



INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

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Indigenous Women and Food Sovereignty

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Introduction

The availability of food for the indigenous peoples of the Philippines largely depends on their access to and control over their lands and resources and on the continued practice of their traditional livelihoods. All these are threatened, and hunger is now a daily problem for many poor people. Indigenous peoples' land, resources and biodiversity are continuously under attack by outside forces, causing the loss of traditional sources of food. The present state of biodiversity of food sources in many communities can no longer secure the food needs of local folk.

Every October 16, World Food Day, people all over the world would celebrate the abundance of food. True, abundance, not scarcity, best describes the world's food supply: Enough wheat, rice and other grains are produced to provide every human being with 3,500 calories a day, not even counting other foods like vegetables, beans, nuts, root crops, fruits, meats and fish. Enough food is available to provide 4.3 pounds of food per person a day worldwide: 2 ½ pounds of grain, beans and nuts, about a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk and eggs (Food First, Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1998).

But amidst this abundance, hunger prevails:

- Every year, hunger kills 112 million people worldwide (Food First).
- A total of 792 million people in developing countries remain chronically hungry.
- Around three-quarters live in rural areas, many come from countries where there is conflict and more than 60% are women.
- There are more chronically hungry people in Asia, but 18 of 23 countries facing the most severe problems are African (PANOS, Food for All, 2001).
- As of 1994, 122,942 families or about 51% of Cordillera families live below the poverty threshold. This means they do not have sufficient income to meet their food and other basic requirements (NEDA 1999).
- All the Cordillera provinces are among the 20 poorest provinces in the country, more popularly called "Club 20". The region ranked 5th among the 15 regions in the country with the highest incidence of poor families (NEDA 2000).

The problem is not that there is not enough food to go around. The problem is that most people are too poor to buy the food they need, while others, like the indigenous peoples, have lost their traditional sources of food (Foodless Day statement, CWERC-Innabuyog).

Food Security and Sovereignty for the People

For the basic masses, food security is simply “being able to eat three meals a day, with food readily available from local resources that can sustain the family’s daily dietary needs” (*Peasant women of Dalupirip, Itogon, 2003*).

But food security is not enough. What we need is food sovereignty, meaning, the right to food, including the right to the land and resources that produce the food we need.

For the Cordillera people, the region’s rich natural resources -- land, natural biodiversity, coupled with customary systems of environmental protection and mutual cooperation -- have sustained the indigenous peoples since time immemorial. Traditional farmers’ varieties of rice, legumes, fruits, vegetables, livestock, fish, coffee and other food crops have fed generations of indigenous peoples. To ensure food security in the whole community, it is customary for all households to help each other during food shortages. It is also inherent in indigenous communities to protect and not to abuse nature. The women play a special role in production by doing about 90% of the work in the rice fields, aside from protecting traditional varieties of seeds and ensuring that there is enough food on the family table.

Threats to Food Sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples

The indigenous peoples face serious threats to their food sovereignty and survival. Through what is now aptly described as “development aggression,” large-scale mining and dams continue to overrun productive agricultural land. The rivers are dammed, polluted or silted by mine waste causing the loss of fish and other food.

Logging, deforestation and government reservations have increasingly ruined and wiped out forests, depriving the people of forest products and traditional food.

As stated by Filipino indigenous women during a workshop on January 2004:

“Government laws, programs and so-called development projects are being imposed without our free prior and informed consent. These violate our right to self-determination and (they) provide no benefits. (These include) forest laws such as the NIPAS, IPAS, IFMA, Forestry Code; industries such as mining, logging and agribusiness; hydropower projects such as San Roque Dam, Kaliwa Kanan, Laiban Dam, Abulug; eco-tourism projects such as the Pacific Coast City/Green Circle, Clark Development Corporation Pinatubo Project, Mangyan Heritage National Park; agricultural programs funded through loans and Official Development Aid (ODA) such as CECAP, CHARM, CASCADE, Aurora Integrated Development Program” (Communiqué, NIWW, 2004).

