

Equity Case Study Brief #5:



Effective Participation in Decision Making for Sustainable Resource Management Baan Muang Chum, Thailand

Equity Dimension: Procedural

Primary Equity Element: Participation and decision making

Secondary Equity Elements: Governance and regulations; livelihoods; grievance mechanism

THE EQUITY CHALLENGE

This is a constructive equity case in community-based forest governance, focusing on the development of a mechanism for community participation in natural resource management. In this case, equity issues were brought about by the absence of participation mechanism in forest management as the communal rights system in practice was not sufficient to control resource utilization within the community.

BACKGROUND

Formally registered in 1969, Baan Muang Chum is a village, locating along the Ing River in Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. It is home to 175 households with 537 people. Main livelihoods of the residents include agriculture and vendor and wage labor. Baan Muang Chum community forest consists of two areas. The first one is Khon Kean Knong Wetland, 500 rai (80 hectares) mixed ecosystem of forest and swamp, mostly surrounded by Ing River, entirely flooded in rainy season. Villagers from Baan Muang Chum and neighboring communities can fish in this flooded forest. The second area is Doi Yao Community Forest, a reserved forest area on Doi Yao Mountain with an area of 3,720 rai (595.2 hectares).

With abundant natural resources, the Doi Yao Forest and Wetland (Khon Kean Swamp) were attractive to local people who lived in nearby districts, leading them to settle in Baan Muang Chum. The migrated populations inherited the local culture and beliefs in collective ownership of resources, locally referred to as 'sitti-na-moo' (communal rights). As such, collective ownership became the accepted norm in Baan Muang Chum. They share benefits through timber harvesting for charcoal, clearing wetlands for rice paddies and other agricultural activities, fishing for consumption as well as income generation from bamboo shoots, mushrooms, wild vegetables and herbs collected from the wetlands. Their culture and beliefs in forest protection also play a role and include paying respect to the forest spirits, prohibiting cutting of some species and not cutting large trees or leaving some fodder when collecting bamboo shoots. Over the past 40 years, Baan Muang Chum has continued to develop the participatory process in natural resource management based on their customary practices and communal rights concept. Community participation, however, requires relevant mechanisms and necessitates collaboration with external governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which provide support in terms of budget and knowledge.

There have been three main groups of stakeholders engaging in Baan Muang Chum community forest management. First, local villagers manage the community forest (CF) area in collaboration with forestry officials, under the leadership of previous and current village heads, the CF management committee and the village committee. The CF management committee, established in 2001, is responsible for conservation, patrolling and camping in the forest. Second, the community is financially and technically supported by the Tambon Kreung Municipality, Chiang Rai Forest Resource Management Office and Hydro and Agro Informatics Institute. Third, community participation in forest management is facilitated by two NGOs. One, the Chiang Khong Conservation Group (CKCG), in collaboration with the Natural Resource and Cultural Conservation Network, initiated a project on local community rehabilitation in Lower Ing Watershed and Mekong Riverbank. The other, the Payao Development Foundation (PDF), initiated a project on wetlands management in the Ing watershed to encourage community conservation.

WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE TO ADDRESS EQUITY ISSUES?

Initially, due to the increasing population and pressure on resources, affected villagers tried to address the situation via communal rights, but they lacked a mechanism to encourage participation within the community to solve the problem collectively and effectively manage resources. Between 1969 and 1987 Baan Muang Chum villagers earned more income by cutting timber for charcoal to sell. There were approximately 100 charcoal kilns during this period. Overharvesting of trees resulted in poor forest conditions and forest degradation. When the village head was blamed, he destroyed community kilns without applying a participatory approach to the situation. Subsequently, while some kilns were destroyed, tree cutting continued and the ecosystem deteriorated more, resulting in insufficient water supplies, decreased fish populations and a decline of wild flora.

