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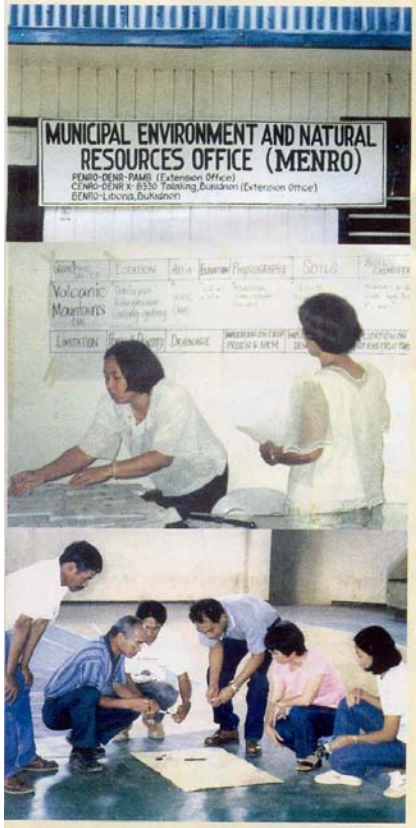


In this issue, we cover the topic on effecting a full devolution of environmental management functions to LGUs by creating the local Environment and Natural Resources Office.

This was identified by the Working Group No.1 led by Dr. Merlyne Paunlagui of ISPPS-UPLB during the Policy Workshop on the First Bukidnon NRM Policy Forum, 8-9 November 2001, Valencia City.

Establishing an institutional infrastructure for improved ENRM: the Local Environment and Natural Resources Office

The Policy Issue

Devolution of environmental management

The Philippine Local Government Code of 1991 (RA 7160) made sweeping changes in devolving key functions to Local Government Units (LGUs) from central government. While significant gains in the devolution of fiscal and social administration were achieved within the decade of decentralization, devolution of environment and natural resources management (ENRM) functions remain ambiguous. The general provisions of the Code remain unclear to many LGUs. The Department of the Environment and Natural Resources' (DENR) Department Administrative Order #30 provides the optional creation of Environment and Natural Resource Offices (ENRO) by LGUs. A majority of the LGUs are reluctant to create local ENROs, due to some of their limitations including budgetary requirements, human and technical resources.

Emerging information indicate that a number of limitations and issues contributing to the haphazard implementation of environmental programs and projects by LGUs fall in six major categories: lack of technical expertise; lack of proactive technical assistance from national government agencies; lack of consensus-building tools for participatory and devolved planning; lack of financial support; influence of traditional socio-political culture; and unclear, yet conflicting policies or regulations *(Catacutan, 2001)*.

Basically, the problem with the poor implementation of environmental undertakings lies much on the absence of an institutional structure responsible for planning and execution of plans and policies. Today, a gradually increasing number of LGUs have developed ways to create their ENROs - overcoming conventional budget constraints and harnessing internal and external resources.

The paradox of ENRM

The Local Government Code provides the legal framework for devolving significant environmental functions and responsibilities to LGUs. However, the Code did not clearly stipulate the mandatory creation of a local ENRO that is supposed to design and implement environmental programs, and ensure that local policies are enforced.

Consequently, funding allocation for environmental management becomes optional, since the budget appropriation from the general funds do not also cover line items for environmental management purposes.

Any expenditure thereof, should be legally justified according to the line items provided by the Department of Budget and Management. For example, there is a budgetary provision mandated for Gender and Development, Drug Prevention and Disaster Management among others, but none is stipulated for environmental management. In such cases, environmental funds are usually drawn from Local Development Funds, under the vagaries of the Local Chief Executive (LCE). Often, budget allocation is unreasonably low compared to the necessary budgets to undertake environmental programs.

Additionally, environmental programs often fall within the disposition of the LCE either by mere interest or genuine concern, or by following requirements from DENR or from other national government projects, in the likes of Integrated Social Forestry Program, Community-Based Resource Management Program or Community-Based Forestry Management Program. The usual procedure is that, the Municipal Planning and Development Office and in some cases, the Municipal Agriculture Office, assumes some of the responsibilities of ENRM.

And since these offices have other regular mandatory functions, environmental management becomes an extra job—an extra burden.

