

# **BUILDING-UP PARTNERSHIPS FOR COMMUNITY FORESTRY: THE ACIAR SMALLHOLDER FORESTRY PROJECT EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper reports experiences of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) *Smallholder Forestry Project* in the establishment of working relationships with a people's organisation in Leyte Province, the Philippines. Strategies adopted in building a partnership with the organisation through the establishment of a community nursery, conduct of field trial research and the emerging practical impacts on smallholders are specifically discussed. Information presented in this paper is the outcome of documented field experiences during the research as well as informal discussions with members of the people's organisation. This project illustrates that within-community research can be an effective extension tool if local people are given the chance to participate in all stages of planning and implementation. Mere participation in research activities, however, is not enough. Ongoing interaction between the researchers and the local people is crucial in paving the way to partnership-building. The developmental partnership that was established has created practical impacts which may lead to more widespread adoption and promotion of farm and community forestry in Leyte Province.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Philippines experienced major deforestation during the second half of the 20th century, with major adverse environmental impacts and a shift from being a major timber exporting nation to a net timber importer. Reforestation for both timber production and conservation objectives is now an area of high national government priority.

Industrial forestry has experienced limited success in the Philippines, and the focus has shifted to community and individual smallholder plantings. Various forestry support programs have been introduced, the major national programs coming under the banner of community-based forest management (CBFM) and community-based resource management (CBRM).

While the Philippine government recognises the importance of people's participation in the rehabilitation of degraded forest lands, the role and potential of smallholder farmers as effective agents of reforestation have not been adequately acknowledged and appreciated (Roshetko and Verbist 2000). For example, as evidenced by the existence of small individual and community plantings on Leyte Island (Mangaoang and Harrison 2003, Emtage 2004), smallholders already have a strong interest in tree farming. However, lack of the support and facilitation measures that would encourage smallholder participation in farm and community forestry means that these plantings are usually managed with limited time, technical knowledge, information and financial resources and with other major constraints. These constraints include existing government policies or requirements on tree registration, harvesting, transport and marketing; also poor and inconsistent implementation of policies, rules and regulations on tree farming, harvesting, transport and marketing. While a few

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smallholders have succeeded in their forestry ventures most have failed, leading to discouragement and loss of interest in tree farming.

Even when excellent technical and socio-economic research is undertaken, there may be little impact on the livelihood of smallholders. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many projects have failed to produce 'on-the-ground' results because the research–development–extension cycle has not been fully performed and insufficient follow-up support has been provided to ensure that adoption proceeds through the community.

It is in this context that the *ACIAR Smallholder Forestry Project* was initiated to examine the requirements and opportunities through which farm and community forestry can be rapidly and widely adopted. The project was funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (Research Project ASEM/2000/088 – *Redevelopment of a Timber Industry following Extensive Land Clearing*) and was conducted over the period 2000-04. It involved collaboration between Australian researchers and staff of the College of Forestry at Leyte State University (LSU), the Philippines with the objective of promoting smallholder forestry.

Earlier ACIAR-supported forestry research in the Philippines provided important information about site-species matching, nutrient limitations and seedling technology (Dart *et al.* 2001, Nasayao and Germano 2002). While a long list of impediments to forestry has been identified (Harrison and Herbohn 2001), assessment of the relative importance of these and formulation of measures to overcome them, requires careful analysis and this has been undertaken in the *ACIAR Smallholder Forestry Project*.

In the five years of project work reported here, the LSU College of Forestry established an active outreach program with respect to smallholder forestry in Leyte Province. Silvicultural research was followed up by socio-economic research, nursery and field trials, forestry extension and community partnership activities. As a practical consequence of the nursery and field trial study conducted by the project, links were established with the Conalum Agroforestry Farmers Association (CAFA) and a number of other communities (Mangaoang and Harrison 2003). The main motivation for small-holder farmers to become involved in tree farming is a keen interest in improving their family livelihood through the production of tree products for home-use or market sale (Roshetko and Verbist 2000). The researchers share the belief that smallholders will be interested to plant trees on their farms and be successful tree growers if given a favourable environment and opportunities for tree farming.

The research partnerships that were established opened up opportunities for the farmer-partners to learn about and appreciate tree farming while they are doing and seeing things happening 'on the ground'.

This paper first discusses the research and development partnership that the project established with the people's organisation. Then the strategic procedure that was adopted to create and sustain the partnership for farm and community forestry development is presented. Finally, practical outcomes of the research and development partnership are discussed.

## **THE HISTORY OF CAFA AND ITS PARTNERSHIP WITH ACIAR**

Conalum Agroforestry Farmers Association is a people's organisation (PO)<sup>2</sup> composed of smallholder subsistence farmers in Barangay Conalum, situated in the municipality of

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<sup>2</sup> A 'people's organisation' is a group of local people in communities, organised to engage in any form of developmental activity. It receives various forms of support from external development agencies.

Inopacan, Leyte Province<sup>3</sup>. The organisation began in 1999 during a World Vision supported program for the environment which encouraged local people's participation. CAFA's initial contact with the LSU College of Forestry occurred when the College was requested by World Vision to conduct training on nursery and plantation establishment for the PO members. The training resulted in CAFA's first seedling nursery, but progress was then halted due to the sudden cessation of the World Vision project. This event created discouragement that resulted in the withdrawal of community members from the organisation, membership falling from 40 to just 10. Those who remained struggled to continue the organisation's activities, maintaining only small vegetable production and hog-raising ventures for livelihood support whilst the seedling production, tree farming and agroforestry activities completely stopped.

The commencement of the *ACIAR Smallholder Forestry Project* in 2000 was inspired by the idea that research activities to promote tree farming among smallholders can create immediate on-the-ground impacts if the smallholders are active participants in the conduct of the research. ACIAR's involvement was timely in that it occurred shortly after the withdrawal of the World Vision project and contacts between the association and the College of Forestry were already established. This meant that the ACIAR-sponsored project received immediate acceptance and participation by members of the association.

ACIAR's conduct of nursery and field trial study hand in hand with CAFA members moulded a strong working relationship that later became a formal partnership in the conduct of the research activities. The initial partnership, which was formalised in 2002 through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), was for the establishment and maintenance of the field trial research, which in turn was a continuation of LSU's nursery experiment looking into the effect of effects of potting medium and hardening intensity on the performance of *Acacia mangium* and *Eucalyptus deglupta* in the nursery and under field conditions (Cedamon *et al.* 2004, Mangaoang and Cedamon 2004). In this research, organisation members were directly involved in site selection, site preparation, field planting, tree protection and stand maintenance. CAFA was able to successfully establish and maintain a total area of about 1 ha of tree farm in three parcels of *Acacia mangium* and *Eucalyptus deglupta* through the assistance of the ACIAR project staff.

The partnership outlined in the MOA involved a 50-50 sharing agreement in the maintenance of the field trial by CAFA and the ACIAR project. CAFA estimated the total labour cost for the two field sites at PHP12,000<sup>4</sup>. The ACIAR project paid the organisation PHP6,000 in cash and the other PHP6,000 was shouldered by the organisation through labour contributed by its members. The timeliness and usefulness of the cash incentive given to the organisation was notable; it was used as a capital investment for hog-raising as a livelihood and capital-build-up activity.

Along with the support for the establishment costs as specified in the MOA, continuing guidance has been provided by the ACIAR research staff to the farmer cooperators on the technical aspects of tree farm establishment, maintenance and protection. Informal discussions have also been held with the community partners on issues and concerns related to policies, prospects on processing and marketing of tree products and tree-farming related livelihood matters.

A second research partnership was formalised with the organisation in 2003 on the conduct of community nursery research related to the effect of type of potting container (re-usable hiko trays vs poly bags) on the growth performance of tree seedlings. The same 50-50 sharing of labour was formally agreed upon through another MOA. The farmers provided

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<sup>3</sup> A barangay is the smallest unit of local government.

