



The Synergos Institute

**AMBASSADOR HOWARD DEE:  
Building Bridges for the Lumads**

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## Ambassador Howard Dee

“When we visited Mindanao at that time, you could see in the affected areas, everything was brown, nothing green. And in some areas, even the bark of the trees were stripped for food. There was nothing.

All over, the earth was parched and cracked all over the agricultural lands. And it being a largely agricultural area, there was nowhere for the people to go. They had to be fed.”

- Ambassador Howard Dee referring to the effects of the *El Niño* phenomenon of 1998.

## Introduction

Much like Mindanao to the rest of the Philippines, the Indigenous People (IP) of Mindanao have been left out from much of the development activities in their region. Until today, the IPs there have been much deprived of the fruits of development that are being enjoyed by many of the other peoples of Mindanao.

In 1998, the El Niño phenomenon again struck the Philippines badly affecting Mindanao and, more significantly, the life of the already deprived IPs living there. A multi-sectoral coalition was formed to attempt to address the needs of the IPs. This coalition was formed by Ambassador Howard Dee and is still very much active in the development of the IPs in Mindanao to this day.

## The State of the Indigenous People of Mindanao

For many generations, the Lumads (the indigenous people of Mindanao) have been living off the land. Unfortunately, continuous years of over-cutting in many of the forests, the initiation of cash cropping and chemical use on have slowly caused their land to deteriorate and leave them with less and less harvest.

The land and forests could no longer sustain the Lumads. This has brought related problems to the peoples. Skin and parasite diseases as well as deadly diseases like cholera have destroyed the lives of both the young and old. In fact, the Lumad people have one of the highest child mortality rates among developing countries around the world.

Desperate Lumad families have forsaken a tradition of working the land carefully. They have resorted to the overuse of expensive fertilizers and pesticides. Furthermore, in an attempt to survive, the Lumad were forced to use slash and burn methods that are destroying the very habitat that once sustained them.

Pesticides and slash and burn clearing has damaged the once resource-rich area. The result has been an ever-increasing loss of productive soil, reduced food crops and a loss of income for families who are already on the brink of disaster.

## **Threats and Opportunities to the IPs**

In a survey commissioned by Tabang Mindanaw, the following were threats identified to the IPs:

- Absence or limited government policies and services favoring the IPs, e.g. education, civil and legal rights, basic services, non-implementation of the IPRA, or the Indigenous People's Rights Act
- Poor peace and order situation in IP areas: presence of armed groups and militarization that result in the dislocation of IPs
- Extreme poverty due to the destruction of the forests (source of their food), unsound farming practices and limited livelihood opportunities
- Development aggression (mining and plantations)
- IP organizations not mainstreamed
- Degradation of IP culture

Aside from these, the IPs were excluded socially from mainstream society. Although seemingly ethnic or religious in nature, this social exclusion was rooted in poverty and the exclusion of certain Indigenous groups from the socio-economic development process. These socio-economic cleavages have translated into socio-political tensions between the IPs.

At the same time, the opportunities were identified as follows:

- Favorable political environment
- Donor interest expressed through the policy of poverty reduction that targets the IP as a sector

## Historical Perspective

During the Spanish period, the suppression of the Lumads was equally important as that of the Muslims. Economically, Lumads practiced swidden agriculture almost fully depending on the land's productivity. The Lumad remained isolated from the hills and forests that were difficult to penetrate, while the Spanish strategy was to begin colonization along the coast towards the plains for easier trade and political consolidation.

The Lumads in Mindanao resisted against American colonization as well. When American rule was consolidated, a systematic policy to integrate Mindanao and Sulu began. During American rule and later during the Commonwealth, the Lumad landscape changed. For example, in Polomolok, South Cotabato, Blaan Lumads gave way to the Dole pineapple plantations; Higaonons and Talaandigs who developed their societies by the plains of Bukidnon were neighbors to the Del Monte plantations. By the 1960's bulldozers and trucks were ever-present in many Lumad areas, and foreign agribusiness already covered a significant area of Lumad lands as well.

