



## 1.10 Reforestation and producer organizations in the Philippines

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### Introduction

In Philippine forest policy, forest and farm producer organizations are intended to play a pivotal role in sustainable forest management. The Community-Based Forest Management program initiated in 1995 by President Fidel Ramos, for example, entitles rural cooperatives to harvest and sell timber. In 1996 President Ramos said: “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.” The *Indigenous People’s Rights Act of 1997* devolves control over large tracts of forest land to indigenous communities. The National Greening Program, which started in 2011, envisions grassroots associations reforesting 1.5 million hectares (ha) in five years.

Over the past two decades the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the government agency responsible for forests, along with international donors and NGOs, has established and strengthened people’s organizations. But apart from isolated success stories, these organizations have largely failed to manage forest resources or improve the well-being of their members, and often fall apart once outside support ends (Severino 2000).

The San Isidro Reforestation Association (SIRA) is a people’s organization in San Isidro, a small village in the municipality of San Mariano on Luzon. For 12 years, DENR, NGOs and the municipal government have worked with SIRA to reforest the buffer zone of Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park, the largest protected area in the Philippines. These reforestation efforts were supposed to be highly participatory, but in practice they remained largely donor-driven. In order to effectively restore forests and improve people’s well-being, it is necessary to rethink the roles and responsibilities of people’s organizations, NGOs and government agencies.



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## San Isidro

In the 1960s the land around San Isidro was still covered with lush tropical rainforest. The indigenous Agta hunter-gatherers and Kalinga shifting cultivators lived in small settlements along the rivers. In the 1970s, logging companies started to harvest timber in the area. They were legally required to reforest their concessions, and they established a tree nursery along the Disulap River. This site eventually became San Isidro, but many people still refer to the village as Nursery. The construction of logging roads facilitated a massive influx of Ilocano and Ifugao farmers, who cleared the remaining forest, cultivated the land for a few years until the soil was exhausted, and then moved farther into the forest. Slash-and-burn farming, known locally as *kaingin*, led to extensive grasslands dominated by cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*). These grasslands often burn in the dry season, preventing forest regrowth.

After the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 all logging concessions in San Mariano were cancelled. In 1999 the secondary forest around San Isidro was included in the newly proclaimed Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park. Timber harvesting remains an important source of income for many households on the forest frontier, however, and intermediaries recruit young men from the village to illegally cut wood in the park, which is a highly profitable business (van der Ploeg et al. 2011).

Nowadays, there are around 100 households in San Isidro; most people live below the Philippine poverty threshold of US\$1.2 per person per day (NCSB 2013). In recent years, farming systems have rapidly intensified. Farmers increasingly rely on chemical fertilizers and herbicides, and no longer maintain long fallows. Maize, cassava and sugarcane have become important cash crops. As a result, most remaining forest vegetation has been cleared. Accessibility is a major problem for farmers: in the rainy season the red earth turns into mud and the unpaved roads become nearly impassable.

Although most of the forest around San Isidro has been felled, it remains officially classified as forest land under the control of DENR. Consequently, farmers do not formally own the land that they till. The “forest land question” remains one of the biggest issues in Philippine forest policy: it is estimated that around 25 million people try to make a living on deforested public land (Pulhin, Inoue and Enters 2007).

Tenure insecurity is a barrier to rural development and continues to fuel violent civil insurgency in rural areas (USAID 2014). A range of government policies aims to formalize farmers’ customary rights, prevent further forest encroachment and encourage the reforestation of grasslands. Farmers can for example apply to DENR for a Socialized Industrial Forest Management Agreement. This provides security of tenure for 25 years on the condition that 90% of the land remains forested or is reforested. People’s organizations can apply for a Community-Based Forest Management Agreement, which entitles the cooperative to utilize forest land for 25 years.



## The San Isidro Rainforestation Association

“Go to the people/Live among them/Learn from them...” (Flavier 1970) are the guiding principles of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement. This is one of the oldest and most influential development NGOs in the country. Founded in 1952, it was the first NGO to send community organizers to remote villages to establish rural cooperatives. The idea was that collective action could enhance agricultural productivity, provide a safety net for poor farmers, give them greater leverage in dealing with land-owners, traders and government officials, and ultimately help overcome poverty. This grassroots development approach continues to be a major source of inspiration for many NGOs, and it heavily influenced the people-centred forest policy reforms instituted after the fall of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

In 1996, the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park Conservation Project, funded by the Government of the Netherlands, was initiated to strengthen the management of the park. One of the target communities was San Isidro. An inventory was made of community needs and aspirations, a community-based resource management and development plan was drafted and a people’s organization was formed. In 1998, the Linglingay organization, with 30 members, was officially registered with the Cooperative Development Authority. In 2013 it was renamed the San Isidro Rainforestation Association (SIRA).

