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Youth Civic Engagement in the Philippine Uplands: The Case of the Higaunons in Brgy. Kiabo, Malitbog, Bukidnon, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Meaningful civic engagement that is inclusive of cultural minorities is vital for thriving democratic societies. This study investigates civic engagement among Higaunon youth, an indigenous community in the Southern Philippines, addressing a gap in the literature on minority engagement in democratic processes. Through focus group discussions (FGDs) with the youth and tribal leaders, key informant interviews (KIIs), and personal interviews, the research explores four engagement domains: grassroots community organizing, civic activism, community service, and political participation. Findings reveal that Higaunon youth actively engage across these areas, driven by social ties, cultural traditions, communal identity, and leadership influence. Notably, indigenous frameworks of engagement, promoted by tribal leaders, shape their civic behaviors. However, challenges such as religious divisions, economic constraints, cultural erosion, and lack of institutional support hinder participation. Despite these challenges, engagement yields significant benefits to the youth through strengthened youth empowerment, community cohesion, and cultural preservation.

1. Introduction

Civic engagement was hailed as a bedrock of a strong democracy (Sidney and Verba, 1989; Glover et al, 2020). As citizen participation is at the heart of a functioning democracy, there is a concern that disengagement, especially among young people, will have a negative impact on governance (Shaw et. al, 2014). As it stands, youth civic engagement as a concept is inclusive going beyond engagement with formal state institutions, broadly referring to prosocial and political contributions to the community and society which can take many forms (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Despite its breadth, the model advanced by Karakos (2015) captured the core concepts of civic engagement divided into two parts: actions (civil activism, political participation, grassroots community organizing, and community service) and mental faculties (civic education, civil identity, political socialization, and civic development).

This study probes into the civic engagement among the Higaunon youth in Malitbog, Bukidnon Province, Southern Philippines cognizant of the historical marginalization suffered by the indigenous peoples (IPs) in the country. National cultural minorities often face structural challenges preventing their meaningful engagement with formal state institutions resulting in what Banks (2015) described as a failed citizenship whereby marginalized citizens disengage and develop weak identities. Paredes (2017) advanced that the exclusion of indigenous peoples is starkly evident in the country's postcolonial historiography wherein the notion of a Filipino citizen connotes the majority who are Hispanized and Catholicized while tribal minorities are relegated to the peripheries and further stereotyped as "living fossils of a precolonial culture", hindering them in the full exercise of their citizenship rights. These circumstances fostered disengagement from political and social activities, perpetuating a self-reinforcing cycle that further limited

opportunities for meaningful involvement (Laforteza, 2012).

However, Paredes' seminal work (i.e. 1997, 2000, 2006, 2013, 2017) also captured the substantial transformations within the two decades of the Higaunon's identification with the Filipino nation revealing a contrast that until the 1990s, most of her research participants support the idea of an armed struggle against the government, while today, these same cohorts appear primarily interested in exercising the duties and privileges of their citizenship such as running in elections, exercising their suffrage, registering as taxpayers, signing up to government programs, sending their children to school, among other performative acts that establish the legitimacy of the Philippine state.

The Higaunons are one of the largest indigenous groups in Mindanao, the second largest island group in Southern Philippines, existing today dispersed in five provinces (Paredes, 2016). The tribe has a distinct society and its political organization revolved around one or more 'datu' (Filipino: chiefs or community leaders) who assumed various roles such as military, ceremonial, administration of justice, and other relevant leadership functions (Paredes, 1997). Despite their geographic dispersion, the whole Higaunon people are united by their customary law, the 'Bungkatol ha bulawan' (Higaunon: bowl of gold) which serves as the cornerstone of the values, norms, and code of conduct passed into the next generations (Malo-ay, 2008). The tribe's ethos is centered on a harmonious relationship with nature, maintaining smooth social relationships, and trust in others (Paredes, 1997), and can even be viewed as a big family (Institute for Advanced Comparative Studies - Philippines, 2011). As a community committed to peace, the Higaunon prioritizes social cohesion and collective harmony. This aligns with Ragandang's (2017) characterization of them as "weavers of peace," recognizing their maintenance of traditional restorative justice

