Lambangian People Revive Their Sulagad System, Push for Their Self-Determined Development

“Pangarap talaga ng mga Lambangian na magkaroon ng kaunit nga tani nga kamoteng kahoy at saging para hindi na kailangang bumili sa merkado. Ang mga ito ay pwede rin sana naming pagkakitaan (It really is the dream of the Lambangian people to grow some cassava and banana in our farms so that we won’t have to purchase these from the market. We can even sell these crops for additional income).”

Members of the community join in the planting activity, making the efforts even more efficient.
Roel Datuwata, one of youth leaders of the Lambangian Peoples Organization (LPO), explained the benefits of the ongoing construction of their mother nursery in sitio 1 Benuan, barangay 2 Kuya, South Upi, Maguindanao, Mindanao, Philippines as well as the continuous maintenance of their three sulagad demonstration farms as part of their efforts to revive their sulagad system during Tebtebba’s visit to their community on 19 June to 5 July 2022.

According to Leticio Datuwata, LPO pioneer and Timuay Labi 3 of Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) — the umbrella organization that caters to both the Teduray and Lambangian indigenous peoples of southern Philippines, the sulagad system refers to a “sustainable alternative and ecological agricultural approach.” It is a form of agroforestry, specifically silvopasture, that combines the cultivation of various kinds of trees—forest trees and fruit-bearing trees (that produce perennial crops)—and provides spaces for short-term crops including root crops, green leafy vegetables, fruit vegetables, legumes, and corn, among others. It also integrates the presence of animals—livestock, carabaos, and horses—into the farm which, then contributes and sustains food sovereignty in the area. The system also includes hunting animals and gathering wild plants.

The sulagad system is an indigenous practice that helps sustain high biodiversity in the land as it does not decimate the nutritional content of the soil but, in truth, enriches it further by fostering the use of natural fertilizers (i.e., animal manure, composting, etc.) and pesticides (i.e., cultivating herbs that act as pest deterents). The said system does away with the mainstream practice of vast monocropping, mass harvesting, and haphazard use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides that gradually poison the soil and remove its vital nutrients, among others.

Nevertheless, it needs noting that the sulagad system, an age-old practice of both the Teduray and Lambangian peoples, requires immediate revival and continuous strengthening. While there...
Bayanihan, a Filipino practice of communal unity and voluntary cooperation, is very much alive in the Lambangian community. Members of the community transport construction materials for their sulagad central nursery from the sitio of Guila-Guila to sitio Benuan, traversing about eight kilometers of mountainous terrain and crossing a river twice or thrice.

Sitio Benuan, one of the villages in the Lambangian ancestral domain and the location of the LPO’s central nursery.

LPO members constructing their sulagad central nursery.

Preparing bamboo fences for the sulagad central nursery.

The central nursery greenhouse to be planted with various seedlings, including indigenous seeds.

Community members preparing the plots for the central nursery greenhouse.
Community members preparing coffee and coconut saplings in the central nursery.

With the help of a carabao, LPO youth leaders plowing the grounds of the nursery.

Members finding a way to divert water towards the central nursery.
are still traces of the sulagad system in the Lambangian ancestral domain, it is not fully maximized. Adopting certain farming innovations, including sloping agricultural land technology (SALT)—since the Lambangian territory is of mountainous terrain, as well as proper planning and execution (i.e., crop spacing) are also deemed necessary.

Furthermore, the introduction of cash crops, particularly high-yielding varieties and genetically modified corn, in the area is slowly eradicating the rich agro-ecology that the people have had for generations. While corn cultivation provides many members of the Lambangian community with minimal income to support their basic needs, it does not provide them with a sustainable livelihood to cover all their expenses. The presence of vast corn plantations in the domain is also increasingly diminishing the high natural biodiversity, including the presence of thick forested areas, in the ancestral territory.

The introduction of monocropping and genetically modified corn in the indigenous territory threatens the naturally high biodiversity in the area.
Exploring the Lambangian ancestral domain.

Surrounded by dense greenery, the mossy lake is home to tilapia and igat (eel).

A majestic lake in the midst of the Lambangian territory.

