Good Practices in Strengthening the Defense of the Aetas' Ancestral Domain in Mount Pinatubo

BASED ON THE EXPERIENCE OF
PEOPLES DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Quezon City, Philippines

[PO Leader discussing the challenges in the ancestral domain titling in Botolan, Zambales]

Contents

Acronyms

ARB	Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries
CADC	Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims
CADT	Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title
CO	Community Organizing
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
DAR	Department of Agrarian Reform
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources
DOST	Department of Science and Technology
EFR	Emergency Food Reserve
ESS	Economic Support Services
IFMA	Integrated Forest Management Agreement
ICC	Indigenous Cultural Communities
IP	Indigenous People
IPRA	Indigenous People's Rights Act
LGUs	Local Governments Units
LRA	Land Registration Administration
LTI	Land Tenure Improvement
NCIP	National Commission on Indigenous Peoples
NFE	Non-Formal Education
PDI	Peoples Development Institute
PO	Peoples Organization
SIB	Social Infrastructure Building
UP	University of the Philippines

Introduction

PDI was established in 1990 as an NGO propelled by a vision to pursue asset reform and rural development by building and strengthening local organizations that would be effective partners in addressing social, economic and political concerns.

This study will focus on the right of the Aetas (or Aytas) to their ancestral lands in the Mount Pinatubo area. It will discuss their struggles against the encroachments on their ancestral domain.

The study will also show how PDI's strategic intervention, which focuses on asset reform and rural development (land tenure improvement plus economic support services and social infrastructure building) in partnership with the local people's organizations, has helped the IP communities defend their lands.

PDI upholds and adheres to the Genuine Asset Reform framework, which argues that rural development and self-reliant communities can be achieved by people's participation in a positive combination of changes in land tenure and social and economic support services, minus the influence of vested interests that impede progress.

Asset Reform =	**[People's participation (Land Tenure Improvement + Economic Support Services + Social Infrastructure Building) – Vested Interests]**

PDI's main role is to encourage and support farmers, farm workers, fisherfolks and indigenous peoples (IPs) who aspire to claim and protect their rights and who aim to pursue their autonomous goals in their respective communities. The asset reform framework was developed by Aurea Miclat-Teves in 1995 as the most appropriate methodology to be adopted to achieve the vision of a free, prosperous and self reliant communities.

Good Practice

The PDI strategic framework provides an opportunity for the rural poor to secure their future within a changing environment with the twin steps of acquiring assets that are due them and protecting these assets (not only for their families but also for the national interest) through capacity building of the organizations of agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) and the IPs, and capital infusion in agricultural production and enterprise activities. The strategic framework's long term proposition is for the rural poor to contribute to the resuscitation and development of the country's agro-industrial base and arrest the

dangerous trend of developing a national economy that is dependent on services and consumption.

Given that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, the governance over land and natural resources should not only take into account rights directly linked to access to and use of land and natural resources but also civil and political rights that are indispensable to the exercise of human rights.

1. Land Tenure Improvement (LTI)

The LTI aspect of PDI's genuine asset reform program includes two major areas: (1) agrarian reform covered by the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and implemented by the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR); and, (2) establishing the ancestral domain of the IPs under the Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA) of 1998. These IP lands pertain mainly to upland and forest areas denoted as ancestral domains under the mandate of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP).

With the support of Bread for the World, PDI's partnership with people's organizations (POs) and PO federations in Central Luzon produces social, economic, and political benefits to farmers and indigenous communities in the form of lands acquired by farming households as evidenced by their Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOAs) and the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Titles (CADTs) awarded to indigenous peoples.

2. Economic Support Services (ESS)

The importance of land tenure security is underscored by PDI's experience in promoting sustainable agriculture and the establishment of economic enterprises so that farmers and IPs could benefit fully from land and the promise of technology to help them establish a suitable, viable and sustainable farming system. Economic support services strengthens the hold of the Indigenous People and Farmers over the lands they till by controlling the means of production.

