

The Kaliwa and Chico River projects

Pilippines: Duterte's Chinese-Funded Dam Will Displace Indigenous Communities

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An ambitious plan to improve Manila's water shortage is leaving Filipino villagers high and dry.

The journey to the crown jewel of China's Philippine ambitions is long, bumpy, and dangerous. A two-hour ride from the nearest city of Infanta, on a dirt track navigable only by motorcycle or 4×4, begins at a turnoff where the words "No to Kaliwa Dam" are scrawled on a Christian cross. The path then winds toward the village of Pagsangahan, home to groups of indigenous residents living along the banks of the river.

The Dumagat community has made this part of the country their home for centuries. Now, they fear construction of the China-backed New Centennial Water Source-Kaliwa Dam Project will threaten their way of life and perhaps even flood them out of existence.

"There are sacred spaces in the land, along the river and in the mountains," explains Bernie Corral, the de facto mayor of a *sitio*, or local settlement. On a recent afternoon in Pagsangahan, just steps from the Kaliwa River, Corral and several other Dumagat natives sat with me in an open wood cabin, shaded by an abundant tropical forest stretching from the riverbanks to the highest peaks of the Sierra Madre. Over coffee, they told me how the impending dam just upstream would likely wash this village away.

Corral described how residents fish and farm for food, growing cassava and sweet potatoes in the valley's temperate climate, and harvest rattan, a palm used to make furniture. His community believes the spring water flowing from the mountains can heal illnesses—but with heavy construction slated to begin at any moment, that's at risk.

According to Corral, government officials have not visited his community to discuss its fate once the dam project comes to life, which could happen as early as this summer. Officials insist that only 46 households will be affected by the project, which is intended to give the water-starved Manila metro area a much-needed lifeline. Meanwhile, environmental groups say that when the three planned dams flank the riverbanks, they will put up to 2,000 at risk of displacement, along with thousands more in communities further downstream.

The dams also raise thorny questions about governance and sovereignty.

In November 2018, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte signed a loan deal to provide financing for the project, with China's state-run Exim Bank financing 85 percent of the \$232.5 million bill. But like many Chinese-backed projects around the world, the Kaliwa Dam agreement calls for the Philippines to repay the loan at higher than usual interest rates. Should the

country default on its loan, it would have to transfer sovereign assets to China, echoing the fates of Ecuador and Sri Lanka, both of which used crucial resources and infrastructure as collateral.

The Beijing-friendly Duterte administration has nevertheless been eager to seal the deal. To do that, it must legally obtain the free and prior informed consent of indigenous landholders—an international legal concept enshrined in Philippine law since 1997. The country's National Commission for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) has been charged with securing the approval of residents in the project's wake. But Dumagat leaders say the process started in January, and details on the project's impacts remain scarce.

Corral says he presented a government-issued certificate of ancestral domain to one official, who said that if Duterte decided the dam should be built, his paper was worthless. Other Dumagat residents say they have never been invited to meetings to talk about the project.

"As a community, we haven't discussed the possibility of relocation," says farmer and Dumagat native Milicio Sabiduria, 60. "Now that it looks like it's going to happen, I'm more worried than I was before. I don't want to move."

Prior to our meeting, Sabiduria did not know Duterte had already signed a deal with China to finance the project, nor did he know the agreement allowed for Chinese investors to control the land should the Philippines fail to pay its loans. Neither did Josie Buendicho, 48, who lives a few houses away. "I know nothing about the deals made," she says when asked about the agreement with China. "I had no idea."

Arnel Cabalida, 22, attended the first NCIP meeting arranged to explain the project to his settlement. "They just repeated, 'Are you for it or against it?'" he says of the January meeting. "But I feel like we cannot make an informed choice. The details of the dam, the effects, the pros and cons, they were not explained to us." Cabalida has since learned that his community lies directly in the projected basin of one of the dams. "For sure, we will be relocated," he says. "Our sitio will be underwater."

China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, announced in late 2013, is an unprecedented effort to fund global infrastructure projects with Chinese investments. And in the Philippines, the Belt and Road has met a natural partner in Duterte's \$158 billion Build, Build, Build project, tasked with building airports, roads, bridges, and dams to transform the archipelago's faltering infrastructure.

In the Cordillera Mountains, stretching north of the Sierra Madre toward the northernmost tip of the island of Luzon, the Chico River Pump Irrigation Project—which would divert water from the province of Kalinga to its northern neighbor, Cagayan—is also controversial. Like the Kaliwa project, it is backed by a Chinese loan agreement which has not been made public, and adjacent indigenous groups say they have not given their free and prior informed consent. Bulldozers have begun to clear the project site, which broke ground last year.

A nearby dormitory houses about 50 Chinese workers, according to a security guard at the gate of the complex. Tang Huazhuan, who has resided in the Philippines since 2005 and now works on the Chico River project as an engineer, says he was pegged for his current role because of his experience working in the country. "Especially with the Belt and Road, there are a lot of loan projects everywhere," he says. "Someone has to be doing it, and I am doing it here."

Tang, standing at the gate of the complex, says the project is popular. "The locals are pretty happy with the project," he says, insisting that they want it to be done as soon as possible.

It's a dubious claim, given the mounting local opposition the Chico River project has faced. In late

April, thousands of indigenous peoples from Kalinga and neighboring provinces poured into Tabuk, the provincial capital, for Cordillera Day, an annual celebration of indigenous heritage that transformed into a rally against the Chico River plan.

