Best Practice Stories Inspire Hope for Philippine Indigenous Communities

FOR DECADES, over 300 indigenous upland folk in remote Ngibat village in Kalinga province in northern Philippines had been groping literally in the dark. The villagers had never experienced cooking dinner at an electric bulb-lit kitchen and school children had never enjoyed doing their homework under an electric light after the sun would set. Not until 1992.
Nineteen ninety two was the year when Ngibat villagers finally saw the light from an electric bulb after a five-kilowatt micro-hydro power project was installed in the community. “This is the longest-running micro-hydro power project in the Philippines,” said Florence Daguitan, a former staff of the Montañosa Research and Development Center or MRDC.

Since it was established in 1978, the Sagada, Mt. Province-based MRDC had been advocating for “appropriate development” and that people must be involved in all stages of development. The micro-hydro power project in Ngibat is situated in one of the country’s “off-grid” areas or remote villages not serviced by the country’s major power distributors through major power grids such as the Luzon grid.

Fully managed by the community, the project has been providing the lighting needs of some 52 households. Shortly later, the project’s electricity was harnessed to support appropriate small industries such as blacksmithing, milling rice, making flour, and extracting sugarcane.

“In the evening under their fluorescent lights, women would also select seeds and children would do their homework,” said Daguitan.

The Ngibat villagers have not only benefitted from the project’s electricity. The small volume of water from a nearby spring diverted to finally run the turbine of the hydro-power facility also serves another important purpose. The diverted water also irrigates nearby rice fields.

“Since the project gives the community both electricity and irrigation, all members of the community have committed to maintain their watershed areas,” said Daguitan.

Daguitan was sharing one of the “best practices” and examples of “holistic” and “self-determined development” during an orientation-workshop for indigenous peoples on 16-21 October in Quezon City.

Organized by Tebtebba, a Baguio City-based global indigenous institution promoting indigenous rights, the workshop drew 41 participants from various indigenous communities nationwide. They tackled “holistic and strategic ap-
proaches towards self-determined and sustainable development.”

The Ngibat hydro-power project’s benefits to the community cannot be understated. Citing MRDC’s study about the facility’s impact, Daguitan said the project enabled community members to appreciate more the need to protect their watershed.

So the project, she noted, encouraged the villagers to strengthen their traditional management and collective customary laws of forest protection among the tribes involved.

The project has helped make life less difficult for the hardy folk. “The rice mill also freed women and children from the burden of pounding rice,” she said. “Community members also have become more productive as new labor-saving inventions, tools and implements were fabricated from their blacksmith shops.”

With reduced labor in many of the community’s activities, the villagers were able to produce root crops, sugar and cash crops to help secure their food needs and to earn them some cash for other needs such as children’s education.

“The electric lighting also helped mothers bond with their children as they helped them do their school homework,” said Daguitan. “Men now also share responsibilities as they have assumed the task of milling rice.”

Muyong and local governance

One secret of the famed Ifugao Rice Terraces, believed to be 3,000 years old, in northern Philippines is a traditional forest management called *muyong*. Individual, family or clan-managed, the muyong refers to a forest woodlot usually situated above a series of rice terraces in Ifugao province. The woodlots have helped sustain the springs and brooks in many communities.

In Tinoc, one of the towns of Ifugao, community folk have organized themselves and asserted that it was time to preserve whatever was left of their forests. From the initiative of Wangwang village, the whole town of Tinoc later has committed to embark on a “Comprehensive Land Use Plan.”

The land use plan would identify primary and secondary forests, creeks, brooks, and agricultural and settlement areas.

“I hope that before 2013, the resolution we have been pushing at the sangguniang bayan (municipal council) will be approved,” Bonifacio Dumanop, a village official and elder from Wangwang, Tinoc, said during the workshop. If approved, the resolution would pave the way for a zoning ordinance, which would strengthen the town’s comprehensive land use plan.

The call for a comprehensive land use plan began when some members of the community became alarmed over the fast conversion of forest lands into commercial vegetable plots. To preserve whatever was remaining of their forests, Tinoc villagers—after training on participatory community 3-D mapping—convinced municipal officials to appreciate the importance of a comprehensive land use plan and zoning.

The continuing engagement of village elders with Tinoc town officials
with the aim of putting in place a zoning ordinance is an example of what Salvador Ramo of Tebtebba, a workshop facilitator, calls “an interface of indigenous and mainstream governance.”

Selective fishing and harvesting wild honey

The territory of the indigenous Mansaka in Davao del Norte and Compostela Valley in southern Philippines’ Mindanao island faces three main threats—militarization, logging and the encroachment of migrants. But the Mansaka people have continued to conserve and wisely manage whatever was left of their resources.

The Mansaka have designated protected areas (which include sacred sites), communal forests, portions for agriculture, and hunting grounds. Each Mansaka community has a respected balyan (traditional priest or priestess), who, guided by the spirit of Magbabaya (Supreme Being), knows where medicinal herbs could be found, said young elder Oscar Sarahan of Tagum.

Through their rotational agriculture, the Mansaka have maintained and continue to cultivate various varieties of native rice, bananas and camote or sweet potato. Their produce from their traditional farming is augmented by the fish and wild game they hunt and other wild fruits and vegetables they gather from the forests.

