



**Mindanao
Climate Justice**
RESOURCE FACILITY, INC.

A Primer and Situationer

Climate Justice in Mindanao: Addressing Challenges and Imperatives

April 2026



I. Overview: Understanding Climate Justice in Mindanao



The climate crisis is changing how people in Mindanao live, farm, fish, and care for their land. Floods, droughts, and storms are becoming more frequent and harder to recover from, consistent with global climate trends identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022).

The crisis cannot be understood in terms of weather alone. It is rooted in long histories of land dispossession, political neglect, and unequal power (Rodil 1994; Tadem 2020)—conditions that determine who is protected, who is exposed, and who carries the greatest risks when disaster strikes.

While all communities feel the impacts of a warming planet, the poorest and most marginalized—especially Indigenous Peoples, farmers, and fisherfolk—bear the heaviest burdens. These frontline communities have contributed the least to global greenhouse gas emissions yet face the most serious threats to lives, livelihoods, and cultural survival (UNFCCC 2015; IPCC 2019). Many also lack adequate state protection, social safety nets, or meaningful participation in decision-making—patterns documented in national climate vulnerability assessments and human rights reports (Eckstein et al., 2019; World Risk Index 2024).

This situationer frames the climate crisis in Mindanao not merely as an environmental challenge, but as a question of justice, rights, and governance. The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) of the Philippines, a constitutional state body, affirmed in its National Inquiry on Climate Change that climate change is fundamentally a human rights issue, as it threatens the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, culture, and self-determination—particularly for Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized communities.

Despite Mindanao's wealth in forests, rivers, minerals, and fertile lands, many communities remain impoverished and highly vulnerable to climate impacts, reflecting long-standing structural inequalities (World Bank, 2022).

Extractive industries, land conversion, militarization, and development policies that privilege corporate interests over community welfare continue to intensify ecological degradation and social harm. In doing so, they undermine the state's obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights in the design and implementation of climate and development policies (Global Witness, 2023; Commission on Human Rights [CHR], 2022).

These dynamics are not isolated phenomena, but interconnected and mutually reinforcing forces that shape how the climate crisis is produced, experienced, and resisted on the ground.

The first part of this document outlines the global and national climate context and how these trends affect the Philippines, particularly Mindanao. The next section assesses the state of Mindanao's land, forests, rivers, and energy systems and how these have been managed—or exploited—over time (DENR 2019; DOE 2022). This is followed by an examination of development aggression and the overlapping social and political drivers of environmental decline and human insecurity. The governance section analyzes how state policies and institutions have often failed to safeguard communities and the environment, and how these same structures can be reclaimed through rights-based and community-led approaches aligned with IPRA and UNDRIP (NCIP 1997; UN 2007). The paper concludes with initial recommendations for dialogue and collective action among communities, advocates, and institutions.

More than a technical account of climate impacts, this situationer invites readers to understand how Mindanao's climate, social, and political realities are interconnected.

Recognizing these relationships is essential to building resilience rooted in justice and dignity. In doing so, it encourages continued study, dialogue, and collective action—toward a Mindanao where care for the environment and the defense of human rights are inseparable.



II. Why Climate Change Is a Matter of Justice

Climate change is a global crisis that affects countries in different ways. Around the world, temperatures are rising, seasons are shifting, and extreme weather is becoming more frequent (IPCC 2021). But not all nations—and not all communities—have the same responsibility for the crisis or the same capacity to cope with it. This is the foundation of climate justice.

This section explains the larger picture of the climate emergency: what is causing it, who is most responsible, and why its impacts are felt unfairly across the world. It also shows how international agreements and national policies define responsibilities and responses.

Understanding this broader context helps us see how the situation in Mindanao connects to global discussions on rights, accountability, and fair climate action.

A. The Global Climate Emergency

Human activities are the primary driver of rapid climate change. Greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and fluorinated gases—come from burning fossil fuels, deforestation, industrial production, agriculture, and waste systems (IPCC 2021). As cities expand and consumption increases, emissions continue to rise unless structural changes are made in how societies produce and use energy.

For more than a century, industrialized countries have been the largest contributors to cumulative emissions, while many poorer nations have contributed very little to global warming (UNFCCC 2015; IPCC 2019). Today, emerging economies also add to emissions, but historical responsibility remains unequally distributed. Meanwhile, the countries and communities with the least emissions—including small island states, African nations, and archipelagic countries like the Philippines—face the greatest climate risks (Germanwatch 2020).

The Philippines, though a middle-income country, emits far less than major polluters like the United States and China, yet it ranks among the world’s most climate-vulnerable nations (World Risk Index 2024). This imbalance is at once a scientific and legal concern: those most responsible for the crisis are often the least affected, while highly exposed nations like the Philippines suffer disproportionate losses.

For this reason, global climate action must center fairness, adaptation support, loss and damage finance, and accessible climate finance mechanisms, as recognized in the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2015) and reaffirmed in the 2022 Sharm El-Sheikh Implementation Plan (COP27 2022).



Impacts of Climate Change

Climate impacts are not distributed equally. Sea-level rise will hit impoverished coastal communities hardest because they often live in low-lying areas with limited relocation options (IPCC 2019). Water scarcity, agricultural decline, and rising food prices will disproportionately affect the rural and urban poor who have fewer resources and alternatives.

Biodiversity loss poses grave risks for Indigenous and rural communities whose livelihoods, food systems, and cultural practices depend on forests, rivers, and wildlife (IPBES 2019). The climate crisis also contributes to health risks—including vector-borne diseases and heat-related illnesses—burdening those without adequate healthcare access.

For Indigenous Peoples, climate impacts threaten not only livelihoods but ancestral lands, cultural survival, and the right to self-determination, rights affirmed under UNDRIP (UN 2007) and IPRA (NCIP 1997).



Solutions to Climate Change

Addressing the climate crisis requires both mitigation and adaptation.

Mitigation measures include phasing out coal and oil, transitioning to renewable energy, improving waste systems, and shifting harmful production and consumption patterns (IPCC 2021). Adaptation strategies involve reducing disaster risks, safeguarding watersheds, improving land use and infrastructure, and strengthening local resilience.

Nature-based solutions—forest protection, watershed rehabilitation, climate-resilient agriculture, and sustainable urban design—play a key role (IUCN 2020). But these approaches must be grounded in justice. If conservation or carbon projects ignore Indigenous rights or lead to displacement, they reproduce the same inequalities that drive climate vulnerability. A just transition requires centering the rights of Indigenous Peoples, frontline communities, and the most vulnerable, consistent with UNDRIP, IPRA, and human rights obligations under treaties such as the ICESCR (UN 1966).

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The climate emergency is fundamentally a social justice and human rights issue. Structural inequalities determine who is protected and who is left behind.

A real transition demands that governments and corporations transform the systems they control—but the direction of this transformation must be guided by the needs, rights, and leadership of frontline communities. These communities are not only victims of climate change; they are rights-holders, environmental stewards, and knowledge-keepers whose governance systems and ecological practices are essential to shaping just and lasting solutions.

B. Climate Justice in the Philippines

Climate justice in the Philippines refers to the fair and equitable distribution of the burdens and benefits of climate change mitigation and adaptation. It centers the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable communities—especially Indigenous Peoples, farmers, fisherfolk, women, and urban poor households—who bear the greatest impacts of environmental degradation and extreme weather while contributing least to global emissions (IPCC 2019; UNFCCC 2015).

A climate justice approach also requires recognizing historical responsibility. Countries that have produced the most greenhouse gas emissions must bear a larger share of the burden in addressing the crisis, while those that contributed least—like the Philippines—should receive the support they need to adapt, recover, and build resilience (UNFCCC 2015; UNFCCC 2022). This includes access to climate finance, loss and damage mechanisms, and technology transfer.

Realizing climate justice requires fulfilling fundamental human rights: the rights to life, health, food, water, education, housing, cultural identity, and self-determination. These rights are affirmed in the Paris Agreement, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN 1966). They are also reflected in the Philippine Constitution, which guarantees a balanced and healthful ecology (Art. II, Sec. 16) and the protection of Indigenous cultural communities (Art. II, Sec. 22).

The urgency of climate justice is reinforced by global risk assessments. The Global Climate Risk Index 2020 identified the Philippines as the second-most affected country by weather-related loss events in 2018 and the fourth-most affected over the long term (1999–2018) (Eckstein et al. 2019). More recent assessments, such as the World Risk Index 2024, now rank the Philippines as the most at-risk country in the world, underscoring its sustained vulnerability to disasters, poverty, governance challenges, and environmental degradation.

These indicators highlight that the Philippines is not only climate-vulnerable but also entitled to climate finance, adaptation assistance, and loss and damage support—principles enshrined in the Paris Agreement and reaffirmed at the 27th Conference of Parties (COP27) (UNFCCC 2022).

A changing climate has already brought more intense rainfall, stronger tropical cyclones, and more severe floods, landslides, and droughts across the country. The 2019 IPCC Special Report on Climate and Land confirms that extreme weather events will continue to intensify, disproportionately affecting highly vulnerable nations like the Philippines (IPCC 2019). This exposure is worsened by structural injustice: many Indigenous, rural, and poor communities face insecure land tenure, exclusion from decision-making, limited access to public services, and militarized environments that undermine climate adaptation and resilience.

Because of this, “business as usual” is no longer an option. Effective climate governance must be rooted in justice, participation, and accountability, as emphasized in UN OHCHR’s 2021 Human Rights Council report on human rights and climate change (UN OHCHR 2021) and reflected in the Philippine Constitution. Scholars, environmental advocates, and people’s organizations have proposed key actions to advance climate justice, including:



Nature-based solutions that protect ecological defenses such as mountain ranges, forests, and key watersheds while supporting local livelihoods (IUCN 2020);



Strengthening Integrated Natural Resources and Environment Management (INREM) systems to improve inter-agency coordination and ensure accountability in environmental governance;



Investing in safer and more accessible evacuation centers, particularly in rural and coastal areas;



Enhancing inter-LGU and inter-agency cooperation to improve disaster response and reduce unequal impacts;



Building Disaster Risk and Reduction Management (DRRM) capacities aligned with rights-based and community-led approaches;



Declaring a climate emergency to prioritize adaptation and mitigation at all levels of government;



Strengthening implementation and monitoring of the Philippines’ Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), including disaggregated monitoring in Indigenous territories and conflict-affected regions, consistent with IPRA and UNDRIP (NCIP 1997; UN 2007).

Climate justice demands policies

that confront the root causes of vulnerability, ensure accountability from government and corporate actors, and uphold the rights and leadership of communities most affected by the climate crisis.

C. Mindanao amid the Climate Crisis

Mindanao is one of the most resource-rich yet politically and economically marginalized regions of the Philippines (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). It is home to the majority of the country's Indigenous Peoples—particularly the Lumad and the Bangsamoro—who continue to confront ancestral land dispossession, militarization, displacement, and political exclusion. These long-standing conditions significantly heighten vulnerability to climate change by undermining access to land, livelihoods, and basic services.

These patterns have been documented by national and international human rights bodies. The Commission on Human Rights has affirmed that climate change exacerbates existing inequalities and disproportionately affects Indigenous and marginalized communities, making climate impacts inseparable from questions of rights and governance (CHR, 2022). Complementing this, UN human rights mechanisms examining the situation in the Philippines—including findings by Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression—have raised concerns over intimidation, harassment, and attacks against human rights defenders and civil society actors. Such conditions restrict civic space, weaken public participation, and erode accountability, all of which are essential to just and effective climate governance (Khan, 2025).

As climate hazards intensify, these structural and political injustices intersect with environmental stressors, producing a distinct and increasingly urgent form of climate injustice in Mindanao.



Environmental Context

Mindanao's rich ecosystems—its forests, mountains, river basins, and coastal areas—hold immense biodiversity and support millions of people. Yet they face severe pressures from deforestation, illegal logging, expanding mining operations, and unsustainable agribusiness. Many ecologically sensitive areas overlap directly with Indigenous ancestral domains, where customary governance systems have long served as effective models of conservation (NCIP 1997; UN 2007).

However, weak recognition and enforcement of customary law contribute to both environmental decline and cultural erosion. Without legal protection and meaningful participation, Indigenous stewardship cannot counter the pace of extractive development driven by corporate and state interests.





Social Context

Mindanao's social landscape is shaped by deep and persistent inequalities. Indigenous communities, Moro populations, peasant farmers, and coastal fisherfolk experience disproportionate violations of land rights and human rights, rooted in historical marginalization and unequal access to resources. Large-scale agribusiness concessions, mining projects, and plantations have driven resource depletion, environmental degradation, and cultural loss, undermining traditional livelihoods and community cohesion.

Drawing on consolidated data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics (BAS), and the Department of Agriculture (DA), the REAP Mindanao Network estimates that approximately 500,000 hectares—around 12 percent of Mindanao's agricultural land—are devoted to export-oriented plantations, including banana, pineapple, oil palm, rubber, cacao, and sugarcane. These plantations are concentrated in Indigenous and rural areas, particularly in Northern Mindanao and SOCCSKSARGEN (Region XII), and are largely controlled by multinational and large domestic corporations through plantation, contract-growing, and outgrower arrangements. This scale and pattern of land conversion have contributed to displacement, precarious labor conditions, and the erosion of community control over land and resources (REAP Mindanao Network, n.d.).

