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Assessing Forest Governance in the Countries of the Greater Mekong Subregion

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Abstract: The forest landscapes of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) are changing dramatically, with a multitude of impacts from local to global levels. These changes invariably have their foundations in forest governance. The aim of this paper is to assess perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the state of forest governance in the countries of the GMS. The work is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the perceptions of forest governance in the five GMS countries, involving 762 representatives from government, civil society, news media, and rural communities. The work identified many challenges to good forest governance in the countries in the region, as well as noting reasons for optimism. Generally speaking, there was a feeling that the policies, legislation, and institutional frameworks were supportive, but there are numerous challenges in terms of implementation, enforcement, and compliance. The work also presents a program of activities recommended by the research participants to address governance challenges and opportunities in the GMS countries. These include the development of a forest governance monitoring system, and initiatives that support informed decision-making by forest product consumers in the region as well as the implementation of a capacity development program for non-state actors (e.g., civil society, news media) to ensure they are more able to support the diverse, and often demanding, forest governance initiatives.

Keywords: forest governance; Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS); civil society; deforestation; illegal logging and trade; FLEGT VPA; REDD+

1. Introduction

The forest landscapes of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) are changing in notable ways, with impacts on local to global levels. Many of these changes are having various negative impacts, including on local communities [1,2], biodiversity [3], and the climate [3,4]. During the period 1990–2015 forest cover declined in the GMS by 5.1%, though forests still cover 46% of the region's land area [5]. However, total forest cover change only reveals part of the story (Table 1). All countries in the GMS are experiencing forest degradation to various degrees. The forest area in Lao PDR and Vietnam is increasing, but both are losing primary forests at a dramatic rate, while Cambodia and Myanmar are experiencing significant overall forest loss (including primary forests). Both Lao PDR and Thailand have experienced large fluctuations in forest cover in the last 25 years [5,6].

Table 1. Forest cover and forest cover change, development of community forestry, and indicators of governance in the GMS [5,7–9].

	Forest Resources (1000 ha)				Forest Tenure Reform (Development of CF)			Governance (General)		
	1990		2015		2010	2016	Target Area (Year)	Corruption Perception Index (2017) *	Democracy Index **	
	Primary Forest	Total Forest Area	Primary Forest	Total Forest Area					2006	2017
Cambodia	766	12,944	322	9457	113,544	296,240	2,000,000 (2029)	21	4.77	3.63
Lao PDR	1593	17,645	1194	18,761	no data	no data	no data	29	2.1	2.37
Myanmar	3192	39,218	3192	29,041	41,000	113,765	919,000 (2030)	30	1.77	3.83
Thailand	6726	14,005	6726	16,399	196,667	750,457	1,600,000 (2025)	37	5.67	4.63
Vietnam	384	9363	83	14,773	3,300,000	4,256,375	4,000,000 (2020)	35	2.75	3.08

* Transparency international Corruption Perception Index, score 0 = highly corrupt; 100 = very clean, global average for 2017 was 43. ** Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index score 8–10 = full democracy; 6–8 = flawed democracy; 4–6 = hybrid regime; and 0–4 = authoritarian countries.

There are numerous commonalities in the direct drivers of forest loss in the GMS including agricultural expansion (especially Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam), infrastructure development (Cambodia, Thailand), illegal and unsustainable logging (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar), mining operations (Myanmar) and forest fires (Thailand) [10], but also specific national issues such as civil conflict (Myanmar). These drivers are arguably indirectly driven by demographic changes and socio-economic development [10], as well as the wider considerations of globalization [11] and past colonial relations [12]. Within this matrix of direct and indirect drivers of forest loss, there is a strong indication that changes to national forest governance systems can mitigate or exacerbate forest loss [11,13,14] and the types of forest cover change taking place [15].

All the GMS countries face numerous challenges regarding governance [16] (Table 1). Forest governance is broadly defined in accordance with Giessen and Buttoud [17] (p. 1) "(a) all formal and informal, public and private regulatory structures, i.e., institutions consisting of rules, norms, principles, decision procedures, concerning forests, their utilization and their conservation, (b) the interactions between public and private actors therein and c) the effects of either on forests [and their landscapes]." Poor governance can play a role in deforestation [5], undermining protection and conservation efforts [18], enabling corruption along the timber value chain [19,20] and increasing the number of forest conflicts as local peoples' rights are ignored [21]. Good governance, on the other hand, can play an important role in the creation of an enabling environment for the sustainable management of forest resources, attracting stable and long-term investments [22,23] and safeguarding the rights of forest peoples over their land and resources [24].

There are numerous initiatives that are directly or indirectly working to strengthen forest governance in the GMS countries:

- international initiatives such as the European Union's Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan (including the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA)), and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+)
- regional programs including the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, ASEAN Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG)
- national efforts, for instance Lao PDR Forest Strategy 2020, national community forestry programs (e.g., Myanmar's Community Forestry Strategy (Table 1)).

