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REMEMBERING AND LEARNING ON EARTH DAY 2010

As a day of learning, Earth Day is also an opportunity to look in various directions: to look deeper, beyond, and back at the intricate web threaded by our ecological, socio-economic and cultural histories

Earth Day, celebrated in more than 175 countries each year, is both a collective gesture of celebration and of protest: celebration at the unity and solidarity of peoples everywhere to defend the only home we have, protest at the continuing plunder and pillage of our lands, forests, mountains, rivers and seas by a rapacious few in the pursuit of immense profits.

Earth Day is a chance to pursue further education about environment and society. We remember its origins: Earth Day was first founded by American Senator Gaylord Nelson in 1970, as a teach-in intended to provoke awareness and appreciation for the natural environment in the United States. This day for learning has taken on an entirely wider dimension since it was commemorated worldwide for the first time in 1990, a decade when the global environmental crisis has reached immense proportions and has repeatedly manifested itself in the various ecological disasters, controversies, and struggles in both developed and developing countries. In this context, the dimensions of learning go far beyond appreciation of our ecosystems but also including critical analysis and action over the crisis.

As a day of learning, Earth Day is also an opportunity to look in various directions: to look deeper, beyond, and back at the intricate web threaded by our ecological, socio-economic and cultural histories and to take heed of the lessons these yield and the sacrifices of those who have treaded this path before us.

We learn by remembering. Thus, in this issue of *Feedback*, we offer a small tribute to the late Eliezer Billanes, a community leader who waged a decade-long struggle with the peoples of South Cotabato against the entry of one of the largest multinational mining corporations in the world. He was murdered for his principles on March 9, 2009. From the opposite end of Asia, we offer an article about the Minamata disease which slowly poisoned an entire city during the period of expansive economic growth in the post-war 1950s, emphasizing how the Philippines must also heed this lesson in sustainability and trajectories of dominant development frameworks. The deaths in the wake of these two faces of development are a reminder of what is to come if we remain numb to the face of escalating threats to the environment and the people.

We learn by action: purposive and critical doing. Thus, we share in writing some of the activities that CEC has offered to grassroots organizations and communities, such as an environmental investigative mission in the drought-stricken Isabela province in this time of El Nino. This issue also offers discussions on two definite policy shifts that have taken place at the global and the national arenas: the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation mechanism spawned by the Conference of Parties 15 last December and the new Philippine law on climate change, Republic Act 9729.

Lastly, *Feedback* closes its commemoration of Earth Day with reflections from its pool of volunteers who have written about their learnings from the grassroots sectors who are foremost affected by the ecological problems of our times. We emphasize this process of learning from the people and their aspirations. For environmental action will be significant and meaningful to Philippine society in so far as it addresses the root problems and and responds to the concerns of the toiling peoples who have historically defended our national patrimony. It is of vital importance that we link hands more closely with these sectors and the majority of our population if we are to aspire for any significant social change.

Vote for the environment, vote for the people: Various organizations stage a rally-parade in front of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources office in Quezon City to commemorate Earth Day 2010. This year's theme highlighted the demands addressed to aspirants for the upcoming national elections in May.

Designing new trainings: CEC staff conducting a workshop for the curriculum design of new environmental education courses for grassroots-based campaigners and advocates. This one yielded CEC's new *EnviCore* (Environmental Cadres Course) curriculum.

Facilitation Training: CEC participates in the NeXT Regional Facilitators Course organized by the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education and Pekka from February 17 to 27 in Bogor, Indonesia.

ON THE HOT SEAT: CRITIQUING THE CLIMATE CHANGE ACT OF 2009

CHEAMSON BOONGALING

Will Republic Act 9729 be the solution to the country's climate woes?

With the issue of climate change snowballing into epic proportions at both the global and local arenas, the Arroyo administration has enacted a landmark law- Republic Act 9729, otherwise known as the *Climate Change Act of 2009*.

Aimed at resolving bureaucratic and institutional issues that have undermined government's response to climate change, the new law created the Climate Change Commission as the sole policymaking body to deal with the issue, dismantling other institutions such as the Inter-Agency Committee on Climate Change and the Presidential Task Force on Climate Change which were previously stymied by politics between its respective heads.

Last January, the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) of the law were promulgated, reiterating the need to come up with a national action plan (NAP) which details government interventions, integrates climate change in the formulation of government policy, and puts programs and projects in line with the country's sustainable development goals.

The NAP, in turn, shall be based on the National Framework Strategy on Climate Change (NFSCC) designed and approved by the Commission this April. The NFSCC is the latest document to mirror our government's future undertakings with regards to climate change. While NAP is still in the works and is due on April 2011, stakeholders can expect it to basically reflect the weak and repetitive character of RA 9729, the IRR and NFSCC. Scrutiny of these documents reveals gaps and issues that question whether the government is serious in addressing the climate crisis.

BIASED ON MITIGATION

Any attempt to address climate change should revolve on two major components: mitigation and adaptation. The latter should be prioritized by poor developing countries like the Philippines, taking into account their low contribution to greenhouse gas emissions *vis a vis* the effects they bear along the way.

The NFSCC states that there is "emphasis on adaptation as a strategy" and that "mitigation should act as a function of adaptation." Yet a closer look at the general contents of the law and previous government engagements leaves one to think otherwise: that the government is geared more on maximizing the carbon trading market than helping poor families in remote coastal areas survive. An example would be the proliferation of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects and REDD+ activities. Although these altogether are not bad and aid in mitigation, their prioritization over more urgent adaptation programs would be detrimental for the country.

FLAWED CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORK

Rule II Sec.1 of the IRR states the adoption of the Philippine Agenda 21 framework which espouses sustainable development. However, since its implementation in 1996, this framework has

failed to weigh and distinguish development from destructive projects, a congenital predicament which stems from the twisted definition of the concept of development itself.

The problem lies in the fact that the sustainable development framework has served, if not become totally equated with, the neoliberal framework in place since the administration of the late President Corazon Aquino. This creates a major problem considering how neoliberal economic policies have aggravated poverty and accelerated the destruction and depletion of natural resources.

The law operates in a context where the burden of mitigation is passed on to developing countries, while industrialized countries and their subsequent transnational corporations (TNCs) are not held accountable for their historical GHG emissions which caused the current crisis. At most, the law has only paid lip service to the UNFCCC principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities". Quite noticeably, the insertion of the phrase "respective capabilities" in the NFSCC sends a clear signal of the government's position in favor of industrialized countries.

INEQUITABLE FINANCING

Perennially bankrupt, the Philippine government relies heavily on foreign investments to finance its climate change programs. Section 9 directs the Commission to recommend "key development investments" in different climate-sensitive areas. In the energy sector, for example, the NFSCC in 8.1 identifies the development of a "competitive energy investment climate" as part of its mitigation strategy. Likewise, in 8.5, engagements in REDD+ projects in the forestry sector also require capitalizing finance from IFIs, among other sources.

The Climate Investment Fund (CIF) from the World Bank, for example, seems to be a very attractive source. The problem with these sources of funding is the existence of conditionalities. In the past, the WB and the ADB's biggest loans to the Philippines have had "free market" policy conditionalities attached to them, such as required changes in overall macroeconomic and sectoral policy frameworks. The privatization of the energy sector, including large dams and coal fired power plants, and the liberalization of the local mining industry are examples of such structural adjustments in Philippine economic policy. Instead of really helping, the aid we get translates to increased vulnerabilities to the environment and the people in the long run.

