

Locking down Lumad Education: Schools under Attack amid a Pandemic

Save Our Schools Network

The struggle for land and life

For the indigenous peoples of the Philippines, education is an instrument of liberation, one that has always been withheld from them by the state. The alternative tribal schools of the Mindanaoan Lumad reclaim this democratic right. What began as basic literacy and numeracy learning centers evolved into a movement for the ancestral land now under siege amid a worsening health crisis.

Comprised of eighteen non-Muslim ethnic groups in Mindanao, the Lumad spearheaded the cultivation of such schools into full-fledged institutions that reshape “mainstream” government-sanctioned education through an indigenous framework, which espouses nationalism, scientific criticality, and a strong community-orientation. To put simply, their school curricula, pulling together academics, agriculture, and health education, proudly contribute to the indigenous movement for self-determination over their *yutang kabilin* (ancestral land).

Before, only one out of ten Lumad children knew how to read, write, and count. This made way for corporations, in collaboration with state agencies, to trick elders and leaders into signing contracts that vend parcels of the ancestral domain, purportedly protected by the state’s Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA). To combat the alarming incidence of illiteracy and its dangerous consequences,

religious groups, along with human rights organizations and IP advocates, built community schools where Lumad people of all ages could learn. Soon, the communities helmed their continued establishment and development and, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, worked toward the legal recognition of alternative tribal schools.

Contrary to allegations made by certain state agencies that Lumad schools teach its students rebellion, academic subjects in these schools, in fact, follow the prescribed basic education curricula mandated by the Department of Education (DepEd). Teachers and students, however, creatively reimagine traditional pedagogical practices and learning outcomes to express and respond to the needs of their tribes, communities, and movement. Through this model, indigenous lifeways, ecological knowledge, and community organizing are syncretized as foundations of knowledge production.

Teaching without schools

“Magbubukas na ng klase whatever form it is,” insisted DepEd Secretary Leonor “Liling” Brionoes. Teachers, parents, and students worried about the inaccessibility of online learning facilities such as WiFi routers, laptops, and printers for themselves and many families in impoverished communities and far-off reaches in the country, and until now, the education sector is scrambling to find a stable internet connection—whether it be atop a mountain or in the next barrio—just to conduct or attend classes.

Lumad schools face a different problem. We are running out of schools to teach. A few months into what becomes the longest pandemic lockdown in the world, DepEd ordered the closure of the Community Technical College of Southeastern Mindanao, Inc. (CTCSM), adding to the 163 Lumad school campuses shut down in

the last four years of President Rodrigo Duterte's ruthless crusade against marginalized peoples.

Given the Lumad's staunch pro-environmental commitment to defend their *yutang kabilin*, they have become targets of violence. "Umalis kayo diyan. Sabihin ko diyan sa mga Lumad ngayon, umalis kayo diyan. Bobombahan ko 'yan. Isali ko 'yang mga istruktura ninyo," [Leave. I'm telling those in the Lumad schools now, get out. I'll bomb you. I'll include your structures] Duterte announced publicly, peddling a pernicious lie that Lumad schools are teaching students to rebel. Indeed, they do—that is, if defending their homes, protecting the local ecology, and struggling for the continuity of their tribes' bloodlines be tagged as "rebellion."

Since their inception, the operation of these schools has already been continuously disrupted by such violence. The Duterte regime saw the fulfillment of the dictator's orders. We in the Save Our Schools Network—a campaign alliance for the right to education of indigenous Lumad children—have collected data and narratives detailing the rising number of attacks, child rights violations, and the use of schools for military purposes that have effectively denied and continues to deny education from almost 4,000 Lumad children. These attacks forcibly evacuate Lumad communities out of their ancestral domains.

According to our data from 2019, around 13,000 indigenous persons have been harassed, intimidated, and threatened due to military encampments in their communities and schools as of July 2019, and 2,350 have been hurt and displaced by aerial bombardment while 930 have fallen victim to indiscriminate strafing in the countryside. In 2019, DepEd formally shut down fifty-five Lumad schools in Davao, citing the schools' "noncompliance" with the technical requirements of the Department, an excuse the agency seems to have missed when they openly and gladly granted the tribal schools legality more than a decade ago.

Attacks amid a pandemic

Worsened by draconic “health” measures, the coronavirus pandemic has only levied a bigger burden on indigenous peoples. The health crisis became an excuse to galvanize the crusade to snuff out the thriving Lumad schools in Mindanao.

