

# Forest policies in Asia – a regional synthesis

## Introduction

Asia is endowed with extensive and biologically diverse forests. Hundreds of millions of people depend directly on these forests for their livelihoods, whether gathering forest products for their daily needs or working in the wood-processing sector of the economy. Many more people make use of the products and enjoy the services Asia's forests provide.

Historically, the main objective of forest management was timber production. Although forest policies and forest management objectives diversified and expanded long before the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), since 1992 forestry has become even more multi-dimensional. Local stakeholders and the international community especially have voiced their concerns about the narrow definition of forestry. Forests are increasingly viewed as a source for sustaining local livelihoods, as providing local environmental services, as a reservoir of global biodiversity and as carbon sinks that need to be maintained to minimize the perceived negative effects of climate change. There is no dearth of initiatives that try to put good forest management into practice and involve non-foresters in decision-making and activities. Yet, many voices claim that a tragedy is unfolding in Asia's forests and that deforestation and forest degradation have reached unprecedented levels.

The performance of the forestry sector depends to a considerable extent on the institutional context, including prevailing forest policies. All Asian countries have formulated forest policies to achieve the goal of sustainable forest management. The earliest forest policies date back to the 1800s. Over the decades, forest policies have been revised and refined in response to the perceived shortcomings of earlier policies.

## Why do we need forest policies?

Policies deal with the articulation of courses of actions to achieve specific objectives. They are the guiding principles that determine what is to happen. Forest policies are concerned with the manner in which forests and tree resources should be managed to meet society's demand for goods and services that forests can – if managed properly – provide for current and future generations.

Forest policy has content in the form of statements and instruments designed to achieve a desired objective such as biodiversity conservation, wood production or watershed protection. Forest policy also has process, meaning policy formulation, implementation and review. The process is circular in that the review of the impact and effectiveness of a policy would lead either to a new policy or adjustments, or confirm the previous policy.

Why do we need policies? The behavior of people is influenced or dictated by the environment in which they operate. In the context of this discussion, the term "environment" stands not only for the natural environment but also the economic and socio-cultural framework conditions under which people organize themselves and which, to a large extent, guide economic activities. Ideally, forest policies address anticipated problems that arise because of an imbalance between public and private goals. Without this imbalance most policies, as well as laws and regulations, would not be necessary. Imbalances result in conflicts and policies try to minimize such conflicts by applying different policy instruments. This does not only apply at the national and state levels but also at the community, private firm or household level. Frequently simple rules precede policies and they are thus not recognized as formal policy instruments. Important is that policy instruments are designed to change behavior so that conflicts can be minimized. Among the policy instruments at the disposal of today's policy-makers are social services (e.g. extension, awareness raising, education and research), laws that regulate what can and what cannot be done, and sectoral and macro-economic instruments, which can encourage or discourage particular behavior.

In addition to the indirect incentives provided through sectoral and macro-economic instruments, policy-makers have direct incentives at their disposal.

The future of forestry and Asia's forest and tree resources is shaped by current policies. The key challenges in policy design are to achieve a balance among the multiple roles of forests to deliver the greatest overall benefits to society, and to adopt instruments that keep the sector responsive to emerging opportunities and changing needs without compromising the sustainability of forest resources. This requires in the first instances an appropriate reading of recent underlying changes and a proper understanding of the current situation.

### **Key changes in Asia's economies and forestry**

Over the past two decades many countries in Asia have experienced rapid and often tumultuous political and socio-economic changes. Although the economies of most countries are still agricultural in nature, the manufacturing and service sectors increasingly determine economic growth. Most people still reside in rural areas but urbanization, increasing off-farm employment opportunities and declining population growth have relieved the pressure on forests to some extent and slowed down the high deforestation rates of the 1970s and 1980s. Economic growth in most countries has been among the fastest in the world. Since 1945, Asia's economy has grown several times faster than the world average. The financial crisis of the late 1990s led to a significant economic downturn, particularly in Southeast Asia, from which many countries have still not completely recovered. As a result, the once booming demand for forest products has slowed and prices for many forest products have fallen, which has dampened the enthusiasm of many potential investors. Within the public domain, research has been particularly affected by a reduction in funding, while the private sector has shown considerably less interest in investing in plantation development and wood-processing facilities.

