

## Exploring Agta's perception of social inclusion

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### Abstract

The study aimed to describe the Agta's perception of social inclusion and analyze their participation to education and training, workforce and voluntary work, socio-cultural and socio-civic events, and participation to decision-making as indicators of inclusion from the Australian Social Inclusion Board (2012). Employing a case study research design, in-depth interviews with the Agta research participants, key informant interviews, naturalistic observation, and triangulation using the retrieved documents were conducted to gather relevant and significant data. Based on thematic analysis, the Agta community in Camarines Sur were socially included since they have participation to education and training, labor force and voluntary work, socio-civic events, and decision-making. However, their access to opportunities, services, and resources from the Philippine government were limited. Moreover, the study also revealed different organizational or systemic roadblocks and challenges among Agta members that hamper them from accessing quality education and training, participating to decent workforce and voluntary work, enjoying socio-cultural and socio-civic events, and participating to decision-making initiatives that affect their life as an indigenous cultural community.

**Keywords:** Agta, indigenous peoples, indigenous cultural communities, social inclusion

## Exploring Agta's perception of social inclusion

### 1. Introduction

As social beings, people are bounded with one commonality that they all belong in a social world with different collections of social practices that originated from different social backgrounds and cultures; gender and religious differences; economic and political landscapes; and philosophical, historical, geographical and sociological origins. These differences resulted as well from various degrees of intimacy and interactions among friends, strangers, families, communities, colleagues and even whole societies. These dissimilarities in social practices among social beings have created social hierarchies that separated humans from intimate social interactions among others. Thus, the concepts of social equality and inequality, social integration and stratification, social mobility, as it relates to inclusion and exclusion, have given birth (Allman, 2012).

The current status quo of the stratified world has been a long project of the United Nations (UN) and other groups to make our society - "a society for all" - in which every social being, regardless of their background and origins, can achieve their full potential in life by ensuring equal access to material and nonmaterial opportunities and thru citizen's participation in the decision-making processes or government-initiated activities that affect their lives (United Nations, 2016).

In 2015, the United Nations approved the 2030 Agenda and reiterated a principle that every social being should enjoy and access the benefits of prosperity, to reach the minimum standard of well-being, free the nations and people and all segments of society, including the most vulnerable and the indigenous peoples, from poverty and hunger and to ensure access to quality education, modern energy and information. This principle was encapsulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was approved by the United Nations to answer the social inequalities that has drastically intensified after the 2008 financial crisis and the period of austerity that followed (Cano-Hila, 2022) and to continually improve the lives of people of all segments in the society, especially those who are disadvantaged, regardless of their age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, equal participation in accessing resources, respect for human rights and deliberate process of encompassing and welcoming all social beings and embracing greater equality and tolerance (UN Report on the Social Situations, 2016).

In the absence of consensual definition of social inclusion, there is a qualified agreement in the scientific literature that social inclusion is made up of different dimensions (Cano-Hila, 2022) as also presented by Simplican et al. (2015). They mentioned that social inclusion is made up of participation, sense of belonging, and rights and citizenship (Simplican et al., 2015). From a liberal perspective, social inclusion is often limited to delivering equal opportunities and eradicating discrimination; whereas from a social-democratic standpoint, social inclusion is built on redistributive frameworks, especially for weaker members of the society, such as the marginalized, underprivileged and the poor, and the recognition of the rights and needs of specific groups, such as the IPs (Cano-Hila, 2022).

In the case of indigenous peoples in the world, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) has already adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. The Declaration is considered to be the most comprehensive and inclusive international instrument on the rights of the IPs. This instrument establishes a framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the IPs all over the world and also elaborates on the existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of the IPs (United Nations, 2007).

In 2009, the UN also conducted its first United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and on its first session, the United Nations System requested to produce a report on the state of the world's indigenous peoples (SOWIP) to promote awareness of IPs' issues within the UN system, with states, academe and the broader

public (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007). This effort of UN only proves that the rights of IPs especially on the promotion of their well-being, culture, environment, modern education, and human rights are being prioritized. However, despite the worldwide recognition and acceptance of the rights of the IPs, which guarantees the fundamental rights of all human beings, the IP sector in the society continues to face serious threats to their basic existence due to systematic government policies. As mentioned in the study of the University of Minnesota Human Rights Center (2003), the IPs, apart from discrimination, injustice and deprivation, have also been denied their right to participate in the governing processes of the current state systems including government-initiated activities. Thus, based on the social dimensions argued by Simplican et al. (2017) and by Taylor (2012), IPs are still deprived of their rights to economic and political participation, access to health services, personal independence and self-determination, access to education and in interacting with society that may fulfil their social roles.

