

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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GEF-Small Grants Programme

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GEF-SGP-5: AFFIRMING THE POWER OF LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

The month of May is, as they say, a merry month, especially for the environment. May is the Month of the Ocean, and tomorrow, we celebrate the International Day for Biological Diversity (IDBD). The launching of the Fifth Operational Phase of the Global Environment Facility's Small Grants Programme or SGP-5 is another reason for making this month a truly significant one for the environment.

Twelve years ago tomorrow, the text of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity was adopted by the family of nations. Since its entry into force in December 1993, the CBD has steered governments towards ensuring the conservation, sustainable use, and fair and equitable sharing of the benefits of biodiversity.

For the Philippines – a megadiverse archipelago and a biodiversity hotspot at that – the importance of CBD cannot be overlooked. The Philippine Government has been pursuing the goals of the CBD, its two protocols and other resulting documents, and other related international agreements, starting with the Philippine Agenda 21, which counts ecological integrity as one of the pillars of the country's sustainable development.

It is, therefore, apt that today we are launching SGP-5, for in the Philippines, SGP-5 is solely dedicated to supporting biodiversity conservation initiatives of NGOs, people's organizations and other community-based organizations. By this I do not only mean to emphasize the biodiversity focus of SGP-5. As important as that is the fact that SGP-5 is supporting the community-based efforts and projects of Civil Society Organizations.

Civil society organizations have been doing a lot of work in poor natural resource-dependent communities. Around 17 Million Filipinos in upland areas are dependent on our terrestrial resources. More than 1.6 Million derive employment from our coastal and marine resources. They are among the 54 Million Filipinos who populate our coastal areas. Imagine them losing these resources. Indeed, the poor are the most at risk in biodiversity loss for they are direct dependents thereof. The Philippine Development Plan cannot be clearer when it said that "The deteriorated state of the country's environment and natural resources is felt most by the poor, who depend on such resources for their livelihood and are most vulnerable to the consequences

of its degradation and depletion. Climate change and risks from natural disasters only amplify the association between poverty and environmental degradation.”

Having said that, let us, however, also bear in mind that biodiversity is the source of our food, water, air, shelter, clothing, medicine and many other human needs. Let us remember that biodiversity is our protection from the impacts of extreme environmental events and climate change. In relation to this, I am reminded of people who held on to mangrove stands that saved them from being thrown to the ocean by storm surges when Typhoon Yolanda furiously swept the central portion of our country half-a-year ago. The floods that inundated big portions of Metro Manila and its neighbors during the wrath of Ondoy and other torrential downpours in recent years were largely attributed to the destruction of our protective forests, especially the watersheds. In sum, the connection between people – whether rich or poor – and biodiversity is as inherent as the gut. No Filipino – in fact, no human being – can ever survive without biodiversity.

It is in this light that we pay homage to our friends – our natural and strategic partners – in civil society. Given the limited financial and human resources of Government, their valuable efforts complement and supplement the work of DENR in many ways. Many of our projects are done in partnership with civil society. They are mostly the ones who implement the nitty-gritties of these projects on the ground, bringing us closer to local governments and local communities. They seek funds everywhere to pursue initiatives to protect the environment, promote the wellbeing of natural resource-dependent communities, and advance environmental rights. They have been generous in sharing their data, technologies and best practices with Government. Their initiatives, experiences and insights have been a source of new knowledge for us. Their practice both enunciates and enlightens policy and governance.

It is, therefore, with an open heart that I welcome the dominant role of civil society in SGP-5. The DENR may be the Implementing Partner of this program, but the National Steering Committee – the highest policymaking body of SGP-5 – is composed of 17 members from National Government Agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations, with the latter consisting the majority. The grants management is to be done by a Responsible Party, which is also an NGO with formidable track record in grantmaking. Of course, the recipients of the grants are members of civil society.

I will not hesitate to point out the conflict-riddled relationship between government and civil society. We lock heads, fiercely, with some civil society members on many issues, such as mining and forestry. We engage in impassioned debates in media, in public gatherings, in the halls of Congress and in courts of law. Our worldviews sometimes furiously collide. I do not see an end to this. It comes with the territory. But don't get me wrong, for the truth is, I welcome it. These entanglements – if I may call it that way – remind us of the ever-widening democratic space in our country. In the realm of environment and natural resources, this democracy means more equitable access to resources for the poor, innovative approaches to resource management, shared-responsibilities between government and people through the direct participation of local communities and citizen groups in resource protection, and enormous possibilities for sustainable financing of our protection sites.

These entanglements, therefore, are not just products of a love-hate relationship between government and civil society. It is, instead, a profound engagement that lets out the best in

each of us, and wakes up the whole nation to the indispensability of our natural resources. We may have conflicting ways of seeing and doing things, yet, at the end of the day, we march towards a shared vision, that is, to make this country a livable place – where Filipinos live harmoniously with, and enjoy the gifts of, Nature.

