

## **Empowering People's Organizations in Community Based Forest Management in the Philippines: The Community Organizing Role of NGOs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Underlying community based forest management is the belief that communities are in the best position to manage and protect forests if they participate in decision-making on the sustainable use of forest resources. For several decades the development approach in the Philippines has been to empower People's Organizations (PO) through the use of community organizers employed by development oriented NGOs. Lack of attention to community organizing and social preparation, however, has been identified as a factors hindering forest protection. In less developed countries the effective reach of government is limited. The relationship between NGOs and POs therefore acts as a dual span bridge to the community relying on the development and training skills of NGO staff and on the ability of the PO to mobilize its membership to perform on-ground works. Analysis of case studies of the use of community organizing at Mt Makiling and Mt Banahaw has demonstrated that the capacity for communities to be involved in community forestry is a prerequisite to effective participation.

Keywords: community organizing; capacity building; community development; participatory forest management; NGOs.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The transition from industrial forestry to community based forest management (CBFM) in the Philippines, as in many developing countries, has been facilitated by the involvement of non-government organizations (NGO). These groups have helped shape the links between government and the community. Indeed, in the case of the Philippines, it was initially the heightened awareness of the flaws of the conventional punitive and regulatory approach to forest protection in the 1970s and the increased ability of the NGO's to organize the community in the 1980's that

lead to the adoption of community-based or people-centred models of resource management. The underlying belief in CBFM is that communities are in the best position to manage and protect forests if they participate in decision-making on the sustainable use of forest resources. This can only be achieved after the issues of poverty and land tenure are adequately addressed (Vitug, 2000).

The Community Forestry Program of the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is recognized as the last line of defence against forest degradation. Former Philippine President Fidel Ramos told the annual meeting of the International Tropical Timber Organization that the degradation and loss of forests could only be overcome through empowering local communities and indigenous peoples and that sustainable forest management could be realized where people are organized and have effective property rights (Fidel Ramos, 1996; cited in Severino, 2000). Lack of attention to community organizing and social preparation has been identified as a factor hindering forest protection (the others being bureaucratic malpractice and politically influential commercial interests) (Severino, 2000).

The inability of the government to operate efficiently in the delivery of services to people's organizations (PO), particularly those representing rural poor communities in remote areas, is one of the reasons for a dramatic increase in the number of NGOs in the Philippines (Putzel, 1998). The other factors include the move to a more democratic society that embraces participatory processes and the enormous increase in overseas development aid being channelled through organizations representing civil society. The expansion in the number of NGOs has taken place particularly in relation to natural resource management. Several thousand Filipino environmental NGOs were officially recognized by the mid-1990s (Severino, 2000).

DENR has used NGOs in reforestation and protected area management programs in the delivery of community organizing, monitoring and evaluation and contract planting. Through the organizing of POs, the involvement in natural resource management by communities is encouraged, facilitated and strengthened.

NGOs are generally not membership-based, relying instead on paid staff, and are typically not-for-profit organizations with small organizational structures formed to provide specialist knowledge or services to, or on behalf of, particular sections of the population. These services can include that of trainer, contractor, project initiator or implementer, facilitator in participatory planning processes, funds conduit and capacity building skills. There is considerable variability in the nature of NGOs in the Philippines, ranging from single issue environmental NGOs to multi-sectoral development groups. People's organizations on the other hand are generally membership-based implementers, often local in nature with a leadership accountable to the membership. For some NGOs the provision of community organizing services to POs is their reason for existence while for others it is a means to a particular end. Single-issue environmental NGOs may have no

connection with POs at all, instead relying on lobbying and appeal to public opinion to meet their goals.

This paper first differentiates between the contemporary approaches to community development. Next, the role of community organizers from NGOs in community based forestry management in the Philippines is examined. The empowering effects of community organizing in two community forestry projects, Mount Makiling and Mount Banahaw, are then reviewed.

