A Commitment to Local Empowerment

In 1991, the Philippine legislature made a landmark decision in local governance by approving the Republic Act 7160 or "the Local Government Code of 1991". This law transferred to Local Government Units (LGUs) or authorities at the provincial, city and municipal level, the powers of taxation, budgeting, planning and management that were for decades exercised by central government authorities and agencies. The new law also made the LGUs directly responsible and accountable for basic public services in health, infrastructure and public works, agricultural extension, tourism, investment programming, and environmental management. In addition, RA 7160 established mechanisms for direct civic participation in local governance by allocating a number of council seats to civil society members in key centers of local decision making.

Through this law, policymakers in the Philippines gave flesh to the principle of local empowerment and people's participation in governance enshrined in the country's fundamental law - the 1987 Philippine Constitution.

It was, however, only a first step. Whilst broader fiscal and decision-making powers and-responsibilities were given to local authorities, essential regulatory and rule-making functions remained with the central authorities. In most instances, local authorities continued to serve as key enforcers and implementers of centrally initiated and de- signed plans and programs.

In the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), for example, decentralization of natural resource management responsibilities was limited to the management of communal forests, community watershed; and establishment of greenbelts and tree parks. It also covered approvals for minor mineral resource extraction activities such as sand and gravel quarrying. On the other hand, enforcement of forest protection laws against illegal logging and other resource extraction was entirely handed over to LGUs. This is also the case for environmental management. Local government powers in environmental management were concentrated in garbage collection and disposal, and the enforcement of environmental laws on smoke-belching and pollution.

Except for health service management and delivery, central government authorities (the DENR included) retained the vast rule-making, monitoring, standard-setting, and permitting of vital technical, legal and institutional functions. Their reluctance to relinquish power can easily be explained by the "fear of losing identity". This fear is based on the premise that central authorities provide a broader framework and therefore greater understanding of the issues and concerns affecting national policies and programs.

Therefore, it is perceived that their technical and intellectual competence gives them ipso facto prior vested rights over local initiatives. What underpins these perceptions is the fear of being left out. Shielded by institutional mandates and legislated policies, local governments exercise their devolved functions and powers "under the review, supervision and control" of central agencies.

Even people-oriented forestry projects and community-based forest management (CBFM) programs that were pioneered by the DENR in the early 1970s as a means to generate greater local community involvement and partnership suffered in field implementation. Through the issuance of stewardship contracts and reforestation agreements, individual upland families and small community units were given responsibilities in the management and administration of forestlands. However, these programs achieved only limited success despite the enormous financial resources (mostly foreign donor funds) poured into these projects. Whilst the schemes intended to mobilize individual families and community groups, forest resource extraction and the promise of cash endowments primarily motivated community involvement in forest management.

As most of these people-oriented and community-based programs were project-driven policy initiatives, particularly by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, their sustainability remained transitory. Internalization into the institution was superficial at best. In the long run, a sizable area of forestlands handed over to upland
communities and individuals in these people-oriented projects remained unmanaged and unattended due to poor forest management skills and limited funds, while those who persisted incurred further indebtedness and greater economic dislocation. At worst, they added to the growing number of marginalized upland dwellers and their lands were added to the burgeoning tracts of “open-access” forests.

It should be made clear, however, that decentralization and devolution is not a substitute to people-oriented or community-based forest management. Nor is sustainable forestry identical with decentralized forest management. Indeed, decentralization and devolution may be the guiding principles for people-oriented or community-based forest management that will ultimately lead to sustainable forestry. They may need to serve but not substitute each other.

From Centers of Authority to Centers of Partnership

Despite its flaws and challenges, the DENR remains committed to people-oriented and community-based forestry. However, for sustainable forest management to work in practice, enabling policies that guarantee decentralized responsibilities, controls and authorities must be instituted. To do this, traditional forest management agencies must shift from being centers of authority to centers of partnership.

In the case of CBFM, the national government has adopted new policies as the national strategy for the sustainable management of forestlands. The declared national policy centers on the formation of strong partnerships among key forest stakeholders (e.g., between DENR and local governments). In this regard, decentralization and devolution of forest management responsibilities play a pivotal role.

For example, endorsements by local government authorities and barangays (smallest political unit) along with community members served as the basis for the selection of CBFM sites and approvals of CBFM Agreements (the tenurial instrument awarded to communities for 25 years, renewable for another 25 years). In more advanced CBFM areas, LGUs have undertaken and financed community organizing, forest land use planning, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluating activities of local communities.

