

GLOBAL **ADVOCACY TEAM**



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NAVIGATING ROUGH SEAS: HOW FISHERFOLK COMMUNITIES IN PANAY, PHILIPPINES TRANSFORM THEIR FUTURE



This community-led development plan is part of a groundbreaking series created by the people of Barangays Santiago and San Francisco in Barotac Viejo and Paghugpong sang mga Mangunguma sa Panay kag Guimaras (PAMANGGAS) in partnership with the Global Advocacy Team initiative, convened by the International Accountability Project.

This initiative unites inspiring community organizers from around the world to conduct community-led research, engaging 945 people across 7 countries. Through co-designed and shared learning, this three-year journey has resulted in a series of transformative community-led development plans focused on locally rooted, globally connected solutions.

Explore other community-led development plans to see the full range of powerful, community-driven solutions.

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Who We Are

The fisherfolks of the barangays of Santiago and San Francisco in the town of Barotac Viejo in the Province of Iloilo, Philippines are among the fisherfolks in the nine coastal communities identified by the Local Government Unit of Barotac Viejo. Most are engaged in small-scale fishing, with a less than one horsepower banca boat, which is used for travelling to stationary fish pens, as well as long-line and short-line fishing.



The two communities have their respective fisherfolk organizations, namely the San Francisco Small Fisherfolks Association (SFSFA) and the Asosasyon sang Magagmay nga Manngingisda sa Santiago (AMMS). Both organizations are members of a municipal organization of fisherfolks engaged in small-scale fishing, namely the Barotac Viejo Small Fisherfolks Association (BASFA). These three young organizations are building their legacy of realizing the aspirations of the fisherfolks they represent.

The daily life of these fisherfolks consists of different activities, from preparing the necessities like gasoline, bait, and other materials needed for the takeoff in the sunset, to doing outside jobs that will enable them to supplement the meager income they get from fishing.

Yes, most of these fisherfolks have a hard time meeting the needs of their families for food and education. That is why families of fisherfolks must look for other means to earn income, through different odd jobs like carpentry, construction work, or charcoal making, and by women doing household chores for middle-class or wealthy families in the barangay. But most of the time they go to local lending institutions. A typical joke of the communities is that “debts and loans are a norm for them,” just to be able to get by for the day.



A fisherman dries fish on a net, a practice that, according to the villagers, helps preserve food supplies, especially as they prepare for the typhoon season. (Photo by Carlo Manalansan/IAP)

The spirit of bayanihan[1] and their relationships with each other are the most precious things that the community can be proud of. Despite their hardships in life, the people in these communities are accommodating even to strangers who travel through and visit their community. Nanay Joy, one of the leaders of AMMS in Santiago, would gladly accept us even though she is hardly getting by herself, even with her husband away from home and leaving their two children under her care. She has a hard time rearing her children with the meager amount her husband sends her from his work. The same goes with other members of the community, who would offer the Global Advocacy Team research team a house to sleep in and food to share. This spirit was what their elders taught them.



*Villagers working together to retrieve logs after a strong typhoon in 2022.
(Photo by Carlo Manalansan/IAP)*

The unity of the community was once tested when Mount Opao, and the two communities lying beneath it, was opened for mining by the Malampay Mining Company. Leaders in the community who opposed the project were threatened. But because of the strong unity of the people to stop the mining of their sacred mountain, they were able to gain a victory that made the Malampay Mining Company abandon its plan of mining the area. It was in this collective action that the community saw the benefits of organizing.

[1] Bayanihan is a term used by the Filipinos to refer to the spirit of community cooperation and unity. Among farmers, bayanihan refers to mutual exchange of labor in farm activities and other community-related activities.

After Typhoon Yolanda struck and devastated the whole country in 2013, the fisherfolks in the two communities noticed that their catch was beginning to dwindle down. In addition to that, in the subsequent years to date, the habagat season (the southwest monsoon season) has brought rougher waves that have made fishing during this season impossible for small fisherfolks like them. Also, several laws and policies passed by the national and local government impeded the ability of the small fisherfolk to go fishing within the waters of their town.

It was this context that gave birth to this research, entitled “Effects of the Fishery Laws on the Livelihood of the Fisherfolks.”

What Do We Mean by Development?

For the fisherfolk of Santiago and San Francisco, “development” has been only a word for them and it is a blurry idea. For some, development involves building bigger houses and buildings or cemented roads. But for most of the fisherfolk in the two communities, development for them is very clear: they would get to fish daily without being hampered and would be able to provide for their family’s daily needs. Realizing their vision for development is very hard because fisherfolks are considered one of the country's poorest sectors.

