



(First of two parts)

MANILA, Philippines — The plains and mountains of Capas, Tarlac, are tied to the stories of the Hungey, said to be the oldest Aeta tribe in the province.

Casimira Maniego, 68, looked out at the fields outside her home and remembered how her parents tended the green that had nurtured her and her five children. Everything she knows about the earth was passed on to her by her father, she said, the way it was passed on to her forebears.

“Our ancestors remain a part of our humanity,” she said. “Their presence is entwined with our daily lives and our environment.”

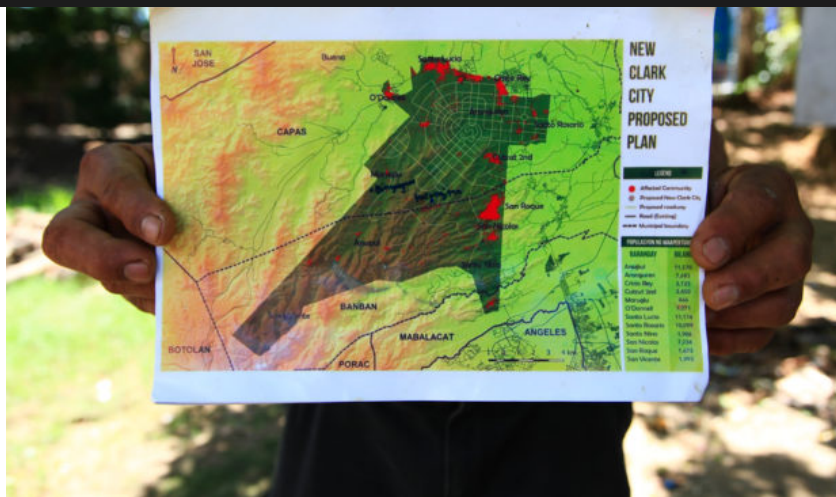


But their memories of home are in peril as the rapid development of the state-initiated New Clark City (NCC)—said to be the Philippines’ first smart and green metropolis—edges closer to their land now being claimed as eminent domain.

The NCC is set to be inaugurated on Nov. 6, but tens of thousands of farmers and tribespeople living in the development area are still ignorant of the project’s extent even as bulldozers have leveled their crops, according to a research led by the University of Glasgow (UG) in the United Kingdom and the University of the Philippines.

Displacement is imminent for the people who have tilled the land for decades, exposing them to the same disasters the NCC is being built to withstand.





A render of the proposed New Clark City land use plan. It will cover several sitios and barangays across Capas and Bamban, Tarlac. —PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN LEI LIMAYO, CONTRIBUTOR

P607-B metropolis

Located at Clark Special Freeport Zone in Capas and Bamban, NCC is a P607-billion metropolis touted as the country’s first “climate-change resilient” city.

This resilience is rooted in the master plan governing NCC’s entire economy, said Vince Dizon, chair of the Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA). At its heart is clean energy and sustainable practices, which are expected to transform the way people commute and power their homes.

But a truly resilient city doesn’t just manage its resources well; it also empowers the most vulnerable, said Red Constantino of the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities.

An archipelago with long, meandering coastlines and a tropical climate, the Philippines is among the countries most vulnerable to both sudden and slow-onset impacts of climate change, such as sea level rise and ocean acidification, Constantino said.

Citing the National Urban Development Housing Framework, he defined resilience as “the ability of a locality and its citizens to withstand impacts and shocks, and to rebuild, reorganize or transform itself when necessary.”

“[It] encompasses the entirety of development, not just infrastructure sturdiness against disasters,” Constantino said, adding: “Acting on both disaster and climate risks also presents an opportunity to improve food and water security, secure livelihoods, and spur both sustainable development and economic growth.”

That’s also the impetus that drives NCC, Dizon said. Approved in 2015 during President Benigno Aquino III’s term, the project is expected to complete Phase 1 in time for its hosting of the Southeast Asian Games in November.





What used to be verdant rice fields were now leveled and demolished to make way for various infrastructure projects. This includes a large portion in Sitio Kalangitan, which would be the site for the upcoming Capas-SCTEx Road.

NCC is designed as an alternative to highly congested, poorly planned Manila. Modeled after green cities in Singapore and China, it was conceptualized by master planners from the Asian Development Bank, Japan Overseas Infrastructure Network, and Singapore's Surbana Jurong.

"The vision [for NCC] was to be the first green, smart and truly resilient city, [and] the natural quality of the location gives it a strategically green and resilient character," Dizon said.