By worsening the country's cumbersome debt obligations, such reliance disempowers the country to raise and free up resources that could be used for climate change programs and projects—and other development goals – especially because of automatic debt servicing. Growing debt and the ever increasing debt servicing payments, combined with the impact of the global financial crisis, intensifies the pressure to generate foreign exchange earnings and thus make it more difficult for the Philippines to start a long-term and sustainable program that will promote low-carbon economic growth.

SHORT ON ADAPTATION

While Section 9 mentions "capacity building" for local adaptation, it remains considerably vague on what particular programs can strengthen the adaptive capacities of local communities, considering their poor and backward state. In contrast, Section 13 has placed adaptation in the forthcoming NAP as seemingly limited to the identification of adaptation measures without even being sure of its implementation.

As there is already a noticeable bias towards mitigation projects such as the CDM, the few adaptation efforts of government tend to be market-biased as well. A case in point is water resources management; where in 9.3 of the NFSCC has been discussed to be subject to "water sector reforms". Implementing the proposals of the ADB and the World Bank, the government has been pushing for the Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) with a system of tradable water rights and raw water pricing, supposedly to encourage conservation and at the same time raise funding for water resource development projects. This puts an even heavier burden on poor farmers, for instance, to adapt to climate change, as they are already saddled by exorbitant irrigation fees. At the same, it legitimizes the large-scale and wasteful use of water by big corporations which are out to profit from the access and control of invaluable fresh water resources while easily passing off the raw water fees to end consumers.

While the NFSCC mentioned the huge declines on agriculture and food security, and the loss of land to communities on coastal areas because of sea level rise, it failed to mention a very crucial issue that will help farmers and fisherfolks, the most vulnerable sectors in our society, adapt to the climate crisis: the issue of land reform.

The law does not explicitly state that the government should prioritize the distribution of lands to the most affected communities. This is

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problematic since studies have shown that a stable right and control over their land allows small farmers to be more flexible on a rapidly changing climate in terms of deciding on what plants to cultivate in what season and what technology to use that will give them the maximum yield with the least impact on the environment. This kind of sustainable agriculture is only possible once a genuine land reform is put in place.

Opportunities are wasted on vague token statements on biodiversity conservation. Aside from not mentioning the real causes of rapid biodiversity loss which is the destruction of species' habitats through large scale mining, logging and over fishing by foreign companies, it has downgraded its solutions in the establishment of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) –based economic endeavors such as ecotourism as stated in 9.2 of the NFSCC. Again, the government has placed a market-value on the issue of conservation, without consideration of the negative effects of tourism projects in the past, such as displacement of communities.

CONTRADICTORY POLICIES

The aims of the Climate Change Act to address the vulnerability of poor communities is contradicted and overwhelmed by the continuation of existing laws, policies and development projects implemented by the government that ironically increases their vulnerability. Instead of reversing these policies, the new law has circumvented the issue by not mentioning the critical issue of vulnerability at all.

The aims of the Climate Change Act to address the vulnerability of poor communities is contradicted and overwhelmed by existing laws, policies and development projects that ironically increase our vulnerabilities.

Take the issue of deforestation, where the Forestry Code of 1975 legally allows and in fact encourages wanton extraction of timber and other forest resources through Timber Licensing Agreements (TLAs) and Integrated Forest Management Agreements (IFMAs). In effect, remaining forest cover significantly dwindled, with estimates ranging from 7.17 million hectares (or 24 percent in 2003 according to DENR) to only 5.2 million hectares or less than 18 percent of remaining forest cover by 2002. The Philippines' deforestation rate pegs at 1.4 percent annually.

While Rule VI Sec. 2 of the IRR directs the Commission to "act with urgency to combat deforestation", the major policy issue on the Forestry Code, which has a direct effect and has become a driver of deforestation, was ignored. Not even a review of the law was suggested and it certainly does not translate to the suspension and banning of TLAs and other odious agreements, the substance of any reform in the forestry sector.

R. A. 7942 or the Philippine Mining Act of 1995 is another example of such a contradictory policy. It has been totally unacceptable and even unimaginable how the government sees to stop deforestation and destruction of ecosystems on one side, and then promote large-scale mining on the other.

As of March 31, 2010, there were 382 mining tenements covering 843,316.58 hectares across the country, most of which are owned by foreign TNCs. Currently there are 2,624 mining concession applications that are being processed by the DENR. Among the projects that have caused much negative impact on the local environment are the Japanese Rio Tuba Nickel Mining in Palawan, Australian (now South Korean) Lafayette Mining in Albay, Canadian TVI Mining in Zamboanga del Norte and New Zealander Oceana Gold Corp Mining in Nueva Vizcaya.

The NFSCC takes note of existing laws on energy such as the Renewable Energy Act and the Biofuels Law that the government can maximize to pursue mitigation and address energy insufficiency at the same time. However, under the Energy Independence Scheme of the MTPDP 2004-2010 and neo-liberal power sector restructuring under the Electric Power Industry Restructuring Act (EPIRA) of 2001, the government offers fiscal and other forms of incentives to renewable energy projects and yet also continues to provide similar, if not more appealing perks to investors in the exploration and commercial production of fossil fuels that contribute to climate change. The whole process then naturally becomes foreign investor-driven and therefore undermines the objectives of promoting clean energy sources.

The NFSCC in its mitigation strategy in 8.1 has not specified the phasing out of dirty technologies such as coal-fired power plants nor in 8.2 does it prevent the selling out of our renewable energy resources to foreign investors, two of the same issues that the Renewable Energy Act has failed to address.

The Biofuels Act has been designed not so much for mitigation but mainly to attract foreign investments and to cash in on the growing global demand especially as prices of crude oil and petroleum products soared astronomically in the past few years. Consequently, no credible and comprehensive scientific study has been conducted to measure the environmental and climate change impact of biofuels on the country before the law was implemented.

Clean coal, reviving the nuclear power plant in Bataan, construction of large dams such as

the Laiban dam, and biofuel plantations are only among the false technologies peddled by the Philippine government and packaged as solutions to climate change when in fact, they aggravate the existing problem and create new problems as externalities are bound to arise.

NO TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

The Climate Change Act has not been explicit about the promotion and prioritization of research and development of local adaptation technologies, as well as clean technologies. Within a market-driven international climate policy environment, real adaptation and mitigation efforts are bound to become hostage to expensive foreign technology, not to mention emerging geological and biological engineering technologies that may have no proven safeguards to the environment and human population. Clear cut statements on development of appropriate technologies, bias and incentives for Filipino scientists and engineers, as well as a ban on foreign loans or tied aid on climate adaptation must be present.

The country's framework relies solely on technology transfer instead of pushing for national industrialization which supports the wise use and development of our resources, build the economic power of the country's rural and urban families, and provide for climate resiliency at the household level for farmers and workers.

BUREAUCRATIC FAILURES

The Climate Change Commission's composition does not reflect enough representation from grassroots communities, which are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Aside from a sole representative from the NGO sector, the closest to grassroots representation that one can get was the President of the Liga ng mga Barangay, who in the context of Philippine politics may not even be from the grassroots communities. Still, the same old bureaucrats topping various departments of the government permeate the list.

As cash flows and other investments are expected to pour in the commission for mitigation and adaptation projects, issues of possible corruption cannot be sidelined, and should be an area for public vigilance. Sadly, the law has no safeguard mechanism whatsoever with regards to these funds.

Rule VI Sec. 5 of the IRR sees to it the continuous execution of Executive Order 774, a policy that established the PTFCC and has been criticized for being redundant, that of mandating government agencies to implement their mandates. Absurdly, Sec. 8.6 of the NFSCC calls for the implementation of RA 9003 or the Solid Waste Management Act, when it should obviously already be implemented in the first place.