## CLASSIFICATION OF DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

In order to review the role of organizations involved in forest management at the community level, this section will examine the range of development approaches employed in the pursuit of community change at the local level within disadvantaged communities. In general, development work is classified by objectives into three distinct approaches: community organizing (CO)<sup>1</sup>, community building (CB), and community development (CD) (Hess, 1999). Although the techniques employed by each vary, participation is common to all.

Community organizing works in local settings to empower individuals, build relationships and organizations, and create action for social change (Alinsky, 1969; 1971; Bobo *et al.*, 1991; Kahn, 1991; Beckwith and Lopez, 1997). Community organizing has historically focused on building localized social movements in places as small as a single neighbourhood. The central ingredient of all effective community organising and what distinguishes it from all other social change strategies – is building individual and institutional power. Community organising builds power and works for change most often to achieve social justice with, and for, those who are disadvantaged in society. The concepts used in community organizing in the Philippines can be traced to Saul Alinsky, a community worker in Chicago (Silliman and Noble, 1998). The Alinsky process of community organizing is 'confrontational, though not in principle violent. It is systematic, involving preliminary social analysis of a community; identification of issues; "groundworking" to build consensus on key issues among the target community; strategizing; roleplaying in anticipation of confrontations with the powerful; mobilization, evaluations and reflections; identification of grassroots leaders; and the building of organizations' (Carroll, 1998, p118).

Hess (1999) defined community building as 'those projects which seek to build new relationships among members in a community and develop change out of the connections these relationships provide for solving member defined problems'. The process then involves the identification of the community's assets and

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym CO is therefore used to represent both 'community organiser' (a person) and 'community organisation' (a process), which is relevant usually being clear from the context.

capabilities taking into account those at the individual, citizen's group and institutional levels. Relationships between these assets then need to be fostered, enhanced and developed to resolve issues in mutually beneficial ways.

Community development strategies are those that use experts to facilitate delivery of physical products or services by the community group. This often involves the provision of capital resources and has a strong focus on agreements, collaborations between community leaders and financial institutions or governments (Hess, 1999).

Each of these approaches has merit and particular applications. However, the emerging view is that a combination of the three approaches is required to effect change (Beckwith and Lopez, 1997; Hess, 1999; Johnson, 1999). In the face of the seemingly intractable problem of poverty, a new model for development intervention called Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCI) has emerged that focuses on coordinating several service and development plans within a framework of participatory processes. Figure 1 (after Hess, 1999) illustrates the interactions that can occur when the three models are employed cooperatively.

Table 1. Comparing community organizing, community building and community development

Basis for comparison	Community organizing	Community building	Community development
Primary value	Participation	Leadership	Expertise
Conception of public interest in a community	Conflicting	Communal	Singular
Power	Agenda setting	Agenda planning	Pluralist
Nature of social capital	Political	Internal	Collaboration
Nature of civic engagement	Political activism	Engaged citizenry	Policy making

### A COORDINATED APPROACH USING COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCI) use an expanded definition of stakeholders to embrace all parties including powerbrokers that have an interest in the outcomes of the community group. This is achieved by coordinating programs across communities and by rebuilding institutions within stressed communities. It also involves attempting to increase social capital and the participation of residents in planning and management. This process has been successful because it recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of the various development approaches and models and draws on these strengths and weaknesses to achieve the most effective approach. The initiative may have a central or local origin. It has been

observed that locally developed CCIs are the more likely to reflect community needs and preferences (Hess, 1999).

Development interventions in Philippine community based forest management have evolved to take the form of CCI with varying emphasis on its separate components. CO has often been the strategy employed to initiate the process and may be called upon should the powerbrokers enthusiasm for participatory processes wane. Before discussing the issues involved in this transition to community forestry it is useful to consider the role of NGOs and POs within the context of the Philippine constitution.

