Wong, Grace Y.; Stockholm Resilience Centre
grace.wong@su.se
Authors: Wong, Grace Y., Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University; Moeliono, Moira, Center for International Forestry Research; Bong, Indah Waty, Center for International Forestry Research; Brockhaus, Maria, International Forest Policy, Department of Forestry Sciences, University of Helsinki; Pham, Thu Thuy, Center for International Forestry Research; Maharani, Cynthia, Center for International Forestry Research
Title: The (Mis)Interpretations of Equity in Social Forestry in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is currently in a social forestry boom. Indonesia has set a target of 12.7 million hectares (mil ha) of forest to be managed under various formal social forestry schemes by 2019, Vietnam has a target of 4 mil ha by 2020, and Myanmar 919,000 ha by 2030. While there are many definitions, social forestry is generally recognized as a response to colonial and state forestry and commercial timber production. Social forestry aims to empower local communities, meet both local livelihood and forest conservation objectives, while building on customary traditions and local governance structures.

However, social forestry policies and initiatives in the region have distinctly shifted away from these initial aims. The discourses influencing social forestry has shifted from one of devolution of rights and empowerment to one of agrarian reform and rural development, to a reframe of social forestry initiatives within a neoliberal development process and state-led governance structure. Correspondingly, the notions of equity in social forestry are being re-translated from social justice claims for democratic devolution, to redistribution of forest land for the poor, and to equal or fair access to markets.

In the haste to implement the social forestry targets, countries have formulated standardized programs and policies that have tended to ignore understandings of forest history, social differentiation and local users’ own experiences. Policymakers often do not recognize these dynamics and are surprised when the initiatives fail. We argue that an alternative approach to social forestry that considers equity as recognition of the diverse goals of local forest users. Based on policy reviews, interviews and focus group discussions at national and local levels in Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar, we examine how social forestry enables or constrains different groups of forest users to determine which of their needs will be met and how, and their agency to express them in policy decisions. Our focus on equity therefore requires an intersectional analysis of power relations and governance practices that are more adaptive, deliberate and reflexive, particularly in contexts where pervasive power relations do not allow dynamic views.