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Peter Walpole, S.J.



The Politics of Logging: Power from the Forest. By Marites D. Vitug. Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1993. 277 pages.

Living in what was once an old logging camp, I occasionally trip over a coil of two-inch cable or climb onto an old bulldozer for a better view. Each time, I have the feeling of disturbing the living dead, and that is what reading *The Politics of Logging* feels like. Even to speak about logging concessions so recently cancelled in the area is like evoking a mythology of destruction and tempting the loggers' return. Here the *lumad* were displaced, while the *dumagat* were temporarily employed by the company. The *datu* now lives in a company-built house, the school bell is a rusting steering rod, children collect the remnants of reforestation for firewood and the road out is abandoned by the company and local government. For all the benefits gained, no one wants the company back, ungrateful as it may appear.

From this perspective where power is taken from the forest, from the people of the forest, three things come to mind after having read *The Politics of Logging*. First, politically the environmental issue is as weak as the catch cry of sustainable development is broad. Second, a new era of openness in government did begin with Secretary Fulgencio Factoran, but the emphasis on and style of reforestation initiated leaves much to be desired, while issues of access and ownership of forest lands are not adequately established. Third, any design for social change has to be sustained from below, as people go about their daily living.

The Environmental Issue

Marites Vitug puts the history of Timber License Agreements (TLAs) on the line and finds them abusive of political and military power, local people, national policies and forest resources. On the national level, TLAs sustained the growth of a whole era of Philippine political history, contributed significantly to the GNP for more than a decade (though not to national revenue) and gave a form of feudal employment to hundreds of thousands of migrants.

The elite and or military in most tropical countries have exploited forest resources for their own benefit. In the Philippines, corruption touched all

loggers and is here presented in such a way that nobody can hide behind the text. Concessionaries are not pawns but cronies when they send blank checks to the President; they are playing with the system (p. 16). The corruption is identified in a particularly damning way with the names of President Ferdinand Marcos, Edmundo Cortes (MNR) and Alfonso Lim.

In talking with the workers of Almendras Company (with a reported P12 million annual income and owned by a Congressman, p. 32), they never said the company's intention was to sustain employment (nor the forests). The sustained effort of TLAs has been profit and power, as affirmed by the litany of political loggers in Chapter 5. Jerome Paras, Chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, is shown as protecting these resource interests and more interested in scoring a political point than any concern for the dwindling resource base.

Loggers have generally hidden behind a series of claims unfounded for the vast majority of the 500 concessioners operating in the 1970s. With such investigative journalism, the charge of being corrupt sticks; similar investigations need to be done on the treatment of workers to dismiss the myth of their concern for employees; and on the pattern of land occupancy to show that population pressure was not the prime or direct pressure that led to the destruction of forest lands.

It is painful to read the history of "the log ban," recalling the struggle from the initial log export ban to the present. I sat through the ritual of the Senate, hoping they would get their act together and not always play for the gallery, for their names being mentioned in the newspapers. I realized that the environment has a long way to go on every issue to make a political point before it falls foul of one or the other House.

Unfortunately the environment is not yet a political issue in society enough to draw a green vote (p. 169), and until it does, sustainable development will only be a form of smooth talking while bending to other pressures. Sustainable development still remains hard to distinguish from sustaining development or the status quo, as made evident by Ormoc (Chapter 1). There has been no adequate relocation of land for housing and people are back living on the sandbanks of Isla Verde.

Openness of Government

The brevity of Ernesto Maceda's term in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) was a blessing and that his stumpage contracts (p. 42) did not set the tone for the new DENR, a further blessing. The subsequent appointment of Fulgencio Factoran was not that of a social visionary but a pragmatic executive. He must be given great credit for reining in the BFM, establishing regional offices and assigning people back to the field (p. 49).

Even with such internal restraints on the executive, it is doubtful if he could have stayed in power and achieved a forest lands' reform by ending the TLA system. Factoran did set a path not to be changed without reason, while surviving the politics and cutting down on the corruption. The very fact that such data on TLAs was made available gives a whole new image to DENR for which Factoran and his management staff must be commended. Environmentalists, however, could not join forces when he was known to speak of TLAs as protecting the forest (p. 53).

Factoran appeared at a time when you were damned if you moved and damned if you didn't. Yet, he never got bitter, smart, nor rich, but sought socially effective ways to sustain resources. He took the first real yet shaky steps in social forestry. Such forestry is not easily achieved, taking time and effort that government is ill prepared to give, confirmed by the priority of reforestation over ownership (p. 150). Major efforts like the granting of certificates to Mangyan communities in Mindoro (p. 150) are already being rejected because of problems with reforestation.