In the above context, this paper aims to assess the perceptions of key stakeholders of the state of forest governance in the GMS countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam). This will be achieved by conducting a quantitative and qualitative analysis of their perceptions of forest governance in each of the GMS countries. By quantifying stakeholders' perception of forest governance—which is broad, subjective, and intangible in nature—using a standardized tool, this research establishes a baseline for long-term monitoring of forest governance and helps practitioners and policymakers to identify governance reform priorities.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The assessment of forest governance in the five GMS countries centered on the Enabling Environment Assessment Tool (EEAT), developed by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF). WWF used PROFOR/FAO's Forest Assessment and Monitoring Framework for good governance [25] as the foundation for the development of the EEAT, incorporating some elements from other tools and frameworks including the World Resources Institute (WRI) Governance of Forests Initiative [26] and the Program on Forests (PROFOR) Assessing and Monitoring Forest Governance diagnostic tool [27].

The PROFOR/FAO forest governance framework understands forest governance in the context of a wide range of different actors with varying interests [25]. The PROFOR/FAO framework has been applied in various countries including Indonesia [28] where it was used to assess governance in the context of REDD+, and in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine to assess forest law enforcement and governance [29]. The framework assesses six principles (1. Accountability, 2. Effectiveness, 3. Efficiency, 4. Fairness/equity, 5. Participation and 6. Transparency) cutting across three pillars of forest governance: 1) Policy, legal, Institutional and regulatory frameworks (i.e., how policies, legislation, and institutions look on paper); 2) Planning and decision-making processes (i.e., how people plan and make decisions); and 3) Implementation, enforcement and compliance (i.e., how things work out in practice).

From the PROFOR/FAO forest governance framework, the EEAT identified four components for each pillar and in total 152 indicators (see Supplementary Materials). Furthermore, the EEAT incorporates a value-chain assessment feature that allows the assessors to evaluate the quality of governance for each stage of the forest product value chain separately. Hence, the tool can be used to provide a baseline for forest governance along the value chain and enables stakeholders to identify which indicators need to be prioritized.

The EEAT is designed to capture the perceptions of those participating in the process. The emphasis on perceptions is seen to be useful to examine the participants' understanding of forest governance, its challenges and opportunities and ways forward. The emphasis on perceptions of governance has been used in academic [30,31] and non-academic work [26]. The EEAT contains both qualitative and quantitative components. Each indicator can be scored on a one-to-five scale where a score of one indicates that the country, jurisdiction, or landscape, is "failing in this area", and a five suggests the conditions are "close to best practice in this area". We acknowledge the scoring is inevitably subject to personal opinions and interpretations, and therefore had incorporated safeguards to reduce such subjectivity. Detailed guidance is provided to minimize arbitrary decisions and the stakeholders were asked to discuss, and as a group give a numerical score for each question. The qualitative part of the tool asks assessors to record a brief comment explaining the basis of the score. The comment might include a reference to a law or document with information that supports the score. The process enabled the participants to substantiate or justify scoring decision with "hard evidence" such as specific legislation or credible research and to use a focus group approach where experts' consensus is required.

2.2. Research Process

Data collection was conducted at national and landscape levels, except in Vietnam where the collection was only held at national level (included stakeholders from the landscape level). The landscapes were:

1. Dawna Tenasserim Landscape (DTL)–covering Tanintharyi Nature Reserve (Myanmar) and Western Forest Complex (Thailand)
2. Northern Thailand–Lao Transboundary Landscape (NTLL): covering Doi Phu Kha National Park (Thailand) and Nam Pouy National Protected Area (Lao PDR)

3. Transboundary Vietnam–Lao-Cambodia Landscape (VLCL): covering (a) Eastern Plains Landscape (Cambodia bordering with Vietnam); (b) Kon Tum province, Central Annamites; Quang Nam province, Central Highlands (Vietnam bordering Cambodia and Lao PDR); and, (c) Xe Pian and Dong Amphan National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (Lao PDR).

These areas were selected as they are transboundary landscapes that represent some of the most biodiverse areas in the region and are home to many forest communities, including Indigenous Peoples, and are affected by illegal logging, hunting and trade. For example, the DTL encompasses one of the most extensive protected area networks in Southeast Asia, with one of the largest population of tigers in Asia. It is also home to a large number of ethnic groups. These landscapes face numerous threats due to infrastructure development, logging, expansion of agriculture and habitat fragmentation, fueled in part by the Special Economic Zones, Economic Corridors, and Border Trade Zones, which also involve the cross-border trade of illegal timber [32–35].

