



LOCKED IN, LOCKED OUT:
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
JUNE 2021



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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic on March 11, 2020. It is now fast developing into one of the worst human disasters in history since the first case was reported in Wuhan, China in late 2019.

As of March 2021, more than 100 million cases and more than two million deaths have been reported, covering more than 200 countries and territories worldwide (WHO, March 2021). While said to pale in comparison to previous pandemics that wiped out millions of people, including indigenous peoples (HISTORY, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a catastrophe impacting millions of human lives and devastating economies and societies on a global scale.

Various preventive measures, such as quarantines, lockdowns, social distancing, school and office closures, wearing of face masks and shields, have been widely instituted to contain the spread of the virus. These are stop-gap measures to bring back normalcy in people's lives as governments struggle to keep economies afloat. Efforts to produce the needed anti-COVID vaccines and inoculate the human population have likewise been stepped up amid the rise of more virulent COVID variants, notwithstanding the fear and reluctance of many to be vaccinated due to the reported side effects of the vaccines.

These efforts, however, have left out certain sectors, including Indigenous Peoples (IPs), who have been gravely impacted by the pandemic.

These sectors have become all the more vulnerable to the pandemic due to unresolved pre-existing disparities. In particular, threats to the IP sector, whose present population stands approximately at 476 million worldwide, are rising at an alarming degree. (Indigenous Navigator, 2020). Even before the pandemic, indigenous peoples' access to general health and other basic services has been poor, no doubt because they live in remote regions. (United Nations, 2020). This is further complicated by food and labor insecurity, human rights violations, land tenure issues, and military mobilization. In the words of United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres: "Prior to the current pandemic, indigenous peoples already faced entrenched inequalities, stigmatization and discrimination. Inadequate access to health care, clean water and sanitation increases their vulnerability."

Confronted with the pandemic's lethal threat, Indigenous Peoples have sought recourse to their traditional rituals and practices to prevent the dreaded virus's entry into their communities. (Community Survival, 2020; Longhurst, 2020).

THE PHILIPPINE COVID-19 CONTEXT

The COVID-19 crisis in the Philippines began to surge after a local transmission. Ten cases were reported early in 2020, prompting President Rodrigo Duterte to declare a public health emergency in the country, nine days after the WHO declared what was then called the novel coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). (CNN, 2020; DOH, 2020).

As of March 2021, the Philippines recorded more than 600,000 active cases and almost 13,000 deaths (DOH, 2021).

Upon the President's declaration of a public health emergency, the government ordered strict lockdown measures. Ranging from Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) to Modified Community Quarantine (MCQ), these restrictions were imposed depending on the number of cases and, later, on transmission rates. (Dancel, 2020; Tomacruz, 2020). The military-led Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), created under the administration of Benigno Aquino III, became the main enforcing agency of the government's stringent anti-COVID 19 interventions. (Lopez, 2020).

In the ensuing months, the Philippine Congress passed two pandemic-related laws. The first was the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act," which granted the government the authority to provide a monthly emergency subsidy of P5,000 to P8,000 to around 18 million low-income households for two months and to implement an expanded and enhanced Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program. The second law, the "Bayanihan to Recover as One Act," or Bayanihan 2, gave the President additional authority to combat the pandemic.

Despite these measures, the country has continued to struggle to cope with the impacts of the pandemic. For the poor, access to health services has become more challenging, and providing food for the family is a daily grind for survival (Rivas, 2021). An estimated 10.9 million Filipino workers lost their jobs and had lower incomes (ILO, 2020). The extraordinary controls on travel and social distancing have also resulted in the disruption of both supply and demand of the agriculture-food system in the country (FAO, 2021). With the lack of farming equipment, poor access to market, and insufficient production inputs even more curtailed by the controls, indigenous peoples, who have long suffered from low incomes and limited opportunities, are pushed to greater insecurity.

There are 110 ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines, with a population of approximately 15 million. 61 percent of these groups can be found in Mindanao, while 33

percent is in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). Other IPs comprising the remaining percentage inhabit Mindoro, Palawan, Quezon, Zambales, and the Visayas region. (Tronqued, 2020).

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE PHILIPPINES

In May 2020 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNSRIP), José Francisco Cali Tzay, raised the alarm on the disastrous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous Peoples. He noted that the issues affecting them are not only limited to health, but also draw from systemic issues of landlessness, poverty, and marginalization aggravated by states of emergency (UN, 2020). The UNSRIP report pointed out the importance of indigenous peoples' free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in decisions affecting their lives, observing that Indigenous Peoples' welfare is hardly considered in government pandemic response, resulting in inadequate national programs and policies (UN, 2020).