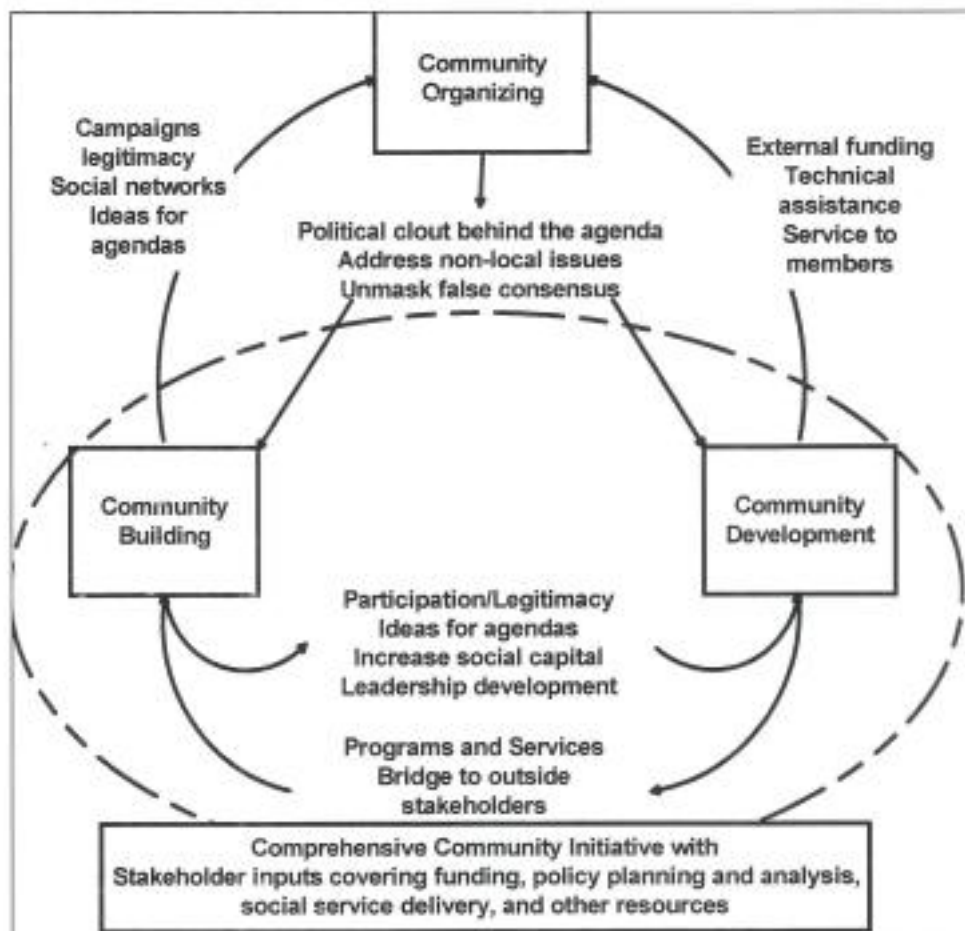


Figure 1. Comprehensive Community Initiatives with cooperation between development models

Source: Hess (1999).

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

In the Philippines, as in many less developed countries, NGOs provide the linkages between international funding on the one hand, and government agencies and POs on the other, especially where the latter are locally based and focused. The Philippine constitution has enshrined the role of POs by making it incumbent on government agencies to respect their role and to facilitate consultation with them. People's Organizations are defined in section 15 of the constitution as: '*... bona fide associations of citizens with demonstrated capacity to promote the public interest and with identifiable leadership, membership, and structure*'. This section goes further in describing the relationship between the State and POs: '*The State shall respect the role of independent people's organizations to enable the people to pursue and protect, within the democratic framework, their legitimate and collective interests and aspirations through peaceful and lawful means*'.

The use of participatory processes has been made an obligation of government agencies by the inclusion of section 16 within the constitution, which states: '*The right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political, and economic decision-making shall not be abridged. The State shall, by law, facilitate the establishment of adequate consultation mechanisms*'.