One positive aspect of the law worth noting is the establishment of open areas and mechanisms for local governments to engage in. Sec. 9 of the law mentions "broader multi-stakeholder participation" and "coordination with local government units" and Sec. 14 delegates power and responsibility for the LGUs to device and implement their own local action plan. Although LGU's are not synonymous to poor and vulnerable communities that we are mentioning, this portion of the law breaks the bureaucratized, top-down character of solving problems in the Philippine context. After all, a rigid bureaucracy is surely not the answer to an urgent climate crisis.

bodys such as the Pollution Adjudication Board and the Mines Adjudication Board, whose track records in prosecuting cases provides little hope.

CONCLUSION

The Climate Change Act mirrors the contradictory policy directions of the government, falling short of essential elements in adaptation and mitigation strategies, and ineffective in building a climate resilient nation. To effectively confront climate change, the Philippines needs to initiate a radical shift in its overall framework, one that has a basic appreciation on the roots of the current crisis – who are responsible and thus must be held accountable – and deal with climate

(continued on page 24)

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REDD+ is picking up pace not just within negotiating halls but on the ground, in the forms of potential investments running into billions of dollars annually.

IS REDD THE NEW GREEN?

ROG AMON

International talks on climate change have recognized the problem of deforestation, particularly in the tropics, as a driver of global warming. Deforestation accounts for around 18% of all annual global emissions of carbon dioxide (IPCC, 2007). It has significantly contributed to turning countries such as Indonesia into large greenhouse gas emitters due solely to land use change, with its virgin tropical forests being converted to palm oil plantations.

The Conference of Parties (COP) 15 negotiations in Copenhagen last December 2009 failed to come up with a binding agreement for United Nations countries, conjuring at most a process that mirrors the 'pledge and review' strategy approach pushed by the United States. At most, what COP 15 did manage to produce was a new mechanism called REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation). REDD+ is a mitigation option, a kind of international payment for ecosystem services, where developed countries can pay developing countries for conserving their forests.

SELLING CARBON CREDITS

After Copenhagen, REDD+ is picking up pace not just within negotiating halls but on the ground, in the forms of potential investments running into billions of dollars annually. While REDD+ uses market and financial incentives to theoretically slow down rates of greenhouse gas emissions, it also allows developing countries to continue polluting as usual under a global system of carbon trading.

With REDD+, "carbon investors" and "biodiversity investors" enter into partnerships within a virtual marketplace called carbon markets. In these markets, "sellers" can be governments or communities which offer to reduce carbon emissions by conserving the forest and selling the offset carbon credits contained in the forest. "Buyers" of these credits can either be other governments (though bilateral agreements) and private sector companies which need to meet their commitments to reduce emissions, or private donors and international funds (such as the World Bank FPIC, World Bank FIP, and UN REDD) created to provide money to help developing countries keep their forests or re-plant forests.

PLUS VS. MINUS

On the surface, REDD+ was considered as the

"good news" coming out of the controversial COP 15 process. It seems to bring in a lot of benefits: curbing of GHG emissions, conversing forest-based biodiversity, and potentially big revenues for governments and rural communities. However, a closer look at REDD+ reveals a litany of downsides and dangers, tipping the scale of pros into cons.

Firstly, the current REDD+ mechanism operates on a flawed definition of forests: one that includes plantations. Plantations are not forests. They also store only 20% of the carbon that intact natural forests store. Historically, the proliferation of large-scale monoculture tree plantations has caused serious environmental, social and economic problems. As long as it embraces and considers plantations as "forests", REDD+ runs the possibility of failing to significantly mitigate global warming and rewarding the traditional players in deforestation: loggers and plantation owners.

Secondly, it also raises the question of ownership: whom do the forests belong to and who has the rights to sell forest carbon credits? While indigenous peoples, upland settlers, and other forest communities have become stewards of our forests, they have often been stripped of their rights and lacked guarantees that they will receive any form of REDD 'incentive' or reward for their extensive forest conservation efforts. It also remains to be seen how REDD+ schemes will affect indigenous peoples' and forest communities' regular access to fuel, their food security, traditional farming practices and medicinal knowledge, and systems of cultural identity and traditional values.

It is of utmost importance that the proper involvement of forest communities and respect for peoples' rights are considered in negotiations; for REDD policies and global carbon and other commodity markets threaten to generate land grabs, displacement, conflict, corruption, impoverishment and cultural degradation.

Thirdly, while REDD unjustly targets indigenous peoples as drivers of deforestation, the large sums of REDD money at stake could reinforce state and private sector control over the forests at the expense of indigenous rights to the land. It could foster an "armed protection" approach which could lead to further displacement of communities by force. Likewise, it could facilitate corruption and poor governance due to the complex nature of the financial mechanisms involved.

Top: The author attending a trainers' training course on *REDD+, Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples*, organized by Tebtebba last January 2010 in Baguio City.

Fourth, the massive technological, financial, and institutional transactions involved in REDD+ projects limits the arena of participation to those who can afford it, mostly large corporations operating on huge economies of scale. Many developing countries will require substantial investments in capacity building, technological and scientific support for inventory and monitoring systems, policies and institutional infrastructure before REDD will really cut carbon emissions and distribute REDD benefits.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE REDD LIGHT

There is a litany of issues involving REDD+ that could be discussed in further details. However, the entire framework of REDD+ ultimately boils down to a mechanism that potentially reduces developing countries' sovereignty over their natural resources. It fogs up the line of responsibility of developed countries in cutting down greenhouse emissions by transferring pressures to developing countries through dubious market-based approaches.

By prioritizing decisions that focus on maximizing profits from foreign investments and allowing foreign investors to buy up forest "services", REDD+ allows richer, industrialized countries to continue polluting and conducting "business as usual". It diverts precious resources and attention away from measures that could address the real underlying causes of deforestation worldwide.

The entire framework of REDD+ ultimately boils down to a mechanism that potentially reduces developing countries' sovereignty over their natural resources.

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ENVIRONMENTALISM FROM THE GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVE

Often, environmental advocacy is addressed to a certain audience. More often than not, our ideas of "going green" revolve around lifestyle changes premised on middle or upper-middle class affluence.

Ironically, those from the basic sectors in Philippine society who comprise the majority of our population, are often the ones branded as unconcerned over the fate of our environment. However, a closer look at the various people's organizations reveals that it is often the most marginalized sectors who have a deeper appreciation of our environmental problems and who are willing to sacrifice more in order to defend our natural resources for the people's welfare.

Three of CEC's interns from the Department of Political Science of the University of the Philippines Manila share their insights on sharing perspectives with three leaders from people's organizations representing farmers, fisher folk, and urban poor organizations which have partnered with CEC on various concerns and activities.

KNOWING THE FILIPINO STORY

MICHAEL RYAN C. MIRANDA

The main concern of any Filipino today is how to have access to education, shelter, food, and health. Every family struggles to provide a better quality of life for its members.

This is even more difficult for the urban-poor, whose aim is plainly survival. The realities they face are daunting enough: willingly taking on dirty and dangerous jobs to earn a meager salary, forced to live in scanty shanties due to lack of affordable mass housing. When their families fall sick, medication and hospitalization costs can range from from hundreds to thousands of pesos. They face more long and short-term health risks due to the polluted environment. On almost every street in the urban areas, the familiar faces of poverty can be seen. Perhaps it is difficult to understand the situation when one has the luxury of remaining an observer.

Environmental problems such as pollution and changes in climate become large issues to the urban sectors, for the simple reason that they are immediately exposed to it: it is their houses that become flooded, it is their health that is threatened when the rivers are filled with trash. The urban poor sector does not have the comfort of access to medicine, quality social services, or the benefit of government prioritization; they are left to their own survival.