The agro- enterprise development is designed to be a starting point for developing PO capacity in forming enterprises and to learn business management processes. This initiative has the long-term goal of capital generation and accumulation to promote agro- industrial development with the active participation of ARBs and the IPs. The immediate objective is to scale up viable enterprises for their crops or commodities produced in every province. The establishment of economic programs in the agrarian and ancestral domain provides ARBs and IPs greater control over their land and means of production.

3. Social Infrastructure Building (SIB)

PDI's strength is based on its accumulated knowledge, experience and social capital and its deep-rooted relations with representative organizations and local governments in

rural and indigenous communities. PDI's programs combine leadership and skills training with a rights-based approach to governance. PDI has provided education support services that address not only the education and literacy dimensions of poverty but also the knowledge and skills required in community institution building. Thus, education support is approached through a multi-pronged delivery system that includes non-formal education (NFE), college scholarships, and barefoot managers' training and organizing.

4. Countering Vested Interests

Despite the communities' and PDI's best efforts in securing land ownership, providing economic support services, and building the social infrastructure, the farmers' and the IP's lands continue to be threatened by powerful vested interests. Even after land titles have been obtained and their lands have become productive and strong communities have been built, they still face harassment and intimidation from land grabbers who collude with local officials to take away their lands illegally. In such cases, PDI works with the POs and lawyers and law students from the University of the Philippines College of Law in order to legally challenge the land grabbers. The partnership among PDI, the POs and the UP lawyers has proven to be effective in providing support to the Aeta Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs). The PO leaders at the forefront are being backed up by strong NGO support and legal advice.

Case Study

Conflicts over land and natural resources and related human rights violations are growing in the Philippines and are the result of a wide range of structural factors. Land and resource grabbing and the re-concentration of access to ancestral land, forests, water sources (freshwater and marine) and other natural resources to an elite few are accelerating as a result of the dominant development model that thrives on industrial monocrop agriculture, tourism, overfishing, large scale mining and destructive industrial and infrastructure projects. Thus, there is a need to generate information on both land use and misuse to help and push the government to improve land institutions and land governance.

PDI currently works in 17 municipalities and cities in the provinces of Bulacan, Bataan, Nueva Ecija, Zambales and Pampanga in Central Luzon, and Palawan in Southern Luzon. Its core programs are Land Tenure Improvement (LTI), Social Infrastructure Building (SIB), Community Organizing (CO), Economic Support Services (ESS) and Education (both formal and non-formal). These are undertaken in partnership with 76 people's organizations and federations with an aggregate membership of more than 4,600 individuals, the majority of whom are women. PDI has made the empowerment of women a special focus of its work.

A. Land Tenure Improvement (LTI)

From the 1990's to December 2019, 3,355 farmer-beneficiaries supported by PDI have acquired ownership and control of 5,723 hectares of land under the government's agrarian reform program in Central Luzon.

In supporting the IPs' right to their ancestral domains from 2000 to 2019, PDI was able to effect the transfer of a combined total of 152,003 hectares of ancestral lands to Aeta communities in the province of Pampanga, Bataan and Zambales, and to the Dumagats in Aurora province.

PDI's intervention on behalf of the Aetas is rooted in its agrarian reform advocacy. It found that the DAR had insensitively treated IPs as Agrarian Reform Benificiaries (ARB) claimants and not as IPs with inherent ancestral land rights. The resulting bureaucratic entanglements among DAR, NCIP, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and local governments units (LGUs) exacerbated the bottlenecks in the processing of the Aetas' ancestral domain claims.

The NCIP is perceived to be one of the weakest national government agencies in terms of resources and capacities to enforce its mandate. Delays in the processing of Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADCs) and CADT applications are common and the lack of field personnel, inadequate surveying capacity or pure bureaucratic inefficiency are often the reasons. This is aside from the fact that NCIP actions are vulnerable to legal and bureaucratic obstructions from DAR, DENR or the LGUs. Local governments generally resent the reduction of their territories with the issuance of CADTs and CADCs, which is the mandate of the NCIP. For the DENR, the CADTs/CADCs are additional considerations in the approval of mining and commercial timber license applications.