Table 2. Evolution of development strategies

Characteristic	Generation			
	First - relief and welfare	Second - community development	Third - sustainable systems development	Fourth - people's movements
Problem definition	Shortage	Local inertia	Institutional and policy constraints	Inadequate mobilizing visions
Timeframe	Immediate	Project life	10 to 20 years	Indefinite future
Scope	Individual or family	Neighborhood or village	Region, nation	National or global
Chief actors	NGO	NGO plus community	All relevant public and private institutions	Loosely defined networks of people and organizations
NGO role	Doer	Mobilizer	Catalyst	Activist / educator
Management orientation	Logistics management	Project management	Strategic management	Coalescing and energizing self-managing networks
Development education	Starving children	Community self-help	Constraining policies and institutions	Spaceship earth

Source: Korten (1990).

## EVOLUTION OF DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS IN CBFM

The shift toward increasing levels of community participation stems from a failure of previous development paradigms to alleviate poverty and inequality (Ferrer and Nozawa, 1998). For several decades the development approach in the Philippines has been to empower People's Organizations (PO) through the use of Community Organizers employed by development oriented NGO. The development NGOs have been funded by a range of donors (notably various church groups) or commissioned to undertake particular functions within development generations defining the role of NGO's as doer, mobilizer, catalyst and activist respectively (Table 2). This is no less true in the move from industrial to community forestry as a process of community development and rural renewal (Pulhin, 1997). CBFM in the Philippines, on the other hand has expanded the definition of community organizers to include all support organizations and trainers (Donohue, 1999). The role of community organizers within the Philippine CBFM context then is one that includes community organizing, capacity building and community development to varying degrees.

## PEOPLE-CENTRED MODELS IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY

The shift toward a people oriented approach to forest management in the tropical developing countries has resulted from the failure of industrial forestry to arrest the rate of deforestation or to provide benefits to the rural poor (Pulhin, 1997). In the Philippines this process toward community forestry has been in train for almost 30 years. DENR (1989; cited in Pulhin, 1997, p1) described community forestry as the 'new approach to forestry management' that has three core objectives: democratizing access to forest resources, poverty alleviation and the sustainable management of forest assets. The development of programs for community participation in forestry have been characterized by a top-down approach with community participation ranging from that of passive participant through source of labour to co-managers of the resource (Wiens, 1996; Pulhin, 1997; Ferrer and Nozawa, 1998).

Programs developed to address the need to involve the community as a key stakeholder in natural resource management include Community Based Resource Management (CBRM), Community Based Coastal Resource Management (CBCRM), NGO-Assisted Community Based Mangrove Forest Management (NGO-Assisted CBMFM) and Community Based Forest Management (CBFM) (DENR, 1994; Ferrer and Nozawa, 1998). In their review of CBCRM in the Philippines, Ferrer and Nozawa (1998) define CBCRM, but equally applicable to the other versions of these programs, as *'people-centered, community oriented and resource based. It starts from the basic premise that people have the innate capacity to understand and act on their own problems. It begins where the people*

are.' They described community based natural resource management programs as including:

- building support institutions or groups to promote resource user's rights;
- management of the environment for sustainable use;
- economic upliftment and equitable distribution of benefits;
- forging partnerships among institutions (government organizations, PO, academe and with NGOs) to improve capabilities and expand services; and
- 'linkaging' and advocacy for policy reforms.

Puhlin (1997) has described the evolution of community forestry in the Philippines using Rebugio and Chiong-Javier's (1995) classification of three stages of development. In the first (pioneering) stage from 1971 to 1980 the Forest Occupancy Management (FOM), Family Approach to Reforestation (FAR), and Communal Tree Farming (CTF) programs were introduced. These programs involved local people as labour providers in reforestation activities. During this period forest degradation began to be seen more as a socio-political problem rather than being purely technical in nature. An integration and consolidation phase followed from 1981 to 1989 in which the Integrated Social Forestry Program (ISFP) and the Community Forestry Program (CFP) were implemented. These programs addressed some of the property rights problems and elevated the role of the community partners to that of resource managers. Participatory approaches were adopted and attention was given to upland poverty alleviation, resource distribution issues and sustainable forestry.

