

Environmental Degradation and Activist Intervention: Reflections on the Philippine Experience

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Background: The State of the Philippine Environment

The dismal state of the Philippine environment is eloquently manifested in the country's denuded mountains, eroded and unproductive slopes, dying and polluted rivers, a declining water table, damaged and dying coral reefs, depleted marine fishery stock, and the level of human poverty in the midst of a deteriorating natural ecosystem.

Throughout the last century, the country's forest cover declined rapidly, from 70 percent of the country's 30 million hectares in the 1900s to 17 percent or 5.49 million hectares in 1996. In the 1980s, the area covered with old-growth rain forests amounted to less than 1 million (0.9 million) hectares or only 3 percent of the original cover at the start of the century. By 1994, old growth forests covered only 800,000 hectares. The rate of deforestation peaked with the expansion of logging concessions, the migration of poor lowlanders to upland areas in search of livelihood, and other forest degrading activities. Large-scale commercial logging was at its height in the 1960s and 1970s, a period that coincides partly with authoritarian rule and with minimal environmental consciousness among the population at large.

Intensive logging, failure to replant logged-over areas and their conversion into farms, grazing and mining areas contributed significantly to the country's environmental problems. Deforestation reduced the stock of tree species and the flora and fauna hosted by former forests. Heaney and Regalado (1999) argue powerfully that the fauna unique to the Philippines (75 percent of amphibians, 70 percent of reptiles, 44 percent of birds, and 64 percent of mammals) are seriously endangered by the loss of rainforests. This is deplorable in light of the country's ranking as among the most mega-diverse in the world. The authors claim that the Philippines has 512 species unique to it; this number is much higher than Madagascar or Spain, countries renowned for their biodiversity.

Apart from further endangering the country's 'vanishing treasures,' the conversion of forests into other uses has had far reaching consequences beyond the forests. It has resulted in the drying up of creeks, frequent and extensive forest fires and reduced capacity for carbon sequestration. Together with road construction activities in sloping mountainous terrain, upland development projects and the practice of agriculture without the application of contour farming and soil conservation, excessive logging

has led to soil erosion and silt accumulation in waterways, rivers, reservoirs and flows into coastal areas. In turn, forest loss, water runoffs and sedimentation have impaired the function and life of reservoirs and the recharge capacities of groundwater aquifers. The magnitude of the country's population, which has continued to grow at more than 2 percent annually since the 1970s, together with inadequate sewage facilities and pollution controls and increasing industrial demand for groundwater have exacerbated the pressure on this resource.

Because of the high quality of groundwater and its relatively lower extraction cost, most residents and establishments especially in urban areas have drawn water from the ground. Groundwater extraction in the national capital region, especially in areas inadequately covered by the metropolitan water system, has resulted in an alarming decline of the water table. During the 1990–1996 period, the water table dropped by an estimated annual rate of 6 to 12 meters. The main artesian aquifer can supposedly tolerate these excessive withdrawals for another 10 years or so, before pumping wells run out of available groundwater resources (Haman, 1996).

Excessive withdrawal of groundwater has not only resulted in its eventual depletion; it has also increased the threat of saltwater intrusion and contamination from polluted surface water. Saline water intrusion is already a problem in the coastal areas of Metro Manila, Bulacan, Cebu City, Mactan, and other urban centers.

Pollution of inland and coastal surface water due to human settlements, industry and agriculture certainly has an adverse impact on groundwater quality and potential supply for domestic use. However, the impact and magnitude of pollution is unknown. Information on the state of rivers in the Philippines is available for only 12 percent of the country's principal rivers. Based on available data, water in these rivers does not meet the national standard for drinking water. A survey of 75 rivers covering the late 1980s to 1992 reveals that 38 percent of them was polluted, i.e. they had levels of biological oxygen demand (BOD), pH or heavy metal, which would require secondary treatment. About 13 percent of the surveyed rivers were pronounced dead.