In a report by the Philippine Statistics Authority[2] published in March 2023, the fisherfolks reflected a higher poverty incidence rate compared to other sectors in the Philippines. Together with the farmers, the fisherfolk posted a 30.6% poverty incidence rate, which is higher than the 26.2% posted in February 2018.

According to Melbert Balbon, one of the members of the research group for the Global Advocacy Team and also a native from one of the communities, development for him is to see his fellow fisherfolks united, helping each other in times of dire needs. For Melbert, a component of a developed community is a strong and united people, despite the hardships that may come their way. Of course, he wanted to see that each and every one of his fellow fisherfolks live without worries of the next day to come. For fisherfolks engaged in small-scale fishing like him, he wants their work not to be heavily regulated and that government support be felt by each and every one of them.



Melbert Balbon. (Photo by Carlo Manalansan/IAP)

For Nanay Lucia Capaducio, the chairperson of Paghugpong sang mga Mangunguma sa Panay kag Guimaras (PAMANGGAS)[3], community development means that there is social equity, that the rights of everyone are respected, and that the government and people are united to achieve a common goal of improving the lives of the people. But to look now, Nanay Lucia is adamant that this cannot be fully achieved while the poorest sectors of the society are forced out of all development projects of the government, and their visions are neglected when the government creates development plans. She said there is little government support felt in these communities. This was especially true during the times that the fisherfolks needed more government support, like during the habagat season and during the implementation of the fishing ban in the Visayan Sea that also limits the fish caught by the fisherfolk in their fishing grounds.

For a long time, we've been coping with our daily needs. From fishing to community bayanihan at times of dire needs, we, as a community, are helping each other. We have not been able to rely on external support to get our affairs sorted out, because it is somehow only occasional. For us, we feel development should be a combination of internal cooperation partnered with programs that help alleviate our situation.

*Joseph Araza, chairperson of the AMMS
(Association of Small Fisherfolks in Santiago)*

[3] PAMANGGAS is an island-wide organization of farmers and farmworkers who advocate for genuine agrarian reform and rural development. PAMANGGAS, in partnership with the Global Advocacy Team, assisted the two communities in drafting their community-led development plan.

For Leopoldo Balbon, or Tatay Poldo as he is fondly called locally, as one of the elders in the community, there is community development when the fisherfolks work hand-in-hand to implement changes in their sectors. These changes might be about policies that affect their livelihood, improving their community cooperation and understanding, and empowering their community to collectively act in demanding what is rightful for them as provided by the constitution.

While everyone has their distinct idea of what development means for them, one thing that is common to all is to empower the community in order to realize their own dreams and aspirations as a community.

Our Community's Development Priorities

The Global Advocacy Team research gave us extensive ideas on what the two communities' development priorities are. These development priorities stem from the current issues and concerns the communities are facing. The research team compiled the issues and concerns from the community and from there crafted a development plan that was designed and agreed upon by the communities. The primary issues are:

- **Fishery Laws and Policies Implemented by the National and Local Government**
- **Household Arrangements That Limit the Potential for Productivity**
- **Youth Focus on Education**
- **Worsening Economic Conditions**
- **Human Rights at Risk**

1

Fishery Laws and Policies Implemented by the National and Local Government

Closed Season/Fishing Ban - The closed season/fishing ban is being implemented by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources together with the provincial local government units (LGUs) surrounding the Visayan Sea. It is implemented for a three-month period, from November 15 to February 15, during the spawning period. During this time, catching mackerel, sardines, herring and other species identified by the Bureau is prohibited. Those who are caught catching and selling prohibited species are penalized under the law. Penalties for violations of this ordinance could include fines around Php 6,000.00 (\$120 USD) for every violation, the confiscation of the fishing gear, and the cancellation of fishing permits. [4]

The fisherfolk themselves stop their operations during this period to avoid paying hefty fines or risk the confiscation of their fishing gear [5]. Those caught by the local authorities said that they would rather stop fishing than get caught again, because the fines and penalties were too much, equivalent to the funds needed to set up one fishing gear, which is approximately Php 80,000 to Php 100,000 or \$1,600 to \$2,000 USD. Most of the fisherfolk rely on line and hook, cast nets and lift nets to make their livelihood. To set up their livelihood, the fisherfolks rely mostly on loans. The fishing gear is expensive on their part and facing fines that would confiscate them would have a debilitating effect on their capacity to earn income.