Integrated Social Forestry, introduced in 1982, conveyed rights of use or stewardship of forest combined with the provision of support services such as credit assistance and extension services, community organizing and technology training. The program however lacked focus and sustainability strategies and the collaboration between local leaders and ISFP staff in some projects was inadequate. Communities were not included in the preparation of agroforestry management plans and community capacity building was weak (Bagadion, 1999). This period highlighted the need for DENR to continue the transformation from an agency that formerly prosecuted upland farmers as trespassers or squatters to an agency that will work with the local people, and also highlighted that there was still much to learn in participatory management approaches.

From 1990 community forestry expanded and became institutionalised with the aid of international funding agencies. The increase in funds from agencies other than government has encouraged NGOs to develop a sharper focus to reflect better the priorities of those agencies. This can be at odds with the broad range of concerns being addressed by the government and can create a divergence of views regarding forest protection and rehabilitation (Malayang, 2000). Vitug (2000) has made the observation that the DENR bureaucracy is still in the process of



acclimatising itself to their new role in these programs, to their changing client base and to working in partnership with NGOs.

## **EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

The Philippine experience in people-centred resource management programs has illustrated the need to demonstrate the benefits to the community and to realize results early in the program. This will reinforce the relevance of the program to the community, develop commitment and enhance participation and therefore improve the likelihood of sustainable outcomes from the project (Ferrer and Nozawa, 1998). Without community participation the program is more likely to fail because it is difficult if not impossible to identify community needs and preferences that should be recognized and appropriately incorporated within the natural resource management strategy.

The inclusion of participatory processes at the earliest possible time has been emphasized by Wiens (1996) who noted that stakeholder analysis can assist in identifying the level of commitment to elements of the forest management strategy. Conditions for successful participation in forest and conservation management include government commitment, decentralized institutional arrangements and devolved authority, use of stakeholder analysis and community consultation, security of tenure, equitable rules and incentives, and access to appropriate technology (World Bank, 1996). Participation alone is not enough. The community must be organized with trained leaders and a heightened social and environmental consciousness of its members. This can be achieved through environmental education and relevant technical and leadership training. The empowerment of these local communities provides them with the ability to decide how to structure their organization, develop and implement policies, prioritize community needs and manage resources, and to ensure the community's interest and participation continue beyond the project's lifetime (Ferrer and Nozawa, 1998).

## **EXAMPLES OF EMPOWERMENT THROUGH NGO INITIATIVES**

Two examples where community empowerment has been attempted with respect to management of forestry and other resources are now reviewed. These examples provide insights into why such efforts may succeed or fail.

### **Green Alliance for Mount Banahaw**

The experiences related by Severino (2000) of Luntiang Alyansa para sa Bundok Banahaw (LABB), which translates as Green Alliance for Mount Banahaw, with community organising provides an excellent contrast between a campaign that succeeded because of CO and one that was viewed with scepticism by the local community where no CO was present.

Mount Banahaw is a volcano situated 170 km south-east of Manila and is the second highest peak (2088 m) on Luzon. LABB was formed in 1994 out of concern for the biodiversity and cultural traditions associated with Mount Banahaw following the withdrawal of local New People's Army (NPA) forces during the previous year. LABBs membership was drawn both from residents of the local towns of Dolores, Sariaya and Tayabas and from Manila-based professionals. By their own admission, LABB members were 'long on enthusiasm and short on community experience' (Severino, 2000, p 101).

