socio-cultural realities and protect the territorial integrity of indigenous areas. The law recognizes indigenous community land registration in order to strengthen the management of land, forests and other natural resources in a sustainable and balanced manner for socio-economic development and to ensure that the indigenous communities can preserve their positive culture, customs and traditions for the future.

The 2002 Forestry Law Articles 37 and 40 Chapter 6 also recognizes customary rights of the indigenous peoples over natural resources and shifting cultivation. The law specifically states that for local communities living within or near the Permanent Forest Reserves, the state shall recognize and ensure their traditional user rights for the purpose of traditional customs, beliefs, religions and living. The traditional user rights of a local community for forest products and by-products shall not require a permit. The traditional user rights under this article consist of:

1. The collection of fire wood, picking wild fruit, collecting bee honey, taking resin, and collecting other forest by-products;
2. Using timber to build houses, stables for animals, fences and to make agricultural instruments;
3. Grass cutting or unleashing livestock to graze within the forests;
4. Using other forest products and by-products consistent with traditional family use;

5. The right to barter or sell forest by-products shall not require a permit, if those activities do not cause significant threat to the sustainability of the forest.

Any third party who has collected forest by-products from local communities for purposes of trade, in a manner consistent with the provisions of the law, shall have the permit for forest by-products transportation after royalty and premium payments. A local community cannot transfer any of their traditional user rights to a third party, even with mutual agreement or under contract. These traditional user rights shall be:

1. Consistent with the natural balance and sustainability of forest resources and respect the rights of other people;
2. Consistent with permissions and prohibitions under the provisions of this law.

In 2009, the Government further defined its policy on indigenous peoples and adopted the sub-decree on indigenous land registration in April 2009 to detail the procedures for communal land titling of indigenous lands. The vision of the policy is an assurance of land tenure security for indigenous communities. The objectives of the policy are:

1. Poverty reduction and for indigenous peoples to have their own land and rights to use other natural resources to support their livelihood, food security and community development;
2. Sustainable land management through land use planning to ease the traditional way of farming of indigenous peoples with country development;
3. Elimination of illegal forest logging and land grabbing by ensuring the basic rights of the indigenous peoples to use resources, so that land, forest and waterways will not be seized by other entities;
4. Maintenance of the rich culture and tradition of the Kingdom of Cambodia by allowing indigenous peoples to sustainably manage the land according to their own traditional way.

In addition to these laws, there is the internal rule on land use and management of the indigenous community in AndongKraleoung village, Sen Monorom commune, Keo Seima district, Mondulkiri province, which is located in the Seima bio-preservation area. This rule, in Chapter 9, Articles 39 to 43 on natural resource management and village protection mechanism states that the community people are allowed to use the natural resources such as collecting firewood, honey, vegetables and small house construc-

tion for the daily consumption needs of the family. This can be done on a small-scale and not for business, with the approval of the forestry administration. There are also preventive mechanisms against illegal logging, collecting rubber, burning the forest and not allowing outsiders to cut trees from the forest in community protection areas. Perpetrators will be fined and sent to the forestry administration not later than 48 hours after their wrongdoing.

However, the natural resources governance-transparent, accountable and participatory management of land, forest, and protected areas-is a serious challenge in Cambodia. Opportunities to promote community rights in the management of these resources have increased with the passage of the community forestry law, and the moratorium on forest concession. However, land remains a contentious issue, with ownership concerns and tenures of short duration. Growing landlessness and near-landlessness, combined with diminishing access to common property resources, such as forests, are increasing poverty and jeopardizing the food security of rural households, especially for women.<sup>10</sup>

The research found that since 1990, the Government of Cambodia introduced a number of incentives to promote private investment as a means to propel economic growth, which included the Economic Land Concessions. This is compounded by the rapid commercialization of land as seen in the trend of converting land used for shifting cultivation into industrial plantations or modern farms. In recent years, it has been estimated that there are 367 companies<sup>11</sup> from various countries includes foreign and national company which spread over 17 provinces. At least 2.1 million hectares of the country's land has been transferred to developers for commercial-scale agricultural investment in the form of ELCs. This program allows the government to lease up to 10,000 hectares of State land for commercial-scale or industrial agriculture purposes. The concessions have affected between 400,000 and 700,000 Cambodians to date, and about 1,900,311 hectares of land have been transferred to extractive industries in the form of mining since 2000.<sup>12</sup> Such activities are adversely affecting indigenous people's development, traditional livelihood, losing their rights control over the land and natural resources they traditionally used, as a result of land grabbing and restrictions in access to natural resources and suppression of their traditional ways of life and livelihood strategies by the company and outsider; loss of culture, community cohesion and traditional governance structures; human rights violations; lack of participation in decision-making, and various problems associated with. This regards is very much linkage to the

limited enforcement of pertinent laws and policies by the government of Cambodia.

The sustainable use of Cambodia's natural resources is a key factor to the country's development. Approximately three-quarters of the population are directly engaged in agriculture and depend upon the land for their daily subsistence. Agriculture and forestry contribute nearly 40 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The forests of Cambodia are diverse and comprise a variety of evergreen, deciduous, mixed and mangrove forest types. Current estimates of remaining natural forest cover vary considerably, but the consensus is that about half of Cambodia's land area has some form of forest cover. The Forest area (% of land area) in Cambodia was last reported at 57.18 in 2010, according to a World Bank report published in 2012. Forest area is land under natural or planted stands of trees of at least 5 meters in situ, whether productive or not, and excludes tree stands in agricultural production systems (for example, in fruit plantations and agro forestry systems) and trees in urban parks and gardens. This page includes a historical data chart, news and forecasts for Forest area (% of land area) in Cambodia.<sup>13</sup>

## 3. Results of the Study

### 3.1. General socio-cultural and economic data/profile of study sites

Indigenous peoples' communities are found in the forests, mountains, and lowland areas of the country and are in varied levels of socio-economic development. They are engaged in a mix of production systems including rotational farming in mountain slopes, settled or sedentary agriculture of rice, corn and vegetables, hunting and gathering in forests, livestock raising, fishing along rivers, and production and trade in local handicrafts.

The current situation and living conditions of the indigenous peoples make it difficult for them to meet the needs of their family members. Some communities mentioned positive conditions while others are negative due to different geographical locations. In some areas, indigenous peoples face land conflicts with private companies and powerful people and are not able to use the natural resources in the areas where they live. For example in Memot district, Kampong Cham province, it was reported that their forest and other trees were cut down a long time ago and most indigenous people have lost hope to struggle for a better life. However, in Samlot district, Battambang province, it was reported that most indigenous people

have been living as usual because they still have their forest and are still able to use their traditional practices as before.

Most of the indigenous women are facing food shortage due to difficulties in accessing their forest to look for natural resource products. In Rattanakiri province, most indigenous women are facing many difficulties such as low yield of their agricultural crops, which is not enough to meet their daily needs, especially for those with many family members and without extra income. As a result, most of them are forced to sell their land to be able to buy food, build houses or buy other materials needed in the family. Recently, most of the land has become private concession land. Even though some plots have not been cultivated with crops, the indigenous women are not able to collect any products because the new land owner controls that part. The living condition of the indigenous peoples is getting worse from day to day. Many are not able to do rotational farming because of having only a small plot of land and the loss of fertility of the soil.

In Monduliri province, indigenous women understand that the problems they face are the result of private businesses getting the natural resources for their own to be used to make profits for themselves. Private companies have confiscated many places thereby reducing the area of community land. In addition to this problem, the government registered the land as social concession land without the agreement of the community. It was also mentioned that indigenous women work harder than the Khmer women because they hardly receive help from their husbands.

### **3.2. Views, perspectives of indigenous women on sustainable forest/ resource management**

General perceptions related to natural resources management are well understood and clearly interpreted by the indigenous women in all places where the interviews were conducted. All of them said the same thing about taking care of the forest: “if the forest is lost, everything will also be lost.” This means that they rely and are fully dependent on their natural resources. Furthermore, indigenous women stated that using natural resources properly is a good way to keep them sustainable and continue to use them for many generations.

Most indigenous women are keen to work harder in order to maintain the natural resources for the sake of their children. They fully understand that forest natural resources are the most important source of vegetables, tra-



A focus group discussion with an indigenous Kouy women leader and activist from two different villages, in Pheah Vihear Province. Photo Credit: Ms. Mane Yun

ditional medicine, firewood, housing materials and agricultural materials. Forests also help prevent natural disasters caused by storms and help to maintain water sources for their crops.

Natural resources are the main source of survival for the whole family and are very much needed by indigenous peoples. Most of the women mentioned that they have to work closely with the local authorities so that they can provide inputs for improving the protection of natural resources. They added that working with NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Cambodian human rights organization (ADHOC) can help them keep their resources for a longer time in the future. These NGOs have provided assistance by engaging the community to participate in the patrolling process, providing training for capacity building on advocacy to protect their land and resources and express their concerns, raising the problem through the media, and meeting with relevant stakeholders to draw the attention of relevant institutions to take action. In addition, they have assisted in filing complaints against illegal logging in the court and with local and provincial authorities.

Indigenous women in Mondulkiri stated that in order to maintain the natural resources in a sustainable way, they should educate the young generation to understand their own identity as indigenous peoples, to know the importance of rotational cultivation, to know why they need the spirit forest and the usefulness of having natural resources in the community to support the daily needs of the people.

Most indigenous women expressed a lack of hope in the government. They feel that they are not brave enough to complain because they do not speak the Khmer language well when communicating with the authorities. This makes them feel hopeless and pessimistic about getting support from outsiders because they see that outsiders are the ones who destroy the natural resources. They are afraid to fight with those people to stop their illegal activities.

A perception raised by the indigenous women is that there is a high demand for valuable timber because of the good price in the market offered by rich and powerful people. Local authorities and the community do not have enough power to stop illegal logging and protect the natural resources. Laws, rules and regulations are not enforced in the real situation, and there is a lack of cooperation and support from relevant institutions especially the land management and forestry administration.

All indigenous women expressed the opinion that they want to sustain their natural resources for the next generations so that they can continue to rely on these natural products for their children. They believe that the benefits they receive from the forest are the most important thing in their lives. With these resources, they can earn some income to pay for their daily needs, as well as using the small trees for house building and small construction. The forest is a good place for wild animals to live and it can be very useful for the indigenous community too.

### 3.3. Description of the concrete practices of indigenous women on resource management including traditional knowledge and mechanisms for enhancement and transfer; biodiversity protection and enhancement, food sufficiency, indigenous technologies and innovations, sustainable livelihoods among others

Indigenous women continue their traditional practices as usual. Most women prefer to cultivate their land and natural resources as before based on their own experiences of rotational farming. They are also trying to help each other in terms of sharing the resources in the forest. In addition to this, they still use traditional materials for agricultural purposes. They understand that this will not harm the forest, unlike when using modern instruments such as mechanized saws or bulldozers to clear the forest. Some women mentioned that they collect natural products from other villages when they see that the local people there do not use their own. They still keep their spirit forest for making graveyards.

Most of the women mentioned that rotational farming is much better because the yield is much higher than when cultivating in one place where there is poor soil quality and infestation of insects that eat the crops. Some cultivators cultivate only in one place without moving even though the yield is low because they have no other choice of land to cultivate. These are the reasons why they face food shortage from year to year by the middle of the year. During shortage, indigenous women need to go to the forest to collect non-timber products and sell their labor to private companies or concessions who have a lot of land to cultivate, for which they get paid around US\$4 to 5 per day.

Rotational farming is a rational farming system wherein the cultivation of field plots is rotated after 3 to 5 years depending on the quality of the soil in order to let the soil rest for regeneration of nutrients. After the soil regeneration of nutrients, normally the cultivator rotates back to their former plot for a continuous rotational farming. Rotational farming is slash-and-burn cultivation, which refers to the techniques of clearing the land, cutting bushes and trees, letting the debris dry for a couple of months and then burning so that the land is clear for sowing. Shifting cultivators do not cut big or all trees and bushes but leave numerous wild plants, which are known to provide sustenance. The ashes from burning provide important nutrients to the soil. Based on traditional practice, rotational farming follows certain steps. Before the cultivator does slash and burn, he looks for

fertile soil which is close to the water and then consults with the traditional elders if the selected plot does not overlap with the plots of other community members. They especially ascertain that the selected plot does not affect prohibited land and forest which needs to be preserved as spiritual sites and for the collection of non-timber products. After consultation with the elders, the cultivator also requests permission from the ancestors and spirit forest by performing a traditional ritual. Usually, this is done through prayers and dreams. If they have a bad dream, this means that the place is not available, but in case of a good dream, it is fine to go ahead with their request.



Vegetables from the forest, collected by Indigenous Bunong Women in Mondulkiri Province. Photo Credit: NTFP-EP and Nomad

Rotational farming remains important as a daily traditional livelihood practice of the indigenous peoples. It offers a wider choice and flexibility in terms of crop varieties of fruits, vegetables and species for herbal medicine in adapting to the climate or terrain. It especially contributes to the conservation of indigenous knowledge for sustainable livelihood and builds strong solidarity among the community members who support each other through the practice of shared labor in the farm.

To maintain the forest in good condition, most indigenous women participate in the patrolling process by taking turns going into the forest to guard and protect the trees from being cut down illegally and to arrest outsiders who cut trees within their protected areas. Maintaining their traditional practices, they negotiate with the private companies in order to get the land back from them. They try to involve the commune councilors in order to raise their voices to the local authorities. They believe that natural resource management is very important for women, as they have been actively involved in the management of those resources.

These days, indigenous women are eager to participate in any activity that can help to support or maintain the natural resources in the community. They added that illegal logging activity is a big issue, which they need to tackle in order to prevent it from happening.

Indigenous women actively participate in using their traditional practices to motivate and educate their children and family members to take care of the natural resources. They teach them to save the rubber in the forest, not to cut down big trees but only small ones, and not to burn the forest as it will affect the bees and animals that may exist in the forest. Most of the women know how to use the natural resources properly in order to keep the forest sustainable and encourage other women to continue to do the same. They also realize that the forest can provide them many things such as vegetables, traditional medicines, firewood, fish, raw materials for house building, making mats, and many others.

Regarding changes or innovations in agriculture, there are now more frequent growing cycles than before due to the availability of chemical fertilizers and chemical powders that make trees bear fruit quicker. Some farmers are now using these to clear the land quickly by destroying the grass so that they can grow their crops three times a year. These new agricultural techniques affect the quality of the soil and cause health problems. Using unnatural fertilizers is not good for the trees and the quality of fruits that they get is not as good as the natural ones. Indigenous women play a major role in protecting the natural resources and maintain their traditional prac-

tices because they can get additional income from selling non-timber products collected from the forest. Vegetables, fruits and mushrooms from the forest provide extra food during food shortage, while collecting rattan and raw materials for basket weaving and traditional medicine provide extra income to support the family.

Traditional dances such as the growing rice dance and other dancing styles are concrete ways of preserving culture. These dances are performed in order to teach the young generations about the traditional way of growing rice. Another way is to educate young generations about spiritual offering, which is a sign of respect for the forest that helps them survive through the use of its natural resources. In short, it is by showing respect and gratitude to the forest that they are able to survive.

As a result of trainings provided by NGOs, most indigenous women are able to actively participate in many activities. They collaborate with other networks and act as leaders of the group when confronting private companies and people from outside the community in an effort to prevent illegal logging. They participate in drafting statements to be submitted to relevant institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Environment, councils of the minister and the parliament.