It is also true that the DENR has had unfortunate experiences with a few civil society organizations as well as some personalities identified with civil society. Accountability has been the fundamental issue in many of those situations. Nevertheless, one important lesson we've learned through years of engagement is that every single NGO, PO and CBO is a different entity. Each has a distinct calling, a distinct leadership, a distinct ideology, and a distinct management system. We at the DENR agree with SGP's policy not to work with organizations of questionable track record. This is in fact the policy of DENR. It is worthwhile mentioning here, therefore, that despite those few lamentable incidents, the DENR has had the good fortune of working with many responsible non-governmental groups. Not only have these organizations done their projects well and faithfully accounted their finances, they have also augmented the meager resources of DENR by contributing to the fulfillment of our targets and scaling them up.

Let me, therefore, put this matter of accountability in perspective. I think this is important on this occasion because SGP-5 will be working with small civil society groups. Many of these organizations, I imagine, have been struggling to keep themselves above water. They lack sufficient funds, expertise and human resources to make them as effective and efficient as we want them to be. It is not farfetched that they will face challenges in project implementation. Their products might not be at par. Their financial reports might be problematic. But that does not necessarily mean they lack accountability. On the contrary, they may even be the most conscientious of conservation workers. I am pleased to note that SGP-5 is heavy on capacity development and institutional building for its partners. As I have said, these local NGOs, POs and CBOs are our natural allies in biodiversity conservation. The more community-based organizations we build and capacitate, the better for our country's biodiversity, and ultimately, for us Filipinos. And pursuing my line of argument, the more conservation organizations we have, the healthier the democracy we enjoy.

By agreeing to be the Implementing Partner of SGP-5, the DENR affirms its policy to work with, and muster the support of, local communities in and around important biodiversity areas, so that we can build a strong social fence that will help us achieve our conservation objectives. This policy is a mainstay in all our work in all ecosystems.

The DENR adheres to the globally recognized strategy of establishment and effective management of protected areas as the best tool in conserving and maintaining the country's biodiversity. Protected Areas provide refuge to species and ecological processes that cannot survive in intensely utilized or altered areas. Protected Areas also provide space for natural evolution and future ecological restoration. The National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act of 1992 is the primary legal instrument on this. The NIPAS Act has put in place a system to establish and manage protected areas, which now count to 240 covering 5.44 Million hectares of terrestrial and coastal and marine ecosystems. More than two decades of implementation of the NIPAS Act have taught us that the approach prescribed by the law needs to be supplemented by other strategies or modalities that will ensure protection of larger geographical coverage. We therefore recognize the need to rationalize the existing protected area system such that we maintain those protected areas that are important for conservation

purposes, and allow the rest to be allocated to their highest and best use, without abandoning the imperative for protection. This implies two important undertakings. First, we need to reassess our existing protected areas and decide with utmost objectivity which ones should be managed according to the highest standards of the NIPAS Act. The other areas may be allocated and utilized to their highest and best value, which leads to the second imperative. We need to employ other modes of management, while still ensuring biodiversity conservation. Along with the diversification of management modalities is the expansion of our conservation areas.

I am happy to note that today we are no longer just confined to the NIPAS Act. The dynamism of environmental legislation in our country – thanks to environmentalist lawmakers like Senator Loren Legarda – has opened a wider playing field for policymakers and conservation managers alike to explore varied and more appropriate natural resource management approaches. The Local Government Code of 1991, for one, vests much power and authority to Local Government Units to manage and protect their communal forests and coastal waters as part of their general welfare functions. The Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act mandates the establishment of Critical Habitats that shall be co-managed by the DENR and concerned local governments. The Fisheries Code mandates that at least 15% of coastal areas be set aside by LGUs as fish sanctuaries and refuges. These include mangrove forests that form part of our country's forests. The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act mandates indigenous communities to conserve and protect natural resources within their ancestral domains. In Palawan, the Special Environment Plan for Palawan Act provides for the establishment of the Environmentally Critical Areas Network in the province. All these pieces of legislation provide us with tremendous opportunities to mainstream biodiversity in our local, regional and national land use and development plans. In fact, it is our dream that the next incarnations of the Philippine Development Plan shall no longer just have a section on biodiversity conservation. Instead, we want the whole PDP to be assessed against biodiversity principles.

Indeed, the policy environment has become so friendly to various strategies for biodiversity conservation. We only need to take advantage of it and do conservation right.

Along this line, the GEF, through the UNDP, supported the New Conservation Areas in the Philippines Project or NewCAPP that put on the spotlight locally conserved areas or LCAs and Indigenous Community-Conserved Areas or ICCAs. We recognize that there are many more natural resource management modalities that can strengthen our protected area system. These modalities shall be the subject of modeling in future endeavors, among them the Strengthening Marine Key Biodiversity Areas Project, which the Biodiversity Management Bureau will soon commence under the leadership of Director Mundita Lim.

These conservation approaches are being pursued mostly in areas where biodiversity protection is not in direct proportion to the need therefor. We note that there are biogeographic regions in the country where biodiversity abounds but without or with inadequate protection measures. I am therefore glad that SGP-5 is paying special attention to Palawan, Samar Island and the Sierra Madre Mountain Range because these belong to biogeographic regions that are underrepresented in protected areas. I hope that by the end of the four-year term of SGP-5, the local stakeholders in those biogeographic regions have already modeled new community-based biodiversity conservation approaches that can help us in Government expand the menu of options for protection and management modalities of more conservation areas across the

Philippines. And while we are here, I hope that the succeeding SGPs will benefit all the biogeographic areas in the country.

