



**BUKIDNON TRIBAL YOUTH AMBASSADORS**

**DARE TO TRUST**

# **SARI-SARI STORE**



# WHO WE ARE

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**Bukidnon Tribal Youth Ambassadors (BTYA)** is an Indigenous Youth-Led organization that is passionately committed to advocating for the development and empowerment of Indigenous youth and indigenous young women in our province. We strive to address critical areas such as education, healthcare, environmental protection, cultural preservation, peace and security, governance, economic challenges and the fight against indigenous young women abuses and inequalities.



**AHDEL LANTONG AGSINAO**  
Provincial President  
Ilangtungen-Kirinteken Manobo Tribe



**LOVELY JEAN BAGNA**  
Provincial Vice President  
Pulangiyen-Kirinteken Manobo Tribe



**CELESTE BAGNA**  
Provincial Secretary  
Pulangiyen-Kirinteken Manobo Tribe



**CERINO SAWIT JR.**  
Provincial Treasurer  
Ilangtungen Manobo Tribe



**DIANA ROSE LABAWAN**  
Provincial Auditor  
Pulangiyen-Kirinteken Manobo Tribe



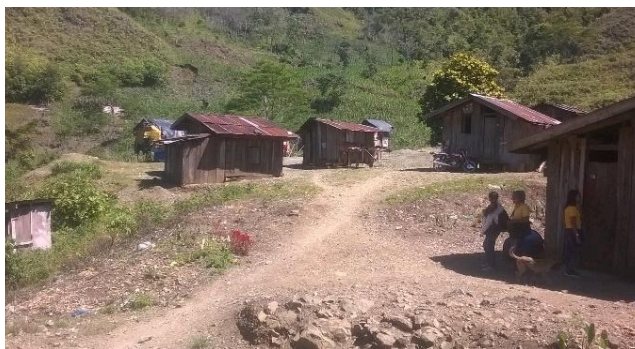
## INTRODUCTION

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The relaxing feeling that the lush, green trees give off betrays the reality of the lives we lead as indigenous people in Bukidnon, Mindanao. In the quietness that comes with the remoteness of being in the Southern Philippines, the challenges we face make it seem that the rest of the world has forgotten about us.

Each day we struggle with fighting for our rights, fair treatment, or at the very least, to be given the simple dignity of living peacefully.

In an ideal world, one that is just and fair, these should be given to us indigenous peoples automatically. We have struggled for so long just to keep our identities and culture intact, playing the role of custodians of traditions passed down through generations. But as years go by, we do not just only face threats against the very existence of our culture, but our own safety and welfare too.



Government services do not reach our communities since we live far removed from the centers of power. It is normal to see families struggle to make ends meet, foraging for whatever they can find to put food on the table, or doing anything to ensure that no one goes to sleep hungry.

Our days are spent walking on unpaved roads to find the nearest source of water. Our nights are for dreaming of a better life, while in a literal darkness due to lack of electricity.



The youth are the most prized members of any indigenous community. They are the ones we see who will continue and preserve our culture, the ones who will ensure that generations to come will remember that we existed, no matter how hard we have to fight for it. Their important role in our future is so important and we never falter in reminding them of this.

But they too face challenges that no child should ever experience, especially in supposedly safe spaces like schools. All these prove to be too much for children. Many of them go through an identity crisis, refusing to be identified as members of our indigenous community. The youth that we hoped would preserve our future turn their back to our culture and tradition.

And we do not blame them. Imagine just wanting to go to school and learn, but circumstances that are out of your control hinder you from doing so. Many of our indigenous youth are excluded from welfare and scholarship programs that could otherwise improve their lives. Their physical appearances are criticized and discriminated against. They are called names – dark-skinned, smelly, curly-haired, or just downright idiots.

