Identity Construction, Social Media, and Ifugao Rice Terraces Conservation of Indigenous People’s Youth Through Appreciative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the important contribution of the indigenous people’s (IP) youth towards the sustainable development and conservation of the internationally recognized Ifugao rice terraces (IRT) of the Philippines, the University of the Philippines Open University implemented a youth capacity building and exchange program among IP youth from Hungduan, Kiangan, Banaue and Mayaoyao rice terraces in the Ifugao province. The study conducted focus group discussions that included identity construction with physical co-presence and utilization of new communication technologies (NCTs) through the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results of an appreciative inquiry approach (SOAR). Beliefs, ethnicity and values were three key identity construction factors. Need, talent, passion, and conscience were also included among the dimensions of identity construction. These findings were subsequently used in the design and construction of training course modules customized for IP youth from the IRT using the blended-mode of learning and practical activities such as video logs and memes in NCTs.

KEYWORDS

Ealdama, Habito, Indigenous People, University of the Philippine Open University, Youth Capacity Building

1. INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity conservation and sustainability of the Philippines’ Ifugao Rice Terraces (IRT) is a top priority due to its status as a World Heritage Site and as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS). The utilization of indigenous knowledge systems is an important means to this end.

The IRT’s conservation and sustainability is largely dependent on generations of Ifugao -- indigenous people who have been farming the site for centuries. Thus, for the future, Ifugao youth have a crucial role to play in the preservation and development of this heritage site. Over recent decades, out-migration of IP youth has become a formidable challenge to the preservation of the IRT, as the loss of the younger indigenous residents threatens the IRT’s sustainability as a socio-ecological productive landscape. In line with this, the University of the Philippines Open University has initiated

DOI: 10.4018/IJSESD.2019100104

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a “Youth Capacity Building and Exchange Program” which aimed to help address the out-migration of youth from the area, a challenge previously elucidated in several studies on the IRT (Calderon et al., 2009; SITMO, 2008; Zialcita, 2015).

There is a need to analyze the identity construction factors affecting IP youth vis-a-vis their role in conservation of the IRT. Thus, the objective of this study was to discover what specific identity construction factors among IP youth should be embedded in the design framework of youth capacity building modules. Ultimately, the long-term objective of the program is to facilitate attitude and behavior changes among IP youth that promote sustainable management and conservation of the IRT and to generate ideas and options for sustainable livelihoods. Hopefully, as they identify strongly with their cultural heritage and native land, empowered Ifugao youth can play a bigger role in strengthening community ownership and capacity for IRT conservation management.

2. BACKGROUND

The Ifugao Rice Terraces (IRT) has a total land area which covers 251,778 hectares (FAO, 2008) located within the province of Ifugao, north of the Cordillera Mountain Range of Luzon Island, Philippines. It is inhabited by the Ifugao people, one of the five ethno-linguistic groups that live within the Cordillera Mountains. The IRT is divided into 198,246 hectares (79%) of nine upland municipalities composed of extensive amphitheater stone or mud-walled rice terraces clusters, with the remaining 53,532 hectares (21%) in two municipalities in the lowlands. The culture of rice in the IRT goes hand-in-hand with the sustainable management of its surrounding grasslands, forests, swidden, cane lands (Conklin, 1980) and river systems. Through many centuries, the IRT has carefully maintained this ecological balance, reflecting the indigenous knowledge and wisdom that has been passed on from generation to generation.

From 2009 to 2014, the IRT was visited by almost half a million tourists (PSA, 2015). The influx of visitors has stretched the carrying capacity of the rice terraces, leading to deterioration of sanitation and waste management, and a surge of commercial activities and infrastructure that cater to the increased demand from mostly western or urbanized tourists. This has led to some problems such as commodification of culture, objectification of local people, declining interest in traditional practices, poor maintenance of the rice terraces, loss of cooperative labor, deforestation, water scarcity, poor land use planning, and Westernized lifestyles (SITMO, 2008). Despite the increasing numbers of tourist arrivals, the farming families of the IRT have not received any direct benefit from it. Environmental users’ fees collected by the local government units (LGUs) are used for the benefit of the tourists. These are used for building concrete paddy field walkways and signages and repair of some sections of collapsed rice terrace walls.

Rice, as the main staple of the Ifugao people, is only planted once a year and vegetables such as sweet potato and taro provide alternative sources of food. With the wet rice paddy fields literally carved out of the mountains, farmers can only plant a limited amount of traditional rice. The rice cycle, involving land preparation to harvest, also requires tedious manual labor. With ageing farmers, youth out-migration, and declining availability of cooperative labor, majority of farming families have struggled economically. These challenges have consequently fueled youth out-migration, a phenomenon not unique to the Philippines (Manalo and Van de Fleurt, 2013; FAO, 2016; Kohsaka, Shih, Saito & Sadohara, 2013). The causes of out-migration can be traced to “rural poverty and food insecurity, lack of employment and income generating opportunities, inequality, limited access to social protection, climate change and depletion of natural resources due to environmental degradation and climate change” (FAO, 2016, p. 4).
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