The question, of course, is where exactly in these biogeographic areas should we pour our resources into. Identifying and delineating important biodiversity areas is in itself a tall order. It requires an intricate weaving of soft and hard sciences. The National Biodiversity Strategic Action Planning process has been doing this for how many cycles now. Its project has been a growing list and map of Key Biodiversity Areas or KBAs. To date, there are already 255 identified and mapped terrestrial and marine KBAs all over the country. This KBA list has been helpful in drawing up BMB's strategic targets for biodiversity conservation. It is only sound that this KBA list be instituted as DENR's basis for conservation priorities.

These KBAs should be protected from destructive activities. In this regard, we shall pursue the following policies. First, we shall re-emphasize the legislative mandate of according NIPAS sites the highest order of protection. We shall remove any cloud of doubt by reiterating that NIPAS sites are "no go zones" for mining and other extractive activities. Second, we shall strengthen our Environmental Impact Assessment System by including KBAs as environmentally critical areas to ensure that their vital ecosystem functions shall be maintained. As a footnote to this, we hope to work with the Investment Coordinating Committee (ICC) to incorporate biodiversity screening in their evaluation process. Third, we shall strengthen law enforcement against illegal wildlife harvesting and trade. We propose stiffer penalties that reflect the true economic value of the resources destroyed. We also call on the military, the Philippine National Police, other law enforcement agencies and the Department of Justice to help us surmount the challenge of ensuring indictment and imposition of penalties. Fourth, we shall promote protected areas as ecotourism destinations. Working with the Department of Tourism, we have identified some 20 protected areas as potential ecotourism destinations. Not only will ecotourism make biodiversity protection imperative, it will also help raise the much needed funds to maintain and develop our protected areas.

Financing is one overwhelming problem in the management of protected areas in the Philippines. By 2009, the overall contribution from national government and other sources to the operations of protected areas was pegged at a meager amount of only 2,213 Pesos per hectare per year. This is hardly improving. Thus, despite the committed work of protected area staff, local governments, NGO workers and local communities, the problems persist. This is indeed paradoxical; and this paradox is made even more glaring by the fact that communities in and around these protected areas are among the poorest of Filipinos, many of them forced by circumstances to resort to illegal activities just to survive. Protected areas are among the repositories of our natural wealth. *Ito ang ating kapital. Pero bakit walang ganansya?* There is no doubt that we are doing bad business here. It is high time we right this wrong. Improving the financing of protected areas and other protection sites entails improving cost effectiveness of management actions, and increasing the revenues of these protected areas. A good starting point is determining the real economic value of our protected areas. This will allow us to appropriately price the use and services of protected areas and exact the appropriate fees and penalties for their destruction. Developing community-based livelihoods and building biodiversity-friendly industries are also a necessity. In this regard, we are being assisted by a number of projects, such as USAID's B-WISER Plus, GEF-UNDP's Biodiversity Partnership Project, NewCAPP, and BIOFIN. It should be emphasized that the object of improving protected area

financing is two-fold: (1) to enable us to afford the cost of management; and (2) to ensure the wellbeing of local communities in and around these areas that work for its protection.

All these require that our conservation managers are equipped with knowledge and skills to so manage their areas. By this I do not only refer to DENR personnel but also those at the local governments, our civil society partners, local communities and other allies in this worthwhile endeavor. I am pleased that virtually all our relevant projects in the DENR involve capacity and capability building one way or the other. I wish to make special mention though of GIZ's Protected Area Management Effectiveness Project or PAME, which champions capacity development.

These policy directions and projects are very relevant to SGP-5. I note that SGP-5 cuts across the objectives of the projects I mentioned. But while those projects are heavy on governmental work, SGP is committed to our counterparts in civil society. The policy directions we shall take should thus help SGP-5 optimize the outcomes of its initiatives.

Before I close, I would like to congratulate the National Steering Committee, the newly-named Biodiversity Management Bureau, the UNDP, and the SGP-5 Country Programme Management Unit for this launch. I would like to thank the UNDP for its continuing faith and support to the DENR through projects that pursue our biodiversity conservation agenda. Similarly, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the National Economic Development Authority, Department of Interior and Local Government, Department of Agriculture, National Commission on Indigenous Peoples and Philippine Commission on Women, Foundation for a Sustainable Future, Philippine Tropical Forest Conservation Fund, Tambuyog Development Center, Philippine Business for the Environment, Worldwide Fund for Nature, and Haribon Foundation. These are the government agencies and NGOs that working with us at the SGP-5 National Steering Committee. I understand that three more NGO representatives are being sought as additional members of the NSC. I would also like to thank these future NSC members in advance.

Finally, I would like to thank and congratulate all the NGOs, POs and CBOs that will help us pursue global environmental benefits through community actions, using the funds of SGP-5.

I look forward to an even more dynamic conservation movement in the Philippines.

I wish you all the best!