Economic development, market liberalization, globalization and advances in information technologies have triggered an unprecedented social and political transformation. Although not all people are affected by this transformation to the same extent, dramatic changes have occurred in the way people work, what they spend their money and time on and especially how they view their inputs to policy-making processes. Once passive by-standers, today many urban and rural people want to have their voices heard and indicate their desire to directly contribute to decision-making processes. The perspectives of people living in Asia toward forest and forestry continue to evolve in concert with economic and socio-cultural changes, emerging perceptions and institutions, value systems and attitudes towards government (FAO 1998). Democratization, decentralization and devolution processes exert substantial pressure on public sector agencies whose representatives used to be able to make decisions and operate without consulting others, with the exception of powerful and influential individuals involved in logging and wood processing.

Historically, foresters viewed people as a problem. This has slowly changed. In Nepal, the Forest Act of 1993 and the Forest Rules of 1995 aimed to develop the forestry sector through decentralization and the participation of individuals and groups and reaffirmed the government's policy of assigning more responsibility to forestry user groups. The government of the Philippines has adopted community-based forest management as the national strategy to ensure sustainable development of the country's forestland resources pursuant to the provisions of Executive Order No. 263 dated 19 July 1995. In Malaysia, the 1978 National Forestry Policy, amended in 1992, stresses multi-sectoral participation in forestry. Section 76 of the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand encourages the State to "promote and encourage public participation in the preservation, maintenance and balanced exploitation of natural resources and biological diversity and in the promotion, maintenance and protection of the quality of the environment...". The examples indicate that today the shift from exclusionary to participatory forestry views people as part of the solution to problems in forestry, although foresters have been slow to adapt to the expanding demands by civil society and their own diminishing role in forest production and protection.

In tandem with the role transformation that foresters are asked to make are direct changes in forestry. Increasingly wood production is shifting to plantations. In some forest-poor countries and/or where timber-harvesting restrictions have been imposed, the wood-processing industry is obtaining up to 90 percent of its raw materials from trees outside forests. This shift has been driven by several factors, including the increasing concern over the loss of biodiversity, a massive increase in protected areas and the reduced supply of merchantable timber from natural forests due to excessive timber harvesting in the past. A major implication of this shift is that the contribution that the management of natural forests makes to gross domestic production (measured in the direct value of wood produced) has decreased in many countries. The declining production of natural forests has led many governments to the belief that forestry is not as important as it used to be. In many countries, forestry is relegated to secondary importance and government departments experience declining or stagnating budget allocations. Even donors appear to be losing interest in sustainable forest management (Anon 2003).

Declining budgets could not come at a less opportune time. Not only, as discussed above are foresters asked to change or become obsolete, at the same time there are additional demands in the nature of reporting requirements under a variety of international agreements, most of them a direct or indirect outcome of UNCED.

It is against this backdrop that policy processes and content, and their impacts need to be viewed.

## **Policy process**

### ***Policy formulation***

As a general rule, policies developed in a top-down and elitist manner will be less effective than policies that have been formulated with meaningful input from all interested and affected parties (Durst 2002). At least until the late 1980s, forest policy formulation was considered the domain of and dominated by forestry experts. The results of exclusivity, i.e. severely restricting stakeholder involvement in policy formulation and review, have been forest policies that said all the right things and read very well but were not necessarily implementable on the ground. They neither received support from other forestry stakeholders nor the backing from other economic sectors, with which forest policies frequently conflict. In some countries, policy reviews and development processes were also externally driven, often through donors, which lead to policies that even forestry agencies did not agree with.