Having established its influence at the top level of national agencies, PDI and the Aeta leaders, were able to unclog the bottlenecks by simultaneously negotiating with the DAR, NCIP and LGUs. For the Aetas of Zambales, whose CADCs had been languishing at the NCIP since 1997, PDI was able to facilitate the grant of CADTs on their ancestral lands within two years.

The accomplishments mentioned above, however, resulted not only from PDI's effective engagement with government agencies and reform-minded officials. Internally, it involved painstaking work. The PDI staff had to strengthen the Aetas' claims by completing the required documentation, such as genealogies and technical specifications of the lands that entailed land surveys and mapping. PDI also helped prepare the IP organizations to assume ownership of their ancestral domains.

Invoking the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) and engaging the NCIP and LGUs on behalf of the Aeta and Dumagat tribes totaling 10,789 individuals, the IPs acquired government recognition of their ownership rights to their ancestral lands. These and other successes would not have been possible without sustained support from PDI's long-standing partnership with EED/EZE and its successor agency Bread for the World.

The recognition of 152,003 hectares as ancestral land was momentous and historic for the Aetas of Zambales, Tarlac, and Pampanga and the Dumagats of Aurora. After years of divestment (i.e. through the utilization of parts of their ancestral domain within the US military bases at Clark and Subic), marginalization, deprivation and displacement (due to the Mount Pinatubo eruption), they have regained control and ownership of their ancestral domains.

It was also "just in time" in that most ancestral domains in the country are now at risk after the Supreme Court affirmed in December 2004 the constitutionality of the Mining Act of 1995. Nearly all mining is done on ancestral lands. In January that year, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo issued Executive Order 270, or the National Policy Agenda on Revitalizing Mining in the Philippines. This became the basis of the Mineral Action Plan that opens up to 70 percent of the national territory to mining companies. The plan indicates the government's willingness to sacrifice the interests of IPs. It suggests that the government could reduce NCIP certification processes by 27 percent and the issuance of an Environmental Clearance Certificate in just 120 days to encourage foreigners to invest in mining. Subsequent administrations have continued this investment friendly policy.

B. Economic Support Services (ESS)

Of course, land acquisition and distribution is the first step to land ownership. What about making sure that the ancestral domain granted is productive and useful to the stakeholders? This is where the second step of PDI's strategic intervention comes in. PDI supports the stakeholders through economic support services, along with training and education.

The stakeholders were given assistance through the initiative of PDI. Farm implements, seeds, and organic fertilizers were distributed to them. PDI also granted funds to women's organizations for carabaos (water buffalos) with carts, hog and goat raising and other agricultural activities. Economic support services are crucial to strengthening the IP communities' possession of their ancestral domain. With support from PDI and several government agencies, they made their lands more productive, leading to good harvests.

Problems did arise when there was over-production. Stakeholders were forced to sell their produce at a cheaper price, so it would not be wasted. Merchants took advantage of this and abused the indigenous peoples, the Aetas, Tagbanuas and Igorots. Due to lack of training and experience, they were unable to negotiate better prices. So when there is a harvest surplus, the Aetas would try to find ways and means to save it. How could these surpluses be converted to cash, instead of becoming feeds for the hogs? PDI stepped in. It realized the importance of training and education. A series of training sessions and seminars were attended by selected leaders or people's organizations, representatives of the Aetas, Tagbanuas and Igorots, and also local farmers. Thanks to PDI's rigorous organiizing work and partnership with the academe, these individuals were able to undergo special studies and trainings at Ateneo de Manila University

College of Business and Management. Furthermore, they received skills training from the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) on how to save and process their surplus, which gave birth to the emergency food reserve (or EFR) which was called vegepowder by the SKP, now used by Aetas in their respective communities. PDI also linked up with government agencies in order to provide additional training, seminars and courses on how to earn, save, manage and enhance their economic activities.

