Indigenous People’s Collective Actions Towards Securing Ancestral Land Rights

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Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to share my experiences and thoughts on the collective actions of indigenous peoples for economic rights. Indigenous People’s collective struggles towards securing ancestral land rights have been going on for many years now, in many communities all over the country and in various ways and on diverse issues. I cannot even begin to share everything that is happening right now in the national indigenous peoples movement. Let me just pick out some struggles of indigenous peoples that I have been part of, and a few others that would serve to give a brief history and picture of indigenous people’s collective actions in the defense of their ancestral land and for self-determination.

The Popular Resistance to the Chico Dams and Cellophil Logging

Allow me to briefly recall my days as a student of UP Diliman during the late 1970s. As an indigenous Ibaloi youth in the city, I was rudely awakened to the harsh realities in the Cordillera region by the popular movement in defense of indigenous peoples’ rights, triggered by the Anti-Chico Dam struggle and the opposition to the Cellophil Resources Corporation (CRC). The construction of 4 megadams along the Chico River would have inundated several villages of the indigenous Kalinga and Bontok people, while Cellophil, a logging and paper and pulp processing plant, would have ravaged vast pine forests in the Tinggian’s ancestral land in Abra, Mt. Province and Kalinga.

Amid state repression and military brutality under martial law, indigenous leaders and warriors from these affected peoples rose up to register their opposition, to defend their ancestral domain and to determine their own course of development. They traveled to Manila, holding forums to expose what was happening in their communities. It was here that I met Rafael Marcus Bangit, then a young Kalinga
activist and now a victim of extra-judicial killing, who spoke of the impacts of the dams and how his people dismantled the camp of the surveyors of the National Power Corporation who had come to build the dams.

Back home, community meetings, rallies, vigils and peace pacts fired up the people’s solidarity to fight as one. Peoples’ organizations were set up, some based on traditional indigenous socio-political institutions, such as the Kalinga Bontoc Peace Pact Holders Association. Throughout the struggle, the people were not alone. Their protest and defiance generated widespread support and admiration from other communities, sectors and countries near and far, including FLAG lawyers Jose Diokno and Lorenzo Tañada, who traveled all the way to Kalinga to show their support, along with hundreds of others.

One of the brave leaders of the struggle was Macliing Dulag of the Butbut tribe, in Bugnay, Tinglayan, Kalinga who articulated his people’s determination not to sell out their ancestral land. On April 24, 1980, military troops of the Marcos dictatorship killed Macliing Dulag in an attempt to intimidate the indigenous peoples’ opposition. Instead, Macliing’s death sparked even more militant collective actions. April 24 has since been commemorated each year to honor Macliing Dulag, as well as other Cordillera martyrs, who have given up their lives in the struggle. April 24, now known as Cordilleran Day, is celebrated every year in different provinces throughout the region, as well as by Cordillera compatriots abroad, to renew their commitment to the indigenous people’s struggle for ancestral land and self-determination. It has also became an occasion where advocates gather to express their solidarity with the Cordillera people.

The Anti-San Roque Dam Struggle

I was also involved as an organizer and campaigner in the anti-San Roque Dam struggle during the late 1990s. One of President Fidel Ramos’ flagship projects was the San Roque Multi-purpose Dam Project, the third dam to be constructed along the Agno River in Benguet and Pangasinan. Enormous funding for the project came in the form of loans from Japan Bank for International Cooperation and investments by corporate interests Marubeni and Kansai Electric, facilitated by the National Power Corporation.

Reminiscent of the anti-Chico Dam struggle, the Ibaloi people of Itogon, Benguet put up a sustained resistance, continuing their struggle against the damming of the Agno River, which they had started as early as the 1950s against the Ambuklao and Binga dams. In 1996, the people of Dalupirip, which was directly affected by the dam, organized the Shalupirip Santahnay Indigenous Peoples Movement (SSIPM) that was at the forefront of the struggle. For several years, the people put up a brave front conducting dialogues, pickets, barricades, rallies, marches not only in Itogon, but in Baguio, Pangasinan and Manila. We even traveled to Japan together with local Ibaloi leaders to meet with parliamentarians, corporate representatives and support groups. Broad alliances were forged with the affected downstream communities in Pangasinan, setting up TIMMAWA, as well as with national and international advocate organizations. We set up the MASRDAM or the Movement against San Roque Dam and All Mega dams. We submitted and presented a case study on the 3 dams along the Agno River Basin and its impacts on the Ibaloi Indigenous People to the World Commission on Dams.
The government ignored the people’s protests, and the dam project pushed through, inundating hectares upon hectares of productive agricultural land in San Roque, Pangasinan and displacing gold panners along the length of the Agno River. Now the government is tied down to an onerous power purchase agreement with the San Roque Power Corporation, having to pay millions of pesos monthly for the power, generated or not, by San Roque Dam.