<sup>4</sup> \$US 1.00 = approximately 50 Philippine pesos (PHP).

indigenous materials including bamboo and timber poles as their contribution to the construction of the research nursery, while other materials including nails, chicken-wire and plastic-acetate were provided by the ACIAR project. Farmers' involvement started from the planning of the research activities through to the implementation phase. These activities included building the nursery, seed collection and germination, preparation of the potting medium, potting of seedlings, watering and fertiliser application, and sanitation practices in the nursery. In all these research activities, close guidance through informal discussions was provided by the ACIAR research staff, while the farmers carried out the physical tasks. Through the guidance and support extended by the LSU College of Forestry staff, CAFA was able to establish a community seedling nursery (Figure 1) that produces high quality seedlings of various tree species, including *Eucalyptus deglupta* (Bagras), *Eucalyptus pellita* (Australian Red Mahogany), *Swietenia macrophylla* (Mahogany), *Terminalia calamansanai* (Kalumpit), *Pterocarpus indicus* (Narra) and other native species of trees that produce premium timber. Fruit trees too are produced in the nursery and together with the forest tree species are used for planting on farms and for sale as a source of cash income for the organisation. The community nursery holds a total of approximately 3,000 seedlings.

Currently CAFA does not have a Community-based Forest Management Agreement with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). The organisation is in the process of formal registration with the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE), which will allow it to operate as a legal group that can engage in business and other developmental activities. The ACIAR Smallholder Forestry project is playing a supportive role, particularly in the preparation of required documents.



**Figure 1.** The CAFA seedling nursery

## **STEPS IN BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN THE RESEARCHERS AND THE RURAL COMMUNITY**

While the nursery and field trial research was being conducted, the research staff considered ways in which a strong working relationship with smallholders could be established and sustained, to eventually produce on-the-ground outcomes for tree farming and community forestry. This section of the paper presents the strategies used by the ACIAR project to capture the interest of the PO members to participate in the research activity and to eventually engage in tree farming. Practical impacts of the research partnership, particularly on the smallholder farmers' attitudes and perceptions on tree farming, including their

knowledge and skills for nursery and tree farm establishment and maintenance, are also presented.

The experience of working in partnership with CAFA has provided lessons on a workable procedure for partnership-building between researchers and small rural communities in Leyte. The activities that were undertaken in the partnership-building may be viewed as a 'model' and can be divided into a number of steps as described below.

#### *Awareness-building and preliminary discussions*

Initial visits to the community made by the ACIAR research project team were intended to relay information about the project among the prospective farmer-cooperators and members of CAFA. The smallholders were informed that the project was to be undertaken in the form of 'action' or developmental research. To build among the farmers awareness of the project and its planned implementation in the community, the nature and objectives of the research project were clearly discussed by the team and association members during a number of informal meetings. This step was intended to help create favourable expectations about the project in the minds of the farmer-cooperators. The initial visits and informal preliminary discussions served as a means for the farmer-cooperators and ACIAR research project staff to get to know each other better. These discussions provided opportunities for the research staff to discover the smallholders' views, knowledge and experiences concerning farm forestry.

#### *Orientation seminar*

Following the initial visits, an orientation seminar was used to more formally present the research study to the members of CAFA. A relatively detailed presentation was made of the nature of the research, its objectives, methods, expected outputs and what it would mean in practical terms to the smallholder farmers. The seminar was an opportunity for farmers to ask more detailed questions about the work and, as they related their unfortunate experiences of development projects in which they had previously participated, to openly express their feelings and apprehensions about this ACIAR project. The forum enabled an exchange of views and experiences, details were made clear and uncertainties overcome on the part of both the participating farmers and the research staff. Also during this meeting, farmers informally shared suggestions about the research activities, revealing their concerns and demonstrating that a certain level of confidence in dealing with the research staff had been established among them.

#### *Participatory planning and implementation*

The various aspects of the research activity became more exciting for the farmers and the ACIAR staff during the participatory planning and implementation phase. The strategy of close collaboration during these stages opened up the opportunity for the farmers and the ACIAR staff to start working together. Participatory planning encouraged the smallholders to contribute their knowledge and skills, their experiences with nursery establishment and management and their experiences with tree farm establishment and maintenance. The process strengthened farmers' appreciation of the activities, in that they clearly saw the direction in which the research was leading and realised the benefits that the nursery and field trial research could be expected to provide them with in the future. Participatory planning and implementation eventually served as an opportunity for the farmers to be trained and gain practical knowledge and skills in performing planning activities, as well as the whole set of on-the-ground nursery and tree farm establishment and maintenance activities. This scenario is consistent with the fact that full participation of farmers in any resource management endeavour can only be achieved and sustained if they themselves

are fully involved in all the phases of the development work. Their full involvement depends on their interests towards the activity as well as their capability to perform (Bonifacio 1986).

