



Socioeconomic and Political Interplay Toward a Sustainable and Unified *Sama* Community

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Received: 17-02-2025

Reviewed: 26-03-2025

Accepted: 17-04-2025

Abstract

This article discusses the socioeconomic and political interplay in the Sama community in Mindanao. Through a comprehensive understanding of their historical background, this article aims to present policies for sustainable development of the long-aspired unified Sama community. A semi-systematic of secondary sources and major works about the Sama was conducted to reveal and outline the importance of identity, access to basic social services, and political representation and participation in ensuring sustainability. An integrative approach to the discussions highlighted from the International Bangsa Summit was also analyzed patterned from the analyses drawn after the systematic review. Interestingly, the analyses from both the semi-systematic and integrative reviews coincided. The article recommends that policies must be developed to support the Sama community through enhanced access to basic social services to develop and enkindle a sense of community, forging a sustainable sense of unity.

Keywords: sama bajau, socioeconomic, politics, sustainable community, indigenous studies.

Introduction

Several ethnographic studies and articles recognize the unique marine-oriented life of the *Sama* people. Common to these studies is the continuous social transformation in their community resulting from the influx and exposure to mainland cultures (Hussin, 2019). Along with the continuous change that poses significant challenges in their way of life, the *Sama* communities form part of the larger minorities in the coastal regions of the Philippines. Roxas-Lim (2017) reported that the Sama Bajau in Mindanao are among the severely affected by the displacement in the country, often struggling to access their ancestral lands.

While the present 1987 Philippine Constitution guarantees self-determination to Indigenous communities, laws have been slow in resolving issues on landlessness that hindered the full realization of generations of *Sama* people, spanning for far more than decades. As a result, the *Sama* communities in Mindanao are not isolated from internal and external power

struggles and are frequently victims of oppression. Socioeconomic factors, such as education level, poverty rate, labor and employment issues, as well as the availability of economic opportunities purported by lack of strong political representation, have become stringent in the region, leaving a unified Sama community a continued aspiration. (Hussin & Baptist, 2019)

Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2017) highlighted the relationship between socioeconomic factors and political attitudes and actions of groups, rooted in the concept that these groups prefer to advocate and advance representatives that favor their economic interests. In other words, individuals with a familiar and shared economic interest are entitled to socioeconomic factors like education, employment, and opportunities facilitated by their political action and behavior. Contextualizing this in the present article, Quiling (2023) presented a unified Sama community's aspiration to entangle it in meaningful economic imperatives. This perspective on a unified Sama community presents an opportunity to develop strategic plans for a sustainable and long-aspired unified Sama that pays respect and does not omit their way of life.

This article examines the interplay between socioeconomic and political factors in the Sama community in Mindanao. It seeks to understand how political actions and behavior in the region purport a lack of representation among the Sama community. This paper is divided into four parts: the introduction, which provides an overview of the article; the literature review and methods of analysis; results; and recommendations, all of which aim to present policy recommendations for a sustainable unified Sama community. Through a comprehensive review and understanding of the context of the issues faced by the Sama people in Mindanao, this paper is determined to contribute to ongoing discussions on potential pathways for development, incorporating sustainability in socioeconomic and political factors without leaving behind their cultural identity as a community of marine-oriented uniqueness.

Literature Review

The History of Sama

The Sama, which form the larger community of marine-oriented groups estimated to be around more than a million and have predominantly lived across Asia, are described for their unique way of living as “sea nomads” (Bociaga, 2021). Their adaptation to the volatile sea environment has tied their identity to the coastal regions of Asia, where most of their economic activities occur.

In the Philippines, the Sama Bajao, also known as the Sama-Dilaut, dominates the coastal regions of the Sulu archipelago (Roxas-Lim, 2017). Records also show that some of these communities inhabit the central and northern coasts of the Philippines, with small settlements, speaking an array of distinct languages, which makes them almost indistinguishable from their shared ancestry of sea-oriented people of Southeast Asia (Roxas-Lim, 2017; Melchor et al., 2024). Melchor et al. (2024) and Hussin (2019) reviewed that the Sama community in Mindanao is categorized into two: the historically referred sea-dwellers, with economic activities that include fishing and the land-based whose primary activities

include farming of vegetables, root crops, and coconut. The latter refer to themselves as the Sama Dilaya.