With their new learning and enterprise skills, an economic enterprise between the DOST and the Botolan municipal government was set up to equip the Aetas in the town with machineries to process food. PDI provided the buildings to house these food processors. The economic processing units, not just in Zambalas but also in other areas in Central Luzon where PDI has a presence, have a similar experience in establishing their own small economic enterprises.

C. Social Infrastructure Building (SIB)

PDI's organizing work cut across all aspect of the program to build strong people's organizations. Organizing work is coupled with a series of training and education seminars and workshops to prepare the men and women leaders at the barangay (village), provincial and national levels. The trainings are building a pool of men and women leaders among farmers and IPs.

The most politically and socially mature among them have become core leaders in their communities who deal directly with the LGUs and other government agencies.

The success and contribution of PDI's efforts in terms of LTI and in promoting sustainable agriculture as a means to adapt to climate change cannot be overemphasized. Through long years of collective action and capacity building, PDI's partners have been able to organize and consolidate into federations of indigenous peoples such as the Bukluran ng Mga Katutubo sa Luzon (BUKAL) and farmers' organizations in six provinces of Luzon under the Nagkakaisang Magsasaka ng Gitnang Luzon (NMGL), Pambansang Koaliyon sa Karapatan sa Lupa (PKKL) and Pagkakaisa ng mga Kababaihang Magsasaka at Katutubo ng Luzon (PASAMAKA-L).

People's participation in local governance has been raised to a higher level. On top of or in conjunction with mass mobilizations, dialogues and consultations and other forms of action as non-state organizations, the POs are able to deploy capable leaders and members to directly participate in decision-making in local governance bodies. These actions produce a convergence of pressure from within and from the outside, thus hastening local government response to issues.

D. Countering Vested Interests

The local government officials wield political and economic power. Driven by selfish profit-oriented objectives, their interests lie in the transfer of large tracts of land to investors with no regard for the food security and the rights of the indigenous peoples.

To push their economic agenda, they harass and intimidate the Aetas. The stage is set for a confrontation and the challenge is how to resolve this conflict in favor of the Aetas.

Some of the Aeta ICCs are located in Barangay Poonbato, municipality of Botolan, Zambales province. Since time immemorial, Aetas have been living on this land, which is now covered by a CADC. Their CADT has been approved by NCIP and is being awaited for release by the Land Registration Administration (LRA).

Hundreds of hectares of the Aeta ICCs are under threat from land grabbing. Below are two examples:

Example 1: Land-grabbing by a clan belonging to the local elite

The clan, with help from local officials, attempted to grab 900 hectares of Aeta lands situated in the barangays of Burgos and Maguisguis, in May 2019. It is rich and fertile and near the Mount Pinatubo volcano. But the Aeta leaders, who had years of capacity building through training and education by PDI, rejected that claim.

The years of painstaking research and documentation work to produce their CADT became a life-saver for the ICCs. The PO leaders of Burgos and PDI were able to produce a map that the Burgos ICCs had drawn when they sought their CADT. It showed that the property being claimed was in fact in an area covered with lahar, mud and sand adjacent to and not within the territorial boundaries of Burgos. The clan had clearly misrepresented the location of this property.

After this foiled claim to 900 hectares, the clan is now claiming another 192 hectares in Barangay Poonbato, which is also part of the Aetas' ancestral domain.

Part of the Ancestral Domain of the Aetas in Botolan town

Much earlier than the current land dispute, this clan and the Aetas used to have good relations. The Aetas' ancestors allowed a certain lawyer belonging to the clan, to lease five hectares of their lands in Poonbato to be used as a pastureland—although no animal had been seen grazing on the land. But the local elite later applied for a free patent land title to these five hectares with the DENR.

