

Empowering Indigenous Peoples: Local Governance Initiatives for the Inclusion of the Sama Dilaut in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring that marginalized Sama Dilaut communities benefit from local government initiatives is critical to their identity, cultural preservation and political empowerment. This study investigates how local government units promote inclusive and participatory governance to improve the welfare of the Sama Dilaut in Tawi-Tawi amid persistent insecurity and sociopolitical marginalization. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered through key informant interviews with 25 purposively selected local elective and appointive officials and analyzed through thematic analysis. Results indicate that the institutionalization of the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR), documentation, and access to government housing programs have directly benefited Sama Dilaut communities, reflecting Local Government Units' proactive role in fostering collaborative governance. The study highlights the importance of co-created governance approaches that prioritize Sama Dilaut voices and needs.

Findings reveal that Sama Dilaut have limited or uneven participation in governance, implying that legal and cultural barriers, selective placement of beneficiaries, and the unilateral design of housing projects continue to exclude the Sama Dilaut from inclusion and planning processes, thereby undermining their identity, recognition, accessibility and participation.

Addressing power imbalance and bridging the gap between LGUs and Sama Dilaut communities, local policymakers and government institutions should adopt culturally sensitive, community-based strategies that prioritize meaningful engagement, cultural relevance, and inclusive decision-making. Such approaches can promote recognition, participation and accessibility, ensuring more responsive equitable governance.

Keywords: Sama Dilaut, IPMR, birth registration, housing, inclusive governance, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) make up around 14-17 population (Veneracion-Rollanza, 2022), spread across all over the regions in the Philippines. The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA) and the Bangsamoro Indigenous Peoples Act (BIPA) or BARMM Act No. 64 categorized Sama Dilaut (Sama Bajau/Badjao) as Indigenous Peoples. Sama Dilaut, one of the Sinama-speaking people, who have lived on mobile boats for centuries, is spread in Sulu archipelago, Philippines, Sulawesi and Kalimantan, Indonesia, and Sabah, Malaysia (Toohey, 2005) had a nomadic lifestyle and relied mainly on fishing for survival (Nimmo, 1968). They inhabit the seashores or coastal areas and live in stilt-constructed houses above the water with no land ownership (Roxas-Lim, 2017; Bracamonte, 2005). The Bajaus are generally regarded as marginalized, outcast, despised, and relegated to the bottom rungs of the social structure (Macalandag, 2009). Their itinerant lifestyle, and frequent border crossings, have resulted in some of them becoming stateless (Desk Review on Populations at Risk of Statelessness, 2021). Nowadays, Sama Dilaut are dealing with a variety of issues, including statelessness and migration (Moreno, 2023), discrimination (Aoyama, 2016), poverty (Usman and Bacongus, 2016) and other concerns caused by legal and structural constraints.

The passage of IPRA or R.A No. 8371 was an important piece of legislation. It mandates the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR) to effectively integrate the IPs in a formal governance structure. Local legislative representation is crucial as it empowers indigenous peoples to engage in local politics. By participating in decision-making processes, IPs' concerns are integrated into the local legislative agenda, thus ensuring and respecting their traditional consultation and participatory governance systems. IP representatives are important in establishing whether the representation mechanisms established by IPRA can address their concerns and interests through local legislative bodies/councils. For example, a study of the Bukidnon Tribe's IPMRs in Mindanao, Philippines, found out that appointing indigenous representatives enhanced communication and political relations between the tribe and the local authority (Jayma-Porquis, 2017).

The Sama Dilaut's itinerant lifestyle and lack of documentation have long hindered their access to basic services. Their marginalization is sustained by the legal invisibility, which limits their capacity to exercise their rights and prevents them from using public services. The importance of birth certificates has made many aware, especially in obtaining social services like Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), TUPAD, AKAP, Ayuda and other services. Without proof of legal identity, Sama Dilaut have difficulty in accessing basic services, applying for employment, and even traveling to locations outside of their communities.

Indigenous populations in high-income countries face unique challenges in accessing safe and adequate housing, stemming from a confluence of historical injustices, economic barriers, and discriminatory practices (Stankov etc. 2025). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and other legal frameworks mandate indigenous inclusion, providing access to basic services like housing. While appropriate housing is recognized as a fundamental human right, it is not commonly available. It is subject to access mechanisms, which can be influenced by formal and informal institutions, as well as structural and relational factors (Brain et al. 2020).

The Sustainable development Goals 2030 (SDGs) emphasized that no one should be left out. Adopting inclusivity will address power imbalance between government and society in the context of ineffective participatory mechanisms (Safkinofsky et al. 2019). Despite increased policy interest and efforts to integrate Indigenous Peoples in governance, the Sama Dilaut continue to experience social, economic, and life disadvantages, preventing them from fully participating in the development process and governance system.

With little attention given on the sea-based ethnic group in local governance raises critical questions regarding the capacity of the LGUs in Tawi-Tawi to operationalize inclusive governance in culturally diverse and institutionally complex settings. This study aims to answer how local government units promote inclusive and participatory governance to improve the welfare of the Sama Dilaut in Tawi-Tawi? The findings may serve as policy feedback on the development of sustainable context based local policies and interventions that facilitate the integration of the Sama Dilaut in formal governance structure.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study design was adopted to provide a contextual understanding of how Local Government Units in Tawi-Tawi promote inclusive governance practices concerning Sama Dilaut using Key Informant Interview (KII). This study used a purposive sampling strategy where the Sama Dilaut community lived and inhabited. A purposeful sampling strategy enabled the selection of specific participants who could contribute information relevant to the research topics (Lugo, 2022).