Concern for the Lumads during modern times focused on the development projects that threaten to displace the Lumads from their ancestral lands. Congress had passed legislation for the protection of ancestral lands through the Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which seeks to "recognize, protect and promote the rights of indigenous cultural communities and to appropriate funds for the purpose."

## The Onset of El Niño In 1998

In early 1998, the El Niño<sup>1</sup> phenomenon was once again hitting the Philippines, the last one occurring 5 years prior. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Red Cross estimated that there would be 984,000 families (or almost 6 million people) that would be affected in Sultan Kudarat, Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sarangani, Davao del Sur, Maguindanao, and General Santos City. Out of those 984,000 families that were to be

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<sup>1</sup> A Spanish term (literally meaning "the boy") to describe the phenomenon of changes in the weather pattern that occurs every 5 or so years around the Pacific Ocean which results in extreme floods in South America while having extreme droughts in Southeast Asia (especially the Philippines).

affected, 255,000 were indigenous families. Then DSWD Secretary Lina Laigo estimated that she would need about P1 billion to feed the 1 million families for 4 months. However, the president at that time gave her only P300 million leaving a shortfall of P700 million.

The situation was getting bad. When Caritas International came and saw first-hand the situation, they said, “it was as if we were transported in time back into the Stone Age.” They saw IPs digging for food in the ground with tools that were of the Stone Age. The root crops called Kayos were poisonous and required a special process of preparation (washing in the river, soaking in water, drying, etc.) to eat. However, when the children were hungry and dug for food, they didn’t know any better. They were very ill prepared for this situation. This resulted in poisoning and a number of deaths, over and above deaths caused by starvation.

When the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) called for a meeting among the donor countries, the donor countries wanted the Philippines to declare a state of national emergency as a basis for assistance. However, in that year (1998) the Philippines was celebrating its centennial anniversary, the 100th Anniversary of the birth of the Republic of the Philippines, and “sad to say, the government did not want to declare a national emergency disaster during its centennial,” Ambassador Dee said. “Therefore, the burden fell on us on how to get food and bring it to the people,” he continued.

## **The Birth of Tabang Mindanaw**

The crisis was not yet well publicized and many people were still not aware of the situation that the people in Mindanao were facing. Government would be able to move, but not fast enough, hence private sector had to come in. During this critical time, DAR Secretary (and Social Reform Agenda Chief) Ernesto Garilao briefed Ambassador Howard Dee of OPAP on the plight of the people in the southern part of the country. Upon explaining all of the information that Secretary Garilao had received, Ambassador Dee, extremely disturbed by the disheartening news, responded simply, “Ernie, we have to do something, we have to do something to help those people.” He thought to himself, “the government does not have the resources to assist these people, and therefore, what can the private sector do?”

Immediately, Ambassador Dee asked Ms. Milet Mendoza, who was working for him in Assisi Development Foundation and who was previously working with the Peace Panel (under Ambassador Dee), to contact the bishops in the affected areas of Mindanao and set-up a meeting to discuss what type of assistance they needed.

For that meeting, Ambassador Dee invited leaders of civil society, some foundations, and media people. Ambassador Dee made an all out effort to reach his political, social, religious, financial, and other personal contacts to ensure that there was enough support as needed for

this enormous task ahead. For the meeting with the Bishops from Mindanao, he invited Jaime Zobel de Ayala of Ayala Foundation, Ambassador Ramon del Rosario of PHINMA Foundation, Mr. George Ty of Metrobank Foundation, Jose Concepcion of RFM Foundation, Ambassador Alfonso Yuchengco, Sr. of AY Foundation, Eugenio Lopez, Jr. of Meralco Foundation, Andres Soriano III of Philippine Business for Social Progress, and Antonio Cojuangco of PLDT Foundation. This comprised a huge bulk of the major corporate foundations in the country. In the letter of invitation, which Ambassador Dee signed on behalf of the four affected Bishops from Mindanao, he began by saying that “THIS IS AN EMERGENCY APPEAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID FOR EL NIÑO VICTIMS IN MINDANAO...” (emphasis as in original invitation letter).

