

**SNATCHING SUCCESS FROM THE JAWS OF FAILURE**  
**Asia-Pacific Forest Policy Think Tank**  
**Expert Consultation on Learning from Past Forestry and Natural Resource Interventions**  
**The Heritage Hotel Manila, Philippines**  
**7-8 December 2016**

**SUMMARY**

FAO recently hosted a two-day expert consultation<sup>1</sup> in collaboration with Environmental Science for Social Change (ESSC) on past forestry and natural resource management interventions that were perceived as failures. A key objective of the workshop was to draw important lessons from “failures” that can be shared especially with the next generation of decision-makers and practitioners. Thirteen of the 20 participants have had long years of work experience (30-40 years) while the rest were young professionals, to encourage inter-generational exchange. Participants candidly and openly shared their insights on the topic.

The workshop was opened by Jose Luis Fernandez (FAO Representative in the Philippines) and Sylvia Micalat (Executive Director of Environmental Science for Social Change), representing the co-organizing institutions. Twelve presentations from resource persons were grouped into four sessions: (i) aspects of international initiatives; (ii) lessons for forests and natural resource management; (iii) lessons relating to people and natural resources; and (iv) other lessons. The workshop concluded with a fifth session on output planning.

Session 1 featured two cases on unexpected outcomes from strategic planning exercises, one at the regional level (ITTO Target 2000) and the other at the national level (Indonesia REDD+ Strategy). In Session 2, three resource persons shared project case studies from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Tajikistan and Vietnam. Session 3 included four presentations that focused on unexpected outcomes of implementing forestry interventions within the broader socio-political landscapes of China, India and Philippines. Session 4 touched on cases related to youth-driven biodiversity conservation in China, soil and water conservation in Thailand, and forest law enforcement and governance in Cambodia.

Session 5 provided a synthesis of insights and lessons.

Key drivers of failure identified include: (i) inappropriate project design; (ii) misaligned or overambitious scope and scale; (iii) flawed assumptions; (iv) unrealistic timeframes and/or expected outcomes; (v) “money toxicity” (unsustainable “collaboration” or “adoption” of interventions driven by financial influence rather than genuine commitment); (vi) weak implementation capacity; (vii) lack of political commitment or “ownership;” and (viii) changing internal or external environments.

Following are some lessons gleaned from the presentations and discussions:

- Spend adequate time during project design to thoroughly understand the history, context and cultures of institutions and actors to avoid establishing misaligned or inappropriate scope or scale for projects, unrealistic timeframes or unachievable outcomes.
- Forestry and natural resource interventions need long-term (generational) implementation, but they simultaneously need to be designed, managed and monitored in the context of short-term leadership cycles and funding uncertainties.

---

<sup>1</sup> Links to: Concept Note and Agenda and Speakers' Profile

**SNATCHING SUCCESS FROM THE JAWS OF FAILURE**  
**Asia-Pacific Forest Policy Think Tank**  
**Expert Consultation on Learning from Past Forestry and Natural Resource Interventions**  
**The Heritage Hotel Manila, Philippines**  
**7-8 December 2016**

- Desirable to have concrete implementation plans laying out responsibilities and at least short-term funding commitments when goals for international cooperation are agreed; lack of funding and/or political will can sap motivation and interest at all levels.
- While a firm legal basis is required to support ambitious goals, a demand-driven, non-bureaucratic approach that empowers people to act can be even more effective in scaling up initiatives.
- High convergence among government and donor priorities can be achieved by coupling environmental protection and poverty reduction.
- Building social capital through training, extension, community organization, etc. generates long-run returns for people and forests.
- Setting ambitious goals can motivate unintended positive change even if formal goals are never met.
- Data integrity and transparency are crucial in earning trust from international community.
- An inadequate assessment based on a small scale and short time frame might label a project a “failure” even when the project is achieving larger, holistic long-term goals.
- Need to recognise that failure is not unusual; more focus should be given to developing systems and institutions that encourage risk-taking and accommodate learning from failure.
- “Being seen to be doing”: the value of high visibility approaches in taking on difficult issues.
- Value in forming coalitions of partners with different strengths.
- Donors and international community should be willing to take risks in project development and implementation.
- Unsung projects have paved the way to recognize and openly discuss illegal forest activities, which is a significant step from a few decades ago.