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## **Engaging Communities in Forest Landscape Restoration: Experiences from Biliran Province, Philippines**

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### **Abstract**

Engaging communities in forest landscape restoration is indeed a great challenge. The forest landscape in Barangay Kawayanon has been a recipient of several reforestation programs in the early 1980s, but illegal logging, fuelwood gathering, grazing, frequent forest fires and the lukewarm involvement of local people have kept the area as permanent grassland for more than three decades. Community people do not engage in forest restoration activities out of interest but rather due to the cash incentive they have from their involvement. After reforestation project implementation, their participation greatly declines. In support of the National Greening Program of the Philippine Government, a pilot reforestation project was implemented in May 2014 in Kawayanon by the ACIAR Watershed Rehabilitation Project Team. A series of meetings, consultations of the stakeholders, community mapping and an information campaign were undertaken by the team prior to the implementation of the project. Consequently, community members have been actively engaged in this project. They planted and are maintaining nearly 20ha of trees which are growing vigorously and have not been damaged by forest fires or grazing. This research has identified a number of keys to successful engagement of communities in forest landscape restoration. These include social preparation, deployment of community organizers, encouraging cooperation among stakeholders, an information and education campaign, and capacity building. Responsive leadership, weekly meetings with the community organizers and the people's organization, transparent financial accounting, and support for livelihoods (i.e. payments for seedling production, and plantation and agroforestry system establishment) likewise enhanced community engagement.

**Keywords:** Engaging communities, community-based forest management, forest landscape restoration, and watershed rehabilitation

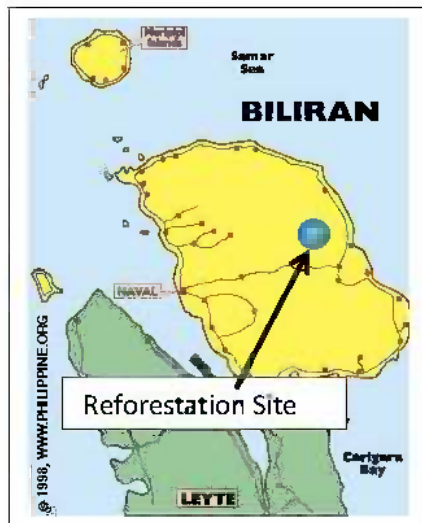
### **Introduction**

Engaging communities in forest landscape restoration is not a new concept in the Philippines. Since the 1970s, forest landscape restoration through reforestation programs in degraded forestlands involving upland communities have been practiced in the country. Harrison et al. (2004) found more than a dozen of these programs which were integrated under the Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) Program implemented in 1995 through Executive Order 263 during the Ramos Administration as a national strategy to ensure the sustainable development of the Philippines' forest resources. The CBFM program unifies all current people-oriented forestry programs of the Philippine government which emphasizes the engagement of communities in and near public forests aimed to protect, rehabilitate,

manage, conserve and utilize the resources (Harrison et al. 2004). Hull (2005) also stressed the engagement of forest peoples in the long-term conservation of tropical forests to minimize degradation, conserve biodiversity, maintain environmental services and strengthen people's livelihoods through effective forest governance. And the Philippine Government believes that such an approach will bring success to the forest landscape restoration work undertaken in the country.

The most recent program geared towards forest landscape restoration is the National Greening Program (NGP) through Executive Order 26. On the 24<sup>th</sup> day of February 2011, the NGP was signed by President Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III as a major strategy of the Philippine Government to alleviate poverty and food security, conserve biodiversity, and mitigate and adapt to climate change. The NGP aimed to plant some 1.5 billion trees covering about 1.5 million hectares for a period of six (6) years in the following lands of the public domain: forestlands, mangrove and protected areas, ancestral domains, civil and military reservations, urban areas under the greening plan of the Local Government Units (LGUs), inactive and abandoned mine sites, and other suitable lands. The philosophy behind the NGP is similar to CBFM where communities should be engaged in all phases of the program. However, despite the established system of engaging communities from the past until the present program, success in community engagement in forest landscape restoration in Biliran Province remains a great challenge.