Armed conflict further compounds these vulnerabilities, causing displacement, disrupting livelihoods, and exposing communities to violence and insecurity. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports that conflict and violence have displaced hundreds of thousands of people in Mindanao, with many communities experiencing protracted and repeated displacement (IDMC, 2023).

These harms are intensified by militarized development and security-driven governance. Policies such as Executive Order No. 70, which institutionalized a “whole-of-nation” approach, and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 have been raised as concerns by UN human rights mechanisms for their association with red-tagging, harassment, surveillance, and the criminalization of Indigenous leaders, educators, human rights defenders, and environmental advocates (UN OHCHR, 2020; UN Special Rapporteur findings).

Such conditions undermine the effective exercise of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) as guaranteed under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). FPIC requires that Indigenous communities are able to make decisions freely, prior to project approval, and with full information, including the right to withhold consent. In contexts of militarization, intimidation, and restricted civic space, these standards are routinely compromised—eroding Indigenous self-determination and deepening climate and social injustice.



Climate Change Impacts

Historically, Mindanao experienced fewer typhoons than Luzon and the Visayas, but this is rapidly changing. Extreme weather events such as Super Typhoon Pablo (Bopha, 2012), Super Typhoon Odette (Rai, 2021), and Severe Tropical Storm Paeng (Nalgae, 2022) caused significant loss of life and livelihood, disproportionately affecting Indigenous and rural communities.

Rising temperatures and prolonged droughts have severely damaged agriculture across Bukidnon, North Cotabato, Maguindanao, and other farming areas, leading to reduced harvests and water stress (PAGASA 2020). Climate projections indicate more intense rainfall events, longer dry spells, and increasing climate variability, with major implications for food security, public health, and local risk governance (IPCC 2021).

Slow-onset events—including sea-level rise, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, and agricultural decline—are expected to worsen. In conflict-affected areas, these environmental changes intersect with armed violence, exacerbating displacement, and humanitarian need (IDMC 2023).

Mindanao has therefore become a critical site for climate justice: real adaptation demands peacebuilding, rights-based governance, and recognition of Indigenous leadership in managing forests, watersheds, and agricultural systems.



Toward Rights-Based and Community-Led Climate Resilience

The combined pressures of extraction, militarization, land inequality, and climate instability show that Mindanao’s vulnerability is not natural—it is political. Climate resilience will remain out of reach unless the underlying drivers of harm are addressed: land grabbing, corporate impunity, displacement, policy incoherence, and the erosion of Indigenous governance.

Effective climate responses must center:



Indigenous rights and self-determined development



Protection of ancestral domains and customary governance systems



Demilitarization of civilian communities and defense of environmental advocates



Equitable access to climate finance and adaptation support



Community-led approaches to agriculture, water management, and disaster risk reduction

Climate justice in Mindanao means supporting the people who have protected these lands for generations.

Their knowledge, leadership, and resistance are essential to building a future grounded in dignity, sovereignty, and ecological balance.



III. State of the Mindanao Environment

Mindanao holds vast forests, rivers, minerals, and fertile lands, yet much of this wealth has been used for corporate profit rather than community well-being. This section examines how land, biodiversity, agriculture, energy, and coastal resources are managed—and how these decisions shape climate vulnerability, especially for Indigenous Peoples. Extractive development, weak environmental regulation, and unequal policies have intensified ecological degradation and deepened social harm. Understanding this ground-level picture is essential for building fair, rights-based climate action in Mindanao (Tadem 2020).

A. Resource Wealth, Extraction, and Poverty in Mindanao

For decades, national planners have framed Mindanao—the so-called “Land of Promise”—as a gateway for investment in logging, mining, hydropower, plantations, and tourism. These industries contribute significantly to the national economy, yet they are rooted in an export-oriented and extraction-driven development model that prioritizes corporate profit over human rights, environmental protection, and Indigenous self-determination (Tadem 2020).

Government data show that more than half of the Philippines’ estimated mineral wealth lies in Mindanao, including nearly half of the country’s gold reserves (Mines and Geosciences Bureau [MGB], 2019). Much of this mineral wealth overlaps with Indigenous ancestral domains. However, documentation by national and international human rights bodies indicates that large-scale mining projects frequently proceed through weak, manipulated, or coercive Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes, undermining Indigenous decision-making. Such practices violate the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) and contradict the Philippines’ obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which affirms Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination, land, and the right to withhold consent (Commission on Human Rights [CHR], 2022; United Nations, 2007).

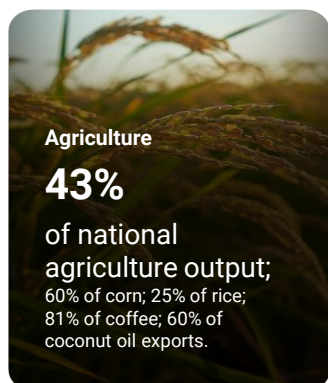
Despite its natural abundance, Mindanao remains among the poorest regions in the Philippines. Surveys show that self-rated poverty is consistently higher in Mindanao than in other major island groups, reflecting deep structural inequalities (SWS 2022). Four of the seven regions with the highest poverty incidence nationwide are in Mindanao (PSA 2021). Wages remain below living-wage standards, while landlessness and insecure tenure persist across the island.

Extraction has not brought prosperity to local communities. Instead, it has reproduced land dispossession, militarization, and regional underdevelopment, creating what Tadem (2020) describes as “development aggression”—violence against both people and the environment, often justified under neoliberal growth frameworks.

This pattern intensified under the Duterte administration, which publicly promoted Mindanao as a resource frontier. Former Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez stated in 2016 that “from food to minerals...the entire gamut of Mindanao’s resources are open to development.” This framing continues under the Marcos Jr. administration: the Philippine Development Plan 2023–2028 positions mining, infrastructure, and energy projects as key growth drivers, maintaining investor-friendly policies in frontier regions, including Indigenous territories (NEDA 2023).

Mindanao’s Economic Contributions

Mindanao remains a major contributor to national production

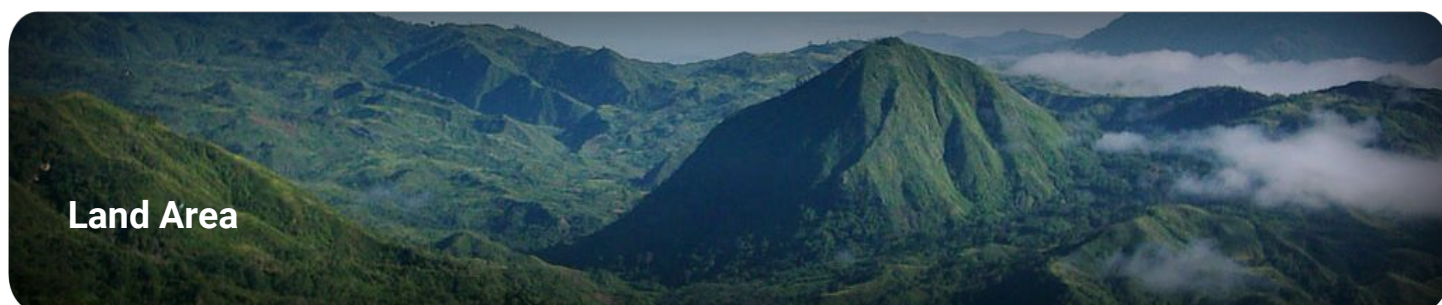


U.S. diplomatic assessments circulated publicly in 2011 described Mindanao as having mineral resources valued at up to USD 1 trillion, reinforcing industry narratives of the island as a high-value extraction zone.

Beneath this narrative lies a stark reality: biodiversity loss, militarized investment corridors, and displacement of Lumad, Moro, and peasant communities who serve as the island's environmental stewards.

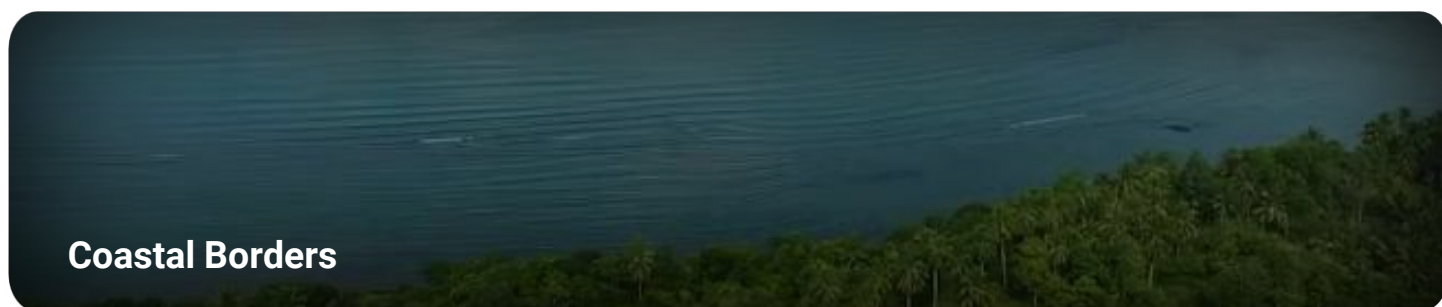
As corporate and state actors expand control over forests, watersheds, and mineral belts, the rights guaranteed in the Constitution (Art. II Sec. 16 & 22), IPRA, and RA 9147 (Wildlife Act) are routinely undermined. Climate justice in Mindanao requires reversing this trajectory—placing restitution, accountability, and community stewardship at the center of environmental governance.

B. Land and Geographical Features



Mindanao is the second-largest island in the Philippines, covering approximately 94,630 square kilometers, making it the 19th largest island in the world (NAMRIA, 2020). Its landscape is dominated by mountain ranges—including Mt. Apo, the nation's highest peak at 2,954 meters—along with volcanic systems, upland plateaus, and river basins that sustain rich biodiversity and local livelihoods.

This varied topography plays a key role in supporting forests, watersheds, and Indigenous agricultural systems. At the same time, it increases the vulnerability of remote and upland Indigenous communities during extreme weather events, landslides, flash floods, and prolonged droughts (PAGASA, 2020; IPCC, 2021).



Mindanao is surrounded by major bodies of water: the Mindanao Sea to the north, the Philippine Sea to the east, the Sulu Sea to the west, and the Celebes Sea to the south. It is further bordered by the Dipolog Strait, Bohol Sea, Surigao Strait, and Leyte Gulf.

This extensive coastline makes the island highly exposed to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, ocean acidification, and storm surges—risks that are intensified by climate change and disproportionately affect fishing communities and coastal Indigenous groups (IPCC, 2019; PAGASA, 2020). Many coastal settlements lack adequate protection infrastructure, increasing their vulnerability.



Administratively, Mindanao comprises six regions—Zamboanga Peninsula (Region IX), Northern Mindanao (Region X), Davao Region (Region XI), SOCCSKSARGEN (Region XII), Caraga Region (Region XIII), and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)—covering 28 provinces, 33 cities, and 422 municipalities (PSA, 2020).

Major urban centers include Davao City, Zamboanga City, Cagayan de Oro, General Santos, Butuan, Iligan, and Cotabato City. Despite these hubs of growth, many rural, upland, and riverine communities remain underserved by public infrastructure, social services, and disaster risk reduction systems—even as they sit in areas of intense resource extraction and climate risk (World Bank, 2022).



Stretching roughly 471 km north to south and 521 km east to west, Mindanao’s geography is shaped by peninsulas, mountain arcs, and deep coastal bays such as the Davao Gulf, Moro Gulf, and Iligan Bay. The island’s two major river basins—the Agusan River Basin in the northeast and the Mindanao (Pulangi) River Basin in the southwest—support millions of people through irrigation, fisheries, transport, and hydropower.

Historically, Mindanao had a milder typhoon profile compared to Luzon and the Visayas. But climate change has altered these patterns. The island now experiences more frequent continuous rainfall, stronger cyclones, prolonged dry spells, and intensified extreme weather events, trends consistent with PAGASA’s climate projections (PAGASA, 2020; IPCC, 2021).

These shifts threaten food security, water availability, public health, and Indigenous cultural practices tied to seasonal cycles. They also expose major gaps in local climate adaptation planning, watershed governance, and disaster preparedness—gaps that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities who already face land insecurity and development aggression.



C. Demographics of Mindanao



Population

Mindanao is the 7th most populous island in the world, with around 26.2 million people in 2020 and an estimated 27 million by 2021, accounting for roughly one-quarter of the Philippine population (PSA 2021). From only 670,833 inhabitants in 1903, the population expanded by more than 25 million over 117 years—driven by natural growth and large-scale migration supported by state policies.

Massive government-backed settlement programs, particularly during the American colonial period and Marcos Sr.'s 1970s resettlement initiatives, brought migrants from Luzon and the Visayas into Mindanao. Today, migrant-settler communities make up an estimated 67% of the island's population (Rodil 1994; PSA 2020). Indigenous and Moro communities, who historically occupied the land, now form minorities in many provinces.

Major urban centers include Davao City, Zamboanga City, Cagayan de Oro, General Santos, Butuan, Iligan, and Cotabato City, which concentrate economic power and political influence.



Ethno-Linguistic Composition

Mindanao is home to two broad Indigenous populations—the Lumad and the Moro—alongside long-established migrant-settler communities and smaller ethnic groups.



