

**Socioeconomic Inequality in Gumatdang and Christian Response  
by Turning Point Development Program Inc.  
by Haruka Shitabayashi**

**Introduction**

Gumatdang is a beautiful *barangay*, consisting of a number of steep mountains and deep valleys.<sup>1</sup> However, what Eleanor G. Sebiano saw were social issues caused by poverty, such as unemployment, abandoned children, and domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Williams states that, because human beings are created as images of God, they must reflect his glory and lovingkindness into the world.<sup>3</sup> He also argues that salvation is not only something that comes after death, but also includes the restoration of the *imago Dei* and the flourishing of societies.<sup>4</sup> Justin Welby says that the original state of God's creation is equality.<sup>5</sup> In other words, inequality is not God's creation, but rather something broken and distorted because of the fall of Adam and Eve. As bearers of the *imago Dei*, Christians have a vital role to narrow the gaps among human beings toward equality.<sup>6</sup>

This paper is a case study at Barangay Gumatdang in the Municipality of Itogon, the Province of Benguet, the Philippines, where Agape Church (a church that I am assisting) is located. This paper is an introduction to the community and to the role of a Christian

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<sup>1</sup>The word *barangay* originally means "neighborhood" in Tagalog. It generally refers to the smallest territorial, administrative, and political unit in the Philippines.

<sup>2</sup>Eleanor G. Sebiano, Interview by author, Baguio City, Philippines, October 25, 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Michael D. Williams, "Made for Mission: A New Orientation for Anthropology," *Presbyterion* 42, no. 1-2 (2016): 40.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>5</sup>Justin Welby, "Does Inequality Really Matter?," *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 1 (2016): 8.

<sup>6</sup>Charles M. Corwin, "That There May Be Equality and Self-Sufficiency: Toward an Evangelical Theology of Development," *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (July 1984): 344.

organization—Turning Point Development Programs Inc.—in this community.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study is to find out if there are, indeed, social inequalities in Gumatdang Barangay, and if any are found, to then determine how the above Christian organization is serving this community by addressing those inequalities.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study follows Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris in defining social inequality not as how much someone has, but as “differential access to valuable resources” based on the social group.<sup>7</sup> The paper will focus solely on the socioeconomic gaps in Barangay Gumatdang concerning livelihood and education. Other factors of inequality, such as ethnicities, genders, and religions, will not be addressed.

#### **Social Structure and Social Inequality in the Philippines in the 21st Century**

The total population of the Philippines has kept growing since 1955.<sup>8</sup> Worldometer shows it grew from 94 million in 2010 to 110 million in 2020—an increase of 14.24 percent.<sup>9</sup> Economic growth in the last ten years has also been remarkable. According to the World Bank, annual growth between 2010 and 2019 was sustained at 6.4 percent, which is higher than the 4.9 percent of the previous decade.<sup>10</sup> It also says that poverty declined from 23.3 percent to 16.6 percent just in the three years from 2015 to 2018. In terms of a gross national income per capita,

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<sup>7</sup>Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 75, Kindle.

<sup>8</sup>Worldometer, “Philippines Population,” November 6, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/philippines-population/#:~:text=the%20Philippines%202020%20population%20is,of%20the%20total%20world%20population> (accessed November 6, 2020)

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>World Bank, “The World Bank in the Philippines,” October 16, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/philippines/overview#1> (accessed November 5, 2020).

the World Bank anticipates that the Philippines will soon grow into an upper-middle-income bracket.<sup>11</sup> The 2019 Philippine Statistical Yearbook shows the number of families with an income of more than ₱250,000 increased from 3.26 million in 2006 to 7.9 million in 2015, while the number of families in the under—₱40,000 income class decreased from 1.4 million to 0.35 million over that same period.<sup>12</sup>

In the year 2003, Arsenio M. Balisacan and Nobuhiko Fuwa pointed out that income inequality had been both declining and changing.<sup>13</sup> According to them, the Philippines has been known for a high level of income inequality. They found that before 2000 wealth distribution inequality was especially noticeable between Luzon Island and the peripheral islands of Visayas and Mindanao and/or between the major urban centers and rural areas; however, such spatial inequality had been declining, and of more significance now were issues within each region rather than issues across regions.<sup>14</sup>

That tendency can be seen in the latest statistics. In 2006, the average income in the National Capital Region (NCR) was ₱311,000, whereas thirteen regions out of fifteen got less than half of the average income of the NCR. On the other hand, an average income of the NCR in 2015 grew to \$425,000, while that of the other regions also increased, and the number of regions which had less than half of the NCR decreased to six.<sup>15</sup> This result seems to confirm the fact that spatial inequality kept declining after 2000. However, economic inequality in the smaller regional units was still evident.

