

Philippines

Chapter 3: Carrying on the Fight

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“...Such arrogance to speak of owning the land when we instead are owned by it. How can you own that which will outlive you? Only the race owns the land because the race lives forever.” - Macli-ing Dulag

Macli-ing Dulag, a Cordillera martyr of the Butbut tribe in Tinglayan, Kalinga, Philippines, uttered these words during the famous Chico Mega Dam Struggle. He was killed on April 24, 1980, by state agents because of his resistance efforts and his assertion of the importance of protecting ancestral land. The date of his death is now being commemorated by the Peoples’ movement as Cordillera Day. He is one of the many inspirations for me to continue to be an Indigenous Peoples’ human rights defender. I have been a part of the Indigenous Peoples’ struggle since I was studying in college. Little did I know of my culture as I grew up in the city, yet the work of urban-based Indigenous Peoples’ organizations has led me to realize the different issues faced by Indigenous Peoples. It started with a question of “why” and “how” Indigenous youth can better the situation of Indigenous Peoples and become present and future leaders.

When I was younger, I remember one time, as I was going to my hometown in Itogon, Benguet, I noticed a mountain up-close. The mountain had no trees, it looked dry, and it was surrounded by a green-looking pond. I found out that these are effects of the destructive open-pit mining that takes place throughout the Philippines and that the green pond is the toxic tailings waste of the Benguet Corporation, a mining company that has wreaked havoc in our province for more than 100 years.

During the annual Cordillera Day in 2014, I became a part of a theater performance. The story was about the struggle of Indigenous Peoples in the Cordillera region and their fight against the construction of the World Bank-funded Chico Dam in Kalinga and against massive illegal logging by the Cellophil Resources Corporation in a forest managed and preserved by Indigenous communities in Abra. The story, as written and told by elders, was an eye-opener as to how brave the women were because they were at the front line of mobilizations, with their young clinging to them and the men supporting them. At the same time, my eyes were opened to how the youth were also part of the struggle by educating their people on the issue and by presenting actions that would enable the community to win this fight against such a large corporation. As I was portraying one of the women in the theater performance, I felt agitation and at the same time pride as Indigenous Peoples were able to stop such a destructive project. Through that

performance, I felt the power of collective actions of Indigenous Peoples; I also felt that these stories should be passed down to this generation of youth.

Upon joining Indigenous youth organizations, I learned that other provinces are also affected by destructive projects, such as irresponsible and unregulated large-scale mining and dam projects twinned with militarization, causing unimaginable effects of environmental destruction, community displacement and continuous human rights violations. These are some of the reasons that, despite that fact that we as Indigenous Peoples live in areas with rich forests, free-flowing rivers, and abundant natural resources, Indigenous Peoples are still considered as part of the marginalized sector of society. Being educated by my experiences and reminded of the task ahead, I have committed myself to become a full-time volunteer for Indigenous Peoples' organizations. Working with the Cordilleran Youth Center, I became aware that we have similar issues to other Indigenous Peoples throughout the globe. Thus, we have to link with other Indigenous youth organizations to strengthen our unity. I learned through my local organization about the importance of reliving history, as this is where lessons can also be learned about the vital role of youth in this struggle.

Now, as a part of the Asia Young Indigenous Peoples Network (AYIPN), it has come as a realization to me that Indigenous youth can and

will change the path to a better and more sustainable future for Indigenous Peoples worldwide.

Asia Young Indigenous Peoples Network (AYIPN)

AYIPN, formerly the Asia Pacific Indigenous Youth Network (APIYN), serves as a regional network of Indigenous youth organizations and groups in Asia. It is a non-stock (meaning it does not have owners represented by shares of AYIPN stock) and non-profit network which relies on the commitment of its member organizations and support from its partners and other networks. In general, it aims to contribute to building the capacities of grassroots Indigenous youth in the Asia region while maintaining linkages at the international level in advancing and defending the Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination, national patrimony and sovereignty, cultural integrity and heritage.

The network traces its roots to the first International Indigenous Youth Conference (IIYC) convened by the Cordillera Peoples Alliance-Youth Commission (CPA-YC) in 2002. That international gathering developed and strengthened solidarity among Indigenous youth representatives from around the world. It recognized the need to empower Indigenous youth.

