

Why landlessness persists in *Barangay Bacusanon*

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Many residents of *Barangay Bacusanon* do not own land. As an enumerator for the project “Enhancing Land Tenure Security of Smallholder Farmers in Northern Mindanao, Philippines,” I became aware of how important land is to the life of indigenous peoples (IPs).

Over two months of going around the *barangay* and asking questions only reinforced this fact. One of the respondents said, “it is hard to work on

someone else’s land because you are limited on what you can do and can plant.”

But how did this come to be?

It depends whom you ask: indigenous peoples or migrants.

For IPs, the overwhelming answer is that their lands were sold by their ancestors to lowlanders. This began during the days when the government resettled people from Luzon and the Visayas to Mindanao.

The settlers needed land and the IPs had an abundance of it. There was little in the way of IP recognition and support in those days and the IPs were only willing to part with their lands whenever they needed cash – a parcel here and there – until they were left with nothing.

It was also around this time that the IPs were relocated to the town centers and “forced” to live with the newcomers, a sort of forced integration.

The logging boom of the 1970s and 1980s in this part of the Kalatungan mountain range also led to the displacement of IPs from their lands, as big logging concessions, with active support from the government, needed more land for their operations.

“It was very hard for us to be told to leave our lands. Land is our life. But we had no choice,” shared one of the respondents.

Indeed, land is a very complicated issue. It is a limited resource valuable

for livelihood, so much so that it leads to misunderstanding and sometimes to violence.

Thus, it is quite understandable that the present-day inhabitants of *Barangay Bacusanon* blame their ancestors for the loss of their lands. However, it should be noted that their ancestors were living in a different time and had different motivations.

Also, recognition of and support to IPs was virtually non-existent then. Nobody advised them that their lands are sacred legacies that should not and could not be sold.

For now, most landless residents work as laborers on other farms, or work in the towns and cities and laborers and professionals, send their children to school, and hope that they can be prosperous enough in the future to be able to buy land which they can own.

For migrants, especially those who came to the village after the resettlement years, landlessness is a function of economics. They simply do not have enough money to buy land.

Far from the prospectors of the resettlement years, these recent migrants came to *Barangay Bacusanon* because they had no lands to farm in their places of origin.

They heard that there were vast tracts of land in Bukidnon that they could

farm, not realizing that said lands were already owned by someone else. Thus, just like the IPs, they became farm laborers and did other work just to be able to eke out a living for their families.

And just like the IPs, they work hard, send their children to school, in the hope that one day, they too will be prosperous enough to be able to buy land.

In hindsight, it is really important to note that land is a valuable asset and should not be sold just because an offer came, or a need arose. This is especially true for IPs because land is a legacy handed down from the beginning of time. For IPs, land is not just a means of production, it is their link to their culture, to their ancestors. It is their reason for being.

The collaborative initiative of the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) and the Xavier Science Foundation, Inc. (XSF), through the support from the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), has made considerable strides in making the communities aware of the importance of land, settling disputes, and giving them a means to verify and certify land ownership.

Unfazed by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic (when all activities ground to a halt), the seeds of hope have been planted, which replaced the long-standing despair of IPs and migrant settlers.

For my part, I am really glad and grateful to be a part of this project because of the knowledge that I learned. As part of the young generation of IPs, it is up to me and my colleagues to ensure that land will retain the importance it deserves. We owe it not only to our ancestors, but to the succeeding generations as well. ■