An example is the case of the private company named SOPHEAK NIKA in Stung Treng province that came to clear the forest by moving into the land of the women's group. The women came together to negotiate with the private company in order to get the land back. They submitted a complaint to the local authorities at all levels and appealed to NGOs for intervention. The reason why indigenous women have become the leaders in the complaint process is because women are better than men at advocating in a non-violent manner and they know how to coordinate and to compromise.

Other activities that indigenous women have been involved in are participating in meetings at the community and provincial levels to find solutions to problems related to the land and forest. They coordinate with the community and local authorities in order to prevent illegal actions on the use of natural resources. They are involved in the patrolling process by rotating with other members in the community. They also share ideas and knowledge through informal training while meeting other women in the rice fields, farms or during home visits. They disseminate knowledge regarding some parts of the law and the rights of the indigenous peoples and also try to raise gender awareness in the community.



Group discussion with an indigenous souy activist and community, in Khoa Dauntey village, Kompong Speu Province. Photo Credit: Ms. Mane Yun

In spite of the heavy burden they carry in the family, indigenous women are able to participate in protecting the community interest and their resources. Most of the women need to stay home and take care of their children, yet they are willing to participate together with the patrolling team and other members of the community in protecting their forest. This is much appreciated in the community because it is a hard job that is supposed to be the men's role. Even though most of the indigenous women do not know much about the law or regulations, they are good at explaining the impact of losing their natural resources, which will affect their daily lives at all stages.

### 3.4. Lessons learned and challenges on forest/resource management based on the practices and experiences of indigenous women

A good practice that was often noted in the research is the strong solidarity of indigenous women in mobilizing the community to negotiate with the private company in claiming back their land. They also complained to the local authorities to get what they need. This good practice was mentioned

not only by the women but also by the indigenous men who have been working closely with the women.

Another good practice of the community is to register their community forest through communal land title rather than individual land title, in order to secure their land and natural resources. When the land is registered as a community title, there is a safeguard mechanism that one individual or one family cannot sell the land unless the whole community agrees. In this way, the land is prevented from being lost or sold to private businesses or the outsiders.

Indigenous women are knowledgeable in farming systems and natural resource management that is necessary to ensure viable and sustainable production. Their knowledge extends throughout seed preparation, soil, planting and storage of food crops and the collection of forest products. The women can sell any left over products they have gathered to earn a little additional income for the family. Women do not destroy big trees as they keep them in their respected place and just collect firewood for their needs, which does not do any harm to their traditional livelihood.

Indigenous women play important roles in their daily household responsibilities of cooking, cleaning and childcare. Traditional healing practices are important for indigenous communities who have little access to modern western health care provided by the government.

Indigenous women have been involved in the community committee and commune council to discuss issues related to natural resource management. They encourage more participation from the women and educate their children to identify the trees and not to cut down big trees that protect them against strong wind. They also teach them the importance of conserving natural resource areas. In addition to these, they educate the community to understand the relevant laws and regulations and the importance of the forest for the whole community.

Indigenous women are strong in leading the community by assisting in conflict resolution within their own communities as well as with other communities. An achievement is getting the land back for the community after filing a complaint and advocating for the common interest of the community.

Most indigenous women participate in forest management by demarcating the forest boundary, patrolling to prevent illegal activity, preparing food for patrolling, making fire paths, clearing away small trees that are not useful to maintain, and replanting more trees to replace the ones that were

destroyed. They also provide information to commune councilors and relevant institutions for legal protection. They demonstrate how to protect the forest and explain their problems to the local authorities and NGOs for intervention. They advocate the commune councilors to find solutions to their problems and submit complaints to the court. They also participate in meetings at the national and international levels, register with the indigenous committee members and participate in the motivation of the family.

Indigenous women were involved in clarification with the commune councilors in relation to illegal logging by inviting the community to explain. Because of this, the commune councilors did not do anything against the community and instead stopped the private company from cutting the trees.

Even though there are some good practices and achievements, challenges still remain. The main issues for the indigenous women are the limited support from NGOs and local authorities, not being brave enough to confront powerful people or private companies, and having less people joining the collective actions of the village.

In addition to the above, indigenous communities in Cambodia are not sufficiently consulted, informed and involved in decision making, such as in the granting of land or mining concessions that affect their land. Climate change such as irregular rain, drought, flooding, insect infestation as well as poor agricultural equipment, high illiteracy and low skills are other big challenges affecting their traditional livelihood. Others are their lack of marketing knowledge, inadequate market services for their products and globalization.

In Rattanakiri province, indigenous women experience gender imbalance in addition to economic issues. Most indigenous women are not well treated by their husbands who abuse their rights and have affairs outside the house, making it more difficult for the women. Facing this problem, women remain quiet and dare not speak out while trying to be patient all the time. In addition, some families who received land allocation from the government could not access the area because it is located very far from the villages, requiring them to travel to very remote areas.

In Monulkiri, indigenous women have been facing problems such as low education and having no skills to advocate with the private company or local authority. There are some threats from the private company, powerful people and the local authority such that the women are not able to find solutions to their problems, such as illegal logging by members of their own community due to some influences from the private company.

Furthermore, they bear heavy responsibilities in terms of caring for family members and working for the community. Local authorities do not pay attention to the women and there are often misunderstandings in relation to cutting trees in the forest.

In Stung Treng province, indigenous women face the challenge of low education thus some of them are not strong enough to confront others. Too many illegal actions happen continuously and women have to deal with soldiers in some cases. While patrolling, they have to go a very far distance leaving the children at home and sometimes having to walk in the rain. They are under pressure from the private company and powerful people in terms of their personal safety and they face a lot of threats while working to protect the natural resources. The protection and conflict resolution process are usually late because local authorities move much more slowly than the practice of illegal logging.

Other challenges that indigenous women face are being afraid of expressing their concerns due to limited knowledge and education, language barrier, being shy and scared of going into the deep forest because there are some bad people who try to take advantage of them.

In Oddar Meanchhey province, it was reported that most of the trees in the forest were cut down in 2000. Indigenous peoples felt sad seeing their forest destroyed and losing their natural resources and they lost hope in getting the forest back. As a result of this, they cannot practice their traditional way of rotational farming and cannot register their land as communal land.

In Kampong Thom province, economic land concession for rubber plantation has had negative impacts on indigenous peoples especially the women. They no longer have the chance to practice rotational farming, losing their farmland, their businesses, their culture and traditions. The forest, natural resources, wild animals, traditional medicine, fruits and vegetables have also been lost, forcing the people to leave their residential villages and move to other places. As a result, their living conditions have deteriorated. Children cannot go to school and the people experience poor health conditions due to poor hygiene and sanitation. They are losing their identity and have become laborers working for others. They are losing their traditions and solidarity that they used to help each other. They cannot maintain their spirit forest, the grave forest and preservation forest for their young generations.

Even though women do all the housework and take care of the children,

they still believe that they are naturally weak compared to the men in terms of physical strength. Thus, women feel they need more support from the men in terms of patrolling and engaging in decision-making in relation to natural resource management.

The women believe that one way to improve their knowledge is to have more information and training from NGOs related to natural resource management. They also want these conducted in their own languages as they wish to maintain their own identity, culture and traditions as indigenous people. They want to be prepared to advocate for getting their land back with the support of NGOs.

The indigenous women in Stung Treng province stated: “We can rest and still have food to eat if we have our remaining natural resources. If we lose all natural resources, we will be the servants of others.”

There has been no wide sharing of information and knowledge about laws, rules and regulations because of the lack of opportunity provided by NGOs or the government. Involvement of commune councilors and relevant government institutions is very limited. Only a few women mentioned about the support they received from the Forestry Administration (FA) in Battambang province. However, this was not enough to meet their needs.

### 3.5. Recommendations of indigenous women in strengthening sustainable resource management and their contributions and roles as well as in addressing the challenges

#### ***Recommendations for the government***

- The government should reduce the land concessions given to private companies in indigenous peoples' land because the private company often creates problems by grabbing the land belonging to the indigenous peoples.
- Local authorities should provide more trainings and encourage women in the community to participate in meetings and advocacy.
- Local authorities should be encouraged to understand the law clearly.
- Local authorities and relevant institutions should provide more support to indigenous women so that they are able to participate in any activity in the community.
- Consultation with the indigenous women should be done proper-

ly when there is a need to withdraw or to manage the natural resource products.

### ***Recommendations for donors and supporting NGOs***

- Donors and supporting NGOs should provide direct funding support to local NGOs working in the remote areas so that they can provide more training to indigenous peoples in the community to enable them to participate in community development and natural resources management.

### ***Capacity building for indigenous women***

- For most indigenous women, capacity building is the major need because their general knowledge is limited and dissemination of relevant laws is not sufficient. Most indigenous women claim that they have learned some skills and knowledge provided by the NGOs, but this is still lacking and done only once or twice a year.
- Most indigenous peoples depend on agricultural products all year round, thus more skills are needed to improve agricultural production, instead of being fully dependent on their natural resources. They wish to maintain those resources for long-term sustainable development, thus it is important to learn new technical skills in agriculture. Most farmers are familiar with traditional agricultural practices but lack knowledge on new methods. New agricultural techniques needed include the following: growing vegetables using new systems of climate change adaptation due to limited water sources, improving crop yield and products, skills in animal raising, mainly chicken raising.

### ***Family education in the community***

- Indigenous peoples, both men and women, need to work together and support each other in patrolling the forest to prevent it from being destroyed by outsiders.
- Indigenous women should continue to practice information sharing in the community, using both formal and informal methods of knowledge sharing.
- Community people should meet with government representatives in order to present their problems and find solutions. Women should be encouraged and be given the opportunity to participate in community affairs and engage with NGOs and government offi-

cial. Informal education also needs to be done within each individual family.

- NGOs should provide more education and training on forestry laws, human rights, gender and primary health care to indigenous peoples.
- Family members should support the younger generation, especially young women, to be educated and to become more courageous in protecting the natural resources. They should be given the opportunity to be involved with NGOs in the process of information dissemination and training of indigenous peoples about laws, indigenous rights and other related topics in order to empower women to be strong in public speaking and confronting problems in the community.

### ***Gender Sensitivity***

- Small project support should be provided to indigenous women so that they can contribute in natural resource management and also participate in other development work.
- More indigenous women networks should be established so that they can encourage more women to join in the protection of natural resources and to prevent illegal acts.
- Women should have more training on negotiation skills for them to be braver in leading the community and provide them the opportunity to protect the community from private companies and the authorities.

### ***Community Forestry***

- In establishing community forestry, the focus should not be based on the standard size of the forest. Giving the spirit forest to the private company should be prohibited. While developing the land title, the wife's name in the family has to be included. Female leaders have to be considered so that women are able to express their problems directly rather than having the men talk about women's concerns.
- The network of indigenous women at the community, national and regional levels, needs to be improved to be more effective. Conduct exchange visits among women from different areas so that they can learn from each other's experiences in terms of natural resources management and protection towards sustainability.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> National Policy on Indigenous Peoples Development issued on 24 April 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Kratie, Pusst, Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, Preah Vihear, Kampong Thom, Koh Kong, Kampong Speu, Kg. Cham, Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Uddor Meanchey, Siem Reap and Kampong Som Provinces.

<sup>3</sup> Decision letter of National Committee Decentralization No.009 issued on 06 June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> NTFP-EP and ILO-ITP Cambodia reported.

<sup>5</sup> Protected Areas Law, 2008, Chapter 6 article 21 to 28.

<sup>6</sup> Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Management, 1996, article 6.

<sup>7</sup> Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resource Management, 1996, Article 10.

<sup>8</sup> Sub-Decree No.72 ANK/BK on the Environmental Impact Assessment Process, 11 August 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Land Law 2001 article 26th and indigenous community internal rule on land used and management Guideline

<sup>10</sup> UNIFEM, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> The resource from [opendevelopment.net](http://opendevelopment.net).

<sup>12</sup> Estimates show at least half Cambodia's arable land and one-tenth of its total land area has been leased to foreign companies in the form of ELCs for agro-industrial development of cash crops. See Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia. 16 July 2012. A/HRC/21/63. Available from [http://cambodia.ohchr.org/WebDOCs/DocReports/3-SG-RA-Reports/A-HRC-21-63\\_en.pdf](http://cambodia.ohchr.org/WebDOCs/DocReports/3-SG-RA-Reports/A-HRC-21-63_en.pdf).

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# Roles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Forest Management in Myanmar

by Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw



Photo credit: Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw

## Executive Summary

Indigenous women are the primary forest users of the natural forest in Myanmar. Women are affected by environmental degradation and have limited access to forest management. The role of indigenous women and their contribution must be recognized in order to promote forest conservation. Although there is an ongoing indigenous peoples' collective struggle for self-determination, gender issues are often overlooked. This leads to gender-blind policies with regards to sustainable forest management.

The overall objective of the research is to gather data and information and analyze the good practices and lessons learned in relation to the roles and contributions of indigenous women on sustainable forest management in Myanmar. Its ultimate goal is to disseminate the research findings for awareness-raising, advocacy and lobbying at different levels in order to promote the rights and welfare of indigenous women, their roles and contribution to resource management, as well as the challenges and their key concerns in the exercise of their rights and in ensuring their wellbeing.

Qualitative research methods were used to gather information on the roles of indigenous women in sustainable forest management. Individual interviews with 75 women who are the forest users were done and focus group discussions and observations were also conducted for data validation. Data analysis for this research was an ongoing process from the start to the end. Conclusions of this study were drawn from the data reduction and analysis.



Focus Group Discussion photo in a village from Irrawaddy division. Photo credit: Aye Thira Kyaw

Desk research was done to review the existing literature and to identify the data gaps.

According to prevailing social norms in Myanmar, men take the leading roles while women play supportive roles. Men have the responsibility to protect the family while women are the caregivers. The main livelihood activities are shifting cultivation, *taungya*<sup>1</sup> farming and permanent farming. Other livelihood activities are hunting and timber extraction, which is done by the men. For women, they gather food, vegetables, fruits and herbal leaves from the forest and sell them as an income source.

All the indigenous peoples make their living from the use of forest resources. The forest resources are important for both men and women since they provide a source of income, firewood, wood for furniture, medicinal plants, vegetables and fruits. The role of indigenous women in sustainable resource management is essential. Women are aware that inappropriate use of forest resources can damage the forest. A profound concern is shifting cultivation, which they strongly believe is the main reason for forest degradation. Women also have an important role in teaching and raising awareness of the children about biodiversity and its advantages. Women in this study are close to the children and are the ones who teach them about the advantages of biodiversity protection.

However, the research found out that there is minimal participation of women in forest resource management at the community level. The Myanmar government has declared some areas as restricted areas for forest conservation. Therefore, indigenous people have no control over the forest. Particularly for indigenous women, they have no control over the forest, have no decision-making power and their participation in community committees is absent. Although they are the primary users of the forest, their voices are ignored and rejected by men because of their gender.

Indigenous women and their gender concerns must be addressed at the community level because of their dependence on the forest. Women must have meaningful participation in forest conservation meetings and their voices must be heard. Indigenous women must be recognized as agents to preserve the forest. In order to do this, women empowerment programs need to be introduced to raise their issues of concern and to develop their capabilities in decision-making.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Background situation

Indigenous women are the primary forest users of the natural forest. However, they are often disadvantaged because of environmental degradation and limited access to natural forest resources. Their absence in decision-making often leads to gender-blind policies with regards to forest management. Although there are now collective struggles to achieve indigenous peoples' inclusion in forest management, gender issues are often ignored. There is a general perception among Myanmar people that women lack leadership qualities because of their lack of education. Thus, engagement of men in planning and decision-making in forest management often leads to gender imbalance. However, women are unable to challenge such biases because they are socialized to accept the decisions of other people such as their husbands or the elderly.