Through the various activities that the network has launched, and different conferences that member organizations have attended, a clearer picture began to emerge that Indigenous Peoples—especially the youth—continue to experience government neglect, discrimination and continuing effects of globalization, thus prompting more Indigenous youth to defend and assert Indigenous Peoples’ rights.

Issues

Indigenous Peoples continue to be over-represented among the poor, the illiterate, and the unemployed. Indigenous Peoples number about 370 million around the world. While they constitute approximately 5% of the world’s population, Indigenous Peoples make up 15% of the world’s poor. They also make up about one-third of the world’s 900 million extremely poor rural people.¹

While attending a regional youth capacity workshop training in March 2017, different Indigenous youth organizations from Asia were reporting on their issues and how they came to act

¹ United Nations Department of Public Information, “Indigenous peoples make up one-third of the world’s poorest and suffer alarming conditions in all countries,” State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples Press Release, January 14, 2010, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP/press%20package/sowip-press-package-en.pdf>.

in resolving these problems. What struck me the most was the fact that we all decided to be part of Indigenous Peoples' organizations, all for the cause of fighting for the rights of Indigenous Peoples, sometimes even to the point where our lives are placed at risk. As the training came to an end, I realized that the situation in the Philippines is not that different from that of other countries.

The influx of westernization in society, the history of colonialism and the continuous process of modernization in the guise of bogus development has negative impacts on Indigenous youth. Indigenous youth are faced with challenges and issues in the fields of land, culture and identity; education and employment; participation and inclusion, especially for women; and human rights violations.

a) Land and culture

Land is life, identity and culture for Indigenous Peoples. However, extractive industries and megaprojects, such as dams, mining and plantations, threaten Indigenous communities and their territories. Indigenous communities are forced to leave their ancestral lands as a result of land grabbing, destruction and militarization. Such conditions are a significant factor in the loss of identity and culture among Indigenous youth.

Culture is thereby weakened as the alienation of Indigenous Peoples from their land

weakens the continued practice of their Indigenous knowledge and socio-political institutions. In addition, elders are no longer able to practice their rituals, customs and traditions, and systems of governance. Furthermore, there is also the intentional miseducation and discrimination that promote stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples as backward or uncivilized people, causing Indigenous youth to be ashamed of their own culture and identity. Thus, Indigenous culture and valuable Indigenous knowledge and practices are disintegrating, weakening and, even worse, being lost.

b) Education and employment

Education is a basic right for every child; however, Indigenous youth are continually fighting for their right to quality, culturally sensitive, accessible education, since state and government support for this kind of education is often insufficient. Governments in developing countries often allocate a very small budget for education, while encouraging the further commercialization of education. This situation in turn deprives Indigenous youth of attending school, as fees are expensive and other requirements for school are such that marginalized families cannot afford them.

In addition, the formal education system is seldom responsive to the particularities and specific needs of Indigenous youth and children. Schools are often found in city centers, and appropriately sized

classrooms, adequately trained teachers and books do not reach far-flung areas, where Indigenous Peoples are often located. In addition, the language that is used in classrooms is often a common and internationally used language, such as English. Indigenous youth have different ethnolinguistic languages that they use because of their heritage. Indigenous Peoples speak the overwhelming majority of the world's estimated 7,000 languages and represent 5,000 different cultures.² Unfortunately, these languages are also being lost.

As education for Indigenous Peoples in remote areas is a low priority for many states and governments, it is also difficult for Indigenous youth to look for job opportunities once they either graduate or age out of the school system. Indigenous youth who cannot attend school prefer to look for a job to help their family meet everyday needs. The percentage of Indigenous youth who are literate and the percentage of Indigenous students who are attending higher education is still considerably behind in comparison with mainstream students. The reasons for this are insufficient schools in majority Indigenous areas, language-cultural difficulties, poverty, lack of teachers from Indigenous groups and poor communication and transport channels, such as accessible roads to Indigenous communities. All of these difficulties affect the academic results of Indigenous students

² United Nations, "International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples: 9 August," United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/>.

as well as their employment opportunities. As a result, Indigenous youth are pursuing alternate sources of income such as migrating from their villages to the city for low-level jobs; engaging in prostitution, crime, drug addiction, corruption, or suicide; joining armed groups; and increasing human trafficking. Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines are rarely found in high-level jobs and in government services, as they need to compete with mainstream youth for these positions.

c) Youth participation and inclusion of women

Indigenous women and children are the most vulnerable members of society, as sexual violence, such as rape and harassment, continue due to a strong patriarchal system and the misogynistic views held by many. Women are viewed as sexual objects and continue to be the victims of violence. In the Philippines, sexual and domestic violence is still prevalent in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), despite the existence of laws for protection such as the Anti Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC).³ These violations can be found in forced sex that leads to teenage pregnancy, human trafficking of children, and the continuing disrespect of the rights of women.