The research process involved three broad steps:

1. Introduction of research to key stakeholders. This aimed to introduce the participants to the work, create a general understanding of forest governance in the region, its importance and the key issues and opportunities, as well as to introduce the EEAT. This involved background research workshops (Table A1). The regional workshop was held in April 2017, with national and landscape level workshops being held in May to June 2017. The participants in the regional workshop were mainly from civil society working at international and national levels. The national level workshops focused on actors working at national levels, while the landscape level workshops mainly focused on actors working at the landscape levels.The regional workshop's introduction to the EEAT tool included assessing of the appropriateness of the indicators for the research process. The participants were representatives from national CSOs from the GMS countries.
2. Data collection. This aimed to capture and understand the perceptions of key stakeholders of forest governance in each country. This involved the participants scoring each of the indicators (1–5) following discussions. Their explanations for each answer were also documented. Workshops were conducted at national and landscape levels in all five GMS countries (in Vietnam the national and landscape level workshops were combined) (Table A2). All the data collection workshops were multi-stakeholder by design to facilitate learning between groups. These were held between September 2017 and February 2018.
3. Results sharing. This step aimed to develop a shared understanding of the findings of the assessment, as well as identify priority activities to address the challenges and opportunities identified. Workshops were again held in each country, except Cambodia and Vietnam where the data collection workshop had an extra day for results sharing and identifying priority actions for addressing (Table A3). In Myanmar and Thailand there were three results sharing workshops, two of which involved multiple stakeholders, while another was held in each country with only participants from non-state actors (NSAs), mainly, civil society and international NGOs. The decision to hold an additional workshop with only NSA representatives was made in each country based on the desire to further explore the potential role of NSAs in strengthening forest governance. These were held between March 2018 and July 2018.

In total there were 1163 participants in the 35 workshops (Table 2), with many participants attending more than one event, with the result being that 762 individuals participated in the research. The selection process for the participants was done following a stakeholder mapping exercise in each country (and landscape). Relevant government departments, civil society organizations, international NGOs, news media, academic institutions working on forest governance issues at national and the landscape levels were then asked nominate representatives to attend the workshop, they were given guidelines in selecting their representatives, including be working on issues related to forest

governance, and have good experience of the issues. The organizations were also provided with information on the objectives of the work and the process.

Table 2. Total number of participants in all the workshops (inception, data collection and results sharing) (for more information see Appendix A).

	Number of Workshops	National and Subnational Government Offices	Civil Society	Others	Total Number of Participants
Cambodia	4	15	49	32	96
Lao PDR	8	178	56	31	265
Myanmar	8	74	71	98	243
Thailand	10	141	128	97	366
Vietnam	3	27	41	52	120
Regional	2	0	16	57	73
TOTAL	35	435	361	367	1163

Others = landscape community members, private sector, international NGOs, academic institutes, and news media.

3. Results

3.1. General Findings

The findings for the assessments in the five GMS countries are presented according to the three governance pillars (Figures 1–4), providing an overview of the perceived strength of forest governance across the region. According to the EEAT categorization forest governance in Lao PDR is (9.0/15) "fair, with room for improvement", while Vietnam (8.2/15), Myanmar (7.95/15), and Thailand (6.9/15) are categorized as "weak with definite problems"; finally forest governance in Cambodia (5.5/15) is defined as "failing".

Focusing on each of the forest governance pillars there are clearly mixed stories from the countries (Figure 1). With the participants from Lao PDR evaluating all three pillars as "fair with room for improvement". Cambodia, on the other hand, has a score of "weak . . . definite problems" for Pillar 1, but "failing" for the other two pillars.

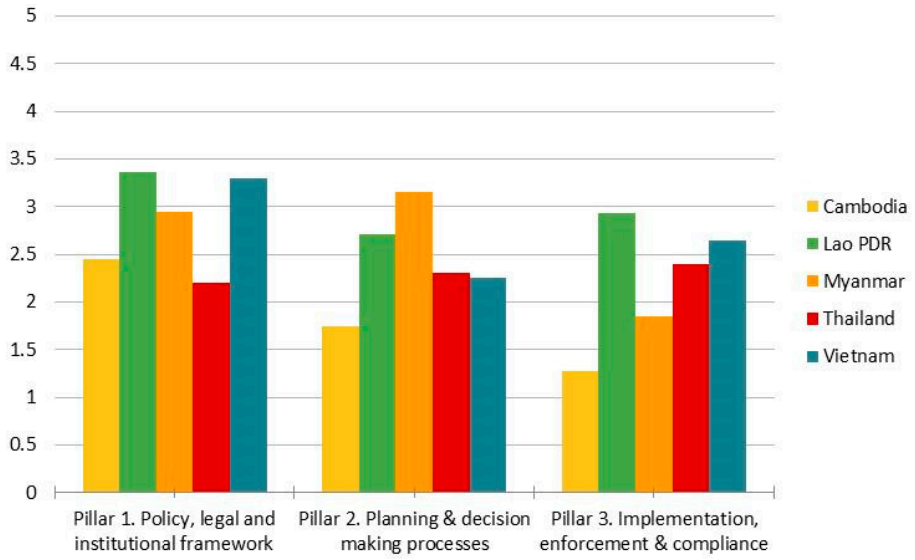


Figure 1. Average score for each country for each pillar.