Did these people want to be in such a situation?. Most are not even aware as to why there are people branded and treated as squatters in Manila. The real issue does not lie with the so-called "side-effects" of the increasing number of illegal settlers, but in the negligence of the government of these communities.

It is commonly known that people from the provinces flock to Manila because of opportunities, despite the uncertainty of a fixed income. However, not all are aware that some of these people were forced out of their lands due to mining and other development projects, often by foreign corporations and their local partners. Despite the great irony of the situation, the government remains apathetic to its citizens and seems to favor these intruders – for they are and will continue to be. No amount of laws, policies or

contracts can make the reality of forcing people out of their lands through brute force, of foreign factories and mining activities dirtying Filipino soil, or of taking the lives of those that stand to defend their environment and lives against the capitalist drive legal and logical.

There are those who even go as far to blame the poor for "creating" problems such as pollution. How humorous would it sound to say that these people wanted to live above canals, beside black rivers and together with troops of mice and cockroaches? At the same time, blame is placed on the government and society for having distanced from these realities.

Bea Arellano of KADAMAY (Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap) calls for awareness, and a government that would actually recognize the problem starting from its causes, and start functioning for its people.

What is called for is for the government to know the story of its citizens. They need not do surveys nor researches to see how large of a struggle it is for society to survive every day. What the government needs to know is the feeling of being unable to buy medicines for a sick mother, of going home every day to a starving family, or of waking up every morning without the assurance of eating even one meal. The Filipinos have a miraculous story; it's just a matter of brilliantly ending it.

WAKING UP TO DISASTER

ANNA DUQUIATAN

Most Filipino stories we've grown up with tell of a pleasant life in the countryside. In these stories, nature provides farmhands with an abundance of food for their families: grains, crops, poultry and livestock. The setting is picturesque: the soft afternoon sun looks on while the breeze is blowing, rustling the leaves of the nearby acacia tree, creating a whistling sound, while children run on the fields, men tend the land, and the women wash clothes along the riverbanks. They paint rustic pictures of comfort and security, of plenty and of tranquility.

Stories like such prove hard to imagine when we get older. Too picture-perfect.

One story I awoke to when I reached the age of maturity was about half a fish floating on the surface of a murky river, dying of water pollution and representative of the school which had fallen victim to the toxins. These stories, disgusting and terrible, are disturbing. What went wrong?

Willie Marbella, Deputy Secretary of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), a national political campaign center of peasants, tells of a pleasant past and a horrid present in the rural areas. Back then, Marbella recounts, farmers planted indigenous crops and they benefited from their rich surroundings. Farm areas provided grains and crops, poultry and livestock grazed the land, and the nearby waters provided fish. The present, in stark contrast, is mired in both socioeconomic and environmental problems. Beyond the landlessness and exploitative relations that plague the farmers are the environmental problems that wreak havoc on the various ecosystems and the livelihood of the peasants.

In 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos introduced Masagana 99. A program seeking to modernize Philippine agriculture and improve sector productivity, Masagana 99 introduced the "Green Revolution" through government sponsorship of high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of crops. These HYVs in turn required intensive application of agrochemical inputs in the form of fertilizers and pesticides. This turned out to be the key that opened the

A transition to a more eco-friendly and pro-people farming system will take time, as TNC-induced farming practices have entrenched techniques that need to be uprooted and replaced.

doors of Philippine agriculture to the influx of imported agrochemical inputs. Over the years, importation of such has rapidly increased matched with a measly growth in crop yield.

Because of this new trend in agriculture, the Philippines became vulnerable in two categories: economic and environmental. Transnational corporations (TNCs) gained control of our agriculture sector through the latter's reliance on agrochemical inputs. Agrochemical TNCs that produced chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides merged with biotechnology firms which generated the seeds, particularly of the HYV-kind. The production of cash crops for export by TNCs, who held large plots of land that should be in the hands of our farmers, aggravated the situation. In this way, the famed backbone of our national economy, the agriculture sector fell under the control of foreign masters: from seeds, to land, to inputs, and even to the sale of the produce.

For Marbella and other advocates of a pro-people environmental stance, TNC operations point to the root of the environmental problems that plague our country. Point-in-case: the increased use of TNC-produced HYVs resulted in the depletion of ten indigenous rice varieties: a blow to biodiversity. Likewise, it has been proven that intensive use of agrochemical inputs led to air and water pollution and soil depletion, causing harm to both humans and animals.

Chemical run-offs to natural water sources poison the habitat and the humans and animals exposed to it. Fish kills have been linked to chemical runoffs from agrochemical intensive farming techniques. Marbella even describes carabaos with burnt skin on their legs, allegedly caused by exposure to the chemicals in the field.

Agrochemical inputs in agriculture are also major contributors to climate change. According to a Greenpeace report, the global contribution of agriculture to climate change is between 17-32% of human-induced greenhouse gas emissions, particularly 8.5-16.5 billion tons of carbon dioxide. Recent destructive typhoons Pepeng and Ondoy that hit the country in the last quarter of 2009 has been explained as manifestations of climate change.

When asked about the principal advocacy of KMP, Marbella succinctly replies "TRA, Tunay na Repormang Agraryo" (Genuine Agrarian Reform). Submitted to the 14th Congress, the Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill (GARB) or H.B. 3059, still hasn't been ratified.

With the loopholes in the current land reform scheme, peasant groups have proposed an alternative, a pro-people land reform program: GARB. GARB has two principal goals: to distribute land without fee and to dismantle the monopoly control of landlords and of foreign and local agrocorporations.

As laid down by Marbella, GARB ensures that the farmers reap what they sow; that the government subsidies go to the peasants and not to the landlords; that the farmers not succumb to the irony of being hungry food producers and that there will be a return to the more sustainable traditional farming system as the transnational agrocorporations have been dismantled.

Marbella, however, reminds us that this transition to a more eco-friendly and pro-people farming system will take time, as the shift to the TNC-induced farming practice has entrenched techniques that need to be uprooted and replaced.

May the transition not be too late and end up finding the wheels of environmental degradation already beyond its control; the doors of a pleasant past closing before its panic-stricken eyes.

THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE

MINA SOTTO

It is not surprising that other countries would be envious of our rich natural resources. What is surprising and is outrageous, however, is the fact that the people who are supposed to be protecting the poor from the harm that the others could to our country are the ones who hurt us, deprive us of our rights and threaten our very way of living.

In an interview, Vice-Chairperson of Pamalakaya (National Federation of Small Fisherfolk Organizations in the Philippines) Salvador France stated that the current environmental crisis has made it difficult for small fisher folk to make a living. Unpredictable weather and extreme heat take their toll on fish populations. Decades of deforestation have contributed to landslides and flooding near cosatal areas.

The government has not done much to help. They have projects that are supposedly in response to these problems but are harboring hidden motives. For instance, many reforestation programs are not directed towards sustainability but for the production of lumber for export. Livelihood and "pautang" projects are not for a sustainable livelihood, but comes on a day to day basis.

Pamalakaya has also raised the issue of the privatization of Laguna Lake. In the process of the conversion of the area into a casino and an international hotel, around 460,000 families will be displaced and will lose their means of livelihood. They foresee a rise in poverty and also prostitution.

Other government policies also impact heavily on the lives of fisher folk. Among the more significant problems are the rampant extra-judicial killings of activists, rampant corruption, a lack of security and the rising rate of poverty. Many children grow up illiterate or with limited access to education.

In order to address these interrelated situations, France and other members of his organization choose to act for themselves and even for those who stay silent. They are vocal of their objection to Republic Act 8550 (Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998), and the need for alternative legislation. They go to various government agencies, scrutinizing the appropriation of budget and funding. They file cases where they see fit, for misappropriation of funds and outright corruption. They are advocating the enactment of HB 3059 (Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill). They are also continuing the fight for a 120 PhP increase in minimum wage and 3000 PhP increase in the monthly wage of government employees to aid in the continuous inflation.

