

Stories of change

2008-2013

RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests

Includes annual report 2012/13



Lao PDR





A family's wealth

An unusual sense of foreboding filled the air one hot summer day in Houaythong village, Lao PDR. Something in the way his wife says, "Take care of the kids," before leaving their house to graze their carabaos gives Don Say a feeling of anxiousness.

A couple of hours pass uneventfully, then suddenly a neighbor bursts into his house, "Come quickly! Your wife had an accident!"

Don Say arrives at the scene of the accident and immediately realizes it's too late - his wife and mother-in-law lie lifeless in a field. He learns they were trapped in a burning rice field and died from smoke inhalation.

Don Say buries his wife, but not their dreams of a secure future for their children. Often, he visits the teak trees that he and his wife planted in 1996 and in 2005. He remembers his wife telling him, "We have three kids to support. Why don't we plant more teak trees on our smaller lot? Remember, you said, 'Teak is our future'."

Because he and his wife consider teak trees as their piggy bank for their children's education, Don Say does his best to keep his family afloat with rice farming, chicken livestock-raising and fishing in the Namtha River. When the situation gets tougher, he relies on the forest for food and medicine. He collects bamboo shoots, vegetables, mushrooms and medicinal plants for subsistence.

Years pass by and things don't get easier. Paying tuition fees for his children is a constant worry. Harvesting his teak trees before they are ready for sale is a constant possibility, but he does his best to sell something else - his cow or carabaos - before resorting to his teak trees.

In early 2012, fate tests him. One of his neighbors tells him a rumor, "Outsiders from the city





“ Teak is our future. ”

are grabbing land – both vacant lots and teak farms!” Don Say says, “This is not right. I already lost my wife, and I can’t allow our dreams to be taken away too.” With his cows and carabaos gone, he gambles his most precious possession: his teak trees.

The next day, Don Say goes to meet a small sawmill shop owner from a nearby village. “I would like to sell some of my teak trees,” Don Say says loudly, above the noise of the saws.

“Okay, let’s go to your plantation,” replies the sawmill owner. He quickly inspects the trees and asks, “How many are you selling?” “Eight,” is Don Say’s quick reply. The sawmill owner inspects the trees again. “Okay, I will buy your eight trees for 12,000 baht (US\$370). Take it or leave it.” Don Say doesn’t have a clue if the price is high or low, and accepts without bargaining. Faster than a bullet, the sound of saws fill the air. Moments later, his trees fall one by one. And each tree that falls makes his heart sink.

A few days later, he buys 600 rubber tree seedlings and plants them in the vacant lot

beside his small teak plantation. He tells his father, “I hope the rubber trees I planted will deter anyone from grabbing my land and my teak trees. I am having sleepless nights because of this land-grabbing rumor.”

“Son, the only way to be sure is to get a government certificate for your plantation,” his father advises him.

In a reversal of fortune, the second half of 2012 brings Don Say good luck. One morning, he hears Mr Humpheng, the village chief, announcing a training on teak plantation certification and management. However, Don Say is reluctant - he fears the government may actually be taking his land and teak trees, or that high fees might be charged for the training. At the dinner table that night, his eldest daughter begs him to join the training and says, “Maybe this is what you have been waiting for. Give it try.”

Still in two minds, Don Say decides to attend the training. He is surprised when he arrives and finds 30 others. Moments later, Mr Ong, the lead trainer, starts the training.



This certificate is not only proof that the trees are yours, you can also use this certificate to get a loan in the future. RECOFTC is working with us to find banks and financing institutions that will make this a reality.



Mr Ong explains, "This training is aimed at helping you better manage your teak plantations. After the training, those who are interested in receiving certificates can register. We will discuss how your certificates can be used as collateral for loans, which means you do not need to sell your young teak trees or cut the mature ones if you need cash." Immediately the room is buzzing, as farmers discuss the information with interest.

During the training, a farmer asks, "Is the certification program free? I heard we need to pay a hefty amount." "The program is free. All you need to do is clean your plantations for inspection," Mr Ong replies. Another farmer asks, "I heard that the government will use the certificate to stop us from cutting or selling our own trees. Is this the purpose of the certificate?" Mr Ong replies with smile, "Absolutely not true. Your certificate is your defense to anyone who might attempt to grab your land or to shortchange you when it's time to sell your teak trees. The government will not use it to restrict you." The crowd seems pleased with the

explanations. At the end of the discussion, Mr Ong calls on the farmers who are interested in the certification program to register. Everyone signs up.

A couple of days later, a government officer interviews Don Say and reminds him to start cleaning his plantations, and to clearly mark the boundaries. He is given an inspection date - 29 September, 2012 - for GPS boundary-marking, teak tree counting and measurement.

While he awaits this date, Don Say builds a bamboo ladder to prune his teak trees, just the way Mr Ong explained. A week after pruning, his teak trees seem to have grown straighter and bigger, but he is not sure whether his eyes are deceiving him. Nonetheless, he is happy he decided to attend the training and became part of the certification program.

Don Say and his father eagerly await the arrival of the inspection team. Finally, Mr Songphet and Mr Khammuan from the Provincial Agriculture

and Forestry Office (PAFO) arrive. They proceed to the plantation sites. Don Say's face brightens up as each of his teak trees is inspected, measured and recorded. He wishes his wife is there with him to witness their 'family wealth' finally being secured from abusive traders and land grabbers.

One month later, Don Say receives the certificate from PAFO indicating the number of trees, volume and estimated value of timber. Mr Songphet explains to Don Say, "This certificate is not only proof that the trees are yours, you can also use this certificate to get a loan in the

future. RECOFTC is working with us to find banks and financing institutions that will make this a reality."

Don Say leaves the PAFO office in Houayxai fulfilled and with the certificates in hand. He feels his journey to secure his teak trees for his children's future is complete. With the possibility of getting loans from banks without sacrificing his trees, he no longer feels worried. Finally, he feels his ownership of his teak trees is secure.



**Story and photography
by Jephraim Oro**

This story is part of RECOFTC's Livelihood Improvement through Generation and Ownership of Forest Information by Local People in Products and Services Markets, or ForInfo Project. The project is being implemented from 2011-2014. It is one of the many activities that RECOFTC undertakes to enhance resource rights for local people, improve forest governance, and achieve fairer share of benefits.

The teak smallholder plantations component aims to help teak farmers to apply sound silvicultural practices and increase the value of their holdings through issuance of ownership certificates recognized by the government and financial institutions, and by securing user rights, improving efficiency and methods in harvesting and transporting of timber, and trading between smallholder and sawmillers using timber volume measurements and plantation inventories.

Ultimately, the project aims to lay the groundwork for a sustainable, efficient and competitive forest-based livelihoods system through the use of innovative approaches and close collaboration between smallholders, forestry officials, sawmill owners, timber traders and credit associations.

From 2011 to 2014, RECOFTC-ForInfo has helped PAFO/DAFO to provide teak ownership/management certificates to more than 100 farmers in Bokeo, Lao PDR. And with the introduction of the 'moveable assets' policy in Lao PDR, RECOFTC-ForInfo team is optimistic that banks and micro-financing institutions will soon agree to accept standing teak trees as collateral for loans.

