

International Conference Highlights

Role of Agroforestry in Upland Development

Lives and landscapes in the uplands of Southeast Asia are being rapidly transformed by profound societal changes in perspectives and emerging global environmental issues, the evolving demands of society on forestry and agroforestry and new actors and institutional arrangements in governance and policy. This was the subject of debate for 130 scientists, educators and practitioners at a 3-day International Agroforestry Education Conference on 24-26 October 2007 in Chiang Mai, Thailand to examine the transformations and identify ways to better develop the uplands through agroforestry.

With the theme “Integrating Conservation in the Upland Agriculture in Southeast Asia,” the conference covered three main sessions, namely: 1) Striking a balance between food security and environmental conservation in the uplands; 2) Making more sense of past and present upland development programs and policies; and 3) Redefining the niche of learning institutions in agroforestry education for upland development. Invited keynote speakers expounded on each of the sessions while 37 participants shared project experiences through oral (16) and poster (21) presentations.

The Conference revealed that upland stakeholders in the region have different perspectives on balancing food security and environmental conservation. For some, the route of market-based intensification of vegetables and flowers for export have worked and provided an alternative to unsustainable shifting cultivation. In other contexts, intensified rice production can still play this role. For others, the complex agroforests have provided a long-term approach that still allows response to changing market environment. Ecotourism, empowerment of minority groups and re-appraisal of indigenous knowledge in conservation are a major influence in the more accessible parts of montane mainland Southeast Asia. Market oriented livelihoods change leads to social stratification depending on comfort level with risk, access to suitable land and transportation. The ‘rights and resources’ issue provides an underpinning for effective lowland – upland linkage, benefit sharing, co-investment and reward mechanisms.

The Conference also noted that development and policy problems in the uplands reflect the needs to (a) challenge knowledge uncertainties, myths, & overly simplistic perceptions; (b) expand sustainability focus from ecology to social & economic dimensions; (c) understand households & communities as managers of asset portfolios; (d) accept & understand diverse interests & needs of local stakeholder groups; (e) address institutional challenges for co-management & stakeholder alliances; and (f) understand processes at different levels/scales & interactions among them. It also highlighted the importance of using scientific tools and approaches beyond agriculture and forestry (e.g., psychology, economics, geography, anthropology, landscape ecology, political science, regional planning, etc.) to investigate local perceptions and decision-making in policy development, and building strategic alliances among stakeholders.

As regards the niche for agroforestry education, the Conference surfaced several basic questions. Why are there few learning institutions in the SEA region that offer programs in agroforestry? Why is agroforestry education generally assumed to fall within the forestry discipline? Is there really a demand for agroforesters? If so, who needs them? With the scope of agroforestry expanding due to the emerging social, economic, and environmental concerns, what are its boundaries? What should really constitute agroforestry as a science? In the absence of a globally accepted typology of agroforestry land uses, spatial data on AF is still weak and more empirical data are needed to critically assess the general romanticising about the potential benefits of AF and trees.

In four working group sessions, participants considered the relations between agroforestry and identified four important policy concerns: market-based economic development, poverty, climate change and environmental services, and decentralization/ governance. In all four areas, agroforestry was considered as being potentially relevant, at farm, landscape and governance scale, respectively. Knowledge gaps, uncertainties and controversies in each of these four relations should stimulate relevant research – which will require disciplinary strengths and tools that go much beyond what has been so far the focus of agroforestry education. A substantial broadening of the approach is thus called for. SEANAFE and other educational networks are critical to create the needed synergy among the academe, government and private sectors towards promoting agroforestry in the uplands.

The conference was sponsored by the Sweden International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). It was jointly organized by the World Agroforestry Centre- SEA, the Southeast Asian Network for Agroforestry Education (SEANAFE), Chiang Mai University (CMU) and the DFG Uplands Program.