³ Lauren Alimondo, “Violence among women still prevalent in CAR,” *SunStar Philippines*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/422658>.

There is also less participation of Indigenous women in decision-making policies in communities and even less for Indigenous youth. In customary practices of some communities, only men are allowed to make decisions, while women are found cooking and tending to the needs of the family. Also, youth are often given tedious work. At a young age, they tend to farms, participate in the family's economic needs—thereby disabling them from attending school—and are not invited to share their voice by participating in any political roles. Although some communities are now giving Indigenous youth the freedom to speak, act and decide on community matters, there remains much room for improvement.

Safe spaces for Indigenous youth to organize and mobilize themselves are limited as well. Providing such space provides Indigenous youth with confidence and a sense of belonging in society.

d) Indigenous human rights defenders

Indigenous Peoples' territories in Asia continue to be heavily militarized, resulting in massive human rights violations. Our assertions of the rights over our lands and resources, as well as our assertion that our fundamental human rights be met, have been received with repression, deception, imposition and militarization. Indigenous youth are being subjected to intimidation, harassment, illegal arrest and detention. Killings and several cases of

rape of Indigenous women and youth have been documented in India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Burma.⁴

The sustained militarization of Indigenous territories aims to disrupt and weaken community cohesion and the consistent practice of socio-cultural systems, in order to further divide and rule the people. When under a constant state of militarization, the elders and community members cannot practice, teach and demonstrate thoroughly to the children and youth their socio-cultural practices. In this way, Indigenous youth suffer from a fundamental lack of understanding, knowledge and appreciation of their own distinct culture. This is one major factor causing an identity crisis amongst Indigenous youth.⁵

In her 2018 report, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, mentioned that: “I continue to receive reports of escalations in conflicts and continued militarisation on Indigenous peoples’ ancestral lands; displacements,

⁴ Jennifer Awingan, Anjo Rey Cerdeña, Mikara Kaye Jubay, Keidy Magtoto Transfiguracion, eds., “Proceedings of the Founding Conference cum Preparatory Meeting for the UNPFII, Leadership Training” (Asia Pacific Indigenous Youth Network: Philippines, December 2007), http://orig05.deviantart.net/a91d/f/2008/085/7/1/apiyn_conference07_proceedings_by_anj0.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

dispossessions and violence; peaceful mobilisations that are countered with attacks, criminalisation and harassments; and the continued, systematic discrimination against Indigenous peoples and the denial of their identity and rights. These violations are part of the everyday lives and struggles of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous human rights defenders across the world.”⁶

There is a need to protect Indigenous human rights defenders, as political repression is becoming a trend among governments dealing with Indigenous leaders. From the training and engagement that we have with Indigenous youth, we are growing increasingly concerned as our youth are now targets of state persecution and vilification.

I question the private sector and some states and governments on the “need” to silence people who are genuinely fighting for and protecting their human rights. As an Indigenous youth, our struggle for self-determination and protection of ancestral land is right and just. I remember stories shared by my fellow Indigenous youth in which they experienced being tailed by a group of authorities, their information taken and sometimes being threatened. If one hears stories from grassroots

⁶ “Statement of Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples to the Human Rights Council 39th Session,” September 19, 2018, <http://unsr.vtaulicorpuz.org/site/index.php/en/statements/252-hrc-2018>.

community organizations, they will always say, “I am only protecting my land and people.” Is there something wrong with not allowing a mining project to enter the community since it will only destroy the environment and the people?

