

REFLECTIONS ON THE PHILIPPINE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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I. THE NATURE OF FOREST PROBLEMS IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippine forest is clearly manifested in its denuded mountains and eroded and unproductive slopes, and the conditions of human poverty in the midst of a deteriorating natural ecosystem. Over this century, the Philippines had lost about 15 million hectares of forest land. By 1996, the country was left with only 5.49 million hectares of lands with some forest vegetation. Deforestation has not only reduced the stock and biodiversity of flora and fauna, it has also contributed to a set of off-site impacts, like drying up of some mountain creeks during the summer month, the increasing occurrence of forest fires, groundwater depletion, coral reef damage and its effect on the stock of fishery resources.

II. UNDERLYING FACTORS OR CAUSES OF DEFORESTATION PROBLEMS

The following explanations has traced environmental problems to:

- 1) the absence of tenure, management, and valuation of the natural resources;
- 2) the economic status, time preference, and present income-maximizing interest of resource users and industries;
- 3) government policies in support of the growth of the natural resource-based industries, and
- 4) the limitations of the existing economic structure and the weak enforcement and developmental capacities of government.

III. APPROACHES AND POLICY RESPONSES TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

The government adopted two general approaches to environmental management: community-based forest management (CBFM) and market-based incentive (MBI) system. These two approaches reflect the debates since the 1970s and 1980s with regards to 1) the role of the State in the economy, 2) democratization, people's participation and empowerment; and 3) growth with equity, and sustainable development. The rise of private voluntary organizations (PVO), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) affirmed the presence of individual and community initiative. It demonstrated the growing dispersal of political and economic power and underscored the fact that development is no longer the prerogative of the State.

IV. COMMUNITY-BASED FOREST MANAGEMENT AND MARKET-BASED INCENTIVE SYSTEM

The Community-Based Forest Management is an effort to promote the participation of the forest and coastal communities in the market. The objective of more equitable access to resources is further justified by the view that if formal access rights or a secure tenure is granted to communities residing close to the resources, they will responsibly undertake sustainable forest management activities. Forest-dependent communities are said to be its most appropriate front line managers and stewards. Since its inception in 1989, the program has grown from a pilot area of 47,572 hectares to about 3 million hectares in 1996. A market-based incentive (MBI) system consists of various types of payment instruments, like charges, taxes, performance bonds, as well as refunds, credits, and tax exemptions. In contrast to the traditional regulatory framework which imposes standards, mandated pollution-control technologies, and rules of conduct, these market-based instruments change the cost of production and profit associated through a particular technology, leading producers and polluters to weigh the net benefit of a new technology or production arrangement.

A foremost limitation of the CBFM and MBI approaches to environmental management is their scale of operation. Both programs are basically applied at the micro level. CBFMs are scattered in patches all over the country. Some of the communities under the program face the threat of unsustainability due to limited financial resources or lack of alternative employment opportunities.

Concretely, government has implemented environmental programs highlighting in different degrees the democratic, participatory, equitable, or technically sustainable components of resource management. In their implementation, conflicts may arise. Whether a more integrative umbrella program, applicable to a wider area can be achieved will spell the difference between effective management of resources in the Philippines or scattered success stories in an overall context of failure.