In the First Bukidnon NRM Policy Forum (2001), Municipal Planning Officers and Municipal Agriculture Officers disclosed that most of them do not possess the technical and skills deemed vital in carrying out the highly technical aspects of environmental management. Even the current notion of community-based and participatory approaches to ENRM require a new level of social skills, which most of the time is insufficient, or worse, missing in the current LGU set-up. Accordingly, there is a need for educating the staff now assigned in interim ENRM committees in most LGUs.

Advocates and technical persons have long debated on this paradoxical provision in the Code, but none so far, is done to improve the situation. The problem of creating local ENROs and providing budgets is a first generation issue in ENRM. Unless, this is resolved, environmental management will proceed with little progress and far-reaching consequences.

Every step starts with 'political will'

To address the environmental problems besetting the Municipality of Arakan in North Cotabato, particularly in Mt. Sinaka due to logging concessions, former Mayor Apolonio Ebon created the Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Office (MENRO). It was a logical step towards sustainable environmental development considering that Arakan is only a fourth class municipality. As with other LGUs, local fund is an important element in implementing local NRM programs. But financial constraints did not become a hindrance for Arakan to create the Office. Protection of the depleting resources is far more important than the money needed to address the problem.

Implementation of a Capacity Building (CB) Program followed, with Technical Assistance provided by the USAID funded ARD-GOLD Project. To date, MENRO leads in implementing the CB Program, which includes the local communities. The interdisciplinary skills of municipal personnel were utilized as resource speakers and trainers, organized as "Environmental Facilitators". They considered the CB Program as dependent on the continuous implementation of IEC undertakings, which they identified as a major strategy for drawing mass-based support for LGU's undertakings.

The Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Council, a multi-sectoral body headed by an NGO leader and co-chaired by the MENR Officer, supports MENRO.

The Policy Actions
Creation of local ENRO: A crucial first step

The importance of local ENRO cannot be underestimated. The World Economic Forum profoundly identified *Social and Institutional Capacity* as an indicator for Environmental Sustainability. This criterion refers to how a local structure effectively and efficiently responds to environmental issues, and how it develops a critical mass supportive of environmental undertakings.

Specifically, this criterion includes the number of scientists, engineers and technicians serving a population, and government spending for Research and Development (R&D) activities. Philippines has only 157 technical people to serve every one million Filipinos, while its R&D budget is only 0.1% of its annual Gross Domestic Product. This shows that human and financial resources invested by the government for environmental management is still far from what is actually needed.

A study was also conducted by ICRAF in Northern Bukidnon (through the SANREM Project) to identify the enabling factors for sustainable local ENRM. Study results revealed that Clear Local Financial Investment is a critical factor for success in ENRM. This means that the sustainability of ENRM rest largely upon a secured flow of investment primarily coming from the LGU and from other external sources. The first necessary step however, is to install the local ENRO and provide budgets thereof.

Additionally, case studies of eleven nationally recognized LGUs in the area of local NRM, were conducted by ICRAF and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to broaden the scope of the study conducted in Bukidnon. Similarly, the case studies revealed a consistent pattern of success, that is, most successful LGUs in ENRM, indeed, established their local ENROs, and thereafter, planned and implemented milestone innovations with the communities. This enabled the LGUs to access more support from national and international agencies. Apparently, this condition is nonnegotiable if sustainability of ENRM is the ultimate goal.

Allocating regular annual budgets for ENRM

The basis of creating a local ENRO could be easily defeated, unless there is a security of funding that comes regularly from the Annual Investment Plan of the LGU. There is ample scope to ensure that budgets regularly come to pursue ENRM activities.

There are two main ways of ensuring availability of funding in mainstream local budgeting. Firstly, ENRM funds can come directly from the general funds, and secondly, it maybe sourced out from the local development funds, in which case is, discretionary upon the desire of the LCE. Quite unconventionally, but becoming more popular and increasingly practiced now a days, is fund leveraging with other external sources. This is becoming a trend with donor agencies now wanting to put their investments to where local financial capacity is available for some form of "bilateral arrangements".

Lastly, LGUs can augment their ENRM budgets by imposing on some levy, tariff or user fees for the resources being used by communities within and outside their political boundaries. This is particularly applicable where an upland community for example, provides clear environmental services to downstream communities.

In preparation for the budgetary requirements, local planners discuss their prioritized action programs with fellow members in the NMRC.

