

Précis

Grassroots Organizations for Resource Management in the Philippines

A BANK-SUPPORTED PROJECT IN THE CENTRAL Visayas region of the Philippines in the 1980s developed natural resource management tools under very sensitive conditions. It achieved most of its objectives, creating local groups of farmers and fishermen who carried out a wide range of actions and gained valuable experience in interacting with public agencies and local authorities. The project's design was innovative in that the implementation unit was independent of core government structures, but was funded directly by the central government rather than by line agencies.

The results, according to an audit by OED*, show that efforts to improve natural resource management must be an institutional as much as a technical process that fosters change, rather than investing only in physical goals. Projects such as this must be flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions, and must be backed by three elements: an appropriate policy and legal framework, managers with organizational skills, and local officials with sufficient decisionmaking powers.

An Innovative Design

In 1981, when the Bank-funded Central Visayas Regional Project was being prepared in the Philippines, natural resource management and poverty reduction were at the top of the agenda. The region, comprising four provinces (Cebu, Bohol, Siquijor, and Negros Oriental), was among the poorest in the country. It had limited agricultural potential, and poor farmers were moving into the hills to clear forest for planting.



The project sought to improve the local management of habitats in forests, uplands, and shore fisheries in order to stop environmental degradation and create income opportunities for the region's poor. In keeping with the government's efforts to decentralize decisionmaking and economic activity, the project's planners tried to maximize local grassroots participation and ensure the region's autonomy. Consequently, the project included two important innovations:

- The project's implementation unit reported directly to the prime minister and included an executive board with four local representatives and four from line agencies.
- Funds for the project were channeled directly to the project unit from the central government, rather than through line agencies.

The project's activities were concentrated in five sites covering 140,000 hectares, 200 km of coastline, and about 200,000 people. The Bank's loan of \$26 million, approved in 1983, funded activities in five areas, to:

- Provide secure tenure to farmers in four watersheds and help them shift cultivation to more stable perennial crops and livestock;
- Improve and reforest an area where "slash and burn" activities had depleted resources, and provide occupants with secure tenure and incentives for conservation.
- Establish artificial reefs, replant degraded mangrove areas, and establish coral reef sanctuaries at four shoreline areas, allocating usage rights to participating households.
- Build access roads, trails, village water supplies, and small irrigation works.
- Provide institutional strengthening, training, technical assistance, and research.

Legal Rights

One key issue that emerged immediately involved the rights to natural resources and the authority to protect them. The problem of land titles was most acute in forest areas. The owners of large enterprises and small farmers were in competition over usable land. Neither had formal land titles, but large operators were in a better position to press their claims.

Similarly, coastline communities did not have the power to prevent outsiders from harvesting fish from breeding areas created by locals. A step in the right direction was taken recently when municipal governments were granted the power to establish committees in

charge of land use plans and zoning, and to establish and police fish sanctuaries.

Results

The project succeeded in reaching the poor. Surveys indicated that the incomes of most participants increased more rapidly than the regional average during the project period. Timber permits contributed significantly to initial increases in the incomes of those taking part in the agroforestry component of the project, but incomes leveled off after the permits were withdrawn. Improved roads and tracks increased both farm and off-farm income opportunities. Project participants increased their farm and off-farm incomes more than non-participants during the project period, and sources of household income have continued to diversify since the project was completed.

The project was largely successful, although some parts were undermined by unexpected changes in government policy. In 1988, in the middle of the project, the government suddenly canceled permits for the removal of old and damaged timber after some permit holders were found to be harvesting live trees. The government failed to give local governments any authority in the matter, thus undermining the project's intended goals of supporting self-management of natural resources and of allowing farmers to use secondary forest products and timber for additional income.

The fisheries component was also threatened by legal disputes. The project installed artificial reefs and reforested mangroves along the shores. Fishermen in the project areas reported increased yields, but they also complained about large landowners attempting to take over beach-front assets (the issues are before the courts) and about encroachment by large, commercial fishing boats with sophisticated gear. Thanks to new laws, local governments now have increased powers to control access to local waters.

The vast majority of farmers in the upland agriculture sites adopted the management practices promoted by the project: soil conservation, agroforestry development, reforestation, fishponds, and small watershed planning and implementation. In addition, farmers report that restricted forest harvesting has helped reduce runoff and flood damage to rice paddies. Most of the farmers adopted the two basic elements of intensive land management in sloping areas: planting hedgerows and contouring.

The project created a number of farmers' and other grassroots organizations that have become experienced and sophisticated in dealing with the government and local authorities, and have learned to take advantage of op-

portunities to get action on their priorities. These groups have become valuable resources for learning teamwork and negotiation skills as well as for obtaining practical information on land management practices. The project was instrumental in establishing a land tenure task force, which has since grown into a regional committee that provides a counterweight to the power of local landowners. The project also provided extensive training for local government officials and beneficiaries, and at the regional level for line agency staff and officials.

The project's innovations are being replicated. Some initiatives promoted by the project, such as new management methods for inshore fisheries, are now widely accepted practice in the Philippines, a fact that reflects the project's overall success. The experience with the project also influenced the current community-run forestry program sponsored by the Philippine Department of Natural Resources.

Conclusions

The project's main achievements were institutional rather than physical. These achievements were made possible by managerial and political (rather than technical) inputs that increased local people's confidence and ability to deal with problems, fostering a lasting change. Even if some farmers' groups cease to exist and some technologies are dropped, the institutional processes set in motion are unlikely to be reversed. Most of the groups formed under the auspices of the project are still operating and effective.

Three conditions are essential for the success of operations that try to empower local communities: an appropriate and stable government policy and legal framework; local communities with adequate decisionmaking powers, allowing problems to be solved without central government intervention; and grassroots organizations with the managerial and political skills, as well as the technical skills, to operate within this context.

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*Performance audit report, "Philippines: Central Visayas Regional Project," by John English, forthcoming. Available to Bank Executive Directors and staff from the Internal Documents Unit and from regional information service centers, and to the public from the World Bank InfoShop:
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