

Unveiling the aspirations of the Ati people in Panay Island: A transformative needs assessment



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Abstract This paper examined the current state of the Ati people in Panay Island and assessed their needs and aspirations. It argued that conducting a needs assessment of these indigenous people is both important and transformative as it contributes to broader social equity in the Philippine society and inspires public awareness of the conditions faced by the marginalized sectors, particularly the indigenous communities. Such needs assessment also helps ensure that development efforts by the government and other stakeholders are equitable, effective, sustainable, and culturally sensitive. Rapid ethnography was employed as research design, with interviews, observations, and focus group discussions as the primary research instruments. The findings underscored the multidimensional challenges that the Ati people faced, which encompass four major themes, namely: 1) cultural preservation and education, 2) land rights and environmental stewardship, 3) economic opportunities and livelihood, and 4) community cohesion, governance, and policy support. The study concludes that a comprehensive needs assessment of the Ati people in Panay Island is both necessary and transformative, as it reveals their multidimensional challenges and enduring resilience. Despite systemic barriers, the Ati people actively preserve their culture, advocate for land rights, protect the environment, and pursue sustainable livelihoods. However, gaps in organizational capacity highlight the need for holistic, culturally sensitive government and stakeholder interventions to support their aspirations, strengthen self-determination, and promote inclusive social equity. The study recommends integrated, rights-based, and culturally sensitive interventions that strengthen education, secure ancestral land rights, support sustainable livelihoods, build indigenous governance capacity, combat discrimination, and promote participatory, community-centered development for the Ati people in Panay Island.

Keywords: community-based development, cultural preservation, social equity, sustainable livelihoods

1. Introduction

Some of the indigenous peoples that have been directly impacted by the advent of globalization are the Ati people in Panay Island in the Visayas region of the Philippine archipelago. Known to be the earliest inhabitants of Panay Island (Prill-Brett, 2007), the Ati people belong to the Negrito ethnic group, a group of indigenous peoples characterized by distinct physical features, such as small stature, curly hair, and dark skin. Traditionally, Prill-Brett further notes, the Ati people are semi-nomadic, living in harmony with nature and relying heavily on fishing, hunting, gathering, and slash-and-burn farming for subsistence. However, in recent years, as Dressler (2006) contends, the Ati people have been forced to relocate from their ancestral land, often to less fertile or less accessible areas to make way for urban development, agricultural expansion, and ecotourism.

Despite their historical significance, the Ati people have been facing numerous socio-economic and cultural challenges over time. According to Petrola et al. (2020), the Ati people have been severely marginalized because of the intrusion and penetration of economic globalization into their communities. In fact, marginalization, land dispossession, and limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities have significantly impacted their quality of life. More specifically, Petrola et al. note that the already impoverished Ati people have also experienced psychological and physical abuses brought about by militarization and extra-judicial killings. Indeed, the social condition of the Ati people in Panay Island in the face of economic globalization has been alarming; yet studies show that little attention has been given to these marginalized communities. It is for this reason that this paper examined the current state of the Ati people in Panay Island and assessed their needs and aspirations. It argued that conducting such a needs assessment is important and transformative as it offers numerous benefits (Diori, 2021; Beran, 2015; Roysse et al., 2016). First, such needs assessment offers a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental challenges that the Ati people face daily. By identifying their specific needs, government agencies and NGOs can better understand the Ati people's aspirations and design targeted interventions that meaningfully improve their well-being, including programs that address gaps in healthcare services (Bani, 2008; Eldridge et al., 2011).

The assessment also provides the Ati people with a proper platform to actively participate in decision-making and development initiatives by articulating their deep-seated claims and expectations. Indeed, this participatory approach ensures that their voices are heard (Chen, 2015). Moreover, the needs assessment helps ensure that development initiatives are inclusive and culturally sensitive (Dean & Ripley, 2016; Altschuld & Watkins, 2014). This is because a clear understanding of the Ati people’s traditions, beliefs, and practices prevents the imposition of inappropriate solutions and encourages community engagement in development programs. In Addition, given the Ati people’s continuing struggle for land rights recognition, the assessment also underscores the importance of protecting ancestral domains by generating evidence that supports advocacy efforts and stronger policy implementation (Choi & Park, 2024).