The Lumad are Indigenous Peoples of Mindanao belonging to 18 ethnolinguistic communities, including groups such as the Talaingod Manobo, Pulangui Manobo, Agusan Manobo, Bagobo, Mandaya, Subanen, Higaonon, and T'boli. They number approximately 2.04 million, or around 8% of Mindanao's population, and represent 61% of the Philippines' Indigenous population (NCIP 2014).

The term Lumad, meaning “born of the earth,” emerged in the late 1970s as a unifying assertion of identity, ancestral belonging, and resistance to marginalization. Lumad communities uphold distinct governance systems, ecological knowledge, and cultural traditions rooted in their ancestral domains across the uplands and interior landscapes of Mindanao.

Today, Lumad communities face intersecting pressures—including land dispossession, militarization, resource extraction, and climate impacts—that threaten their rights, cultural continuity, and self-determined development. Their stewardship of forests, watersheds, and biodiversity remains central to Mindanao's ecological health and climate resilience.



The Moro population comprises 13 Islamized ethnolinguistic groups, including the Maguindanaon, Meranao, Tausug, Sama-Badjao, Yakan, and Iranun. They constitute roughly one-fifth of Mindanao’s population and form the majority in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) (PSA 2020). Historic Moro settlements extend beyond current BARMM borders.

Both Lumad and Moro communities assert their rights to ancestral domains, self-determination, and cultural survival under the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and international human rights instruments.

Religious Composition



About 70% of Mindanao residents identify as Christian, with Roman Catholics comprising about 61%.



Islam remains dominant in BARMM, where 90.10% of the population are Muslim (PSA 2020).

Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity

Mindanao’s ethnic mosaic includes:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1 Cebuanos (dominant in Northern Mindanao and the Davao Region)</p> <p>2 Hiligaynon/Ilonggo (SOCCSKSARGEN)</p> <p>3 Bisaya/Binisaya (Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Mindanao, Caraga)</p> | <p>4 Maguindanaon (BARMM)</p> <p>5 Tausug (BARMM and Zamboanga Peninsula)</p> <p>6 Surigaonon (Caraga)</p> |
|--|---|

Cebuano is the most widely spoken language (29%), followed by Bisaya/Binisaya (27%), with Hiligaynon/Ilonggo, Maguindanaon, and Tausug as other major regional languages.

Mindanao’s linguistic diversity reflects histories of migration, resistance, militarization, religious identity, and competing claims to land and political power.

Political Representation and Inequality

Demographic patterns significantly influence governance and equity in Mindanao. Migrant-settler majorities dominate most lowland cities and provincial governments, giving them control over budget allocations, land-use planning, access to resources, and political representation. In contrast, Lumad and Moro communities—many of whom live in upland, interior, or conflict-affected areas—remain severely underrepresented in the very institutions that make decisions about resource extraction, infrastructure projects, and climate adaptation.

This structural imbalance deepens the long-standing political marginalization of Indigenous and Moro peoples and limits their ability to assert rights over ancestral lands and environmental governance.



Education and Literacy

Education access remains deeply unequal across Mindanao. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) consistently records the lowest literacy rates in the country:



Basic literacy
~**78–79%**



Functional literacy (PSA 2019)
71.6%

Meanwhile, Caraga (92%), Northern Mindanao (91%), and the Davao Region (91%) report much higher rates. These disparities stem from:

1

Geographic isolation

4

Systemic neglect

2

Protracted conflict

5

Militarization of indigenous communities

3

Chronic underinvestment in public education

The forced closure of over 200 Lumad schools since 2016 drastically reduced access to culturally relevant education, violating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and national education rights (Save Our Schools Network 2021).



Labor and Employment

Mindanao’s workforce faces structural challenges rooted in neoliberal policies, weak labor regulation, and the dominance of export-oriented agriculture.

Regional statistics (PSA 2020) show



Labor force participation: 70% in Northern Mindanao vs. 51% in BARMM



Unemployment: Mirrors national trends but varies by region. Northern Mindanao had all-time high due to COVID pandemic.

Workers experience



1 Low and inadequate wages



4 Repression of union organizing



2 Contractualization and involuntary layoffs



5 Pandemic-induced livelihood shocks



3 Rising living costs

Child labor persists at alarming levels



597,000 children in labor nationwide (PSA 2020)



63.6% in agriculture



Northern Mindanao highest among all regions at 7.2%

A 2012 CTUHR study found 24% of workers in Mindanao palm oil plantations were children, some working 12-hour days hauling 15–50 kg fruit bunches—violations of RA 7610, the CRC, and ILO conventions.

These labor conditions cannot be separated from land inequality, resource extraction, and decades of state development models that favor corporate interests over community welfare.

D. Economic Resources of Mindanao

Mindanao is rich in minerals, fertile land, and marine resources that sustain both local communities and national industries. But this wealth has been shaped by extraction-driven development, weak regulatory enforcement, and persistent violations of Indigenous and community rights. These structural conditions continue to deepen poverty, intensify conflict, and heighten climate vulnerability across the island.



Mineral Resources

Mindanao hosts some of the Philippines' major mineral production zones, including gold, nickel, copper, and chromite. According to the Mines and Geosciences Bureau's 2020 Mineral Commodity Profiles (Mines and Geosciences Bureau [MGB], 2020), Mindanao accounts for a substantial portion of national nickel output and hosts large-scale gold and copper mining operations in Regions XI, XII, and XIII. Surigao del Norte and Surigao del Sur remain central to the country's nickel production, while gold and copper mining is concentrated in Agusan del Sur, Compostela Valley (Davao de Oro), and parts of North Cotabato.

Non-metallic resources—including limestone, silica, and sand and gravel—also form key inputs to construction, cement production, and manufacturing supply chains across Regions X, XI, XII, and Caraga.

Despite this resource abundance, mining has intensified land dispossession, militarization, and ecological degradation. A significant portion of Mindanao's mineralized land overlaps with Indigenous ancestral domains. In multiple regions, FPIC processes have been documented as incomplete, coercive, or improperly conducted, contravening the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples [NCIP], 1997) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007).



United Nations human rights mechanisms have documented persistent patterns of militarization and criminalization of dissent affecting Indigenous Peoples, environmental defenders, educators, and community leaders who oppose mining, dam, energy, and other large-scale development projects in the Philippines. These practices are most acutely manifested in Mindanao, where extractive expansion, Indigenous ancestral domains, armed conflict, and climate vulnerability intersect.

Following her country visit, Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, identified red-tagging, surveillance, harassment, and intimidation as systemic threats to civic space. She raised serious concerns over the deployment of security legislation—particularly the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020—to suppress dissent, legitimize arbitrary prosecutions, and deter public participation. Such practices, she warned, have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and place human rights defenders at heightened risk of violence and reprisal (Khan, 2025).

UN human rights bodies have further linked these patterns to the role of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). In its 2020 report, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented how the NTF-ELCAC has been associated with systematic red-tagging, threats, and the vilification of Indigenous leaders, educators, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations. The OHCHR found that these practices contribute to an environment that enables violence and impunity and recommended the dismantling of the NTF-ELCAC-led counterinsurgency architecture for its adverse impact on human rights, due process, and democratic space (UN OHCHR, 2020).

From a climate governance perspective, these findings are reinforced by Ian Fry, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. Fry has emphasized that environmental and climate defenders—particularly Indigenous Peoples defending land, forests, and waters—face disproportionate risks of intimidation, criminalization, and violence, especially where extractive and energy projects proceed without genuine Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). He has underscored that the repression of defenders and the erosion of civic space directly undermine rights-based climate action and weaken States’ ability to implement just and effective climate responses (Fry, 2023).

These dynamics are illustrated by the Talaingod 13 case, involving Lumad volunteer teachers and community defenders in Mindanao who were criminally prosecuted following humanitarian actions to protect Indigenous children. In a joint communication by multiple UN Special Procedures mandate holders, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, UN experts expressed serious concern over the convictions. They warned that the case reflects a broader pattern of criminalizing legitimate human rights and protective work, with chilling effects on Indigenous education, community self-protection, and advocacy (United Nations Special Procedures, 2025).

Taken together, the findings of UN Special Rapporteurs, Special Procedures, and the OHCHR demonstrate that militarization, red-tagging, and the criminalization of dissent—particularly through bodies such as the NTF-ELCAC—function as systemic governance practices, not isolated security measures. By silencing defenders, invalidating FPIC processes, and constricting democratic participation, these practices fundamentally weaken accountability and erode the foundations of just, inclusive, and rights-based climate governance in Mindanao.



Resource valuation and extraction pressure

Official data from the Mines and Geosciences Bureau estimate the total value of Philippine mineral resources at PHP 7 trillion, with significant concentrations in Region XI, XII, and Caraga (MGB, 2020). While investor estimates sometimes place Mindanao’s potential value higher, the PHP 7 trillion figure remains the most conservative and verifiable government baseline.

Across Mindanao’s regions, extraction activities are widespread:

Zamboanga Peninsula (Region IX)
gold, chromite, coal, iron, lead, manganese

Davao Region (Region XI)
gold, copper, nickel, chromite, manganese

Northern Mindanao (Region X)
iron ore, cement, coconut oil

SOCCKSARGEN (Region XII)
gold, copper, iron, silver, zinc, limestone, steel



Agricultural Resources

Agriculture remains central to Mindanao's identity and economy. Approximately 3.73 million hectares—about one-third of the island—are devoted to agriculture and fisheries, supporting major rural livelihoods and contributing significantly to regional development (Tadem, 2020).

Commercial agriculture dominance

A substantial share of Mindanao's agricultural land is devoted to commercial and export-oriented crops, many operated by large domestic and transnational agribusinesses. Key commodities include:

1 Banana and pineapple

2 Coconut and copra

3 Palm oil

4 Rubber

5 Sugarcane

6 Coffee

7 Abaca and tobacco

Mindanao is widely recognized as the country's primary production base for bananas, pineapples, coconut, and coffee—commodities that anchor Philippine export earnings. Yet this commercial expansion has often displaced Indigenous and peasant communities, weakened food security, and contributed to deforestation, pesticide contamination, and entrenched land inequality.

Violations of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), exploitative labor conditions, and environmental degradation have been documented across major plantation zones, including Bukidnon, North Cotabato, Agusan, SOCCSKSARGEN, and parts of Davao and Caraga.

Livestock and systemic pressures

Livestock production—including cattle, poultry, and swine—continues to expand in several regions, particularly Northern Mindanao and Caraga. These industries, however, intensify ecological pressures through land conversion for feed crops, water-intensive operations, and heightened vulnerability to drought in already stressed watersheds.

Land inequality and agrarian reform

Land distribution in Mindanao remains highly unequal. Although agrarian reform has made gains in selected provinces, large areas of agricultural land are still concentrated in the hands of corporate plantations, landed elites, and political families. Many farming households continue to face insecure tenure and limited access to support services.

This concentration of land



Contradicts constitutional principles on equitable access to natural resources (art. XII sec. 6–7)



Fuels social conflict and displacement



Undermines community resilience to climate shocks and food system disruptions

Mindanao’s agricultural wealth is undeniable—but under current development models, it remains inequitably distributed and environmentally unsustainable. These factors deepen the vulnerability of Indigenous and rural communities amid intensifying climate risks.



Marine and Aquatic Resources

Mindanao’s coastal areas teem with marine biodiversity and sustain more than half of Philippine fisheries production. Cities like General Santos and Zamboanga anchor globally significant tuna and sardine industries (BFAR, 2020).

However, this wealth is under increasing threat. Overfishing, coral reef degradation, mangrove loss, and pollution have weakened the region’s coastal ecosystems. The expansion of coastal industrial zones and export processing areas has increased pollution, resource extraction pressure, and large-scale land conversion, threatening long-term marine sustainability and undermining the livelihoods of fishing and coastal communities (DENR, 2019; BFAR, 2020).

Key regional contributions:

Region IX

(Zamboanga Peninsula)

tuna, mackerel, shrimp, sardines, lobsters; major seaweed processing

Region XI

(Davao Region)

important fishing grounds; coastal industries linked to agribusiness expansions

Region XII

(SOCCSKSARGEN)

home to the country’s tuna capital (General Santos)

Region XIII (Caraga)

prawns, crabs, aquaculture, marine tourism potential

BARMM

top national seaweed producer; active in pearl culture

Climate and development pressures

Mindanao's coastal resources are threatened by

- 1 Overfishing and destructive fishing methods
- 2 Coral reef degradation and mangrove loss
- 3 Sedimentation and pollution from mining, agriculture, and industrial estates
- 4 Coastal land conversion linked to ports, economic zones, and agribusiness
- 5 Sea-level rise, stronger storm surges, and coastal erosion (IPCC, 2019; PAGASA, 2020)

These pressures disproportionately affect fisherfolk, Moro coastal communities, and Bangsamoro island barangays, many of whom rely directly on marine ecosystems for food, livelihood, and cultural survival.

Weak enforcement of coastal regulations—including mangrove protection, fisheries management, and pollution control—further increases vulnerability to storm surges, saltwater intrusion, declining fish stocks, and climate-related disruptions.

