The Reforestation System in the Philippines: The Case of Sicopong in Negros Oriental

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1. Introduction
In the 1900s the Philippine forest cover stood at 70%, but almost a century later it had dropped to 19% (ESSC 1999). There are many hypotheses as to the causes of deforestation. Among the most common factors identified by researchers as contributing to the decline in forest cover are the following: first, rampant logging, both legal and illegal, that took place for export to developed countries; second, land conversion, that occurred when forests lands were cleared as early as the colonization era to pave the way for the establishment of agricultural plantations, both permanent and subsistence; and finally, increase in upland population and concomitant poverty that was brought about by the lack of income-earning opportunities in the lowlands. When the effects brought about by deforestation surfaced, the government started adopting some approaches that evolved into what we now call Community Based Forest Management (CBFM) to combat the growing problems of deforestation and poverty in the uplands.

This study is about a community tapped by the government to carry out a reforestation project financed by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). Aside from rehabilitating the denuded forests through reforestation, it is also aimed at uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the affected communities. To achieve these general project objectives, the government employed the CBFM strategy whose main features included the awarding of land tenure to the People’s Organization (PO) through the Community Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA).

The main objective of the present study was to assess the People’s Organization’s management system, the people’s participation, and land tenure, among others, in relation to realizing the objectives of CBFM which included attaining social justice, poverty alleviation, and sustainable forest management.

The methodology adopted in conducting the present research was the Rapid Rural Appraisal under the exploratory type of survey. Key persons and ordinary members from the PO were interviewed by the team including government personnel involved in the implementation of the subproject. Direct observation was also used as one of the data collection techniques.

2. Community Based Forest Management (CBFM) in the country
2.1 CBFM, its objectives and features
CBFM is the national strategy adopted by the government, through the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), to combat the growing problem of forest degradation while attempting to uplift the socio-economic status of the upland communities regarded as the “poorest among the poor”. The overall concept of CBFM is “the people first and sustainable forestry follows” with the objectives of attaining social justice and equal access to rights, poverty alleviation, and sustainable resource use. In the CBFM program, newly formed and/or previously existing associations or cooperatives were tapped for the protection, conservation, and management of established and/or existing natural forests found in the area awarded to them. Unlike in ISFP, where the CSCs were awarded mostly to individual/families, the Community Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA) was only awarded to qualified people’s organizations. The CBFMA is thus the only key by
which the PO is able to harvest forest plantations, both existing and established.

3. CBFM in Sicopong and project situation

The Sicopong watershed subproject in Negros Oriental is one of the 36 subprojects (24 watersheds and 12 mangrove rehabilitation) under the Forestry Sector Project (FSP) implemented nationwide. FSP, on the other hand, is one of the many foreign-assisted projects/programs adopting the CBFM strategy financed in large part by loans from JBIC, formerly the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF) of Japan. The total project cost for the Sicopong subproject was 71 million pesos where 62% (44 million) was intended for the development of 2,000 ha plantation out of the more than 7,000 ha total watershed area. The cost was originally scheduled to be spread out over a period from 1996 to December 2000, but was subsequently extended up to June 2003, with 90% coming from JBIC and the rest provided as the government counterpart (NFDO 2004).

CBFMA was awarded to the PO in 1998 with an area of 2,000 ha covering the original project boundary. Since they have plantations outside the original boundary, they are in the process of amending their CBFMA to cover those plantations outside the original project boundary previously awarded with CBFMA. If it is amended, then the PO’s area will increase to more than 7,000 ha.

3.1 Socio-economic profile of the community

The majority of the residents around the subproject are migrants from neighboring towns and provinces who relocated there shortly after the logging company abandoned the area in the late 1970s. They entered and started cultivating the lands by shifting cultivation, commonly known as “kaingin.” Based on the appraisal report (NFDO 1996) the average annual income in the community was 13,107 pesos coming from on-farm, off-farm, and non-farm sources as described in Table 1. The bulk of income from these people came from “kaingin” farming. Apparently, only 5% of the total population of the covered barangays belongs to the organization.

Most of the previous projects by different government agencies in the area targeted the individual or family as beneficiaries and not organizations. Unfortunately, those that were organized under the ISFP eventually disappeared due to the absence of regular community development workers from DENR.

Prior to the Sicopong subproject, the community could be accessed easily only during dry season. The most common form of transportation is through the limited number of single motorcycles called “habal-habal” transporting residents to the nearest highway.

3.2 Formation of the People’s Organization

To realize the objectives of FSP in the Sicopong watershed subproject, the community within the project area was organized into a PO. Community Organizing (CO) was conducted by an Assisting Organization (AO) through a two-year contract with DENR. They helped to form the present Sicopong United Ecological Rehabilitators for Sustainable Development Association, Inc. (SUERSDAI) in the barangays covered by the subproject through a special general assembly meeting. The main role of the AO was to prepare the community participants socio-institutionally, to assist them technically, and to mobilize them to manage the subproject on a sustainable basis.

