

## [Time to put people before land profits](#)

By **Joji Cariño**, Special to CNN

*Editor's note: Joji Cariño, an Ibaloi-Igorot from the Cordillera region of the Philippines, is director of the Forest Peoples Program. The views expressed are the writers' own.*

At the end of last October, Elisa Lascoña Tulid was shot at point blank range in front of her husband and four-year-old daughter. She died as the result of retaliation for daring to defend the rights of her people to the lands where they live and farm in the Philippines' Quezon Province.

Her story was not unique in 2013, nor was it limited to the Philippines. In Thailand, assassins reportedly killed Prajob Nao-opas after he demanded a clean-up of dangerous industrial toxins that were polluting farming communities in Chachoengsao Province. In Colombia, gunmen killed Adelinda Gómez Gaviria, who led a campaign against a gold mine that was damaging her community's farmland. Pedro César García Moreno, another Colombian leader, was shot, likely for his role in resisting yet another mining operation.

The murders of these community leaders took place against a backdrop of an inexorable grab for land in tropical forest regions, and are becoming a prominent feature of investment trends in these countries.

Increasingly, the land on which Indigenous Peoples and local communities live is becoming more valuable for food producers, industrial manufacturers, and the investor community for its ability to produce the raw materials that power the global economy.

So the question of who owns the land should define the shape and outcome of this persistent global quest for new sources of food, fuel, water and fiber. States have the duty to protect the customary land rights of Indigenous Peoples and communities, yet even when legally recognized, these are rarely enforced. And on too many occasions to count, human rights defenders face death.

The reports of unsavory and often illegal corporate and government behaviors have damaged reputations and consumer confidence. In response, some of the world's largest companies, including Nestlé and Unilever, have pledged to clean up their supply chains, promising to make sure the palm oil, timber, gold and other minerals and raw materials they purchase or source will not come at the cost of violating the land rights of the people who live on the land.

International initiatives such as the United Nations' REDD+ scheme and multinational organizations such as the World Bank, meanwhile, have also required greater protections for the rights and resources of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. They have called them essential to eliminating political conflicts, mitigating climate change, and increasing the world's food supply.

All of these commitments sound like great news. Yet, a **new report** from the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) finds that the area of forestland secured for community ownership since 2008 is less than 20 percent of the area that was secured in the previous six years – meaning that governments are actually slowing down in their efforts

to protect community land rights. The research examined 33 countries representing 85 percent of forests in the world's low and middle income countries. Perhaps even worse, laws passed since 2008 are weaker, recognizing fewer rights than those passed before, and none of the recent laws in the countries studied recognize community ownership of land. Governments still claim 61 percent of the forests in low and middle income countries, home to tens of millions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

The RRI report also finds that governments of developing countries continue to pursue economic development by allocating lands and resources to investors through long term concession agreements, which seldom involve consultation with the people that depend on these lands and resources for a living, or due diligence on the part of many investors to address rights infringements.

True economic security is impossible when people are denied ownership rights to the lands that they have lived on for generations – and when their future continues to be determined by governments or other actors. Industry and government leaders must translate their words into action; their failures generate tragedies, not profit.

What happens on the ground when their promises aren't kept? More injustice will lead to more horrific crimes and more poverty. Ultimately this will undermine global economic development, social stability and efforts to slow climate change before they even begin.

Recognizing rights delivers good results. The violence against Elisa Lascoña Tulid and her heroic peers will stop only when humans are valued more than profits from their land. It is past time for governments – my own included – and financial interests to embrace this reality, with no strings attached, before the next advocate is gunned down in cold blood.