

6

POVERTY ASSESSMENT

Cordillera Region

This section attempts to convey the perspectives of the poor in the Cordillera with regard to poverty and development. It also aims to present a general picture of the poverty situation in the region. This is a result of 4 months of field work in the form of focus-group discussions and key informant interviews in the provinces of Abra, Benguet, and Mountain Province. The field data are augmented by studies conducted by academic organizations and NGOs.

First, the general poverty situation of the Cordillera is presented. Next are perspectives of indigenous peoples of the Cordillera on poverty, followed by views on the causes of poverty. The fourth section tackles the indigenous notions of well-being and their expressed needs and aspirations. The final section outlines the perceived causes of poverty.

GENERAL POVERTY SITUATION

The Cordillera region of northern Philippines contains the highest and largest mass of mountains in the country. It is home to over one million indigenous peoples collectively known as Igorots.⁴⁸ It has five provinces: Benguet, Mountain Province, Ifugao, Kalinga, Apayao, and the city of Baguio. The indigenous peoples by major ethnolinguistic identity are Ibaloy, Kankanaey, Bontoc, Ifugao, Kalinga, Isneg (Apayao), Tinggian, and Kalanguya. The region is rich in natural resources: rivers and hot springs; minerals, mainly gold and copper; lowland and temperate agricultural areas; some remaining forests; and high biodiversity.

The native inhabitants of the Cordillera are indigenous peoples who have occupied and sustained their territories since time immemorial. They have maintained their culture, distinct languages, and

sociopolitical systems. Not having been effectively colonized by Spain spells the difference between a Filipino minority like the peoples of the Cordillera and the majority of the colonized Filipinos. This difference persisted even with American colonization and succeeding Filipino regimes that pervaded all aspects of socioeconomic and political life in the Cordillera. The indigenous institutions persist even as they accommodate external influences.

Another feature of the Cordillera region is that it is one of the poorest and most marginalized regions in the country. All the Cordillera provinces are among the country's poorest provinces, more popularly known as "Club 20."

As of 1997, there were 110,000 families or about 42% of all Cordillera families living below the poverty threshold of P12,836. This means that almost half of all Cordillera families did not have sufficient income to meet their food and nonfood requirements. The incidence of poor families decreased from 51.0% in 1994 to 42.5% in 1997. This was attributed to the 59.9% increase in average family income in the region between 1994 and 1997. Moreover, the total number of poor families decreased by 12,800 or 10.4% over the same period. Despite this improvement, with about 4 out of 10 families living below the poverty line, CAR ranks 5th among the regions with the highest incidence of poor families.⁴⁹

There remains a wide disparity between the poverty situation in urban and rural areas. In 1997, the incidence of poor families in the urban areas was 14%, while that in the rural areas was 55%. This disparity is attributed to the slower growth of average income in the rural areas (32%) compared with urban areas (72%) from 1994 to 1997.⁵⁰

The 1996 Minimum Basic Needs Survey conducted by local government units in CAR revealed that the greatest unmet needs in the Cordillera are income and

employment, followed by water and sanitation, then by basic education and literacy.⁵¹

Health

The total population of the CAR was estimated at 1,404,000 in 2000. The annual growth rate has been highest in Benguet (2.9%), Ifugao (2.3%), and Apayao (2.2%). The birthrate in 2000 was 22.25 live births per 1,000 population. The infant mortality rate in 1999 was 13.82 per 1,000 births, with the main causes being pneumonia, preterm birth, septicemia, congenital anomalies, and respiratory distress syndrome. Most provinces have good immunization schemes. However, malnutrition has been increasing, with 9% of preschool children classified as either moderately or severely underweight in 1999 compared to 5% to that in 1998.

Maternal health care continues to be a problem. Not all pregnant women have been able to avail of prenatal care and vitamin supplements from the health units. Education on pregnancy and childbirth seems to be a continuing necessity to uplift maternal health in CAR.

Potable water continues to be a problem in most provinces of CAR. Virtually all households in Baguio City and Mountain Province have safe water, but only 65% of those in Apayao have access to potable water. Most households in Baguio City (85%) have complete basic sanitation facilities including provisions for sewerage and garbage disposal, but only 19% in Kalinga and 34% in Ifugao have these facilities; the average for CAR is 48%.

For the CAR population, the leading causes of death were pneumonia, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, accidents/trauma, tuberculosis, hypertension, vascular diseases, and peptic ulcers. There is a growing incidence of "affluence-related" diseases.

