

CONFERENCE REPORT

NGP Summit: Revisiting the Implementation of the National Greening Program

Quezon City, Philippines
February 20-21, 2014

A conference sponsored by:

Environmental Leadership & Training Initiative (ELTI)
Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE)
Philippine Tropical Forest Conservation Foundation, Inc. (PTFCF)
Rain Forest Restoration Initiative (RFRI)

Background: On February 24, 2011, the President of the Philippines issued Executive Order 26 declaring the implementation of the National Greening Program (NGP) as one of the government's priority programs to reduce poverty, promote food security, ensure environmental stability, conserve biodiversity, and enhance climate change mitigation and adaptation. The program specifically aims to plant 1.5 billion seedlings on 1.5 million hectares of public land throughout the country by 2016.

Upon its inception, the NGP received strong criticism from civil society groups, particularly regarding the use of a handful of exotic tree species, which was justified on the notion that there is a limited supply of native tree seedlings to grow. Jumping at the opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of native biodiversity, the Rain Forest Restoration Initiative (RFRI) held a series of meetings and consultations with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the lead agency in the implementation of the NGP. These meetings brought about the signing of a Partnership Agreement on February 20, 2012,



Photo: FMB-DENR





between the DENR, the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE) and the Philippine Tropical Forest Conservation Foundation (PTFCF) – the latter two being RFRI members that signed the agreement on behalf of the network and other civil society organizations (CSOs).

Under the Partnership Agreement (also referred to as the DENR-PTFCF-FPE Partnership Agreement), RFRI members committed to mobilize their respective community partners to produce and plant native tree species in areas mutually identified by the parties. The DENR, for their part, agreed to pay the community partners for whatever seedlings they produce, plant and maintain. Both parties also agreed to jointly prepare annual work and financial plans and to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the agreement starting in 2013. The intended goal is to create a roadmap towards the complete use of native species in all reforestation efforts in the country from 2016 onwards.

In connection with this process, the DENR Central Office issued a Memorandum Order on March 30, 2012, to all of its Regional Executive Directors that outlined the operationalization of the Partnership Agreement. The DENR Secretary also issued another Memorandum Circular on May 2, 2012, directing the DENR Regional Offices to engage RFRI-assisted CSOs in the production and planting of indigenous forest species pursuant to the Partnership Agreement.

Despite the Partnership Agreement and policies issued in support of it, field implementation remains slow and problematic. Since the signing of the Agreement in 2012, only a few people's organizations were able to secure NGP contracts with the DENR. There are a number of issues and concerns emanating from both the CSOs and the DENR on this matter. It is in this context that RFRI members organized a national summit to analyze the effectiveness of the DENR-PTFCF-FPE Partnership Agreement and the broader implementation of the National Greening Program, and to develop recommendations for improving the situation.

Objectives:

- Document and consolidate accomplishments of the DENR-PTFCF-FPE Partnership Agreement;
- Identify facilitating factors, obstacles and gaps in the implementation of the NGP and Partnership Agreement;
- Draft recommendations for more effective field implementation of the NGP and Partnership Agreement;
- Document success stories and lessons learned in the implementation of the NGP and Partnership Agreement; and
- Identify mechanisms to sustain gains and overcome challenges during the implementation of the NGP and Partnership Agreement for the 2014-2016 implementation period and for future reforestation programs.



Conference Format: Mr. Nestor Carbonera, Chair of the Board of Trustees of FPE, officially welcomed the participants. Atty. Jose Andres Canivel, Executive Director of PTFCE, then explained the rationale and set the expectations for the two days of the conference. Mr. Alejandrino Sibucan from the Forest Management Bureau of the DENR (FMB-DENR) started the presentations with an overview of the Philippine forest and land cover change, reporting a decline in forest cover from 7.1 million hectares (ha) in 2003 to 6.8 million ha in 2010, resulting primarily from the conversion of “closed forest” to cultivated and other wooded land (i.e., understocked land).

Ms. Teresa Aquino, also from FMB-DENR, provided updates on the NGP and outlined the DENR accomplishments to date. According to her presentation, the DENR claims that the

annual reforestation rate has more than doubled, increasing from 154,000 ha/year during 1986 to 2010, to approximately 333,000 ha/year during the first three years of the NGP. She also emphasized that from 2011 to 2013, 397 million seedlings were planted in about 683,000 ha, which exceeded the targets for that period and generated more than a million jobs. Ms. Aquino then showed geo-tagged photos of different NGP sites, but it turned out that a majority of the sites were still monoculture plantations of exotic species.