[4] Fisheries Administrative Order 167-3

[5] In the context of the Philippine Fishery Law, municipal fisherfolks have been using passive fishing gear consisting of line and hook, stationary lift nets, and cast nets.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources has programs and resources allocated to help the affected fisherfolks during the implementation of the fishing ban and other fishery laws. In a dialogue with representatives of the fisherfolks in 2019, the Bureau presented alternative programs for fisherfolks. But those programs and services do not align with the actual needs of the communities. In addition, fisherfolks lamented that, since this policy was implemented in 2013, neither the Bureau nor the local government has provided support to the fisherfolks affected. Despite the alternative livelihood programs of the Bureau, no livelihood projects were presented to the fisherfolk affected by the implementation of this policy. The fisherfolks are made to get by on their own during these hard times.

Municipal Boundary - The municipal boundary is one of the provisions of the Republic Act (RA) 10654 [6]. It limits the fishing grounds of the fisherfolks into municipal boundaries. Those who are caught fishing outside of their defined municipal boundaries will be apprehended and be fined by the Bantay Dagat[7] of the municipality where they are caught.

Prohibition of the Use of Fine Mesh Net in Fishing - Under RA 10654, fine-mesh net is defined as nets whose eye is 3 centimeters and below. In the municipal waters of Barotac Viejo, fisherfolks who are operating tangkal and punot[8] use nets that are less than 3 centimeters. As a result, they were not issued permits for the year 2022 and 2023.

Imposition of Higher Fees - Fisherfolks report that the renewal of permits for fishing gear are higher for 2022 compared to 2019, with little to no explanation at all regarding the increase of fees. They also reported increases in the penalties and fines being imposed on fisherfolks caught violating laws and policies.

[6] Republic Act 10654 is an amendment to the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998. It is the main fishery law being implemented in the country.

[7] Bantay Dagat is a task force created by the province of Iloilo to monitor and implement the fisheries ordinances and law, as well as apprehend violators of those laws. They are composed of civilian and uniformed personnel assigned by the province.

[8] Tangkal and punot are traditional fishing methods of the communities where fish nets are attached to stationary bamboo poles erected in the sea.



2

Household Arrangements That Limit the Potential for Productivity

The women are doing everything they can to provide for their family. Many do the household chores, tend to their children and fill in the needs of the family outside the capacity of their husbands to provide for their income. Their issues also reflect that of their husbands. These included the following:

- High prices of commodities while the price for the fishing catch remains low;
- Lack of alternative sources of income;
- Lack of access to healthy and nutritious foods for their family, due to insufficient income to provide for their daily needs;
- Insufficient funds to own their own fishing gear, requiring that they rent them; and
- Insufficient government or other support.

On the last point, in Santiago, there is an innovation project called Tambon 2.0 [9], which was launched by a non-governmental organization, but as of this writing, there is little maintenance of their existing projects, which has resulted in minimal evaluation of its potential to materially improve conditions in the community.



3

Youth Focus on Education

Youth that are still in school are much more concerned about their scholastic performance than their family's means of livelihood. It is in the culture that as much as possible the children are spared from the burden of providing for their family and instead should focus on their studies.

Meanwhile, those who graduate from senior high school (especially men), whose family cannot afford to send them to college, serve as helpers in the fishing activities of their families and relatives.

[9] *Tambon 2.0 is a fishing innovation project in partnership with a non-governmental organization.*



Worsening Economic Conditions

During the southwest monsoon season, the normal fishing days of the fisherfolks are cut down due to strong waves, which may cause their small boats to capsize. Based on the accounts of the fisherfolks, their normal fishing days of 20-25 days per month during calm days from November to June, are cut down into 10-15 days per month during the southwest monsoon season, starting from July and lasting to October. After the southwest monsoon, they are hit with the implementation of the fishing ban season, which starts from the month of November and runs until February. As the research shows, during the implementation of the fish ban, the fisherfolk who use siklob [10] lose 50% of their income, while those who use likos stop operation, losing 100% of their income. In addition, no alternative livelihood has been offered to the fisherfolks in the times of the monsoon season and the fishing ban and they are left to tend on their own.

In 2021, the fisherfolks launched a petition campaign to call for subsidies during monsoon season to address their loss of income. They submitted the petition to the municipal government to call for action, and the municipal government responded that they will allocate Php 300,000 (\$6,000 USD) for the fisherfolk during the monsoon season as capital to set up an alternative livelihood project. The fisherfolk complied with the municipality's requirements. But almost two years have passed and they have yet to receive the subsidy from the municipal government. The community have submitted a letter to the office of the municipal mayor to inquire about the status of the project and also wrote to the sangguniang bayan [11] to call for an inquiry, but the municipal government has yet to answer their letter.