In the Philippines, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), the primary agency mandated to fulfill Indigenous Peoples' rights under the IPRA, has not published many reports on Indigenous Peoples' plight during the pandemic. There are no available data disaggregated by ethnicity. This is reflective of how Indigenous Peoples are barely taken account of during this pandemic (Minority Rights Group International, 2020).

This report aims to bridge the information gap by collating data on the situation of select Indigenous communities during the pandemic.

The research focuses on the experiences of three Indigenous communities, namely, the Taboli-Manobo in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato and Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat; the Teduray and Lambangian in Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat provinces; and the Tuwali community in Nueva Vizcaya. The communities were represented by their organizations, namely the Taboli-Manobo S'daf Claimants Organization (TAMASCO) for the T'boli Manobo; Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) for the Teduray and Lambangian communities; and the Didipio Earth Savers Multi-Purpose Association, Inc. (DESAMA) for the Tuwali community.

The methods employed in the data gathering were key informant interview (KII) and focused group discussion (FGD) or kwentuhan (storytelling) with select leaders and members.

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY STRUGGLES



Datal Bonlagon, part of the ancestral domain of TAMASCO.
Credit: JM Ferraris.

TAMASCO is locked in a decades-long struggle over land with Consunji-owned companies Silvicultural Industries Inc. (SII) and M&S Company in South Cotabato. M&S Co. operates an agro-industrial coffee plantation under an Integrated Forest Management Agreement (IFMA) with the government. The community asserts that they have not issued their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) for the IFMA, which is required under the Indigenous Peoples' Right Act (IPRA). The Department of Environment and Natural Resources had slyly integrated this IFMA, just as it was about to expire, with another IFMA, thereby extending its validity.

The community has experienced numerous incidents of violence related to their struggle. Since the 1990s, community members have been displaced and their agricultural livelihoods impacted by the plantation. Even earlier, they were displaced by logging operations. On December 3, 2017, eight staunch TAMASCO leaders and members were killed, including their tribal chieftain, Datu Victor Danyan. Alleging that that they chanced upon members of the New People's Army (NPA), the troops belonging to the 27th and 33rd Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army open-fired upon the TAMASCO men. Community members assert that this was not a chance encounter and neither were their men insurgents. (Mindanews, 2018).

In Didipio, Nueva Vizcaya, DESAMA is at odds with OceanaGold Corporation (OceanaGold), an Australian-Canadian company operating an open-pit mine under a 25-year Financial and Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA). The FTAA expired in 2019, but the DENR is currently finalizing its renewal.

Following the expiry of the permit, the community set up a barricade at the entrance of OceanaGold. In April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some 100

members of the police force escorted a diesel tanker for dewatering into the mining site. They violently dispersed the community barricade and even arrested a DESAMA leader.

DESAMA opposes the mining company for its negative environmental impacts, including polluting water sources and affecting agricultural productivity.

Meanwhile, the Teduray and Lambangian are in danger of becoming minoritized in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Armed Moro secessionist groups have themselves conspicuously present in Moro territories, raising huge concerns for the civilian populace, both Moro and non-Moro, including the indigenous populace like the Teduray and Lambangian indigenous peoples.

In fact, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, cases of killings, massacres, ambushes, and the burning of houses attributed to the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), private armed groups of politicians, and bandits have been documented. (Taqueban, 2020; Teduray Justice and Governance, 2021). Massive land grabbing and aggressive occupation of the Teduray and Lambangian communities by the BIAF and other armed groups, besides clashes between the Philippine Army and the BIFF, have also been reported, triggering the evacuation of hundreds of residents. (Teduray Justice and Governance, 2021). The Teduray and Lambangian decry the intrusion of armed groups into their *fusaka* (ancestral domain) and breaches of provisions in the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) that protect the rights of non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (NMIPs).

THREE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This paper aims to sketch the situation of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines through the lens of three Indigenous communities. There were 18 participants, ten women and eight men. Eight Tawali leaders from Nueva Vizcaya (four female and four male) participated in the FGD, while two tribal leaders (female and male), a female youth, and two women elders participated from the Taboli-Manobo community. Three women represented the Teduray and Lambangian communities.

INFORMATION ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Lina, a Taboli-Manobo, first learned about the coronavirus when barangay officials came to inform their

village that there would be a lockdown. The officials told them to stay at home and avoid going out of the community, explaining this was to curb the spread of COVID-19. Villagers were restricted from going to their farms as part of the quarantine measures. There was no warning; they only learned of COVID-19 as they were placed under a lockdown.

The barangay officials also announced the suspension of face-to-face classes. At that time, Lina's two daughters and younger brother were enrolled in a public school in an adjacent barangay. They were told that the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated from a foreign country and quickly spread from one person to another through coughing and sneezing.