Finally, the process strengthens collaboration among government agencies, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations by establishing a shared framework for action, reducing duplication of efforts, and promoting the efficient use of resources. Indeed, by bringing attention to the Ati people’s plight, this study can contribute to broader social equity in the Philippine society and inspire public awareness of the current conditions of the marginalized sectors, particularly the indigenous peoples.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Instruments

This study employed rapid ethnography as its research design. Rapid ethnography is a research approach that involves conducting ethnographic research within a shorter timeframe than traditional ethnography (Vindrola-Padros, 2021). According to Vindrola-Padros, rapid ethnography is useful in cases where the researchers do not have the luxury of time to immerse themselves fully in the community for extended periods, often spanning months or even years, as is expected in traditional ethnographic studies. While efficient, it cannot be denied that rapid ethnography has several limitations. For example, its condensed time frame may prevent deep immersion, which may potentially overlook subtle cultural nuances and long-term social dynamics. Data collection may also be less comprehensive, which increases the risk of researcher bias and limits the generalizability of findings (Aquil et al., 2023). Aquil et al., however, maintained that these limitations can be addressed by combining multiple data collection methods, such as interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, and triangulating findings across different sources and participants. Moreover, engaging local collaborators or cultural insiders can provide contextual insights, which ensures a more nuanced and accurate interpretation of the community studied. This study then ensured a comprehensive and triangulated approach to data gathering, which utilized three research instruments, namely: 1) interviews, 2) observations, and 3) focus group discussions (FGD). The interviews provided personal insights from the Ati people; the observations captured the contextual realities; and the focus group discussion highlighted the collective aspirations and needs of the Ati people.

2.2. Research Locale and Participants

The locale of this study includes four areas in Panay Island, namely: the City of Iloilo, Province of Iloilo; Municipality of Tobias Fornier, Province of Antique; the Municipality of Dumarao, Province of Capiz; and the Municipality of Jordan, Province of Guimaras. The figure 1 below showed the spot map of the research locales. Data gathering was conducted in these locales four times in 2024: first, on January 16-19, 2024; second, on May 5-11, 2024; third, on June 25-29, 2024; and fourth, on October 15-19, 2024.



Figure 1 Spot map of Panay Island showing the research locales prepared using materials from Google Maps.



The participants of this study consist of a diverse range of Ati people from various backgrounds and demographics, carefully selected from different Ati communities across Panay Island to represent the target population of interest. But to guarantee a comprehensive understanding of the Ati people's aspirations, needs, as well as challenges, purposive sampling was employed in selecting 25 participants (five from each locale) who have direct experience or knowledge related to the phenomenon under investigation. It must be noted that, as Ahmed (2025) argues, in qualitative research with ethnographic design, the focus is on obtaining deep, contextualized insights rather than achieving statistical generalization; hence, a smaller, purposively selected sample of 25 participants allows for in-depth exploration of experiences, beliefs, and practices. For Ahmed, this size is sufficient to capture diverse perspectives within the community while maintaining manageable data for detailed observation, interviews, and analysis. The participants included five tribal leaders who serve as custodians of their traditions and customs.

The rest of the participants included members of the Ati households, consisting of elders, adults, and youths to capture intergenerational perspectives. Women, who were often viewed as pivotal in community and family dynamics, were purposefully included to explore gendered experiences and aspirations.

It must be noted that the participants were chosen based on their willingness to share their lived experiences and insights about the social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions that affect their lives and the broader Ati communities. Individuals who do not belong to the Ati communities were excluded to ensure that the study focused solely on authentic voices and experiences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were also assured in accordance with ethical standards in research; hence, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants throughout the research process.

2.3. Data Gathering Procedure

To make sure that the entire data gathering process was both scientifically rigorous, ethically sound, and culturally sensitive, proper protocol were conscientiously followed. Hence, prior to engaging with the participants through interviews, observations, and focus group discussions, specific measures were taken to ensure that the research was conducted in a manner that respected the culture, rights, and dignity of the Ati people.

Firstly, Administrative Order No. 1, Series of 2012 of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), titled "The Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) and Customary Laws (CLs) Research and Documentation Guidelines of 2012" was reviewed. This document provides indigenous scholars and researchers with a comprehensive guide on the procedures for conducting research in indigenous communities in the Philippines. It outlined the necessary steps, including securing an application form, paying the required fees, and submitting all mandated documents to NCIP before entering the communities and collecting data.

