

Greening PHL the public-private way

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Mt. Apo (background), seen from Davao City, is the country's tallest mountain, home to a variety of native tree species and where one of the country's largest geothermal reservation that is controlled and managed by the Energy Development Corp.

The Energy Development Corp. (EDC), the country's largest and the world's second-largest geothermal energy producer, recently celebrated the 12th anniversary of Binhi, the company's nationwide greening program.

Over the years, the Lopez Group's global and diversified renewable-energy firm was able to accomplish a feat unmatched by no other companies in the Philippines.



The tindalo tree planted by then-President Manuel Quezon in Bacolod City.

From 2009 to 2019, EDC was able to plant over 6.4 million seedlings and restored 9,449 hectares of denuded forests inside geothermal reservations and other watershed areas “to leave a legacy of a verdant Philippines for the next generation.”

Humble beginning

It all started with the planting of a single tindalo seedling at the heart of the Quezon City Memorial Circle 12 years ago.

From the single binhi, or seedling, taken from the tindalo mother tree that Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon planted on the town plaza of Bacolod City in Negros Occidental on its inauguration as a chartered city on October 19, 1938, EDC’s Binhi Program went on to carry out its mission of planting native trees and covering more areas as possible.

“We realized that it was not enough for us to just plant any random tree seedlings to maintain, if not enhance, the biodiversity in our areas of operation. Beyond this, we knew when we launched this program that Binhi

will benefit not only EDC but more so our partner communities and our planet,” Atty. Allan V. Barcena, head of EDC Corporate Social Responsibility and Public Relations group said in a statement.

Collaborative partnerships

Realizing the gargantuan task, EDC has partnered with institutions and communities to realize its mission.

Over the years, the company has partnered with a total of 183 institutions in 16 regions and 88 communities for various forest-restoration projects.

“It was not easy, but through our constant communication and engagement, we were able to forge a mutual trust that resulted in our farmers’ associations’ transformation,” Barcena told the BusinessMirror via e-mail.

One of its most successful Binhi initiatives is the Baslay coffee program. Three generations of farmers in Dauin, Negros Oriental, through the program operated by the Baslay Farmers Association (BFA), have learned the value and income potential of taking care of the forests.

Baslay’s community forest is now a refuge to 113 species of birds and one of the primary sources of quality coffee (robusta and arabica) in Central Visayas.

More importantly, the former kainginero (slash-and-burn farmers) are now masters of interplanting coffee with native tree species.

Welcome initiative

In a telephone interview with the BusinessMirror on January 11, Amerlita D.J. Ortiz, assistant director of the Biodiversity Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), underscored the importance of preserving the country’s native trees and welcomed the initiatives of EDC.

The Philippines has a total land area of 30 million hectares, almost half of which are classified as forest land.

However, only half of the forest land, or approximately 7.5 million hectares, are covered with trees, leaving almost the same area falling under the classification of “open, degraded and denuded forests.”

With its limited financial and technical capacity, the DENR welcomed private-sector support to boost its reforestation efforts.

Food and habitat

“First, native trees [should be used]. When you say native, they are already here in our country. If ever they carry pests or diseases, because they naturally occur here, we can easily address them. Unlike exotic or nonnative trees, the pests or diseases can wipe out entire species,” Ortiz said partly in Filipino.

According to Ortiz, there are lots of wildlife species that depend on native trees for food and for habitat.

“If the native trees become extinct, or are wiped out, the source of food for the wildlife is also gone,” Ortiz said.

Biodiversity friendly

The advantage of growing native trees cannot be overemphasized, said Tommy T. Valdez, national council president of Society of Filipino Foresters Inc.

In reforestation, forester Valdez said the obvious choice is the use of native tree species.

In a telephone interview on January 11, he said native trees easily survive and grow well in an area where they occur naturally. More importantly, native tree species promotes balance ecosystem.

“Native trees can perpetuate the existence of other species in a particular area, compared to areas planted with exotic trees, like mahogany and gmelina,” Valdez said partly in Filipino.

Exotic threats, natural attracts

Valdez said some exotic trees also release certain chemicals that are not favorable to wildlife.

This, he said, explains why some forest plantations planted with a single tree species do not attract as many insects or birds.

Exotic trees sometimes adversely affect the growth of other native trees in a forest as the trees tend to compete for sunlight, soil nutrients and even space.