E. Mindanao Forest Biodiversity

Mindanao's rugged mountains, tropical rainforests, and protected areas contain some of the Philippines' richest and most threatened ecosystems. The island remains a national stronghold for forest cover and biodiversity conservation, hosting extensive lowland dipterocarp forests, montane ecosystems, and critical watersheds essential for climate regulation and cultural survival (DENR-FMB, 2020).

These ecosystems face mounting threats from extractive industries, land conversion, plantation expansion, and weak enforcement of protective laws. These pressures often overlap with militarization and development aggression in ancestral domains, exposing both ecological systems and Indigenous communities to heightened risks.

Mindanao is recognized as a biodiversity hotspot, particularly for amphibians, reptiles, and forest-dependent species. Research by Brown et al. (2013) documents Mindanao as a center of endemism in the Philippines, hosting unique assemblages of frogs, lizards, snakes, birds, and mammals found nowhere else in the world. Endemism across many taxa remains exceptionally high, underscoring the importance of forest protection and Indigenous stewardship for sustaining ecological resilience.

Stronger implementation of the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System (E-NIPAS), the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act (RA 9147), and Indigenous rights laws such as IPRA is essential to safeguarding these ecosystems.



Mt. Apo

Mt. Apo—the Philippines’ highest peak at 2,954 meters—functions as a biodiversity refuge, a climate buffer, and a cultural heartland for multiple Indigenous groups including the Manobo, Bagobo, Ubo, Ata Manobo, Kalagan, and Tagakaolo peoples. Its forests sustain major river systems, agricultural livelihoods, and ecological services crucial for communities across Davao and Cotabato.

Biodiversity surveys in the Mt. Apo Natural Park describe the mountain as home to numerous endemic and threatened species, such as the critically endangered Philippine Eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*) and the iconic Waling-Waling orchid (*Vanda sanderiana*) (DENR–BMB, 2015; Philippine Eagle Foundation, 2019).

Environmental assessments conducted for hydropower and geothermal projects within the Mt. Apo area highlight rich flora and fauna diversity and emphasize the ecological sensitivity of the mountain (Tacio, 2022).

For Indigenous Peoples, Mt. Apo is not only a habitat but a sacred landscape central to identity, spirituality, and ancestral governance. Ongoing hydropower, geothermal, and tourism developments continue to raise concerns over compliance with Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) requirements under IPRA and the protection of sacred sites under UNDRIP.



Mt. Busa

Mt. Busa in Sarangani is recognized as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) and an important refuge for forest-dependent wildlife in southern Mindanao. Conservation groups and local assessments identify the area as habitat for threatened species such as the Philippine Eagle and numerous endemic plants, reflecting the high ecological value of the region (DENR–BMB, 2015).

For the T’boli community, Mt. Busa—locally known as Bulul Tembob—is a sacred landscape vital to cultural identity, spiritual practice, and ancestral governance. Protecting the mountain is therefore both an ecological and an Indigenous rights imperative.

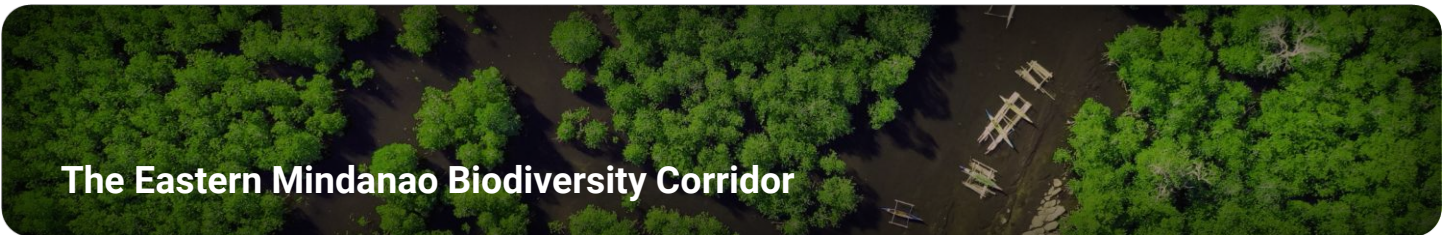




Pantaron Mountain Range

The Pantaron Range, extending through several provinces in eastern and central Mindanao, is among the island’s largest remaining blocks of old-growth forest and a major watershed supporting numerous river systems. It forms part of the ancestral domains of the Manobo, Matigsalog, and Dibabawon peoples, whose stewardship has long maintained the ecological integrity of the range.

Despite its importance, the Pantaron Range remains threatened by logging interests, mining proposals, hydropower projects, and militarized “development” operations. Weak enforcement of IPRA and environmental laws has contributed to conflict, displacement, and red-tagging of Indigenous communities who defend their territories.



The Eastern Mindanao Biodiversity Corridor

The Eastern Mindanao Biodiversity Corridor (EMBC) is a DENR-designated priority conservation landscape integrating protected areas, key biodiversity areas, community forests, and ancestral domains. It contains high levels of endemism and provides habitat for threatened species found in mountain ranges and lowland forests of eastern Mindanao (DENR–BMB, 2015).

While promoted as a model for integrated conservation, the corridor faces significant governance challenges. Logging, mining applications, plantations, and infrastructure projects continue to operate within or adjacent to the corridor. Without full implementation of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), transparent decision-making, and ecological monitoring, biodiversity corridors risk enabling extraction rather than safeguarding ecosystems.

Implications for Climate and Development Policy

Mindanao’s forests are foundational to climate resilience, cultural survival, and environmental security. As extractive pressures escalate, conservation must be grounded in:



Meaningful recognition of indigenous land and governance rights under IPRA and UNDRIP



Ending militarized resource development



Strengthened environmental law enforcement,



Supporting community-led stewardship systems.

Genuine climate justice requires protecting Mindanao’s remaining forests through approaches rooted in rights, accountability, and ecological integrity, ensuring that conservation efforts reinforce rather than undermine the livelihoods and sovereignty of frontline communities.

F. Energy in Mindanao: Implications for Climate Change

Mindanao’s energy landscape is marked by a structural paradox. The island has experienced years of increased installed generation capacity—especially from coal and large hydropower— yet many rural, upland, and conflict-affected communities still lack reliable, affordable, and climate-resilient energy access. This mismatch between supply and lived reality reflects long-standing issues in national energy planning, where power expansion is driven primarily by industrial demand, private-sector investment, and grid integration goals rather than community electrification or Indigenous rights (DOE, 2021; DOE, 2022).

Government planning documents project continued demand growth in Mindanao, reinforcing pressure to expand the generation portfolio and transmission networks (DOE, 2022). However, the benefits of these projects remain uneven. Electrification rates in remote and Indigenous territories continue to lag behind national targets, underscoring inequities in the distribution of energy infrastructure and public services. These gaps have major implications for climate vulnerability, as households without stable electricity face greater risks during disasters and have limited access to communications, cooling, and essential services.



Power Development and the Mindanao Energy Mix

Mindanao’s grid is historically anchored in hydropower, with the Agus–Pulangi complexes long serving as its backbone (DOE, 2021). In the past decade, however, the region has seen a sharp increase in coal-fired power plants, which now constitute a substantial share of its generation mix. Despite national goals to increase renewable energy, Mindanao’s electricity supply remains dominated by fossil fuels, particularly coal, alongside large hydropower facilities (DOE, 2021; DOE, 2022).

This dependence on coal and large dams raises several concerns:

Environmental and climate implications



Coal remains one of the highest greenhouse gas-emitting energy sources.



Large hydropower facilities are increasingly vulnerable to climate-induced droughts and shifting rainfall patterns, which can reduce generation during critical periods (PAGASA, 2020).



Watershed alteration and habitat loss associated with dam expansion contribute to long-term ecological stress.

Social and Indigenous rights implications

Hydropower and coal projects have repeatedly been proposed or implemented within or adjacent to Indigenous ancestral domains. In many cases, affected communities have documented shortcomings in Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes, inconsistent with the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) (NCIP, 1997; UN, 2007).

Grid reliability and access

Even as total installed capacity has grown, many barangays in upland, island, and conflict-affected areas report limited or intermittent electricity access. These disparities reflect an energy system designed around commercial corridors, export-oriented industries, and urban centers rather than equitable distribution.

The Mindanao Energy Plan (2018–2040) envisions increased renewable energy integration and a more climate-resilient grid. Yet implementation has lagged, and fossil fuel dependence persists. For Mindanao to transition toward a just and climate-resilient energy future, policy reform must focus on community electrification, decentralized renewable systems, Indigenous leadership, ecological protection, and rights-based planning.



Infrastructure Development and Policy Context

Infrastructure Projects

Infrastructure development in Mindanao has accelerated in recent years, driven by national priorities in energy, transportation, and industrial expansion. Major projects—including roads, transmission lines, ports, and large hydropower dams—are framed as essential to economic growth and regional integration (NEDA, 2023). However, many of these investments primarily serve commercial corridors, mining concessions, and agribusiness plantations rather than improving access for remote or underserved communities (DOE, 2022).

The expansion of transmission infrastructure under the Mindanao–Visayas Interconnection Project (MVIP) aims to integrate Mindanao into the national grid, but the benefits of this integration have not yet translated into universal, reliable electrification. Upland Indigenous communities, island barangays, and conflict-affected areas continue to face the lowest electrification rates in the country (DOE, 2021).

Policy and Regulation

Policy frameworks such as the Renewable Energy Act (RA 9513) and the Feed-In Tariff (FIT) were designed to accelerate the transition to clean energy. However, implementation has lagged due to several challenges:

- Weak regulatory enforcement
- Inconsistent national energy planning and shifting policy signals
- Limited technical capacity among local governments
- Strong corporate lobbying for coal and large hydropower (DOE, 2021; IEA, 2020)

Despite national climate commitments, investment incentives continue to favor fossil fuels and mega-infrastructure over decentralized renewable systems. As a result, Mindanao's transition to renewable energy has been uneven and inequitable, with benefits concentrated in industrial zones rather than rural and Indigenous communities most vulnerable to climate change.

Community Engagement and Social Impacts

Energy and infrastructure projects often involve land acquisition, road development, or watershed alteration within or near Indigenous ancestral domains. In many areas, communities have reported displacement, militarization, and intimidation around dam sites, geothermal fields, mining-linked infrastructure, and transmission corridors (UN OHCHR, 2020; KATRIBU, 2022).

These impacts highlight recurring failures in:

- Meaningful community consultation,
- Transparent decision-making, and
- Full compliance with free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) as required under IPRA (NCIP, 1997) and UNDRIP (UN, 2007).

A rights-based, climate-just energy transition requires:

- Accessible and multilingual consultations,
- Respect for indigenous governance systems,
- Fair and accountable benefit-sharing, and
- Protection from red-tagging and threats against environmental defenders.



Prioritizing community electrification over extractive industry demand is essential for advancing climate justice in Mindanao.



Energy Security, Resilience, and Climate Justice

Mindanao's vulnerability to droughts, flooding, and watershed degradation underscores the need for an energy system that strengthens resilience rather than deepening inequality (PAGASA, 2020). Climate justice demands that energy planning address historical marginalization and ecological harm, not just supply-demand ratios.

A climate-just energy transition in Mindanao means:

1

Reducing dependence on coal and fossil fuels to lower emissions and minimize climate risks (DOE, 2022)

4

Ensuring FPIC and indigenous territorial rights in all energy developments

2

Protecting and rehabilitating watersheds that have been altered by dams, mining, and deforestation

5

Integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into watershed management and local energy governance

3

Supporting off-grid, community-owned renewable systems such as micro-hydro and solar— technologies well-suited to upland and island communities

While renewable energy can enhance energy security and reduce exposure to volatile fuel prices, technological shifts alone are insufficient. Structural reforms in governance, rights protection, and equitable investment must accompany technological change to ensure that the benefits of clean energy reach historically underserved communities.

Mindanao's pathway to a low-carbon future must center people, ecosystems, and justice, not merely power generation targets. Decentralized governance, strong FPIC implementation, and prioritizing renewable solutions for Indigenous, rural, and conflict-affected communities are essential for building a resilient and equitable energy system.



IV. Development Aggression in Mindanao

Mindanao is rich in biodiversity and fragile ecosystems, yet it remains a site of violent development aggression. The island faces multiple environmental crises—from dirty energy practices and destructive mining to forest degradation, food insecurity, and collapsing marine ecosystems. These crises are intensified by the oppression of Indigenous communities, the displacement of the rural poor, attacks on environmental defenders, and worsening pollution (CHR 2019; Global Witness 2023). Taken together, these threats are systemic, political, and central to the climate crisis.

Often described as the Philippines’ “last frontier,” Mindanao has long been treated as a resource colony within national development planning. Extractive industries such as logging, mining, and agro-industrial plantations have generated wealth for a narrow elite while contributing to environmental degradation and social instability in frontline communities (Tadem, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Much of this natural wealth lies within the ancestral territories of Lumad Indigenous communities, Moro peoples, and peasant populations. As large-scale development projects expand, these communities have disproportionately borne the costs of state-sanctioned displacement and marginalization, with documentation by UN agencies pointing to patterns of coercion, land grabbing, weak or compromised consent processes, and militarized encroachment in project areas (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020; Commission on Human Rights [CHR], 2022).

These patterns violate the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) and contravene international instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).



