

Sustainable Peace in Sagada: From Indigenous Peacebuilding and the Whole-of-Nation Approach toward a Culturally Grounded Framework for Peace

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Abstract

Sustainable peace involves more than the absence of armed conflict. It also depends on social justice, cultural continuity, inclusive governance, psychosocial well-being, and the capacity of communities to sustain relationships through periods of change. This qualitative case study examines how indigenous peacebuilding traditions among the Applai of Sagada, Mountain Province, intersect with the Philippine government's Whole-of-Nation Approach. Guided by Sikolohiyang Pilipino and indigenous research methodologies, the study drew on key informant interviews, pakikipagkwentuhan (story-telling), pagtatanung-tanong (informal asking of questions), documentary analysis, and a thematic review of relevant media reports. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The findings show that the Applai understand peace as a continuing process of maintaining and restoring harmony among individuals, families, clans, the community, the natural environment, and the spiritual world. Institutions such as the Dap-ay (sacred socio-political spaces), Tongtongan (conflict negotiation), and Peden (peace pact) remain important mechanisms of governance, mediation, restorative justice, and social cohesion despite colonial, political, and institutional change. Participants also recognized the contributions of the Whole-of-Nation Approach, particularly in infrastructure, livelihoods, and public services. At the same time, they stressed that development and reduced armed encounters do not, by themselves, constitute sustainable peace. Trust, dignity, reconciliation, emotional healing, cultural identity, and meaningful community participation remain essential.

The study argues that indigenous and state-led peacebuilding need not be treated as competing systems. Their strengths can be combined through a culturally grounded framework linking indigenous values, community-centered governance, socio-psychological healing, inclusive development, and intergenerational resilience. In doing so, the study positions indigenous knowledge not simply as local tradition, but as a substantive source of peacebuilding theory and policy..

Keywords: sustainable peace; indigenous peacebuilding; Applai; Sagada; Whole-of-Nation Approach; conflict transformation; Sikolohiyang Pilipino; restorative justice; community governance; Cordillera.

Introduction

In a world characterized by armed conflict, political instability, displacement and increasing social polarization, sustainable peace has become a central issue. Hence, the meaning of peace has also widened. The definition of peace as the absence of open violence is no longer enough. Increasingly, contemporary scholarship considers it as a condition sustained by justice, inclusive institutions, cultural recognition, psychological well-being and resilient social relationships (United Nations, 2015; United Nations General Assembly, 2016; United Nations & World Bank, 2018). This broader outlook is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 16, which connects peaceful and inclusive societies with access to justice and accountable institutions.

The Global Peace Index showed that world peacefulness continued to deteriorate, with the economic impact of violence estimated at US\$17.5 trillion in 2022 or nearly 13% of global gross domestic product (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2023). The scale of the problem shows why military security or a formal political settlement alone will not suffice. Violence may die down, but mistrust, fear, exclusion and grievance persist.

Peace scholarship has long distinguished between ending violence and creating the conditions in which communities can live with justice and dignity. Galtung (1969) defined negative peace as the absence of direct violence and positive peace as the presence of just institutions and harmonious social relations. Later, Lederach (1997) defined conflict transformation as a long term process of re-constructing relationships, restoring trust and strengthening local capacities. Recent work on locally grounded peacebuilding also points to the fact that communities are not passive recipients of peace interventions. Their knowledge, institutions and everyday practices are important for peace to take root (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Such concerns are particularly pertinent in the Philippines, where conflict has taken various forms: communist insurgency, Moro self-

determination movements, clan feuds, resource disputes and localized political violence. Since the establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army in the late 1960s, various administrations have conducted military operations, negotiations, amnesty programs, and development programs in efforts to solve armed rebellion (Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity [OPAPRU], n.d.). Such efforts have led to periods of reduced violence, but they have also shown the limits of security-focused approaches when historical grievance, exclusion and weak community participation are not adequately addressed. The Whole-of-Nation Approach was institutionalized by virtue of Executive Order No. 70 in 2018, which created the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (ELCAC). The policy was designed to synchronize national agencies and local governments in responding to the socioeconomic conditions related to insurgency while enhancing governance and hastening development in geographically isolated and conflict-affected areas (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2018). Nevertheless, academic and human rights discussions have raised concerns about centralized implementation, red-tagging, civic space and limited community participation (Andreopoulos et al., 2020; International Commission of Jurists, 2022; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2020). Such wide-ranging assessments call for community-level scrutiny.

This inquiry is situated in a unique setting of the Cordillera Administrative Region of the Philippines. Customary law, collective governance, resource management and conflict-resolution systems had been developed by communities to handle disputes involving territory, kinship, resources and inter-community relations before colonial and national institutions reached the highlands (Cariño, 1996; Prill-Brett, 1987; Scott, 1974). Their resilience suggests that regional peacebuilding cannot be understood solely in terms of the modern state.

Among the *Applai* (indigenous group) of Sagada, peacebuilding is linked with the *Dap-ay* (sacred socio-political space for elders and leaders decision making and ritual facilitation), *Tongtongan* (conflict negotiation), *Peden* (peace pact) and reconciliation practices based on dialogue, consensus, reciprocity and restoration of social harmony. These mechanisms do not isolate legal accountability from relationships. Even when a dispute is between individuals, its effects may be felt by households, clans and the wider village. Resolution is not only about settling a case but about repairing what has been disturbed (Cariño, 1996; Macaspac, 2019).

