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Impact of COVID-19 to the Manobo Indigenous Peoples in Pangantucan, Bukidnon, Philippines

Introduction

There are quite a number of indigenous tribes or ethnic groups in the Philippines. Despite the abundance of natural resources around them, they remain the poorest, least privileged, and most disadvantaged sector. They are deprived of rights and opportunities to develop capacities to cope with the fast-changing social, economic, and political environment (ILO, 2021). The indigenous peoples (IPs) mostly reside in the mountains, and hence were not affected by Spanish or American colonization, which is the primary reason they were able to retain their customs and traditions (Valdeavilla, 2018).

There are two main ethnic groups comprising several upland and lowland indigenous tribes living within the Philippines – from the northern and southern parts. The IPs living in the northern part of the country are called the *Igorots*, whereas those non-Muslim indigenous tribes in the south are referred to as *Lumad* (Valdeavilla, 2018).

Lumad is a Cebuano term which means “native” or “indigenous”, collectively referring to the IPs found in Mindanao and Western Visayas.

In Mindanao, there are 13 ethnic groups which are the *Blaan*, *Bukidnon*, *Higaonon*, *Mamanwa*, *Mandaya*, *Manobo*, *Mansaka*, *Sangir*, *Subanen*, *Tagabawa*, *Tagakaulo*, *Tasaday*, and *T'boli*. Among these, the Manobo tribe includes further big ethnic groups such as the *Ata-Manobo*, *Agusan-Manobo*, and *Dulangan-Manobo* to name a few. The total population of the *Manobo* group is unknown as they occupy the core areas in main provinces of the Mindanao Region (Valdeavilla, 2018).

At the start of the year 2020, a rapidly spreading virus took the world by storm. The Corona Virus or COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization as a pandemic. The global threat of the pandemic has instituted travel restrictions, limited physical contact and prohibition of mass gatherings. This has also disrupted the food system resulting to inadequate food supply to consumers and surplus products by the producers. Everyone in the world has been greatly affected by the pandemic but more so with the way of life of the IPs.

This brief aims to show how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Manobos of Pangantucan in Bukidnon province. The main respondents of this study are the members of the Nagkahiusang Manobong Manununod sa Yutang Kabilin (NAMAMAYUK, Inc.), an IP organization (IPO) with over 200 member households.

Due to constraints brought about by the pandemic, a mixed data gathering methodology was used. An initial email questionnaire was sent to the IPO and was followed-up with face-to-face interviews upon ease of travel restrictions and protocols.

General Information on the Village and its People

Community Profile

Municipality of Pangantucan

The Municipality of Pangantucan is situated along the southwestern border of the province of Bukidnon. It lies within 124° 40' to 124° east longitude and 7° 35' to 7° 55' north latitude, bounded on the north by the Municipalities of Valencia and Talakag, on the east by the Municipalities of Maramag, Don Carlos and Kadingilan, on the west by the Municipality of Kalilangan, and on the south by the Province of North Cotabato. It is approximately 75 kilometers southwest of Malaybalay City, the capital of Bukidnon Province, and is about 166 kilometers southeast of Cagayan de Oro City, the capital of Region 10 (Northern Mindanao).

Pangantucan has a total land area of 485.84 square kilometers (48,584 hectares), of which, about 52 percent is currently classified as forestland; the remaining 48 percent are classified as alienable and disposable (A and D) lands.

The terrain of the Municipality is characterized by slightly undulating and rolling upland areas, about 62 percent of which has rolling or hilly terrain within 18 to 50 percent slope range. Only about 14 percent of the land area is suitable for agricultural production. On the northwest portion of the municipality is Mt. Kalatungan, the second highest peak in the province with an elevation of 2,824 meters above sea level. Its mountain ranges occupy about 21 percent of the total land area of the municipality.

Pangantucan is composed of 19 *barangays* (villages). Two (2) of which is where the concentration of the Manobo IPs reside namely *Barangay Nabaliwa* and *Barangay Bacusanon*.