In the case of the Latin America, there have been multiple and varied forms and expressions of discrimination that IPs face on a daily basis. These forms and expressions of discrimination brought adverse impact on all the universally recognized rights and freedoms and damage the life and the dignity of the IPs, communities and individuals.

In the Philippines, the *Dumagats*, an indigenous group of people along the Pacific coast of the province of Aurora, also experienced deprivation especially in accessing quality and right education (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). The *Badjao*, like many of the Philippines' indigenous peoples, are also one of the neglected tribes. They are forced to move inland from their homes along the coasts because of insurgencies and violence. The *Badjao* are also forced to join the ranks of beggars in the country's urban places or dive for coins thrown by boat passengers due to extreme poverty. This IP group in the country usually does not receive state aid and assistance because of their nomadic existence (Conde, 2016). In this case, the Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) and IPs of the Latin America, the *Dumagats*, the *Badjao*, and the Agta in the Philippines and other indigenous groups share the same experience of social exclusion in some or many aspects of social dimensions especially on survival, dignity and well-being.

In its goal to recognize the inherent dignity, equal and inalienable rights of all members of the Philippine society as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace, the Philippine government promulgated Republic Act No. 8371, otherwise known as "The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997" (IPRA). Section 4 of IPRA enumerates six operating principles: a) cultural diversity, which respects diversity of cultures, traditions, beliefs and aspirations of IPs; b) consensus and peace-building, which reiterates that in resolving conflicts or disputes, decision thereon shall be reached through dialogue and consensus; c) cultural integrity, which IPs' customs, beliefs, traditions, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, and the assertion of their character and identity as peoples shall remain inviolable; d) human dignity, which recognizes the inherent and inalienable character, sacred human dignity and unique identity of the IPs as peoples; e) subsidiarity, solidarity and total human development, which reiterate the duties and responsibilities of everyone, including the IPs in the pursuit of civil, political, economic, social and cultural development; and f) transparency and capacity building, which says that the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) shall perform its task on the basis of transparency and active support and participation by the ICCs/IPs, and shall take a proactive strategy in empowering IPs in the fulfilment of its mandate (IPRA, 1997). With these policies enumerated and with the passage of this act, it can be noted that the Philippines recognizes the rights of IPs as universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. However, IPRA has proven to be a very weak protection on the ground, for IPs continue to experience displacement, discrimination and deprivation of both material and nonmaterial opportunities (Belo, 2020).

Thus, this study aimed to describe the Agta's perception of social inclusion and critically analyze their participation to education and training, participation labor force and voluntary work, participation to local, social, cultural, civic, and recreational activities, and participation to decision-making as indicators of inclusion from the Australian Social Inclusion Board.

## 2. Methodology

**Research Design** - The study was conducted in the *Ilian* community of Agta in Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines during the Academic Year 2022-2023 from May 18, 2023 to June 21, 2023. Qualitative in nature, this study used a case study design. The case study research design is most appropriate for research that requires in-depth knowledge about a certain phenomenon. It uses multiple sources in investigating the contemporary phenomena (Range, 2021).

**Population and Sample of the Study** - The main research participants of the study were 20 Ilian community members in Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines consisting of 10 adult men and 1- adult women whose ages ranged from 18 and above. Research participants were selected using purposeful sampling selection method. Those who were information-rich on the most effective use of limited resources available in the area were considered as research participants.

**Data Collection** - The researcher collected data in the field where participants experienced the issue or problem at hand. The researcher employed face-to-face in-depth interview among the research participants and key informant interviewees using a semi-structured and open-ended questionnaire tool. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher, guided by the definition of social inclusion by the Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB, 2012). Other ways to supplement the results of the study were the notes generated from the field, community, immersion and naturalistic observation. The use of related literature and studies in reporting the results of the study show the connection and relevance of the results with other studies' significant findings (Bastida, 2021).

**Data Analysis** - The results obtained from the semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews were transcribed, translated from Bicol to English language, and analyzed. The researcher employed descriptive statistics describing or summarizing the demographic characteristics of the research participants such as age, gender, civil status, number of children, and occupation. Also, the researcher used manual thematic coding analysis to determine initial codes, main theme, subthemes, and the interconnections between themes and subthemes that transpired from the significant statements generalized from the interview transcription.

**Ethical Consideration** - Prior to the conduct of data gathering, the researcher sought permission and certification precondition from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples and from the Agta community in Camarines Sur. Moreover, the research has also received research ethics clearance from the University of the Philippines Los Baños Research Ethics Board on May 10, 2023 to conduct data gathering involving human participants.