Twenty-five (25) knowledgeable participants were selected purposively from among local elective officials and heads of local government institutions, who are directly or indirectly knowledgeable about the implementation of policies, activities, and programs. These selected heterogeneous individuals were chosen purposively for their knowledge on the subject matter who were asked to share their thoughts, opinions and ideas on the implementation of policies, programs and activities based on pre-determined set of criteria was used for the selection of individual participants such as their experiences as members of the local legislative bodies, officials of the local government units, and heads of local institutions, length of service and willingness to be interviewed.

This sampling method is a useful methodology in qualitative studies since qualities of the participants are spelled out by the researchers. In this design, the researchers used their good judgment in selecting the participants who best met the purposes of his study. The objective was not to have many participants but to make sure that they are heterogenous (diverse) and would provide a wealth of information (Lukman, 2019). Because it is qualitative in nature, a small number of informed participants were needed to reach data saturation.

An official letter was sent to the participants requesting permission to conduct the interviews. After receiving approval, the researchers scheduled a preliminary meeting with the target participants and addressed ethical considerations and got free consent from them. Following the questionnaire, the participants elaborate on their perceptions on how LGUs promote inclusive participatory governance to improve the welfare of the Sama Dilaut. The study received ethical approval from the Research Integrity Committee Office of the Mindanao State University Iligan Institute of Technology with UERB-2025-00027. All participants were given written informed consent, which included permission to record the interview, and the researchers informed them that they were free to withdraw at any time should they wish to do so.

The researchers informed the participants about their involvement in the study and their prior consents were sought. The researchers also explained the nature and purpose of the study. As part of the precautionary measures, the researchers did not force the participants to participate in the study. Moreover, the researchers secured the participant's privacy and maintained the confidentiality of the information shared in order to protect the anonymity of his participants, and thus, code numbers were used instead of their names. Interviews took place at a designated time and location that was most convenient for participants. Interviews were done face-to-face and lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes depending on the conversations with the participants using semi-structured guide questions combined specific and probing questions.

The researchers analyzed the qualitative data collected manually using thematic analysis from interview transcripts. The gathered data was processed through coding, and analyzed before being interpreted. Thematic analysis was employed, which is defined as a method used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a highly common technique among qualitative researchers for interpreting qualitative data, which typically includes thick descriptive data (Naeem et al., 2023). The data was manually categorized and coded. The interview protocol and participant information were transcribed, translated, tabulated, and grouped into themes, and coded by using distinct highlighted color markers and marking ideas/statements with the same color that fell into the same category (Richards, 2009). Lastly, the researchers engaged in reflexivity that could influence the interpretation of the study.

RESULTS

The study utilized a purposive sampling with a validated semi-structured guide questionnaire to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants. The data gathered were transcribed and evaluated to identify themes. The data reveals three recurring themes: institutionalization of the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR), documentation and access to government housing programs.

Institutionalization of the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative

For nearly three decades since the passage of R.A No. 8371 in 1997, the Sama Dilaut have been marginalized in local politics, with little or no input in decisions that have a substantial influence on their life. Their participation in local governance is frequently hampered by institutional neglect, bureaucratic exclusion, and systematic discrimination which poses a barrier to inclusion in decision-making processes. The transition of Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019 marked the process of accrediting the Sama Dilaut's IPMR in Tawi-Tawi. The implementation of the IPMR in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), requires compliance with the guidelines set by the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA), where an assembly must be held with community leaders/council of elders (Botang Matto'a) to discuss and process the requirements. The requirements include the raising awareness of the IPMR in the LGUs concerned; obtaining endorsement from the council of elders or any IP organization representing Sama Dilaut and local government unit concerned that must be presented to the regional office; passing a resolution recognizing the IPMR representation; submitting

a resolution to BARMM-Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA), and the issuance of certificate of affirmation for recognition of the LGU concerned.

Complying with the above requirements affords the Sama Dilaut the opportunity to be represented in the local legislative body. The implementation of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which mandated an Indigenous Peoples Representative (IPMR) for each local government unit in Indigenous Peoples populated areas, has ensured indigenous populations' representation (Jayma, 2017). Multiple participants stated as follows;

“Sama Dilaut can now participate in local legislation. Their voice is now heard through the IPMR in the Sangguniang Bayan (local legislative body)”

“The implementation of the IPMR is a way to include the Sama Dilaut community in local governance”

“The inclusion of a Sama Dilaut representative in the Sangguniang Bayan would facilitate the situation and condition of the Sama Dilaut community so that they could participate in decision-making, and in policy implementation”

“The implementation of the IPMR is important to increase the Sama Dilaut inclusion in local governance”

However, out of 11 total number of municipalities, only two have been appointed as the IPMR in their respective Sangguniang Bayan and none Sama Dilaut IPMR has been appointed or designated in the barangay level. This translates that their participation and inclusion in the formal local governance have remained inadequate, with limited representation in the local legislative bodies or councils. This limited uptake might be due to literacy or capacity issues, hindering broader implementation. Some individuals have received MIPA affirmation, having complied with the necessary requirements for appointment/designation, but local chief executives often don't recognize them, citing identity mismatches with Sama Dilaut IPs. Moreover, the presence of the Sama Dilaut IPMR does not result in an ordinance stating, for example, on housing plans be favored and prioritized. The Sama Dilaut representative's role is confined to preserving their cultural heritage with no effort to advocate for homes or shelter or other pressing needs for their ethnic community.