Over the last ten to fifteen years this has slowly changed, in part due to pressures from the donor community and other stakeholders, in part also because foresters have realized the shortcomings of the earlier approach.

#### ***Stakeholder participation in policy formulation***

The government has begun to realize the importance of a meaningful dialogue with NGOs and other members of civil society in crafting new policies. It is making special efforts to engage civil society by giving responsibility to NGOs to facilitate the identification of stakeholders and dialogue between government officials and civil society.

Source: India country report

#### ***From no input to multi-stakeholder participation***

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Source: Pakistan country report

There are considerable differences in how countries conduct forest policy processes and how stakeholders are involved in policy formulation. In some countries, the shift from exclusionary to participatory approaches is welcomed, while in others forest agencies feel that they are pressured to collaborate with other stakeholders and forced to tolerate people's participation in the policy process. Even where stakeholder involvement in recent policy formulation initiatives has gone quite far a number of problems remain.

Although considerable information of the regions forests have been amassed, in many countries, relevant and up-to-date information on some aspects of forests, forestry and existing forest policies does not exist, is outdated or is not easily available outside the government bureaucracy. This seriously curtails the opportunities for non-foresters to contribute meaningfully. For example, in the Philippines, forest cover data are close to 15 years old and hence provide no basis for a review of the current situation and leave the door open for speculation on the status of forest cover and the impacts of previous policies. In many of the forest-poor countries, the importance of trees outside forests (TOF) has only become recognized in recent years. However, TOF assessments exist, to a limited extent, only in India and Sri Lanka. In other countries, little is known about this valuable resource. Although most countries claim to be a biodiversity hotspot, little information is available on how much biodiversity there is, whether it is threatened and to what extent it contributes to local livelihoods and national economies. The increasing involvement and significance of the private sector in forestry makes it more and more difficult for the public sector to collect data and to provide a complete overview of national forestry aspects. This is a particular problem in the plantation sub-sector, which is riddled with data gaps on the extent, species composition, age and quality of plantations. However, the lack of information is only part of the problem, the other part is that many forest departments still view the data they collect as proprietary and are unwilling to share them or recognize the legitimacy of information that other stakeholders provide.

Overall, attempts to include non-foresters in policy formulation and national forest programme processes are laudable. The level of involvement varies from public reviews, consultations or hearings and the request for inputs from stakeholders (e.g. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka), to the facilitation of stakeholder discussions (e.g. India), or the establishment of task forces composed of diverse stakeholders (e.g. Nepal). However, in spite of advances made over the last ten years, involving stakeholders appears to be still of an *ad hoc* and informal nature, and sometimes only lip service is paid to involving affected parties. Also, in most countries, specific procedures that formalize stakeholder involvement do not yet exist. Policy formulation continues to be dominated by bureaucratic procedures and the passing of documents from one hierarchical level to the next, which can be very time consuming. In Sri Lanka, the formulation of the 1995 National Forest Policy took three years. In Bhutan, the National Forest Policy of 1991 is still in at a draft stage. How cumbersome the process of formulating new and contested legislation can be is perhaps best illustrated by the drafting of the Community Forestry Bill in Thailand, which is now in its twelfth year. Such lengthy processes lead to dissatisfaction and do not further the meaningful involvement of interested parties in policy formulation.

### ***Theory and practice of stakeholder involvement***

In theory, the task force has to interact with and take note of the views of other interested people or agencies. But in practice, limited interaction or discussion takes place due to time constraints or to maintain a degree of official secrecy.

Source: Nepal country report

### ***Policy review***

In many countries, tools for the monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation are inadequate or do not exist at all. Hence, policy formulation is usually reactive in nature and is not

necessarily the outcome of a timely and purposeful review. Instead it is frequently the response to a crisis such as the imposition of logging bans in various Asian countries (Durst *et al.* 2001) or pressure, which resulted in the revocation of timber concessions of 15 companies due to their failure to develop required industrial timber plantations or the log export ban to curb illegal timber trade in Indonesia. Another problem area of near crisis proportion that until today has not received sufficient attention, although it is often described as a serious problem, is the excess capacity in the timber-processing industries of many countries.

