

EMPOWERING BOTH FORESTS AND ITS COMMUNITIES BY STRENGTHENING THE PHILIPPINES' CBFM STRATEGY

SUMMARY

Forest Foundation Philippines, in partnership with Tropenbos International, conducted a review of the Community Based Forest Management (CBFM) strategy; the Philippines' national strategy for the management and protection of forests and its resources.

The review focused on the outcomes of the CBFM strategy on People's Organizations (POs) that were granted rights under Community Based Forest Management Agreements (CBFMA), and the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and academic institutions that support them. The study was conducted through a comprehensive desk review of the CBFM's legal and regulatory framework, followed by in-depth interviews and a workshop with 22 purposively sampled POs, NGOs, and academic representatives.

The study identified and organized gaps in the current implementation of the CBFM strategy, based on the expected outcomes for formalized community forest rights, namely (i) increased tenure security; (ii) effective and inclusive self-governance; (iii) improved access to external support; (iv) lessening external deforestation; (v) communities maintenance of forest cover; (vi) improvement of livelihoods; and (vii) equality in livelihood improvements and how CSOs support these themes.

This policy brief focuses on the issues raised related to livelihood improvement and access to external support. The study highlighted a lack of systematic and sustainable support for forest communities' livelihood, coupled with an irregular and diminishing access to external support from CSOs and the government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On Livelihoods

- **Conduct a legal and regulatory review focused on livelihood improvement.** The review's results can be developed into clear and simple regulations that direct communities' economic activities, including facilitating access to capital, setting clear market linkage mechanisms, and establishing programs that provide sustained training and mentorship.
- **Simplify and revise the existing Resource Use Permits (RUPs) process.** This should encourage communities to explore sustainable livelihood opportunities within their awarded CBFM areas, and increased incomes for forest communities. In the long run, this can help address their immediate needs, as well as to provide capital to develop and diversify their livelihood options.
- **Conduct feasibility studies on the introduction of organic farming systems and review existing mechanisms for implementation (i.e. DA-DENR CARP program).** The results can help create an integrated system between the environment, and agriculture sector where both ecosystems benefit, and communities become more responsible managers of natural resources.
- **Create a digital CBFM-marketplace.** As more people turn to digital spaces to purchase their needs, it is an opportune time to market CBFM products and produce to be showcased online. This can be an effort together with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), where CBFM products can be included or labelled as sustainably-sourced products, and thereby increasing consumer's awareness, and roles to support local products.

On Access to External Support

- **Strengthen existing and establish new PO Federations.** When active, PO federations are able to provide spaces for POs to establish partnerships and strategies within and outside of their regions, and even aid in marketing their products. CSOs can play a vital role to strengthen PO Federations at the local, regional, and national levels.
- **Establish a local venue where CBFM POs can visit, find technical support and opportunities for networking.** In line with strengthening PO Federations, a contingent strategy could be institutionalizing partnerships with regional state universities and colleges where POs can access technical support and information, share their preferred community-appropriate project ideas, and eventually decrease their dependence on DENR.
- **Strengthen partnerships with CSOs and the private sector.** It is important to encourage the continued participation of CSOs and the private sector in the CBFM strategy, including ensuring that processes to establish partnerships are efficient, straightforward, and just, and setting the proper incentives to maintain long-term support.
- **Review and simplify the application process for grants and funding,** particularly by allowing to write proposals in Filipino or local dialects, and by creating screening mechanisms catered for POs. This can be complemented with training that improves PO members' ability to fulfill requirements.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the Community-Based Forestry Management (CBFM) Program was institutionalized under Executive Order (EO 263) as the national strategy to achieve sustainable forestry and social justice. Subject to prior vested rights, it was applied to all forest lands and previous forestry programs.

The CBFM Program is meant to (1) democratize access to forests and forest resources, (2) improve the upland communities' socio-economic condition, (3) decentralize and devolve forest and forestland management, and (4) conserve biodiversity and maintain the environmental services of forests and forestlands to both on-site and off-site communities.

Land tenure instruments were granted to organized upland communities, people's organizations (POs), or individual households/families. The Community Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA) is one these instruments, entered between the DENR and the PO. It was designed to ensure that the participating community enjoys the benefits of sustainable management, conservation, and utilization of forest lands and natural resources within a defined area. As of 2018, 1,615,598 hectares are covered by 1,884 CBFMAs managed by 1,884 POs. This study focused on the outcomes of the CBFM strategy on select POs, and the CSOs that support them.

APPROACH

The study sought to identify the outcomes, conditions, and constraints of the CBFM strategy on seven key themes: (i) increased tenure security; (ii) effective and inclusive self-governance; (iii) improved access to external support; (iv) lessening external deforestation; (v) communities maintenance of forest cover; (vi) improvement of livelihoods; and (vii) equality in livelihood improvements and how CSOs support these themes.

A desk review of the CBFM's legal and regulatory framework was conducted to develop the interview guide. This was followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 purposively sampled representatives from POs, NGOs, and academic institutions. Participants shared their views on the effect of the CBFM strategy on each key theme, and the conditions that helped and constraints that hindered the success of each outcome. Each interviewee was also requested to score the effect of the CBFM strategy on each of the expected outcomes, from a scale of -2 (Very negative/inadequate) to +2 (very positive/adequate).

Based on the review and interviews, a workshop that invited the same PO and NGO representatives was designed to validate results and, more crucially, for participants to reflect on how they can shape the conditions and overcome the constraints identified. During the workshop, participants assessed and prioritized actions that can improve their implementation of the CBFM strategy and pathways to collectively implement them.