This understanding also echoes *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (psychology based on Filipino worldviews). Relational personhood and shared humanity are emphasized in concepts such as *loob*, *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). The *Applai* notions of *rikna* and *inayan* in the narratives studied here also link inner well-being, moral responsibility, and communal life. Sagada is important because there have been overlaps of several peacebuilding frameworks in the area: earlier inter-community conflict regulated through *Peden* and *Tongtongan*; armed conflict between government forces and the New People's Army; the community-led Peace Zone declared in 1989; and the Whole-of-Nation Approach. Research on the Peace Zone supports its community-led origins and ongoing local initiatives (Macaspac, 2019, 2023). Together these episodes illustrate the interplay of indigenous institutions, community initiatives and state programs over time.

The indigenous political institutions and Peace Zone in Sagada have been studied (Cariño, 1996; Macaspac, 2019, 2023), but the implications for integrated national peace policy are underdeveloped. The customary and state systems are often presented as separate, or even antagonistic. Analyses of the Whole-of-Nation Approach also tend to focus on security and development metrics, with less focus on trust, collective memory, reconciliation and emotional healing. There is a gap in the literature on sustainable peace in Sagada through indigenous and state led approaches. This study fills that gap. It does not ask which system should prevail, but how their strengths and limits might inform a culturally situated framework.

Objectives of the Study

The study examines sustainable peace in Sagada by analyzing the relationship between indigenous peacebuilding traditions and the Philippine government's Whole-of-Nation Approach. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) examine *Applai* concepts and practices of peace; (2) describe community experiences under the Whole-of-Nation Approach; (3) compare the strengths and limitations of indigenous and state-led peacebuilding; and (4) propose a culturally grounded framework that integrates indigenous knowledge with contemporary peace initiatives.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was utilized to understand how sustainable peace is understood, experienced and maintained in Sagada, Mountain Province. This was the right approach because peace cannot be reduced to security statistics. History, cultural meaning, relationships, institutions, and lived experience shape it (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was grounded on *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* which argues for knowledge production that is based on Filipino worldviews and culturally appropriate researcher-participant relationships (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000; Smith, 2021). Thus, data collection was part of the *pagtatanung-tanong* and *pakikipagkwentuhan*. These methods allowed participants to interpret peace through their own categories, memories and social contexts, rather than through rigid externally imposed questions.

The main data was gathered through informal interviews with a purposive sample of community elders, traditional leaders, local government officials, indigenous knowledge holders and other community members with first-hand knowledge of peace practices and local experiences of conflict transformation. Discussions centered on the definition of peace, typical responses to conflict, evolution of peacebuilding in the area, and views on the Whole-of-Nation Approach.

Field narratives were supplemented with documentary analysis of government reports, executive issuances, historical accounts, local documents, and scholarship on indigenous governance and peacebuilding. National and regional newspapers' accounts helped piece together major peace-related events in Sagada. Articles containing terms such as conflict, peace, Peace Zone, encounter, ELCAC, and Sagada were analyzed for recurring themes and shifts in public discourse. Triangulation increased the interpretive credibility.

Thematic analysis was carried out as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). Interview reports, documents and media materials were coded inductively. Subsequently, related codes were grouped into broader themes that related to indigenous meanings of peace, customary institutions, historical transformation, experiences of state-led peacebuilding, socio-psychological reconciliation, and possibilities for integration.

Ethical procedures were based on respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the community ownership of knowledge. We followed community protocols, received informed consent, kept confidentiality when requested, and confirmed preliminary interpretations through community consultation. The steps were aimed at ensuring cultural accuracy and respectful representation (Smith, 2021).

Results and Discussion

Findings indicate that peace in Sagada is a work in progress, a social and cultural process, rather than a state attained at the cessation of armed conflict. The participants highlighted relationships, responsibility, emotional balance, customary values and repair. Their accounts indicate that sustainable peace depends on the structural conditions and quality of relationships in the community (Galtung, 1969; Lederach, 1997).

Applai peacebuilding predates the modern nation-state. The roles of customary institutions in governance included regulating conduct, settling disputes and transmitting values. They transformed, but did not vanish, under colonial rule, postwar governance, insurgency and contemporary policy. To put it differently, peacebuilding in Sagada is complex, involving indigenous, community-based, and state-led practices that at times reinforce each other and at times create tension.

Indigenous Meanings of Peace

Participants seldom described peace in narrowly political or legal terms. Kapya is usually used to mean peace, but the accounts collected for the study gave it a wider meaning. Peace means having good relations among people, households, clans, neighboring communities, the natural environment and the spiritual world. It was balance restored and kept up all the time.

A state-centered definition may evaluate peace by reduced armed encounters, decreased crime or greater institutional control. Those concerns are part of the Applai perspective, but it also asks if people live without fear, if obligations are fulfilled, if emotional wounds are healed and if relationships with the land, sacred places and the unseen world are in balance.

