

## Introduction

In 1988, it was estimated that 17.8 million live in the rural uplands, majority of which are poor (Cruz et al, 1988). At the time, this was about 30 percent of the total population of the country. Though dependence on agricultural cultivation has since been complemented by off-farm sources of income in many areas, a significant majority of upland households derive their main sources of livelihoods from land-based activities. Majority of these lands, which by law are considered as public lands under the jurisdiction of the State, are of marginal productivity. Recent estimates show that these lands considered as arable yet are in the public domain constitute about 3.2 million hectares, which is about one-fifth of the total 15.8 million hectares considered as forest lands. Earlier estimates using slope as reference placed the figure of lands suitable for agriculture within the public domain at 57 percent of the total forest lands (Cruz et al, 1988), which at current figures would be close to 9 million hectares. This is almost equal to the total area of agricultural lands which are not considered as forest lands, which stands at around 10 million hectares as of 2000, and is about a third of the total land area of the Philippines.

Thus, we have a significant number of Filipinos living on a large portion of our territory living below the poverty threshold and eking out a living from a resource that is both marginal in productivity and of which they may have access but have no control. This is the picture that confronts us as we inquire into the future of upland agriculture in the Philippines. This is juxtaposed with a vision provided by RA 8435, otherwise known as the “The Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act of 1997,” (AFMA) which mandates a policy regime that would bring Philippine agriculture to a state where poverty has been alleviated and agricultural production has become sustainable and globally competitive.

This paper inquires into the different issues that confront the upland agriculture sector in the Philippines. It analyzes the impacts of State policies and programs in agriculture and in natural resources vis-à-vis this sector, and evaluates these in the light of how they enable or retard the attainment of the policy vision of poverty alleviation, agricultural sustainability, and global competitiveness. It also proposes policy options and directions which need to be explored or taken to enhance the attainment of such vision.

## Issues of Governance: The Uplands as an Object of State Power

The uplands, as a geographical space, has been defined by the government as referring to marginal lands with at least 18 percent slope, lands that fall within mountain zones including plateaus lying in high elevations, and lands with hilly and mountainous terrains (BFD, 1982). However, the technical definition of what constitutes the uplands has been the object of academic debate. There are attempts to differentiate the uplands from hilly lands and highlands, with uplands being only those with 18 percent in slope, while highlands are those that fall in high elevations, regardless of whether they have slopes 18 percent or higher. On the other hand, Raymundo (1984) offers a definition of hilly land as:

“...an area at least one sq. kilometer (100 hectares) of which 70 percent of the land forms have more than 15 % slope gradient; or a maximum 30 percent of the land forms have less than 15 % slope

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<sup>1</sup> The author is the dean of the College of Liberal Arts of De La Salle University in Manila.

gradient and with no contiguous level (= 15% slope gradient) area of more than 10 hectares.”

While this attempt to have finer distinctions may sound academic, it has bureaucratic implications. Clearly, in this differentiation, some types of uplands are now limited to lands above 18 percent in slope. This definition coincides with the legal definition of public lands, as specified in PD 705 or the Forestry Reform Code of 1975. As such, these lands are considered in the public domain, and are now placed under the administrative jurisdiction of the Forest Management Bureau (FMB) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Public lands, which include both forest lands and areas that are suitable for agriculture, constitute about 53 percent of the total land area of the country. Lands falling in this category cannot not be declared alienable and disposable (A and D), and those that have been declared as A and D will have to be reverted back to forest lands. On the other hand, a significant portion of hilly lands and highlands, particularly those which fall below 18 percent in slope, are now considered as A and D, the administrative jurisdiction of which now belongs to the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Local Government Units (LGUs) and the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR).

Thus, the territory called “uplands” possesses a bureaucratic identity that straddles several government agencies. While a portion of the uplands under the jurisdiction of DENR are suitable for agriculture, such are managed in the context of PD 705 and its attendant and succeeding related policy issuances and directives. This policy climate puts emphasis on conservation, and while there may be references on upland farming, these are seen as secondary activities compared to the primary function of watershed protection and rehabilitation through appropriate land uses.

A closer examination of the discourse of the State vis-à-vis upland agriculture reveals a punitive origin, wherein upland cultivation is seen as mainly destructive in character, and has to be punished, prohibited and controlled. This view was premised on the legal principle that all forest lands, including those that are suited for agriculture and/or being cultivated, are public lands owned by the State, as well as on the argument that upland cultivation was destructive, as symbolized by “slash and burn” agriculture. Later policies and programs gradually accommodated upland cultivation, but subject to regulation and control. Succeeding community-based programs have placed more emphasis on resource conservation, even as they also provided some mechanisms for allowing some forms of upland agriculture in the form of agroforestry. Executive Order (EO) 263, which took effect in 1995, institutionalized community-based forest management (CBFM) as state policy.

