From Mainland to Island: The Role of Community Warmth and Tranquility in the Migration of Abaca Farmworkers in Catanduanes

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ABSTRACT

This article is an offshoot of a qualitative case study that examined the lived experience of migrant abaca farm-workers in Catanduanes, Philippines. It describes the dynamics of migration, livelihood adaptation, and community integration of the migrant farm-workers. A number of Household cases showed that migration was impelled by push factors such as insurgency, natural calamities, and poverty in their places of origin. Surprisingly, it was found out that abaca farming was not the primal pull factor among the migrant abaca farm-workers though it served as a means of their survival. Instead, migrants were pulled to Catanduanes by its peace and order situation, kinship ties, and the hospitality of local communities. It was also found out that the abaca farming, though abundant in the province, is beaten up by low and unstable pricing, irregular tenancy arrangements, and vulnerability to typhoons. Nonetheless, such conditions keep migrant families stay and endure poverty. They strive to overcome such poverty by engaging in various livelihood, combining abaca farming with fishing, construction work, and wage labor, and by giving important consideration to the education of their children, hoping that it could bring positive changes in their lives. The local government's role was also felt by providing social services, calamity aid, and poverty alleviation programs, which sustained families during lean periods and helped them integrate into host communities. The study concludes that migration is a relocation motivated not only by economic factors but also by social, political and psychological aspects of life. Moreover, this study has policy implications, which include the need for abaca price stabilization mechanisms, land tenure reform, livelihood diversification programs, disaster resilience measures, and expanded educational support. Findings of the study emphasize that paying attention to both the abaca industry and community-based social policies is essential for sustainable rural development in Catanduanes.

Keywords: Migration; Push Factors; Pull Factors; Community Integration; and livelihood adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Catanduanes is known as the "Abaca Capital of the Philippines," with abaca farming serving as a major livelihood for rural communities and farm workers.

The Abaca industry in the province is, however, not spared from challenges. Despite its importance, abaca farming is affected by unstable prices, insecure tenancy, plant diseases, and frequent typhoons, forcing workers to seek additional sources of income.

With these challenges, government intervention plays a significant role in the life of farmers including the abaca farm-workers. The Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (PhilFIDA), under the Department of Agriculture, supports the fiber industry through the provision of planting materials, disease management, technical training, production and post-harvest assistance, and market development. Despite these interventions, the experiences of migrant abaca farm-workers remain underexplored. Examining their migration, livelihood adaptation, and community integration can provide insights to improve policies and programs for sustainable rural development in Catanduanes. It is therefore, both interesting and practical to conduct a study that deals with the lived experience of migrant abaca farm-workers in Catanduanes.

Out of the felt necessity to investigate the phenomenon of migration of abaca farm-workers in the Island-Province of Catanduanes, the study sought to: (1) scholarly describe the lived experience of these migrants; (2) draw essential insights and information from the narratives of their lived experience as migrant farmers; and (3) to determine the implications of the essential insights to the local government and Catandungan society in general.

Other than documentation, the study has produced policy-relevant recommendations for helping abaca markets become more stable, enhancing programs that promote migrant well-being, and strengthening community support systems. Confidently, the output could serve as both an academic contribution to migration and rural development studies and a practical resource for local government and industry stakeholders.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of the Study

The lived experiences of migrant abaca farmers in Catanduanes were examined by looking into three interrelated dimensions: economic, social, and psychological. Each dimension is anchored in established theories that reveal migration as a multidimensional process of survival and adaptation.

Economic Dimension – Push-Pull Migration Theory

The economic struggles of migrant farmers are best understood through Lee's Push-Pull Theory of Migration (1966). Certain push factors compelled them and their families to leave their places of origin, while some conditions identified as pull factors drew them to Catanduanes.

Social Dimension – Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory explains how trust, reciprocity, and networks reduce isolation and provide migrants with resources beyond economic livelihood. This dimension underscores that migration is sustained not only by material opportunities but also by the strength of social relationships and institutional support.

Psychological Dimension – Resilience and Coping Theories

Migrants' reliance on perseverance, hope, and investment in their children's education aligns with Resilience Theory (Masten, 2001) and Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These perspectives emphasize how individuals appraise stressors and mobilize coping strategies, drawing on inner strength and meaning-making to endure adversity.