Commercial agriculture is killing subsistence production and making indigenous people heavily reliant on loans and credit, if only to keep their production going. The influx of imported vegetables, grains and fruits has left legions of indigenous folk cultivating commercial vegetables bankrupt. After using and getting exposed to hazardous agro-chemical products, indigenous farmers have suffered from serious health problems, including abnormalities of their offspring.

The cash economy has also reduced the role of women from producers to farm workers. In subsistence production, women peasants are more or less in control of their

production. With the cash economy, the capitalist, trader-supplier and usurer control agribusiness.

The introduction of modern varieties of crops dependent on agro-chemical inputs has destroyed the soil and caused the extinction of traditional varieties of rice, vegetables and other food crops. The heavy use of inorganic, agro-chemical inputs for high-yielding varieties results in higher production costs, which eat into the meager earnings of poor farmers. Farm yield is decreasing, pushing people to migrate or engage in other cash-earning occupations to buy food.

Similarly, traditional practices of cooperation such as the “innabuyog”, “ub-ubbo” and “tinnulungan” are giving way to cash-based relations that weaken community solidarity.

Military operations in many communities have also prevented poor farmers from tending their rice fields or swidden farms and from hunting or fishing for fear of their lives.

Lack of money prevents many families from buying commercial food products that could augment their daily food requirements. This has caused health problems like rising incidence of malnutrition, goiter, ulcer and other food-related illnesses. The use of pesticides and fertilizers and the consumption of chemical-laden food products have also caused many illnesses.

Globalization and anti-people policies and projects of the government have worsened the plight of the indigenous people, including women, with particular impacts on women’s role as food producers.

Indigenous Women’s Role in Ensuring Food Sovereignty

Indigenous women in the Philippines are largely peasants engaged in subsistence agriculture in mountainous interior communities. Indigenous women who live along coastal areas like the Dumagats in Quezon are engaged in fishing. As subsistence peasants, indigenous women do the backbreaking and tedious agricultural work of clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting, and selecting seeds. Such a role has enabled them to acquire a vast knowledge in agriculture. They play an important role in seed selection and storage, herbal medicines, various uses of flora, pest management, soil fertility management, the best season for planting specific species of plants, and what plants suit a particular terrain and type of soil. They also tend domestic animals for food and cultural rituals. With the growing needs for cash, these livestock are now being raised as an additional cash source (Innabuyog-Gabriela, 2004).

Indigenous women peasants also play an important role in health-related concerns or on community medicine. The knowledge they have acquired on herbal medicines is shared with their communities. Involved more in rearing children, women are also responsible in transferring indigenous knowledge to children, including indigenous agricultural knowledge and technology, handicraft-making, dances and songs.

The cash economy has pushed some indigenous women and their communities to produce commercial vegetables, fruits, rice, corn and other cash crops. Even traditional crafts like loom weaving among Igorot women in the Cordillera, Mangyan women in Mindoro and the Lumad women in Mindanao have turned into a commercial activity. Bead products have also become a cash source for Mangyan women.

In times of food shortage, the mother is mainly responsible to find ways to feed her family. It is culturally imposed that the woman shoulders the burden of feeding her family and earning money for other pressing needs. Many are forced to migrate outside their community to find ways to earn income.

In the Cordillera, the women earn daily wages from “por dia” (per day) odd jobs within or outside their community. They offer their services in cleaning houses, washing clothes, tending gardens, helping in domestic chores, or in construction. Others also join the small-scale miners in Loacan in Itogon town in Benguet Province. Women who are used to doing heavy work like mining are best chosen in construction work because they are physically able and are very thorough in their work.

Por dia jobs pay P80.00 to P150.00 per day, which is just enough to buy a kilo of rice and a kilo or less than a kilo of *galunggong*, a kind of fish poor Filipinos commonly choose. But por dia jobs are also seasonal and very unstable. So to earn income, some women raise a couple or three pigs, cultivate commercial flowers, and make brooms.