Between 1987 and 1994, Baan Muang Chum depleted their surrounding resources by clearing wetlands for rice paddies, claiming forest lands to grow fruit trees, cutting trees for construction, blast fishing and cutting fuel wood to sell to a tobacco factory. In addition, the traditional beliefs in resource utilization and protection which before had influence in local management was not followed and unable to adapt through the rapid change. Furthermore, people from neighboring communities started to violate communal rights. Overharvesting, lack of community participation in the management of resources and inappropriate use of the areas negatively impacted the ecosystem and caused severe droughts, weakened food security and deteriorated resources.

WHAT HAPPENED AND HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

Development of community participation in natural resource management

Community participation in resource management in Baan Muang Chum began in 1958 when the villagers in Muang Chum cluster, the major group of villagers, called for a meeting of all three village clusters. They asserted their communal rights and used them to establish community agreements to protect 500 rai (80 hectares) of Khong Khon Wetlands of as a community area and to conserve it as a livestock feeding ground of Baan Muang Chum. As a result, tree cutting and land clearing were prohibited, people from other communities were given access but only

allowed to collect non-timber products, and no individual could claim the land for their own benefit. Apart from these agreements, there were no clear management activities.

In 1996, the village head developed a project on dredging in Knong Kai Hai with support from the Land Development Department and Irrigation Department. The project resulted in forest clearing around Knong Kai Hai with timber sold to a jute factory and villagers being allowed to expand the lands for agriculture. Initially, settlers and elders in the community together opposed this forest clearing and communal land grabbing for private use. People from Muang Chum cluster asked for a public forum to allow wider discussion and situation analysis which engaged different groups of beneficiaries and affected members. Elders, for example, had wanted designated allotments for communal purposes and future generations. Others reasoned that the project could create more inequitable gaps between the poor and rich through investments from the wealthy to clear and make use of the land and inability of the poor to invest and keep their lands. After the forum, the vote was 60:40 in favor of keeping the area for communal use. The minority group accepted this collective decision because they also retained access to forest resources while the dredging and clearing project stopped. Knong Kai Hai forest was also designated as a livestock feeding area.

Another important transition occurred in 2000 when staff from CKCG expanded their work to the Ing watershed. They met with community leaders to discuss results from the community's conservation and resource management, followed by sending community representatives on study tours to learn about community forest initiatives and resource conservation in different provinces. These activities enhanced participants' understanding of participatory natural resource management. The villagers also made the collective decision to stop all tree cutting for charcoal due to very low tree density and classify the remaining livestock feeding area of the 500 rai at Knong Khon Kean as community forest. They applied some rules and regulations from CF management in Nan province while considering the local context of existing resources and community utilization. Baan Muang Chum's rules and regulations developed from this, followed by a village public forum and declaration in 2001.

From 2001 to 2006, the community began summarizing their experiences and knowledge on livelihoods and community resources through a participatory action research project on community food security with CKCG, supported by PDF. Local researchers worked closely with PDF and staff from CKCG in conservation and management activities as well as with analysis and monitoring and evaluation of self-learning. In addition, knowledge enhancement through training and study trips in other communities led to the decision to establish the CF management committee to take on conservation activities. This included creating fish sanctuaries, setting rules and regulations for community forest management and declaring Knong Kai Hai as a community forest. This CF management committee also included Doi Yao as a community forest site, which helped expand collaboration with the municipality, school and government agencies.

WHAT LED TO SUCCESS?

Two key factors helped achieve success in promoting equity in forest management. First, there was meaningful engagement of the people in forest management activities. Villagers, who are self-motivated and have to rely on natural resources, value participation as an effective tool to mobilize their community toward managing and conserving natural resources, including development of a participatory decision making mechanism. Participation in natural resource management became a mechanism to improve equity within the community as everyone could access the resources and were satisfied in the benefits they gained from them. Communal rights were used to find agreeable and equitable solutions for the common resources, which also led to transparency in management, monitoring and social control. In addition, the rules and regulations responded to the needs of every community member under the principle of communal resources, which gave more rights to the villagers to access and use the resources they managed than those from outside, an incentive to use resources in a sustainable manner. Second, there was critical support from NGOs and governmental actors for community capacity building. Technical, financial and facilitation support from those organizations helped villagers successfully enhance their capacity to plan, organize and implement necessary activities for protection and use of their forests.