practices that sustain communal stability. Furthermore, their oral literature intrinsically plays an important function in defining good citizenship and maintaining a harmonious community (Cajetas-Saranza, 2016). Traditionally, their lifestyle involved cultivation supplemented by fishing, hunting wild game, and foraging forest goods and materials (Paredes, 1997). Yet contemporarily, they are also engaged economically in seeking job opportunities in towns and cities. There is also an increased opportunity to acquire education beyond secondary schools and a growing number of Higaunons joining the civil service (Paredes, 2019).

On the other hand, it is well established in the literature that having a Sense of Community (SoC) fosters civic engagement and participation (Davidson and Cotter, 1986; Rollero et al., 2009; Procentese and Gatti, 2021), as strong identification and rootedness to a community cultivates prosocial actions and civic values (Procentese and Gatti, 2021). However, in modern times, individual members often no longer perceive communities as relational spaces (Gatti and Procentese, 2020), where most treat their problems as private and are less interested in collective actions (Doolittle and Faul, 2013; Procentese, 2011). Thus, what emerged is an atmosphere of a serious lack of civic engagement while incentivizing reciprocal indifference and mistrust (Procentese and Gatti, 2021).

Nevertheless, it is evident that the culture of indigenous peoples such as that of the Higaunons exhibits strong communitarian principles embedded in its very social fabric that facilitates civic engagement (Cajetas-Saranza, 2016; Malo-ay, 2008; Allan and Egirani, 2008). Literature demonstrates that Indigenous populations worldwide exhibit different modes of civic engagement, blending traditional practices with contemporary adaptations. Research by Houde (2007), Nakanura (2008), and Hill et al. (2012) documented a growing global

involvement of Indigenous communities in environmental governance, particularly through the assertion of land rights and the application of indigenous ecological knowledge. Parallel studies reveal intergenerational participation patterns, with Blanchet-Cohen and Fernandez (2003) highlighting how Indigenous youth traditionally engage through observational learning and familial and communal responsibilities. This aligns with Alfred et al.'s (2007) findings that while Indigenous youth may show lower engagement in formal political institutions, they actively participate through alternative, culturally grounded avenues of civic action, to elaborate: Raynauld et al. (2018) documented the civic engagement of Indigenous peoples around the world such as the use of Twitter as a means of civic and political protest among Indigenous people in the case of Canada's Idle No More Movement; Etchart (2017) reported on the role Indigenous people at the frontline of the fight against climate change; and Frazer and Carlson (2017) examined the utilization of the Australian Aborigines activist of the internet and memes to confront and deconstruct narratives of colonialism. Furthermore, literature such as Friedel (2015), Raynauld, Richez, and Morris (2017), Carlson and Frazer (2014), and Callinan (2014), revealed the online engagement of Indigenous people including activism. While facing systemic barriers to self-determination, Indigenous communities in the Philippines also maintain significant civic involvement, as evidenced by the narratives of activities documented by (De Jong, 2010), Balane (2012), Pedroza (2016), and Sablad (2018) showing meaningful civic engagement worthy of examination.

Further surveying the field, previous studies such as Nusbaum's Capabilities Approach suggested that young people engage to cultivate personal and collective competencies, ultimately fostering a society where such capabilities are universally available. Complementarily, Social Ties and

Community Cohesion Theory (Shaw et al., 2014) emphasized familial socialization as the root of community cohesion, proposing that youth who observe civic behaviors in domestic settings are more likely to replicate such engagement patterns through emotional community attachment. This study operationalized Karakos' (2015) model with a particular focus on the action domain of civic participation. The action-oriented framework examines four tangible dimensions: political participation, community service, civic activism, and grassroots community organizing, domains chosen for their observable characteristics in community contexts. First explored is the engagement of the youth in the core domain before further delving into the facilitators and barriers of their engagement, and finally, probing the benefits that the youth and the community derived from their engagement.