### The Pilot Reforestation Site



The site of the pilot reforestation program is Barangay Kawayanon, Caibiran, Biliran Province covering 26.6 hectares and located 11.59 north (latitude) and 124.52 east (longitude) which is about 17 kilometers from the municipality of Naval and 3.5 kilometers from the municipality of Caibiran. The prevailing climate condition is Type 2, characterized by having no dry season and with maximum rainfall between November and January. The site has been a recipient of several reforestation projects in the past but considerable grasslands remain due to forest fires, grazing, fuelwood gathering and illegal cutting. These prevailing conditions become a great challenge to the implementation of the pilot reforestation program within the site.

### Methodology

In response to the need for rehabilitating the denuded uplands in Biliran, the Australian Center for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) Research Team at the Visayas State University (VSU), in collaboration with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), established a pilot reforestation program within the 26.6 hectares of grasslands in Barangay Kawayanon, Caibiran to support the NGP. The program aims to improve the rehabilitation of critical watersheds in the area by identifying the key technical, socio-economic and policy drivers for successful rehabilitation and then applying this knowledge to design and pilot-test initiatives to improve the outcomes from watershed

rehabilitation. Such outcomes include improved watershed health, sustainable land use, and increased livelihood opportunities for rural upland poor leading to decreased poverty. Following the protocols of engaging communities in watershed rehabilitation, at the outset initial meetings and discussions on the various research and development activities, identification of stakeholders and deployment of two community organizers within the partner community were undertaken. Together with the research team members and DENR officials, initial activities were followed by several meetings, information and education campaigns, and capacity building activities involving not only the partner community but also the local barangay officials.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results presented here are not yet conclusive as the program was assessed at its mid-term implementation stage but the initial findings are providing vital signs for program success. While working on the ground, the team identified a number of key factors that have direct influence in engaging communities within the partner community. Nonetheless, the team needs to push forward and work on these key factors (enumerated below) on a sustainable manner to achieve the desired outcome.

### **Keys to successful community engagement**

There are several key issues to consider when implementing forest landscape restoration in a certain community depending on the prevailing social, economic and environmental factors. The ACIAR research team, based on field experience, would like to share how the team capitalized on these issues or factors and made significant milestones towards achieving the successful implementation of the pilot reforestation program in the partner barangay or village.

#### ***Social Preparation***

Social preparation in landscape restoration or watershed rehabilitation is a great challenge to DENR and other line agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs) in Biliran Province. While this has been the usual method in upland development, particularly for reforestation, social preparation has not been intensively undertaken to prepare, stimulate the interest of and motivate community residents to participate in landscape restoration. Interviews and focus group discussions conducted by the ACIAR research team revealed that “cash incentive or payment” has become the main command and control mechanism of residents’ involvement rather than their interest or desire to restore landscapes or watersheds. With the support from the Australian Government, the research team decided to intensify social preparation (together with livelihood discussed in the succeeding paragraph) through several approaches including baseline community data and community mapping, delivery of vital information about the project to be implemented through meetings, open line communications and consultation with the concerned groups or stakeholders, involvement and collaboration of stakeholders in decision-making, and capacity building through training and educational tours (see also DSE 2013, JICA 2009 and UNICEF 2013 on the strategies the project adopted). Consequently, the members of the Kawayanon Farmers Association, Inc. (KFAI) have raised their awareness and inculcated the vital importance of the landscape restoration program in their barangay. Arousal of their interests through their involvement in various activities and group meetings became noticeable.

### ***Deployment of community organizers***

One of the crucial components in landscape restoration activity is the deployment of responsive community organizers. Estoria et al. (2005) revealed that community organizers are effective in forming people's organizations, motivating people to participate in voluntary activities, and encouraging cohesiveness among members of the people's organization. Hence, the project deployed two community organizers within the partner barangay. The two organizers keep the peoples' organization moving by joining and monitoring the day to day activities. They provide advice and suggest solutions on some issues that can be addressed at the local level. They call the attention of the officers and members of KFAI whenever problems arise and arrange meetings so that solutions can be formulated. They conduct weekly meetings to evaluate progress and determine whether some things have been missed. They see to it that every detail of the pilot reforestation program is implemented according to plan. They seek further advice from the project leader and other members of the research team as the need arises. In this way, the implementation is moving towards the targeted output.