When they cannot find jobs, women are forced to acquire loans either in cash or kind in order to feed their families. Some women borrow rice and some essential items from grocery stores, which they pay after they get paid for their por dia jobs.

A macho culture still prevails in most of indigenous peoples’ communities. So while women play an important role in economic production, their political life is limited and sometimes restricted traditionally. However, there are tribes or groups where women are also leaders or are given chieftain and peace-pact holder titles like certain tribes in the Cordillera and in Mindanao. Generally, indigenous women still assume traditional roles of gathering food and tending to the children while political deliberations within the indigenous socio-political systems are going on.

The particular case of the Ibalois of Benguet

Threats to Food Security and Agricultural Biodiversity

The natural resources and biodiversity in the Ibaloi communities of Itogon are rapidly deteriorating. Much as the people depend on local resources for their food security, they regret that these are not as productive as they were about 10 to 15 years ago.

Ibaloi farming folk now recognize that the fertility of their farm soil has steadily deteriorated. The accumulated use of HYVs together with the use of inorganic fertilizers and pesticides has turned the soil acidic, leading to low production. As a result, traditional varieties of rice can no longer survive in farmlands used for HYV production. The introduction of HYV rice and inorganic inputs has destroyed, if not poisoned, the once fertile soil of many communities.

The introduction of HYVs has altered also the spending capacity and inflow of income of the people. The high cost of agricultural inputs requires large expenditures from farming households. Instead of spending money to buy food, money is allocated

to purchase seeds, pesticides and fertilizers. The purchase of these expensive seeds and inputs has decreased the people's net income.

The mines and dams along the Agno River also threaten the food security and biodiversity in Itogon after the river was polluted and silted, thanks to toxic mine wastes. The water of the Agno River has now become shallower because of accumulated silt from the mines. For many years, Benguet Corporation and Itogon-Suyoc mining companies had disposed of their mine tailings into the Antamok and Ambalanga rivers and other tributaries of the Agno River. Tailings dams built by the companies, which were supposed to contain mine wastes, had collapsed on several occasions, finding their way into the rivers. The Baayan Creek used to give Ucab villagers fish and shells. But Benguet Corporation built a tailings dam along the creek and is now polluted.

The construction of hydropower dams along the Agno River had deprived the people from their traditional sources of livelihood such as gold mining or "panag-sayyo". After the Binga dam was built upstream of the communities, Ibaloi folk could no longer extract gold particles from the riverbed. This lessened the additional income brought into each household, particularly in the villages of Dalupirip and Ballococ. The water quality of the river has also deteriorated after the Binga and Ambuklao dams were built. Not only that. During the typhoon season when the dams' caretakers have to release water, residents along the riverbanks cannot sleep for fear of soil erosion and flooding. Releasing water from the dams often has caused damage to lives and property.

Due to illegal logging and deforestation, wild animals in the forest, which used to help give protein to local folk, have disappeared.

One of the more recent threats to food security is land conversion. What used to be rice fields and vegetable farms are now being converted into green house production farms for non-food crops such as cut flowers. The need for cash to buy food, pay for children's education, utility bills, and other basic needs, has prompted many community folk to engage in floriculture. If the trend continues, all farmlands devoted to food production would become a sea of flowers. But this would further aggravate the rice shortage already being experienced by the people.

Threatening communities like Loacan and Ucab, which depend on small-scale mining, vegetable gardening and daily wage jobs for their food security, are large-scale mining operations. Corporate mining operations displace and marginalize small-scale miners. After almost a century of mining operations by Benguet Corporation, almost nothing is left for small-scale miners to mine. Gold production by small-scale miners has drastically decreased compared to 10 to 15 years ago.

Benguet Corp's operation also denuded the forest and ruined the environment. The company's open pit mine stripped the land of its topsoil and destroyed community folk's swidden farms. The open pit mine operations also depleted water sources so local folk could no longer cultivate their rice fields and gardens. The mine operations also turned the soil acidic so rice, fruit trees and many varieties of vegetables could no longer survive. Fruit trees do not bear as much fruit as before and some of the fruit do not even mature.