## 3. Results and discussion

**Profile of Agta Research Participants** - Table 1 presents the detailed profile of each Agta research participant. There were 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) aged 18-71 years old. With regard to marital status, seven were single, eight were married, and five were with live-in partner. The participants were engaged in different employment: four were laundry workers, one was a housekeeper, five were construction workers or laborers, three were sari-sari store owners or vendors, one was barangay police, three were farmers, and three were unemployed. The KII participants were composed of one male tribal leader, married, and works as a construction worker; one female Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR), who is single, and is a college student; one male DSWD representative, single, and a government employee; one male NCIP representative, married, and also a government employee; one school DRRM coordinator, female, married, and works as a public school teacher; and one female junior high school, single, and a private school teacher.

**Agta's Perception of Social Inclusion** - The perception of Agta of social inclusion was examined based on the indicators given by the Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB) in 2012. ASIB noted that for certain social groups to be considered socially included, they must have access to resources, opportunities, and capabilities.

Moreover, social or community groups must be able to participate to education and training; workforce and voluntary work; local, cultural, civic, and recreational activities; and decision making that may affect their life or their community per definition of social inclusion.

**Table 1**

*Profile of Agta research participants*

Participant No.	Age	Sex	Civil Status	Number of child/children	Occupation
1	38	Female	Married	2	Laundry worker
2	19	Female	Single	0	Unemployed
3	35	Female	With live-in	7	Laundry worker
4	34	Female	With live-in	4	Vendor
5	26	Female	Married	1	Vendor
6	51	Female	Married	6	Laundry worker
7	48	Male	Married	0	Barangay police
8	41	Female	With live-in	5	Laundry worker
9	33	Female	Married	4	Housekeeper
10	67	Male	Married	4	Farmer
11	31	Male	Single	0	Construction worker
12	26	Male	Single	0	Construction worker
13	30	Male	With live-in	2	Construction worker
14	27	Male	With live-in	0	Construction worker
15	54	Male	Married	1	Construction worker
16	19	Female	Single	0	Unemployed
17	38	Female	With live-in	5	Vendor
18	59	Male	Married	9	Farmer
19	43	Male	Single	5	Farmer
20	22	Male	Single	0	Unemployed

**Participation to Education** - The Agta community in Ilian community in Iriga City, Camarines Sur has noticeable access to education as the community has an elementary school that offers indigenous peoples' education (IPed), a semi-private junior high school, and higher education institutions available in the city. There are also scholarship programs being offered by the Commission on Higher Education, such as the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) in which a beneficiary receives twenty thousand pesos every semester apart from the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education or free education in the tertiary level particularly in state universities and colleges. Moreover, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) offers educational assistance to Agta college students who qualify to the basic requirement of the commission such as having a general weighted average of 85% or higher. The NCIP representative said:

*“Selected sana an pagtao nin scholarship sa mga college o ma-college pa sana na mga estudyante kan Agta community, may qualifications na dapat sindang ipasa. Dapat an marka ninda 85% pataas, saka dapat maipasa ninda an scholarship examinations. Pero dahil diit sana an nakakapasa sa exam, tgsuspendi na ini kan central office, basta ang marka halangkaw, pwede magqualify.”*

[The scholarship being offered by the commission is selective in nature. Those Agta students who are in college level or will enter college must have a general weighted average of 85% and should pass the scholarship examinations to qualify. However, due to the low turn-out of passing rate on the scholarship examinations, the central office has decided to suspend the exam for scholarship and just rely on the applicants' grade. The grade must be higher to qualify.]

The elementary pupils and junior high school students, respectively, also received assistance from the commission. Moreover, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) of the city offers educational assistance to IP students especially those who are members of the Modified Conditional Cash Transfer for Indigenous Peoples (MCCTIP). Student-beneficiaries from the elementary level receive three hundred pesos, five hundred pesos for junior high school, and seven hundred pesos for senior high school. While the Agta may have participated or has participation to education, access to quality education among them is still scarce. Agta in

poverty are most likely to drop out of school. While some people say that education is free, it becomes more complicated for IPs in Camarines Sur because of some educational roadblocks that hinder the Agta students to access quality education.