They are working to expose corruption in government and to educate the people on social realities. As a response to the issue of foreigners dominating the economy of the country, they apply a 'Filipino first' vision where Filipinos should benefit from our resources foremost.

I came in for an interview about the environmental issues. I learned that the environment is deeply entangled in the web of politics and governance. Their ongoing struggle is an eye-opener. They have suffered so much while others benefit from their suffering which is outright unfair. When the environmental crisis is concerned, one cannot disregard the impact of those in power have on those that are stripped of their rights. It is not a pretty sight and only we have the power to change it.

LETTER FROM A CANADIAN TRAVELLER: MY TRIP TO RAPU-RAPU

ÉMILE KINLEY-GAUTHIER

My trip to Rapu-Rapu was an unforgettable experience. I travelled there with two experts from the Center for Environmental Concerns to meet local people and instruct them on how to gather data about the impacts of mining in the region.

A twelve-hour bus ride got us to the capital of Albay province, where we stayed with a woman who is very involved in progressive causes. Despite the fact that she is not very rich, she is one of the most smiling and laughing persons I ever met; she really seems to enjoy life, which just goes to show that money doesn't make happiness. I am always surprised when I travel, and meet people who have difficult lives and own almost nothing, but are happier than people who have never lacked for anything.

At noon, we went to the harbor to catch a ferry to Rapu-Rapu. As soon as I got on the ferry, all eyes were fixed on me. People are not accustomed to seeing foreigners, because it's really not a tourist spot. This was going to be even more the case later on.

The trip lasted about three hours, and several people were seasick. The members of the crew had some fun at their expense. When a young girl started vomiting over board, one of the seamen said, "There's another one feeding the sharks!"

We arrived in Rapu-Rapu and got on a tricycle to pick up some materials we had to take to the village where we were heading. I remember telling myself, "Wow, here's a village that's been spared by modern life". No cars, just a few little motorcycles and tricycles, and little houses made of bamboo or concrete. It was the first time that I was seeing such a "traditional" village: there is nothing of this kind in Canada.

During our tricycle trip, I really experienced the feeling of being the only white person on the island and being one of those rare foreigners having ever come this way. Everybody was looking at me with curiosity. The children were extremely intrigued; for some of them I was probably the first white person they had ever seen. Back to

> If we could all do our part to fight social inequalities, in one way or another, things would change.

the harbour, we boarded a small motor boat that took us to a village called Tinopan.

When we arrived at the village, I realized that Poblacion (the village we had just come from) was in fact quite a modern city in comparison. Here, there were no tricycles or bicycles: just a small community of about 148 families living together.

One of the villagers was generous enough to offer us to stay at her place. The following day was spent assisting two of the villagers who were campaigning in Tinopan and in the neighbouring village for Anakpawis Partylist. It was a great experience where I got to meet the villagers. Once again, everybody was thrilled to see a foreigner in their midst. The children were following us, they would come as close to me as they dared and then run away laughing and screaming as soon as I turned around. It was quite funny.

The second day, I attended the course given by the geologist. It was interesting to see that villagers of all ages were taking part. You could really see their willingness to learn. The villagers were very grateful and enthusiastic. They even thanked me again and again for having come to their village and I quickly thanked them for their kind hospitality. Once again I was struck by their generosity and by the fact that they shared what little they had with us.

In the afternoon we went back to Poblacion. It was on our way back that I caught my first sunburns, the traditional mark of tourists!

We spent the last night in Poblacion, with an old gentleman and his numerous relatives. His house was very cozy and comfortable. This is where I partook in the "national sport" for the first time: the karaoke! I was surprised to see that almost everyone here has his own karaoke kit. Even in Tinopan, the small village where we went, there are no phones, no internet, but they have karaokes!

This whole experience really got me thinking. It's obvious that, in sharing their way of life on Rapu-Rapu, I started wondering how I can encourage people to support their cause.

I told myself that if we could all do our part to fight social inequalities, in one way or another, things would change. If every individual on this planet could make just a little effort to help those populations in crisis, we could solve many issues. But we're still far from that. While some devote their lives to these kinds of causes, others spend their lives trying to avoid thinking about it. There is a profound defeatism in us: "Ah, what can we do, things will never change, that's how it is and we might as well accept it". Which is wrong. Individual actions can contribute to the success of "progressive" actions, and can even sometimes prolong or save lives. We're simply discouraged by the scope of the problem when we look at it from a global point of view. The problem is that we see ourselves trying to change the world on our own. Obviously, seeing things this way is demoralizing.

If everyone could say, I'll do my share, regardless of the rest, it would change everything. That's why I believe that the most important thing is to try and find the best way to encourage people to get involved in causes that support social justice.

Top: The author pushing a *banca* out to sea, along with community leader Antonio Casitas and CEC's training and community services coordinator Ric Saturay, Jr.

Bottom: Mothers and women from Rapu-Rapu participating in educational sessions on community-based disaster management.

Émile Kinley-Gauthier, 21 years old, travelled all the way from Quebec Canada to the Philippines and worked with CEC-Philippines as a volunteer this March.

DOUBLE TROUBLE: COMPOUNDED EFFECTS OF EL NIÑO AND MINING IN ISABELA

CHEAMSON BOONGALING

The ESM sought to assess the environmental, social and economic impacts of a natural phenomena and how they are aggravated by irresponsible man-made activities, neglect and flawed governmental policies.

While barely recovering from the havoc wreaked by typhoons Ondoy and Pepeng during the last quarter of 2009, the Cagayan Valley region has been hit by an equally devastating menace through the El Niño season which struck in February 2010. Local governments declared the province in a state of calamity while the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) categorized it as the region most affected by the typhoons with the highest worth of estimated damages to agricultural products amounting to P6.2 billion.

Isabela province, the known rice and corn granary of Luzon, was among the most heavily devastated provinces, with most of its total land area planted with palay and corn. Damages to local agriculture amounted to an estimated P4.09 billion which affected a total of 112,000 farmers from the 34 towns and two cities in the province. Natural disasters however, were not the only problems the province had to deal with in relation to their environment. Human-induced activities such as mining were rampant in the area, placing its mostly agricultural communities under perilous circumstances.

In response to this onslaught caused by El Niño, and recognizing the existence of mining in the area that may have compounded the dire effects of the disaster to the farmers and their environment, an Environmental Service Mission (ESM) was held last April 7 to 8, 2010 in the city of Ilagan, Isabela.

EIM TEAM VISITS COMMUNITIES

The ESM sought to assess the environmental, social and economic impacts of a natural phenomena and how they are aggravated by irresponsible man-made activities, neglect and flawed governmental policies. It also aimed to provide recommendations and concrete actions to prevent or minimize the effects of natural and man-made disasters in the future.

Spearheaded by Taripnong, a Metro Manila-based organization of Cagayan Valley advocates, in partnership with Lakbay Cagayan Valley and farmers' organization Danggayan Dagiti Mannalon ti Cagayan Valley, the ESM mobilized a team of farmer-leaders, scientists, students, and volunteers to visit communities from four depressed barangays in Ilagan, namely: Batong Labang (formerly called Bintacan); Cabecera 14-16; Cabecera 25 and Cabecera 27.

Using a Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal method to gather qualitative information, the team held focus group discussions, key informant interviews, did spot mapping, water source mapping, and ground truthing activities. Community meetings spearheaded by the ESM team were attended by approximately 800 families in Brgy. Batong Labang; 600 families at Cabecera 14-16; 400 families at Cabecera 25 and 100 families at Cabecera 27.

