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By Minnie Degawan

Now, four months into the worldwide crisis brought about by COVID 19, the situation of Indigenous Peoples is slowly coming to light with the dissemination of reports from different Indigenous organizations. Indigenous Peoples are facing particularly challenging times due to some basic facts including the susceptibility of Indigenous communities to infectious diseases due to their lower immunity and, their lack of, or limited access to information, among others.

Some of these realities are consequences of poor planning by national governments, and others are the result of discrimination and disregard for Indigenous Peoples. The impacts of the many exploitative projects in Indigenous territories, such as mining and mono-crop plantations are an added threat and challenge. All of these contribute to the further marginalization and greater risk Indigenous Peoples face, especially in times of crises.

Coping Mechanisms

Indigenous Peoples are no strangers to disease and disaster. Through generations, Indigenous Peoples have established responses and coping mechanisms – grounded in traditional knowledge, customs and practices – to different circumstances affecting their communities. These are all founded on one fundamental principle: to ensure that the community survives.

A common response across Indigenous communities is that of closing-off the community to all – this means no one can enter the community until deemed safe. Such community closures are done for different reasons. In the Cordillera, Philippines such practice is regularly observed during the agricultural cycle. Before or after the fields are ready for planting and harvesting, the community declares *ubaya/tengaw* which basically means everyone stays at home, no hard labor is to be done by anyone. This is a time for the community and the earth to rest and typically lasts a day or two.

The *ubaya/tengaw* is also declared in times of epidemics or other disasters. Rituals to shut off the community from outsiders, including bad spirits, are performed by elders all directed at expelling whatever harm is in the community. The *ubaya/tengaw* is not meant just to protect the community but also outsiders who might want to visit. The signs that a community is in *ubaya* is very simple – a knotted piece of branch/leaf is placed at the entrance of the community – yet a powerful deterrent.

During extended community lockdowns, traditional community practices come into effect, such as the *binnadang/ub-ubbo* which can be loosely translated as exchange labor where community members look out for those in need and extend help. Food is shared by those who have more with those who have less. In addition, the basic principle of *ayyew*, meaning to not waste anything from food to water is constantly practiced and enforced. Food, such as dried sweet potatoes, that have been preserved for the rainy period are brought out and portioned to last for the period of *ubaya*.

It is during the period of *ubaya* that one often hears the term *kasiyanna* meaning “all will be well”. It is an affirmation that balance will soon be achieved. To the community, problems are

reflections of imbalance in the world – whether it be between neighbors or with the natural or spiritual world, and to resolve it is to restore balance.

So, when this global pandemic came about, the Indigenous communities did not find the idea of quarantine a strange one. For example, when the Philippine national government imposed the quarantine measures across the country, several Indigenous communities further strengthened this by declaring *ubaya/tungaw* in their respective communities. The declaration of *ubaya/tengaw* meant that these communities were closing their borders to everyone, including members who were in the cities at that time. It was a difficult decision but one that had to be made to avoid proliferation of the virus. Such mechanisms are also practiced by the Karen and other groups in Thailand, as well as by Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia.

While on lockdown, the communities took stock of the situation to assess who from the community was still outside, where they were, if they were planning to come back, and if so, what could be done for them? Are there people who are sick in the community, what is needed? Is there enough food for all and for how long? These questions and subsequently answers, were then used by the community to plan better for the days, weeks or months ahead. Some communities decided to forego the food packs distributed by the government, in favor of those in urban areas, specifically those in poverty, as they could be facing greater challenges in obtaining food.

In different parts of Asia, such as Malaysia, the Orang Asli, have decided to return to the forest as their defense against the pandemic. The forest has always been their home and their source for medicines, so it is a logical response for them to return to it during times of danger. This is also true for other Indigenous Peoples, such as those living in the Amazon.

Particular Challenges

Unfortunately, these traditional practices of coping with pandemics and other disasters is proving to be particularly challenging for Indigenous Peoples given the current threats they face from the extractive industry and climate change, among others.

The conversion of forests to mono-crop plantations or to logging and mining concessions

means less agricultural lands for communities. In addition, the introduction of fast-growing, input dependent, genetically modified species has compromised the productivity of the community lands. Climate change, too, has impacted the agricultural cycle and yield. The result of these occurrences is that communities now have less food stocked, making them vulnerable to hunger if the quarantine period results to be longer than anticipated.

The destruction of their surroundings brought about by the extractive industry also add to these challenges. Mining and logging have caused water sources to dry up and contamination of traditional water sources to increase. Even the designation of forests as protected areas is a cause of concern. In the instance of the Orang Asli, for example, their return to the forests has caused some wildlife protection groups to demand stronger protection for endangered animal species as hunting could increase.

But the Orang Asli, and other Indigenous Peoples, follow very strict rules governing hunting for food, among which is the caution of never taking more than what one needs; as well as looking out for animals that are very young or pregnant. There are also calls from some groups for stronger implementation of protected area rules, including keeping people out of the forests. This is ironic given that extractive industries are being allowed to continue their operations despite community lockdowns – such as in Ecuador where oil companies still traverse Indigenous communities to arrive at their operations.

In countries where the national government has taken on a more militaristic response, Indigenous Peoples are especially more vulnerable. For one, some of the national policies are unclear and not readily communicated to communities. Secondly, if/when the policy is disobeyed a drastic measure of either arrest or death (in the case of violations of curfew times) is taken. For Indigenous Peoples, orders to stay home and wait for the relief promised by governments is just not an option, as they are accustomed to fending for and relying on themselves.

In the case of the COVID19 pandemic, it might be hard to get a full picture of its impacts on Indigenous communities because they might not be prioritized in terms of testing. However,

what is clear is that their ways of life are being tested.

What lies ahead

This global health crisis has proven and reinforced the need to respect and promote Indigenous Peoples' rights, placing them at the center of the discussion. If only Indigenous Peoples' rights to their lands and resources were respected, they would be better able to fend for themselves in times of crisis and would not have to look to outside for help. If only traditional resource use and management practices were respected and strengthened, there would be less destruction of nature, and perhaps less possibility for diseases to develop. These are among the greatest lessons from this global health pandemic and it is our hope that the policy makers will do what is needed to ensure that these rights are not forgotten.

When and if this crisis is over, there will be a rush to "help" Indigenous communities. It would be prudent to learn from this and to ensure that any intervention must have Indigenous Peoples at the center in terms of their agency and rights. It will be timely to look at policies and adjust these to reflect the situation and needs of the communities. It will also be useful to harness the knowledge and skills of the youth, who have access to information to communicate the community's needs to the outside world.

The communities know best what they will need and how such support should be delivered. It will be as the elders say, kasiyanna.

-- Minnie Degawan (Kankanaey-Igorot) is an activist for Indigenous Peoples' rights from the Cordillera, Philippines. She is the director of Conservation International's Indigenous & Traditional Peoples Program (ITPP).

Photo by Judy Flores Partlow (https://www.flickr.com/photos/judy_ph/)

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Cultural Survival advocates for Indigenous Peoples' rights and supports Indigenous communities' self-determination, cultures and political resilience, since 1972.

Our Vision

Cultural Survival envisions a future that respects and honors Indigenous Peoples' inherent rights and dynamic cultures, deeply and richly interwoven in lands, languages, spiritual traditions, and artistic expression, rooted in self-determination and self-governance.

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