Community Maps Can Empower Indigenous Peoples to Assert Land Rights

Bangkok, THAILAND, 14 September (Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service) – An Australian-Filipino mining company during a September 2011 public consultation mobilized its “experts.” Their goal: to persuade local officials and indigenous and local communities about the “safety, merits and sustainability” of the company’s US$5.8-billion project in southern Philippines.
The “experts” were armed with figures, graphs and pictures all showing the “benefits” of the proposed big mining project. Fortunately, the community folk had a secret weapon—a 3D (3 Dimensional) map, which helped unmask true lies wrapped in the technical jargons of “experts.”

Trained on 3D mapping and using the mining company’s own data (e.g., potential stockpiles of mine tailings and wastes), the community folk—aided by skilled mapping facilitators—practically exposed the company’s “experts” as lying through their teeth.

Kail Zingapan, a 3D mapping expert and facilitator of the nongovernment Philippine Association for Intercultural Development or PAFID, and local indigenous folk produced a 3D map of the Koronadal Valley and the Tampakan watersheds, where the company targets to mine in South Cotabato province.

“This is the people’s map. We did not invent this,” she told the consultation after she and indigenous leaders opened the 3D map at the public plaza for all to see.

The company’s “experts”—who included British, Australian and Filipino mining executives—were the first to present during that public consultation.

To prepare for the public consultation, Zingapan and the affected indigenous community members labored to produce the 3D map, which they sneak in to the plaza early morning of the consultation. The 3-D map was covered while the company’s “experts” were presenting.

“The people showed us where their lands were located and we just plotted them on the map,” Zingapan told the consultation. “We showed them the outcome and they saw that the mine development area would cover their ancestral lands. It appeared not all of them were consulted or correctly informed about the risks.”

The people at the consultation—estimated to be 10,000, including local officials—were shocked as Zingapan explained details of the map. Through the 3D map, she pinpointed that the company targets to build its tailings dam on top of a hill, which is considered sacred by the indigenous folk. The hill is also the headwater of the vital Mal River, which irrigates fields and a source of fresh water fish.

“This is your land where you live and get your food and other daily needs. It is up to you now if you want to see this land wasted and taken away from you or not,” she told the people in the local language.

The 3D map was so powerful and so graphic that it reinforced public arguments against the mining company’s plans to extract copper and gold in the area through the open-pit method.

After the consultation, South Cotabato Governor Arthur Pingoy declared that he was duty-bound to implement the province’s 2010 environment code, which bans open-pit mining.

The company, says recent reports, is still contesting the “constitutionality” of the province’s environment code and is insisting that open-pit mining is the “safest method.” But Gov. Pingoy has stood his ground, a position which pleased indigenous and local community folk.
Empowering tool

So what could be learned from the South Cotabato community’s experience?

“The lesson is participatory community mapping can empower local communities to assert their land rights,” said Dave de Vera, executive director of PAFID.

De Vera was speaking at a three-day training workshop on “Community Participatory Mapping and Resource Inventory of Indigenous Peoples’ Territories” on 26-28 August in Bangkok, Thailand. He cited the community map Zingapan, his colleague, did together with the indigenous folk of South Cotabato, a video which was presented at the Bangkok workshop.

Some 34 indigenous participants from Asia, Latin America and Africa participated in the training workshop organized by the Tebtebba and supported by ClimateWorks Foundation.

Tebtebba is a Philippine-based non-government organization dealing with indigenous peoples’ rights and concerns and promoting “self-determined development.” ClimateWorks, on the other hand, is an American-based donor organization, which supports “public policies that prevent dangerous climate change and promote global prosperity.”

De Vera and Zingapan took turns in orienting the participants about participatory mapping and resource inventory and shared their experiences and insights from training indigenous peoples in the Philippines and various parts of the world. Both represent a non-government organization, which has been helping facilitate community mapping after it was established in 1967.

Stressing on “more culturally sensitive” community participatory mapping processes, both trainers sought to link these processes with monitoring, reporting and verification of biodiversity and REDD Plus. REDD Plus refers to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries plus Conservation, Sustainable Forest Management and Enhancement of Carbon Stocks.

They said that from these participatory processes community monitoring and safeguard information systems could be established.

Both trainers said the value of maps could not be underestimated. “Maps are powerful tools that allow people, institutions and states to record history, describe, understand, plan, manage and claim areas and places,” De Vera said.

According to him, states use maps both as basic tools in planning and as regulatory or control mechanisms resulting from planning.

“Wherever the planning process excludes marginalized groups, planning and regulatory maps reproduce dominant production systems and their underpinning power relations,” he said.

But he said participatory mapping is aimed at ending the exclusion of marginalized groups in the planning dialogue.

For indigenous and local peoples who know well their territories like the back of their palms, maps, said De Vera, could show their experiences about their landscapes.

“Ultimately, community maps define local people’s ideas of the landscape and its functions,” he said. “Maps enable local people to identify and define the extents of their interactions with the landscape from their own points of view and based on their own unique experiences.”
Community maps, he added, allows local people to identify customary governance systems in place.

