



**The Impact of COVID-19 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples under the United Nations Declaration
on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: A Philippine Experience**

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Mr. Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honor to join you in the 13th Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP). As the Chairperson of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) my central message for today is that indeed, while the Philippine indigenous peoples to many have been resilient during the pandemic, and the effects of COVID-19 has increased their risk and vulnerabilities in their economic, social and cultural life, to many more, they still have, to this day, relevant indigenous knowledge, institutions and mechanisms that can significantly contribute to COVID-19 response and recovery interventions.

Indeed, to the PH ICCs/IPs, the COVID-19 pandemic has generally become a common invisible crisis to reckon with that they differently addressed in various fronts including in their health, access to health care, in the protection of their land, territories and resources. *Much as COVID-19 is an unknown virus but known to have originated in Wuhan, China, the IPs have known this either through the local radio, from the market place during market days or through their indigenous communication systems and abundant social capital.* The information on what this virus and pandemic is and how to follow advise and guidelines by the Government have added to the challenge. With lack or little understanding of how to avoid the spread of this pandemic, the increased risk is eminent.

The NCIP, the various local government units, indigenous traditional leaders, Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs)¹ who are chosen or selected by their respective indigenous communities to seat as their authorized representative in local decision making bodies or councils, non-government organizations, hand-in-hand explained to IPs what this pandemic is all about in their language or in a dialect they understand. Several information campaigns in IP communities were conducted to explain the dangerous effects of the COVID-19. Modules for COVID-19 information dissemination were modified and translated in IP vernacular with the help of indigenous leaders and IPMRs which made our work easier and comprehensible by ICCs/IPs. The involvement of these indigenous leaders and IPMRs has also emphasized the sensitivity of Government services to ICCs/IPs.

The increased health risks to ICCs/IPs has also been evident given that in the everyday life of these communities, socializing, interacting, cooperation, sharing and caring from womb to tomb have been their core values since time immemorial. To ICCs/IPs, they venerate their dead. The community has to attend wakes, burial, wedding and even help a community member to build his house in an act of cooperation and sharing or “ub-bu” to the Tualipi IPs as their social responsibility that should be reciprocated when one needs others in the future. In a sense, the essence of social distancing and cremation of the demised by the virus imposed by Government may seem to contradict these cultural values. The deeper commitment of the NCIP to explain this danger to ICCs/IPs was ably done with the help of indigenous leaders and IPMRs re-echoing in their own vernacular why such are not allowed to their constituents.

¹ Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) are indigenous peoples selected or chosen by indigenous communities through their customary laws to seat in Government’s decision-making bodies or councils.

The non-functioning market and trade chain has also impacted to ICCs/IPs engaged in business and/or entrepreneurship. They were unable to sell their products such as brooms, mats even vegetables and fruits. To a large extent, these products were just left in the sidewalks of major highways to just be rotten as lockdowns were imposed. To others, they engaged in illegal trade of products because of the implementation of quarantine protocols. Moreover, with the imposition of quarantine and lockdowns, the IP elders or senior citizens were restricted to go out thus also restricting them to have their medical consultations. To address these, the NCIP as a member of an Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) through the whole-of-nation approach, measures to ease and allow the passage of vegetable dealers were done. To other ICCs/IPs, food packs, fruit tree and vegetable seedlings were also distributed while to address IP elders and senior citizens, medical teams, composed of various local government agencies that included representatives of the NCIP with IP leaders, were encouraged to conduct house to house medical consultations and visitations regardless of the peace and order situation and pandemic. The ICCs/IPs utilization of herbs for health purposes were noted. Indigenous women opted to make use of ginger, garlic, onion, honey and others during the pandemic on to the lockdowns and quarantines.

In many ancestral domains, just like the effects of lockdowns, social distancing and quarantines, the cultural life of ICCs/IPs were affected. The conduct of IP rituals was either suspended and/or disallowed during those times. The “tagtag” or the ritual performed to drive away pests from the rice fields were suspended. While the belief system of ICCs/IPs may have given a negative interpretation on this instance, the ICCs/IPs willingly suspended the ritual that may seemingly affect the protection of their traditional lands and resources, impedes the transmission of indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs) by IP elders and women to the IP youths and children who are also to be the next generation of IPs in securing their land, territories and resources and by non-transmission of IKSPs, doing so, contribute to a worst health situation of ICCs/IPs.

As government lockdowns and quarantines were imposed, the Applais, Bontocs, Ifugaos, Higaonons and more ICCs/IPs performed their own indigenous lockdown or IKSP of as “tengao”, “pi-le” where no one is allowed to and from their respective communities. Other rituals performed included the “changtey”, “phengamu” among the Subanens, “Samaya” among the Talaandigs and “Awat” among the Obu Manuvus. This manifests that IPs are custodians of IKSPs.

Our attention has also been noted in many ancestral domains because of violence and conflict. Even when all were attending to cope with the pandemic, many indigenous leaders who have contributed much to the alleviation of their respective communities’ poor situation were ambushed and killed by Communist Terrorist Groups (CTG) such as the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF). Ancestral domains have become guerrilla bases of CTGs. Exacerbating this is the deeply rooted networks of non-government organizations affiliated with these CTGs that exploit and utilize the platform of indigenous peoples issues to access funding from foreign organizations but little would benefit the ICCs/IPs. Worse yet, these front organizations would picture themselves as experts on IP issues that they think gives them the permit to represent and negotiate funding in behalf of the Philippine IPs. These acts of deceit in whatever form, violence and senseless killings of our indigenous leaders simply because they have returned to the folds of the law, deserve the highest degree of condemnation and equal attention by no less than the UN expert mechanisms and rapporteurs mandated for indigenous peoples concerns.

As such, these good practices of how the NCIP closely engaged, collaborated and partnered government, non-government organizations at the national and local levels, all together with indigenous leaders that include the indigenous political structures (IPS) that consists of IP governance systems and institutions, IPMRs with them leading government COVID-19 interventions should be underscored. The utilization of IP governance and leadership institutions utilizing their own dialect or languages in letting ICCs/IPs understand the virus, its effects and how to avoid being affected are essential good practices and giving high regard to indigenous decision-makers themselves with the wisdom and who know better what is best for their communities. Encouraging the use of IKSPs relevant to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant good practice and extending interventions that involve government agencies, non-government agencies, civil society and ICCs/IPs through a whole of nation approach is also central to the good practice. All these good practices should be sustained.

As enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and together with the Philippine Indigenous Peoples, I call on the EMRIP to continue to support the PH indigenous peoples in particular and recognize the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) as a legitimate representative of indigenous peoples as it is mandated by law to be so; to ensure the representation of authentic indigenous socio-political or leadership/governance institutions of indigenous peoples to participate and represent themselves in all conferences or discussions affecting them in this august body and other similar avenues; to ensure that ICCs/IPs perspectives, relevant IKSPs and necessities are taken into consideration in COVID-19 response and recovery.

Thank you very much , Mr Chair, Excellencies.