To prevent encroachment into the park, the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park Conservation Project facilitated the issuance of Socialized Industrial Forest Management Agreements (SIFMAs) to farmers in the buffer zone of the park. In San Isidro the project assisted the members of the newly founded people’s organization with the SIFMA application process and provided them with tree seedlings (General 2005). The impact of providing tenure security to farmers in San Isidro has, however, been limited. Many



farmers have now converted their orchards into maize and cassava fields. The legal status of the SIFMA plots is highly uncertain. In fact, the national government stopped issuing the agreements because of non-compliance with the regulations and persistent irregularities in the implementation of the programme. In the meantime, slash-and-burn farming continued unabated in the protected area.

When the project ended in 2003, some of the staff members founded the Mabuwaya Foundation, an NGO that aims to save the critically endangered Philippine crocodile (*Crocodylus mindorensis*; see van Weerd and van der Ploeg

2012). San Isidro is one of the few areas where this endemic crocodile still occurs in the wild. To effectively protect the species in its natural habitat and to restore the ecological functions of riverbanks and watershed areas, the Mabuwaya Foundation continued working with SIRA, especially in reforestation efforts.

### The NARRA project

In 2003 northeast Luzon was hit by a severe typhoon. Most houses in San Isidro were severely damaged, and banana plantations and maize fields were destroyed. In urgent need of cash, the members of SIRA asked the municipal government to allow tree harvesting in the protected area.

The municipal government instead offered an alternative: it would purchase native tree seedlings collected in the park and use them for reforestation. The municipal council then asked the Mabuwaya Foundation to assist the people's organization in developing this ad hoc initiative into a more sustainable project. The resulting project, Native Advocacy for Rural Reconstruction Agro-forestry (NARRA), received a US\$25,000 grant from the World Bank. Narra is also another name for the highly valued hardwood *Pterocarpus indicus*, the national tree of the Philippines. The NARRA project

aimed to reforest 26 ha: 10 ha with fruit trees and the remaining area with native forest trees. The idea was to provide a short-term alternative to illegal logging by paying SIRA members to plant and tend the trees, while at the same time improving livelihoods and resource management in the long term through reforestation and agroforestry.



The project started energetically in 2003. Members constructed a tree nursery, planted seedlings and maintained fire lines. They also applied for a Community-Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA), which would provide them with secure tenure over the land and trees. In 2007, however, a fire destroyed 12 ha of plantation. Another setback was DENR's refusal to issue a CBFMA. After a lengthy and expensive process, the department had concluded that official land classification maps showed the reforestation site to be located in Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park, and that it therefore could not approve the application. The department acknowledged that the official land classification maps were inaccurate, but correcting them was considered too difficult.

Despite the efforts of the SIRA members to control fire, and to weed and fertilize all individual trees every year, tree growth has been slow. This is largely due to poor soils and competition from grasses. It was envisioned that canopy closure would eventually control the growth of grasses. By selecting slow-growing premium timber species and by spacing the seedlings in wide rows the NARRA project made the same mistakes that plague many reforestation projects in the tropics. It would have been better to first plant fast-growing, pioneer tree species in mixed high densities, and only later plant forest trees (Kuper and Lixin 2014).

A survey in 2014, ten years after the first trees were planted, found 47 tree species in the plantation, with an average height of 3.3 metres (m) and a range between 1.6 and 10.6 m (Diepenveen 2015). The fruit trees have grown well. SIRA members now harvest jackfruit, guyabano and citrus, although transport problems continue to hamper the marketing of these fruits. In 2014 another fire destroyed 8 ha of the plantation. Successfully restoring forest vegetation requires a great deal of labour, money, expertise, support and time — and a little luck.

