



UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

**OPPOSITION AND RESISTANCE
TO FOREST PROTECTION
INITIATIVES IN THE PHILIPPINES**

By Howie G. Severino

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◆ Preface

International concern that forest conservation programmes and projects are not achieving their objectives has been increasing in recent years. Explanations of “project failure” often focus on technical constraints associated with finance, administration and “know-how”. Far less attention has generally been paid to institutional, social or political aspects that influence both the orientation and performance of conservation initiatives. Participatory or community-based approaches to forest protection, which have gained in influence in recent years, have moved some way towards overcoming these limitations by adopting a more integrated approach to forest protection. Nevertheless, their proponents have often ignored many of the pitfalls and tensions that beset “people-centred conservation”.

In this paper Howie Severino examines how the implementation of environmental protection initiatives can be undermined by the responses of local “stakeholders” whose interests and livelihoods are affected by specific forest protection programmes and projects. Following a brief assessment of attempts by the government of the Philippines to reverse forest destruction and promote community-based forestry, the author presents four case studies which focus on very different types of forest protection initiatives and sets of actors. They include large commercial interests which use political and bureaucratic connections to subvert government attempts to curb unsustainable logging and conserve watersheds; NGOs that do not have the necessary community organizing skills; and grassroots organizations that lack cohesion and external support. The author also shows how institutional reforms associated with decentralization can undermine environmental programmes in contexts where, for example, local authorities attach relatively little importance to conservation and waste human and other resources that have been devolved for forest protection.

Beyond analysing the politics of project failure, Howie Severino identifies key factors that have served to counter these negative experiences. He stresses, in particular, the importance of strong grassroots leadership and external support for people’s organizations; sensitive approaches to community organizing on the part of NGOs; lobbying key people in executive or legislative positions of power; exposure of malpractice in the media; and the formation of broad-based alliances that link local and national actors.

This paper was commissioned for a workshop on “Social and Political Dimensions of Environmental Protection” that was organized jointly by UNRISD and the Institute of Environmental Science and Management (IESAM) of the University of the Philippines at Los Baños. Held in April 1996, the workshop formed part of an UNRISD research project of the same name which involved case studies in Costa Rica, the Philippines and Senegal.

Given the sensitive nature of some of the issues, and the difficulty of researching situations involving conflict, corruption and malpractice, UNRISD decided to engage the talents not only of university scholars but also of investigative journalists with academic backgrounds and extensive experience in the environmental field. Until recently, Howie Severino co-ordinated the Environment Desk at the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. He has written numerous newspaper and scholarly articles on environmental politics in the

Philippines and is currently a reporter for **The Probe Team**, an investigative news programme on Philippine television.

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◆ Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CBBC	Cebu Bishops-Businessmen Conference
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources
EDSA	E. de los Santos Avenue
IESAM	Institute of Environmental Science and Management
IFMA	Industrial Forest Management Agreement
ISF	Integrated Social Forestry
KPPSK	Kapunungan sa Pagpanalipod ug Pagpalambo sa Kinaiyahan (Organization for the Protection and Development of the Environment)
LABB	Luntiang Alyansa para sa Bundok Banahaw (Green Alliance for Mount Banahaw)
MCWD	Metropolitan Cebu Water District
MMWDPG	Muleta-Manupali Watershed Development Project Group
NGO	non-governmental organization
NIPAS	National Integrated Protected Areas System
NPA	New People's Army
OECF	Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund
P	peso
PAMB	Protected Area Management Board
PCIJ	Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism
PO	people's organization
TAC	temporary allowable cut
TLA	Timber License Agreement

INTRODUCTION

Many well-intentioned forest protection policies, programmes and projects in the Philippines have not achieved their goals because of the way implementation has been affected by the responses of different stakeholders. This paper considers how and why local interests undermine attempts by outside agencies or grassroots organizations to protect forests and identifies areas for action to improve implementation.

The forest protection initiatives referred to, such as controls on commercial logging and community-based reforestation, were introduced within the context of recent national forestry policies, which have opened up avenues for involving local people in environmental protection. These policies reflect a growing consensus among many policy makers and development practitioners, in the Philippines and abroad, about the need for what might be called “participatory conservation” (Utting, 1996), namely, an approach to forest management characterized by the active involvement of local communities.

However well-intentioned such policies are, efforts at implementation in the Philippines and other countries have exposed a host of constraints that affect their likelihood of success on the ground. It becomes necessary, therefore, for analysts to examine not only the political obstacles to more enlightened forestry policies at the national level, but the obstacles posed by various local interests once these policies are in place.

This paper examines several such constraints by drawing on four case studies from the three main regions of the country: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Most of these studies were assembled primarily from material gathered by this author in his work as an environmental journalist with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), and also, more recently, as a volunteer for a grassroots organization active in upland communities. The case study in Mindanao draws heavily on the work of Ruth Martinez Ignacio, who studied what happened to forest protection activities in a farming community that suddenly became the focus of national and international attention because of successful environmental activism. The present author also visited the town in May 1996 and conducted his own interviews.

THE FOREST POLICY BACKDROP

For much of the post-war period, forestry policy was premised on two primary assumptions: (1) upland degradation is caused by farmers carrying out shifting cultivation, or *kaingineros*; and (2) the timber concession system is the best means of protecting, managing and developing the nation’s forest resources.

In the last decade, however, new policies and presidential declarations on community-based resource management (F.V. Ramos, 1995) and new forestry laws, such as the National Integrated Protected Area System (NIPAS) Act (Republic Act 7586), have turned these assumptions on their heads. Upland farming communities are now seen by the government as potential stewards of the remaining forests; timber companies are viewed more as villains than protectors.

In a 15 May 1996 speech before the annual meeting of the International Tropical Timber Organization, President Fidel Ramos professed in clear terms this shift from corporate to community forestry. He denounced the commercial concession system as “benefiting only those with financial and political clout”, and described it as “biased against indigenous peoples and local communities” (F.V. Ramos, 1996).

We are determined to restore the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples to the enjoyment of our natural resources. People who are organized, who have a real stake in the forest, who have effective ownership, acknowledged rights of use, and who have accepted the protection and management responsibilities over these forests can be depended on to achieve our vision of sustainable management of our forests. We believe that only by empowering organized local communities and indigenous peoples would we be able to arrest the degradation and loss of our forests (F.V. Ramos, 1996).

Of course, only time will tell whether government actually invests enough in upland programmes to make this vision a reality. But such strong rhetoric is being backed with the formulation of policies that will be difficult to reverse. Many national government functions, including pollution control, small-scale mining regulation, agricultural extension services and community forestry programmes were devolved to local governments in 1992 under one of the most far-reaching decentralization laws passed anywhere in modern times.

The changes in policy and official thinking have coincided with the near-depletion of commercially viable forest resources, higher public awareness of the consequences of forest destruction, and a shift of the onus of blame from *kaingineros* to loggers.

In the last several years, a wide range of government and non-government initiatives for forest protection have been launched. Some of these are official policies meant to benefit forest lands nation-wide. Others are specific activities carried out by NGOs whose involvement in environmental programmes increased tremendously following the EDSA uprising in 1986 that ousted the Marcos régime.

Of all government environment programmes in the Philippines, forest protection and rehabilitation have received the most attention by policy makers (Factoran, 1992). The forestry sector has, by far, also been the most favoured by foreign donors, according to data from the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 1995). The ADB/Overseas Economic Co-operation Fund (OECF) loan for contract reforestation, which amounted to US\$ 240 million, was the largest environmental loan ever given by the bank.

Despite these initiatives, the Philippines is still losing substantial areas of its remaining forest cover (personal communication, Dalmacio, 1995). While the reasons are complex, and the available studies are inconclusive, it would seem that the two-step process of deforestation described by Kummer (1992) and others — commercial logging, both legal and illegal, followed by agricultural expansion — still persists in the uplands.