Beyond these primary economic activities, the Sama community is best known for their boat-making craft, enabling them to be one of the greatest sea navigators in Asia, bartering goods in exchange for food commodities. Nonetheless, inter-household exchange of material among the Sama community is relatively observed by few studies, indicating the level of kinship and familial affiliations among them (Phelps, Pitogo, Emit, & Hill, 2023). Tied to their boat-dwelling identity, kinship in their community is crucial in defining the relationship and power dynamics within them.

The Sama community, like any other ethnic group in the Philippines, has several beliefs. While reports, like those made by Horvatic (1993), show that the Sama people define the majority of their practices as Islamic, Hadji (2010) clarified that not all Sama are Muslims, making distinctions on their belief of the “Omboh,” which is a mediator-spirit between the living and the Supreme God. Concerning their beliefs, Hadji (2010) said that their beliefs and practices play a crucial factor in their aspirations for social transformation, including socioeconomic factors like education and economic opportunities, purported by their direct political participation in political changes.

Socioeconomic Struggles Among Sama Community

As a collective group, with most of their population living in the coastal regions of the country, most ethnographic studies about them discuss narratives on the poor state of their socioeconomic backgrounds, often ascribing these standards to Western and outsider perspectives. Moreno (2023) presented a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the sociopolitical dynamics that surrounded the Sama Bajao community. Their findings are consistent with the report from Roxas-Lim (2017), which revealed that the Sama Bajao community had had a long history of “statelessness” rooted in the idea that they did not meet the year-requirement of the present law (IPRA) on claiming ancestral lands, mainly because these communities have struggled and have been persistent victims of limited access to essential social services like education, issues in landlessness and continued marginalization, which likewise trickles to the preservation of their cultural heritage, an important factor to consider in incorporating a sustainable social transformation.

Moreno (2023) further emphasized that socioeconomic factors in the Sama Bajao community are directly related to the policies implemented by the Philippine government. Nevertheless, without proper state recognition, the Sama Bajao community consequently suffers from several socioeconomic struggles, most of which have led to the diaspora and cycle of poverty. As such, there is a need to review the guiding policies to recognize their identity and ensure the sustainability of their way of life, tradition, and cultural heritage. Statelessness, as the primary source of socioeconomic problems, severely adds to the cyclical problem of lack of genuine representation and participation in local and national politics. (La Ola et al., 2020)

Political Representation and Participation of the Sama

Genuine political representation is integral in advancing sustainable policies that secure access to socioeconomic services, especially in groups and communities that have long been victims of marginalization. Studies have shown that several factors, including insufficient voting capacity and the formation of parties, influence a lack of political representation, eventually resulting in consequential policies geared toward certain groups (Verma, 2019).

Various reasons for the lack of political representation of the Sama Bajau in Mindanao are recorded in the literature of ethnographic studies as well as conference papers. For example, Morales (2015) recorded that the Sama Dilaut shared some political victories with the help of other tribal organizations in Zamboanga. There were also records showing political movements that claimed cultural assertions and identity recognition of the Sama Bajau. Among these groups are the National Sama Bajau Movement (NSBM), the Philippine Council for Sama and Bajau, and the Sama Bajau Tribal Council, which have been actively working to consolidate Sama leaders in the region. These groups advocated for the rights of the Sama Badjao, particularly after the extremist encounters in Zamboanga City. However, unlike any other minority groups, these political movements are relatively younger, making their influence in the larger political dynamics difficult and challenging.