While the people’s struggle was not successful in stopping the construction of the San Roque Dam, there were other significant gains such as the organization of the people and a raising of their political awareness on the nature of Philippine society and the need for a wider struggle for national democracy and self-determination.

**Struggle against the Destructive Large-scale Corporate Mining**

During the 1980s, the State’s view of the Cordillera region as a resource base for extraction and exploitation by large corporations would manifest with opening of the Batong-Buhay gold mines in Kalinga. Having learned from the Chico experience, the people in the affected communities once again put up a fierce opposition to frustrate the mining company’s operations. Peasants in Tabuk and Cagayan Valley and environmental organizations joined in the protest against the pollution of the Chico River caused by Batong Buhay’s mining operations.

Meanwhile in the late 1980s, the massive mining operations for gold and copper in Benguet intensified. Benguet Corporation shifted from underground mining, which had started in 1905, to open pit mining, thereby devastating the environment and dispossessing the indigenous Ibaloi people of their ancestral lands. As an organizer in Itogon then, I was in the thick of the people’s opposition to BC’s open pit mining operations. We organized and mobilized numerous grassroots organizations, small-scale miners associations, women’s organizations, and even the Anti-Open Pit Mining Kids, under the leadership of the Itogon Inter-Barangay Alliance (IIB-A). Alliances were forged with the Cordillera Peoples’ Alliance, church groups, NGOs, academe, national environmental groups, media and international solidarity friends such as the International Rivers Network and Friends of the Earth.

The people militantly resisted through petition-signing, dialogues, community meetings, rallies, marches, human barricades and many more. These militant actions were sustained over a period of almost a decade, starting in 1988. The struggle succeeded in stopping the planned expansion of the open pit mines to other barangays in Itogon. However, the people were unable to stop the first open pit, in the face of harassment, bribery, law suits, arrest and militarization by the company in collusion with the government. In 1996, Benguet Corporation halted its open pit mining operations, after exhausting the gold ore in the Antamok Gold Project. They abandoned the open pit mine site, now a vast gaping hole, leaving behind severe and irreparable damage to the people’s land and livelihood.

Aside from the open-pit mining operations of Benguet Corporation, other destructive mining operations were ongoing in the Cordillera, particularly Lepanto and Philex Mines. Both Lepanto and Philex have been repressive of workers’ demands for just wages and humane working conditions. The people’s swelling anger and defiance erupted in the Lepanto workers’ strikes in February 2003 and June 2005,
with strong and sustained community and outside support. These were long drawn strikes, lasting for three months each time, which compelled Lepanto to give in to the workers’ demands.

At the same time, the indigenous people launched a sustained opposition to Lepanto’s unabated expansion projects and the extent of destruction it had caused both to land and water resources. Until now, the people are opposing the continued denial of their right to their ancestral land and livelihood, while the mining companies are granted limitless access to resources both under and above ground. Barricades, dialogues, pickets, rallies and other forms of collective action were held. Their barricade against the drilling by Lepanto and Gold Fields in Mankayan has been going on for several months now despite the barricaders being charged in court by the company for obstruction.

In support of the people’s struggle, the Save the Abra River Movement (STARM) was organized to address environmental and health issues brought about by Lepanto’s operations all the way along the Abra River from Mankayan down to the Ilocos Region. STARM is composed of NGOs, peoples organizations, academe, scientists, religious groups, professionals and other individuals. STARM has conducted several environmental investigative missions to expose the environmental and health problems caused by Lepanto’s operations. On the international front, in January this year, the Beaconsfield Initiative, a fact-finding mission composed of church people from Canada came to see the impacts of Lepanto Mines and to assess the potential impact of Canadian mining on indigenous communities along the Abra river. This campaign has been successful in raising the issue of mining in the church hierarchy and among investors, parliamentarians and policy makers in Canada.