A few weeks after the lockdown was enforced, village officials ordered the communities to wear face masks every time they went out of their houses. However, no masks were provided. The Taboli-Manobo had to make do with old clothes to use as face coverings.

As there were no educational materials available from the barangay, Lina had to go online for more information about COVID-19 as the elders wanted to know more about the virus. The tribal council also helped gather facts about the pandemic from barangay health workers (BHWs) and passed them on to the community.

The Taboli-Manobo were worried that their situation could only worsen from all the restrictions. They could not sell their produce to the market, let alone go to their farms. "We would probably die of hunger instead of COVID-19," Lina said. So, they requested the barangay to let them continue farming. Local officials eventually acceded, but reminded the community to observe social distancing, hand washing, and other quarantine protocols.

Barangay Peacekeeping Action Teams (BPAT) put up checkpoints in the area to observe the entry and exit of people. Some of the tribal leaders volunteered to help the BPAT and BHWs to monitor non-TAMASCO community residents' entry into their ancestral territory. In Didipio, barangay officials gathered tribal leaders to explain to them the coronavirus and quarantine measures to be implemented in the community. Fortunately, the community had access to television to keep track of the news about COVID-19 and the lockdown.

Monitoring camps were immediately put up to ensure that Barangay Didipio was safe from the disease. DESAMA leaders even signed up as volunteer barangay tanod (village guards) to help in checking the entry of non-residents into the community. The barangay council also requested nurses to help the residents.

In Teduray and Lambangian communities, barangay officials gathered the elders in March 2020 to explain

COVID-19 and ways to avoid it. They warned community members that if the community residents did not take care of themselves, they could easily get infected.

As an initial response, community members thought of performing the kanduli ritual. But because of mass-gathering restrictions, they opted to go around the area and inform the community of the disease. To make up for the lack of health and related services, the community revived their traditional healing practices to try and combat the disease.

The Dulet of the Teduray and Lambangian



Members of the Teduray indigenous people perform a ritual. (This photo was taken before the pandemic.)
Credit: MSI Alim Bandara.

Respondent Nang Rosa recalled when, four decades ago, her grandmother had recounted a story about a disease that struck their place. Her grandmother told her that the people had to quickly get inside their houses not later than four o'clock in the afternoon, because of a dreaded disease they called in the Teduray language as dulet.

Nang Rosa said people, who were only a few at that time, believed that “the disease might be carried by the wind, so they had to ensure that their houses were closed.” The whole community could only get out of their houses the following day, at six o'clock in the morning, she said. Neighbors would just leave food outside of a sick person's house or hang it on their fence to avoid contact.

Nang Rosa could no longer remember what that disease was and other details. All she could say was that it coincided with a “malaking init” (great drought) and that one could get infected “if touched” by a sick person. People refrained from going to other houses so as not to catch the disease, she said.

The dulet phenomenon, it seems, is now buried in the distant past; it was difficult for Nang Rosa to remember it. “Parang naranasan na noon (We seemed to have gone through something similar),” Nang Rosa said.

“Pero kahit pamilyar (ang COVID-19), matakot pa rin (ang mga tao) na mahawakan, maingat pa rin sila, (dahil) sa pagkakaalam namin, walang gamot ang COVID (Although COVID-19 seems familiar), people are still afraid to be touched, they are still cautious, because from what we know there is no cure yet for COVID-19,” she said.

She said that whenever diseases occur in their place, people perform their kanduli ritual at once, to summon the Seguyong (spirits dwelling in the environment) to help them fight off the disease. But during the pandemic, as much as they want to practice the ritual, they can no longer do it because community gatherings are highly restricted.

During the research validation, FGD participants brought up the need to document narratives of how Teduray and Lambangian peoples coped with epidemics in the past, and share these stories to the next generation.

BLENDED/DISTANCE LEARNING

TAMASCO FGD participants said that blended (mostly online) learning was difficult for low-income families with poor or no access to technology and electricity.

Jane, a first-year college student, could not concentrate on her studies because her online classes were usually disrupted by weak Internet connection. She would often rush to an area with a strong reception so she could continue with her classes. The twice-a-week brownouts also caused problems. Power outages are common in the area due to insufficient power supply from the distribution utilities. Brownouts become more frequent during the summer.

Less than 5% of the total households in TAMASCO has access to electricity. These families reside near the power distribution lines and can afford to pay a monthly bill and a one-time connection fee of around 700 pesos. Jane's parents had to pay for the cost of Internet (840 pesos a month) and mobile data (100 pesos a month). They also had to spend at least P1,200 a month to get the modules from a public school in Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat, where Jane's brother is enrolled. Modules are picked up twice a month.