Large-Scale Commercial and Illegal Logging and Poaching

Large-scale commercial and illegal logging have reshaped Mindanao’s forests for decades. Logging expanded dramatically during the Marcos dictatorship, when timber licenses and forest concessions proliferated across the island, accelerating the loss of old-growth dipterocarp forests (Broad & Cavanagh, 1993; DENR–FMB, 2020). Historical analysis shows that Mindanao hosted the majority of the country’s timber concession areas throughout the 1960s–1980s (Broad & Cavanagh, 1993).

Mindanao’s once extensive forests have since been reduced to fragmented remnants. Satellite monitoring shows continued deforestation in provinces such as Agusan del Sur, Davao Oriental, and Sarangani (Global Forest Watch, 2021). During the late 20th century, forest conversion intensified as government-backed agro-forestry and plantation projects replaced natural forests with monoculture species such as *Falcatia* and *Ipil-ipil*—driven by export markets and domestic demand (DENR–FMB, 2020).

Today, logging activity remains concentrated among a relatively small number of large firms, while many smaller operators continue to harvest timber under weak regulatory oversight (DENR–FMB, 2020). The industry employs thousands of workers, but labor conditions are often precarious, with reports of wage insecurity, unsafe working environments, and limited protections (CTUHR, 2012; DOLE, 2019). These patterns show how environmental destruction and labor exploitation frequently reinforce one another.

Weak law enforcement has allowed both legal and illegal logging to continue even in areas covered by protected-area designations or ancestral domain claims, undermining environmental laws and Indigenous land rights (CHR, 2020; LRC, 2019). Logging, whether authorized or illicit, has accelerated watershed degradation, soil erosion, landslides, and flooding—intensifying climate vulnerability across the island (IPCC, 2019; PAGASA, 2020).

Illegal Wildlife Poaching

Illegal wildlife poaching poses an additional and growing threat to Mindanao’s ecosystems. Key biodiversity areas—including Mt. Busa, Mt. Hamiguitan, and sections of the Pantaron Range— show documented pressure from harvesting of rare orchids, birds, reptiles, and amphibians for the wildlife and ornamental plant trade (DENR–BMB, 2019). National biodiversity assessments confirm that Mindanao’s forests house some of the highest concentrations of endemic species in the Philippines, making poaching particularly destructive (DENR–BMB, 2019).

Weak enforcement of the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act (RA 9147) remains a major challenge, due to:

- 1 Limited surveillance capacity
- 2 Resource shortages in enforcement agencies
- 3 Difficulty identifying endangered species in the field
- 4 Insufficient inter-agency coordination

The ecological consequences are extensive. Deforestation and poaching reduce biodiversity, destabilize habitats, degrade watersheds, and weaken the island’s natural defenses against extreme weather events (IPCC, 2019; PAGASA, 2020). Indigenous and rural communities who depend on forests for food, medicine, cultural practices, and stewardship are disproportionately affected—facing displacement, livelihood loss, and erosion of ancestral knowledge.

Ultimately, the violence of extractive development is ecological, political, cultural, and generational—falling hardest on communities denied secure land tenure, Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and meaningful participation in environmental governance.





Impact of Destructive Mining Activities

Mining operations in Mindanao—particularly open-pit and large-scale metallic mining—have caused widespread environmental damage and intensified social conflict. These activities have increased climate vulnerability and weakened community resilience, especially in Indigenous and rural areas. Mining has contributed to large-scale deforestation, soil erosion, watershed contamination, and disrupted ecosystems, endangering biodiversity and straining already fragile water resources.

The socio-economic impacts are equally severe. Indigenous communities, smallholder farmers, and rural populations face displacement, food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and health risks from polluted air, water, and soil. These harms are concentrated in ancestral domains and conflict-affected areas, deepening long-standing inequalities. Numerous human rights reports have documented harassment, surveillance, forced displacement, and killings of environmental defenders and Indigenous leaders in mining-affected areas (CHR 2019; Global Witness 2023). Weak regulations, poor enforcement, and corporate impunity enable these abuses to persist.

The Philippine Mining Act of 1995—frequently criticized for being investor-centered—continues to override local ordinances and customary law, undermining rights protected under IPRA and international frameworks such as UNDRIP and ICCPR.

Despite these environmental and social costs, large-scale mining remains central to national development policy and is framed as a driver of economic growth and foreign investment. On the ground, however, mining corporations in Mindanao are widely recognized as major contributors to environmental destruction, social unrest, and widespread displacement. Open-pit operations have cleared vast areas of forest and agricultural land, introduced toxic chemicals into watersheds, and released heavy metals into river systems.

A 2015 study by IBON Foundation found that mining tenements covered more than 948,209 hectares, much of it overlapping with Indigenous ancestral domains (IBON 2015). The Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) recorded 1,473 mining applications as of 2016, with Mindanao showing a sharp rise in applications for copper, gold, and iron. This extractive footprint continues to expand despite local opposition and clear evidence of ecological harm.

Economic gains touted by the industry often rely on labor exploitation. Many workers—mostly internal migrants—endure low wages, unsafe working conditions, inadequate housing, and limited access to healthcare (CTUHR 2012; DOLE regional reports). Profits are captured largely by corporations and political intermediaries, while communities absorb pollution and displacement.

Deforested mining landscapes are highly vulnerable to landslides and flooding. This was tragically demonstrated during Typhoon Bopha (Pablo) in 2012, when poorly regulated mining zones in Compostela Valley experienced catastrophic landslides that killed hundreds of small-scale miners and their families. More recently, the 2024 landslide in Barangay Masara, Maco, Davao de Oro—linked to Apex Mining Co., Inc.—claimed at least 68 lives, despite the area being declared a no-build zone since 2008 (MGB; OCD 2024). These tragedies illustrate government failure to enforce hazard mapping, implement disaster risk reduction, and protect vulnerable communities.

Mining Patterns Across Mindanao

Zamboanga Peninsula (Region IX)

Mining operations—particularly for gold, nickel, and chromite—have long affected Subanen communities. Reports from CHR (2019) and civil society networks document displacement, threats, and militarization surrounding contested mining areas. These cases illustrate how corporate interests and security forces frequently converge to suppress Indigenous resistance.

Northern Mindanao (Region X)

Northern Mindanao faces persistent mining pressure, including applications targeting the Pantaron Range. The region has repeatedly documented cases of rights violations linked to extractive projects (CHR, 2020; LRC, 2019).

The Philippine Sinter Corporation (PSC), an iron-processing facility established during the Marcos era, remains a major industrial emitter of waste, with concerns raised by labor unions and environmental groups (DOLE, 2019).

Davao Region (Region XI)

Mining tenements in the region cover tens of thousands of hectares (MGB, 2020). Communities have raised concerns about river pollution, including contamination in waterways that supply irrigation and household use.

SOCCKSARGEN (Region XII)

The Tampakan copper-gold project—considered one of Southeast Asia’s largest undeveloped deposits—was suspended and later revived following national policy shifts. Despite South Cotabato’s open-pit mining ban, the national Mining Act prevails, creating a legal conflict.

Church groups, Indigenous leaders, and local governments continue to resist the project due to its massive environmental and cultural risks (CHR, 2019).

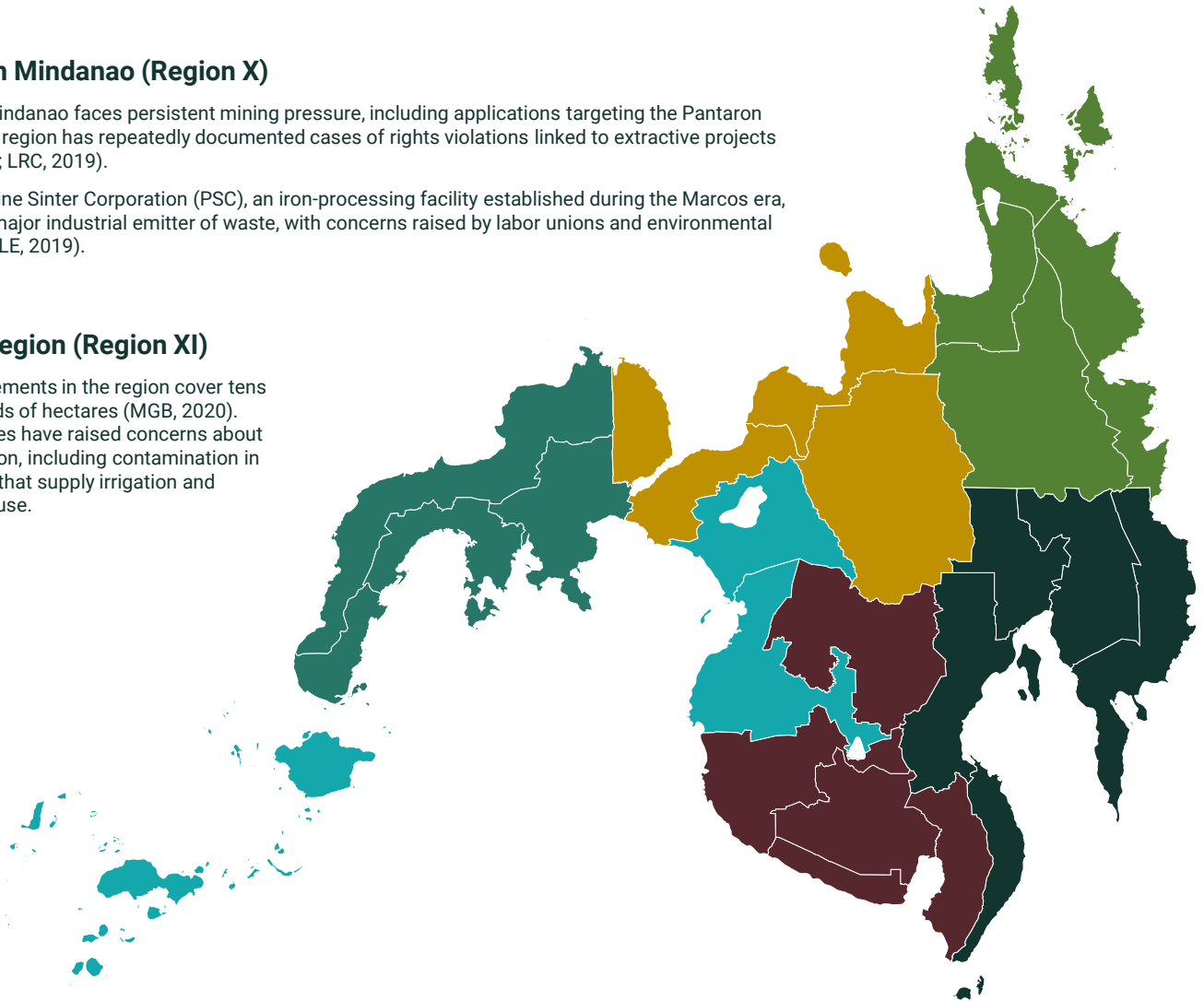
Caraga (Region XIII)

Caraga is the Philippines’ mining capital, hosting the country’s highest concentration of nickel operations. DENR–MGB (2020) identifies Surigao provinces as major extraction hubs.

Indigenous communities in affected municipalities have reported displacement, militarization, and rights violations linked to mining expansion (CHR, 2019; Global Witness, 2023).

Across Mindanao, destructive mining drives land dispossession, militarization, and political repression. Its impacts fall most heavily on Indigenous territories, which have become frontline battlegrounds in the struggle for climate justice, land rights, and ecological protection.

Without structural reforms—including revising the Mining Act of 1995, strengthening FPIC mechanisms, and requiring corporate accountability—Mindanao will remain locked in a cycle of ecological degradation and social violence.





Infrastructure development in Mindanao is often presented as a pathway to economic growth and regional connectivity, with projects ranging from new road networks and bridges to industrial corridors and logistics hubs. However, these initiatives frequently carry major environmental and social costs—including habitat destruction, watershed degradation, pollution, displacement, and heightened inequality. These realities raise urgent questions about how “development” is defined, who benefits from it, and what ecological and cultural sacrifices are being imposed. Strengthening governance, transparency, and accountability is essential to ensure that infrastructure serves communities and ecosystems rather than reinforcing extractive and inequitable development (CHR 2019; UNDP 2020).

During the Duterte administration, Mindanao was framed as a major “development frontier.” Fourteen large infrastructure projects worth approximately PHP 150 billion were proposed for the island, with eight financed through Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) (NEDA 2020). Davao City alone received roughly PHP 80 billion in ODA-backed projects for roads, irrigation, and airport expansion. Although promoted as modernization efforts, many of these initiatives were implemented without meaningful consultation with affected Indigenous Peoples (IPs), rural communities, and urban poor residents. This aligns with a broader pattern in which infrastructure facilitates state–corporate expansion rather than justice, inclusion, or climate resilience.

Large-scale infrastructure projects—often backed by foreign loans and technical assistance— are justified as promoting economic recovery, connectivity, and post-conflict rehabilitation. Yet their environmental impacts, including deforestation, soil erosion, and reduced watershed capacity, pose long-term risks to communities already vulnerable to climate change. Their social consequences are equally serious: displacement, loss of land, weakened tenure security, and increased militarization in project sites (ADB 2019; WB 2022).