Myanmar needs to ensure the inclusion of indigenous peoples in decision-making in compliance with the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The Declaration calls on governments to respect the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination and to participate in decision-making in matters that affect their rights. States shall consult indigenous peoples in order to obtain their free,

prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them. (UNDRIP Articles 18 and 19). These rights of indigenous peoples need to be respected by the Myanmar government when introducing the REDD+ program. REDD refers to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing countries, which is an effort to create financial value for the carbon stored in forests by offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development. (UN REDD 2009)

REDD+ refers to reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries; and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries. The UN-REDD programme was introduced in Myanmar in November 2011. Since Myanmar is starting to implement REDD+, the effective participation of women in forest management must be ensured in its implementation.

This research is intended to gather and document the existing knowledge of indigenous women and identify gaps and challenges in their role and contribution to sustainable forest management. It will also study gender issues in relation to indigenous women and forest management.

## 1.2. Study Team

Eight (8) field researchers and students conducted data collection in ethnic villages where indigenous peoples use the forest for their livelihood. The students are enrolled at the Myanmar Institute of Theology and were chosen based on their previous experience in data collection. They went to Kachin State, Chin State, Shan state, Ayeyawaddy division and Tanintharyi division to conduct the research.

## 1.3. Research Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used for the data-collection process. The methods used include desk research, field-research interviews, focus group discussions and observations.

### **Desk Research**

With an objective to review the existing literature on the forestry sector and gender in Myanmar, a wide range of documents such as journal ar-

ticles, research reports and project reports were reviewed. This provided the available data and knowledge gaps about gender roles and forest resource management.

### **Site selection**

After consultation, 4 ethnic areas where people rely on the forest were chosen for the study sites. Three (3) villages were chosen from the 4 ethnic areas. Five (5) women were interviewed in each village.

### **Individual informant interviews**

Key informant interviews were done to gather information, document and analyze the roles of indigenous women in sustainable forest management. Altogether, 75 individual informant interviews were conducted.

### **Focus group discussions**

Focus group discussions were used as a triangulation method to validate the data and to explore the village profile and livelihoods. Focus group discussions included both men and women in order to produce substantial data.



Focus Group Discussion in a village from Tanintharyi Division. Photo credit: Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw

## **Observations**

Observations were made while approaching the informants in order to build trust between the researchers and the indigenous women.

## **Data analysis**

Data analysis was an ongoing process from the start to the end of this research. The data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were sketched into notes and formulated into ideas. The data was then written into organized, compressed and assembled information.

## **Ethical consideration**

The field researchers obtained the informed consent of the respondents before the interviews and let the informants know about their right to discontinue the interview if they felt uncomfortable. The research kept all the informants' names confidential and changed the addresses of the informants.

## 2.1. Introduction

The British colonized Burma (now Myanmar) after three Anglo-Burmese wars (from 1824 -26, 1852 and 1885). They replaced the Burmese self-sufficient and self-consumption economy, which was then found in the Kingdom of Burma, with the world market-economy. An understanding of Myanmar's economy will not be complete without looking into the political context. Successive governments in Myanmar ruled the country with different economic systems, which can be classified into three stages: the period of parliamentary democracy and free economic system (1948-1962); the period of socialism (1962-1988); and the period of market economy under the military government from 1988 to 2010. (Thein, 2003).

### 2.1.1. Market economy under the colonial period

The British transformed lower Burma, the Irrawaddy delta, into the largest rice exporting country in the world, exporting more than 3 million tons of rice at its highest point. Aside from rice, Burma also exported teak, oil products and non-ferrous metals. (Nishizawa, 1991)

Myanmar (then Burma) is famous for its best quality, most valued and sought-after teak in the world. As a matter of fact, timber became an attraction for British colonial intentions and the British colonized Burma after three Anglo-Burmese wars. It is often asserted that beautiful natural teak can only be seen in Myanmar today. (Htun, 2009; Baginski, et al. 2011)

The British colonial regime systematically established its forest department in 1856, before colonizing the whole of Burma. The exploitation of Myanmar timber and other natural resources, which were controlled by foreign companies, left the Burmese people poor despite living in one of the rich countries in South East Asia. (Nishizawa, 1991)

### 2.1.2. Parliamentary democracy free economic system

Myanmar (then Burma) gained independence in 1948. A combination of nationalism, socialism and the market system was adopted after the harsh experiences under the colonial rule. First, the government took over the rice trade, which was previously monopolized by foreign firms, and reallocated this to the cultivators. This was followed by the nationalization of the timber industry. The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, which was owned by foreigners, was transformed into a state-owned industry. In fact, the government wanted to restructure new independent Burma by using socialism as a nationalistic movement. This can be understood to mean that they wanted to remove foreign control that does not benefit the local people since foreign companies controlled most of the natural resources during the colonial time. After independence, the government restructured the Burma Corporation and the Burma oil company, which were primarily controlled by foreigners, into joint ventures to welcome local and private entrepreneurs. As a result, the private sector was allowed to participate using the operation of the market mechanism and to perform in many sectors of the economy including foreign trade. (Nishizawa, 1991)

### 2.1.3. Burmese way to socialism

The military government of the Revolutionary Council in the 1960s adopted more radical policies under the slogan of the so-called “Burmese Socialism” after the military coup in 1962. In fact, the government target was to build an economy for the people in Burma by eradicating foreign elements since the government was mostly nationalistic and anti-capitalistic. A strict closed-door policy was pursued to prevent the penetration of neo-colonial-

ism. This policy caused foreign trade shrink and led to a stagnant economy and a 22-year long dictatorship. (Nishizawa, 1991)

#### 2.1.4. Market economy

Following a military coup in 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took over civil power and embraced the market economic system to upgrade the country's economy. In principle, the economy was a market economic system, but in practice, it still was largely controlled by the state. State control undermined market-based competition. (Myanmar Country Report, 2012) Economic reforms were made in state sector activities such as manufacturing, mining, communications, services and banking. The government also encouraged the registration of exporters and importers. Then, approval was given to foreigners for setting up companies and branches. To support internal and external trade, the union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry was established. Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) started coming into the country after the introduction of Myanmar Foreign Investment Law, which gave foreign investors attractive incentives. (Thein, 2003) However, investments were made only in the natural resource extraction sectors, especially oil, gas, timber and gems. Since 1998, the Myanmar government has relied on natural resource extraction for foreign Direct Investment inflow. (Myanmar Country Report, 2012)

#### 2.1.5. Diverse ethnicity

Myanmar has diverse ethnic groups, which constitute 35 to 40% of the national population. There are 8 major ethnic groups, which are Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Shan, plus over 100 minor ethnic groups, languages and dialects. Ethnic nationalities face a great deal of discrimination and difficulties to preserve their culture as they are always treated as second-class citizens by successive governments. (Community Organizing and Rights Education Burma, 2012)

**Table 1.** Composition of Different Ethnic Groups in Myanmar

Sr. No.	Type of Ethnic group	Percent of total population	Number of groups	Name of different group
1	Kachin	1.5%	12	Kachin, Trone, Dalaung, Jingphaw, Guari, Hkahku, Duleng, Maru (Lawgore), Rawang, Lashi (La Chit), Atsi, Lisu
2	Kayah	0.75%	9	Kayah, Zayein, Ka-Yun ( Padaung), Gheko, Kebar, Bre(Ka-Yaw), Manu Manaw, Yin Talai, Yin Baw
3	Karen	7%	11	Kayin, Kayinpyu, Pa-Le-Chi, Mon Kayin (Sarpyu), Sgaw, Ta-Lay- Pwa, Paku, Bwe, Monnepwa, Monpwa, Shu (Pwo)
4	Chin	1%	53	Chin, Meithei (Kathe), Saline, Ka-Lin-Kaw( Lushay), Khami, Awa Khami, Khawno, Kaungso, KaungSaing Chin, Kwelshin, Kwangli (Sim), Gunte(Lyente), Gwete, Ngorn, Zizan, Sentang, SaingZan, Za -How, Zotung, Zo-Pe, Zo, Zahnyet (Zan-niet), Tapong, Tiddim (Hai-Dim), Tay-Zan, Taishon, Thado, Torr, Dim, Dai(Yindu), Naga, Tangkul, Malin, Panun, Magun, Matu, Miram (Mara), Mi-er, Mgan, Lushei( Lushay), Laymyo, Lyente, Lawhtu, Lai, Laizao, Wakim (Mro), Haulngo, Anu, Anun, Oo-Pu, Lhinbu, Asho (Plain), Rongtu
5	Bamar	68%	9	Bamar, Dawei, Beik, Yaw, Yabein, Kadu, Ganan, Salon, Hpon
6	Mon	2 %	1	Mon
7	Rakhine	3.5%	7	Rakhine, Kamein, KweMyi, Daingnet, Maramagyi, Mro, Thet
8	Shan	9%	33	Shan, Yun(Lao), Kwi, Pyin, Yao, Danaw, Pale, En, Son, Khamu, Kaw (Akha-E -Kaw), Kokang, Khamti Shan, Hkun, Taungyp, Danu, Palaung, Man Zi, Yin Net, Shan Gale, Shan Gyi, Lahu, Intha, Eik-swair, Pa-O, Tai-Loi, Tai-Lem, Tai-Lon, Tai-Lay, Maingtha, Maw Shan, Wa

Source: (2001) *Political Situation of Myanmar and Its Role in the Region*

### 2.1.6. Situation of indigenous women in Myanmar

The society of ethnic people is patriarchal, in which women are subordinate to men in every aspect of life stages. (Women League of Burma, 2006) The culture of silence among Myanmar women including ethnic women is widespread. Traditionally, ethnic women are not supposed to decide on their own and their issue of concerns are mostly discussed by their husbands. Moreover, sons are given the opportunity to pursue higher education, whereas daughters are not given the same favor. This has led to less participation of women in the public sphere and most women end up staying at home. Traditionally, ethnic culture discourages women from engaging with the outside world. (Lahtaw Raw, 2012) Moreover, there is discrimination against women in public offices, such that few female politicians and senior government officers are found in government offices. (Myanmar Country Report, 2012)

### 2.1.7. Civil war and ethnic women

Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, various ethnic groups have formed armed groups fighting for autonomy of their ethnic areas. The government's aggressive response towards ethnic communities has been extreme, leading to a 60-year long civil war in ethnic areas. Civil war is still ongoing in some regions, such as in the Kachin state in particular, although the government has agreed to ceasefires with some ethnic armies. Negotiation of the peace process is still ongoing. However, few women can be seen in the peace process although women are among the victims of the war. (Myanmar Country Report, 2012)

In ethnic areas torn by war or armed conflict, rape has been used as a weapon of war by the Myanmar government. Rape cases are deemed as a natural and inevitable outcome of the war. It is also used as a mode of suppression to intimidate the ethnic communities. Indigenous women are targets in these conflicts because of their gender and ethnic origins. In addition to rape cases, forced labor and force relocation is widespread. Oftentimes, ethnic women face forced recruitment and they are prevented from completing schooling and performing the duties of caring for their family. Pregnant women and even breastfeeding mothers are recruited for forced labor such as engaging in backbreaking work, walking many miles carrying heavy supplies and equipment. (The Karen Women's Organization, 2007)

## 2.2. Indigenous Women's Participation in Forest Sustainability

More than five decades of civil war have led the Burmese people to live in fear. Along with fear, militarization has created a culture of male domination throughout the ethnic areas. (Palaung Women Organization, 2011) With regards to forestry management, the statutory laws are insensitive to the cultural laws and practices in the community. Women's participation in forest management is very minimal and their issues are discussed by their husbands. Although women's knowledge and needs are different from those of men, many conservation programs ignore gender perspectives. Ignoring the voices of half of the population could lead to poor management and potential loss of essential ecosystems.

The Myanmar government has made some ethnic areas as restricted areas for forest conservation. Therefore, indigenous peoples have no control over the forest. For indigenous women, they have no control over the forest and their decision-making powers and participation the community committees are absent. Although women are the primary users of the forest, their voices are ignored and rejected by men because of their gender. If there is a meeting, men are officially permitted to participate. Women sometimes participate only when their husbands are not around. If the village committee knows that her husband is at home, they ask the woman to go back home and tell her husband to come. Women are under the control of men in the decision-making process. Their issues and concerns are discussed by their husbands in the community committee.

This is the reason why women are often arrested by government personnel because they do not know what parts of the forests are restricted areas or not. Women need to get permission from the forest authorities to sell their forest products. There is also little women's participation in other development projects because meeting times often conflict with their household activities. Even when women participate, they have no power to decide. Women's participation in emergency community affairs was found to be discouraged. There is no encouragement for women to participate and address the challenges they face in relation to management of forest resources.

## 2.3. Brief Description of the Forest Condition.

Myanmar has four main regions, which can be divided topographically. These are the Western mountain ranges, the Shan Plateau, and the Central Region. Western mountain ranges cover Rakhine, Chin and Kachin hills in the west and the north. The Shan Plateau covers the extensive Shan plateau and the mountain ranges from Kayah, Kayin, Mon States and Tanintharyi region. The Central Region covers the Ayeyawady, Chindwin and Sittaung Rivers. The Ayeyardady delta and coastal region include coastal areas in Rakhine State, Mon State and Tanintharyi Region. (Tint, 2011).

### 2.3.1. National forest

Myanmar is famous for its abundant natural resources. More importantly, the forest resource is an important natural resource since it not only produces world-class teak but also provides livelihood for the people and national economy for the country. (Htun, 2009) The forest in Myanmar can be classified into 8 categories which are: tidal forests, beach and dune forests, swamp forests, tropical evergreen forests, mixed deciduous forests, dry forests, dipterocarp forests, and hill and temperate evergreen forests. (Htun, 2009; Baginski, et al. 2011)



Forest land in Taninthayi division. Photo credit: Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw

### 2.3.2 Natural resource management policies

Systematic management of the forest sector for sustainability has long been an endeavor of Myanmar since 1856. It has been more than 150 years since then and its forests are still productive. (“Status of Myanmar Forest Management,” 2004) There have been some amendments and modifications made in the country’s management strategies for forest sustainability. (Htun, 2009)

The Burma Forest Act of 1902 and its series of amendments were used until the SLORC period. SLORC legislated a new Forest Law in 1992 to support conservation for forest sustainability. SLORC also created decentralization and gave space for community participation in the management of the forest. The 1995 Myanmar Forest Policy is responsible for implementing the 1992 Forest Law. Other important forest tools are:

- Forest Rules (1995);
- Protection of Wildlife and Wild Plants and Conservation of Natural Areas Law (1994);
- Community Forestry Instructions (1995);
- Myanmar Agenda 21 together with Environmental Policy;



Forest in Chin state. Photo credit: Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw

- National Forestry Action Plan 1995;
- Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management 1999;
- Forest and Guidelines for District Forest Management Plans 1996;
- National Code of Practice for Forest Harvesting; and
- National Framework for Environmental Law. (“Status of Myanmar Forest Management,” 2004).