Dr. Perry Ong, a professor from the University of the Philippines-Diliman Institute of Biology and a RFRI member, provided a more critical perspective on the NGP and the Partnership Agreement. He began by reviewing the history of the Partnership Agreement, reminding the audience of the CSOs’ concerns regarding the NGP, particularly the use of exotic species. He also highlighted how the CSO community rose to the DENR challenge of producing and planting native species. Dr. Ong then summarized the issues faced by the CSOs in implementing the Partnership Agreement and the NGP in general. The issues he mentioned included unreasonable planting requirements, strict eligibility requirements for People’s Organizations (POs), difficulty in communication with the DENR Central Office and in coordinating with the field offices, and various irregularities in the implementation process causing delays in issuance, or worse, non-issuance of contracts and payments. Despite these obstacles, the few POs that qualified were able to produce 9.3 million native seedlings and were able to plant and maintain about 12,000 ha in two years.

In order to give the participants an opportunity to voice their own issues, the conference then adopted a workshop format with participants being divided into four groups based on where they are involved: Protected Areas, Indigenous Peoples, POs and Mangroves. Each group had a professional facilitator from the NGO Tanggol Kalikasan (‘Defend Nature’) and a co-facilitator and documenter from RFRI. For the first activity, the whole NGP implementation process was laid out on a big sheet of paper, and participants were asked to place a sticker with their organization’s name



on a particular step if they went through it. If there were additional steps that they had to go through, which were not included in the outlined process, they had to write it down on a card and place it where it happened along the process. The participants were then asked to identify the accomplishments, both biophysical and socio-economic, as well as the facilitating factors that contributed towards achieving the accomplishments, both in general and in relation to the Partnership Agreement.

The third activity focused on the barriers, challenges and gaps in the implementation of the NGP and the Partnership Agreement, how CSOs tried to address these problems, and the missed opportunities that resulted as a consequence. Based on the facilitating and hindering factors, the participants formulated recommendations for improving the NGP implementation during the remaining years of the program, for sustaining ecological and socio-economic gains after the end of the NGP in 2016, and for innovations for future reforestation programs. All the groups then presented their results to the plenary.



Despite the difficulties faced in implementing the NGP, participants still recognize the huge potential of the program in general, and the Partnership Agreement in particular, to not only rehabilitate degraded forest ecosystems, but also to provide opportunities for livelihood and community empowerment. Pertinent recommendations for improvement included:

- Streamlining the implementation process for CSO participation to facilitate efficient release of contracts and payments;
- Increased coordination by the DENR Central Office with the field offices and other relevant government agencies to ensure effective on-the-ground implementation;
- Enhanced transparency and accountability with a working grievance mechanism; and
- Ensuring greater and more authoritative role of assisting NGOs in the Partnership Agreement.

A *Conference Statement* summarizing the findings and recommendations, and expressing the general sentiment of the group to continue supporting the NGP was drafted towards the end of the conference. Ms. Mayumi Natividad, the Assistant Director of the FMB-DENR, acknowledged the findings and recommendations and offered to keep the lines of communication open to make this Partnership Agreement truly work. The Secretary of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), the department that handles the national budget, including financing of the NGP, made a special appearance during the 2nd day. He rallied the participants by first recognizing their significant contribution to the NGP, then by presenting options for streamlining the process for CSO participation, including a more efficient disbursement of funds, which he is personally working on together with the DENR. This, and an inspirational message from Mr. Godofredo Villapando, Executive Director of FPE, closed the conference on a hopeful note.



RFRI also held an exhibit along the conference halls during the two-day Summit that showcased the work of each of the members, as well as the collaborative efforts of the network. ELTI put up posters highlighting the *Rainforestation* program as an approach to restore Philippine forests for communities, biodiversity and ecosystem services, and provided other information about ELTI's work in scaling up *Rainforestation*. ELTI also contributed an article about the recent Forest Restoration Research Training for the first issue of *Panao*, the official RFRI Newsletter, which was distributed to the conference participants.

Participants: The conference was attended by over a hundred participants representing various People's Organizations, Indigenous People's Organizations, and other CSO partners of RFRI from different regions of the Philippines that are participating in the NGP, particularly under the Partnership Agreement. Representatives from the DENR, the DBM, local government units, and the media were also present.

Media: A press conference was held during the 2nd day of the event. An article entitled, *Is the government reforestation program planting the right trees?*, captures the message of the NGP Summit and can be accessed online at <http://www.rappler.com/nation/51200-national-greening-program-native-trees>.

Outcome: RFRI members, including ELTI, have been holding follow-up meetings to finalize the *Conference Statement* for official endorsement to the DENR. The network will work more closely with the DENR to ensure that the issues raised during the conference will be immediately addressed, and the recommendations incorporated into policies and implementing rules and regulations. Concurrently, RFRI is planning to engage directly with the DBM to explore options to resolve certain administrative and financial bottlenecks, and possibly to create an alternate and more effective Partnership Agreement altogether.



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