## Ningas kugon

*Ningas kugon* (or cogon grass fire) is a common expression in the Philippines. It describes the enthusiasm for a new activity that disappears when things get difficult, just as a grassland fire burns out quickly. At first the SIRA members seemed motivated to reforest the land around San Isidro, but after a few setbacks their interest dwindled and large parts of the plantation burned. This is a familiar pattern in Philippines reforestation projects (Chokkalingam 2006). It is wrong, however, to attribute the problems of reforestation projects solely to the attitudes of local people, as often happens. To understand and overcome the difficulties of community-based forest rehabilitation it is essential to understand the divergent roles and responsibilities of people's organizations, government agencies and NGOs.

In San Isidro, the members of the people's organization see the NARRA project mostly as a source of income; they earn US\$5 a day for planting, tending and clearing. Farmers feel that another important reason to plant trees is to establish or secure a claim to the land (Martín et al. 2012). The long-term benefits of reforestation remain uncertain for SIRA members, especially as trees are not individually owned and transportation remains problematic. Nonetheless, SIRA members see the reforestation project as a success. The NARRA project catalyzed community support and led to investment in other income-generating activities: the cooperative now manages a bakery and shop in San Isidro and runs a generator to provide electricity to members. The members gained valuable skills and knowledge; for example, in tree seedling propagation and vermiculture, and developed new contacts and partnerships with other NGOs and government agencies. The reforestation efforts generated attention, exposure and prestige for the people in San

Isidro. Most significantly, the project kept the people's organization going. The fact that SIRA still exists is a major achievement in itself: of 36 people organizations established by the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park Conservation Project, SIRA is the only one left.



A key responsibility of government agencies is to create the right conditions for forest rehabilitation, particularly by providing secure land tenure and improving accessibility (Friday, Drilling and Garrity 1999). The devolution process makes municipal governments in the Philippines key participants in community-based forest management.

Municipalities lack the technical capacity to manage, conserve or restore forests, however, and tend to prioritize development over environmental conservation. The San Mariano municipal government actively backed the people's organization when it started, but since then support has been erratic and has depended largely on personal relationships. Some activities of the municipal government, such as the active promotion of industrial-scale sugarcane production for biofuel feedstock, actually counteract reforestation efforts.

Working with DENR is even more difficult. Since the 1990s the department has aimed to reforest denuded public grasslands by contracting people's organizations, but it lacks the staff, capacity and budget to effectively design, implement and monitor these efforts. The issuance of forest management agreements is hampered by red tape, disinterest, incompetence and petty corruption. Despite the official rhetoric on participatory forest management, many DENR employees, who were trained as foresters, still see farmers as a threat to the forest. Another problem is the department's failure to enforce environmental legislation and curb illegal logging in protected areas (van der Ploeg et al. 2011). Illegal logging continues unabated in Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park, which makes reforestation projects seem futile. At the same time, DENR continues to invest in large-scale reforestation, often without taking into account the lessons from previous experiences (Snelder and Lasco 2008).



The primary responsibilities of NGOs in community-based forest management are to facilitate communication between associations and government agencies, and to serve as a conduit of funds (Duthy and Bolo-Duthy 2003). The main reason for the Mabuwaya Foundation to work with SIRA was to strengthen the conservation of the Philippine crocodile. The reforestation project built trust between the cooperative and conservationists; this is an essential precondition in such a poor and isolated community. But not everybody in San Isidro is a member of the people's organization, and there is some friction and conflict within the village over SIRA's activities. Working with a people's organization does not guarantee the participation of all households in a community.

Documenting and sharing what went wrong in 12 years of reforesting grasslands around San Isidro is relatively easy; the challenge is how to avoid repeating the mistakes. In 2012 SIRA and the Mabuwaya Foundation started the Restoration of Degraded Landscapes along the Buffer Zone of Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park project, funded by the Small Grants Programme of the United Nations Development Programme's Global Environment Facility. The initiative tried to implement the lessons of the NARRA project; for example, by focusing on assisted natural regeneration and by planting relatively fast-growing pioneer species such as *kakawate* (*Gliricidia sepium*). Moreover, the new project does not aim to reforest an open-access marginal grassland, but focuses on assisting farmers to plant fruit and forest trees in their own fields. More than 11,000 tree seedlings have now been planted. It will take years before these trees bear fruit and a new rainforest is created. But every seedling planted is a small step forward, a sign of hope of a better future for people and forests in the northern Sierra Madre.

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