



Strengthening livelihoods, Restoring the rainforest

Linda Deconlay is a member of the Talaandig tribe, one of the main indigenous groups which inhabit the mountainous interior of the Philippine island of Mindanao. With the support of the 'Ridge to Coast, Rain to Tap' (R2CR2T) project, she is improving her food security, building a sustainable livelihood and reforesting the slopes of Mount Kitanglad.

Author and photographer: Arianne Gijsenbergh

Linda spent her whole life in Pawagaon, a small Talaandig community just south of the Mount Kitanglad Range Natural Park. Pawagaon is part of barangay Lirongan, in Talakag, Bukidnon Province. "When I was young, this community was completely surrounded by rainforest", recalls Linda, now 59 years old. However, over the past decades most of the forest has disappeared due to intensive logging, slash and burn practices and wildfires. Only about 3% of the Philippines remains primary forest, down from 70% at the start of the 20th century. A large portion of these forests can be found in the rugged mountains of Mindanao.

The landscape around Linda's community is now characterized by a patchwork of farmlands and open fields where cogon grass has taken over. Remnants of primary forests can be seen in the distance, higher up the slopes of the Mt Kitanglad and Mt Kalatungan mountain ranges.

With limited income opportunities in the area, many of the families in Pawagaon and surrounding communities live far below the poverty line. Food insecurity is widespread, especially during the dry months. Linda is a widow, with five adult children and ten grandchildren. Her only source of income is through irregular contract work on nearby farms, where she earns 100 pesos (around 1.80 euro) per day.

The Hineleban Foundation partners with the indigenous communities of Pawagaon and neighboring Magsaysay to provide them with food security and livelihood support while restoring and protecting the forest environment. This initiative is part of the 5-year R2CR2T project, co-funded by the Dutch government through the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW). It serves as a pilot for the rehabilitation of the Cagayan de Oro River catchment area, and aims to demonstrate effective and sustainable ways for addressing the causes of downstream flooding.



Community cooperation



At the start of the project in 2018, the 'Kaliwawa Salawagan Talaandig Tribal Agricultural Cooperative' (KASATATRIACO) was established to lead project implementation. The cooperative holds weekly meetings to discuss project progress, coordinate activities and address issues and concerns of its 55 members and their families – the project's target participants. Linda is an active member of the cooperative: "I have never been absent for the Friday meetings. The KASATATRIACO is very useful for guiding us and for helping us sell our crops. I would not be able to do it alone."



The Hineleban Foundation trains the families in sustainable and organic practices for farming on sloping lands. First, assistance is provided to grow a variety of food crops, enough to meet the nutritional needs of a family year-round. Once food security is ensured, the families are supported in building sustainable livelihoods through the production and sale of high value income crops. Linda received support to plant banana and root crops for personal consumption, as well as adlai, an indigenous grain that serves both as a food and income crop. Adlai is increasingly popular among health-conscious Filipinos as a substitute for rice.

The work in the field is carried out through traditional collective farming, or 'hunglos'. Linda is in a hunglos group with 4 other women: Conchita, Amor, Emilia and Nenita. The women help each other in their fields on a rotational basis.

Besides crop production, Linda is also engaged in the reforestation of cleared and degraded lands surrounding her community. The project provides support to reforest 150 hectares of land along river gullies and streams and 15 hectares in the buffer zone of the protected area.

The Hineleban Foundation's reforestation methodology is adopted, in which calliandra trees are planted as a pioneer species to control the growth of cogon grass, prevent the spread of wildfires, and prepare the soil for the seedlings of indigenous tree species. When the indigenous trees mature, the calliandra dies off naturally, giving way to a healthy tropical rainforest.

Linda participated in various reforestation activities, from land preparation and slashing to planting tree seedlings. So far, over 30 hectares of land have been planted with calliandra through the collective efforts of the community members. Although it is heavy work, Linda is committed to continue her reforestation efforts in the years to come.



“I really believe the forest can come back if we all participate in tree planting. Reforestation is important, because trees are the source of life.”



Harvesting the fruits of labor



Linda's dedication in planting and tending her crops has begun to pay off. She regularly harvests sweet potato, cassava, taro and lutya and recently harvested her first 423 kilo of adlai. She sold 172kg of the grains through the KASATATRIACO, kept 20kg for seeds and shared the remainder with other community members who helped her with her harvest. The Hineleban Foundation supports the cooperative in transporting, processing and packaging the grains, and accessing high-end markets.

For her first adlai sale, Linda received around 9,000 pesos (160 euro), or 52 pesos per kilo. She has started expanding her adlai production and plans to grow other high value crops, such as coffee and abaca, over the next years.

“This is the first time I have sold my own crop. I am very happy and proud that, despite being a widow, I can earn money from my crops and share it with my children.”



The 'Ridge to Coast, Rain to Tap' project aims to reduce flood risks and vulnerability in the Cagayan de Oro River Basin. The project adopts an integrated approach, working to improve the resilience of the water supply infrastructure and disaster preparedness in Cagayan de Oro City, at a systemic level through a pilot of catchment rehabilitation, and by strengthening the enabling environment.

The project is a Public-Private Partnership between Cagayan de Oro Water District, VEI, Unifrutti, Hineleban Foundation, Bukidnon Indigenous Peoples Advisory Council, Cagayan de Oro River Basin Management Council, Wetlands International, FITC, Philippines Red Cross and Netherlands Red Cross, co-funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) through the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW).