

GMS Forest Policy Brief 05

Training and education

National and international focus on forests and forestry has grown rapidly. Many new factors are coming into play and increased understanding of forest-related processes and how to manage them for the greatest benefit is required. Improved performance at all levels will be necessary and it is possible that by the time the international focus generates major implications, a protracted period of institutional strengthening and training will be required for implementation to be realized.

Education is necessary both to address human resource limitations in forestry and to increase awareness among the general public of forests and forestry. The long time scales over which national-level changes in forests and forestry occur strongly suggest that education in relation to the values of forests and the opportunities and challenges faced should be a key focus in the GMS. The current scarcity of skilled human resources in several countries points to a clear need to improve tertiary education in forestry, while there is also evident need to strengthen education in a general sense and to increase awareness in relation to forests and natural resources.

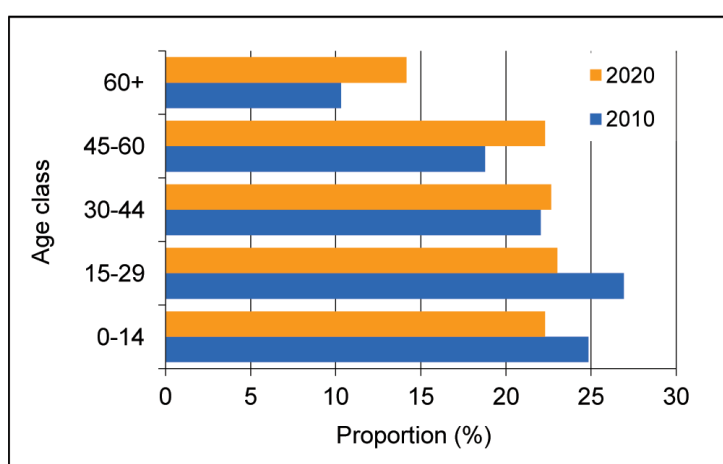


Figure 1. Age distribution in the GMS, 2010 and 2020

The Subregion's growing population and skew towards younger generations place significant emphasis on the need for improved education and awareness. Currently, 55% of the population in the GMS is under 30 years of age (Fig. 1). By 2020, this group will acquire huge purchasing power while increasingly taking responsibility for steering the Subregion's institutions. Without an 'environmentally smarter' next generation of consumers and decision-makers, it is likely that environmentally sustainable practices will remain outside the mainstream and resources will be irretrievably eroded. More immediately, the lack of human resource capacity in forestry and increasing complexity of forest management, including especially linkages with climate change, imply that high quality education and training should be made available to those working in forestry and related disciplines at local, provincial and national levels.

Currently, institutional capacity within the forestry sector is scarce in several countries in the Subregion. At the national level there are often only a handful of people with a comprehensive understanding of state of the art in forestry and although national and international NGOs provide vital support in several countries, in others the potential of civil society remains largely unrealised in forest management.

At the field-level, severe skill deficits exist in relation to forest management. Knowledge of techniques for community engagement, reduced impact logging, fire management, forest mensuration, afforestation/reforestation, assisted natural regeneration and many other areas is often lacking. Among those fully or partially dependent on forests, understanding of formal forest policies and legislation and of local level rights and responsibilities is often almost non-existent and, as such, forest policy implementation is often lacking. More generally, topics such as the natural environment and natural resources are often not well covered in the curricula taught in the majority of schools and urban children may leave school without ever having visited a forest.



At the policy and strategic planning level constraints in forestry often stem from poor identification of policy issues, poor policy formulation and inadequate support for implementation. Technical solutions are rarely lacking and yet the environmental, social and economic contributions of forestry remain deficient in many GMS countries. Forestry professionals' abilities to evaluate economic, environmental and social aspects of forest policy; to effectively communicate findings and opportunities; to formulate proposals and policy papers; and to oversee policy implementation and evaluation often need upgrading. Analytical and communication skills and in-depth understanding of the multiple issues that make forestry a uniquely challenging area for effective policy making are needed.

Different approaches are needed at different levels and formal forestry education at the tertiary level need only form part of it. Indeed, forestry professionals do not necessarily need to come from backgrounds in forestry if in possession of the basic skills and qualities needed to advance forestry. Older generations of forestry professionals may be bound by the strictures of more traditional societies where educating newcomers more willing to engage in political confrontation may offer promise.

The way forward

The weak implementation of forest policy in several countries in the Subregion suggests that education is particularly important in relation to the policy process. Without an understanding of the means by which stakeholders can be consulted and then mobilised to tackle complex problems, it is almost certain that forest policy will continue to exist in document form only. Too often, local level stakeholders are completely unaware of the aims of forest policy and their rights and responsibilities. Heavily centralised processes and command and control approaches are no longer tenable and efforts need to be made to re-educate forestry officials to enable them to adapt to new roles (**Box 1**).

A first step along the path towards institutional strengthening might be an institutional "skills audit" to compare current skills to necessary skills. External assistance to assist upskilling is likely to be necessary and many organizations are becoming more involved with training in forestry and development. Within institutions there is, however, also a need to promote learning cultures, and to provide mechanisms to transfer skills in addition to providing external training. In implementing education and training activities, different methods will be appropriate at different levels and may range from training of trainers, as part of a cascading approach, to individual scholarships for highly skilled positions.

Another key area for educational improvement in relation to forests and forestry is in schools. Creating respect for the natural world and understanding of the multiple benefits that forests offer – from biodiversity protection to timber production – will be vital for the future management of the Subregion's natural resources. Environmental education is equally important for urbanites as well as rural people. Without a basic understanding of natural resource issues, growing disparities between urban and rural areas, in terms of both wealth and understanding, may divide opinion and threaten the unity and inclusiveness of approaches to national development. An important way to introduce young people to forests is through formation of nature groups, visits to forest areas and involvement in activities such as tree planting, which instil a better understanding of the component processes behind forest ecosystem functioning.

Box 1. The FAO Forest Policy Short Course

Constraints in forestry often stem from poor identification of policy issues, poor policy formulation and inadequate support for implementation. The FAO Forest Policy Short Course aims to upgrade forestry professionals' abilities to evaluate economic, environmental and social aspects of forest policy; to effectively communicate findings and opportunities; to formulate proposals and policy papers; and to oversee policy implementation and evaluation.



References

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