

Disaster capitalism in the Philippines: How investors make use of a Super-Typhoon to re-develop an eco-tourism project

For decades, about 1,400 families struggled for their right to land, food and water on the small island of Sicogon in the Philippine province Iloilo. But before they received their land titles under the national agrarian reform program, Super-Typhoon Yolanda (internationally known as Haiyan) raged over the island. The typhoon destroyed not only their houses and fisher boats; it also gave way to the aggressive re-introduction of an eco-tourism project of the private company “Sicogon Development Corporation” (SIDECO). Today, this project is threatening the traditional livelihoods of the people of Sicogon as farmers and fishers as SIDECO claims their agricultural and residential lands. For the first time in history, private companies partnered with the government to manage the disaster recovery and relief. On Sicogon, Ayala Land (hereafter: Ayala), one of the most powerful real estate firms of the country, was supposed to lead the rehabilitation of the island. In this position, Ayala took the opportunity to re-develop SIDECO’s eco-tourism project and entered into a joint venture partnership with SIDECO. Ayala and SIDECO used the emergency situation of the people of Sicogon to expel them from the island in order to realize the tourism project.

Sicogon’s situation is an example of how a humanitarian problem can turn into a long-term social and economic tragedy. Naomi Klein, author of the book “Battle for Paradise”, aptly calls this phenomena “disaster capitalism”, as ‘the rich and powerful must be deliberately causing the catastrophes so that they can exploit them’. After Typhoon Yolanda, Ayala and SIDECO prevented any emergency assistance, neither food nor construction material, from reaching the island. Only at the prodding of a village head from Sicogon, the local government agreed to a one-time delivery of rice in December 2013. The two companies offered the typhoon-victims merely two options after one month: Either they take a one-time payment of 150,000 Pesos (about 2,537 Euros), leave the island and never return, or they take 5,000 Pesos (about 84 Euros) and relocate on the mainland, once new houses were constructed.

Anecito Mercurio, father of six children, saw no other choice and took, like over 300 families, one of the two companies’ options: ‘I took the first option because my family was starving. We were not successful on the mainland. After five months, the money was gone and I found no work. On Sicogon, I can catch fish and collect shells, so I came back.’ Today, his house is made of street stones, bamboo mats, empty concrete bags and old emergency tarpaulins. Anecito plants vegetables in between the washed ashore plastic waste and stones of the shoreline, and battles his way with occasional jobs.

Raul Ramos, president of the local community organization “Federation of Sicogon Island Farmers and Fisherfolks Association” (FESIFFA) explains in an interview: ‘The people of Sicogon were forced to [accept] these options when they were extremely starving.’ The 784 families, who belong to FESIFFA, rejected the offer. They did not receive any support from Ayala and were starving for over two weeks. Only a few engaged local organizations were able to bring scattered emergency support on the island. Any attempts of the families to rebuild their houses or fisher boats were prohibited under threat of violence by the armed security guards of the two companies. In March 2014, over 200 families fled out of fear into the timberland area of the island, which they now proudly call “Freedom Land”, and where emergency boats were finally able to deliver support goods.

Sicogon is a 1.163 hectare island, surrounded by crystal-clear water, white sand beaches and an evergreen forest. The island offers the more or less 6,000 residents of the three villages everything that they need for a sustainable livelihood: clean spring water, fertile agricultural land and rich fishing grounds. Ramos emphasized: ‘As long as we can fish and farm, we can survive independently.’ In order to sustain their traditional livelihoods, obtaining land titles is essential to them. Already close to 100 years ago, the Supreme

Court guaranteed the people of Sicogon sufficient square for their community, meaning their school, cemetery, and roads, as precondition to the grant of title to the original applicant. But the government failed to execute this order. ‘That’s why we people of Sicogon are until today squatters in our own home’, criticizes Ramos.

SIDECO holds a land title for about 70% (809 hectares) of the island, of which, since 2004 334.65 hectares agricultural land had to be allocated under the national agrarian reform program to 256 farmer beneficiaries. The remaining 30% of the island consist of two parcels of alienable and disposable land (72 hectares) as well as the timberland (282 hectares). In 2008, the people of Sicogon had already applied for free patents of the 72 hectares but the government never processed their application. Moreover, the people of Sicogon applied since 2004 for a “Community-based Forest Management Program”. SIDECO’s aggressive anti-land reform resistance led to a lengthy legal battle with the people of Sicogon.

Typhoon Yolanda turned the situation of residents land tenure for the worse. One year after the storm, FESIFFA, which is leading the residents’ land rights claim, was forced by high-level government officials to sign an agreement with Ayala and SIDECO. The agreement provides that the members of FESIFFA will receive 30 hectares of residential land and 40 hectares agricultural land. In exchange, they have to give up all previous land claims and are prohibited from making any business with tourists. Ramos criticizes: ‘The agreement was a manipulation by the government and the capitalists to pursue their [tourism] business. Until today, nothing was fulfilled.’

Instead, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) approved Ayala and SIDECO’s application for the conversion of the almost 335 hectares agrarian land in February 2016. Since the agreement with the two companies remained unfulfilled, FESIFFA filed a Petition for the revocation of conversion order granted to Ayala-SIDECO in August 2017. Until today, the petition has yet to be resolved. In addition, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) awarded a total of 16 Free Patents for the alienable and disposable land in 2010, but to persons who are unqualified for such as non-residents of the island and due to a lack of proof for any possession on the island for a minimum duration of 30 years. Moreover, the two companies are planning on getting the timberland portion covered as a protected area in order to evict the people who are living in that portion of the island.

Ayala’s role in “rehabilitating” the island after Typhoon Yolanda gave way to the eco-tourism project. Two hotel facilities were already constructed and an airport is now operating. The “International Ecotourism Society” describes eco-tourism as ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the wellbeing of local people’. This means, eco-tourism should not threaten but improve the traditional livelihoods of the people of Sicogon. Amelia de la Cruz, FESIFFA’s vice president is highly concerned: ‘We have a good source of water [but] I am afraid that Ayala will take it. The infinity pool of the hotel has already reduced one village’s access to water. During dry season, they will not have any water.’ To date, Ayala has neither obtained a permit for the water diversion nor faced a penalty for the water grab.

Basically, the people of Sicogon are not against tourism but against tourism that threatens their basic human rights. They demand ‘freedom’, as Ramos emphasizes, and their freedom is based on their right to land. In December 2018, FESIFFA filed a case against the government at the Commission for Human Rights in Manila. In March 2019, the DAR’s secretary has finally issued at FESIFFA’s prodding a cease and desist order which temporarily stops any further development on Sicogon.

Although Ayala and SIDECO have not fulfilled their agreement with FESIFFA after five years, the government is still prolonging the resolution that will secure their agrarian lands. FESIFFA’s unprocessed applications for free patents of the alienable and disposable land as well as for community-based forest management of the timberland threaten residents’ permanent tenure on Sicogon. Due to those delays, Ayala and SIDECO are able to file ejectment cases in order to evict the people completely from the island.

Since late last year, FESIFFA has been initiating dialogues with concerned government agencies in Manila. Beginning of March 2019, FESIFFA has started to intensify their social mass protest actions at the national and local level in order to pressure responsible government agencies. FESIFFA also plans to file criminal cases against government officials, who were involved in anomalous acts that favoured and allowed corporate control of virtually all of the lands of Sicogon Island.

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