In Northern Mindanao, the establishment of Area Development Zones (ADZs)—such as the Cagayan de Oro–Iligan Industrial Corridor and the Panguil Bay–Mt. Malindang ADZ threatens to convert extensive forest, coastal, and agricultural areas into industrial enclaves. These conversions jeopardize ecosystems and undermine community land tenure, especially in areas where ancestral domains lack formal recognition or are contested by state infrastructure claims. Such developments heighten conflict risks in regions where Indigenous land rights have long been ignored or overridden.

In post-disaster and post-conflict areas, foreign development assistance has increasingly prioritized “hard infrastructure” over ecosystem-based or community-led recovery. Although framed as humanitarian or reconstruction support, Official Development Assistance-backed programs—from USAID, JICA, and other bilateral partners—have often favored highways, bridges, and utility corridors running through conflict-affected and ecologically sensitive zones. This approach frequently leads to the displacement of informal settlers, peasant communities, and IP groups, reinforcing the vulnerabilities these programs claim to address.

The Asian Development Bank’s Improving Growth Corridors in Mindanao Road Sector Project is promoted as fostering inclusive growth. Yet several proposed and ongoing road expansions cut through ancestral domains, critical watersheds, and protected forests. Indigenous organizations and civil society groups have warned that these routes risk violating the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) provisions of IPRA, and may irreversibly damage ecosystems that sustain downstream communities (ADB 2019; LRC 2020).

Similar concerns surround the Emergency Assistance Loan for Marawi Reconstruction and Recovery. While intended to support post-siege rebuilding, the rapid rollout of large infrastructure in Marawi has raised serious issues regarding environmental safeguards, limited public oversight, and the exclusion of displaced Meranaw families from key decision-making processes. Without meaningful participation and transparency, “build back better” risks becoming “build back without the people”—or worse, “build back for investors.”

The Samal Island–Davao City Connector (SIDC) Project illustrates the tension between infrastructure expansion and environmental protection. Despite strong objections from local scientists, environmental groups, and coastal communities about impacts on coral reefs, seagrass beds, and the island’s tourism-dependent ecosystems, the project was approved and fast-tracked. The decision reflects a recurring trend in which claims of “progress” override ecological integrity and silence community concerns, especially when powerful political and economic actors benefit.

Taken together, these infrastructure investments demonstrate that such projects are not neutral or merely technical. They are political decisions that determine who gains and who loses access to land, mobility, and economic opportunity. While marketed as drivers of growth, many projects have resulted in ecological destruction, the loss of livelihoods, deepened socio-economic divides, and weakened local governance. Gaps in transparency, environmental monitoring, and community participation raise serious concerns about accountability and equity.

Rather than enabling inclusive development, many infrastructure initiatives in Mindanao have consolidated control over strategic territories, enabled extractive industries, and reinforced militarized governance. It is therefore vital to interrogate whose interests are being prioritized— and whether communities and ecosystems are being sacrificed to advance infrastructure that primarily benefits a privileged few.



Agricultural Expansion

Agriculture in Mindanao faces deep structural challenges that limit its ability to drive inclusive growth or reduce poverty. These challenges include an export-oriented production model, widespread subsistence-level farming, limited infrastructure, dependence on rain-fed systems, and persistent land tenure insecurity. Rather than advancing food sovereignty or strengthening rural livelihoods, agriculture in Mindanao has increasingly become a site of agribusiness expansion, land grabbing, and ecological extraction (World Bank, 2022; CHR, 2019).

The region’s vulnerability to climate change is directly linked to exploitative agro-industrial practices, which use Mindanao’s rich agricultural lands to supply global markets. Large-scale plantations producing banana, pineapple, palm oil, and sugarcane occupy extensive areas across the island, and these monocrop systems contribute to deforestation, soil erosion, river siltation, and biodiversity loss (DENR-FMB, 2020; LRC, 2020). While profitable for multinational corporations, this model leaves ecosystems degraded and frontline communities more exposed and insecure.

Corporate farms in Northern Mindanao and the Davao Region have expanded rapidly over the past decades, often at the expense of Indigenous Peoples and smallholder farmers. Multinational and large domestic agribusiness producers—including long-established fruit companies—dominate these areas through large-scale monoculture plantations supported by lease agreements, contract-growing schemes, and other corporate land arrangements. Documentation by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and land-use analyses consolidating official agricultural data show that these plantation systems frequently undermine agrarian reform objectives, weaken local land tenure, and marginalize Indigenous and rural communities, particularly where ancestral domains and redistributed lands overlap with plantation expansion (Commission on Human Rights [CHR], 2020; REAP Mindanao Network, n.d.).

Land concentration in commercial plantation zones is rooted in historical inequities. Research on agrarian structures in Bukidnon and adjacent provinces shows that sugarcane estates and fruit plantations have remained in the hands of a small number of powerful landholders, contributing to displacement and conflict among Indigenous communities, including the Manobo-Pulangion (LRC, 2020; CHR, 2019).

Similar patterns of land grabbing are evident in the palm oil sector. Across Northern Mindanao and Caraga, Indigenous communities have documented cases of displacement, unfulfilled benefit-sharing agreements, and environmental contamination linked to plantation expansion (CHR, 2019; LRC, 2020). Communities report loss of farmland, damaged water sources, and increased militarization around contested territories.

Palm oil expansion has surged in parts of Caraga and SOCCSKSARGEN, where large-scale conversions of agricultural and forest lands have intensified over the past two decades. These trends are consistent with national policies promoting agro-industrial investment and export-oriented agriculture. However, documentation by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and land-use analyses consolidating official agricultural and environmental data raise serious concerns regarding violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), weak environmental safeguards, and the encroachment of plantations into Indigenous and community lands (CHR, 2020; REAP Mindanao Network, n.d.).

Conflict over land tenure is particularly acute in areas where plantation expansion overlaps with Indigenous ancestral domains. In South Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat, Indigenous communities and organizations have long contested plantation operations that proceeded without genuine Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Documentation by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) indicates that such projects have contributed to displacement, land insecurity, and the exposure of Indigenous leaders and land rights defenders to heightened security risks, harassment, and intimidation (Commission on Human Rights [CHR], 2020). These patterns are consistent with findings of UN human rights mechanisms, which have raised concerns about the targeting of Indigenous Peoples and environmental defenders in the context of land and resource disputes in the Philippines (UN Special Rapporteur findings).

Agribusiness expansion has produced severe environmental, social, and economic consequences. Monoculture plantations degrade soil fertility, deplete water tables, accelerate erosion, and contribute to biodiversity loss (DENR-FMB, 2020). Land conversion often proceeds without genuine FPIC, violating IPRA and environmental laws such as the Environmental Impact Statement System (PD 1586) and the Clean Water Act.

For Indigenous communities, displacement results in the loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, identity, and ecological stewardship practices. Even when agrarian reform titles exist on paper, leaseback schemes and corporate growing contracts have re-concentrated land in highly unequal ways, undermining agrarian reform goals and entrenching rural inequality (World Bank, 2022; CHR, 2019).

Regulatory gaps are widespread. Environmental impact assessments are often incomplete or inadequately enforced, and labor violations—contractualization, low wages, unsafe conditions—persist across export crop industries (CHR, 2019). These governance failures allow agro-industrial corporations to operate with limited accountability, while communities face landlessness, hunger, repression, and criminalization for asserting their rights.

Agribusiness-led development in Mindanao deepens climate injustice.

It extracts ecological value, displaces the peoples who care for the land, and concentrates wealth in the hands of transnational corporations and their political partners. Without structural land reform, strict FPIC enforcement, and strong environmental justice mechanisms, Mindanao will remain a battleground between people's rights and corporate profit.



Social Conflict and Militarization

Militarization in Mindanao has long served to protect and advance the interests of corporations exploiting the island's natural resources. While often justified under national security and counterinsurgency, military operations have enabled widespread violence against communities resisting development aggression. The 2017 declaration of martial law under the Duterte administration intensified these dynamics across the island, creating a permissive environment for state violence against Indigenous Peoples, environmental defenders, and entire rural populations. This violence is not incidental—it is systemic and targeted, contributing to the Philippines becoming the deadliest country in Asia for environmental defenders (Global Witness 2021; Enano 2021).

For decades, government agencies and corporate actors have treated Lumad and Moro communities as obstacles to extraction and profit. Their resistance to logging, mining, dams, plantations, and other large-scale ventures has often led to their criminalization and vilification. In 2018, President Duterte publicly suggested opening Lumad ancestral lands to oil palm and mining investors, even stating he would personally “choose investors” for these territories (MindaNews 2018). In the Bangsamoro region, the rise of post-conflict development plans that include joint ventures with private corporations has raised concerns that natural resources in former war zones are being commodified rather than managed as shared community assets.

Mindanao hosts the majority of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' combat battalions, deployed not only against armed insurgent groups but also against Indigenous and peasant communities organizing to defend their land. These forces are supported by so-called “force multipliers,” including paramilitary groups and state-backed militias who have been implicated in attacks on Lumad schools and encampments on ancestral lands. Repressive policies such as the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, the Anti-Terrorism Council's designations, and the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) have institutionalized a militarist approach to governance under the “Whole-of-Nation” framework. In practice, this has enabled routine red-tagging of Indigenous leaders, human rights workers, and environmental defenders.

Before leaving office, former National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. requested the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) to block 27 websites—including alternative media outlets, progressive groups, and civil society organizations—citing the Anti-Terrorism Act. This move, documented by journalists such as Buan (2022), was widely condemned by digital rights advocates and human rights groups as a form of online censorship and red-tagging.

Several of the affected organizations had been reporting on Indigenous struggles, mining-related militarization, and attacks on environmental defenders, reinforcing concerns that counterinsurgency tools were being used to silence dissent and restrict civic space.

Before leaving office, former National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon requested the blocking of dozens of websites—including alternative media outlets and civil society groups—by invoking the Anti-Terrorism Act, a move reported by journalists and rights advocates as a form of online censorship and red-tagging (Buan 2022). This tactic was used to silence activists, journalists, and organizations advocating for Indigenous rights and environmental protection.

These policies and operations have produced a wave of human rights violations: red-tagging, arbitrary arrests, fabricated charges, forced evacuations, and extrajudicial killings. Nearly half of the 225 environment-related killings documented since 2001 occurred in Mindanao, and Indigenous Peoples account for over 36% of victims. Attacks escalated sharply during the Duterte administration (Global Witness 2021; CHR & NGO monitoring).

Prominent cases include

- 1 Nora Apique, a peasant leader from Caraga, assassinated during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- 2 Mariam Uy Acob, a Maguindanaon paralegal advocating against militarization in Moro communities.
- 3 Bae Milda Ansabo, a Lumad leader killed after opposing logging in North Cotabato.
- 4 Jomorito Goaynon and Gloria Tomalon, Lumad leaders arrested on fabricated charges for resisting development aggression.

In many cases, red-tagging and media vilification preceded arrests or killings. Women leaders and elders have been disproportionately targeted, revealing a gendered pattern of militarized violence. A recent study by the Ateneo Human Rights Center (AHRC) recorded over 456 cases of rights violations in the first half of 2024 alone, identifying state security forces as primary perpetrators (Buan 2024).

Militarization has also aggressively targeted the education sector. Lumad schools—established by communities to address the systemic exclusion of Indigenous youth from public education—have faced raids, harassment, and closure. In 2016, there were 216 functioning Lumad schools; by 2020, all had been shut down through a combination of forced evacuation orders, military encampment, and regulatory attacks. Teachers were arrested, students displaced, and entire communities criminalized for pursuing culturally grounded education.

A notable case is the Talaingod 13, a group of Indigenous school educators and advocates who assisted displaced Lumad students. In July 2024, they were convicted of child abuse—an outcome widely condemned by Indigenous networks, educators, and human rights organizations as an attempt to criminalize Indigenous education and solidarity work (APNED 2024; AHRC statements).

Militarization is not separate from environmental degradation—it is one of its key enablers. By displacing communities, criminalizing dissent, and weakening grassroots resistance, state violence clears the way for mining operations, plantations, energy projects, and infrastructure expansion. It dismantles the community-based stewardship that is essential for biodiversity protection, watershed management, and climate resilience.

Upholding Indigenous rights, ending militarized governance, and ensuring community-led environmental governance are not only matters of justice—they are prerequisites for any genuine climate adaptation or biodiversity conservation strategy in Mindanao. Without dismantling the systems of militarization and land dispossession, calls for sustainability and resilience will remain empty rhetoric.



V. Climate Justice, Legal Contradictions, and the Crisis of Governance

A. Climate Justice in Mindanao under the Marcos Jr. Administration

Under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the climate crisis in Mindanao has taken the form of a compound emergency, where intensifying climate hazards converge with land dispossession, militarization, displacement, corruption, and the erosion of Indigenous and community rights. Evidence documented by Mindanao Climate Justice (MCJ) demonstrates that while climate change magnifies risk, it is governance choices and institutional priorities that ultimately determine whose lives, lands, and futures are placed in harm's way (MCJ, 2024; MCJ, 2025).

Mindanao's position as the country's primary resource frontier and most militarized region places it at the epicenter of climate injustice (MCJ, 2024; UN OCHA & UNHCR, 2023). Despite public commitments to climate resilience, disaster preparedness, and sustainable development, the Marcos Jr. administration has largely retained an extractive, investor-led, and security-oriented governance framework inherited from previous administrations. The persistence of this model—without decisive corrective action—has allowed climate-related harm to continue and, in many contexts, intensify (MCJ, 2025).



