



**MARITES BULACLAC**  
Urban Poor Housewife

What forestland could not provide

Mayette is 29 years old and a mother to three children. She comes from Sorsogon, a province located at the southernmost tip of Luzon and around 12 hours by land from Manila. Mayette left Sorsogon for Manila when she was 19 and worked as a household helper in Marikina, until she got married five years later. Her husband is a construction worker from Hinigaran, Negros Occidental in the Visayas region.

The couple settled in Payatas<sup>1</sup>, a garbage dump in Quezon City, after they were married. Her husband's friends at work encouraged them to live in Payatas. They informed him that in Payatas, they do not have to pay rent for a house. So the couple built a makeshift house from corrugated sheets, cardboards, tarpaulin, and plastic sheets. They were glad that a benevolent woman allowed them to stay in her lot for free.

In 2001, they were informed that the area they were staying in Payatas will be used for the cemetery expansion, so they went back to her husband's hometown in Hinigaran, Negros Occidental and worked in a firecrackers factory. But the business was good only during the Christmas and New Year periods. For the rest of the year, they did not have work and hence, no income. Her husband joined the local fisherfolk to fish, but his share was insufficient for their family of four then. There were days when only the children would eat because the food was not enough.



After two years, they decided to go back to Payatas. They rented a 6 feet x 8 feet decrepit room for PhP1,200.00 a month, excluding electricity and water. They get their water from a nearby deep well for washing and laundry. They buy potable water from their neighbor who has a water connection. They have a single light bulb for the house. They do not own a stove, and Mayette looks for fuelwood in the nearby cemetery, usually wood from *kakawate* (*Gliricidia sepium*) or guava trees. They were allowed to get wood from the area as the cemetery is also being cleared to remove the medium-sized trees, shrubs, and other plants. And Mayette knows that soon there will be no more wood available, and they will have to buy charcoal or a fuelwood bundle for cooking.

Mayette's household cannot afford to own a TV set nor a transistor radio. They get their entertainment from watching people pass by, talking with the neighbors, or watching TV outside their neighbor's window.

Her husband now works on a small construction project in Makati and earns PhP250.00 a day. His transportation fare from Payatas to Makati (and back) costs more than a hundred pesos. He also deducts his lunch from this daily wage, as he has no packed lunch. Thus, Mayette's husband can only provide less than a hundred pesos daily for the family's needs. So they have something to eat, Mayette resorts to buying rice and packed noodles from the neighborhood store on credit, and she pays for them in a week's time. She hopes that there will be another construction project as soon as the current project finishes, otherwise her husband will not have work and they will have nothing to eat.

When construction projects are rare, her husband does scavenging<sup>2</sup> in the dumpsite. From this, he only earns enough so that they can eat. Mayette would like to help but no one will care for the three children.

Currently, her husband is sick and cannot do construction work. But he also cannot afford not to do anything, so he waits for the dump trucks to arrive early in the morning, and he picks the garbage for what can be sold. With this initial money he earns at the start of the day, he returns



Innocent of the dangers, children find the fun in garbage

“When asked why they did not return to the province or avail of the government’s *balik-probinsiya* (back-to-the-province) program, Mayette replied that “I prefer Payatas even if we are scavenging the garbage dumps, because no matter what happens, we have something to eat. It is more difficult in the province. I experienced having really nothing to eat, and our stomachs were empty.”



Rainwater tanks ease life and add color!

home to buy porridge for the children. After having coffee for breakfast, he then resumes the work in the dumpsite until he can have enough earnings for lunch. After lunch, he returns to the dumpsite, waiting for the trucks near the gate<sup>3</sup>. This is strategic as he can have access to the trucks before they dump the garbage at the main dump. This provides a wider selection of sellable plastic containers and other junk materials. He returns around 6:00 to 7:00 pm with sufficient earnings to buy food for dinner. Mayette prepares and cooks food for dinner that they usually have at 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening. As soon as he recovers from his slight flu and persistent cough, he will return to construction work because scavenging just aggravates his health condition.

