



Role of civil society participation in advocating for improved forest policy and decision-making

insights from the Asia-Pacific forest governance project in the Philippines

This policy brief draws on key insights and lessons from the implementation of the Asia-Pacific forest governance project* in the Philippines, highlighting the role of non-state actors in forest policy advocacy. Through active, sustained lobbying, Haribon Foundation (Birdlife's Philippines Partner) has mainstreamed biodiversity and championed Indigenous Peoples' rights in decision-making, leading to improved forest policies and laws.¹

Challenges

In 2015, the Philippines had a total of 15,805,325 hectares of forestlands.² However, forest cover remains in less than half of these, and between 1990 and 2010 the country lost an average of 54,750 hectares per year due to agricultural and logging operations (legal and otherwise).

Weak governance, limited enforcement, corruption, and lack of transparency and accountability have hampered efforts to address forest loss. In the last 30 years, the Philippines government has enacted new laws that have impacted forest management in the country. These laws have, to varying degrees, repealed, modified, and revised forest management policy and there is an urgent need for a single comprehensive piece of legislation that incorporates all recent aspects of participatory forestry.

Opportunities

The Philippines has a vibrant civil society movement, the main actors being non-government organisations and community organisations. The Local Government Code in 1991 provided a legal platform for their involvement in forest governance, including policy formulation.

Activities and outcomes

Haribon Foundation has been advocating for the mainstreaming of biodiversity issues in the Sustainable Forest Management Bill (SFMB), and for the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. Competing interests among stakeholders have made this challenging but Haribon has succeeded in getting key provisions of their own Forest Resources Bill (FRB) included in the consolidated version of the SFMB, which is now under consideration by the House Committee on Natural Resources.

Haribon's work on the ground focuses on Key Biodiversity Areas and their local communities in Mount Irid Angilo-Binuang (Luzon), Mount Siburan and Sablayan (Mindoro), and Mount Hilong-Hilong (Mindanao). The communities have been engaging with their respective local government offices and other local bodies, resulting in more participatory forest governance and management. They have conducted research to generate data for evidence-based advocacy to improve forest governance and natural resource management. These local experiences provide additional information to support forest policy advocacy at the national level.

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² <https://forestry.denr.gov.ph/index.php/statistics/philippines-forestry-statistics>

Key insights and learnings

- Forestry legislation and policies are often focused on timber harvesting and embody a vision of productivity and efficiency, hence there is a need to review and reform national policies with a focus on forest conservation, restoration and sustainable management.
- Haribon's past advocacy has won individual cases in tackling unsustainable agricultural and forestry expansion into primary forests and peatlands. Engagement in national policy advocacy is more recent, leading to the Expanded National Integrated Protected Area system, as well as the efforts to achieve an effective Sustainable Forest Management Act.
- Haribon's advocacy experience on mainstreaming biodiversity concerns in national forest policies and championing of indigenous peoples' rights provides some useful insights and lessons and has helped them to raise important concerns of their local constituencies (e.g. contradictory land use provisions) as well as respond to global concerns.
- It is important to involve a variety of non-state actors, including indigenous peoples, right from the beginning of the policy process (i.e. from the agenda-setting stage to policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation and evaluation stages).
- Providing evidence-based research is a key 'entry point' for policy advocacy, strengthening one's case. Hence it is important to equip non-state actors with an evidence-based advocacy toolkit to challenge damaging forest laws, policies, regulations and incentives affecting their lives.
- Genuine reform in the policy process requires a corresponding shift in power. A rights-based approach is necessary for modifying policy processes and mechanisms into a more dynamic, responsive and equitable system. While the Philippines legally recognises indigenous peoples' rights at national and international level, implementation falls short.
- Through the Asia-Pacific forest governance project, Haribon has built capacity for civil society to engage in forest governance, including stronger provisions for communities in new forest laws.



As indigenous peoples depend on healthy nature, mainstreaming biodiversity and recognising their rights is critical.

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