



Integration of community forest management and development activities: Lessons learned from Ubon Ratchathani province



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ABSTRACT

Community forest is expected to be a tool for improving the quality of life of people living in the forest. However, the integration of community forest with the development activities for sustainability has not been investigated. This study analyzed the integration between community forest and community development toward sustainability using a case study involving Ban Donmu and Ban Chard, Ubon Ratchathani province. This qualitative research used observation and in-depth interviews with 22 key informants consisting of 2 forest officers, 4 community leaders, 6 forest community committee, 3 non-government organization workers, 2 scientists, and 5 forest community users. Snowball sampling was used to select persons for interviewing, followed by content analysis and synthesis. The results showed that the communities performed strongly in forest management, based on community tradition and culture, and a kinship system integrated with academic knowledge and local wisdom. A learning process through community-based research contributed to the integration of holistic community development activities fitting to the community's way-of-life and needs. Learning centers were established for sharing knowledge. Grouping and participation were developed based on community democracy. A conservation concept was implanted in youths through activities, and leaders acted as good role models on how to live. The communities received support from outside agencies, screened by the community forum. The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and Buddhist doctrines have been followed in development and lifestyle activities, resulting in changing practices and ways of thinking to those that agreed and balanced with the social and cultural context.

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Introduction

Forest is a renewable natural resource and can be a common resource. Ostrom (1990) concluded that the resource users can commonly look after and manage and use the common resource efficiently under proper

regulations for sustainable land use. The factors underlining the successful common use of community resource from studies in many countries identified by Poteete and Ostrom (2004) were receiving common benefits and relying on the natural resource for community livelihood. This could occur through the community itself or with support from an outside agency.

In Thailand, community forest is legally defined as forest or other forms of land use under the Community Forest

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Projects approved by the Royal Forestry Department according to the designated guidelines, with management by community participation under the relevant Forest Acts, for conservation and sustainable benefit of the community (Office of Community Forest Management and Royal Forestry Department, 2011). Community forest covers 3,993,341 rai (1 ha = 6.25 rai) and the Northeastern region has the highest number of community forest projects with 4,070 projects involving 4,546 villages. Community forest is a form of forest management that allows local people participation in management together with the Royal Forestry Department, focusing on land use with sustainable forest resource management. However, such issues as “forest for society”, “forest community's role in the quality of life of the people using the forest” and “forest management that is human management” have not been adequately discussed (Ramitanan, 1985). This involves mind elevation and changing behavior from looking at one's own benefit to cooperating in conserving resource for the common interest. The regulations controlling the behavior of people and the incentives offered have not been effective enough to control and guarantee the sustainability of community forest land use.

Community forest management as a tool for improving people's quality of life to be capable of living together with the forest on an interdependent basis, by applying the approach of sustainability and the Sufficiency Economy as a conceptual framework have been set down in National Economic and Social Plans—from the 8th plan (1987–2001) to the present 11th plan (2012–2016). However, the application of the Sufficiency Economy has been mostly limited to the agricultural sector. There has been an attempt by an academic group to design indices for the application of the Sufficiency Economy in natural resource and environmental management at the community level to further extend the ideas and practices.

Ban Donmu and Ban Chard in Ubon Ratchathani Province are communities practicing strong community forest management that were selected by the government agency as learning centers of community development under the Sufficiency Economy and natural resource conservation. The communities are well known and widely accepted at both the provincial and national levels. This study aimed to explore successful community forest management that had been linked and integrated with other aspects of community development in order to elaborate and document the lessons learned and to apply the knowledge to other communities.

The objectives of the study were to investigate the existing integration process of community forest management with community development and to analyze the integration process of community forest management towards sustainability.

Methodology

The method used in this study was qualitative research based on a case study of the two communities of Ban Don Mu, tambon Kampia, Trakarnpuetpol district and Ban Chard, tambon Namtaeng, Srimuangmai district, both in Ubon Ratchathani province. The data were collected from

relevant documents, observations, and in-depth interviewing of the 22 key informants consisting of 2 forestry officers, 4 community leaders, 6 members of forest community committees, 3 non-government organization workers, 2 social scientists working at the study sites, and 5 community members using the community forest. Snowball sampling-purposive sampling was used, linking from one person to another. The research was carried out over 18 months from November 2011 to April 2013. The data were analyzed using content analysis and accuracy checks were made with relevant people until a common conclusion was achieved, followed by synthesis by describing the contextual relationship linkages.