Mayette keeps on praying that her children will not get sick. At their house, the stench from the dumpsite is not that strong, compared with where they stayed before. She feels that the children are not as easily susceptible to the health problems they used to experience in their previous house.

She had to stop her four-year old child from going to kindergarten school because she cannot afford to pay the required PhP50.00 monthly fee and the PhP10.00 daily allowance. Mayette's other children include a toddler of two years and a baby that she breastfeeds and is less than a year old. At this time in their lives, she cannot have other expenses apart from their daily food needs.

When asked why they did not return to the province or avail of the government's *balik-probinsiya* (back-to-the-province) program, Mayette replied that "*Mas gustuhin ko na sa Payatas kahit mangaykay sa basura dahil kahit papaano may makakain kami. Mas mahirap doon sa probinsiya. Naranasan ko doon na wala talagang makain, walang laman ang sikmura.*" ("I prefer Payatas even if we are scavenging the garbage dumps, because no matter what happens, we have something to eat. It is more difficult in the province. I experienced having really nothing to eat, and our stomachs were empty.")

She does not feel bothered by the landslide tragedy that she witnessed in July 2000. Their house was far from the dumpsite, and she can only share

her sentiment and sympathy with those who lost their loved ones, “*Na ipasa-Diyos na lang ang lahat*” (to leave everything to God). She does not have fears or anxieties for their safety and health as she and her family continue to live in Payatas. For Mayette, the important thing is that they will survive and she will still be alive for her children.

Urban squatters, like upland *kaingineros*, have a bad reputation and have long been unwelcome and seen as the problem. But in just photographing the clearance of communities along a stretch of road widening to Payatas, it is also very evident that squatters are major tree planters. Walking around such areas, it is not hard to identify 30, if not 40 species of trees they have introduced. These trees form a green mantle that will eventually be taken out for more urban expansion. Fruit and food, fun for the children, cool in the summer, shelter in the rain, some fuel wood, and medicine if only for a bad stomach ache: not bad for a start and would definitely improve if granted greater security of home, health, and education. The lack of livelihood is the biggest driver of poverty – rural to urban and a reinstatement of the urban squatter syndrome.

At the end of the day, many of the poor do not complain; maybe too easily they are grateful for the little they have and hope undemandingly for more. Is this not a good basis to build upon?

<sup>1</sup> *The Payatas Dumpsite in Quezon City is the main terminal for the solid waste collected in the city and managed by Colonel (ret.) Robert Jaymalin who is responsible for transforming the dumpsite into a well-managed “recycling industry.” Payatas is divided into areas, all with their area managers. The Payatas’ forerunner was Smokey Mountain in Manila that gained notoriety for the inhuman conditions of people living off, and earning from, the city’s garbage. Payatas gained national and international prominence with the huge garbage slide in July 2000 when, after 15 days of rain, around 200 scavengers were literally buried alive as they slept. Around 800 people still remain unrecovered to this day.*

<sup>2</sup> *The whole family is usually involved in the scavenging and the different members of the family take turns in the work. Children form a substantial part of the workforce. The scavengers are organized in an association who then negotiates with the junk shop owners for the best price. Market rules govern so an association or*



Source: [http://images.pennnet.com/articles/seg/archive//landfill\\_stability\\_01\\_255.jpg](http://images.pennnet.com/articles/seg/archive//landfill_stability_01_255.jpg)

*group of scavengers can switch to another junk shop if the prices are better. An active scavenger can sell recyclable garbage for around PhP150 to 300 daily and a family of five may earn PhP1,000 in a day.*

<sup>3</sup> *When the dump trucks arrive, the documents are checked to evaluate what truck has arrived at what time and from where. Around 1,000 trucks per day arrive at Payatas, each carrying two to three tons of waste. The dumping is strictly organized and a certain group of scavengers is assigned to a certain truck and waits until it dumps. Security guards carefully supervise the scavenging.*



## The high cost of human security and sustainable resources

### RODRIGO SUGALAN

Farmer

Born 1957, Died 5 April 2005, 48 years old

Buried 14 April in Casandig II, Paranas, Samar

The first and last time we met Rodrigo “Ka Digo” Sugalan was last 4 April 2005. Ka Digo was the Vice-Chair and member of the Board of Directors of the Casandig Farmers Multi Purpose Cooperative (CAFAMPCO), a 155-member people’s organization (PO) in Barangay Casandig in Paranas, Samar in the Eastern Visayas region. CAFAMPCO is noted as perhaps the only cooperative in Region VIII with the most number of government agencies and non-government organizations extending appropriate attention on a monthly basis.

