

EDITORIAL

Reforestation fail

[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) / 05:08 AM January 09, 2020

Here's another "massive failure," on a different but no less consequential front, and likewise backed by telling numbers: According to the Commission on Audit, the government's National Greening Program (NGP) missed a whopping 88.17 percent of its target within the covered years of 2011-2019.

The NGP, the government's biggest reforestation project, was launched in 2011 during the Aquino administration to jump-start the country's recovery of forestlands. By then, the Philippines had already lost 60 percent of its total forest cover, with approximately only 6.84 million hectares of the 16.90 million hectares in 1934 remaining.

The Forest Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) had previously said the country loses about 47,000 hectares a year due to deforestation.

The culprits?

Illegal logging, slash-and-burn farming and mining.

Enter NGP, which aimed to regain 1.50 million hectares of forest lands by planting 1.50 billion trees within six years, or from 2011 to 2016. It was later extended into a long-term program to try to recover the entire Philippine forest cover.

The DENR was given a total budget of P47.22 billion from 2011 to 2019 to implement the program. However, after eight years of implementation, the forest cover yielded a marginal increase of only 177,441 hectares — or 88.17 percent below the target of 1.50 million hectares.

Even more interesting, said COA, most of the forest gains were attributed to "natural growth" that could have been due to the government's moratorium order on logging, and not to deliberate reforestation efforts.

The DENR appeared to have resorted to shortcuts that only sabotaged the program. In 2016, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies already advised the national government to review the NGP, particularly with regard to the mix of tree species being planted, as many were not always appropriate to the site.

Per the COA report, many NGP sites, while registering an increase in forest cover, were in fact planted to timber species like Falcata trees that would be harvested eventually.

Other species and perennial crops that were planted — like coffee, cacao or other agroforestry types — do not contribute to forest cover. In some cases, the seedlings barely survived due to natural calamities such as typhoons “Ompong” and “Rosita,” both in 2018.

Among other missteps the DENR committed in its rush to meet its target, COA said, were imposing “too ambitious” targets on field officers; proceeding with the program without adequate survey, mapping and planning; and including remote, untenured areas without first identifying people’s organizations (POs) that could manage and maintain them.

It’s that old adage: Haste makes waste. “Instead of accelerating reforestation, fast-tracking only opened the program to waste,” noted COA, adding that the DENR “forced itself” to meet the 1.50 million-hectare target “without adequate preparation and support by and among stakeholders.”

The recovery of the country’s forest cover cannot, of course, be overstated given the country’s vulnerability to climate change.

“We depend on forests for our survival, from the air we breathe to the wood we use,” said international conservation organization World Wide Fund for Nature. “Besides providing habitats for animals and livelihoods for humans, forests also offer watershed protection, prevent soil erosion and mitigate climate change. Yet, despite our dependence on forests, we are still allowing them to disappear.”

Reforestation remains an urgent concern for the country. However, reminded COA, “this does not mean that the government has to hurry implementing the program” and in the process fritter away efforts and resources through a badly designed game plan.

The DENR also needs to change its strategy to make it more community-centered than target-driven; this means training field officers and POs and adjusting targets to their capacity, among others.

“With only about 40 percent remaining forest cover in the Philippines, it is understandable that there is a need to take big steps to regain the forest cover losses,” noted the report. “However, if the key stakeholders lack capacity, the program is bound to miss its objectives.”

Last year, legislators skeptical over the impact of the program slashed NGP’s budget by half from P5.15 billion in 2018 to P2.60 billion in 2019. The people behind the program are tasked with an important, time-bound job critical to the country’s well-being; they need to show the public that they are well up to it.