Documentation

One initiative undertaken by the local institutions is the LGU- initiative caravan targeting isolated places where the Sama Dilaut thrives. The case in point is the collaboration between the Local Civil Registry Office of the Municipality of Sibutu, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and the Barangays concerned resulting in the conduct of the Free Mobile Civil Registration Project for birth registration. A key initiative is the annual road project such as IEC on birth registration held every February during Civil Registration Month, which targets under-served communities such as indigent populations and geographically isolated Sama Dilaut residents. Similarly, the local government of Sitangkai municipality has collaborated with the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) to launch a caravan for birth registration. This initiative aims to reach the remote and isolated marginalized communities, and facilitate individual birth registration. The caravan brings municipal officials and staff, and necessary forms to accessible locations, making it easier to register their births and obtain birth certificates. Moreover, the Municipality of Bongao has partnered with the Bangsamoro Commission on Human Rights (BCHR) provincial office in Tawi-Tawi to provide free birth registration services to marginalized Sama Dilaut in Bongao. This initiative demonstrates the commitment of local governments to ensure that all citizens have access to basic rights and services.

Additionally, the Local Civil Registry Office (LCRO) partnered with the health sector to promote on-time birth registration by requiring parents to register newborns delivered at birthing clinics. The intervention through the IEC initiative of the local institution that includes teaching communities about the importance of civil documentation, reducing the process and cost of birth registration, and boosting the digitization capabilities of local civil registrars (PSA). Recent initiatives by local governments, institutions, and community volunteers have made significant strides in addressing this issue. By facilitating legal birth registration, these efforts have clothed the Sama Dilaut with a legal identity, unlocking rights and privileges previously inaccessible to them. Bearing

the nationality of being a Filipino citizen provides them a high sense of their legal identity which empowers them to participate in governance without fear of discrimination or isolation. One participant emphasized:

“Ya birth registration maka kesog Bangsa Sama Dilaut (Bajau). Ta protektahan na sigam ma banan jawlaka maka pagdeyoh-deyoh. Hangkan subay sigam protected na as Filipino citizen ma reyoman sarah Pilipin (With a birth registration, Sama Dilaut (Bajau) individuals are now empowered. They are protected from abuse, harassment, and bullying. Because being a Filipino citizen, they should be protected by Philippine law)”

The Sama Dilaut’s itinerant lifestyle and lack of documentation have long hindered their access to basic services. Their marginalization is sustained by this legal invisibility, which limits their capacity to exercise their rights and prevents them from using public services. Sulat katarrangan (valid document) is just a piece of document but carries multiple effects such as needed as for 4Ps beneficiaries, requirement for enrolment in school, passport requirement, proof of being native, age validation, marriage application requirement, organization membership requirement to facilitate assistance and needed to access government services/assistance. With legal identity, birth registration has become a means to lifting barriers to social services, ensuring their entitlement to essential benefits like education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. As highlighted by one participant:

“Maka access na sigam nip ag-iskul. Maka enrol na anak Sama Dilaut ma school mowa ni katallakan ma sosongun. Maka avail na sigam ma health services. With birth certificate sigam na, Sama Dilaut maka peyha na hinang maka buwan na kahapan ma kauman (Birth registration has enabled them to access education. Sama Dilaut children can now enroll in school, paving the way for a brighter future. Sama Dilaut can avail health services. With a birth certificate, Sama Dilaut can seek employment and contribute to their communities)”

The Sama Dilaut constantly relocated from one region to another. As sea nomads, they spend most of their time at sea and rely on sea resources for their living. Their circumstances are difficult because their daily lives revolve around the water environment in search of a source of income and sustenance. A day's catch meant survival. Sama Dilaut used to shift from one location to another in search of the abundance of sea bounties or when situations were not favorable for their peaceful living. The latter conditions denied them access to basic services. Their frequent travel from one location to another makes it difficult for them to obtain their live birth certificates. With a lack of formal education, Sama Dilaut felt inferior, and chronic poverty hampered their ability to gain civil registration with the Municipal Civil Registry Office. They are hesitant to go to the office to secure or receive birth registration for reasons of fear, unattended or worse, discrimination. Fines for late registration are another legal impediment for Sama Dilaut seeking for live birth registration. With the collaborative efforts of local institutions have made significant leap forward in addressing this issue. With the issuance of free birth certificates, Sama Dilaut individuals can now unlock opportunities for business and travel. As elaborated by one of the participants.

“Dikayuh saheya-heya tabang yana birth registration ni Bangsa Sama Dilaut. Heka kamaksuran na (Birth registration is a huge help to the Sama Dilaut. It serves many purposes)”

For instance, those living in Sitangkai Municipality, who frequently visit Semporna, Sabah Malaysia can now obtain a passport and travel freely with their sulat katarrangan (valid document). A birth certificate is a basic legal document that proves identity, citizenship, and filiation. It is a prerequisite for obtaining a passport which is a crucial document for international travel. Without a birth certificate, Sama Dilaut individuals face significant challenges in traveling abroad, particularly countries like Malaysia, where many of their families have migrated for good. Engaging in business requires a legal identity, which can only be supported by the issuance of a birth certificate. With this document, Sama Dilaut individuals can participate in the formal economy, accessing opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment. Birth registration has become a vital step in promoting economic empowerment and inclusivity within the Sama Dilaut community. Multiple participants highlighted:

“Maka travel na sigam ni saddi-saddi paglahat. Pasal bang niyah na certificate of live birth sigam maka apply na sigam passport (they can travel to different places. Having certificate of live birth, they can apply for passport)”

This means that holding a birth certificate can provide Sama Dilaut with the possibility to obtain a passport, as birth registration, along with a birth certificate, is one of the conditions for applying for Philippine passports.