CAFAMPCO is also one of the eight PO members of the Ulot Watershed Model Forest Partnership Federation. In February 2000, the Ulot Watershed joined the International Model Forest Network and was identified as the Philippine Model for Sustainable Forest Management with support from the Japanese government and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The model forest approach builds on the national Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) strategy and on existing community forestry and people-oriented forestry projects in the watershed. It is also part of the project site of the Samar Island Biodiversity Project supported by the UNDP and the Global Environment Facility.

In an exchange visit organized and facilitated by the Asia Forest Network, a visiting group of Cambodian NGO workers wanted to learn about how POs are working with forest management in the Samar Island Natural Park. They spoke with Ka Digo and his colleagues and went around the Ulot watershed area.

The next day, at around 7:00 am, three armed men shot Ka Digo at close range while he was having coffee and waiting for his wife at the market place in Barangay Tutubigan. Ka Digo was hit five times. His killers remain unknown and Ka Digo’s murder remains unsolved.



Ka Digo was born in Oras, Eastern Samar, and after graduating from high school, he joined the New People's Army (NPA), the armed group of the Communist Party of the Philippines that continues to wage war with the Philippine government. Ka Digo rose through the ranks and became the NPA's Regional Commander in Eastern Visayas, and then in Western Visayas.

But as he shared in previous media interviews, Ka Digo was looking for other ways to institute reforms in government and society. In 1992, he availed himself of the *Balik-Baril* amnesty program of the government and surrendered to President Fidel Ramos, through the previous Eastern Samar Governor, Lutgardo Barbo. He became employed at the Eastern Samar provincial government, where he found the opportunity to obtain a college education. He enrolled at the University of Eastern Philippines and eventually finished an agricultural course.

Ka Digo always wanted to farm and discover new ways and methods and upon graduation, he moved out of Eastern Samar and started a farm in Barangay Casandig II, Paranas, Samar, and made this place his home.

He also benefited from the government's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program and the accompanying technology packages and became one of only two outstanding Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARB) of the Department of Agrarian Reform in Samar in 2004. Ka Digo was also nominated for the Most Outstanding ARB of Eastern Visayas. Ka Digo tilled two small-sized farms whose combined area was even less than the ideal maximum of three hectares for each ARB. One of these farms is devoted to off-season vegetable farming and he used to harvest sweet watermelons that he showed off in agricultural trade fairs.

Ka Digo was a member of the Samar Provincial Land Reform Coordinating Committee and he represented the cooperatives sector. He was among the three nominees selected to chair the



Ka Digo served his community well and imparted his knowledge and experiences with the other farmers. He was a "veterinarian" and a farmer's tutor, a farmer-entrepreneur. The other small farmer-entrepreneurs in Casandig are now applying Ka Digo's farming legacy, but justice for Ka Digo's murder is still to be found and applied.



committee. With CAFAMPCO, he was also active in the Samar Biodiversity Project and DENR's programs in the area.

When the media interviewed his wife Consec, or Conching, after his murder, she said that when she caught up with one of the casually departing men who shot her husband, she held him by the arm and asked what her husband's sin was for which he was killed. The assailant told her that he was a *traydor ha kagiosan* (traitor to the movement). Conching replied that Ka Digo never was one. He was a highly respected and recognized community leader with a good track record as an ARB. Ka Digo himself said that he first sought the approval and blessing of his seniors and peers in the *kagiosan* before he left.