During the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) imposed by the Philippine government, Lumad communities have been constricted by haphazard policies that limit movement, thus disrupting their lifeways. Securing food and other basic necessities has become a challenge. This has been an especially difficult time for schools that have already been militarized pre-pandemic and those which are in evacuation. Worse is that the state does not seem to care about the welfare of the evacuees and is, in fact, using the pandemic to force the Lumad to return to their still militarized ancestral lands, keeping them in line. The following are some cases of human rights violations recorded by the Save Our Schools Network amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

March 2020. Without shame, government agencies and military elements have instigated attacks right at the onset of the lockdown across the Philippines. On March 15, members of Tinananon Kulamanon Lumadnong Panaghiusa (TIKULPA), a local lumad organization, were forced and summoned by the military who initially pretended they were officials of DSWD. After their arrival, the DSWD denied that they were being called. The military then escorted them as they exited the office and brought them to the main camp of 19th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army (IBPA) near the municipal hall of Arakan, North Cotabato Province. The soldiers forcefully took videos and photos of them branding them as “rebel surrenderees.” Since then until April 1, scores of parents, students, and former students of CTCSM were rounded up in a military camp in Nabunturan, Davao de Oro. At least three

students and two parents were forced to record scripted videos, claiming teachers taught them to handle firearms and other lies. The said videos were later posted on social media.

Only a few days later, the family of a former Salugpongan teacher, composed of four people, was taken by Bagani Forces, a local paramilitary group in Arakan, North Cotabato, to the same military detachment in Sitio Upper Napanlahan, Poblacion Arakan, North Cotabato.

April 2020. CTCSM faced more attacks in the next month. There were three soldiers in full battle gear from the 71st Infantry Battalion who trespassed and entered the school farm of CTCSM on March 31. On April 5, a student of CTCSM, along with his parent, was illegally accosted at a COVID checkpoint by policemen and military elements while he and his mother were on board a vehicle owned by their barangay council. They were brought to a nearby police station and interrogated for six hours; they were threatened not to reenroll in any Lumad school for the upcoming school year.

Moreover, on April 18, Manobo adults from Sitio Laslasakan were brought to Sitio Nasilaban, Barangay Palma Gil, Talaingod, and were coerced and labelled as rebel surrenderees. A total of seventeen individuals from the said community are victims of forced and fake surrenders after soldiers encamped and stayed there since April 1, 2020.

The red-tagging and malicious labelling as rebel surrenderees persisted despite the clamor of the public against poor government measures in handling the pandemic. The new Literacy-Numeracy Coordinator of Rural Missionaries of the Philippines—Northern Mindanao Region (RMP-NMR) Reywynx Morgado received a subpoena on April 22 from Tandag City Office of the Provincial Prosecutor for trumped-up charges of murder along with several individuals, which led to their false branding as rebels.

For the rest of April, these operations extended to other schools. Several graduates of CTCSM were threatened by men identified to be part of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in their different households on April 25. From April 29 to 30, forced and fake mass surrender of parents and teachers of Tri Farmers Program for Community Development (TFPCDI) lumad school in Arakan, North Cotabato.

May 2020. Despite recent protests against Duterte’s draconic responses to the health crisis, the onslaught against tribal schools and communities in the countryside did not falter. On May 1, Ramel Miguel, a former Lumad teacher, and his mother was interrogated and harassed. His mother was brought to the detachment and only returned home a day after the family filed a police blotter report along with few local officials. Besides teachers, parents are also a target as what happened on May 5. A member of the parents and teachers association reported that soldiers aerially bombed a forest cover in Sitio Balukangon, Brgy. Pange, Siayan, Zamboanga del Sur. A wide area of forest cover / ancestral land of Subanen were burned as a result.

On May 6, dangerous disinformation hit social media instigated by none other than the Department of Social Welfare and Development, a government agency that purports to help the unfortunate. DSWD personnel tried to fetch a fifteen-year-old student—“Irish,” she was called—as allegedly requested by her parents who live in Makilala. The school intervened and requested for the parents to come as to verify they are the ones who made the request. It was later learned that there was coercion from the 39th IPBA, as their page announced they “rescued” Irish from the progressive school, tagging her as a “child at risk” as part of their black propaganda against the Lumad movement.