IMPACTS OF EL NIÑO ON WATER, CROPS

El Niño is a phenomenon caused by warm wind from unusually warm oceans in the Equatorial Pacific, through the process of oscillation. The ESM team gathered community views on how this phenomenon and its effects are under-

stood by most. Asked about what the El Niño phenomenon means to them, some community partners expressed a general notion of "punishment from God" for man-made evils and errors such as the destruction of the environment, like the cutting of trees.

Community folk were also asked to describe in detail the effects of El Niño on their lives and their environment.

Some effects of drought that the community reported were difficulties of water sourcing in the area. Pumped water used for drinking has gone below the regular water basin levels while rivers have run dry in most tributaries as recorded in their statements. As a result, livestock were dehydrated, animal diseases spread further in the fields and deaths of both crops and livestock due to extreme drought became prevalent. There were also recorded cases of diarrhea in the area.

This lack of access to adequate freshwater sources for irrigation caused devastating impacts on the local agricultural productivity. The average harvest for the season reached only a minimum low yield of six to eight cavans per hectare for both rice and corn products in irrigable and irrigated lands. Rain-fed plots, however, recorded a much lower yield.

This situation has contributed to worsening the lives of community members, who have often nothing left but their piles of credit lists from sari-sari store owners and usurers in the area who lend money at interest rates as high as 30%.

LARGE-SCALE MINING

In addition to the drought season caused by El Niño, the area's agricultural and freshwater resources are also threatened due to the exploration operations of large-scale mining companies.

Partner interviewees reported that the presence of an exploratory open pit mining for iron started as early as 2006 in the area by Altera Mining Company. However, they stressed that no comprehensive information campaign and public consultation was conducted by the company despite their hiring of some residents as stone/brick lifters and the knowledge of local officials about the operations.

Community informants recalled their surprise when bulldozers, backhoes and other large equipment started to dig a pit for the mining bioprospecting activity. Residents disclosed that a 20-fathom deep open pit was dug in the vicinity of Barangay Batong Labang or Bintacan. Lifters hired were paid P80.00 to P 150.00 for one cubic meter of piled stones extracted.

Residents associate the ongoing mining operations with the landslides, pollution of the rivers, destruction of crops, and fishkills that happened during the last rainy season. George Domingo, a resident of Cabecera 25, reported that his irrigation went down because of heavy siltation that eventually destroyed some fourteen farm lots dependent on it. Because of the exploration activities, soil and rocks near the site have become loose and were prone to erosion. The mining company did not pay for any of the damages.

Residents also observed that brackish water with metal sludge had seeped into the water basin of household water pumps that they use as a source of drinking water.

Because of these effects, the community expressed apprehension on the threat of mining operations in the area. Some had justified their participation in the mining activity as hired stone lifters only because of their poverty. Others said that they had turned down participation in mining activities during a mining proposal hearing in their area. Meanwhile, an earlier petition signing activity was undertaken to stop mining operations in Barangay Batong Labang but has managed to push through because certain officials had approved its operations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The team concluded that, like other agricultural provinces characterized by widespread landlessness, poverty-stricken farm households of the four barangays visited suffered more with the onslaught of extreme drought, after their regular yearly dose of floods. Mining operations have further aggravated this situation because of their direct environmental and economic impact on the livelihood of farmers.

The team recommended the following measures to the national and local governments: 1. That food relief be provided to the community until after the next cropping season to help them adapt to the immediate effects of El Niño; 2. That contingency measures should be put in place as La Niña takes place right after an El Niño episode; 3. That in the long run, proper planning for food production towards food security be developed; and finally, 4. That due to the compounding environmental problems created by the mining activity in the community, it should be stopped.

As a day of learning, Earth Day is also an opportunity to look in various directions: to look deeper, beyond, and back at the intricate web threaded by our ecological, socio-economic and cultural histories

HOPE RISING FROM RUIN: LEARNING FROM THE MINAMATA DISEASE

LISA ITO-TAPANG

This poisonous plague unfolded quietly, taking its time through a series of ominous and unexplainable events. In the industrial city of Minamata, off the coast of Southern Kyushu in Japan.

The massive amounts of methyl mercury chloride dispersed in Minamata Bay contaminated the fish and shellfish which the city's residents consumed.

It was in June 1954 when hundreds of cats in Minamata's fishing village of Modo suddenly died in mad convulsions, triggering a pestilence of rats. In other fishing hamlets, crows fell from the sky, seaweeds disappeared, and dead fish floated around. Soon, the "dancing disease" struck residents: people stumbled while walking and trembled uncontrollably, unable to write or swallow. On April 21, 1956, a five-year old girl was hospitalized for symptoms of damage to her nervous system. A month later on May 1, the factory hospital of Chisso Corporation, Minamata's largest employer, admitted four more patients suffering from the unknown disease.

A laboratory experiment in April 1957 unravelled more clues. Dr. Hasuo Ito, director of the Minamata Public Health Center, gathered fishes and shellfish from Minamata Bay and fed them to cats. The animals fell sick shortly after, suggesting that the fish were contaminated with toxins that triggered this illness. This was confirmed two years later by researchers from Kumamoto University, who announced that this disease was "a neurological disorder caused by consuming fish and shellfish from Minamata Bay," identifying mercury as the polluting toxin.

PRODUCTION OF POISON

In this city dominated by a single corporation, the source of the toxins was easy to identify, but harder to stop in its tracks.

Established in August 1908, Nippon Chisso Hiryo K.K. (Japan Nitrogen Fertilizer Company) was one of the largest chemical manufacturing firms in Japan. Its products included fertilizers, synthetic fibers, vinyl chloride plastics, liquid crystals, military goods such as dynamite, oils, and industrial chemicals such as acetic and suplhuric acid.

In May 1932, Chisso's Minamata factory began to produce acetaldehyde for its production of PVC and plastics. Untreated industrial wastewa-

ter from the manufacturing process, containing methyl mercury, was discharged into Hyakken Harbor. When production soared after World War II as a result of shifting from electrochemical to petrochemical industrial outputs, so did the volume of Chisso's poisonous discharges flowing into the harbor.

By the time that industrial effluents were widely suspected as the cause of the disease in 1958, Chisso changed the location of its drainage outlet from Hyakken Harbor to a sedimentation pond near the mouth of the Minamata river, causing toxic sludge to spread over to the Shiranui Sea. Soon, fish kills, cat and pig deaths, and symptoms of the disease in humans spread to the neighboring towns of Hachiman, Shirahana, Yunoko, and Tsunagi.

EFFECTS OF METHYL MERCURY

The massive amounts of methyl mercury chloride dispersed in Minamata Bay contaminated the fish and shellfish which the city's residents consumed. Methyl mercury slowly accumulated at different levels of the food chain, reaching concentrations of hundreds or thousands times more. Absorbed by plankton and sea grasses, the toxin spread into the systems of fish and shellfish who consumed these marine plants or who absorbed it through their gills or skins. This devastated the rich marine ecology of the Shiranui Sea, once considered a haunt of fishes. Between 1953 and 1957, fish catch declined by as much as 91%.

Most of the people who fell sick were clustered in the fishing hamlets: consumers of fish and shellfish from Minamata Bay. Local birds, ducks, cats, dogs, and pigs who tended to eat leftovers and scraps, also came down with the syndrome.

Once absorbed by the body through ingestion, mercury concentrations eventually cause loss of sensation, numbness in limbs, as well as difficulties seeing, hearing, and swallowing. These signs would progressively worsen, followed by severe convulsions, coma, and eventually, death.

