



# The effectiveness of decentralisation reforms in the Philippines's forestry sector

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## ABSTRACT

Decentralisation reforms and political conditions in the Philippines present an ideal environment for forest management by recognising the land entitlements of upland and indigenous communities and promoting the involvement of local government units. By assessing whether current conditions – policies, institutions, and programmes – are conducive to effective decentralisation, this study examines the present state of decentralisation in the forestry sector of the Philippines. By analysing case studies conducted in Nueva Vizcaya Province, it also attempts to answer a broader question: when is decentralisation a success and when is it a failure? A number of uncertainties are revealed, along with various issues that hamper decentralisation, and that are interrelated and reinforce one another in much the same way as they have done over the past decade. The study highlights the need for caution when increasing the involvement of government at different levels, as it affects the pace of decentralisation reforms. It also shows that a mix of site-specific interventions and community endeavours that focus on securing local livelihoods has led to some success. This is a strategy that helps decentralisation reforms.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, a considerable literature has emerged on the shift from centralised to decentralised management of natural resources, specifically the forests in developing countries. This reflects the experiments and programmes in community forestry or local forest management that aim to empower local communities, assigning responsibility or enabling devolution. Decentralisation in the forestry sector is considered an effective alternative to the command and control approach towards forest management, which in the past has led to the decline and degradation of forests in developing countries. It has been estimated that by 2002 around 22% of developing countries' forests were formally under some form of decentralised management (White and Martin, 2002). Such noticeable changes in developing countries' forestry sectors took place during the 1990s with the implementation of new forest policies supported by facilitating institutional arrangements at various government levels. These policies recognised decentralisation as a fundamental instrument for managing and conserving forest resources. Now the question that arises is: Are conditions conducive to effective decentralisation in the forestry sector?

In this study, we attempt to answer this question in the context of decentralisation in the forestry sector in the Philippines. The study focuses on the Philippines because of its relatively extensive experience in forestry sector decentralisation (Pulhin et al., 2007). It has a relatively long history of forestry programmes that solicit broad public participation, and more policies and laws favouring devolution in forestry management than any other Asian-Pacific 'developing country' (Banerjee, 2000). It uses a mix of democratic, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation strategies in the natural resources sector. A major approach to decentralisation in the Philippines involves transferring responsibilities from the national government to local government units and local communities. Grainger and Malayang (2004, p. 11) suggest that decentralisation in the Philippines forestry sector contributes to "democratisation and pluralisation, by changing relationships between villages, local and provincial governments and the state", and it is "as much a social experiment as a forest management strategy". The Philippines also has one of the largest programmes especially under Community-based Forest Management (CBFM) projects. There are in all 5503 CBFM project sites nationwide covering around 5.97 m ha, and involving 690,691 households and 2877 people's organisations. Around 1577 sites are being managed through CBFM Agreements (Statistics provided by CBFM Division, Forest Management Bureau, The Philippines), whereas in the remaining sites different tenure arrangements mainly intended for upland communities are

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being implemented, such as Certificate of Stewardship Contracts (hereafter, stewardship contracts) and Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims (hereafter, ancestral domain).<sup>1</sup>

In the discussion that follows, we examine the literature on decentralised forest management, outline how our study contributes to this literature, and elaborate on the methodology used to undertake our study.

Early literature on decentralised forest management focused on communities (villages, user groups, and also formal and informal institutions), probably because of increased academic interest in common property resource management (Berkes, 1989; Ostrom, 1990; Hobley, 1996). However, recent literature is more concerned with local governance systems and downward accountability of local authorities (Larson, 2002; Contreras, 2003; Andersson, 2004; Manor, 2004; Ribot, 2004; Ribot et al., 2006). This reflects the efforts of developing-country governments particularly in the 1990s to shift responsibilities for resource management to local government units or municipal governments. There is a need for analysis of forest governance above the community level (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999), and of structures and functions of devolved formal authorities (Andersson, 2004) or local government administration (Grootaert and Narayan, 2004). There is also a need to describe the political economy of social-environmental interactions in view of widespread evidence of bribery and illegal exchange in natural resource management (Robbins, 2000). This is highly relevant in the context of increased emphasis on decentralisation involving a number of actors and stakeholders. Furthermore, several studies (e.g., Enters et al., 2000; Sundar, 2001; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2003; Post and Snel, 2003; Mccarthy, 2004; Nygren, 2005; Rosyadi et al., 2005; Mvondo, 2006; Sikor and Thanh, 2006; Mapedza, 2007) suggest the emergence of some common patterns including the pros and (mostly) cons of decentralised forest management and thereby emphasise that there remain critical features of decentralisation processes that need attention. Based on such studies, we have concluded that the necessary conditions for achieving decentralisation are as follows. First, grant local communities more access to forest resources (Post and Snel, 2003). This might be achieved by limiting the influence of political and economic elites on decentralised institutions and having state agents direct benefits to the intended beneficiaries, who are socially and economically weaker (Larson, 2002; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2003; Andersson, 2004; Mvondo, 2006; Sikor and Thanh, 2006). Second, increase the influence of local communities in the goal-setting and decision-making processes (Enters et al., 2000; Mapedza, 2007), and enable local communities to challenge traditional state authority (Nygren, 2005; Rosyadi et al., 2005). This can be achieved by transferring sufficient authority and setting up appropriate institutional arrangements at the local level, and by overcoming “imaginative obstacles [erected by central governments] in the path of decentralised institutions and choices” (Ribot et al., 2006, p. 1881). Third, establish accountable institutions at all levels of government (Ribot et al., 2006) and hold the state accountable for failures (Sundar, 2001). Fourth, expose conflicts over resource interests (Mccarthy, 2004; Nygren, 2005). Fifth, increase financial and human resources for local governments that assign high priority to forest resource development

