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Lessons learned from the ASEAN-Korea green partnership in the restoration and sustainable management of degraded forest ecosystems for the Philippines

Lucrecio Rebugio¹, Woo Shin Lee², Don Koo Lee², Ho Sang Kang³, Leni Camacho¹, Marilyn Combalicer¹, Dixon Gevaña¹, Josefina Dizon⁴, Jessa Ata¹

¹College of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of the Philippines Los Baños, College 4031, Laguna, Philippines – lucrebugio@gmail.com

²College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Seoul National University, Seoul 08826, Republic of Korea

³Institutes of Green-Bio Science and Technology, Seoul National University, Gangwon-do 25354, Republic of Korea

⁴College of Public Affairs and Development, University of the Philippines Los Baños, College 4031, Laguna, Philippines

Abstract

This paper presents the lessons learned from the Republic of Korea financed ASEAN-KOREA Environmental Cooperation Project (AKECOP) about two decades of experience in creative collaboration in research and human resource development in the restoration and sustainable management of degraded forest ecosystems in the ASEAN region. The Philippines and nine other participating ASEAN member states (AMS) have learned valuable lessons from the various innovative collaboration strategies employed by the Project.

Participatory project management was adopted to ensure project relevance, quality, reliability and equitability and maximum impact. Research and development in-country and cross-cultural collaborative modes were tried and found to be effective strategies in enhancing research outputs and in facilitating research process learning experiences. Cross country exchange visits to locally successful restoration sites were found to be effective schemes for information exchange and technology transfer. And needs-oriented short training programs and graduate studies at the MSc and PhD level were effective strategies in building a pool of high-level expertise in forest restoration and SFM. However, the most valuable lesson from the Project's experience in creative collaboration is that SUCCESS in smaller collaborative initiatives such as AKECOP can inspire the creation of larger institutional partnerships such as Asian Forest Cooperation Organization (AFoCO).

As a way forward, the participating AMS have arrived at a consensus that AKECOP should continue to serve as a platform for regional collaboration in SFM considering its notable part achievements. In line with the ASEAN "GREEN VISION" and its journey towards regional integration, AKECOP is envisaged to re-align its innovative strategies to the changing needs and challenges in the sustainable management of a healthy and productive forest ecosystems in a new world order threatened by the scourge of the COVID 19 crisis.

Keywords: creative collaboration, cross-country visits, green vision, participatory planning, shared vision, thematic research

Introduction

AKECOP is the ASEAN-Korea Environmental Cooperation Project. Otherwise known as the ASEAN-Korean Green Partnership, it is a collaborative undertaking between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and 10 ASEAN member states (AMS) in the rehabilitation, restoration, and sustainable management of degraded forests of Southeast (SE) Asia through research, information exchange and institutional development. In January 2000, AKECOP was launched following the first ASEAN–ROK Summit in 1997. It was established to implement

research and educational activities under the theme “Restoration of Degraded Forest Ecosystems in Southeast Asian Tropical Region” with participation from leading research institutions and universities. It is an initiative for environmental collaboration using the ASEAN-ROK Special Cooperation Fund (SCF), which was established in 1990 through a contribution by ROK (Fig. 1).

