



# Communities make a stand on shared care for the land

Women are the force behind landcare in remote areas of the Philippines in a quest to reduce farm input costs, increase incomes and nourish families

BY JENNI METCALFE AND MARY O'CALLAGHAN

Only about 500 Philippine eagles remain in the wild, and the primary reason is their habitat is being destroyed by deforestation, some of it illegal. Our guide at the Philippine Eagle Center in Davao City in southern Mindanao tells us this

magnificent bird—a symbol of strength and bravery—is being bred in captivity to ensure its longevity.

It makes an apt introduction to the work we have come to see, the ACIAR-supported Philippines–Australia landcare project, in which families, particularly the women, are demonstrating strength by

taking risks and trying new ideas in their search for a better life for themselves and their communities.

Landcare brings together groups of farmers, villagers and extension specialists and provides them with training and tools to help manage their farm, on which they depend, and some of the problems



PHOTO: IAN WILLETT

### THE TREASURER

Neneng Baijang is the treasurer of one of the newest landcare groups in the village of Malisbong in southern Mindanao. The area is home to about two million Muslims and due to recurring bouts of violence is off-limits to foreigners. Neneng and her husband, the chair of the landcare group, and three farmers have travelled by public bus for more than two hours to meet us in General Santos City.

She describes Malisbong as a long, narrow coastal strip of land that rises steeply to the mountains, beautiful and lush with plenty of water, but where families eke out a hand-to-mouth existence.

The persistence of a pair of energetic landcare facilitators from South Cotabato—Eldon Ruiz and Lorena Loma, both supported by the SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) and the Landcare Foundation of the Philippines—finally paid off when they succeeded in convincing the Philippines Department of Agriculture to provide seeds for the Muslim community.

Women are often the first to take on landcare and the women in Malisbong are



### The Philippines

**PARTNER COUNTRY:** The Philippines

**PROJECT/DESCRIPTION:** ASEM 1998/052: Community and industry-led groups working with scientists to adopt simple conservation practices; ASEM/2002/051: Sustaining and growing landcare systems in the Philippines and Australia

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Treasurer, Neneng Baijang



PHOTOS: JENNI METCALFE

Mayor, Irene Hitigano

no different. They have planted vegetables and fruit trees around their homes as a more diverse and nutritious food source for their families and they hope to eventually increase their incomes.

For Neneng, hunger is at the root of the problems in Malisbong. She is passionate about the benefits of landcare and hopes that the Malisbong Landcare group can one day inspire neighbouring communities, both Muslim and Christian: “When there is food and people are earning, there is peace,” she says. “Landcare can sustain peace because productivity brings peace.”

### THE MAYOR

In the municipality of Trento in the province of Agusan del Sur, Mayor Irene Hitigano aims to provide the woman in every family in the municipality with a pig to generate additional income. The municipal piggery is one of the projects of which she is most proud.

Irenea believes that landcare can help farmers in her community tackle poverty by reducing farm input costs and diversifying their income source. She visits each village (or *barangay*) with her agricultural officers

threatening the health of their land.

In a region where conflict is not uncommon, their landcare movement is emerging as a community builder, with women emerging as leaders not only within the landcare groups, but also in leadership roles within local government, schools, research institutions and industry.

and a landcare facilitator from the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to provide farmers with information on landcare, answer their questions and provide technical support such as how to make organic fertiliser. She has appointed a landcare coordinator to help drive the spread of landcare in her municipality.

“I do this because I want to help farmers and I want to lift their incomes. The fertilisers they buy from the stores are so expensive. One hectare of rice can cost 8,000 pesos to fertilise, but with organic fertiliser it will cost only 2,000 pesos,” she explains.

Irenea’s plans for the municipal piggery are to supply one of the biggest supermarkets in Davao City with organic pork within two years. Pigs from the households will be purchased by the municipal government and delivered to market.

Irenea targets women for landcare activities, such as raising pigs and planting vegetables and fruit trees. “The women can help their husbands instead of going from house to house gossiping. If they care for the land, they and their families will have healthy food and healthy bodies,” she says.

### THE SCIENTIST

With her qualifications and experience, Dr Delia Catacutan could probably choose to live and work anywhere in the world. Indeed, she’s often flying overseas for summits and meetings that seek out her skills as a social scientist working with poor rural communities in developing countries. Instead, the World Agroforestry Centre research manager chooses to work from her home town of Lantapan in a remote area of



Scientist, Delia Catacutan.

### Children teaching parents

The children attending Malamba Elementary School, an hour’s drive from Davao City, are growing up with landcare. Ninety-five per cent of the children are Bagobo indigenous people and many of them swim or raft across the Davao River each day to attend school.

