

Atamanobo local chieftain
Datu Doming Tumaytay by
the bridge that JICA helped to
build

PEACE & STABILITY IN MINDANAO

A long road for the Atamanobo

Scarlet and yellow dominate a traditional dress of the Atamanobo indigenous people in Davao del Norte province. In Sitio Talos in Santo Tomas town, members of the tribe live surrounded by greens of velvety hills and blues of mountains in their vast ancestral domain.

The richness of those colors would come in painful contrast, just three years ago, with the everyday hardships. Children crossed a bridgeless river and walked, road-less, through partly wooded land, five kilometers to school.

Villagers climbed 200 meters down a ravine to fetch water from a spring. There was no electricity. Food was scarce.

"Pockets of the poorest of the poor" like Talos were the targets of the Mindanao Sustainable Settlement Area Development, or MinSSAD, a massive, 3.1-billion-peso project of the Philippine Department of Agrarian Reform funded by a Japanese ODA loan aimed at uplifting 6,125 households from poverty.

MinSSAD covered 123 villages (a sitio is a small, often remote part of a village) in six provinces in three regions of Mindanao. Most of the project sites are upland like Talos, and many are home to indigenous peoples like the Atamanobo.

Begun in 2003 and completed in 2008, MinSSAD developments included farm-to-market roads, potable water systems, irrigation, technology demonstration farms, school buildings, and skills training.

Among other key quantifiable results, the average family income in the project sites grew 26.6 percent, and poverty incidence fell to 36 percent as of 2007 from 60 percent in 2003. Among the non-quantifiable benefits are accessibility and mobility, and improved long-term development prospects.

In Talos, MinSSAD built a five-kilometer earth road and a 25-meter concrete bridge. The infrastructure connects the Atamanobo community of 337 people with the rest of the town, giving them tremendously increased access to the market and to the transport, health, and other facilities.

The small children no longer have to leave their sitio to go to school. For them, there is a two-classroom, government-registered school in a multi-purpose building provided by MinSSAD. For the older children, MinSSAD built an elementary school and a high school further down toward town, which they share with students from the lowland.

For the sitio's water supply, MinSSAD installed a windmill-powered pump at the spring.

A major undertaking now in place is envisioned to last for the long term and lift the community from subsistence farming: A 50-hectare rubber plantation has been established on Atamanobo land with seeds and tools given by MinSSAD and the fertilizers and other farm inputs were provided by the Local Government of Santo Tomas.

"*Maraming salamat, dahil binigyan kami ng pangkabuhayan tulad ng rubber plantation,*" said Datu Doming Tumaytay, the local tribal chieftain: Thank you very much for giving us means of livelihood like the rubber plantation.

"*Malawak man ang aming ancestral domain, mabuti ang may project tulad ng rubber plantation,*" he added: Our ancestral domain may be vast, but it is good to have a project like the rubber plantation.



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It has also trained women in dressmaking and in making beads, which they sell mostly at cultural trade fairs, Boding said.

Electricity is in the plans, Boding added, noting that many posts will have to be erected across a 4.7-kilometer distance to connect Talos to the nearest power line.

MinSSAD generated possibilities that might have been too remote in the past, so that today the Atamanobo are able to express aspirations. With improved access to the big banana plantations where some of them occasionally find work, "we wish we can have work every day," says Bae Arlene Aling, the tribal secretary.

Students who have finished high school want to go higher. "Many want to go to college," said Ivy, one of Datu Doming's granddaughters.

Amid the many help-enabled developments in Sitio Talos, the Atamanobo have kept their heritage well intact. They display its bright colors to show their best.

Near where the road began, the tribe gave a brief cultural performance. Under a wide-open sky, amid green grassy hills and distant indigo mountains, Datu Doming, a pensive-looking man of 72, played a blackened old gong for the costumed children to dance what appeared to be small steps and circling flights of birds.



Boding Quezon, former Provincial Project Coordinator of MinSSAD in Davao del Norte

While waiting for the rubber plantation to become productive, the villagers have planted corn, banana and root crops around the trees.

The MinSSAD developments were turned over in 2008 to the respective local government units which, although faced with financial constraints, have since been doing their own projects for the beneficiaries.

In Sitio Talos, the Santo. Tomas government provides instructors in vocational skills training and in basic reading and writing for some elders, said Boding Quezon, former Provincial Project Coordinator of MinSSAD and now the town's Planning and Development Officer.