Barangay Nabaliwa

Barangay Nabaliwa is located approximately 17 kilometers in the north from the Poblacion of Pangantucan. It lies at the grandeur of Mt. Kalatungan in a plain surrounded by hills and centered by a cool, crystal clear water of Sagayaran River. The name Nabaliwa was derived from a tribal Manobo term “*liwa*” which means to exchange.

The total land area of the barangay is 4,613.6244 hectares. About 4.6 percent of the total area are classified as forestland while about 2.6 percent hectares are classified as A & D. It is bounded by the Municipality of Talakag in the North, by the Municipality of Kalilangan in the South, by *Barangays* Pigtauranan and Madaya in the east and by *Barangay* Bacusanon in the west.

It is composed of nine (9) purok which are headed by an elected *Purok* President together with the rest of its officials.

Barangay Bacusanon

Barangay Bacusanon is in the northern most barrio of the Municipality of Pangantucan, Bukidnon. It is located 21 kilometers northwest of *Barangay* Poblacion.

It can be reached either through a 174-kilometer cement national road traversing from the cities of Cagayan de Oro, Malaybalay and Valencia then turn west at the Municipality of Maramag to the junction of Barandias crossing then turn northwest to the partially graveled 13-kilometer road to *Barangay* Bacusanon or a shorter 61-kilometer route via CdeO-Lumbia Airport-Talakag, Dominorog-Bacusanon road.

The barangay's land area is 5,227 hectares with forestland and A&D areas. It is bounded by Dominorog, Talakag in the north, Malinao, Kalilangan in the south, Nabaliwa in the east, and Forchacu III, Kalilangan in the west.

It is composed of nine (9) purok which are headed by an elected *Purok* President together with the rest of its officials.

Nagkahiusang Manobong Manununod sa Yutang Kabilin, Inc. (NAMAMAYUK)

The Nagkahiusang Manobong Manununod sa Yutang Kabilin, Inc. is an Indigenous Peoples Organization (IPO) organized in pursuit of economic growth, conservation of the environment and natural resources as well as to preserve their culture and empower its people living within their ancestral domain. They envision to have tenurial security over their lands with the issuance of the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT)¹, a tenurial instrument mandated under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act or IPRA of 1997. The CADT will provide IPs the most coveted legal recognition and respect of the community's right to traditionally manage, control, use, protect, and develop their ancestral domain in perpetuity.

The NAMAMAYUK is duly recognized by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) with a Company Registration No. CN201964184. It is composed of 220 member households spread over four *sitios* or hamlets namely Bugwak, Balmar, San Guinto and Megbadiang situated in *Barangays* Nabaliwa and Bacusanon.

The organization was able to formulate their Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP)² in 2016 and is still in the process of applying for their CADT.

The struggles of the Manobos over their land have been around since colonial times. Around Mt. Kalatungan in Bukidnon province, large

¹ CADT is a formal title recognizing the rights of possession and ownership of indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples over their ancestral domains that have been identified and delineated in accordance with the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA).

² ADSDPP is the "consolidation of the plans of indigenous cultural communities within an ancestral domain for the sustainable management and development of their land and natural resources as well as the development of human and cultural resources based on their indigenous knowledge, systems and practices." (UP Resilience Institute)

patches of IP lands became logging concessions and the Manobo and Talaandig indigenous peoples were driven away from their communities on the slopes to hamlets in and around the town centers established by the colonizers. There, they were forced to live alongside migrants from the Luzon and Visayas island groups, people who have been assimilated to the culture of the colonizers.

What used to be Manobo ancestral land became logging concessions almost overnight. Thus, began the start of not only dispossession of their lands and properties, but also the erosion of their indigenous traditions and practices.

To this day, non-indigenous peoples own most of the Manobo's land; and many of NAMAMAYUK's members are forced to work as laborers in plantations (mostly banana) on land which rightfully belongs to the tribe.

