



SUCCESS STORY

Local religious beliefs and cultural norms integrated into Muslim Mindanao's Forestry Law

The integration of *Shari'ah* and other cultural norms in the Muslim Mindanao's Sustainable Forest Management Act was a first in the history of forest management legislation in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, enforcing the law has sometimes been a difficult task. This is partly because many of the laws do not necessarily reflect the cultural values or social norms prevailing in many communities. Thus, laws or ordinances that ignore the people's traditional way of life and religious beliefs usually result in conflict.

To mitigate conflict and show respect for local religious beliefs, USAID/Philippines' Environmental Governance (EcoGov) Project worked closely with the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Government to adopt a Regional Sustainable Forest Management Act (RSFMA). The ARMM is located in the southern portion of Mindanao and is comprised of four mainland and remote island provinces, where poverty is widespread, and the use of critical natural resources like forests is often unchecked and can lead to conflict.

The EcoGov Project promotes the principles of transparency, accountability, and participatory decision making as integral parts of good environmental governance. EcoGov worked closely with the ARMM's Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the ARMM Regional Legislative Assembly (RLA) to tap Filipino Muslim legal specialists, social scientists, and indigenous peoples' leaders, among others, in putting together the RSFMA and its subsequent implementing rules and regulations (IRR).



ARMM Regional Government and DENR officials converge for the signing of the IRR of the RSFMA, a product of extensive consultations with stakeholders in the region.

Informed by extensive local consultations, the RSFMA's key features include incorporation of principles found in Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and customary laws (*Adat*), as well as multi-sectoral, participatory and community-based approaches to sustainable forest management.

The result was a RSFMA that empowers local communities to address the destruction and degradation of forestlands, and gives ARMM inhabitants, including indigenous peoples, preferential rights to use critical forest resources they depend upon.

"On behalf of the people of Tawi-Tawi, we should be happy and proud (of the RSFMA), because this is the first time that (this consultation) actually happened in our province."

*- Vice Governor Hadji Jilkasi Usman
Province of Tawi-Tawi*