

SONA (State of the NGP Agreement): History, Implementation and Future Directions

Timeline

February 24, 2011: President Aquino signed the *Executive Order No. 26* declaring the *National Greening Program (NGP)* as a government priority program to pursue sustainable development for poverty reduction, food security, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. NGP aims to *plant 1.5 billion trees in 1.5 million hectares of public lands* from 2011 to 2016.

March 8, 2011: DENR released *Memorandum Circular 2011-01* stating the Guidelines and Procedures in the Implementation of the NGP. Fifty percent (50%) of the seedling production/procurement target for CY 2011 is composed of exotic species, while only 10% is native species.

April – October 2011: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) expressed concerns regarding the guidelines and procedures of the NGP, particularly the use of exotic species and the disenfranchisement of local communities because of big-time/business-as-usual contractors.

November 11, 2011: CSOs hosted a “*NGP Stakeholders’ Forum*” to formally present the concerns, as well as recommendations for the use of native species, to DENR. DENR offered CSOs to be a part of the NGP Expert’s Group, but the opportunity never realized.

December 16, 2011: DENR Secretary Ramon Paje engaged in a dialogue with the CSOs regarding the concerns, and challenged them to produce 50 million seedlings of native trees for the NGP.

December 2011 – January 2012: After CSOs consulted with their People’s Organization (PO) partners throughout the country regarding their capacity to supply the 50 million native seedlings, CSOs accepted the challenge.

February 20, 2012: *Partnership Agreement (PA)* between DENR, and the Philippine Tropical Forest Conservation Foundation, Inc. (PTFCF) and the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE), in behalf of the CSOs, was signed. This agreement included both seedling production and planting.

March 30, 2012: DENR Central Office issued a *Memorandum Order* to all its Regional Executive Directors regarding the implementation of the PA, with consideration for all CSO partners in different regions for the 2012 NGP implementation.

May 2, 2012: DENR Secretary Paje issued *Memorandum Circular 2012-01* directing DENR Regional offices to engage PTFCF- and FPE-assisted CSOs and POs in the production and planting of native forest tree species, pursuant to the PA.

Despite the agreement and policies supporting it, **field implementation** from 2012-2013 has been **very slow** and **problematic** due to the following *issues*:

1. Unreasonable planting area requirements, e.g. *minimum contiguous* planting area is 50 has. for upland and 10 has. for mangrove.
 - a. Most POs do not have the required area.
 - b. DENR would sometimes identify the areas, which are either far or inaccessible for the POs, making the Php 1/seedling hauled insufficient.
 - c. Even if POs have identified the areas, DENR still has the final say whether or not it is acceptable under the PA. Some DENR field offices would claim the identified PO areas under the 'regular' NGP, the target of which is different from the one under the PA.

These area requirements have been subsequently changed to a minimum of 10 has. for upland and 2 has. for mangrove, then overturned again by another memo discounting areas below 50 has. In 2012, only 21,794 has. were approved by DENR and 70% of which had contracts with POs for planting.

2. Difficulty in communicating and coordinating with the DENR Central Office.
 - a. As with the changing guidelines and policies, so did the DENR-imposed role of PTFCF and FPE under the PA. From just seedling production to both seedling production and planting, and now even geo-tagging of the identified planting areas, so that DENR can "easily verify" them and supposedly "fast track the process". However, this step should have been done by DENR from the very beginning when coming up with the NGP targets. Furthermore, DENR has the budget to do survey and mapping specifically for NGP, which was not extended to the CSOs doing the geo-tagging.
 - b. There was an agreement to have a joint planning for 2013 implementation in 2012 but a "Commodity Roadmap", with a strong emphasis on exotic species, was suddenly produced in September 2012 without prior consultation with the CSOs, i.e. FYI to PTFCF and FPE. DENR claimed the reason behind the insistence on the use of exotics was due to the planting material available in their nurseries.
 - c. There was an agreement to have a joint monitoring of the 2012 implementation, but come 2013, DENR claimed that monitoring was already done without representation from the CSO group.
Given that there are a lot of inconsistencies on the ground, accomplishment reports would have been more valid if they were audited by a reliable third party.
3. Strict eligibility requirements before POs can sign a contract with DENR to enter the NGP even under the PA, e.g. POs still have to undergo the bidding process under COA regulations for suppliers. There are some overlapping POs – POs identified under the PA but are also reported as DENR-identified POs under the

'regular' NGP. NGOs and academic institutions also do not qualify under the PA. Only 50% of the total number of CSOs (129/257) endorsed by PTFCF and FPE were granted contracts and implemented NGP in 2012, and this number decreased to a mere 4% in 2013.