While the PO was supposed to be trained and knowledgeable at least on project management, the CO did not prove to be effective. Most of the time the participants to these training sessions were just the officers and members who could easily be tapped to attend the said training sessions and seminars. The objectives of CO were not achieved.

![Table 1 Source and average income in the community](image-url)
since the AO stuck with the pro-formatted contract that did not necessarily reflect the needs of the organization.

Unlike in Japan, where organizations and/or cooperatives are formed out of the needs of the village, many organizations in the country were formed as a requirement for community-oriented developmental projects usually funded by foreign institutions.

3.3 Types of PO membership

Based on the PO policy, for one to become a member, he/she must be a stakeholder. Table 2 shows the type and the number of members divided into three categories. First are the stakeholders who may have once worked on the plantations and want to have their claimed land developed. Second are the honorary members ("absentee claimants") who also want to have their claimed lands developed, but do not actually reside in the barangays covered by the subproject. Finally, there are the non-stakeholder members who merely provided the labor requirements during plantation activities. Lack of area to complete the original target forced the PO to resort to accepting new members (honorary and non-stakeholders). This took place after DENR had approved their request to plant outside the original subproject boundary as long as it is within the whole watershed.

3.4 Area developed and species planted

Based on the Comprehensive Site Development (CSD) contract, the PO must develop the 2,000 ha target area for forest tree and agroforestry plantations until year 2000. However, only 46% of the total target area equivalent to 926 ha was developed until year 2000. One major reason for the shortage in the area to be developed was that not all the residents participated in the project. These people did not allow their area to be developed into plantations for fear that they would be ejected once the trees had grown, based on the experiences they had heard from residents of neighboring towns. This situation forced the PO to request DENR for area expansion as mentioned earlier.

They also requested for a change in species and area allocated for some components. Under the original plan of 1,212 ha forest tree plantation, 791 ha should be planted with Swietenia mahogani (L.) Jacq. (mahogany) and the rest with Acacia mangium Willd. (mangium). Considering the adaptability and high survival rate of mangium, the latter being the basis for the payment of their achievements, the PO opted for mangium which now comprises the greater part of the trees for re-planting to replace the dead mahogany seedlings.

Under the agroforestry plantation, Mangifera

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 Membership data for year 2003</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. stakeholder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. non-stakeholder</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. honorary</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Field survey, 2004
indica L. (mango), which was not originally included in the plan, now has a total area of 711 ha equivalent to 95% of the total agroforestry plantations. The PO, through the demands of the stakeholder members, preferred mango over Artocarpus heterophyllus Lam. (jackfruit) because they are more familiar with the management of the former, and it has a higher market value than the latter. This is shown in Figure 1. Most, if not all, plantation activities stipulated in the CSD contract were paid.

4. Problems and present status of the PO

4.1 Management system

Most activities concerning the plantations, i.e., from silvicultural to marketing, have been decided by the PO and not by the member stakeholder claiming the land. The main role of these stakeholder members is to protect and maintain their plantations.

While there was a CSD committee in their organizational structure in charge of monitoring and supervising plantation activities, still it was not enough to be effective especially after area expansion. Being sporadically located and with the recommendation of the newly-boarded Subproject Site Management Office (SUSIMO), in lieu of a single staff previously assigned in the area, the PO further subdivided the area into four smaller units and assigned a core group for each. They used the initials of their barangays’ and sitios’ (hamlet) name to identify their groups (MATBU, NORSNERA, TRIO, and TERA). Each core group is composed of five individuals of which one acts as the team leader for the group. The members of the core groups are residents of the smaller unit assigned to them. They are being paid an honorarium by the PO to conduct monitoring and supervision. Unfortunately, the PO has yet to define a concrete management plan for their plantations since they do not have sufficient funds to pay these groups to do these tasks. The project fund had already stopped in June 2003 and there was no other source of income for the PO except for the consumer store that was established for the daily subsistence of their members on a credit basis.

4.2 Monitoring and marketing of their products

Another major issue facing the PO in the future concerns the selling of their products derived from their mangium plantation. In an interview, one man involved in wood products said that they still prefer Gmelina arborea (yemane) as raw material for furniture than mangium. While it can be utilized for pulp, it is unfortunate to note that pulp production using mangium in the country has yet to be established. The market for pulp is in other countries, and the PO must be well established in order to be able to close a deal with groups that might be interested in their products. In that situation, their timber products might end up only as fuelwood that does not command a higher price, putting the country on the losing end since the funds used came from a loan.

