Gender, social equality and sustainability certification in Thai smallholder rubber production

Sustainability-certified goods can command premium prices from consumers, meaning that certification could be particularly valuable for smallholders looking to increase incomes. However, research shows that certification schemes can reinforce and even widen existing inequalities in the sector, without careful steps being taken to avoid it.

The certification schemes run by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) are a case in point. FSC certification is recognized in markets around the world. However, implementing schemes aimed at smallholders and addressing structural gender and other inequalities in the sector are proving challenging, especially in the global South. This is despite a pledge to promote “equitable participation in decision-making and the empowerment of workers, Indigenous Peoples, communities, smallholders, women and other under-represented groups” as one of the core values cited in the current FSC strategy.

In 2018 SEI carried out a study of the scale, nature and causes of gender and other social equality issues linked to rubber production and FSC certification in Thailand. Thailand is the world’s largest producer of rubber latex, and an increasingly important exporter of rubberwood. To enter the growing global market for certified forest products, the Thai government has recently pledged to support smallholder rubber farmers – 90% of all the producers in Thailand – in joining the FSC voluntary sustainability certification schemes for latex and rubberwood production.

This scoping study aimed to inform planning of a potential larger study of FSC implementation in the Mekong region, as well as the ongoing drafting of Thailand’s national FSC standards.

The study

This P2CS project investigated barriers and gaps in implementation of FSC schemes in Thailand, looking particularly at the Small and Low-Intensity Managed Forest (SLIMF) scheme, which is designed to make it easier for smallholders to participate by simplifying the certification requirements.

It combined a literature review with 13 field interviews in Hat Yai district, Songkhla province, and key informant interviews with representatives of a rubberwood processing company leading a group certification scheme for smallholders, FSC International, FSC Greater Mekong, the Rubber Authority of Thailand, WWF and academics specialized in agroforestry and rubber. The field interviewees included both female and male smallholder farmers: the owners of both certified and non-certified farms, as well as hired labourers on certified smallholdings.
Key findings

- To date, only 13 FSC certificates have been granted for rubberwood production in Thailand. Although most of these are under the SLIMF scheme, they have not been granted to smallholder-led groups, but instead to local rubber-processing companies supplied by smallholders.

- Our interviews with the company and with farmers supplying rubberwood indicated that while the farmers have gained knowledge and support for sustainable production methods and livelihood diversification, they have received little or no direct economic benefit as a result of the certification. Furthermore, some of them were unaware of the FSC certification – and its potential benefits and entitlements – and assumed that the sustainability requirements came from the company.

- Women were highly active in production, and the number of male and female farmers under the group certificate was roughly even. However, women tended to be excluded from governance (for example in the community’s rubber-selling cooperative) and from trainings, reflecting deep-rooted social norms viewing men as the primary farmers. Furthermore, there were large pay gaps between what are considered “men’s tasks” such as fertilizing and grass cutting and “women’s tasks” such as tapping rubber.

- While the SLIMF scheme aims to reduce the red tape involved in obtaining certification, some smallholders interviewed said that they were unable to obtain certification because they could not present documentary evidence of secure land tenure. For most, this was a result of land reforms in the 1960s and 1970s that demarcated areas as national reserve forest or protected forest, making it difficult to obtain the necessary deeds.

- FSC gender and social standards largely focus on labour rights. However, landless labourers and migrant and seasonal workers frequently lack formal written contracts, making it very difficult for FSC auditors to monitor labour standards on smallholder farms – a situation exacerbated by the reduced documentation requirements under the SLIMF scheme.

If the new Thai national FSC standards are to address gender and social equality issues like these, they will need to move beyond the current focus on labour standards on larger plantations and pay more attention to smallholder farms. The government also needs to find ways to increase smallholder enrollment, particularly ensuring the rights of groups that for various reasons are excluded from the scheme or its benefits. A larger study could help to clarify the current dynamics and obstacles.

Gender and social equality deserve a central place on the global FSC agenda. Efforts to enhance them have mainly been directed at issues such as fair employment conditions for women; less attention paid to systemic issues such as unequal access to certification.

The FSC Policy and Standards committee and national committees could seek to increase its knowledge and capacity on gender and social equality issues in order to ensure that these concerns are properly taken into account in FSC schemes. Additionally, the external auditors who grant FSC certificates would benefit from training in gender and social equality issues to make sure any improved standards are being implemented. The ongoing revision of the FSC’s smallholder-focused schemes also offers good opportunities to address these issues. The findings of this study will be presented to the FSC and to the drafters of the Thai national FSC standards.