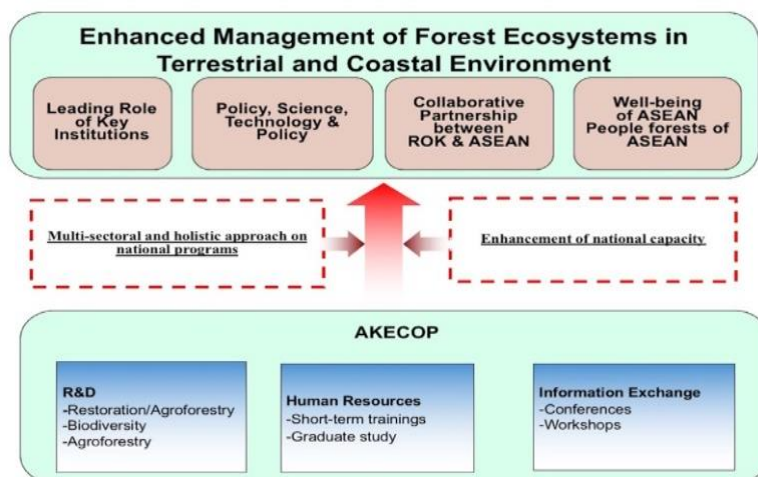


Fig. 1: Schematic diagram of the project goals and strategies

There are two compelling motivations for the creation of AKECOP. One is the need to arrest the worsening forest situation that threatens the integrity of the forest resources to contribute to sustainable economic development and environmental harmony in the region. In most countries, forest areas continued to decrease in the past decade. In addition, the forests have been converted into other land uses, thus altering their structure and composition (Lee and Park 2011 as cited by Rebugio et al. 2015). Although there has been a significant decrease in the rate of forest loss in SE Asia primarily because of the forest area gains in Vietnam and substantial reduction of the forest loss in Indonesia during the last decade (2010–2020) compared to 1990–2000, the sad fact is that the ASEAN region still suffers from a continued pattern of net forest loss until now (FAO 2020). Another compelling factor is the ardent desire of ROK as an internationally acknowledged paragon of successful forest restoration to share its innovative ways in the ASEAN region. As a modern progressive economy, she wants to return the favor of having sourced a steady supply of timber from SE Asian forests that she needed for rapid reconstruction after the Korean war by committing sustained financial support for the badly needed effective program for forest restoration and sustainable forest management (SFM) in the region.

As a platform for ROK-ASEAN forest cooperation, AKECOP has been acknowledged by both Korean and ASEAN authorities as a successful project in terms of its goals and objectives in promoting forest restoration and SFM through research, institutional capacity building, and information exchange. A major factor contributing to its success is the adoption of a strategy of creative collaboration in its major undertakings. As a generally recognized model of regional collaboration on sustainable forest and environmental management, it has inspired the creation of another collaborative endeavor in the same area of sustainable forest and environmental management with similar fundamental goals and basic operational structure and programs but of wider geographical coverage such as the Asian Forest Cooperation Organization (AFoCO).

Scope

This paper focuses on the lessons learned from AKECOP’s experience in collaborative forest restoration and SFM for about two decades.

Objectives

Discuss AKECOP's collaborative structure, strategy, domain and types based on the experiences of participating ROK and AMS institutions and draw significant lessons learned from these collaborative undertakings.

Methodology/Approach

Data or information needed for this paper were mainly obtained from secondary sources. Relevant documents such as official Project documents and memorandum of agreements, integrated project annual reports, individual activity completion reports, and relevant publications on AKECOP implementation were examined. Analysis of the information gathered enables us to discuss the structure, domain, modes, and types of collaboration employed by the Project. We also referred to relevant literature on creative collaboration to get insights on collaborative structure and framework to guide our analysis. Lessons learned were drawn from closer scrutiny and analysis of the collaborative programs undertaken by AKECOP member states.

Results and Discussion

AKECOP's collaborative architecture

According to Pisano and Verganti (2008), collaborative architecture refers to the structure and principle that govern collaborative relationships, such as in AKECOP. And based on their collaborative framework (Fig. 2), AKECOP's collaborative structure reflects a unique hierarchical-open decision-making pattern.

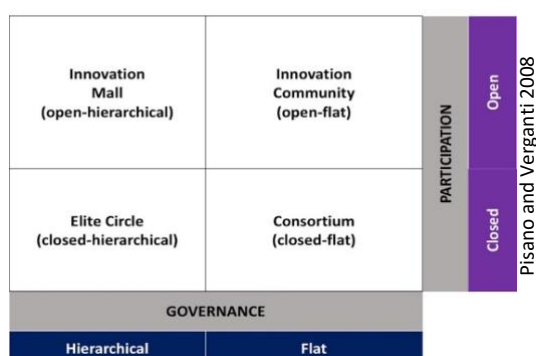


Fig. 2: Framework for determining collaborative structure

Hierarchical because decisions are made across several levels of the policy-policy implementation decision-making pathway arranged in a hierarchy. Open, because decision-making is participatory and consensual among all AKECOP collaborating teams at each level of the hierarchy. We would like to believe that this unique collaborative structure would enable ASEAN and ROK partners to work as members of creative collaboration networks or teams (Bennis and Biederman 1997) in the various levels and domains.

