

DATU MONDIA IMBOK, HOLDING ON THROUGH DISASTERS

The Resilience Of Bagobo-Tagabawa Balangon Farmers

This is about the intertwined stories of Datu Mondia Imbok and his Bagobo Tagabawa IP community in Buhay, Mkilala. This is both a personal story in the context of a community story.



Datu Mondia Imbok is a Bagobo-Tagabawa leader of the more than 120 families of Indigenous people living in the uplands of Buhay, Makilala, and North Cotabato. He was born on March 15, 1953, a true native of Buhay, having been born and raised there. He barely finished elementary school walking long hours downhill to Indangan Elementary School. He remembers life was extremely difficult then, that was why he was unable to pursue high school education and had to stop at having elementary education. He ended up helping his parents till the land for the survival of their big family.

Buhay was not accessible to vehicles and farmers like his family, had to carry their produce (mainly coffee at that time) by themselves and for those who are a bit better off, by horseback.

Having no options because of the lack of opportunities due to lack of education, he pursued farming. At 23, he married a local maiden, Erenita Siyo, also of the Bagobo Tagabawa ethnic group. They had 12 children. However, because of poverty, seven of his children died from ages 1-2 years old and only 5 survived to adulthood. The cause of their deaths are childhood illnesses such as measles and dysentery. Where today there are health services which reach the remote villages, there were none during that time. Doctors and hospitals were too expensive for rural poor like his family.

As an IP farmer, he tried his best to send all his 5 children to school. Most of them reached high school, one of them reached third year College but had to stop because the expenses were just too much for the family after a brother met an accident.

In time, Mondia Imbok grew in experience and in leadership of his tribe. He was voted as Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR) to the village council, and currently heads the Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction and

Management Council. He is also the president of a legally registered and recognized Tribal Settlement Association and currently serving as the president of the Farmers' Association of Barangay Buhay. He has been working in active partnership with the Municipal Agriculturist Office. It is through them that he learned of the organic Balangon Program of Don Bosco Foundation with primarily the Muslim Maranao ethnic group of Buhay,

Remembering the Balangon (Bonguran in Bagobo Tagabawa language) banana that his father planted when he was 15 and having the same Balangon crop stand continually producing robust fruits even without care for the last 46 years , in 2015 he joined the program along with his other Bagobo Tagabawa people.

The then mayor through the office of the Municipal Agriculturist supported the Balangon initiative by providing for the Balangon corms for the Buhay farmers. These were sourced out from Miarayon, Talakag, Bukidnon, Unfortunately, the village allocated most of the corms for the Maranaos and only 5,000 reached the Bagobo Tagabawa constituents of Datu Mondia Imbok. They divided these among themselves and they were taught by Don Bosco Foundation staff to undertake macropropagation to hasten the production of seedlings. They were provided with tunnel films and sawdust for the purpose. Because of the high altitude and low temperature of the locality, the macropropagation did not play out well for lack of heat. However, Datu Imbok and those who were not discouraged went on and gradually increased their crop inventory.

The trials and test to the resilience of the Bagobo Tagabawa community of Buhay has been manifold, the hardest of which is the earthquake swarm of October 16, 29, 31 and December 15 which left them homeless and many organic balangon farms lost to huge landslides; some left with nothing because these farms were located on slopes. Though PHIVOLCS recorded magnitude 6.6 in their instruments, the instruments of EDC (Energy Development Corporation) just above the ranges of Buhay and Batasan recorded magnitude 9. The Tagabawa IPs fled from Buhay to the evacuation centers in the town center with unimaginable trauma to both young and old as aftershocks were still strong and landslides continue in every tremor.