### ***More reactive than proactive***

The policy process in the forestry sector has been more reactive than proactive. It is often said that the Philippines has good forestry policies but policy implementation has generally fallen short. This failure of policy implementation can be attributed to one or both of the following practices of past administrators and planners:

- a) When implementation fails or when rules and regulations are violated, rather than improving the process of implementation, support and monitoring systems, a new policy is issued to plug the loopholes and;
- b) Forestry planning is done usually for the sake of planning (as a requirement) not necessarily based on available resources and realistic objectives. The first practice has resulted in a maze of policies that does not allow people to operate viably or profitably without violating one or more regulations.

Source: Philippine country report

In most Asian countries, forest policy reviews suffer from weak capacities to analyze the impacts of previous policies. This is particularly the case in new areas such as community-based forest management or biodiversity conservation. Although the forming of multi-disciplinary teams is encouraged most reviews are dominated by forestry professionals who are ill equipped to cover all relevant areas. Proper reviews require accurate, up-to-date and relevant data, which are in short supply. Weak monitoring is compounded by poor accountability and transparency, undocumented activities in many countries (Johnson 2002) and a lack of feedback from the field to policy makers.

One reason why there is a lack of a formal review process is that in some countries there is no policy continuity in the sense that forest management is not guided by forest policies but by a never-ending stream of new administrative orders, decrees and directives, which replace what are assumed to be inappropriate guidelines. That previous guidelines are not always inadequate or outdated is highlighted by Bajracharya and Amatya (1993, cited in Amatya 2002) who concluded in their review of forest policies in Nepal that the different policy guidelines provided by the major plans at the national level were adequate and correct in their own time. However, the national-level policies were not translated adequately into regional and program strategies. Most importantly, the broad policies were not translated to operational tactics. Policy changes are time and again made without proper reviews, which leads to confusion and a lack of trust and confidence in the policy process.

### ***Lack of continuity***

Many implementing agencies anticipate that most policies do not last long as new governments frequently introduce new policies. Between 1982 and 2002, Thailand had 10 governments and new governments rarely follow the paths of former ones.

Source: Thailand country report

## ***Policy implementation***

There is broad agreement that the implementation of forest policies remains a major bottleneck to achieving sustainable forest management. There is no dearth of explanations why what is written so beautifully in policies and plans is not translated into visible improvements on the ground. Although it has been proposed that one reason for poor policy implementation and a lack of impact is that policies might be seriously flawed, out of touch with reality and outdated (e.g. forest management in the Philippines is governed by the “Revised Forestry Code of the Philippines”, a 1975 Presidential decree), there are numerous equally important reasons that account for the poor implementation of existing policies.

A serious weakness is that in a number of countries, forest policies are neither sufficiently backed up with legislative provisions nor are they followed up by program and strategy development, action plans and operational tactics. For example, the forest policy promulgated in Bangladesh in 1994 encourages people’s participation. The Forestry Act, however, was only amended in 2000 to accommodate social forestry. In other cases, plans are drawn up that are not supported by policies or the law, or so many plans and provisions exist that it becomes literally impossible to know, what to follow when.

Dramatic changes in forestry have been recognized widely and have affected the content of forest policies to a considerable extent, especially since UNCED in 1992. However, what has not changed or changed only very little are the attitudes of institutions and people and their willingness to focus on the more comprehensive and partnership-oriented approaches required for sustainable forest management (de Montalembert and Schmithüsen 1993). This does not only include government bureaucracies but extends to research and education. Under such circumstances it should not be surprising that enlightened reforms remain on the drawing board but fail to make a change on the ground.