Manila, for one, is at zero to 80 meters above sea level (masl) and sits atop several fault lines. NCC, on the other hand, is over 200 masl at its lowest and 800 at its peak.

Unlike Manila's haphazard land use and development, NCC will develop only 40 percent of its land; the rest is for open space.

Development aggression

But Andre Ortega, a research fellow from UG who did a field investigation of areas covered by NCC, said the project was a classic case of development aggression.

Satellite images would bear him out. In the course of 18 months, NCC contractors managed to turn hectares of green into concrete.



Satellite images showing the changes on the land covered by the NCC



“Maps are the product of struggle,” Ortega said. “The BCDA has [its] own map and [its] own master plan, a narrative about how it wants to project the place, and we also have our accounts in partnership with the community. [Counter]mapping is the tool to counterpose and contradict these narratives.”

For six months, Ortega’s team lived among some of the estimated 15,000 local farmers and 20,000 Aeta and Abeling from around 26 indigenous communities likely to be affected by the development.

The team listened to the residents’ stories, and provided disposable cameras with which to take pictures of places they deemed crucial to their daily routines. The team even identified landmarks that have yet to be mapped but were tied to the residents’ lives.

What emerged, Ortega said, was a picture of generations of lowland farmers and Aeta in Tarlac: The earth gave them food, and the mountain covers protected them from the battering of typhoons.

Forbidden land

But when NCC kick-started development in 2017, productive rice fields like those of “Michael” in Sitio Kamatis were abruptly flattened to make way for concrete roads.

The sitio is the main site of the ongoing construction for Phase 1, or the National Government Administrative Center.

The rice crops in Michael’s paddies were nearly ripe for harvest when the backhoes came in 2018 and laid nearly a hectare of palay to waste.

He was paid around P300,000 for the land, which will become part of the Capas-SCTEx highway to link the town to the metropolis. But the lost crops would have been equivalent to 150 cavans of rice, he said.

Contractors also shaved certain parts of the forest cover of Mount Dalin in Sitio Alli, a small straw-hat mountain where the Aeta used to plant ube and tended farm animals.

The Aeta consider Dalin—“Tela Kaban” in their tongue—an ideal place for newly harvested palay to dry under the sun. The trails are level, and the summit is good for planting root crops.





Parts of Mount Dalin, which was shaved to make way for the Capas-SCTEx road.

Like most nomadic tribespeople, “Melba,” an Aeta Mahawang in Kalangitan, equated comfort with the freedom to roam and to plant food.

Then the bulldozers arrived “noong ikatatlo (2017),” Melba said, and the mountain they called home for generations was suddenly “marked”—forbidden land.

They were pushed back to the fringes of the sitio. Suddenly they were cramped in a small area with little arable land. “Before, we didn’t think about these things,” she said. “We were free.”

So Melba sent her two sons, aged 19 and 22, to work at the NCC construction site as laborers. But they worry that when construction for Phase 1 is done in August, they will also be out of work.

An Aeta from Sitio Kalangitan

Redirecting rivers

In retracing the residents’ geographical memories, the research team also found that NCC’s contractors had redirected the natural flow of Cutcut and Marimla rivers to make way for a 1.4-kilometer river park.

According to the NCC master plan, altering the rivers’ flow based on a 500-year flood projection maximizes the socioeconomic value while minimizing harm to the ecosystem.



Dizon said check dams and edges along the river would create a permanent 45-hectare lake midstream, both a renewable water source for the city and the heart of a central park for Phase 2.

But Yany Lopez, chair of UP’s geography department and Ortega’s coresearcher, said these drastic changes disturbed the fragile ecobalance.



These changes are expected to compound the natural vulnerability of the NCC development, said assistant professor Ony Martinez, also Ortega's coresearcher.

For one, Aranguren, Kalangitan, Maruglu and Anupul— areas covered by the NCC development—are highly susceptible to landslides and flooding.

To determine this, the team overlaid the NCC development plan over the five-year flooding and landslide hazard maps by Project Noah of the Department of Science and Technology and the Mines and Geosciences Bureau.





But “what kind of resiliency is the BCDA trying to build in this aggressive development, which clobbered the communities’ environment?” Martinez said.

Business-centric

And there have been casualties. In May, three young children were discovered dead in a pond that formed in a quarrying site for the NCC project.

“You’re really changing the ecosystem and expecting that it would not have an impact on the surrounding area,” Ortega said. “It’s a schizophrenic development. You’re trying to develop a green city but you’re removing the green.”

What’s clearest from the NCC development is that it remains business-centric, with little to no input from the people who cultivated the land, he said.