Secondly, a preliminary consultation with the NCIP Region VI was conducted to discuss the research objectives, methods, and potential benefits to the Ati communities. This step aimed to guarantee transparency and establish a foundation for mutual understanding and collaboration. During this stage, the research team executed an undertaking in good faith, which affirmed their commitment to abide by the guidelines set forth in the aforementioned Admin Order. A meeting between the researchers and NCIP personnel followed to discuss and prepare the Work and Financial Plan (WFP) in consultation with the Ati elders and leaders. After the WFP was approved, a conference with the members of the Ati communities was held to present the purpose of the research, the methodology that would be employed, and other relevant information including the potential benefits of the research project. Once approval from the Ati communities was secured, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was executed between the researchers and the Ati communities. Identification of participants based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria followed.

Thirdly, interviews with the 20 participants (five from each locale), along with one-on-one interviews with an additional five participants, were conducted. Using an interview guide with open-ended questions in Hiligaynon language, consistency was maintained while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on topics they deemed significant or to share information they considered relevant. The questions focused on key areas, such as health, livelihood, education, cultural preservation, and social inclusion. The interviews were conducted within the Ati community spaces and in settings familiar and comfortable to the participants. With their consent, audio recordings and detailed field notes were taken to preserve the richness of their narratives and capture insights implied in their responses.

Fourthly, the research team engaged in daily activities, events, and interactions within the communities during each visit. They observed both participants and non-participants, and took field notes on behaviors, practices, rituals, communication patterns, and other relevant aspects. The context, setting, and situational factors were also taken into consideration. It must be noted that the research team assumed a reflexive stance throughout the observation process to remain aware of their own biases, assumptions, and positionality as researchers. They also reflected on their role and influence in the field and remained mindful that their presence in the community might influence the way the Ati people in the community interacted with one another.

And finally, a focus group discussion was conducted with eight participants who had the most experience and knowledge of the topic under investigation. The participants were selected from diverse backgrounds, age groups, and genders to ensure

balanced and inclusive representation. The participants were gathered in Iloilo City, as they came from four different remote indigenous communities in Panay Island. A quiet and spacious restaurant in Iloilo City was chosen as the venue to ensure that the participants were comfortable and that the ambiance was conducive for discussion. The questions were framed broadly to encourage participants to share their experiences and opinions while probing questions were used to delve deeper into specific areas of interest. A facilitator was assigned so that the discussion proceeded in an orderly, interactive, and participatory manner. A recorder was also designated to guarantee that all important data and insights were captured during the discussion.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in identifying, organizing, and interpreting the patterns and themes that emerged from the data collected through interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. The thematic analysis model of Naeem et al. (2023) was followed closely, with slight modifications to account for the nuances in rapid ethnography. The process involved ten phases, explained below.

The first phase was familiarization with the data. A meticulous verbatim transcription of the interview recordings was carefully prepared and cross-checked against the original recordings to ensure accuracy. Field notes were reviewed and organized. To preserve the authenticity of the data, the translations from Hiligaynon to English were prepared. The research team then immersed itself in the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and field notes. This iterative process was necessary as it allowed the researchers to identify initial patterns and make meaningful sense of the Ati people's narratives (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

The second phase focused on generating initial codes. In this stage, the data were systematically examined to identify significant features relevant to the research objectives and questions. With the use of both inductive and deductive approaches, codes were assigned to specific segments of the text. It must be noted that manual coding was done by highlighting and writing notes on the text to identify potential patterns.

In the third phase, broader themes were identified by clustering related codes. At this point, raw data were transformed into meaningful patterns that captured the essence of the Ati people's aspirations and needs. Overlapping and redundant themes were merged, and sub-themes were created to enhance the depth of the analysis.

The fourth phase involved reviewing themes. This process required examining the themes against the coded data as well as the entire dataset to ensure that they were representative and coherent (Hopwood, 2007). Hence, themes that lacked sufficient support were redefined; others were discarded.

In the fifth phase, themes were clearly defined and named. Each theme was identified and accompanied by detailed descriptions, which included outlining its scope, significance, and relationship to the research objectives.

The sixth phase involved interpreting and contextualizing themes. Here, the themes were synthesized and situated within the broader socio-cultural and historical context of the Ati people.