Women do not escape the same discrimination our children face. Justice seems to be a distant dream for many victims of abuse. Our tribal leaders, the ones supposed to promote and guard us from harm, are the very ones who perpetuate the cycle of violence, failing to protect the women who seek their protection. These are linked to the lack of women representation in the council that makes the decisions as part of indigenous governance, making the issues of women seldom heard in places of power.

We acknowledge how daunting these challenges are. We understand that these are not just simple issues that we should just ignore, swept under the rug, never to be brought up again. The fact that these occupy our every waking moment makes it all the more important for us to fight for ourselves and for our rights.

But what do we get in return? Death threats, harassment, and more discrimination. We are labeled as communist sympathizers, or sometimes even communist rebels, exposing us to the dangers that come with being tagged as such. There are many of our brothers and sisters from other indigenous groups who have been killed or arrested after being tagged as communist rebels. There exists a cloud of violence above us, and we feel like we're just waiting for it to fall down on us.

All these just because we want to fight for the most basic rights. But the very fact that these are basic rights makes it more important to continue to fight. To be silent is to allow our identity and culture to slip through the cracks and out of our hands. We do this as we acknowledge that this fight is not just for us, but also for the younger generations that should come of age in a world that recognizes their worth and hears their voices.

At the end of the day, our indigenous community in Bukidnon just want to live with dignity, to be seen and respected without violence, and to be given the same opportunities as other Filipinos. This is a struggle that we cannot afford to lose.





## FROM PLANS TO ACTIONS

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Our voices matter in our fight for our rights, no matter how small your voice is. But we acknowledge that standing up alone against the powers that be can be very dangerous, especially in the culture of violence that dominates the Philippines. That is why we highlight the importance of working together as an indigenous community.

As Budkinon Tribal Youth Ambassadors (BTYA), we do our part by establishing efficient systems that could help in collectively addressing challenges faced by communities. We emphasize the importance of grassroots organizing and the role each individual plays in ensuring that indigenous rights are respected. In doing so, we tap the individual strength of each member and point out how these contribute to achieving the goals that these communities want to achieve.



For example, we want to prevent the continued abuse and discrimination against the indigenous youth and women, so we make sure that they know their rights and other important laws in order for them to know what to do in case they find themselves in these situations. One of the important initiatives that we've done is to empower women to file cases to seek justice against gender-based violence.



One key issue that we are also confronting is the impact of climate change. Our indigenous history shows how closely woven the environment – forests, mountains, and the trees – into our lives as indigenous peoples. The environment is the bearer of our needs and the giver of comfort in times of troubles. It is the gift that keeps on giving, even if the rest of the world turns their back on us. As climate change continues to worsen, we see it fit to educate ourselves on ways to handle not just the impact on the environment but also our lives.



