



Press Release: Land and Forest Governance in the Naga Village Republic
Resource Rights for the Indigenous People (RRtIP)
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Indigenous Naga communities call on the Myanmar government to recognize customary tenure and respect their rights to own, use and govern over the lands, territories and resources, which they have occupied since time immemorial.

The Naga Hills lie on the divide between northwest Myanmar and northeast India. Naga people have deep historic, cultural and spiritual ties to their land, which is managed through the Naga customary tenure system. The customary tenure system refers to the way that local communities govern their lands, and defines who can use and manage different resources, and provides rules for how they should be managed.

The Naga customary tenure system is flexible and diverse, rooted in ancestral history and adapted over generations. The system comprises local institutions, which make decisions and enforces rules for how lands and resources can be used, a customary justice system which resolves local disputes over lands and resources, and an adaptive land use system which both conserves valuable resources and provides for the livelihoods of indigenous communities. Both religion and cultural practices are expressed through the customary tenure system, and traditional practices are rooted in the land and the spirits, which inhabit it.

‘The proof that we have a way of managing the forest is that after hundreds of years there is still forest here. Thanks to our Naga system there is still forest.’ - Somra community member

As a result of this locally embedded governance system, which manages over land and forest resources, Naga territories still maintains some of the richest biodiversity in the region. The landscape varies from low elevation semi-evergreen rainforest, to alpine meadows and snow-capped peaks, which support a vast biodiversity and habitats for a range of vulnerable and endangered species.

“We have no VFV land, all of our land is being used” – Somra village elder

Despite the values of the customary tenure system in protecting natural habitats and providing for the livelihoods of Naga communities, lands that have been customarily held and managed by Naga communities since time immemorial are not recognized under the current legal framework, putting their livelihoods at risk from land and resource grabs. None of this land is vacant, but under the amended Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Law (2018) communities will be considered criminal trespassers on their own customary lands as of March 11.

The recognition of customary tenure is not only essential for the livelihoods and culture of indigenous and forest-dependent communities and protection of the environment, but also for securing a foundation for sustainable and equitable peace throughout Myanmar.

"We own this land and we have a good system for managing the land and the forest. We have owners in namesake, but actually we share the land with the poor and landless... Our management system should be considered to be helping the government. If we do not practice our customary system for land, our identity and our customs will be gone. Our laws are not documented, but we continue to keep them alive."

– Village Chief, Somra