Ambassador Dee also pulled in the religious and non-religious relief agencies such as Catholic Relief Services, the International Red Cross, and Philippine Red Cross. The Bishops-Businessmen’s Conference, of which he was a part of, was also ensured to be present. Not the least,

Ambassador Dee knowing full well that he needed mass support for this initiative, invited the Philippine Daily Inquirer and GMA-7. “We needed media people in order to let the public know of this plight,” he said. Government was of course represented in the meeting. There were appraisal reports from Sec. Garilao and Sec. Laigo while other government agencies were also present.

After the presentations and discussions, the question was “what now?” Through guiding the discussions, Ambassador Dee was able to build consensus in creating a vehicle for the assistance to reach those in dire need in Mindanao. The end result of the discussions was the creation of Tabang Mindanaw (from the local dialect meaning “help Mindanaw”). It was an informal coalition of business groups and foundations and the League of Corporate Foundations. It was decided that the co-chairmen would be Ambassador Dee, President of Assisi Development Foundation, and Mr. Fernando Zobel de Ayala, Vice-Chairman of Ayala Foundation. The latter, who comes from the Ayala family that are majority shareholders of Bank of the Philippine Islands (one of the largest banks in the country), offered to have a simplified system for donations by allowing anyone to deposit directly into a special account in their bank which would then be credited to Tabang Mindanaw.

**Box 1**

***Assisi Development Foundation***

Assisi Development Foundation, Inc. was and still is a non-profit, non-stock, corporation

organized in 1975 to undertake programs to help the poor and disadvantaged. Its Honorary Chairman is Jaime Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila, and its Chairman is Fr. Francisco Araneta, S.J. of the Ateneo de Manila University. Ambassador Dee is the President of the organization.

Assisi Development Foundation's major concerns were in the following areas:

1. Agricultural production and rural technology;
2. Social credit for small enterprises;
3. Health and medical assistance;
4. Education and values formation;
5. Land sharing for farm workers;
6. Community building; and,
7. Spiritual enrichment

Assisi's existence springs from the foundation's desire to affirm in the spirit of peace and Christian love, expressed in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, the Lordship of the Almighty Father over life and the resources of the world. The foundation's goal is to return to society its lost ideal

which is God's imperative to "love your neighbor as yourself," to be so possessed by the love of God that every person and all of creation is loved as brother and sister. Funding of the foundation comes mainly from family donations of Ambassador Dees's family, as well as other various donors.

Ambassador Dee, being the highly religious person that he is, knew the persuading force that the Church has in the country. He therefore felt and knew that it was imperative that the symbolic head of the Church in the country was to be greatly involved. There was one small problem—His Eminence Jaime Cardinal Sin of Manila was in the Vatican for a series of meetings and was not to get back until a much later date. This being the case, Ambassador Dee faxed a letter to the Cardinal in the Vatican stating the situation and his invitation for

the Cardinal to Co-Chair the newly-created Tabang Mindanaw. And, just as heaven would have it, Cardinal Sin immediately faxed back sympathizing with the victims of the calamity and agreeing completely with the plans outlined.

The set-up was such that Ayala Foundation took care everything related to finance (receiving of donations, disbursement, and audit), while the Philippine Daily Inquirer newspaper would take care of the necessary media coverage and free advertisements in its daily to raise awareness and generate donations (See Annex 1 and 2 for the advertisements). Media support would also be provided by GMA-7. They would be responsible for drumming-up awareness on the plight of those affected in Mindanao, and how the general public could provide their support. Assisi Development Foundation, on the other hand, would manage the program utilizing funds raised directly for program expenditures. This meant that Assisi Development Foundation was paying their people to implement the Tabang Mindanaw programs. None of the funds raised for Tabang Mindanaw were ever used to compensate the Assisi personnel who were implementing the project. Assisi Development Foundation eventually became the Manila secretariat for the whole Tabang Mindanaw operations – it became the nerve center of operations.