Thus, this research aims to describe the civic engagement of the Higaunon youth of Brgy. Kiabo, Malitbog, Bukidnon, and in particular to:

1. Identify the civic engagement of the Higaunon youth within the actions domain;
2. Identify the different socio-cultural, economic, and political facilitators and barriers of civic engagement among the youth; and,
3. Examine the benefits of civic engagement to the youth and their community.

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically a case study design conducted in Brgy. Kiabo, Malitbog, Bukidnon Province, a remote northernmost mountain barangay. Situated at 8°32'N, 124°53'E with an estimated elevation of 620 meters above sea level, Kiabo is one of eleven constituent barangays comprising the Municipality of Malitbog (PhilAtlas, 2019). For context, the barangay (abbrev. brgy) is the smallest socio-

political unit in the Philippines. Brgy. Kiabo hosts approximately 3,000 residents, accounting for 10.02% of Malitbog's population, with 90% belonging to the Higaunon ethnolinguistic group. Aligned with Zainal's (2007) framework for context-bound inquiry, this research employed a case study methodology to facilitate intensive examination within a defined socio-geographical setting, further implemented through a triangulation of data gathering methods consisting of focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and personal interviews.

Rigorous ethical standards were also maintained by securing free, prior, and informed consent from the tribe before commencing research activities. Data collection employed multiple qualitative methods to ensure comprehensive understanding, starting with two focus group discussions involving Higaunon youth and a separate FGD with tribal council members, all utilizing semi-structured guide questionnaires. Key informant interviews were conducted with barangay officials, selected tribal leaders, and the principal of Kiabo Elementary School using similar semi-structured guides. To corroborate the findings, the researchers conducted personal interviews among community members. All interactions were conducted in the Cebuano dialect to facilitate clear communication. Field data were independently transcribed and translated by the researchers. More so, themes from the segments were separately identified across all data segments until complete analysis was achieved. The researchers then compared their thematic findings, aligning common interpretations and resolving discrepancies.

In analyzing the data, the study implemented a descriptive analysis and thematic approach. Thematic analysis was employed to extract themes involving rigorous identification of meaningful patterns across the entire datasheet (The University of Auckland, n.d.)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Core Civic Engagement

In the domain of grassroots community organizing, several concerned Higaunon youths in Brgy. Kiabo led by Jefson Dagpong organized the Tribal Youth Organization (TRIYO) last 2016 which was later on adopted as a permanent committee of the tribal council in response to a perceived gradual decay of cultural practices and traditions in the community due to the non-practice by the younger generations. Datu Timbangan, the village babaylan (priest) expressed his worries about the survival of their culture when their youth are turning their backs on their traditions and practices and prefer to adopt the mainstream culture and way of life. Notably, this concern is not a unique experience in the village but a shared concern among other Higaunon communities in other provinces such as in Agusan del Sur and Misamis Oriental (Cajetas-Saranza, 2016; Malo-ay, 2008).

The TRIYO began as a youth initiative to ensure the continuity of the Higaunon culture. Before its inception, the youth had no formal representation in the tribal council composed exclusively of village elders, thus, the organization was also instrumental in ensuring youth participation in the affairs of the elders while passing to the youth the knowledge of the elders on the cultural practices of the tribe. Although the primary concern of the organization is cultural preservation, it transcended beyond that purpose by conducting community work and venturing into organic farming.

Notably, membership and active involvement in TRIYO represent a form of youth civic activism. Beyond preserving cultural traditions, the organization also cultivates practical skills and economic stability through agricultural ventures. The founder of TRIYO rationalized the importance of economic security as he observed that one of the causes their youth are pushed to leave

their barangay is to seek jobs in distant towns and cities.