Paredes (2015) further highlighted the double minority concept in negotiating the place of indigenous groups within the Bangsamoro, implying political dynamics with the larger political landscape in Mindanao. According to her, as second-order minorities, Indigenous groups like the Sama Dilaut are negotiating their place and claims for ancestral and cultural rights over these areas not only with the Philippine government but also those of political power within the Bangsamoro homeland, where some, if not, most of their population has had a long shared history and relations. Given these struggles, the Sama Dilaut, forming part of the larger marginalized communities in Mindanao, faces consistent problems in representation, often negotiating their place and reasserting their identities to ensure claims and access to opportunities.

Research Method

This article primarily aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on developing a sustainable unified Sama community in Mindanao, addressing policies geared at promoting cultural and identity recognition that enables them to access socioeconomic services, like education, healthcare, and basic social services, through understanding the political interplay involved in the process.

This article follows Snyder's semi-systematic and integral literature review. According to Snyder (2019), a semi-systematic review follows a structured analysis of published materials, including scientific papers, journals, essays, reports, and other academic and government-issued releases, which aids in understanding the issue at hand. Furthermore, Snyder (2019) suggests that an integrative review, which highlights pertinent materials or reports, enables researchers to identify new ideas and frameworks that add to the pool of ideas

on a specific topic. It includes recommendations on new approaches and improving how to address an issue.

Following these approaches, the papers of Roxas-Lim (2017), Melchor et al. (2024), Hussin (2019), Phelps et al. (2023), Hadji (2010), Moreno (2023), Maglana (2016), and Morales (2015) were analyzed through the semi-systematic review. The analysis of these papers distinguishes the socioeconomic and political interplay within the Sama Dilaut community, observing potential grassroots causes and possible benchmarking areas for sustainable development and solutions. An integrative review was used through the reports made from the 2023 International Bangsa Summit held on 18-19 March 2023. From this analysis, policy recommendations are proposed as part of the main objective of this article, which is to engage in ongoing discussions on the socioeconomic and political interplay for a unified Sama community in Mindanao.

Results and Discussion

The Sama and the Bigger Socioeconomic Struggles in Mindanao

Table 5. Provinces in the Poorest Group Based on the 2023 Poverty Incidence Among Families: 2018, 2021 and 2023

Province	2018				2021				2023			
	Group	Poverty Incidence (%)	95% Confidence Interval		Group	Poverty Incidence (%)	95% Confidence Interval		Group	Poverty Incidence (%)	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit			Lower Limit	Upper Limit			Lower Limit	Upper Limit
Basilan	1	66.3	62.0	70.7	2	42.5	37.3	47.7	3	33.7	29.4	38.1
Cotabato City	3	35.2	30.5	39.9	3	31.3	26.3	36.3	3	33.3	27.7	38.9
Maguindanao	2	40.6	34.7	46.6	4	29.8	24.9	34.6	3	30.4	27.2	33.5
Tawi-tawi	5	15.1	12.4	17.7	4	28.1	22.4	33.9	3	32.3	26.2	38.4
Zamboanga del Norte	3	36.9	31.6	42.3	2	40.8	36.1	45.4	3	37.7	32.5	43.0

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority

Conversely, Basilan, Cotabato City, Maguindanao, Tawi-Tawi, and Zamboanga del Norte were included in the group of provinces with the highest poverty incidence among families in 2023. (Table 5)

Fig. 1 Provinces in the Poorest Group Philippines. Lifted from the Philippine Statistics Authority

The figure above shows the provinces with severe poverty in the country from 2018, 2021, and 2023. Notably, these provinces are the same province where most of the Sama community is located. These numbers present a broader challenge to Mindanao's analysis and overall poverty landscape. Socioeconomic issues are not independent of the issues of poverty. Hence, discussing them in detail in the context of the Sama communities in Mindanao is imperative. (Md Nor & Hussin, 2019)

The Sama communities, particularly the Sama Bajao, share common socioeconomic problems faced by Mindanao. These challenges and struggles are deeply rooted and interconnected with the looping poverty level and persistent non-inclusive development

projects, purporting more systemic problems in Mindanao. The following are the common themes of socioeconomic problems that play a crucial role in achieving a sustainable unified Sama community: poverty and continuous marginalization, access to basic social services, and land conflicts. (Rodriguez et al., 2022)