As a bilateral collaborative partnership between ASEAN and ROK, a network of institutions is primarily involved from both sides. From the ASEAN side are the ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN Senior Officers of the Environment (ASOEN) and ASEAN Senior Officers of Forestry (ASOF), the Heads of State, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and the participating institutions of the 10 AMS. From the ROK side, the country's President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT), the Ministry of the Environment (MOE), and Seoul National University (SNU).

Levels of collaboration and platforms of decision-making

Collaborative relationships occur at the policy and implementation levels with the general support of the ASEAN Secretariat. Fig. 3 shows the hierarchical collaborative decision-making pathway at the policy and implementation levels by concerned ASEAN and ROK institutional actors or partners. It is our interpretation of the hierarchical, open, and consensual decision-making structure of AKECOP based on information from several project documents (AKECOP 2014, 2011a, 2011b, 2009).

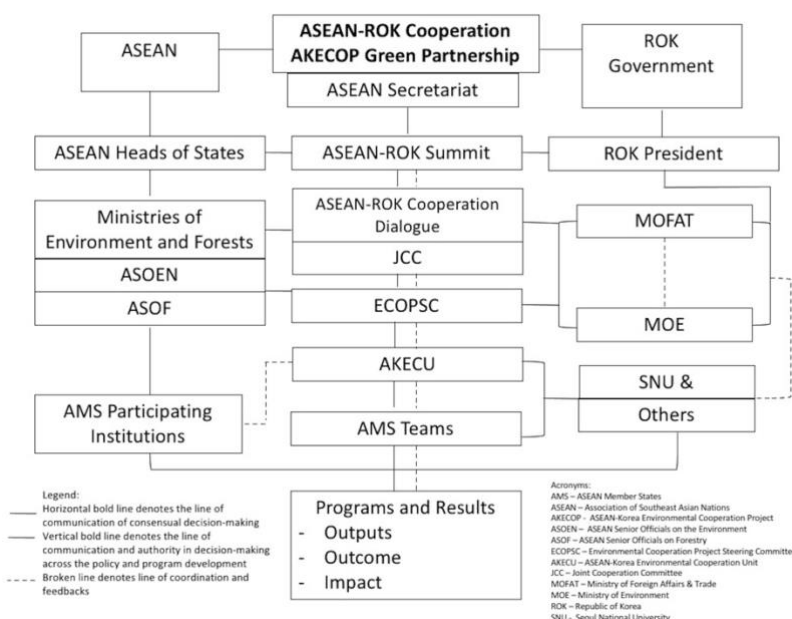


Fig. 3: AKECOP’s hierarchical, open, and consensual decision-making structure.

The specific platforms for AKECOP policy decisions and in all ASEAN-ROK Cooperation projects are the ASEAN-ROK Summit and the ASEAN-ROK Dialogue with the technical support of the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) formerly, the Joint Planning and Review Committee (JPRC). As the top ASEAN-ROK Cooperation policy-making body, the Summit is composed of ASEAN Heads of States and the President of ROK. And as the ministerial support for the Summit, the Dialogue is composed of ASEAN ministers of foreign affairs and the ROK ministers of MOFAT and MOE.