At present, more multinational mining giants are poised to plunder the nation’s mineral resources at a scale more massive than ever before, facilitated by the Philippine Mining Act of 1995 and National Mineral Policy. Once again, local indigenous communities are on the alert as they vigilantly defend their land and resources from exploration and destruction by mining companies. Indigenous peoples all over the country are waging similar collective struggles for the defense of their ancestral land and for self-determination. They are asserting their right to free, prior and informed consent for any project entering their ancestral domain.

The national network Kalipunan ng mga Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas (KAMP) has their ALARM campaign against mining plunder in ancestral domains. According to KAMP, almost 600,000 hectares of ancestral lands or roughly 56% of the 1,046,350.87 hectares covered by approved mining applications have been appropriated for mining operations, depriving indigenous peoples their lands and livelihood. Thus in 2009, KAMP started its Ancestral Lands at Risk of Mining (ALARM) campaign, which highlights community resistance to large-scale mines by forging community declarations. Among the ALARM sites are Diwalwal in Compostela Valley, Andap Valley in Surigao del Sur, Bakun, Benguet, and Mindoro, among others.

This campaign is backed up by the Thousand Streamer Campaign, a nationwide protest launched on February 20, 2012 that aims to register support and solidarity to the struggle of the indigenous peoples and other mining affected communities to Scrap the Mining Act of 1995. Any
organization, office, church, school, institution and even individuals can join the Thousand Streamer Campaign by publicly displaying the common campaign streamer.

We are also witness to other ongoing anti-mining struggles by indigenous peoples in Mindanao, Palawan and Mindoro. For instance, in 2009 indigenous peoples and the Catholic Church in Mindoro Island led a successful campaign to stop the mining exploration of Norwegian miner Intex Resouces Corp. The protesters went on hunger strike that pushed the DENR to cancel Intex’ environmental compliance certificate (ECC). The campaign was led by ALAMIN or Alyansa Laban sa Mina which is a coalition of civil society groups and the Church.

In October 2010, the indigenous people Subanen conducted a human barricade against the mining exploration in Mt. Pinukis in Zamboanga province. Mt. Pinukis is considered a sacred mountain by the Subanen tribe and also a watershed area. The barricade was led by the Tumanod Pusakal Subanen Dig Midsalip (TUPUSUMI), an indigenous people’s organization. The following month, the mining companies pulled out their mining equipment in the area.

It is also important to mention that the Subanen people made use of UN mechanisms as a means to defend their ancestral land against mining. They filed a complaint against the Philippine Government in the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) in relation to the mining operations of TVI in the Ancestral Domain of the Subanon of Mt Canatuan, through a submission to CERD’s Early Warning Urgent Action Sub-Committee. As a result, the Committee urged the Government “to consult with all concerned parties in order to address the issues over Mt. Canatuan in a manner that respects customary laws and practices of the Subanon people.” At the same time, they also brought the case against TVI to the customary justice system of the Subanen and formally requested the traditional court Gukom of the Seven Rivers to intervene.

**Community Mapping as a Collective Tool for Defense of Ancestral Domain**

Another very effective form of asserting rights to ancestral land is Community mapping, which has been effectively used by KASAPI and PAFID. Community mapping is a tool that has proven to be useful not only for delineation of boundaries of the ancestral domain but also for cultural strengthening through transmission of oral traditions, documentation of customary land uses and values, culturally significant places and resources including of sacred sites and monuments, documentation of external threats and competing claims, assessment and monitoring of changes in land use and land tenure on indigenous territories, for FPIC requirements and other important biodiversity and traditional knowledge indicators. It is also an effective tool for policy dialogue with LGUs and other government agencies concerned with sustainable development plans and land administration, and as a tool for land use planning and self-determined development.

An incident illustrating the power of community mapping occurred in Cotabato in a gymnasium with about 9,000 people present, mostly organized by the mining company Xstrata-SMI. The bishops, ex-Governor and other officials were there. The experts of mining were there too. When a 3D map made by the community was presented, with several screens all over the gymnasium to show the impacts of mining to the land and watershed of the people, the people roared against the project. At
that moment, the Governor stood up to reject the mining application, belying whatever FPIC processes that occurred.