In February 2020, a meeting was held at Poonbato between representatives of the Aeta ICCs and leaders from the IP organization "Samahang Katutubo ng Poonbato" (SKP), on one side, and the local elite on the other. In this meeting, both parties agreed to do a resurvey of the land on February 19-21, 2020. The purpose was to verify the validity of clan's claim on their application for a free patent land title. This resurvey was witnessed by both parties and their respective lawyers as well as representatives from the regional and provincial offices of the NCIP and the municipal and provincial environment and natural resources offices. After the survey, the parties agreed, in the presence of the representatives of the government agencies, that neither one would fence in any portion of land within the ancestral domain without the free, prior, and informed consent of the Aeta ICCs that currently hold a CADC covering the land being claimed, and without the decision and approval of the proper government agencies as to the identification, including the exact boundaries, of the land or property claimed by the clan.

However, in March 2020, after the SKP's lawyer left Poonbato, the clan started fencing an area much larger than the five hectares it had originally claimed. The clan then said 192 hectares it is claiming are allegedly covered by a total of 45 patent titles that it claimed to have acquired. The clan recruited some residents from Poonbato and other barangays to put up the barbed wire fence.

The Aetas found out from some villagers who were recruited to guard the fence that the clan conducted a resurvey of the land by simply using Google Maps to plot and label the areas it wanted to claim. The Aetas of Poonbato admitted that since they were not familiar with the Google technology used in the bogus survey, they were unable to immediately disprove the claim without assistance from PDI and their lawyers from the UP Law Center. The Aetas later heard that the 192 hectares had been sold by the clan to one of the country's largest conglomerates and that it was this company that helped finance the fencing, which was finished in five days. They also heard that buildings would be constructed on this land since it is located beside the Zambales-Tarlac Road, making the site well-suited for business and commerce.

The clan hired surveryors and a security company and they were accompanied by a geodetic engineer from the NCIP and a representative of the DENR. However, when UP Lawyers visited the area, the surveyors could not present any land titles.

Some of the Aetas who witnessed the fence going up cried, helplessly watching their lands being fenced off by land grabbers. These lands had been theirs since the time of their ancestors as shown in the genealogy and the documentation of markers such as century-old trees and other plants cultivated by their forebears. They wanted to stop

the fencing but they were afraid of the violence that may erupt. One NCIP employee who tried to stop it was chased away with an "itak," or machete, by one of the people building the fence. Police and soldiers were seen guarding the fencing operation. The Aetas were being careful about speaking out or taking action which could be used against them. To this day (in October 2020), the fence still stands in the Aetas' ancestral land in Poonbato.

On those fenced in lands are the Aetas' bountiful crops—vegetables of various varieties, mangoes, coconut and rice—which they had planted and marketed. Their carabaos and other animals as well as nipa huts, or "bahay kubo," are also within this area. With these, the Aetas could precisely identify these lands as part of their ancestral domain that has always been under their productive use and longtime possession.

The Aetas now worry about the increased harassment and intimidation by the land grabbers through verbal abuse and the destruction of their crops and trees.

Example 2: Land-grabbing through the DENR's Integrated Forest Management Agreement (IFMA)

While the land grabbing by the local elite has yet to be resolved, a similar case arose concerning 900 hectares of the Aetas' ancestral domain also in Poonbato. The ICCs were told that the land was to be used for a government project under the Integrated Forest Management Agreement (IFMA) of the DENR.

The DENR told the ICCs that the IFMA project was intended to create environment- and forestry-related livelihood projects such as tree planting and nurseries, and that it will only be implemented if they give their consent, which is a requirement under the IPRA. However, PDI and the Samahang Katutubo ng Poonbato (SKP) obtained a copy of an Executive Order, which was the basis of the project, and discovered that they were being misinformed by the DENR. The ICCs were not informed that, as indicated in the Executive Order, all resources within the 900-hectare area covered by the project would be solely managed by the government and that the Aetas' use of these resources must be subject to the prior approval by the government.

In short, after the project is completed, the Aetas would no longer have control over the resources within their ancestral domain.

The SKP then explained to every family belonging to the ICCs in Poonbato all the stipulations in the Executive Order and the DENR's IFMA, after which the Aetas refused to allow the implementation of the project. The Aeta PO leaders stood their ground against this new type of land grabbing. However, the struggle continues, as the LGU has heightened the militarization of the area and prohibited freedom of movement.

