Indigenous languages for development: the Philippine experience

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Philippine languages

The Philippines is an archipelago composed of 7,107 islands with a population of 75 million people. Because of its archipelagic character, there are more than a hundred languages in the Philippines. The Summer Institute of Linguistics identified at least 151 languages in the country. Except for one Creole language, Chavacano, all of these languages belong to the Western Malayo-Polynesian subfamily of the Austronesian languages. These languages are further classified as belonging to the following language groups: Northern Philippine (70 languages), Central Philippine (46 languages), Southern Philippine (22 languages), Sama Bajaw (7 languages), Southern Mindanao (5 languages), and Sulawesi Sangil (1 language).

Despite this big number, only eight of these languages make up 85 percent of the entire Philippine population. These are Tagalog, Sugbuhanon, Iloko, Pangasinan, Hiligaynon, Bikol, Kapampangan, and Waray. Native speakers of these eight languages comprise the ethnic majority of the country, i.e. the lowland Christian Filipinos.

Tagalog is the language spoken in Manila, the national capital, and the outlying provinces. Because of its strategic position, it has been designated as the national language since the establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935. While the 1987 Philippine Constitution mandated that the national language is ‘Filipino’, this is based on the Manila dialect of Tagalog.

Minority languages

The remaining 15 percent of the population are further divided into 143 language groups. Since ethnic identity, especially in the Philippines, is largely defined by language, the speakers of these 143 languages comprise the ethnic minorities of the country.

These ethnic minorities can further be classified into two distinct groups: the Bangsa Moro, found in southern Philippines, and the ‘indigenous peoples’, who are scattered in the relatively isolated areas of the archipelago.
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The term Bangsa Moro is a generic category referring to the dominantly Muslim or Muslim influenced communities found in southwestern Mindanao, southern Palawan, and the Sulu group of islands. Ethnolinguistically, they are made up of several groups, namely the Meranao, Maguindanaon, Tausug, Sama, Yakan, Iranun, Jama Mapun, Molbog, Palawani, and Badjao.

The term ‘indigenous peoples’, on the other hand, is a new legal category that was created by virtue of Republic Act No. 8371, otherwise known as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA). This law defined ‘indigenous peoples’ (IPs) or ‘indigenous cultural communities’ (ICCs) as:

A group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organised community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilised such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonisation, non-indigenous religions and cultures, became historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos. (IPRA, Section 3h).

Indigenous peoples

For convenience purposes, the indigenous peoples of the Philippines can further be classified into:

- the peoples of the Cordillera region in northern Luzon;
- the peoples of Cagayan Valley, also in northern Luzon;
- the Mangyans of Mindoro Island;
- the peoples of Palawan Island;
- the island peoples of central Philippines;
- the Lumads of Mindanao Island; and
- the Negritos who are scattered in the major islands of the country.

Among the Cordillera peoples are the Bago, Bontok, Ibaloy, Ifugao, Ikalahan (or Kalanguya), Isneg, Itneg (or Tinguian), I’wak, Kankanaey, and Kalingá. They inhabit the mountain ranges of the Gran Cordillera Central and have relatively maintained their animist beliefs, traditional lifestyle, and customary laws.

The peoples of the Cagayan Valley, on the other hand, are made up of the Gaddang, Ibanag, Ilongot (or Bugkalot), Isinay, Itawes, Kalingá, Malaweg, Paranan, and Yogad. Except for the Ilongot, all of these groups have already been Christianised although they are distinguished from the dominant lowland Christian majority because of their small population.

The term Mangyan is the collective name for the indigenous peoples of Mindoro Island, found southwest of Manila. These groups are made up of the Alangan, Bangon, Batangan, Buhid, Gubatnon, Hanunoo Mangyan, Iraya, and Ratagnon. These groups are mainly
swidden agriculturists. The Hanunoo Mangyan is quite unique because it has maintained the ancient Filipino syllabic script.

The peoples of Palawan are the Cuyonen, Ke-ney, Pala’wan, Tagbanwa, and Tao’t Bato. Just like the Mangyans, they are mostly swiddeners who practice slash-and-burn agriculture. The Tagbanwa and some of the Pala’wan also continue to use the prehispanic syllabic script.