***Implications of Limited Access to Quality Education*** - Evidently, access to education among Agta is still rigid due to educational barriers, more specifically due to socioeconomic inequality that limit them for upward mobility. Hence, the perennial issues in the community still endure such as poor health, increased number of teenage pregnancy, lack of voice, and poverty trap to name a few. Bloxham (2023) mentioned that poverty trap involves a combination of economic, social, and psychological factors that create blockades and keep indigenous people trapped across generations. This recurring issue on poverty among Agta that leads to limited access to education is a major concern that the government must consider ultimately. While improvement has been made by the government such as the creation of inclusive education through the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 that seeks to fulfill the government's mandate in providing the IPs the right to a culturally appropriate educational system (Or, 2017), various social justice issues continue to pose educational challenges today apart from the crucial issue on socioeconomic inequalities, lack of IP teachers in the basic education who could have fairly represent the beliefs, feelings, principles, and general ideas of the IP students, non-IP curriculum, in which the current education curriculum is incapable of addressing the special needs of IP learners (Eduardo et al., 2021) and bullying and discrimination are also evident.

***Participation to Education as a Form of Social Inclusion*** - One of the indicators presented by Australian Social Inclusion Board (2012) for a group or community to be considered socially included is to have participation in education. Looking at the perspective of the Agta community in Camarines Sur, Philippines regarding their participation to education and as per definition of ASIB, the indigenous peoples in Camarines Sur are socially included in terms of participation to education. However, on the lens of social justice, the Agta community is still deprived of their rights to education due to systemic barriers and inequities that limit the Agta especially the students in accessing equal opportunities to quality education.

***Participation to Trainings*** - The Agta in Camarines Sur has significantly participated to livelihood trainings as the Department of Social Welfare and Development provides capacity building to equip its partner participants under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) with the necessary skills for increased employability or for better management of their microenterprise. The DSWD representative commented:

*“Hindi lang naman po yung sa 4Ps ang ibinibigay ng agency, meron ding KALAHÍ and other sustainable livelihood programs na kadalasan mga IP members yung mga beneficiaries.”*

[The agency does not only offer livelihood programs from the mandates under 4Ps, we also offer sustainable livelihood programs under KALAHÍ in which most of the beneficiaries are members of the IP.]

The KALAHÍ-CIDSS or the *Kapit Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan*- Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services is the Philippine government's anti-poverty program, which is being implemented by DSWD to reduce poverty by empowering communities to be active participants in their own development (KII No. 1). The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples has also conducted livelihood trainings among Agta members with partnership among private and non-government institutions to conduct trainings for the IPs. Moreover, the Local Government Unit of Iriga, in partnership with the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), also offered livelihood trainings for Agta members in Ilian Tribal Settlement. With the livelihood trainings being given to the indigenous communities by the government, the community did not receive reskilling sessions that would supposedly sharpen their learned skills, did not obtain government support or financial backing, and did not manage to apply in the industry or in the market the learned skills, bringing them back into poverty trap.

***Implications of Participation to Trainings*** - With the government's effort to find and search for solutions to alleviate poverty especially to the marginalized sectors of the society like the IPs, and uplift the standard of living

of its people, they have created livelihood programs and projects that would serve as remedies to the alarming situations of the vulnerable sector. However, if there is a mechanism but not properly implemented by the delivering agency and not accurately monitored and evaluated by the government, the significance of livelihood trainings or programs will not be effective solutions to poverty alleviation. Ideally, participation to livelihood trainings does not only improve the financial asset of the community by providing them income generating programs to improve their finances, but also empowers the human assets through the delivery of capability trainings that would enhance their skills and knowledge and would give them the higher possibility of acceptance to work that would soon help improve their physical assets like their homes and facilities and would also strengthen their social assets through relationships and networks to other communities. Thus, livelihood and capability trainings must be participated fully especially by the marginalized sector and be properly managed by the involved agencies as these poverty alleviation programs and projects of the government play a crucial role in realizing the functioning and capabilities of an Agta member of the IP community.

***Participation to Training as a Form of Social Inclusion*** - Based on its definition by the Australian Social Inclusion Board (2012), social inclusion implies the need for participation to training. Such training seeks to provide individuals with skills that are directly applicable to workplace and getting a job, and improving their financial capacity (Hargreaves, 2011). Hargreaves (2011) added, however, that vocational or livelihood trainings may be required to help remove barriers to participation but may not necessarily lead to a stable job in the first instance. Moreover, inclusion to training is through 'socialisation' in which Nilsson (2010), as cited in Hargreaves (2011), stated that it can range from gaining confidence, self-respect, life skills and interpersonal skills, to engagement in the community.