Challenges and Limitations

PDI believes that the Genuine Asset Reform framework (as explained above) provides the best means of protecting ARBs' and IPs' land, because strong self-reliant communities that achieve economic security from productive use of the land are best able to defend their land. However, as shown in the two examples in the above section, despite acquiring legal recognition of their land, the IP's ancestral domain is still under threat from vested interests.

Based on the findings of the PDI, the UP Law Center and the PO leaders, the Aetas in the cases mentioned above have legal and valid ownership of their ancestral domain. This is covered by and registered through a CADT. Promulgated on February 10, 2016, the NCIP en banc resolution on the CADT recognizes the Aeta ICCs' occupation, possession, and ownership of their ancestral domain, including the lands being grabbed from them, since time immemorial. The resolution also properly and clearly identifies their ancestral lands, including the exact size or area and boundaries. The NCIP en banc resolution said:

> "WHEREAS, from the facts above-mentioned and based on the basic documentary proofs gathered and researches made, the Aeta ICCs/IPs, undoubtedly have a legitimate and valid claim over the areas they regarded as their ancestral territory, the metes and bounds of which having been already identified and validated on ground. They have predominantly inhabited the same places since time immemorial beginning from the generations of their forebears.
>
> "WHEREFORE, premises considered, this Commission resolves that the application or CADC 069 conversion into CADT of the Aeta ICCs located at Barangays Poonbato and Owaog-Nebloc in the Municipality of Botolan, Zambales and portion of the Municipality of San Jose, Province of Tarlac, Island of Luzon, Philippines, with an aggregate area of FOURTEEN THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED TWENTY SEVEN AND 9426/10000 (14,127.9426) hectares more or less and which is more particularly described in the technical description as hereto attached is hereby GRANTED. The Ancestral Domains Office, through the Director, is directed to prepare a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) bearing number R03-BOT-0216-205 in the name of the Petitioners."

The Aeta ICCs have a more valid and ironclad right to the land than any of the other claimants. Under Article 434 of the Civil Code, any party who claims that it has a better right to the property must prove (1) the identity of the property and (2) that they have a better title to the property than the opposing party. The Aeta ICCs could easily and clearly identify the land being grabbed as theirs in accordance with the title on which the Aetas have established their rightful ownership, which is their CADT.

The two examples of land grabs in the section above showed that the root of the conflict was *the violation of the basic human rights of the Aetas.* The conflict also resulted from the incomplete or poor implementation of the IPRA and a national policy that promotes mining and corporate-led agribusinesses that disregard indigenous peoples' rights.

In many cases, the local elite and private corporations are able to turn their land claims into legal assaults against the IPs who end up charged with criminal offenses and placed on the defensive. This happened to one of the leading Aeta PO leaders, Lucy Badar, who is now in jail facing trumped up charges. The high cost of a legal defense (which farmers and IPs can

hardly afford without NGO support) discourages the pursuit of their rightful claims. This situation could be used to force IPs and farmers to compromise either their livelihood or even their ancestral domain claims and land rights.

One expects impunity from human rights violators when no one is punished for committing abuses. In fact, most violators are able to hide behind other laws to pre-empt the land claims of the poor or shield them from prosecution.

The examples illustrate how land grabbing is being aided and abetted by the government's own policies, specifically those that promote investments and private corporate interests through so-called public-private partnerships.

While the efforts to obtain the CADT for the Aetas have been a success, the same success brings new challenges and demands — primarily, the need to assist IP communities in protecting, developing and defending their lands. In doing so, there is also the continuing challenge to sustain PO participation in local governance and to deepen their penetration of local bodies to ensure that their voices are heard in policy making.

The goal is not only to cement the Aetas' ancestral domain ownership but also to care for these lands for future generations and the larger society's need, among others, to create ecological balance, biodiversity and watershed protection.