By combining push-pull migration theory, social capital theory, and resilience/coping frameworks, a holistic lens was adopted. Migration emerges not merely as economic relocation but as a multidimensional process shaped by livelihood struggles, community integration, and psychological resilience. Such framework connects micro-level narratives with macro-level policy implications, particularly those that affect the abaca markets, community networks, and the wellbeing of migrant households in Catanduanes.

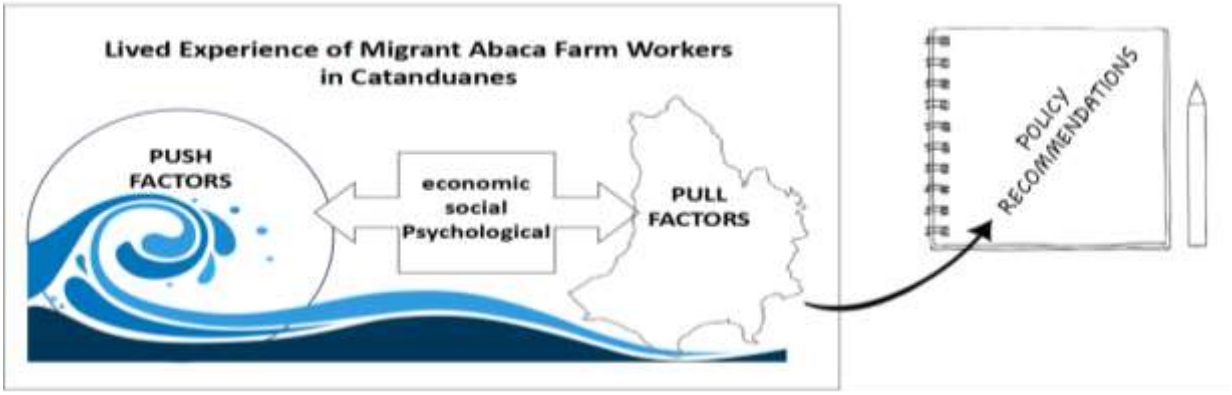


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of migrant farmworker households in Catanduanes. Through case study approach the researchers were able to obtain an in-depth understanding of the circumstances, motivations, and lived experiences of migrant farmworkers within their natural social setting. Through detailed narratives, the study examined the factors that influenced migration and the realities encountered by migrant households in their host communities.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in three barangays in the Province of Catanduanes where migrant abaca farmworker households have established residence and livelihood. These barangays were Danicop, Virac; Moning, Baras; and Bagumbayan, Bato. The sites were selected because they are areas where migrant farming households from mainland Bicol and neighboring provinces have settled and engaged in agricultural work.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of three migrant farmworker households residing in the identified barangays. Each household was composed of two or more family units living and working within the same community. The participants were carefully chosen through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) they were migrant farmworkers or members of migrant farmworker families, and (2) they had experienced relocation from their place of origin to Catanduanes for livelihood-related reasons.

The three households served as individual cases from which narratives of migration experiences were gathered. Their accounts provided rich descriptions of the factors that influenced their decision to migrate and their experiences of settlement and work in Catanduanes.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through face-to-face, in-depth personal interviews. An interview guide was utilized to facilitate discussion while allowing participants to freely narrate their experiences. The interviews focused on the participants' migration history, reasons for relocating, livelihood opportunities, adjustment experiences, challenges encountered, and perceived benefits of living in Catanduanes.

With the participants' consent, the interviews were documented through note-taking and audio recording. The collected narratives were subsequently transcribed and organized for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The narratives were carefully reviewed and coded to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and meanings related to the migration experiences of the participants. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from which themes emerged. These themes served as the basis for understanding the push and pull factors influencing migration as well as the lived experiences of migrant abaca farmworker households in Catanduanes.

Ethical Considerations

Moreover, the study religiously observed ethical standards by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants. The purpose and scope of the research were clearly discussed with the respondents. Their participation was voluntary and they can opt to withdraw at any time. Data that can hint personal identification of the informants were concealed to protect privacy, and data were kept securely. Asking questions was done with utmost care to avoid psychological or cultural harm. Informants are free to decline answering questions they find sensitive. Data collection and analysis were executed with commitment to honesty and integrity. Findings of this study are intended to benefit migrant abaca farmers and local stakeholders. Through

this study their voices might be heard, and respective authorities be informed to formulate policies for community development.