Caesar B. Cororaton, Erwin Corong, and John Cockburn call the people who live in the rural areas and earn income from agricultural

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), *2019 Philippine Statistical Yearbook* (Quezon City, Philippines: Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019), 2-1. [https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/2019-PSY\\_1003.pdf](https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/2019-PSY_1003.pdf) (Accessed October 10, 2020).

<sup>13</sup>Arsenio M. Balisacan and Nobuhiko Fuwa, "Is Spatial Income Inequality Increasing in the Philippines?" (UNU/WIDER Project Conference on Spatial Inequality in Asia, United Nations University Centre, Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, 2003), 19. [https://www.academia.edu/19091746/IS\\_SPATIAL\\_INCOME\\_INEQUALITY\\_INCREASING\\_IN\\_THE\\_PHILIPPINES](https://www.academia.edu/19091746/IS_SPATIAL_INCOME_INEQUALITY_INCREASING_IN_THE_PHILIPPINES). (accessed October 17, 2020).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 2, 20.

<sup>15</sup>Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), *2019 Philippine Statistical Yearbook*, 2-2.

production and unskilled labor jobs “the poorest of the poor.”<sup>16</sup> They state that competitiveness and productivity in agriculture are not growing nearly as much as in non-agriculture sectors because of the failure of government policies to protect domestic agriculture—policies that began in the 1980s and were enhanced when the Philippines became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995.<sup>17</sup> Although the government optimistically anticipated that trade liberalization together with domestic agriculture and reforms would eventually reduce poverty in the Philippines by resource reallocation, such an effect has yet to be realized.<sup>18</sup>

Melba Padilla Maggay, president of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, criticizes this perception. According to her, the culture in the Philippines has been divided since the colonial ages between the elite culture and the mass or “folk” culture.<sup>19</sup> Under this situation, the social/political elites distribute the benefits on the basis of kinship and other connections, not on the people’s interests.<sup>20</sup> The interests of the elites are usually aligned with the global economic order; therefore, the non-elites cannot share in the economic growth of the globalized age and are left with no access to social power and political participation.<sup>21</sup> While the poor understand that the socioeconomic inequality is caused by such a social structure, the elites nevertheless call the poor to be accountable for their condition because of loose morals and gambling.<sup>22</sup> Such different perceptions will only enhance an emotional division between the elites and the poor. Thus, the elites are receiving the benefit of economic growth, whereas the lower socioeconomic classes do not have the opportunities to escape from poverty.

The variety of ethnic groups is another factor in forming social structure in the Philippines. According to Jesus T. Peralta, there are 77

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<sup>16</sup>Caesar B. Cororaton, Erwin Corong, and John Cockburn, “Agricultural Price Distortions, Poverty, and Inequality in the Philippines,” *Agricultural Distortions Working Paper* (World Bank’s Development Research Group, June 2009), 19. <https://www.academia.edu/23899425> (accessed October 17, 2020).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>19</sup>Melba Padilla Maggay, “Why the Poor Are Always with Us: A Filipino Christian’s Propositions,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (2009): 18.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 21, 23.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

major ethnolinguistic groups and 244 subgroups.<sup>23</sup> However, Peralta also points out that not only does modernization of lifestyle make it difficult to identify ethnic groups, but also ethnic boundaries are disappearing because of relocation of the people.<sup>24</sup> As a result, diverse ethnolinguistic groups, the influence of geographic circumscription, distribution of plants and animals, traditional kinship, political structure, economic practices, religions, etc. have been intertwined, resulting in the forming of various social groups in their habitation areas.<sup>25</sup>

Eduardo T. Gonzalez and Rosario Gregorio Manasan say that educational inequality lies not in the system as such but in its quality, which includes “qualification and number of teachers; availability of learning materials and facilities; classroom space and quality.”<sup>26</sup> They argue that the ‘quality gap’ between public and private schools is causing differences in children’s achievement and/or performance.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the presence of schools and financial support are not the only things students need; the children cannot climb the social ladder if the quality of education is not assured.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, the quality-of-education issue became more visible and critical. Like most countries around the world, the Philippine Government closed schools in March 2020.<sup>28</sup> Thus, as of today, education in the Philippines is mainly operated using self-learning modules (SLMs) and online remote learning. Although the Department of Education provides alternative learning delivery modalities (i.e., modular, television-based, radio-based, blended, and online) to try to ‘salvage’ the children in remote communities who do not have access to the internet or electricity, the differences in the