Efforts to reverse these trends through various forest protection strategies are hindered by the types of social and political factors highlighted in the case studies

below. These include, for example, bureaucratic malpractice and corruption in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), lack of attention to community organizing and social preparation, and politically influential commercial interests.

Ironically, the decentralization of the government's community forestry programmes, with the major exception of those which receive foreign funding, has resulted in the abandonment of many agroforestry project sites (personal communication, Bacalla, 1996). A number of governors assigned newly devolved forestry personnel to process mining permits and collect taxes, thereby reducing the time they spent in upland communities. The governors saw no immediate revenue potential for local governments in community forestry, and thus neglected it.

The Local Government Code that took effect in 1992 transferred substantive powers from national to local governments based on the belief that governors and mayors would be more sensitive to grassroots concerns and that benefits to local communities would increase. But the detrimental effect of devolution on the social forestry programme demonstrates that the impetus to assist upland communities tends to be outweighed by the pressures on local officials to raise revenues. In some cases, such as in Agusan del Sur, local officials invoked the new legislation to usurp even undeveloped functions, such as the setting up of highway timber checkpoints to corner the market for contraband wood (Severino, 1996).

Obviously, despite some good policies, much work needs to be done for policy implementation to actually benefit both local communities and the environment. While policies have changed, the fundamental socio-political make-up of Philippine society has not. As several writers have pointed out, deforestation in the Philippines cannot be fully understood without considering the distribution of power in society (see, for example, Porter and Ganapin, 1988; Boyce, 1993; Vitug, 1993). Technical and economic explanations are inadequate, as are the solutions and policies that flow from them. Despite the community bias in official rhetoric, the legal and extra-legal means still exist for the wealthy and influential to control access to the country's natural resources. The concentration of private land in the hands of the few, combined with a rapidly growing population, continue to push the poor to open-access areas in the public domain, such as forest lands. The state, traditionally the vehicle for narrow segments of society to control sources of wealth, still has not evolved into an autonomous and honest broker among competing interests.

But with such measures as the crackdown on commercial logging in 1996 and the promotion of community forestry, the state has also shown signs that it is no longer a monolithic entity simply facilitating the destruction of the environment. There is a constant tension today within the state between those who want to continue to use the government's forest protection apparatus to advance private interests, and those who are trying to defend its integrity.

Perhaps the best hope for sustainable management in the uplands rests with the progressive or modern elements in the state combining with activist and grassroots organizations to make the spirit of community-based policies come alive.

LOCAL RESPONSES TO FOREST PROTECTION

Forest protection policies are mainly national in scope, but implementation is by nature local. The effectiveness of national forestry policies depends on many local factors, including the responses of local players competing for access to forest resources.

This paper broadly defines the concept of “local responses” as the reactions of sectors and groups based in locales where the national policies will have a direct impact. These varied interests would include grassroots communities, logging companies, local politicians and government officials, and civic groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Particularly important are the responses of those in upland communities who are directly affected by forest protection policies. It may be assumed that there will be some form of backlash from these communities, or specific groups, against well-intentioned but naive policies which fail to consider local livelihoods fully (Utting, 1996). This backlash has perhaps been most evident in the government’s large contract reforestation programme, which failed to provide local residents with an economic stake in seeing planted seedlings become fully grown trees.

In contrast, some of the more successful forest protection experiences, such as the Kalahan Educational Foundation in Nueva Vizcaya and the recent phase of the conservation programme for Mount Makiling, have integrated community participation in planning, planting, monitoring and harvesting.

The official rhetoric about “community-based resource management” and the intention of certain forestry policies and programmes to benefit communities are often contradicted by the way in which government initiatives are implemented on the ground. One example is the Industrial Forest Management Agreement (IFMA) system, which was touted by a senior DENR official as a community-based programme; but a cursory examination of the list of IFMA holders (Forestry Management Bureau, 1996) shows that many are former and current timber concessionaires, and none are community-based groups.

Any overt grassroots response to defend local interests will almost always come from an organized segment in these communities; many upland residents, however, are not only poor but unorganized. The failure of many forest protection policies to benefit community-based resource users results as much from a deliberate attempt by certain local actors to block their implementation or concentrate benefits in their hands, as it does from bureaucratic incompetence. Powerful vested interests associated, for example, with commercial logging and real estate development, may seek to subvert forest protection policies that deprive them of opportunities for profits in the uplands. Some groups posing as environmental NGOs have attempted to corner the benefits of these policies, to the detriment of local communities.

The case studies presented below are examples of specific types of local responses to forest protection efforts by either government agencies or non-governmental organizations. They are not meant to be representative of generalized patterns drawn from nation-wide evidence, but they do reflect the fact that the implementation of forestry policies is often undermined by a wide range of responses of local actors — be they commercial interests, politicians, NGOs or community residents. It is hoped that these actual experiences will yield insights into the local dynamics that can make or break national forestry policies and local forest protection initiatives, as well as what type of approach might lead to more successful implementation.

COMMERCIAL LOGGING AND BUREAUCRATIC MALPRACTICE

In recent years, diminishing forest cover coupled with public opposition to logging have compelled the government to tighten controls on commercial logging. The Philippine Constitution, ratified in 1987, forbade the new issuance or extension of Timber License Agreements (TLAs), the primary legal instrument granted to loggers. This paved the way for the phase-out of the timber concession system. At the same time, the DENR strengthened enforcement of forestry regulations, resulting in the closure or suspension of several timber companies. This also coincided with the government's pronouncements on its shift to community-based forest management. Such policy developments seemed to suggest that the timber industry was doomed.

However, while it is true that wood supplies have become increasingly scarce, their high price and the tight restrictions on cutting have made various kinds of logging permits even more precious. This has fuelled a thriving cottage industry of logging-related corruption in the government, which is concentrated in the DENR. New TLAs can no longer be issued, but there are any number of ways for a commercial logger to continue or revive his business, and thwart recent forest protection policies. Some of the means employed during the administration of DENR Secretary Angel Alcala (1992-1995) have been documented by this author (see Severino, 1994; PCIJ, 1995). As illustrated by the case of the Siari Timber Company, described below, they often involved efforts by Alcala's aides secretly to prepare decisions or orders favourable to timber companies.

Cases such as these may be categorized as "local responses" because many of the beneficiaries of these pro-logging orders resided in provinces outside Manila, and exploited weaknesses in the regulatory system to skirt new logging restrictions.

◆ Siari Timber Company

A recent landmark case officially investigated by the DENR resulted in the removal from office of six DENR staff members and the suspension of five more by Alcala's successor, as well as the cancellation of a logging company's permit to operate. These unusually harsh punishments set the tone for a new DENR administration, under Victor Ramos, which sought to convey the message to the ranks that it was serious about cracking down on corruption. Others, however, observed that the punishment caused demoralization among ordinary DENR employees, who felt that the punished staff members were merely scapegoats for offences instigated by top management.

This case, involving the Siari Timber Company, also has academic value because it produced voluminous documentation that traces "a series of actions that unjustifiably, illegally, and irregularly favoured Siari", according to the DENR's official decision on the erring personnel (V.O. Ramos, 1996). These actions, beginning with a memorandum from Secretary Alcala and ending in the field, enabled a logging company, whose license had been suspended several years earlier, to make tens of millions of pesos on the eve of the May 1995 elections.

Siari is a useful example for understanding how a small-town company was able to log in a forest area the size of Metro Manila, after being inactive for almost a decade. As such, it also provides a view of the anatomy of bureaucratic malpractice and corruption. Many anomalous permits begin with fraudulent paperwork prepared in the field and end with the signature of an often oblivious Secretary. However, the case of Siari, as well as others during the three-year Alcala era, began with the Secretary's signature.

Siari Timber Company was a TLA holder based in Katipunan, Zamboanga del Norte (see map). The company's licence was suspended in 1986 by DENR Secretary Ernesto Maceda for alleged violations of forestry regulations. Siari executives had briefly tried to have the suspension officially lifted in 1987, but to no avail. The company's license was considered suspended until 21 November 1994 when Secretary Angel Alcala issued a memorandum declaring that Siari's TLA "appears to have not been officially suspended", thus deeming it "valid and subsisting".

The reasons why Siari was singled out from dozens of idle TLA holders for special treatment are still not officially established. But an affidavit issued by one of Alcala's assistants at that time stated that Alcala's legal consultant, a native of Dapitan City (which is adjacent to Siari's base of Katipunan), had been asking for Siari's background papers shortly before Alcala's memo.

That memo started a chain reaction of events, including an order by a DENR Under-Secretary to the Region 9 Director, to inform the company that it could start preparing the documents required to resume logging. This was followed by a March 1995 memorandum from Alcala to the same Regional Director instructing him to grant a "temporary allowable cut" (TAC) of "not more than 10,000 cubic meters" to the company pending a timber inventory. The TAC, an unprecedented type of cutting permit not found in any DENR regulations, was issued in lieu of the conventional annual allowable cut received by TLA holders as part of their approved operations plan for the year.

This author's investigations in May and June 1995 revealed that Alcala's legal consultant had drafted the memo, had Alcala sign it, and then sent it by commercial courier directly to the regional office, without providing a copy to the DENR records office, or to any other DENR office. He had also drafted it without informing the Director of the Forestry Management Bureau or the Head Executive Assistant, both of whom should have reviewed it according to established procedures. But Alcala did have an Under-Secretary initial the memo before he signed it. The Under-Secretary later claimed that he had been misled.

The legal consultant ran for mayor of Dapitan City in the May 1995 elections, without relinquishing his position at DENR. He lost the election, and was back in Alcala's office the week after his defeat. He was reportedly on good terms with the manager/owner of Siari Timber Company and his brother, the mayor of Katipunan, who ran in and won the same elections.

The Region 9 Director approved the operations plan submitted by Siari, after its preparatory documents had moved quickly through the DENR system, from Field Forester to Community Environment and Natural Resources Officer to Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Officer to Regional Executive Director, with

Siari personnel physically taking the papers from one desk to the next. The DENR decision on the case strongly implied that Siari executives themselves had drafted the endorsement letters signed by several DENR personnel. (They were printed on the same kind of computer printer as a Siari letter.)

A DENR investigation later found that the logging operations plan submitted by the company was based on a fraudulent timber inventory and defective concession map, and that the field personnel had been aware of these defects when they had endorsed the plan.

During the administrative hearings of the field personnel involved, the Regional Director's defence was that Alcalá's legal consultant had verbally ordered him by telephone to authorize the logging by Siari, an order supported later by Alcalá's memo. The legal consultant denied that he had drafted the memo and that he had ever heard of Siari, but a letter from Alcalá addressed to this author later acknowledged that he had drafted all his documents of a legal nature. He was the only lawyer in Alcalá's office at that time.

An investigation conducted by the DENR in July 1995, after Alcalá was transferred to the Commission on Higher Education, found that, from March to June 1995, Siari committed a number of violations of forestry regulations, including cutting the protected *almaciga* species, cutting undersized trees and sub-contracting to two other timber companies. It was also found to have started cutting trees prior to the approval of its operations plan.

For this damage to forest area, and the violations of established procedures, the DENR punished 11 of its own field personnel. Siari executives were not punished, except for the cancellation of the company's TLA, although it was clear that Siari had already earned a substantial sum from the logging that had occurred. It had received an allowable cut of about 9,500 cubic metres, which, at a conservative market value of about 7,000 pesos per cubic metre, would have been worth more than P66 million (US\$ 2.6 million). According to forestry laws, there is no penalty for erring loggers except for the cancellation of their permit to operate.

When Alcalá's replacement, Secretary Ramos, announced the cancellation of Siari's permit in mid-1995, he also released a statement that its temporary allowable cut had been granted by Alcalá in "utter disregard of the substantive and procedural requirements before a logging company could operate inside residual forests" (DENR, 1995). But the DENR stopped short of investigating the involvement of Alcalá and other senior aides and officials, claiming that it was beyond their authority since the main persons involved were no longer with the Department.

The illegal permit to log acquired by Siari was the outcome of a local response to the forest protection policy of restricting operations of TLA holders. The DENR central office would not have acted to reverse Siari's suspension had it not been for initiatives taken by the company's owners, a powerful family in Zamboanga del Norte.

It is interesting to note that Siari officials cultivated relationships with DENR personnel up and down the chain of command, starting with Alcalá's legal consultant who prepared the document that triggered the process resulting in illegal logging. Siari waited nine years before the DENR granted them the required

permit. And, according to DENR findings, it wasted no time in extracting its allowable cut, even illegally sub-contracting two other logging companies. The case shows how DENR officials, from the Secretary to the Community Officer in a faraway town, were either involved with or duped by a logging company. Alcala's decision to allow Siari to resume logging was marked by secrecy. Copies of correspondence were not furnished to the DENR's central office. Officials who, according to established procedures, should have known about the decision were not informed.

This and other cases reveal the corruption that has permeated the DENR, which has regulatory powers over more than half of the nation's territory, and almost all of its forest lands and mineral resources. Corruption is one of the greatest obstacles to forest protection. Regardless of the number and quality of forestry regulations, they are only as effective as the agency mandated to implement them. Without strong and honest law enforcement, loggers and other commercial interests will persist in exploiting the system for the quick profits derived from what is essentially environmental destruction. The problem looms even larger if the department's senior officers are perceived to be involved and if their actions are tolerated or encouraged by the Secretary himself.

When the present author's newspaper articles regarding this case were published, they attracted little notice from elected officials. The president, however, saw fit to transfer Alcala out of the DENR, only to reward him with another position, albeit with a lower profile. While 11 field personnel have already been punished, there has been no official investigation of Alcala's actions while at the DENR. The documents regarding the case were submitted to the Office of the Ombudsman, leaving it up to that body to decide on an investigation of former DENR officials. As of this writing, no action has been taken, although there are reports that environmental NGOs will soon be filing official complaints.

For the nation's remaining forests to be adequately protected, corruption must be weeded out of the DENR. While the post-Marcos administrations have vowed to fight corruption, they have only done so when pressured by the public and some of its elected representatives. However, the DENR's pro-logging decisions leading up to the May 1995 elections elicited little reaction among local or national environmental groups.

Government procedures and institutions that should deal with corruption, such as the Office of the Ombudsman and various other anti-graft bodies, are more often instruments used to exonerate accused government officials, rather than the means for impartial investigation. The rare instances when they work are occasions when public outrage erupts over specific acts of corruption as, for example, when former Health Secretary Hilarion Ramiro was swiftly dismissed from the government. In such cases, the role of the media in exposing corrupt officials and stoking public anger is critical. More often, accused officials are simply removed or transferred from office to silence the criticism, and are not prosecuted.

Punishment in logging-related corruption cases is almost always limited to lower-level government officials. The companies actually logging illegally or trafficking in contraband wood have their licenses cancelled, but that occurs only after acts have been committed that often made them millions of dollars.

The ease with which secret orders at the DENR can be issued shows the lack of transparency in the system, inadequate checks and balances, and the absence of vigilance on the part of media and environmental organizations. To address these defects, legislators could demand that all decisions affecting logging and other industries to be posted publicly or published promptly. In the short term, it may help to remove from the DENR political appointees who are suspected of having been involved in illegal activities. Failing to make them accountable, even while punishing lower ranking career officers, does not contribute to a moral renewal in the agency.

Environmental NGOs appear to have been less than energetic in monitoring Alcala's decisions. Because he came from their ranks, they may have relaxed their vigilance. In this author's coverage of the DENR, activists have rarely been seen lobbying or observing the department that possesses so much power over the nation. NGOs bear a responsibility to monitor processes at the DENR to learn about pending decisions which are objectionable, and to deter anomalous practices simply by making their presence felt. They should not rely on the media to learn about goings-on in the bureaucracy.