But apart from the effects of forest loss on the water table, siltation, pollution and fishing with dynamites and cyanide have destroyed a significant portion of the country's coral reefs. This is unfortunate since coral reefs account for at least 10 to 15 percent of total annual fish production. In conjunction with the loss of mangroves, estuarine degradation and over-fishing by commercial outfits, coral reef destruction has reduced fish catch in coastal zones, impoverishing the fisher-folk who used to depend on what was once the richest and largest fishing grounds in the world.

From whichever way one looks at it, the Philippine environment is severely degraded. Decades of cutting trees in the inaccessible mountains have now manifested their consequences in the lowlands. Deforestation, loss of soil nutrients, river pollution, groundwater depletion, coral reef degradation, loss of mangroves and other habitats reflect the depreciation of the country's natural capital without any replacement.

Within the context of a growing environmental consciousness worldwide, the depressing state of Philippine forests, rivers, marine sanctuaries and biodiversity has

attracted the attention of foreign governments as well as local and international non-government organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations. Many of the agencies focus on deforestation because of its salience and extensive onsite and offsite impacts. They address historical and contemporary factors that continue to threaten the remaining residual and old growth forests. These factors include the persistence of illegal logging activities, migration and occupation of upland forests, lack of effective forest management and protection systems and tenure of migrant and indigenous communities, and the incessant conversion of forestlands into farms, unproductive brushlands, or grazing, mining and other extractive areas.

In response to the problem of deforestation, a number of NGOs have directly engaged in community-based forest and coastal management. Specifically, they have organized communities to prevent and monitor forest fires and soil erosion, regenerate coral reefs and mangroves, protect forest and marine resources from illegal encroachment, and develop mechanisms for on-site environmental protection especially among the indigenous communities. With support from foreign NGOs and donor agencies, they are also involved to some extent in watershed protection.

Some agencies, however, have focused on biodiversity conservation or some form of watershed management. While they are aware that forest-related activities may improve aquifer recharge capacity and address the depletion of groundwater in the long run, NGOs do not yet have a handle on groundwater depletion. Nor are they significantly involved in addressing river pollution, although the collaborative efforts of government and civic action groups to revive the Pasig and Marikina Rivers are notable exceptions. All told, environmental activism in response to the depreciation of the country's natural capital, has figured quite significantly in the scenario of Philippine social movements.

This paper reflects on NGO and PO interventions in the last 15 years. It gives a brief overview of some of the forms their interventions have taken through the years and the conditions that have facilitated or constrained environmental activism. The paper concludes with the challenges and prospects of environmental activism in the context of the country's vulnerability to political and economic crisis, of which the current problem of legitimacy is an example.

The Emergence and Imperatives of Environmental Activism: Five Forms of Activism

In the face of deteriorating environmental and social conditions, local NGOs have pursued a wide range of actions to address particular problems. Mapping roughly the areas where environmental activists are visible, one would note that they are found in various parts of the country. However, their numbers are still quite limited. One estimate puts the number of NGOs at 5000 organizations, consisting mostly of small outfits performing diverse and specialized functions (Malayang, 2000). Interestingly, environmental activists are hardly found in localities that need them. It would also seem that they have not yet developed strong networks to link them to each other. But

while NGO and PO activists in the different areas where they are found are like oases in deserts of degraded forestlands, it is undeniable that they have become more visible, with activities covering a wide range of domains.

Five forms of environmental activism may be inferred from the Philippine experience. These are as follows: 1) direct confrontation against perceived culprits of environmental destruction; 2) advocacy work for institutional reform or policy change; 3) community organizing either for a legal struggle and mobilization for an environment-related issue or for resource protection and management purposes; 4) implementation of conservation and development programs at the local level; and 5) networking for larger/macro issues, like the impact of trade or globalization on the environment, climate change, or the overall sustainable development strategy/vision.

Most of the above actions are purely local and private initiatives while a few, like the conservation and development programs, are government initiatives with external support. Some of the actions require large external funding sources while others depend on internal resources. For instance, networking does not seem to require as much resources as the requirements for community organizing and resource protection and management. Compared to direct confrontational activities at the local level or advocacy work in the national capital, conservation and development programs are supported by massive external funds. Interestingly, some actions are financed by external bilateral grants and loans; other locally-funded activities, like advocacy and networking are pursued in collaboration with foreign NGOs.