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<sup>23</sup>Jesus T. Peralta, *Glimpses: Peoples of the Philippines*, 1st edition. (Manila, Philippines: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2000), 1.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>26</sup>Eduardo T. Gonzalez and Rosario Gregorio Manasan, “Social Protection in the Philippines,” in *Social Protection in Southeast & East Asia*, ed. Adam Erfried, Michael Von Hauff, and Marei John (Singapore: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002), 195. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/01443006.pdf> (accessed November 29, 2020).

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>28</sup>UNICEF Philippines, “Providing Youth a Second Chance to Complete Their Education Amid COVID-19: A Case Study on Education in Emergencies in the Philippines,” UNICEF, August 16, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/stories/providing-youth-second-chance-complete-their-education-amid-covid-19> (accessed November 22, 2020).

formats are already creating inequality, not from lack of opportunities to learn but from reduced quality of education.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, higher education institutes are using remote online learning, although the schools and institutes are attempting to make it more flexible.<sup>30</sup> This means that accessibility to the internet is more directly affecting opportunities to learn. Thus, in the ‘new normal’ created by the COVID-19 pandemic, variations in the internet infrastructure are resulting in educational inequality. In order to narrow this gap, more access must be provided to both digital and printed learning materials in a smaller unit of communities, preferably at the family level.

### The Bible and Social Equality

Christians tend to understand evangelism as spiritual work, whereas social actions, such as restoration of economic, social, and political justice, belong to the physical/material world; therefore, it is appropriate for the church to respond just to spiritual needs.<sup>31</sup> However, when the Bible speaks of human beings, it includes the physical aspect of life (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). According to Michael D. Williams, the word *body* in the Bible usually refers to the whole person, including soul, heart, and mind.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is a misconception to separate spiritual realms from physical realms. James 2:18 describes the inseparable nature of God’s mission: “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.” Williams also explains that God created human beings as social beings.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is his will for Christians to respond to physical and social needs as well. Social actions can be a holistic way of witnessing to the love of God.

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<sup>29</sup>Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education. “DepEd Prepares Self-Learning Modules for Education’s New Normal,” August 16, 2020, <https://www.deped.gov.ph/2020/07/02/deped-prepares-self-learning-modules-for-educations-new-normal> (accessed November 29, 2020).

<sup>30</sup>Jeremiah Joven B. Joaquin, Mark Anthony Dacela, and Hazel T. Biana, “The Philippine Higher Education Sector in the Time of COVID-19,” *Frontiers in Education*, October 22, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2020.576371> (accessed November 29, 2020).

<sup>31</sup>Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, rev. and updated edn. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), chap. 1, sec. 2.3.1. Kindle.

<sup>32</sup>Williams, “Made for Mission,” 50.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

Keith Warrington points out that, even among Christians, Pentecostals traditionally have had a limited political and social justice agenda. However, they have gradually started recognizing the need to engage in social issues such as poverty, disease, and lack of education.<sup>34</sup> He further states that the Holy Spirit is concerned with the physical conditions of all creatures with compassion and ‘groans’; therefore, Pentecostals, who emphasize the Spirit, should take on themselves the Spirit’s agenda.<sup>35</sup> They should engage with social issues because God is concerned about the socially vulnerable. That is why the Bible calls him “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Psalm 68:5a).

In today’s world, active agencies for social equality include Christian non-governmental/non-profit organizations such as Compassion International, Food for the Hungry, and World Vision. One of the major approaches these organizations take to bring about social equality is ‘community development’. The word *development* describes an effort to improve the wellbeing of the poor. However, when it was first introduced in the 1950s, it was more like modernization (westernization), which explains why ‘development’ is still sometimes accused of being another form of colonization or cultural invasion.<sup>36</sup>

In the 1990s, the understanding of poverty shifted to “being the result of deprivation of human freedom”; hence, development means to enhance the capabilities of people in removing or mitigating sources of “unfreedom.”<sup>37</sup> The important thing about this latter theory is that the people who are socially vulnerable should be the ones to define what is well-being for themselves. They also should be the major actors of development. Nonetheless, Christians need to be careful about one more thing—to whom are their words and actions witnessing? Myers points out the dangers, such as development technology or the development agency becoming the object of worship if those are the central features of the program.<sup>38</sup> For Christians, the ultimate goal of development is not just freeing people from deprivation. According to Myers, the Christian way of development is inviting all people to relationships with self, the

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<sup>34</sup>Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 226; 231.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>36</sup>Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, chap. 2, sec. 1.2.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, chap. 10, sec. 1.3.

community, others, and their environment, in addition to the relationship with God through Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup>

### **Overview of Gumatdang Barangay**

Gumatdang Barangay is located at the northwest part of the Municipality of Itogon, the Province of Benguet, adjoining Barangay Tuding to the north, Barangay Virac to the South, Barangay Ucab to the east, and Baguio City to the west. Because the barangay is only fifteen kilometers away from Baguio City, many residents go there for basic necessities.<sup>40</sup> The barangay is a very steep mountainous area. Only twenty-eight percent (151.1 hectares) of the total land area (531.4 hectares) is developed for housing and other buildings, while most of the land is pine forest, grassland, and brushland.

According to Barangay Profile 2019, the total population of Gumatdang is 1,742 (comprising 406 households).<sup>41</sup> While the Municipality of Itogon hosts many gold mining companies, only a few small-scale ones are located in Gumatdang. Today, 214 of its residents work in mining,<sup>42</sup> twenty-eight are employed as construction workers, and eighteen have agricultural jobs. Because the soil type of Gumatdang is Nakakeng sandy clay loam, rice cannot be produced as much as in other parts of the country, but plantation crops, fruit trees, and fruit vegetables are the major crops grown in the barangay.<sup>43</sup> Even though only eighteen residents make their living as agricultural workers, most of the households do have vegetable gardens.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the proportion of malnourished children (0-5 years old) in Gumatdang is lower than in Benguet.<sup>45</sup>

According to official records of the area, the first settlers in Gumatdang were the Ibalois in 1850, with the next group being the

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., chap. 10, sec. 2.1.

<sup>40</sup>Febiana N. Bayacsan, "Barangay Gumatdang," Barangay Profile 2019. <http://www.itogon.gov.ph/index.php/barangays/Gumatdang> (accessed October 12, 2020).

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 7, 9.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>45</sup>Celia M. Reyes et al., *The Many Faces of Poverty*, vol. 10 (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University, 2019), 25, [https://www.pep-net.org/sites/pep-net.org/files/CBMS/Publications/TheManyFacesofPoverty\\_Vol10.pdf](https://www.pep-net.org/sites/pep-net.org/files/CBMS/Publications/TheManyFacesofPoverty_Vol10.pdf). (accessed November 27, 2020).

Kankana-eyes in 1870.<sup>46</sup> Although some families of Ifugao, Bontoc, Kalinga, and lowlanders settled in the area in the twentieth century, the biggest tribe in the community today is still the Ibaloi, followed by Kankana-eyes.<sup>47</sup> The Ilocano language is mainly used for communication in the barangay, although some Tagalog speakers have recently migrated into the area.<sup>48</sup> In the author's 2020 interview with Vicente Puguon, the chairman of the barangay, he said that one of the distinctives of Gumatdang Barangay is peace and order. According to him, there have been no major conflicts over the last few decades.<sup>49</sup>

As to religious diversity, Gumatdang Barangay has several denominations: an Iglesia ni Cristo, a Roman Catholic church, a Baptist church, and a Pentecostal church. Recently, a small number of Muslims moved in from Mindanao.<sup>50</sup> Most people in the barangay are practicing both Roman Catholicism and animism.<sup>51</sup>

### **Social Inequality in Gumatdang Barangay**

In the author's 2020 interview with Chairman Puguon, he stated that there were no issues regarding the socioeconomic gap among the people in Gumatdang because most of them were in the middle class. Very few in the community were unemployed, even though their incomes might barely be enough for the family.<sup>52</sup> He admitted that there was poverty in the community; however, its severity was relatively low because housing conditions were adequate and most families had vegetable gardens.<sup>53</sup> He insists that life in Gumatdang was better than in urban areas because the houses were built on safe and solid ground and most residents were able to eat "more than three times" in a day.<sup>54</sup>

A survey by the Community-Based Monitoring System Network (CBMS) tended to confirm Puguon's observations. The proportion of

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<sup>46</sup>Bayacsan, "Barangay Gumatdang," 2; Vicente D. Puguon, interview by author, Municipality of Itogon, Philippines, October 12, 2020.