Since November last year, the elementary school and adjacent high school have been working with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to bring landcare into the schools. CRS has also been promoting landcare to schools in five other Mindanao provinces.

The children at Malamba have planted fruit trees, such as lanzones and rambutan, and a vegetable garden in the school grounds. They have been taught how to make fertiliser from leaves and decaying matter. School principal Melba Robrigardo sees that the benefits of students doing landcare have spin-offs to better farming practices throughout the community. “The children understand the importance of landcare because it affects their lives and their future,” she says. “And they are starting to influence their parents. They are teaching them to stop the ‘slash and burn’ way of farming.”

The produce grown is also generating income for the school, some of which goes to the children’s families and some to improve school facilities. In spite of its proximity to Davao City, the school has no electricity. Three recently donated desktop computers sit on display, still wrapped in plastic. “I let the children touch the keyboards now and again so that they can get the feel of them,” she says.



PHOTOS: JENNI METCALFE

the north-central region of Mindanao.

Dr Catacutan’s work keeps her involved in the local ACIAR–AusAID landcare project, in which she first played a part back in 1996 when landcare started in the Philippines. Often travelling on foot or by donkey to remote villages in her region, she presented slide shows on landcare to engender or maintain the enthusiasm of the local communities.

Supported by an ACIAR John Allwright Fellowship, Dr Catacutan completed her PhD at the University of Queensland in 2005. In her research, she developed criteria for selecting the best sites for promoting landcare in the Philippines. Eager to return home to her three teenage children, she completed her PhD research 12 months early. “I was able to achieve this with the support of World Agroforestry Centre colleagues and landcare project staff, especially during my field work in the Philippines,” she says.

Dr Catacutan’s study did not stop with

her PhD. Awarded a six-week ACIAR John Dillon Fellowship, she bolstered her management and leadership skills and built closer links with Australian research agencies, including CSIRO, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, and the University of Queensland. She is now looking forward to a postdoctoral position in the US, researching the links between knowledge generation and policy practice.

But Dr Catacutan’s heart remains with the Filipino farmers: “I like to share their experiences to inspire others across the world. And then I enjoy coming home and connecting farmers with the knowledge and resources that can help them. Ultimately, they are my clients.”

### THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

In January 2008, the Landcare Foundation of the Philippines took over responsibility for strategic planning and support processes of ACIAR–AusAID’s landcare project. This



Chief Executive,  
Maria Aurora Laotoco.



Farmer, Sergia Subaah.

Melba Robrigardo, principal of Malamba Elementary School, with landcare students.

is a dream come true for Maria Aurora Laotoco, or Au as she prefers to be called, the foundation's executive officer since 2005.

The foundation is a non-government organisation established to support the development of landcare in the Philippines.

Au has long been passionate about the need for a single organisation to bring together landcare projects and other natural resource management activities. Her experience of landcare stretches back to the year 2000 when, as a facilitator, she worked on the first ACIAR-funded landcare project in the Philippines.

"The biggest challenge I face," Au says, "is leading the foundation's members and staff to develop and transform it to an institution that is ready to push and market landcare to a broader level."

Au faces challenges at a personal level too. "There are so many new things that I want to learn or read about, and so many good ideas that come to mind that I want to

put to action. Juggling the responsibilities at home and work is not easy. My work often requires me to travel for two weeks straight or more. This kind of responsibility needs a very understanding family. But I'm happy that my three children can now mainly manage on their own. And landcare is not simply work, but a life commitment to contribute something in the little way I can to rural development."

Au sees an increasing number of women involved in landcare in the rural communities and in the local government municipal agriculture offices.

"The increase is perhaps because the women are as involved as the men in the farm activities. They are as concerned about the sustainability of the household farm production. And they are interested in new ways of increasing the household income. In some cases, it is the women who participate in the landcare meetings. They then share what they've learnt with their husbands so that it can be applied on their farms."

## THE FARMER

Sergia Subaah works a farm for a landowner in San Isidro in the north-west of Bohol, an island in the Visayan region of the Philippines. High rainfall on steep slopes was giving the landowner quite a headache.

"Big portions of our soil used to flow down onto the neighbour's rice fields below and cover the plants, killing them," Sergia says.

That all stopped after she convinced the landowner to plough the slopes as contours, rather than vertically, and to replace the corn crop with seven different crops, including a variety of fruit trees.

Erosion is common on Bohol. The World Agroforestry Centre and the Landcare Foundation of the Philippines are supporting facilitators in spreading landcare to more sites on the island. Sergia is an active member of the local landcare women's group, which has started a nursery and is producing flowers for market. The income from the flowers is used to support other activities, such as tree planting and extension training. ■