Climate Impacts in a Structurally Unequal Landscape

Mindanao is among the most climate-exposed regions of the Philippines, facing increasingly frequent floods, landslides, typhoons, droughts, earthquakes, and extreme heat (WorldRiskIndex, 2025). Between 2017 and 2022, an estimated 4.4 million people in Mindanao were displaced, the vast majority due to climate-related disasters (Housset, 2023). These trends have continued under the current administration, as demonstrated by the September 2025 flooding in Bukidnon, which displaced thousands of families and devastated livelihoods (MCJ field documentation, 2025).

MCJ documentation underscores that climate hazards do not operate on neutral ground. Indigenous Peoples, Moro communities, and rural poor populations are disproportionately located in ecologically fragile and conflict-affected areas, where land insecurity, weak public services, and militarization magnify disaster impacts (MCJ, 2024). In these settings, climate shocks quickly translate into protracted displacement, chronic food insecurity, and long-term livelihood loss, rather than temporary disruption.



Development Aggression and the Political Economy of Climate Injustice

Under Marcos Jr., Mindanao remains the focal point of large-scale mining, plantations, logging, energy projects, and infrastructure expansion, much of it situated within ancestral domains and critical watersheds (MCJ, 2024).

MCJ monitoring indicates that:



plantations cover approximately 500,000 hectares



mining tenements span 948,209 hectares



logging concessions exceed 4.8 million hectares (MCJ, 2024; DENR data consolidated by MCJ)

These projects frequently proceed without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), in violation of the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (RA 8371). They are commonly justified through development, conservation, or climate-related narratives, including “green growth.” Rather than reducing climate risk, this model accelerates deforestation, degrades watersheds, undermines Indigenous livelihoods, and weakens governance systems essential for long-term resilience (MCJ, 2024; IPBES, 2019).

While this development framework predates the current administration, MCJ documentation shows that the Marcos Jr. government has failed to reverse or meaningfully restrain its most harmful features, allowing land- and resource-intensive projects to proceed despite their well-documented social and ecological costs (MCJ, 2025).



Highlighted MCJ-Documented Cases: How Climate Injustice Is Produced

MCJ’s field documentation provides concrete evidence that climate vulnerability in Mindanao is actively produced through institutional neglect, development aggression, and state tolerance of abuse, rather than by climate hazards alone (MCJ Community Profiles, 2023–2025).

Sitio Gabonan, Talakag, Bukidnon – Ancestral Rights without Enforcement

In Sitio Gabonan, the Talaandig people remain displaced more than two decades after their ancestral domain was approved but never formally issued. Under the Marcos Jr. administration, private land grabbing backed by armed groups and political influence has continued with impunity (MCJ Community Profile: Gabonan, 2024).

State institutions—including the LGU, NCIP, CHR, and the courts—have consistently failed to provide effective protection. The killing of Romel Sagayno in 2023 remains unresolved. MCJ documentation shows that the prolonged non-issuance of the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) has enabled violence, displacement, and livelihood collapse, exposing the limits of legal recognition without enforcement (MCJ, 2024).

Sitio Sinandigan, Quezon, Bukidnon – Conservation without Consent

In Sinandigan, a 5,000-hectare watershed project implemented by a government-owned water district entered a legally recognized Matigsalug-Manobo ancestral domain without FPIC (MCJ Community Profile: Sinandigan, 2024). Framed as environmental protection, the project criminalized subsistence farming, destroyed food sources, and intensified surveillance and militarization.

Despite formal complaints filed with the NCIP, the case remains unresolved, illustrating how state-led climate and conservation initiatives can operate as mechanisms of dispossession when Indigenous rights are treated as procedural formalities rather than binding obligations (MCJ, 2024).

Marawi City – Reconstruction without Climate Justice

Eight years after the Marawi Siege, tens of thousands remain displaced. Under the current administration, rehabilitation has prioritized infrastructure and security over return, restitution, and psychosocial recovery (UN OCHA & UNHCR, 2023; MCJ Community Profile: Marawi, 2024). Climate risks—particularly flooding and heat stress—continue to worsen in transitory sites, while access to compensation and sustainable livelihoods remains limited.

MCJ documentation shows that post-conflict reconstruction has normalized prolonged displacement, transforming climate vulnerability into a permanent condition rather than a problem to be resolved (MCJ, 2024).

Displacement, Psychosocial Harm, and Intergenerational Impact

As of mid-2024, more than 137,500 people remain displaced in Mindanao due to the combined effects of conflict, disasters, and land disputes (UN OCHA & UNHCR, 2023). Displacement under Marcos Jr. is increasingly protracted, with families unable to return because of unresolved land claims, continued militarization, and recurring climate shocks.

This has generated a deepening psychosocial crisis. Mindanao has only 41 psychiatrists serving more than 26 million people (DOH, 2023). MCJ fieldwork shows that trauma, grief, and burnout now threaten not only individual well-being but also community resilience and the continuity of climate and human rights defense (MCJ, 2025).

Climate Justice as Political Accountability

Taken together, MCJ's documentation shows that climate injustice in Mindanao under the Marcos Jr. administration is produced through policy choices, institutional neglect, and impunity (MCJ, 2025). Climate change intensifies harm, but it is development aggression, militarization, corruption, and weak accountability that determine who bears the greatest burden.

While the administration has articulated climate commitments at national and international levels, climate action in Mindanao remains largely technocratic and extractive, failing to address land inequality, Indigenous dispossession, fiscal accountability, and shrinking civic space.

Militarization and the Erosion of Climate Governance

Across MCJ-documented cases, militarization functions as a central governance mechanism enabling extractive, infrastructure, and even so-called “green” projects (MCJ, 2024). Indigenous leaders, educators, environmental defenders, and community organizers opposing destructive development continue to face red-tagging, harassment, arrests, and killings.

Mindanao remains the deadliest region for environmental and land defenders in the Philippines (Global Witness, 2024). MCJ documentation indicates that these attacks are not incidental but systematically silence communities defending forests, watersheds, and ancestral lands, eroding the foundations of participatory and rights-based climate governance.

Flood Control Corruption, Climate Risk, and Loss & Damage

Beyond land and militarization, fiscal governance—particularly flood control spending—has emerged as a critical driver of climate loss and damage under the Marcos Jr. administration. Investigative reporting and policy analysis published between 2024 and 2025 point to persistent irregularities in flood control projects, including substandard, delayed, or non-functional infrastructure (East Asia Forum, 2025).

While these problems predate the current administration, MCJ's concern lies in continuity and failure to correct. During a period of escalating climate risk—when disaster budgets expanded and flooding intensified—long-standing weaknesses in procurement, oversight, and accountability were not decisively addressed (East Asia Forum, 2025).

Available analyses consistently suggest that losses from anomalous or failed flood control projects run into tens of billions of pesos annually, a scale sufficient to materially undermine climate resilience (East Asia Forum, 2025). From a climate justice perspective, the precise figure matters less than the outcome: corruption functions as a climate vulnerability multiplier, transforming adaptation spending into an added source of risk.

These failures are directly relevant to Loss and Damage (L&D). Loss and damage refers not only to unavoidable climate impacts, but also to harm exacerbated by the absence or failure of effective adaptation measures (UNFCCC, 2023). MCJ supports the Philippines' access to international L&D finance, while emphasizing that such funding must be accompanied by strong accountability, transparency, and community participation (Rappler, 2024).

Until these structural conditions are addressed, climate action in Mindanao will continue to protect projects and profits, rather than people and ecosystems.



B. Overview of Governance Contradictions

The previous sections have shown how development aggression in Mindanao—destructive mining and logging, plantation expansion, militarized infrastructure, and forced displacement— has produced severe environmental and human rights harms. These crises are not accidental or merely the result of weak implementation. They arise from deep legal and policy contradictions, where laws meant to protect people and ecosystems are systematically undermined by policies and practices that incentivize extraction, erode Indigenous sovereignty, and suppress opposition.

The Philippines is formally committed to international human rights and climate frameworks, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007), the Paris Agreement (2015), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (UNGA 1998). These instruments affirm Indigenous communities’ rights to land and cultural integrity, the requirement of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and the right of all individuals and communities to defend the environment without fear.

Yet, the situation in Mindanao reveals a persistent and dangerous gap between legal recognition and lived reality. Indigenous communities continue to face forced displacement, denial of FPIC, criminalization, red-tagging, and extrajudicial killings. These practices directly violate UNDRIP Articles 10, 29, and 32 on forced removal, environmental protection, and FPIC. They also contradict Article 7(5) of the Paris Agreement, which requires adaptation measures to be participatory, rights-based, and grounded in Indigenous knowledge.

Domestically, the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA, RA 8371) is often praised as one of the most progressive Indigenous rights laws in Asia. It recognizes ancestral domains, mandates FPIC, and affirms self-determined development. However, in practice, IPRA is routinely overridden by laws and policies that privilege extractive industries and militarized governance. The Philippine Mining Act of 1995 (RA 7942) treats mineral resources as state property and prioritizes large-scale mining, often in direct conflict with IPRA protections. Executive Order 70 (2018) institutionalized a militarized “Whole-of-Nation approach” to counterinsurgency, while the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 has been widely criticized by legal experts, human rights groups, and international bodies for enabling the criminalization of dissent and expanding state surveillance (Amnesty International 2020; Human Rights Watch 2024; International Commission of Jurists 2022).

Human rights reports—including submissions to UN special rapporteurs, NGO documentation, and academic studies—show how these frameworks are used to pressure communities into accepting extractive projects or silence environmental defenders (Delina 2020; IWGIA 2024; IPMSDL 2019). The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), mandated to uphold IP rights, has long faced accusations of collusion with military and corporate actors. Numerous cases have been documented where NCIP certified FPIC despite community opposition or failed to intervene in clear rights violations.

Environmental and climate governance frameworks face similar contradictions. The Climate Change Act of 2009 (RA 9729) and subsequent policies require local government units (LGUs) to develop Local Climate Change Action Plans (LCCAPs). However, many LGUs—especially in conflict-affected and upland areas of Mindanao—lack the technical capacity, institutional support, or funding to meaningfully implement these plans (Climate Change Commission 2010; DILG-CCC 2014). Climate adaptation research consistently shows that regions like BARMM, Caraga, and the Davao Region face severe resource gaps and governance constraints despite being among the country’s most climate-vulnerable areas (CARE 2020; Chandra et al. 2017; NCCAP 2011–2028; NAP 2023–2050).

The Philippine Constitution (Art. II, Sec. 16) affirms the right to a balanced and healthful ecology. This principle gained legal force in *Oposa v. Factoran* (1993), where the Supreme Court recognized this right as enforceable and binding on the state. Yet despite this powerful precedent, constitutional environmental rights have not been consistently used to challenge the approval of large-scale extractive projects lacking comprehensive environmental impact assessments, FPIC, or climate risk analysis. Communities pursuing legal remedies often face retaliation, red-tagging, or prohibitive legal costs, further restricting civic space.

At the same time, the Anti-Terrorism Act and the operations of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), created by EO 70, have produced a climate of fear that undermines environmental governance. Environmental and Indigenous rights advocates have been designated as “terrorists,” surveilled, subjected to asset freezes, or charged under broad and vague legal provisions. Reports by Global Witness (2021), IUCN NL (2020), and The New Humanitarian (2024) document how these mechanisms are used to suppress environmental defense, weaken community autonomy, and justify militarized encroachment into resource-rich ancestral domains.

Militarized governance reshapes environmental risk in Mindanao by displacing communities from key ecological zones, disrupting traditional resource management systems, and enabling extractive operations that heighten climate vulnerability. Military encampments, counterinsurgency operations, and “area clearing” campaigns frequently occur in watersheds, forest corridors, and agricultural frontiers—areas central to climate regulation and disaster mitigation. When Indigenous communities are forced to evacuate or abandon their farms, the loss of community-based land stewardship accelerates deforestation, increases soil erosion, and weakens watershed protection. Militarization also diverts state resources away from disaster preparedness and climate adaptation toward surveillance, armed operations, and paramilitary support. The result is a pattern of security-driven ecological degradation where militarized governance itself becomes a driver of climate risk.

Indigenous governance systems—rooted in customary law, collective stewardship, and ecological reciprocity—represent some of the strongest climate solutions available in Mindanao. Research across the Philippines and globally shows that territories under Indigenous care experience lower deforestation rates, stronger biodiversity outcomes, and more sustainable resource use than state-managed or corporate-controlled lands. Customary institutions such as datu leadership, councils of elders, sacred site protection, rotational farming, and strict community rules on hunting and forest use function as embedded climate adaptation systems, developed across generations of close ecological observation. Climate justice therefore requires recognizing that Indigenous land rights are not only moral and legal imperatives, but also ecological necessities. A just transition in Mindanao demands governance structures where Indigenous communities hold genuine decision-making power over forest management, watershed protection, renewable energy siting, and disaster recovery. Climate adaptation will remain ineffective—and often harmful—so long as the state treats Indigenous territories as extractive frontiers rather than climate-stabilizing landscapes.