[10] Siklob and likos are fishing gears that include motorbanca (small motor boats) equipped with fishnets.

[11] Sangguniang Bayan is the local legislative body of the municipalities in the Philippines, in charge of passing laws and ordinances at the municipal level.

Human Rights at Risk

In addition to the dire economic situation of the fisherfolks, their leaders are being red-tagged or terror-tagged for organizing and pushing for reforms and economic benefits for the fisherfolks. Even the GAT research team and Pamanggas, who are helping the fisherfolks, are being called as such by the minions of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed-Conflict (NTF-ELCAC).

The communities focus their development priorities on addressing the issues and concerns presented above.



Roque Cris Chavez facilitating a meeting with community members to discuss their various concerns including livelihood, environment, and human rights. (Photo by PAMANGGAS)

Participation of the Community in Designing and Implementing the Development Plan

When the Global Advocacy team began its research on the effects of the fisheries law, and brainstormed together with several key leaders in the community, several leaders of the local fisherfolks organization were ecstatic. Finally, there could be an avenue for them to raise their issues about the habagat (southwest monsoon) season and the fishing ban. In addition, it could be an avenue for them to finally engage the Local Government Unit of Barotac Viejo to address the pressing issues they are facing.

Community participation in the conduct of this research is essential for the success and results of this community development plan. Several methods by the GAT team were employed to gather meaningful input for this community development plan.

The research team held community assemblies for the two communities to start off the research project. The community assemblies aimed at informing the communities about the research and to gain their approval as partners in conducting the research. All in all, they were attended by almost 100 representatives from the two communities.

The team then held several meetings with the local leaders of the fisherfolks organization to finalize methods to be employed to obtain the sources of information needed. Focus group discussions with three groups (the fisherfolks, the women, and the youth) were held with the two communities. The community leaders made sure that the focus group discussions [12] represented and reflected the whole sentiment of the fisherfolk in the locality. Questions asked ranged from their sources of livelihood, their knowledge, the effects of the fisheries laws and policies implemented in their locality, and their recommendations for addressing the existing concerns they are facing.

[12] The focus group discussions were divided into three groups: fisherfolks (22 respondents), women (18 respondents) and youth (20 respondents).



A research team member conducting a community-led survey with a community member to understand their position on issues they face and idea of development. (Photo by PAMANGGAS)

Another focus group discussion was held, this time as a whole, to validate the results of the data collected and if those results reflected their current status and sentiments. The focus group discussion also included a workshop to identify what the community development plan should consist of. The recommendations from the locals were listed and summarized in a report. The report was presented again to the locals through focus group discussions to verify if this is how they wanted the development plan to look. To ensure the participation of everyone in the community in the crafting of the development plan, an invitation was made in-person at the local meetings of the fisherfolks organization.

Aside from the focus group discussions, individual surveys [13] were also employed to get more data on the effects of the fisheries law on fisherfolks, to get the knowledge of the communities with regard to laws and policies that affect the use of the seas, and the qualities an organization should possess to enable the active participation of the members.

To ensure that the communities' reflections and aspirations are included, the GAT research team is living with these two communities and organizing with them. This has enabled the research team to understand and be at one with the goals and aspirations of the communities.

[13] Individual surveys were completed by 91 respondents from the two communities.

What We Are Asking

1

Change and Reform of Laws and Policies

Closed Season / Fishing Ban - The communities would like to push for a reform of this policy. Instead of implementing it for 3 months, they would like to push to shorten it to 1-2 months only. The basis to shorten the implementation period is to also shorten the suffering of the fisherfolks due to lack of income brought about by the implementation of the law. The fisherfolk recognize that the spawning period is not only confined to November to February, but is all year round. They noticed that every 3 months, adult fish are spawning.

They would like to recommend that local government units only identify areas that will be considered as fish sanctuaries and will be off limits to the fisherfolk. The Bantay Dagat should also strictly enforce the sanctuary boundaries to ensure that the sanctuary is protected well.

Municipal Boundary and Regulatory Transparency and Consultation - The community plans to hold a petition and conduct dialogue with the Local Government Unit of Barotac Viejo to present the problems with the fishing ban and their alternatives.