Local residents felt alienated by the NPA and the government. Consequently, LABB was initially mistrusted by members of the community, the prevailing perception being that it was a front for one or the other. It took one year to erase that belief. LABB began to work with the Bugon community in Sariaya with the assistance of community organizers from CO-Train, a Manila-based NGO specialising in providing community organizers to assist POs in their development. LABB acted as a broker in the formation of a PO (Binhi ng Magsasaka ng Bugon or Binhi which means seedling), the focus of which was on agrarian issues. It also assisted in the drafting of a Protected Areas Management Plan for those parts of the mountain that were national park. The facilitators from CO-Train sought information about the community by first gaining their trust and confidence, they were able to explain the agrarian reform processes and LABBs interests in terms easily understood by community members. In March 1996, Binhi was successful in obtaining ownership certificates for the land through organizing community meetings, developing strategies and lobbying the Department of Agrarian reform. In contrast the community showed little interest in the other LABB project which involved the planting of several thousand trees on ten hectares in the community. The community's objections to the reforestation project were:

- lack of property rights in the trees,;
- suspicion that the tree planting would undermine their land tenure;
- trees displace other agricultural pursuits; and
- involvement in tree planting meant less time for other 'more productive' chores.

In this latter project, LABB did not use community organizers, opting instead to appoint an environmentalist to introduce ideas and projects to the community. The coordinator lacked organizing skills and personal rapport with Binhi members. His initiatives at planting indigenous trees, biodynamic farming and solar ovens failed to be adopted. The failure of this exercise forced LABB to re-evaluate its commitment to organizing, consultation and the empowerment of the upland communities. It had demonstrated that community organizing could be a strong tool for change at the grass roots level as in their agrarian reform project and that, when community organizing was lacking, the community's involvement in forest protection and rehabilitation cannot be achieved.

### **Mount Makiling Community Based Conservation Program**

The Mt. Makiling Forest Reserve (4244 ha) occupies about half of the area of Mt. Makiling, a dormant volcano of 1130 m bounded by the municipalities of Calamba, Los Baños and Bay in Laguna and Santo Tomas in Batangas province. It was established as a field laboratory for the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) Department of Forestry in 1910. By 1960, when the administration of the reserve was handed over to the university, an estimated 45% of the area had been converted into farmlands and settlements. After failing to achieve an effective eviction of squatters the university eventually turned to participatory processes facilitated by community organizers (Bagadion, 1999).

UPLB initiated the Mt. Makiling Community Based Conservation Program (MCBCP) and assigned community organizers in the barangays. It funded training courses on sustainable upland farming practices and alternatives sources of livelihood. The community organizers set up residence in three pilot barangays, allowing them constant, intensive interaction with community leaders and members. The communities began to mobilize and organize around needs and issues they perceived as being urgent, such as the lack of an accessible source of water, the encroachment of the Makiling Center for Mountain Ecosystems projects on their lands, and garbage dumping.

Early on, the proponents of the Mt. Makiling program recognized the need to build the trust and confidence of the people in the university as a precondition for any success. Two factors played a critical role in bringing this about. First, the community organizers were immersed in the project areas, and second, interventions were grounded on the perceived needs and priorities of the forest dwellers.

With the CO approach, farmer's group were able to mobilize themselves to resolve their water problems. The community organizers provided support by linking with a foundation that specialized in community water projects. The organization accessed funding under the Philippine Australian Community Assistance Program. Shortly after the water system was approved and built, the community joined a four-month tree-planting initiative around one of the creeks.

Forest conservation issues were tackled much later - only after community residents' feelings of trust has been built toward the implementers. The threat of possible eviction, which they constantly feared, led to the discussion of land security in exchange for the protection of forest. People's organization of farmers were formed under the MCBCP which were replicated in eight other barangays and later federated into KASAMA-BM (Kaisahan ng mga Samahang Magsasaka sa Mt. Makiling or Confederation of Farmers' Organizations in Mt. Makiling), a mountain-wide federation. With NGO support, KASAMA-BM and its members collectively negotiated and were eventually formally allowed to stay and continue their forest-based livelihood activities by virtue of a joint forest protection arrangement. The agreement was signed by organizations and the university.