3.2. Pillar 1. Policy, Legal, and Institutional Framework

The scores for Pillar 1 range from 2.2 ("weak") for Thailand to 3.4 ("fair... with room for improvement") for Lao PDR. Within in each country there are some areas of strength such as "Policies and legislation" in Myanmar and "Concordance of sector-level policies" in Vietnam both scoring four

or higher—in other words, they evaluated themselves as having "good conditions/performance in this area". The most critical scores in the pillar are "Institutional frameworks" for Cambodia and Thailand, and "Concordance of sector-level policies" for Myanmar—for all three cases the scores were less than 2—evaluating themselves as "weak" with "definite problems" (Figure 2).

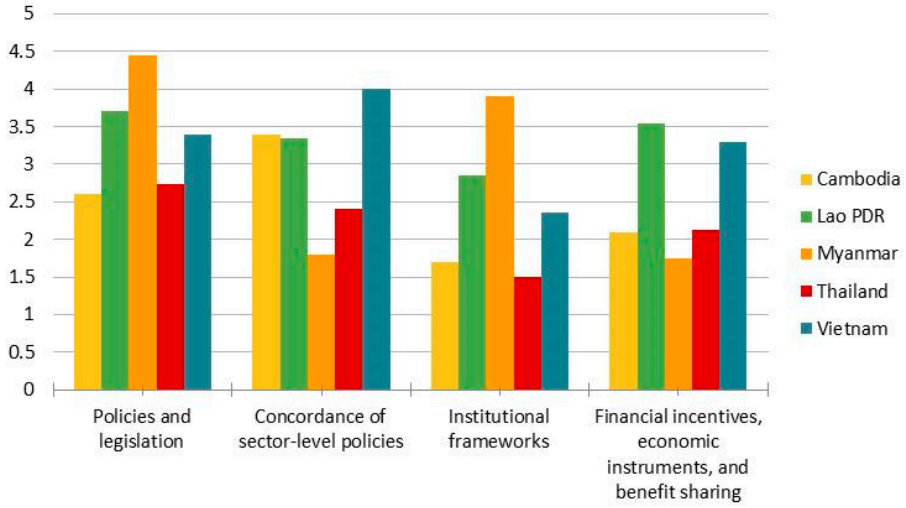


Figure 2. Average score per component of Pillar 1 for each country.

Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand all rate "Policies and legislation" as being stronger compared to the other components. Examples of progress regarding this component were provided for each country such as the efforts in Lao PDR to align regulations and laws with the Forest Strategy 2020, while in Vietnam a great deal of optimism is placed on the replacement of the Forest Protection and Development Law (2004) with the new Forestry Law. The new law has clearly stated and regulated roles and responsibilities for forest sector actors at all levels.

Cambodia and Vietnam on the other hand gave prominence to "Concordance of sector-level policies" over the other components in this pillar. In Cambodia, for example, the participants emphasized efforts by the government on seeking synergies in policies, laws and regulations in relation to climate change mitigation, sustainable livelihood development, and to other sustainable forest management practices. In Vietnam emphasis was placed on the Vietnam Forests Protection and Development Law (2004), the Forestry Law (2017) and the Vietnam Forestry Development Strategy 2006–2020, among others, all stating synergies and working towards integrating and promoting sustainable forest management.

Meanwhile the institutional frameworks for all countries, except Myanmar, were categorized as "weak" or "failing" (only Myanmar can be categorized as having a "fair" institutional framework). Emphasis in each country, including Myanmar, was that often there is little incentive or clarity regarding collaboration between state agencies from different sectors. One reason often given was that budget constraints creates an environment of territoriality, compounded by the previous emphasis on sectorial thinking, rather than collaboration across the different sectors affecting landscapes.

The participants from Lao PDR and Vietnam were comparatively more positive towards the "Financial incentives . . . " component. For example, in Lao PDR the legal framework encourages the private sector, villagers and other organizations to develop commercial plantation forests including rubber via forestland concessions or on their own private lands. Consideration was also given to countries making efforts to address issues of unclear tenure arrangements in order to create a more welcoming environment for investments. The other three countries were less positive towards this component with common concerns including weak benefit sharing arrangements. For example, in Cambodia the legislation states that revenues generated by timber trade, as any other revenue generated from the forestry sector, will go entirely and directly to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, to be then redistributed to line ministries.

3.3. Pillar 2. Planning and Decision-Making Processes

The scores for Pillar 2 range from 3.15 ("fair... with room for improvement") for Myanmar to 1.75 ("failing") for Cambodia. Within the pillar there are some areas of strength such as "political, legislative, and judicial decision making" in Myanmar (though the participants in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam were far less positive on this) and "stakeholder participation" in Lao PDR and Myanmar, both scoring higher than three ("fair . . . with room for improvement").