This view is supported by Galtung's (1969) differentiation between negative and positive peace. Nonviolence is necessary, but peace also needs justice, trust and functioning relationships. The Applai accounts take the idea a step further by adding ecological and spiritual levels. Participants mentioned ancestral spirits, sacred sites, guardian beings or *pinading* and the consequences of failing to meet customary expectations. This is consistent with scholarship that describes indigenous worlds as relational systems in which human life, nature and spirituality are inseparable (Battiste, 2002; Berkes, 2018; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Peace was constructed by narratives in three interdependent domains: the social world, the natural environment and the spiritual world or *adi kaila*. Disruption in one domain could impact the others. Participants used the term *lawa* (taboos) to refer to negative consequences that could manifest as illness, misfortune, interpersonal discord, or broader communal imbalance. Within this worldview, harmful action does not stop with the person who commits it. It has a ripple effect on the self, the community, the environment and generational relationships.

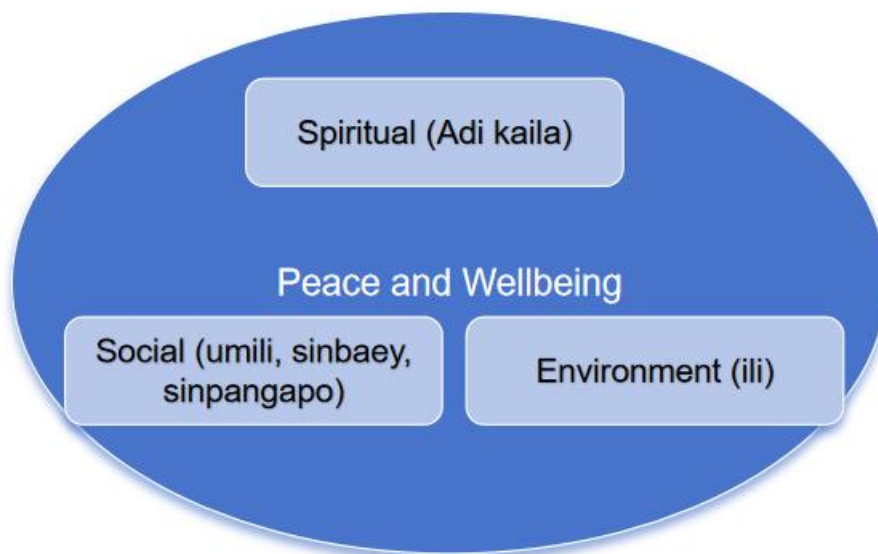


Figure 1. Indigenous dimensions of peace and well-being among the Applai

The social domain itself is a domain of relationality. The immediate base is the *sinbaey*, or household. The *sinpangapo* is the clan which comprises generational relationships from ancestors to descendants, and the *ili* is the village and the environment. Peace in the *ili* is a function of relationships at all levels. Disputes between individuals can involve their households and ultimately their clans, between whom relational harmony must be established. Conflict resolution is thus not a private affair. The community has a stake in preventing escalation and repairing social ties.

This collective orientation is similar to the concept of *kapwa* (shared self) in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* where the self is understood through relationship, rather than through radical separation from others (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). It also echoes the Cordillera accounts of governance where rights and responsibilities are embedded in kinship, reciprocity and community accountability (Carino, 1996; Prill-Brett, 1987). The person is not erased, but the person is not conceived of separately from the social world either as everyone is connected. *Rikna* and the Work of Reconciliation

One of the clearest themes in the interviews was the role of *rikna*, which could be broadly translated as the inner emotional and psychological state. Participants noted that while an agreement, compensation or legal settlement may resolve a dispute, it may not heal it fully. Sustainable peace depends on attention to what remains within people: anger, shame, grief, fear or mistrust. This was compared to legal battles where resolutions were not based on resolving the *rikna* (inner psychological state) which often results in unresolved issues that can escalate in future scenarios.

Formal proceedings may establish liability and bring about a legal result which does not really resolve inner psychological turmoils engendered by the conflict. Indigenous peace processes can occur through dialogue, ritual, prayer, communal meals and renewed obligations. These practices are not mere celebrations of an agreement that has been reached. They have a social return. They acknowledge the injury, they encounter former enemies, they return to a shared moral universe.

Similarly, Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation framework contends that peacebuilding must address damaged relationships and not only the immediate issue in dispute. The community psychology perspective also recognizes that violence and collective trauma can erode trust and belonging long after the physical threat is gone (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The Applai accounts demonstrate that psychosocial healing is not a new feature of peacebuilding. It has long been embedded in local reconciliation processes. Comparative Indigenous research also links resilience and healing to cultural continuity, collective identity, and connectedness (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

This however does not equate the customary ritual with a standardized mental health intervention. The evidence for a narrower claim is that participants regarded culturally meaningful practices as necessary for restoring *rikna* and rebuilding social relationships. Their value is in how they are interpreted and performed in the community. Inayan as Preventive Peace

Peace is also maintained before the outbreak of war. Participants repeatedly described *inayan* (golden rule) as a moral principle that promotes restraint, respect, responsibility and consideration of others. The accounts described it as more than a rule against specific acts, although sometimes translated as prohibition or taboo. It is an internalized moral stance.