Access to Government Housing Programs

As related by the participants, the Sama Dilaut formerly lived in a lepa or banca, a tiny wooden boat that could accommodate a small family of two to three. Their forefathers preferred to live this way since it is easier, simpler, and more comfortable to move around the sea and can be transferred to one spot at any moment depending on the movement of the water. Over time, the lepa or banca cannot withstand the attack of marine worms that eat the boat's hull. Seawater penetrated the entire boat, eventually destroying it. In addition, as large trees begin to diminish as a result of illegal cutting in the forest, logs for new boats are becoming scarce.

Participants underlined that the Sama Dilaut are destitute and unable to make a large income. The paucity of finances and assets is evident in the way their homes are constructed. Sama Dilaut dwelt in their bancas in Tawi-Tawi until the late 1970s and 1980s, when they spread to the nearby barangays of Lamion, Pasiagan, Pahut, and Sanga-Sanga, all in the Municipality of Bongao. Participants lamented that the Sama Dilaut from Sitangkai municipality began to build stilt buildings above shallow seas in order to restrict specific places for seaweed growing. Apart from fishing and collecting other marine resources, the Sama Dilaut also make money by farming seaweeds. In the early 1980s, there was a fierce struggle for control of the pondohan (houses in shallow waters). One participant explained that one of the reasons for Sama Dilaut's sedentariness and construction of buildings above sea level was to monitor a portion of the shallow seas where they could plant seaweeds.

Because Sitangkai municipality is known as the Philippines' seaweed capital, the transition from banca to stilt houses made significant progress due to the arrival of non-Sinama speakers who flock to the islands of Sitangkai to plant seaweeds. Some might see this as an encroachment upon the Sama Dilaut's supposed ancestral territory. Furthermore, imitating the status and financial conditions of the dominant Sama attracted many Sama Dilaut, who began sending their children to school to gain an education. Participants believed that education gives Sama Dilaut legitimacy and serves as a gateway to integration into Philippine society. One participant indicated:

“Baanan Sama Dilaut itu landuh miskin ba. Kulang usaha. Mbal maka hinang ahap paglumah. Pain ullum, na amiha kaulluman para maka kakan. Mbal na amaruli lowa ilu, lumah ilu, basta pain maka kakan, a-ullum (Sama Dilaut are very poor. They lack the necessary livelihood. They are unable to build comfortable houses. In order to survive, they must look for a way to eat and live. They do not care about their appearance or their homes. What matters to them is that they can eat and survive)”

The Office of the Chief Minister of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through the coordinated efforts of the Ministry of Public Works (MPW), Ministry of Human Settlements and Development (MHSD), the Provincial Government of Tawi-Tawi, Municipality of Simunul and Barangay Doh Tong in Simunul have constructed a 150-unit housing project situated in Barangay Doh Tong in the Municipality of Simunul, Province of Tawi-Tawi intended for the marginalized and impoverished Sama Dilaut beneficiaries. The complex was developed as a comprehensive resettlement program and includes a mosque, school buildings, a health facility, access roads, a footbridge, and other amenities designed to meet the specific needs of the Sama Dilaut community. The participant who happened to be member of the local legislative body explained:

“This housing project is dubbed as Madinatul Badjao (City of Badjao) intended for the Sama Dilaut community. The project aims to empower the Sama Dilaut and a way to integrate them into mainstream society. Not just building a home but goes beyond it that includes access to services like education and health services”

The authorities emphasized that the project's goal is to do more than just offer shelter, with the goal of creating real homes that support families, foster camaraderie, and strengthen the social fabric of indigenous communities. The local officials reaffirmed the Provincial Government's commitment to the continuous progress of the Sama Dilaut people. It aims to demonstrate its long-term goal for inclusive and sustainable community development in the province by enhancing the Madinatul Badjao Complex with a Madrasah, a multipurpose covered court, and better educational facilities. The Madinatul Badjao Complex is an excellent illustration of development that is both people-centered and culturally sensitive due to the close collaboration between the regional government and the Provincial Government of Tawi-Tawi.

However, the participants expressed concern over the housing project beneficiaries' selection process, stating it was unfair. They pointed out that some officials, with whom had relations to implementing bodies, gave preference to families that backed their political agendas over indigenous Sama Dilaut residents. The project's declared goal was thus compromised because some of the recipients were either newcomers or non-Sama Dilaut people. As related by key informants, the situation is comparable to other social programs, such 4Ps, where reports of apparent differences in beneficiary selection have surfaced. One key informant highlighted;

“Bangsa Sama Dilaut kaheka-anna, ta discriminate sadja du. Mbal ta tabuwanan. Buwat arapun sikeyya Sama Dilaut yana tabuwanan housing. Maka lamud ma 4Ps. Kansehan sab mbal ta lista (Sama Dilaut is discriminated against and cannot receive. Non-Sama Dilaut are allocated housing units while also being included in the 4Ps program. Some are not on the list)”