As pointed out by Mangaoang and Cedamon, 2004, mere participation of local people in activities like forest research (in their case study) and other forest-related activities such as landscape restoration is not enough. These authors added that an ongoing or open interaction between the implementers and the local people is crucial in paving the way to partnership-building. The organizers deployed within the community adopted such findings thereby creating an open interaction system that strengthened partnership and engagement of all the stakeholders.

### ***Cooperation of appropriate stakeholders***

Gathering the right people to support the successful implementation of the pilot reforestation program within the partner barangay is another crucial component that the project considered. At the start, site selection for the pilot reforestation program was a great challenge for the research team. A solution was achieved through consultation meetings with DENR officials, LGU Officials, and several peoples' organizations. After site selection, meetings with the peoples' organization including the barangay officials of the selected site together with DENR officials were also undertaken to inform everyone about the pilot reforestation program implementation, the people involved, their respective role, and the benefit they will gain from the program. When all things were set and stakeholders informed, the program implementation began. Whenever problems arise, the stakeholders are consulted and solutions are formulated. Even those stakeholders with minimal involvement (as in the case of the Barangay officials) should be consulted from time to time in view of their contribution for the success of the program. They can make ordinance that could deter grazing and forest fires within the planting site and could impose penalties for all violators. Their role is indeed crucial, hence their involvement is crucial.

### ***Information and education campaign***

An information and education campaign (IEC) is also a vital component in engaging communities in forest landscape restoration. A study conducted by Gravoso et al. (2009) revealed that the flow of information (tree registration policies in this case) can be further improved through posters and presentation of seminars for farmers. Hence, in the course of the pilot reforestation program implementation, all barangay residents including the school children were informed about the project. Included here were meetings and workshops with the residents and officials in the barangay, an information campaign within the school, distribution of leaflets, and installation of information boards within the barangay including the plantation site. Through this strategy, all barangay residents including nearby communities became aware of the program being implemented. Related socio-economic and

biophysical studies within the area involving interviews and surveys were also used as avenues for information dissemination. These activities further enhanced the information and education campaign of the project. In a barangay or village, residents can easily spread the information because everybody knows each other. The IEC thus enabled them to share any information about the project, and particularly to tell people to protect the established plantation.

### ***Capacity building***

Capacity building is another crucial factor to raise the level of awareness, interest and motivation of KFAI members to engage in the program. Thus, the research team together with the two deployed community organizers and DENR officials conducted a series of training activities for the KFAI members. These training activities covered tree nursery establishment, quality seedling production, seedling care and maintenance, mother tree selection, and plantation establishment, maintenance and protection. Consequently, a nursery with elevated hardening beds was established and the seedlings raised are high quality planting stock. Four months after planting in the harsh grassland, these seedlings showed vigorous growth performance reaching an average height of about one meter. At present, there are no grazing and forest fire incidents within the plantation sites. This is in part a result of the communities' awareness and cooperation, whereas adjacent grassland areas have suffered from several forest fires in recent weeks.

Another important activity conducted by the research team was the educational tour by KFAI members to a successful CBFM project of YISEDA (Young Innovators for Social and Environmental Development Association, Inc.) in Maasin, Southern Leyte. During this event, YISEDA officials gave lectures on the various aspects of their experiences including financial accounting, transparency and accountability, and provided useful insights on the successful implementation of their CBFM project. This activity also provided KFAI members very relevant and applicable information on how to undertake a successful pilot reforestation program in their barangay.

### ***Responsive leadership***

The leadership of the program at different levels has been responsive to the needs of the KFAI members for them to carry out various activities of the pilot reforestation program. The research team, the community organizers, DENR officials and KFAI officers conducted frequent meetings to ascertain that target activities are implemented according to plan. These meetings were also the avenues to resolve conflict among stakeholders, clarify issues and concerns, and address other important matters. The research team realized that a problem or conflict that started to emerge must be brought immediately to the leaders to avoid a perilous spread. Frequent meetings with the president of the people's organization are also conducted by the community organizers to discuss matters that will affect the entirety of the project implementation. In this way, the president also relays the essential information to the group as often as possible, thereby providing an open communication line for all group members.