The information or data gathered in narrative forms were treated in the following steps: (1) transcription of the recorded interviews; (2) reconstruction of the raw data into narratives with a structure designed to make the next steps more convenient and comprehensible; (3) Determination of recurring themes drawn out of the narratives; (4) Formulation of statements or claims describing the phenomenon understudied.

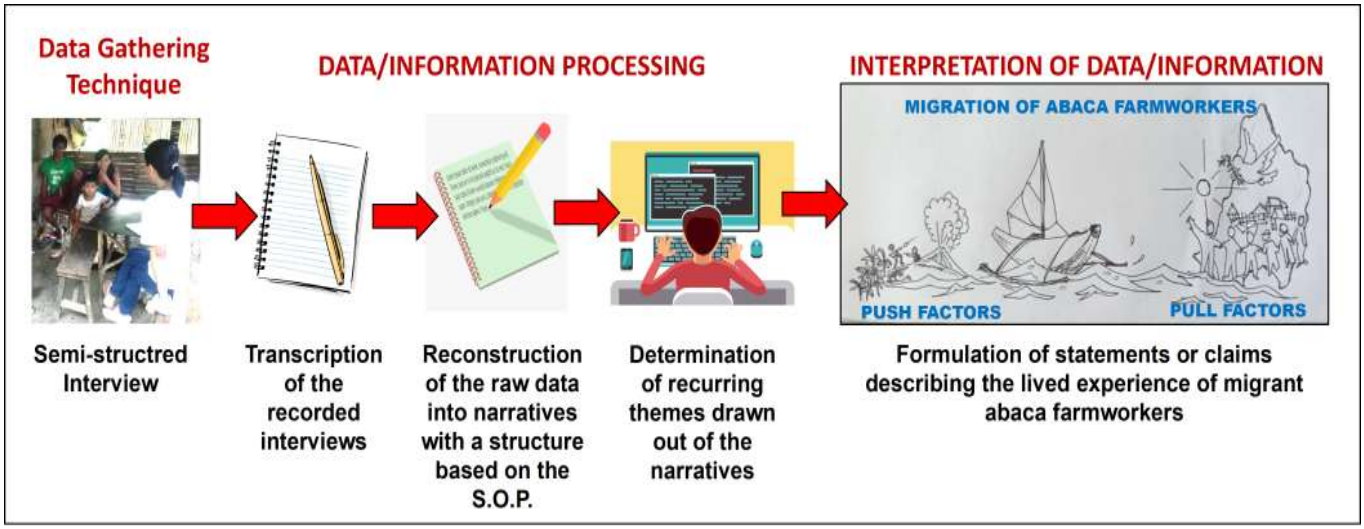


Figure 2. Research Process Flow: From Data Gathering to Interpretation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was conducted with the collaborative participation of abaca farm workers. Their real identity, however, is disclosed for ethical consideration, particularly respect for one's privacy.

The participants were all migrant abaca farmers who had migrated to Catanduanes, from other provinces, particularly form the mainland of Bicol Region. Most were heads of the family and spouses engaged in abaca farming, though some of them combined farming with other rural occupations, such as construction work and fishing. They were generally middle-aged to elderly, with low levels of formal education, and have their families settled in Catanduanes over different periods of migration. Their backgrounds show the varied characteristics of rural households attracted to the Catanduanes by more available abaca farmland and more stable living conditions.

Table 1: Profile of Research Participants

Case	Present Address	Place of Origin	Civil Status	Number of Children	Occupation (Before)	Occupation (Now)
Case 1	A barangay in Bato, Catanduanes	A barangay in, San Jorge, Samar	married	7	Farmer (corn & ginger)	Farmer (abaca, copra, rice) Abaca stripper
Case 2	A barangay in Baras, Catanduanes	A barangay in Rapu-rapu, Albay	married	5	Abaca stripper, copra, construction worker Fisherman Pier porter	Abaca stripper, construction worker, fisherman

Case 3	A barangay in San Miguel, Catanduanes	A barangay in Tabaco City	Live-in partner	7	Abaca farming (owns the estate) Copra Daily-wage construction labor	Abaca stripper Caretaker of abaca & vegetable farm

Narratives of Lived Experiences of Migrant Abaca Farm Workers

The Narratives of Lived Experiences of Migrant Abaca Farm Workers in Catanduanes had been reconstructed from the interview transcripts, putting together the variables into a story-like account. By doing it in this manner, every family's journey of migration is presented as a story with human face rather than just lifeless data points. Nevertheless, the names stated in the accounts are fictitious to secure the confidentiality of their identity.