Inayan functions through conscience and through shared expectation. We see that people avoid harmful behavior not simply because some external authority might punish them, but because wrongdoing damages relationships and can have repercussions for the individual, family or community. Regulation is therefore moral and social.

This preventive role resembles restorative justice approaches that focus on responsibility for harm and the restoration of relationships rather than punishment (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020; Zehr, 2002). It also supports Berkes's (2018) argument that customary values can act as durable institutions, because they are transmitted through identity, memory, and socialization. *Inayan* is supported not only by instruction but by repeated participation in community life.

The broader point is that peace is not a reaction to violence. It must be worked out in everyday conduct. Dialogue, reciprocity, respect for elders, and collective responsibility make escalation less likely. In that sense peace is practiced every day.

Historical Transformation of Peacebuilding in Sagada

The historical findings show continuity without inactivity. Indigenous institutions persisted, but they also adapted to changing political and social conditions. Four broad phases emerged from the data: pre-colonial indigenous governance; colonial and post-colonial institutional change; the Peace Zone established amid the communist insurgency; and the contemporary Whole-of-Nation Approach. These phases overlap rather than replace one another completely.

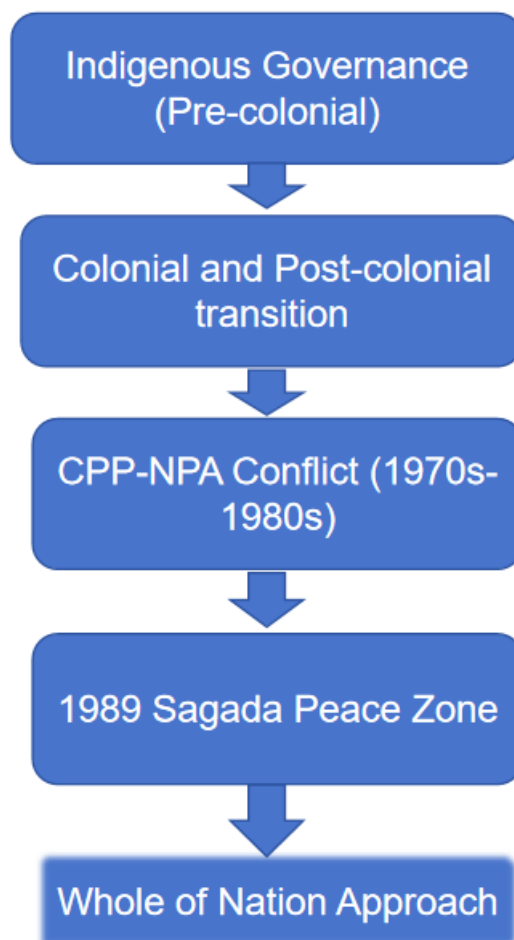


Figure 2. Historical trajectory of peacebuilding in Sagada

Indigenous Governance before State Formation

Prior to the development of formal institutions of the state in the Cordillera, local communities adhered to political and legal arrangements rooted in kinship, customary law and decentralized authority. Mountain terrain and

sustained resistance limited Spanish colonial administration in many areas (Scott, 1974). Indigenous institutions thus were largely responsible for maintaining order.

The *Dap-ay* (indigenous sacred space for council of elders) of the Applai had several functions at the same time. It was a political body, a deliberative council, a space of instruction, a ritual space. The elders did not rule by force. Their influence came from experience, moral standing, knowledge of custom and the ability to lead consensus (Carino, 199).

This type of governance is akin to Ostrom's (1990) concept of polycentric institutions where communities make rules at local levels to solve common problems. The comparison does not erase the cultural specificity of the *Dap-ay* but helps explain how governance occurred in the absence of a centralized bureaucracy. Rules and accountability were established in everyday relationships.

Participants also defined peace as a collective responsibility during this period. Conflicts could easily spread from the individual to the household and clan, and intervention was directed towards preventing an escalation. The goal was not merely to establish guilt, but to restore the social equilibrium before vengeance fueled the conflict.

Historical depictions of the Cordillera often emphasize headhunting and warfare (Scott, 1974). Participants did not deny that there was inter-village conflict (e.g., over boundaries, resources, marriage alliances, revenge). But they did insert those conflicts into a larger system that also produced mechanisms for restraining violence. But that history of institutions is skewed if we look only at warfare.

This work was at the core of the *Peden* and *Tongtongan*. *Peden* established peaceful relations and mutual obligations between communities, while *Tongtongan* provided a process of dialogue, mediation and collective decision-making. Agreements covered compensation, conduct, trade and future relations. Rituals, feasts and reaffirmation of the community reinforced their authority. Peace was institutionalized through social participation, not just through written terms (Cariño, 1996; Macaspac, 2019; Prill-Brett, 1987).

Prill-Brett (1987) too, describes the Cordillera peace institutions as legal, political, economic and social arrangements. As noted by Scott (1974), such pacts contributed to stable inter-community relations without central rule. Evidence from Sagada supports this interpretation: indigenous peacebuilding was not an off-hand alternative to the state. It was the Government.