In Ambasadddor Dee's further meetings in the next few days with the government (DSWD) and the Bishops, it was decided that Tabang Mindanaw would take care of reaching the IPs, whereas the DSWD and the Red Cross combined would take care of the needs of the lowlanders. This meant that Tabang Mindanaw would be focusing on the 255,000 IP families, or roughly 1.5 million IPs. The reason behind this was that the government had a hard time reaching the far-flung communities of the IPs because the social workers of DSWD would not be able to reach those far-away places. These far away places would however be reached by the Church.

The missionary church—the missionary Fathers and Sisters—who were comprised of the Passionist Fathers, the Marist Fathers, and other religious groups were already working with the IPs. In fact, they were the ones often kidnapped because those places were where the rebels regularly operated in. These groupings of the church work under the aegis of the bishop of the diocese, so their work is always coordinated with the bishops. And with Tabang Mindanaw being a bishops program, naturally, these different religious orders were the implementing arm together with the local parish priests, especially those with outreach programs. Basically, the Church used their infrastructure to undertake the distribution of rice and other relief goods

## **Assembling the Program**

Tabang Mindanaw launched the fund-raising campaign in the Philippine Daily Inquirer on April 30, 1998. Thousands responded instantly to the call for help. In a span of four



months, the total fund effort netted P92,459,932.48 not counting the donated goods and services.

The Tabang Mindanaw task force consisting of Ayala Foundation, Philippine Daily Inquirer, Assisi Foundation, Caritas Philippines, Bank of the Philippine Islands, Caritas Manila, Philippine Business for Social Progress, Corporate Network for Disaster Response, League of Corporate Foundations, and GMA 7 were able to raise P32,525,706.48. This was augmented by the DSWD with rice supplies worth P25,745,850. Echo Caritas Internationalis provided rice rations for selected lumad families in four dioceses with a donation of P34,188,376.

Working with the Bishops and social action directors of the Dioceses of Marbel, Cotabato, Kidapawan, Digos, and later Malaybalay, food relief was given to 252,435 critically affected families jointly identified by the DSWD and the Dioceses in the provinces of South Cotabato, Sarangani, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Davao del Sur, Maguindanao, Bukidnon, and General Santos City. Tabang Mindanaw distributed 108,769 sacks of rice—hardly half a sack of rice per family—but for those families, it meant the difference between a meal a day and starvation.

Relief food products donated by food companies were distributed to the various Dioceses through the Philippine National Red Cross. The Philippine Air Force and the National Disaster Coordinating Council helped transport the Tabang Medical Missions, while Negros Navigation Company and Air Philippines provided free cargo space on their boats and planes, respectively.

The medical missions were also conducted with Tabang volunteer doctors and nurses giving medical assistance to almost 50,000 victims of hunger and disease. Many pharmaceutical companies donated medicines and medical supplies. P3,235,821.91 was spent on medical missions, mostly to buy medicines and supplies, and for air transportation. At the same time, P2,500,000 was used for the provision of seeds to help replenish the seeds of the marginal subsistence farmers, who had eaten their seeds to stave off starvation.

## **Tabang Mindanaw II – From Relief to Rehabilitation**

When the drought was over, Tabang Mindanaw realized that the IPs survival was still being threatened because they were on a hand-to-mouth existence. Their method for agriculture

was the Swidden method,<sup>2</sup> which was not compatible with their forced migratory experiences (see Box 1 for the causes). The IPs could almost no longer practice their centuries-old cultivation method because of the lack of land, and therefore could not move around their agricultural areas as much as in the past to cultivate.