### ***Lack of institutional change***

Institutions related to forests and biodiversity conservation have hardly changed since their establishment. Institutional reforms of provincial forestry and wildlife departments; the Federal Forestry Wing, the Pakistan Forest Institute, the Zoological Survey Department and the National Council for Conservation of Wildlife are crucial to meet emerging challenges.

Source: Pakistan country report

Some new policy elements such as private sector participation in forest management and participatory forest management are not being implemented. The lack of provisions in the current legislation and the slow change in attitudes by government officials have contributed to this delay.

Source: Sri Lanka country report

It has been observed by a number of experts that Indonesia’s existing institutions in the forestry sector represent a barrier to necessary changes. The present structure of the forestry organization needs to be adjusted to realize the effective and efficient administration of forest management, and accessibility for stakeholders to forestry-related data and information.

Source: Indonesia country report

In part, inertia and resistance to change can be explained by lack of funds and weak capacities. Most forest departments are faced with declining budgets at a time when they are asked to take on additional and new tasks. Recognizing that funds are limited has not resulted in comprehensive adjustments and prioritization exercises within an overall strategy of policy implementation.

Instead, in a number of countries, decentralization and devolution of forest management is viewed as a solution to insufficient funds. Responsibilities, although not necessarily authorities, are passed down to the provincial or local level, to forest user groups, communities or non-governmental organizations with little or no accompanying budget allocations.

Achieving sustainable forest management will remain an elusive goal wherever the forest policy environment is overly prescriptive and bureaucratic and forest management is guided by command-and-control approaches. In countries such as Indonesia, forest concessionaires are more concerned with fulfilling the paper exercise of administrative requirements, which prescriptive regulations tend to generate, than with worrying about the impacts of forest harvesting on the forest ecosystem. Most forest policies envision a substantial increase in investments in plantations by the private sector. A variety of incentives are offered to make tree planting more attractive. However, direct incentives such as free seedlings or cash payments will continue to play only a limited role in accelerating forest plantation development as long as rules and regulations concerning tenure (land and crop), cutting and transport are restrictive and costly. For many decades, little attention was paid to such disincentives (Enters *et al.* 2003). Recently, a number of countries including India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, have started to relax the permit systems for timber cutting on private lands and the transport of timber.

Law enforcement is weak throughout the forestry sector in Asia. Illegal logging, the associated illegal trade, and wildlife poaching are increasingly recognized and acknowledged threats to forest resources in Asia. In addition, forest encroachment can rarely be contained and influential people are often able to operate outside the law. In recent years, a number of technological advances (e.g. optical bar coding of valuable logs and satellite imagery) have made it easier and cheaper to observe and measure key parameters thus substantially facilitating detection of illegal acts. Also, various initiatives to combat illegal activities organized by international NGOs and Government International Organizations have been initiated in recent years (Contreras-Hermosilla 2001). However, many forestry agencies remain poorly equipped to enforce the law and corruption is widespread.

#### ***Weak law enforcement and corruption***

Laws (and related regulations) have been designed to prevent overexploitation (beyond the specified annual allowable cut). However, the existence of laws *per se* does not guarantee the prevention of illegal activities. Enforcement needs to be efficient and judicious. There is a tendency to disobey the laws, which will remain a problem as long as inefficient and corrupt systems allow lawbreakers to escape unpunished. In fact, some elements involved in illegal activities have developed a sense of immunity.

Source: Indonesia country report

Finally, policy implementation is hampered by macro-economic and extra-sectoral policies that frequently run counter to forest policies and may carry more weight than forest policies. This is no more evident than in the case of deforestation, which is certainly not driven by forest policies. Kaimowitz and Angelsen (1998) reviewed more than 150 economic models of tropical deforestation and came to some certain as well as uncertain conclusions. Higher agricultural prices, lower wages, less off-farm employment and better accessibility generally lead to more deforestation. It is less clear to what extent technological change in agriculture, agricultural input prices, household incomes, and tenure security influence deforestation. The role of macro-level factors such as population growth, poverty reduction, national income levels, economic growth and foreign debt remain uncertain. To this already extensive list Schmithüsen (2000) added other factors that may not necessarily drive deforestation but influence forest management. They include tourism, land-use planning, environmental protection, national park policies, water resources development and mining. Finally, the absence of a land-use policy in countries such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka also leads to conflicts and negative impacts on forest resources.