4. Some DENR field offices do not honor the PA. They have either identified their own alleged "PO contractors", or contracted commercial, business-as-usual nurseries that POs cannot compete against during the bidding. There were some instances that these contractors, although "eligible", were not capable to produce their target seedlings, so they still ended up buying the seedlings produced by the POs but at a lower price.
5. For those field offices that do honor the PA, there have been several delays in the processing of contracts and/or payments due to bureaucratic reasons.
 - a. There was no clear instruction from the DENR Central Office regarding NGP allotment (NGP under PA vs. 'regular' NGP), therefore most of the contracts and funds were used for the 'regular' NGP by the field offices.
 - b. In 2012, CSOs were made to believe that Filipino people's money will be used for the NGP, instead a World Bank loan was used due to unclear reasons, resulting in further delays because of WB-imposed conditions.
 - c. CSOs and POs were made to front costs and are still at a loss because they remain unpaid. In 2012, only 66% of the total payment, based on signed contracts, was actually received by the implementing POs.
 - d. Because of the delays in relaying communications to DENR field offices, POs were also pressured to deliver targets on short notice so they were forced to buy seedlings, instead of actually producing them.
6. Misconduct and illegal practices on the ground.
 - a. There were instances wherein POs were pressured to accept payments lower than the standard price of Php 12 per seedling – as low as Php 2.93 per seedling has been reported.
 - b. Whenever payments were received, dubious fees, such as 2% encashment fees for issued checks and 15% supervision cost for the inspection and validation team, were deducted.
 - c. Identified partner POs of PTFCF and FPE were contracted directly by DENR and their accomplishments counted under the 'regular' NGP accomplishment. Similarly, DENR would ask the PO to plant the DENR-grown seedlings, which are mostly exotic species, even if the POs have raised their own supply of native seedlings.
 - d. Contrary to the agreements, contracts were still awarded to DENR-identified nurseries, supplying seedlings, including exotics, to far-flung regions, e.g. nurseries from Batangas supplying seedlings to Isabela, Bukidnon, Zamboanga Sibugay and Polilio. While POs in Leyte were not allowed to supply seedlings for Samar planting areas, forcing PTFCF to buy some of the seedlings using their own funds.

Notwithstanding the shifting sands and bottlenecks, the 129 POs with contracts for seedling production were still able to produce 9.3 million seedlings, or 90% of the DENR-approved target production. Additionally, 12,079 has. were planted, which is 80% of the DENR-approved target area with contracts for planting. Deficits in both targets were actually mostly due to bureaucratic delays in processing of contracts and payments.

The CSO community supports the NGP because we believe in its *potential to address the issues of forest and biodiversity loss*, and to *restore forests* structurally and functionally to as close to their natural states as possible *for the common good*. Moreover, NGP is an opportunity to change mindsets, attitudes and practices towards the importance of our native/endemic biodiversity. If DENR required the strict use of native species for NGP instead of the usual exotic species, nursery operators would have followed suit; and by planting our native premium dipterocarp species over fast-growing pulp and paper exotic species, we could have captured the high-end market of the timber industry to achieve sustainable development goals as well.

The CSO community, however, does not condone invalid accomplishments, as it sends the **wrong message** not only *about the real state of our forest ecosystems*, but also *about the proper way to restore Philippine forests to produce the right kind of green*. We are constantly frustrated with the prevailing mentality of DENR of “*meeting (NGP) targets at all cost regardless of consequences*”. The NGP Partnership Agreement should have been an opportunity and turning point for DENR to set things straight and develop a mutually beneficial, productive partnership with the CSO community towards a truly green and thriving society. The NGP still has 3 more years to go. We are, therefore, throwing the challenge back to DENR to take the lead and make things right to ensure that NGP will be a genuine success. We are willing to continue with the Partnership Agreement if there will be a guarantee that the issues raised will be immediately and permanently addressed; otherwise, we will be left with no choice but to rescind.

