

Rising Valleys: Women of Nueva Vizcaya Stand Up Against Large-Scale Mining

For mining companies, Nueva Vizcaya is just another gold mine. But for women whose children were nourished from its valleys and rivers, the fight against large-scale mining is a fight for life.

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Her serene face is as furrowed as an ancient valley, but Carlita Cumila, 70 years old, can still remember the time she and her husband settled in the lush slopes of Kasibu, Nueva Vizcaya back in 1964.

"We went to Papaya from Kiangon on foot. It took us three days of walking and hiking. My son Gilbert was three months old at that time," she recalls. Dressed simply in a faded floral blouse and black skirt, it seems hard to imagine how Cumila and her son endured the three-day trek through steep mountains and rugged terrain in search of a home. Cumila and her growing family were among the first settlers in Barangay Papaya, Malabing Valley. It was here where her other seven children after Gilbert were born and raised.

"When we came to Papaya, we were only a few. Only gabi, corn, beans, and rice grew here. There were no fields. But if we stayed in Kiangon, there would have been little, not enough to provide for an education for our children. In my previous home, there was space for only one and a half hectares of rice terraces to till," she said.

"Here in Papaya you could have four to seven hectares. Here we had enough food," she said.

Cumila has seen their lives prosper since that first day she set foot in Barangay Papaya. Malabing Valley's residents now reap the fruits from a flourishing local citrus industry that started there over a decade ago. A cooperative in the town center stands. Her son Gilbert finished Agricultural Engineering and now gives seminars to people on citrus cultivation.

Cumila, however, now fears for the verdant valley which has nurtured her family for four decades.

Foreign mining companies have recently entered Nueva Vizcaya and are eyeing the wealth beneath its rich soils. And like many other women residents living in Kasibu and its adjacent valleys, Cumila is now preparing to devote her strength to defending her home against the looming threat of large-scale mining.

Mining triangle

Barangay Papaya - a key citrus-growing area in the region and a critical source of irrigation water for Malabing Valley's other agricultural farms—is the target site of a mining exploration project by New Zealand-owned Oceana Gold Philippines, formerly owned by Climax-Arimco and Australasian Philippines Mining, Inc. (APMI). Oceana Gold is the holder of the original 37,000 hectares of Financial and Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA) granted by then Pres. Fidel Ramos to Climax-Arimco.

Another impending exploration by Oxiana Philippines, Inc. (now owned by Australian company Royalco Resources Ltd.) threatens five other barangays of Kasibu (Pa-o, Kakidugen, Paquet, Dine & Katarawan). A barricade set up by Kasibu residents since July 2, 2007 has so far successfully blocked the entry of Oxiana's drilling equipment into Pa-o.

Barangays Pao and Kakidugen is located few kilometers south of the Didipio Gold-Copper Project of Oceana. Almost beside Didipio, the village of Runruno, is currently being explored by MTL (formerly FCF/Greenwater) and Metals Exploration Mineral Resources Corp. (Metex).

Defend Patrimony convener Clemente Bautista Jr. says these three projects comprise "a triangle of foreign-controlled and large-scale mining projects with dire consequences for the people of Nueva Vizcaya".

Environmental and agricultural destruction

Community opposition to the projects is largely based on the degree of environmental and agricultural destruction that large-scale mining operations will be bringing about. Oceana's mining bid in Malabing Valley, for instance, poses grave implications on the valley's ecosystems.

According to Cumila, Brgy. Papaya is the source of the watershed which feeds the creeks leading to four other sitios: Ubon, Paduan, Malong, and Alimaden.

"This watershed gives us the cleanest water from the mountains. If this will be flooded by mining waste, it will destroy the area for agriculture. What will come to our people, especially our grandchildren?" she asks.

Precsilla D. Guilao, Cumila's niece and current barangay treasurer, worries about Malabing Valley's flourishing citrus industry.

Guilao recalls that mining existed in Malabing Valley from 1975-79. But this was limited to small-scale mining operations such as blanket-type gold panning. It was in the early to mid-1980s when Malabing's residents started experimenting with growing and cross-breeding citrus crops. By the mid-1990s, citrus varieties as well as other tropical fruits were being cultivated widely throughout the valley. Its annual production of citrus varieties has given Kasibu, Nueva Vizcaya the monicker "Citrus Capital of the Philippines".

"You can not put together agriculture and (large-scale) mining," Guilao emphasizes.

Charmaine L. Cadoy-Dulnuan, a kagawad (councilor) in the local government of Kasibu, believes that Kasibu's citrus and agriculture crops should be protected from large-scale mining.