The seventh phase centered on triangulation to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Data from the interviews, observations, and focus group discussions were cross-verified and corroborated with observational insights about the Ati people's needs and aspirations. Discrepancies were identified to understand diverse perspectives and experiences within the Ati communities. As Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, this process truly helped reduce biases and resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and aspirations of the Ati people.

The eighth phase involved visual representation. A table was created to illustrate the relationships between and among themes and sub-themes in the study. The intention was to make complex ideas easier to understand and communicate.

The ninth and final phase focused on community validation. Here, preliminary findings were shared with some members of the Ati communities to ensure that the themes and interpretations truly resonated with their perspectives and experiences. Feedback from the Ati people was then integrated into the final analysis, reinforcing the credibility and cultural relevance of the research findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The data analysis yielded four themes: 1) cultural preservation and education, 2) land rights and environmental stewardship, 3) economic opportunities and livelihood, 4) community cohesion, governance, and policy support. The Table 1 below illustrates these themes, including the sub-themes.

3.1. Cultural Preservation and Education

The first theme that emerged in the data analysis is cultural preservation and education, which, as the study revealed, lies at the core of the Ati people's needs and aspirations. As a matter of fact, cultural preservation and education reflect their deep connection to ancestral traditions and collective heritage. In Dumarao, Capiz, for instance, data showed that the community focused its initiatives on training the younger generation in weaving techniques to improve both the craftsmanship and marketability of their products. As one participant said, "*Amo ni ang ipa intindi sa aton mga kabataan nga trainingon naton para sa weaving* (We need to let our children understand that we have to train them in weaving)". This finding aligns

with previous studies in indigenous culture and education. For example, Lam et al. (2020) argue that indigenous knowledge systems are key to maintaining ecological sustainability and understanding cultural education. In addition, Druker-Ibanez and Caceres-Jensen (2022) contend that education is crucial in ensuring that indigenous youth inherit the knowledge and skills necessary to sustain cultural practices.

Table 1 Themes and sub-themes drawn from the data analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes
Cultural Preservation And Education	Revitalization of traditional practices Language preservation Scholarships and access to quality education
Land Rights And Environmental Stewardship	Ancestral domain recognition Sustainable land use Community-led conservation efforts
Economic Opportunities And Livelihood	Entrepreneurial ventures Employment access Agricultural support
Community Cohesion, Governance, And Policy Support	Strengthening indigenous governance Partnership with NGOs and stakeholders Addressing issues of discrimination

While this initiative may initially appear to fall under the theme of “economic opportunities and livelihood,” the findings indicate that this is more closely tied to cultural preservation and education. This is because for the Ati people in Panay Island, their work and livelihood are direct reflections of their identity as indigenous people. In fact, the Ati people in Dumarao, Capiz emphasized how their cultural practices heavily rely on the preservation of natural resources, like *nito* fibers - a climbing fern native to the Philippines valued for its durability and pliability and commonly used as a primary raw material for traditional crafts such as baskets and bags (Pazon & Del Rio, 2018). As one participant said, “*Ang amo na kultura naga sandig sang nito...kun wala ang nito indi namin ma obra ang amin kultura* (Our culture [weaving] is dependent on *nito*...without *nito*, we can’t practice our culture).” Niigaaniin and MacNeill (2022) underpin this interconnectedness between indigenous culture and natural resources by arguing that indigenous culture and natural resources have a close affinity and that indigenous cultural activities are performed always in direct interaction with nature.

The case of the Ati people in Jordan, Guimaras is telling. Their problem about education is classic, which is also true to other Ati communities across Panay Island. The findings revealed the bitter challenges that they faced, particularly in accessing education and employment opportunities. Indeed, financial constraints emerged as the main barrier to education, with many families unable to support their children’s schooling. It is worth noting that Ati students are eager to study; however, financial difficulties bar many of them from pursuing education, especially at the high school and tertiary levels.

While poverty as a hindrance to education was common among the Ati communities in Panay Island, one defining educational need for the Ati people in Hamtic, Antique is the need for the establishment of the School of Living Traditions. Bayi Delia, one of the female Ati tribal leaders in Hamtic, Antique, who allowed her name to be mentioned, explained that their community is working to revitalize their traditional practices and preserve their language and cultural spaces through the establishment of the School of Living Traditions. She said that they already organized the school informally, but they lacked funding for the construction of a physical facility and the purchase of instructional materials, tools, and equipment.