Even so, Myanmar forest is under threat because of a variety of factors including disorganized shifting cultivation, illegal logging, policy inconsistency between forest sectors and other sectors, and conflict of interest between sustainability and income. (Htun, 2009)

#### 2.3.4. Data on forest condition

According to the forest department, Burma’s forest is now facing the most challenging situation in its history. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has now marked Burma as among the countries with the highest deforestation rates in the world. The total area of the country is classified into five types: closed forest, open forest, other wooded land, inland water bodies and other land. From 1990 to 2000, forest area decreased from 56% to 52.1% of the total land area. In 2005, the forest areas decreased further to 50.2% of the total land area. In 2010, the percentage of forest area dropped to 47%.

**Table 2.** Changes in area of land types in Myanmar (in hectares and percentage) from 1990 to 2005

Year	1990	1990	2000	2000	% Change (1990-2000)	2005	2005	% change (2000-2005)	% change (1990-2005)
Land type	Area	Percentage Share	Area	Percentage Share		Area	Percentage Share		
Closed forests	28114.7	41.6	25841	38.2	-8.1	24704.2	36.5	-4.4	-12.1
Open forests	9755.8	14.4	9426.9	13.9	-3.4	9262.4	13.7	-1.7	-5.1
Total forests	37870.5	56.0	35267.9	52.1	-6.9	33966.6	50.2	-3.7	-10.3
Other wooded land	10405.8	15.4	11435.3	16.9	9.9	11950	17.7	4.5	14.8
Other land (including water bodies)	19381.6	28.6	20954.7	31.0	8.1	21741.3	32.1	3.7	12.2
Total land area	67657.9	100	67657.9	100	0	67657.9	100	0	0

Source: FAO (2006); Myanmar Forestry Outlook Study

## 3.1. Results of the Study

### 3.1.1. Socio-cultural values and norms

The Chin people love their traditional dances, costumes and festivals. They celebrate New Year, Christmas and Chin national days as part of their culture. According to marriage customs, men are the head of the household. They are responsible not only for protecting their wives but also for earning money for the family. Chin women cannot propose to men and when they get married they become housewives. Culturally, only sons can inherit property and daughters may not. It is also a tradition that Chin people help their neighbors and they live interdependently. Chin women face more restrictions than men as they grow up. Women are not allowed to go out, to have fun, to laugh out in front of other people. They are taught how to cook, how to dress up, and be feminine. In Chin culture, men as the head of the household need to earn money for the family, while the women have to spend little and save for the future.

The Kachin people love their culture, their name, their traditional costume and traditional festivals. According to cultural norms, men are the head of the household and are the breadwinner of the family. Women are housewives, pay respect to their husband and look after the children. Traditionally, the value of men and women are different. Kachin women believe that men are born with a higher social status than women. The Kachin people prefer sons and it is the sons who can inherit property. Women are the servants of men. Kachin women are taught to be feminine and to dress properly. Having long hair is also a symbol of femininity. They are also taught not to climb trees and are supposed to be responsible for the housework. However, these practices are starting to change nowadays. The people are interdependent and have solidarity (sister-brother spirit) in the community. Men do *taungya* farming, working in other people's farms, and working in gold mines. There is a tradition of using "*sha lit*" (a kind of basket for putting fruits, fish, grilled chicken, etc.) at the ceremony of Kachin villages. Kachin state has a lot of natural resources. Jade from Kachin is of world-class quality, which Kachin women use as their jewelry.

Most Karen people live in Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwaddy division. In the villages, men go hunting once a week. Women sometimes get together and go fishing, depending on the weather situation. While doing *Taungyar* farming, they practice "labor exchange" for each *Taung Yar*. After the successful cultivation, they celebrate Thanks giving ceremony as the tradi-

tional festival. Every year, Karen people celebrate Karen new year, which is a remarkable traditional ceremony for them. Main livelihood for Karen people is traditional Taung-Yar farming and garden farming. Livestock breeding is an additional livelihood activity for Karen people. Karen people love their literature, traditional costume and Karen New year. Women are taught how to dress up, manage household chore. They are also taught to be faithful to the husband. Husbands are responsible for making money, having understanding and capability to lead the family.

Shan People are the traditional Buddhist and their traditional festivals are Thadinkyut festival and New year water festival. Main livelihood activity is the Taung-ya farming and Htoon business (limestone production in English). Men also go for hunting and build house with the use of forest wood. Women gather fruits and vegetables from the forest. Shan people also value seasonal festivals like all other Buddhists. According to the informants in this study, women and men together in their livelihood. Husbands do work that needs physical strength and wives must fulfil the responsibilities of a wife.

### 3.1.2. Gendered-division of labor

There is a widespread phenomenon in gender relations that we found to be common among the ethnic groups, i.e., that men are the breadwinners and women act as housewives. Men earn money outside and do all the hard work that need physical strength. Women do all the housework such as cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, sweeping, and taking care of the children and elderly. In some households, both husband and wife earn money to make ends meet. They work together in farming, agricultural production and livestock breeding. However, men have little participation in doing household chores while women also have to work outside. When they have free time, men spend their time doing fun activities like listening to music on the radio and hanging around with friends. In their free time, women do cleaning, washing clothes, teaching children, looking for food and vegetables from the forest, etc. Women are found to be the caregiver of the children, the sick and the elderly, while men are responsible to earn money for health care.

This reflects the culture that women, as housewives, are solely responsible for doing household chores. Women who cannot manage the household activities are deemed to be bad housewives. This same traditional pattern is found among the ethnic groups. The inheritance system is from grandfa-

ther to father to son. This reveals the patriarchal culture that favors men, whereas women become economically dependent on their husband under customary law.

### 3.1.3. Gender norms

As to social norms, men take the leading roles while women take supportive roles. Men have the responsibility to protect the family and women have the responsibility as caregivers in the family. In Myanmar culture, men are believed to have “Hpon” meaning holiness and women have to respect Hpon. Men are called “Eain OoNat” and they are the breadwinners of the family. There is also the traditional custom that women “longyi” cannot touch the men’s clothes because longyi is dirty and can lower men “Hpon.” Gender norms are found more restrictive when it comes to women. Women are more restricted in social activities because of their gender and ethnicity. Girls are taught to dress properly, not to climb tall trees, not to shout when they talk, not to challenge what elder people said. Girls need skills such as cooking and doing housework because they will get married one day and they have to serve their husband with those skills.

### 3.1.4. Livelihood activity

**Table 3.** Population and livelihood activity of major ethnic groups in each state and region

State/ Region	Ethnic group	Population	Main Livelihood Activities
Kachin State	1. Kachin 2. Bamar 3. Shan 4. Chin 5. Kayin 6. Others	1,254,381	Shifting cultivation
Chin State	1. Chin 2. Rakhine 3. Bamar 4. Other	465,539	Shifting cultivation
Shan State	1. Shan 2. Kayah 3. Bamar 4. Kachin 5. Kayin 6. Chin 7. Rakhine 8. Other	4,751,773	Permanent farming

Ayewarwaddy Region	1. Bamar 2. Kayin 3. Rakhine 4. Chin 5. Mon	6,668,947	Permanent farming, fishery
Tanintharyi Region	1. Bamar 2. Kayin 3. Mon 4. Shan	1,324,127	Orchard, fishery

Source: (2001) *Political Situation of Myanmar and Its Role in the Region*

Aside from agriculture, other livelihood activities are hunting and timber extraction, which is done by the men. Women gather food, vegetables, fruits, herbal leaves from the forest and sell them as an income source. All of the indigenous peoples make their living from the forest resources. They cannot imagine their lives without the forest and they are not skilled to do other jobs as well. Therefore, their concerns about forest degradation are increasing as logging activities are going on at an enormous scale in their places.



Individual interview with a woman from Irrawaddy division. Photo credit: Ms. Aye Thira Kyaw

## 3.2. Views and Perspectives of Indigenous Women

Women believe that sustainable resource management is important. They all agree that the forest provides abundant natural resources such as firewood, herbal plants, fruits, vegetables and flowers for their livelihood. It is the only income source for them since indigenous women make their living by selling forest products. Women also believe that trees give shade, provide clean air and protect them from disaster. They agree that if they maintain the sustainability of the forest by preventing forest degradation, it will benefit them as well as future generations. The indigenous women also share their views that improper use of forest and unnecessary acts such as cutting of the trees and setting fire in the forest can cause forest degradation. In their opinion, logging is the main factor that causes forest depletion. They feel sad that all tall and big trees are cut down for the commercial purposes. Indigenous women are concerned about cutting down trees for doing business. Using the soil several times makes forest trees die and they experience weather changes because of fewer trees in the forest. However, they have no other alternative way for their survival.

Indigenous women have some good practices to maintain forest sustainability, i.e., collecting vegetables and fruits without taking the roots, not cutting down trees near the village and lake, and avoiding setting fire in the forest. They all believe that taking the plants with roots will lead to extinction of the plants. Cutting down trees near the lake can cause bad quality of soil and make the lake shallow, leading to drought. Many indigenous women participate in activities such as replanting timber trees, preventing wildfire, helping other people prevent wildfire from spreading and cleaning the forest to prevent forest degradation. In some areas, there are efforts to reduce the use of firewood for cooking. Some women encourage other people to enhance the growth of forest plants and trees. They even grow some vegetables in their compound. They have also learned from their ancestors traditional ways to protect the forest. When using bamboo trees, they don't cut the bamboo during the rainy season so that new bamboo can grow. These perspectives of indigenous women on sustainable forest management have been passed on to them by their ancestors.

### 3.2.1. Environmental awareness of indigenous women

Regarding sustainable resource management, women are aware that inappropriate use of forest resources can damage the forest. A profound concern of women is shifting cultivation, which they believe is a reason for forest modification. Shifting cultivation is seen as the main livelihood in all the study areas. One mountain can be used only once for the shifting cultivation. The lack of livelihoods and increasing population have induced unregulated practice of shifting cultivation. Indigenous women are concerned about the use of trees without replanting. They are also worried about the future and their generation's livelihood. Without the forest, they cannot survive since they have been living in this place for so many years. If the forest is healthy, their lives will also be healthy. Since indigenous women are the primary forest users, they are able to notice forest changes and they share their experiences comparing the richness of biodiversity before and after. They have also experienced food shortage, unsuccessful cultivation and flooding in their communities, which makes them feel guilty of using the forest. Women believe that there are some practices of forest use that can harm the forest and destroy biodiversity. In one village in Shan state, “htoon” business, limestone production in English, is found to be popular. In order to do ‘htoon’ business, a lot of forest trees are cut. Women said that this “htoon” business is really destroying the situation of their forest. Women strongly believe that forest conservation is needed for the sake of future generations. However, a few women don't agree that using forest resources for their daily survival is a big deal because they are not using the forest for commercial purposes.

### 3.2.2. Role of indigenous women in sustainable forest resource management

Forest resources are important for both men and women since they provide a source of income, firewood, wood for furniture, medicinal plants, vegetables and fruits. The role of indigenous women in sustainable resource management is essential. However, the research found that there is minimal participation of women in the forest resource management at the community level. Even when they are able to participate, women are only committee members whereas men are the leaders. The women's role in sustainable forest management is found mostly at home where they teach environmental awareness to their children. Women's participation in sustainable forest management is significant since women are the primary forest users and their daily activities are closely linked with the forest. The

forest provides firewood for cooking, vegetables and fruits for nutrition, herbal plants and trees for medicinal uses. It was also found that indigenous women know several medicinal plants and use them to treat different kinds of diseases. The women get nutrition from fruits and vegetables and earn cash income from selling forest products such as flowers, vegetables. They also teach the younger generation to protect the forest and forest resources so that these can be used for many more years to come. Women also train the children on how to protect the environment by explaining the negative consequences of forest degradation and deforestation. Since women and children interact easily, the role of women is central in developing good habits in the future generation for forest conservation. There are, however, concerns among women about forest degradation and food scarcity because of activities such as cutting trees without replanting.

### **3.2.3. Indigenous women and spiritual belief about forests**

Village women believe that their ancestors still exist in the forest. They worship according to “Nat” tradition and pay respect every year. Moreover, the cutting trees that are believed to have “Nat” is prohibited. According to their traditions, if they break such a tree, they are believed to have bad luck. Their belief in the supernatural power of “Nat” contributes to forest conservation because they are afraid of the anger of “Nat.” This strong belief of traditional “nat” is widespread in the rural ethnic areas.

### **3.2.4. Women’s views about development projects**

There are development projects being implemented in the villages that promote community forestry, micro-credit, road construction, health prevention, and others. Women believe that these development projects bring advantages at the same time disadvantages to their community. Some say that development projects destroy their spirit and destroy moral ethics. Before the projects came, the villagers were independent and hardworking. Now, the villagers depend so much on the benefits from the projects that they don’t want to work any more. However, environmental conservation projects encourage them to conserve the forests and women are very supportive of it. There is also ongoing construction of roads and bridges to the villages. Although road construction brings job opportunities to the community, the women believe that this could lead to forest degradation since they cut down natural trees in the process. Environmental awareness programs need to be integrated into village development projects since some villagers lack awareness about climate change and preservation of the forest.

Economic projects in some villages produce electricity using the village riv-

er. Because of this activity, people are starting to experience water shortage. These kinds of economic projects usually ignore the needs of the indigenous peoples. Although the community does not agree with this project, they have no power to raise their concerns. The women have raised serious concerns about drinking water because they notice that the water quality is not as good as before.

### 3.3. Concrete Practices of Indigenous Women on Sustainable Resource Management

Different practices of resource management can be found among indigenous men and women. Men are more likely to be involved with activities that need strength while women are involved with lighter jobs such as planting, caring for seedlings and collection of non-timber forest products (NTFP) for household use. Men use forest wood to build houses, fences and to produce furniture. Men do hunting in the forest and the women sell the meat from the animals that the men get from the forest. Forest resources not only give food to eat but also give livelihood for the village women. Their main livelihood is farming and shifting cultivation.

Women also make handicrafts out of forest products, which they learned



Gardening in Shan state. Photo credit: Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw

to do from their mother and grandmother. Handicrafts are sold in the market at different prices, depending on the quality. The forest provides food for the indigenous peoples throughout their lives. Practices of indigenous women in resource management include using firewood for cooking, fetching water from the forest, collecting flowers, vegetables, fruits and medicinal plants from the forest. Women know the nutritional content of the fruits and vegetables and use these to provide nutritious meals for the family.

### 3.3.1. Knowledge of indigenous women on seasonal plantation

Indigenous women are also familiar with growing seasonal plants. They know when the plants can grow, where they can be grown and when to harvest. Seasonal flowers are also grown and sold in the market. Women do not normally use artificial fertilizers when growing plants.

*We usually grow trees in the rainy season. Mango trees can be used after three years of planting. Other plants take 5 or 6 years to produce fruits. Other short period plants are grown before winter and can be reaped after winter. (Daw Khin Khin, 43 years old, kachin state)*

### 3.3.2. Medicinal uses of herbal plants

Herbal plants are used for medical purposes. Women are familiar with the different kinds of herbal plants that they can use to cure bruises, dental problems, malaria, cancer, hepatitis B, tuberculosis, gout, hypertension, fever and other illnesses. Herbal plants have various uses and are called different names according to their ethnic language. For instance, *sanwon* is used for women during delivery (childbirth), *sin-tone-ma-new* is used to aid digestion, honey is used for coughing, and *pait chin* leaves are used for malaria. Women use their knowledge of medicinal plants to cure the sick. Their traditional knowledge can be used appropriately for different diseases.