## **Box 2**

### ***Three Causes For The IPs Migration***

1. When the Spaniards colonized the country for more than 300 years, they slowly encroached on the land occupied by the IPs, whether for the Spaniards own use or as a reward to their faithful Filipino followers. This slowly pushed the IPs to further and higher lands. This was the first wave of migration.
2. The second wave of migration was after World War II when Philippine lumber was so much in demand all over the world. The politicians in government were giving logging licenses all over.
3. Some of the biggest holders of forest licenses were mostly our congressmen and people powerful in government (Marites Vitug). When they started cutting the trees in the forests, they in effect pushed the IPs even further away. Given that 95% of Philippine forests were cut down, the IPs could no longer practice their Swidden method of cultivation and could no longer hunt as much of their animals.
4. The third wave of migration is happening right now with the population explosion and the wars between the military and the different rebel groups. The IPs have to escape the warring factions and move even further and higher.

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<sup>2</sup> For centuries, they have used this system of cultivation. This entails farming an area of land for about 2 years, and when the soil is depleted of its nutrients in that area, they would slash and burn a new area to cultivate. After another two years, they move on to another area, and so on and so forth. The cycle takes about 15 years, after which time they can cultivate the first area that they first started with. This allows for the soil to regenerate naturally.

After providing subsistence to the IPs during the drought, Ambassador Dee said, “we realized that they continued to need help so we came in with sustainable agriculture and worked with the University of the Philippines—Los Baños to provide 4 training modules to the IPs. This was now Tabang Mindanaw II (See Annex 3 for the brochure). “Through the academe, we simplified the training method and came out with learning farms; we had two farms per diocese and had it sponsored by Hope Canada, Hope U.S.A., and other international donors,” he added.

The farms operated under the generally accepted basic principles of sustainable agriculture. They are primarily geared toward food-for-the-table, and were considered learning farms or practicum sites for indigenous peoples’ farmers to learn and practice sustainable agriculture. It included a seed production site, or nursery, as well as gene banks for resource conservation for the community.

This program helped the lumad communities to again become, as they have been for centuries, self-sufficient in feeding themselves. This agricultural rehabilitation towards their human development required the reinforcement of sustainable agriculture farming practices suitable to upland and mountainous areas, adopting principles of friendly environmental strategies and approaches.

The farms were established in collaboration with NGOs practicing sustainable agriculture (including Xavier University, Metsa) under the guidance of the Diocese and in coordination with government technical and/or logistical support. Local health workers were also trained for disease prevention and indigenous health practices. Tabang Mindanaw II was also a combined effort of Church, civil society, and government, particularly the Department of Agrarian Reform, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Department of Education, Culture and Sports, and DSWD.

An integral part of the sustainable agriculture program is the setting up and enhancement of a culturally appropriate functional literacy program and primary health care espousing the use of herbal medicine and other traditional health practices in coordination with the lumad communities.

There was also a group from the Netherlands called CordAid that helped Tabang Mindanaw in providing water systems to the IPs, most of whom sourced water from a three-hour walk away (and had to strap a water container behind their backs). Now, with this “new technology,” water is piped in to their communities. Referring to the piped water program, Ambassador Dee said,

This has now liberated the women who used to fetch water the whole day. Water is now brought to their farms and beside their homes. Their health is now improved doing away with water-borne diseases. Whenever we complete a water system, there is always a celebration in the community because for centuries they've been carrying water. For the first time, water is now flowing into them. We intend to continue this work, but it needs a lot of bridging, bridging civilization to them.

The war declared against the Muslim separatists by then President Estrada in 2000 was fought in the heart of Muslim Mindanao—Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Kidapawan, and Cotabato. There were 150,000 families evacuated, many of which were Muslim. Scattered in all these dioceses were 164 evacuation centers. Some of the evacuees refused to enter the evacuation centers, due to the disease, the misery, and the generally poor atmosphere, and instead went to their relatives and friends.

