

# Indigenous neighborhood's food insecurity

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It was a cold and foggy morning as I passed by our beloved *Barangay* Bacusanon, a one-hour *habal-habal*<sup>1</sup> ride on muddy and bumpy roads going to *Sitio* Mahusay from my home of *Sitio* San Guinto.

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<sup>1</sup> *Habal-habal* is a motorcycle with wooden plank at its back so that two to three passengers can sit close to each other.

Located in the western foothills of Mt. Kalatungan in Bukidnon, the *barangay* is part of an indigenous community conserved area (ICCA)<sup>2</sup> where the two tribes of Bukidnon – the Talaandig and the Manobo – live peacefully.

The two tribes respect each other by showing support in the performance of rituals and in decision-making. They continue to perform their indigenous knowledge system and practices (IKSPs) to show young people how to be proud of their traditions. This is one reason why, despite widespread poverty and harsh living conditions, the ambiance of the community is very relaxing and breathtaking.

Ninety percent of the community's population are indigenous peoples (IPs), while the remainder are migrants who married into the community. Majority of community members are experiencing a lack of livelihood and food – the biggest problem that the community is facing today.

While many families are beneficiaries of the government's *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps), this is not enough to sustain them, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Robert M. Salang, 44, *Sitio Mahusay* Chairman, is teary-eyed as he narrates

the dismal situation of the community. As a leader he struggles with seeing his community suffering from lack of food. Before the pandemic, the said community abounds in food and farm products. Their food supplies can sustain the whole community for many months; they have access to markets where they can deliver their vegetables and root crops. In fact, prior to the pandemic, the demand for their products was so high that they sold out almost immediately.

When the pandemic hit, their feeling of confidence was immediately replaced by fear and shock. Helplessness set in as the local authorities declared a one-month lockdown from March to April 2020 in *Barangay Bacusanon*. They had no choice but to follow the government's health and safety protocols during the pandemic.

They strictly implemented border controls, denying entry of visitors and tourists to the *barangay*. At first, the villagers panicked because they did not know what to do. As a good leader, their Chairman helped them calm down by instituting concrete and doable activities like scheduling a meeting to ensure availability of food that can sustain them during the lockdown period.

When the lockdown ended in April 2020, the country was placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), which is no better than the

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to "natural and modified ecosystems containing significant biodiversity values, ecological services and cultural values voluntarily conserved by indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples and local communities, and governed through customary laws or other effective means"

total lockdown as far as the community is concerned. They were allowed to go back to their farms and the forest but they could not sell their root crops and vegetables because the markets were still closed. The food stocks of the villagers were running severely low because they could not buy from the market.



Several buyers were willing to purchase vegetables directly from them, but the presence of checkpoints were a major deterrent. In the end, the villagers were left with no choice but to eat their own produce, lest these spoil and to fend off starvation.

Since they could not go out of the community, the villagers decided to just plant on their farms and forage in the nearby forest. They consoled themselves that at least they were safe from the pandemic and still had food to eat. However, after some time they ran out of fertilizers and seeds.

They were able to get support from the government, in the form of foodstuffs and rice, which they used to supplement the ones they harvested and gathered.

But even before COVID-19, the community has faced threats of hunger, mostly due to landlessness. Almost 90 percent of their land is under a contract-

growing arrangement with Sumifru, Philippines, one of the largest banana producers in the country.

Villagers who had landholdings willingly went into contract-growing arrangements with Sumifru because it was easy money – the company paid a handsome rent, gave incentives, provided all the inputs, and even hired them as laborers.

However, they could not plant anything else and had to buy their food from the market or gather them in the forest. Effectively, the land was no longer theirs for 25 years, which was the usual length of such arrangements.

And those were the lucky ones. Many villagers do not even have land to call their own. These people had work as laborers – doing back-breaking work for a measly pay of 200 pesos a day, or

plant on their neighbor's farms, and of course, scrounge for food in the forests. But how did these indigenous peoples, who supposedly owned these native lands since time immemorial, end up being landless? The simple answer is apparently, they "sold" their lands some time ago.

*Datu* "Abayan" Isabelo L. Tandejon, 44 years old, and a resident in *Sitio* Megbadiang, Bacusanon, Pangantucan, Bukidnon, is the tribal chieftain of Bacusanon and a sub-leader of their people's organization, Nagkahiusang Manobong Manununod sa Yutang Kabilin, Inc. (NAMAMAYUK).

He is one of those whose family's lands were sold a long time ago. For the longest time, he took it as fact that the land is no longer theirs, although he still felt a pang of regret. Until such time that he began to question the deal.

"One day, it occurred to me that if the lands were sold by my parents, then how come we could not find one single document that proves it? There was not a single document with my father's signature on it showing that they indeed sold the land," *Datu* Abayan explains.

Armed with this realization, *Datu* Abayan talked to other people in the same situation. Lo and behold, not a single document which bears the signatures of their forefathers proves that their lands were sold.

If such a document existed, it was in the form of a "Deed of Donation," under which the land was "donated" for a measly sum of 500 pesos per hectare.

*Datu* Abayan became intrigued. What really went down during those said purchases? He decided to talk to the families who bought the lands, hoping that they could shed more light on the matter. It turned out that even the buyers do not possess signed documents consummating the sale.

In the end, the families who "purchased" the lands in question agreed to give back half of their lands to the heirs of those who sold it.

Aside from contract-growing and bogus sales, other threats to land in and around the village are the boundary disputes between the municipalities of Pangantucan and Kalilangan, and the Army Reservation Area (ARA) declared on some parts of it since the 1980s.

Henien Lauron, 18 years old, is a resident in *Sitio* Pud-ong. The *sitio* is located at the southern area of Bacusanon which is a contested area between Kalilangan and Pangantucan. It is also within the ARA. Henien has taken over the task of farming from her father.

While she has her own land, she also works on her neighbor's land, for which she is paid in rice and dried fish. Henian's life is difficult to say the least, but she has no choice because she

married early (at age 16) and has children to feed.

Working on other people's land meant that she cannot pay attention to her children's daily needs, as well as their farm. There have been times when neglect has led to losing their crops to pests.

"It is so hard to work on two farms and still pay attention to the needs of our families," Henian shares. "We also need to rest but we will not eat if we just depend on our own farms," she adds.

The COVID-19 pandemic has especially been brutal to people like Henian. The restrictions due to lockdowns meant that they cannot go to their places of work, which means they do not have extra income. There were times that they only eat twice a day to prolong their food stocks. This has been especially hard for the children.

Fortunately for Henian, they live on indigenous land where foraging yields root crops, berries, and other edible plants and where wild game is still available. They just need to know where to look, which is supposedly part of their indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs).



However, Henian admits that their desire to eke out a day-to-day existence has resulted in them forgetting their indigenous ways. With the pandemic, Henian realized that *lumads*<sup>3</sup> need not go hungry if they use their IKSPs, if they allow their lands and forests to feed them; and, if they practice traditional food preservation techniques handed down through generations.

While poverty and food insecurity still haunt these IP enclaves, there is hope that going back to their indigenous ways of planting and gathering, food preservation, even land tenure management, will serve them in good stead now and for future generations. ■

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<sup>3</sup> Cebuano term for indigenous