Colonial and Post-Colonial Adaptation

The American colonial government introduced municipal government, courts, police, and public schools. Such institutions assumed functions that were carried out within customary systems. Yet the interviews suggest that the *Dap-ay* and *Tongtongan* did not just disappear. They persisted and adapted along with formal structures (Cariño, 1996).

In situations of legal conflict, courts could be used, but many interpersonal conflicts were still resolved through *Tongtongan*, especially when the maintenance of relationships was considered as important as the determination of legal liability. This coexistence is an example of legal pluralism in which communities use customary and formal systems depending on the nature of a dispute and the outcome that is sought (Merry, 1988).

The persistence of indigenous institutions should not be romanticized as intact survivals. Colonial and post-colonial governance altered authority, law, education and community life. Instead, Applai peacebuilding exhibited adaptive resilience as external institutions were selectively integrated while *inayan*, reciprocity, collective responsibility and respect for elders continued to shape relationships (Berkes, 2018).

Table 1. Historical Evolution of Peacebuilding Institutions in Sagada

Historical period	Dominant institution arrangement	peace or	Primary function	Key characteristics
Pre-colonial	Dap-ay, Peden, Tongtongan		Conflict prevention, governance, and reconciliation	Consensus, ritual, kinship, reciprocal obligation
Colonial and post-colonial transition	Customary institutions alongside municipal government		Hybrid governance and dispute resolution	Legal pluralism and institutional adaptation
Peace Zone period	Community mobilization		Civilian protection and local peace advocacy	Participation, collective ownership, moral authority
Whole-of-Nation period	Multi-agency state governance interacting with local institutions		Security, development, and service delivery	Infrastructure, coordination, and continuing questions of trust and participation

The Sagada Peace Zone

The creation of the Sagada Peace Zone in 1989 was a turning point in local peacebuilding under the leadership of Thomas Kilip as mayor that time. The research participants described it as a community response to militarization and to the dangers of armed encounters between the government forces and the New People's Army. It didn't come out of the nation. It emerged from local efforts to protect civilians (Macaspac, 2019, 2023).

Reports indicate that the civilian deaths helped mobilize elders, churches, women's groups, educators, local officials, and other community members. They said Sagada should be kept free from military encampments and armed confrontation. Participants did not see this position as indifference to political conflict, but as a humanitarian stance on civilian life (Macaspac, 2019).

The Peace Zone is a demonstration of the power of collective legitimacy. Anderson (1999) describes zones of peace as spaces that communities endeavour to shield from armed conflict by means of participation and moral authority. Also a source of Sagada's strength was broad community ownership, not coercive enforcement.

That ownership was based on familiar practices of dialogue and consensus. The initiative was modern, but its social base was nothing new. Elders, religious leaders, local government and civic groups operated through relationships already molded by indigenous expectations of collective responsibility. In this regard, the Peace Zone exhibits Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding from below – local actors did not wait for a comprehensive national settlement before creating a measure of protection in their own community (Macaspac, 2023).

Participants associated the Peace Zone with other benefits than the reduction of armed encounters. Schools worked more reliably, tourism increased, and community organizations were given more room to operate. Peace created the practical conditions of social-economic activity. This supports the positive peace argument that security and development are linked to trust, cooperation and functioning institutions (IEP, 2023).

Nevertheless, the Peace Zone was not self-sufficient. External political shifts, evolving military strategies and resurgent insurgent activity continued to put pressure on the municipality, respondents recall. It had to be constantly negotiated and kept in place.

Experiences under the Whole-of-Nation Approach

Executive Order No. 70 introduced another layer to Sagada's peacebuilding landscape. The Whole-of-Nation Approach combined security objectives with coordinated development and governance interventions (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2018). Participants recognized tangible gains, including farm-to-market roads, public facilities, livelihood assistance, improved transportation, agricultural support, and wider access to government services. These are participant accounts in Sagada itself; the study did not independently audit program delivery or effectiveness.

The appreciation was real, but qualified. Participants repeatedly distinguished development from peace itself. Roads and services can reduce isolation and improve daily life. Livelihood programs can address economic vulnerability. Yet these gains do not automatically repair mistrust, humiliation, grief, or social division. A community may be materially better served and still feel psychologically insecure.

Concerns about red-tagging were especially significant in the interviews. Some participants described anxiety that church workers, educators, civic organizations, or development practitioners could be associated publicly with insurgent groups despite legitimate community involvement. Experiences varied, and the study does not claim that every participant encountered the same conditions. It does show that suspicion can affect belonging, public participation, and confidence in institutions (International Commission of Jurists, 2022; OHCHR, 2020).

This matters because safety is not only physical. Community psychology links well-being to belonging, agency, trust, and confidence in social institutions (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Reduced armed encounters may improve physical security, but fear of accusation or social labeling can weaken the relationships on which community peace depends.

Critiques of centralized peace interventions often point to the gap between territorial or institutional control and local legitimacy (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). The Sagada findings support a careful version of that critique. They do not dismiss state development. Rather, they show that infrastructure, services, and security need to be accompanied by dialogue, procedural fairness, culturally appropriate participation, and attention to psychosocial consequences (United Nations & World Bank, 2018).