"35 percent of Kasibu's residents are directly dependent sa pananim," (directly dependent on crops and agriculture) she says. Malabing Valley, she notes, is now citrus dependent, while other villages rely on the production of rice, corn, and other vegetable crops.

"Pwede pa itong manahin," (These can even be inherited.) she said of the agricultural farms.

Cumila and her niece fear that Barangay Papaya will face the same troubles confronting the town of Runruno. The initial exploration activities of MTL yielded already-observable effects on the people's health and environment, says Josie I. Guillao, Secretary of the Runruno Landowners Association and a native of the Kankaney tribe.

"Ginagamit nila ang Liquipol sa drilling activities, na nahahalo sa mga tubig-sapa na ginagamit ng komunidad. Makati ito sa balat. Ang ahas na lumangoy dito, patay," Guilao

says. (They use Liquipol in their drilling activities, which mixes with the water in the streams used by the community. It's itchy on the skin. Snakes which swim in the streams die.)

Runruno, which was also identified as a geohazard area, will also be vulnerable to landslides if exploration and operation activities continue along its steep slopes, Bautista says. These landslides could threaten the safety of the community living just at the foot of the mountain.

Women in the frontlines

The women in Kasibu have actively been opposing the large-scale mining projects in their respective villages.

As a local official, Dulnuan has twice opposed the attempts by Oxiana (then Climax-Arimco) to secure an endorsement from the local government in Kasibu. Despite facing pressure from the mining companies and the national government, she continues to stand against large-scale mining in Kasibu and believes that the Mining Act of 1995 should be scrapped.

"Naniniwala ako na ang tao sa lugar ang dapat mismong makinabang mula sa mining. Pero, dito (sa Kasibu), ibang bansa ang makikinabang," Dulnuan said. (I believe that the people should be the ones to benefit from mining, But here in Kasibu, other countries will be the ones to benefit).

Dulnuan is unhappy over pressure from the Arroyo administration on local government units to accept policies on mining despite opposition from the communities involved.

"The consequences (of mining), hindi ang national government ang tatanggap kundi ang tao," (will be borne not by the national government but by the local people) she says.

"Ayon sa Local Government Code, prior to implementation ng isang proyekto ay dapat may consent mula sa LGU. Kami ang nakakaramdam ng hirap ng tao, hindi sila," she asserts. (According to the local government code, there must be consent from the LGU prior to the implementation of a project. We are the ones who can feel the suffering of the people, not the national government)

In Runruno, women also take on an active role against mining.

"Ang kababaihan dito ay aktibo sa laban, lalo na noong panahon ng barikada," Guillao said. (The women here are active in the fight against mining, especially during the time of the barricade).

While the men were often at work, the women of Runruno shared the responsibilities of uniting against the mining company. "Kapag sabay-sabay na nagbarikada ang mga magasawa, hindi kakain ang pamilya. Ang kababaihan ang umaattend ng mga trainings at seminar ng NGO hinggil sa pagmimina. Medyo tumapang ang aming kalooban na igiit ang aming mga karapatan," (If both husband and wife join the picket, the family will not be able to eat. It is the women who attend the trainings and seminars of NGOs regarding mining. Thus, our resolve became stronger.) Guillao says.

Later on, it was Runruno's women residents who literally "manned" the frontline when they staged a barricade to block MTL's exploration equipment from reaching the drilling site.

Around 28 women led the barricade, flanked by male Runruno residents, Guillao recalls. They were dispersed by MTL's bulldozer, employees (many of whom were relatives and even family members of those in the barricade), and even armed men in fatigued uniforms.

Displaced by mining

The women of Kasibu have all reason to be wary of the mining operations threatening their communities. Many of them have been historically displaced from other mining-affected communities in Northern Philippines, settling in Nueva Vizcaya after in search of better pastures.

Benito Cudyam, a leader of the Bugkalot tribe in Barangay Paquet, first learned about the negative impacts of large-scale mining from his wife, who hails from the Ibaloi tribe from the Atok mines in Benguet.

"Namamasyal ako sa Benguet at nakita ko ang epekto ng mining dito," Cudyam said. (I visited Benguet and I saw the effects of mining there).

In Barangay Pa'O, where the Cudyams live, only 30 out of 224 households are from the region's original Bugkalot tribes. The rest of Pa'O's population are mostly Ibalois who came from other mining-affected areas in Benguet, such as Ambuklao.

