



REBIRTH OF A MANGROVE FOREST

As climate change intensifies cyclones in the Philippines, an Oxfam partner is helping local fisherfolk revive a forest that is protecting their lives and livelihoods.

BY ELIZABETH STEVENS | WINTER 2020

The bleached remains of ancient mangroves dot the coastal landscape of Eastern Samar. They are monuments to a battle they both lost and won. That battle has a name: Haiyan, the super typhoon that struck the Philippines in 2013. What these trees lost was their lives, but by buffering the coast from the storm's ferocious winds and waves, the protection they provided people and the environment is immeasurable.

On an October morning, Pedro Calumpiano, the president of the Maslog Coconut Farmers and Fishermen Association (MCFFA), sits in the dappled shade of mangroves on an island near the hamlet of Maslog. Here, new growth crowds around the standing deadwood—the result not only of nature's resilience but of a yearslong project to restore the damaged forest.

"Mangroves are very important," Calumpiano says. "They provide a place for fish and crabs to spawn, and they give humans protection during cyclones." Despite Haiyan's extraordinary force, he explains, everyone in Maslog survived the storm.

Since 2015, the association has planted more than 20,000 mangrove seedlings, aided in recent years by Oxfam and its local partner PRRM (the Philippines Rural Reconstruction Movement). Oxfam and PRRM have funded bamboo walkways that enable people to navigate the island at high tide. We've provided fishing boats and accident insurance, and soon we will distribute electronic cards that will enable association members to easily bank their savings and receive cash aid when the next disaster strikes.

Growing mangrove seedlings produces a modest income, as other communities need them to shore up their own forests. But PRRM and the association are hatching another plan, as well: make this island a destination for ecotourists—for the people who want to view local monkeys, birds, and sea life up close.

LOOMING THREAT

Climate change—and the likelihood that more catastrophic storms like Haiyan are in the cards—is a looming threat and a current reality.

"In the last 10 years, the typhoons have become stronger. I was born 60 years ago, and I never experienced a typhoon like Yolanda," says Calumpiano, referring to Haiyan by its local name.

Already, it has made this impoverished community poorer.

“Before Yolanda, the fish were nearby. It only took one liter of gas to reach them,” says MCFFA member Julita Daep. “Now it takes five liters.” That alone has driven some fishing families out of business, but there’s hope that coaxing the fish nursery back to health will make a difference.

LIFTING SPIRITS

Meanwhile, as in resilient communities everywhere, the association members are experts at making the most of what they have.

“We enjoy planting mangroves together,” says one woman. “It relieves stress and gives us a break from our work at home.” Others chime in: “When we’re working together, we talk and laugh. We joke around and sing. We share our problems.”

Calumpiano wants to see to it that the forest project provides respite from some of those problems. He is a strong believer in gender equality and knows that some of the women in his community face harsh treatment in their lives. “If men treat women as equals, they can have a good relationship,” he says. He and his wife share household work, he says, and he chokes up as he talks about their loving marriage of 30 years. Calumpiano used to



ABOVE: Pedro Calumpiano, president of the MCFFA, holds a mangrove sapling. Mangroves, which sequester carbon, play an important role in mitigating climate change. *Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America*

be a well-known boxer, representing the Philippines in the Asian Games, but he rejects the machismo that bedevils the sport, and finds practical ways in his life to promote the rights and well-being of women. “In the association,” he says, “I encourage men to share the women’s work of potting seedlings.”

Poverty, disasters, and the climate crisis weigh heavily on vulnerable communities like Maslog, but the mangroves are

beginning to thrive again, and that is lifting people’s spirits. Not only does the forest offer them hope for a better future, but it brightens their lives in the present. Says member Lolita Catologo, “The sight of the monkeys and birds gives me joy.”



PHOTO: ELIZABETH STEVENS / OXFAM AMERICA

DO ONE MORE THING TODAY

Climate change is increasing the risk of severe weather-related emergencies. Local organizations like PRRM and MCFFA are well positioned to assist vulnerable communities, and they deserve our support. Read more about Oxfam’s work to strengthen and promote local humanitarian leadership: oxf.am/localhumanitarianleadership.



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