“Because they grow faster, they displace the native tree species” Valdez said.

“Most exotics are invasive. You must not allow them to invade an area,” he said. Native birds, insects and other wildlife are naturally attracted to native trees, he added.

Initial plantations

The use of fast-growing trees, such as mahogany and gmelina, have their purpose as far as the Philippines is concerned, Valdez said.

“Some native trees cannot survive directly under direct sunlight like the dipterocarps, so some foresters use fast-growing trees like mahogany and gmelina to establish the initial cover crops,” he said.

Once the fast-growing trees are able to provide enough shade and improve the micro-climate that would allow native trees to grow and thrive, after some time, the fast-growing trees must eventually go or be cut down, he said.

Private-sector support

Given the government’s limited financial capacity, the private sector should be encouraged to come in.

“First, we don’t have that much money to sustain or maintain the planted trees until they are fully grown,” he said. “Most of our reforestation programs, after tree-planting, the sites are eventually left with nobody to maintain the trees.”

He said private-sector partners ensure that reforestation of forest plantations are sustained, with the sites having someone permanently protecting the area, nurture the trees, and, at the same time, protecting the area from timber-poaching or illegal cutting.

Misconception about forestry

Valdez said there are many misconceptions about forestry, a reason why the country is not able to realize its full economic potential.

For instance, some people are not in favor of cutting trees, when, in fact, trees provide much-needed resources that can be replenished through plantation development.

“Let us remember that trees or our forest are renewable. What is bad is the indiscriminate cutting of trees or illegal logging,” he said.

He explained that the Philippines has a tropical rainforest with uneven aged trees, composed of old, mature, young trees, and with a diverse number of tree species.

“In such case, for us to perpetuate the forest, we need to cut the old and mature trees to liberate the growth of the young trees that would become the next timber crops. If not, the old trees will die and the young ones will not be given the opportunity to grow,” he said.

According to Valdez, this is what foresters call “sustained yield cutting.”

“If this was practiced religiously in the past, then we should have never been in a situation where we are now. What we need is to cut trees in a sustainable manner, allow natural regeneration and plant at the same time new ones to take the place of the ones that will be cut down,” he explained.

Valdez, however, was quick to point out that there are areas that cutting of trees should not be allowed. These are watershed areas, declared protected areas, areas with an elevation of 1,000 meters above sea level and areas with more than 50 percent slope and river embankment, he told the BusinessMirror via e-mail on January 12.

Economic opportunity

According to Valdez, partnering with the private sector will allow the government and their development partners to realize the economic potential of forest plantation development, while rehabilitating and managing the degraded forest areas.

“We have a vast tract of forest lands and we need the private-sector investment to come in and help us develop and protect these areas,” he said.

This will allow the government to realize revenues from these areas while the private sector gain from such venture, and, at the same time, institute a better strategy in protecting the forest.

“Please note that we have more than 25 million people living in upland areas who have been dependent from the forest lands for survival. Providing them employment and livelihood through plantation development will provide the government reliable partners who will protect the forest from further degradation,” he said.

Sustainable development fund

Valdez said the Society of Filipino Foresters Inc. has proposed to promote sustainable forest development through a financing mechanism and public-private partnerships.

Called Sustainable Forest Development Fund (SFDF), the establishment of the financing mechanism, he said, will provide the much-needed capital investment that could be available to the private sector to do business in forest plantation development.

The SFDF could be made available “through a loan with a reasonable interest.”

Under this scheme, the fund will be rolled out and will be returned back to the government, or to the financing facility that will handle the fund.

The financing scheme is a part of the proposed Sustainable Forest Management Bill that is being deliberated in Congress.

Organize the people

“What the government need is to organize the people. Once they are into forest plantation development, you will no longer have a problem protecting the forest because they will be the ones going after illegal loggers, or anyone that destructs their source of livelihood,” Valdez said.

The Philippines has an excellent program launched by the government in 1995, the Community-based Forest Management Program, Valdez said.

“If we can focus our efforts and improve it further based on our past experiences in implementing the program, this will provide the key strategy to our problems in forestry,” he said.

Valdez said Filipinos need to rely on the country’s forestry experts who understand the science of forestry to help provide the direction toward sustainable forestry.

“We must leave forest management to experts,” he said.

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