## TANGIBLE PROJECT, TANGIBLE IMPACT

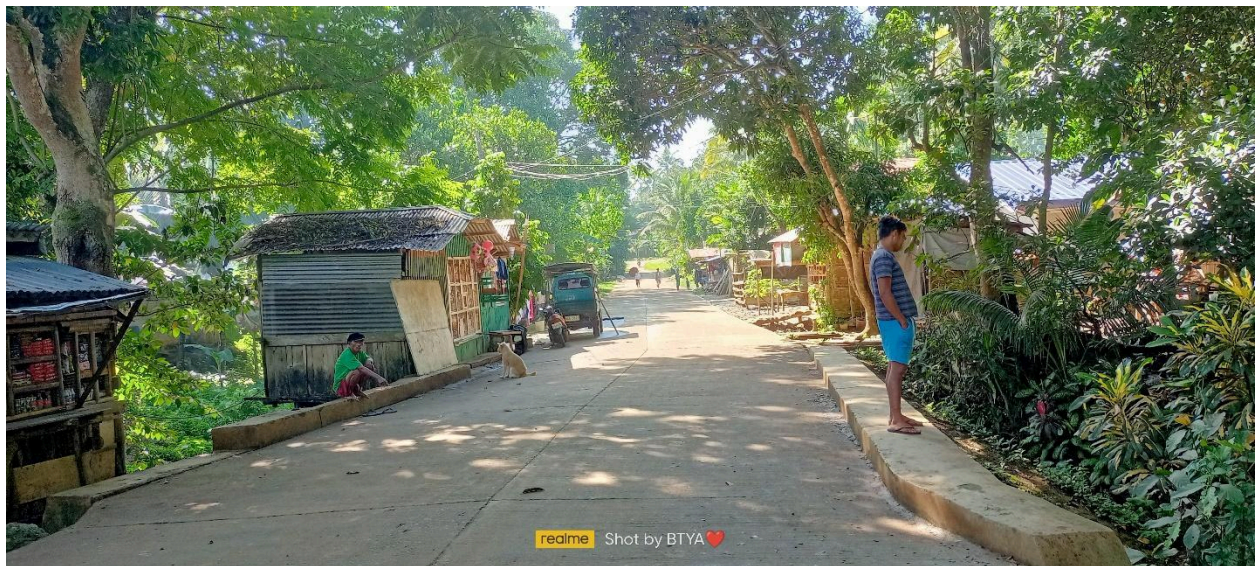
We are confident that the programs and projects that we implement as part of BTYA have done a lot to address the existing challenges in our communities. But while these are implemented voluntarily and from the bottom of our hearts, it is a reality that we need to accept that doing so also requires resources, particularly funding.

As community organizers, it is important for us to find a sustainable solution for this problem. We cannot always rely on the good graces of donors or people in our own communities who donate small amounts. While these are most always welcomed, we know that they too have to spend on themselves in order to survive.

That is why we decided to start a small *sari-sari* (convenience) store under the Dare to Trust program, aided by LILAK. This livelihood program came from the shared experiences of BTYA members whose childhoods were spent manning some stores that helped our families survive day-to-day.



While we see how a store as a livelihood can ensure steady income, we also think that having a sari-sari store could improve our relations with our community because of our daily interactions with other indigenous peoples. Not a day goes by that we are not able to talk to residents where they share their thoughts on our projects, the issues faced in our areas, or even just to catch up with how things are doing in their lives.



The sari-sari store that we were able to start under the Dare to Trust program has become a community point of interest, serving not just the financial needs to fund our projects but also helps with organizing other indigenous peoples.

But running a small store is not a walk in the park. It comes with its own set of challenges that allows us to think and implement creative solutions that in turn help us thrive. For example, our shelves are always stocked with different products to ensure that we stand out among other stores. We've sold not just food and vegetables, but also dry goods like school supplies, toys, and even digital services like mobile payment and cellphone loading.

We have ventured into expanding our inventory because we strive to be the one-stop shop for the needs of the community. But we also wanted to not just offer the goods they need, but also the important interaction that could improve one's life outlook. We greet every customer with a smile, a good attitude, and a kind of service that is honest and credible, one that prioritizes their welfare and needs.



For example, we never tell anyone that we do not carry the goods they are looking for. Instead, we just note their request and just restock as soon as possible. Our prices are affordable, not just to stand out among competitors but also to make sure that indigenous peoples who have not that much money can buy what they need anytime. Having affordable prices allows us to not tolerate customers – even friends and family – from getting debts from our stores, since this could affect its financial health.



Running a sari-sari store has taught us invaluable lessons when it comes to shared responsibilities among BTYA members. Since we take turns managing the store, we have learned to discuss among ourselves how to balance this with working with our own organization. We now plan to hire a member of our indigenous community to help us man the store when we cannot do it. This means that the sari-sari store will not just only benefit the BTYA programs, but also give livelihood to indigenous peoples.

There are a lot of challenges. And the past year that we've run the sari-sari store has proven the importance of adapting to changes to address these issues. Despite these, the BTYA is committed to improving our sari-sari store. After all, its impact is far wider than just monetary gain for the organization, but it is the life and soul of our programs that aim to improve the lives of indigenous peoples.