Victims of the disease acquired it unknowingly. As children, many used to playfully collect fish and shells on the shore of Minamata Bay—very near the drainage pipe where effluents were released—blissfully unaware of the poison accumulating in their system. Many of their parents, who were often employees of Chisso, fell sick. Some of the children eventually succumbed to the disease themselves; other generations would be born with the syndrome..

The social impacts of the disease were equally immobilizing. Victims were ostracized and isolated as people mistakenly thought it was contagious. Discrimination from their own families, co-workers, and neighbors, deprived many of the opportunity to pursue stable work, studies, and marriage. Victims who sought certification and compensation faced tough obstacles, including counter-actions from their own fellowmen who were dependent on Chisso. Not only were individual bodies poisoned and shattered; the entire fabric of a close-knit community was ripped apart.

"Sufferers were placed in the most tragic of circumstances: many died in agony, others were forced to live with a body they could no longer freely control. Compounded with baseless slander, prejudice and discrimination, their torment was not only of the body, but also of the mind. This suffering goes beyond description," said Masazumii Yoshii, the first mayor to apologize to the victims on May 1, 1994.

COMPOUNDED COLLUSIONS

Seeking accountability from Chisso for its

Previous page: Previous page: Juxtaposed against the bay is a photograph of barrels containing contaminated fish, caught and destroyed to prevent further spread of the disease

Top: A visitor to the Moyai Center views exhibitions recalling the struggles of Minamata disease victims.

Top: A memorial cenotaph to the victims of the Minamata disease overlooks the Shiranui Sea.

The city of Minamata has had to rebuild itself, painfully and slowly from the ruins and ravage of the past.

poisonous discharges proved to be a formidable task, vastly complicated by the corporation's monopolistic hold on the domestic economy, local politics, and national policymakers. For Chisso was not a mere "outsider" firm in Minamata; in many ways, it was the city itself. From 1956 to the 1970s, Chisso occupied 68% of its land area, consumed 93% of its water supply, employed around 60% of its workforce, and generated almost more than 50% of the city's tax revenue. Among the largest suppliers of PVC worldwide, it produced substances and raw materials used by other major companies in the 1950s heydey of high economic growth targets. This dominance was used to fan painful divisions among its workers and residents.

The combined actions of Chisso and the local and national governments during the disease outbreak created a disaster, where poison was allowed to spread regardless of the impacts on the people who worked in the factories and its seas.

For instance, Chisso's discharges of untreated wastewater continued even as studies increasingly pointed to its factory canal as the source of the soaring mercury levels. In October 1959, Hajime Hosokawa, director of the Chisso factory hospital, conducted private tests on healthy cats fed with wastewater from the acetaldehyde factory. Another survey by the prefectural governments of Kumamoto and Kagoshima revealed high levels of mercury in the hair of people living around the Shiranui Sea, ranging from 50 parts per million (ppm) to 920 ppm. Normal concentrations ranged from one to five ppm. The results of both studies, however, were not readily made public. No legal ban on fishing from the bay was ever enforced.

It also took the national government years to finally acknowledge the pollution-triggered disease. Finally, on September 26, 1968, twelve years after the official discovery of the disease, the government issued an official conclusion that the Minamata syndrome was a pollution-triggered disease, recognizing that "[it] was caused by the methyl mercury compounds produced in the acetaldehyde acetic acid facilities of Chisso Minamata Factory."

Chisso stopped discharging its untreated wastewaster into Minamata Bay when the technology became outdated in 1968, nine years after Dr. Hosokawa's study. For 36 years, the company released an estimated 400 to 600 tonnes of wastewaster containing methyl mercury and other heavy metals into the sea.

Yoshii traces the roots of the disaster not only to Chisso's negligence, but also to the rapid and extremely profit-driven economic growth as a national policy, lack of respect for human rights and life, and lack of concern for the regions from the national government. In 2004, the Supreme Court issued a final and binding judgement recognizing the liability of the state and the local governments in the entire tragedy.

AFTERMATH OF A DISASTER

Public action and demands over the pollution disaster has continued from the 1950s up to the present, proving that the story of Minamata disaster is far from over.

The early years of the outbreak saw militant actions from citizens, fisher folk and patients. In 1959, a "Fishers Rebellion" calling for the stoppage of factory operations was organized by 2,000 Shiranui sea fishers who rallied and stormed into the Chisso factory, outraged by plummeting demand for fish. Another sit-in in front of the factory was staged by the Minamata Disease Patients Mutual Aid Society, demanding compensation of three million yen per patient.

Similar actions followed as the contaminated water spread to other areas.

The pursuit of social justice for thousands of victims has been marred by controversial and unequal compensation agreements. In response to the demands, Chisso attempted to dilute accountability by terming payments as "sympathy money" and attempted to forfeit the rights of claimants to future redress.

Similarly, a move in 1977 to create a system of ceritification of disease victims turned out to be so strict that many unrecognized victims have resorted to filing citizen lawsuits against Chisso and the prefectural and national governments. Most are still up for resolution. This March 29,

a group of 2,123 uncertified victims reached a settlement to receive lump sum payments of 2.1 million yen each plus medical allowances.

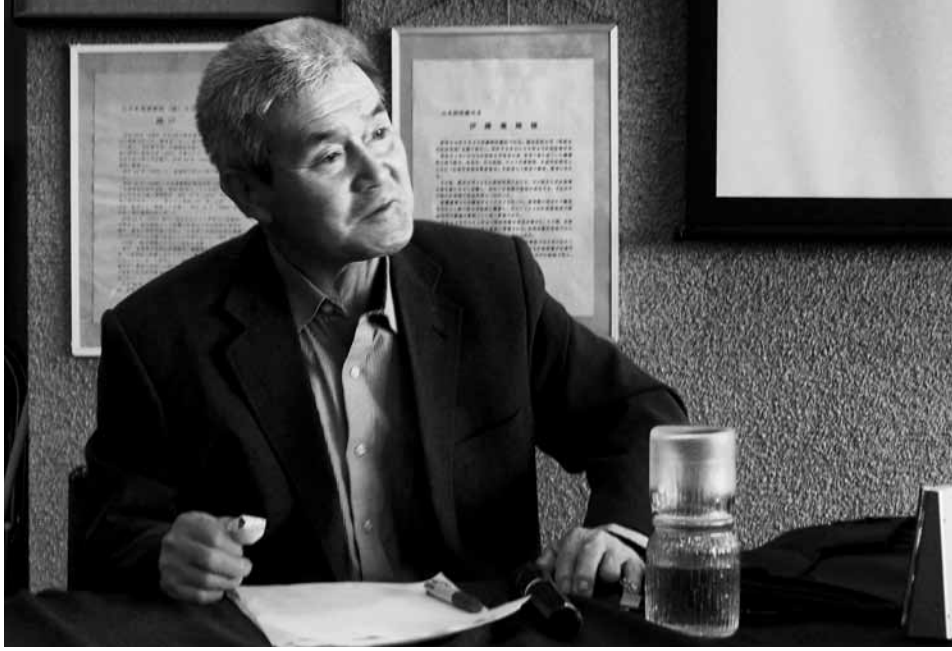
The city of Minamata has had to rebuild itself, painfully and slowly from the ruins and ravage of the past. The prefectural government placed nets around the bay in 1974 to prevent the spread of polluted fish. It enlisted the fisheries cooperative to catch the fish, which Chisso bought and buried. By 1997, the government declared the bay safe and had the nets removed. It also embarked on a 14-year, 48.5 billion yen project to dredge and reclamation the bay area filled with the contaminated sludge dumped by Chisso. On around 58 hectares of reclaimed land, other facilities and numerous memorials have been set up: a museum devoted to preserving testimonies of the victims, a memorial garden, a field of votive statuettes, and a poignant cenotaph facing Shiranui, the sea of sadness.