As shown in the table below, there has been a substantial shift in the management system of public lands away from corporate timber production through Timber Licensee Agreements (TLA) to people-oriented forestry programs (POFP) through CBFM, the Integrated Social Forestry Program (ISFP) and forest land management agreements (FLMA).

**Forest area under different management systems (in '000 ha).**

National Forest Programs/Access Systems	Y E A R	
	1990	2000
TLA	3,762.0	910.0
CBFM/ISFP/FLMA (POFP)	596.3	5,708.4
IFMA/ITPLA/JV/CP/PS	304.0	548.0
Pasture leases/permits	413.6	122.0

SIFMA	-	22.4
TFL	13.0	19.0
AFL	110.0	91.0
Forest Reserve/Reservations	3,644.7	3,644.7
National Parks/Protected Areas	1,341.0	893.2
Fishpond	75.5	75.5
Areas under formal mgt	10,260.1	12,034.2
Open Access	5,622.2	3,820.7
Total Forest lands	15,882.3	15,854.9

Source: FMB

The implementation of these community-oriented policies in forest management, while effective in turning around the punitive discourse against upland farming into a more participative and development-oriented mode, has nevertheless failed to engage upland agriculture as a viable sector in the environment and natural resource policy arena. This is due in large part to the bureaucratic culture of the DENR. DENR focuses on conservation, but has yet to implement a comprehensive approach to enhancing upland agricultural productivity through crops cultivation and livestock production.

The agency which is supposed to address this issue is DA. Unfortunately, while upland agriculture is widespread in hilly lands and highland areas not declared as part of the public domain, the DA has yet to fully articulate a well-defined upland agenda. This is because its policy discourse is driven by the language of “commodities” wherein the dominant units of planning and policy imaging are crops and not land spaces. It is telling that in the 120 sections of AFMA, there is no single reference to upland agriculture. This is also evident in the marked absence of data on the actual contribution of upland agriculture to national agricultural productivity, and to GDP and GNP. It is also seen in the weak institutional linkages between DA and the upland communities and the civil society organizations that attend to their interests.

Other agencies which provide support services to some areas in the uplands include DAR and the LGUs. DAR is tasked to lead the effective implementation and management of land reform in the county, through the provision of support services for the integrated development of landless farmers, farm workers, and small landowner-cultivators, which include farmers in upland areas. Both DAR and the LGUs, together with other government agencies, are identified in AFMA as major partners in the development and operation of Strategic Agricultural and Fisheries Development Zones (SAFDZs), which include Agrarian Reform Communities (ARCs).

The multiplicity of institutional actors and of definitions makes the uplands a territory with needs which are very problematic for state power to fully address. This compounds the problem of fit between the current bureaucratic system and the ecological and productive aspects of the uplands. By virtue of the topography and the existing resource base and configuration, the uplands demand appropriate conservation measures to combat soil erosion, protect the watersheds and promote biodiversity. This is fully addressed by the environmental protection agenda espoused by DENR in areas within the public domain that are currently cultivated. However, the marginal economic conditions of the communities demand that their livelihood activities be sustainable and viable and that their community institutions be organized. Here, DENR is able to mobilize social capital of civil society groups, as well as build it internally within the upland communities themselves. However, it is finding difficulty to translate this into sustainable livelihoods and viable agricultural systems.

The DA is ideally in the best position to address the technical needs of upland agriculture, as it is the government agency mandated to provide technical support for agricultural activities. However, most of the uplands are not within its jurisdiction. Furthermore, it is unable to provide a systematic and comprehensive upland support program due to its focus on crops. A focus on commodities also naturally leads to a bias in favor of single-crop regimes that can have some adverse impacts on biodiversity, ecosystem health and soil and water quality. The interventions and mediations of DAR and the LGUs also have this limitation, considering that they operate within the AFMA which was crafted using the commodity framework. Thus, to fully harness the potential of the uplands, the reorientation, synchronization and convergence of the bureaucratic systems, policies and program perspectives of DENR, DA, DAR and the LGUs become an imperative.

