

# THE SOCIAL GREEN ECONOMY: A PERSPECTIVE ON A FOREST COMMUNITY PROJECT IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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## Abstract

**How to cite this paper:** Thathongkham, T., & Sonsuphap, R. (2023). The social green economy: A perspective on a forest community project in a developing country. *Corporate & Business Strategy Review*, 4(4), 62–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.22495/cbsrv4i4art7>

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**ISSN Online:** 2708-4965

**ISSN Print:** 2708-9924

**Received:** 27.03.2023

**Accepted:** 22.09.2023

**JEL Classification:** F60, F64, Q50, Q56

**DOI:** 10.22495/cbsrv4i4art7

The social green economy prioritises the use of green technologies and sustainable practices in economic activities, resulting in a reduction in environmental impact and an improvement in social well-being (Guo et al., 2020; Söderholm, 2020). Furthermore, the efficiency evaluation of the green economy development of forestry is related to the direction of forestry development and plays an important role in balancing economic and environmental issues within it (Huang et al., 2022). This study aims to explain forest community projects as a promising example of how sustainable development and the green economy can be achieved through community-based initiatives. A qualitative approach was applied. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 key informants, employing purposive sampling. Content analysis and NVivo were adopted to analyse the data. The findings confirmed the potential benefits of community-based forestry initiatives, such as job creation, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability. A forest community project can contribute to a green economy by implementing sustainable practices and utilising green technologies in its operations. By participating in carbon credit programmes, a forest community project can contribute to a green economy, mitigate the effects of climate change, and improve the economic prosperity and social well-being of the local community.

**Keywords:** Social, Green Economy, Forest Community Project, Sustainable

**Authors' individual contribution:** Conceptualization — T.T. and R.S.; Methodology — T.T. and R.S.; Software — T.T. and R.S.; Validation — T.T. and R.S.; Investigation — T.T. and R.S.; Resources — T.T. and R.S.; Writing — T.T. and R.S.; Supervision — R.S.

**Declaration of conflicting interests:** The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The green economy presents an alternative vision for economic growth and development, aiming to improve people's lives while also promoting environmental and social well-being. An essential aspect of this approach is the promotion of sustainable technologies, which play a crucial role in

green economy strategies (Söderholm, 2020). The concept of a green economy originated from environmental economics and gained significant attention during the United Nations' "Rio+20" conference in 2012. Since then, it has become a widely discussed topic in international policy discussions on sustainable development. At its core, a green economy is characterised by its low-carbon footprint, efficient use of resources, and inclusivity.

In a green economy, both public and private investments prioritise the reduction of carbon emissions and pollution, the enhancement of energy and resource efficiency, and the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Importantly, the green economy is touted as being capable of generating equal or even greater economic growth compared to the current business-as-usual model, but in a more sustainable and inclusive manner (Vuola et al., 2020). Given the pressing global challenges such as climate change, population growth, environmental pollution, and the unsustainable use of natural resources, countries must adopt environmentally friendly technologies and approaches to economic activities. Sustainable development, driven by comprehensive policies at the international and national levels, is associated with minimal environmental harm and considers the needs of future generations. Many of these policies endorse the utilisation of green technologies (Guo et al., 2020). Sustainable development serves as the guiding framework for the economy, enabling concrete and measurable progress at the intersection of the economy and the environment. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a roadmap for addressing environmental issues and the depletion of resources caused by human activities. All three dimensions of sustainable development — economic, environmental, and social — provide valuable perspectives for identifying challenges and developing green policies within the economy. Furthermore, the green economy is expected to act as a catalyst for national policy renewal and international support, which are integral to sustainable development as a strategic economic agenda. The United Nations Environment Programme defines the green economy as a form of economy that can enhance human well-being, promote social equity, and effectively address environmental and ecological concerns (Khoshnava et al., 2019).

According to Adamowicz (2022), Huang et al. (2022), Lee et al. (2022), and Mason et al. (2022), the green economy has gained widespread recognition as a viable solution to address resource scarcity, environmental degradation, financial crises, accident prevention, and loss reduction. Many countries have formulated strategic plans for green development. For instance, the United States is prioritising clean energy, while the European Union is focusing on developing green industries. The forestry sector plays a crucial role in climate change mitigation, economic development, and ecological and environmental preservation, making it an ideal application of the green economy theory. Investing in and managing forest resources can yield multiple benefits within the framework of the green economy. Forestry contributes to human well-being by providing valuable products and supporting forest tourism services. It also creates green jobs, enhances the income of local farmers, and helps alleviate poverty. A forestry-based green economy represents a sustainable development model for forest resources, encompassing activities such as tree cultivation, planting, woodcutting, transportation, processing, and manufacturing. The key distinction between the previous economic development model and a forestry-based green economy lies in the latter's emphasis on social benefits, such as

green employment and poverty reduction. Therefore, an efficient forestry-based green economy model can improve the environment, promote social equity, mitigate environmental risks, and serve as a stable economic development framework.