Lina, on the other hand, reported having to juggle several tasks in a day. She is currently taking up Business Administration, hoping to fulfill her dream of finishing college. Besides her online classes, she also has to help her two young daughters with their modules, and tend to their crops. Her husband was among the eight men who were killed by government troopers in December 2017 in Sitio Datal Bonlangon.

Lina uses a low-range smartphone for her online classes and research work. Buying a laptop, even a second-hand one, is beyond her means. She spends 50 pesos for a three-day internet subscription to a neighbor's Pisonet service.

Mercifully, a non-government organization has donated solar panels to her family; otherwise, she would have to walk to the next village to charge her phone.

Although teachers conduct regular visits to young learners in TAMASCO, Lina and other parents still bear the burden of assisting and monitoring their children, making it even more frustrating because most of them did not finish school themselves.

DESAMA respondents echoed similar sentiments. They said that DepEd's blended learning approach is a burden, particularly to parents who have more than one student in the family. Because they could not afford to hire tutors, parents (the mothers) couldn't do farm work when they were helping children with their lessons.

Fortunately, the school in Didipio is near the community, so families do not have to spend on transportation. Parents pick up the modules twice a month. Nevertheless, Eduardo, a father of three children, expressed concern that frequent visits to the school might increase their risk of COVID-19 exposure.

Due to difficulties in blended learning, motivation among indigenous children in TAMASCO and Barangay Didipio has decreased significantly. Some students in Didipio have already told their parents that they would like to leave school. In TAMASCO, two students have already dropped out of school.

Jane said that she is just complying with school requirements instead of aiming to get good grades. "It's different when you are in a face-to-face class. I get easily distracted here because of the poor internet signal and brownouts. And there are just too many requirements that we have to submit," she explained.

DESAMA respondents hoped that face-to-face classes would resume in areas where there are no COVID-19 cases, like Barangay Didipio, so they can continue their daily farm work.

Among the Teduray and Lambangian communities, due

to the suspension of face-to-face classes, respondents shared that some students have stopped schooling. Others are losing interest or are dissatisfied with blended learning because they do not have support, e.g., cellphones, Internet connection, etc.

A majority of the students, especially those in higher grades, discontinued their studies due to poor Internet signal and lack of funds for Internet and cellphones.

Some students even constructed a makeshift study area with a good reception. Others rented cellphones at 50 pesos to conduct their research.

Parents had difficulty helping their children as the modules were written in English. The modules seemed far advanced for their intended students.

For communities displaced by armed conflict, blending learning became problematic. Cramped evacuation centers are not conducive to learning.

Students and parents had to travel outside their community to get the modules or submit school requirements.

Transportation costs, ranging from 100 to 300 pesos, were another burden to families. Where parents have to accompany their children or vice versa to get the modules, additional transportation costs were incurred. The modules had to be picked up four times a month.

AGRICULTURAL LIVELIHOODS

The long quarantine period forced Taboli-Manobo farmers to borrow from small traders. The traders sold farm inputs at very high prices. Pesticides were sold at 1,500 pesos per gallon, 36% higher than the market price of 1,100 pesos. While prices of fertilizers shot to 1,500 to 1,600 pesos, a hefty 67% increase. Robert, one of the FGD participants, said that they had no choice given the circumstances: It was either they borrowed money or let pests destroy their corn crops.

Transportation costs also spiked because of the prolonged lockdown. Only skylab (a motorcycle fitted with a slab of wood for carrying additional passengers or products) drivers could transport agricultural products from the community to the market as trucks were prohibited. Farmers used to pay truck owners 50 pesos for each sack of corn; skylab drivers were charging them 250 pesos per sack. Skylab drivers also delivered goods to the sitios for a ten percent service fee.

Some community residents of TAMASCO would eventually be allowed to go down to town, to buy essential goods as long as they had a COVID-19 Contract

Tracing System (CCTS) card, a face mask, and a face shield. Cloth masks could be purchased in sari-sari stores for 60 pesos apiece. Prices of face shields ranged from 100 to 150 pesos, which are way too expensive for the T'boli-Manobo, who can hardly eat a complete meal in a day.

"Things are different now. You have to pay for almost everything," Lina said

As the government continued to extend the lockdown, Taboli-Manobo farmers witnessed their meager farm capital shrinking slowly, month after month. What's more, they had to deal with another calamity — a new cycle of rat infestation. Respondents shared that a cycle usually persists from one year to three years. Lina already lost three cropping harvests to the infestation.

The Tawali, too, went through a similar predicament due to quarantine restrictions. Farmers had to pool their rice, bananas, ginger, and other crops and share the trucking fee of 4,000 to 5,000 pesos. Before the pandemic, the fee was only 3 pesos per kilo. Others sold their produce directly to truck traders at fluctuating price rates depending on market demand.