Empowering the local staff

An important issue emerging from the studies is about "technical and social capacity". There is a clear manifestation of insufficient capacity of the current field staff both technically and socially. Knowledge is dynamic and sometimes elusive. ENRM is multi-faceted, requiring a constant reflection and adjustments to cope up with fast-changing landscape conditions, as well as the dynamic changes in socio-political and economic systems.

The capacity of local staff cannot be overestimated nor underestimated. Government should be serious in providing a dynamic Capacity-Building Program for concerned local executives and government staffs in order to keep abreast of current trends and technologies, and more importantly, to proactively cope with changes within and outside the organization.

Some LGUs with exemplary innovations in the areas of policy, institutional and best practices in NRM:

1. **Quezon Bukidnon**: Greenbelt Buy-Back Program;
2. **Arakan, North Cotabato**: Active Environment and Natural Resources Council at the municipal and barangay levels;
3. **Maitum, Sarangani**: Co-management of natural forests with the provincial and municipal governments, DENR and the upland/tribal communities;
4. **Bohol Province**: Tree farming initiatives by the provincial government with support from local community and the local business chamber;
5. **Negros Occidental**: Integrated upland development and forest conservation through Balik-Ilahas Program;
6. **Maasin, Iloilo**: Integrated livelihood and tenure security using the water district funds;
7. **Naga City**: Development of Naga Watershed Plan by the city government with the community people;
8. **Alaminos City**: Communal reforestation project;
9. **Baguio City**: ECO-WALK Program;
10. **La Trinidad:** Reforestation of 48-hectare community forest and creation of a multi-sectoral environmental council; and
11. **Nueva Vizcaya:** DENR-LGU Co-management scheme of the Lower Magat Forest Reserve and the Tree for Legacy Program.

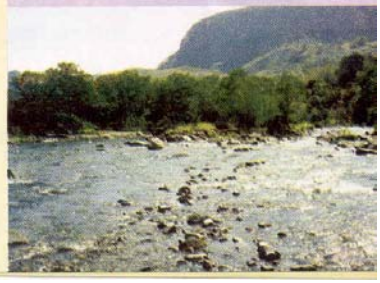
Bukidnon's Watershed Management Initiative

Watershed Management is one of the major concerns of Bukidnon's Provincial Government. In 1994, it set up a multi-sectoral Bukidnon Watershed Protection and Development Council tasked to develop the Bukidnon Watershed Development Framework Plan.

Recently, the Province availed a grant from LGSP-CIDA for a Capacity-Building Program for Watershed Management. The 20 municipal and 2 city Technical Working Groups in the Province underwent the 6 training-seminar modules on Watershed Management. The short courses included Orientation on Watershed Management, Technology of Participation I, Resource Management Appraisal, Resource Management Options, Technology of Participation II and Strategic Action Planning. Participants are expected to develop their local Watershed Management Plans. These will be further integrated into an inter-local Watershed Management Plan (where several local governments fall in one watershed boundary).

Using watershed as a planning unit enables the LGUs to better determine the biophysical and socio-economic features of their municipalities, and understand the interconnections of their actions affecting the state of their watersheds. Hence, protection of a watershed requires the mutual cooperation of all stakeholders in that particular watershed.

At the municipal level, various development-oriented projects by NGOs were carried out. The World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) provided technical assistance for a municipal-led NRM planning and implementation involving municipalities around the Mt. Kitanglad Range Natural Park. The Environmental Science for Social Change, the Philippine Kitanglad Integrated NGOs among others have also carried out various environmental research and development initiatives to support the Province's environmental efforts.



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Mandatory ENRO can be the first simple step

The environment and natural resources management is a matter of whether we do it now, or never. The state of the environment has almost reached "irreversibility". The country's natural resources is undergoing serious dramatic decline in favor of high-end economic development objectives. More and more prime lands are taken out of production through land use conversion, while the current production areas are suffering from continuous decline of its productive potentials. Pollution problems are rampant not only in the urban areas, but in the rural areas as well, through indiscriminate use and disposal of chemical or pesticide wastes from small and large farming operators. Rivers and streams are silted and the water polluted, with poor watershed conditions. The problems are enormous against the resources available to solve them, but to leave the situation in status quo is dreadful.

There are small steps that can go so far, in this case, government should handle the first generation issue in ENRM—that is, by amending the optional provision for the creation of ENROs for municipalities, cities and provinces into a mandatory provision. With this, the LGUs can begin to effectively perform the devolved functions in ENRM.

Historical mapping by the Impasugong Natural Resources Management Council.

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