While previous studies have investigated various aspects of the social green economy, such as green economy performance in Saudi Arabia (Chaaben et al., 2022) and the impact of green credit on green economy efficiency in China (Guo et al., 2022), there remains a notable research gap in exploring the social green economy within the context of forest community projects in Thailand. Thailand is renowned for its abundant biodiversity and forest resources, which play a crucial role in climate regulation, water conservation, and supporting local livelihoods, as highlighted by Open Development (2017). In 2019, the Thai government acknowledged the significance of community-based forest management and granted communities the right to manage their forests (Agarwal et al., 2022). Within the realm of forest community projects in Thailand, the social green economy perspective emphasises community participation, sustainable forest management, and equitable distribution of benefits (Salam et al., 2006; UN-REDD, 2013). The scarcity of studies in this specific context underscores the need to address this research gap. Hence, the objective of this paper is to shed light on forest community projects as a critical area of study, illustrating how community-based initiatives can contribute to sustainable development and the green economy. By exploring the social green economy within the specific context of forest community projects in Thailand, this research aims to provide unique insights and a deeper understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and potential impacts of such initiatives within a distinct cultural, environmental, and socio-economic setting.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 1 sets the foundation for the paper. Section 2 presents the relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, followed by the presentation of results in Section 4 and their subsequent discussion in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper and offers recommendations based on the findings.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Karki (2013), there is a lack of consensus among policymakers and development experts regarding the definition and driving forces of a green economy, especially concerning mountainous countries like Nepal. However, the concept holds great relevance in the face of rapid climate change and unsustainable development. It is widely acknowledged that the green economy offers opportunities for forest-rich developing countries like Nepal, as reliance on fossil fuels and import-oriented consumerism is unsustainable in the present and future. The green economy has the potential to foster sustainable development in mountainous regions. Nevertheless, the implementation of specific strategies and action plans is crucial for the adoption of green and low-carbon economic activities. First and foremost, a national policy and commitment to a green

economy are necessary to achieve poverty reduction and sustainable development. It is essential to ensure economic growth while reducing poverty through well-designed development plans and programs that actively involve and empower rural and urban communities, with support from government, non-governmental organisations, and donor agencies. Nepal, being a low-income country, faces multiple challenges in adapting and implementing green economy policies. These challenges include capacity and skill development, technology adaptation, transfer, and retrofitting to suit the hilly and mountainous terrain of Nepal, the need for substantial investments in processing and value addition, and addressing climate change adaptation and mitigation. Despite these constraints, green economic policies and programs can contribute to sustainable development in mountainous regions. It is imperative to document successful case studies to draw lessons, establish clear green growth pathways, and scale up successful initiatives to create larger impacts. Additionally, effective and outcome-oriented implementation will require multidisciplinary planning, interdisciplinary implementation, and participatory monitoring and evaluation. Assoua and Molua (2018) emphasise the central role of sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation in the transition to a green economy. The ongoing biodiversity and climate crises provide an opportunity to reassess traditional growth and business models, with these crises serving as catalysts for the new paradigm of the green economy. Forests, besides providing timber products, play a critical role in the carbon cycle and serve as a foundation for the green economy. Recent developments in sustainable development, driven by the urgency of addressing climate change and transitioning to a green economy, have placed increased policy focus on the link between sustainable forest management and the green economy.

In their study, Vuola et al. (2020) examined the implementation of green economy policies in the energy and forestry sectors of Laos and Cambodia. Both countries have established green growth targets; however, conflicting processes related to natural resource management have unfolded over the past decade. While some efforts have been made to decentralise natural resource management by empowering local communities through initiatives like community-based forest or fishery management, the predominant trend has been the opening up of Laos and Cambodia to large-scale investments by multinational corporations. The proliferation of extensive hydropower projects and increasing deforestation pose challenges to the sustainable management of natural resources. Although green economy principles emphasise strong state regulation, policy development often takes place within a complex dynamic shaped by the interests of donors and investors. Achieving a green economy necessitates state intervention to direct investments towards environmentally less damaging industries and ensures social inclusion in land-use decision-making processes.