Food Security Situation of IP Community Before and During Covid

Before COVID

The NAMAMAYUK community is deeply rooted in their culture, ensuring to preserve it for the upcoming generations. Thus, cultural and traditional practices especially in farming and agriculture are still observed to this day. They believe that a healthy nature or environment with the living order of their Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) as well as their strong, fair, humane, friendly and Godly customary law is the real definition of food security.

Simply put, as long as the Manobos are given the right to self-determination over their ancestral lands, they will never go hungry. The problem starts when they are not allowed to work their own land freely.

Generally, a Manobo household secures their food through a sustainable and diligent cultivation of their farms. They typically grow sweet potato, cassava, taro, bananas, corn, rice, and vegetables. Most of the produce is for the community's own consumption, with the surplus sold in the market at Pangantucan town proper.

Hunting and gathering practices are becoming rare nowadays due to deforestation, scarcity of game, and laws which hamper indigenous peoples from roaming freely within their ancestral land.

During COVID

With the quarantine restrictions imposed during the outbreak of the pandemic, the Manobos lost their access to markets – both for selling their excess produce and for buying food essentials that they could not produce. Thus, food supply to and from their villages has been reduced.

However, the NAMAMAYUK members are confident that they will never go hungry because they still continue to grow their own food. They will always have something to eat because they are accustomed to working together and sharing with one another.

But if they were to buy their own food, then there would be a problem since their cash income is small and the price of their produce is low.

While government support has been given, in the form of cash assistance, this has been a one-time-only deal.

Thus, the tribe relied on the women to generate additional income, by weaving mats and rugs, and selling coffee and rice.

In terms of the quarantine restrictions affecting their way of life, the Manobos think little of them since they strive to uphold their traditional laws and encourage and motivate their indigenous brothers and sisters to live according to their IKSPs. By doing this, they believe that problems will not get worse.

Household Experience

Before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, many NAMAMAYUK-member families sold their surplus crops to the local market. When the pandemic hit, selling became both a blessing and a curse: a curse because quarantine restrictions prevented them from selling their surplus crops and earning additional income; a blessing because surplus crops augmented their food stocks.

Many families who have members working outside the *barangay* or even within the *barangay* were temporarily laid off. With no source of income and nothing to do, these people became extra hands in the fields and helped in foraging or in making handcrafted items to sell. They reconnected with their families and reinvested their efforts in their community.

Gender situation in the IP community

Traditionally, the Manobo women of NAMAMAYUK not only keep the home running while their husbands are farming in the fields or hunting in the forest, they also help their men farm and gather forest products and medicinal herbs.

On top of this, women are also involved in other income-generating activities to help expand or extend the family finances.

One economic activity involving the women of NAMAMAYUK is making mats (*banig*), from a type of grass that is indigenous to the area (called *Sedsed*). The women also make baskets and crafts, which they sell during the town fiesta or on big market days. However, with the onset of the pandemic, they could not sell their crafts. But they continued helping their menfolk in the farms and did their share of foraging activities.

Women Experience

As the tribe's "pharmacists" and "healers", the women of NAMAMAYUK were relied upon more so during the pandemic to treat a variety of ailments, as the midwife from the town was not able to visit the area due to quarantine restrictions.

The women also shared that their anxieties were heightened during the pandemic, as they worried about what to do if any member of the community contracted the virus, given that they were not trained on this.

Nonetheless, the most important role for the women of NAMAMAYUK, is teaching their children to love and take care of the forest, and handing down their Manobo traditions, thus ensuring that their culture and way of life live on for succeeding generations.

Using Indigenous Knowledge and Practices During COVID-19

The restrictions on movement due to quarantine measures imposed by the government to stem the tide of COVID-19 affected the livelihood of NAMAMAYUK's members. Many of them work in the town of Pangantucan or in the banana plantations in the vicinity and they were prevented from doing so.

However, the community is thankful that they still have their farms and forests as these served as their sources of food during the dark days of the pandemic. They harvested root crops, foraged for wild tubers, herbs, and berries, and trapped fish and small animals (e.g. wild rodents).

