

## ROOT CAUSES

We asked you to tell us about the specific project you are working on now (if not currently, recently). Lay out what you see as the issue(s) at play in your project and why you think the situation exist (why is there a need for such a project in the first place?). Trace the root causes as deep as you can. If the root causes are clear to you, try to explain it in unassuming language. If your explanation gets stuck, let us see where. Raise the questions around which your analysis becomes unclear.

I used to coordinate a program for an environmental legal assistance organization in Palawan, Philippines. In 1997, the organization, ELAC, was invited to teach community paralegal skills to the Coron Tagbanua, an island tribe in the northern tip of the province. The Tagbanua leaders sought ELAC's legal assistance in the face of myriad external threats

since the law was enacted in 1993, takes years of advocacy to push through. In Palawan, only four tribes out of eleven applicants to date have approved. The Coron Tagbanua recently became the fifth.

Tribal leaders view this recognition as a great victory. Now that national government has legally de-

## ABBY REYES

ABBY REYES has been organizing WWC full-time since January in New York City, the site of her most recent adventure: finding an apartment. She left the Philippines last summer to begin an internship at the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) in New York City, as a recipient of the Lela Initiative award for emerging women leaders. At WEDO, Abby worked on impacts of coastal tourism in preparation for the 1999 U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development. In September, she was part of the secretariat for the Second International Women and Water Conference in Kathmandu, Nepal. She maintains links to her work in the Philippines by serving on the Board of Trustees of the Environmental Legal Assistance Center in Palawan, to which she was recently re-elected. Please keep Abby in your thoughts and prayers as she comes to terms with the loss of her boyfriend, Terence Freitas. In early March, Terence and two American women were killed while working with indigenous peoples in Colombia.



Hometown: Herndon, VA, USA

Birthday: September 28, 1973

to their *lupaing ninuno*, or ancestral domain. These concerns include illegal commercial fishing, cyanide fishing, dynamite fishing, illegal logging, sand quarrying, encroachment, illicit island selling, and difficulty processing the tribe's application for government recognition of their ancestral domain. Of these concerns, the Tagbanua consider the last the most pressing. For the Philippine government to recognize indigenous territory, a tribe must go through a laborious and complex bureaucratic process that typically,

lineated their ancestral domain, the Tagbanua should theoretically be able to tackle other ecological and cultural threats facing their community. Unfortunately, this optimistic picture - that legal recognition would suddenly make everyone respect the tribe - doesn't acknowledge what I saw to be a far more menacing challenge. While legal recognition is vital to being able to defend resources, it alone is not likely to win over local townspeople with vested interest in illicit resource extractive activities. As in most places,

it seems that the historical split between the tribe and local townspeople falls along race and class lines which manifest as abuse of power and deeply rooted mistrust.

Townspeople, mostly old Spanish-decent families and more recently arrived Chinese-decent merchants, live in Coron Town, located on the "mainland" island of Busuanga. Tagbanuas, indigenous to the region, live on Coron Island (and several other regional islands and mainland villages), located in Coron Bay, a stone's throw across the water from Busuanga Island. Racial animosity here manifests in familiar ways: paternalistic and reluctant service provision

forest to the water's edge, where several Tagbanua youth live, sharing a hut away from their families' homes in order to attend Town schools.

While I read the contrast between Coron's local elite and indigenous people in every interaction, most townspeople - locals and expat residents alike - seemed oblivious of the disparity, let alone unjust conditions embodied within that disparity. Even Tagbanua leaders, people for whom I hold utmost respect, had not traced conflict back to these pervasive race and class dynamics. While certainly aware of discrimination, Tagbanua leaders, on the whole, did not seem to consider it a barrier to solving their natural resource use conflicts once legal recognition of their ancestral domain had been granted.