The most critical scores in the pillar, were "Political, legislative and judicial decision making" for Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam (categorized as "failing"), "Stakeholder capacity" for Cambodia and Lao PDR, and "Transparency and accountability" for Cambodia—for all three cases the scores were lower than two—evaluating themselves as "weak" with "definite problems" (Figure 3).

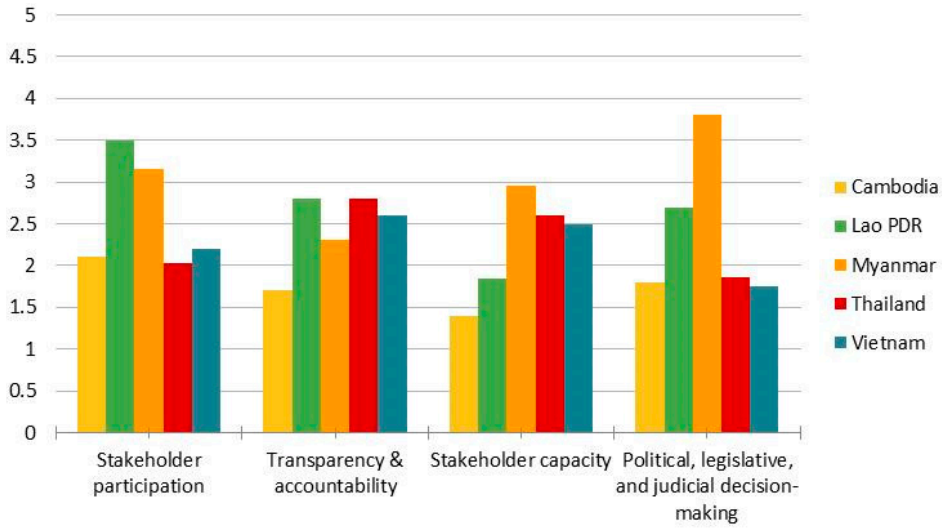


Figure 3. Average score per component of Pillar 2 for each country.

Stakeholder participation is a clear issue in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. The lowest scores, "weak . . . with definite problems", borderline "failing" were in Thailand (2.0) and Cambodia (2.1). The explanation provided from these countries were based on limited roles of CSOs and perceived marginalization of minorities in Cambodia, while in Thailand the highlighted concerns were poor consideration and processes for respecting the rights and understanding the needs of rural communities, especially ethnic groups. All countries, however, stressed that progress has been made in recent years, especially with the development of community forestry supporting participatory processes, with specific reference made to ambitious targets for area under community forestry, and stronger legislative environment.

The "Transparency and accountability" component was rated poorly across all the countries, with no countries scoring higher than 2.8 (Lao PDR and Thailand) and the lowest score being Cambodia (1.7). In Cambodia the low score is based on various issues including lack of transparency in land use allocation for concessions involving conversion of state lands. In Thailand there is a feeling that all actors in the forest sector are subject to oversight, monitoring and reporting, and auditing facilitating transparency and accountability, but often special connections often lead to some laws being broken by connected individuals and organizations with little punishment. An issue in all countries was the fact that the general public, as consumers of forest products, are poorly informed about the (un)sustainability of the forest practices, and have little concern about the provenance and legality of the products they buy.

The "Stakeholder capacity" component was a particular issue in Cambodia and Lao PDR (scores of 1.4 and 1.85, respectively i.e., "failing"). In Cambodia emphasis was placed on limited public awareness of government decisions; this is compounded by CSOs having low capacity to effectively

step in and influence the process. In Myanmar, the more positive score (2.95) may be attributed to the recent growth in community forestry, which has been supported by investment by the government and development organizations in a comprehensive capacity development program.

The fourth component in this pillar ("Political, legislative, and judicial decision-making") presented a notable range between the countries. With Vietnam having a 1.7 ("failing") and Myanmar having a 3.8 ("fair" to "good"). The concern in Vietnam was particularly linked to "politics", an issue also raised in Cambodia and Thailand (though the opposite perception was expressed in Myanmar). In Vietnam it is the power of the Party over all institutions and decision-making. Additionally, all countries raised the concern about the continued prevalence of top-down decision-making, despite progress in recent years. In addition to a perceived lack of political interference in decision-making, Myanmar's comparatively positive outlook was based on legislative activity being conducted in an increasingly transparent and participatory manner.

3.4. Pillar 3. Implementation, Enforcement, and Compliance

There were few scores over three in Pillar 3 (Figure 4). The least positive perceptions were for "Measures to address corruption" in Cambodia and Myanmar, while the most positive perceptions was for "Cooperation and coordination between government agencies" in Vietnam and "Administration of forest resources and land tenure" in Lao PDR.