The platforms for collaborative Project implementation or action are the Environmental Cooperation Steering Committee (ECOPSC), ASEAN-Korea Environmental Cooperation Unit (AKECU), and the participating AMS institution Project implementing teams headed by a Coordinator or Country Project Leader. The ECOPSC is the oversight unit of AKECOP to ensure effective program implementation. Chaired by the AKECOP Project Leader from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs), SNU, ECOPSC draws membership from the ASEAN Secretariat, ASOEN and ASOF, and the ROK MOFAT and MOE relevant units.

The AKECU is the Project executing and management arm with an office located at the National Instrumentation Center for Environmental Management (NICEM), CALs, SNU. It is headed by the Project Leader, assisted by a Secretary-General and several administrative and management staff, and supervised by MOFAT and MOE. And lastly, the AKECOP country project implementing teams at the participating AMS institutions are composed of multidisciplinary researchers and educators in forest and environmental management. They are the “foot soldiers” who collaborate to implement AKECOP programs on the ground.

Collaborative strategy: domains and types

AKECOP collaboration among participating networks of AMS and ROK institutions was demonstrated in the domains of policy decision-making, project management, research and development, and institutional capacity building.

Policy making

As explained earlier, policy making is specifically the function of the ASEAN-ROK Summit and the ASEAN-ROK Dialogue. During its meeting held in December 1997, a consensus on critical environmental issues as a priority area of ASEAN-ROK Cooperation was formed. And it was during the 5th ASEAN-ROK Dialogue meeting in October 1998, almost a year after policy direction towards environmental issues was formed, that the implementation of AKECOP was announced. And on 2 May 2000, three years after the policy was decided, JCC approved the Project and allocated USD 490,000 annually from the SCF as initial funding support for five years. After this, policy implementing teams took over to translate policy pronouncements into a workable plan of action. The chronology of events in AKECOP's policy making demonstrates the hierarchical and consensual nature of the Projects policy forming process. Since it is hierarchical and consensual, decision-making usually takes a long process requiring patience, perseverance, and understanding among collaborators. The trade-off, however, is full commitment and support that will ensure Project's success.

Project management

General Project Management is the task of ECOPSC and AKECU. Both employ a participatory project management approach during the entire phases of the Project implementation. Participatory planning and review of projects are a yearly exercise of ECOPSC and AKECOP. To monitor the progress of each participating country's projects, annual review and planning workshops are organized by AKECU in close coordination with host participating AMS institutions chosen on a rotation basis. Results of review and planning workshops organized by AKECU are brought to ECOPSC for further review and endorsement to the Project's highest policy-making bodies for final approval. One unique collaborative project monitoring scheme introduced by AKECU to track down the progress of individual AMS research projects is the in-house joint assessment process involving a cross-cultural/country team of researchers/experts drawn from the participating AMS institution team members. The joint research assessment team is described as "in-house" because the membership is drawn from the qualified team members of each of the AMS participating institutions.

Research and development (R&D)

Collaborative regional country research. Under this mode, each participating country works independently on a research topic/problem unique or deemed most relevant to each country's particular situation but within the ambit of the agreed-upon common regional broad research area of forest restoration, poverty alleviation, and environmental conservation. Each participating country research team can freely choose their research approach and depth and breadth of research focus.

Generally, country research teams adopted internal and external collaboration schemes. The internal collaboration consists of multidisciplinary teams working together to solve a research problem with membership coming from the same or different units of the AMS participating institution. External collaboration requires country research teams to establish links or networks with external groups who have stakes in the research being undertaken.

Altogether, 43 collaborative regional types of research were undertaken by the AMS research teams during AKECOP's Phases I-V from 2000 to 2015 (Rebugio et al. 2015). Three of the many interesting and innovative collaborative research are Thailand's action-research cum extension and development project in forest restoration in Trat Province in collaboration with local communities; Indonesia's development-oriented research approach to agroforestry in the Gunung Walat Educational Forests (GWEF) in collaboration with informal settlers; and the Philippines integrated program in forest restoration, agroforestry, and biodiversity in the Mt. Makiling Forest Reserve (MMFR) in collaboration with ROK scientists and local people.