Some of the driving forces are so dominant that they completely dwarf the intent of forest policies. Their potential impacts on forests and forestry need to be part of a comprehensive review, particularly in situations where the political commitment to economic growth is far stronger than to forestry. In most countries, this is still not happening, which continues to constrain forest policy implementation.

Despite the various constraints to policy implementation there have been some remarkable developments. Forests with protected area status increased considerably in most countries. In Bhutan, close to 35 percent of the total land area has been set aside as protected areas, in Pakistan 72.4 percent of the forest area has forest protection status. In India, protected areas have increased from 24 000 km<sup>2</sup> in 1975 to 156 000 km<sup>2</sup> in 2002.

### ***Forest protection in Thailand***

In 1999, 1 221 forests with a total area of 230 370 km<sup>2</sup> or about 56 percent of the existing forest areas were declared national conserved forests.

By 2001, there were 81 national parks (46 277 km<sup>2</sup>), 68 forest parks (887 km<sup>2</sup>), 53 wildlife sanctuaries (34 849 km<sup>2</sup>), 55 non-hunting areas (4 452 km<sup>2</sup>) and 54 arboreta. They are all protected by the Forest Act. Budgets for forest protection and conservation have increased steadily and reached 74 percent of the RFD's total budget in 2001 (Annual Report RFD 2001).

Source: Thailand country report

In most countries, international agreements and conventions had also the biggest impact on forest and biodiversity conservation. For example, Malaysia formulated a National Policy on Biological Diversity, prepared a National Conservation Strategy and formed a working committee to screen the IPF/IFF Proposals for Action. India prepared the National Forestry Action Programme in 1999 and a National Policy and Macro-level Action Strategy for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. While most countries formulated Biodiversity Actions Plans and responded to most conventions by extending their protected area systems, to what extent plans have led to action on the ground and how many of the protected areas are actively managed as protected areas remains unclear.

### ***Follow-up to UNCED in Malaysia***

Malaysia has established a National Committee on the Convention on Biological Diversity (NCCBD) to plan, coordinate and implement actions as required under the Convention. In this regard, the NCCBD formulated the National Policy on Biological Diversity in 1998 to provide the direction to implement strategies, action plans and programs on biological diversity for the conservation and sustainable utilization of its resources.

Source: Malaysia country report

Many countries have drafted policies and legislation for implementing devolution and decentralization of forest management in one way or the other and the number of communities and households involved in forestry has increased steadily. In Bhutan, participatory approaches to forest management have been evolving gradually since the first Royal Decree on social forestry in 1979. In Nepal, more than 853 000 ha of forests have been transferred as community forests to 11 000 forest user groups comprising more than 1 million households. In India, joint forest management (JFM) covers more than 14 million ha of forestland managed by more than 63 000 JFM committees. However, between policy and implementation obvious gaps remain, and there is little conceptual clarity about the meaning of decentralization and devolution (Fisher *et al.* 2000).



With regard to forest plantation development there has been a considerable shift from public to private sector involvement. A main reason for this shift is that budget constraints have made it largely impossible for most forest departments to devote as many resources to forest plantations as they have in the past. Hence, governments are increasingly looking toward alternative actors and policy instruments that stimulate interest in growing trees. While there have been some successes and plantation areas have considerably increased, investments by the private sector still fall short of expectations (Enters *et al.* 2003). In fact, in recent years and particularly since the start of the financial crisis in many Southeast Asian countries, investments have considerably declined or even ceased. Incentives offered by the public sector are frequently viewed as inadequate.