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION

The government has a policy of vesting so-called "critical watersheds" with a protected status that prohibits real estate and other development activities within their ecological boundaries. But the process for having watersheds declared as such, through presidential proclamation, is tedious, complex and often highly political.

Regulations regarding protected watersheds have recently been superseded by the NIPAS Act, which makes these vital ecosystems initial components of a system of "protected areas." These areas are managed by a Protected Areas Management Board (PAMB), which is chaired by the DENR, but whose membership includes various stakeholders, including local governments and NGOs.

Cebu City's recent experience with efforts to protect its critical watershed highlights the attempts by large commercial interests, backed by prominent Cebuano politicians, to subvert a major forest protection initiative.

Political support for real estate development in Cebu City's watershed would also seem to bring into sharp focus the trade-offs urban planners and policy makers face between short-term growth and environmental protection. But even this trade-off has been muddled by politicians who insist that real estate development in the uplands is the best protection for the watershed.

This case, then, reveals how national policy to protect critical watersheds can be undermined by the responses of local élites with clout in national politics.

◆ Commerce amid Water Crisis

Cebu province leads the nation in economic growth and produces nearly 10 per cent of Philippine exports despite having only 3 per cent of the population. The one great disadvantage of this island is the lack of flat land for both agriculture and development. The great demand for space for economic expansion, combined with a scarcity of lowlands, makes developers turn their eyes to the uplands. There is little space left for growth in Cebu City except for the hilly areas above the city, which are considered its watersheds (see map). While there is little dispute about the importance of these areas for the city's water supplies, and thus its future, there has been considerable debate, much of it acrimonious, about the best ways to protect them.

The watersheds surrounding Cebu City, especially the Kotkot-Lusaran, have been the subject of an intense battle between developers and their political backers, and those who want to leave these places largely undisturbed by commercial development. The stakes have been magnified by Cebu's perennial water supply problems, which can be traced to the denudation in the nineteenth century of the island's forests by ship builders. But water shortages have been exacerbated in modern times by the over-pumping of aquifers by numerous private well owners outside the control of government regulators. The depletion of underground water sources has resulted in salinization of wells as far as four kilometres inland.

The water shortage has become so acute that some investors have thought twice about starting up businesses in Cebu, especially manufacturing processes that require abundant clean water, such as electronics (Severino, 1996). In other words, water in Cebu is no longer simply a consumer issue, but one which threatens to derail one of the locomotives of the government's industrial ambitions.

The urgency of the problem has given the Metropolitan Cebu Water District (MCWD), a government corporation, considerable clout in tapping new sources of water. The political struggle is now over future sources of water, and what the city is willing to invest and sacrifice to ensure its water security.

The local water district does not have many promising options. The MCWD has a plan for operating wells in nearby towns, particularly Compostela, to satisfy immediate demands for more water, especially for the Mactan Export Processing Zone where managers of profitable factories have long been complaining about having to buy water from delivery trucks. But that has been delayed by opposition from Compostela's mayor.

For the long term, the MCWD is considering piping in water from the nearby island of Bohol. That plan has caused an outcry among both Boholanos anxious about their own water supply and Cebuano activists fearful it will delay environmental protection on their own island.

While planning to extract water far from the actual consumers, the MCWD also recognized the importance of protecting the nearby watersheds that will replenish the city's depleted aquifers. Acting on appeals from MCWD, the DENR regional office in Cebu sought to have a major portion of Cebu City's hilly areas declared a "critical watershed" by presidential proclamation. Both the MCWD and DENR also apparently wanted to pre-empt the plan of Ayala Land, a subsidiary of the giant Ayala Corporation, and its Cebu partners to develop over 200 hectares of the watershed area for a golf course, exclusive residential area and recreational complex.

After surveying and drawing the ecological boundaries of the watershed, the DENR regional office in Cebu submitted a draft of the presidential proclamation to its head office in Quezon City in 1991. By early 1992, DENR Secretary Factoran forwarded it to the Office of the President. One of President Aquino's last acts as the nation's chief executive was to sign the proclamation in June 1992.

But after a copy of the signed document was sent back to Cebu, hydrologists at the Water Resources Center (WRC) of the University of San Carlos noticed that the original co-ordinates of the watershed boundary as drawn by the DENR regional office in Cebu had been changed. It was as if the entire boundary had been lifted from the map and moved several degrees north. The water experts led by Rev. Herman Van Engelen, the WRC's Executive Director, noted that Ayala Land's projected site for development, which the company called Kang-Irag, was now neatly outside the newly proclaimed watershed boundary.

The revelation caused an uproar in Cebu. The issue was played up in the local press, although generally ignored in the national media. For months, Ayala Land insisted that it would only recognize the boundary in the president's proclamation and would push ahead with its plan to build on the land.

Public pressure and protest by Cebu's most prominent clergymen and the Cebu Bishops-Businessmen Conference (CBBC), however, compelled then-DENR Secretary Alcala to suspend Ayala's project and order another survey of the watershed. At the time of this writing, a new proclamation with an even more refined technical description of the area is being prepared for the signature of President Ramos.

Although Ayala Land is backed by the formidable Osmena political clan, the company has agreed to honour the ecological, rather than political, boundary, which is expected to be the basis of the second presidential proclamation.

It is still a mystery how the co-ordinates of the original proclamation were changed. It is, however, no secret that the governor of Cebu at that time, Lito Osmena, an Ayala Land backer, exerted considerable influence in Malacanang Palace (the official residence of the president), and was also known as a prime real estate developer in Cebu City's hilly areas. The Zobel de Ayalas were also well-known supporters of President Aquino.

Despite the anticipated inclusion of Kang-Irag in the final delineation of the city's protected watershed, the struggle over the land continues, with Ayala Land still hoping to build its world-class golf course and residential area on the original site. Proponents of the project argue that there is no conflict between the project and protection of the watershed. According to former Mayor Tommy Osmena, "Right now there is no watershed to protect. Development will alleviate the poverty which is causing people in the watersheds to destroy it" (Osmena, interview, 1996).

To the DENR, however, the policy on protected watersheds is clear: no real estate development allowed (Alcala, 1994). The Osmenas point out that while the national government has prohibited commercial development in the area, it has done little to create alternative livelihood and protection activities.

The law is less clear on the fate of such watersheds. When it is finally declared, again, a protected watershed, the land will fall under the NIPAS Act, which mandates the formation of a PAMB that will prepare a management plan for the area. This would include delineating zones for various uses. Theoretically, it would still be possible for the PAMB to allow Ayala Land's original project but, in practice, various stakeholders on the Board, including the DENR and NGOs, are likely to have sufficient weight to oppose it. However, the main political players in the province, including the Garcias, who are Osmena allies, may side with Ayala Land.

An ironic twist on the watershed issue has been provided by the mayor of nearby Compostela municipality, where the MCWD is ready to operate several wells to deliver crucial water supplies to Cebu's export processing zone. Mayor Antonio Dangoy is preventing the operation of the wells. He objects to having most of his town's land placed under protected watershed status, and is demanding exclusion from such protection in exchange for the wells' operation. The value of Compostela's land has risen as a result of growth in Cebu City and industrial investments being made in the town. In effect, Mayor Dangoy has presented the national government with an interesting dilemma: water or watershed. In the end, water experts in the city argue, Cebu will have neither if development proceeds without controls.

◆ **Countervailing Social Forces**

The case of Cebu City's watershed is a test of the strength of local resolve to protect a key environmental asset in the face of strong commercial and political pressure. The arena for deciding its fate has shifted from the DENR to the PAMB, a new structure intended to empower a range of local groups. So this case could also be a test of this new protected area system's ability to resolve conflict.

The experience of Cebu may have implications for other places undergoing rapid land conversion and other modernizing changes. The prospect of quick profits from real estate development is tempting to local governments, given new opportunities for raising revenues under the Local Government Code which took effect in 1992.