Military attacks and operations continued to disrupt peace as the days went by. On May 10, a Sunday, ten students of the Mindanao

Interfaith Services Foundation, Inc. (MISFI) were rounded up and brought to a daycare center in Barangay New Caridad in Tulunan, North Cotabato. The students, all minors, were left to the care of a person who introduced himself as “Bryan” and a member for the National Taskforce to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). This “Bryan” told the students that he obtained their names and addresses from a list of Lumad school students but decided not to elaborate further. “Bryan” and his team took videos and photos of these children and gave out a “test” on what they are learning in school by making them sing the national anthem and list down national heroes and other general information. They were released after two hours of this interrogation and were warned they might be invited again along with other students. The said men also claimed that they were responsible for the supposed “rescue” of Irish from MISFI, only furthering their crime against minors and indigenous peoples.

Instead of channeling funds to medical and relief services, the month witnessed to how Duterte prioritizes terrorism over his people’s health. On May 12, at around 3 a.m., two bomber planes flew above Diatagon, Lianga, Surigao del Sur, and dropped four bombs. At the same time, five cannons exploded in the same direction. A drone helicopter flew above the area of Diatagon, Lianga, Surigao del Sur, from May 12 to 16. On the last day, a military chopper dropped pamphlets wrapped in plastic, propaganda for the IPs to leave the mountains and save themselves from COVID, in the community of Diatagon, Lianga, Surigao del Sur and in the Alternative Learning Center for Agriculture and Livelihood Development (ALCADEV).

Attacks continued throughout May on different fronts. On May 16, Maricres Pagaran, project coordinator of ALCADEV, was red-tagged in a post of a Facebook page “Kamatuoran.” In that post, her picture was posted and she was tagged as a communist

recruiter. At that time, around thirty-five students and teachers of CTCSM, a community school in Davao de Oro, were forced to leave their campus by armed military, police, paramilitary forces, and representatives from the provincial government unit under Governor Tyrone Uy. Two days after, two men barged into the quarantine facility housing the thirty-five students rescued after being stranded in CTCSM in Davao de Oro.

Around forty military and Philippine National Police (PNP) troops in full battle gear arrived in the Lumad communities of Km. 16 and Han-ayan in Brgy. Diatagon, Lianga, Surigao del Sur, on May 19. The next day, several proceeded to enter the school grounds of the Han-ayan Learning Center run by the Tribal Filipino Program of Surigao del Sur (TRIFPSS) and ALCADDEV and took pictures and videos. Eric Enriquez, a resident of Km. 16, was arrested in the morning of the same day by PNP-Lianga personnel.

June 2020. On June 12, Mongkel Tacalan, sixty-six years old, visited the MISFI Academy in Brgy. Kisanate, Makilala in North Cotabato to fetch his sons aged seventeen and nineteen in light of the lifting of the community quarantine in the Sangani province. MISFI Academy teachers noted that four police officers escorted Tacalan aboard a mobile police vehicle, manned by three other men. One of them was identified to be from the 73rd Alpha Company of the AFP.

Weeks later, on July 17, media in North Cotabato informed the SOS Network that the two Lumad students and their father were being held inside the 39th IBPA camp after they were taken by the police. We fear that they are being intimidated, threatened or, worse, tortured and forced to appear in videos that discredit Lumad schools, same with the previous cases in May.

July 2020. The month of July saw the continued failure of the government in handling the pandemic as Duterte's efforts are directed, it seems, to maligning and violating Lumad communities.

The return of military presence in some communities arose later into the pandemic. On July 14, soldiers marched to Lianga, Surigao del Sur, to threaten teachers and students regarding the closure of ALCADDEV and TRIFPS schools. Teachers were also threatened with imprisonment should they continue teaching indigenous youth.

Conditions at Lianga took a turn for the worse a few days after. At least thirty-seven Lumad families from Sitio Panukmoan and Decoy in Diatagon, Lianga, Surigao del Sur, evacuated to a neighboring community after the bomber planes of the AFP dropped eight bombs near their community at 2:00 a.m. on July 15. Residents, especially the children and elders, were gravely traumatized by the incident. They were still sleeping during when the bombing happened. According to them, they started to hear at least four helicopters, two bomber planes, and two drones hovering around their area as early as 1:00 a.m. Aerial attacks restarted in Lianga since July 8 when the AFP also dropped bombs in nearby town of Tago. On July 9, gunshots from military choppers were also heard.

These attacks happened during a community quarantine, which guaranteed the safety of civilians, and during the government's unilateral ceasefire declaration with the New People's Army (NPA). However, the belligerent state continues to ignore the pleas of the people for access to resources and the right to safety. Instead of helping the people, particularly the already marginalized indigenous peoples, Duterte directs his regime's efforts at a fruitless witch hunt for rebels, involving and harming innocent students.