In summary, the institutionalization of Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR) in Tawi-Tawi establishes a formal governance structure aimed at integrating the Sama Dilaut community. However, their participation is at the level of tokenism. It also presents a test of their agency. Under this system, the Sama Dilaut are expected to transition from a dependent to an independent mindset, enabling them to assert their rights and privileges without relying on government institutions and civil society. While collaborative governance improves coordination among agencies, facilitating access to social services and addressing issues like unreliable birth registration, it also risks fostering a culture of dependency among the Sama Dilaut. Government's housing initiatives, though a positive step towards inclusion, may inadvertently perpetuate this dependency, as benefits are often seen as a result of government benevolence rather than Sama Dilaut agency. Furthermore, the selective placement and unilateral design of housing projects may exclude Sama Dilaut from planning, undermining their participation in governance. Overall, Sama Dilaut will benefit from inclusive governance policies that prioritize participation, collaboration, and accessibility. These LGU activities highlight the importance of co-created governance approaches that prioritize Sama Dilaut voices and needs.

DISCUSSIONS

Implementation of Sama Dilaut's IPMR in Selected Municipalities in Tawi-Tawi

The enactment of the IPRA in 1997 up until 2021, IPMR as mandated under IPRA was never implemented in Tawi-Tawi. The passing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) or R.A No. 11054, which establishes new political autonomy for the Bangsamoro is a positive step. With the creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA), the office supports IPs in the BARMM in their particular communities to work toward recognition by local government units. It plays a crucial role in assisting the Sama Dilaut community in achieving recognition from LGUs as it specifically provides assurance for IPs representation in the local legislative bodies. However, this is not readily granted unless the mechanisms for recognition and appointment are followed. Compliance with these requirements is workable in some other tribes in Mindanao to increase their engagement in mainstream local politics by utilizing IPRA to advance their political participation and identity (Jayma, 2017). Recently, this development was replicated by the Sama Dilaut and thus, allowing them the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes that directly influence their economic, social, and cultural developments.

The recognition of IPMR by the concerned local government units in Tawi-Tawi serves as a significant political victory among the Sama Dilaut by legally recognizing the latter's rights to self-governance, cultural integrity and socioeconomic justice. IPRA promises of a voice at the policy-making table, though not fully realized, represents a crucial step toward empowering IP communities and addressing systemic exclusion. By recognizing IPs' representation in the local legislative bodies/councils, the Sama Dilaut community can become more engaged and active citizens, particularly if decisions provide them with tangible benefits and advantages. This approach fosters a sense of ownership among community members, especially when decisions directly impact their well-being.

Moreover, this provides a crucial tool for empowering IP communities fostering greater inclusion in both local and national processes, and strengthening their collective voice. The institutionalization of IPMR in selected municipalities in Tawi-Tawi particularly through its representatives were able to pass resolutions. This milestone

signaled the meaningful integration of the Sama Dilaut community participation in local decision-making. Local special bodies in education, health, environment and disaster management, peace and order should ensure that their voice is genuinely heard and not being stuck at the level of “Tokenism” whereby the authority pretends to hear their voice but without assuring that their voice are being accounted for in the final outcome of the decisions, but rather be at the level of “Citizen’s Power” which is considered authentic whereby the citizen is given a full control of the majority of the decisions (Lukman, 2015).

Hall & Patrinos (2012) pointed out that indigenous and marginalized communities often experience exclusion and marginalization in policy-making processes. Such findings confirmed the situations of the Sama Dilaut in the margins and that their participation in governance is frequently hampered by institutional neglect, bureaucratic exclusion, and systematic discrimination. Despite increased policy interest and efforts to incorporate Indigenous Peoples in governance, the Sama Dilaut continue to experience social, economic, and life disadvantages. The Challenges in the creation of the IPMR included the processing of documents that had to be presented to higher offices, with some IP leaders unable to do so and struggling to process the documents. The intervening challenges for the IPMR in the process of improvement were inevitable, such as establishment in the mechanism of participatory governance in other island municipalities where Sama Dilaut thrives.

In a sense, the mechanism is designed for public engagement providing a leeway for the potentials to open up governance structures and provide avenues for meaningful interactions with the citizens (Oni et al., 2020). Participatory mechanisms through grassroots forms of mobilization and organizations that operate as governance intermediates between civil society and the government would bring about inclusive governance (Thompson, et al. 2014). In this context, IPs have the opportunity to participate and engage in local formal governance giving opportunity for their integration and inclusion in local decision-making. Public participation has served the community in a number of ways, including, among others, the opportunity for the people to express their sentiments and concerns, and to address the problems they confront. The processes involved in public participation take many forms, including face-to-face deliberation, problem-solving, consensus building, traditional public hearings and public comment procedures (Chrystalbridge, 2001).

Through public participation such as representation to local legislative bodies/councils, policy and decision makers can obtain various views and perspectives from different sectors of the community. In effect, public participation improves the quality of the decisions, and can effectively resolve differences among competing interests, build trust in institutions, and educate and inform the public (Lukman, 2015). However, in practice, the traditional governance structure of the Sama Dilaut community has been largely undermined by the formal local governance system, which has relegated them to the sidelines, treating them merely as constituents or voters rather than active participants in decision-making. This reality has resulted in the Sama Dilaut having minimal influence on local decisions, except during election periods when they can exercise their right to vote, albeit often under compromised circumstances.

