# Learning from failed reforestation

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The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) marked the International Day of Forests this year by launching its “Forests for Life: 5M Trees by 2028” program, the latest demonstration of its “commitment to climate resilience and sustainable forest management.”

The massive reforestation program has garnered the wholehearted support of some of the country’s largest corporations, whose shared enthusiasm for the project even led to the doubling of the target to an ambitious 10 million indigenous trees across key provinces by the end of the Marcos administration in 2028.

With this, the expected carbon sequestration resulting from the project will increase from the original estimate of 3.5 million tons by 2038 to as high as 6.5 million tons of carbon dioxide, one of the harmful greenhouse gases behind adverse climate change.

Captains of industry as Ramon S. Ang, Manuel V. Pangilinan, Jeffrey Lim, Isidro Consunji, Sabin Aboitiz, and Federico Lopez personally made the commitment during the memorandum of agreement signing with Environment Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga on March 21.

Despite formidable backing, however, there are reasons to be concerned that the program will fall far short of its targets considering the spotty track record of previous government reforestation programs.

## Dwindling forest cover

Recall the National Greening Program, the banner DENR reforestation project of the Benigno Aquino Jr. administration that called for the planting of a whopping 1.5 billion trees in 1.5 million hectares over six years, from 2011 to 2016.

The 2019 special audit by the Commission on Audit, however, yielded damning findings, not least of which is the project’s abject failure to meet its target despite the P47.22 billion allocated to the DENR from 2011 to 2019 to implement the program.

Indeed, of the joint goal of the Departments of Agriculture, Agrarian Reform, and Environment to increase the country’s dwindling forest cover by 1.5 million hectares, only 177,441 hectares were added, which means that the program—the largest reforestation project ever undertaken in the country—achieved a minuscule 12 percent of its target.

COA pointed out that the DENR had forced itself to meet the overly ambitious target, even though the officers in the field had been vocal about their inability to handle the load.

The agency was also so gung-ho about the National Greening Program that it dove into the project despite the lack of proper survey, mapping and planning that would have helped make sure that the right species will be planted in the right places to improve chances of the seedlings’ survival.

## Agroforestry species

“[Thus] instead of accelerating reforestation, fast-tracking only opened the program to waste,” stressed COA in its report, “Forest cover yielded a marginal increase of 177,441 hectares after five years of implementation. It could not be expected that the forest cover would increase significantly because the seedlings are not surviving.”

And of those seedlings that did manage to survive, these were mainly coffee, cacao, and other agroforestry species that do not even contribute to forest cover.

“With forest cover at 7,014,154 hectares or 41.50 percent of what it was in 1934, reforestation remains an urgent concern. However, this does not mean that the government has to hurry implementing the program. DENR must pace the implementation of the program according to available resources,” COA underscored. The COA report may have been issued six years ago, but its conclusions and recommendations remain valid.

COA, for example, suggested that the DENR shift its strategy from being merely “target-driven” to becoming “community-centered”, which means helping the peoples organizations on the ground become ready to participate in the program, from producing the seedlings to taking care of them until maturity. Forcing them to deliver when they are not yet ready would only lead to more waste, it pointed out.

## Monitoring tool

The DENR was also urged to be more realistic about its targets and base them on the capacity of field offices and partner organizations and to also devise a monitoring tool for greater accountability among those entrusted to not just plant the seedlings but to also nurture them.

It would do well for the DENR under Yulo-Loyzaga’s stewardship to review the lengthy report, see where the National Greening Program succeeded and determine the shortcomings that ultimately led to its paltry achievement.

By doing so, the DENR will learn from those costly mistakes and make the “Forests for Life” succeed where the National Greening Program failed.

In the end, the success of any reforestation program does not lie in the trees nor the land, but in the people tasked to lead such a noble undertaking that must be given the best chances to bear fruit.