In islands of central Philippines, one can find the Aklanon, Bukidnon, Kiray-a, Magahat, Masbateño, and Sulodnon. They are closely related to the Visayan Sugbuhanons, Hiligaynons, and Waray in terms of language, belief system, and subsistence patterns although they are fewer in number.

The name Lumad is an exonym coined by Visayan migrants of Mindanao for the traditionally non-Christian, non-Muslim groups found in Mindanao. They are made up of the Bagobo, Banwaon, B’laan, B’lit, Bukidnon, Higaonon, Jangan, Manobo (or Manuvu), Surigaonon, Tagakalo, Talaandig, T’boli, Teduray (or Tiruray), and Ubo.

The term Negritos was used by the Spaniards to refer to the dark-skinned pygmy populations of Southeast Asia, including Andaman Islands, Malay Peninsula, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines. In the Philippines, these are the Agay (of Cagayan Province), Agta (or Dumagat, of eastern Luzon), Ati (of western Visayas), Aytan (or western Luzon), Batak (of Palawan), Mamanwa (of Mindanao), and Pugot (of northern Cordillera). These groups were traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherers. With regards to language, what is interesting is that these groups have lost their native languages and now speak the languages of neighboring non-Negrito groups.

‘Development aggression’ against indigenous peoples

The indigenous peoples of the Philippines have, for a long time, suffered from the consequences of large-scale development projects in the country. Because they are usually found in resource-rich areas, these peoples have been asked to vacate their ancestral lands in exchange for the development of hydroelectric dams, geothermal plants, mining corporations, and logging concessions. They have been asked to make a sacrifice for the benefit of the majority of Filipinos.

In the Cordillera region, for example, the Ibaloys have been evicted from their homelands to make way for the construction of the Ambuklao and Binga dams, the first hydroelectric dams in the country. Until the present, the Philippine government has not yet compensated those that have been displaced from Ambuklao and Binga in the 1950s. Moreover, while these two dams have brought about power generation to the urban centres of Luzon, many Ibaloy villages around the dam sites remain without electricity.

One of the most notorious projects during the Marcos era was the Chico River Basin Hydroelectric Project. This project called for the construction of a series of four hydroelectric dams along the Chico River in the Cordillera region. If the plan pushed through, it would have displaced 100,000 Kalingas and Bontoks and would have inundated their
rice terraces and burial grounds. The project, however, failed to push through because of widespread opposition. Many Kalingas and Bontoks joined the communist New People’s Army (NPA) to wage an armed struggle against the dam project. President Corazon Aquino eventually shelved the Chico project when Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown.

In many instances, the indigenous peoples were not consulted at all in the design and development of these projects. In the few cases where the villagers have been informed about the project, the local folk have not really understood the deeper implications of such projects because the language used by government extension workers is mostly in English and too technical in nature. There have been several complaints about residents being made to sign documents, the contents of which they have not fully understood.

**Indigenous Peoples Rights Act**

To correct this situation, Republic Act No. 8371, otherwise known as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, was passed into law in 1997. The IPRA provides for a bill of rights for the indigenous peoples of the Philippines, including the rights to their ancestral domains, right to self-governance and empowerment, social justice and human rights, and cultural integrity.

Part of the recognition of the indigenous peoples’ cultural integrity is the recognition by the state of the right of indigenous peoples to use their native languages, especially for education purposes:

> The State shall provide equal access to various cultural opportunities to the ICCs/IPs through the educational system, public or private cultural entities, scholarships, grants and other incentives without prejudice to their right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions by providing education in their own language, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. (IPRA, Section 30)

Moreover, documents written in indigenous languages are now considered legal and binding:

> The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) Provincial Office shall prepare a copy of the basic documents of the ancestral domain claim, including a translation thereof in the native language of the ICCs/IPs concerned. (IPRA Implementing Rules and Regulations, Rule 8, Part 1, Section 21-1).