Those at most risk are the Aeta, already the most displaced group in the country, whose living conditions and food security are threatened by this development.

Dizon said the BCDA had met with an Aeta group accredited by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) every month to make sure they “were not excluded from this development.”

Part of their demands were access to water and roads, and for the BCDA to build schools in the community, he said.

Dizon also issued the assurance that no ancestral domain would be affected by the development, per the NCIP.

But this technicality masks the development’s blind spot: the people whose stake in the land transcends state records.

Part 2: New Clark City: Development for whom?

(Editor’s Note: This story was written with the support of Internews’ Earth Journalism Network.)

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Roddison Rainier Cruz

5 years ago

Yung bundok na Susong Dalaga dyan sa Tarlac, nandyan pa ba? Tapos pag nagkabaha baha...paano na...

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JGuerzon

5 years ago edited

But the conclusion here should not be ergo, don't build Clark. The Philippines must pull away from its economic dependence on Manila and build new economic centers. Jobs and people need a new hub and new opportunities must be available in the provinces. Rather, a good masterplan should integrate the needs of the affected indigenous community with their social and economic progress. It can be done. What I mean is, if the rest of the region progresses they can too. It neev has to be separate nor a mutually exclusive dilemma. The progress of the rest of the region does not necessarily mean that it comes at the expense of the indigenous community. In fact, New Clark City could (actually Should be, otherwise it fails to meet its objectives) be the stepping stone the Aetas need to accelerate their own economic status and provide them with jobs and opportunities to join the formal economy.

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CLARK1018

5 years ago

pag natapos eto project na to, lahat ng nega nag comment dto magppuntahan dn naman yan sa new clark city tapos sabihin ang ganda pala hayyyssssss

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CLARK1018

5 years ago

Aetas, farmers 'to benefit' from New Clark City development ,

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Dante Belenko

5 years ago

As long as they the aetas will benefit with the development by giving them jobs and land further from clark if they want. Forests should also be preserved to red green house effect.

Share >



CLARK1018

5 years ago

→ Dante Belenko

100% agree

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jemsbon

5 years ago

Clark would be inhabited by mostly Chinese nationals!...perhaps included in the secret agreement between iDiuterte and Xi!...

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NEW daddeManila

5 years ago edited

Another commie propaganda from Lumad converts. This development sits on what had been a long time U.S. army camp and reservation known as Camp O'Donnell in Capas that also included the Crow Valley Range Complex. This had been fenced off a long time ago by the American govt in Manila, unless your lumads sneaked in and illegally settled in parts of the reservation

Share >



5 years ago

The Lumads are in MIndanao and not in Luzon.

o o Share >



Rommel S

5 years ago

Will anyone stand up for our Negrito/Aeta brothers and sisters? I pity them and the cultural minorities of the Philippines who have always been treated as second class citizens. Their plight is miserable enough by any standard: life expectancy, infant mortality, income, literacy and education, Now, the land where they raise families will be taken away from them. What do you think will they do for a living? I used to see them at NLEX clover leaf, in San Fernando and Angeles, begging. Would we want them to turn out like these? These are human beings whose way of life will be taken away from them. What jobs await them once uprooted from their homes?

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CLARK1018

→ Rommel S

5 years ago

Aetas, farmers 'to benefit' from New Clark City development , thats the reality

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WisdomOfTheWise

5 years ago

Based on the article, it appears that, soon, New Clark City will be a world-wide poster city of what NOT to do in creating a "green" city. What a disaster! It is SNAFU in the Philippines.

o o Share >



break8

5 years ago

napuntahan ko na yan. hindi agricultural dahil mountainous, barren at walang tubig para mag sustain ng crops. previously ay practice firing range ng american troops based sa clark airbase kaya hindi ancestral land ng indigenous . ang aeta community ay mas malayo pa, sa mas looban pa at sa mas mataas pa na lugar sa zambales side . matagal na matagal na, bago pa mag pinatubo ay meroon na progressive community ng local residents sa capas shrine at hindi sila aeta but mga lowlanders at ang kanilang craft ay wood carving at hindi farming .

1 o Share >



regz

5 years ago

i hope this Project will unsaturate the congested Metro Manila and redirect migration to this Green City! of course, there will be collateral damage to the ecosystem but this initiative provides an alternative to urban decongestion of MM!

1 o Share >



Alex Aleks

→ regz

5 years ago

only the super elite can live there. not for ordinary folks

o o Share >



CLARK1018

→ Alex Aleks

5 years ago

kaya nga kasama sa master plan un maglagay ng mga residential building dyan para dun tumira un mga government employees ,

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