Chisso, unable to pay the full amounts of compensation, still operates in Minamata and produces chemicals, fertilizer and floppy discs. It is still facing charges of accountability. In other parts of the world, similar cases of mercury pollution and poisoning have already occurred.

The victims have tried to carry on with their lives. Many disease survivors who formerly earned their living as fisher folk could not continue their work after the tragedy and turned to other means of livelihood, such as growing amanatsu oranges or creating recycled crafts. Some set up organizations like Gaia Minamata, a small NGO producing organic orange marmalade and avoiding agricultural chemical inputs hazardous to health. Yet they continue to face challenges related to production and a quickly declining rural population.

The struggle to remember and to hope continues in Minamata. Citizens have been trying to rebuild relations among residents and local communities since the 1990s, popularizing concepts such as moyainaoshi (community healing) and jimotogaku (community studies) to rebuild trust among residents. Other survivors have formed support organizations and have continued to tell their stories to educate the public, bravely confronting the past so that others more may contribute to changing the future.

Slowly, in many ways, this city which was the site of great ecological and social tragedy is working to build itself as a city for environmental education and rethinking of development frameworks. In this decade of escalating ecological crisis, graver threats to human rights, and higher risks of disasters, it is imperative that people from other countries remember the story and lessons of the Minamata tragedy and work to ensure that this massive sacrifice of human lives and ecosystems in the name of profit and "development" should not happen again, whether in Japan nor in other parts of the world.



Top: During a dialogue with visitors, former Minamata City Mayor Masazumii Yoshii shares his reflections on the tragedy

Slowly, in many ways, this city which was the site of great ecological and social tragedy is working to build itself as a city for environmental education and rethinking of development frameworks.

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TWO POEMS FOR A MARTYR

The Center for Environmental Concerns commemorates the first death anniversary of Eliezer "Ka Boy" Billanes, 46 years old. Billanes was Chairperson of SOCCSK-SARGENDS-AGENDA (Alliance for Genuine Development), a partner organization of CEC leading the opposition to Tampakan Copper-Gold project in South Cotabato. He was killed in broad daylight by unknown assassins on March 9, 2009, in the market of Koronadal City; his killers have not yet been brought to justice to date. Billanes was posthumously awarded the 2009 Gawad Bayani ng Kalikasan (Most Distinguished Award).

FOR BOY

In Memoriam (Eliezer "Boy" Billanes)
Noel Sales Barcelona
March 10, 2010.

Neither our eyes, nor our shadows
have ever met.
We are strangers, I know
But we have known each other
in every day of struggle
in the defense of the land,
the boondocks, the air and the sea.
I am not there
On that fateful day of March 2009
When your life is cut-short
by the paid assassins
of the local barons and lords
As they silence your ever fiery voice
shouting their transgressions
against the Earth and the people of loam...
Yes, you are absent in our sight
But I know you are here -
You are in the trunk, branches and leaves
of the sturdy trees,
which are deeply rooted
in the bloody-colored loam
where your earthly body now lays.
I know that you are deeply planted in the ground
but I can still hear your voice
for it is being echoed in the currents
of Rio Grande de Mindanao
as it empties itself into the deep.
I can hear you whisper
in the waves of the deep, blue Sulu sea -
as it wash away some silt and stones,
and play happily with the seagrass;
tossing those little dirty-white shells that
the children of the Seas
loved to pick and keep.

Even though you are out of sight:
We will never forget you.
We will remember you...
For your memories, brother, are in deeply engraved
in the face of the grayish skies
of smoke and acid rain;
So every time that we look up -
We will remember you.
Even if there are days of forgetfulness -
We will remember you.
That everytime we look into the fields -
the golden palay will remind us
of your tears and sobs
Whenever you are sad
and whenever you are being attacked
by a number of fears -
though you will never show it.
And even in the midst of silence,
Your memories will whisper to us and remind us of you.
The sound of the lark in flight
will bring us your laughter;
There, we will remember you.
Even in the middle of a violent storm,
We will remember you.
That every whip and blow of Habagat and Amihan
will remind us of your conviction -
strong and has never been shaken.
And because of that, we will never forget, Brother.
We will continue the fight.
For we all know -
Even in the time when
the light in your eyes
Slowly fades away -
You remember us
And never forget—
And because of that
We will remember you!

Noel Sales Barcelona is a freelance journalist and poet.

MAHAL KONG ITAY

Romina Astudillo

Mahal kong Itay
Mahal kong Itay
dalawang taon ng nang ika'y namatay.
Ako ang iyong bunsong anak
na iniwan mong umiiyak.

Mahal kong Itay,
hindi tayo madalas na nakakapag-usap
ngunit nagseselos ako pag sila ang iyong kaharap:
mga taong naghihirap, pagbabago ang hinahanap.

Mahal kong Itay,
lagi kayong nakasalamin
ngunit malayo pa sa dagat ang iyong tingin
kasabay ng pagsubo ng sawdakot na kanin.

Mahal kong Itay
natagpuan mo raw ang bundok ng ginto:
bundok na nagluluwal ng yamang higit sa ginto.
Ngunit sa payat ng iyong katawan, lubos kaya mo itong pinahinto.

Mahal kong Itay,
naniwala akong superhero ka noon
ngunit iba ang naganap alas kwatro ng hapon.

Mahal kong Itay
binaril ka sa iyong kanang pisngi
habang nasasabik akong hintayin ang iyong pag-uwi.

Mahal kong Itay,
makabuluhan ang iyong buhay
pagkat 'di mapapantayan ang iyong inalay.

Mahal kong Itay
huwag kang mag-alala,
isa na akong kasama.

Mahal kong Itay
sa akin ay hindi ka nawalay
pagkat sa piling ng masa nakikita kita, Itay.

Mahal kong Itay
ikaw ang matandang huwang
na nagpatag ng bundok Tai.

Mahal kong Itay,
matuwa ka sana kapag ako ay namatay.
Sakali mang tayo ay magkitang muli
hayaan mong ikwento ko
kung paano ko pinagpatuloy ang buhay mo.

Romina Astudillo is a graduate of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication.

CEC OPEN TO VOLUNTEERS AND INTERNS

The Center for Environmental Concerns (CEC) is a non-profit non-government organization helping Philippine communities address environmental challenges from a rights-based, patriotic, and scientific perspective. Founded as an institution two decades back in 1989, CEC has served grasssroots communities and their organizations as a provider of environmental education and training, scientific and technical research, and campaign and advocacy support.

A large part of CEC's work and its achievements have been accomplished through volunteerism. The programs implemented by the Center's core staff have been supported by the pooled efforts of individuals coming from a diverse range of backgrounds: scientists, students, educators, teachers, health workers, Church workers, environmentalists, audio-visual groups, writers, artists, and musicians who believe that volunteering is a form of learning as well as giving and a means for singifying support and solidarity for affected communities.

The CEC Volunteers for the People and Environment Program is aimed at engaging the broadest network of advocates to support research, advocacy and campaigns protecting and rehabilitating the people's environment. CEC-Phils is open to local and international internships, institutional linkages, and individual volunteer work. CEC volunteers will benefit in terms of the following:

1. Gaining first-hand exposure to Philippine environmental issues
2. Enhancing skills in environmental research, advocacy, training, and campaign work
3. Expanding contacts with fellow advocates
4. Helping grassroots communities address environmental challenges

CEC is also open to school-based organizations who wish to co-organize
1. Regular exposure/community programs to CEC partner areas
2. School-based environmental education activities
3. Advocacy and information-dissemination activities

For inquiries and more information, please write us at volunteer@cecphils.org or call +63.920.9099 (telefax).

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CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS-PHILIPPINES

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