

# Land use conflicts and armed struggles in the Northern Negros Forest Reserve

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*This article was primarily based on triangulated historical timeline narratives of longtime residents of Barangays Marcelo and Bagong Silang in the rapid rural appraisal for a community forestry program that BIND began implementing in 1995. The section on the growth of the CPP-NPA was based on talks with former leading CPP cadres in the province who are now working with NGOs. The macro data on the sugar industry was based on Filemeno Aguilar's "The Making of Cane Sugar: Poverty, Crisis, and Change in Negros Occidental," a La Salle Monograph.*

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Conflicting land uses between self-sufficient and monoculture agriculture, community food security versus agricultural export crop production, commercial agricultural encroachment on forestlands often led to intense peasant land and armed struggles against landed elites in Negros Occidental, Philippines.

During the 1970s boom in the global spot prices of sugar, big landowners expanded and converted large areas of land, even secondary growth mountain forests in steep slopes, to plant sugarcane geared toward export production. The rise and fall in land area for sugarcane production depended on global sugar price fluctuations. When sugar commanded a whopping price of US 20.49¢ in Crop Year 1975-76, sugarcane land conversions rose by 13 percent.

Consequently, land monopolies devoted to export sugar monocultures intensified. At its height, sugarcane plantations in the province covered 241,686 hectares, or 51 percent of alienable and disposable agricultural lands, even more when we include sugarcane land use conversions of the public domain. Only a handful benefited from the export windfalls as sugar barons owning 25 hectares and above cornered 75 percent of the sugar monoculture plantations.

At the Northern Negros Forest Reserve, as in other mountainous areas of the province, the expansion of the sugarcane monocultures often meant land grabbing from small farmers and encroachment of primary and secondary growth forests.

A case in point was in Barangay Marcelo, the municipality of Calatrava and Barangay Bagong Silang, the municipality of Salvador Benedicto. (A barangay is the equivalent of a barrio or community.) Once covered by the Insular Lumber Company, an American-owned logging concession, many of their *sitios* or subvillages, still carry names like the various Spars, Upperline and Magazine. Another is Sitio Minatay (or Sitio Death) in commemoration of lumberjacks who died in an ILCO-owned train.

When the ILCO logging concession was established, they dispossessed the Aeta indigenous communities of their ancestral lands. Their descendants were later assimilated into Cebuano migrant farming communities. Remnants of their culture are the names of places in their own language referring to natural resources found in localities: Balagoncagay (big vines), Olonganon (rattan) and Capunlawan ("many *bahi*," a Philippine hardwood). ILCO eventually left Marcelo and Bagong Silang in the late 1960s after clearing thousands of hectares of primary growth dipterocarp forests.

The hacenderos came in 1977-78. One of the biggest whom locals only knew as Vercales who claimed 1,000 hectares along Spar B-11, Bayabas, Spar 7 and 11, and Santiago. Another laid claim to a 1,000-hectare of secondary growth forests in Olonganon. (We double-checked the Calatrava municipal Registry of Deeds and the only proof of ownership shown are tax declarations).

In their struggle to get more lands, the hacenderos brought with them their private armies against the small farmers who refuse to sell their lands or against their fellow landowners. Oldtimers still tremble with fear at the mention of the Javelosas, Briones and Tumbokon. Spar 13 in the adjoining Barangay Minapasok are littered with unmarked graves of shoot-out victims, reminiscent of the American wild, wild west.

The situation was thus ripe for the entry of the New People's Army led by the Communist Party of the Philippines. Using the Maoist doctrine of encircling the cities from the countryside, they waged "people's war" especially the forested mountainous hinterlands, which they recognize as the weakest link—as to be almost non-existent—in governance of the Philippine state. Their armed propaganda units organized in the mid-1980s poor upland farmers and Aetas into waging what they called "anti-feudal and anti-colonial struggles" which they associated with extensive land monopolies for sugarcane monocultures for export in the "imperialist" industrialized countries.

The NPA won the peasants' hearts and minds by repelling the private armies and expelling the hacenderos. Within two years, the CPP decided that mass support was wide enough in the NNFR guerilla zones to launch guerilla war. Fulltime guerilla units were formed to launch tactical offensives. NPA attacks escalated, from ambushes of isolated Philippine Army squads to daring military operations against municipal centers and PA company detachments.

Military reprisals were just as intense. In 1989, the Armed Forces of the Philippines launched Operational Plan-Lambat Bitag (baiting the net). Rather than dispersing its forces on all fronts, they concentrated on nine provinces, with Negros island as one of the priorities. Moreover, it launched hearts-and-minds campaigns during their counter-insurgency operations, using their special operations teams to counter-organize the farmers into civilian volunteer organizations (CVOs). Those who refused to join the CVOs were forcibly evacuated and hamletted in communities at the barangay centers. Far-flung farms were then deemed free-fire zones, and constantly and indiscriminately bombarded with artillery fire. Suspected NPA sympathizers were picked up and several mass leaders became "*desapericidos*" or salvaged (summarily executed). The strategic aim of the new counter-insurgency was, in a play with the Maoist metaphor, "deprive the fish of water to swim on," with the fish as the NPA guerrillas and the water, its mass base.

Overnight, new subvillages sprouted and remain as such today. An example is Sitio Huevesan in Barangay Marcelo. The reconcentrated villagers stayed and rebuild houses and claimed new farms near the hamlets. Many peasants left their farms and homes to avoid the armed conflict, thus depopulating the barangays. An inadvertent benefit was the easing of pressure to clear forestlands for agriculture.

But with the split within the revolutionary movement in the early 1990s, the armed conflict simmered down. The different factions became busier putting each other down with their ideological, political and organizational debates and struggle for possessions of weapons and matériel. The scale of armed confrontations plummeted, although one anti-NPA faction did gun down in 1999 Barangay Captains Javelosa and Puren Carbilledo, one of more active CVO leaders organized by the military in 1989.

Government, on the other hand, became more visible in mountain communities. Realizing that the armed conflict cannot be won solely through military means, civilian agencies other than the military became more visible with social economic development and environmental programs. Social and community forestry found a niche even in the far-flung mountain sitios, providing subsistence farmers with land tenurial security and resource use rights. NGOs are

making their presence felt as their community organizers and extension workers penetrate even remote hinterland areas promoting community-based natural resource management.

The Provincial Government recognized these cooperative efforts in its Resolution No. 0137, Series 2002 declaring its participation in the 2002 International Year of the Mountains celebrations. Says the Resolution:

*Civil society has likewise aided the province in community-based resource management in the Negrense mountains, with government agencies and NGO's working with local organized upland communities in promoting food security, agro-forestry, micro-enterprise, reforestation, forest protection and conservation, gender equity, fair trade and land use planning in classic best practice examples of multi-functional cooperation.*