

The Asia Soil Conservation Network for the Humid Tropics (ASOCON)

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The Asia Soil Conservation Network for the Humid Tropics (ASOCON) was formed with UNDP/FAO support in 1989 and became a quasi-legal entity in June 1993. The network structure consists of a coordinating unit at the Ministry of Forestry (MOF), Jakarta, and National Coordinating Committees established by each member country (China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam). National Coordinators form the Network Consultative Board (NCB) which serves as both the steering committee and the policy-forming body. The network aims to assist its member countries through a programme of information exchange, regional workshops, expert consultations and learning activities to enhance the skills and expertise of those responsible for the development and dissemination of soil and water conservation practices for small-scale farmers. The ultimate objective is to help small-scale farmers use their land sustainably and productively.

ASOCON regional activities have included workshops on new approaches to in-service training for soil and water conservation and indigenous conservation farming systems, Regional Action Learning Programmes on the development of conservation farming systems and conservation project design, and a review of distance education programmes on soil and water conservation in ASOCON countries. ASOCON also assisted FAO in the development of the scheme for the Conservation of Lands in Asia and the Pacific (CLASP) to provide a means by which countries of the region can develop their own programmes to fight land degradation. To foster information exchange on soil and water conservation the network newsletter CONTOUR, first published in 1989, is issued on a regular basis.

Since 1991 ASOCON has operated through the contribution of its members in cash or in kind and limited FAO financial and technical assistance. Lessons learned from the Regional Action Learning Programmes, particularly the integration of soil and water conservation practices in farming system development and the enhancement of farmers participation in agricultural development as a whole, have formed the basis for national soil and water conservation projects and programmes. These have included the Fujian Soil Conservation and Rural Development Project in China, the Credit for Conservation Upland Farming Project in Indonesia, Group Farming Projects in Malaysia, the programme for development of marginal areas in the Philippines, linkage of soil conservation with commodity based farming systems in Papua New Guinea, the Land Development Village Programme in Thailand, and the Regreening of Barren

ASOCON an Overview

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Lands Programme in Vietnam.

The increased awareness of the importance of environmental issues across all sectors of society is a key external opportunity for ASOCON, but is threatened by the relative unattractiveness of soil and water conservation per se to international donors, governments, and the public at large. ASOCON's basic strengths are strong cooperative arrangements between its member countries, its functioning secretariat, its long collective experience in soil and water conservation, and its proven track-record in facilitating international meetings. Despite the termination of UNDP/FAO project support in 1991 ASOCON has continued to operate as a quasi-legal independent entity. However, in its present form, ASOCON's basic weaknesses are lack of external and limited internal funding, lack of ability to field specialized expertise and implement visible field programmes, lack of official support at high level between countries, and difficulty in relating ASOCON to government priority areas where national soil and water conservation programmes are not in place or approved. If ASOCON is still to play a role in promoting soil and water conservation at regional and national level there is an urgent need for its member countries to review ASOCON's structure and objectives and formulate a viable plan of action.

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