



Louise Mabulo pruning a cacao plant. These plants thrive in the Bicol climate and are also just the right height to survive bad weather like typhoons.

# Fighting deforestation with cacao farming

By planting a new crop, an enterprising young woman is working with farmers to restore deforested land. NURUDIN SADALI reports.

Farmers in Bicol, Philippines, live difficult lives. Their harvest is **vulnerable** to many factors outside their control. Events such as bad weather could drastically affect their livelihoods. In 2016, typhoon Nock-ten hit the region and 80 percent of all farmland in Bicol was destroyed.

Because they had lost their livelihoods, the farmers resorted to cutting down trees and selling the timber to make ends meet. However, clearing

forests is not good for the environment.

It was in the wake of this destruction that Louise Mabulo decided to step up and help her community. Knowing that typhoons occur seasonally, Ms Mabulo and her team came up with a long-term solution for the farmers. She launched the Cacao Project, which involves helping local farmers adopt cacao farming.

In an interview with CNN Philippines, Ms Mabulo explained

how there was a “need to create new livelihoods that were more sustainable and resilient to disasters. Because, we couldn’t keep **weathering** through the yearly cycles of typhoons”.

Planting cacao has since proven to be a brilliant solution. Since its **inception**, the Cacao Project has trained over 200 farmers. Ms Mabulo explained that the programme “promote(s) natural and responsible farming practices, making fertilisers, and preserving traditional farming methods”. The Cacao Project has planted more than 70,000 trees across 70 hectares of land. This is an area the size of more than 130 football fields!

The rebuilding effort of Ms Mabulo, her team and the farmers is inspiring. It is a story of resilience and a showcase of community spirit. In the Philippines, the term “bayanihan” is used to describe this community spirit in action. This is very similar to the Malay concept of gotong-royong.

## Also a great cook

Louise Mabulo is no stranger to the limelight. At the age of 12, she was a finalist in the 2011 Filipino edition of Junior MasterChef. She placed fifth,



Ms Mabulo with a farmer in Bicol. She has helped many farmers recover from Typhoon Nock-ten, which struck in 2016. The typhoon destroyed most of the agricultural land in the area. This meant that even after the immediate danger of the storm, the community continued to suffer. Not only did they have to rebuild their homes, they also needed to figure out ways to make money to live there. Ms Mabulo’s Cacao Project came to their rescue.

and continued to pursue her passion in cooking after the competition.

Since then, she has won several local and regional cooking awards. This includes winning the Best Dessert Award at the Disciples des Escoffier Young Talent Trophy Asia in 2015, despite being the youngest competitor there. Imagine achieving all that before even graduating from secondary school.

Last year, however, she achieved her highest honour yet. Mabulo was declared joint-winner of the prestigious Young Champions of the Earth Prize. It was awarded by The United Nations Environment Programme. The award celebrates the efforts of entrepreneurs under the age of 30, for leading environmental change in their communities. Ms Mabulo was one of seven winners worldwide.

Ms Mabulo was awarded the prize for her work with the organisations she had founded — the Cacao Project and Culinary Lounge. Her work has not only helped **restore** the environment in her hometown of Bicol, but has also had a tremendously positive impact on her community.

## VOCAB BUILDER

**vulnerable** (say “vul-ne-re-bel”; adjective) = at risk of getting attacked or overcome by what is not good.

**weathering** (say “we-the-ring”; verb) = coming safely through a difficult situation.

**inception** (say “in-sep-shen”; noun) = establishment.

**eroding** (say “ee-ro-ding”; verb) = washing or wearing away.

**restore** (say “res-tor”; verb) = return something into its original condition.

## WHY CACAO IS THE RIGHT CROP FOR BICOL

The seeds of the cacao tree are known as cocoa beans. They are the most important ingredient in chocolate. It is estimated that about 7 million metric tonnes of chocolate is consumed every year. That is the weight of 1.2 million African elephants! With that much demand for chocolate, it is no wonder the cacao plant is so valuable.

Besides the financial benefits of growing cacao, there are practical and environmental reasons for growing it. For one, the cacao plant thrives in areas with rainy weather and high temperatures. Therefore, the cacao plant likes the climate in Bicol.

The cacao plant is also just the right height to survive bad weather. It is neither too short nor too tall. Short crops such as rice and pineapples tend to drown during floods. The height of the coconut trees, on the other hand, means that they are often uprooted by strong winds during storms.

The cacao plant has a very strong root system. This means that the plant is less likely to be uprooted during storms. This strong root system also helps to hold soil in place. It forms a barrier preventing wind and rain from **eroding** the soil. This, in turn, prevents disastrous landslides from happening.