Among the infectious diseases, the specter of tuberculosis continues to haunt the region. A greater number of cases has been reported from the outlying provinces than in the more urbanized areas. There is more success with leprosy. The Department of Health Integrated Regional Field Office received the Kagawad Award of the Civil Service Commission in 1998 due to its successful leprosy program in CAR.

Malaria, rabies, pneumonia, and gastroenteritis are significant in some provinces of CAR.

As of 1999, there were 73 physicians working in the local government units of CAR. There were also 37 dentists and 32 medical technologists, while the numbers of other health personnel (nurses, midwives, and village health workers) can be said to be barely adequate.

Literacy/Education

The Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey of 1994 revealed that the Government needed to put more efforts in bringing education to CAR. In terms of simple literacy (i.e., able to read and understand a simple message in any language or dialect), CAR scores poorly, with only 89% literacy rate.

WHO ARE THE POOR?

Each of the ethnolinguistic groups in the Cordillera has its own terminology to refer to the *poor* and *poverty*. For example, the Ibaloi of southern Benguet and the Kankanaey of northern Benguet refer to the poor as *ebiteg* and *nabiteg*, respectively. Both terminologies refer to one who has no land to till and lacks the resources to be able to work. These resources are capital, transportation, machine sprayer, and *kuliglig* (a small tractor). An *ebiteg* is also one who lacks time and money to learn new skills and ideas. He/she is usually indebted, without a regular source of income, and does not enjoy amenities such as television, appliances, or an "LPG" (liquefied petroleum gas for cooking).

The Kankanaey of Mountain Province call the poor person a *kudo*. He/she is one who has no *payew* (irrigated rice field) and, therefore, works on the land of the landed or *kadangyans*. Since the *kudo* is frequently without enough food and money, he/she is forced to stay with well-off or better-off relatives. See also Box 1.

The Tinggian of Abra identify the poor as *pobre* or *panglaw*. This refers to a person who is *sangkasapulan*, *sangkaapuyan*, which literally means hand-to-mouth existence. They lack food and money to buy basic commodities and send children to school, they cannot read or write, and their children are not properly clothed. These problems occur because they lack such resources as land and draft animals

Box 1. Kankanaey Traditional Notions of Poverty and Wealth

To understand the Kankanaey notions of poverty, one must understand their notions of wealth or who are considered rich.

Traditionally, those considered rich are those who host thanksgiving feasts called *sida* or *pedit*. These religious feasts are offered to gods and the spirits of the ancestors. These feasts are ranked according to the number of pigs the host family can offer to the gods and spirits. Ranking starts from 3 pigs, then 5, 7, 9, 13, 15, 17 and so on. The sequencing is always based on odd numbers because of the belief that the pig without a pair will again attract more pigs when the host family raises pigs again after the feast.

The bigger the feast a family hosts, the wider the circle of relatives and clans can be invited. The host family gains more prestige as it invites a wider circle from within and outside the community. With the prestige comes the status of *kadangyan* or *baknang*, which connotes wealth and the ability to share such wealth. One was thus considered rich if he/she was able to hold feasts, during which the wealth was shared with many people in the community. One may have dozens of cattle and livestock but cannot gain the community's respect without sharing the wealth through a feast.

Being rich is not synonymous with accumulating wealth. Being rich is being able to share one's wealth through a *sida* or *pedit*. It follows, therefore, that poverty, at least according to old tradition, is the opposite of the Kankanaey notion of wealth: being poor means being unable to invite a wide circle of relatives and clan members to a feast.

Notions of poverty are socioculturally defined. For example, the Tinggian of Abra believe that one indicator of poverty is the physique of the person, i.e., being thin is an indicator of being poor, while being stout is an indicator of being rich. One Tinggian elder even

suggested that the smell of a person is a marker of poverty: "You can tell that one is poor when he/she stinks—he/she cannot even afford to buy bath soap."

Current (government) concepts of poverty tend to disaggregate the poor according to income brackets. Thus, the participants of the project's provincial workshop held in the Cordillera identified three categories of poor people. These are (i) ultra poor—those earning below P20,000 per household per annum, (ii) poor—those earning P20,000 to P39,000 per household per annum, and (iii) near poor—those earning P40,000 to P51,000 per household per annum. This categorization is based on the regional poverty threshold of P12,836.⁵²

While there may be divergence in definitions of poverty based on the cultural context of each ethnic group, the most common markers are landlessness; lack/no source of cash/income; lack/absence of equipment such as spray machines, *kuliglig* (tractor), and transportation; and lack/absence of access to basic services such as health and education.