*Whether you see these environmental violators as merely ignorant or as discriminating illegalistas, understanding their starting points is vital.*

In the past, this discrimination has bred mistrust and often led to an impasse in negotiations between local officials

from local institutions, discriminating and unfair prices from local merchants for indigenous goods, colloquial slurs using the name *Tagbanua* in derogatory ways. Class divisions fuel these racial divides. Because the Tagbanua typically have less money (until recently their livelihood has been largely subsistence and not fully dependent on the outside market, as it now is), those who choose to live in Coron Town live on the physical margins, usually in clusters of shared foreshore structures. Walking Coron Town's streets, the handful of beggars seen are usually Tagbanua, darker in skin, barefoot, with *nga nga* (betlenut) red lips. This is the Tagbanua townspeople see. Townspeople hold stereotypes of Tagbanuas based on cultural and language difference, physical isolation from the mainstream, and material poverty.

and the tribe. In recent years, with NGO support, the Tagbanua have become more assertive of their environmental and human rights to local and national officials. While these assertions (at public hearings, through the court system, the ancestral domain ruling itself) have been powerful, they seem merely to skim the surface of a buried mountain of injustice. In some ways, it can be called progress that local officials will now sit in a conference room with Tagbanua, do "multi-stakeholder" tourism or land use planning, make attempts to do public hearings in Tagbanua villages, and the like. But it feels more like the status quo masked. A meeting will decide that Tagbanua Traditional Authority should approve tourism development on Coron Island, but does not leave room for the Tagbanua to choose no tourism at all. Tagbanua leaders and local officials from Coron Town do not come to the table as equals, even given legal recognition of ancestral domain. Inequalities in political, educational, economic, and social mobility and power are still too great.

In contrast, those with whom I had to work in Coron Town's local government came largely from local elite families. Those in office were never very far removed from those locally known to control the black markets (of real estate, fish, resort development, timber, coral, seahorses, etc.). In fact, ELAC is currently investigating one local official's key role in brokering illegal sale of several Tagbanua islands. When in Town, I used office space at Municipal Hall, was courted by city council members younger than myself (practically inherited positions) with polo shirts, shades, and keys to the latest motorcycles specially shipped from Manila. Their days were spent hustling, their nights at the town's disco, from which house music nightly drifted down past coastal mangrove

The babysteps described above are important - historic, in fact. But to get at the root causes of natural resource and cultural conflict in Coron, it seems like pretty massive community organizing efforts - not only with the tribal communities but also with townspeople and resident expats - need to happen. Community organizing could bridge communication and cultural gaps between tribe and town (by, say, uniting over "being green"). Parallel to general community organizing efforts - and equal in necessity - is



the act of engaging the principle town-based decision makers in honest dialogue about how and why they make policy as they do. By using a communicator equal in professional rank to these local officials, they might start talking. NGO advocates might then begin to better understand how to best approach historical barriers of race and class with this group of influential people. And maybe they would actually listen. Whether you see these environmental violators as merely ignorant (and therefore educatable) or as discriminating *illegalistas*, understanding their starting points is vital.

With community organizing and honest dialogue with local officials, the legal spectre held over them for environmental violations gains strength and influence. I can imagine, with such efforts, a local offi-

cial who double talks at a public hearing being shocked at voices piping up from the audience - his neighbors, his wife's maid's friend - calling him on wrongdoing. I can imagine his defenses go up and then, eventually, coming down. With intense organizing and honest dialogue with key stakeholders, eventually, things change. I still believe in that.

Currently, NGOs, including ELAC, have not broadened their scope to consider making community organizing efforts in Coron Town itself. And at this point, Tagbanua leaders themselves may consider any such efforts as helping the 'enemy camp.' But as I left Coron last summer, it seemed pretty clear that given who holds the power - the power of political and natural resource control - any movement reaching deeper than the surface would have to start here.

## KATIE TINTO

*KATIE TINTO is currently trapped in the NYU law library, where she is studying for finals. A Root-Tilden-Kern Scholar for public interest law, Katie focuses on race and gender issues in the criminal justice system. This summer she returns to the Bay Area, to work at Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in San Francisco.*

*Hometown: Syracuse, NY, USA*

*Birthday: June 28, 1974*



When I think of root causes, both of domestic violence as a societal problem and the family violence prevention program I helped to create, my thoughts burrow themselves deeper and deeper until I reach the word, "misunderstanding." For domestic violence itself, this signifies the misunderstanding by society of the prevalence of emotional and physical abuse against women, the power dynamics and sexual politics that underlie that abuse, and of our ability to create positive relationships. For the community education program I worked on spe-

cifically, I see the "root" of misunderstanding as encompassing the inability of service providers to examine community prevention methods, the lack of communication between various groups in a community, and the difficulty of practicing cooperative methods of community building rather than competitive ones.

Why was a community based family violence prevention program necessary? In my thoughts, the base root of misunderstanding branches into roots writ-