But according to Conching, the killers did not act, behave, and talk like a *kasama* (comrade) and Ka Digo's killing was not a *sirot han rebolusyon* (punishment inflicted by the revolution). Since 1992 when he surrendered, Conching said that they never experienced

being accosted, molested, warned or advised by any of his former comrade-in-arms and they even moved more freely around the whole island of Samar than they did before.

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This is part of the much larger problem of unresolved extrajudicial killings of activists, farmers, labor leaders and former NPA that generated much attention from the United Nations and the European Union in 2007. On the level of community forest management and agrarian reform, one of the original hopes was that people who withdrew to the forests in rejection of a distant government in the 1970 and 1980s could settle with their families and be given a productive role again at the margins of society and contribute to the reform of forest management. The design of CBFM and CARP was partly to help people with landless livelihoods.



DALLAY ANNAWI  
NGO Employee



Dally is worried. Every time she goes back to her hometown in Besao, Mountain Province, she sees more and more forest being cleared and converted for agriculture. In Dally's area this conversion is for vegetable growing, a multi-million peso industry that historically supplies 75% of the country's vegetables, now greatly affected by the liberalized entry of imported vegetables.

Vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, cabbages and other high value temperate-climate crops are grown in sloping gardens, and not terraced like the famous rice fields found in this mountainous region. The newly-opened gardens are located in not yet steep areas. The conversion is not extensive like the mountain sides of Java in Indonesia, but it is increasing and there is a progression up the mountainside.

Dally acknowledges that traditionally "land is cleared to grow sweet potato and other products for subsistence and food security. Then, these lands are allowed rest after some time. But the conversion that's ongoing is making way for permanent crop lands and houses."

She is particularly worried about Mount Polis, a thickly forested area shared by Ifugao and Mountain Province, and there is an application for its classification as a watershed but where vegetable gardens are starting to appear.

Dally is worried that Mount Polis will turn out to be like Mount Data National Park, where deforestation and commercial farming expansion has turned the protected area into a "potato park," a sad joke amongst the local communities. Despite government proclamations and protection projects initiated since the early 1970s, the deforestation and farm expansion continued. Already, the soils in Mount Data are getting more acidic and less productive.

Mountain forests and vegetable  
gardens: Why worry?





DENR officials acknowledge that commercial farming expansion continues unabated in areas of Mount Data National Park, especially nearer Benguet where most of the vegetable farms are located. They are perhaps wondering what happened to the Kaingin Management Program where farmers were allowed to maximize agricultural productivity within the identified farming areas, but not to expand their farm sizes. The DENR also tried fencing a small area identified as part of the uppermost headwaters for major tributaries of the Abra, Agno, and Chico Rivers, despite strong pressure from communities to expand their farms. Meanwhile, the drive for agriculture over forests drove the Benguet provincial board to pass a resolution supporting the “disestablishment” of Mount Data as a national park, but their counterparts in Mountain Province have not done so.

Dallay, as part of her work with an environmental research group working with local governments and communities in natural resource management, is exploring the idea of bringing together local government initiatives to address the potential threat that Mount Polis faces. She is already drawing several parallels with the Mount Data situation: “the area of conversion in Polis is near an all-season accessible road, there is a boundary dispute amongst the towns and provinces that share the mountain, it is a major headwater for many tributaries of the Chico River and Pantabangan Dam, there is access by gardeners to the more interior forests, and there are increasing conflicts due to water shortages.”

Just recently, she learned that one of the local government staff, who owns vegetable gardens in the area, allowed a road to be opened up as part of a government project for resource management. And so it seems that infrastructure wins when there is money involved to the advantage of land conversion, but not in securing ecological services such as water supply. Unless there is greater prominence of policy implementation, infrastructure and housing will continue to overtake the remaining forest. Dallay shares that these situations are exploited in areas of political dispute, thereby sustaining increased inroads into forest cover. This confirms the concern that those with authority, even where government policies prohibit land-use change, unilaterally wield the power to convert forest lands.

There is a push by the DENR's regional office in the Cordillera for more local government unit (LGU) involvement and the Regional Executive Director admits that forest protection cannot be effective without the LGU.