Taken together, these legal contradictions, institutional weaknesses, and militarized governance structures reveal a political economy in which Indigenous and environmental rights are treated as obstacles to economic policy. A development model anchored in extraction, repression, and elite interests stands in direct conflict with climate justice and with the Philippines’ constitutional, human rights, and climate obligations. Addressing the climate crisis in Mindanao requires confronting these structural political conditions so that rights, ecosystems, and community-defined futures are placed at the center of governance.





C. Toward Rights-Based Climate Governance

Addressing climate injustice in Mindanao requires more than reforms on paper. It demands a transformation in legal culture and governance that centers Indigenous perspectives, strengthens environmental jurisprudence, and makes state and corporate actors genuinely accountable. Without structural reforms in the institutions that mediate land, labor, and environmental conflicts, climate justice will remain aspirational rather than achievable.



Shrinking Civic Space for Defenders

Civic space for environmental and Indigenous rights defenders continues to narrow. Red-tagging, online and offline surveillance, and the criminalization of those who oppose mining, logging, dams, or energy projects—including Indigenous teachers, paralegals, journalists, and NGO workers—undermine communities' ability to assert their rights (ICJ 2022; HRW 2024; Global Witness 2021). These practices deter participation in FPIC processes, weaken grievance mechanisms, and erode trust in public institutions.

Cases of land grabbing, FPIC violations, killings, and environmental destruction frequently stagnate in courts or administrative agencies, especially in militarized and conflict-affected areas. Legal, psychosocial, and security support for frontline defenders remains severely under-resourced, even as they face heightened risk for participating in climate and environmental campaigns (IPMSDL 2019; Focus on the Global South 2021; Global Witness 2021).



Enforcement Gaps and Institutional Contradictions

Despite having one of the most progressive legal frameworks for Indigenous rights and environmental protection in Asia—including IPRA, the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) System, the Clean Water Act, the Climate Change Act, and constitutional guarantees of a balanced and healthful ecology—meaningful enforcement is weak and uneven (RA 8371; PD 1586; RA 9275; RA 9729; Const. Art. II, Sec. 16).

Overlapping mandates among the NCIP, DENR, LGUs, and security agencies create jurisdictional confusion and regulatory inaction. Corporate actors exploit these gaps to fast-track resource extraction and infrastructure projects, while Indigenous and rural communities struggle to access timely and impartial remedies. International and local analyses repeatedly underscore these contradictions: IPRA and FPIC in theory, yet Mining Act and security policies in practice; climate adaptation plans on paper, yet militarized and extractive projects on the ground (UNESCO 2003; CAFOD 2009; Delina 2020; CARE 2020; IWGIA 2024).

The result is governance in which environmental and Indigenous rights are treated as secondary to mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure priorities. This directly undermines climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, and community resilience, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions like Mindanao and BARMM.

D. Policy Recommendations: Toward Rights-Based Climate Governance

To advance climate justice in Mindanao, the Philippines must confront these governance contradictions head-on. This requires far more than technocratic fixes or the passage of new laws. It demands political will, structural reform, and a rebalancing of power away from extractive and militarized development models toward rights-based, community-led governance.

A meaningful shift begins with dismantling the legal and policy architectures that permit environmental destruction and human rights violations. This includes repealing or substantially reforming the Philippine Mining Act of 1995, which prioritizes foreign investment over ecological protection; the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which has facilitated the criminalization of Indigenous and environmental defenders; and policies such as Executive Order 70, which institutionalize a militarized approach to governance that frequently overrides FPIC, environmental safeguards, and local autonomy. As long as these frameworks remain intact, extractive industries and security agencies will continue to exercise disproportionate control over Indigenous territories and rural landscapes.

Institutional strengthening is equally critical. Agencies tasked with upholding human rights and environmental protections—including the NCIP, DENR, CHR, and local environmental governance bodies—must be depoliticized, adequately resourced, and empowered with clear accountability mechanisms. Their mandates must shift from facilitating investment to ensuring enforcement, rights protection, and ecological integrity. This requires insulating them from political patronage, militarized influence, and corporate capture, all of which currently constrain their ability to act independently and in the public interest.

Central to a rights-based climate framework is the recognition that Indigenous Peoples are not merely stakeholders but rights-holders and knowledge-holders. Their customary governance systems, ecological practices, and collective stewardship of land and watersheds are indispensable to climate adaptation and biodiversity conservation (UNDRIP 2007; Paris Agreement 2015, art. 7(5)). Upholding ancestral domain rights, strengthening FPIC, and supporting Indigenous-led conservation are not only matters of justice—they are climate solutions rooted in centuries of lived experience.

A reorientation of climate and environmental policy is necessary. Current approaches—largely top-down, militarized, investment-driven, or purely technocratic—fail to address the root causes of vulnerability. Rights-based climate governance requires centering community-defined adaptation strategies, enforcing collective land rights, and supporting women, youth, and local leaders who defend ecosystems and livelihoods. It also means rejecting “development” models that rely on coercion, displacement, or greenwashed extractivism.

Embedding these principles across state institutions is essential for building a climate-resilient Mindanao grounded in justice, ecological integrity, and self-determination.

Genuine climate governance does not treat Indigenous Peoples as obstacles but recognizes them as co-equal architects of the region’s future. Only through such a transformation can the Philippines bridge the gap between its international climate and human rights commitments and the lived realities of communities on the frontlines of both environmental protection and state violence.





V. Conclusion and Recommendations

A. Recap of Climate Injustice in Mindanao

Mindanao is one of the most ecologically and culturally diverse regions in the Philippines, yet it remains among the most marginalized and environmentally endangered (World Bank 2017). The island faces overlapping crises of environmental degradation, socio-economic inequality, and militarized governance—conditions that together produce systemic climate injustice.

Indigenous Peoples, farmers, and fisherfolk contribute least to the climate crisis but are among the most severely affected.

Climate change has intensified long-standing vulnerabilities. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, stronger typhoons, and shifting rainfall patterns threaten agriculture, food and water security, and community health. Meanwhile, extractive industries—mining, logging, agribusiness, and large infrastructure projects—continue to expand into forests, watersheds, and ancestral domains, often without Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). These activities erode ecological resilience and undermine local capacity to adapt.

Indigenous leaders and environmental defenders face some of the gravest risks. Documentation by Kalikasan PNE and allied groups shows that nearly half of all environment-related killings in the Philippines since 2001 occurred in Mindanao, with Indigenous Peoples comprising around 36% of victims (Mongabay 2019; UCA News 2019). The red-tagging of Lumad educators, the forced shutdown of almost all 216 Lumad schools by 2020, and the conviction of the Talaingod 13 illustrate a broader effort to suppress community-led resistance to development aggression (SOS Network 2020; UPLB Perspective 2021; HRW 2024; APNED 2024). Together, these patterns reflect not only governance failures but a development paradigm that treats land, labor, and life as expendable.

B. Recommendations for Action

Responding to climate injustice in Mindanao requires coordinated efforts in research, policy, and community-led action. These recommendations aim to bridge scientific understanding with Indigenous knowledge, strengthen community resilience, and ensure that climate responses uphold rights, justice, and self-determination.



Research and Knowledge Generation

Emissions Inventory and Impact Assessment

Conduct a comprehensive greenhouse gas emissions inventory across Mindanao's industrial, energy, transport, and agriculture sectors. This must be paired with updated climate vulnerability assessments and hazard maps—from municipal to watershed levels—to inform evidence-based mitigation and adaptation strategies that reflect the realities of frontline communities.

Socio-Economic Vulnerability Studies

Support research that examines how climate change disproportionately impacts Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, farmers, fisherfolk, and rural poor communities. This includes studying links between environmental degradation, displacement, food insecurity, militarization, and systemic marginalization. Research must be participatory, community-driven, and accessible.

Conflict–Climate Linkages

Examine how environmental destruction, militarized governance, and resource extraction fuel social conflict, human rights violations, and displacement. These insights are essential for developing conflict-sensitive, rights-based adaptation strategies.



Community-Led Interventions

Adaptation and Resilience Building

Scale up community-based initiatives in watershed rehabilitation, agroecology, disaster risk reduction, and climate-resilient food systems. Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth should lead program design and decision-making. Support Indigenous and peasant agroecological practices that restore soil fertility, protect water sources, conserve biodiversity, and strengthen food sovereignty.

Renewable Energy and Energy Justice

Promote community-owned and decentralized renewable energy systems—particularly in off-grid and conflict-affected areas. Prioritize solar, micro-hydro, and wind systems that respect ancestral domains and guarantee FPIC. Energy planning should be guided by community-defined needs rather than industrial demand.

Environmental Justice Education

Reopen and protect Lumad schools and other community learning institutions as essential centers for environmental education, Indigenous knowledge transmission, and youth climate leadership. Promote ecological literacy, human rights education, and culturally grounded pedagogies.



Collaborative Efforts and Partnerships

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Foster collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, Indigenous communities, the private sector, religious institutions, and grassroots movements. Establish platforms for shared governance and collective decision-making that prioritize marginalized voices.

Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing

Invest in long-term training and support for communities, LGUs, and civil society on climate adaptation, DRRM, participatory land-use planning, conflict resolution, and environmental governance. Integrate Indigenous ecological knowledge with scientific and technical expertise.

Public Awareness and Education

Launch campaigns promoting climate justice, sustainability, and human rights. Develop accessible educational materials and emphasize civic engagement, media literacy, and community storytelling.

These collaborative efforts underscore that climate justice in Mindanao requires not only technical solutions but also a redistribution of power in environmental decision-making.



Policy Advocacy and Institutional Reform

Policy Integration

Integrate climate justice principles into development planning at national, regional, and local levels. Ensure that climate mitigation and adaptation inform policies on agriculture, land use, energy, water, and disaster risk reduction.

Institutional Strengthening

Strengthen governance systems so they can design and enforce climate-responsive and rights-based policies. LGUs, Indigenous institutions, and civil society must have the capacity and resources to coordinate and monitor environmental and human rights standards.

Community Empowerment and Participation

Ensure meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, farmers, fisherfolk, workers, and other marginalized groups in all stages of climate policy. Support community-led planning and monitoring of climate initiatives.

Legal Literacy and Capacity Building

Provide legal training and support for communities and paralegals to defend land and environmental rights. Promote awareness of IPRA, UNDRIP, the EIS System, the Clean Water Act, the Climate Change Act, and jurisprudence empowering communities.

Corporate Accountability

Ensure strict enforcement of environmental, labor, and human rights obligations for mining, agribusiness, energy, and infrastructure companies. Provide communities with accessible grievance mechanisms.

Responsible Investment

Promote investment models that uphold sustainability, rights, and Indigenous land tenure. Reject investments that displace communities or intensify conflict.

International Solidarity and Cooperation

Mobilize climate finance, technology transfer, and global support for community-led adaptation in Mindanao. Elevate Mindanao as a climate justice priority in international forums.

South–South Knowledge Exchange

Facilitate solidarity and knowledge sharing across the Global South on climate adaptation, resistance to extractivism, and alternative development paths.



Protection of Environmental and Human Rights Defenders

Environmental and human rights defenders—including Indigenous leaders, educators, paralegals, journalists, and community organizers—face severe risks in Mindanao. Protecting them is essential not only for human rights but also for climate justice, biodiversity conservation, and democratic governance.

Guarantee Protection for Defenders

Implement comprehensive protection mechanisms aligned with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

End Red-Tagging and Criminalization

Amend laws that enable criminalization of dissent, including provisions under the Anti-Terrorism Act and EO 70. Hold state officials accountable for false terrorist designations.

Independent, Accessible Protection Mechanisms

Create well-resourced, independent systems for rapid response, legal support, psychosocial care, safe relocation, and community early warning.

Indigenous Governance and Community Schools

Reopen and protect Lumad schools; safeguard Indigenous governance institutions; demilitarize civilian spaces; ensure genuine FPIC.

Accountability for State and Corporate Actors

Investigate and prosecute killings, threats, and fabricated charges targeting defenders. Strengthen the CHR's independence and mandate.

Protect Civic Space and Digital Rights

Guarantee freedoms of expression, assembly, and digital communication. Reverse website-blocking orders targeting Indigenous and environmental groups.

International Support and Monitoring

Invite UN Special Rapporteurs and expand global solidarity networks for defenders at risk.

C. Toward a Just and Sustainable Future

The struggle for climate justice in Mindanao is inseparable from the struggle for land, rights, and dignity. The pathways presented here—from community-led adaptation to institutional reform, solidarity work, and the protection of defenders—are grounded in the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples, farmers, fisherfolk, and environmental protectors who safeguard their territories despite violence and state neglect.

Addressing the climate crisis requires transforming the systems that have enabled ecological destruction and deepened inequality. This means ending militarization, corporate impunity, and policies that undermine Indigenous sovereignty. True climate justice is possible only when those who have long cared for the land are centered in decision-making and when defenders of territory and life can act without fear. The struggle for climate justice is therefore also a struggle for self-determination, democratic space, and cultural survival.

A just future cannot be imposed from above. It must be built from the ground up—through community empowerment, collective action, and governance systems grounded in rights, equity, and ecological integrity. Climate justice must be lived and practiced by the communities who have sustained Mindanao’s forests, rivers, and mountains for generations.



The work begins with listening.

It continues through solidarity, accountability, and sustained action.

And it will be realized only when all communities in Mindanao can live, learn, and thrive in a future that is not only sustainable, but just.

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