- The community proposes to forego the implementation of the municipal boundary for fishing because it limits their fishing grounds. In the case of Barotac Viejo, their fishing grounds are only limited due to the geographical location of the town, which has harmed their livelihood with the implementation of the municipal boundaries.
- Their recommendation for policy change includes that the municipal boundaries be lifted. Instead, implement an island-wide boundary to cater to more fisherfolks to fish within the waters of Panay.
- Allow the use of the current nets (#12 or 2.75cm) in stationary fishing gears like the tangkal. Because tangkal is stationary and is not moving to include the small frys, they should be allowed to use the current nets in their fishing activity.
- In addition, the law enforcers should strictly implement the banning of hulbot-hulbot that are destructive to the coral reefs.

The community proposed to make the fees and fines more transparent to the public because, previously, no fees were presented to the fisherfolk.

Lastly, the fisherfolks proposed that the Barotac Viejo Local Government Unit, including the agencies that monitor and implement fisheries' law in the province, regularly conduct consultation with the fisherfolks in the barangays to get to know their situation.

The municipal government should schedule a community visit with the fisherfolk every month to know of their situation and other things needed for their improvement.

Lastly, the agencies and the government should conduct information drives about existing laws and policies in the sea which may affect them.

2

Involve Women in Decision-making in the Locality

The women suggested that the local organization engage with their barangay development council in crafting a development plan in the barangay. The women proposed that in the local development plan, the barangay should include in their proposal to have a bagsakan or drop-off center wherein the local government will serve as the buyer of the fish caught by the fishermen so that the fisherfolk can get a fair price for their catch.

The women also want to take part in lobbying with the Barotac Viejo Local Government Unit to regulate illegal fishing activities in the local area, and to call for support to the fisherfolks in times of the habagat (southwest monsoon) season and the fishing ban.

3

Give Youth Should a More Proactive Function in the Society

The youth shared the recommendations of their families, especially regarding the reforms in the fisheries law (subsidy during the closed season, shorten the implementation of the fishing ban, call for higher price for their catch while lowering the costs of commodities, and others).

There are also particular calls from the youth, which included the following: erase all school fees, community cooperation for the cleanliness of the community, free education for all students, and better and accessible roads to and from the schools and their community.



Consultation and discussion with the youth. (Photo by PAMANGGAS)

4

Step-Up Government Efforts To Uplift the Lives of Fisherfolks

The government (both the national and local government) should work with the communities to create community development projects, especially during the implementation of the fishing ban, and during the onslaught of habagat season which both heavily affect the income of the fisherfolks.

The government should institutionalize the allocation of support during the habagat season to the fisherfolks whose income is greatly affected.

5

Stop the Attacks Against Fisherfolks

The state, particularly the armed forces and the agencies that discredit community organizations, such as the National Task Force to End Local Communists Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), should recognize that fisherfolks organizing themselves is a part of their collective effort to address their pressing issues as guaranteed by the Section 8 of the Article III of the 1987 Constitution. Their collective action is to push for their agenda of having a community that is helping each other and a government that cares for its people. Threats of surveillance, smear campaigns, and other similar tactics should be stopped. The local government should ensure that the fisherfolk are guarded against unwarranted attacks that undermine their potential as productive members of society.

There are efforts to push for government accountability for the series of attacks on human rights, not just with the fisherfolks. As one with all the sectors who are being attacked, the fisherfolks call for the support for the passage of the Human Rights Defenders Bill, which is currently pending in the Philippine Congress.



Community members gathering and discussing livelihood projects with their allied organization. (Photo by Carlo Manalansan)

6

Build Networks and Alliances for Sustainability and Cooperation

In sustaining the gains of the organization on the political and economic side, both communities aim to extend their network and alliances with other sectors in the society. These sectors, like academia, the church, lawyers, and others can be a great force in realizing the development plan of the fisherfolk communities. These sectors can: extend to the communities further research on the plight of the fisherfolks; offer relief and support in times of disaster and to mitigate the effects of the habagat (southwest monsoon) season; and launch trainings on sustainable livelihood programs, human rights orientation, and free legal services. There are a variety of things that the communities can gain through networking and alliance building. That is why this has been included in the plan of both of the communities.

The fisherfolks know that, to be able to create a fully developed community, each needs to contribute together while enjoining other sectors of the society and demanding what is rightful support from the government. It is not an easy feat for them, as this is like riding the rough waves of the habagat season. But one thing is clear within these communities, that their dreams will be realized with their cooperation and understanding for the development they want.

Co-Designed Solutions for and by the People of Barangays
Santiago and San Francisco, Barotac Viejo, Philippines

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