Case 1: The Dela Paz Couple

The Dela Paz couple migrated from Samar to a barangay in Bato, Catanduanes compelled by the weight of insurgency and instability in their place of origin. With seven children to raise, they shifted from corn and ginger farming to abaca stripping, copra, and rice cultivation.

The couple find life in Catanduanes that somehow, gave them peace and tranquility, but not prosperity. Abaca farming proved harder than corn planting—longer harvest cycles and low prices meant their income barely improved. As tenants rather than landowners, they felt the limits of their labor. Their hopes rest on the future: that abaca prices will rise, that they might share in their brother-in-law's estate, and that one day, when old age makes abaca farming too difficult, they can return to Samar. Their story is one of endurance, where peace was gained but economic security remains elusive.

Case 2: The Fidelis Couple

Tired of enduring the blows of calamity, the Fidelis couple decided to migrate to Catanduanes. From their place of origin, Rapurapu, Albay, where volcanic eruptions often destroy abaca plants, the couple were plunged into poverty. The husband recalled how difficult their life was. "*Kaipuhan ko mag hanap nin maayos na trabaho para masuportahan ang sakuyang magulang. Grabe and pag tios mi lalo pagatuga ang bulkan*." (I need to look for a job to support my parents. Our life was really difficult and hard brought about by volcanic eruptions.) Seeking survival, they moved to Catanduanes. They settled in one barangay in Baras, where relatives accommodated them and the sea offered new resources. Their livelihood became a patchwork of abaca stripping, construction work, fishing, and pier labor. Though abaca farming is more demanding in time and energy than fishing, they persevered. The wife described their attitude and priority in life very clearly. *"Sa pag buhay natural na man po iyan na igwa nin challenges pero mas piga prioridad mi po ang pag adal nin mga aki mi."* Life's challenges are normal. We give first priority to our children's education.) The couple's perseverance is fueled by a clear and noble goal: that their children finish their studies. They prioritize it above all else.

They were warmly welcomed by Catandunganons. Their neighbors were hospitable, They did not experienced being discriminated, and basic services were available for them as they are for the rest. The husband Fidelis narrated their experience of hospitality. *"Mad-ayad ang kumunidad na ini para sako pati sa pamilya ko. Nag kaigwa ako nin opportunidad na magibo ang ibang hanap buhay na dae ko nagibo sa Rapurapu. Nakamatid ako mag lawod maski papano pati nag iba ang paagi nin pag buhay mi. Mga mabuot ang tawo uya sa Baras, dae sinda gahiling kung tagasain ka. Alisto sinda makisama kaya dapat maki sama ka man."* (For me and my family, this community is better. I had the opportunity to do certain jobs, which I didn't have in Rapurapu. I learned deep-sea fishing. Our livelihood changed. People in Baras are kind, they don't discriminate strangers. They are good to get along with. One should also be good at it, in return.) Inspired by people's hospitality and determined to pursue their children's schooling, the Fidelis couple stayed in the place, despite hardships and difficulties. Their aspirations are deeply spiritual: faith in God's fairness, hope that their children will finish

college, and trust that their diligence will be rewarded. The Fidelis' story presents migration as both a response to disaster and a commitment to fulfill family dreams.

Case 3: Pedrito Juaquin and Felicitas Delgado

Pedrito and Felicitas's story of migration from Tabaco to San Miguel, Catanduanes was determined by hardship and calamities. With seven children, the couple sought a more stable life in Catanduanes, where Felicitas' kin and Amado's uncle paved a way for them to abaca farming. Their livelihood is a combination of abaca stripping, caretaking vegetable farms, construction work, and copra production. Though abaca prices were slightly lower than in Tabaco, frequent harvests and better income-sharing systems made farming more viable. Government support through the 4Ps program and community aid during emergencies strengthened their resilience. Typhoons in Catanduanes remained a challenge, but they adapted to the challenging situation. They engaged in shifting jobs: construction work during lean times and returning to abaca when opportunities are abundant. Their children helped in farm work during school vacations, manifesting the family's collective survival strategy. The kindness of neighbors, who informed them of government aid and supported them during childbirth, made them feel at home. Their aspiration is simple yet profound: to work every day, sustained by faith that God provides. Their story illustrates how kinship, community, and spirituality intertwine to sustain migrant families.