“Where I come from, it is difficult to imagine Besao, and also Sagada, without the forests. There needs to be a balance between vegetables and tourists. But I cannot say whether LGUs and communities can see the bigger picture, as both seem to be looking at short-term benefits at the moment,” Dally notes.

She admits that even if these areas (Besao and Sagada) have a rich historical culture, the present communities and personalities cannot bring the wealth of their history to bear on present decisions. Cultural history somehow cannot be used in a way that sustains the future.

Dally's work has brought her to areas outside of the Cordillera, and some of her strongest memories were those of the houses along the rivers in Dolores, Oras, in Borongan, Eastern Samar. “I have never seen that much poverty in the Cordillera. Poverty for me includes a very insecure living area and without land one can call one's own. This lack of security in housing and land, plus the livelihood or the lack of it, are poverty indicators for me. There is poverty in the Cordillera, but in one way or another, a family will have a small piece of land. If they have none, the larger community will allow the family access to a piece of land that others can lend them for a time and where they can build their home. There is strength in the community in the Cordillera. There does not appear to be that security in the communities I visited in the poorer areas in Eastern Samar.”

Dally reflects that this poverty in Samar does not seem to match the landscape, as “the forests are not super degraded and there are economic opportunities, though limited. The houses do not seem to match the environment. I grant that there are limited resources, but there are resources. Seemingly, the resources are not enough to support the population or access to the resources is not automatic.

“In Mindanao, I was able to visit Agusan del Sur. The stories I've heard seem to be true, that there are lots of opportunities, if people are willing to do manual,



physical work. It's been said that it was some Cordillera people who went to Mindanao who were responsible for forest conversion. In the Cordillera, access was established, while in Mindanao, this has not been done yet. There are also stories that in Agusan, people are indolent and do not make use of what they have. People will need to assert their engagement."

Dallay is also involved in disaster analysis work, and on a personal level, she is worried that a debris flow will hit their house in Baguio City. This is the house their parents built for them and her brother's house is also in the city. "My realization is that there is vulnerability in the house we were so happy about."

"I relate this with the debris flow in Northern Samar. I went with a lot of people to the site of the disaster, and I heard their stories. We went to the locations where the bodies were found, where children were found, tracing the path where the debris flow came from, assisted by the people who accompanied me. I had difficulty grasping everything and I was caught by anxiety. How an event can happen like that and after some days, the river looks friendly again? It was only the memories of people and the loss of lives that reminded me of the disaster that occurred. It was the same on Makiling in Los Baños, Laguna and I can't imagine how it happened. Only the large rocks and boulders left behind reminded me of the tragic event."

Dallay considers the "Cordillera lucky in that people have control over LGUs and have a say in their development. It is not a problem of lack of capacity in resource management, because LGUs are aware that they can partner with NGOs for assistance. This is not only recognized in Besao where the local government planning officials recognize that the comprehensive land use planning guidelines are not appropriate for their area. Provincial planning government officials also are aware that there are local government policies that do not fit the process, but hope to see this develop more appropriately in time."

The DENR regional office's admission that they cannot protect forests and need to partner with LGUs also means that LGUs need to partner with communities, especially those that have strong cultural practices. "I use the word strong because the sense of community is still strong and values are being upheld and recognized. The recognition of elders is still there, but weakening. Communities still need to think very deeply about whether they will hold out or be compromised," says Dallay.

Dallay is also trying to connect with other *iBesaos* in different parts of the globe. She joined an *iBesao* Yahoo group but "it seems all they're interested are the snails, the berries, the sunset in Besao. I tried once to bring up issues of ancestral domain but didn't get any response. My sister concluded that they do not really want to tackle local political issues. There is awareness of the concerns, but no willingness at the moment to take action."

Dallay Annawi was born of *iBesao* parents, the sixth out of seven children and went to elementary and high school in Besao. She has an AB Social Science degree and recently finished her Master's degree in Applied Sociology-Anthropology. Her graduate paper focused on issues in ancestral domain delineation in Mountain Province.