(Larson, 2002; Post and Snel, 2003; Andersson, 2004; Ribot et al., 2006).

However, the overall effectiveness of decentralisation and the conditions conducive to effective implementation differ significantly from country to country. The differences may be related to the degree of devolution of power in those places or their particular social, legal, and political conditions. As such, there is need for further research on decentralisation from a wider perspective, analysing the factors that facilitate or constrain its effectiveness. It is with this intention that this study assesses the effectiveness of decentralisation reforms in the Philippines's forestry sector.

Recent literature emphasises that more levels of government and a wide range of stakeholder groups necessitate studying the interactions of processes at different scales (e.g., Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Wilbanks, 2005; Dengler, 2007). This applies to the decentralisation processes in the forestry sector. For example, in the Philippines, besides the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples at the national level, provincial governments (governor as head), municipalities (mayor as head), barangays (captain as head) and *sitios*,<sup>2</sup> which constitute the hierarchy of local government units, are involved in decentralisation processes. In the literature, increasing emphasis is also placed on the ‘local aspect’ of environmental policy as a key site for policy intervention (e.g., Gibbs and Jonas, 2000). In special circumstances, there is a need for contextualisation of governance, which includes the integration of environmental conservation with local institutions, practices, and social structures to increase involvement of local actors and to co-ordinate programmes with the place in question (Lejano et al., 2007). Decentralisation empowers local people to deal with forest management but does not prescribe the appropriate strategies for achieving goals. In order to further examine these issues, this study attempts to explore whether increasing involvement of government at different levels affects decentralisation reforms and if site-specific interventions help decentralisation reforms.

We adopted a two-pronged methodology for this study. To assess whether current conditions – policies, institutions, and programmes – are conducive to effective decentralisation reforms in the Philippines's forestry sector, this study analysed the views of officials of governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donor agencies, and academics, and reviewed literature on forestry sector decentralisation in the Philippines. To assess the site-specific conditions that facilitate or hinder effective decentralisation and address the broader question of when decentralisation is a success and when it is a failure, this study analyses three case studies including three Community-based Forest Management (CBFM) project sites in Nueva Vizcaya Province in the Philippines. Actors, stakeholders, and institutions at different locations and levels are analysed to find out what forces are driving and constraining decentralisation processes. The results show that there are shortcomings in the implementation of policy, institutions, and programmes, and thereby emphasise that decentralisation policy and implementation in the Philippines need improvement. The results also show that on the one hand there are grass roots realities that slow or cause the failure of decentralisation reforms, while on the other hand there are some collective community endeavours and interventions to secure local livelihoods that help decentralisation reforms and inspire policy makers. The results of this study are of interest to varying degrees from a policy and programme implementation point of view for the Philippines as well as other developing countries following similar paths of decentralisation.

<sup>1</sup> CBFM Agreements and stewardship contracts are awarded to communities and individuals, respectively, to use forestland for 25 years, renewable for another 25 years. Under stewardship contracts, allocated areas require actual occupation or private development of forestland by individuals prior to project implementation. Ancestral domain includes individual and community-owned areas, but ownership of the entire area is entrusted to the community. In this sense, ancestral domain and CBFM Agreements involve collective management responsibility, but ancestral domain is issued only to indigenous people who have always lived in the same place.

<sup>2</sup> *Sitios* are sub-units of a barangay, although the smallest recognised political unit in the Philippines is the barangay itself.

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