CAUSES OF POVERTY

Several studies have shown that most farming communities in the Cordillera (i.e., the interior villages under a subsistence system) experience low production. A 1994 household survey conducted by the Cordillera Studies Center of the University of the Philippines College in Baguio City showed that the average harvest of farming households in 5 communities studied was low. Samoki had the lowest yield per household at 2.5 cavans (first crop) (1 cavan = 50 kilograms) and 2.22 cavans (second crop). The average rice yield was 10.90 cavans per household in Bineng, 31.44 cavans per household in Suyo, and 20.57 cavans (first crop) and 13.33 cavans (second crop) per household in Masikil.⁵³ The average area of irrigated holdings is 0.5 hectares.

Low production is attributed to several factors, the most important of which are (i) small, fragmented landholdings in most Cordillera villages; (ii) inability of households to generate cash required to purchase inputs; (iii) farmers' limited access to markets because of the poor quality of social infrastructures, e.g., transport and communications; and (iv) inadequacy of

social support services and information about these services, such as credit and marketing.

Small Fragmented Landholdings

According to data compiled in 1991, of a total land area of 1,829,368 hectares, 81.4% were public/forest lands, of which 33% (or 26.9% of the total land area) were protected areas and 67% were production areas, of which 6.8% (or 3.7% of total land area) were agricultural areas including public land. Alienable and disposable land constituted 18.6% of total land area.⁵⁴

Land-use data for the Cordillera region⁵⁵ reveal that forestland constitutes 40%; extensive land use (cultivated/open areas, grassland, and mixed crops/shrubs), 53%; and intensive land use (croplands and others), 7%. About 57% of the pine forest area in the Cordillera has a slope greater than 50%, which DENR considers unfit for development (by virtue of PD 705).

These data clearly show that land use extends into what the Government calls “public land.” At least some parts of this must include what indigenous communities call their “ancestral lands.”

To compensate for the problem of small, fragmentary, agricultural land area, farmers resort to intensification through the use of inorganic inputs or expansion into forested areas. Both options are not without ecological⁵⁶ as well as health⁵⁷ costs.

Lack of Irrigation

Related to the problem of small and fragmented land is lack of irrigation in most Cordillera farming villages. Data from the National Irrigation Administration show that, despite the fact that there was an increase of 13,000 hectares of land irrigated from 1988 to 1992, overall irrigation service coverage in CAR remained very low at 34%. Among CAR provinces, Mountain Province has the lowest irrigation service coverage (17%) and Abra has the highest (65%). There are still 118,476.66 hectares of arable land that require irrigation to make them productive.⁵⁸

Inability of Households to Generate Cash

The low level of productivity of the upland agricultural systems is also due to the inability of households to generate cash to purchase inputs as well as consumption goods. The 1994 household survey by the Cordillera Studies Center showed that in the 5 communities they studied, farming was the principal source of cash receipts.

Cash receipts of farming households have to meet both production/marketing costs and consumption expenditure. There are several requirements that compete for the cash pool of farming households: debt payment of previous/current cropping period(s); operating capital for the succeeding crop; current household expenditures on food, clothing, housing, education, health, and leisure—immediate needs that cannot be postponed; and savings for fixed agricultural capital investment or for other forms of household investment. In view of these competing uses, and where the cycle for crop production receipts and expenses and the cycle for consumption expenses and receipts do not coincide, farmers are left with two options: off-farm/nonfarm and other sources of cash receipts, or credit including remittances from absent family members.⁵⁹

Production, whether for home consumption or market, depends not only on land and other natural resources but also on the households' ability to obtain commercial production inputs. On the consumption side, quality of life (i.e., the ability to consume beyond staple goods/services) suffers when the ability of the household to participate in the market for goods and services (e.g., education, health, and recreation) competes with production and basic consumption requirements such as food.⁶⁰

Inadequate Social Infrastructure

A major problem for Cordillera farmers is their limited access to markets because of the poor quality of infrastructure such as transport, storage, and communication.⁶¹ One respondent in Bucloc, Abra, said that because the farmers could not bring their produce to the market, often they just fed it (fruits and some vegetables) to their pigs.

Poor social infrastructure is seen as the “missing service sector” that contributes to the “failure of the

market” in most Cordillera farming villages. Market failure occurs when it (the market) cannot allocate resources to production and distribute the output of the process most efficiently. This results in higher equilibrium prices of commodities or factors, lower quantity in the exchange, and decline in overall welfare level.⁶²

Here, if you were small farm operator without transport and storage facilities and you have a product with a short shelf life, you are figuratively at the end of a gun pointed at you by a buyer who has those facilities. And the big wholesaler himself, or through a network he has established, is in the best position to exploit the missing market elements.

