Indigenous Peoples Respond to the Challenges of the New Normal

Due to the necessity of halting rapid COVID-19 transmission, various communities worldwide are adapting to a *New Normal* way of life. Nonetheless, various reports speak of the increasing inability of many, including indigenous peoples, to keep up with the new societal demands brought about by COVID-19 and its impacts.

Indigenous peoples are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 due to a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, socioeconomic and cultural reasons. These include the lack of access to basic health amenities and other government services in many indigenous communities, the absence of disaggregated national data on indigenous peoples, and the lack of comprehensive information on the new disease, among others.

However, indigenous peoples are also among the most resilient. Even before COVID-19, many indigenous peoples across the globe have been indepen-
dently sustaining themselves and their communities. Though they are among the world’s poorest, they were able to take care of the world’s remaining biodiversity using a collection of their traditional knowledge which, unfortunately, is not being recognized and is often regarded as backward or obsolete.

So, with this traditional knowledge passed on through generations, indigenous peoples were able to live productively even without adequate access to government services while taking care of the earth at the same time. Nevertheless, the pre-COVID-19 challenges faced by indigenous peoples and communities have become even more compounded by the additional problems caused by the unprecedented pandemic.

The COVID-19 situation has also brought along emerging difficulties for indigenous peoples’ organizations to operate in the new normal.

**IP Advocacy and Community Work**

**Go Digital**

The internet and its different platforms are now being used to continue interactions that were previously done via face-to-face contacts prior to the COVID-19 problem. However, many are not accustomed to such virtual, contactless transactions. Indigenous peoples are not excluded from feeling such alienation. Many are forced to learn the different functions of various programs and applications like Zoom, Google Meet, and so on.

Tebtebba, along with its partners, have started making adjustments including work-from-home (WFH) arrangements since the start of community lockdowns. These alterations magnify the role of working mothers who have to assist their children who, at the same time, have to join online classes and do their designated modules from home, keeping in line with the government’s anti-COVID-19 campaign. For Tebtebba, a single room is presently dedicated as well to virtual meetings due to the need of circumventing the intermittent internet access—a prevalent problem across developing countries like the Philippines.

ELATIA Training Institute coordinator, Maribeth V. Bugtong-Biano, says that the Institute is now piloting virtual training sessions. They are also learning how different online platforms can be modified to suit indigenous peoples’ contexts, as she foresees that it might take some time before everything goes back to normal.
COVID-19 Plus Pre-Existing and Emerging Community Needs

Many indigenous leaders are occupied with different responsibilities in their communities. Thus, it easily becomes a double burden for them to participate in virtual gatherings. Many of them are liaising with the local governments on matters relating to their ancestral domains, including, but not limited to, responding to the immediate effects of COVID-19 lockdowns and its corresponding impacts. They are vouched for by their indigenous peoples’ organizations, recommended to represent them in activities that were otherwise conducted face-to-face prior to the pandemic. However, some of these leaders are also farmers who are tied to other personal and/or community responsibilities. A lot of them are also women—and mothers—who have both productive and reproductive roles at home. Hence, a lot of them do not have sufficient and quality time to fully attend these synchronous, virtual training sessions.

Indigenous Peoples Exert Painstaking Efforts to Access the Net

Many indigenous peoples also reside in the outskirts of the city or town proper that are hardly reached by internet and telco providers. Thus, they still need to travel to the nearest city or town proper to access the internet so they can attend these virtual gatherings. In the Philippines, for instance, especially among indigenous participants located in the far-flung communities in the south, they have to hire a habal (motorcycle for hire) which costs about 600 PHP (12.40 USD) per trip. Travel time to reach the nearest internet signal location takes approximately half a day, as well. Such a lengthy process cuts the time appropriated for training purposes. Facilitators and trainers are forced to cut short the training time each session to give way to the difficulties encountered by those who hail from these remote locations.

Learning Digital Skill Despite Meager Resources

A big percentage of indigenous participants do not also have access to the needed digital devices. Many have limited knowledge on how to operate such gadgets or launch the different software programs or applications used for these online sessions. Hence, the need for more online (or offline through mobile phone direct calls) preparations is inevitable. Jayford Sacla of the Institute
mentions that scheduled discussions now take twice the time to finish. Post-COVID-ID-19 training sessions are, therefore, also more resource-intensive for the trainers and facilitators.