**Issues of  
Production:  
The Uplands as  
a Domain of  
Economic  
Activity**

AFMA's potency rests on its three objectives of poverty alleviation, sustainable agriculture, and global competitiveness. It is against these three goals that one should examine current efforts in upland agriculture. In order to do this, one has to inquire into the viability of the upland economy. As earlier pointed out, there is no data on the percent contribution of the upland economy to the national income accounts. Nevertheless, there is a preponderance of documented evidence to show that the upland economy is characterized by relatively high incidence of poverty. This is due to the marginal productivity of lands which are prone to erosion. Since majority of upland areas fall within public lands, such are held by farmers mostly by virtue of usufruct rights granted by government through the various incarnations of POFP, such as CBFM.

Upland poverty is a well perceived phenomenon. Numerous field studies have been conducted documenting its prevalence. In Mindoro, for example, the per capita income in 1997 among upland families was 8,709 which was below the poverty threshold for the region at 12,492. However, the preponderance of local case studies is not translated into an aggregate figure that would account for the relative existence of upland poverty vis-à-vis other sectors. Most of the existing figures are at best extrapolations from reference variables, and not as actual direct measures. This largely stems from the absence of an effort to distinguish upland economic activity from other sectors of the economy in general, and of agriculture in particular, in statistical databases.

The framers of Philippine Agriculture 2020<sup>2</sup> identify key policy principles that would support the implementation of AFMA and address the issue of upland poverty. One of these is the organization and management of agriculture as a business. This would entail the transformation of subsistence farmers into entrepreneurs, and of products and markets for higher value. Improving the efficiency of the supply chain and clustering of agriculture-based industries in such a way that linkages between primary production, input suppliers and processors will be strengthened are also key strategies being suggested to achieve this. A policy principle being forwarded to alleviate poverty specifically in the uplands is asset reform. This can be done by awarding private titles to production forests and CBFM areas.

Privatization of upland farms is premised on the argument that if farmers own the land they cultivate, they would have incentives to minimize environmental damage. There is a belief that the current practice wherein only usufruct and collective rights are given fails to provide a sense of security to the farmer enough to enable him to adopt more aggressively sustainable land

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<sup>2</sup> PA 2020 was commissioned by the National Academy of Science and Technology and is in its final drafting stage.

conservation practices. Indeed, field studies show that farmers with more secure tenure tend to adopt conservation practices more. However, the same studies also show that while providing tenurial security is a necessary condition for environmentally sound farming practices, it is not a sufficient condition.

The decision of tenured upland farmers to lease lands to third parties is undoubtedly driven by higher income opportunities. In fact, in areas where there are no available third parties, upland farmers are drawn to off-farm income sources in lieu of upland cultivation. In situations wherein the crops foregone are environmentally degrading, such as corn and vegetables, the presence of off-farm employment may also provide the needed push for conservation practices. Rola et al (2002) suggest that an increase in the opportunity cost of farm labor may lead to a reduction in labor-intensive cultivation methods. However, this may also lead to a reduction in labor-intensive soil conservation practices, which may jeopardize conservation activities.

The ideal situation is to tap the profit-seeking behavior of upland farmers and translate this into a motivation to adopt sustainable farming practices that are also profitable and may even make them globally competitive. One possible policy alternative is to use market-based mechanisms to induce farmers to shift from labor-intensive and environment-degrading farming practices and adopt more sustainable and efficient technologies. This would also constrain them to expand into ecologically fragile areas, and motivate them to move to more productive areas. This could take the form of economic liberalization.

However, adoption of market-based policy instruments, such as trade liberalization, to induce farmers to shift to ecologically sound upland farming practices, while at the same time promoting their transformation into business entrepreneurs, will likely have some short-term adverse impacts on livelihoods, and may in fact aggravate upland poverty. To alleviate poverty, one also has to ensure sustainability of the agricultural production system. Studies show that upland conservation rests on arresting soil erosion and protecting the watershed. However, this would entail controlling for production systems that are yielding higher incomes for farmers. This may also compromise the income of households. Shiveley and Zelek (2001) point out that policies that promote ecological sustainability tend to reduce household income, or are costly for local governments.

It is therefore apparent that the attainment of the goals of AFMA is constrained by the economic complexity of the uplands, wherein no single policy intervention can bring about the desired results. Policies to alleviate poverty, promote agricultural sustainability and enable upland farmers to be globally competitive require structural transformations in the modes of production and exchange. Short-term adverse impacts on income levels, while expected effects of radical restructuring, such as the removal of tariff barriers on crops such as corn and vegetables, will have to be socially addressed by a combination of programs and policies that would provide safety nets to already marginal communities.