Seasonal farmworkers and their families in Didipio suffered more under the lockdown. It became challenging for them to look for work in other barangays or towns because of the checkpoints, lack of transportation, and curfew. Farm workers typically earned 300 pesos a day, without free meals.

The series of typhoons that ravaged the province of Nueva Vizcaya in 2020 also made it harder for them to market their agricultural produce.

Corn production, which has been the primary source of income for Teduray and Lambangian families, was severely affected by the pandemic. When corn prices fell, farmers chose to store them for longer, resulting in their eventual rotting.

For those that did sell, they only got 650 to 750 pesos for one sack of corn. Where they used to earn 20,000 pesos for 17 sacks before the pandemic broke out, they only now netted 7,000 pesos.

Teduray and Lambangian farmers switched to organic corn farming to allow the soil to regenerate from being degraded from pesticide use. However, the price of corn remained prohibitively low; no local trader was buying organic corn, which was being sold at a higher price.

GOVERNMENT'S RELIEF ASSISTANCE

Local government units (LGUs) provided food packs, containing three to five kilos of rice, canned goods, and noodles, to TAMASCO families during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ). Eight sacks of rice were also given to 50 families in the two rounds of relief drive, with fresh vegetables added in the second round. Barangay health workers gave Vitamin C tablets and processed the Philhealth registration of TAMASCO members.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) handed out cash assistance under its Social Amelioration Program (SAP) and Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). However, TAMASCO decried the selective distribution of the emergency subsidies. Most people in TAMASCO could not get cash aid on account of their non-membership to the 4Ps program. The SAP cash assistance they received was only around 2000 pesos per household.

According to an FGD participant, M&S company guards and workers were included in the list of SAP beneficiaries instead of TAMASCO members.

In December 2020, nine months into the lockdown, the Department of Agriculture (DA) introduced its crop insurance program to indigenous farmers in Barangay Ned, including TAMASCO. They also offered accident insurance worth 50,000 pesos, with an annual premium of 50 pesos and an "All-in-One" life insurance worth 50,000 pesos for 375 pesos annually.

The DA, accompanied by the NCIP, also distributed 35 kilos of rice (half sack), two trays of eggs, and five Chooks to Go marinated chicken to 35 TAMASCO members. The same individuals were encouraged to apply for a non-collateral cash loan of 25,000 pesos, at zero interest for corn production. The loan is payable in ten years on a semi-annual term.

Lina and Robert said they could not afford the services offered by the DA.

An image copy of a document obtained from TAMASCO shows that the cash loan offered by the DA is part of the agency's Expanded Sure Aid and Recovery Project, in support of the "Ahon Lahat, Pagkaing Sapat (ALPAS) Laban sa COVID-19" program.

Only one farmer for each household was allowed to apply. They must have a corn farm below three hectares. Application requirements included:

- A valid government-issued ID
- Application form
- Promissory note
- Proof of Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA) registration

The document also indicated that target beneficiaries should at least belong to an "ELCAC barangay."

Barangay Ned is one of the priority barangays under the Regional Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (RTF-ELCAC). (PIA, 2020)

Issues related to the Integrated Forest Management Agreement (IFMA) in Sultan Kudarat were also part of the agenda of the RTF-ELCAC in 2019-2020. (DILG R12, 2020) The 31-billion-peso "Ahon Lahat, Pagkaing Sapat (ALPAS) Laban sa COVID-19" program or "Plant, Plant, Plant Program" is in line with the "whole-of-nation" approach of the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act. Among the projects funded by the program are the expanded agriculture insurance project and social amelioration project for farmers and farm workers. (DA, 2020)

In Didipio, barangay and municipal governments handed out 5,000- to 5,500-peso cash assistance to households while single parents received 3,000 pesos. Food packs consisting of three to five kilos of rice, canned goods, and instant noodles were also distributed to the families. The provincial government also gave additional food and cash aid.

DESAMA leaders commended the local governments' relief program in their barangay. "Maayos at malakas ang tulong ng LGU sa Didipio (The LGU support to Didipio was strong and well-coordinated)," Mira, a DESAMA leader, said. The LGUs supported DESAMA and other local organizations' barricade against OceanaGold. The barangay captain of Didipio was among those arrested in the dispersal on April 6, 2020.