Maximizing Meetings During COVID-19

The ELATIA Training Institute’s problems are but some of the different issues brought about by the on-going pandemic. This is also true for many Indigenous peoples organizations who are engaged in regional and global forums where consultations are now done online. The Indigenous Peoples’ Advocacy Team (IPAT) of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) had to resort to using different platforms to reach out to countries and IPOs. The process of online consultations, however sincere they may be, could miss out on many indigenous peoples’ inputs from the grassroots.

Similarly, during the Pacific Regional Consultation Workshop that took place on 14-16 October 2020, Ruby Bangilan-Españoña, Tebtebba’s IPAF Coordinator shares, “It’s good that Pacific was able to carry out a face-to-face consultation workshop because for Asia, we are still organizing the region’s own consultation workshop but it will have to be in virtual and series form due to the on-going restrictions caused by the pandemic.”

Indigenous Peoples’ Resilience and Traditional Systems

Indigenous peoples have their own traditional systems that cover all the different facets of life. Way before the onslaught of this drastic pandemic, indigenous peoples have already been practicing their own traditional systems that cover decision-making, food production, medicine collection, and several other areas.

These practices provided—and continue to provide—indigenous peoples with the capacity to remain independent. These traditional knowledge systems enable them to secure the basic necessities for their collective community. At present, they also use these traditional systems as they control coronavirus transmission as well as mitigate the burgeoning effects of the pandemic in their daily life.

As cited from another Tebtebba report, indigenous communities use their extensive traditional systems—and newly developed ones—in attenuating the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis within their communities including the prac-
tice of customary lockdowns and rituals, voluntary isolations and entry closure to outsiders, ancestral food preservation and healing practices, small emergency funds for periods of scarcity, food sharing and bartering systems, public service announcements, community quarantine centers, and online market systems.

The Need for More Support and Inclusion

In addition to the COVID-19 initiatives created by different indigenous peoples and organizations around the world, various governments worldwide also appropriated support specifically for these indigenous communities. However, there is a necessity to further advocate for indigenous peoples’ inclusion in various COVID-19 prevention drives.

World Bank’s article entitled “Everyone Equal: The Resilience of Indigenous Peoples Across the Globe” reiterates that indigenous peoples “…are no strangers to pandemics and epidemics — but measures to address these crises have often excluded them.” Indeed, the continued survival of these indigenous communities around the world is due to their adherence to effective, traditional knowledge systems that have been passed down through generations. The necessity of allowing them to perpetuate these practices must be amalgamated with improved and IP-focused governmental consideration.

Additional Protection of Indigenous Peoples

While indigenous peoples have their own traditional knowledge, mitigating measures, and crises management systems, we cannot ignore the fact that, “[in] every country across the globe, Indigenous Peoples are poorer, have worse access to basic services, and enjoy far fewer social and economic opportunities,” adds the same World Bank article.

The article cites “Dr. Wallet Aboubakrine, who is also a trained medical doctor specializing in humanitarian action and education, highlighted that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted the elderly and those with complex and multiple underlying conditions. And as Indigenous partners around the globe have echoed, when elders die, it can result in the total loss of a culture, as the elders are often the primary source for the transfer of traditional knowledge, language, and identity. In remote communities, COVID could lead to the loss of an entire people or affect the very existence of communities.”

Indigenous Peoples’ Empowerment and Equal Access to Social Services

Nevertheless, the article also mentions the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, celebrated on 9 August, which is an excellent latitude to stress the problems faced by different IP communities across the globe and the unrelenting resilience that they exhibit amid this coronavirus crisis.

It is essential to stress the adaptation techniques—the combined traditional and new mitigating measures—arrogated by various indigenous groups around the world as they continue to face and survive the daily impacts of the pandemic. The government’s duty to respect,
protect, and fulfill Indigenous Peoples’ rights can only commence by making Indigenous Peoples relevant and visible in government data, plans, and actions for the New Normal initiative. Indigenous peoples have always been resilient—thanks to their persevering spirit of collectivism. However, the coronavirus pandemic should not be just another story of Indigenous Peoples’ unrelenting adaptability and strength. Their resilience must not become a convenient excuse for the further exclusion of indigenous peoples in the different forums that are relevant to them.

May this present COVID-19 crisis produce meaningful stories of how different states, all around the world, fulfill their duties and responsibilities in the recognition and fulfillment of Indigenous Peoples’ rights. In effect, such a move can, then, further perpetuate the vision of permitting all indigenous peoples around the world to receive equal representation and inclusion in the different societal policies, projects, and services.

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