#### *Formalisation of work-partnership*

Gaining the full confidence of farmers about the research work is one of the major considerations that the ACIAR staff had sought in order to arrive at a healthy and sustainable working relationship with them. Preceded by an informal discussion and verbal agreements, a research partnership between ACIAR Project staff and CAFA was formalised through a Memorandum of Agreement to jointly conduct the on-farm nursery and field trial research. To ensure maintenance and protection of the nursery and field trials, the agreement assigned responsibilities for the provision of and payments for labour and materials. The farmer participants' responsibilities to and ownership of the research activity and the realisable outputs thereof were also formalised.

#### *Continuing community visitation and discussion-meeting/workshop*

After the research partnership had been formalised and activities implemented on the ground, the ACIAR research staff continued to pay visits to the community at least twice a month. The purpose of the visits was not only to check progress of the research study, but also to have the opportunity to have discussions with the partners about problems, issues, new plans and desires, as well as observations related to or arising from the research activities conducted. It was in this way that simple problems and issues were immediately discussed and resolved through a participatory discussion cum workshop. The community visits demonstrated to farmers that they always had a partner to lean on in times of difficulty and also served to revitalise their morale and enthusiasm for the nursery and tree farm study.

#### *Linking the PO to market and support opportunities*

The most common inquiry about the project raised by the farmer cooperators concerned the future of whatever products the research partnership was able to produce. What is to be done with the expected thousands of tree seedlings produced and the logs from the field trials when they reach harvest age? What is next for the partnership when the ACIAR research is completed? Will the working relationship be sustained as presently existing? These sorts of questions arose during informal discussions in the community and required immediate and valid answers.

Tree seedling production is by itself a livelihood activity only if a market is available and the farmers are able to sell what they have produced. In this context the ACIAR project staff looked for means by which the seedlings produced by the research activity in the community could be sold by the farmers to realise cash income. It was because of the desire of the farmers to sell the seedlings that they recognised the importance of producing high quality stock. They felt that if seedlings were of high quality then they would always be preferred by prospective buyers. This feeling intensified the farmers' willingness to take a more active part in the nursery research as they learnt skills needed to produce high quality nursery stock and carried out tasks hand in hand with the ACIAR staff.

The ACIAR Project also initiated moves to register the trees established in the field trial study under the name and ownership of CAFA. Registration as a 'tree farm' involves an inspection and recording of all trees by species and number with the DENR and ensures that the people's organisation will be able to fell the trees when they reach harvestable age and to market the tree products.

To further strengthen and sustain the working relationship it has been a key initiative to link the PO and its development activities to support and funding agencies. This strategy has involved the preparation and submission of development and extension proposals to funding and support agencies such as the Foundation for the Philippine Environment, DISOP Philippines and Leyte State University. This strategy is expected to ensure continuity of the farmers' participation and engagement in farm and community forestry until such time that they themselves become the sole operators and managers. If successful in their tree farming activities, it is possible that the CAFA members will in time become development workers for farm and community forestry in Leyte with less assistance from development agencies.

## **PRACTICAL OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP**

A number of practical benefits of the research partnership have been identified and these are now discussed.

### *Creation of awareness among smallholders of the importance of producing high quality seedlings*

In the past, smallholders have not cared much about the quality of seedlings that they used in tree farming. The research partnership demonstrated the importance of using high quality seedlings in tree farming. The message was effectively conveyed through an on-site participatory training workshop, informal discussions during community meetings and the guided learning-by-doing approach where the farmers worked side by side with the ACIAR research staff in the nursery and field trial study. One specific example is that farmers had noted to a degree the difference in establishment of the trees from hiko trays (healthy seedlings) and poly bags (less healthy). They had noted that seedlings in hiko trays, though relatively smaller at planting stage, were the same size one year later. They believe that the eventual effect of good root form may not be evident at this stage unless high winds strike the plantation so that stability against wind is tested. A further benefit was that farmers became able to distinguish healthy growing trees and those that are not, on the basis of size for age, colour of the leaves, and presence or absence of pests and diseases, through the help of the project.