FGD participants, however, acknowledged that the relief assistance was barely enough to sustain the Tuwali community throughout the lockdown. Nevertheless, they knew that they could depend on the LGUs alone. "Nagkakaisa ang tribu at tuloy ang tradisyunal na pagba-Bayanihan na kung may magkakasakit o walang makain magtutulungan ang tribu kahit kamote nagbibigayan pa rin (The community is united and continues to hold on to its long-held traditional Bayanihan system. If somebody gets sick or has no food, the tribe will help each other. We share, even if it is just sweet potato)," Mira explained.

Amid all their fears and anxiety, the Tuwali leaders believed that their indigenous knowledge and practices, such as the baddang o pun oh ohhaan, will get them through the COVID-19 crisis as they did for their ancestors in past epidemics.

Among Teduray Lambangian communities, in line with the implementation of "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act," the barangay and the municipal government distributed packs containing NFA rice (5 kilos), sardines (2 cans), noodles (5 packs). Meanwhile the national government

gave them pails containing a piece of Safeguard bath soap, one bar of laundry soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, bread, and noodles.

However, the FGD participants said the assistance was given per household and not per individual, adding that those who were not registered in the barangay did not receive anything at all. Moreover, the people did not receive any cash assistance except 4Ps members, who each received 3,000 pesos.

Those in the evacuation centers received face masks and soaps at the height of the pandemic. Local support groups, LGUs, and some international humanitarian groups also distributed face masks. But despite all the support, the evacuation centers breached anti-COVID-19 protocols as they were crammed with hundreds of evacuees who fled from their villages in March 2021.

One FGD participant also lamented, "Even if there were evacuations before the pandemic, we were still free to move around, but in our evacuation during the pandemic, our movements are highly restricted."

Reports say that Teduray and Lambangian peoples evacuated twice in March 2020 alone, following a shooting incident involving armed groups, and skirmishes between the Philippine Army and Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces.



An informal evacuation site in Lebak, Sultan Kudarat.
Credit: TRIPOD

Before the evacuation, on March 19, 2020, an armed group also ambushed a farmer, signaling the arrival of different armed groups in the Teduray and Lambangian peoples' territories.

The evacuation of the residents ensued again in June, September, November, and December in the same year due to the presence of Moro armed groups such as the BIFF and MILF forces, and the heavy operations of Philippine Army against the BIAF.

Reportedly, the BIAF, MILF's armed wing, also occupied the areas within the fusaka inged (ancestral domain) of the Teduray and Lambangian peoples, and hung up tarpaulins declaring it an MILF Community.

It should be noted that in July 2018, Duterte signed Republic Act 11054 or theBOL, which seeks to establish the now-operational Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) as a replacement of the corruption-mired and mismanaged Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), a provisional regional government, was afterward established in the BARMM. Its term is set to end in 2022, but some Moro groups are now lobbying for its extension for another three years, contending that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted transition matters laid down in the BOL.

However, the Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) has expressed its disapproval of the BTA extension, decrying the massive land grabbing and occupation in IP areas by the BIAF, other armed groups, and bandits; and the ambushes, shooting incidents, and burning of houses committed by Moro armed groups. The TJG also laments the breaches of provisions upholding the rights of the Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (NIMP) to their ancestral land and their representation to the local government, especially the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affair (MIPA).

Meanwhile, respondent Nang Rosa said that she could not say that the government was remiss in giving assistance to them during the pandemic. But she deplored the fact that indigenous peoples' rights are not being recognized during the pandemic. When asked about the support extended by the TJG, she grew speechless and began to cry, highlighting the steady support of the TJG to the Teduray and Lambangian peoples in critical times.



With support from individual donors and organizations like LRC, the Teduray Justice and Governance distributed emergency relief packs in the early months of the pandemic.
Credit: TJG.

VACCINATION

When asked about the COVID-19 vaccine, Ye Anita and other women respondents from TAMASCO quickly said that they didn't want to be inoculated because "something bad" might happen to them. "Wala pa ko nakakita og doktor sukad. Mahadlok ko sa dagom. Basi sakit kaayo (I haven't even seen a doctor in my entire life. I'm afraid of the (injection) needle. It might hurt a lot)," Ye Anita confided. Lina added that maybe they don't need the vaccine since there is no COVID-19 case in TAMASCO. "May ara man kami sarili na bulong (We have our herbal medicines)," she said.

Respondent Robert said that he was willing to be vaccinated for free. But he doubted if the government had enough supply for the entire population. Indigenous peoples might not be included in the government's priority list, as is always the case in other government programs and services, he added.

The Tuwali were also skeptical about the coronavirus vaccine. They, too, prefer not to be inoculated since there are no cases yet in the community. Mira was afraid that the COVID-19 vaccination would turn out like the Dengvaxia debacle, where it was found out that the dengue vaccine could increase the risk of uninfected persons before immunization. (Manila Times, 2020).