Recognition and Issuance of Sulat Katarrangan (Valid Document)

The Sama Dilaut have long been challenged by their lack of birth registration. Historically, the Sama-Badjao have been regarded as a people with a “borderless” notion of territory (Macalandag, 2021), being traditionally marine-oriented and nomadic peoples roaming the waters of Sulu Sea (Bracamonte, 2005; Roxas-Lim, 2017). The Sama-Badjao were not afforded citizenship status by the Philippines when it was formed as a state because of their nomadic character, and thus rendered stateless. The narrative of being “stateless” peoples foments assumptions that they have little concern for notions of citizenship, nationality and its duties and entitlements (Macalandag, 2021). With the passage of the IPRA and BIPA, the Sama Dilaut have been categorized as one of the Indigenous peoples of the Philippines making them official citizens of the country. However, formal recognition did not necessarily result in the Badjao immediately identifying themselves as ‘citizens’ of the Philippines to which they belong, having historically a more fluid sense of boundaries (Tagliacozzo, 2009, citing Macalandag, 2021) going beyond the nation-state.

At times, the Sama-Badjao experienced frequent border crossings, and decades of non-registration of births (Desk Review on Populations at Risk of Statelessness, 2021), it therefore exacerbates their marginalization and contributes to their lack of identity and recognition. As a result, Sama Dilaut encountered difficulties obtaining

legal documents, such as identity cards and birth certificates, as well as essential government services. Their itinerant lifestyle, and frequent border crossings, have resulted in some of them becoming stateless (Desk Review on Populations at Risk of Statelessness, 2021), hindering their access to basic rights and services. Aggravated by lack of civil registration during crises or natural disasters can result in statelessness (Petcharamesree, 2023). This was particularly evident during the Zamboanga siege in 2013, when hundreds of the Sama Dilauts had trouble due to lack of proper documents, registration and a valid certificate of live birth.

Despite efforts to promote digital birth registration, the Sama Dilaut has remained under-served due to factors such as mobility, cultural reluctance, and limited awareness, which intersect with poverty and geographical isolation. In Tawi-Tawi, there were a few Sama Dilaut families who were beneficiaries of the 4Ps, a conditional cash transfer initiative by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). The program requires beneficiaries to submit civil registry documents (as a requirement for admission of their children in the daycare, elementary and secondary levels), mandated under Joint PSA-DILG Memorandum. Parallel activity has been done by Sibutu LGU when it launched a six-month free registration drive for 4Ps-affiliated Sama Dilaut communities to align with the national policies. However, despite nearly all Sama Dilaut families being 4Ps beneficiaries, older children whose names are not listed as program beneficiaries often lack documentation due to historical gaps in education. The current program of 4P's has motivated the mothers and elders to secure Live Birth Certificates for their children which explains a greater percentage of children having Live Birth Certificates (SBPP, 2017).

It has been observed that the persistent cultural practices of the Sama Dilaut would affect the birth registration. A number of Sama Dilaut mothers prefer "hilot" (traditional midwife) for birth delivery at home than in clinics or hospitals, despite health campaigns enforcing a "No Home Birth Policy" to improve maternal and child healthcare compliance. The effect of this traditional practice of birth delivery would not only endanger the lives of the mothers and newborn babies, but add to the persistent problem of a ballooning number of unregistered individuals, mostly from the Sama Dilaut community. However, such traditional practice of birth delivery and having untimely (delayed) registration of their child's birth is persistent due to isolation/distance especially most Sama Dilaut communities are located in the far-flung islands away from health centers and government offices such as LCRO and PSA.

Every state has its own laws to establish the existence of a person living or residing in its territory and as a basis for conferring the so-called legal identity. Civil registration is a primary means for citizens to prove their identity and thus, eligible to avail of or have access to public services as well as to social assistance and protection from the government. Whilst civil registration of individuals guarantees their human rights and security, civil registration likewise guarantees the security of States in every dimension, including State security, social security, and economic security, when States know who, and how many, are living in their territory (Petcharamesree, 2023).

Birth registration is one important document that carries protection and provides the foundation for securing their children's rights (Todres, 2003). It is said that children without birth certificates are at risk of lifelong exclusion from fundamental benefits and rights, including access to education, health services, conditional cash transfers, and pensions. Moreover, they may be denied civil rights such as adoption and inheritance and be exposed to great jeopardy from exploitation and human trafficking (Corbacho et al. 2012). The right of the person to birth registration and legal identity are stipulated in the international human rights treaties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) guaranteed the right of everyone to be recognized everywhere as a person before the law.

The purpose of the civil registration is to record in the appropriate Local Civil Registry Office (LCRO) certain vital acts and events affecting individual civil status. This precedes the birth of a child who shall be registered within 30 days from the time of birth at the respective LCRO of the city/municipality where the birth occurred. Birth registration in particular is to establish a relationship between individuals and a State, and ensure the rights that derive from the legal identity under the law of the country (Petcharamesree, 2023). It is also a prerequisite to establish parentage and a means to acquire proof of nationality. Moreover, Article 172 of the Family Code of the Philippines stated that the filiation of legitimate children is established by any of the following, to wit, among others, the record of birth appearing in the civil register.

Registration or acquisition of live birth entails expenses that oftentimes could not be afforded as these individuals are economically-scraped, and the support of the local governments are limited. These social infirmities of the Sama Dilaut are manifested in their responses when asked to tell or reveal the ages of their children. Most of the ages of their children when applying for delayed registration are all, but merely to the best of their guessing, and not to the best of their knowledge. Compounding this issue is the community's seasonal migration to other municipalities, provinces or crossed borders to Sabah, Malaysia, for livelihood opportunities, making record-tracking nearly impossible.