Moreno (2023) exposes the significant causes of these socioeconomic problems. The report is centered on the criticality of “identity and citizenship,” which are tied to the concept of “statelessness.” Although efforts by the Philippine government pave the way for the recognition of their identity, the Sama Bajao, or Sama Dilaut as they collectively call themselves, still struggle to claim their lands (Roxas-Lim, 2017), leaving 82% of their population feeling socially excluded and left stateless (Moreno, 2023). Melchor et al. (2024) showed a much different and progressive take on the issue of access to social services, citing that the Sama communities engage in economic activities that enable them to become financially independent, stressing and countering the fossilized ideas of their economic situation. Their records further showed that most of the younger Sama generation are now sent to school by their parents, citing the need for a comprehensive and competitive advantage offered by education (Frederico et al., 2024). This take is a departure from the description of Hadji (2010), which tackles certain beliefs in their communities that hinder the older generation from sending younger ones to school. Notably, however, these students' education system is underfunded and, at worst, left out by the Department of Education. This situation is not isolated to the Sama community because a lack of funding and focus also affects individuals and students outside their group. Nevertheless, this situation must be assessed using a critical lens that leads to a nuanced understanding of how this type of problem shared by students within and outside the Sama community intertwines with other socioeconomic problems. (Harakan & Said, 2023)

Historically marginalized, the Sama community has not been spared from issues of land conflicts. Roxas-Lim (2017) made a detailed report and dedicated a particular section in their study to expose the advocacies and intentions of the Sama Bajao, saying that they “...demand government guarantee of their access to land as authorities and dominant majority groups have prevented them from founding settlements on land.” This guarantee comes in the form of certificates that ensure their ownership of the land they currently possess. They further demanded easy access to basic social services that will eventually enhance their way of life without necessarily abandoning their sea-orientedness. These basic social services include access to potable waters, travel, and economic access to their old lands in Sulu, other parts of Mindanao, as well as neighboring countries like Borneo and Indonesia. However, the latter demands are constrained by monolithic state policies and, therefore, contradict their requests.

Socioeconomic problems faced by the Sama people are heavily concentrated on poverty and continuous marginalization, access to basic social services, and land conflicts. These problems demand solutions that are centered on their need, ensuring sustainability and a unified Sama aspiration. Ensuring that policies on sustainable development for a unified Sama entails consideration of their cultural heritage, identity, and distinct relationship with other communities in Mindanao. The question of how these solutions can be achieved entirely depends on the efforts of the people involved in the process. (Sendera et al., 2023)

Socioeconomics and Political Interplay for a Sustainable Unified Sama

Politics is important to consider when discussing sustainable solutions to socioeconomic problems. This factor presents a crucial influence on the development of policies that cater to the population's needs, affecting access to basic social services, which must be rightfully given to all population sectors. Furthermore, the political interplay is linked to institutions that enable and streamline enhanced access to various opportunities that uplift communities (Santamaria, 2019). The support access provided to the Sama communities in Mindanao, both from the government and the public sectors, is found to be inconsistent and poor. There are also institutions that provide access to opportunities for these communities, especially those listed by Morales (2015). However, the broader implications of these linkages often left the Sama community at the margins.

The analysis from the papers of Morales (2015), Moreno (2023), and Maglana (2016) reveals that the factors of identity, nationhood, and regional and national recognition all shape the ultimate interplay of politics and development in conversations about development. For example, the diaspora observed by Maglana (2016) about the Sama Bajao communities led to varying principles and revelations about their identity when they talked about sociocultural context and political aspirations as a group. Conversely, this sense of knowing their identity puts a notion on their reflective ability to talk about identity when viewed in a much larger space, assimilating it with outsiders and the shared history of the Philippines. (Wianti & McWilliam, 2023)