The Mansaka also have a way conserving fresh water fish by catching only the big ones. How? “They have designed their fish traps in such a way that these spare the small fishes,” said Sarahan, citing a study by Sildap, a Tagum City-based non-government organization concerned with indigenous peoples’ education and welfare.

Despite militarization, wherein military troops and rebels have made most upland communities their battle zone, the Mansaka have learned to live with the conflict. Since they have been forced to evacuate from time to time as a result of skirmishes, the Mansaka would plant only “long-term crops, such as fruit trees,” which they could abandon and harvest later during lulls in the armed conflict, said Sarahan.

Amidst their difficult situation, the Mansaka have established “schools of living tradition” where elders pass on to the young traditional occupations such as weaving, wine making, blacksmithing, pottery and how to harvest wild honey. Sarahan said wild honey is one forest product, which indicates the biodiversity’s richness in a Mansaka community.

Raising community income

Decena Cae was 22 in 1992 when he joined the Pagtutulungan at Pagkakaisa Sangkap sa Matagumpay na Tindahan ng Mamamayan, a cooperative in the sub-village of Calinogan, Barangay Casoon, Monkayo, Compostela Valley.

He invested P6,000 (US$147) as share capital in the coop and eventually in 1998 he qualified to loan P10,000 (US$244), which he used to buy a ten-hectare farm lot. He inter-cropped rub-
ber, banana, coconuts and fruit trees on this farm lot, which eventually has since been providing for him and his family a decent income.

“Through this farmland, I was able to build a house and continue to send my two children (ages 15 and 10) to school,” Cae told the Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service.

As a coop member, Cae was able to loan P20,000 (US$488), which a cousin used for his wedding. He eventually repaid this loan because of the good income from his farm.

The cooperative was established in 1992 primarily to buy basic items for the purok or sub-village, which is an hour drive by “skylab” (a motorcycle-driven vehicle) from the town of Monkayo.

Each of the 53 members pooled P2,000 (US$49), which they used to buy the necessary items for the consumer store. From a consumer cooperative, this was transformed into a multi-purpose coop, which also gives out loans to members and later, even non-members. The first initial capital for credit purposes was P3,498 (US$85), which was loaned to members at 3% interest. Later, the loan services were offered to non-members, who were charged 5% interest.

The multipurpose cooperative has helped provide basic services for the community of Calinogan. The coop eventually bought a power generator, which provided electricity for the community every 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm. This is much welcome for school children who have to do their homework in the evening.

The coop also acquired a motorcycle which was transformed into a skylab. The community badly needs the skylab, especially during emergency such as having to deliver patients to the clinic in Monkayo town. The vehicle also hauls goods from Monkayo and in between the vehicle is hired, giving additional income for the coop.

Cae admits that the coop has some problems such as delinquent borrowers. “But these problems are easily resolved through dialogue,” he said.

He also cited the presence of big consumer stores in the town center. “But our coop’s items are still cheaper,” he said. “And with the patronage refund for members, our coop has since been well patronized. Even a former small variety store in our community closed as almost everybody patronizes our coop.”

**Enriching each other’s experiences**

The workshop became a venue for the exchange of various experiences among indigenous peoples in the country. Ngibat’s micro-hydro power facility, for example, has drawn interest from other indigenous leaders in Mindanao, whose communities abound in springs and brooks, which could be tapped for small hydropower.

The participants were also introduced to new interventions, which could enhance traditional occupations. For example, many participants
considered the possibility of enhancing traditional farming systems through the help of an earthworm called “African night crawler,” which was discussed by Moren Macay, a young Ibaloi organic farmer in Baguio City in northern Philippines.

During the workshop, participants also learned about the well-established indigenous political governance of many indigenous communities. Timuay Alim Bandara, a Teduray leader from Upi, Maguindanao, shared how their Timuay justice and governance system is working.

The Teduray, whose ancestral domain is within the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao or ARMM, are under threat of being marginalized under a Bangsa Moro setup. “But we can still survive despite the odds because our justice and political governance is well-established,” said Bandara.

“The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) also claims it has nothing to do with us because we are under ARMM,” he added. “But with or without NCIP, we have to strengthen our justice and governance system for our survival.”

Timuay Rodrigo Rangaban of the Ilelama Council of Timueys also shared the importance of strong local governance among the Erumanen Manuvu in sustainable development. Backed by the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act or IPRA’s recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples’ customary laws and governance, the Erumanen Manuvu through their tribal structure imposed laws and sanctions on forest resources, for example.

“Without strong traditional governance, our forests would have ended up as board feet of timber for sale,” said Rangaban.

In Aurora province in northern Luzon, the Igongots have also instituted policies about how to protect their remaining resources. For example, young Igongot leader Rocky Valderama said his community has organized “ancestral domain guards,” who have been tasked to protect their forests at certain community-designated checkpoints.

Facilitated mainly by Ellen Bang-oa and Salvador Ramo of Tebtebba, the workshop encouraged questions about how to further deepen and apply in the communities the knowledge participants gained from the six-day exercise.

In response, Tebtebba Executive Director Victoria Tauli-Corpuz highlighted the need to further strengthen the grassroots. “From this workshop, we can organize from among you (referring to the participants) a pool of trainers, who can propagate the principle of self-determined and sustainable developments in local communities,” she said.

For sustainability of projects and programs in the grassroots, would-be implementers may yet have to sharpen their community organizing and project management skills, Tauli-Corpuz stressed.