### 3.3.3. Practices in biodiversity protection and enhancement

Indigenous women's roles in protecting biodiversity are found to be very important. As the primary caregivers, women are more likely to comply with rules and regulations because they fear of losing their livelihood from the rich biodiversity. For instance, they don't use dynamite for fishing and follow the rules when fish are breeding in the village's river. They also dis-

courage young people from going to the river or forest when there are restrictions in going there. Women also know that animals in the forest need to be protected in order not to become extinct. There are laws that protect wildlife animals from extinction. For instance, they refrain from killing animals when they are in their breeding period. Women in this study unanimously agree that they should strictly follow the laws for biodiversity protection.

The women's role is also important in giving knowledge and awareness to the children. Children are taught about biodiversity and its advantages. Women in this study are close to the children and they are the ones who teach the advantages of biodiversity protection to the children.

*“ I teach my children about the environmental awareness and the way to maintain the forest. For example, not to cut down the trees without need, to replant the trees. I also tell them the benefit of the forest to the forest users like us.*

*- Daw May Hla, 45 years old, Irrawaddy division*

There are also efforts to replace trees that they cut down. The women realize that their use of firewood for cooking will eventually lead to forest degradation. Thus replanting of trees is a habit that is common among all indigenous women. Women practice gardening in their place in order to grow seedlings and vegetables to enhance biodiversity.

There are also seasons when people avoid hunting, which helps to protect the forest animals. In order to prevent extinction of wildlife, plants that are food for animals are grown. In this way, wild animals will not die from food shortage.

In some villages, the government preserves mangrove trees to prevent disaster. Women also conserve mangrove trees since they know that mangroves are effective to prevent flooding.

### **3.3.4. Indigenous technologies and innovations for conservation of the forest**

Up to now, indigenous women have no new technologies or innovations to conserve the forest. They use their traditional ways such as not cutting old trees, protecting animals in their breeding season, not killing wild animals, not taking the roots of medicinal plants in order to preserve nature. This

knowledge is gained from their great-grandparents, which they also teach to the next generation to be able to preserve the forest accordingly.

*// In our village, people are not allowed to go for fishing in the breeding period. At that time, we don't go. We don't also cut down trees in the time we are not allowed. We use this method as the traditional conservation to the forest.*

*- Ma Nge 34 years old, Kachin state*

In some villages, there is a traditional way of doing shifting cultivation that they learned from their ancestors, which is doing shifting cultivation in two places for many times. They wait for one mountain to gain good quality soil, while they cultivate in another mountain. This method is believed to prevent forest degradation. It also produces successful paddy. Sometimes, they transfer and grow plants from the forest in their garden, which they can then sell in the market. In this way, they don't need to get forest plants quite as often and they can preserve the forest. The women lack education and environmental and forestry awareness to be able to innovate new ways. They would like to have an introduction to forest conservation and to learn new ways to protect their forest.

### 3.3.5. Food sufficiency

Forest resources are vital for the indigenous women's livelihood since they provide food for their family. Women realize the nutritional content of vegetables and fruits from the forest and use them daily for their food. They make their living by selling food such as vegetables and small animals. All of the women in this study earn their cash income from selling forest food. Therefore, they believe that their role in maintaining the forest is very important because the forest is the only thing that they can rely on for so many years. However, food sufficiency is increasingly threatened because some people are unaware of misusing the forest. Paddy fields are becoming less productive and small animals are becoming scarce.

*// In the past, we get enough food to cook and eat from the forest. At present, food is no longer sufficient for the family. We have to cut down trees for our survival everyday. Our forest is not as green anymore.*

*- Daw Aye, 50 years old, Nyaung Pinthar village, Shan state*

## Sustainable livelihood

In order to have sustainable livelihood, forest conservation is essential. This includes using electricity instead of firewood. Using firewood for cooking everyday can harm the forest in the long term. However, such kind of technology is too advanced for indigenous peoples, including women. Instead of doing shifting cultivation, they replace this with permanent cultivation and gardening. Shifting cultivation can be done only for one time and then the land becomes a wasteland after one cultivation. Shifting cultivation needs to cut down trees and is seen as one of the factors that cause forest degradation. Villagers avoid hunting to preserve the animals from extinction. However, these efforts cannot be helpful in the long term since they rely on the forest on daily basis. Another good practice is using natural fertilizers when they do the cultivation. This practice is found in a few villages as the preservation method. Women share their views that sustainable livelihood also depends on the illegal logging activities for commercial uses. Logging makes the forest situation worse and women are starting to experience bad weather, water shortage and unsuccessful paddyfield. They believe that effective law enforcement is essential to make the forest sustainable.

### 3.4. Lessons Learned and Challenges

Indigenous women are primary forest users for the provision of their family's food. Therefore climate change and forest degradation directly affect women's lives. Women use firewood to cook. However, gathering firewood is getting more difficult, unlike in the past. To gather firewood, women have to go deep into the forest. The distance travelled to gather firewood has become challenging and the women need to carry the firewood a long way. It takes time to collect firewood and dry it during the rainy season, causing some delays in the cooking process.

Water shortage is also another challenge for the indigenous women. Forest degradation and inconsiderate logging dry up the rivers and streams. Thus, fetching water in the forest has become more difficult for the women because the river has become shallow.

Although the women face many challenges in their practice of forest resource management, they cannot make their voices heard because they are not allowed to participate socially and culturally in decision-making in the village committee. The culture of silence is acceptable among Myan-

mar indigenous women. Women's suggestions and knowledge about forest resource management are not considered seriously because of their gender and religion. Culturally, women are labeled as weak and subordinate to men.

There are other challenges hindering women's participation in decision-making. Indigenous women do not have the time to attend meetings because they are too busy with household work, or the distance of travel to the meeting place is very far. The tradition of women's participation in social activities is absent because women are sometimes not interested and they lack the education for making decisions. Fulfilling household responsibilities is the main barrier for the women to participate in the public sphere. Traditionally, wives are expected to do all the housework. The husband has little involvement in doing housework in the patriarchal ethnic society. Women cannot go out if they have housework to do. There are also prejudices about women who go out quite often and they are labeled as bad and lazy housewives who fail to do their duties. The responsibility of taking care of the children is another reason for women not being able to join the village committee. Women's voices are unheard since they don't have power and they don't earn money. They are not the leaders and they do not inherit from their parents. Burmese ethnic society favors men and oppresses women in many ways.

Many years ago, women enjoyed abundant food and products from the forest. In recent times, food and forest products have become scarce because the soil is no longer as good quality for growing. They experience climate change, drinking water shortage, shortage of forest resources, shortage of fish and animals in the lake and the forest. Flooding and soil erosion affect the livelihood and income sources of the women. Indigenous people do farming and shifting cultivation as their main livelihood activity. Now their economic activities are at risk of being affected by climate change and forest degradation

*Disaster destroys my livelihood. Because of climate change, we experience flooding that leads to failure of the paddy field.*

*- Ma Hla, Shan state*

As a matter of fact, indigenous women are aware of the need to protect the forest from degradation. However, they are heavily dependent on the forest and they do not have other alternative livelihoods for their survival. Concerns of using the forest for commercial purposes seem to worry the indigenous women. Indigenous people are uneducated and they lack skills

to do other livelihood since they have been living on the land for generations. Logging by businessmen is threatening women's lives and livelihood as well since it leads to forest depletion. However, they cannot challenge the activities of the businessmen, who have close relationships with the authorities. Effective protection and forest management is very important now to be able to sustain the forest. Although there are prohibitions against catching wildlife animals and logging old trees, the indigenous peoples continue to do so as a way of life because they have no other alternative livelihood.

### 3.5. Recommendations

In order to ensure meaningful women's participation in forest resource management, it is necessary to combine forest conservation with projects targeted to meet women's needs in their daily lives. These two must come together in order for women to have free time for conservation efforts. In this study, women are aware of forest conservation. However, they cannot afford to give time because they are too busy with their daily activities.

It is also necessary to include women in decision-making and to ensure their participation in management committees by using a quota system. Women should be provided empowerment activities that promote their economic independence and enhance their technology, skills, and self-confidence.

When it comes to the implementation of REDD+ projects in ethnic areas, integration of a gender perspective into the program is a must to ensure that indigenous women's participation is included. Gender equality concerns must be addressed among indigenous men and women, since women have different experiences in forest resource management.

Indigenous women and their gender concerns must be addressed at the community level because of the dependence of women on the forest. Meaningful women's participation in forest conservation meetings should be ensured and their voices must be listened to. It is necessary to recognize indigenous women as agents for forest conservation. In order to do this, women empowerment programs need to be introduced to address their issues of concern and to ensure equality in decision-making. Indigenous women are often absent in the decision-making process because of their lack of education. The cultural belief that women are subordinate to men needs to be erased and women's right to self-determination needs to be promoted.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The Taungya system in the tropics is, like shifting cultivation, a forerunner to agroforestry. The word is reported to have originated, as mentioned in Chapter 1, in Myanmar (Burma) and means hill (Taung) cultivation (ya).

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Thai woman teaching young women about embroidery. Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

# Roles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Sustainable Forest Management in Vietnam

by Ms. Luong Thi Truong



Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

## Executive Summary

Documents studied as well as survey results on the ground revealed that indigenous women play a very important role in the exploitation and management of the forest and its resources. Ethnic minority women not only exploit and enjoy the benefits from forest. They are also the ones who keep the cultural traits of the community alive and transfer indigenous knowledge and values about the forest to the next generation. They protect biodiversity and genetic resources in the forest and rivers and share new knowledge and experiences in protecting and improving the forest. They expand the forest area utilized for sustainable livelihoods and plant new seedlings. They are family medical doctors who take care of the health of their family and community using herbal medicine from the forest.

However, indigenous women also face serious challenges in relation to forest management. Forest land tenure and rights to use the forest are not ensured for indigenous peoples in general, and for women in particular. The women's role in managing and protecting the forest is becoming less important because of the lack of recognition of indigenous knowledge and the fading away of indigenous knowledge which indigenous women are good at. The complicated system of forest classification and administrative management has caused difficulty for the people, especially the women, in dealing with policies, programs, projects, investment and credit policies.

## 1. Background

As a multi-ethnic country, Vietnam has 54 recognized ethnic groups. The Kinh represents the ethnic majority, comprising 87% of the total population. The remaining 53 groups are ethnic minority groups, with an estimated population of 13 million, accounting for around 14% of the country's total population of 90 million. Each ethnic group has its own distinct culture and traditions, contributing to Vietnam's rich cultural diversity. The term "ethnic minorities" is often used interchangeably with "indigenous peoples" in Vietnam. The Thai, Tay, Nung, Hmong and Dao are fairly large groups, each with between 500,000 and 1.2 million people. However, there are many groups with fewer than 300,000 people, and some with only a few hundred. Around 650,000 people belonging to several ethnic minority groups live on the plateau of the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen) in the south. The mountains comprise 13.5 million hectares (ha) out of the total 33 million ha of Vietnam as whole. In 2008 the total forest cover is 39.1%.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Ethnic minority women and sustainable forest management in the country

Ethnic women are highly appreciated for their role in the protection of forests, and in providing a prosperous and happy village life. The Ha Nhi people worship the "Mu thu do" Goddess to bless their village, crops, livestock and young generation. Many mountains and water resources of the Thai and Muong are named after the Goddess, with beautiful legends about respected women. The Tay and Nung highly appreciate women who always pray for the villagers' health, happiness and peace. Ethnic women play an important role in preserving indigenous knowledge of the ethnic minorities. Ethnic women (such as Nung, Tay in Lang Son and Cao Bang) are decision makers in choosing forests to make forest gardens. Men do the heavy work such as cutting down big trees and digging trenches to prevent animals and cattle from destroying the crops. Women decide which crops to plant and which techniques to apply such as inter-cropping of cassava, upland rice, corn, peanut and other short-term crops. Every year, towards the end of the cropping season, women undertake seed selection for the following year.

## 1.2. Research organization

### ***Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas - CSDM***

CSDM has more than 14 years of experience working with ethnic people and women. It has conducted relevant project and research activities on various topics such as: ethnic minority rights, rights to forest land tenure, indigenous knowledge, shifting cultivation, reproductive health of ethnic minority girls, climate change and community forest management.

This research was conducted in provinces where CSDM has implemented project activities for some years. CSDM staff members with rich experience of working with ethnic minorities were selected to conduct the research. These include:

- Mrs. Luong Thi Truong, Director of CSDM, who took primary responsibility for conducting the research, including field research and writing reports.
- Mr. Dang Duc Nghia, project staff with more than 8 years experience in research and intervention projects, who directly coordinated and participated in the field work, including group meetings, interviews, secondary data research and compiling the final report.
- Mr. Hoang Ke Sy, project staff with 10 years experience in research and intervention projects, who joined the field work, including group meetings, interviews, secondary data research and contributed ideas for the final report.
- Mr. Ha Trong Hieu, project staff doing intervention projects in the localities, who took part in the research fieldwork, including group meetings, interviews, supporting photos and preparing the report's appendixes.

## 1.3. Research methodology

The research methodology included:

1. Desk research on information, documents, statistics, reports and policies related to forestry management in the localities.
2. Field work for primary data gathering using methods such as:
  - Collection of available documents with secondary data and statistics
  - Field observation
  - Discussion with related agencies and organizations

- Group discussion, semi-focused interview combined with field survey

Before conducting surveys and group discussions at each village, the research team held meetings with leaders and representatives of professional agencies in the communes. During these meetings, basic information about the natural, economic and social conditions of the village and typical local customs and habits of the people were gathered. The research team also discussed with leaders of the communal women’s union on the role of women in general, and in relation to indigenous knowledge on forest management and protection, the current situation of land use and agricultural and forestry products.

In consultation with commune leaders, the research team selected the villages where they would conduct surveys and group discussions. The following villages were selected:

	<b>Commune, district, province</b>	<b>Number of village</b>	<b>Village</b>
1	Cat Thinh commune, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	5	Villages: Pin Pe, Khe Ria 1&2, Da Gan and Ba Khe 2
2	Son Thuy commune, Quan Son district, Thanh Hoa province	3	Villages: Ban Tranh, Ban Hiet 1&2
3	Mai Hich commune, Mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province	2	Villages: Hich 1 and Den
4	Chau Thai commune, Quy Hop district, Nghe An province	3	Villages: Ban Bom, Ban Co&Ban Noong On
5	Quan Son, Chi Lang district, Lang Son province	2	Villages: Cau Ngam and Cu Na

In each village, four to seven (4-7) women who are experienced in production and are aware of the village history and indigenous knowledge were chosen to take part in the group discussions. The group discussions focused on identifying and analyzing indigenous knowledge and practices related to exploring, using and managing forest resources in the localities. Along with the village representatives, the research team also conducted field surveys to analyze and evaluate experiences and indigenous knowledge in forest resource protection, usage and management.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Overview of ethnic minority women in Vietnam

Vietnamese women account for approximately 51% of the total population and labor force in Vietnam. Rural women play a major role in agricultural activities and daily family and parenting responsibilities.