Pangiyak ki!

To continue the schooling of the Lumad youth, communities, parents, teachers, and advocates mounted the *bakwit* school, a makeshift and mobile learning environment. To "bakwit" is

not merely to evacuate, to cope, or to survive; it means “to fight another day.” More than 3,000 Lumad students disenfranchised by militarization study in these refuge classrooms in Metro Manila and other urban centers. This allows them to expose and protest the situation of alternative tribal schools in Mindanao.

Under the Save Our Schools Network, churches, seminaries, universities, and colleges opened their doors to the transient bakwit school. From 2017 to 2018, and from April 2019 until today, around 700 Lumad students, teachers, and parents from all over Mindanao have already travelled to Manila, mostly by land, to seek justice for human rights violations in the form of attacks against schools, communities, ancestral land, and resources. The evacuation centers in UCCP Haran Center in Davao City and at the Tandag Sports Complex in Surigao del Sur also house bakwit schools to let the Lumad continue their studies.

Locked down by a bloodthirsty regime, the bakwit schools serve as the incubator of the Lumad youth’s dreams to finish their education amid a pandemic.

Constant dialogue with government units and organizations and other forms of militant engagements such as protest actions have been and will be held when possible—following minimum health standards, of course. Lumad schools included in their political campaigns issues faced by other sectors, such as the recent passage of the dangerous Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 in the Philippines, whose provisions render the Lumad, being environmental and human rights defenders, as targets of worse state hostility.

Evacuees in bakwit schools, who cannot go home in Mindanao both because of militarization and the community quarantines across the country, have been involved in activities in the recent months that contribute to their welfare as indigenous students and to their public campaign in general.

Donation drives. Faced with the difficulty of securing basic necessities, the Save Our Schools Network has been organizing donation drives to sustain the operations of bakwit schools. For the first few months of the pandemic, the drives focused on vegetables, fruits, rice, and other healthy food for the evacuees. Toiletries, first aid, and medical kits were also solicited both from drives and institutions and public offices willing to donate. Since July, we have also been encouraging the donation of entertainment, educational, and hobby materials like books and musical instruments to help the children cope with the extraordinary times.

Remedial classes. Before the pandemic hit the Philippines, we had been busy preparing for the moving up ceremonies in Lumad schools and the first ever graduation of Senior high School students in the bakwit schools. All efforts turned out to be for naught when Duterte called for a nationwide lockdown, barring students from finishing the school year and finally going home to the communities they hope to serve once they finish their studies.

Given that the school year has ended and that volunteer teachers cannot enter the school premises of the bakwit schools, remedial classes on literacy and numeracy and intermediate reading comprehension were conducted so that the students could enter the next school year all at the same level. Older students, mostly at the senior high school level, are also assigned to assist younger learners in book reading and subject review activities.

Extracurricular activities. The environment of isolation and the constant news about their families and communities being harassed have posed big challenges to the mental health and welfare of many of the students. Different activities that cultivate skills and hobbies were conducted not only to “distract” the children from emotionally taxing dangers outside the school but also to provide them temporary comfort. These include intramurals-like sports events, beadwork, art-related activities such as drawing and

painting, and learning musical instruments. Internet connection in the bakwit allows for some of the children to contact their parents in Mindanao too.

Psychosocial support. Some students suffered a more alarming deterioration of their mental and emotional health. Their anxieties are mostly directed at the safety of their families and communities, the possibility of going home, and the upcoming school year. To address this, psychosocial support from allied health and children's welfare organizations were conducted, equipping children with the psychosocial knowledge to help themselves and their schoolmates.

Alliance work. Besides psychosocial support, the organizations within and outside the Save Our Schools Network engaged in manifold varied activities that seek to cull donations. These include free film screenings and arts and craft commissions. Students and youth formations also volunteered for the Network, providing writing and graphic design services for the campaigns of the bakwit schools.

Fighting for land and life. If critical indigenous education is seen as a threat to autocracy, then the pandemic and its consequent death toll must be a blessing to Duterte. Despite the numerous attacks committed by a bellicose state, with the AFP, PNP, DepEd, and even DSWD, Lumad refugees in the bakwit school continue to protest human rights violations by virtue of continuing their education.

The bakwit schools in Metro Manila, Cebu, and Davao are in strategic locations to encourage the participation of other sectors in the Lumad's campaign for self-determination and other democratic rights, exposing along the way the state's treachery amid the health crisis. By learning what has been withheld from their ancestors in the preceding decades, they are arming themselves with weapons for their own liberation.