Some of the above forms of activism may entail specialized functions that have not been specified. For instance, the marketing of upland products by NGOs or efforts at cultural recovery by POs themselves may be part of community organizing work or conservation programs. The monitoring of public or private investment projects for their adverse social or environmental impacts may be a necessary component of direct confrontational action or advocacy work while information dissemination and consciousness raising are part of networking activities.

Direct Confrontational Actions

There have been a number of instances of NGOs undertaking direct confrontation activities against perceived or identified culprits of environmental degradation. These include the blockage of logging trucks transporting timber; the prevention of commercial fishing vessels, fishing trawlers and cyanide or dynamite fishermen from moving in coastal waters; protest actions demanding the United States government to clean up the toxic waste materials left behind in the former US military base and compensate the residents whose health have been affected; and pickets for an import ban on sources of hazardous wastes, such as foreign batteries. There are other stories of nonviolent confrontation activities although many NGOs have not spent time documenting their experiences.

With regards to the blockage of logging trucks, the community and NGO action cases in San Fernando, Bukidnon and Cagayan de Oro are noteworthy. Over a 17-

month period from July 1987 to November 1988, a group of 200 farmers from San Fernando, Bukidnon together with their families, a Canadian parish priest and youth catechists prevented logging trucks coming down from the surrounding hills to bring timber to the coastal sawmills (Esquillo, 1992; Severino, 2000). Having regularly experienced deforestation in the form of lower crop production, droughts, and flash floods, and attributed these experiences to the large-scale commercial logging in their vicinity, the farmers blockaded the provincial highway. Prompted by their successful effort in blocking a dam project earlier in the decade, they were aware of the value of collective action.

With the assistance of the Catholic Church and church support groups, the San Fernando action was publicized in the national press. When news of the violent dispersal of the blockade was disseminated (several protesters including a pregnant leader were injured), the DENR who was then headed by a former human rights lawyer Factoran, cancelled the permits of the logging companies. Unfortunately, the cancellation did not stop logging activity in the area. In response to persistent logging, 13 protestors from Bukidnon staged a hunger strike within the compound of the DENR central office. In order to prevent any death, President Aquino met with those fasting for the forest. As a result, DENR Secretary Factoran ordered all timber licenses in Bukidnon revoked, hence effectively imposing a province-wide commercial logging ban.

The DENR also promised support for upland rehabilitation, reforestation, and the deputization of volunteer forest guards. Given the weak enforcement capacity of the state, the log ban did not stop the illegal cutting of trees in Bukidnon and neighboring provinces. Logging trucks continued to stream to the sawmills and port of Cagayan de Oro. Inspired by the San Fernando experience, a group of young lawyers, agriculturists, and social science graduates who were involved in community organizing and development work among the farmers and fisher folk of Misamis Oriental organized a blockade in the early 1990s and sustained it for a specific period in subsequent years (Ravanera, 1999). The Center for Alternative Rural Technology, the NGO in the area, was able to spearhead and sustain this action because of its multisectoral approach. It recruited students and youth volunteers and carried out organizing and livelihood projects like cattle dispersal, alternative farming systems, and other projects among the farming and fishing communities. Like the San Fernando farmers, they were also subjected to violent dispersal, but they did not resort to hunger strikes. The organizers believed that people's lives were already on the line in the blockades. Their leaders also received more serious death threats because they confronted a larger interest, a nationwide syndicate involving high-ranking officers.

There have been less dramatic local confrontations. For instance, NGOs report the existence of organized coastal communities patrolling the seas and driving away fishing trawlers and cyanide or dynamite fishermen within their coastal waters. As localized actions against their own fellow residents or a less organized and strategic business sector like the wood products industry, these local community actions have

not received as much attention in national newspapers. However, in order to undertake and sustain these community actions, organizing work and education in legal rights were necessary inputs before they took off.

Confrontational actions have not only been undertaken at the local level for location-specific concerns. They have also been carried out locally for issues with an international dimension. Two particular actions are worth noting. The first is the People's Task Force for the Clean-up of the former US bases. As noted above, the national democratic movement and Greenpeace have demanded the clean up of toxic waste materials left behind in the former base and the compensation of residents whose health have been affected. To dramatize the issue, it was brought up to the regional court. However, it did not reach the International Court of Justice because the Philippine government has to be the petitioner in the case.