Considerable changes have also occurred in the wood-processing sector. In many countries substantial achievements have been made in downstream processing and domestic value addition. However, the switch to lesser-known species, small-diameter logs and species such as rubber and oil palm has not only been guided by prudent policies but also by the dwindling supply of timber from natural forests. The problem of excess capacities in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia has not been addressed sufficiently yet, which has exacerbated the problem of illegal logging and illegal timber trade.

Although most forest policies are clearly directed at sustainable forest management of natural forests most of the Asia's tropical forests remain managed in an unsustainable way. Countries spent resources on designing new strategies and paradigms that are continuously refined. Real progress on the ground is disappointingly slow despite, or perhaps because of, the focus on criteria and indicators (C&I) for sustainable forest management, developing codes of practice for forest harvesting, the increasing interest in certification and the often talked about potential of CO<sub>2</sub>-offset projects. Little of what has been recommended in the form of guidelines and codes has had the desired impact. Although foresters are familiar with the concept of the annual allowable cut (AAC), which also is referred to in many policy documents, forest departments rarely determine the level of wood production. In many countries, it is not based on the AAC but rather on the needs to generate revenue and directives from finance ministries.

During the last two decades, many Asian countries have experienced major fire and haze events with enormous negative impacts. Particularly in response to the events of September to November 1997, many countries have adopted policies and regional legal instruments to address forest fires and their associated impacts. Despite the numerous changes on paper, implementation is far from satisfactory. Abdullah (2002) explains why this is so in a review of regulatory regimes of ten ASEAN countries. She points out the following common problems (p. viii):

- “None of the ASEAN members has a specific law on forest fires. Provisions for dealing with forest fires are found in forestry and environmental-related laws.
- The laws of most of the countries do not clearly allocate responsibility for forest fire management among public and private sector actors.
- Most of the regulatory regimes provide penalties that forest authorities are to impose on violators, but there are no corresponding provisions for dealing with forest authorities that fail to carry out their duties.
- The laws of nearly all ASEAN countries omit rewards and incentives to the public to assist authorities in spotting and fighting fires.”

The list of common problems is complemented by problems occurring at national and local levels and include insufficient political will, vested interests, lack of financial human and technological resources, lack of appropriate information and communication systems, indifference, poor knowledge of fire prevention and mitigation, bureaucratic procedures, land-use conflicts and poorly defined resource ownership (Abdullah 2002).

Overall, most countries in Asia have made some progress in achieving sustainable forest management but are still far away from reaching the objectives outlined in their forest policies. There continues to be a lack of political will needed to make the sustainable management of forest

and tree resources a priority area. Budget allocations have declined in some countries to such low levels that foresters are confined to implementing policies from their desk than in the field. Forest management capacities of virtually all stakeholders need strengthening. However, as long as vested interests prevent the enforcement of the law, and national interests are dominated by macro-economic and agricultural policies that favor short-term export earnings and an expansion of agricultural crops, even the most judiciously designed and well-intentioned forest policy will remain unimplementable.

## **Policy content**

Despite the considerable differences among countries in Asia with regard to the importance of forestry to the national economy and environmental and socio-economic indicators, some common shifts in forest policies can be observed. Over the last two decades, forest policies have been shaped by the problems of deforestation, the widening gap between timber supply and demand, the recognition that forests are a source of diverse goods and services besides timber, and the trend towards decentralization, devolution and privatization of forest management.

An issue that is frequently discussed is whether the content of current policies is adequate to address the emerging challenges of sustainable forest management. Pointing to the various problems that forest management and more generally the forestry sector are facing many people would contend that Asia's forest policies are seriously deficient, as they do not help to achieve what they are set out to do. In response to such criticism, policies have been amended and revised and sometimes it becomes confusing when people talk about different versions of policies and plans.

