

Correspondence

The Indigenous Peoples in time of a global pandemic

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave threat to Indigenous Peoples (IPs) around the world. In a recent correspondence, the author explores the vulnerabilities at the local level during COVID-19. IPs experience a high degree of socio-economic marginalization and are at disproportionate risk in public health emergencies, becoming even more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, owing to factors such as their lack of access to effective monitoring and early-warning systems, and adequate health and social services. This correspondence calls for a ‘multisectoral strategy of intervention’ and a ‘preferential option for the indigenous peoples’ during this global pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19, global pandemic, indigenous peoples, IPs

There are more than 476 million Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in the world, found in all regions of the world, from the tropical forests to the Arctic. IPs are more than 6% of the global population.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic poses a grave threat to IPs around the world. In a recent correspondence, the author explores the vulnerabilities at the local level during COVID-19.² This correspondence calls for a ‘preferential option for the indigenous peoples’ during this global pandemic.

The Philippines is a culturally diverse country with an estimated 14–17 million IPs belonging to 110 ethno-linguistic groups; they are mainly concentrated in Northern Luzon (Cordillera Administrative Region, 33%) and Mindanao (61%), with some groups in the Visayas area.³ The Philippine Constitution, in recognition of this diversity and under the framework of national unity and development, mandates state recognition, protection, promotion and fulfillment of the rights of IPs. Furthermore, Republic Act 8371, also known as the ‘Indigenous Peoples Rights Act’ (1997, IPRA), recognized the right of IPs to manage their ancestral domains and has become the cornerstone of current national policy on IPs.⁴ The number of COVID-19 infections and mortality rates rises among certain vulnerable groups with underlying health conditions. However, the United Nations reports that data on the rate of infection in IPs are either not yet available (even where reporting and testing are available) or not recorded by ethnicity. Relevant information about infectious diseases

and preventive measures is also not available in indigenous languages.⁵

IPs communities in the Philippines, generally located in distinct ancestral territories, have high rates of unemployment, underemployment and illiteracy. While their socio-economic, cultural and spiritual lives revolve around their ancestral domains, IPs see their ownership of land shrinking and disregarded.⁶ As lockdowns continue in numerous countries, with no end in sight, IPs and the marginalized communities who already face food insecurity, as a result of the loss of their traditional lands and territories, confront even graver challenges in access to food. Outside relief, however, there have been insufficient and inconsistent—offering little relief. The government’s social amelioration program has also been marked by non-inclusiveness and selectiveness, slow and stressful processes, and limited Local Government Units (LGUs) capacities.⁷

Bearing in mind that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples establishes the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of IPs, stakeholders should consider a ‘multisectoral strategy of intervention’ and a ‘preferential option for the indigenous peoples’, while promoting policies to protect their rights, including the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No.169)⁸ and supporting capacity-building initiatives through technical cooperation projects for IPs in their ancestral domains. The

Convention is consistent with the framework established by a national law—the IPs Rights Action (IPRA)⁴ and UN Declaration on the Rights of IPs.⁹ Thus, the deeply interconnected nature of the problems facing IPs means that the most effective responses occur through the cooperation of involved agencies. On a positive note, the IPs are seeking their own solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic by using traditional knowledge and practices such as voluntary isolation, and sealing off their territories, as well as preventive measures in their own local contexts.

Funding

No funding was received for this paper.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz
Department of Theology and Religious Education, De La
Salle University, Manila 1004, Philippines

Address correspondence to E-mail: jeff.corpuz@dlsu.edu.ph
doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab223