



The Ata-Langilan
Talaingod, Davao del Norte

Livelihood

Sowing the Seeds of Continuity

The Ata-Langilan community of 53 households in the hinterlands of Talaingod, Davao del Norte is almost untouched by modern influence, not even television. No instance of mixed marriage seems to have taken place from as far as the elders can remember, even though a few have managed to attend college and work in the city.

The Ata-Langilan's most striking characteristic is the strong sense of collectivity, evident in how everyone seems to know what is going on with the rest. Even the dogs are communal responsibility. "If you have no extra food but I do, then I will feed the dog. And the following day, if we both don't have any, then somebody else will," one man said.

The experience of CIDA's Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) with the Ata-Langilan confirms the difficulty of traditional small-scale farming for a poor IP community without the necessary credit, extension and other support systems in place because although the community has secured the title to its ancestral domain, which covers some 90,000 hectares, the members do not have the means to buy their most immediate farming inputs. (*See page 74 for information on CFLI.*) It should be noted,



An Ata-Langilan elder, also considered the community's weaving expert

moreover, that the vast expanse of the Ata-Langilan territory is solid rock. A very limited area is arable.

The option of subsistence farming for the Ata-Langilan is also challenged by high transport costs. In bringing any excess rice and corn to the mill, the community has to fork out PhP1 per sack for the motorcab, another PhP1 to bring this back home for packing and storage, and then another PhP1 to haul the sack to the market to sell.

Set in barangay Dagohoy in Talaingod, 13 kilometres of steep roughroads from the neighbouring town of Kapitalong, the project entailed the provision of capability-building, technical and capital assistance to make the Ata-Langilan's subsistence farming more tenable and sustainable. The specific form of assistance was the distribution of

carabaos, goats, ploughs, and rice, banana, corn and vegetable seedlings. The Ata-Langilan prefer to plant only indigenous varieties as farming is organic, rain-fed, and essentially for their own consumption. "We grow white, black, brown and red rice, and our coconut is more fragrant," the people said.

Before the project, the farming of upland Ata-rice was a dying practice, but the communal farm has been instrumental in its revival. The Ata-rice is an indispensable commodity for the Ata tribe as it is used in almost all of the community's rituals and ceremonies.

The community elders, all of them men, decided on the distribution of land parcels of the communal farm, with a household getting from one to three parcels to till, according to need. The Council of Elders also divided the community into clusters

Snapshots: Ata-Langilan members gather on the community's ritual grounds; an elderly woman inspects her freshly harvested tubers; and curious women and children oblige an equally curious camera.

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Elements of the sustainable farming project — goats, carabaos, and seeds, seedlings and technology; NGO workers atop the pen coax the goats with grass stalks.

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as a way of regulating the use of the 20 sets of carabaos, iron ploughs, harrows and bolos. The families take turns in using these during land preparation.

Income from working the communal farm has also allowed the families to save rice and corn for the observance of Indigenous People's Day in August 2004, and the occasional purchase of meat and other food items. Twelve couples were also able to finance their weddings from their farm earnings.

The carabaos made the women's task of land preparation lighter and faster. "Ah, the carabaos make such a big difference," the mothers said. "We used to be so exhausted after working in the farm but now we have more time and energy for our other chores."

Some of the 85 native goats distributed have also served as a food supplement, injecting a welcome change in the community's daily fare, which typically consists of rice or tubers. With the goats, the people are able to have meat every now and then. The goats also provide the manure that they apply to their crops as growth boosters.

There are also 15 bigger and slower hybrid goats, crossed from local and imported breeds, which the Ata-Langilan discovered to be prodigious milk producers. The milk has alleviated the high incidence of malnutrition among the children substantially. So now, the goats are carefully tended in an elevated pen under

the indigenous *ipo* tradition of caretaking of animals.

The Ata-Langilan, as with a few other Lumad groups such as the Bagobo, follow the *ipo* tradition of animal care and protection wherein animals that are gifted or entrusted to a family are treated as members of the family. In this case, the animals are not raised for their commercial value alone, and cannot be sold off or given away as dowry by the recipient. "In fact, the recipient family takes even better care of the animal, which may have been the original owner's pet, than its own pets because the kindness shown to the animal is a reflection of the family's respect and esteem for the donor," an advocate explained.

This principle of kinship and social support underlying the custom of *ipo* is not unlike the importance that tribes in Africa attach to animals entrusted to them by neighbouring clans, usually in times of adverse conditions such as an epidemic or prolonged drought.

When the carabaos and the goats purchased for the sustainable farming project arrived, the elders immediately reminded the community that the animals were being assigned for their use and to their care under the *ipo*. The goats – whether the natives or the hybrids – were not to be sold off until they had been propagated. The hybrids have so far produced eight offspring, and the community awaits with a sense of thrill the kids that one is about to have any day soon.