### **The Need to Reform Policy and Practice**

The present policy climate of DENR promotes conservation and institution building but is not sufficient to address poverty and agricultural productivity. On the other hand, the policy thrusts of DA (and by extension, DAR and the LGUs) fall short of the ecological requirements of the uplands, and espouse a “commodity” framework that does not position the uplands for a coherent policy treatment. It is in this context that there is a need for policy reform.

The fundamental step is to redefine more precisely what constitutes the uplands, and to redesign the bureaucratic mechanisms by which such are governed. There is a need to recognize the

multiplicity of upland farming systems in terms of social structure and political-ecological dynamics. Clearly, there are two types of uplands vis-à-vis jurisdictional responsibility: those that are within public lands and are therefore under the control of DENR; and hilly lands, highlands and areas above 18 percent in slope but are not declared public lands which are under the area of manageable interest of DA, and by extension, of DAR and the relevant Local Government Units (LGUs). In terms of production systems, the uplands consist of areas that are planted to single crops (either annuals or to more permanent crops), or are devoted to multiple-cropping as agroforestry farms. There are also upland areas wherein farming is still the dominant mode of production, and areas in which it is now secondary to non-farm and off-farm income sources. An effort to map out these areas, and to characterize their economic and institutional dimensions is an imperative prerequisite for any meaningful policy intervention to be crafted. Efforts must be exerted to quantify the contribution of the uplands to the national economy, and to desegregate upland socio-economic data from the aggregate data, using appropriate valuation techniques to truly reflect their scarcity.

One of the key recommendations by the drafters of PA 2020 is to translate into policy the principle of agriculture as a cultural construct and a way of life. One of the better ways to operationalize this is by recognizing the vitality and dynamism of the uplands as a distinct agro-ecological zone. The greater challenge is for the agricultural development cluster, which include DA, DAR and the agricultural units of the LGUs, to go beyond their “commodity orientation” and to begin to seriously operationalize a farming systems approach to the uplands. They have to re-engineer their activities away from their traditional boundaries, and make agroforestry a distinct area of concern that cuts across commodities.

To enable convergence, there is a need to institutionalize the integration of DA, DENR, DAR and the LGUs vis-à-vis upland agriculture and community based forest management. There is a need to harmonize the policy instruments, program directions and practices. These can be achieved initially through multi-agency partnerships, as what was initiated among DENR, DA, and DAR when they jointly issued Joint Memorandum Circular No. 1 on 26 January 1999 creating an inter-departmental steering committee and technical working group for the application and monitoring of a common sustainable rural development framework. Such effort has been reactivated through Joint Memorandum Circular No. 1, dated 18 October 2004, which set the guidelines for convergence.

Beyond convergence, the more radical proposal which this paper proposes is to elevate CBFM as a cross-cutting program that could either be jointly managed by DENR and DA, or be an independent council with its own corporate and legal personality, like a National Council for Upland Development. This would require an enabling law, and would entail a restructuring of the current activities and organizational set-up of DA and DENR. Though radical, this is justified by the fact that the uplands is a vast territory that is home to the most economically and politically marginalized sectors, even as it also provides an enormous potential for employment and value creation. Its complexity requires a multidisciplinary and novel approach.

Beyond structures, however, there is also the equally crucial need for appropriate economic and land-use policies to promote upland productivity without jeopardizing the environment. There is a need to provide farmers with incentives to move to crops that are not erosive, even as safety nets for farmers, such as credit availability, adequate infrastructure, and enabling support institutions are provided.

Studies indicate that the more appropriate farming system in the uplands is agroforestry in tandem with the adoption of sloping agricultural land techniques that take into account soil and

water conservation measures. Agroforestry generally refers to the management of forestlands which increases their productivity by combining forest trees and agricultural crops including livestock simultaneously or sequentially over time through the application of appropriate management practices. In 2005, DENR issued DAO 25 which seeks to provide guidelines for the implementation of an upland agroforestry program in the Philippines. Specifically, the program aims :

- To reduce rural poverty by increasing productivity and employment in the uplands through the development of upland agroforestry farms and plantations nationwide;
- To enhance forest cover of forest lands by planting economically beneficial crops in addition to timber species;
- To ensure sufficient supply of agricultural and fruit tree crops through private-public participation and by encouraging all sectors to engage in the development of agroforestry farms and plantations; and
- To improve the economic well-being of upland people and communities dependent on forest lands and forest resources by ensuring equitable opportunities and access to forestlands and forest resources.

The development of agroforestry farms and plantations may promote the creation of employment opportunities and increase the value added of the uplands, even as it fosters resource conservation. However, it can also lead to the further marginalization of the poor and unorganized upland farmer. While corporate agroforestry is a welcome development, measures should be installed to level the field in favor of disadvantaged and unorganized farmers. Adequate safety nets should be in place to ensure competitive wages for farmer-laborers. Furthermore, a more liberal window for loans should be made available to people's organizations and other community-based groups who would like to avail of the program. In addition to DENR and the LGUs, which are tasked to provide technical assistance as stipulated in DAO 25, the DA should be actively involved, particularly on matters pertinent to agricultural production. DAO 25 should be revised to accommodate the involvement of DA, which is a party in interest but has not been recruited to become a partner in the endeavor.

The issue of land tenure has been identified as a crucial concern. In fact, the drafters of PA 2020 boldly propose the titling of upland production areas. As previously discussed, security of tenure is a necessary but not a sufficient factor. Evidence from the field suggests that what matters most are the institutional support mechanisms that would enable the holder of tenurial rights to optimize the use of the resource to which such rights are held. Granting tenurial rights, such as private titles, to lands which are marginally productive may in fact pressure the holder to abandon such land in favor of non-farm activities. In situations where the opportunity cost of tilling the land is high, such move may in fact have positive economic benefits. However, the socio-economic reality of upland communities indicates that not all farmers will be competitive in the off-farm labor markets. This may engender a relocation of the poverty problem away from the uplands into lowland and urban areas. Thus, the provision of institutional mechanisms to provide employment opportunities to upland farmers becomes an imperative.

Nevertheless, releasing upland production areas for titling remains a problematic solution, as it may lead to the privatization of the burdens that come with ecologically marginal lands to already marginalized individuals. Giving tenure beyond usufruct rights to upland areas may only result in further degradation and/or continued subsistence. Should this be a policy, it is recommended that the implementation be limited to lands that will be deemed productive. Marginally productive lands can then become areas devoted to aggressive reforestation and land rehabilitation activities.

The use of other market-based instruments, such as trade liberalization and the lifting of tariff barriers on agricultural crops that are environmentally degrading may become a driver for farmers to shift to non-destructive production technologies. This would require the provision of adequate support mechanisms that would insulate the farmers from the shock of reduced incomes in the short run, and provide them opportunities for alternative employment.

One of the most visible outcomes of community-based interventions in the uplands enabled by CBFM is the development of forest-based institutions such as people's organizations, as well as the strengthening of social capital within and among various groups. Evidence from field studies reveals that strong social capital, in combination with other variables such as dependence on the resource and the presence of strong organizations, enables resource conservation (Contreras, 2003). Paunlagui et al (2003b) found out that social capital has a positive relationship with eco-governance, and is higher in areas where soil productivity is perceived to be higher. It is in this context that there is value in adopting partnerships with people-based organizations and third party civil society mediators not only in the delivery of support services and safety nets, but also in building the capabilities of marginal farmers.

**Summary of  
Policy  
Recommendations**

The sector of upland agriculture is indeed complex, and the issues that arise from it require creative and innovative solutions, some of which have already been articulated through existing policies. This paper proposes the following policy interventions that would enable the uplands to become a template upon which the agenda of poverty alleviation, sustainable agriculture, and global competitiveness can be realized.

- Concretely define and characterize the economic and institutional dimensions of the uplands as a complex agro-ecological zone, and value its resources and its contribution to the national economy using appropriate valuation techniques
- Reorient the institutional mechanisms by which bureaucracies operate in the context of the uplands. Agencies pursuing the agricultural development agenda should go beyond "commodity" orientation and recognize the uplands as a distinct space for policy and program development.
- Institutionalize partnerships in support of the convergence agenda, by involving relevant government agencies, civil society organizations and people's organizations, even to a point of establishing an independent National Council for Upland Development
- Promote industrialization in the uplands through the establishment of agroforestry-based industries, with a strong social support system for marginalized communities
- Provide stronger usufruct rights, including but not limited to the issuance of titles, to productive upland production areas even as marginally productive lands are kept public and are subject to land rehabilitation activities
- Adopt the principle of environmental payments, through the charging of user fees on environmental services as a way of raising funds for upland rehabilitation
- Provide adequate support services and safety nets, and enable the capacity of upland farmers to become active players in the development of upland agroforestry based industries

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