In Cebu, economic pressures are being countered by a strong civic, business and consumer lobby already beset by water woes, which is led by a member of the Aboitiz clan, Cebu's richest family. It has also been supported by Cebu's highly respected Water Resources Center, the nation's only institution of its kind, which has been sounding alarm bells about the island's water situation for years. The issue has also received substantial and thorough coverage in the local press.

NGOs AND UPLAND COMMUNITIES

Since the People's Power Revolt that ended the martial law régime in 1986, numerous NGOs have become involved in various functions that were almost exclusively performed by government agencies during the Marcos era. Several thousand entities are said to be officially recognized as environmental NGOs, many of them working in upland areas where few other external agents intervene. A policy environment conducive to NGO involvement in forest protection

programmes and substantial funds for the non-government sector have created a surge in NGO upland activities in the last several years.

The DENR has actively mobilized NGOs in such programmes as contract reforestation and protected area management. Sub-contracting NGOs for reforestation, community organizing, evaluation and monitoring has widened the reach of government's forest protection programmes, and pleased foreign donors anxious to see the strengthening of "civil society."

However, the large amount of money available for these initiatives also led to the mushrooming of so-called fly-by-night NGOs and abuses of the system by profit-seekers posing as activists. In 1992 the DENR instituted an accreditation process to screen out such misfits and make participants more accountable.

The NIPAS Act gives even more importance to NGOs by placing them in positions where they can officially influence environmental policy formulation and management of protected areas, lands over which government bureaucrats previously monopolized decision-making.

By attracting memberships that transcend class and sectoral divisions, environmental NGOs have the potential to mobilize middle class support for social equity goals. With the advent of the environmental movement, reforming the nation's feudal structure need no longer remain a preserve of class politics. A wide spectrum of civil society has identified social equity as a prerequisite for sustainable development.

However well-intentioned many NGOs are, they often lack the numbers, experience and organizational stability that would enable them be effective agents of change in upland areas. Nevertheless, the commitment, presence in upland sites and community orientation of some of these NGOs make them a critical asset to forest protection efforts. Their typically small size and flexibility also enable them to adjust easily to changing grassroots realities and correct their mistakes. With more experience in managing larger programmes and in dealing with recently empowered local governments, upland-oriented NGOs should become an even stronger force to reckon with.

◆ **Luntiang Alyansa para sa Bundok Banahaw (Green Alliance for Mount Banahaw)**

The following case study involves one NGO's recent experiences in two different upland communities. It must be noted here that the author is a volunteer and founding member of this NGO, which grew out of his regular visits to Mount Banahaw, a volcano and the second highest peak (elevation: 2,088 metres) on Luzon, the country's most populated island.

The first experience concerns the NGO's activities in an upland farming community and examines its role and effectiveness in community organizing. The second experience involves the NGO's efforts to stop forest destruction, and highlights the tensions that arose with a community group that saw the NGO as an obstacle to local progress.

The Luntiang Alyansa para sa Bundok Banahaw, or LABB, was formed in 1994 with the aim of protecting and enhancing the biodiversity and cultural traditions of Mount Banahaw, located about 170 kilometres south-east of Manila (see map). LABB was organized during a period of growth for environmental NGOs, many of which were long on enthusiasm but short on community experience.

LABB's membership is itself an example of diversity, having come from various professions and points of Luzon, with about half of the members residing in towns near the foot of the mountain. Among other things, its varied membership means a wide network of contacts.

All 20 or so active members of LABB are said to be devotees of the mountain, if not spiritually in the way of the well-known religious sects based on Banahaw, then environmentally. LABB members are quick to point out that the mountain's biophysical well-being is inextricably linked to respect for its rich mystical, historical and spiritual traditions.

Most of the slopes of Mount Banahaw have enjoyed national park status since 1941, although jurisdiction has been muddled by a more recent decree by former President Marcos that placed a large swathe of the mountain under the authority of the National Power Corporation, which regards it as a geo-thermal reserve. The remaining area is officially under the authority of the DENR. Government jurisdiction over the mountain in recent years, however, has been more on paper than on the ground. This was particularly the case when the communist New People's Army (NPA) exercised considerable influence over upland communities — until 1993 when NPA Commander Ka Hector and his men gave up their arms.

The defection provided an opening for a group of Banahaw devotees to form LABB, which aimed to create a presence in upland areas previously controlled by Ka Hector. It seemed an opportune time for the entry of an NGO, since both the NPA and the government had alienated local residents. But having been previously exposed only to neglectful government and aggressive insurgents, the community misunderstood the role of LABB. The NGO was an alien concept to Banahaw uplanders, and its approach had to be explained through painstaking consultations. Suspicions that it was a front for either the government or the NPA were dispelled only after a year of organizing.

LABB members were driven by what they saw as the threat to Banahaw's remaining forests — mainly growing resident populations using farming methods harmful to the mountain. But LABB also recognized the dangers from lowland business interests who saw the commercial potential of an improved peace and order situation on a relatively unexploited mountain. LABB set up sites in three areas of the mountain: Sta. Lucia in the town of Dolores, the base for over 70 religious sects, some of which reside near the mountain's forest line; Bugon in Sariaya, a farmers' community on mostly open and denuded slopes of Banahaw; and Tayabas, a historic town with forested watersheds which remain, for the most part, intact.

The formation of LABB coincided with a shift in government thinking and policy on national park management. While LABB was establishing an upland presence, the government activated an interim PAMB for the mountain under the NIPAS Act. LABB helped organize a people's organization (PO) that was represented on the PAMB, and sent LABB members to participate as NGO representatives. This was a

concrete example of how government policy evolved from regarding upland residents as squatters and agents of destruction, to accepting them as potential stewards and even tenured landholders.

But LABB also helped push this process along by maintaining links with ranking DENR officials who exerted influence over the PAMB — from foresters assigned to sit on the board to the DENR Under-Secretary supervising NIPAS implementation. In a sense, LABB acted as a broker in this process, by bridging the gaps between community groups participating in the PAMB and DENR bureaucrats who traditionally maintained a certain distance from grassroots communities.

◆ Community Organizing and Reforestation

LABB has recognized the value of community organizing in upland development. With the close involvement of seasoned organizers from a Manila-based NGO, CO-Train, LABB helped community residents form a people's organization, *Binhi ng Buhay ng Magsasaka ng Bugon*, or *Binhi*, that focused on agrarian issues, particularly on the process for acquiring titles over portions of alienable and disposable land within the lower elevations of the community. LABB's assistance on this issue was actively sought by community residents after they perceived threats by the DENR to take over their lands. But LABB's involvement on this issue was also consistent with its understanding that a large part of the upland environmental crisis was rooted in land hunger in the lowlands. Community consultations and facilitating conducted by the CO-Train organizers were key to the success of *Binhi* in solving its agrarian problems. The professional organizers were trained to explain in terms easily comprehensible to rural people and to facilitate discussions among members of the community. LABB could not have related effectively to the community without the involvement of the professional organizers who elicited information, gained trust and instilled confidence. These are all rare skills that other NGOs may take for granted.

Binhi organized community meetings, formulated strategies and lobbied the Department of Agrarian Reform until residents were awarded land ownership certificates in March 1996. *Binhi* is now discussing plans to take their organization forward by forming a credit co-operative and becoming a source of advice to nearby communities wanting to emulate its example.

While *Binhi* was active in working for land tenure and ownership, it demonstrated much less enthusiasm for the community-based reforestation that LABB was promoting through on-site seminars and example. LABB members have planted several thousand trees on about 10 hectares of land in the community.

Local residents would politely express interest in what LABB was doing. But in more reflective moments they conveyed doubts about whether tree-planting was in the best interest of the community. They had several objections to reforestation: (1) there was little guarantee that the trees would eventually be owned by community residents; (2) they had suspicions that tree-planting was a means for government to take away their land; (3) trees got in the way of farming; and (4) it took time away from other field chores.