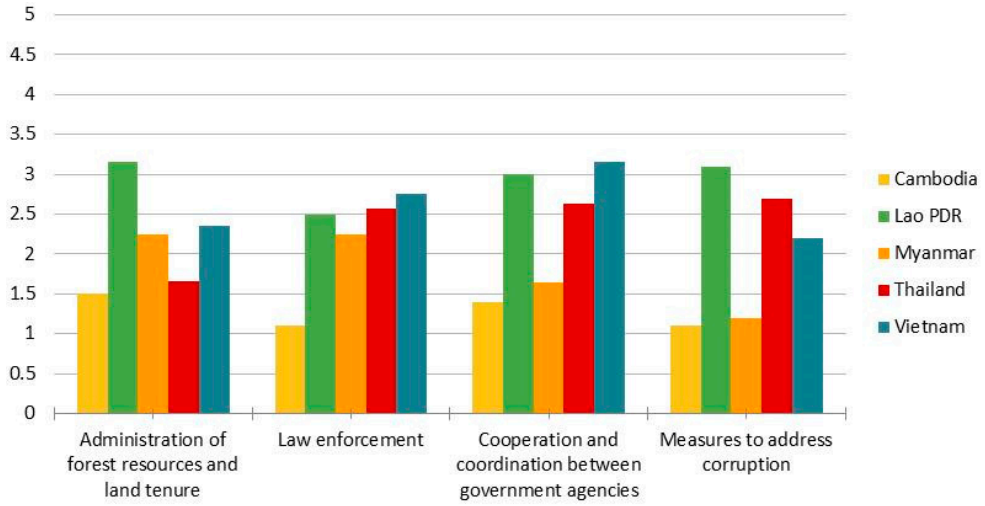


Figure 4. Average score per component of Pillar 3 for each country.

"Administration of forest resources and land tenure" sees Lao PDR as being categorized as "fair" (3.1), but Cambodia and Thailand were both perceived to be struggling ("failing"), with the reasoning including the many tenure and rights issues facing forest communities. Cambodia also faces challenges regarding "Law enforcement" 1.1 ("failing"). The main reason for the perceived problem in Cambodia was also a common concern in all countries: that the sanctions for illegal activities are not effective deterrents, which is compounded by the lack of resources and capacities of the law enforcement agencies.

"Cooperation and coordination" was highlighted as a particular issue in Cambodia (1.4) and Myanmar (1.6), while Vietnam was comparatively better. In Myanmar consideration was placed on poor information sharing and distrust among stakeholders at the landscape level and its impacts. This is partly based on the history of civil conflict in the landscape in question, but also by the lack of incentive to improve cooperation and coordination.

There was also particular concern in Cambodia and Myanmar regarding "Corruption", with both being categorized as failing. In all countries there were feelings that there is a strong legislative foundation to address the issue, but that challenges related to capacity and resources result in poor enforcement.

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of Findings

To certain degrees, the results were as anticipated reflecting the numerous challenges facing governance in each of the GMS countries [36]. The findings present interesting discussion points regarding the perception of forest governance in these countries, and some ways forward for addressing the challenges and opportunities identified.

Under Pillar 1 (Policy, legal, and institutional framework) the participants in each country saw reasons to be optimistic, but also identified challenges including a lack of financial resources that hinders cross-sectoral cooperation (Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand) and weak institutional frameworks (Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam). The lack of coordination amongst government agencies can have many consequences for forest governance. Research into state agencies involved in sustainable forest management (SFM) in Bangladesh, for example, found that these agencies competed against each other for donor-funded projects and funds [37]. It was found that the bureaucracies that gained the most power and access to funds set the direction of national SFM in the country, but at the cost of, for example, identifying synergies. While at the local level in Cambodia, a lack of coordination between government agencies was found to result in unclear tenure arrangements, with numerous impacts including social conflict [38]. This lack of coordination should be noted as conservation and forest governance projects are increasingly advocating for a landscape approach [39,40], requiring broad partnership and close sectoral level coordination [41,42].

As expected, under Pillar 2 (Planning & decision-making processes), transparency and accountability scored poorly in most of the countries [36,43]. It was also noted that top-down decision-making processes in the GMS countries still prevails. However, the engagement of non-state actors, such as civil society and the private sector, in policy processes has been a key recent trend within international programs to strengthen forest governance, notably through REDD+ and the FLEGT VPA processes [44], as well as national initiatives such as the development of community forestry [9,45]. The extent to which non-state actors meaningfully engage in planning and decision-making processes has seen mixed results on the ground [31,46]. The types of participation and at what stage in the policy development process, needs to be examined further [31,46], including the extent to which non-state actors are the drivers or implementers of forest policy change, and their capacities to contribute effectively [47].