A more established partnership arrangement exists in the recognition of rights by indigenous peoples to their ancestral domain claims. A special task force on ancestral domains composed of representatives from tribal group claimants, settlers, local government officials, DENR, and other concerned agencies process and endorse the granting of Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADCs) by qualified indigenous peoples (IPs).

A similar multi-stakeholder mechanism for forest protection has been established in most of the 14 regions and 76 provinces nationwide. These deputized multi-sectoral forest protection committees are composed of local church organizations, law enforcement agencies, civic and academic groups, members of civil society, LGUs, media representatives and local DENR and national agency officials. These committees have contributed to the reduction of illegal logging and timber poaching in many “hotspots” in the country.

One of the main achievements in decentralized local forest management has been the creation of protected area management boards (PAMBs). Created by RA 7586 or the National Integrated Protected Area System (NIPAS) law, more than 100 local PAMBs serve as the main management bodies of the country’s 209 protected terrestrial and marine areas.

The boards are deemed more responsive to local needs considering that they are chaired by a DENR field official, and composed of representatives of the provincial, municipal and barangay governments. Tribal communities and local non-governmental agencies are also represented. PAMBs are probably the lowest level, multi-sectoral group created by law with the mandate to formulate policies and programs as well as oversee the protection, development and management of declared protected areas in the Philippines, like the Mt. Apo National Park and the Mt. Matutum Protected Landscape.

As a further step to strengthening the DENR-LGU partnership, a joint memorandum circular between the Department and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities in forest management including conflict resolutions, joint sourcing of funds, information sharing and monitoring at the municipal, city and provincial levels.
More than a Change in doing Things, It’s a Mind Shift!

The purpose of decentralizing and devolving forest management from central to local authorities is more than a change in doing things. Foremost in the paradigm shift of forest management, or any natural resource management for that matter, is a change in thinking and attitude.

Where traditional forest management practice calls for tight and linear approaches to maximize timber production and achieve efficiency, decentralization and devolution demand greater flexibility and innovation. Where sustainability is concerned, people come first. Such a frame of mind demands efforts towards a level of common awareness or consciousness to achieve success and accept failure in forest management. To make this work, tremendous efforts are made to reach out to every stakeholder in the uplands, including local members of DENR field offices. Accustomed to traditional command and control systems of authority, the DENR at all levels of responsibility has to reorient itself to accommodate new development and management functions under a decentralized system.

Internalizing the spirit and soul of the objectives of decentralization and devolution as well as sustainable forest management is a non-negotiable item in the process of institutional change in the DENR. Its absence in the overall management agenda of the central agency will only stifle the progress attained by local implementers and field partners in forest management.

The new DENR management has committed itself to a transformation of its traditional regulator and enforcer role to a more holistic and ecosystem-based player. Rather than being a “police dog”, it now acts as an "ecological officer". In other words, the DENR has taken on a more facilitative, integrative and service-oriented role. This entails a complete reconfiguration of its employees' ways of doing things and reinforcement of its technical and people-handling skills and capabilities.

On the other hand, internalization without implementation is only part of the process of strengthening local forest management. As central authorities restructure, devolution and delegation of authorities must be implemented simultaneously. In the DENR, approval of tenurial instruments for CBFM, CADCs and Socialized Industrial Forest Management Agreement (SIFMAs) have been devolved to local offices.

Even the approval of CBFM plans, like the Community Resource Management Framework and the Annual Work Plan, have been decentralized. In fact, CBFM communities with completed plans only need to deal with the Community Environment and Natural Resources Offices (CENROs) at the municipal level for plan approval. They only have to contact regional offices when they want to obtain permits to establish their own forest products processing plants, and transport and sell finished products outside the political boundary covering the CBFMA area. As a result, more than three million hectares of former 'open access' forestlands are under some form of CBFM.

Going Beyond Forest Management

Finally, the processes of decentralization and devolution of forest management must go beyond itself. Forest management in its very essence is situated within the broader system of intertwined networks of social, economic, physical, biological and political linkages that form a broader lifesystem or ecosystem — the watershed. As such it generates intense and sensitive vested economic and political interests and demands.

To manage such a situation requires a more dynamic, flexible, deliberate yet interactive approach to forest and watershed management. It requires political savvy and intuitiveness, skills that are neither taught nor learned in forestry schools but are critical elements to effectively manage the remaining forestlands in the Philippines.

However, because we share the same constituency as our authorities or political leaders, we inevitably are forced to deal with the body politic and its representatives. And this makes our work more challenging and exciting during the next cautious steps towards decentralization, devolution and local governance in sustainable forest and watershed management.