***Participation to Labor Force and Voluntary Work*** - Checking one of the demographic characteristics of the participants, the Agta members also have participation in the labor force. Seventeen out of the 20 participants were employed, while three were still in the process of securing employment. Majority of them have sources of income through employment that in one way or another can provide the daily needs of their families especially on food. In addition, the IP members had also the chance to participate to labor force outside their community. Most of the Agta men are into construction work, while Agta women are household employees or laundry workers. Some members of the Ilian community have already worked in Manila and other cities in the Philippines just to support their families due to financial insecurity. Other sources of income of the Agta members rotate from farming, motorcycle riding that pick up and alight passengers from Ilian to downtown Iriga, and vice versa. Though the salaries of the Agta members from their employment are meager, the IPs are resilient enough to take different employment roles just to make ends meet for their families. When an Agta woman does not have any laundry work to do from their employers, they would also make delicacies and sell them to and outside the community to earn. Moreover, when the contract of an Agta construction worker ends, he would also take some jobs being offered by the local government such as canal cleaner, which is also project-based in which his employment is coterminous with the project. Participant No. 15, who is male, 54 years old, married, and a construction worker shared that:

*"Nagtrabaho ako dati sa proyekto kan dating mayor; naglilinig kami ning mga canal sa centro kan Iriga."*

[I used to work as a drainage cleaner from the project of our former mayor. We cleaned the canals in the downtown Iriga.]

On the same note, some Agta who worked in Manila had also ventured to different works as they were looking for a job that offered better pay to survive the high cost of living in the metro and to send money back home. Despite earning the minimum salary, the Agta workers managed to perform better at work and stay longer with their employers because of the comfortable working environment that they were in including the good working relationship with their co-workers and employers, other employment benefits, and positive treatment of their employers towards them despite differences in some aspects. Meanwhile, other Agta workers who did not experience the same favorable working environment just like the other IP members opted to keep their work. This

is because not all IPs are given the same opportunity for employment. There are IP members that were not given opportunities to find work outside their communities. Despite the fact that some of the Agta workers who joined the workforce and have experienced good working environment, there also came a point in their employment life that they would leave their employers due to bullying and discrimination. The perennial and extended issue on discrimination among indigenous peoples in the country or even to their counterparts from other nations is still prevalent among workplace. Despite the presence of laws in the Philippines that protect the IPs such as IPRA of 1997 and RA No. 7610, discrimination in the workplace still occurs.

***Implication of Participation to Labor Force and Voluntary Work to Agta's Wellbeing*** - While many young adults have obtained quality education due to good socioeconomic status of their parents and achieved their position in the labor market, the youth from the economically disadvantaged or minority background like the IPs in Camarines Sur have experienced and are still experiencing challenges and issues in attaining such. Thus, many IPs are still facing economic deprivation due to lesser or no access to quality education that block them from obtaining a well-compensated entry level job and hinders them for attaining the good quality of life. Educational attainment always has lifelong implications not only for the economic wellbeing of individuals but also for their empowerment and health. Educated individuals who end up economically stable, tend to be healthier and more empowered compared to those who are disconnected (Zajacova et al., 2015). As education, employment, and health and safety are interrelated, positive outcomes will be achieved such as improvement of one's economic status, access to quality education of the people they support, access to healthcare, empowerment of an individual and, ultimately, achievement of total wellbeing. Thus, education and skills training and enhancement play crucial roles in attaining an individual's welfare.

***Participation to Labor Force as a Form of Social Inclusion*** - One important component of social inclusion is the improvement of one's well-being through reassuring participation in employment and labor force (Leach et al., 2010). Furthermore, as per definition of social inclusion that was presented by ASIB (2012), a society is considered socially included if the members of the community have participation to work force and be able to gain access to employment resources, opportunities, and capabilities. With the current status of Agta's access to employment and labor force, though circling to manual or technical labor jobs due to their limited capabilities as hindered by lack of other necessary skills and education, the Agta community has certainly participation to education. However, from the perspective of social justice in participation to labor force, a healthy society must ensure that its people can obtain government's equitable services and resources. This includes primarily access to education as this is the prime example of the consequences that a marginalized sector experiences. When the members of the vulnerable sector such as an indigenous community cannot afford quality schools, they are left with no choice but to settle for less. Those who did not able to access good education would find a lower-paying jobs that would lead those young IP members growing up with no education as well and would only access certain jobs that would fit to their qualifications. Thus, employment discrimination and other employment barriers persist violating the very core of social justice that covers a multitude of issues within society (Soken-Huberty, 2023).