Pillar 3 (Implementation, enforcement and compliance) was viewed as the weakest pillar in two (Cambodia and Myanmar) of the five countries. This indicates that efforts may need to focus more directly at improving governance at the sub-national and local levels. It is notable that both of these countries have ambitious and evolving community forestry programs [20,30], with one objective being to improve forest governance at the local level [30]. The findings reveal that whilst there may be effective legislative and policy frameworks in place in most countries, challenges remain at the implementation stage, particularly in locations without support from development organizations [30]. Furthermore, secure and clear land tenure rights for forest communities continues to be a pressing issue, as reflected in the fact that few countries in the GMS are willing to fully devolve tenure and rights to harvest timber to forest communities [20]. This points towards the continued prevalence of the belief among decision makers that state authorities have the sovereign right, and are the best equipped to manage the nation's forest resources.

4.2. Methodological Challenges

The work presented here assessed the state of forest governance in the GMS countries. Some aspects of the methodology need to be considered regarding the findings. Firstly, the processes of data collection varied between each country, including the number of workshops and participants. Secondly, the EEAT, with its emphasis on perceptions, was not originally designed for comparing one country with another. Instead, the tool is designed to highlight the strengths and weaknesses

of forest governance and enable systematic monitoring over time. Thirdly, both government and civil society actors participated in the workshops in each country, with implications regarding the participants speaking freely. The challenge for civil society organizations to air their opinions without fear of consequences is reflected in the arrest of activists in the region, but also recent legislation that potentially further curtails the work of civil society such as the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organizations (2015) in Cambodia [48], and the Decree on Associations (2017) in Lao PDR [49]. This challenging environment may not at times be reflected in the scores, as demonstrated in global assessments by Transparency International [7] on perceptions of corruption, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators [36] and EIU's Democracy index [8] where most of the GMS countries score poorly (Table 1). Considering the challenges to freedom of expression in the region, one must keep in mind the recent history on issues related to forest governance and with an understanding that some concerns may not have been aired if they are too critical.

4.3. Implications of the Findings and Moving Forward

While the focus of the research is on perceptions of forest governance within a country, there is also value in considering the work from a regional perspective. One illustration of the importance of a regional understanding of forest governance is its international dimensions, including the level of trade of illegal timber in the GMS, and Asia-Pacific as a whole. The illegal timber supply chain exists beyond the boundaries of individual countries with illegal logging and related trade being viewed as a significant issue throughout the GMS [50,51]. Thailand and Vietnam are considered major processing hubs of illegally sourced timber [52,53]. In the case of Vietnam, one-fifth of total imports are considered to be at high risk of coming from illegal sources [53], with Lao PDR and Cambodia being sources [54]. Myanmar is also a significant source of illegally harvested timber in the region [50,55]. Efforts to address this issue through, for example, export and logging bans in the region, have had a varied impact [56], with [57] finding that they were actually counter-productive, while others see a significant positive impact, including reducing the trade in illegal timber [58].

While the challenges facing forest governance in the region appear deeply entrenched, there are international and national initiatives that are providing impetus in addressing these challenges [59]. The European Union's FLEGT VPA initiative, for example, focuses on the issue of forest governance beyond illegal logging, including facilitating the effective participation of CSOs in forest governance mechanisms [49]. CSOs and news media are key in the efforts to strengthening the governance of natural resources [47,49,60,61]. However, they are working in a restrictive environment, and often their capacities are low [49], the latter issue was particularly emphasized in the research process. The design of the FLEGT VPA and its direct and indirect support is helping to address the capacity issue. This includes the FAO-EU FLEGT Programme, which is funding projects working to strengthen the capacity of CSOs in Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam to support the VPA process [62]. The research demonstrates, however, that there is still some way to go, a view supported by recent research [14,49].

The development of FLEGT VPAs in most of the GMS countries, along with the enforcement of the European Union Timber Regulation (2013), and the US Lacey Act Amendment (2008), and Australia's Illegal Logging Prohibition Act (2014), have resulted in increasing focus on the advancement of due diligence systems. However, weak governance in one country in the GMS may undermine the efforts to address illegal logging in other countries [44]. This is also a pressing matter under the FLEGT VPAs as monitoring regarding import and export controls are expected to be included within FLEGT timber legality assurance systems. Without the effective strengthening of governance throughout the GMS, FLEGT VPA will not be successful at curbing the trade in illegal timber, as highlighted by the outcry by some Cambodian NGOs when Vietnam and the EU signed the VPA in October 2018 [63], though some international NGOs note the efforts by the Vietnamese government to address this issue [44].

Cross border policy integration across various sectors is occurring through mechanisms created under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). These include initiatives that are directly or indirectly working to strengthen forest governance,

including under the Work plan for Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) in ASEAN 2016–2025 [64] and the APEC Experts Groups on Illegal Logging and Associated Trade (EGILAT) [65]. While the overall goal of the ASEAN FLEG program is for enhancing the international competitiveness of ASEAN's forestry products, it also recognizes the value of good forest governance for national economies and addressing social (e.g., poverty) and environmental (e.g., deforestation and forest degradation) issues. However, there is concern that the ASEAN level initiatives are not effective at addressing sensitive issues revolving around governance, including human rights and democratic processes [66,67].