My family is experiencing such human rights violations as well. My mother, Rachel Mariano, an Indigenous community health worker, submitted herself to court on September 17, 2018, for trumped-up charges filed against her by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The charges were filed in August 2017, then in October 2017, on three counts: homicide, frustrated murder, and murder. The last charge—murder—is what she is facing now and the reason she is in jail. All her life, my mother has devoted herself to bringing health services to Indigenous communities in far-flung areas. She is the reason why communities, reached by her services and the services of others doing the same work, have basic knowledge of first aid and are able to promptly decide on what to do about certain illnesses. Although she is not a doctor, many call her such. She has carried me along to these communities and to see the situations there first-hand is heartbreaking. The road going to one particular community takes 13 hours by bus followed by a six-hour walk. While their health training was ongoing, one of the elders said to me: “It is better to die immediately than to get sick.” He further explained that in dying, only his funeral would have to be taken care of, but if he gets sick, his transportation to the hospital, his associated bills

and medicine would only burden his family. This is an example of why my mother continues to advocate for a proper healthcare system for Indigenous Peoples.

Activists are not terrorists. Development workers are not terrorists. Nor are they criminals.

Good practices

Despite all of these issues that are experienced first-hand on the ground, Indigenous youth continue to empower and strengthen themselves. One of the activities that member organizations of AYIPN do at the grassroots level is capacity skills training. Capacity skills training is a way to raise awareness of the various challenges and conditions among Indigenous youth by providing them with knowledge of their rights. These member organizations of AYIPN have established themselves at the grassroots level and most have been working for Indigenous youth even before becoming a member of the network.

I admire the work that these Indigenous youth leaders perform in their communities and they continue to be an inspiration for me and others to continue working and advocating for Indigenous youth rights. Listed below are some of the many activities of member organizations, especially on raising awareness of issues facing their Indigenous Peoples among other network members.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Youth Headman-Karbari Network, Bangladesh, organized an Indigenous youth leadership training entitled “Training on Land Rights and Climate Change.” This was held at the Hill Resource Center, Rangamati Hill District, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. It is noteworthy that the majority of the participants in the training were young Indigenous women. Some of their elders were also invited to share their wisdom and experiences with the youth participants on how they nurture their lands and other natural resources.

Alongside Jharkhand Indigenous and Tribal Peoples for Action (JITPA), located in India, the National Indigenous Youth Network of India (who are founded and managed by JITPA) organized the Second National Indigenous Youth Conference in Bagaicha, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India, with the theme “Converging Diversity into Integrity.” This four-day event had the participation of Indigenous youth from eleven states of India and guests from Nepal. Among the highlights of the conference were educational discussions and workshops on the key issues confronting Indigenous youth and the various Indigenous Peoples of India, including militarization and human rights violations, land problems and lack of adequate quality education, among others. The young participants also learned skills in drafting position papers, memoranda, letters to authorities and press releases, as well as skills related to media engagement and conducting dialogues with authorities.

The Cordillera Youth Center (CYC) and Progressive Igorots for Social Action (PIGSA), Philippines, organizes a Kaigorotan Youth Week which is celebrated annually by the Indigenous youth in Baguio City, Philippines. This annual commemoration is held to remember the Indigenous youth struggles in the city during their campaign against the commercialization and bastardization of the Igorot culture in the early 1990s. In 2018, under the theme “Engaging the Indigenous youth in the defense of land, life and resources,” the various Indigenous youth organizations in the city, including the Regional Secretariat of AYIPN as part of the commemorative committee, celebrated KYW through cultural workshops where the youth participants shared their cultural skills with fellow youth. In addition, CYC is currently acting as the secretariat of the AYIPN.

LIMA Indigenous Youth Working Group, in Taiwan, together with students of Shih Hsin University, conduct an annual Indigenous youth exchange with Indigenous youth in the Philippines. The exchange is about learning and sharing cultures and practices and also learning about the present issues facing Indigenous youth in each country.

Youth for Environment Education and Development Foundation (YFEED), in Nepal, conducts Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) orientation workshops in schools and universities. They also co-organized the second International

Youth Forum on Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals in Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2018. The workshop and training were fruitful for all members and helped these members to understand the SDGs.

Barisan Pemuda Adat Nusantara (BPAN), in Indonesia, conducts an annual community immersion in Indigenous Peoples' communities, where participants learn Indigenous cultural traditions and conduct activities to strengthen their own organization and leadership.