The study sites were selected based on the following criteria: 1) each community was legally approved, and 2) each community had experience with situations or operations that had required solving natural resource deterioration by organizing a group to look after and regenerate the natural resource based on the research assumption that the community had potential in development and for changes at the individual level—development from the inside to the outside.

Results

Community Context

Ban Chard, tambon Namtaeng, Srimuangmai district, Ubon Ratchathani province is an over-100-year-old agricultural community, covering 6,446 rai, of which 3,000 rai is agricultural land and consisting of 161 households with a population of 844. Ban Don Mu, tambon Kampia, Trakarnpuetpol district, Ubon Ratchathani province dates back over 200 years, occupying 3,540 rai, of which 2903 rai is agricultural land and is also an agricultural community of 835 people in 166 households.

Both communities were old communities, possessing strong traditions and culture with a kinship system, following the E-sarn (Northeastern) rural society simple way of life, but having also modernization from its industrial economy.

Community Forest Management Context

The Ban Chard community forest is located 3 km from the village and covers 2,408 rai of deciduous dipterocarp forest type, which is currently under rehabilitation. The villagers cooperate in caring for the community forest which is used both directly and indirectly. Ban Chard community forest management is unique due to the role of females and its being the learning center for other communities regarding sustainable forest use and family forest tree planting along farm bunds or boundaries to reduce the pressure on using natural forest.

The Ban Donmu community forest is also a deciduous dipterocarp forest that is being rehabilitated with the cooperation of community forest care. The forest occupies three parcels totaling 626 rai. The Donmu community involvement in forests includes establishing a community forest committee to control the community members who must follow the regulations commonly designated for

forest use and care. The community's direct uses of the forest were as a food source, for gathering herbs, and for wood products; the indirect uses were as a learning center for children, youths and others on natural resource conservation. Ban Donmu has unique aspects with organic agriculture, a financial institution and the application of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in community development.

The strength of community forest management is that it has been integrated and linked to the development of other aspects such as economic, social and environmental aspects under the approach of the Sufficiency Economy. There has been support from outside agencies in budgeting and the learning process. Community knowledge, including the community forest management of the two communities, has involved the integration of local wisdom and academic knowledge.

Integration of Community Forest Management and Community Development

From the study, the integration of community forest management and community development was described in three phases as follows.

Phase 1: problem realization and solution finding (2000–2003) by unifying the community power and seeking collaboration from related outside agencies. In the past, both communities had fertile natural resources. As the population increased, the need for natural resources increased, thus reducing both the quantity and quality of the remaining natural resources. The ecosystem became unbalanced and drought occurred. Moreover, the people from outside entered the area to compete with the community for natural resources. To address these problems, the leaders and some community members searched for solutions with suggestions from forest officers and non-government organization workers.

Phase 2: establishing the community forest (2003–2005). When the community members realized the value of the forest resources, they became unified to establish the community forest committee to create rules for the use and care of the community forest, setting activities to restore forest resources, delineating the forest boundary and classifying the forest area into "forest for general use" and "conserved forest", not allowing any forest use so that the forest could recover naturally, planting additional trees, making fire break zones, and holding networking activities to promote the community learning process. When the forest land use and care regulations were effective, the deteriorated forest became rehabilitated and fertile. Balance in the ecosystem returned, benefiting the community members that had cooperated through community forest management.

Phase 3: extending to sustainability (2005–present). When the community appreciated these community forest values and received benefit from cooperation, more activities were then extended to other aspects of development that fitted their requirements for career improvement, the recovery of traditional wisdom and culture. This was linked to development levels of both materials and the mind to a

holistic community development approach following the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy.