The national initiatives to strengthen forest governance include formal processes such as legislative reform, as well as community forestry programs, and informal developments driven by, for example, the general public. The importance of the general public as drivers of change is visible through political movements, but also as consumers. As the region becomes more affluent, consumers are increasingly considering environmental issues when purchasing environmental products and services [68], but significant efforts still need to be made towards increasing environmental awareness so that consumers are able to make informed decisions [69].

Three main recommendations were proposed by the participants in the results sharing workshops (Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand) and data collection workshops (Cambodia and Vietnam). The broad recommendations were recommended to address governance issues at the landscape, national and regional levels:

- Development of a forest governance monitoring system to help address the limited access by civil society and news media, as well as government offices, to information related to forest governance. The system should be accessible to all stakeholders at landscape, national and regional levels, for inputting and accessing information. The system could be designed to build on the numerous international (e.g., LandPortal, Forest Legality Initiative, EFI FLEGT and REDD+ Facilities), national (e.g., national VPA and REDD+ programs) and landscape (community forest monitoring) level projects and programs.
- Capacity development program for non-state actors to support efforts to strengthen forest governance. The program would need to address the fact that advocates and watchdogs for good governance are working in a highly sensitive environment in the GMS countries. The program can also include components on operational management, and technical skills and knowledge (e.g., on FLEGT VPA).
- Awareness raising for supporting informed decision-making by consumers of forest products in the GMS recognizing they can be key agents of change if they make efforts to buy forest products from sustainable sources, and the impacts this will have (e.g., having a reliable system to demonstrate the legality of the product).

5. Conclusions

While the participants in the forest governance assessments highlighted numerous challenges for strengthening forest governance in the GMS countries, they also emphasized the progress in recent years, and opportunities for up scaling. There was emphasis in all countries on the need to build on this progress, including supporting national initiatives. This will require support being provided to civil society, news media, and local government offices in order that they can more efficiently and effectively support efforts to strengthen forest governance.

There are numerous issues when researching sensitive topics such as forest governance, especially in countries where environmental activism comes with significant risks. Innovative methods are needed to research such an important topic. The EEAT may prove itself to be such a tool, having proven to be a useful mechanism to systematically explore the perceptions of forest governance in the region, as well as to bring together key stakeholders to collectively explore the importance of good governance, and the challenges and opportunities to its achievement.

Future research priorities in this area can utilize the EEAT to explore forest governance throughout the remaining Southeast Asian countries, supporting the development of a program linked to the ASEAN FLEG. Additional work can include a similar assessment in the GMS countries in a few years, with the same stakeholder groups, to determine if there has been progress in strengthening forest governance in the region. Beyond the EEAT, additional research should also examine the potential power of consumers in Southeast Asia to support forest governance initiatives, they are increasingly being targeted by the private sector and NGOs to support green initiatives, but there is still limited understanding of their willingness to pay, for example, for certified forest products.

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Appendix A

Additional information on the participants in all workshops used in data collection.

Table A1. Participants in the background research workshops.

	Number of Workshops		Participants from National and Subnational Government Offices		Participants from National Civil Society Organizations		Others		Total
	National	Landscape	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Cambodia	1	1	9	0	19	2	12	4	46
Lao PDR	1	2	70	11	20	12	16	5	134
Myanmar	1	1	21	1	20	6	21	15	84
Thailand	1	1	57	13	23	6	30	21	150
Vietnam	1	0	6	0	13	6	16	15	56
Regional	1		0	0	3	3	16	17	39
TOTAL	11		163	25	98	35	111	77	509

Others denotes: Local community members from landscape, private sector, international NGOs, academic institutes, and news media.

Table A2. Participants in national and landscape quantitative (EEAT) and qualitative (situational analysis) data collection workshops in each GMS country.

	Number of Workshops		National and Subnational Government Offices		National Civil Society Organizations		Others		Total
	National	Landscape	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Cambodia	1	1	5	1	22	6	11	5	50
Lao PDR	2	2	79	15	11	4	3	1	113
Myanmar	2	1	36	16	23	11	33	16	135
Thailand	1	4	37	13	32	17	20	11	130
Vietnam	2	0	20	1	15	7	18	3	64
TOTAL	7	8	177	46	103	45	85	36	492

Others denotes: Local community members from landscape, private sector, international NGOs, academic institutes, and news media.

Table A3. Participants in results sharing and ways forward workshops in each GMS country.

	Number of Workshops		National and Subnational Government Office		National Civil Society Organizations		Others		Total
	National	Landscape	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Cambodia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lao PDR	1	0	3	0	4	5	4	2	18
Myanmar	1	2	0	0	10	1	12	1	24
Thailand	1	2	17	4	35	15	8	7	86
Vietnam	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional (Bangkok)	1		0	0	8	2	15	9	34
TOTAL	3	4	20	4	57	23	39	19	162

Others denotes: Local community members from landscape, private sector, international NGOs, academic institutes, and news media.

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