These findings clearly demonstrate the urgent need for the government to prioritize cultural preservation and education as integral components of social policy and program development. This is because cultural preservation and education are foundational to the Ati people’s identity, not to mention that they may directly influence broader socio-economic outcomes (Indigenous Environment Network, 2020) . In fact, the sustainability of traditional practices, such as weaving, cannot be achieved through skills transfer alone; it requires secure access to essential natural resources, which highlights the inseparable link between cultural continuity and environmental stewardship (Bell et al., 2025). Moreover, persistent financial barriers to education systematically limit human capital development, restrict future opportunities, and reinforce cycles of poverty. Therefore, targeted interventions, such as funding the School of Living Traditions, providing scholarships, and ensuring resource accessibility, are not optional but necessary strategies to strengthen cultural resilience, enhance educational outcomes, and promote sustainable, culturally grounded development for the Ati communities.

3.2. Land Rights and Environmental Stewardship

Land rights and environment stewardship constitute another recurring theme that emerged from the data analysis. As mentioned previously, the Ati people are known to be among the earliest inhabitants of Panay Island; and as historically nomadic people, they have roamed Panay Island for centuries to gather, hunt, and practice slash-and-burn farming for their



sustenance. Due to colonization during the Spanish and American period, as well as the more recent intrusion of globalization into their spaces, the Ati people were displaced and pushed to the peripheries, resulting in the loss of access to their ancestral domains. Indeed, in the contemporary society, the Ati people have become “squatters” on the very land they once called their own. Even with the passage of the Indigenous Peoples’ Right Act (IPRA) in 1997, which guarantees their rights to ancestral domains, they continue to struggle for the recognition of their land rights. In fact, all Ati communities in Panay Island, except the ones in Boracay, have yet to be issued a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT).

The misrecognition of the Ati people’s rights to ancestral domain has been compounded by the apparent lack of political support or even indifference on the part of the local government units to the plight of the Ati people. For instance, there was an incident in Hamtic, Antique where the government bulldozed and destroyed heedlessly Ati houses along the riverbanks in the name of development.

In terms of environmental stewardship, the data revealed that the preservation and proper management of their natural resources is another central concern of the Ati people. This is because their livelihoods depend entirely on raw materials like *nito* fibers, herbal plants, and wild root crops. Although they have practiced slash-and-burn farming for ages, the Ati people have now abandoned this practice, acknowledging that it destroys the environment. In fact, the Ati people in Jordan, Guimaras believe that slash-and-burn farming destroyed vital forest resources. As one Ati participant explained, “*Oo ang gakaingin sang tawo makapatay, sang pagguba sang kakaho yan* (Yes, slash-and-burn farming by people can kill [the environment], as it destroys the trees)”. Meanwhile in Dumarao, Capiz, the Ati community there has advocated for ordinances to protect their natural resources from exploitation. This strongly supports McLeod et al. (2024) claim, the indigenous peoples are the best stewards of the environment.

Integral to environmental stewardship is the Ati people’s call for the preservation and conservation of their herbal plants, such as *montawi* and *bita*. While they have long been recognized as best stewards of their environment, they have become unable to perform this role lately because they no longer own the land they inhabit. Being peace-loving people, the Ati often chose to relocate when private companies developed indigenous lands, transforming these lands into sugarcane plantations or constructing telecommunication towers therein. One participant in Dumarao, Capiz expressed this sentiment poignantly: “*Ari sir tungod kay usa ako ka elder dia dili kaayo mi ka protekta sir tungod kay ang ancestral domain na belong tua sa ilaha ginatapas ni nila ang mga nito kay wala man kani gamit sa ilaha* (Here, sir, since I am one of the elders, we cannot fully protect it, sir, because the ancestral domain belongs to them. They are cutting down the nito vines because they find no use for them)”.