The Sama Dilaut's lack of paperwork, documentation or registration leads to their vulnerability and statelessness. This has substantial implications for both national and local documentation policies. Non-registration limits their access to basic government services. The PSA's Birth Registration Assistance Project, which seeks to increase the birth registration rates in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) will boost the registration rates whereby Sama Dilaut who are at risk of becoming stateless may be benefited. By working together, the local government and PSA are able to reach more communities and provide essential services to those who need them most. These efforts promote inclusive governance and demonstrate the commitment of local governments and organizations to serving all citizens, regardless of their background or circumstances. Such intervention from both government institutions and would be translated to overcoming barriers through the registration of live birth accorded to the Sama Dilaut.

It must be borne in mind that through stakeholders' collaboration, decision making improves through the inputs of different opinions and ideas from different perspectives (Lukman, 2015), and hence, governance through collaboration is effective and well-founded from the petrified support of all stakeholders. Moreover, collaborative governance requires a significant amount of effort in which the structural, institutional, and cultural elements are all crucial to help policy-makers collaborate (Mukhlis & Perdana, 2022). The challenges remain where registration or acquisition of live birth entails expenses that oftentimes could not be afforded as Sama Dilaut individuals are economically-scraped, and the support of the local governments are limited. These social infirmities of the Sama Dilaut are manifested in their responses when asked to tell or reveal the ages of their children. Most of the ages of their children when applying for delayed registration are all, but merely to the best of their guessing, and not to the best of their knowledge.

The legal registration gives Sama Dilaut families a legal identity, opens doors to school, health care, and ayuda, protects them from abuse, and helps the community be fully recognized and served by the government. By obtaining birth certificates, Sama Dilaut will be able to access education, healthcare and other essential services that will improve their overall well-being.

Provision of Housing Programs to Sama Dilaut Beneficiaries

In her survey of the Sama Dilaut housing and resettlement projects, Quiling (2016) labeled the projects as bordering "appeasement or pretended contentment". With the agenda of weaning them away from nomadism into a permanent lifestyle, resettlement projects for the Sama Dilaut have tended to be patronizing and homesteads have pretentious titles or names suggesting veiled discrimination or measured condescension. There are the Ahon Badjao (Fish-out the Badjaos) and Badjao Hope in Zamboanga City. Some had livelihood and education components, such as 'Lifting- Indigenous-People-from-Indignity' (LIPI). Still another, not even attempting to be subtle such as the newish village in Davao City's Aplaya boldly baptized as 'Good-Jao' village. Overall, as the project titles connote, most of these welfare projects were designed as a 'civilizing mission' which is targeted to sedentary or permanently settled the sea nomads (Quiling, 2016).

Sama Dilaut do not have a formal interaction with the government in terms of lobbying or expressing their rights to advance their political, social, and economic interests. Their interactions with dominating tribes are primarily transactional, with little social or political engagement. The Sama Dilaut modest manner of living places them at a disadvantage, which is exacerbated by structural neglect, social marginalization, and bureaucratic inaccessibility. The lack of education has also exacerbated their position in society, as Sama Dilaut lacks the bargaining power to press for their agenda on the table and gain the backing of the government. Their poor socioeconomic level makes them vulnerable to abuse, and discrimination. Sama Dilaut cannot compete for better

living conditions because they lack the necessary abilities to apply for quality jobs both locally and internationally.

Sama Dilaut spent the most of their time at sea looking for a living by harvesting any sea resources they could find. Some have permanently relocated to cities, but they occasionally resort to begging. The continuance of poverty forces Sama Dilaut to work at the expense of their ability to assert their rights and seek government assistance to address their needs and concerns. Lack of formal education or none at all, impedes their ability to exercise influence and push the government for support. With no political agency, it is extremely difficult to obtain the government's attention and solve their problems. Simply defined, Sama Dilaut lack the resources and ability to pursue their interests and strive for their wellbeing.

The Sama Dilaut's behavioral participation attitude is so traditional that they should be invited and informed about the projects planned for them. This merely means that the government should initiate talks with the Sama Dilaut. A dialogical two-way process that encourages their engagement. Sama Dilaut will never seek to engage with the government. This explains why the Sama Dilaut have little access to services and receive support from the government. The Sama Dilauts non-engagement with the government could be interpreted as a coping mechanism, helping them to maintain their independence and resilience in the face of modernization. The government should create more effective tactics for connecting with the Sama Dilaut and addressing their specific needs and concerns. By doing so, the government may encourage more inclusive and equitable growth for the Sama Dilaut community.

The Pambansang Pabahay Para sa Pilipino (4PH) program, which is the main government housing program in the Philippines, aims to build 6 million housing units by 2028 to address the country's housing backlog with a focus on vertical, multi-story construction, is intended for beneficiaries with low- and middle-income families; however, the Sama Dilaut, like other indigenous peoples, do not fit the housing ideal. First and foremost, the housing concept is built on land. This essentially excludes Sama Dilaut, who lives in the sea. The government determines where to locate housing projects for marginalized areas such as Sama Dilaut. While government-initiated housing projects are a commendable attempt to meet the shelter needs of marginalized Sama Dilaut communities, their implementation frequently falls short.