### *Improvement of knowledge and skills of smallholders and their appreciation of farm and community forestry*

Success in establishing an authentic research partnership with CAFA led to a better appreciation of farm and community forestry by the smallholder members. One consequence is that the nursery and field trial research in the project sites has become part of the partner organisation's main development project and concern. The approach of the ACIAR project's technical staff working side by side with smallholders had a favourable impact in improving their capabilities and confidence in nursery and tree farm establishment and maintenance. This is evidenced by the fact that selected members of the organisation have already served as farmer-teachers to members of a newly starting people's organisation in a nearby community (Anolon Farmers' Association in Hindang, Leyte) on nursery and tree farm establishment as well as agroforestry.

### *The role of nursery and field trial research as an extension tool to promote farm and community forestry*

The relationships that were built during nursery and field trials evolved to become an effective means of extension for farm and community forestry. ACIAR project staff came to realise that building an effective research partnership with local people in communities is one of the best and easiest ways to promote farm and community forestry. Smallholders readily gain confidence and the needed knowledge and skills while they work hand in hand with the

research staff in performing action research activities – i.e. through practical activity in the company of experienced personnel as opposed to theory-based lectures and seminars.

*The research partnership experience and accreditation of smallholder seedling producers and tree growers*

The research partnership experience with CAFA created interest among several farm and community forestry stakeholders to initiate a policy advocacy movement for the accreditation of seedling producers and tree growers in Leyte. This is premised on the belief that accreditation could be used to create a favourable market for seedlings and tree farm products produced by smallholder farmers. Accreditation is expected to encourage involvement of smallholders in farm and community forestry because it creates a source of differentiation, with products from accredited seedling producers and tree farmers being preferred by prospective buyers. To date, the market connections that CAFA has been able to establish through the project are POs and NGOs engaged on tree farming, agroforestry and other related environmental projects, including World Vision and the Anolon Farmers' Association. Seedling buyers have been referred to CAFA by the LSU College of Forestry and ACIAR office. Other buyers include passers-by from other areas who are interested to plant trees in their farms and students from primary and secondary schools near the CAFA site.

*Developing strategies for community participation in nursery and tree farm demonstration projects*

Various technologies have been developed to raise the economic and educational status of smallholders in rural areas of the Philippines. Some of these technologies have not been widely adopted due to the superficial involvement of farmers in their introduction and in their generation and development. Examples include Sloping Agricultural Technology (SALT 1) (ERDB, 2002), hedgerow intercropping and improved fallows using shrub legumes (Menz *et al.* c1998) and natural vegetative filter strips (NVS) (ICRAF, undated). Involvement of farmers in the activities of technology generation and trials make them more confident, with a clear understanding of the benefits that they can expect to derive. This is what the *ACIAR Smallholder Forestry Project* has done, slowly but surely involving farmers in establishment and maintenance of the nursery and field trials. Their direct involvement has created an atmosphere of discovering new things that will improve their existing local knowledge and skills. In addition, the farmers' morale was boosted and their confidence increased through their regular contact with the ACIAR research staff. Their achievements in collaboration with the LSU College of Forestry have encouraged other local people to join the people's organisation. CAFA membership has now increased to 19 and more are thinking of joining. The group is run by a strong and committed leadership composed of the President, Secretary and Treasurer, backstopped by a number of working committees and is clearly making progress in its activities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the active participation of smallholders in the planning and implementation of the nursery and field trial study, the *ACIAR Smallholder Forestry Project* has had favourable on-the-ground impacts on their knowledge and skills and appreciation of farm and community forestry. The partnership established between the ACIAR research staff and CAFA has flourished over time and can be attributed to the project staff's effective working relationship with the smallholders, regular community visits and meetings and discussions with the partner farmers. Building this kind of collaborative partnership between a research organisation and local community people requires an innovative approach with a focus on developing smallholders' confidence and trust in the research organisation and in their capacity to 'perform or deliver'. The ACIAR on-site nursery and field trial research is an



example of such an approach that has successfully established a sound developmental partnership with smallholders. This approach is expected to lead to increased adoption of farm and community forestry in Leyte.

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