Given these findings, it can be argued that recognizing and protecting the Ati people’s ancestral land rights is not only a matter of social justice but also essential for sustainable environmental stewardship. It must be noted that historical displacement, ongoing misrecognition of their ancestral domains, and lack of political support have undermined their ability to manage natural resources, which in turn threatened both their livelihoods and cultural identity. As Nitah (2021) argues, the indigenous peoples, when given secure access to land, can actively conserve forests, herbal plants, and other critical resources, an active participation which demonstrate their capacity as responsible environmental stewards. For this reason, policy and development interventions must prioritize the issuance of Certificates of Ancestral Domain Title, enforce protections against land encroachment, and support indigenous-led conservation initiatives to ensure both ecological sustainability and the Ati communities’ socio-economic well-being.

3.3. Economic Opportunities and Livelihood

The data revealed that the Ati people have been facing significant economic and livelihood challenges due largely to their historical marginalization and displacement from ancestral lands. To reiterate, the Ati people traditionally relied on fishing, hunting, and gathering for sustenance. But then again, due to colonization as well as the intrusion and penetration of the forces of economic globalization into their spaces in the forms of land encroachments, deforestation, and development projects, their resources have been greatly diminished, which resulted in difficulties in securing stable sources of income. This has forced the Ati people to engage in low-paying jobs and rely on seasonal work in nearby communities. Their limited access to education and skills training has further compounded their inability to obtain stable and sustainable livelihoods.

In particular, data showed that since weaving is the primary source of income for most Ati people in Panay Island, deforestation and development projects have taken a toll on their economic opportunities and livelihood. These activities have been the main culprits behind the gradual disappearance of their weaving materials, such as *nito* fibers and rattan. As a result, it has become common for Ati weavers in Panay Island to travel to distant mountain areas just to obtain these weaving materials.

On top of this problem is the difficulty the Ati people face in selling their products. In fact, they rely heavily on tourists to buy their products. They do not usually bring their handicrafts to the town market because buyers dictate the price and purchase them at very low rates. One Ati said, “*Tapos kon may mga mahuman man gid kami ang problema gid namon nga dako ang baligyaan bala maam way sang nagabakal kon di may nag abot sa amoa nga bisita nagakalipay kami kon ma baklan kami ti karon dal-on man namon sa ano sa banwa baklon lang sang tag 20 pesos* (And even when we finish making our

products, our biggest problem is finding buyers. Only if visitors come to visit us and buy something, we're happy. But when we take our products to town to sell, they only buy them for only 20 pesos each).

Lack of jobs for their youth is another urgent need that the Ati people face in terms of economic opportunities and livelihood. While many Ati youth have gone to school and finished high school or college, finding employment remains a significant challenge. In fact, several participants appealed to the researchers for assistance in helping their youth secure jobs so that they could have money for food on a regular basis.

As one can see, the Ati people's economic and livelihood challenges are deeply rooted in historical marginalization, land displacement, and ongoing environmental and developmental pressures. In fact, traditional subsistence activities, such as fishing, hunting, and weaving, have been severely disrupted by deforestation, land encroachments, and commercialization, which undermine both income stability and cultural practices. Limited access to education and skills training further exacerbates these vulnerabilities, leaving many Ati people, especially the youth, with few viable employment opportunities. The precarious market for their handicrafts also illustrates systemic inequities, where their labor and cultural products are undervalued. Indeed, these realities clearly demonstrate the urgent need for targeted, culturally sensitive interventions that secure resource access, strengthen market opportunities, and provide employment and skills development for the Ati youth, which in turn ensure that economic initiatives align with both their cultural heritage and sustainable livelihood aspirations.

3.4. Community Cohesion, Governance, and Policy Support

The last theme that emerged is community cohesion, governance, and policy support, particularly in areas that have something to do with strengthening indigenous governance, partnerships with NGOs and stakeholders, and addressing issues of discrimination.

While the Ati people have their own effective ways of managing the environment and resolving internal conflicts, it appears that they lagged when it comes to modern ways of organizational management, especially those involving finances. For example, the Ati people in Jordan, Guimaras, attempted to establish an association so they could properly manage funds, aid, and resources. However, they consistently encountered challenges in terms of leadership. One participant expressed her disappointment with their leaders, who failed to fulfill their functions. In fact, one previous president of the association did not even conduct regular meetings. It turned out, therefore, that some of the urgent needs of the Ati people in terms of community cohesion, governance, and policy support are the establishment of Ati people's association, such as cooperatives, and capacity-building initiatives for community leaders through seminars, trainings, and workshops on leadership principles and processes. As a matter of fact, one participant appealed to the researchers, saying, "*Gusto gyud nako ma boligan nga matindog ang amon nga association* (I wanted [you] to help us create our association)". Another participant said, "*Sir sa tuod lang ang problema sir ang mga opisyaes bara sir way nagatuman sir, halimbawa sa livelihood magkuha ko kinsemil o sige pagkuha nya wala bala sir tali ba ug sa asa bana sang livelihood bana kag sa asa ba* (Sir, in fact, the problem is when our officials weren't following our rules... example, in livelihood, when I loaned 15 thousand pesos or I'll just borrow money from livelihood [cooperative] but these are not properly recorded)." She added: "*Oo sir mao bala sir ang pang governo namo diri sir kinahanglan tuod mga seminar sir* (Yes sir, we have to improve our internal governance through seminar)".