Regional cross-cultural thematic research partnership. Two schemes were tried for this mode of research collaboration: the tripartite (3-country arrangement) and twinning (2-country arrangement). Table 1 shows the thematic research partnership done during Phase III of the Project.

Thailand, Vietnam, and Philippines were involved in the tri-partite agreement. Each country's research team was able to conduct research on the agreed-upon common theme using a similar framework. Each of the collaborating country teams was able to successfully conduct and submit the results of their studies, respectively, the Project annual reports. In the case of the Philippines, the mangrove research team was even able to publish the results of its studies in reputable international journals. Unfortunately, however, because of time and resource constraints, there was no chance to discuss the results of the studies of each of the collaborating country research teams together, thus missing the opportunity to exchange insights and learnings with each other.

Research twinning arrangement between Indonesia and Lao PDR is a mutually reinforcing technology or expertise sharing arrangement between two partner institutions (one sharing its expertise to the other to overcome the other's weakness and *vice versa*). And that of Malaysia and Myanmar is a kind of "big brother-small brother" helping relationship where an acknowledged more advanced research institution helping the other that is in the process strengthening its research capabilities.

Table 1. Regional cross-cultural thematic research partnership

Phase	Research Title	Research Sites
Phase III	Economic valuation of mangrove ecosystems	Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam
Phase III	Dissemination of research approach on quantification of growth, carbon sequestration capacity, and bio-accumulation ability of tree species grown on a degraded ecosystem in Myanmar	Malaysia, Myanmar
Phase III	Promoting sustainable use of biomass energy in the rural area of ASEAN	Lao PDR, Indonesia

Collaborative on-site field research. Under AKECOP's collaborative umbrella, senior forest and environmental scientists from SNU and several other reputable Korean educational institutions and their counterparts from the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB), College of Forestry and Natural Resources (CFNR) collaborated to work on four research studies on ecological restoration and conservation plant biodiversity in the MMFR and Heritage Park of UPLB and four other sites in the Philippines and one site in ROK (Table 2). The on-site research sites not only offered mutual learning opportunities among collaborating scientists from ROK and the Philippines in terms of sharing technical expertise, information, and insights, but also a teaching and learning laboratory for Korean and Filipino forestry students on tropical forests dynamics and forest restoration research development initiatives.

Table 2. Collaborative on-site research

Year	On-Site Research Title	Research Sites
2001-2008	Restoration of degraded forest and development of agroforestry techniques by local people's participation	MMFR, CFNR, UPLB, Philippines
2003-2005	Biodiversity and genetic resources of plant species in tropical forests	MMFR, CFNR, UPLB, Philippines
2005-2011	Conservation of plant biodiversity in tropical forests	MMFR, CFNR, UPLB, Palawan, Butuan-Surigao, Baguio-Cordillera Mountains, Subic-Zambales, Philippines; Gyungsangnam-do, ROK
2008-2011	Ecological restoration research in the Philippines	MMFR, CFNR, UPLB

Collaborative capacity building through formal and non-formal education

AKECOP undertakes short-term training programs in close coordination with AMS participating institutions and with NICEM, SNU. Altogether, more than 20 short-term training have been sponsored by AKECOP. Those organized and conducted by AMS are attended by selected Project team members of participating AMS institutions and other stakeholders in the region, i.e., government agencies, people's organizations, non-government institutions, and academia. The training courses are offered on different themes/topics in forest ecosystem restoration and conservation. However, those short-term trainings that provided opportunities for research skills improvement, including new research methodologies about biotechnology, soil testing, instrumentation, and plant analysis, and to acquire skills in the operation of highly sophisticated equipment for environmental science research are offered at NICEM, SNU.

AKECOP provides two types of graduate programs: a graduate thesis support only grant and full scholarship grant including tuition, travel cost, living and book allowance, and thesis/dissertation support for masteral and doctoral studies at SNU. Seven graduate students from UPLB, Philippines, Kasetsart University (KU), Thailand, and Institute Pertanian Bogor (IPB), Indonesia, were recipients of graduate thesis support. While 17 masteral and doctoral students studying at SNU from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam received full scholarship grants.