### ***Weekly meetings***

Weekly meetings are also important particularly at the outset of the pilot reforestation program implementation to determine the aspiration of the partner people organization, past and present problems related to their involvement, and the benefits they will derive from the program. Weekly meetings were also the avenues to discuss concerns and issues related to the program implementation, and to resolve conflicts as mentioned above. As the group moves on the right track, meetings were changed to a monthly basis except when crucial issues arise that need immediate solutions.

### ***Transparent financial accounting***

Transparency in all transactions particularly on financial matters is a very important key to unity among the members of the peoples' organization. Thus, financial transparency was always emphasized during meetings and group activities. Interviews and focus group discussion conducted by the research team in a number of people's organization in Biliran showed that conflicts arise among members due to non-transparency of project financial transactions.

Financial accounting is also essential in providing members of the people's organization transparent disbursement of funds on where and how it is used. Confidence of the members of the people's organization to join and perform their specific tasks also hinges on the honest handling of funds. When members know there is clear and fair distribution of money for their specific outputs, they are united and move according to the targeted output.

### ***Livelihoods***

One of the crucial factors to consider for the successful engagement of communities in landscape restoration is the livelihood component. Engagement of the organization becomes shaky and superficial when the members will not obtain something to satisfy their daily needs. In fact, membership of KFAI at the start of the program implementation was attended by 170 people but sharply declined down to 23 when the majority found that the livelihood opportunities of the program are insufficient to support their daily subsistence. The shaky initial implementation of the program, however, became the barometer for the research team to identify who are the reliable members that can carry out the tasks ahead. As the program implementation progresses, all the remaining 23 members gladly received their monetary compensation on weekly basis as wages for their engagement in various activities.

Nevertheless, there are cases where some members have aired their aspiration for better opportunities and compensation. At this juncture, the research team decided to find augmentation funds specifically for the livelihood component. With the help from DENR officials in Biliran Province, additional funds were allotted for the livelihood component of the program providing KFAI members better opportunities than the previous situation. The livelihood component that will soon be implemented is focused on an agroforestry system which is beneficial to both the environment and the partner organization and the community as a whole.

Emtage (2004) found that households that intend to plant trees on land they owned or managed have higher levels of resources than those that do not intend to plant. Jesusco et al. 2009 also found that providing financial assistance is the primary condition that would encourage tree planting among smallholders in Leyte Province. This means that the project needs to support the partner community in finding livelihood opportunities that could possibly increase their level of resources and encourage them to fully engage in the pilot reforestation program in their village. The research team is hopeful that with the proposed agroforestry establishment within the pilot site, the partner organization will be more enthusiastic in their engagement.

### **Challenges encountered**

A number of challenges occurred during the course of the program's implementation. These include sustainable livelihood opportunities, fair distribution of wages, unnecessary cash advances and absences. The livelihood opportunities become a reference point for the

members to sustain their involvement in the program implementation. A majority of the original KFAI members disengaged due to the absence of such a livelihood opportunity that is crucial for their survival. Fair distribution of wages on the other hand emerged when some members found that somebody received higher pay than others. Spreading the monetary benefits equally and justifiably is also a big challenge when engaging communities in the pilot reforestation program in this part of Biliran Province.

Members of KFAI would also like to make cash advances as often as possible particularly when they know that funding is available with the president and treasurer. This happened when special occasions demand celebrations like the annual fiesta. After receiving the cash advances, for some reason the members do not join the field activities the next day. When they find a better livelihood opportunity on certain days, they are also absent for obvious reasons thereby affecting the planned activity for the week.

### **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

It is clear at this point that of all the factors influencing the engagement of the KFAI members in the pilot reforestation program in Barangay Kawayanon, livelihood is the most crucial component. Attendance of members in all program activities is largely driven by the available remuneration opportunities. This is a single driving force that would entice community members to engage in forest landscape restoration. It is vital that in all reforestation initiatives, a livelihood component should always be seriously considered. Nonetheless, other factors are also vital for the successful engagement of all the stakeholders and should therefore be seriously considered together with livelihood opportunities when conducting similar reforestation initiatives in other parts of the province or country.

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