It was clear that the lack of land tenure in the uplands and the consequent short time horizon of the community were also major obstacles to tree-planting on

denuded slopes. In hindsight, the objections seem serious enough to have warranted a community organizing effort similar to what was going on for agrarian issues.

Instead, LABB decided that urgent environmental problems on the mountain required a full-time technical person to initiate and co-ordinate activities that were more strictly environmental. LABB recruited a University of the Philippines-educated environmentalist and mountaineer to establish residence in Bugon and introduce ideas and projects in the community, such as indigenous tree-planting, biodynamic farming, solar ovens and other alternative technologies. This LABB co-ordinator had been trained by Nicky Perlas, a widely respected proponent of sustainable agriculture technologies in the Philippines. The co-ordinator had also spent time in India as a student of Eastern religions, was a practising vegan, lived in a teepee and had a German wife.

It soon became evident that his uncommon ways created a wall between himself and the community. His lack of organizing skills and personal rapport alienated Binhi members. While he had technically sound ideas, he was neither trained nor oriented as a community-based person, and did not have a grasp of the community's basic needs. Instead he used his position to push what were essentially the NGO's priorities.

The experience threatened to undermine the progress that LABB had made in creating trust within the community for the NGO approach. But it did force LABB to re-examine its relationship with the community and appreciate the importance of organizing, consultation and demonstrating to the community that the NGO's goal was to empower upland residents and not to dominate them. It was a painful lesson, for it side-tracked efforts to address the urgent environmental problems on the mountain, such as rapid soil erosion.

LABB's experience in Sariaya in 1994-1995 demonstrated two things about community organizing: (1) when it is done competently, as it was for the community's agrarian struggle, it could be a strong tool for change at the grassroots; (2) when it is lacking, as it was in the case of LABB's initial environmental efforts, communities cannot be mobilized for forest protection activities.

In other words, community organizing is an essential yet often neglected aspect of forest protection. One problem is that since most experienced organizers cut their teeth on agrarian issues, there are relatively few organizers oriented towards environmental goals such as community-based resource management.

Many NGOs have known for years of this need for community organizing in upland development. While the government has repeatedly recognized this need, it has been neglected in its budgets. It has also failed to support community organizing as part of its array of services. Since the DENR's integrated social forestry (ISF) personnel and the agriculture department's extension workers were devolved to local governments, these trained community-based personnel have received negligible support, and in many cases are no longer applying their organizing skills. A number of the DENR's former organizers, for example, have been assigned by provincial governments to supervise commercial mining operations, which are a much more lucrative source of revenue for local governments.

◆ Trees versus Electricity

LABB's efforts in Dolores have been complicated by the diversity and social make-up of the resident community. While Barangay Bugon is composed purely of farmers, the slopes of Barangay Sta. Lucia in Dolores are populated by members of over 70 Christianity-inspired religious sects.

Of particular concern to LABB is further encroachment of these communities into the forested interior, and the environmental impact of a steady stream of devotees who come to worship at any one of dozens of shrines. Every Easter, these problems are multiplied many times over by the sheer volume of visitors to Dolores, with some estimates placing the number at over 250,000. This occurs in a small area in a national park with virtually no sanitation facilities for such large numbers.

LABB has been at the forefront of an environmental education programme that seeks to remind visitors that they are drawn to Banahaw because it is a natural temple where many rituals are performed in its clear waters. They should therefore respect the physical integrity from which Banahaw's sacredness flows.

One obstacle to educating devotees about protecting the environment is the common belief among the resident sects that the end of the world is near. Among such people with visions of Armageddon, talk of conserving resources for future generations is not very convincing. With most sects led by messianic leaders, LABB has had some difficulty organizing in Dolores for forest protection activities. Nevertheless, LABB's five associates based in Dolores have established a nursery for indigenous tree species and are planning a reforestation programme for Sta. Lucia's denuded slopes.

While not overly excited about LABB's earthly vision, the sects have generally regarded the NGO as just another eccentric group of devotees, with the environment as their religion. But an incident in August 1995 put LABB on a collision course with one sect that attempted a plunge into the modern world. LABB's direct action to stop the destruction of trees on an upper slope alienated one of the oldest religious groups on the mountain, the Tres Personas Solo Dios.

After many months of preaching the value of trees to the sects and other Dolores residents, LABB members discovered the presence in the area of personnel from the country's largest electric company, Meralco. Trees, including precious hardwoods such as *narra* and mahogany, were being cut in the secluded territory of the Tres Personas Solo Dios to make way for electric poles and cables.

The worshippers of Tres Personas Solo Dios had lived for decades at the site without electricity. After much deliberation that took account of electricity's (and television's) impact on lifestyles and culture, sect leaders agreed to accept the offer of the congressman from the province, former Meralco vice president Jun Punzalan, to bring power to the community in order to fulfil a campaign promise.

When confronted by LABB members about the killing of the trees, both Punzalan and sect leaders claimed that they did not know that Meralco was going to cut them down. But once it did, the act was accepted as part of the price of electricity. Of 105 trees that formed an archway leading to the Tres Personas Solo Dios sanctuary, nearly 40 had been felled before the operation was suspended (Mayuga, 1995).

LABB researched the law and discovered that the cutting of trees in national parks is prohibited for anything but scientific and educational purposes, and that would only be allowed with special permission from the DENR. Meralco, on the other hand, invoked the authority of the consenting National Power Corporation, which had official jurisdiction over the area. LABB petitioned the regional trial court in Lucena for a restraining order to temporarily stop the cutting of the remaining trees.

The Lucena court threw out LABB's petition, ruling that it properly belonged in a court in Manila, where Meralco has its offices. But by that time, after being alerted by a LABB member, DENR personnel had gone to the site and ordered the tree-cutting to stop. This prevented the electrification from being completed in time for the sect's anniversary celebration, to which Punzalan was invited. A banner had even been hung thanking the congressman for the electricity (which, at the time, had not yet been connected). The celebration was held without the special event — the switching on of the electricity — that the community had long awaited.

This embarrassed sect members and caused deep resentment towards LABB, which was blamed for the fiasco. On another level, the incident may have affected LABB's overall advocacy efforts by creating the impression that LABB was obstructing progress in the community.

LABB activists felt that they had borne the brunt of the clash between two values: electricity, which the community wanted, and the trees that LABB felt it had a duty to defend. But LABB members had insisted from the day the tree-cutting was discovered that there might be another way of setting up the electric cables without chopping down the trees. This involved altering the path of the cables to avoid obstructive trees and branches. This alternative had simply not occurred to Meralco, Tres Personas Solo Dios, or the congressman.

The tensions surrounding this incident were resolved on several levels. LABB and sect leaders met and the former explained the environmental rationale of delaying the electrification until a less damaging solution was found. They agreed to wait until an alternative route for the cables was arranged. A meeting was also held with Congressman Punzalan. Finally, after some prodding from the DENR, Meralco agreed to search for a means to connect the cables without killing trees, perhaps a lesson that could be applied in other areas where its personnel would otherwise cut without qualms and the presence of protesting activists.

At the time of writing, electricity has not yet arrived in the community, but it is expected soon through re-routed cables and without the cost of any more trees.

◆ Resolving Conflict with the Community

Several insights can be drawn from this incident. The first is that an NGO that lobbies and develops relationships at various levels in the bureaucracy can obtain results at critical moments, such as when the DENR personnel arrived to stop Meralco just before it was due to cut down more trees. It helped that LABB's overall co-ordinator had access to DENR Secretary Ramos and two of his Under-Secretaries.

Other NGOs, even those with national constituencies, may not appreciate the importance of backstage or personal lobbying and tend to limit their advocacy to press conferences and press releases, if they do any advocacy at all. They may owe their reluctance towards personal lobbying to what they see as the distasteful backslapping relationships that politicians form with cronies and constituents. But at least in LABB's case, person-to-person advocacy has proved to be effective.