The nearby barangay of Kakidugen is populated by Ifugaos who were also displaced from their lands and sources of irrigation by mining operations from the 1960s to 1980s. Similarly, most of Runruno's residents, including the Guillaos, are settlers displaced by mining operations from Itogon in Benguet. In 1958, many Ilongot, Kalanguya, Kankaney and Ilocano families evicted by Americans from Itogon's mines to Runruno in search of gold. Runruno's residents now live on agriculture and small-scale mining.

The entry of large-scale mining, however, threatens this way of life.

"Ang small-scale mining ay okay lang dito. Malaki ang sinisira ng large-scale mining: isang taon lang, wala na ang bundok," Guillao says. (Small-scale mining is okay here. The extent of destruction is worse in large-scale mining: in one year, a mountain can be gone).

Traumatized and Divided

Now that mining companies have caught up with them in Kasibu, the women have directly seen how mining is beginning to bring human rights violations, trauma and division in their respective communities.

During the community consultation with Defend Patrimony in Runruno, Guilao gestures to an elderly lady dressed in black, sitting quietly and sadly in a corner.

"Siya si Aling Mayang, ang pinakamatanda sa komunidad. Siyam ang anak. Sa palayan nakaburo ang kanyang asawa," Guilao offers. (She is Aling Mayang, the oldest in our community. She has nine children. Her husband is buried in the rice fields).

Aling Mayang's family migrated to Runruno from Kayapa a few decades back, driven away from their homeland by a mining project.

Aling Mayang, Guilao says, remains psychologically traumatized after being dispersed by her own grandson during the barricade and seeing the mining equipment near her home. Like other women residents, she joined the barricade but was forcibly carried away from the site by her grandson, a worker at MTL, while the barricade was being dispersed. When the equipment was carried into Runruno, Aling Mayang witnessed how the company dumped waste on a canal irrigating her crops.

"Tinapon ng MTL ang lupa sa kanal na katabi ng bahay niya. Iaanod iyon papunta sa sakahan niya na pinagtataniman nila ng luya at kamote. Nakikita niya ang mga equipment kaya nagsisigaw at umiiyak. Nag-hysterical siya at nawalan ng boses," Guilao recalls. (MTL threw the excavated land in the canal beside her house. The water there flows into

the field where she plants ginger and yams. She saw the equipment and strated screaming and crying. She went into hysterics and lost her voice).

Still traumatized, Aling Mayang can barely speak even up to now, Guilao says.

"Ang apo niya na bumuhat sa kanya, kinamumuhian na niya," Guilao says. (She now despises her grandson who carried her away from the barricade).

Back in Barangay Papaya, residents such as Cumila are also beginning to feel the pressures of the mining rush on their families.

"We used to be peaceful here. Now, neighbors, father and sons, are quarelling because of mining. Fathers are anti-mining, their sons are for mining. It causes a great disturbance and trouble to families," Cumila deplored.

"I'm the number one to oppose mining because it caused all our troubles," Cumilo said.

Gearing up for the fight ahead

Despite the pressures from mining companies and from the national government, Dulnuan remains resolute in her commitment to protect Kasibu's people and lands from large-scale foreign mining firms in her capacity as a local official. Along with other local officials such as Kasibu Mayor Romeo Tayaban, she continues to oppose Oxiana's exploration bid alongside the active resistance of Kasibu's ten barangays.

In Barangay Papaya, Carlita Cumila and her niece Prescilla Guilao strive to make their fellow residents aware of the threats posed by Oceana. Through consultations, meetings, and other awareness-building efforts, they hope to consolidate more support by the time Oceana decides to bring in its drilling equipment.

In Barangay Runruno, Josie Guillao and RULANAS continue to rally opposition to MTL's continuing explorations. It won't be easy because MTL has already set one foot into Runruno and other residents are contemplating on a possible sell-out, Guillao knows. But they find strength in the support of regional and national formations such as Defend Patrimony.

A mother of three children aged 11, 9, and 4, Guillao also strives to pass on her advocacy against large-scale mining to her eldest child.

"Minumulat ko na siya sa sitwasyon. Time will come na itong laban ay aabot sa pagbibinata niya," Guilao said. (I let him know what the situation is. Time will come when this fight will extend up to his adolescent years)

For Oxiana, Oceana, and MTL, Nueva Vizcaya may be just another gold mine; a vast expanse of space where profit awaits. But for the women whose children were nourished from Nueva Vizcaya's valleys and rivers, whose husbands lie in repose beneath its verdant soils, and whose very livelihoods depend on the land, the fight against large-scale mining is a fight for history, family, and life itself. **Bulatlat**