During the rollout of LRC's booklet on COVID-19, Tuwali community members expressed fears around vaccination, following the Dengvaxia debacle.
Credit: DESAMA.

Mira suggested that the government consider indigenous peoples' traditional practices and spiritual beliefs in its vaccination program. She echoed the exact sentiment of TAMASCO leaders that indigenous peoples are always at the end of the government's priority list, if they are there at all. The government must include indigenous peoples in the discussions on COVID-19 and the vaccination, she added.

Participating Teduray and Lambangian respondents said that they heard about the vaccination matter from radio reports. They said that people, especially senior citizens, were afraid to be vaccinated and expressed fears of the side effects from the vaccines. "If something happens to us after getting vaccinated, an ambulance might get us and bring us to the hospital where we might be declared COVID-19 positive," an FGD participant said.

CORPORATE AGGRESSION

"The company has been operating for 30 years in our place, way before the COVID-19 pandemic began to emerge. It's more acceptable for us to die from COVID-19, because we know it's a disease, than to perish from the company's brutality. We have shed a lot of tears with its continued presence. Our fellow tribesmen have died as a result of its operations. The company is a virus more lethal than the COVID-19 pandemic."

Respondent Robert from TAMASCO



Members of a Tuwali community oppose OceanaGold. (This photo was taken before the pandemic.)
Credit: DESAMA.

During the early months of the pandemic, some employees of OceanaGold, a large-scale metallic mining company, reported for work. They reasoned they were Authorized Persons Outside the Residence (APOR), but were not able to show proof when asked, according to respondents.¹

Fuel tanks for dewatering were also able to enter OceanaGold, even though its operations had been suspended following the expiration of its permit. The

police even escorted the tanks and, according to eyewitness reports, violently broke up the community barricade on April 6, 2020.

After the dispersal, the Didipio Community Coalition, a pro-mining group, filed charges against the barangay captain of Didipio and four barangay council members. The PNP, on the other hand, filed charges against 14 members of DESAMA and Samahang Pangkarapatan ng Katutubong Magsasaka at Manggagawa Inc. (SAPAKKMI), which is another environmental group.

When the nationwide ECQ was declared, community leaders enlisted as volunteer barangay tanod, not only to help the barangay implement quarantine protocols but to monitor OGPI's movements as well. DESAMA leaders were worried that OGPI workers might bring the coronavirus to the community. The volunteers' appointment papers were signed by the barangay captain.

DESAMA is appealing to the government not to renew OGPI's permit and immediately order the mining company to commence rehabilitation and decommissioning work. They are concerned that the open-pit mine will bring more hazards to the people in the area.

In particular, DESAMA is calling for the president to issue an executive order ensuring the environmental protection of natural resources in the province of Nueva Vizcaya. Respondent Mira said that this would be a lasting legacy to the next generation, emphasizing the importance of agriculture over mining. "Hindi ako naniniwala na may mabubuhay sa patay na ekonomiya (I don't believe that a person can survive in a dead economy)," she stated.

The respondents also asked the national government to scrap the Mining Act of 1995, which, according to one participant, violates their rights as indigenous peoples, particularly, the right to land and water. "Patuloy ang aming panalangin na walang makapasok na COVID-19 virus sa Didipio at matuldukan na ang renewal ng OGPI. Dagdag itong pahirap; mas lalong mapandemya ang komunidad.(We continue to pray that the COVID-19 virus does not enter Didipio and that the renewal of OGPI's operations will not happen. It's an additional burden for us; the community will become more vulnerable to the pandemic)," they said.

TAMASCO

Respondent Robert said that it seems like the government is using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to slow down the already lagging justice system. TAMASCO had filed a petition for a continuing mandamus in October 2019 due to DENR's inaction on the legality of

FOOTNOTE:

¹ During the research validation, DESAMA leaders shared that Didipio had its first recorded COVID-19 case, an OGPI worker, on March 1, 2021.

IFMA. The first hearing was held in November 2020, after being postponed twice due to the lockdown. The second hearing will be on April 14, 2021, but Robert doubts if it will push through considering the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the National Capital Region (NCR).

When the travel restrictions were eased, TAMASCO leaders resumed their engagements with the NCIP and local government units regarding the IFMA and other land issues. The NCIP has sided with TAMASCO and other affected communities in Sultan Kudarat and Ampatuan, Maguindanao on the IFMA issue.

On August 16, 2018, the NCIP issued en banc Resolution No. 07-130.2018, canceling the certificate precondition (CP) issued to M&S Company. The company filed a motion for reconsideration, but was denied through NCIP en banc Resolution No. 07-155.2018 dated November 15, 2018.