De Vera said participatory mapping had helped some indigenous peoples to secure tenure claims not only for lands but sea- scapes. He cited the indigenous Tagbanua of Coron Island in Palawan in north-central Philippines, who, with the help of maps the community did with PAFID, were able to reclaim their ancestral lands and ancestral waters, which included fishing grounds. This, he said, was the first in the world, where indigenous peoples mapped their ancestral waters and got a Certificate of Ancestral Domain for this.

Citing other examples, he said participatory mapping has helped indigenous and local communities to resolve resource-use conflict and tension (such as conflict over water use), define resource management planning and development priorities, and to identify community conservation and monitoring directions.

Long overdue

A participant agreed with De Vera about the need to document through maps the territories of indigenous and local communities. “This training workshop is actually long overdue,” said Stanley Kimaren Ole Riamit, director of the Indigenous Livelihood Enhancement Partners or ILEPA, a nongovernment organization in Kenya.

Kimaren comes from a continent where colonizers and states used maps to dispos- sess and displace scores of indigenous and local communities. “There is a need to document through community maps and reclaim our territories,” he said.

Inspired by the community mapping training workshop, another participant, Adrien Sinafasi Makelo said he was consid- ering to choose at least one or two communi- ties to train on community mapping, particularly on how make 3D maps. Makelo represents the Dynamique des Grupos Peuples Autochtones, a network of NGOs and Dignite Pygmee, his own NGO, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the two autonomous regions of Nicara- gua (North Atlantic Autonomous Region or RAAN and South Atlantic Autonomous Region or RAAS), community participatory mapping is urgently needed to strengthen demarcation initiatives of indigenous peoples there, said Dennis Mairena of the Centro para la Autonomia y Desarollo de los Pueblos Indigenas (CADPI).

“The community mapping can also help our communities in developing policies to effectively and properly manage our lands and resources,” he added.

Nicaragua has a national law, which provides for the demarcation of indigenous peoples’ territories. Using their traditional
knowledge, the indigenous peoples there designated and defined their territories.

“For example, we know how far we went hunting, fishing and gathering wild fruits so we designated the boundaries for our territories,” Mairena told the Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service. “In some cases, there are no problems. But in some cases, there are overlapping problems.”

He said participatory community mapping could help resolve these overlapping issues once and for all. The community mapping exercise could also help address the issue of encroachment into indigenous territories by illegal occupants, he added.

Mairena would like to invite PAFID and further train CADPI’s staff and indigenous community leaders there in community mapping. During the Bangkok training workshop, Mairena accompanied two of his staff—Adelia Auxilaidora Aleman, an architect, and Karla Muller, an engineer.

But Mairena said his staff and community need more training, especially on Geographic Information System (GIS), 3D mapping, and the use of such gadgets such as Global Positioning Satellites (GPS), which are important in producing “geo-referenced” (scaled) maps.

In the State of Roraima in Brazil, indigenous leaders also need to improve their skills in community mapping, particularly 3D maps, said Mario Nicacio, general coordinator of the Conselho Indigena de Roraima (CIR).

Nicacio said it would not be difficult to further train indigenous leaders and members there since they were oriented on the basics of GIS and ethno-mapping.

Improved community maps could help policy-makers in instituting policies on the proper management of forests, savannahs, rivers, and other resources, Nicacio and his colleague, Joenia Batista de Carvalho, a lawyer who comes from the Wapichana peoples and who coordinates CIR’s legal department, told the Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service.

Such proper management of Roraima’s lands and resources may yet protect the indigenous peoples there from the threats of big companies, which are raring to exploit timber and minerals, they said.

De Carvalho particularly cited the role of community maps in helping Roraima’s indigenous peoples secure their rights to their lands. “The whole participatory process of involving the community in mapping is in itself empowering,” she added.

From Asia, two participants, who were more advanced in community mapping, presented their experiences and the impacts to their communities of the maps they did in their respective areas.

Matheus Pilin, director of PPSDAK-Pancur Kasih, showed other participants how their community maps in Kalimantan, Indonesia, which they have been doing since 1990, have helped them in their natural resource management plans.
Pilin highlighted an important requirement before community mapping is undertaken. “The community must first ask for it,” he said. He added that he and colleagues do not just rely on a letter from the community. “After we receive the request, we go back to the community to validate whether this is truly a community request, and not just that of a specific individual or clan.”

Using a community map based on Dutch map (as the Dutch were among Indonesia’s colonizers), the indigenous Dayak and other local community members there succeeded in rejecting a mining company’s proposal to mine there, he said.

Vu Thi Hien of the Center for Research and Development in Upland Areas or CERDA also presented how “ethnic minorities” in Vietnam used community mapping, along with other “holistic development approaches,” as their way of developing carbon/REDD Plus-based policies.

“The policies developed are good tools to better manage forests in Vietnam’s uplands,” she said.

Vietnam’s ethnic minority folk have reached a certain level of expertise so much so that on their own they could map and measure carbon. “After we facilitated their training, community leaders and members proved that they were brilliant,” said Hien.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Executive Director of Tebtebba, who also participated in the training, said that community participatory mapping and resource inventory would be useful in establishing useful baseline information from which participatory monitoring processes could be based.

“Such monitoring can include the vitality of biodiversity resources, land use and land use changes, traditional knowledge and customary ecosystem management,” she added.