The cycle of violence caused tremendous destruction in the lives of thousands of families and communities in Mindanao. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims, Christians, and Lumads (Filipino term for indigenous people)—together referred to as the tri-people of Mindanao—were traumatized by war, most especially women and children. More than nine provinces in that southern island were affected by the conflict. Thousands of houses were totally destroyed and burned while many more were partially damaged. Communities were displaced from their homes and source of livelihood. Even worse was the psychosocial trauma of war besetting the children.

With the diminishing local resources, the local government units (LGUs), non-government organizations including the church could barely attend to the immediate needs of the thousands of evacuees. The limited availability and access to nutritious food, and the poor living conditions resulted in vulnerability to disease of children and women. Many deaths were recorded, and the war had also heightened the biases and prejudices among the tri-people.

## **Tabang Mindanaw Responds Once Again**

### *Return to Relief*

The 75,000 families that were sheltered in the evacuation centers were being fed first by the DSWD and Tabang Mindanaw. Later on, the International Red Cross (IRC) came in to help out and the work was divided among the three. Once again, the far-flung areas were assigned to Tabang Mindanaw since it was not advisable for the IRC to go to the far-flung areas due to the threat of kidnappings. Tabang Mindanaw, in the evacuation centers, had to

bridge the cultures and faiths between the three peoples—the Muslims, the Christians, and the IPs.

The DSWD, IRC, and Tabang Mindanaw agreed on a standard family assistance pack that consisted of rice, oil, mongo, etc, which was given once a week. This pack cost P400 which, when multiplied by the number of families being served by Tabang Mindanaw (25,000 families), translated to P10 million per week. In the initial months when people were aware of the plight, raising money was relatively easy. However, “later on, raising P2-P3 million per week already made us so happy,” Ambassador Dee clarified. Therefore, there were times that instead of giving the pack once every week, they had to give it once every 15 days.

Although the Muslims were not the constituents of the church, the bishops still took on the risk, or courageous act, of assisting the Muslims in need. This was a courageous act since the war was a popular war with the Christian community, their faithful constituents. This led to the parishioners questioning their bishops actions—asking them why they were “feeding the enemy?” In other areas, Muslims were discriminated in Christian hospitals. Tabang Mindanaw staff had to often times bring some of the Muslim sick to the catholic hospitals run by nuns. “If these bridging initiatives were not done, probably what could have happened was a religious war like the one that erupted in Indonesia,” Ambassador Dee surmised.

In partnership with the Social Action Center of the Archdiocese of Cotabato and the Notre Dame University Hospital, Tabang Mindanaw established a medical assistance program for the IP victims of war. A charity ward was constructed through a grant from the Government of Japan and funds from His Holiness, Pope John Paul II.

### *Return to Communities*

In January 2001, the newly installed Arroyo government moved for a resumption of the peace talks with the Muslim separatists. This now made Tabang Mindanaw turn to rehabilitation programs. Presently, there are 42 communities with 3,000 families that are being assisted through rehabilitation efforts. The P50 million peso rehabilitation project was funded by the Philippine-Canada Fund and by other donors through the initiatives of Tabang Mindanaw. Because war is dynamic, it had to be ensured that the Integrated Return and Rehabilitation Program (IRRP) was under a comprehensive peace framework.

The IRRP was an immediate response to the need for a systematic return of the evacuees to their villages and assistance in rebuilding their lives, homes, and communities. It was hoped that through the IRRP, the tri-people of Mindanao would deepen their respect for one another, as well as develop the commitment needed towards building communities of peace, justice, and understanding.