According to an assessment by the United Nations (UN), “Vietnamese women engage in political activities with the highest proportion in the world.” Of the total number of deputies in the National Assembly of Vietnam, the highest authority of the country, female deputies accounted for 25.8% during the term 2007-2012. Likewise, women’s participation in local People’s Committee Councils is significant but still limited: 23.8% at the provincial, 23.25% at the district and 20% at the commune level.<sup>2</sup>

In Vietnam, women account for 36.24% of university graduates, women with masters degree account for 33.95% and women with doctoral degrees account for 25.96%.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic women are always the most vulnerable among the vulnerable ethnic people in Vietnam. Viet Nam made impressive achievements on Poverty Reduction in 2010 and it has since become an average low-income country. However, the ethnic people still exhibit the highest poverty rate. The national and regional poverty rate in 2010 according to the new poverty standard of Vietnam is 20%. However, the poverty rate is higher in areas where ethnic minorities are found, i.e., the rate in the northwestern mountainous area is 51.6% and in the Highlands is 37.5%.<sup>4</sup>

**2.1.1. The physical status of human resources:** The physical status of the human resource in the minority and mountainous areas has been assessed based on some key indicators, such as malnutrition rate, child mortality rate, diseases and life expectancy. Malnutrition rate of the children in the minority and mountainous areas both in terms of weight/age, height/age and weight/height ratios has been reduced for the last few years, but is still higher compared to the national average. The malnutrition rate of some minority groups is very high: Mang ethnic group- 40.03%, La Hu- 44%, Co Lao- 47.37%. The mortality rate of minority children under age 1 year is also high, especially in some provinces of the Northern Mountains and Central Highland regions, which are twice or even three times higher than the national average: Lai Chau (47.7%), Dien Bien (39.7%), Ha Giang (37.5%), Kon Tum (38.2%). The life expectancy of the ethnic minorities is also lower and

the gender difference is higher than the national average: in Lai Chau - 63.8 years, Lao Cai - 65.8 years, Ha Giang - 66.3 years. For some very small ethnic minority groups living in the most disadvantaged areas, e.g. Mang, La Hu, Cong, Co Lao, Pu Peo, Romam and O du, the life expectancy is dangerously low (around 50-55 years) and the gender gap is very high. The average height of young people at the age of 18- 22 in mountainous and ethnic minority areas is lower than in other areas.<sup>5</sup>

Child marriage has not been controlled, leading to high percentage of marriage before age 19 years: 15% for men, 36.8% for women in the Northern mountainous region and 10% for men, 31.8% for women in the Central Highland. There are even cases of marriage at age 13-14 years. There are also many cases of marriage between blood relations among some very small size ethnic minority groups with less than 10,000 population, like the Mang, La Hu, Co Lao, Khang, H'Mong, Dao, Xinh Mun Gia Rai, E De, Lo Lo. This has caused a declining population growth rate among these ethnic groups. Big sized families are another reason for poverty and child malnutrition. In the Northern mountainous region the average family size is 4 members with 31.4 % of the households having more than 4 children. In the Central Highland, average family size is 4.1, with 35.9% households having more.<sup>6</sup>

**2.1.2. Clean drinking water supply and sanitation:** Non-hygienic lifestyles, poor sanitation and lack of clean drinking water have made tuberculosis, malaria, Japanese encephalitis, petechial fever, dysentery, typhoid fever, worms, goiter, leprosy, gynecological diseases, gastric ulcer, enteritis, poisoning, tetanus and malnutrition the most common diseases of the people in the minority and mountainous areas. In mountainous and remote areas, most households lack drinking water for two months per year on the average. During dry season, people in many villages have to travel far distances of 5 to 10 kilometers (km) to get water for drinking. Almost all ethnic minority households in high mountains have no protected latrine. These conditions have especially affected women's health.

**2.1.3. Education levels in ethnic minority and mountainous areas:** The illiteracy rate of the people in ethnic minority and mountainous areas is still high and is even higher for ethnic minority women. The Northern mountainous region with the highest ethnic minority population proportion is also the region with the highest percentage of illiterate population above age 15 years (12.7%). The Central Highland and Mekong river delta are the second and third highest in the proportion of illiterate population, i.e., 11.73% and 8.4% respectively. Among the reasons for the high illiteracy rate in the ethnic minority and mountainous areas are: high percentage of out-of-school

children, short school attendance rate, difficulties in the use of languages, poor studying conditions (e.g. poor school infrastructure, lack of learning aids), poor living conditions (e.g. long distance to schools, remoteness and poverty incidence) and irrelevance of teaching methods and curriculum. The enrolment rates in primary, lower and upper secondary education are lower in some ethnic minority and mountainous areas, such as in the Northern Mountains, Central Highland, and Mekong river Delta, when compared to the national average.<sup>7</sup>

**2.1.4. Labor skills in ethnic minority and mountainous areas:** The percentage of unskilled labor in the ethnic minority and mountainous areas is much higher than the national average. The Mekong river delta and Central Highland are the two regions with the highest percentage of unskilled labor (more than 90%), with 17 provinces having more than 90% unskilled labor. Some provinces even have more than 94% unskilled labor, like in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang. The percentage of the population of ethnic minority groups that have completed primary, secondary vocational training and university education is very low: Thai – 1.6%; Muong 2.0%, Khmer 1.0%; H'Mong – 0.3%, and other groups- 1.5%. Although the difference in men and women's economic activities is not big, the men's average income is still bigger than the women's. The percentage of women who have been trained is still lower than the men. On the average, women's working time is 4 hours longer than men's because women have to do house work such as looking after the children and cooking, in addition to their main jobs.<sup>8</sup>

**2.1.5. Key factors affecting women in minority and mountainous areas:** Among the key factors affecting ethnic minority women are high poverty incidence, poor health care given to women during pregnancy, limited access to health care services, and habits and traditions of some ethnic minority groups. In the Vietnamese traditional view, the female is expected to do housework before getting married, thus Vietnamese girl children have to learn housework from a very young age, especially in the rural areas. In some families, girl children are in charge of looking after their baby brother/sister, sweeping the floor, cooking rice, washing clothes, etc. Girl children under the age of 15 are used to staying at home to assist in their family's housework and other domestic activities. Young girls and ethnic minority women have more difficulties than young boys and men, and don't have much time to study.

The law on gender equity came into effect in July 2007. However, the implementation of gender equity and women's progress faces many difficulties and challenges. Vietnam is a poor country, influenced by many feudal

and backward ideas. There have been many setbacks in achieving gender equity due to gender preconceptions and valuing of men above women at all social levels. Such ideas can be seen in the preference of boy over girl children, housework as a wife's duty, child rearing as a woman's job, boys are given the advantage in inheritance division, and men are considered to be family bread-winners and decision-makers. Trafficking of ethnic minority women and children as housewives or for prostitution to neighboring countries such as China is also common. Their situation gets more difficult by the day as the women who have been traded are often poor, coming from remote and underdeveloped areas where they lack information and have poor education. There are many cases of fraudulent marriages between women and foreigners. In this situation, the incidence of women and children who have been infected by HIV/AIDS is increasing.<sup>9</sup>

## **2.2. Brief description of national forest and natural resource management policies and data on the forest condition**

### **2.2.1. Vietnam forest condition**

In recent years, Vietnam has taken great efforts in its program of greening barren lands, protecting natural forests, reforming management mechanisms, establishing the rights of local people to use forest and forest resources, and forestry socialization. Since 1995, forest coverage in Vietnam has been increasing every year. In 2011, the forested area reached 13.5 million ha, representing a forest cover of 39.7%. Protection forests and special use forests, which were established according to national general planning, have contributed effectively to protect watersheds and preserve diversity of all forest eco-systems.<sup>10</sup>

The changes in forest protection and management, along with policy changes and law enforcement over time, have decisively influenced the survival and development of forest resources as follows:

- The period before 1954: the right to manage and protect the forest belonged to the villages. Using the customs and laws of each ethnic group, and due to the small population, the villages were able to protect the forest well and sacred and forbidden forests were protected completely.
- The period from 1954-1986: the right to manage forests was given to cooperatives and Commune People's Committees. During this period, national policies had negative impacts on the forests

by allowing fixed mono-cultivation of cash crops and construction of public works. Combined with weak enforcement of forest protection law, discouragement of community's role in forest management and protection, rapid population growth (due to high birth rates and migration from the plains), the result was that the general forest resources were severely damaged, and the area of sacred forests decreased or even vanished.

- The period from 1986 up to the present: This is the reform period during which forest resources were allocated to households and the community for protection, instead of being given to the state farm and commune people's committee. However, villages did not apply the laws on forest protection that were used during the period before 1964. Currently, villages mostly apply laws issued by the Government to manage and protect allocated forests, but the process of law enforcement is weak leading to ineffectiveness in forest protection. Since the year 2000, shifting cultivation has mostly disappeared. However, illegal logging in watersheds of some localities still remains, especially the collection of herbals to sell to Chinese traders. As a result, forest quality has declined, although the rate of decline is still lower than that of the previous period.

### **2.2.2. Laws, Policies and Programs relating to forest land use, ethnic minorities and their legal rights and responsibilities**

#### **a. Forest use, protection and management**

Vietnam has issued many relevant acts and policies and implemented different programs to benefit households, communities and private enterprises that participate directly in forest protection and forest plantation. On July 29, 1998, the Prime Minister enacted Decision No. 661/1998/QĐ-TTg on the implementation of a new 5-million ha forest plantation program (Program 661), and promulgating mechanisms for natural forest protection. Under this law, People's Committees at different levels are assigned to define forest location and scale, implement the forest allocation, forest land leasing, issue land use right certificate for households and other economic entities in compliance with the law.

In relation to forest protection, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 178/2001/QĐ-TTg on November 12, 2001 defining the benefits and responsibilities of individuals or households who are hired or sign contracts to protect the forest land. Also, in line with Decision

No. 2740 /QD- BNN- KL dated September 20, 2007, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) came up with a plan for forest land allocation and leasing during the period of 2007-2010. However, the implementation of forest land allocation and leasing is facing some problems such as the following:

- In many places, the boundary of allocated forest land is not clearly demarcated in the field and the process of land allocation has not been consistent, comprehensive and well-managed. The Government is thus now undertaking the national forest land cadastral map. Some allocated forest land have been converted to the other inappropriate purposes. However, these cases have not been dealt with in accordance with the law.
- According to an evaluation conducted in 2008, around 20-30% of allocated forest land started bringing in benefits to the forest owners but these were unsustainable. Many state enterprises were allocated a large area of forest but they did not have sufficient capacity for effective management. Forest areas under the management of People's Committees have not been protected and well managed. Households and communities have been allocated some forest land, even though their livelihoods could not be secured by small plots of poor forest.
- Forest protection and management is closely linked to socio-economic development and poverty reduction targets in the field of forestry. For years, forest protection and management was considered a tool for economic and social development and poverty alleviation. However, some surveys show that the poorest people are the people who live in or near forest; and they are usually implicated as a factor of deforestation and forest degradation. Vietnam has encountered a lot of challenges in persuading and encouraging local people to participate in forest protection and management. But the outcomes are not fully satisfactory, because of people's limited awareness and poor policy dissemination to the communities. In addition, task assignment amongst agencies is overlapping and unclear, while government investment in forest protection and development is limited.

Currently, Vietnam is the first and only country in South East Asia implementing Payment of Environmental Services (PES). The Decree on Policy for Payment of Forest Environmental Services (PFES)

(established by decree 99/2010/ND-CP dated 29/10/2010) has been implemented since January 2011. So far, 23 provinces have established a Provincial Fund for Forest Protection and Development. The PFES system allows for payments to be made by hydropower plants to those responsible for protecting forested areas, including organizations, households, individuals and village communities contracted for forest protection.

b. Forest tenure

In the past, most of natural forest land areas were managed by government and state enterprises. This has changed since 1994, when the government issued the policy and decisions to allocate forest land to households, individuals and economic entities in order to improve the execution of forest land rights and ensure sustainable forest management. This policy has resulted in a big change in terms of land tenure in Vietnam. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) in 2009, a total number of 1,037,000 land use certificates with an area of 8,422,000 ha of forest land have been issued nationwide. This accounts for 69.2% of the area required for allocation and 51.9% of total forest area planned for forest development purposes according to the National Assembly Resolution. The Government issued a number of Decisions and Decrees promoting forest land allocation to households. Decision No 146/2005/QĐ-TTg was issued on June 15, 2005 to reclaim productive forest land from state enterprises for allocation to poor ethnic minority households. Government Decree 200/2004/ND-CP, issued on December 3, 2004, promulgates the restructuring and reforming of state forest enterprises. Some state enterprises have to change into forest companies, while others were transferred under the management of Forest Management Boards. All ineffective state enterprises will be dissolved and their forest land areas taken back and allocated to communities, households or individuals. However, the enforcement of the Decrees is slow and big forest areas are still not allocated as intended.

According to the General Department of Forestry, forest land has been allocated to the different forest land users: for households (28.6%), community (1.3%); Forest Management Board (39.9%); Economic agencies (14%); Armed force (2.2%); other agencies (4.2%). People's Committee manages the unallocated production forest land of 23%.

In September 2007, the MARD already approved the National Project on Forest Land Allocation for the Period 2007 – 2010 to promote the forest land allocation process, with the expectation that 12.6 million ha will be allocated for communities, households and other economic entities by the end 2010.

Despite of all these policies, the trend of accumulation of small forest land area into a bigger area is happening in most locations. This is done through various means as follow: (1) join-venture and collaboration; (2) forest land lease; (3) forest land right transferring. In terms of land tenure rights, the relevant policies on forest and forest land create opportunities for ethnic minorities to access forest land as a first priority.

However, the real situation of ethnic women being able to access land is a matter of concern. Among all ethnic groups, the percentage of families wherein both spouses jointly have a right to the land use certificate is highest among the Kinh people (28%). Patrilineal ethnic minority groups have the lowest percentage of women with a right to the land use certificate (11%).<sup>11</sup> This percentage is significantly lower than in the matriarchal group, which is 21%. In patrilineal groups, daughters do not inherit properties equally as the sons because sons are expected to take care the parents while daughters will get married and belong to their husband's houses. Thus the husbands have greater access to land tenure than the wives. In matriarchal groups, daughters are expected to be the descendants and are entitled to inherit properties from their parents. However, the husbands are still the owners of land and have the responsibility to solve matters related to land.

## 3. Results of the Study

### 3. 1. Indigenous knowledge in forest management

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is a system of experiences gained through practice that has been transferred verbally from generation to generation, among the members of a family and members of a community. IK is associated with the life and activities of the people, especially among ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities mostly live near forests and their lives are dependent upon the forests. Therefore, they possess a rich indigenous knowledge system made up of knowledge and experiences in protecting,



Thai women going to the forest. Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

developing and using forest resources, which contribute to the maintenance and preservation of biodiversity and sustainable forest development. IK is applicable and suitable for indigenous people's customs and local conditions. It is comprehensive because it has been developed over a long period of time. IK can be applied easily and is the basis for solutions to local strategic problems. It is especially suitable for the poor because it is sustainable and less risky.

IK and practices have been applied in managing, protecting and improving forest resources such as in the cultivation of land, identification of forest trees and animals, and exploiting and using forest products. Some examples of experience and customary laws of the Thai and Dao in exploiting timber, firewood, medicinal plants and bamboo shoots are the following:

**3.1.1. Timber exploitation for house building:** Dao people have some rules on exploitation of timber from big trees. For example, people must ask for permission from god and worship the soul of the tree, must not speak bad words when cutting the timber, choose a good date, must not exploit on the day when pests are expected to come, must not cut down trees in August, and must not chop down trees that are ghost haunted. The Thai people have rules that people can only exploit old trees. To claim a tree, people must ask permission from the patriarch and they must leave a mark

on it, so that other latecomers cannot exploit that tree. The Muong people have rules that people are not allowed to cut down or step on young trees, and that they must not cut down a whole bunch of trees.

**3.1.2. Collecting firewood:** In gathering firewood, people must take only the dried branches. If they exploit fuel wood in a forest that belongs to another family, they first need to get permission from them.