The second case has to do with the involvement of Greenpeace in monitoring and stopping the trade of hazardous waste. While the activists were able to effect the ban on the flow of used batteries from OECD countries to non-OECD as mandated by the Basel Convention, they continue to monitor the importation of batteries by local battery producers.

Advocacy

The dramatic and courageous efforts of communities and NGOs to block the transport of timber to the market were extra-legal actions or forms of civil disobedience that may have contributed to later developments that have gone beyond the retention of illegally cut logs in the forest site. Specifically, they may have induced and supported legal actions for forest conservation that were pursued in existing governmental institutions. In both the judicial and legislative bodies, advocacy actions were made for a nationwide ban on logging or the cancellation of government's lease of forestlands to TLA holders. In fine, these extra-legal actions also possibly stimulated or coincided with two other related advocacies — the recognition of ancestral domain claims of indigenous communities, and the amendment or rejection of the Mining Act.

With the assistance of environmental lawyer Oposa, forty children aged 9 years old to 16 years old demanded the cancellation of Timber License Agreements in an unprecedented class suit against the government of the Philippines on behalf of their generation and unborn generations (Minors Oposa et al versus the Secretary of the DENR). Filed in March 1990, the minors charged the Philippine government of committing a grave abuse of its discretion by leasing about 3.9 million hectares of public forest lands in 1990 to 92 TLA holders (Oposa, 1993). The plaintiffs alleged that given the annual rate of deforestation in the country of 120,000 hectares, the remaining old growth/virgin forest in 0.8 million hectares will be totally decimated in less than 10 years. Hence, they will be left with nothing to use, conserve, enjoy or benefit from in the future. While the trial court dismissed the case, it was raised to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. The ruling is instructive because it

exemplifies or asserts the precedence or primacy of the future/option value of the forest over its present market value.

The Supreme Court ruling affirmed this future/option value, as expressed in the following statement.

“ . . . We (The Supreme Court) find no difficulty in ruling that (the petitioners) can, for themselves, for others in their generation and for the succeeding generations, file a class suit. Their personality to sue in behalf of the succeeding generations can only be based on the concept of inter-generational responsibility insofar as the right to a balanced and healthful ecology is concerned. . . . every generation has a responsibility to the next to preserve the rhythm and harmony for the full enjoyment of a balanced and healthful ecology. Put a little differently, the minors’ assertion of their right to a sound environment constitutes, at the same time, the performance of their obligation to ensure the protection of that right for generations to come.”

However, the petitioners’ demand for the cancellation of the loggers’ TLA was not realized in the Supreme Court (Gatmaytan, 1993).

The debate on logging moved on to the Legislature at the time the current Forestry Code was being assessed. Together with drafting a new Code, the Legislature also faced the question of whether to enunciate a total logging ban or not. The issue was not resolved; neither was a new Code legislated. With the old Forestry Code still in place, the status quo upholds the legality of the TLA and the practice of selective logging.

While supporting the call to cancel the TLAs or put in effect a logging moratorium, some NGOs and POs have also lobbied in the Legislature for other issues. They have campaigned, for instance, for the recognition of the rights of indigenous people to their ancestral domain. Moreover, they have actively participated in the debates over the provisions of the 1997 Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act and the Fisheries Code, and have opposed the 1995 Mining Act. Advocacy for these issues continues to this day.

With regards to the recognition of indigenous people’s rights to their ancestral domain, much work has been accomplished in pursuit of this objective. The issues have sufficiently been ventilated and supported in national fora and international conferences. A Commission was created to formulate a participatory delineation process and issue a moratorium on the lease of public lands, their transfer, and the extraction of natural resources. Moreover, while progressives and advocates of indigenous people’s rights in the DENR have drafted an administrative order on the issuance of Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADC), the Department as of 1999 had issued CADCs over 2.5 million hectares or 19 percent of cultural zones certificates of ancestral domain. Despite these initiatives and accomplishments, however, the Legislature has not yet passed any bill. Moreover, the granting of more CADCs is constrained by mining applications and leases in 53 percent of potential CADC areas or 38 percent of the cultural zones of indigenous peoples.