The return and rehabilitation program was guided by the principle of partnership with all the stakeholders, and convergence of interests and resources. Tabang Mindanaw first went to the military and asked them to declare themselves as respectful of peace for a particular area. They went first to the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Camp Aguinaldo and spoke to the highest levels of authority. Once the AFP leaders agreed in principle and informed their local commanders, Tabang Mindanaw went to the commanders on the field and arranged a dialogue with the communities to thresh out their responsibilities to one another. They then did the same with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). They got the commitment of the leaders and then the commitment of their field commanders. Tabang Mindanaw only rehabilitated in the areas where both parties agreed to work in peace.

Tabang Mindanaw launched a pilot undertaking for the survey and delineation of ancestral domains for the purpose of securing a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) in accordance with the Indigenous Peoples' Right Act (IPRA) of 1997 (Republic Act No. 8371), whose constitutionality the Philippine Supreme Court ruled with finality.

The general objective was to fast track the identification, delineation and recognition of the ancestral domain claims of the Lumads in Mindanao, to protect their rights, and to promote their welfare and development as a people. For this purpose, Tabang Mindanaw worked closely with the NGO forum that has united in their common interest to promote the welfare of the indigenous peoples, and to participate in a national ancestral domain-mapping program, which was approved and coordinated by the government.

Soon after assuming office in January 2001, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo signed Executive Order No. 1, which created the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Indigenous Peoples' Affairs (OPAIPA). Seeing the success of Ambassador Dee in providing assistance to the Lumads through Tabang Mindanaw, President Arroyo appointed Ambassador Dee to head the office and effectively become the Presidential Adviser on Indigenous Peoples' Affairs.

He was tasked to reorganize and reconstitute the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). The need for reorganizing the NCIP was evident since it was not fulfilling its mandate in accordance with the IPRA. The problem was not sufficient funding, as was being circulated, but it was the misuse of funds which were not effectively utilized to operationalize its vital functions. Furthermore, there was a weak organizational structure that was without clear delineations and definition of functions, and was without skilled and trained personnel to perform the commission's vital functions.

One of the major recommendations of Ambassador Dee was for the creation of quick response teams. “Even if we have all the elements in place to implement IPRA, we can still fail in the face of the serious threats posed by powerful groups who would use a combination of political and armed power to displace IPs from their ancestral lands,” he explained. The IPRA could still be sabotaged by greedy politicians and powerful business interests who control the local situation, oftentimes rendering military and police forces ineffective in dealing with this oppression.

Ambassador Dee recalled one incident where armed men stormed lands of ancestral domain in a far-flung area, and killed several Lumads in order to force them to leave their (the IPs) very own ancestral land. When this was reported to the local police, the police commanders simply responded by saying that there was a fiesta (a town party, usually commemorating the town’s founding day or celebrating a religious occasion) that day and that they would just attend to it afterwards.

Given the need for political clout to deal with this situation, the proposal is to establish a multi-agency Quick Response Task Force operating under the Office of the President but coordinating with the NCIP, particularly with its Bureau of Empowerment and Human Rights, to forcefully address this concern of gross injustice. OPAIPA has collected over 25 such cases since the president went to Quezon, Bukidnon to reinstate 650 Manobo families in their ancestral lands.

## **Future Challenges**

Given the many successes of this unique coalition, there are some major organizational and other issues that have to be looked at closely. Thus far, the accomplishments of Tabang Mindanaw have been nothing short of stellar. However, as with all development projects, sustainability of operations is a question that must always be answered. There is a need to ensure that the interventions are carried out consistently and in just as an effective manner as during initial operations when there was heightened awareness of the situation which resulted in relatively easier fund-raising.

Related to the issue of sustainability is the issue of institutionalization. Since there is no formal and legal entity that embodies Tabang Mindanaw, there is the possibility that, when Ambassador Dee does retire, the organization has a chance of retiring with him. Although there are specific benefits derived from the current loose informal set-up, there are also future issues that have to be foreseen in order to ensure that what was started as Tabang Mindanaw will continue to provide the benefits that it currently does

Lastly, although Tabang Mindanaw has achieved so much as it is, the IP population that has been reached is still a relatively small figure compared to the overall number of affected IP communities. This is not to take any credit away from an organization that has done so much, but it is a realization that there is still much work that has to be done. Hence, one of the major challenges of the organization would be for replication in other IP communities, either through their current programs and set-up, or through other means (such as getting into more partnerships). Again, there will be more bridging that needs to be done to achieve this.