One cannot imagine the physical and psychological suffering of evacuees living in very hot tents and living off the kindness of

donors. Being uprooted from the land, the uncertainty of the future, the prohibition of government agencies for people to visit their farms were too much to take. Buhay was categorized by government agencies as NO GO zone. The more courageous Maranao men, like hardy warriors stayed put and never left their lands while their women and children went to evaluation centers and to their relatives. After some time, the people could take it no more and defied such orders. Even Don Bosco Foundation for Sustainable Development, Inc (DBFSD) defied this category many times as DBFSD had to check on the farmers and see what can be done to extend assistance to them. To those who had not left, DBFSD brought them relief goods (rice, etc) from donors like Altertrade Philippines, Inc (ATPI) and Alter Trade Japan (ATJ), brought them medical relief with partner doctor and staff from Alternatibong Katilingbanong Kalambuang Panglawas (AKKAP) , brought them PE pipes to restore their spring water supply destroyed by the landslides.

The IPs also went back to Buhay in a temporary evacuation site (unfortunately surrounded by corporate chemically treated Cavendish banana plantation). There too, DBFSD brought them PE pipes to temporarily establish spring water supply to them who suffered 2 weeks without water and needed to go so far to get their water.

Most of the spaces occupied by the IP farmers were classified as high risk by PHIVOLCS. The government is still negotiating for the purchase of suitable relocation sites for the earthquake refugees of Buhay, majority of the IPs are still staying in evacuation sites using tents.

The disaster has not yet been properly responded to and resolved when the CoViD pandemic came bringing more suffering to the Tagabawa community with the lockdowns, etc. DBFSD brought some relief goods to the Bagobo Tagabawa community, not only to our organic Bungan/Balangon farmers.

Throughout these disasters and suffering, the Tagabawa showed their resilience as exemplified by Datu Mondia Imbok and the role of the Balangon P2P Initiative in their lives. Balangon has helped them bounce back after the earthquakes and gave them courage despite the trauma to go back to their lands and farms because, indeed LIFE (Buhay) is there. Two weeks after the earthquakes swarm, even if DBFSD lost its center, it resumed operation and shipped Balangon bananas even while the workers, the staff and everyone was reeling from the catastrophe. DBFSD had to resume and come back to normal because people need to have income to survive. We were so blessed that the balangon crops (except for some farms brought down by landslides) remained standing and productive even after the earthquakes. Balangon was the lifeline whom growers held on to.

Then came COVID pandemic. Everything shut down. Copra farmers lost their market, no traders can cross regions, only one truck driver (no crew were

allowed to travel in Region 11 (Davao region), etc. Rubber traders stopped buying rubber cuplump, cutflowers (enthurium) lost their market but lo and behold! Balangon never stopped even with the pandemic. The resilience of Balangon amidst these disasters has amazed people and awoken them to the resilience and therefore the advantage of Balangon. In times of global crisis like pandemic hey even realized that Balangon could be eaten as ripe table banana or as cooked plantain. They realized that they could not eat copra, much less rubber or cutflowers. Now, more and more of the IPs, the Muslims and the settlers of Buhay have applied and requested for planting materials and training seminars on organic balangon production.



In the midst of this in Buhay is Datu Mondia Imbok, still going strong at 66. How has the Balangon P2P initiative changed his life? The weekly income from his Balangon has afforded his family their daily needs. He has not grown rich but his little savings from his Balangon income has paid for his motorcycle which he used to carry their bananas to the Packing Center (PC) of DBFSD. A year ago, he was able to get assistance from government resources to buy a second hand *multicab* (small light truck) which the Buhay farmers used to transport their bananas to the PC of DBFSD. He has become an inspiration and model for the IP community and even for the settlers

and the Muslim Maranaos. He has not stopped dreaming for his people and has not stopped paying the price to make his dreams come true. At 66, he still feels young and full of energy and positivity.

Apart from this amazing resilience of the Balangon P2P, the farmers have also felt the truth of the P2P not only in trade but as a relationship beyond trade. The assistance extended by ATPI, ATJ and partner Japanese consumers is beyond trade but rooted in the recognition of Oneness as Humanity. The experience of kindness beyond borders, ethnicity, religion is truly beyond amazing. Sometimes, the only fitting response is that of silence (as one is confronted with the ineffable, an encounter with the Holy) as words cannot really capture the richness of the experience of a truly humane relationship.