> All Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plans (ADSDPP) shall be disseminated among community members in any mode of expression appropriate to the customs and traditions of the ICCs/IPs including, but not limited to, writings in their own language, oral interactions, visual arts, and analogous modes. (IPRA Implementing Rules and Regulations, Rule 8, Part 2, Section 2)
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To safeguard the indigenous peoples from deception by unscrupulous elements, the new law required that all project proponents first secure free and prior informed consent (FPIC) from the indigenous peoples in case these projects intrude into their traditional territories. The use of the indigenous languages for information-education campaigns, public hearings and meetings, as well as for contract signing purposes has been stressed in the IPRA.

According to Rule 4, Part 3, Section 6b of the Implementing Rules and Regulations of the IPRA,

The proponent of any policy, program, project or activity requiring Free and Prior Informed Consent of the ICC/IP community shall submit to the IP community and the NCIP in a language understandable to the concerned community an Environmental and Socio-cultural Impact Statement, detailing all the possible impact of the policy, program, project or activity upon the ecological, economic, social and cultural aspect of the community as a whole.

The specific steps to be undertaken in securing FPIC highlights the importance of the use of indigenous languages:

For every meeting, notices thereof written in English or Pilipino and in the indigenous people's language and authorised by community elders/leaders shall be delivered and posted in conspicuous places or announced in the area where the meeting shall be conducted at least two (2) weeks before the scheduled meeting.

All meetings and proceedings where the proponent shall submit and discuss all the necessary information on the proposed policy, program, project or plan shall be conducted in a process and language spoken and understood by the ICCs/IPs concerned.

The minutes of meetings or proceedings conducted shall be written in English or Filipino and in the language of the concerned ICC/IP and shall be validated with those who attended the meeting or assembly before the finalisation and distribution of the minutes...

Consent or rejection by the ICC/IP shall be signified by affixing signatures or thumb marks in a document written in their own language or dialect with corresponding English or Filipino translation. (IPRA Implementing Rules and Regulations, Rule 4, Part 3, Section 5)

In case an agreement is reached between the indigenous peoples and the project proponent, the contract should also be written in the indigenous language:

As a component part of the process of securing the free and prior informed consent of concerned ICCs/IPs, a Memorandum of Agreement shall be executed by and between the proponent, host ICCs/IPs, and the NCIP, written in the dialect or language of the concerned ICCs/IPs, with corresponding English and Filipino translation. (IPRA Implementing Rules and Regulations, Rule 4, Part 3, Section 8).
In the specific case of the Newcrest Mining Corporation that has mining claims in the Kalinga culture area, it was forced to hire a Kalinga interpreter to be able to translate all of its major public information documents into the Kalinga language. The company eventually went into a Memorandum of Agreement with the residents of the area with the contract written in both English and Kalinga as official languages.

**Language as empowerment**

The use of indigenous languages in the transactions with development agencies gave the necessary protection to the indigenous peoples from being deceived. They are now more aware about government plans as well as private interests within their areas.

Moreover, the utilisation of these languages has been an empowering tool by itself. The first time the Kalingas of one village heard a document being read to them in the Kalinga language, they were very much surprised that their language could be written and read. Because they were not able to develop a native script, they thought that the languages that can only be written are English, Tagalog, and Iloko (the regional lingua franca in the area). With their new realisation, they no longer look at their language and culture as inferior to those of the lowlanders.

Among the Hanunoo Mangyans of Mindoro, there is a growing interest to revitalise the use of the syllabic script. This teaching of this script has now been integrated into the formal educational system in the town of Mansalay. In the same municipality, street signs are now written in both the Latin and Hanunoo Mangyan scripts. For the Hanunoo Mangyans, the continued use of this script in the modern time is very important for them as it has become the symbol of their cultural survival in the age of globalisation.

Some quarters in the Philippines may argue that IPRA’s encouragement of indigenous languages can eventually be anti-development, as evidenced by the fact that many of the indigenous peoples, having become aware of their rights, now actively resist the intrusion of so-called development projects. This brings us to a basic question — for whom is development anyway? Surely, the real notion of development is not intended to exclude the marginalised sectors of society.

**References**


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