Participants continued to view *Tongtongan*, elder mediation, and reconciliation practices as credible because these mechanisms address relationships directly. Government programs and indigenous institutions were therefore not seen as mutually exclusive. They were seen as differently equipped. The state can mobilize funds, technical capacity, and inter-agency coordination. Customary institutions can contribute trust, cultural legitimacy, local knowledge, and mechanisms for restoring damaged ties (Republic of the Philippines, 1997).

Indigenous and State-Led Peacebuilding: A Comparative Synthesis

The evidence does not support a simple choice between indigenous and state-led peacebuilding. Both seek to prevent violence and sustain social order, but they begin from different assumptions and use different mechanisms. Their limits also differ.

Indigenous peacebuilding treats conflict as a disruption of relationships within an interconnected community. Disagreement is not necessarily abnormal; the danger lies in escalation, retaliation, and the widening of harm across households or clans. Accordingly, *Dap-ay deliberation*, *Tongtongan*, and *Peden* emphasize mediation, consensus, reciprocal obligation, and restoration. The goal is to make continued social life possible.

The Whole-of-Nation Approach begins from a national security and governance analysis. It treats insurgency as sustained partly by poverty, weak services, isolation, and limited state presence. Its tools include security operations, inter-agency coordination, infrastructure, livelihood programs, and local governance interventions (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2018). This orientation can address structural conditions beyond the resources of customary institutions.

The difference is not absolute: indigenous institutions also govern resources and conduct, while state actors may support reconciliation and welfare. Still, the contrast is useful. Indigenous processes often begin with relationships and legitimacy; state programs with institutional capacity and material conditions.

Participants made clear that both are necessary. Infrastructure can improve access to schools, markets, health services, and government programs. It can reduce forms of structural exclusion. But a road cannot reconcile estranged families. A livelihood grant cannot by itself restore dignity after public suspicion. Conversely, customary dialogue may rebuild trust but cannot independently provide all the public investment, legal protection, and administrative capacity required by contemporary communities.

Justice provides another point of comparison. Indigenous processes emphasize restoration, compensation, forgiveness, and reintegration. Responsibility includes repairing the harm done to victims, relationships, and the community. Shared meals, rituals, and reaffirmed obligations help mark the return to social life. This aligns with restorative justice, which shifts attention from punishment alone to the needs created by harm (UNODC, 2020; Zehr, 2002).

Formal government institutions must operate through statutory law, due process, and enforceable legal standards. These are indispensable, particularly in serious criminal cases and in protecting rights beyond the reach of local consensus. Yet legal judgment may close a case without restoring everyday relationships in a small community. The study therefore supports legal pluralism, not the replacement of formal law by customary practice (Merry, 1988; Republic of the Philippines, 1997).

Decision-making also differs. *Dap-ay* and *Tongtongan* rely on extended deliberation, elder credibility, and consensus that includes community values and norms. Participation can strengthen ownership because those affected by an outcome are involved in reaching it. State-led programs function through administrative hierarchies and national policy frameworks. Central coordination can move resources quickly and create uniform standards, but it can also narrow local participation when community institutions are consulted late or only symbolically (Cariño, 1996).

The central issue is not whether governance is formally national or locally customary. It is whether affected communities exercise meaningful agency. Mac Ginty (2011) describes hybrid peacebuilding as the interaction of formal and local systems rather than the clean dominance of either. In Sagada, such interaction already occurs. The policy question is how to make it more deliberate, accountable, and culturally responsive (Republic of the Philippines, 1997; United Nations General Assembly, 2016).

Cultural continuity is another indigenous contribution. Practices surrounding *inayan*, reciprocity, collective responsibility, and respect for elders do more than resolve disputes. They transmit expectations across generations. This preventive function is difficult to capture through indicators focused on armed encounters, completed infrastructure, or program expenditure. Yet participants consistently identified trust, belonging, dignity, and identity as central to whether peace endures.

That does not make relational indicators easy to measure. Nor does it justify treating culture as uniformly harmonious. The findings support a more modest conclusion: evaluations of peace in indigenous communities are incomplete when they omit locally meaningful accounts of trust, reconciliation, emotional well-being, and participation.

Table 2. Comparative Dimensions of Indigenous and State-Led Peacebuilding

Dimension	Whole-of-Nation Approach	Applied indigenous peacebuilding
Primary orientation	Security, governance, development, and rule of law	Harmony, reciprocity, and restoration of relationships
Institutional base	National agencies, local governments, and formal programs	<i>Dap-ay</i> , elders, <i>Tongtongan</i> , <i>Peden</i> , families, and clans
Conflict response	Administrative coordination, formal mediation, law enforcement, and services	Dialogue, consensus, customary obligation, and reconciliation

