

# **MAPping the Future: Filipinos who can influence our future**

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OUR GAWAD KALINGA (GK) PROJECT AND my participation as speaker at the World Conference of the Society for Ecological Restoration (SER) in Zaragoza, Spain, two weeks ago have brought me in contact with two groups of Filipinos who can significantly influence the future of our country.

## **The indigenous peoples**

The first is our Indigenous Peoples (IPs), the Filipinos in 110 ethnolinguistic groups that "have continuously lived as organized communities in defined territories (or ancestral domains) since time immemorial, and who have retained some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions." They comprise about 17 percent of our country's total population.

The IPs live mostly in mountainous areas that are difficult to reach and are vulnerable to natural disasters, such as the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, which displaced about 20,000 Aetas. They are, perhaps, the poorest of the poor. Government programs hardly reach them.

## **How can IPs influence our future?**

It is now being recognized worldwide that IPs can significantly influence the future of the world. The SER conference, which is the largest held in Europe on the subject, with 850 participants, is the latest gathering to recognize the role of IPs in global sustainability.

According to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, IPs account for most of the world's cultural diversity, between 4,000 and 5,000 of the world's 6,000 cultures. They speak three-quarters of the world's 6,000 languages. They inhabit many of the areas of highest biological diversity, on which the long-term security of food and medicines in the world depends. They also inhabit areas rich in minerals.

I do not have up-to-date statistics on the cultural diversity and languages of our IPs. But we all know that they--the Aetas, Dumagats, Mangyans and others--live mostly in our mountains, which are rich in biodiversity and minerals.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, an international treaty, has recognized the important role that IPs play in conserving the world's biological diversity, as well as in addressing issues on climate change. It is now promoting the protection of traditional knowledge of IPs, which enables them to conserve biodiversity and to have capabilities for predicting climate changes locally.

The mountainous areas that IPs mostly live in are also important not only for their biodiversity but for the fact that "almost all of the world's major rivers rise within them." Mountains are the source of much of the world's water supply, which is used for food production and energy development. Yet, many IPs remain at the survival stage. For example, the Aetas in our GK project site eat only two meals a day and live without electricity.

Helping IPs acquire the basic necessities in life and develop sustainable sources of livelihood is the challenge to us. The work starts with understanding them and their cultures and environments.

## **The OFWS**

The other group of special Filipinos is composed of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Much has been said about how OFWs help keep our country afloat economically. Yet, they continue to receive inadequate public services.

Consider, for example, the OFWs in Barcelona, Spain. They, their families and other members of the Filipino community there have a total population of about 17,000 and growing fast. But the

Philippine consulate there is a one-person office run by Honorary Consul Dolores Sanchez. It operates through a share of the collected visa fees. Its revenues used to include part of the passport application fees. But I was told that the processing of passports has been transferred recently to the Philippine Embassy in Madrid due to a new system that applies improved but expensive technology.

Unfortunately, that change in the system, according to the Filipinos I met there, costs them at least one day of work as they have to go to Madrid for the renewal of their passports. Although they now live more comfortable lives, they cannot yet afford to miss even one day of work. They also wonder until when Consul Sanchez alone can attend to all the needs of their growing community.

That is a brief look at the life of our OFWs and how government services reach them. Yet, what is heart-warming is that they are now setting aside part of their hard-earned money to build GK houses and, soon, a complete Fil-Hispanic GK community for the poor in the Philippines.

Ato and Beth Glinoga, a couple leader of the Couples for Christ group who opened their home to me enabled me to experience how life has been treating our OFWs and to know how they raise funds for GK. For example, Ato asked his friends on his last birthday to donate to GK instead of giving him gifts. That simple gesture netted enough funds to build a few GK houses.

Fr. Reuel Castañeda of Cavite, their parish priest, is now helping the Filipino community organize one or more cooperatives that will pool funds for investing in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Philippines, including setting up dental and medical clinics in rural areas.

### **Special Filipinos**

The IPs and OFWs are special Filipinos who can influence our future, as well as our present in the case of OFWs. We hope public-private partnership initiatives can give them what they deserve.

Our GK project, the Kalinga-IP, is one initiative that aims to build ecologically sound villages for IPs. It also aims to recognize the role of IPs in our country's sustainable development and the importance of traditional knowledge in protecting the environment. It is a partnership project of the Management Association of the Philippines (MAP), the TOWNS Foundation, which is composed of past recipients of The Outstanding Women in the Nations Service awards, and the GK Community Development Foundation.

The project got a big boost lately, through the help of TOWNS awardees Deanie Lyn Ocampo and Teresita Ang-See, with the contribution of 50 GK houses by the Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran Foundation on behalf of the Tsinoy community.

MAP is also presenting the SOIL (Search for Outstanding IP Leadership) Awards tomorrow night at the MAP cultural night. Through this project, MAP, in partnership with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Earthsavers' Movement, National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, Tribal Communities Association of the Philippines, and others, will recognize leading IP individuals, groups, and communities that have accomplished outstanding achievements for the development and progress of their indigenous cultural heritage and communities.

For OFWs, a call for better government service to the OFWs, is a simple step we are taking. We also hope some MAP members will form partnerships with OFW communities in funding SME projects.

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