The more important insight is that without adequate social preparation and organizing, an NGO risks alienating a community that is not fully aware or convinced of the importance of the environment vis-à-vis "progress". There is sometimes the mistaken notion that communities will always take the side of NGOs. But in this case, NGO and community were on opposite sides of an issue. LABB took the opportunity to discuss with those concerned, including a congressman, the nature of the trade-off, and how trees need not be sacrificed for the community to progress.

The possibility of misunderstanding NGO motives again demonstrates the value of community organizing, not just to build up local organizations, but to create confidence in NGO work and educate the community about the issues that the NGO cares about.

The conflict here between trees and electricity is not an isolated one. Many communities have reacted to power companies' apparent disregard for the trees that are in the way of their installations. Cutting used to be the routine way of handling such obstacles, until the public's growing appreciation for trees compelled electric utilities to reconsider their approach (*The Philippine Journal*, 1996).

THE LIMITS TO GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

It has often been argued that poverty drives the poor to destroy the environment, that upland farmers burn vegetation and clear land in order to survive, and that they have few concerns beyond their day-to-day subsistence. The poor, according to this argument, make poor environmentalists. Indeed, some of environmentalism's critics claim that the cause is a luxury reserved for élites.

This is one of the reasons why a group of brave farmers from a poor, land-locked province in the Philippines attracted national and overseas attention in the late 1980s. By organizing themselves to blockade timber trucks passing through their community, residents of San Fernando, Bukidnon (see map) demonstrated that rural people could act collectively to protect their environment.

Theirs was a poignant story, a David-and-Goliath moral tale full of drama and what, at first blush, seemed to be heart-warming success. Since their protest had a strong undercurrent of Catholic teachings and spirituality, and was encouraged by local clergymen, the farmers received strong support from the vast Catholic church network and consequently garnered more publicity than any other community activists in recent memory. In many publications, the group has been portrayed as an example of how home-grown grassroots activism can succeed against large commercial interests that are destroying the environment. And it has been cited by scholars to refute the notion that poor farmers cannot look far enough ahead to be good environmentalists (Broad, 1993).

But the disappointments that eventually befell these “first environmentalists,” as one prominent Filipino activist called them, have hardly been told, and neither have some of the lessons from the bittersweet experience of San Fernando. Except for a newspaper column by Denis Murphy and a brief postscript in **Saving the Earth** (Hofer, 1993), which mention some of the disappointments, there are only positive references in the published literature to this famous community.

◆ The Road to Protest

Commercial logging and shifting cultivation were widespread in the region enclosing San Fernando from the 1960s to the 1980s, resulting in rapid forest denudation in this mountainous municipality of over 35,000 farmers. A common consciousness about the threat to the environment was raised not by deforestation but by the prospect of a dam that would flood communities. Success in blocking the dam project in the early 1980s convinced members of the community about the effectiveness of collective action.

Declining crop production, droughts and flash-flooding had created in farmers deep insecurities about their future (Manila Observatory, 1989). The logging trucks passing along their one provincial road became the natural locus of their resentments. A charismatic Canadian missionary and San Fernando's parish priest, Father Pat Kelley, encouraged the activism of a local group of catechists, and accompanied them on many of their subsequent protest activities. Over a period of 16 months, from July 1987 to November 1988, more than 200 San Fernando farmers and members of their families organized highway blockades to stop the passage of logging trucks from the surrounding hills to coastal sawmills.

With the help of church support groups based in Manila, the actions were publicized in the national press. The DENR first suspended then cancelled the permits of the logging companies after news was published of a police dispersal of the blockade, which injured several protesters, including a leader of the group who was then seven months pregnant.

But even after cancellation of the permits, timber cutting continued, in some cases by local residents and officials. The protesters decided to take their struggle to Manila. For more than a week, 13 San Fernando protesters fasted for the forest in front of the DENR, a strategy that was clearly church-inspired and in sharp contrast to the type of angry protest rallies that were common at that time and which ended occasionally in violence.

The fasters also prayed and asked for dialogue. Despite coinciding with the death of former president Marcos, the fast was covered widely by the press and culminated in a meeting with President Aquino, a devotee of religious prayer who seemed genuinely touched by the fasters' approach. DENR Secretary Factoran subsequently ordered that all timber licenses in Bukidnon province be revoked and all commercial logging banned. Moreover, a seven-point agreement was forged between the DENR and the fasters' group that promised government support for, among other things, upland rehabilitation, reforestation and deputized volunteer forest guards in San Fernando.

The people's blockades, coupled with the high profile fast in Manila, seemed to convey to many that grassroots activism could be powerful enough to change a system that had been so entrenched in the nation's politics. But it also showed that poor farmers, lacking resources and sophistication about the legal and political system, also needed the power of the church and the attention of a sympathetic media.

◆ Enthusiasm Peters out

Most publicized accounts of the San Fernando environmentalists stopped with this happy ending. Broad (1993) concluded that the experience in this remote mountain town showed that “when working together, the poor themselves are likely to become not only the catalysts for halting the plunder but also the initiators of sustainable alternatives”. However, even after the glare of publicity faded, significant events continued to unfold in San Fernando. There was the matter of implementing the seven-point agreement between the government and the fasters, which would require cohesive community organization, co-ordination with government and the astute management of funds.

Ruth Martinez Ignacio, then a graduate student at the Ateneo de Manila University, stayed in San Fernando for several months in 1990 and 1991 to research her master’s thesis and expected to write about an “ideal case” of a rural community that had succeeded in reversing environmental degradation in its locale. Instead, she reported community dissension, lack of credible leadership, corruption and, finally, loss of interest in collective efforts at environmental revival (Martinez Ignacio, 1992). Commitment of resources by government also was not sustained, resulting in the termination of the volunteer forest guard scheme that had effectively policed forest areas.

In a May 1996 visit to San Fernando, the author of this paper found that timber companies were no longer logging in the town, a legacy of the grassroots anti-logging movement. But the hills were starkly bald, and there was no evidence of the kind of widespread reforestation one would expect from a place made famous by home-grown environmentalism. Moreover, there were reports of widespread small-scale logging involving local officials and ordinary residents. There was apparently little law enforcement when it came to community violations of forestry laws.

Only one person from the original group of protesters, the controversial leader of the 13 fasters, was still active in environment-related activities in the community, and no longer had a substantive following. The rest of the original anti-logging protesters were no longer active. Even the parish church, which had been at the forefront of the anti-logging movement, was no longer involved in environmental work. The new resident priest was preoccupied with finishing the construction of an impressive concrete church to replace the old wooden structure.

It appears that the anti-logging movement in San Fernando was popular while tree-cutting was dominated by large corporations. But after the commercial log ban was imposed in the province, and local residents increasingly became the suppliers of logs and other forest products, the enthusiasm for collective action petered out.

Martinez Ignacio points out that the San Fernando protest had a vastly different dynamic from upland rehabilitation and protection, which require community structures and transformation that occur over time. When the villains were abusive outsiders, it had been easy to focus community efforts. When the logging companies were stopped, “everyone thought the battle was over”, says a former protest leader (Escoto, interview, 1996). “But it was really only just beginning”. Indeed, when the companies were replaced by chainsaw-wielding residents, the consensus within the anti-logging group evaporated.

Martinez Ignacio cites the suddenness with which an informal group of protesters who organized around a specific goal — halting commercial logging in their community — were compelled by circumstance to transform themselves into a formal community organization, Kapunungan sa Pagpanalipod ug Pagpalambo sa Kinaiyahan (KPPSK or Organization for the Protection and Development of the Environment), with multiple responsibilities.

The necessary planning and capacity-building which should have solidified KPPSK's organizational structure, demands, and functions did not take place. . . . The six months between the fast and the creation of KPPSK were not sufficient to prepare and orient KPPSK for the responsibilities ahead (Martinez Ignacio, 1992).