Houses in the Lambangian territory are generally built with light construction materials including palm leaves and sawali (interwoven bamboo splits) as well as bamboo poles and slats.

The Lambangian Tribal Hall, found in the heart of Benuan, is where various meetings and other important functions of the indigenous community take place.

A traditional stove with a wooden hook to hold the kaldero (cooking pan) in place above the fire.
“Dito sa mga bahay-bahay, wala na akong makitang mga garden (I cannot seem to find backyard gardens in the community anymore),” Pedro Arig, member of the LPO council of leaders and also Benuan Purok Vice President pointed out in a meeting conducted during the said visit, highlighting the waning practice of the said traditional knowledge system.

Chairman Mantil Enggo urges fellow members of the Lambangian community and LPO organization to continue the efforts to revive their sulagad system and attain food sovereignty.

LPO. He explained that several coconut saplings have already been planted but that maximizing the farm’s area would require the planting of more seedlings.

Meanwhile, Son Alaw, Lambangian people’s spiritual leader—he leads all of the indigenous community’s traditional rituals—and caretaker of LPO’s demo farm in Kubangan Fafan, reported that coconut saplings have already been planted in the said area as well. “... Ngunit ang mga kape ay hindi pa naitanim sapagkat dumaan kami sa matinding krisis. Kasabay ng pagsimula ng ating proyekto ang...

According to Son Alaw, obstacles must not stop the continuous revival and strengthening of the sulagad system in the Lambangian community.

During the gathering, LPO officers, elders, and youth leaders provided updates on their development and maintenance of their three sulagad demo farms or learning sites located in sitios Siyok, Kubangan Fafan, and Lutoy of the same barangay. They presented the different experiences, challenges, and lessons learned from the said initiative.

“Nung pumunta kami sa Siyok, nagsimula na ang pagtatanim natin doon. Ngunit pwede pa nating dagdagan [ang mga naitanim doon] (When we went to the Siyok demo farm, planting has already started but we can plant more seedlings there),” shared Mantil Enggo, Chairmain of
Overlooking part of the Lambangian ancestral domain on the way to visiting Siyok.

Along the way towards the sitio of Siyok to visit one of the learning farms.

Crossing a river on the way to Siyok.

On the way to Siyok, traversing the slippery foot trails up and down the mountains.

Community members planting seedlings in the Siyok demonstration farm using mostly sticks as tools.

An LPO member planting a coffee seedling in the Siyok demo farm.
pagdating naman ng mga daga. Ang ibang mga kasama ay dumayo sa ibang lugar para maghanap ng trabaho (…Although the coffee seedlings have not yet been planted. We had a rodent infestation during the start of the project and many of our companions had to go to other places to find work),” he said. Nevertheless, Alaw emphasized that these challenges must not serve as lasting obstacles to the organization’s plan of continuously developing their sulagad farms.

Mentioning their recent visit to the third sulagad learning site situated in sitio Lutoy, Chairman Enggo announced that the initiative there was doing great. Nonetheless, the said farm was very far from sitio Siyok, the site of the said gathering and, as mentioned, also of the central nursery that was being built by the group. “Nakakapagod pumunta doon (It is tiring to go there),” he commented, voicing out a fact that mostly applies to the distance of one focal area to another as, generally speaking, clusters of households are far apart from each other which, in turn, require lengthy hikes along slippery trails winding up and down the Lambangian ancestral domain.

Nonetheless, while the distance between each demo farm can be a challenge, especially for the organization’s officers who need to regularly visit the said sites for monitoring purposes, developing learning farms in the three separate locations was considered crucial to reach the organization’s members residing in the said remote areas and develop an income-generating project concept for each household cluster. The total Teduray-Lambangian ancestral domain is 208.51 thousand hectares of which some 58,000 hectares of it are of Lambangian territory.