**Native Title and Forest Guards in Mindanao**

Several Lumad communities in Mindanao have also started declaring native title over their ancestral lands as opposed to the government’s Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). Native Title is a self-assertion of legal title of ownership to indigenous lands and territories in accordance with existing jurisprudence and laws of the government at the local, national and international level. It represents a communal and collective ownership to lands, waters, mountains, forests, plains and communities that is hereditary, and which therefore cannot be sold or exchanged because it is based on the language, culture and identity of the people. A system of self-delineating the indigenous territory and identifying the beneficiaries of a Native Title has already been established in some areas of Mindanao through a Native Title Coordinating Center. The Talaandig of Mt. Kitanglad in Bukidnon have even organized their own cultural guards and forest guards to defend their ancestral domains declared by their native title.

Indigenous peoples have waged all these struggles in uncompromising defense of their ancestral land and the right to self-determination. Self-determination is the right of indigenous peoples to freely determine their continued existence as distinct peoples, and the right to freely determine their political status, and their economic, political and socio-cultural development, at a pace which they themselves define.

Sad to say, these struggles have come with a heavy price. Many indigenous peoples leaders and development workers have lost their lives in the process. Aside from Macliing Dulag and Rafael Bangit, the most recent cases of extrajudicial killings of indigenous leaders are Genesis Ambason, Gilbert Paborada, Jimmy Liguyon, Arpe “Datu Lapugotan” Belayong, Rabenio Sungit, Avenio Sungit, and other known leaders of indigenous organizations, who were vocal in local struggles against mining, plantations and human rights violations. During the Arroyo administration from 2001 to 2010, 151 extrajudicial slays of indigenous persons were reported. While in the first year of the Aquino administration, 13 indigenous peoples were victims of extrajudicial killings. This number has since risen, not to mention the other forms of harassment and human rights violations committed against indigenous peoples.

**Lessons and Gains from the indigenous peoples’ movement**

1. **Formation of Peoples’ Organizations and Alliances**

Through their struggles, indigenous peoples have learned the value of organizing for concerted and unified collective action and increased coordination among the growing number of militant organizations. For instance in the Cordillera region, peoples organizations have come together under the umbrella of the Cordillera People’s Alliance or CPA. Starting with 23 organizations as founding members in 1984, the CPA has since grown to 220 member organizations with provincial chapters and
regional sectoral formations. CPA now serves as a regional political center of the steadily growing Cordillera mass movement that is at the forefront of the struggle for indigenous peoples’ rights.

Where traditional leadership structures have weakened or are no longer able to represent the community, we now see the formation of new indigenous peoples organizations to assert indigenous peoples’ rights on a wider scale and face the new challenges confronting indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have formed organizations from the community up to municipal, provincial and inter-tribal federations that are in the forefront of the opposition to destructive projects. For instance in Palawan, the Pinagtibukan Kaundaundangan et Palawan (PKP), a provincial tribal federation was formed and is currently working to establish and broaden their organizational chapters in all 8 municipalities in Southern Palawan, while continuously strengthening ties with other tribal organizations in the provincial level through the Palawan Inter-Tribal Forum. Likewise in Mindoro, the Iraya tribal organization Mal-Anggatan Agpasa-e Iraya (MAMI) was organized while the island wide inter-tribal federation of Hanunuo, Gubatnon, Iraya, Bangon, Buhid, Alangan and Tadyawan, known as HAGIBBAT-Mangyan Mindoro was set up in 2009.

At the national level, indigenous peoples’ networks and alliances have also been formed including KAMP and KASAPI. National networks of non-government organizations, including our organization, the Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights (TFIP), composed of 11 NGOs, have been working closely with indigenous communities and organizations in the different region in advancing their struggles.

The popular resistance that started with the Chico and Cellophil struggles in the Cordillera during the 1970s has now grown into a national indigenous peoples movement for the defense of ancestral domain and for self-determination, within the framework of the wider militant national democratic mass movement.