There was little time to develop the organizational discipline that could have prevented an early demoralizing setback. Martinez Ignacio describes this as the "absence of management abilities". "A crucial lesson", she writes, "is the importance of capacity-building, of having the required technical and managerial skills, to effectively carry out organizational tasks". She added that community management skills were so weak that an issue that should have been handled at the local level — illegal logging by members of the community — had to be raised at the national level during the fast.

The KPPSK's new duties included allocating wood from nearby forests to members of the community for their lumber needs, so that people would no longer have to resort to illegal logging. Such a responsibility over one of the community's richest sources of natural wealth, however, came with great temptation. After only six months, the committee responsible for determining the lumber requirements of community members ceased to function. Allegations of corruption and favouritism in the allocation of wood deprived it of credibility and moral authority.

◆ Grassroots Cohesion Unravels

The attention and goodwill generated by the fast imposed on the protesters a heavy burden of responsibility and resulted in the sudden availability of financial resources for reforestation. That eventually led to the unravelling of the community's cohesiveness. The people's organization did not, perhaps could not, develop fast enough to respond to the changing circumstances.

Successful community organizing and sustainable environmental action often require a gradual process of awareness raising, education and institution building, combined with tangible socio-economic benefits. In an April 1996 workshop in Los Baños on "Social and Political Dimensions of Environmental Protection in the Philippines", organized by UNRISD and the Institute of Environmental Science and Management (IESAM), Protestant missionary Delbert Rice described the gradual process undergone by the Ikalahan indigenous community in Nueva Vizcaya. Environmental education, established through the missionary school and initiated decades before, produced local political leaders who gave importance to the upland environment.

In San Fernando, clear and efficient lines of communication had not been established, resulting in meetings attended only by members of the core group, most of whom resided in or near the town's centre. The media publicity also focused on one articulate member, who was not fully accepted as the group's

leader, but nevertheless frequently spoke on the group's behalf, occasionally at overseas conferences.

The organization that was formed after the fast was not without achievement. After the national government linked it up with the large foreign-funded reforestation project in the area, the Muleta-Manupali Watershed Development Project Group (MMWDPG), the project was much more closely monitored and produced better results. That experience signalled the promise of having a people's organization involved in the implementation of a national government project.

The group's activism, however, was short-lived. The gradual withdrawal of the external support system — professional organizers and technicians assigned to the community — contributed to the breakdown of community organization. The crucial role of the church also dwindled into insignificance. The missionary priest who had zealously championed the fasters' cause was eventually reassigned, to be replaced by priests who were less outspoken. The KPPSK had originally been a formal part of the parish church structure. But resentment from other parishioners towards KPPSK leaders, who were perceived to be making decisions without sufficient consultations, led to the KPPSK's separation from the parish.

The nucleus of an environmental constituency still exists in the community, in the person of Clarita Escoto who is active in what remains of the KPPSK. The group operates a small co-operative store which, it hopes, will eventually support environment-related activities. But its influence in the community has waned. Small-scale logging and rattan-gathering continue unabated.

It is clear that the momentum created by the farmers' successful blockades in the late 1980s has been lost.

CONCLUSIONS

It has become an article of faith among rural development practitioners that protection of the uplands will entail the participation and vigilance of local communities, whether they are poor farmers in Bukidnon or well-to-do water consumers in Cebu. But as Martinez Ignacio reminds us in her study of San Fernando, "community participation requires an effective organization".

In the Philippines, the policy environment is being established to empower local communities to exercise more control over forest lands and resources. But it is a large step from policy to community participation. The government currently lacks the capacity to make its upland policies come alive. Endemic corruption also undermines policy implementation. Actual control and empowerment will come about only with local organizations that mobilize communities, enforce laws, lobby government and implement upland programmes.

As gleaned from the case studies reviewed in this paper, the role of institutions outside government — specifically NGOs, the church and media — can be vital in mobilizing the community, catalyzing upland change, and compelling government to enforce its laws and clean up its ranks.

The case studies show that the success of forest protection initiatives can hinge on the quality — and even quantity — of organizing at the local level. One primary

reason for the eventual debacle at San Fernando, once the protesters achieved their original goal, was the inability of the group to respond to sudden responsibility. There was little time to develop an organization that could handle the multiple tasks required for reforestation.

Community organizing is often started by NGOs. With external aid increasingly channelled to NGOs, and the government recently forging partnerships with these groups on upland issues, the role of “outsiders” has become more crucial than ever before. But the skills and experience of NGOs vary widely. While there is no lack of NGOs that focus on the upland environment, the minuscule number of experienced organizers who are active in the field means that upland organizing must be given more support.

There is a tendency by some to underestimate the importance of community organizing. A relatively new NGO such as LABB had to go through a difficult period of trial and error before realizing that change in the uplands required more than a person assigned to the area who was trained in sustainable technologies. More importantly, what was needed was a full-time organizer focused on environmental protection.

The role of the church as catalyst cannot be discounted. Parish priests in San Fernando were deeply involved in the protests that ended commercial logging in Bukidnon province. But once the challenge shifted to the long-term tasks of rehabilitating the uplands and changing the behaviour of local residents who became aggressive loggers, the church’s involvement dwindled.

In Cebu, the Cardinal’s consistent support for the water lobby has given the citizens’ movement tremendous clout. Church-backed groups and individuals have been at the forefront of organizing and educating consumers to oppose commercial development in the watershed.

In addition to effective organizing, forest protection initiatives also benefit greatly from media attention. Policy makers and elected officials in the Philippines derive most of their information from national newspapers, and often react to what is published in the press. This aspect is sometimes overlooked by development practitioners who become preoccupied with service delivery or community work at the expense of advocacy.

Local media in Cebu contributed to raising awareness about watershed issues, which galvanized the water lobby in the province. In contrast, media in Mindanao failed to detect the illegal logging that occurred in Zamboanga and elsewhere in the months leading up to the May 1995 elections. Exposure could have alerted environmental activists before much damage was done.

LABB activities have been widely documented in the press, and have given the group a higher public profile than many larger NGOs. Publicity, of course, is not synonymous with effectiveness. But it does open doors, and makes media-conscious policy makers sit up and listen. Advocacy writing in national newspapers by LABB member Sylvia Mayuga has given LABB considerable influence in Quezon province that it certainly would not have otherwise.

In San Fernando, media publicity was critical in bringing about the changes demanded by the farmers. But at the same time, the fame that it brought to a small

community and its tiny cadre of leaders appears to have contributed, to some extent, to the resentments that eventually damaged future efforts at collective action.

Finally, the responsiveness of some elected officials and appointed policy makers to forest protection initiatives does not only demonstrate effective community activism. It also shows that government can no longer be considered a monolithic entity which ensures élite control over natural resources. In the past, analysts often pointed out that the Philippine state was simply a vehicle for plundering the nation's environmental assets. It is true that Congress is still populated by a high proportion of politicians with strong links to extractive industries, such as logging and mining. But political change has also allowed the entry of more progressive environmental policy makers. Their influence is evident in policy changes that tend to favour community forestry over commercial logging, and moves towards transforming the DENR into a more honest broker of various interests.

Time and again, environmentalists have proved to be effective critics of government policy. Their influence is bound to increase as NGOs become stronger and better funded, and the public more aware of environmental issues. Even as they become increasingly involved in project implementation, activists must continue to exert pressure on both national and local policy makers if the momentum for more progressive policies is to be sustained. Corruption in the natural resource sector should be exposed and not tolerated.

One additional challenge to community and non-governmental organizations today is to identify enlightened and honest bureaucrats, politically reward progressive and courageous actions with favourable publicity, and build on the goodwill to push for more state support for effective upland programmes.

As the nation's politics and forestry policies change, so too will the relationships among the major actors involved in the uplands. Increasingly, the success of many forest protection initiatives will depend on how those outside of government take advantage of policy changes, while pressing for greater community control over resources.

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