***Participation to Local, Cultural, Civic, and Recreational Activities*** - In the dimensions of wellness presented by Viscogliosi et al. (2020), as adapted from Miller and Foster (2010), cultural, social, and physical (recreational) wellness are important in the accomplishment of life domains. These life domains include interpersonal interactions and relationships, communication, learning, knowledge application and community, social and civic life, and intergenerational solidarities which refer to mutual help between generations wherein each one is giving to and receiving from others. Therefore, participation in local, cultural, civic, and recreational activities is one of the facets of social inclusion that promotes warmth, affection, attraction, and interaction among members of the society—may it be among IPs or non-IPs. Besides, a society, including the marginalized, must be able to participate to social activities to be considered socially included.

In this regard, the Agta in Camarines Sur, through the guidance and assistance of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples Region V, has invited and encouraged the Agta in Camarines Sur to join in the celebration and showcase their cultural background through performances. Their participation in different social activities in



the community, city, and even in the province brought lifelong learning to them. Hence, despite the cases of bullying, harassment and other forms of exploitation among IPs in the country or in their own city, there are more open-minded and culturally-sensitive people who are willing to accept differences in the society wholeheartedly.

***Implications of Social Acceptance of Agta to Social Development*** - Social acceptance is vital to cultural and social development of a community. Being rejected by members of the society can result negatively in the socio-emotional and socio-cultural aspects of the IP community. Rejection, disrespect, humiliation, and even apathy can affect person's sense of self-worth and competence. The emotional distress from social disapproval can cause worry among the IPs, self-neglect, self-doubt, and anxiety. Thus, finding essential factors to be able to effectively support the indigenous peoples' social acceptance is crucial despite the challenges in a society because of its heterogeneity (Garrote et al, 2020).

***Participation to Cultural, Local, Civic, and Recreation Events as a Form of Social Inclusion*** - Another tenet that considers a society to be socially included is their connection with people, be able to use local services, and participation in local, cultural, civic, and recreational activities (ASIB, 2012). According to United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021), social justice encompasses three essential elements: equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal treatment. Looking on Agta's participation to socio-civic events as per definition provided by ASIB (2012) and the three essentials of social justice, the IP community is socially included because of the equal opportunities to participate in cultural events such as the IP Day that is being participated by different tribal groups in Camarines Sur. The invitation and support given by NCIP and the city is also a form of equal treatment as they have participated on the cultural gathering together with other IP groups. Their performances during such event were also a revealing factor that they have given an equal chance of showcasing their indigenous culture and heritage. That segment in the program wherein they were listed to perform was another way to say that equal opportunity was given. To marry social inclusion and social justice on Agta's participation to cultural, local, civic, and recreational activities despite a few isolated and minimal issues on their participation can significantly validate that IPs are socially included in terms of their participation to socio-civic events.

#### ***Participation to Decision-Making***

*"Takot kami magtaram kontra sa barangay"*

[We are afraid to speak against our barangay.]

Speaking ill against the barangay is one of the core reasons of Agta in Camarines Sur for not speaking up, per Participant No. 1, who is female, 38 years old, married, and a laundry worker. Thus, most of the IPs in Ilian Tribal Settlement, especially those who did not vote to the incumbent barangay captain, were afraid to visit the barangay and even afraid to seek assistance relative to their needs. Participant No. 1 recalled:

*"Dati before election, nag-watcher ako, tapos pag may kaipuhan kami sa barangay arog kan barangay certification, dae kami tig-i-entertain. Ipapaapod kami kayan tapos masabi nap ag nabirik ngaya kamo, bibirikon ko man kamo. Kaya sim ga tao igdi lalo na si sa kabilang grupo, habo na magpabarangay...mayo ako sinasabi, takot talaga kami. Dae na talaga kami nakakababa, pinagsabihan pa na ang mga taga Ilian na masasama"*

[Before the election, I was one of the watchers. When we visited the barangay to secure barangay certification, they did not entertain us. They would tell us that if the other party would influence us to vote for them, the barangay would also do something to us because of that decision. Those IP members who voted the opponent would no longer want to visit the barangay...I did not say anything; we are really afraid. We do not want to go there at the barangay anymore, they also said that people in Ilian are bad.]

The Constitution says that every Filipino citizen has the right of suffrage provided that they meet the requirements such as age (18 years old and above) and they must be registered voters. Even the illiterate and the disabled are given the right to vote. Moreover, the Constitution mandates the Congress to provide a system for

securing the secrecy and sanctity of the ballot to prevent the unscrupulous politicians to take advantage of the electorate especially those under the marginalized sectors such as the IPs (De Guzman, 2016). However, despite the secrecy of votes of the people, there are powerful politicians who managed to get access of the information of people who have voted the opponents, thus, took advantage of the ignorance and innocence of the IPs by not providing them the necessary assistance come appointment to their offices. Furthermore, there are political leaders who take advantage of the IPs knowing that the majority are illiterate and will just do the same thing that someone else has done (De Guzman, 2016). But the IPs in Camarines Sur cannot be easily manipulated, thus, some who voted the other candidates, were targets of suppression of their rights to access other services from the barangay.

