

# Will we appreciate the importance of land when it is no longer ours?

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Indigenous peoples (IPs) believe land tenure security to be an inherent right. But in today's world where proof of ownership (like land titles, tax declaration certificates) is the rule, a number of IPs concede that any piece of paper that proves their right to their ancestral lands is important.

Land is important to IPs because it is their source of sustenance and livelihood, and because it anchors their culture and traditions.

Majority of upland dwellers in the province of Bukidnon are IPs. History reveals that they have been easily disenfranchised over their lands, oftentimes out of pity for others whom

they deem need the land more than they do. This attitude is grounded on their indigenous, knowledge, system and practices (IKSP).

During the government's resettlement campaign of the 1950s, migrants from Luzon and the Visayas flocked to Mindanao where it was widely believed that land is plentiful. While there were large swathes of land seemingly waiting for the taking, these were ancestral lands of IPs – lands that have belonged to the tribe generations long before colonizers came.

However, since recognition of IP ownership over their ancestral lands was not a concept back then, the migrants simply occupied whatever "idle" land they found. The IPs, seeing that the newcomers needed land for their homesteads and farms, allowed them to use the land as long as they made them productive.

With the passing of time, the "users" came to regard the land as their own, even going so far as to have them titled. Thus, it came to pass that the IPs lost their land right under their noses.

One of the more documented cases in *Sitio Megbadiang, Barangay Bacusanon, Pangantucan, Bukidnon* is that of a local tribal chieftain, *Datu "Abayan" Isabelo Tandejon*. *Datu Abayan*, 47 years old, is the tribal leader of *Sitio Megbadiang*, the third largest *sitio* of the village.

He is one of the leaders of the *Nagkahiusang Manobong Manununod sa Yutang Kabilin, Inc.* (NAMAMAYUK), one of the partner IP organizations of the project "Enhancing Tenurial Security for Smallholder Farmers in Northern Mindanao, Philippines."

The Tandejon family was one of those who lent their land to migrants during the resettlement period. According to *Datu Abayan*, his grandfather lent their land to the newcomers because their IKSP decrees that land is owned by the supreme spirit *Magbabaya* and people are only stewards of the land.

Thus, when somebody needs the land to be able to survive, the IPs as responsible stewards should gladly lend the land to them.

Their IKSP also declares that land should not be sold because the right to land inherited from their ancestors will extend to their heirs. However, little did they know that the land was sold by one of *Datu Abayan's* uncles in 1988 to the migrant family occupying the said land, without permission from the clan or worse, the tribe. The new owner subsequently had the land titled under his name.

*Datu Abayan* called all concerned for a dialogue, and asked the assistance of the *Barangay Local Government Unit (BLGU)*, to settle the dispute. In March 2018, the dispute had been resolved with the support of the BLGU



and Council of Elders. Our IPO Leaders witnessed, supported, and imparted potent advice in the dispute resolution processes.

After much back and forth between the contending parties, and with the intervention of the said project, an agreement was reached: two hectares of the land will revert back to *Datu Abayan's* family, while the buyer retains three hectares.

The project was instrumental in settling disputes over land, mostly involving disagreements over boundaries. Survey

activities utilizing technology such as Global Positioning System (GPS), and respondent interviews established clear and agreed-upon boundaries between landowners.

Also as a result of the mapping activities, Certificates of Customary Land Occupancy were generated and issued to landowners, giving them much-needed proof that the land is theirs. ■