“Ang mga binibigay sa atin, dapat nat-ing maalagaan at mamintena. Totoong malayo [ang mga demo farms] at hindi ko na sila mapuntahan dahil hindi na ako makalakad [ng malayuan]; matanda na ako. Ngunit nag-aadvise ako sa mga kabataan – sa mga kabataan, dapat lahat ng mga napag-usapang plano ay maisagawa (We must maintain and care for the projects that are given to us. It is true that the demo farms are far and, because of my age, I cannot visit them anymore. But I provide some guidance to our youth. To our youth leaders, it must be made sure that our projects are done as planned).” Purok Vice President Arig emphasized the need to sustain the entire project, stressing the key role of LPO’s youth leaders who, in response, have been actively participating in the different operations of the project—from clearing to cultivation to maintenance. Arig also encouraged the members, underscoring the necessity of maintaining these sulagad farms. “Imposible na magkakrisis ka kung masipag ka. Pwede mong gawing patag ang bundok – matagal talagang gawin, pero hindi imposible (It is impossible to be impeded by whatever crisis if you are determined to work despite it. Through persistence, you can flatten a mountain—it may take some time but it isn’t impossible),” he continued.

“Kaugnay sa inyong sulagad system, ang pagtatayo ninyo ng isang nursery ay magandang inisyatibo upang magkaroon kayo ng mga maitatanim na mga tradisyunal na butil para magkaroon ng sapat na pagkain ang mga Lambangian (In relation to the revival of your sulagad system,
the construction of a nursery is a good initiative. It will allow you to preserve and cultivate indigenous seeds that would, then, help ensure adequate food for the Lambangian community," posited Roger Lambino, Tebtebba’s focal point for the said project, underpinning the significant benefits of the sulagad system revival in the community which aims to adopt a semi-permanent mother nursery that will provide food and extra income for the Lambangian families in the domain—plant vegetables and trees (both for timber and for fruit), raise pigs, ducks, and chickens (especially if their farms are near their houses), and construct fishponds if feasible. The said project is also a timely opportunity to promote indigenous seeds, according to Lambino. “It is for the achievement of both food sovereignty and agro-ecology—both food and nature,” he added.

“Like Timuay Jerry Rico who has 11 members in his household. Somehow, he has attained food sufficiency as he has all kinds of food varieties, including upland rice, cassava, corn, coconut, and an assortment of other vegetables and fruits, in his sulagad,” Lambino shared.

With the emphasis on indigenous peoples’ sustainable self-determined development (IPSSDD), the said project was facilitated by Tebtebba with support from the Pawanka Fund.

In line with this, the installation of both a corn mill and a rice mill in the Lambangian community was facilitated by Tebtebba, through the Indigenous Navigator (IN) initiative in the Philippines, with support from the European Union. The project was part of the Initiative’s livelihood strengthening through the creation of a viable social enterprise for the Lambangian people. Since corn
cultivation—and selling—is one of the main livelihoods among the people, the organization found it beneficial to have their own corn mill, allowing the members of the community to granulate their own corn rather than having to mill the said raw grains in a commercial establishment located in the sitio of Guila-Guila, some eight kilometers away from Benuan, for a sizable milling fee each time. At present, the said corn mill is being used by the community while the rice mill is yet to be set up, requiring more support for its eventual completion.

As of writing, the mother nursery has already been fully set up in Benuan with both LPO members and the Lambangian community members joining hands to plant various saplings and seedlings in its confines. A water hose has also been installed, diverting some of the water from the main source into the nursery to allow continuous supply there.

“These natural farming technological innovations (i.e., SALT) are new to them,” explained Lambino. He, then, highlighted the need to partner with the community, reiterating the necessity of implementing the IPSSDD framework. This process, however, takes beyond just a single project approach—it is years of “social preparation, organization development, livelihood support, and then phasing out.”

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Endnotes

1 Sitio (or purok) is a Filipino term that refers to a group of households within a barangay (See Endnote 2), used to designate specific geographic and/or territorial location especially for delivering services.
2 Barangay refers to a small administrative and territorial unit of government which can, then, be further divided into puroks or sitios.
3 Timuay Labi formally means “supreme leader,” a title bestowed on the highest leader of the Teduray and Lambangian peoples of Mindanao in line with their customary system of governance.
4 Timuay formally means “chieftain” or “leader,” a title bestowed on a leader by the people which, then, has several levels including timuay labi (supreme leader), remfing fenuwo timuay (cluster of villages chieftain), and fenuwo timuay (village chieftain).