WHAT WERE THE LONG-TERM RESULTS?

Baan Muang Chum has developed a strong community which now uses participation as a tool in both resource management and other development aspects. Ecosystem restoration and improved resources conditions showed Baan Muang Chum the importance of participation in sustainable natural resource management. The collective action of the people increased fish species and populations, wildlife, food fodder in the wetlands and herb growth also increased (information from the participatory research between community and PDF on food security in wetland in 2006). Participation and collaboration resulted in the establishment of the CF management committee and mechanisms for participatory management of the community forest.

CF management committee

The CF management committee, responsible for conservation purpose, was established in 2001, after CKCG started their work in Baan Muang Chum. The committee currently comprises of 15 members. The key roles of the committee include conserving and managing communal resources including fish sanctuaries, wetlands and Doi Yao Forest through patrolling, forest fire protection, resource surveys and enforcement of CF rules and regulations. They are also responsible for the tree ordination ceremony, longevity ritual of the river, sharing information within the community and to visitors who come to learn from Baan Muang Chum.

The community worked with the Chiang Rai Forest Resource Management Office to survey the vast area of Doi Yao Forest. Community leaders made use of the activity to increase more participation by establishing two groups of

committees; a committee for wetlands and a committee for Doi Yao Forest, with 10 members in each group with some members retaining roles for both areas. The committee for Doi Yao Forest works with forest officials to patrol. Other community members contribute through the decision making, which ensures more participation in forest management.

Regular village meetings and meeting records

The village committee meetings started after the first election of village head and village committee. The village committee meets monthly and the dates are set based on the existing situation and communication needs. The meetings operate based on two-way communication with the village committee sharing information with the villagers and then allowing them to discuss concerns. Issues can be raised by the villagers through the village committee or village head while the committee from each unit discusses and makes an agenda one day prior to the meeting. The village committee or village head then organizes a pre-village meeting and makes a decision, which is publicly shared. If any significant issues need community agreement or approval, the committee organizes a village public forum, which includes males and females as well as landless people. Every meeting is recorded and the minutes are signed by village committee members who attend the meetings. The minute books are stored as evidence of community agreements and a source to refer back to especially to review rules and regulations. The books can be reviewed at any time and record draft rules and regulations before formal decisions are declared. The villagers can refer to the rules and regulations written there, functioning as a community constitution.

Participatory mechanism, the village public forum for formulation of rules and regulations

Regarding rules and regulations that require community decisions, the villagers are involved in the decision making through a village public forum. The village committee first shares information that a forum will take place, then gives villagers time to consult within their own groups. Further consultation takes place in the village committee meeting where a date for the public forum is decided. The village head then calls everyone in the community to attend the forum and facilitates the discussions. At the end of the forum there is a vote by hand. However, after a majority is reached, before making the final decision, the village committee allows additional responses. The minority is encouraged to share their opinions, which are sometimes used to improve decisions following further majority acceptance.

WHAT WERE THE EQUITY LESSONS LEARNED?

The case from Baan Muang Chum is a strong example of the development of a participatory process in forest management. During the process, facilitation and support from both governmental and NGOs demonstrated their importance for enhanced and strengthened community capacity. The participatory mechanisms allowed equitable management of resources, inclusion of different groups of beneficiaries' voices and needs and preservation of natural resources as well as communal rights.

The participatory process in the community was designed to allow meaningful participation of everyone in decision making, including the poor, and landless, and both males and females. The process ensures equitable procedures in benefit sharing, access to resources, acceptance of diverse perspectives and respect of decisions collectively made.

For more information on the case study: KRITSANARANGSAN, Sureerat & THAWORN, Rawee (2015), "Baan Muang Chum Equity Case Study", c/o RECOFTC - The Center for People and Forests

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