The government's site selection decisions typically overlook the sociocultural demands of the intended beneficiaries, notably in terms of house design and placement. To the Sama Dilaut, the proximity of housing units to the seaside is critical since it enables fast access to their principal source of income. While concrete structures are robust and sustainable, Sama Dilaut prefers houses built of wood and bamboo to meet their cultural requirements. Sometimes, the Sama Dilaut must follow government policies and programs, even if it means being relocated from their homeland (SBPP, 2017). It has been confirmed that Sama Dilaut in Tongkalang, Sanga-Sanga, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi lost their native homeland due to a relocation issue caused by local government officials (Datu Halun and Bagalanon, 2024). Uprooted from their traditional homes, some are forced to live in cities and other locations with no security of tenure, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination, marginalization, and abuse (Talampas, 2017).

The Sama Dilaut wants to have access to aid and development programs like free education, health services, housing settlements, livelihood assistance and other social services. However, they have a sad experience because their names are either not recorded or are switched with those of other tribes. As a result, they do not get any housing units. Sama Bajau elders who are fishermen relate the sorrow of being promised livelihood assistance in the form of materials and fishing instruments that were never delivered or failed to meet their expectations (SBPP, 2017). In selected municipalities in Tawi-Tawi, the local government units, in collaboration with BARMM regional governments built a Madinatul (City) Bajau Complex to serve as a model for culturally sensitive and people-centered development. It is a positive step toward increasing the Sama Dilaut's inclusion in governance, which will benefit their welfare. This would probably help destitute Sama Dilaut populations in need of housing.

Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as IPRA and BIPA, Sama Dilaut continues to face numerous challenges in accessing services up-shore, including housing. The lack of suitable shelter is a pressing issue affecting their quality of life. The lack of political agency, coupled with being a passive beneficiary and through

the government's benevolence that the Sama Dilaut would be able to benefit from the government's housing project. Finally, Sama Dilaut's access to government social services will be improved through multilevel governance and cross-sector collaboration in policy development and program execution.

CONCLUSION

The political participation of Sama Dilaut in the local political affairs is of paramount importance taking into account their experience and indigenous system of resolving their socioeconomic condition and their societal status. The implementation of the IPMRs in Tawi-Tawi has provided indigenous Sama Dilaut communities with the opportunity to participate in local legislative bodies. IPMR is not solely mandated for cultural preservation, but should encompass aspects of Sama Dilaut's welfare development, thereby uplifting their living standards and lifestyles. The Sama Dilauts' representation and participation in IPMR should not be optional, but necessary considering these underprivileged people are less attended and often discriminated against because of their identity as perceived to be the people occupying the lowest echelon of the society. Thus, their voice based on their traditional system of leadership and governance should be given spaces in the local legislative bodies.

The documentation and birth registration initiatives taken by concerned local governments and institutions for the Sama Dilaut community are significant steps towards promoting inclusive governance. Not only boost civil registration rates, it also brought about a significant shift in the lives of the Sama Dilaut community as many of them are at risk of becoming stateless. By providing them with a legal identity, birth registration has opened doors to opportunities and services previously inaccessible. In addition, the coordination initiatives of the inter-agencies or institutions among the PSA, LGUs and community stakeholders highlighted the importance of co-created approaches that prioritize Sama Dilaut access to documentation through mobile registration of live birth. As the Sama Dilaut continue to receive support and empowerment, they can look forward to a brighter future, free from the shadows of statelessness. With their legal identity, they can now participate fully in society, contributing to the growth and development of their communities. Hence, collaborative governance requires a nuanced strategy addressing the Sama Dilaut's cultural needs and challenges, promoting inclusive governance for their social well-being.

Sama Dilauts' failure to access government propelled assistance is not to be construed as stubbornness, neither is it due to reluctance but because of their traditionally independent-mindedness and self-subsistent tendency. Sama Dilaut chooses to evade from meddling in other's business that they would rather keep to themselves than become a burden to others. This is largely cultural and should be dealt with culturally such as through confidence-building interventions. Any government project directed at settling-down and introducing permanency by providing housing projects and assistance must be founded in the deep understanding of the once seminomadic ways of this population. To reduce the negative impact of the change in lifestyle, the beneficiaries should be properly consulted and given a substantive role in designing their own domicile, and related infrastructure and facilities.

From choosing the site or location to designing the architectural make, and in setting the guidelines and rules and regulations of the homestead, the local beneficiaries are to be on board in every step of decision-making. Culture sensitivity and ensuring appropriateness to the values and indigenous mores are rules of the thumb that development actors must always abide with. Furthermore, housing management should be delegated to Sama Dilaut elders, who will ensure that it is used in accordance with Sama Dilaut cultural norms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, Local Government Units in Tawi-Tawi must secure greater involvement through representation of the Sama Dilaut in IPMR and to recognize their traditional participatory decision-making system affecting their conditions and status. The LGUs concerned should move beyond regular tasks to register, maintain funds to sustain the program, enhance collaboration with other institutions, stakeholders and barangay, train Sama Dilaut volunteers, strengthen CSO/encourage the creation of the Sama Badjao CSO/volunteers that work on birth registration. Social preparations are essential in starting up projects for the Sama Dilaut. Any developmental interventions must consider a component preliminary to actual project implementation to soften the impact of the project and to dispel the traditional evasiveness and distrust of the Sama Dilaut. The preparatory

period should be given ample time and efforts be exerted to build trust and confidence. Because the indigenous population are used to segregating themselves from the dominant population, soliciting their approval, inviting their active participation and sustaining their engagements are burdens that development actors and government must bear and highly invest resources and efforts on. Affirmative actions and reinforcements of positive approaches should be pursued. The Sama Dilaut is considerably a special case and must be handled gently with much care.

Conflict Of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

AI Disclosure

We declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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