To be secured in their food, residents of Loacan and Ucab need income-earning activities. But income-generating activities, including odd jobs, are unstable and not always available. Many local folk are thus often stressed on where to get money for the next meal.

Summary and Recommendations

The food security of the Ibaloi people of Itogon is very much threatened at the moment. The people experience several months of rice shortage each year. They regularly need to find cash-earning occupations, which are difficult to find, to buy the food they need. In some communities, the land, natural resources and biodiversity are still able to provide much of what the community consumes. But in other communities, the environment has been so much abused and damaged for many years that it can no longer feed the people. In the latter case, the availability of “por dia” jobs determines whether a family will be able to eat or not. The lack of money prevents many families from buying commercial food products that could augment their daily diet.

Coping with food insecurity has largely been the responsibility of the women. They are expected to find ways to provide food for their families. Thus, many women are now employed in “por dia” jobs such as construction, domestic chores, cleaning, washing clothes and other manual and odd jobs. These jobs are by nature irregular and unstable, but these are what enable the women to give their families three meals each day. It is necessary to support the women in their effort to put food on the family table. Livelihood projects and sustainable agricultural practices can be developed to help give these women income.

The Ibalois of Itogon continue to practice their traditional systems of mutual cooperation in the community and environmental conservation measures such as the “*tuneg*” in agricultural communities and “*sagaok*” in mining communities. Under both practices, community members help each other through labor exchange or by sharing the blessings of a small gold mine. Such practices help community members cope with harsh and hard times. But these practices are slowly giving way to the pressures of poverty and outside forces.

It is thus necessary to reinforce the positive traditional values of the Ibalois, which help them cope with hardships and poverty. Education and cultural revival programs to develop appreciation and strengthen traditional values of the Ibalois should be initiated at the community level. Education modules and courses on these positive indigenous values should be formulated and integrated into the informal and formal education of the young generation.

It is also recommended that a program to conserve the remaining resources and biodiversity in Itogon be implemented by government or other institutions. Indigenous systems of resource management and conservation should be strengthened and supported. Programs to revive soil fertility and to wean the soil from dependence on agro-chemical inputs also need to be initiated. Organic farming of traditional varieties of rice and vegetables can be promoted in areas where this is still feasible in order to serve as a good example for others to follow. Dalupirip could serve as a pilot area for a model farm where traditional varieties of rice and vegetables can be cultivated. Government and non-government agencies can help communities to gradually shift back

from HYV to traditional varieties so farmers won't be economically dislocated in the process.

Alongside with this, livelihood programs should be a sponsored to support the families during times of low production. Restoring organic farming entails a long process, thus the people must be provided with the necessary safety nets (such as livelihood projects, credit programs and subsidized services) to secure their food.

The lack of livelihood opportunities is largely affects food security in the community. Alternatives to small-scale mining and other sustainable livelihood programs, which won't undermine existing community unity and solidarity, should be explored together with the communities. A feasibility study together with community consultation must be done beforehand to ensure that livelihood programs to be conceived and implemented are appropriate and responsive to community folk's needs. The community people should also be involved in all the steps of the project from planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Women by tradition are expected to make ends meet when it comes to securing food for their families. But there is a need for basic women's orientation education for men and women in identified communities. Through this, both men and women can appreciate that they need to mutually cooperate in addressing community or domestic issues and problems such as food shortage. This shall also help the women and men to demand from government better state services for their families and communities, which are actually part of their rights.

As the people starve because they lack income-generating jobs and livelihoods, government should provide the necessary services and support. There should be accessible health centers that provide free medical and health services such as immunization and maternal health care. A subsidized day care system should be put up in every barangay or village in order to allow parents more time for production. Because water source is one of the major problems in mining communities, not only for drinking, cooking, washing, bathing but also for irrigation, the government should provide or install an efficient, safe and free or affordable water system for the community people.