Themes Culled out of the Narrative of Migrant Farmers' Lived Experiences

Theme 1 - **Migration: a Survival and Opportunity-Seeking Strategy**

The cases reveal families uprooted by hardship, such as rebellion in Samar, volcanic eruptions in Rapu-rapu, and poverty in Tabaco. Each household carried with them histories of struggle and resilience, seeking peace, livelihood, and stability in Catanduanes.

Push factors, such as insurgency or conflict, calamities, scarcity, and poverty compelled families to leave their places of origin. Pull factors, such as peace, providence of nature (the sea), abundant abaca, and kinship ties drew them to Catanduanes. Migration thus, is rendered as a negotiation between despair and hope, between leaving behind instability and embracing new opportunities.

Theme 2 - **Integration: Building Belonging in a New Community**

Upon arrival, migrants settled in rural barangays in Catanduanes. Their experience of integration to the new community varied but was generally marked by hospitality, camaraderie, and access to basic services. The presence of relatives or kin networks eased their transition, while kindness from neighbors and government aid programs strengthened their sense of belonging.

The host communities generally welcomed migrants warmly. They offered assistance during emergencies, shared information about government aid, and fostered camaraderie. This social acceptance reduced feelings of isolation and allowed migrants to feel "at home," even in unfamiliar territory

Theme 3 - **Family: Both a Privilege and a Responsibility**

Large families, often with six or seven children, shaped the rhythm of migrant life. Children were both dependents and contributors, helping in abaca farms during school breaks. Parents prioritized education despite economic hardship, seeing schooling as the pathway to a better future. Aspirations for children's success became the anchor of perseverance.

Theme 4 - **Overcoming Challenges: Adaptive Resilience in Everyday Life**

Occupational transitions were central to their stories. Farmers who once planted corn or fished in the sea had to adapt to abaca farming, stripping, and copra production. While abaca offered more frequent harvests, it demanded longer labor hours and was vulnerable to low market prices. Migrants often combined farming with construction work, fishing, or wage labor to sustain their families. This diversification reflects both economic necessity and adaptive resilience.

Life in Catanduanes was marked by tenancy arrangements, government support programs like 4Ps, and the constant balancing of abaca farming with other jobs. Migrants experienced both hardship (low abaca prices, typhoons) and opportunity (availability of alternative jobs, community aid). Their narratives highlight the tension between vulnerability and resilience in everyday survival.

Theme 5 - **Hopes and Aspirations: Strength to Endure**

Despite challenges, migrants expressed enduring hope. They dream of their children having graduated from their studies, of a more favorable abaca prices, and of returning to their places of origin in old age. Faith in God and trust in his righteousness sustain their outlook, revealing how spirituality and optimism keeps them going through uncertainty.

With the aforementioned eight themes, the study posits that migration for these abaca farm workers is not merely a change of geographical abode. It is a lived interplay of survival, adaptation, and aspiration. Their stories show how job shifting, family responsibilities, community receptivity, and psychological motivations like faith converge to shape the migrant experience in Catanduanes.

The data and the themes culled out from the narratives of lived experiences of migrant abaca farm workers in Catanduanes reveal that while abaca farming was the livelihood these migrants turned to, it was not the main factor that pulled them into the province. What truly keep them to stay were social, relational and psychological factors: the kindness of host communities, kinship ties, and the peace and order situation; as well as their hopes and that aspirations sustained by their faith in the Divine Providence.

CONCLUSIONS

Although abaca farming offered livelihood opportunities, the migrants' narratives show that the real pull factors were not the strength of the abaca industry itself in Catanduanes. Rather, it was the quality of accommodation expressed by the host communities, which is marked by hospitality, camaraderie, and access to basic services. The peace and order condition has made their settlement in Catanduanes more viable. These social and environmental pull factors outweighed the economic limitations of abaca farming in the province. This indicates that migration decisions are shaped as much by community integration and stability as by livelihood prospects.

Pull factors are not so much about abaca's profitability as about community warmth and peace in the province, a jewel every catandunganon should cherish, preserve and be proud of.