In community service, the youth usually engaged through 'pahina', a traditional voluntary collective work system, and organized Operation 'Linis' (Filipino: clean-up), a monthly village cleanup organized by the village. They also actively participated in barangay events like fiestas, sports leagues, and charter day celebrations, demonstrating their civic engagement through both cultural traditions and modern community initiatives.

The tribal leaders also noted during focus group discussions that the youth frequently assist them with various tasks during their leisure time. For instance, the tribe is engaged in an organic farming business with the support of the Green Minds, an agricultural non-governmental organization, and the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) of the Department of Agriculture (DA). This initiative enables them to cultivate and supply organic crops such as peanuts, coffee, and turmeric using a blend of indigenous and modern farming methods. This agricultural project has become vital to the community's economy, with elders noting youth participation during their free time, particularly after school. Additionally, some young members help market and sell tribal products at regional trade fairs, further relating that by joining in these affairs, they also gained valuable skills that benefit both their personal development and the tribe's future.

In the domain of political participation, informants shared that they participate through voting and joining in governance by getting themselves elected in the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK), an elected youth council in every barangay of the country that aims to ensure meaningful youth participation in governance and nation-building. The revival of the Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Council) under RA 10742 has enabled greater youth involvement in governance, with the current SK leadership in

this Higaunon community predominantly composed of indigenous members with the chairperson and six of seven councilors are Higaunon youth actively engaged in formal political processes.

Focus group discussions with tribal elders and interviews with the barangay chairman revealed that youth regularly participate in barangay assemblies, prompting the barangay local government to hold dedicated youth consultation meetings. To ensure effective communication, each sub-village unit has appointed youth representatives who facilitate information dissemination within their immediate communities.

However, the youth's political engagement largely follows traditional patterns of involvement. They shared that they have not tried petitions for the fear that it "will create friction in the relationship as almost everyone (residents) are just relatives". With regards to the utilization of the online space as a new form of political participation, respondents posited that they have not utilized this space for political participation, and are merely consumers of information in the virtual space. However, it must be noted that Brgy. Kiabo as a remote barangay has limited internet penetration and access to cellular signals and the digital divide is also evident among its constituents.

Table 01. Summary of Higaunon Youth Core Civic Engagement

Core Civic Engagement	Forms of Engagement
Grassroots community organizing	Tribal Youth Organization (TRIYO)
Civic activism	Membership and active participation in TRIYO
Community service	Pahinas (communal work), voluntarism, and assistance in barangay activities and works of the tribal elders
Political participation	Electoral participation, governance, voluntarism during elections, attendance in barangay and SK meetings

This reveals a contrasting pattern to Bennett's (2008) and McCormack et al.'s (2015) findings of youth disengagement from conventional civic activities like voting and political awareness.

The Higaunon youth demonstrate active participation in precisely these traditional forms of engagement. While their social media use parallels Callinan's (2014) observations about youth digital practices, the Higaunon employ these platforms primarily for recreational purposes rather than online activism or political discourse.

Facilitators and Barriers to Engagement

The Higaunon culture and society encourage engagement as evident in their customary law which is an embodiment of strong communitarian principles. Hilario (2005) advanced that the customary law or the bungkatol ha bulawan embodies values such as pahaon-haona (Higaunon: loving, caring, and freeing one another), pagbatun-batuna (Higaunon: helping one another), palaglagimowa (Higaunon: sharing with each other), pagpasayuda (Higaunon: open communication), and matareng and huda

daugon (Higaunon: justice and absence of exploitation). Even in leadership, the Higaunon *datu* exercises authority through stewardship rather than authoritarian rule, where they guide community members, viewed as capable individuals, in taking on responsibilities according to their abilities. Paredes (2017) outlined the ideal characteristics of the *datu* which include among others an intensive knowledge of the customary law, the ability to treat everyone fairly, reach public consensus, humility, and incredulity to attention-seeking behavior.