Information exchange and technology sharing through communication and extension strategies

An innovative communication and extension strategy involving *cross-country field visits* of model forest restoration projects was adopted during Phase III, involving the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. This provided an opportunity for researchers to visit and mutually learn from exemplary forest restoration projects in their respective countries. The primary rationale for this type of collaborative information and technology exchange is that if learnings are shared or transferred to fellow researchers/professionals, forest restoration in their respective countries will be improved.

With AKECOP's financial support, AMS Project team members, including some local country partners, are encouraged to attend national or international *seminars and conferences* related to AKECOP Project programs and goals. Seminars and conferences are powerful media for communicating AKECOP's R&D results and other accomplishments. They are also effective methods for Project staff to learn or acquire new knowledge, skills, and insights on forest restoration that could improve Project program implementation. Some of the more significant international conferences where Project team members played the role of plenary or sub-plenary speaker, paper and/or poster presenter, and side-event panelists.

All products of collaborative research between AMS and ROK scientists, AKECOP has published several scientific and technical books and articles in reputable journals. *Scientific and technical publications* are important communication research outlets, especially for students, scientists, academicians, and professionals. Among its significant scientific publications are a plant guidebook on Mt. Makiling (Fernando et al. 2004), and on biodiversity and natural resource conservation in protected areas in the Philippines and Korea (Lapitan et al. 2010) and the two-volume "Asia Green Book" (Lee et al. 2007, 2011). All these provided a general understanding of the restoration efforts in Asia, besides keeping track of national capacities in the respective countries, while providing timely recommendations to decision-makers in the region. Through AKECOP's financial support, AMS participating institutions such as Philippines and Vietnam by themselves have also published scientific and technical books out of their collaborative research efforts.

Lessons learned from AKECOP collaborative programs

From participatory policymaking and project management. Consensual decision-making and shared vision are essential to meaningful collaboration in both policymaking and project implementation. But it is a long process that entails a lot of preparatory work, perseverance, and commitment among all sectors concerned.

Two important lessons can be drawn from the participatory management experience of AKECOP. First, participatory planning ensures the relevance and maximum results or impact of research and other AKECOP undertakings. In-house joint research assessment is a unique scheme for collaborative project monitoring that could ensure the quality and reliability of regional research programs. It is also a strategy for facilitating mutual learning through exchanging information and sharing expertise among joint assessment team members and the local team of researchers.

From collaborative R&D. From the regional research initiatives, we have learned that the mode of research significantly influences the speed of utilization of research results. Multidisciplinary basic research, like some done in the Philippines, must be followed up by in-depth policy analysis and action research programs to maximize the usefulness of basic research results. Participatory action-oriented cum extension research like those done in Thailand and Indonesia, if properly executed, could significantly accelerate the speed by which expected research results are delivered to or realized by the identified beneficiaries or stakeholders. Based on the successful collaborative research experiences of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia it is suggested that AKECOP supports the institutionalization of the research sites in their respective countries as Centers of Learning in forest restoration research, teaching and extension.

The twining experiences of Indonesia/Lao PDR and Malaysia/Myanmar, collaborative research schemes were found enriching and effective in promoting scientific exchange and technology transfer. AKECOP should therefore promote these schemes as part of a strategy for strengthening research programs and building research competencies in developing research institutions in the ASEAN region. Further, the AKECOP should encourage AMS participating institutions to explore other cross-cultural mutually enriching and helping relationship models of research collaboration.

Based on the Philippine-ROK experience, collaborative on-site field research was found to have great potential as a strategy for promoting closer cooperation, synergy, and effectiveness among teams of experts from different countries working together on forest restoration and biodiversity conservation in the ASEAN region. Some problems, especially at the early stage of collaborative engagement, have to be overcome to make the scheme more experientially rewarding scientifically and professionally to the collaborating research teams. They include barriers to effective communication due to cultural differences and time management problems considering the school calendar differences between Korean scientists/professors and their local counterparts.