Because identity is tied to the concept of nationhood, it affects their political representation and thus the ability to demand and forward policies that govern and pay respect to their cultural heritage and practices. The semi-structured analysis from the papers reviewed in this article reveals that the prerequisites to secure a long-term and genuine political representation involve a whole level of acceptance of the group's identity. This revelation comes after the discussions on their struggles to assert cultural rights because of a lack of recognition. Hence, in order to maintain a sustained political representation, there is a need for proper recognition of their identity, one that is unique without bordering them in a single lens of being sea-nomad individuals. (Chong et al., 2018)

Finally, political interplay is constantly related to socioeconomic, as revealed in the studies reviewed in this article. This relationship dwells on the idea that political representation and participation directly result from socioeconomic status. Translated in the context of the Sama community, this means that their identity as a group must be recognized to enrich and forward a meaningful political representation. Conversely, political representation is a channel that finds support for development policies that provide solutions to existing socioeconomic problems faced by the community. Thus, while these interplay and relationships exist, those involved in proper recognition to advance a sustainable unified Sama community must work hand-in-hand to find the balance between asserting political representation and dealing with socioeconomic problems.

Towards a Sustainable and Unified Sama Community

Integrating the findings and results from the previous sections into the recently concluded International Bangsa Summit held from 18 to March 19, 2023, requires a progressive lens to comprehend the trajectory of a unified Sama community.

Several discussions and take were made to understand the status quo of the Sama community in the Bangsamoro region. These talks and discussions ranged from artistic display, language, and cultural heritage to aspirations, imperatives, and sustainable paths to achieving a unified Sama community. These discussions deal with imperative strategies that must be undertaken to integrate the security of access to basic social services. The discussions highlighted the following important themes: social security, sustainable development, and identity recognition. These themes are aligned with the discussions made from the semi-systematic review in the previous sections. These themes deal with the interplay between socioeconomic factors and politics in achieving a sustainable community for the Sama people.

Social security includes wider considerations like economics, politics, food, health, environment, personal, and community. These security measures ensure a sustainable path forward for the Sama community, especially in crafting enhanced guidelines and measures to develop long-term strategies that will benefit the community. These considerations are also perceived as holistic in nature, covering individual and community-based security and transcending boundaries for environmental sustainability. Similarly, these sustainability assessments from the summit highlight the critical importance of acknowledging identity. Consistent with the literature, these problems allow for a step forward in advancing longstanding issues on cultural marginalization and protecting future societal development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The article dutifully examined existing literature about the Sama community, particularly the Sama Bajao, in the coastal regions of Mindanao. The context of the unified Sama includes the proper integration of policies geared towards sustainability. These policies must have long-term and short-term goals, which are crucial to ensuring a step-by-step approach to understanding socioeconomic problems.

Socioeconomic and Political Solutions

While resources are needed to carry out sustainable solutions, socioeconomic development policies should address access to basic social services, especially education. Facilitating these easy access and streamlining solutions will trickle down to the individual lives of the Sama people, making them feel socially included. Furthermore, prioritizing basic social services profoundly impacts the community's perception, building a greater sense of unity among them. Consistent with the analyses from the semi-systematic and integrative reviews, socioeconomic problems are the grassroots of greater political interplay issues. Hence, policies that benefit the majority of the population will give rise to cooperation and consequently lead to meaningful development of the aspired unified Sama community.

Similarly, political representation must be genuinely participatory. This representation translates to the active involvement of the community not only during elections but also in crafting policies that secure their rights and protect their heritage. By giving voice and a proper platform to the Sama community, a stronger sense of commitment towards a unified Sama will be fostered much faster, hence, a sustainable community. Nonetheless, the political interests and leadership aspects of those involved in the process must also be taken into consideration to ensure the protection of equal opportunities and meaningful freedoms for every Sama individual.

Indeed, a unified Sama community is an aspiration and a work in progress. Excellent commitment to the protection of political rights must draw inspiration from the problems and experiences shared by the Sama people as a result of socioeconomic problems. Unless policies are crafted for the betterment and benefit of all, the purported abuse and historical marginalization will persist, leaving these communities with the reality and the constant aspiration for a unified Sama people.

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