Belia Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JBOAS Belia/JOAS), in Malaysia, together with the Indigenous Youth's Council Sabah (MBOA Sabah) and more than 200 Indigenous youth, organized for youth representing more than 20 Indigenous communities from all over Malaysia to come together to celebrate Indigenous Youth Day on September 16, 2018. This is the first time that many of these Indigenous youth had gathered with other Indigenous youth in one place, and this was an excellent opportunity to learn and share issues to increase awareness and capacity building among themselves

The Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA), in Cambodia, recently conducted an action protest in October 2018 to stop illegal logging by a private company in the Kbalromeas village. These youth are also active in the campaign against the Lower Sesan 2

hydropower dam project that threatens the vitality and biodiversity of two of the Mekong River's most significant tributaries.

The above-mentioned are some of the many activities that member organizations of AYIPN are doing at the grassroots level.

At the regional level, AYIPN and its members provide venues for Indigenous youth to meet and organize, such as the International Indigenous Youth Conference (IIYC). Aside from these organizations, below are some other Indigenous youth organizations encountered by AYIPN: Covalima Youth Center (Timor Leste), Youth Circle (Myanmar), Youth Federation in Nepal (YFIN), Newar Student Association (Nepal), Ping-pu Taiwan Indigenous Youth (Taiwan) and the Indigenous Student Council (Bangladesh). In 2016, AYIPN held its third IIYC where Indigenous youth leaders gathered and updated themselves on emerging issues and actions that needed to be taken in response. The conference offered spaces and opportunities for grassroots Indigenous youth organizations to express their ideas, concerns and voices on important issues occurring at the global level. The discussions and sharing included the application of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP); Indigenous self-determination; international policies, mechanisms and processes for resolving issues faced by Indigenous Peoples; and the Sustainable Development Goals. Other topics that are relevant

to Indigenous youth, such as the environmental crisis, education, employment, health and culture, were also tackled. From the discussions and workshops, the Indigenous youth participants studied the appropriate frameworks and skills on these themes that are relevant to them and their communities. The sharing included elders, who challenged the youth to act as their country's hope.

Additionally, at least 200 youth leaders from various countries in Asia gathered for the International Youth Solidarity Conference, which was held on September 2, 2017, in Quezon City, Philippines. The conference had the theme "Strengthening the Role of the Youth in Advancing Peoples' Rights and Self Determination." The young participants learned about the key concerns and successful struggles of the National Minority and Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines, the international situation of Indigenous Peoples, and the vital role of Indigenous youth. In the afternoon, Indigenous youth leaders from the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Indonesia shared their experiences in handling issues such as plunder and militarism, culture and identity loss, and community organizing and action.

In the international arena, Indigenous youth organizations and individuals regularly engage in different mechanisms such as attending both the preparatory meetings for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples, and bringing the recommendations from the meetings to the forum itself. Representatives of AYIPN from the Philippines, Taiwan, Burma, India, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Malaysia and Bangladesh participate in the annual Asia Regional Preparatory Meeting on UN Mechanisms. This is a venue where participants learn the processes involved in the various UN mechanisms that are relevant to Indigenous Peoples. They also share the current conditions of Indigenous Peoples in their communities and, from these discussions, the participants come up with resolutions and statements that may be submitted in the upcoming United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues or the upcoming Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Passing on the light

“We must struggle for a better life. Never give up and stand up for our rights. Defend our land, the source of life. Learn from the past and carry on the fight.”

This was a song composed and sang by the AYIPN secretariat about the vital role of youth in our society today. Being an Indigenous youth of today is quite challenging as issues affecting Indigenous Peoples are still regarded by society as insignificant concerns. We are at a period in our lives where we have the most energy and time, we have the ease of learning and adapting, and we are open to change with aspirations of being that

change ourselves. Our role for today is to continue passing on good practices that we learned from our elders and to become stewards of change and development for our People.

Upon visiting different places in Asia, I saw how Indigenous youth can be leaders and change makers. They are able to pass on the culture by learning and performing it in different ways.

The youth carry a greater responsibility as the next holder and changer of the future. It takes courage to be in our line of work, where lives are often at risk. It takes passion and motivation to be able to stand with the oppressed and marginalized and join them in their struggle. It takes collective power to be able to achieve significant change.

Let us recall the Indigenous youth leaders who dedicated themselves to serving the people and at the same time let us take lessons from the work that they have put in. Let us continue to be pillars for sustainable development by working hand in hand. Let us link with the oppressed and marginalized sectors of society in crafting a better future for us all.