The evaluation of the activities in the two communities using indices that applied the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy for natural resource management at the community level (Sathirathai, 2011), revealed that there existed all three degrees or levels of the Sufficiency Economy (covering, understanding, and accessing) and that these were contributing to the problem solution approaches concerning conservation and human development at all three levels. According to Promkunaporn (2011), the levels of behavior, mind, and wisdom are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Application of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in natural resource management at community level^a

Sufficiency economy level	Activities of application corresponding to the indices
Covering level—community practices solving problems by creating immunity; the level that improves human behaviors by creating rules and restoring tradition and accustomed behaviors that supporting peaceful common living.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community activity of conservation and rehabilitation of natural resource and cooperation in community forest establishment. Establishing rules for the use and care of natural resources in the community forest. Human resource development and networking, training and recursion supported by forestry officers, NGO workers, and academic institutes. Creating the realization of natural resource conservation among the members, using community participatory and democracy processes through the village meeting forum. Application of innovations and local wisdom, integration of academic knowledge and local wisdom for community forest use and care. Doing holistic practices considering the harmony between natural resource conservation and improving the quality of life of the community members. Realizing the capability of ecosystem balancing, reflected from making rules for forest uses and the methods used in harvesting optimum forest products to allow product availability in the following seasons. Adjustment of the way of life to fit with nature; sustainable consumption, concern for long term benefits and able to transfer knowledge to others.
Understanding level—a way of thinking based on moderation and knowledge, carefulness, consciousness; the mind state that perceives the values of doing or the punishment of not doing, creating responsibility, morality, and mercy.	
Wisdom level—a way of life emerging from reasonable and morality-based practices and ways of thinking. The level of intellect or wisdom, clarified by one's wisdom, stable changes of behavior and mind, being united and in harmony with the way of life and being a good role model for the others.	

^a Information obtained from surveying during 2011–2013

The results of the integration of community forest management with community development in different aspects of Ban Chard and Ban Donmu showed that the communities had holistic development, integrating and linking economic, social, and environmental dimensions based on sustainable development, emphasizing the balance of the living system and living together with nature interdependently. Furthermore, the communities had conducted activities creating conservation consciousness for children and youths (Table 2).

Mechanisms, Principles, Process and Tools of Integrated Sustainable Community Development

The analysis of the integration of the community development of Ban Chard and Ban Donmu communities clarified the understanding of the community development factors as mechanisms, principles, processes and tools.

The driving mechanism inside the community comprised: 1) community leaders with morality who

worked hard and continuously sacrificed, being a good villager model; 2) community members cooperated and conducted activities voluntarily; and 3) the village committee, community forest committee, and representatives from different clusters in the village shared and distributed responsibility according to the knowledge and ability of the community member's needs, carrying on development activities with flexible adaptation based on any changing situation from outside.

The support mechanisms from outside the community consisted of: 1) budget support for activities by government agencies so that the communities had a screening system and bargaining with other agencies to serve the members' requirement and common interest through public hearings in a village meeting forum; 2) supporting the community set up the learning process through community research funded by the Thailand Research Fund, Community-based Research Division by selecting a village to conduct community-based research to record the obtained information for supporting decision making in community development; and 3) supporting and coordinating to enhance sharing of the learned lessons through study tours, establishing a learning center for the community members and to help other communities establish a learning network.

The principles used by the community were: 1) applying the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy to be the common vision and target of the community so that it could be recognized as a Sufficiency Economy village; 2) applying Buddhist doctrines and practices based on tradition and culture fitting to the way of life and activities, obeying the five precepts and avoiding all vices; 3) self-reliance as an ideology to strengthen the way of life in the community, diminishing the patronage system and seeking advantage from outsiders; 4) sustainable development through a holistic linkage of activities; and 5) community democracy through listening to members of the community through the village community meeting forum.

The different processes conducted by the communities were: 1) the community participatory process from the perception and realization of community problem, helping together to find the solution, sharing opinions, practices, enrolling in activities and gaining the benefits, creating recognition of common property, arranging activities according to the needs, and conducting the activities prioritized for children and youths in order to transmit the knowledge and successful implementation of these concepts to future generations; 2) the community learning process, through practicing and establishing the learning center for forum sharing among members within the communities and across visiting communities, contributing to a learning network; in addition, the community was able to learn participatory research procedures with scientists or technocrats, allowing systematic data collection and data analysis for decision making; 3) the vigorous use of the grouping process, with grouping used for continuous activities based on voluntary participation of the members with flexibility agreement with the community way of life and using relative relations as strengthening factors; and 4) the integration process, with the way

Table 2
Integration activities of community forest management with the community development of Ban Chard and Ban Donmu communities^a