The reality of the Philippine politics is a huge slap on the faces of the Filipino people especially those from the indigenous communities who do not have power and voice due to lack of education. Despite the existence of their human rights, some government elected officials deny the access of IP members to resources and services due to political color. Thus, bringing fear to the Agta members and even distancing themselves to prevent humiliation and discrimination. Another major concern of the Agta people for not being able to participate to decision making is their fear to speak. Due to lack of education, the IPs did not want to put themselves into humiliating situations during meetings in school or in any conferences that require their attendance. Most of the Agta participants shared that they did not want to speak up due to embarrassment and due to lack of self-confidence.

***Implication of Agta's Participation to Decision-making*** - As IP members in Ilian, San Nicolas, Iriga City were being consulted to decision making through the representation and participation of the IPMR, the Chieftain and other selected Agta members, the issues at hand, despite being raised to proper agencies multiple times, were still left unresolved, thus, piling up of other community issues that need to be resolved apart from the older ones. According to Open Government Partnership (2019), the NCIP is confronted with serious institutional weaknesses and limitations that compromise its ability to enforce compliance, thus, it needs to develop and enforce an internal reform strategy to strengthen its capacity to advocate for IP rights and IPMR. If NCIP's capacity, as the sole agency that advocates the IPs' right, is weak due to lack of government funding and other administrative issues, the clamor of IPs' development in their own community will remain disconcerted. Thus, the significance of IP representation in local legislative bodies, though crucial, will remain despairing in representing the collective voice of the IP members if recurrent issues will only be raised for the purpose of discussion but provided no solution, the status of the IPs in Camarines Sur will continue to hurt their IPs' human rights, thus deprivation of access to services and benefits from the government shall continue to prevail.

On related points, if participation of IPs to decision-making will only stay as a 'dummy' representation just to satisfy the mere existence of IPMR and for the sole purpose of reporting for compliance as there are still many institutional challenges within NCIP and its rural representatives that delay the full implementation of its commitment to ensure full implementation of the policy on the IP mandated representation (OGP, 2019), the indigenous peoples will continue to endure the underlying causes of poverty, including denial of self-determination and total wellbeing.

***Participation to Decision-making as a Form of Social Inclusion*** - The Australian Social Inclusion Board (2012) defined social inclusion as an opportunity of a social group to participate in decision-making that may affect their life. Moreover, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, Section 16, clearly stated that the ICCs/IPs have the right to participate fully, if they so choose, at all levels of decision-making in matters which may affect their rights, lives, and destinies. Thus, the State ensured that an IP mandated representative shall represent a particular IP group.

On the other hand, on the concept of social justice, participation to decision-making is also one of the principles to consider apart from the other equally important principles of equality, equity, and rights (United Nations, 2013). Participation in the context of social justice also means involving people in the decisions that govern their lives including engagement of the IPs in decision-making processes on the kind of public services needed in their localities or communities, and assurance that the IPs must be able to participate in political and

cultural life to achieve better distribution outcomes, and to strengthen democracy.

As participation to decision-making is also linked to power, the traditionally weak and marginalized groups, like the ICCs/IPs, will be placed in stronger positions the same with other non-IP members both in public and other social institutions (UN, 2013). In the status quo of Agta in Camarines Sur in terms of participation, the IP members were treated with dignity and respect by the government due to the existence of an IPMR that serves as the representative of the powerless and incapable members of the Agta community due to lack of self-confidence and self-worth because of illiteracy. However, if social justice attempts to address inequalities in different forms at the level of public policies and national development, the Agta in Camarines Sur may be socially included because of their participation but not aligned with the principles of equality, equity, and rights. It can be noted that there are several disparities in terms of access to clean and safe environment, safe and clean water, safety and security during calamities, and opportunities for civic and political participation that were not rightfully distributed to the IP community despite their several attempts to request and follow-up the ancient social problems in their community. Moreover, greater access to quality education, which could have been the necessary mechanism to opportunity of prevent other socioeconomic, socio-civic, and sociopolitical inequalities, is still inadequate. Consequently, this lack of quality education leads to other inequalities, inequities, and injustices in many forms among IPs.