RESULTS

On Livelihoods

The review highlighted **a lack of systematic and sustainable support for forest communities' livelihood**, despite being one of the CBFM strategy's main objectives. PO representatives shared that they need assistance to establish and improve their current livelihood practices to meet their basic needs.

PO participants **identified the DENR and NGOs as the institutions that provide the most support** to enhance their livelihood options. Government projects such as the National Greening Program (NGP) and Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) have helped them diversify their livelihood and access other sources of funds.

PO representatives also credited their **access to capacity building efforts as a crucial enabling mechanism** that sparked communities' interest and confidence to undertake livelihood efforts. **Strong leadership and transparency marked successful livelihood enterprises.** These POs also have dependable benefit sharing mechanisms, which improved self-governance and participation, and in turn their livelihood projects.

Unfortunately, these key conditions are inconstant. Most support is sporadic and fails to leave the resources needed to maintain livelihoods once projects end and funds are used up. **A lack of adequate and sustainable capital was a major constraint experienced by all POs.** Even with NGO support and the initiative to build organizational funds, POs did not have access to capital for new livelihood projects, to maintain plantation establishment, or for acquiring post-processing equipment to increase the value of their produce.

POs **reported difficulties to comply with government processes and obtain the required permits.** POs shared it was tedious to obtain resource use permits (RUPs) and CRMF approval, which prevent them from harvesting and affects their products' economic value. While CBFM promotes forest protection and management, it should also explicitly ensure and promote profitable livelihood options for communities. Most of the respondents expressed that without a proper source of income, the people are vulnerable to commit illegal forest activities to support their basic needs.

On Access to External Support

Access to adequate external support, whether from government or CSOs, is also irregular and disproportionate. In addition, the number of NGOs that support POs in CBFM work are steadily decreasing. Thus, most communities do not receive systematic to develop income-generating activities that support their households, leading them to return to illegal activities or relocate to urban areas for work opportunities.

POs have received a variety of support, but **most support, especially from the private sector, is concentrated on reforestation aid through seedling donations and tree planting activities.** While helpful, POs shared that these activities do not fully address their primary needs.

POs' recognition as legitimate legal entities have enabled them to access support. But **most POs rely on the DENR to mobilize assistance for them, and lacked the initiative to secure support on their own.** When probed, these common factors emerged: (i) a lack of proactive leadership and political will, (ii) an absence of avenues to network and forge partnerships with CSOs, due to their remote locations, and (iii) complicated processes and requirements that discouraged them from pursuing grants and projects, despite their interest.

External support would need to focus on community-led projects that are **tailored to the PO's current capabilities, and needs**. These are complemented by capacity building workshops that fostered leadership and allowed them to discuss the community's preferred programs and projects. Workshop participants also recommended the conduct of feasibility studies before projects were introduced.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

If the lack of sustainable livelihoods remains unaddressed, it will be difficult to secure the CBFM strategy's future, especially as CBFMAs expire, and POs decide whether to renew them.

Now is the best time to refocus and strategize as an alliance of government, private sector, CSOs.

Importantly, this needs to be driven by the forest communities' needs.

On Livelihoods

- **Conduct a legal and regulatory review focused on livelihood improvement.** The review's results can then be developed into clear and simple regulations that direct communities' economic activities, including facilitating access to capital, setting clear market linkage mechanisms, and establishing programs that provide sustained training and mentorship.
- **Simplify and revise the existing Resource Use Permits (RUPs) process.** This should result in increased incomes for forest communities, to address their immediate needs, as well as to provide capital to develop and diversify their livelihood options.
- **Conduct feasibility studies on the introduction of organic farming systems and review existing mechanisms for implementation (i.e. DA-DENR CARP program).** The studies' results can not only provide an additional source of livelihood, but also aid in addressing our country's food security issues.
- **Create a digital CBFM-marketplace.** As more people turn to digital spaces to purchase their needs, it is an opportune time to market CBFM products and produce online.

On Access to External Support

- **Strengthen existing and establish new PO Federations.** When active, PO federations are able to provide spaces for POs to establish partnerships and strategies within and outside of their regions, and even aid in marketing their products. CSOs can play a vital role to strengthen PO Federations at the local, regional, and national levels.
- **Establish a local venue where CBFM POs can visit, find technical support and opportunities for networking.** In line with strengthening PO Federations, a contingent strategy could be institutionalizing partnerships with regional state universities and colleges where POs can access technical support and information, share their preferred community-appropriate project ideas, and eventually decrease their dependence on DENR.
- **Strengthen partnerships with CSOs and the private sector.** It is important to encourage the continued participation of CSOs and the private sector in the CBFM strategy, including ensuring that processes to establish partnerships are efficient, straightforward, and just, and setting the proper incentives to maintain long-term support.
- **Review and simplify the application process for grants and funding,** particularly by allowing to write proposals in Filipino or local dialects, and by creating screening mechanisms catered for POs. This can be complemented with training that improves PO members' ability to fulfill requirements.

"On its 25th year of implementation, it is timely to reflect on the CBFM strategy's successes and failures, and the factors and conditions that led to these results. It is likewise appropriate to review what more can be done by the key actors to improve the outcomes of the CBFM strategy. It is hoped that the experiences, and recommendations shared in this policy brief can serve as valuable starting points for stakeholders to review their strategies, so that the CBFM strategy will achieve better outcomes for both forests and people"