Activity	Ban Chard	Ban Donmu
Economic aspect	Promotion of careers that decreased pressure on forest uses: mushroom production, bamboo shoot preservation, natural-dyed cloth weaving.	Promotion of careers that decreased pressure on forest uses: mushroom production group, organizing various career groups with fertilizer production and organic agriculture.
Social aspect	Spiritual ceremony as traditionally paying respect to forest spirits.	Spiritual ceremony as traditionally paying respect to forest spirits; setting up monk resident to be spiritual center in the community forest.
Environment aspect	Planting trees on important days, making local dams to retard water flow and increase moisture in the forest.	Planting trees on important days, forbidding putting garbage in the forest area, promoting organic agriculture, reducing chemicals in rice farming, keeping ecosystems balanced.
Learning through community research	Conducting research entitled "Sustainable Forest Use".	Conducting organic agriculture research.
Extending from community research	Promoting energy-saving stove to increase efficiency of firewood use, forest community study center.	Farmer school, Sufficiency Economy Learning Center and community bank.
Conservation and consciousness building for children and youths	Coordination with school setting up local curriculum of herbs and Sufficiency Economy.	Protection through "Forest as Children Know", using school area as plant nursery, tree bank managed by the students.

^a Information obtained from surveying during 2011–2013

of life and changing ideas to consider holistic life-balancing relationship systems.

The tools that the communities used for the integration process consisted of: 1) groups—organization or activity groups, such as the mushroom production group, organic agriculture (Table 2); 2) rules—clear and simple disciplines that were able to be practiced. The comments received during the study showed that there was high trust inside the communities; the rules or regulations were not complicated and there were senior people or leaders managing reconciliation when conflict occurred in the community; 3) a clear development approach or community master plan; 4) kinship system; 5) community tradition and culture; 6) morality and ethics system; and 7) community data system for decision support systems—the community learned how to collect data systematically through the community research process.

Conclusion and Discussion

Community Forest Management Process

Community forest is a type of forest land use that includes people participation in management and is a tool for improving the quality of life of the community in a forest area. The case study in Ubon Ratchathani province showed that the communities were vigorous and had potential in managing community forest under the laws and regulations designated by the government. The communities were able to integrate the community forest with the community development of other aspects to conform with local traditions and culture. Community forest management had been adjusted according to changing circumstances from outside the community impacting the community, and was consistent with Ganjanapan (2011) who insisted that conservation and development could be done synchronously under the context of management using a complex pattern and not just as a single aspect of either conservation or extreme development.

Integration Process from Community Forest to Sustainable Development

Ban Donmu community adopted and applied the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in community development in its actual practices and this was accepted by the government and private agencies. There were Sufficiency Economy Learning Centers for transferring and sharing experiences with other communities. The community conducted holistic development and the integration of economic, social and environmental aspects in accordance with a sustainable development approach contributing to behavior change. Changes in the way of thinking impacted the mind system, and practice showed consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of what was done or was not done. The intellectual development affected changes of habits to become the way of life and fitting to nature, resulting in sustainability and changes from the inside to outside at the individual level. This in turn resulted in society contributing to support institutional mechanisms determined by the rules of common living. This agreed

with Piampongsan (2011), who explained development through applying sustainable wisdom based on Buddhism, covering every aspect of the ecosystem, economy, society, and culture, as well as the world, life and spirit.

The process included working with outside persons or agencies, on the basis of sincere friendship, and having mentors stimulating the activities of the learning process in the community. However, the community needed to have an ideology or concept of self-reliance so that they were not always expecting assistance in the long run, which agreed with self-management of the community based on the self-reliance ideology of Puang-ngam (2010). Any salutary announcement or reward for various group activities provided reinforcement to the community in addition to financial support.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

The Royal Forestry Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment should integrate works with community development agencies to use community forest as a tool in developing the community's quality of life, allowing the community to live sustainably with the forest under principles insisting that conservation and development can occur together at the same time, with the forest receiving care and being used sustainably, so that the people have improved quality of life and their minds are elevated.

Suggestions to the Community

For sustainable integrated community development, there should be an investigation of the community context to develop a common understanding of community problems and prospects. Activities managing common resources can be used to drive other community development activities under the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. The community should also allow the proper outside agencies from civil society to participate in monitoring and evaluating the community development to strengthen the community in order to cope with any rapid socio-economic changes.

Recommendations for Future Research

Community management of the forest in the conservation zone that is not registered as community forest should be studied to cover the different integration patterns of community forest with the sustainable development of other aspects.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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