In conversations, the youth noted that tribal leaders actively support their activities, evidenced by the leaders' close coordination with TRIYO initiatives. Strong social ties and a shared Higaunon identity further facilitate engagement, as most members are interrelated, helping foster openness and communication that enhances participation when social capital is utilized for communal benefit consistent with the tribe's communitarian values. Additionally, youth with family members engaged in community work reported being influenced to participate, with nearly all FGD participants agreeing that having role models in their households encouraged their involvement. One participant in the youth FGD emphasized that she emulates her father's active community role and hopes to similarly inspire her siblings.

At the political and institutional level, the revival of the Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Council) through Republic Act 10742 has created formal avenues for youth participation in local governance, particularly in matters concerning young people.

The law established a democratic electoral process where barangay youth directly choose their SK representatives. Furthermore, it institutionalized an annual Youth Week observance across all local government levels, timed to coincide with International Youth Day on August 12. This provision specifically enables indigenous

youth leaders to develop and execute programs tailored to their communities' needs.

Thus, the supportive role of tribal leaders, coupled with strong social ties, familial influence, and institutional mechanisms facilitates a strong foundation of civic engagement. These draw similarity to the findings of Shaw et al. (2014) on the importance of social ties and cohesion and to the long line of literature on SoC evinced by Davidson and Cotter, (1986) to Procentese and Gatti (2021) where Higaunon identity, as in this case, fostered a strong sense of community that facilitated collective action in solving problems faced by the tribe.

On the other hand, there are also notable barriers to the civic engagement of the youth subsumed along the themes of religious divide, incentive-seeking behavior, cultural decay, poverty, and lack of political support.

Firstly, religious division appeared to be a significant challenge to community cohesion, though not necessarily to civic engagement itself. Participant accounts revealed a clear bifurcation within the community, with members primarily aligning with either Roman Catholicism or Pentecostal Christianity. Paredes (2006) traced the Christian conversion efforts of the indigenous peoples by different missionaries in the past as early as the first mission established in Mindanao last 1596. Both Catholicism and Protestantism reached the upland interior leading to the conversion of many indigenous people to Christianity. However, she highlighted that unlike Catholicism which was transformed into a variant of "folk Catholicism" integrating folk beliefs into their Catholic faith, Protestant missionaries produced a growing number of "true believers" – converts who do not syncretize old or indigenous beliefs and practices in their new faith.

During FGD, Roman Catholic Higaunon participants described how Pentecostal

leaders actively denounced traditional tribal practices, including nature-based rituals and spiritual customs, further claiming a gradual abandonment of indigenous traditions among community members who converted to Pentecostalism. A youth during a discussion remarked, "Higaunon man sila pero sa dugo nalang nila, wala na nila gikinabuhi ang pagka-Higaunon" (Cebuano: They are Higaunons but only in blood, they don't live with the ways of the Higaunon). This relates to the claim of Malo-ay (2008) who demonstrated how religious influences have compromised indigenous cultural preservation, with certain denominations explicitly labeling traditional practices as evil. Such phenomenon has been particularly documented among the Higaunon of Malitbog, where competing sects have fueled community fragmentation (Masinaring, 2011). Paradoxically, while religious differences divide the broader community, they simultaneously enhance group cohesion and mobilization capacity within each religious faction, particularly among youth members.

Secondly, youth respondents in the two FGDs revealed incentive-seeking behavior of some youth that hinders their engagement. A participant in the second youth FGD on March 17, 2019, averred that "kung dili sila ganahan sa activity, dili jud sila muapil" (Cebuano: if they don't like the activity, they will not really participate) resonating Datu Timbangan's concern that some youth will not engage without incentive.