Ali et al. (2021) conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to assess Ghana's efforts in transforming its economy

into a green one. The analysis revealed several strengths, including the country's favourable geographical location, potential for a green energy mix, environmental policies, and a young and dynamic population. Ghana's commitment to reducing poverty levels and illiteracy rates were also highlighted as strengths. However, the analysis identified key weaknesses such as weak institutions, insufficient funding for green technology innovations, inadequate long-term policies for green strategies, and limited political will. The study also identified various opportunities, including the involvement of commercial interests in driving green technology development and transfer, cross-border collaborations, global attention to climate change, support for the green economy at local and international levels, and growing awareness and understanding of environmental protection. Conversely, threats to Ghana's green economy transformation efforts include insufficient commitment to technology development and transfer, the high cost of green technologies, the escalating threat of climate change, and corruption. Policymakers are encouraged to formulate strategies that capitalise on strengths and opportunities while addressing weaknesses and threats. Additionally, prioritising science and technology education and other relevant aspects is crucial to support the development of a green economy.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically utilising in-depth interviews, as the research strategy. The qualitative approach aims to understand the underlying contexts and reasons behind specific phenomena by exploring individuals' or groups' decision-making processes and behaviours. In-depth interviews facilitate two-way communication, allowing for the collection of additional data during the interview (Siripipatthanakul et al., 2022). The qualitative research process generally involves four main steps: research design, data collection, data analysis, and report writing (Limna, Kraivanit, & Siripipatthanakul, 2023). In-depth interviews are particularly useful for obtaining detailed and specific information about the research topic, ensuring accurate data to fulfil the research objectives (Limsakul & Kraivanit, 2020; Sonsuphap, 2022). The interview questions were carefully designed to encourage detailed and meaningful perspectives, and a pilot test was conducted to ensure clarity. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and the interviews were conducted in comfortable settings, respecting the participants' preferences. Detailed notes or recordings were taken with consent, and the recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis following the guidelines provided by Limna Kraivanit, Jangjarat, et al. (2023).

Furthermore, to complement the primary data, the researchers utilised the documentary method to review secondary data, which aided in the development of appropriate survey questions. Purposive sampling, a commonly employed technique in qualitative research, was adopted to select a sample based on the researchers' expertise, aiming to gain comprehensive insights into



#### 4.1. The role of a forest community project in a green economy

A forest community project can contribute to a green economy by adopting sustainable practices and utilising green technologies in its operations.

- *Sustainable forest management:* By practising sustainable forest management, the community can ensure that the forest resources are utilised in a manner that is environmentally responsible and sustainable. This includes using environmentally friendly methods for harvesting, planting, and managing forests, as well as conserving biodiversity and protecting wildlife.

- *Eco-friendly operations:* The community can implement eco-friendly operations, such as using renewable energy sources, reducing waste and emissions, and conserving water. This helps to reduce the environmental impact of the project and promote sustainability.

- *Community-based enterprises:* A forest community project can encourage the development of community-based enterprises that are focused on sustainable products and services. These could include eco-tourism, sustainable forestry, and the production of non-timber forest products, among others.

- *Job creation:* By promoting sustainable development and creating community-based enterprises, a forest community project can help create jobs and improve livelihoods in the local area. This can contribute to economic prosperity and social justice.

- *Environmental education:* A forest community project can also play an important role in promoting environmental education and awareness, by educating the local community about the importance of sustainable development and environmental protection.

By adopting these practices, a forest community project can support the goals of the green economy and contribute to sustainable development in the local area.

#### 4.2. Using a forest community project for carbon credit

A forest community project can participate in carbon credit programmes as a way of contributing to a green economy and mitigating the effects of climate change.

- *Carbon sequestration:* By practising sustainable forest management, a forest community project can maintain or increase the carbon stored in the forest, which is referred to as carbon sequestration. This helps to mitigate the effects of climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

- *Measuring carbon stock:* To participate in carbon credit programmes, a forest community project must first measure its carbon stock using recognised methods, such as utilising national or international protocols.

- *Verification:* Once the carbon stock has been measured, it must be verified by a third-party organisation to ensure the accuracy of the measurement and that the project meets the eligibility criteria for the carbon credit programme.

- *Registering the project:* Once the carbon stock has been verified, the forest community project can then register for a carbon credit programme, such as the Clean Development Mechanism or the Voluntary Carbon Market.

- *Selling carbon credits:* Once registered, the forest community project can then sell carbon credits to entities such as businesses, governments, or individuals that are seeking to offset their carbon emissions. The revenue generated from the sale of carbon credits can be used to fund further sustainable development projects in the local area.