NAMAMAYUK's IKSPs

The community's *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices* (IKSPs) are key to their sustainability and survivability during the critical times, just like the current pandemic.

According to Datu Herminio "Tumanod" Guinto, NAMAMAYUK's Tribal Adviser, the customary practices of food collection from the natural resources such as the forests, rivers and lakes are still being practiced by the tribe to this date. However, only few chosen tribes' people, an estimated of about 10 individuals can do this. They are considered "expert" in this indigenous way of gathering food and are known by different names like *Mangangatay*, *Manulo*, and *Mangangalingot* depending on the type of resource they would expertly gather.

They use indigenous ways of capturing food, for instance, wild frogs or locally called "*bak-bak*" and even the tadpoles using intertwined leaves as traps. These are placed in small flowing water area. The leaves with just enough space for water to flow strains the tadpoles and are caught in the trap. This method allows smaller tadpoles to flow with the water and can continue to live and grow while those big enough to be in the trap are suitable as a delicacy. This traditional method also applies to capturing wild pigs, they use "lit-ag" that is set to capture the most suitable size of the pig. Small ones will not be harmed by the trap, as well as those big mother pigs.

The "experts" who are able to capture any animals for food, brings it back to the community and shares it with the rest of the members. However, Datu Minio expressed that there are some changes to this, since the one who caught the animal may share only half of the animal to the community and has the opportunity to either sell the other half or have it for the family.

Their ancestral and IKSPs helped sustain them during the pandemic.

The Manobos of the Mt. Kalatungan range have for centuries taken care of their sacred mountain. They know every nook and cranny of the mountain and every plant and animal species they share it with. For the Manobo occupying its slopes, Mt. Kalatungan is sacred, and it is essentially this perception that the tribe nurtured a close and protective relationship with the environment. To them, the use of the mountain's resources has always been governed by their beliefs and practical knowledge of taking just enough at the right time and place, using the right method and with due permission and respect to the spirits. Thus the "break" brought by the inactivity due to the pandemic, is a sense keeping faith to their indigenous belief of the sacredness of the forest.

Impact of Government Response

By and large, government response during the pandemic was woefully inadequate and late in coming. For the Manobos, although they were given help in the form of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), there were issues of beneficiaries being not among the neediest.

There were also issues of some families receiving aid twice over (cash and goods), while others who are lower in station receiving none at all. This situation bred resentment towards local government officials and neighbors.



NAMAMAYUK Council of Elders share how they cope with the COVID-19 pandemic

The community also lamented that activities of government agencies basically stopped during the pandemic, as only the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and municipal LGU staff visited their area during the time of enhanced quarantine – and only to give out dole-outs and the SAP. Other agencies were virtually non-existent since March of this year (2021).

The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) is the government agency mandated to oversee the welfare of IPs and ensure the implementation of the landmark IPRA. Its most important task is to ensure that IPs have legitimate control and ownership of their ancestral lands through the issuance of CADTs, a process which takes time and considerable effort from the NCIP.

Submitted in 10 October 2001, the CADT application of NAMAMAYUK has not been processed as no petition number was issued by the NCIP-Bukidnon Provincial Office. With the help of church organizations and NGOs, NAMAMAYUK has brought its case to the attention of the NCIP regional and national offices. In a radio interview (January 2021), the new NCIP Community Service Center (CSC) Head for the municipality of Talakag said that NAMAMAYUK's claim papers are already at the provincial level and that some requirements are still pending for the tribe's submission. He also stated that the NCIP will be conducting a delineation and titling activity this February 2021 (Demit, 2021).

Sadly, the NAMAMAYUK members lament that not a single activity pertaining to their CADT application was conducted during the pandemic. □

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The Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) is a regional coalition of national and regional CSOs in Asia actively engaged in promoting food sovereignty, land rights and agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, participatory governance, and rural development.



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