FORESTS NEWS

Phantom forests: Trees on paper or trees to sustain livelihoods?

10 May 2022

Over the last decade, commitments to restore hundreds of millions of hectares of degraded land have arisen thick and fast.

The Bonn Challenge, Forest and Landscape Restoration Mechanism of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), New York Declaration on Forests, African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100), Initiative 20×20, Great Green Wall, Partnerships for Forests, the Manila Declaration on Forests and most recently the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use signed and sealed at the U.N. COP26 climate summit last year.

These non-binding commitments led to a flurry of enthusiasm for tree-planting, inspiring myriad initiatives around the world led by governments, the private sector, environmental groups and individual enthusiasts.

Increasing forest cover leads to carbon capture, reducing the planet-warming gases released into the atmosphere, a key part of the fight against climate change.

The U.N. Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), targeted toward youth through a "Generation Restoration" social media campaign, also launched last year, serving as a de facto umbrella dedicated to raising awareness of the pitfalls of degraded lands.

As momentum for tree planting initiatives grew, while applauded by the Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), fears grew over the potential risks of overplanting of invasive species, which encroach on native species and often take over, with negative consequences for local livelihoods, flora and fauna.

In response, CIFOR-ICRAF produced "Principles for Successful Tree Planting," a guide cautioning planters to "plant the right tree for the right place and the right purpose."

But the increase in tree-planting initiatives also led to concerns over whether the species planted, were actually surviving – if they were left to fend for themselves without being cared for or nurtured and dying off.

In this vein, at that time, we thought it timely to report CIFOR-ICRAF research that aimed to provide a detailed and nuanced interpretation of challenges faced by the National Greening Program in the Philippines.

It summarized work carried out in collaboration with the government of Philippines to develop solutions for upland communities to restore land with trees, profitably.

Flash forward almost a year, and with the World Forestry Congress (WFC) hosted by South Korea in Seoul last week in full swing – where the theme "Turning the tide: reversing deforestation and forest degradation" was one of six under heated debate and discussion — an article published on Britain's BBC news website drew renewed attention to this critical issue.

The piece titled "How phantom forests are used for greenwashing" – while simplified in relation to the extensive research we produced – drew attention to the critical issue we had previously exposed at CIFOR-ICRAF.

Specifically, how can we be sure that the trees being planted actually grow into mature and useable resources?

The BBC article points out the problem that sometimes these replanted forests exist only due to being documented on paper – "because promises have not been kept, or because planted trees have died or even been harvested."

A new effort will now be made to track success and failure, the article states, adding that the National Greening Program was an attempt to grow 1.5 million hectares of forest and mangroves between 2011 and 2019 but that a report from the country's Commission on Audit found that in the first five years 88 percent of it had failed.

The article points to the fact that the audit itself is a rare and significant achievement, and one which indicates the seriousness of the government's intent regarding its restoration efforts.

Of perhaps even greater import is the yawning void between the large, and growing, global investment in tree planting as afforestation, reforestation and avoided research and development projects around the world and the absence of any coherent global effort to build the capacities of national audit offices or their equivalents to undertake independent third-party assessments of the success, or otherwise, of tree planting programs.

Furthermore, this deficit is underscored in a quote by Tim Christophersen, who was until last month head of Nature for Climate with the U.N. Environment Programme overseeing the U.N. Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. In the BBC article, he said that "of the 1 billion hectares of landscape that countries have promised to restore worldwide 'most' remains a promise rather than a reality."

With all this in mind, we thought it prudent to dust the cobwebs off our story "Trees on paper or trees to sustain livelihoods?" from last year to give our findings about the National Greening Program another airing.

It aims to provide a more nuanced and detailed picture of the challenges facing the National Greening Program based on the research CIFOR-ICRAF was invited to conduct in the Philippines in 2020-2021.