Reforestation became the centerpiece of Factoran's leadership (p. 49), but it was a good idea with poor direction. The feeling at times is that the DENR still responds to the tropical forest as an agricultural crop (p. 13). Unfortunately the author had to draw the line somewhere (p. 185) and could not review the US\$ 260 million loan with an undeclared success rate somewhere between 20 to 30 percent. Internationally-designed and ADB-assisted reforestation in Southeast Asia deserves further investigative journalism.

From the community perspective of piecing events together, what is very interesting is the reporting on how things were between the two Houses and the Executive. Here, the future of actual people and places was decided, as distinct from policies that may not even change local orientations.

In Gabaldon, we often wondered what was going on in Fort Magsaysay with logs coming out, cut by Barba and Sangil Forest, Inc., and confiscated logs disappearing inside (p. 104). This is just one of many well-documented activities by the author that helps one understand the powers-that-be and how complicated are the military and political relations. Moreover, while the people of San Fernando fasted at the DENR on Visayas Avenue, one smiles upon knowing how the second-richest lawmaker, Victorico Chavez (with P37 million) of El Labrador Lumber, maneuvered to go on with logging (p. 50).

Sustained Change

People have forgotten Ormoc (p. 1), where again the biggest issue in the Philippines raises its head—land. If anyone has any illusions about social change, look further at the difficulties of getting people to respond to the dangers of lahar flows, the old ways of politicians and government, and the disappointedness of NGO action—yet, we go forward.

Two biting forestry issues need further investigation: community livelihood for those living near the forest and adjustments in the country's timber consumption, especially by the construction industry. The tendency now is to solve both problems in one stroke and have communities supply a ready market.

The new Community Forest Management Agreements (Chapter 9) may be a local alternative to large-scale logging in a few areas. However, as the CFMA is being increasingly promoted for widespread application, such general factors as the poor success of local cooperatives, pressures to log, complications of government decentralization, and financial support from logging interests may render this ineffective in sustaining the forest.

Industrial Forest Management Agreements (IFMA) (p. 184) are intended to fill the vacuum in timber supplies by the next decade. However, by bringing back many of the old names and taking the greater share of secondary forest for cutting and planting it clearly sustains old-style development. We still want to meet the national timber needs from an already degraded forest land. Until timber plantations catch up, it will pay to log, legally or otherwise, unless the demand is regulated. Present policies appear to give everyone a piece of the pie, but will leave only crumbs for future generations in the form of 2 percent unprotected primary forest.

As the country embarks on reforestation, with the same people who through selective logging were responsible for the sustainable use of resources, no one should be surprised that we strive to meet economic demand for timber to the probable detriment of forest regeneration and the empowerment of local people.

These are the alternatives society is given, but not the hard alternative of a timber consumption cutback, which would take the pressure from production forests, plantations and thus also the secondary forests. Consumption gives preference to plantations over land rights. It is also the reason why cultural communities will be left with a few success stories but not a successful wide-scale program of ancestral domain. These are issues a task force should take up along with the existing effort on law enforcement.

Moreover, there is the problem of a thousand NGOs needed for organizing community forest projects (p. 161). Traditionally, NGOs have been social organizers, often protecting people from abusive military and government. Many rural groups are now heavily involved in agrarian land reform. Many NGOs are watching the political environmental scene for abuses and building the green vote; others are watching policies for loopholes and reinstatement of the status quo. Of course, if there is money around they mushroom overnight, but to expect to get credible NGOs skilled in forestry management in such numbers is not done overnight. There are other considerations, too. The Local Government Code, though welcomed, is yet to be interpreted, thus bringing much confusion and extra work for any NGOs involved in project implementation (p. 189).

In the light of what has been said, I would be very cautious in saying "for environmental NGOs the atmosphere could not be better" (p. 193). Though there is far greater acceptance of the principles of sustainable development and the possibility of a presidential commission, changes have to be sustained by the most marginalized people of the country who have suffered most and received nothing from the government but for the imposition of alien reforestation.

Marites Vitug has led the way in documenting in a serious way for the public the irresponsible powers that have unnecessarily destroyed the forest and the complex path by which we must find our way out. With such documentation, a lot more people can make an informed judgment and decide the basis for participating in environmental action.

A note to the publishers is called for: Outside of commending the design and presentation, the speed of getting the work out is most important, given the nature of the present discussions.