With regards to the Mining Act, a group of NGOs and POs have proposed the banning of open-pit mining and other technologies that cause irreversible damage to

lives and the environment. This proposal, however, has not been adopted. Apart from it, NGOs and POs have also advocated the provision of monitoring mechanisms to communities so as to enable them to detect safety violations. Moreover, activists have demanded transparency in government negotiations with mining companies on financial and technical assistance agreements. The absence of the above NGO and PO proposals in the provisions of the Mining Act of 1995 forms part of the basis for their position to repeal the Act.

Community Mobilization: Implementation of Conservation at the Local Level

At the local community level, NGOs are involved in a myriad of activities. Because many of the previously discussed issues have not been resolved and the destructive environmental activities of logging and mining companies persist or continue to pose threats, some NGOs operate as outright environmental activists. They have intervened by filing legal suits and providing legal assistance to affected parties. Others would monitor proposed government projects or private investments in the forestry, mining, energy and public works sectors, as well as undertake environmental impact assessments at the community level. In their advocacy work or active engagement against corporate organizations and central political authority, some would also organize the local communities of indigenous peoples, upland migrant settlers, and other marginal sectors.

More NGOs, however, have concentrated on development work. As a result of earlier advocacy activity, new government policy, and the support extended by foreign donor countries and multilateral agencies, the opportunities for direct NGO involvement in the environment and local communities have expanded. For instance, the World Bank and foreign country donors, like USAID, JICA, and the European Union have supported community or civil society participation in the protection of old-growth forests and natural parks, and in community management of environmental and natural resources. These programs, in turn, entail the need for the organizing, training, and technical capacities of qualified NGOs.

Specifically, NGOs and POs have played a significant role in the establishment and operations of the Multi-sectoral Forest Protection Council, the protection and management of the old growth forest, natural parks and other protected areas, as mandated by the 1992 National Integrated Protected Areas (NIPAS) Act, and the DENR policy thrust towards community based forest resource management. In these government programs, the NGOs have performed various functions, such as organizing communities for protected area or resource management, facilitating the development of management plans, providing training and assistance in the planning and implementation of livelihood projects, sustainable technologies, marketing of local products, helping address local conflicts emanating from resource access or use, and mobilizing external resources and networks.

However, there are limits and uncertainties surrounding the gains associated with these government programs. The community-based forest management (CBFM) pro-

gram is a case in point. Like CADC, the CBFM is being promoted to democratize access to natural resources. Supported by ADB, USAID and the World Bank, it confers tenure rights over at least 1000 hectares of residual forest to a registered community association. With their tenure over public forestlands, local communities, including indigenous peoples will be responsible for the protection, rehabilitation, and management of the environment and natural resources with the assistance of government agencies, local government units, NGOs, resource institutions, and other private agencies.

At present, about 3 million hectares are under CBFM. These lands are within 8 million hectares of forestlands whose timber license agreements (TLA) either expired, were cancelled, or suspended. The prospect of expanding CBFM beyond its present coverage is uncertain because private commercial timber plantation enterprises are competing for the same lands. The future of the program also depends on the availability of funding CBFM area operations, the success of community organizing efforts, and the establishment of alternative income or livelihood opportunities within the communities. The immediate economic needs of upland residents are usually met through destructive livelihood activities, like shifting cultivation and small-scale logging.

Facilitating Conditions for the Emergence and Growth of Environmental Activism

All told, environmental issues have reached the forefront of policy making in the various branches of government because of the concerted efforts of environmental activists with direct or indirect support from international NGOs or donor agencies. The increasing salience of the environment in current public discourses at the national and local levels would have been unthinkable more than 15 years ago. A confluence of factors has made it possible for environmental activism to emerge and prosper since the mid-1980s. They are as follows:

- the visible and alarming signs of ecological degradation, which have reached dramatic proportions in occasional tragedies, like the deaths and destruction that accompanied the flashfloods of Ormoc and other places;
- the emergence of new conceptual perspectives on the environment and more importantly, their embodiment in international environmental movements and worldwide advocacies that have facilitated support for environment-related activities in the Philippines and other parts of the world;
- the democratic space after 1986, the devolution of central powers to local governments in 1991, and the greater emphasis on local actions to address concrete environmental problems; and
- the growing number of environmental activists or groups originating from the ranks of political activists in the 1970s, concerned citizens responding to obvious problems in their surroundings and NGOs involved in externally-supported programs that address specific environmental issues.