From collaborative capacity building through formal and non-formal education. AKECOP experience in short-term training and graduate education support grants reinforced the role of non-formal and formal education in strengthening competencies required for project management and implementation. AMS conducted training programs that strengthened technical capabilities and the interpersonal competence of participants for collaborative activities. NICEM training allows a new window of opportunity to learn new research methods and techniques to be exposed to the use of state-of-the-art technologies in forest restoration and environmental management. To maximize the impact of NICEM training on AMS institutions, however, AKECOP needs to recognize the need for resource support to enable AMS trainees to undertake transfer-of-training activities in their respective institutions.

Formal education through graduate program support provides an excellent opportunity for rigorous training or high-quality research and teaching expertise/workforce in forest restoration and SFM. But it also serves as an effective medium for building networks and linkages between institutions and researchers necessary for collaborative works to achieve SFM goals. Students' thesis and publications add up to AKECOP's research achievements.

Only SNU thus far is involved in the formal training of graduate students under full scholarship grants. However, for a more meaningful and equitable collaborative graduate program, AKECOP considers reformulating or redesigning the program to allow capable participating academic institutions like KU, IPB, and UPLB to accept full AKECOP graduate scholars for graduate studies in their respective institutions with the Project support.

From information and technology sharing. Based on reports of participating researchers from the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, we have learned that **cross-country visits** were an effective medium for information exchange and possible technology transfer in forest restoration; thus, the use of this extension strategy should be encouraged.

Various types of **publication** materials are considered the most popular communication and information outlets for research results and other scientific outputs. However, for publications to be effective as a communication tool in terms of policy and action impact and behavioral change (in understanding, appreciation, and participation in forest restoration and SFM), scientific outputs must be published in a communication medium most adapted to the needs and characteristics of a particular identified public/audience. AKECOP has to produce more communication materials designed to reach busy policy makers and the general public.

AKECOP encourages Project team members to attend **seminars, workshops, and conferences** because these are highly beneficial. But to enable them to derive maximum benefits in terms of information sharing, mutual learning, and cost-effectiveness from attending them, Project staff participants must be selected carefully using fair and equitable criteria.

From AKECOP success to AFoCO. In terms of tangible outputs and the perceived impact of its programs, AKECOP is generally acknowledged by ROK and ASEAN as a successful regional collaboration in sustainable forest and environmental management. A significant lesson that can be learned from AKECOP collaborative experience is that success can have a multiplier effect. It can inspire and lead to the creation of even bigger collaborative endeavors such as AFoCO.

Conclusions/ Way Forward

Based on AKECOP's experience, collaboration is the right paradigm or strategy for doing the right things in sustainable forest and environmental management. AKECOP has evolved into a model of ASEAN regional collaboration in forest restoration and SFM due to innovative collaboration practices. Collaboration can only succeed with the following necessary conditions: visionary leadership and shared vision among all parties concerned; commonality of problems and concerns and unified commitment to address them; technical expertise and interpersonal skills for creative collaboration among participating scientists and other professionals; and work environment conducive to creative collaboration (Rebugio et al. 2016).

AKECOP success has inspired the creation of AFoCO, a fitting response to ROK's "Low Carbon Green Growth" strategy, a new vision to guide the nation's long-term development.

As a way forward, the participating AMS have a consensus that AKECOP should continue to serve as a platform for SFM regional cooperation considering its past achievements. However, to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in line with the ASEAN "GREEN VISION" and amidst the COVID 19 pandemic, AKECOP must institute some needed reforms.

Considering that AKECOP and AFoCO have similar fundamental goals, concerned ASEAN and ROK authorities wisely consider institutionalizing a formal collaborative link between AFoCO and AKECOP. This provides more synergy to strengthen the impact of the ROK-ASIAN Forest Cooperation on the socio-economic progress and environmental harmony in ASIA through science-based sustainable forest and environmental management program.

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