Since agroforestry plantations will be harvested earlier, the PO then will provide assistance to the stakeholder. However, this situation has yet to be realized.

The problem that the PO might face is how they can monitor the amount or volume of products harvested from a plantation considering the fact that they have neither sufficient manpower to monitor all these activities nor additional funds to provide honorariums to the core groups. In this situation, they must be able to come up with an effective monitoring system.

4.3 Land tenure status

Most residents are considered “illegal” occupants, i.e., the government has yet to recognize their claim to the land in the area except for some who were issued with CSCs, while some farmers worked in others’ farms as share tenants. The CSCs, as land tenure, gave them the right to access the productive resources on the land. Land “acquisition” then was on a first come first serve basis. The awarding of CBFMA to the PO in 1998 assured them of tenurial security for at most 50 years. Individual security of tenure similar to CSC will also be awarded to members of the PO. In the case of Sicopong, under this system only 37% of the members (based on 2003 membership data) who are
either original claimants or who obtained the lands through other means can benefit from this security of tenure. Apparently, the remaining 67% comprising the majority have yet to obtain parcels of land to be claimed for development. Those who provided and contributed the labor for the achievement of plantation goals cannot have land tenure security. It would have been better if lands slated for development had been distributed to the majority in the first place.

4.4 Benefit sharing system plan

The benefit sharing system of the PO will come from the harvest of both forest and agroforestry products. Based on the government policy, 25% of the gross income that is derived from selling timber products will go to the government while the remaining 75% will go to the PO. Regarding the 75% PO share, 33% will go to the organization while the remaining 67% will go to the stakeholder member claiming the piece of land. In the agroforestry plantations, however, there will be no government share which means that all the income derived from it will be solely for the PO. Like the forest tree products, benefit sharing between the organization itself and the stakeholder member exists wherein 20% of the income (based on gross) will be for the former while the remaining 80% will be for the latter. With this benefit sharing system plan, the organization itself will receive only a little. The amount might not be enough to sustain the expenses incurred in managing the project especially the plantations, and this is all the more so in establishing various viable livelihood projects as the source of additional income.

This clearly suggests that the benefit sharing system only benefits those with lands (sometimes called “local elites”), and that the majority comprising 67% have no benefit at all even when these products are harvested. This is a glaring example of what Pulhin (1997) described, wherein the profits from community forestry (and other rural development in general) solely benefit the elite sector of the population. The earlier set of officers (almost all of whom were stakeholders) came up with this benefit sharing system plan to convince the claimant to have his/her area developed under the project.

4.5 People’s participation

Many studies assert that the success of a development and/or community based projects should begin at the planning stage or designing, up to the monitoring and evaluation of the projects’ progress. In Sicopong, however, involvement or participation of the community has been limited to providing labor for the achievement of plantation goals. This is because of the fact that, like most foreign-funded projects in the country, the plan was established by professionals is usually based on the agenda or follows the demands and requirements of the funding institutions. This scenario is what Pulhin (1997) calls “bounded participation.”

However, even taking the simplest meaning of participation, it was also noted that the interest of many PO members about the project is very low, taking into consideration the rate or attendance during general assembly meetings. Out of the 11 general assembly meetings of the PO, the average participation rate was only 30% compared to the ideal 50% plus one. Reasons cited for the low attendance rates include distance and transportation cost. It is hypothesized that the majority of those who attend the GAs were stakeholder members who stand to benefit from the subproject. Overall, people’s participation in the entire project duration has been limited to providing labor and achieving the goals set forth both by the implementing agency (DENR) and that of the funding institution, thus it is very shallow.

5. Conclusion

In light of the above situation, the objectives of CBFM in Sicopong are still far from being realized. Lack of clear incentives and land for development, and working under the shadow of poverty, especially for the majority of the PO members, have resulted in their low participation rate and lack of interest. The benefit sharing system alone cannot alleviate the majority of the members from poverty but instead it will make the “local elites”
even “richer” in the long run. Social justice is also not visible since equality in terms of income (or benefits), wealth (lands), and power almost always leans toward these “local elites” and not to the majority of the members. In terms of sustainable forest management from the point of view of the PO, the very fact that they do not have a concrete management plan for their plantation speaks for itself. With these points in mind, the overall concept of CBFM, which is “the people first and sustainable forestry follows,” may not hold true in Sicopong, since the people (who are supposed to be the poor and landless) received only short term benefits through the salaries paid during project implementation. At present, since forest trees cannot be harvested based on the pending approval of CBFMA expansion, we can also say that the project leans more toward the environment and less toward social and economic benefits to the community. Sustainability, both of the organization and that of the project, appears to be in the gray.

References