The agreement outlined the responsibilities of UPLB and the community organization. The community's function centred on conservation and protection while the university pledged provision of livelihood, education and health services to the community members. These services were in the form of training in farm practices, informal education courses, scholarship grants to qualified youth, discounts to the facilities and services of the university infirmary and an assurance that forest dwellers would not be evicted. Essentially, the forest dwellers were granted access to forest resources in exchange for their commitment to protect it.

KASAMA-BM initiated measures to protect the forest such as the reforestation of critically damaged areas and the adoption of ecological farming practices by farmers. Knowledge and skills gained from resource management training courses sponsored by the MCBCP were put into practice. The farmers' federation had initiated reforestation activities and other forest protection measures without any form of assistance from the government or UPLB. As all this transpired, the ecological balance in the forest reserve passed from critical to a more manageable state: encroachment was curtailed, critical sites were reforested, and the opening of new sites for cultivation ceased.

Bagadion (1999) stressed that a project labelled 'community-based' or one that operates on people participation, must muster sufficient flexibility to mobilize both at the micro or community level and at the macro or agency level. Effective community resource management should be able to develop a dynamic link between the expert-generated environment protection policies and the area specific, community generated environment protection policies as it links people on the ground with those in the corridors of power in a collective action.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In each of these case studies NGOs have empowered POs within CBFM areas. An empowered organization is one that enhances relationships, identifies issues, and mobilizes around those issues. The cases also support the views of Stoecker & Stall (1996) in that community organizing focuses on developing relationships of solidarity and strategic effectiveness under conditions of adversity. An empowered organization can move larger numbers of people and effectively communicate the needs and the demands of the organization. It can influence and exert pressure on decision-makers. Engaging in effective action is the essence of community organizing.

Community organizations are empowered through involving people in decision-making and planning, defining the issues of importance to them. The enduring value of community organizing is the legacy of having the leaders and organizations in place with a capacity to deal with the as yet unforeseen problems that inevitably beset disadvantaged communities.

Using the generation of development framework, the NGOs role in CBFM was as a catalyst - to stimulate people rather than impose on them, emphasize process

over product, enable people to do it themselves, start where people are, help people plan, act and evaluate. In these cases the NGO did not act as an advocate for people or to focus solely on solutions to problems but on human development.

It is rare that POs have either the capacity or the desire to deal directly with international donors or national bureaucracies. This is particularly true in the early years of their development. In less developed countries it is also likely to be true that the effective reach of government is limited. CBFM provided a venue for development NGOs to act as an intermediary between government or donor agency and the community whilst empowering them through a combination of collective action around concrete issues and training on a broad range of topics pertaining to resource management, organizational development, and livelihood. This dual span bridge to the community relies as much on the development and training skills of the staff of the NGO as it does on the ability of the PO to mobilize its membership to perform on-ground works.

Characterizing the development approaches as being different and competing is useful as one could conclude that in practice the distinctions help choose what approach effectively meet development objectives. It can be seen that the term 'community organizing' is only loosely used in Philippine CBFM. Community organizing, as practiced in CBFM was often combined with community development and community building and could therefore be classified as comprehensive community initiatives as defined by Hess (1999).

With such a large number of NGOs involved in CBFM and other forms of community based natural resource management it would be natural to be able to identify those that failed to perform adequately. One challenge in the area of community organizing is the evaluation of the impact of the process. Parachini & Covington (2001) have cited major difficulties in evaluating community organizing, among them is the absence of valid benchmarks for assessing "process" which is the key to organizing success. In the Philippines, the Philippine CO Society has developed Rural CO Indicators designed as an instrument to meaningfully evaluate CO and to facilitate improvement through feedback loops. There have, however, been no published results of its use to date.

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