

Thirteenth Session of the Assembly
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Agenda Item 16

Updates on the Operationalization of the Regional Office

I. Background

1. The Regional Office for the Mekong (ROM) has been operational in Hanoi, Vietnam, since November 2024, with its Head appointed in March 2024. The Vietnam Academy of Forest Sciences, the host agency for the ROM, has provided office space and is working to finalize the legal status of the office within Viet Nam. This process is crucial for the office to perform basic functions, such as to secure a serial number and to open a bank account. These functions are vital for the ROM to effectively fulfill its roles as a subsidiary of the Secretariat, particularly concerning project implementation and resource mobilization.

II. Roles and Responsibilities of the Regional Office

2. The primary responsibilities of the AFoCO Regional Offices include: Project Development; Resource Mobilization; Project Implementation and Reporting; Monitoring and Evaluation; and Enhancing Collaboration and Communication.

3. To effectively carry out these responsibilities, the ROM is tasked with improving coordination with national focal points (NFPs) to ensure that projects are in direct alignment with national forestry goals. The ROM also plans to establish regular sub-regional meetings to strengthen collaboration and communication, specifically for project development and resource mobilization.

III. Feedback and Proposed Projects

4. The ROM has solicited feedback from NFPs in the region regarding the office's functions and responsibilities.

5. Lao PDR views the ROM as a timely opportunity to align regional cooperation with its national "Forestry Strategy to 2035" and "Vision to 2050," which focus on sustainable forest management, forest landscape restoration, and poverty reduction. Lao PDR also recommended that the ROM provide capacity-building support for project design, monitoring, and reporting to help meet national and donor requirements.

6. Thailand expressed that the ROM would serve as a central hub for new project ideas from the Royal Forest Department, including initiatives on nature-based restoration, biodiversity credits, community-level climate change resilience, and forest fire prevention.

7. Cambodia emphasized several key areas for ROM operations, including strengthening partnerships with development partners, maintaining close communication with NFPs, and ensuring proper coordination throughout project cycles. Cambodia also highlighted the importance of accessibility through rotating regional events among Member Countries and giving priority attention to vulnerable countries in the region.

8. Based on this feedback, the ROM will concentrate on developing and supporting several key program areas:

a) Transboundary Cooperation:

- Transboundary forest projects in Mekong to restore shared watersheds and forest ecosystems
- Peace Forest Initiative, by Korea Forest Service and adopted by UNCCD, to address cross-border environmental issues

b) Climate Change and Livelihoods:

- Community-based Carbon and REDD+ Pilots: Projects to provide livelihood benefits for local people and contribute to carbon neutrality goals
- Climate-smart Forest Fire Management: Projects to address fire risks through early warning, prevention, and community-based response
- Forest–Livelihood Nexus Projects: Projects to promote sustainable income and resilience for rural households through non-timber forest products (NTFPs), bamboo, and eco-tourism

9. All proposed projects will be aligned with the priority areas under AFoCO's Strategic Plan 2024-2030 and the ten (10)-year Climate Action, ensuring consistency with Member Countries' national policies and priorities.

IV. Operational Suggestions and Conclusion

10. The ROM plans to establish strong partnerships with development partners and international organizations, including KOICA(Korea International Cooperation Agency), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), GIZ (German Agency for International Cooperation), SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), AFD (French Development Agency), and SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), to maximize synergies and prevent duplication of efforts in support of forestry sector development in the Mekong region.

11. The office is also considering the establishment of an annual "AFoCO Mekong Forest Forum" to serve as a platform for communication, knowledge exchange, and collaboration. Additionally, the ROM will ensure the participation of women, youth, and local communities to support equitable and sustainable development.

12. To strengthen the ROM's operational capacity, Member Countries have suggested several enhancement measures, including: developing a regional management structure; strengthening staffing arrangements; establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms with active stakeholder participation; utilizing existing facilities such as the RETC for capacity building; and strengthening cooperation with the Korea-Mekong Forest Cooperation Center (KMFCC). Additionally, Member Countries have proposed hosting an official inauguration ceremony for the ROM to enhance visibility and Member support.

13. The Forum will be organized to fulfill the roles of the ROM and be focus on the issues raised by the countries in the region. The Forum is expected to support and facilitate AFoCO's goals and Strategic Plan of action approved and endorsed by the Assembly, particularly the issues for the Mekong countries. The ROM wishes to organize the Forum regularly, subject to the annual budget of the Secretariat and relevance of the agenda raised by the countries in the region and/or partners in and/or beyond the region. The Forum venues would rotate among member countries to enhance accessibility and facilitate sharing of regional experiences and lessons learned.

14. A fully operational ROM is expected to provide tangible benefits to Member Countries by accelerating their national forestry strategies and strengthening AFoCO's role as a trusted regional partner. The ROM is committed to translating these goals into meaningful actions for Member Countries, partners, and the broader Mekong region.

V. Points for Consideration

15. The Assembly may wish to:

- a. Consider the proposal for the establishment of the AFoCO Mekong Forest Forum; and
- b. Consider the operational enhancement measures proposed by Member Countries to strengthen the ROM's capacity and effectiveness in serving the Mekong region.

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