## Ambassador Dee -- The Person

Ambassador Dee was born in Tondo, Manila on November 23, 1930. He finished his Bachelors Degree in Business Administration and Economics from the University of the East. Later on, he was bestowed with a Doctor of Humanities degree (Honoris Causa) by Xavier University. In 1986, after the people power revolution that overthrew President Marcos, President Aquino assigned Ambassador Dee to be her official representative in the Vatican. He is currently the president of the Family Rosary Crusade and heads the Assisi Development Foundation.

Over the years, Ambassador Dee has been, in his words, “blessed with the opportunity to participate in several programs of bridging.” These have been a wide range of programs which include governance policy advocacy. The Embassy at the Holy See, headed by Ambassador Dee, was successful in advocating for a Christian development philosophy of the Aquino Government that was promulgated by President Cory Aquino during her state visit to Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. The government defined its principles of development as (1) founded on material and spiritual development, (2) promotes solidarity of labor and capital, (3) preserves Filipino traditional values, (4) promotes free enterprise towards the common good, profit with social justice and responsibility.

As Chair of the Government Peace panel, Ambassador Dee was in the center of **Peace negotiations** to bridge ideological and political differences between the National Democratic Front, the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New Peoples Army, with the Philippine government and civil society. This resulted in a general amnesty that was granted to 11,000 members of the rebel groups who returned to mainstream society.

**Peace advocacy.** As convenor of the National Peace Conference, Ambassador Dee brought together all sectors of civil society to formulate a common vision of peace and to pursue a common agenda for peace in relating to the government as well as rebel groups.

**Social reform.** Ambassador Dee was the convenor of the Social Pact, advocated by Pope John Paul II, which worked with the Office of the President to produce a Social Reform Agenda that was later on adopted and pursued by the Ramos Government under the Social



Reform Council. This process has now been institutionalized with the creation of the National Anti-Poverty Commission.

**Social organization.** Ambassador Dee participated in the conceptualization and organization of the following foundations/associations:

- Assisi Development Foundation
- Tabang Mindanaw
- Bishops-Businessmen's Conference
- Punla Foundation, to provide micro-finance technologies and training for institutional providers of social credit to the poor
- CASAGAL (Court Appointed Special Advocates and Guardians Ad Litem), an organization of family court judges, human rights lawyers, NGOs, and volunteers, for the protection and legal defense of children in conflict with the law, either as offenders or victims.

**Policy mediation.** As mediator in resolving the policy conflict of the government with the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, Ambassador Dee helped resolve the policy differences in population and family planning that were seriously eroding relations between the two parties. A common position was attained and approved by both principals to guide the policy discussions and formulations at the Cairo Conference. Ambassador Dee also mediated between the Bishops of Mindanao with President Joseph Estrada on issues such as the plight of the victims of armed conflict between government and the MILF.

**Bridging warring factions.** Through Tabang Mindanaw's Relief and Rehabilitation and Bamboo for Peace programs, bringing all the warring factions together (Armed Forces of the Philippines, MNLF, MILF, and local government) and having them all agree to respect and support the "sanctuaries of peace" of the tri-people communities being rehabilitated by Tabang Mindanaw.

Ms. Milet Mendoza, a long-time senior staff of Ambassador Dee, noted that during this author's interview with the latter, this author would not be able to get anything about the personal life and background of the ambassador. "His humility is too great for him to even discuss those personal things with other people, he is a man of so much compassion, a man of principle, a man of faith, and a selfless giver," she said.

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