On September 12, 2019, almost a year after the cancellation of the CP, NCIP Chairperson Allen A. Capuyan issued a cease and desist order (CDO) against M&S Company, ordering the same to immediately cease from all its activities and operations pursuant or related to IFMA No. 18-2007.

However, M&S Company has continued to blatantly ignore the CDO, as evidenced by its continuing operations in TAMASCO areas. On the other hand, the DENR is dilly-dallying with its response to the IFMA controversy, saying that it is still investigating the case.

Robert lamented that the M&S Company is gaining more leverage with the quarantine. Special Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit Active Auxiliary (SCAA) members, who serve as company guards, continued to patrol the TAMASCO ancestral territory, monitoring the community residents' movements. They seemed to have been exempted from the quarantine restrictions that the government itself has imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Worse, M&S has enforced its own "lockdown," disallowing the Taboli-Manobo from working in farm areas within the coffee plantation.

At the height of ECQ, the SCAA prevented six farmers from harvesting their crops. They alleged that the contested area is within the coffee plantation. TAMASCO leaders were able to negotiate with M&S officials to allow the farmers to harvest some corn and other crops so they could feed their families. The company agreed on the condition that they would not enter the same area again. Instead, M&S proposed that TAMASCO members farm in different locations within the land covered by the IFMA. Robert said that TAMASCO leaders refused the offer because the company wanted them to sign an agreement allowing the community to use a portion of land inside the plantation.

The SCAA also put up a barrier in Sitio Datal Bonlangon to prevent the tribe from tilling the land, which the company asserted was part of the disputed coffee plantation. This incident and other similar actions of the company in the ancestral domain of TAMASCO showed its non-compliance with the cease and desist order (CDO) issued by the NCIP chairperson. Also, such actions were a flagrant violation of the tribe's FPIC right, Robert explained.

Respondent Lina said that the SCAA had also disseminated fake information that the local government's relief assistance to the community came from rebel groups. Barangay officials quickly took action to stop the company guards from making false accusations against the community. TAMASCO's former chairperson and seven others were killed after they were red-tagged in 2017.

Given the precarity of the situation of DESAMA and TAMASCO amid the twin onslaught of corporate aggression and the COVID-19 pandemic, one FGD participant had this to say: "COVID-19 is 'curable' by vaccines, but there are no vaccines that can drive away the company."

CONCLUSION

In this time of COVID-19 pandemic, the face mask has become ubiquitous – a protection from the highly infectious and deadly virus. But for indigenous peoples, internal displacements, company aggression, and land grabbing typically backed by military mobilizations are much more suffocating than face masks. Robert, a Taboli-Manobo respondent, said, "The company is more stifling than a face mask. Before, we could still farm peacefully on our lands. But if we farm on our lands now, the company will not hesitate to slap us with criminal charges. And we see a lot of firearms being brandished before us to quell our dissent."

The same situation holds true for indigenous peoples in areas occupied by armed Moro groups, where armed hostilities have been weighing them down amid the pandemic.

Compounding their present predicament are the following: the blended learning program of the Department of Education; short-term and selective or discriminatory relief assistance; and government inaction on transgressive corporate conduct and on military and armed groups' mobilizations in ancestral territories.

And while Indigenous Peoples observe protocols and perform their traditional preventive practices, they have been deprived of their right to be included in discussions affecting their lives amid the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for the government were shared by the community leaders during the data gathering:

Didipio Earth Savers Multi-Purpose Association, Inc. (DESAMA)

- The Office of the President should not renew the mining contract of OceanaGold.
- The Office of the President should issue an executive order ensuring the environmental protection of the natural resources in Nueva Vizcaya province.

The government should

- Scrap the Philippine Mining of 1995, or Republic Act 7942, because it disregards the rights of indigenous peoples, particularly their right to land and water.
- Resume face-to-face classes in areas where there are no COVID-19 cases.
- Include the Tawali tribe and other indigenous peoples in discussions on COVID-19 and vaccination.

Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG)

The government should

- Distribute relief assistance amid lockdowns, and the distribution of cash and in-kind aid should be fair and non-discriminatory.
- Resume face-to-face classes in areas where there are no COVID-19 cases.

Taboli-Manobo S'daf Claimants Organization (TAMASCO)

The government should

- Distribute relief assistance amid lockdowns, and the distribution of cash and in-kind aid should be fair and non-discriminatory.
- Resume face-to-face classes in areas where there are no COVID-19 cases.

Realities on the ground show that Indigenous Peoples are experiencing lack of access to health care and other basic services, and worsening food insecurity. Their narratives illustrate how the government's COVID-19 response, far from alleviating their situation, has actually exacerbated it. Issues around their tenurial rights brought about by commercial interests and armed conflict have been compounded by the pandemic.

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