**3.1.3. Taking bamboo shoots:** People must only take bamboo shoots in the sunset side and only take the bamboo shoots during the second season of the year so that the tree can grow again. They can take only 1/3 of the shoot, and not the whole one. They must not use a spade to dig the root of the bamboo tree. They must not destroy or let the cattle destroy the bamboo trees.

**3.1.4. Collecting medicinal plants:** People must love and respect forest flowers and herbal medicine, while keeping the belief that it can help cure the disease when picking the plant. They must not take the whole tree or the young branches, but only take the mature branches. The attar tree can only be cut down when the seeds are ripe and give good oil. You should plant a new tree whenever you cut down one to replace it and make sure that the tree will not become extinct and to feel that you did not take away a life.



Thai woman on her way to home after collecting herbal in the forest. Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

With regards to serious diseases, medicinal plants will be more helpful if they are taken in the morning. The medicine to cure snakebite is a special prescription, thus the patient needs to pray to express gratefulness after recovering. Medicinal plants should be taken in the morning and afternoon only, and prayer must be done beforehand to ask permission. Only the top and trunk or part of the roots must be taken, without digging up the roots.

**3.1.5. Forest management:** The Thai people divide forests into 3 types: holy forest (Dong Xen forest), old forest and cultivation forest. The holy forest is about 0.2 - 2.0 ha wide and is a place for worship; exploitation activities in this forest are prohibited. Old forest is usually watershed forest or the forest along the river, which is needed to preserve and maintain the water source called mother water that is consumed by the villagers. This forest is strictly protected. The last type is community forest, which can be used for exploitation of timber, wood, bamboo or bamboo shoots.

The Dao people divide forests into old forest where medicinal plants are planted (under the shadow of big trees) and where timber is exploited; watershed forest where water resources are preserved and maintained; and secondary forest where people can exploit medium and small sized timber, other forest products, and where forest planting or cultivation of fields can be done if allowed by the authority. The villagers monitor the community forest (Xen Ban, Dong Xen forest). The household manages the forest allocated to them and they have the right to exploit the forest in the allocated area.

Among the Thai ethnic minority and many other ethnic minorities, the holy forest is the heart of the community as it represents the customs and habits of the community, especially the traditional values of the community passed down through generations. To indigenous peoples, every forest, river and mountain has its own spirit value that they worship. In a scientific sense, the holy forest is the watershed forest where various genetic resources are preserved, which has been strictly protected by the communities. However, in recent decades, the holy forest has been forgotten or destroyed, resulting in the loss of watershed, genetic resources and traditional values.

### 3.2. Customary law and practice in sustainable forest management

Customs are community regulations institutionalized from the beliefs and interactions between man and man, and between man and nature. Customs are for the common benefit of the community and are voluntarily obeyed by the community members. Customs help the community pur-

sue sustainable development by regulating and harmonizing relations between man and man, and between man and nature. Revision of customs is sometimes done to adapt to changes during certain development periods. Customs ensure fairness and equality with respect to forest management and sustainability for the community. The customs in relation to forests include regulations on ownership, protection and use of forest resources such as respect for the forest, respect to the god, love of nature and protecting natural resources. In the customs of many ethnic groups, people do worship to ask permission from the god whenever they want to use the forest, trees or water sources.

Following the customs on management of holy forest and old watershed forest has helped the people protect their natural resources, prevent over-exploitation, and protect the biodiversity of the forest area. The equality and transparency in the division of benefits among individuals based on their needs have minimized over-exploitation of forest resources. Customs also guide the punishment of wrong behavior in using the forest, which is even stricter than current legal regulation. In particular, the community will reject those who do not obey the rules. To them, this punishment is even worse than being sentenced to prison or a monetary fine. These customs are monitored and adjusted by the village patriarch, head of the village, head of a family or those who are highly respected in the community. The community's behavior towards the forest is based on their beliefs and customs, which were developed voluntarily by all members of the community and are transferred from generation to generation.<sup>12</sup>

The forest is a source of livelihood of the people. It nurtures the community's beliefs, knowledge and experience gained through co-existence with the forest. The forest is a magnificent space for the creativeness of the community. It is a source of motivation for communities' initiatives that are improved and adjusted over time for the socio-economic, cultural development and beliefs of the community. The Dao Do and Thai ethnic people believe in supernatural power. The Dao Do people believe in Ban Vuong, Ban Ho, god of land, god of forest and god of water. The Thai people have absolute belief in mother of land, mother of water, mother of plants, holy forests, ghost forest and watershed forest, which is protected voluntarily by the villagers. The Mong people see the forest as their mother and the sky as their father, who gave birth to them and all species. The community worships the forest and takes care of nature in all their acts, even when they travel to the field or when they build houses. The community believes that the forest and land have super powers and do not belong to anyone in specific.

**3.2.1. Cosmo vision of forest resources:** Forest and forest land are seen foremost as a common wealth of all, within which individuals can claim a certain area to use and manage. This custom allows the community to make decisions on land use in the area that they have claimed. There are signboards of dangerous areas in the forest.

**3.2.2. Benefits and products from forest:** The forest, once exploited, can be used and the ownership of the forest belongs to those who claim on a first-come first-served basis. All members of the community enjoy the benefit of forest products in accordance with the rules set by the community in a transparent way.

**3.2.3. Supervision and monitoring:** The community monitors the application of customs on resource management. The village patriarch will monitor and evaluate the behavior of members in the community.

### 3.3. Ethnic minority women and Indigenous knowledge in Forest/forest land use

**3.3.1. Upland rice:** In the past, upland rice was planted mainly by Dao, Mong and Thai people. The forest patches with good soil are selected for upland rice farming. In cultivating upland rice, ethnic women play the main role. They are the ones who choose the seeds, sow, take care of the plants and harvest the rice.

The period for planting upland rice in a site lasts from 5-6 years, after which the land will be abandoned for recovery within a period of 10-12 years before being re-used. In recent years, due to policies of resettlement and land/forest allocation, shifting cultivation has decreased significantly.

**3.3.2. Cultivation of maize, cassava, beans, taro, canna, arrowroot, white radish.** Maize is the main food crop of most ethnic minorities, especially for the Mong group. In the past, people chose jungles with good soil to make maize farms. Since shifting cultivation has been banned, ethnic minority people and even the Mong people plant maize in fixed fields using hybrid varieties for production of cash crops. The job of planting and taking care of the maize, cassava, beans, taro, canna, arrowroot and white radish are handled mainly by the women. They directly choose the seeds, plant and take care of all the crops. Men are involved more in the transportation of the harvested crops.

**3.3.3. Bamboo, luong, cane:** Bamboo, “luong,” “vau” and cane are used to build houses and make household items such as a variety of baskets and fences. Bamboo shoot is used for food, or is sometimes dried for alternative uses or to be sold in the market. The Thai, Muong and Dao women are skillful in choosing land for planting “buong,” the trunk and shoots of which are a good cash crop for households. Women and girls bear the responsibility of collecting and processing bamboo shoots.

**3.3.4. Tea:** The ethnic minorities have been drinking tea for a long time. In the past, each household planted tea mainly for their family’s own need and consumption. In Van Chan, the local people use the famous big perennial tea, which has become an export product in Cat Tinh, Van Chan, Yen Bai. Mong, Dao and Muong women are mainly responsible for the job of taking care and collecting tea.

**3.3.5. Fruit trees:** Some types of fruit trees are planted in the uplands such as: banana, papaya, orange, pineapple, lemon, finger citron and plum. The Thai women in Hanh Dich plant banana and plum as cash products and collect and bring them to the market for sale.

**3.3.6. Upland vegetables.** Vegetables mostly planted by the ethnic minorities are cabbage, pumpkin, zucchini, chayote, and others. The special vegetable of the Mong people is upland cabbage, which has a delicious taste. The Mong women know very well how to keep good seeds and plant upland pumpkins, which are used as food for both human beings and cattle, or are sold for cash. In the uplands, ethnic minority women also plant some types of spices such as ginger, saffron, pepper, chili, onion and garlic. Nowadays, some other vegetables species from the lowland are also planted in gardens of the ethnic minorities such as kinking and cabbage.

**3.3.7. Cattle and livestock:** Ethnic minority women have experience in raising cattle and livestock such as buffalo, cows, pigs, goats, geese and chickens. It should be noted that the plants and animals mentioned above are local breeds that are able to adapt to severe environmental conditions such as drought, lack of nutrition and disease. The quality is acceptable and they are easy to grow. Currently, grazing of buffalo, cows, goats and pigs is still popular in areas of the Mong and Thai people (Van Chan, Quan Son) where there are a lot of grass fields and clear lands. In the household, women are in charge of raising cattle and livestock and have a lot of experience in taking care and curing diseases of these species. The way the Mong people raise pigs has created a new species with bigger form and less fat. Chickens raised by the Tay and Nung women in anise for-

ests produce food of high quality.

**3.3.8. Collecting and using mushroom, forest vegetables and bamboo shoot:**

In the past, when shifting cultivation was still practiced, upland fields burnt every year provided a variety of vegetables and mushrooms like “don,” wood ear and “moi” mushroom. For centuries, bamboo shoot had been a daily food for the ethnic minorities. Dried and fresh bamboo shoots are also sold in the market to generate income for the family. The collection of forest vegetables for daily food is the work of women. Since there are now fewer upland farms and vegetables in forests, ethnic minority women have to plant vegetables in their gardens to provide their daily food.

**3.3.9. Collecting and using herbal medicine:** Most ethnic minority women know how to use popular herbal medicine. Ethnic minority women from the age of 15 to 30 years may know about 20 to 30 popular types of herbals. Women over 30 years old may know from 40 to 50 or more types of herbals. The Dao and Muong women know herbals the best, and some of them are herbalists. Some herbalist women (“Me”) know hundreds of herbals and special treatments for some diseases such as infertility, kidney, liver and bone diseases.

**3.3.10. Catching fish and shrimp in rivers and streams:** Ethnic women take care of the daily meals for the whole family. Thus, after working in the forests and upland fields, they pass by rivers or streams to wash themselves



The Muong Woman with the herbal medicine. Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

and to catch fishes or shrimps for meals. Nowadays, because water is polluted, catching fish and shrimps has become more difficult.

**3.3.11. Indigenous knowledge has vanished or become unpopular:** The local culture and customary laws are still strong in the communes, especially in remote villages. At the same time, the current way of managing forests is no longer purely based on customary laws due to contextual changes. Because of forest degradation and lack of community ownership over forests, the Sen Muong ceremony has been lost. Several ceremonies and rituals of the Dao people are getting lost or are celebrated in a less extensive way. For instance in the past, every household used to organize a yearly ceremony to worship the spirits for good crops. Nowadays, most households organize this only once every three years. The customary belief that trees are living beings with their own spirit, which can be hurt when cutting down, is no longer widely referred to. The collection of herbal plants using a spiritual approach also seems to getting lost.<sup>13</sup>

**3.3.12. The significance and role of indigenous knowledge/traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples:** Prejudice against the customs and habits of indigenous peoples as being depraved and outdated and the prohibition of indigenous practices have caused a number of special cultural values and valuable knowledge about farming on upland fields, seeds, medicinal plants, architecture, etc. to fade away. Such long-lasting prejudice causes indigenous peoples to lose confidence in their traditional knowledge passed on by their ancestors through generations. Gradually they forget their knowledge as a result of feeling inferior. Traditional customs of indigenous peoples are forgotten because the communities were not permitted to practice these for years, especially since forest land was allocated to individuals.

Local rice seeds were also lost as there was no mechanism for preserving indigenous seeds and genetic varieties. In addition, new hybrid seeds were used without careful consideration as a result of vast programs to increase productivity. Ethnic minority communities are not yet aware of their roles in sustainable development and protection of the forest, biodiversity and indigenous knowledge. Being stuck with the thinking of “reliance on government” and feeling inferior, indigenous people lack the initiative to conserve and develop indigenous knowledge for the conservation of biodiversity and the environment.

For instance, nowadays, the number of traditional houses has decreased significantly. Building wooden houses with brick roofs or in plain styles is more convenient, while most materials for making old ethnic houses have



The H'Mong Women doing the weaving. Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

vanished or have become scarce. Experience and knowledge in hunting has also been eroded because hunting is forbidden and wildlife has been exhausted. Currently, ethnic people only hunt small animals such as rats, ferrets and mongoose. Only few people in the Thai, Tay, Nung and Muong villages have experience and knowledge in using species of plants and animals for traditional medicines. In the research areas, plants for fiber such as cotton, “lanh” and pandanus and plants for dyeing like indigo, gardenia and ramie leaf are no longer found despite the fact that these had long been used as materials for clothes and blankets. Currently, the Thai, Tay and Nung people rarely or no longer do weaving. Mong women no longer make clothes using the “lanh” fiber. In some places in Quan Son, the Thai women still weave traditional embroidery for use and sale.

Ms. Luong Thi Tram, a Thai woman, head of Women's Union of Hich village, Mai Hich commune shared her experience in protecting holy forest, ghost forest of her village. "Among the forests of Hich village, watershed water has been allocated to households for management. Among community forests (holy forest, ghost forest), ghost forest is protected the best. The forest is where the dead persons are buried, thus seen as a holy area by villagers and the whole community.

Those who intend to cut trees in the forest are believed to be punished by the gods, be taken away by the ghosts and their family will meet bad fortune. Thus, no one dares to cut tree in the forest. When a tree is fallen down or dead by storm, the community will hold a meeting to ask for god's permission to cut down that tree, and the tree will be used for the common purpose of the whole community. For that reason, there are still big trees, precious timber in the ghost forest, and home to many species of animals."

### 3.4. Ethnic minority women's role in protecting forest and forest resources

Traditionally, ethnic minority women play an important role in the family, community and social affairs in their daily lives.

**3.4.1. Ethnic minority women preserve the cultural values of the community.** Ethnic minority people can be distinguished from each other by their costumes. The Mong women embroider the pattern in their costumes expressing the history of their immigration into Vietnam long ago. The Mong and Thai people have their traditional dance with umbrella, cone hat and scarf. The Tay and Nung women have their "then, si, luon" melodies that tell about their hardworking life and rich knowledge in harmonization with nature. The women are also the ones who preserve precious traditional knowledge and language, as a means of communication and distinguishing among ethnic groups.

**3.4.2. Ethnic minority women teach indigenous knowledge and value for community forests to the next generation.** In early childhood, indigenous children learn of the value of the forest and forest resources through folk songs and lullabies sung by their mothers and grandmothers. Thai people teach their children about the value of the forest through a folk song that goes: "the forest feed us when we are alive, and bury us when we die," "Who often go to river will know many kinds of fish, who often go to the field will know many types of rice, who often go to forest will know many kinds of for-

est animals”; “Vegetable, bamboo shoots, firewood are available in the forest; take them on the way back home,” or “Fresh bamboo can be torn to be string, dried one can be used as firewood.” As they grow, children are taken to the forest by their mother and grandmothers and taught to recognize and collect different kinds of vegetables, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, etc. When they grow bigger, they are taken to the upland field and taught how to cultivate and collect the crop. The indigenous women prepare the food from vegetables, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, and show their children the benefits from forest. Each ethnic minority of Vietnam has their own special song melody. The song “Chim kham khac” with the “Then, Sli, Luon” melodies of Tay people express the pain of the bird when the forest, which is their home, is burnt. Forest protection is the topic in many songs presented during festivals, meetings and cultural exchanges in their community.