Given that the demand for more and more agricultural land is perhaps the greatest driver of deforestation, researchers are investigating how best to help re-establish the ecological health of degraded land while also providing multiple socio-economic benefits from sustainable land management.

Researchers with CIFOR-ICRAF are at the forefront of this research, examining how to benefit smallholder livelihoods by improving value chains while at the same time protecting and enhancing the environment.

For the National Greening Program, these efforts were part of technical support provided to an ambitious land restoration project, Integrated Natural Resources and Environmental Management Project (INREMP), implemented by the Philippines Department of Environment and Natural Resources with funding from the Asian Development Bank.

It operated in 23 watersheds extending over 11,385.54 sq km with an estimated population of around 1.8 million. Roughly 223,000 households in nine provinces, 81 cities and municipalities and some 1,332 local governments were involved.

In these watershed areas, natural resources are the primary source of domestic energy, while local production and forest ecosystems play a crucial role in the local economy.

INREMP introduced sustainable options, such as boosting the use of agroforestry, commercial forestry plantations and conservation farming, enhancing the viability and economic contributions of forest-based industries through private investment, ensuring wide participation and equitable sharing of benefits, and improving governance.

CIFOR-ICRAF technical support focused on civil society organizations that have been working with the government since the adoption of the national community-based forest management strategy 25 years ago.

For INREMP, we prepared a series of reviews and reports on this topic (see links below).

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Although previously a leading producer of timber in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has been a net importer of forest products for more than 30 years.

Despite pouring billions of pesos into reforestation programs for decades, the focus remains on meeting tree-planting targets — at least on paper — rather than supporting the emergence of self-reliant, community-based forestry enterprises.

Seedling production represented 34 percent of the total cost of the National Greening, which after its first phase began in 2011, was followed by the Enhanced National Greening Program in 2016. A 2019 audit report recommended sub-contracting people's organizations to produce the tree seedlings themselves, which would lead to better care.

Other positive developments can be seen in the Caraga Region — the so-called "timber corridor" of the Philippines — which provides around 70 percent of the timber produced in the country. The department at regional level has provided a more enabling environment to encourage tree growing by smallholders for a well-established timber market.

For example, the Balungagan Farmers' Association, made up of around 90 farmers, has benefited from a series of tree-planting projects over the years. Now leading viable businesses, success is in large measure due to land tenure security achieved through an official Community-Based Forest Management Agreement.

However, challenges remain, in part because the complex matrix under which the forestry sector is governed.

Establishing a clearer, simpler and more stable policy framework would be a big step toward better administrative planning, oversight and monitoring.

RECOGNIZING RIGHTS

In our work with the Philippines, we learned that securing greater clarity in tenure instruments issued for forest lands is also a critical move for overseeing tree planting.

Currently, only 38 percent of production forests are under some form of tenurial agreement.

It is crucial that ambiguity over access and harvesting rights for timber and non-timber forest resources is resolved as the government is in the process of transferring rights to forest resources back to Indigenouscommunities.

Management capacity for oversight must also be developed in local government units and other third-party forest managers, such as people's organizations, cooperatives and small-to-medium-sized enterprises.

Organizing farmers for effective training and capacity building related to the establishment and management of tree-based enterprises is also key.

Mainstreaming an accreditation system for people's organizations developed on the basis of guidelines under certification schemes, including the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which

oversees the widely recognized ethical international process for certifying that wood-based products are sustainably produced.

Other recommendations include establishing fair and transparent benefit-sharing in government forest restoration programs.

The BBC article makes mention of a new voluntary monitoring guideline for landscape restoration projects introduced by FAO, which includes 20 indicators designed to develop the capacity of countries to measure and report progress with greater transparency.

In our view, this will be invaluable, but we believe that independent audits are also crucial for governments that want to do more than pay lip service to landscape restoration initiatives.

Source: https://forestsnews.cifor.org/77229/phantom-forests-trees-on-paper-or-trees-to-sustain-livelihoods?fnl=en