While the customary law and traditional values remain central to Higaunon culture, its gradual decline threatens these indigenous practices. Where collective values of sharing and mutual aid once prevailed, individualistic attitudes particularly incentive-driven behavior, have increasingly taken root. This cultural shift reflects the youth's growing rationalistic worldview, which weakens the intrinsic link between engagement and the Higaunon cultural identity. Datu Timbangan's personal interview underscored this

transformation: "Today, I am quite disturbed by the individualistic approach to activities of a person instead of sharing them. In the past, there is sharing." However, this phenomenon does not signal the end of engagement altogether. Rather, it marks the emergence of new participation patterns, where pragmatic motivations like material incentives may paradoxically serve as alternative facilitators of involvement, even as traditional cultural foundations decline.

Thirdly, the youth stressed that poverty is a hindrance to their engagement. A participant expressed that instead of participating in activities, he would rather prioritize finding means to meet their daily needs. This view was corroborated with the interview of the school principal stressing that financial constraint impedes the engagement of the youth. The founder of TRIYO also related that financial constraints impede their operations, especially in their organic farming venture. Respondents also expressed that there are youths who went to school in other barangays such as in San Luis since there is no secondary school in their place, and some went to college in distant towns such as Tagoloan and Claveria, Misamis Oriental, and in Cagayan de Oro City. They shared that it is often rare for these students to come home due to expensive transportation costs. Thus, it hindered their participation in activities and some would even choose not to exercise their political rights during elections because of such constraints.

Finally, a lack of support from the government can be seen as a missed opportunity for facilitating engagement. Participants in the first FGD lamented the lack of support from the Local Government Unit of Malitbog, Bukidnon for the youth. However, when asked if the barangay council is supportive of the affairs of the youth, the narratives of participants in the two FGs varied. While respondents in the second FGD claimed that the council is indeed supportive and what has been lacking is the participation of the youth and that Barangay Chairman Sul-

aron highlighted the huge role the barangay played and the symbiotic relationship between them and the youth; participants in the first FGD did not share this view.

Benefits of Engagement

The benefits of civic engagement with the Higaunon youth are diverse, yet hinges on its role in individual and community welfare. Participants highlighted that engagement enhanced their individual development particularly psychosocial impacts such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and communication skills. In addition to individual development, the active participation of the youth has also resulted in concrete actions to reverse cultural decay, enhanced community mobilization, and greater social cohesion, showing that civic engagement is a pivotal tool for empowering Indigenous youth and at the same time responding to deeper social issues.

In virtually all FGDs and interviews, respondents identified that one of the major benefits of civic engagement to the youth is personal development such as improved self-esteem and self-confidence. A youth participant in the FGD pointed out that, "engagement and participation enabled us to be less shy and more engaging towards others", relating to the claim of Dworkin et. al. (2003) that self-esteem development is one of the psychosocial benefits that can be gained through engagement. More so, self-confidence and trust towards others also improved their communication skills owing to their confidence in engaging with other people.

It is also notable how the improvement of the communication skills of the Higaunon youth enables them to work more efficiently such as in organizing activities and resolving issues, not only with their fellow youth but also in the community. They also relate how engagement elevated their level of social awareness not just from the level of the community but also beyond the tribe.

Along this vein, Barangay Chairman Sul-aron stated that "when the youth join these activities, their awareness level is raised in terms of the events in the barangay and how issues are addressed". Linked with the personal development of the Higaunon youth through participation is the positive impact on education and academic life. According to the same respondent, "It [engagement] encourages them [Higaunon youth] to do well in their studies since they are able to witness and assess the present conditions in the community that may make use of their assistance in the future."