There is, therefore, a direct link between poor infrastructure and the frequently-lamented problem of high interest rates on credit supplied by entrepreneurs.

Box 2. Needs and Aspirations of the Poor

I have simple aspirations. I only wish that I had a more regular employment or source of income like a piggery so I will be able to buy basic needs like rice, sugar, coffee, salt, and food. Rosita, 45 years old, from Maguyepyep, Sallapadan, Abra.

We need capital to start a handicraft business here in Bucloc. We have abundant bamboo; all we need are skills trainings and seed capital...We also need capital for livelihood activities like pig and goat raising, and furniture making. Participants of the focus-group discussion held in Lamao, Bucloc, Abra.

“Gawis ay panagbiag”: good life means having my own land to till, being able to buy basic needs, and being able to send my children to school. Farmer from Fidelisan, Sagada, Mountain Province.

Inadequacy of Credit and Marketing Services

The high cost of inputs and the lack of adequate capital for production are frequently mentioned sources of livelihood instability. The absence of capital limits the number of crops to one per year, or prevents farmers from buying inputs to support regular farm activities (Box 2). Consequently, income and living standards are negatively affected.⁶³

Several studies⁶⁴ on the vegetable-growing communities of southern Benguet and Mountain Province (areas that are already producing cash crops at an intensive level) show that a typical household engaged in vegetable production is usually trapped in a cycle of indebtedness because of market problems including low prices, high transport cost, high input cost, and poor access to credit.

The absence of capital should have encouraged rural banks to participate actively in economic activities in the vegetable areas. However, the findings of a 1983 study appear valid today.⁶⁵ These studies reveal several problems with the banks: lending policies are rigid and complex for a farmer to observe; rural banks have credit portfolios too small to support both long-term and short-term agricultural production; and banks require credit collateral like land titles, generally uncommon in the Cordillera.⁶⁶

Entrepreneurs and other informal credit sources become ready sources of capital. Unlike rural banks, these informal credit sources have simple lending procedures, share the risk with the farmer-borrower in case of a crop failure due to natural calamities and poor prices, and are willing to lend production credit to farmers twice or thrice.⁶⁷ The role of the entrepreneur as buyer, supplier, and creditor explains the high interest rate in the informal sector.⁶⁸ Despite this high interest rate, farmers prefer to borrow from entrepreneurs. Thus, because of these informal credit sources, farmers have been able to sustain their production.⁶⁹

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON WELL-BEING

The poor people of the Cordillera, like people everywhere, desire a “good life” or at least a better life. The poor’s perspectives of well-being are expressed in such terms as *gawis ay biag* and *nasayaat nga biag* (Kankanaey), meaning being able to meet basic needs like food (rice, sugar, salt) and clothing.⁷⁰ At the same time, perspectives also vary across ethnic and socioeconomic groups (perhaps even gender).

For some Ibaloy respondents of this study, the Tuba Benguet, good life means the state of being able to buy amenities such as gas for cooking, a tractor to lighten the burden of farm work, and a vehicle to transport their goods and products.

Well-being means good health. Among the Ayangan of Ifugao, good life is synonymous with a healthy life—*ap-ap-hochan*, which means that a person or a community is able to maintain a harmonious relationship with the environment and supernatural world. To attain a good life, one should not ravage the forest or spoil the land, especially the ricefields. One should nurture them (not leave them idle or unproductive), otherwise, one will become ill and suffer misfortune.⁷¹

For the Iffialig of Barlig, Mountain Province, notions of well-being are also linked to notions of health. The “generic” term for health is *apu-apuor*, which mean absence of illness or sickness. Related to the concept of *apu-apuor* are the terms *kursi/kunog*, which mean strong. Women and men in Barlig have a positive definition of health. Health is not simply the absence of illnesses but a condition of well-being or being strong in order to face the day-to-day challenges of life in a cheerful way.

The Iffialig description of a healthy person is *amma ammay chi achor*, which means that the whole body is in good condition. “When one is conditioned, one is healthy and strong.” Note that there is the implicit assertion here that one is able to work or function because the body is fully developed in relation to one’s need to work. Health is then considered to be an integrated aspect within the system of life of the people. For many men and women in Barlig, there is emphasis on the idea that “life is work.” If one is *apu-apuor*, *nakursi* or *ammay chi achor*, then he or she is capable of doing

things. As one woman emphasized, “one cannot work properly when one is not healthy.”

Although indigenous worldviews persist, they do not constrain people in the villages of the Cordillera. Values and ideas of good life are increasingly influenced by what they read, see, and hear outside their villages. Increasingly, people believe that education is a key to a better life, especially for the younger generation. They work hard to be able to send their children to college. Some dream of sending one or two of their children to work overseas.

NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE POOR

The following is a “wish list” of needs and aspirations of the poor in the Cordillera, as articulated by respondents as well as by other empirical studies in the region. The list does not cover all the needs and aspirations of all poor people, only those that are most commonly or frequently mentioned.

Education of Children

Studies across the Cordillera region show that the most common aspiration of farming families is a college education for their children,⁷² even if they can barely afford the cost.⁷³ It is common to find farming households selling a piece of land or a precious heirloom to pay for their children’s school expenses. Consequently, expenditure for agricultural production is sacrificed. Respondents explain that a college degree for their children is their passport out of farming. This finding suggests that some farmers in the village see the attainment of the “good life” as being outside the confines of their village. Indeed, outmigration is a common phenomenon all over the Cordillera.

Income-generating/Livelihood Activities

This study validates the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) survey findings on Minimum Basic Needs: that people in the Cordillera aspire to have more income to provide for basic

household needs like food, clothing, education, and medical services. The most common livelihood activities in the “wish list” of farming households are pig raising, fruit and vegetable production, handicrafts business, and dressmaking (for women).

Food Security

Food security seems to be a contentious issue in the Cordillera, according to the views of participants and respondents in this study. Even household surveys are not unanimous on the issue. A 1986 sample survey that looked into food adequacy in the Cordillera (except Abra) revealed that Cordillera households experience shortages in the supply of staple foods or sources of carbohydrates (rice, sweet potatoes, cassava, corn, and taro) and even protein.⁷⁴ Some 84% (n = 46) of the respondents claimed shortages in rice and 64%, shortages in sweet potatoes, an immediate substitute for rice. These shortages were not only because of seasonal fluctuations in the availability of food, they constituted a real shortage of food, because all possible substitutes were also in short supply.

A more recent (1994) survey of 5 communities in Benguet and Mountain Province study found that in Bineng (Benguet) and Suyo (Mountain Province) at least, some 85% of the respondents reported that their respective households enjoyed adequate food. On the whole, rice sufficiency (i.e., ability to obtain rice, whether home-produced or bought) was claimed by all households in all study sites, and sufficiency in vegetable by 93%. The study concluded that the problem is not overall food consumption level per se, but insufficiency only in the consumption of particular food crops. For example, insufficiency in consumption of fish/marine products was claimed by 90% of respondents in Bineng, 77% in Samoki, 72% in Lamayan, and 60% in Suyo.⁷⁵

Improved Infrastructure

Participants in the focus-group discussions expressed a common desire for better access roads and bridges, so that they will be motivated to be more productive. The present study's field work confirms earlier studies that reflect the local people's views on

the importance of their control of and participation in the running of infrastructure projects in their locality. This means that the local residents' needs, rather than the needs articulated by (sometimes even genuinely concerned) external agencies, should be given priority. It also requires the inclusion of local knowledge, technology, and materials in project planning and implementation, and the subsequent reliance on local expertise to maintain infrastructure.⁷⁶

Participation in the Development Process

Community participation in the development process is a recurrent theme in academic studies as well as workshops and conferences of indigenous peoples' organizations in the Cordillera.

A study conducted in 1993 found that generally, people in the Cordillera do not accept programs, projects, and activities that are “externally determined.”⁷⁷ This explains their negative reactions toward so-called development projects such as the San Roque hydroelectric dam and several mining interests in the region. Externally determined development projects like these are perceived as having no substantial benefits to the members of the communities, and threaten their ancestral lands and cultural heritage.⁷⁸

Increasingly, people from the communities want more meaningful participation in the development process. Likewise, NGOs and government organizations working at the grassroots level have realized that the participation of community stakeholders in the conceptualization, planning, implementation, and monitoring/evaluation of projects is key to the success of projects.

This study reveals that indigenous peoples in the Cordillera do not give a single definition to the categories “poor” and “poverty.” These concepts are given meaning within the context of culture and society. Yet, Cordillera culture(s) and society are transforming, even if indigenous worldviews persist. Poor Cordillera farmers are increasingly exposed to new values and tastes, and even definitions of “good life” are becoming a mix of indigenous and modern values. They do not simply want to be in constant harmony with the environment and supernatural beings; they also express the need for more income to

buy such basic commodities as salt and sugar. They also dream of owning a piece of land to till, a carabao or a tractor to lighten their burden in the field, and a vehicle to transport the products. They need all these so as to

gain more income to be able to afford college education of their children. A son/daughter who obtains a college degree is considered the passport out of poverty.