To gain strength, voice and power, Itogon communities must undergo capability-building and consciousness-raising activities. Part of these activities is educating the people about their current situation and about the wider context of current issues and problems obtaining in the region and in the country. Raising people's awareness through educational discussions is one form of empowering them to progress and to assert and struggle for their rights. Unity building is also necessary for communities to build their organized strength. There should be strong people's organizations as well as women's organizations that can wield their collective strength in the face of various forms of development aggression and abuse.

It is all the more necessary to empower and support the Ibaloi people in their efforts to confront the threats to their food security, biodiversity and survival. The people of Itogon have shown their organized strength and militancy in their struggles to stop Benguet Corporation's open pit mines and the San Roque Dam. We need to fully support them all the way in their struggles to defend their rights to land and natural resources, and their rights to self-determination, food security and biodiversity in the face of the powerful odds against them.

Responses and Empowerment of Indigenous Women

The intimate connection of indigenous women to the land and their high regard for life and dignity make them active participants in indigenous peoples' struggles. Each tribe or indigenous peoples' group has its own story to tell about the women's role in their local struggles, mainly in asserting their right to self-determination.

Ibaloi women took part in resisting against the entry of Spanish conquistadores in the 16th century in their gold expeditions to Benguet, a gold-rich province of the Cordillera. Women were always in the forefront of driving mineral prospectors as displayed by Kankanaey, Bontok and Maeng women of the Cordillera in different times. Bontok and Kalinga women have shown their courage against the World Bank-funded Chico Dam, despite threats and even loss of lives among their ranks. Tingguian women joined their communities in protesting against the Celophill Resource Corporation, a pulpwood industry that denuded vast swaths of forests in the Cordillera.

Recent reports tell about the resistance of Ata-Manobo women against logging companies and plantations like the Alcantara and Sons in Mindanao; Agta women's resistance against the Aurora Integrated Development Program that would make indigenous people's homeland as protected areas, eco-tourism sites and other economic development projects that will eventually displace the Agtas of Aurora province in Central Luzon; the Mangyan women's resistance against mining and the national integrated protected area system (NIPAS); Tumandok women of Panay's resistance against a military reservation that usurped 33,000 hectares of their ancestral lands and against a proposed hydro-electric project; and Higaonon and Manobo women's resistance against big mining applications and plantations in North Central Mindanao.

Aside from the struggles related to land rights is the struggle or resistance of the IPs against militarization. The courage of indigenous women leaders to confront military officers and soldiers, who have violated human rights, has contributed to the assertion of the rights of indigenous peoples and human rights. Indigenous women stood firm during dialogues, petitions, barricades and mass actions against militarization.

Indigenous women's participation in the defense of land, life and resources started from spontaneous or sporadic actions. These actions eventually became organized and coordinated actions. With the growing strength of the indigenous peoples' movement in the Philippines, local struggles are gaining support from various sectors in the country and abroad.

The forms of struggle of indigenous people range from legal to meta-legal or extra-legal forms. Basic to all of these is the formation and strengthening of their organizations, raising their political consciousness, and linking up their organizations with other sectoral organizations.

There are now varying levels of indigenous women's organizations in the country. Regional indigenous women's alliances exist in the Cordillera and in Southern

Mindanao Region. The other areas have provincial and municipal level organizations of indigenous women. But other communities have yet to form indigenous women's organizations because they only have general indigenous people's organizations.

A recent development is the formation of BAI, the national network of indigenous women's organizations in the Philippines. This evolved from a national workshop of indigenous women last January 23-26, 2004 in Baguio City. As a national network, BAI serves as a campaign center for indigenous women's issues, a network that will strengthen the capability of its network members in terms of organizing, education, research and campaigns, building links with other indigenous women's organization in the Philippines and overseas, and facilitating sharing of and access to resources to meet BAI's objectives.

This development shows the level reached by indigenous peoples' organizations in the Philippines as well as the assertion of indigenous women to have their own organizations where their particular issues and concerns can be raised and discussed. The formation of a national network is a breakthrough in the indigenous people's movement, in the women's movement as well as in the overall people's movement in the Philippines (Innabuyog, 2004).

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