Lastly, the data showed that the Ati people have been facing persistent discrimination. For example, the Ati community in Lanit, Iloilo City, could hardly sell their root crops because, as they said, buyers perceived them as "dirty people". One participant sadly said, "*Gina discriminate kami indi sila mag bakal kay kasi daw madumi ang pagkain kasi ati kami* (We are discriminated, they will not buy [our food products]...they said, our food is dirty because we are Ati)".

Another participant expressed frustration over the discrimination experienced by IP schools. In Panay Island, IP schools are discriminated simply because they are "IP schools". One participant emotionally said, "*Ang akon iya na experience discrimination dalagko gid ang mga na experience nakon ahhh una-una anay dira sa school namon gin tawag ina sya nga aypi school pero that is discrimination naman tungod gin tawag ka nga aypi school* (I have many experiences of discrimination. First is in our school. They call our school an IP school, but that is also discrimination because they call our school an IP school.)"

Finally, it is worth noting that discrimination is also one of the reasons why many Ati youth do not go to school. Some Ati youth attempted to attend school but eventually stopped because they just felt embarrassed or unwelcome in the classroom. In some cases, even some teachers discriminate against them by calling them "Ati" in a derogatory manner.

The above findings clearly indicate that strengthening community cohesion, governance, and policy support is critical for the Ati people's social and economic development. While they possess effective traditional conflict-resolution and environmental management practices, the lack of modern organizational structures, leadership training, and financial management limits their capacity to manage resources and advocate for their needs. Persistent discrimination, whether in markets, schools, or public spaces, further marginalizes the community, which discouraged youth from pursuing education and reinforcing social inequities. With these realities, there is, therefore, an urgent need for interventions that support the establishment of Ati cooperatives, provide leadership and capacity-building programs, and implement anti-discrimination policies. Indeed, this study argues that addressing these gaps is essential not only for the empowerment of the Ati people but also to ensure their meaningful participation in governance and sustainable community development.

4. Conclusions

As already mentioned, the paper examined the current state of the Ati people in Panay Island and assessed their needs and aspirations. Its thesis revolved around the argument that conducting a needs assessment of these indigenous people is both important and transformative, as it contributes to broader social equity in the Philippine society and fosters public awareness of the current state of the marginalized sectors, particularly indigenous peoples. Such needs assessment also helps ensure that development efforts by the government and other stakeholders are equitable, effective, sustainable, and culturally sensitive. The findings underscored the multidimensional challenges that the Ati people face, which encompass four major themes: 1) cultural preservation and education, 2) land rights and environmental stewardship, 3) economic opportunities and livelihood, and 4) community cohesion, governance, and policy support.

One of the significant insights that we can draw from the study is that despite the systemic barriers that hinder the Ati people's development and self-determination, such as poverty and limited access to education, they continue to demonstrate unrelenting determination to preserve and conserve their culture and uphold their identity. In fact, the findings showed that they initiated bold efforts, like the establishment of the School of Living Traditions and training indigenous youths in weaving, which played a pivotal role in sustaining the Ati people's heritage.

Another key insight is that the Ati people are committed not only to securing their future through the struggle for land rights recognition but also to preserving and conserving their environment. Although they have been dispossessed of their ancestral lands, undermining both their cultural and spiritual connection to the land, as well as their role as stewards of the environment, they remain a peace-loving people, conscientiously and patiently advocating for their land rights and the protection of their natural resources.

In terms of economic opportunities and livelihood, one can conclude that the Ati people are persevering and very resourceful. The study showed they lacked employment opportunities and that their handicrafts failed to command fair market prices; yet they continue to make ends meet. As a matter of fact, the Ati communities in Panay Island are gradually but steadily making progress.