The civic engagement of Higaunon youth brings advantages that extend beyond personal growth to benefit the entire community. These include cultural continuity, enabling more effective community organization, promoting peace and stability, and fostering stronger bonds among community members. It also stands that the engagement of the youth gives hope, especially for the tribal elders, for cultural preservation. In some ways, it allayed the fear of the *datus* on the gradual decay of the tribe's traditions. However, the founder of the TRIYO revealed that he is still in the process of fully learning their practices; he admitted that he has not mastered speaking Binukid, their native dialect and that he also did not fully know the '*pandalawit*' (Higaunon: prayer especially during rituals) of the *babaylan*. Nevertheless, the presence of willing youth is deemed as an assurance of cultural survival through youth community action building overarching capabilities. More so, the organic farming venture of the youth also provides the community with sustainable economic means and livelihood while protecting their resources.

Furthermore, the youth have emerged as crucial partners for the barangay council in supporting community initiatives. This is particularly evident during elections when they consistently serve as poll volunteers across the barangay's dispersed sitios. The school principal also stressed that the youth

became “an instrument to realize the programs of the barangay”. This active participation has created a virtuous cycle as their involvement enhances community mobilization which in turn strengthens social harmony and unity among residents.

Moreover, engagement also strengthened cultural identity among the youth, as evidenced by one leader's FGD account. She narrated her past experience of insecurity about her indigenous identity when they were in cities, and how she gained confidence through engagement reflecting how civic involvement cultivates both community bonds and personal pride in indigenous heritage.

She further shared how she developed the confidence to speak her native language even in urban contexts free from fear of judgment by other people from mainstream cultures.

In the main, this dual impact of engagement that empowers the youth while revitalizing the community exhibits its significance as a framework for development. As the Higaunon youth continue to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, their involvement not only protects and preserves their cultural heritage but also paves the way for a more cohesive community. This nexus underscores the transformative potential of youth engagement in indigenous contexts.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The narratives of the participants surmised that the Higaunon youth of Brgy. Kiabo, Malitbog, and Bukidnon have exhibited forms and activities that constitute the concept of civic engagement advanced by Karakos (2015), drawing parallelism with the seminal work of Paredes as in this case, the Higaunon youth are also actively exercising their rights as citizens and stakeholder of Philippine democracy both by engagement with their community writ large and formal state institutions, such as in the context of electoral participation.

Evidently, TRIYO demonstrates how Higaunon youth civic engagement is deeply grounded in traditional cultural principles. The value of pagbatun-batuna (mutual assistance) is reflected in their voluntary participation in community clean-ups and support for elders' organic farming initiatives. Palaglagimowa (sharing) materialized through collective resource distribution during group activities, while pahaon-haona (loving, caring, and freeing one another) underpins their environmentally sustainable farming projects aimed at economic stability. Additionally, pagpasayuda (open communication) guides their decision-making processes, evidenced when youth sought elder counsel before establishing TRIYO and launching agricultural ventures. More so, TRIYO's activism serves as a vital force for sustaining Higaunon cultural heritage, as youth actively seek to learn traditional practices from elders. This initiative demonstrates Nussbaum's (2011) Capabilities Approach in action, where participation fosters both personal growth and community development, rooted and grounded in a shared Higaunon identity.

Thus, the sociocultural foundation of the tribe such as the bungkatol ha bulawan or the shared code of conduct or customary law among the Higaunons is an integral facilitator of engagement compounded with social ties and a sense of community.

However, a gradual decline of cultural traditions and practices has been observed which prompted the formation of TRIYO to ensure cultural preservation. This erosion threatens core engagement concepts embedded in its cultural foundation. The lack of government support further compounds these challenges, despite clear evidence that strong leadership is crucial for effective youth engagement. Religious differences within the community have also led to conflicting views about the barangay's support for youth programs. It stands that government initiatives respecting Higaunon culture could

significantly boost youth participation, as engagement is an integral part of the tribe's organization.

Finally, this paper underscores the need for more research into Indigenous civic engagement to inform culturally responsive policymaking. At the local level, the local government of Malitbog should prioritize developing targeted programs that address participation barriers while actively facilitating youth involvement. Further, this study highlights the critical importance of interfaith dialogue and reconciliation initiatives to bridge religious divisions that currently hinder youth unity and collective action.

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