Since the Club of Rome issued its warning regarding the limits to growth and threats to the sustainability of the planet in the 1970s, environmental problems have persisted and increased in their severity. This has resulted in a more serious rethinking

of modernity, contemporary lifestyles and perspectives on nature. The debates and practices of various groups in different parts of the world have produced emergent perspectives on the environment. At the risk of oversimplification, these perspectives are characterized by a future orientation, recognition of nature's contribution beyond the extractive view underlying neoclassical economics and Marxist theories of value, and consequently a concept of valuation that goes beyond market price. Social valuation from this viewpoint is a process that involves collective action.

In the usual political economic analysis, the focus is on forms of social exploitation and oppression and the relations between the State and civil society. An environment-oriented perspective, on the other hand, would view these relations within the broader context of the use of the environment and natural resources. This view, in turn, would require incorporating a nature theory of value in methods of economic valuation and the philosophical notion of the intrinsic value of any life form. Although the environmental movement in the Philippines has not consciously adopted concepts and methods underlying environmental economics, there is growing recognition of the intrinsic value of nature's ecological functions that is not captured by financial or economic values.

More important than these conceptual developments, however, is the embodiment of the inchoate and newly crystallizing perspectives in Filipino environmentalists who have affiliated themselves with worldwide environmental movements and organizations. They have played significant roles in the crafting of international accords and conventions for the protection and regeneration of the environment. The movements' lobbying in conferences such as in Rio de Janeiro or Kyoto is not insignificant for countries like the Philippines, which penned its commitment to official international declarations. The current discourses on sustainable development, now incorporated in the Philippine government's medium-term plans, while rhetorical, have provided tools for ordinary citizens in NGOs and POs to articulate environmental concerns and hold government to its avowed commitment to address the country's mounting problems in this area.

But without the democratic space ushered by the end of authoritarian rule in 1986, emerging environment-oriented perspectives would not have had fertile ground to grow and develop in the Philippines. From the experience of the last three decades, it would seem that environmental activism in the country would only thrive in a non-repressive regime where the bureaucracy or relevant agencies are open to reform and willing to embark on new programs and policies. A repressive political regime would not have allowed any form of protest, particularly those forged against powerful interests that have contributed to environmental degradation (e.g. abusive loggers and miners).

However, political openness is not enough. In addition, a certain measure of economic stability is also required since economic crises tend to absorb the energies of the state and citizens alike. A regime under crisis would give primacy to the survival of particular factions and the immediate solution of pressing economic problems, rel-

egating environmental issues that may have reached crisis proportions, to the background. In the logic of everyday life in a poverty-stricken society like the Philippines, the destruction of nature would be perceived as tolerable because it does not have immediate political consequences. Even among activists, struggles over political and economic issues would tend to arouse a greater sense of urgency than environmental concerns.

Seen against this light and the historical rise of environmental movements worldwide in the 1980s and the 1990s, it is not surprising that the projection of environmental organizations and issues to the forefront in the country coincided with the end of authoritarian rule and occurred after recovering from the most serious of three economic crises since the 1980s. Compared to the economic stagnation in 1991–1992 and the financial and agricultural crisis in 1997–1998, the sharp economic recession in 1984–1985, with its massive capital outflows, bank slowdown and labor layoffs, was the most severe, sapping the energies of government and civil society groups. It was hardly possible while the crisis inflicted economic difficulties in 1984 and 1985 and a few years after that to put any environmental agenda on the table.