By participating in carbon credit programmes, a forest community project can contribute to a green economy, mitigate the effects of climate change, and improve the economic prosperity and social well-being of the local community.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study highlights the concept of forest community projects as a promising avenue for achieving sustainable development and realising the goals of the green economy through community-based initiatives. Green technologies encompass environmentally friendly and sustainable methods and equipment used in economic activities, which help mitigate the negative impact of human actions on the environment, conserve natural resources, and promote overall sustainability. Sustainable practices involve conducting economic activities in a manner that considers their environmental impact and the well-being of future generations. These practices encompass waste and emission reduction, resource conservation, and environmentally responsible production and consumption. The integration of green technologies and sustainable practices into economic activities lies at the core of the social green economy concept. Ishak et al. (2017) affirmed the significant contributions of green technology to the environment, human well-being, and organisations. Green technology applies scientific knowledge to safeguard resources and the environment, while also mitigating the adverse effects of human activities. Sustainable development is at the heart of environmental technology, necessitating solutions that address social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Governments play a crucial role in driving the advancement of green technology through the formulation of various policies. Acosta et al. (2020) explored the performance of countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) specifically related to the protection of natural capital. They divided the green growth concept into four pillars: environmental quality, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction, ecosystem and biodiversity protection, and cultural and social value. Natural capital protection is a dimension within the Green Growth Index developed by the Global Green Growth Institute to assess countries' progress in transitioning towards green growth. The chosen indicators for natural capital protection are either SDG indicators themselves or directly contribute to SDG targets. Performance scores are measured based on the proximity to achieving the SDGs, benchmarked against sustainability targets for the SDGs, Aichi Biodiversity, and the Paris Climate Agreement. While many regions have made strides in improving environmental quality and reducing GHG emissions, challenges remain in enhancing biodiversity and

ecosystem protection, as well as cultural and social values. Furthermore, numerous countries in Asia and the Pacific face significant challenges in terms of expanding protected areas to cover a larger proportion of key biodiversity areas and ensuring the preservation of soil biodiversity. Failure to address biodiversity loss resulting from deforestation and intensive farming will hinder countries' ability to meet sustainability targets for reducing GHG emissions and enhancing environmental quality.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the potential of forest community projects as a means to achieve sustainable development and contribute to the green economy. Forest community projects represent a promising example of sustainable development and the green economy can be achieved through community-based initiatives. The environmental impact of economic activities is reduced by encouraging the use of green technologies and sustainable practices. Reducing GHG emissions, minimising waste and pollution, conserving natural resources, and protecting biodiversity are all examples of this. These actions help to ensure a more sustainable future in which the environment is protected for subsequent generations and the negative effects of human activity are minimised. Simultaneously, the concept of the social green economy seeks to improve social well-being by promoting social equity and addressing poverty. This includes providing decent jobs, increasing access to education and healthcare, and promoting social inclusion. The social green economy seeks to improve the overall quality of life for all members of society, particularly those who have been marginalised or left behind, by balancing economic prosperity and social justice. The social green economy seeks to establish a mutually reinforcing relationship between environmental sustainability and social well-being, allowing both to be improved at the same time. Furthermore, by implementing sustainable practices and utilising green technologies in its operations, a forest community project can contribute to a green economy, mitigate the effects of climate change, and improve the economic prosperity and social well-being of the local community by participating in carbon credit programmes.

The study underscores the potential of forest community projects as a promising avenue for achieving sustainable development goals and fostering a green economy. The findings of this study can provide valuable insights for administrators, governments, and other stakeholders involved in developing and implementing strategies for sustainable development. By understanding the potential benefits of forest community projects

and their contribution to the green economy, these stakeholders can make informed decisions and design effective policies to promote sustainability and improve social well-being. Incorporating the lessons learned from this research can help shape strategies that prioritise green technologies, sustainable practices, and community-based initiatives, leading to more successful and impactful sustainable development efforts. Additionally, this paper adds to the existing literature on forest community projects as a promising example of sustainable development and the green economy. Hence, this study's findings may aid academics in broadening their research by incorporating more potential elements. The measurements could be used to guide future research on forest community projects, sustainable development, and the green economy.

While the study explores the potential benefits of forest community projects in contributing to a green economy, there are several research limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations can inform recommendations for future research in this area. First, this paper explains forest community projects as a promising example of sustainable development and the green economy in Thailand. In terms of further research, it is suggested that more areas be added. In addition, the study conducted in-depth interviews with only ten key informants using purposive sampling. While qualitative research emphasises depth over breadth, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could consider larger sample sizes or employ a mixed-methods approach to capture a more diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Moreover, the study does not include a comparison group or control group for evaluating the effectiveness of forest community projects. Without a baseline or alternative scenario, it is challenging to attribute the observed benefits solely to community-based forestry initiatives. Future research could incorporate control groups or employ comparative studies to better assess the impact of forest community projects. Lastly, the study does not extensively explore the specific contextual factors that contribute to the success or failure of forest community projects. Factors such as local governance structures, policy support, community engagement, and resource availability can significantly influence the outcomes. Future research could delve deeper into these contextual factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their role in achieving sustainable development and the green economy through community-based initiatives. By addressing these limitations, researchers can provide a more robust understanding of the potential benefits and challenges associated with community-based forestry initiatives and their role in achieving sustainability goals.

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