Lastly, while the Ati people possess strong internal conflict-resolution skills, they lag behind in terms of organizational practices, such as managing finances and human resources administration. Thus, the study concludes that they need capacity-building initiatives, leadership training, and guidance to strengthen their advocacy efforts and manage their resources effectively.

In the end, despite the strengths and positive traits that the Ati people possess, their current state underscores the need for a holistic and culturally sensitive government intervention to uplift their plight. Indeed, they need financial and moral assistance in their long journey to progress and self-determination.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to safeguard the rights of the Ati people in Panay Island, enhance their well-being, and promote their socio-economic development.

Firstly, in terms of cultural preservation and education. On the one hand, given the vulnerability of the Ati as indigenous and marginalized peoples, providing their youth with scholarships and other forms of financial support at the high school and tertiary level can help alleviate barriers to education. Partnerships with the government and other stakeholders, such as NGOs and people's organizations, play a pivotal role in formally institutionalizing these educational programs. On the other hand, it is also recommended that stakeholders help formalize initiatives that preserve and conserve the culture of the Ati people, most especially the establishment of the School of Living Traditions. This can be achieved by supporting traditional crafts, language programs, and other cultural activities that help secure funding for materials, facilities, and training.

Secondly, in terms of land rights and environmental stewardship. It would greatly help if concerned government agencies expedite the issuance of Certificates of Ancestral Domain Titles (CADTs) for the Ati communities across Panay Island. This should be given priority, considering that allowing the Ati people to have legal ownership of the land they inhabit is a crucial step toward promoting their socio-economic development and well-being. It is also recommended that the Ati people be given an active role in managing and protecting their natural resources. This not only empowers them but also ensures that conservation initiatives directly align with their cultural practices. Moreover, environmental policies of the government should integrate indigenous knowledge to guarantee the Ati people's active and meaningful participation in decision-making processes. The government also needs to prioritize programs that address the displacement of the Ati people.

Thirdly, in terms of economic opportunities and livelihood. To address the economic difficulties that the Ati people regularly experience, it is recommended that they be given access to livelihood opportunities. Since weaving is the primary source of income, establishing markets for Ati handicrafts can help ensure that their products are sold at fair prices, thereby providing a more stable income. It is also recommended that the government, as well as key stakeholders, support this initiative by providing funding for raw material sourcing, as well as implementing skills development programs that are tailored to the needs of the Ati youth.

Fourthly, in terms of community cohesion, governance, and policy support. It would greatly help if the government and NGOs partner with the Ati communities in establishing sustainable associations, such as cooperatives, as well as in providing targeted capacity-building initiatives for the Ati leaders. Leadership training, financial management workshops, and regular community forums can greatly empower the Ati leaders in fulfilling their roles effectively. To address inequality and discrimination, public education campaigns that promote cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, especially in schools, should be conducted regularly.

Finally, for future researchers on the Ati people in Panay Island. It is important to adopt participatory and culturally sensitive approaches to fully understand the specificity and nuances of the Ati people's needs and aspirations. This includes employing mixed methods to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of their experiences. It would also greatly help if future researchers on the Ati people align their findings with recommendations that support the Ati people's needs and aspirations, particularly in areas of sustainable development, self-determination, and equitable integration into broader political and socio-economic frameworks.

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6. Declarations

6.1. Ethical considerations

The ethical aspects of this research have been conducted according to the guidelines established by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). The NCIP has provided a Certificate of Precondition, Control No. R67-2025-07-050, prior to conducting the data collection. The researchers respected the tradition and customary laws of the Indigenous Peoples involved in the research, followed the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) principles throughout the study, and handled the data collection and analysis with full respect to the Indigenous Peoples' cultural traditions and customs. The participants were voluntary in their participation; their anonymity was guaranteed; and cultural sensitivity and ethical integrity guided the research.

6.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that the generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool ChatGPT was used exclusively for language editing and grammatical improvement. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, study design, data analysis, data interpretation, results, conclusions, and recommendations of the manuscript. Full responsibility for the content rests solely with the authors.

6.3. Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that they have no conflict of interest. The funding agency had no part in the study design, data collection and analysis, and manuscript preparation or publication.

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