



The Bagobo
Talomo-Lipadas Watershed, Davao City
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Environment

People and Watersheds: Mapping the Balance

Mario “Jabi” Vargas, a staff of CIDA’s People Collaborating for Environmental and Economic Management (PCEEM), listened intently to a Bagobo leader, his eyebrows furrowed in deep thought. The Bagobo was explaining how the Lumad of Mindanao have been “forced out” and “hemmed in” – forced out of their territories by development aggression, but “hemmed in” by environmental protection initiatives that disenfranchise them from their natural environment. “The law on National Integrated Protected Areas System completely disallows the cutting of trees in protected areas where some IP communities are found. This may be good, but the law also deprives us of wood for our own consumption,” the Bagobo cited as example.

Later after the forum, Jabi reflected on PCEEM’s mandate of watershed protection. “Our job is to bring the different interests together, encourage dialogue and ensure participatory decision-making,” Jabi said. “But not only that. Along the broad and strategic concerns such as land use and water use, we also have to address the immediate survival concerns of the people, including the small farmers and IPs,” he noted. (See page 75 for information on PCEEM.)



Collection of water sample for testing.

Up close: In various spots the Talomo-Lipadas watershed are troubling sights of neglect including quarrying and indiscriminate water collection and use.

Responding to the needs of the IP communities occupying the Talomo-Lipadas watershed, however, is easier said than done as there was no baseline data on these communities that PCEEM could use in the beginning. Such information on the Tagabawa, Ubo, Klata communities, all subgroups of the Bagobo, is critical to PCEEM's "multi-stakeholder" approach to watershed management.

PCEEM was prompted to carry out cultural mapping to determine the conditions of the IP communities in the 38,000-hectare watershed area, considered an environmental hotspot. The project covered the identified IP settlements in 19 upland barangays (11 in Talomo and eight in Lipadas), and utilized a survey and participatory rapid

appraisal methods, including focus group discussions, to gather the necessary information on the IPs. The participation of the community at each and every step was important, the principle being that the community members have the most intimate knowledge of their conditions, including the watershed they live in. The mapping project therefore allowed the Bagobo communities to define their own issues, aspirations and development goals.

In all, the census surveyed 2,724 IP households (2,119 in Talomo and 605 in Lipadas) based 600 metres and above. "We wanted a more comprehensive survey and cover the entire Talomo-Lipadas watershed," said Marcel Goño, executive director of PCEEM, "but we just didn't have enough resources and time."

A common Davao sight: a billboard at the entrance of a banana plantation advising the schedule of aerial spraying of chemical inputs; examples of farm management techniques to prevent erosion such as intercropping bananas with durian, and canals to trap the soil carried down by rainwater; farmers in the watershed area in action during a demonstration-teaching session

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*Farmers working together to protect their livelihood and the watershed;
an inspection team crossing one of several springs in the area*

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The mapping project revealed that indigenous peoples comprise almost one-third of the total population in the watershed. “Our engagement in watershed protection has made it clear to PCEEM that in spite and because of their absence, the IPs are very much in the picture,” Jabi said.

Seven of every 10 households rely on farming for income although of the total number, only 39% in Lipadas and 43% in Talomo own the land they till. The productivity levels vary widely, with majority citing lack of capital, pest infestation and poor soil fertility as the most common problems encountered. The rest are tenant farmers operating under fixed sharing arrangements with the landowners or farm labourers paid daily wages. The traditional sharing of produce with the owner is called *nilima*, that is, four parts for the owner and one part for the worker. The harvest is reckoned either by sack or cavan.

Whether owners of their farms, tenants or seasonal labourers, the majority of the IPs live below the poverty threshold. The average monthly income is only PhP3,833, or not even one-third of the established poverty index in the region of PhP11,000.

The IP settlements subscribe to a concept of stewardship – instead of ownership – of the land, which is common among indigenous peoples. The vast Lipadas watershed, for example, was the ancestral

homeland of the Tagabawa, and in the community’s memory are important places that serve as referents to the group’s collective identity including mountains, hills, burial grounds, ritual grounds and other physical monuments. According to the elders, they use just enough resources to survive and limit their economic activity in any given area to two planting seasons a year to give the land time to replenish or regenerate. They exhibit deep reverence for their natural environment in general, and continue to ask permission from the spirits guarding the rivers if they can catch the fish and frogs in the waters.

Another significant discovery of the cultural mapping project is the threat of loss of indigenous knowledge systems, cultures and practices. Although the adults in 71% of the IP households can speak and understand their traditional language, the proportion of children who do so is much lower at 37.2%. The elders decry the disappearance of traditional practices, including communal sharing of natural resources.

The vast area of Talomo-Lipadas watershed has seen, over time, bountiful harvests, long droughts, tribal wars, invasions, waves of migration, and the encroachment of big corporate interests. With the information the cultural mapping project gathered, a powerful tool is available to PCEEM and other advocates in helping the Bagobo address their problems and chart the course of their development.