Political liberalization since 1986 has freed some anti-dictatorial and human rights groups and individuals from direct political confrontation with government and made it necessary for many of them to redefine their political orientation and activities within and outside governmental structures. With a more congenial political and economic context, political activists turned environmental activists were able to inform the public through media about undesirable environmental conditions, their adverse impacts on communities and other ecosystems, and the responsibility of government agencies and private business groups to mitigate the problem. They were also able to organize effectively for collective actions without fear of political retaliations. The direct confrontation cases, like the case of the human blockade of logging trucks would not have progressed had the past experiences of political activists turned environmental advocates not enlightened these actions.

But it is also important to note that other groups wittingly or unwittingly joined the environmental movement in response to the severity of the problems and the growing popularity of environmental issues in the wake of the Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development. The funding priorities given by bilateral and international donor agencies to environmental issues and the openness of particular individuals in relevant government agencies also facilitated the shift in interest of development-oriented NGOs to ecological degradation. It is noteworthy that significant gains in new environmental policies have been realized with the help of progressive individuals within government and donor-initiated programs (USAID, European Union, OECF, ADB, WB, UNDP, etc.).

Constraints Facing Environmental Activism: Challenges and Imperatives

Environmental issues are locally specific, as they would differ from one geographic site to the next. No matter how grave the problem is, however, its chances of being

assessed as serious to warrant urgent attention depends on the presence of a core of NGOs or environmental activists. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, there are still very few environmental NGOs working in scattered areas with varying levels of degradation. As such, much of the environmental situation in the country remains unmonitored and the communities facing problems continue to be unorganized.

But even in areas where NGOs are found and the communities are organized, the challenges facing environmental activists are daunting and demand tremendous efforts. Six case studies of communities covered by the Community-based Forest Resource Management strategy instruct us on the uphill struggle toward sustainable development (Borlongan, Bautista, Bernasor and de Quiros, 2000). There are particular conditions, activities and resource practices that are required to carry out the strategy.

These broadly include the following conditions: access to land tenure, the formation of community organizations, the formulation and enforcement of local forestry policies, participatory decision-making in land use and resource management planning and other actions, conflict resolution, mobilization of human power for forest rehabilitation and protection purposes, agro-forestry, soil and water conservation, fire management and linkage with external entities or partners to access support and resources.

In short, the difficult task of creating and nurturing critical human institutions and viable networks on the ground is a prerequisite to the achievement of successful outcomes. Without a critical mass of activists from outside the communities and within them, this prerequisite and the attendant actions would be hard to fulfill, unless the communities are homogenous and possess strong indigenous institutions, as was the case in the older communities we studied.

The need for community organizations and institutions is reflected in the outcome of the Catholic Church-backed environmental actions (logging blockade and hunger strike) in San Fernando, Bukidnon. This was not sustained. There was no local community organization before and after the blockade and the spontaneous protest did not build up an organization (Esquillo, 1992). The local community was beset with division, dissension and leadership problems. Moreover, the livelihood problem was not addressed, leading to a loss of interest among the community residents who had to eke out a living.

As the San Fernando case and other cases reveal, the process of building institutions for environmental protection is constrained by the need for activists in the field to initially focus their attention on the problems of poverty and the search for alternative livelihood opportunities. To illustrate, our case studies reveal the immediate income needs of households who depend on timber poaching, shifting cultivation (*kaingin*), or environmentally degrading cash crop production for their reproduction and sustenance. Although searching for and organizing livelihood activities is a means toward environmental protection, efforts in this direction are time-consuming and may absorb the activists completely. Moreover, alternative environment-friendly livelihood opportunities, developed in the framework of sustainable resource man-

agement, may prove to be unviable. Take the case of timber harvesting under community management. It has not been a source of income in the communities we studied because the forest charges or tax levied on the PO, apart from other informal payments, have made its timber more expensive than the illegally cut and marketed wood. Unless the illegal timber market is eliminated through local forest protection efforts and enforcement of national policies, the trading of timber from community-managed forestlands is not a viable livelihood source.

Apart from the heavy organizing and institution building tasks that fall on the shoulders of activists, their work is also constrained by conflicting land claims and the lack of financial and logistical resources. Unresolved land conflicts divide the community and prevent them from optimizing their efforts to address environmental concerns. As to financial constraints, our case studies also highlight the need to provide economic incentives for tree planting in and off the farm and other forest protection activities. Although households have undertaken the planting of forest and fruit tree species in their farms, the work of forest protection cannot depend solely on the volunteer work of villagers tottering on the brink of subsistence. It would require financial and logistical resources from the local and national governments. For understandably, the cost outlays for methods like contour farming, in a context of hand-to-mouth existence, discourage households from adopting the practice.

The challenge of balancing poverty alleviation and environmental concerns in the process of community organizing and building local institutions is difficult for environmental activists to face and meet head on. It is even more difficult when the job requires networking and monitoring tripartite collaborative efforts among local government units, NGOs and POs on the ground. Although the devolution of powers to local governments in 1991 has provided a framework for participatory development down to the village level, local governments themselves may constrain the outcomes and effectiveness of environmental activism. This is especially true in areas where local government officials have strong economic interests in maintaining systems that degrade the environment and the organized pressures for them to set aside personal interests are weak. This situation prevails in many localities in the Philippines.

There are other constraints or challenges but two are worth highlighting. The location-specific character of environmental action enhances its effectiveness. However, when a limited number of activists are scattered across the archipelago and an environmental consciousness and a notion of public good are not fully developed in the citizenry, location specificity makes it difficult to foster networks among activists; thus, the emergent environmental movement remains fragmented. Such networks are necessary because generating external attention and support as well as influencing public policy entails staging actions in urban centers or within the premises of centralized government agencies. Unlike political movements, which have central commands, the environmental movement suffers from its lack.

Political activists turned environmental advocates are more linked to one another because of their continuing ties with their respective political movements. These ties

have enabled them to involve more people in local actions for the environment. The downside, however, is that burning political issues (and there are many in a politically unpredictable country like the Philippines) tend to draw them away from organizing around an agenda to protect the environment. This brings me to a final reflection on the prospects of environmental activism in the Philippines.

Concluding Remarks: The Prospects of Environmental Activism

Environmental issues, while flagrantly manifested in natural disasters, are abstract and more distanced from the day-to-day life of a young and poor nation, like the Philippines. The abstract yet locally concrete nature of the problems augurs well for environmental activism. The issues tend to transcend ideological divisions, making it possible for the environment to be a mobilizing point for a much broader coalition involving a plurality of individuals and communities, some of whom would otherwise shun working with politicized groups. The seeds of such a coalition and movements have been planted and support from external groups have nurtured their initial development.

On the other hand, the prospects of environmental activism are hampered by the economics and politics of the day. It is difficult for these activists to concentrate fully on instilling an environmental consciousness and the will to act locally on global issues in a country that is vulnerable to volatile markets and political crises. Philippine economic development in the 1980s and 1990s has followed the boom and bust pattern of earlier decades. As alluded to earlier, the economy declined sharply in 1985, recovered briefly from 1986 to 1990, only to stagnate in 1991 and 1992. Just when it was performing better with a 5 to 6 percent GDP growth rate in 1996, it was struck by the Asian financial crisis. With an economic structure dominated by low-end services and an industrial sector that grew in the mid-1990s due to the shares of nontradeables rather than manufacturing, the economy is extremely vulnerable. Coupled with a high rate of population growth, economic crises even tend to have greater impact because the country's poverty levels are much higher than those of its Asian neighbours.

But vulnerability to economic crisis is not the only obstacle to environmental activism. As the last three decades has shown, the country has also been prone to political crises that induce or magnify incipient economic crises. The current political crisis triggered by exposes of cronyism and opulence and the disclosure that the Philippine president has received payoffs from illegal gambling, for instance, has distracted the nation and a number of environmental activists from the painstaking work of building local institutions.

In such a context, what are the prospects for environmental activism — difficult to sustain, nevertheless positive. To my mind there is now a mass of activists imbued with a vision reoriented from the present to the future. Whether it constitutes a critical mass is difficult to say. But despite the obstacles, I have faith that it does. I also believe environmental activists will negotiate the interstices of economic and political

crises and continue to lay the groundwork for a growing environmental consciousness. To believe otherwise is to give up on the future.

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