Dimension	Whole-of-Nation Approach	Apply indigenous peacebuilding
Justice	Due process and legal accountability	Restorative repair, compensation, forgiveness, and reintegration
Participation	Consultation through formal structures	Direct community participation shaped by customary institutions
Development role	Infrastructure, livelihoods, public services, and institutional capacity	Protection of social relations, cultural continuity, and ecological balance
Psychosocial dimension	Social welfare and formal services	Rikna, ritual, prayer, storytelling, communal support, and renewed obligation
Source of legitimacy	Constitution, law, public mandate, and administrative authority	Custom, moral credibility, historical continuity, and community acceptance
Main strength	Resources, scale, coordination, and enforceable policy	Cultural legitimacy, trust, local knowledge, and relational repair
Main risk when used alone	Technocratic or security-centered implementation with weak local ownership	Limited capacity to address all structural, legal, and material needs

Toward an Indigenous Sustainable Peace Framework

Based on the findings, the study proposes an Indigenous Sustainable Peace Framework with five interdependent components: indigenous worldview and values; community-centered governance; socio-psychological healing; inclusive development; and community resilience through intergenerational continuity. The framework does not replace national peace policy. It identifies conditions under which state and indigenous institutions can work together more effectively.

The first component is indigenous worldview and cultural values. Participants consistently located peace in principles such as *inayan*, reciprocity, collective responsibility, respect for elders, and communal accountability. These values shape conduct before formal intervention becomes necessary. Because they are learned through participation and socialization, they function as lived institutions rather than abstract ideals.

The second component is community-centered governance. The *Dap-ay*, *Tongtongan*, and *Peden* create spaces for deliberation, mediation, consensus, and reconciliation. Their legitimacy comes from cultural recognition and community participation. That legitimacy should not exempt them from critical examination, but it should prevent policy from treating them as decorative traditions. They remain active governance resources.

The third component is socio-psychological healing. The concept of *rikna* captures a recurring finding: peace agreements are fragile when emotional injury and mistrust remain unaddressed. Healing may involve dialogue, ritual, prayer, shared meals, storytelling, remembrance, and renewed obligation. These practices are culturally specific ways of rebuilding belonging and social confidence. They can complement, rather than substitute for, formal psychosocial and welfare services (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

The fourth component is inclusive governance and development. Participants valued education, health care, roads, agriculture, livelihoods, and responsive public institutions. These address material inequalities and reduce conditions that may intensify conflict. Development becomes more peace-sustaining, however, when communities participate meaningfully in defining needs, setting priorities, implementing programs, and evaluating effects (United Nations & World Bank, 2018).

The fifth component is community resilience and inter-generational continuity. Indigenous peace systems endure because knowledge is transmitted. Elders, households, schools, local institutions, rituals, and community stories all have roles in carrying historical memory and ethical expectations forward. Younger people are not merely recipients of tradition; their participation determines how customary practices adapt to changing conditions (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

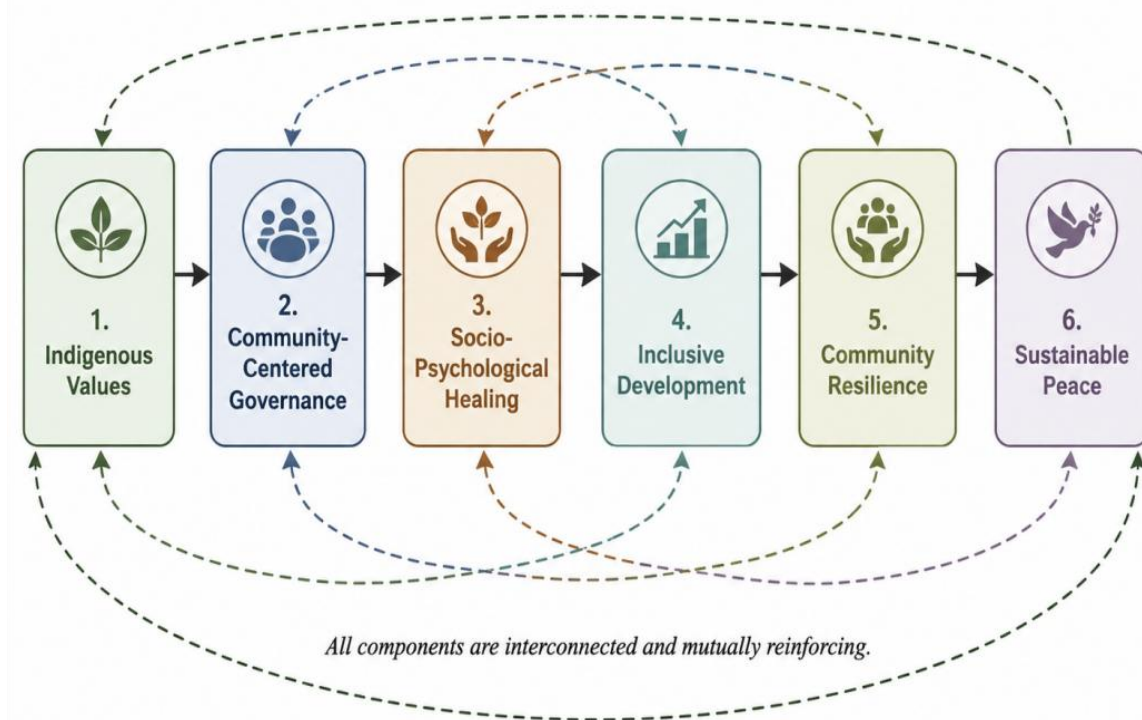


Figure 4. Proposed Indigenous Sustainable Peace Framework

The components are not a rigid sequence. Cultural values influence governance; governance shapes inclusion; healing affects trust and participation; and inter-generational continuity sustains the system across changing conditions and generations. Weakness in one area can undermine the others. Development without legitimacy may produce compliance without ownership. Reconciliation without material support may leave grievance intact. Cultural continuity without opportunities for younger generations may become brittle.