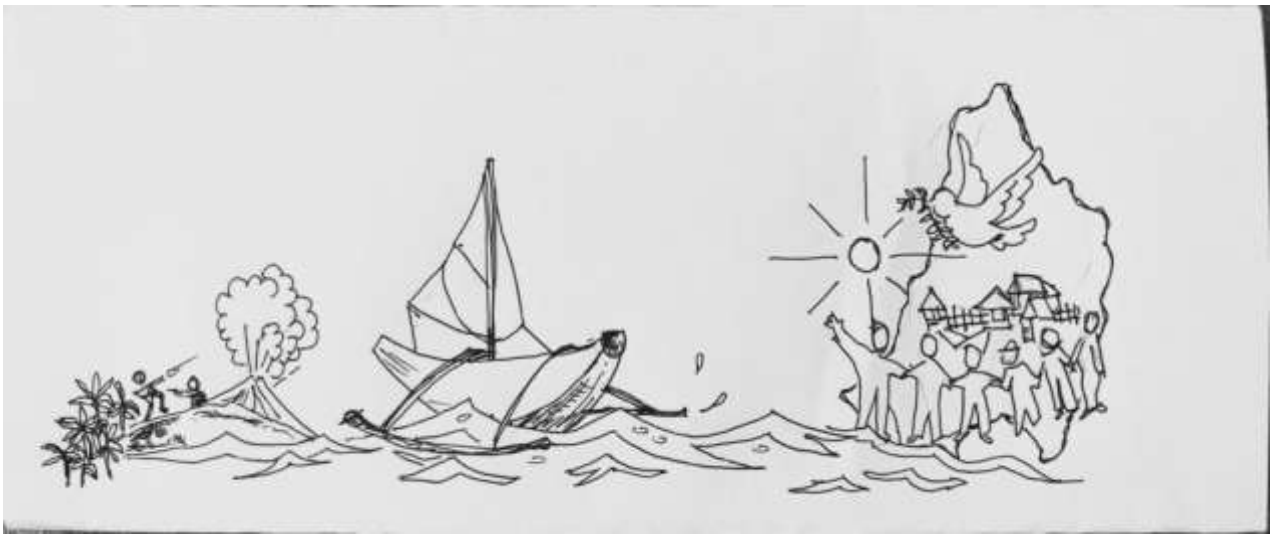


Figure 3. Symbolic Synthesis of the Phenomenon of Abaca Farm-workers Migration in Catanduanes

The figure above symbolically shows the economic, social, and psychological push and pull factors that operate in the dynamics of migration of the farmworkers in Catanduanes. It creatively but clearly depicts the factors that pushed the migrants to Catanduanes. The abaca figures in the place of origin represent a good-enough economic

condition. But insurgency and natural calamities, symbolized by men firing each other and the erupting volcano compelled them to leave and look for better place of abode. The sailing boat symbolizes the act of migration. The pull factors shown by the human figures holding each other, the neighboring houses, the shining sun, and the dove with laurel leaves are the hospitality or warm acceptance of the people, social supports, and the peace or tranquility the migrants experienced in the place of destination, which is Catanduanes. Notice that there is no figure of abaca plant in the place of destination. It is so, because the study reveals that while abaca farming was the livelihood these migrants turned to, it was not the main factor that pulled them into Catanduanes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policies, therefore for the abaca industry must be paired with community development and peace initiatives. The following are recommendations for the local authorities particularly, the local government unit in the barangay, municipal, and provincial levels to consider in crafting policies for a more holistic development in the lives of Catnadunganons, particularly the abaca farm workers.

Economic Policy

Establish price stabilization mechanisms by supporting and creating cooperatives, and by government floor pricing.

Improve market access through local processing centers and supply chain support.

Strengthen land tenure reform to empower tenants to become landowners.

Social Policy

Expand social safety nets like 4Ps and targeted subsidies for abaca farmers.

Develop community integration programs to foster hospitality and reduce discrimination.

Provide education support through scholarships for children prioritizing those of abaca farmers.

Disaster Resilience and Climate Adaptation

Invest in typhoon-resistant abaca varieties and disease-resistant strains.

Offer crop insurance schemes to protect farmers against calamity losses.

Train communities in disaster preparedness and response.

Livelihood Diversification

Provide skills training for alternative livelihoods (construction, crafts, fishing).

Expand microfinance and credit access for small-scale enterprises.

Create seasonal employment programs during lean abaca harvests.

Governance and Peace-Building

Maintain peace and order as a key pull factor for migrants.

Ensure transparent aid distribution to build trust in government support.

Promote participatory policy-making by involving farmers and migrant communities in consultations.

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