However, the Aetas and their organizations have certain limitations that PDI is helping them to overcome. They are as follows:

1. Some ICCs have weak leadership.
2. Aetas have limited knowledge and skills to defend their land rights due to their low educational attainment. They are overwhelmed when shown documents by land grabbers.
3. The ICCs lack of financial and/or other resources to meet the necessary requirements in ancestral claims and to do lobby work, dialogues and negotiations with the government.
4. The long struggle has led to "fatigue" (resigned attitude) among some of the leaders and members of claimant organizations.

From its many years of working with the Aetas, PDI has gained the following insights and learnings:

1. It is very important that the principal claimants themselves (farmers and IPs) assert their land rights.
2. The capability of claimants' organizations must be enhanced with respect to issue awareness or analysis, paralegal skills, lobbying and negotiation, mobilizing support, etc.
3. Horizontal and vertical tactics in lobby and negotiation work must be employed.
4. Pressure from local, national and international support groups and networks is invaluable; it moves government to respond to the needs of the people.

5. Building the endurance and resilience of claimant organizations is needed as manmade and natural threats remain.
6. Coalitions and alliances are important as they create the mass base to push and oblige the government to provide for the people.

The pandemic and the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), which took effect in July 2020, are adding a new dimension to the land dispute principally by limiting the options of both the Aetas and PDI. The pandemic and the terror law are being used by the local government to restrict freedoms in Botolan, Zambales, where local officials in collusion with the multinational corporation use the pandemic to heighten militarization to achieve their objective of grabbing lands in the ancestral domain of the Aetas. When the Aetas resist, harassment and intimidation are used such as Red-tagging (labelling people as communists), restrictions on the movement of people and the imposition of new controls and threats of warrantless arrests under the ATA.

The limited movement all over the country has caused grave consequences in the land struggle. Communication with far flung ICCs has practically been cut because PDI personnel are prohibited from entering Zambales due to the pandemic lockdown. Meanwhile, the Aetas are not allowed to leave their sitios (villages). Isolated *sitios* are at the mercy of the land grabbers and the military, trying to push the Aetas into submission.

Conclusion

Asset reform has a direct influence on the distribution of power in rural areas, especially in localities where the landed and corporate elite exercises monopoly over local politics. Genuinely reforming landholdings underscore the transfer of economic authority from big landowners to new small owner-cultivators. With lands in their names, Aetas and small farmers are motivated to become fully invested actors in building the local economy through production and active participation in local governance processes. In addition to the lands now being recognized as theirs, the IPs/farmers are acquiring knowledge and skills to contribute to the larger economy and becoming more politically responsible.

The Aetas' newly acquired assets gave them the capacity to display their economic and political clout over their land and resources. But they still need to be further equipped with more knowledge and skills to more effectively negotiate with government and market players to improve their livelihood, protect their lands and uphold their rights as members of an indigenous community and as citizens of the republic.

The documentation of PDI's experience in working with farmers and IP communities clearly shows how the rural distribution of power shapes and is shaped by collective actions of POs that enable communities to protect their economic interests and deal with risks. Their collective action lowers their vulnerability and creates stronger links for asset reform, thus, preparing the POs and the community to manage conflict while defending their land rights.

The strategic interventions by PDI helped the Aetas to secure their future in the changing environment with the twin steps of acquiring assets that are rightfully theirs and protecting these assets (not only for their families but also for the national interest) through capacity building of their organizations and capital infusion in agricultural production and enterprise activities. PDI's long term proposition is for the rural poor to contribute to the resuscitation and development of the country's food sovereignty and socially just economic development and to arrest the dangerous trend of developing a national economy that is dependent on services and consumption rather than increasing agricultural and industrial productive capacity.

PDI and its PO partners must look into possible adjustments in the coming years to accommodate the resource needs of ancestral lands and IP communities due to growing fascism in the country, heightened militarization and the effects and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.

PASAMAKA-Luzon and PKKL President, Elsa Novo speaking at CARP Anniversary rally in front of Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) Central Office in Quezon City.