The H'Mong children going to the forest with their mother and sisters. Photo credit: Ms. Luong Thi Truong

### **3.4.3. Ethnic minority women are good at protecting and improving forest.**

Women often decide which tree should not be cut and which tree should be planted in the forest. They go to the forest early in the morning to pick medicinal plants and find food. They often recognize the problems that may cause danger to the forest such as forest fire, harmful insect and tree disease. In the forest allocated to them, they know each kind of precious

timber and medicinal plant and can find them easily when needed. They always have a knife to clear up trees that are not useful. They are the ones who remind their family to regularly clean the forest such as cutting grass or cutting down dead trees. Besides, they discuss with their neighbors about the situation of their forest and find solutions together.

**3.4.4. Ethnic minority women know how to use forest land for a sustainable livelihood.** As mentioned above, indigenous peoples cultivate in the upland areas. Women know very well what kinds of plants are suitable for their land, and what they should plant rotationally to diversify their fields. They decide what kind of plants to cultivate in the next crop. The Mong women often plant pumpkin in corn fields, while Thai and Muong women plant corn and peanut rotationally. They take care of their crop and harvest it. They are the ones who select seedlings and preserve them for the next crop.

**3.4.5. Ethnic minority women are the ones who protect biodiversity and genetic resources of the forest and river.** Ethnic minority women collect the products they need from forest. They know that the forest, river and natural resources are a common wealth that should not be destroyed. They collect forest products and do fishing in an environment-friendly way. The Thai people take bamboo shoots only on the side where the sun sets, do not use spades to dig the roots up, take only 1/3 of the bamboo shoots and use a special drift net “xon” to catch small amounts of fish and shrimp. By doing so, forest products are not used up but some are left for other people. For medicinal plants, they do not collect from the top to the root but only take the grown branches, leaving the newly grown branches. The attar tree can only be harvested once the seeds are ripe. By doing so, the Dao and Muong women have protected the genes of the medicinal plants from being over-exploited. The women take good care of medicinal plants in the community forest and in their household forest.

**3.4.6. Ethnic minority women introduce new indigenous knowledge and experiences in protecting and developing the forest.** Majority of ethnic minorities in Vietnam do not have their own script, and even if they do, most of experience and indigenous knowledge are passed on verbally. During events such as festivals, weddings, funerals, or during their free time, women often share information and experiences in taking care of the forest, and planting trees in the private forest. The Thai, Tay, Nung and Muong women often participate in trainings and meetings where they learn much knowledge about forestry. They share with each other their experiences, failures and successes when applying this knowledge or when planting new kinds

of trees. In Van Chan, women think it is better to plant industrial trees “cay mo, bo de” than the “keo” tree, which is often cracked down. The Thai women in Quan Son often share their experience in planting “luong” - a kind of bamboo, which can be collected in a short time. For the long term, they can plant perennial trees “lim, lat.”

**3.4.7. Ethnic minority women disseminate new seedlings.** Whenever they find new seedlings while travelling, they bring them home to plant in their garden or forest. They often share the new seedlings with their friends. Women in Van Chan share that they are excited to try planting what is recommended by the forestry extension agency. They follow the process and recognize if it is suitable and if the result is good.

**3.4.8. Ethnic minority women provide first aid to their own family and community using herbal medicine.** Women in the countryside know that medicinal plants can cure common illnesses or symptoms such as fever, cold, stomachache, etc. In the forest and especially in the garden of the family, popular medicinal plants such as lemon grass and ginger are planted and cared for by the women for use in case of need. The Thai, Dao and Muong people use a balanced combination of spices in their food such as chili, garlic and onion to lessen bad smell and to avoid food poisoning. The Dao, Muong, Tay, Nung and Thai women often teach herbal medicine prescriptions to their daughters and daughters-in-law. In addition, they often tell each other how to plant scarce medicinal plants in their forest garden.

### 3.5. Lessons learned and challenges faced on forest resource management based on the practices and experiences of indigenous women

Study documents and survey results on the ground show that indigenous women play a very important role in the management and exploitation of forest and forest resources.

Ethnic minority women not only exploit and enjoy the benefits from forest. They are also the ones who keep the cultural traits of the community alive and transfer indigenous knowledge and values of the forest to the next generations. They protect and improve the forest and know how to use forest land for sustainable livelihoods. They protect biodiversity, genetic resources in the forest and river. They share new knowledge and experiences in protecting and improving forest and expand the area and use of new seedlings. Women are family medical doctors who take care of the

health of their family and community using herbal medicine.

However, indigenous women are facing the following challenges:

- Forest land tenure and rights to use the forest are not ensured for indigenous peoples in general, and women in particular. In most regulations and policies on forest and forest land, the rights of indigenous women are not mentioned specifically. Their rights are recognized along with the few rights of indigenous peoples. In Vietnam, there is no specific law on indigenous peoples, while other vulnerable groups already have laws applied for them. Most indigenous women do not have any certificate of using forest land, thus they cannot avail of loans, and they suffer loss when it comes to land in general and forest land in particular. The role and right of women in managing and enjoying the benefits from forest have not been recognized and regulated in legal documents. Moreover, they do not have a thorough understanding of their rights in using and managing forest resources to be able to ask for their rights to be recognized.
- The core values and indigenous knowledge of the people include respect for nature and the ecosystem, reasonable and harmonized relations between man and man, and between man and nature, and protection and sustainable development of forest resource. However, these values and knowledge are weakening, and existing issues on forest management are not well recognized. The lack of recognition of indigenous knowledge and the fading away of knowledge that indigenous women are good at result in diminishing importance of their role in managing and protecting forest.
- The Government has made policies on allocating forests and its benefits to communities and households. However, the portion of forests allocated to ethnic minorities is not sufficient for their sustainable livelihood and income generation, and thus, does not motivate forest protection. The authorities rarely encourage the community to manage and exploit the forest based on their traditional knowledge. Instead they impose methods that are not appropriate for the customs and knowledge of the community. The complicated system of forest classification and administrative management has caused misunderstanding about forest. The Mong people in Pin Pe village know only two instead of three forest types classified by the government, i.e., one type is owned by them and the other by government. The ethnic minorities often mistake the forest owned by a private company for a government-owned one. This has caused

difficulty for the people, especially the women, in dealing with policies, programs, projects, investment and credit policies. As a result, forest management is not effective enough to contribute to the achievement of targets in the socio-economic development of the country.

### **3.6. Recommendations for strengthening sustainable forest resource management by indigenous women and their contribution and roles in addressing the challenges:**

- The Government of Vietnam needs to develop a law for ethnic minority people, paying particular attention to ethnic minority women who are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in the course of community and social development. In the revision of the Land Law, there is a need to reconsider some articles related to forest, forest land and the rights of indigenous people, especially indigenous women, in order for them to enjoy benefits from the forest.
- The Government and authorities at all levels need to develop detailed guidelines on the allocation of forest land and on the rights of indigenous households, especially for indigenous women, in order for community to enjoy forest benefits.
- Authorities and indigenous peoples need to cooperate to improve the recognition of the role of indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women, in keeping alive the customs, values and indigenous knowledge in sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation.

## Annex: Program of the survey and group work in 3 provinces

No	Agenda	Time	Location	Facilitator
1	Interviews and group discussion with Cat Thinh Women's Union, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	20/07/2013	Meeting hall's Cat Thinh commune	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
2	Interviews and group discussion with Khe Ria 1 village, Cat Thinh Women's Union, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	21/07/2013	Khe Ria 1 village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
3	Interviews and group discussion with Khe Ria 2 village, Cat Thinh Women's Union, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	21/07/2013	Khe Ria 2 village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
4	Interviews and group discussion with Da Gan village, Cat Thinh Women's Union, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	22/07/2013	Da Gan village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
5	Interviews and group discussion with Ba Khe 2 village, Cat Thinh Women's Union, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	22/07/2013	Ba Khe 2 village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
6	Interviews and group discussion with Pin Pe village, Cat Thinh Women's Union, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province	23/07/2013	Pin Pe village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
7	Interviews and group discussion with Son Thuy Women's Union, Quan Son district, Thanh Hoa province	28/07/2013	Meeting hall's Son Thuy commune	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
8	Interviews and group discussion with Hiet village, Son Thuy Women's Union, Quan Son district, Thanh Hoa province	28/07/2013	Hiet village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
9	Interviews and group discussion with Tranh village, Son Thuy Women's Union, Quan Son district, Thanh Hoa province	29/07/2013	Tranh village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu

10	Interviews and group discussion with Mai Hich Women's Union, mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province	30/07/2013	Meeting hall's Mai Hich commune	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
11	Interviews and group discussion with Hich 1 village, Mai Hich Women's Union, mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province	30/07/2013	Hich 1 village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu
12	Interviews and group discussion with Den village, Mai Hich Women's Union, mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province	31/07/2013	Den village	Mrs Truong, Nghia, Sy, Hieu

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> National report for CBD – 2008.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Source Empowerment of Women in public sector project (EWPO): Quantitative research on Women's leadership in Vietnam's Public sector.

<sup>4</sup> Report summary on Situation and Recommendation for Land use and management by ethnic minority in mountainous areas – CEM and UNDP, 2012).

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<sup>7</sup> RESEARCH Situation of ethnic minority human resource and recommended solutions for human resource development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas, towards 2020.

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# About the Authors

**Ms. Jacqueline Cariño** is an indigenous Ibaloi from the Cordillera region, Philippines. She has worked on various indigenous peoples issues since the 1980s, including indigenous women's rights and concerns, particularly in mining-affected communities of the Cordillera. She is currently the Vice-Chairperson for External Affairs of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) and is a member of the Executive Council of Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP). She is also Convenor and Director of the Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights (TFIP), a national network of non-government organizations working to promote indigenous peoples' rights to land, indigenous knowledge systems, food sovereignty and self-determination.

**Ms. Mane Yun** is an indigenous Bunong from Mondulkiri in the North East of Cambodia. A graduate of the Royal University of Law and Economics, she is the member of the board of the Cambodia Center for Human Rights and a board member of the Organization to Promote Kui Culture. Mane spent three and a half years working with the United Nations Development Program Regional Indigenous People Program and two years as a Program Officer with the International Labour Organization Support to Indigenous Peoples Project. And also one year as a consultant with the International Labour Organization Support to the process of indigenous collective land title application. Mane also involved supporting indigenous people in Cambodia, their rights to land and education and efforts to promote and preserve indigenous culture in Cambodia.

**Ms. Aye Thiri Kyaw** earned her MA at Mahidol University, where she worked as a research assistant for one year after her degree. Her research interests are on gender, women and society development, gender and health equity. She has been involved with many research projects at the Thai-burma border and inside Myanmar. She is now working at the Gender Equality Network (Myanmar) as the national researcher.

**Ms. Luong Thi Truong** is the director of the Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas (CSDM), Vietnam. She belongs to Thai ethnic minority. Under her leadership, CSDM has implemented numbers of development projects in mountainous areas aimed at improving socio-economic condition of the vulnerable groups including women, children, disabled and ethnic minorities peoples. CSDM has been doing the REDD+ project under the Climate Change Partnership with Indigenous Peoples since 2010. Madame Truong was involved in the evaluation of the FPIC pilot project of UN-REDD Programme, Vietnam. Currently, she is the interim IP/ethnic minority representative in the Programme Executive Board (PEB) of the UN-REDD Programme, Vietnam.



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## AIPP at a glance

The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization founded in 1988 by indigenous peoples' movements. AIPP is committed to the cause of promoting and defending indigenous peoples' rights and human rights, including advocacy work on issues and concerns of indigenous peoples in Asia. At present, AIPP has 47 members from 14 countries (in Asia) with 11 indigenous peoples' alliances/networks and 36 local and sub-national organizations. Of this number, 16 are ethnic based organizations, 5 are indigenous women's organizations and 4 are indigenous youth organizations.

### Our Vision

Indigenous peoples in Asia are fully exercising their rights, distinct cultures and identities, are living with dignity, and enhancing their sustainable management systems on lands, territories and resources for their own future and development in an environment of peace, justice and equality.

### Our Mission

AIPP strengthens the solidarity, cooperation and capacities of indigenous peoples in Asia to promote and protect their rights, cultures and identities, and their sustainable resource management systems for their development and self-determination.

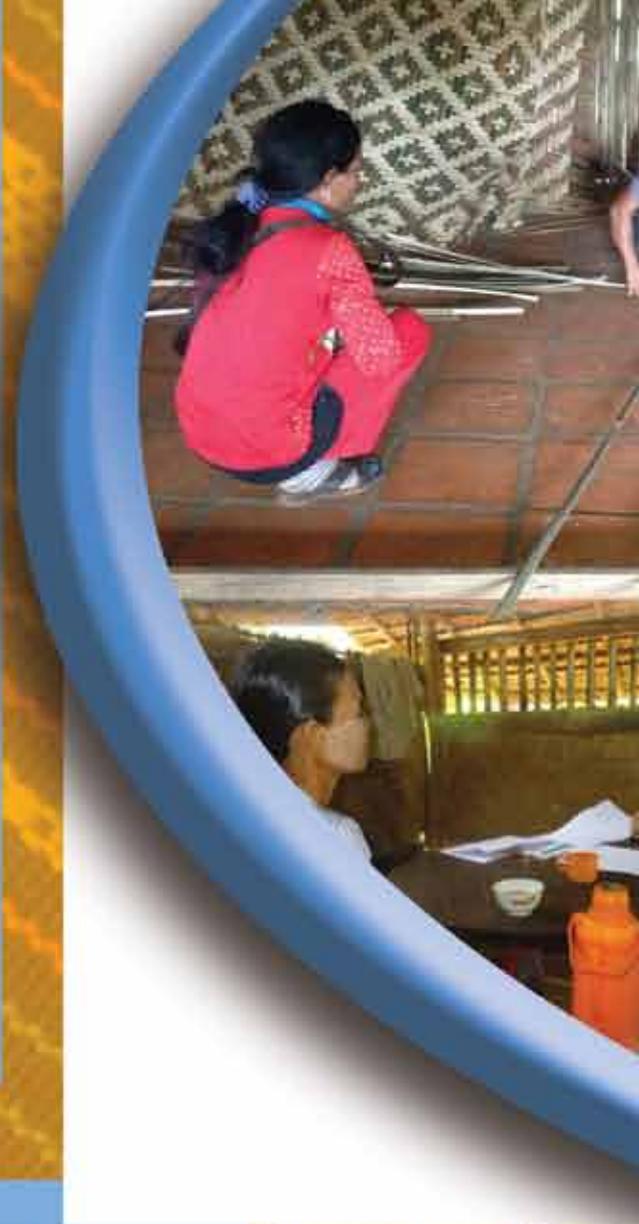
### Our Programmes

Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy. Regional Capacity Building. Environment. Indigenous Women. Research and Communication Development. Indigenous Youth.

AIPP is accredited as an NGO in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and as observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). AIPP also recently received accreditation with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) NGO Network and the International Land Coalition (ILC).

International standards including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and recent climate change agreements recognize the important role of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, systems and practices in the sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation. Yet, indigenous women's role and contribution to sustainable forest management is often overlooked, thus the need to document good practices of indigenous women as well as the challenges they face in their role as managers of forest natural resources.

Indigenous women depend daily on the forests to supply the needs of their families for food, water, livelihood, firewood, shelter and health care. They deeply value their forests and care for them through their spirituality and rich indigenous knowledge on forest protection, development and use. Indigenous knowledge contributes to the maintenance and preservation of biodiversity and sustainable forest development. Indigenous women's traditional knowledge and practices have been found to be effective in securing food, conserving their culture and traditions, and contributing to sustainable natural resource management in their community.



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