The Igorot, a catch-all term for indigenous groups in the Cordillera region, have long been known for their activism. During the rule of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, they united against a proposal to construct a dam on the Chico River, setting equipment on fire and forming human barricades to block military forces from entering the project site. Locals fondly recall the story of a nursing mother who squirted milk from her breast onto an approaching soldier to ward him off.

The turning point, residents say, came in 1980 when Butbut tribal leader Macli-ing Dulag was assassinated by military forces under the command of Marcos, drawing widespread condemnation and causing the dam project to be abandoned. His son, 59-year-old Robert Macli-ing, who has organized tribal opposition to subsequent irrigation and energy proposals on the river, says the presence of Chinese investors has made things more complicated.

"During my father's time, the people we were in conflict with were Filipinos as well," he says. "Now, what's happening is there's a Chinese company who doesn't speak Filipino or Kalinga, and who are actually permitted by policy to be here. They are part of the President's Build, Build, Build program. They own everything here, including the hiring of workers. That's difficult."

But the Igorot of Cordillera, weathered by decades of opposition to investors eager to reshape their land, have emphasized unity among the various peoples of the mountains, organizing internally through indigenous networks and broadcasting their message to national media and lawmakers.

"This project will not benefit the people of Kalinga," says incoming congressman Ferdinand Gaité of the left-wing Bayan Muna party, who attended Cordillera Day. Gaité says he has viewed details of the financing agreement with China and is urging the people of the region to unite in their opposition to the project. "When the affected people rise and state their position," he says, "there is pressure, locally and internationally. We've seen that."

On May 3, less than two weeks after Cordillera Day, the Philippines' NCIP formally called for the Chico River project to be suspended, saying in a letter that although the free and prior informed consent of all affected communities had not been obtained, "earthmoving and construction are already taking place within the domain." Days later, government administrators agreed to temporarily suspend the project pending approval from adjacent indigenous communities.

Robert Macli-ing hopes this will give his community the chance to register their stance on the project—and he says no further discussion of the plan is needed. The people of Tinglayan already have their answer. "We don't want to know more about the project," he says, "because it's already a no."

The Dumagat residents of the Kaliwa river basin have taken steps to organize against the project. Joan Jaime, the campaign coordinator of the indigenous-rights coalition Katribu, says the group has established a locally headquartered initiative to oppose the Kaliwa Dam project.

The China-backed plan is not the first proposal to dam the river. The government has mulled the project since the rule of Marcos, but past presidents never managed to finance the project. Sabiduria, the local farmer, says he first learned of proposals to dam the river in the late 1990s from bypassing engineers en route to inspect the site. It was not until 2009 when another group of engineers casually mentioned that, should the dam be built, his community would likely be resettled.

This uncertainty hasn't slowed the project, says Jaime, whose organization has monitored the

assemblies aimed to obtain free, prior and informed consent. “They are fast-tracking the process to get the consent of the indigenous peoples,” she says. The project has also yet to receive an environmental compliance certificate, a legal evaluation of its impact on the Sierra Madre ecosystem. The area is home to several threatened species, including the endangered Philippine eagle and rare species of rattan, according to a past environmental impact assessment by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency. The government has not yet revealed how, or if, it plans to preserve their habitats.

Several alternatives to the China-backed Kaliwa project have been proposed, including a Japanese-funded proposal to build a smaller dam with a lighter environmental impact on the region. The IBON Foundation, a Philippines NGO focused on people-oriented research, insists Manila’s water supply can be obtained from alternative freshwater sources, such as the nearby Laguna Lake. But the Duterte administration has shown no interest in reopening the bidding, and alternative proposals have not been discussed at the NCIP meetings to obtain the consent of indigenous residents.

Then again, most indigenous residents have never been called to such meetings. Those who have recall damning stories of how their consent was obtained.

In Tabuk, a village downstream in the site of another of the proposed dams, Dumagat residents say they have been harassed by military personnel assigned to protect the construction area. Indigenous peoples living in the shadow of both the Kaliwa and Chico River projects told stories of a farcical process in which government officials have been said to ask attendees to raise their hands in favor of the project after minutes of discussion, and to collect thumbprints from indigenous title holders under the guise of a food distribution program.

Cabalida, who attended the January meeting at his sitio, says NCIP officials discussed how the project would benefit Manila—but not what it would provide the Sierra Madre. To him, the commission seemed hell-bent on getting a “yes” answer to the project Duterte and Xi had shook hands on months before. “I felt it was kind of phony,” he says. “Like, ‘Why are you asking us now? You come here and tell us it’s a done deal. And then you ask us? It means you don’t really value our decision, you don’t want to hear us out. It’s all for show.’”

Most residents, like Cabalida, fear their objections will ultimately not block a project that appears inevitable. If they are forced to move, he says he wants to be allowed to retain the semi-nomadic lifestyle he and the Dumagat natives inhabiting the region enjoy now: to be given free rein to roam the Sierra Madre.

“This project is going to benefit Manila for many, many years,” Cabalida says. “We also want to enjoy the benefits of the mountain range and the lifestyle we’re accustomed to for the same amount of time that project is running.”

“Basically,” he says, “leave us alone to live as we’re used to.”

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P.S.

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<https://www.thenation.com/article/philippine-duterte-indigenous-china/>