Without doubt there is room for improvement, but continuing to fine-tune existing policies will probably not make much of a difference. That is at least the consensus that has emerged in recent years. The content of most forest policies is in general sufficient to guide necessary institutional and managerial changes, and to provide a framework that can be followed up with strategies and actions. That this is frequently not happening to the extent necessary and that policy implementation remains weak has been noted above.

With regard to content, it can be observed that most policies are very ambitious and replete with unattainable targets. Envisaged forest cover is sometimes set 10 percentage points higher or more than the current extent of forests. Forest plantation programs foresee ever-increasing planting rates while the reality on the ground indicates a very different picture.

Some policies are so old that they have become entirely obsolete. They are out of touch with conditions and realities and address problems or issues that may have existed several decades ago but have become largely irrelevant. Too many policies continue to focus exclusively on government activities and interventions when in fact activities in many countries have been taken over by the private sector including local communities and individual households. Many policies lack clarity with regard to implementation responsibilities and fail to adequately address the needs and demands of the stakeholders that may be in the best position to manage forest and tree resources. For example, many policies detail access rights for poor people to firewood, non-timber forest products and fodder, while they are also in need of timber that can be sold and converted into much needed money.

Finally, although an array of instruments for shaping activities in the forestry sector lies at the disposal of today's policy makers and governments at the local and national levels the emphasis remains on legislative and administrative instruments. Although it is realized that the costs of administration and enforcement are high and that enforcement is weak, a shift to sectoral instruments and incentives is progressing only slowly. Disincentives to achieving sustainable forest management remain unrecognized or their removal is avoided as they are viewed as contentious.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this synthesis is to provide an overview of the nature of forest policies in Asia and their effects on the management of forest and tree resources. As the subject matter is complex and the situation in Asia's countries far from homogenous, most issues can only be treated in a general manner (it is also recognized that only a limited number of countries in South and Southeast Asia are part of this synthesis). Although many of the examples provided in the discussion of policy process and content paint a bleak picture, it should be emphasized that developments in forest policy process and content have not reached a standstill. Progress is most visible in policy formulation and review, which are obtaining considerable inputs from a variety of stakeholders in most countries. Policy content has also been amended in response to emerging problems and opportunity. Policy implementation on the other hand could benefit from considerable strengthening.

The synthesis indicates that the difference that even the best forest policies can make continues to be smaller than one would hope for. The sector continues to be plagued by deforestation and forest degradation caused by a variety of factors that are often out of reach of the forestry community. Macro-economic and extra-sectoral policies affect forests and forestry to a considerable extent. For decision-makers in the forestry sector it is fundamental to take note of them and to observe trends so that forest policies are not made in a vacuum. A thorough analysis of the forestry sector is insufficient for assessing its performance if a blind eye is turned to developments of other sectors.

A recurring theme in literally all of the country papers that make up the remainder of this volume as well as the more general discussion on the total value of forest products and services, is the undervaluation of the contribution that forests make to local, national and global economies. While the rhetoric has shifted from the management for timber production to multiple use forest management, governments appear to fail to realize that the management for other forest products and diverse environmental services requires an increase and not a decrease in financial inputs and human resources.

To increase the effectiveness and impact of forest policies requires that they are taken more seriously and backed up with political commitment and increased budget allocations. However, the forestry community cannot blame only a lack of support for obvious shortcomings in forestry. It has to make better use of available policy instruments to translate policies into strategies, programs and actions, in other words, to implement policies. Stakeholder involvement in policy review, formulation and implementation needs to be taken more seriously and formalized. This requires a change in attitudes and a willingness and openness to rethink institutional arrangements and address necessary reforms of public sector agencies.

Finally, policies will fail if they are based on inadequate information and, in extreme cases, on hiding or sanitizing the facts. Data collection needs to become purposeful, relevant information needs to be generated and circulated widely and monitoring systems that ring alarm bells when things are going wrong need to be put into place.

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