



Religion, Forest, and REDD+

Raising awareness is an essential aspect of getting ready for REDD+. In several countries in Asia-Pacific, religious leaders play an active role in raising rural communities' awareness about forest protection and REDD+, for example:

- In Cambodia, the Monk's Community Forest Association has raised awareness at the community level in Oddar Meanchey on the Community Forestry REDD+ Project that was initiated in 2008.
- In Thailand and Myanmar, religious leaders have been active in forest conservation. In Thailand "ecology monks" have been conducting tree ordination activities since the late 1980s, and the Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches in Chin State, Myanmar.
- Near the border with Myanmar, Christian and Buddhist groups in Mae Hong Son, Thailand, held a tree ordination ceremony and set up rules to protect their forests in January 2013.
- In Jakarta, Indonesia, the leaders of Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist organizations came together for the event "The Role of Religious Leaders in Reducing the Impacts of Climate Change", organized by the UN-REDD Indonesia Programme in 2011, and signed a declaration stating their commitment to support efforts to reduce GHG emissions.

The relationships between human beings and nature are illustrated in many religions and indigenous traditions. Spiritual ties to forests have long been nurtured, and ecological values and sustainability well acknowledged as people rely on forests for their livelihoods and identities.

Concerns about the impacts of economic activities on the environment and climate change are not only raised by scientists, but also by religious leaders. Poor and marginalized communities that are dependent on forest resources, are affected most by the negative impacts of climate change, but lack access to information and knowledge. In some rural communities, religious leaders are filling this gap by actively raising awareness and leading forest conservation efforts.

The UN-REDD Programme recognizes the multiple benefits REDD+ presents beyond carbon offsets: ecosystem services such as water regulation, soil protection, and biodiversity, as well as cultural and spiritual values. It supports efforts not only to increase access to information, but also for the information to be prepared and delivered in a manner most suitable to its intended audience. As depicted in this brief, religious leaders can play a unique role of intersecting science with religion. Consultation through existing processes, organizations and institutions, including religious organizations, are strongly encouraged.

THE UN-REDD PROGRAMME

The UN-REDD Programme is the United Nations Collaborative Initiative on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD). It builds on the convening role and technical expertise of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Programme supports developing countries prepare and implement national REDD+ strategies.

Lesson 1. Religious leaders are among the early community organizers who initiated collective efforts on forest conservation, long before the role of forests in climate change mitigation was acknowledged. Historically, religious leaders may hold the longest track record in promoting forest conservation in Asia-Pacific. The principles of forest conservation are supported in religious beliefs, leading to some of today's notable community forestry practices. In some communities, religious leaders play an important role in many aspects of governance, such as conflict management. It is important to acknowledge the role of local religious leaders when working with a community.

Lesson 2: Religious leaders are more influential in the communities where they are based—importance of a “rural presence”. Religious leaders are usually more effective as grassroots awareness raisers with long-term residents in a community with very little migration in the area. Such communities tend to have a closer tie to the forests and thus a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for their forests. Community leaders can be trained to raise awareness where there is no local religious leaders. For instance, in Myanmar, an interfaith program in Kayar State organizes awareness raising workshops for community leaders on a regular basis.

Lesson 3: Educate rather than prosecute. In communities with a strong religious leader's presence, their members are more respectful of their leaders, who are seen to carry moral and spiritual authority. As such enforcement of forest conservation is typically conducted through monitoring, education and awareness raising. In Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia, monks are actively monitoring their community forest. When they encounter offenders, the monks explain to them that the forest is protected. Although there have been few repeat offenders, the monks' enforcement power is often

dependent on outside support and coordination with local authorities, especially when dealing with the military and other powerful interests involved in land clearing and illegal logging.

Lesson 4. Religious leaders and networks can create opportunities for multi-stakeholder consultations by reaching out to other communities across countries and religions. Some religious leaders are very active in mobilizing resources and networking with others including religious organizations, NGOs and governments. They also actively participate in climate change workshops where they meet other stakeholders from inside and outside of the country. In Mae Hong Son, Thailand, Christian Shan refugees from Myanmar and Thai Buddhist residents are working together to protect their forests, guided by their respective village heads and religious leaders, despite their differences in religion and ethnicity. They conducted a tree ordination ceremony, followed by a discussion on the importance of forests for their livelihoods. As a result, codes of conduct were developed, which are monitored by volunteer forest patrols. However, coordination with government agencies remains a challenge in many cases.

Lesson 5: Strong emphasis on multiple benefits of REDD+ can help and connect with religious leaders, and raise awareness of broader communities. The main challenge in raising awareness for REDD+ is its complexity (i.e. carbon) and uncertainty (i.e. the incomplete negotiation process). However, benefits of REDD+ such as biodiversity conservation are shared values among religious, indigenous, and forest-dependent communities. In communicating REDD+ to local communities and working together with religious leaders, focusing on benefits beyond carbon and conservation can have an immediate and strong appeal to communities.



Photos by Monks Community Forest (left), Naw Ei Ei Min (two in the middle) and RECOFTC Thailand (right)

For more information, please visit www.UN-REDD.org or contact:

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