The framework contributes to debates on the localization and decolonization of peacebuilding by treating indigenous knowledge as analytical and institutional capacity. Indigenous communities are not only beneficiaries to be consulted after programs are designed. They are co-producers of peace whose concepts and practices can shape diagnosis, implementation, and evaluation (Smith, 2021).

Implications for Peacebuilding Theory

The Sagada case reinforces the view that peace is relational, cultural, and participatory. Positive peace theory emphasizes justice, effective institutions, equitable relationships, and social conditions that reduce the likelihood of violence (Galtung, 1969; IEP, 2023). Participants affirmed these concerns but also brought cultural continuity, ecological balance, spirituality, and *rikna* to the center of analysis. These are not peripheral features in their accounts. They shape what peace means.

The findings also deepen conflict transformation theory. Tongtongan and Peden embody dialogue, restoration, and long-term relationship building—principles often associated with contemporary peace scholarship (Lederach, 1997). Their historical presence cautions against treating Western academic theory as the origin of relationship-centered peacebuilding. Indigenous institutions should not only be interpreted through established theories; they may also revise those theories by showing how peace is sustained through kinship, ritual, moral obligation, and relationships with land and the spiritual world.

The study further supports the usefulness of hybrid peacebuilding (Mac Ginty, 2011; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Formal and customary systems are neither fully separate nor automatically compatible. Their interaction involves negotiation, unequal resources, and possible tension. Yet the evidence suggests that sustainable peace is strengthened when state institutions provide services, legal protection, and policy support while indigenous institutions contribute local legitimacy, cultural continuity, participation, and relational repair.

The most distinctive contribution is the emphasis on socio-psychological healing. Peace assessments often privilege ceasefires, security incidents, institutional reform, or economic indicators. Those measures matter. But the participants' focus on *rikna* shows why they are insufficient. A community can meet formal indicators while carrying unresolved fear and mistrust. Sustainable peace requires attention to what people can safely say, how they regard one another, and whether damaged relationships can be repaired (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Sustainable peace in Sagada is culturally grounded and continually renewed. For participants, it extends beyond the absence of armed conflict to harmony among people, households, clans, the village, nature, and the spiritual world. It also requires restoring *rikna*, observing *inayan*, and preventing conflict from spreading.

The *Dap-ay*, *Tongtongan*, and *Peden* remain relevant because they combine governance, mediation, accountability, and relational repair. Their endurance through colonial rule, state expansion, insurgency, and development policy shows adaptation. The Peace Zone likewise demonstrates the protective force of community ownership and moral authority.

Participants valued infrastructure, services, and livelihood support under the Whole-of-Nation Approach. Yet development and security measures do not automatically create reconciliation or psychological safety. Suspicion, red-tagging, limited participation, and mistrust require equal attention to relationships and material conditions.

The two approaches offer complementary strengths. Government provides resources, legal protection, coordination, and public services; indigenous institutions contribute legitimacy, local knowledge, restorative processes, and community ownership. Neither is sufficient alone.

The proposed framework connects indigenous values, community-centered governance, socio-psychological healing, inclusive development, and intergenerational resilience. Its central claim is clear: peace lasts when communities are heard, trusted, and engaged as partners in shaping their future.

Implications

The study has implications for theory, policy, governance, education, and research. *Applai* concepts integrate relational, ecological, spiritual, cultural, and psychosocial dimensions, extending positive peace and conflict transformation through *rikna*, *inayan*, and culturally grounded responsibility.

National peace initiatives would benefit from stronger recognition of indigenous governance. Indigenous leaders and customary institutions should participate in planning, implementation, and evaluation, not merely after priorities are set. This can strengthen trust and is consistent with legal and international commitments to participation and local institutions (Republic of the Philippines, 1997; United Nations General Assembly, 2016). Local governments, schools, civil society, and communities can transmit peace traditions through dialogue, education, storytelling, and cultural practice. Indigenous knowledge should remain a living resource for contemporary problems, not only an object of preservation.

Peace education can place local concepts beside national and international frameworks. Teaching the *Dap-ay*, *Tongtongan*, *Peden*, *inayan*, and *rikna* shows how peace is practiced and challenges the assumption that knowledge moves only from formal institutions to communities (Navarro-Castro & Nario-Galace, 2019).

Future research could compare other Cordillera peace systems and examine women, youth, and traditional knowledge holders more closely. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could assess how government-indigenous collaboration affects trust, participation, development, and resilience.

Sustainable peace does not emerge from security or development programs alone. It grows through justice, cultural continuity, inclusive governance, psychosocial healing, and community agency. Recognizing indigenous peacebuilding as living knowledge and governance offers a stronger basis for enduring peace in Sagada and other diverse communities..

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