2. Articulation of Indigenous Peoples Rights

Indigenous peoples’ struggles are life and death struggles for survival. Not to act would mean death leading to ethnocide. These struggles served to educate us on the concrete realities of indigenous peoples and were a great learning experience in our understanding of indigenous peoples’ rights. We learned that for indigenous peoples, there is a deeper dimension to human rights, beyond the usual definition of individual civil and political rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights violations have particular collective implications for indigenous peoples. For example, militarization is not just a simple violation of individual civil and political rights, but have long-term impacts on land, life, identity, culture and self-determination of indigenous peoples. The inherent and collective human rights of indigenous peoples thus need to be considered and recognized, as are now articulated in the UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

3. Wider Philippine Consciousness and Nationalism of Indigenous Peoples

These struggles have led indigenous peoples to assume a wider Philippine consciousness and nationalism, beyond narrow indigenism. Given the present realities, indigenous peoples have been
challenged to recognize the pressing need for a greater unity, not only among themselves, but with the wider society, if they hope to succeed in the defense of their collective human rights as indigenous peoples. The different groups have come to realize that they share a common history of national oppression; common worldviews of land, territories and resources; common persistence of their indigenous cultures in varying degrees; and common problems and common enemies within a wider Philippine society. Present-day problems of indigenous peoples are much bigger and more complex than ever before. Thus, problems of indigenous peoples cannot be taken in isolation from the wider Philippine realities, and the incursions of imperialist globalization.

4. Using various forms of struggle and a sustained campaign for the Defense of Ancestral Land and for Self-determination

The ongoing campaign of indigenous peoples for the defense of land, life and resources needs to be strengthened and sustained. The first line of defense is on the ground, in the affected communities, by indigenous peoples organizations. All possible forms of action need to be considered in any given context to meet head-on the agents of development aggression, militarization and imperialist incursion. Community leaders and IP organizations and networks need to be ever vigilant against attempts by multinational corporations to do mining exploration and operations, construction of mega-dams, hydro-electric projects, logging, plantations and other destructive industries. They need to be on the guard against state terrorism.

5. Generation of Broad Support for Indigenous Peoples Struggles

The heroic struggles of indigenous peoples have inspired and motivated many non-indigenous advocates, generating broad support from academics, lawyers, environmentalists, church groups, the mass media, NGOs and a wide array of solidarity organizations. Community development workers have organized communities. Advocate organizations have launched national campaigns. Lawyers have offered their legal assistance. Anthropologists and academics have written numerous researches. Media practitioners provided good press coverage. Scientists have conducted environmental investigative missions. Everyone can do something.

6. International Work

International solidarity has facilitated networking and building linkages among a broad range of indigenous peoples, advocates and international friends all over the world. It has helped generate support for local projects, activities like research and capability-building. In our experience, our sustained international solidarity work has resulted in greater political, moral, financial and material support for the indigenous peoples movement.

In Asia, we have the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), a regional advocacy organization for indigenous peoples rights founded in 1988 by indigenous peoples movements. Through the years, AIPP has sustained its lobby and advocacy on indigenous peoples rights and concerns at various levels and strengthened indigenous leaders and organizations through its capacity-building activities. It has expanded its reach to many indigenous peoples organizations, indigenous experts, advocates and
support organizations at all levels. At present, AIPP has 34 member organizations including 7 national federations and networks from 13 countries in Asia.

Projection of issues and campaigns of indigenous peoples in international fora and making use of UN mechanisms has helped in internationalizing and gaining broad support for our campaigns. The adoption of the UNDRIP as a minimum standard that states are expected to recognize, can be used as a basis for building solidarity relations, as well as a tool for advancing our struggles.

*What can community development practitioners and professionals do in our work for change and transformation for a better life of indigenous peoples?*

Be part of these struggles, don’t be an observer from afar. There is so much that we can do to support indigenous peoples in their struggles. Research, documentation, fact-finding missions, community integration, organizing, capability-building, information dissemination, campaign support, negotiating with government and companies, joining barricades, teaching your students the importance of indigenous peoples’ collective rights and action. These can all contribute much towards defending indigenous peoples’ rights and securing their ancestral land.

In particular, studies to develop greater appreciation of indigenous cultures, traditional knowledge, customary law, and indigenous peoples’ innovations in the face of new and bigger problems. For instance, developing the capacity of indigenous peoples to strengthen their community protocols as a form of defense against development interventions. We need to support indigenous peoples own agency and creativity in the defense of their land and resources. We need to recognize indigenous peoples’ right and capacity to decide for themselves and determine their own development. As one indigenous activist has said, self-determination of indigenous peoples is the exercise thereof. Let us allow indigenous peoples the freedom to exercise this right. #