**Critical Analysis of Agta Community's Participation** - The Agta community's perceptions of social inclusion were investigated using the Australian Social Inclusion Board's (2012) social inclusion indicators. Despite the differences in sociopolitical and socioeconomic aspects of Australia and the Philippines, the primary investigator utilized the ASIB's social inclusion indicators as the Australian Social Inclusion Board also used the indicators to assess the social inclusion status of the marginalized and underprivileged sectors in Australia. The Board was asked to focus on the most disadvantaged communities in the nation. Thus, it is valid to say that since the indigenous peoples in the Philippines are noted to be one of the most vulnerable and relegated sectors in the country, the social inclusion indicators of ASIB such as participation to education and training, participation to labor force and voluntary work, participation to local, cultural, civic, and recreational activities, and participation to decision-making were critical tenets to use in investigating and assessing the Agta's social inclusion.

In analyzing the status of social inclusion of the IPs in Camarines Sur, considerably, the Agta in Camarines Sur has participation to education and training despite the presence of educational barriers that stop them, especially the young ones, from accessing quality education. Moreover, the IPs have noticeably participation to livelihood and capacity trainings since DSWD, LGU, TESDA, and other non-government organizations offered livelihood trainings and seminars among the Agta members. Though there were also post-training roadblocks such as lack of financial support from the government to use the learned skills to start their own livelihood income generating programs in the community, still, the IPs in Camarines Sur has participation to trainings.

The IPs have also participation to labor force and voluntary work. Despite the fact that most of the Agta's job were categorized under blue-collar such as construction and household works, the fact that the Agta can provide the needs of their families, despite insufficient, their participation to workforce could be good enough to sustain their economic backbone. Moreover, as the IPs need sociocultural and socio-civic support from the government, the IPs were also invited and encouraged to participate to events that would strengthen their relationship with other social groups in Iriga or in Camarines Sur, though there were noted cases of neglect, discrimination and partiality, these did not stop them from participating to activities that showcase their unique cultural background.

The Agta members have also participation to decision-making through the representation of the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative to legislative bodies in the local government unit. They were also being invited to attend meetings and conferences that would soon require their opinions and suggestions prior to decision-making. Despite Agta's embarrassment to speak up and question and other issues and challenges appertaining to attending decision-making events, the Agta were not excluded in terms of identifying decisions, gathering information, and assessing alternative solutions.

#### 4. Conclusion

Indigenous peoples are one of the most disadvantaged sectors in the society and their unfavorable socioeconomic condition has significantly contributed for not attaining the good life that they deserved. Evidences from the current study have highlighted the deprived situations of the IPs in Camarines Sur particularly on their limited access to government resources, services, and opportunities despite their participations to education and training, workforce and voluntary work, socio-civic and socio-cultural events, and decision-making.

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Due to the lack of scholarship opportunities for students from IP communities, more public-private partnerships between financial aid agencies and private schools, businesses, and non-governmental organizations may be formed in order to provide more financial aid and school supply assistance to worthy Agta students. In addition, Agta recipients who do not fulfill the scholarship requirements may be granted part-time employment through memoranda of understanding (MOA) with private companies or educational institutions in the city, enabling them to pursue their studies.

NCIP and DSWD may also ink memoranda of understanding with other governmental agencies, corporations, and non-governmental organizations in order to expand Agta's employment opportunities. Similarly, in addition to financial support or assistance, the partner organizations may provide IPs with programs that provide a means of subsistence and relevant skills as part of their corporate social responsibility. Furthermore, through partnering, the partner organizations could be able to offer work opportunities to deserving IP members, boosting the family's net worth. Moreover, it is essential that DSWD and NCIP incorporate frequent, in-depth seminars and trainings on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination into their monthly projects, programs, and activity plans because IPs are the main victims of bullying and harassment. By informing and orienting people to IP rights and maybe eliminating these concerns among IPs, this will not only assist IPs but also other non-IP communities. The non-IP population will gain more knowledge about tolerance for cultural differences, inclusivity, and diversity through education.

In relation to Agta's participation in socio-civic and socio-cultural events, in order to further strengthen the IPs' sense of confidence and leadership, all government agencies must keep inviting and including them in voluntary work at socio-civic events with the help and cooperation of NCIP. It is crucial that the IP communities are not disregarded or abandoned because they have unique characteristics that might support the social development of the city. It is essential that NCIP take the lead in educating other government offices, about IP rights and their involvement in decisions that may have an influence on their lives or communities, as NCIP represents the interests of ICCs and IPs.

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