

# Social Forestry :

## What it means for indigenous communities in Thailand

Thailand issued a masterplan for the protection of forest resources in 2014 with the goal of increasing forest cover by 40% - 128 million *rai*<sup>1</sup> [20.48 million hectares] over a 10 year period. This translates to increasing the current 107 million *rai* by more than 21 million *rai* in order to conserve land, water and other resources. The question that follows is: Where will this new forest land come from?

Order No. 64/2557 of the National Council for Peace and Order [NCPO] calls for a number of government agencies to join forces in carrying out heightened suppression and arrests of persons encroaching on, owning, or destroying forest lands. This order does not make allowances for the different persons and circumstances involved in such encroachment, seriously impacting on villagers and the poor who have previously farmed these new 'conservation' lands. Thus, the NCPO issued Order No. 66/2557, Section 2.1, which states "...*carrying out all aspects [of Order No. 64/2557] must ensure that the poor and landless people residing in the designated areas prior to NCPO Order No. 66/2557 are not negatively impacted, excepting those who relocated there after the order*". Thus, the government's goal of arrest and seizure of land has refocused on the capitalists rather than poor farmers. However, in practice, officials in the field did not discriminate, and the poor and landless were still arrested and taken to court. For example, the Karen residing in the area around the Kaeng Krajang National Park in Nongyaplong District of Petchaburi Province.

*"On that day, the Forest Rangers [special task force of the National Parks Department] seized a nearby resort, and some border control officers witnessed me planting mango trees here. They said nothing, but today I was arrested on the grounds of encroaching on 5.75 rai [0.92 hectare] of land; the local police station is now preparing the documentation . . . the land I was working was passed down to me from my parents and I have farmed it for many years. How can this be considered new encroachment? I even don't know where my 5.75 rai of land is officially located."* (Interview on 25 May 2017).

The conflicts between the state and the villagers regarding forest land and resources have been on-going for a very long time, with little indication of a resolution. Analysis of the causes reveals the following:

1. The policies and laws governing forest resources are not in line with reality. They focus on forest resources, flora and fauna more than the traditional residents/communities and their forest-dependent livelihoods. The government continues to see the communities as responsible for forest destruction, due to their alleged desire to expand agricultural production for commercial purposes. As a result, laws have been enacted to guard, protect and suppress persons breaking the 4 relevant state laws, which make no mention of

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<sup>1</sup> 1 hectare = 6.25 rai

community rights or rights to establish residence and pursue traditional livelihoods related to natural resources; although those communities were established for a considerably long period prior to the establishment of reserve and/or conservation forests. Importantly, the proposed community forestry law still has not been enacted after more than 25 years.

2. There have been no genuine participatory processes involving the indigenous and local communities, including the establishment of conservation forests which have never included community participation. This has resulted in many communities denoted as communities located in reserve or conservation forests, rather than being accepted as areas handed down by their ancestors over hundreds of years [verified in accordance with the Cabinet Resolution of 30 June 1998]. Many issues remain unclear, for example, what are “vulnerability” areas? the use of satellite photos and continuously use of land. We still lack a clear operational process for constructing knowledge in these areas.
3. Stereotyping or negative attitude. The state continues to believe that traditional indigenous land use – e.g. rotational farming – is not sustainable and provides little economic income in comparison with permanent agriculture [in one designated area]. This is not the reality in this current age of organic agriculture.

Considering the nature of these problems, following is the option that indigenous communities feel the state should consider:

The state should change its process of knowledge construction concerning the conservation of natural resources. It should emphasize co- management of these resources, because the consolidation of authority at one higher government level does not respond to community problems regarding conservation in Thailand. What needs to be done is:

- Review and revision of relevant policies and laws in increasing the importance of local community conservation practices and using these as a basis for conservation and development for a better balance of benefits.
- The state must accept and support both the traditional indigenous models of land use in accordance with local customs, and focus on a new approach to development founded on knowledge of ecological systems and “forests for society”.

Such a forward-looking and proactive approach will go far to address the question: “What model would the indigenous communities like to see?” The answer being: “People and the forests living together in a sustainable manner. Social Forestry adds the dimension of Balanced Security, an important issue.”

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