<sup>47</sup>Bayacsan, "Barangay Gumatdang," 2; Sebiano, interview by author.

<sup>48</sup>Puguon, interview by author.

<sup>49</sup>Sebiano, Interview by author.

<sup>50</sup>Puguon, Interview by author.

<sup>51</sup>Nector T. Coperu, Interview by author, Municipality of Itogon: Philippines, October 25, 2020.

<sup>52</sup>Puguon, interview by author.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

households that experienced hunger during the food shortage in Gumatdang between 2014 and 2017 was zero, in addition to a lower proportion of malnourished children (0-5 years old) than any other municipalities in the Province of Benguet.<sup>55</sup> The survey also showed that, although 28.5 percent of households had incomes below the poverty threshold, that percentage was only slightly higher than for the Philippines as a whole (26.9 percent) as well as for Benguet (26.6 percent).<sup>56</sup> Comparing Gumatdang with the other barangays in the province, seventy-four of them (52 percent) had higher proportions of households with incomes below the poverty threshold than did Gumatdang.<sup>57</sup> Thus, according to the data, conditions may not seem that severe. However, does that necessarily mean there are no socioeconomic inequality issues in Gumatdang?

Life in the barangay became a struggle when the bigger mining companies began to close starting twenty years ago,<sup>58</sup> abandoning the mining quarries and putting many out of work.<sup>59</sup> Over the past decade, small-scale companies have taken over those abandoned quarries, providing employment and creating secondary economic derivatives in the barangay.<sup>60</sup> However, because of the taxation system, the companies' profits are still given to the NCR and are not being distributed in the community.<sup>61</sup> In addition, of the 215 residents who today work in mining, all but one are working at the mining sites.<sup>62</sup> Not only mining, but most people are also working as manual laborers in agriculture, construction, and transportation, whereas only about 70 have white-collar jobs, such as in education, human health activities, and office administrative/support activities.<sup>63</sup>

The list of livelihoods on the barangay profile suggests there are few people (if any) in the upper socioeconomic class making money from investments and business ventures. Even medical doctors and dentists are not assigned permanently but only during immunization periods.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Reyes et al., *The Many Faces of Poverty*, vol. 10: 21, 43.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 2-8.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 44-46.

<sup>58</sup>Pugon, Interview by author.

<sup>59</sup>Sebiano, Interview by author.

<sup>60</sup>Bayacsan, "Barangay Gumatdang," 14.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 20.

As to education, there are two day-care centers and one elementary school that goes up through the seventh grade, which means that the children have to go outside of the barangay after grade seven to continue their education.<sup>65</sup> While these data may tend to confirm Puguon's observation of no big socioeconomic gap within the community, nonetheless, compared to the rapid-growing urban areas of the country, the inequality is quite evident.

### **A Christian Organization's Response in Gumatdang Barangay**

About Turning Point Development Programs, Inc.

Turning Point Development Programs, Inc. (TPDPI) is a Christian non-profit organization registered with the Philippines Securities and Exchange Commission.<sup>66</sup> It was founded in 2004 by Eleanor G. Sebiano, who believes that God called her to serve the Ibaloi people in the Province of Benguet.<sup>67</sup> In the author's interview with Sebiano on October 25, 2020, she explained why she focused on the Ibaloi people, while she herself is a Kankana-ey—the reason being that there are more Christians among Kankana-ey in Benguet State than among the Ibalois.

Sebiano, with two friends, Jocelyn Limangan and Rachel Acdal, started evangelism in the Itogon municipality.<sup>68</sup> While doing so, they encountered an Ibaloi lady at the Asia-Pacific Theological Seminary (APTS) who led them to Gumatdang Barangay.<sup>69</sup> In 2004, Jonathan Libag, who studied agriculture, joined up with Sebiano in her passion to reach out to the Ibaloi people.<sup>70</sup> Meeting with the then Gumatdang Barangay captain, the team learned of the lives and social issues in the barangay—e.g., abandoned mines, poverty, domestic violence, and abandoned children.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>66</sup>Turning Point Development Programs Inc. (TPDPI), Profile (Municipality of Itogon, Philippines: Turning Point Development Programs, Inc., January 2020), 1.

<sup>67</sup>*Turning Point Development Programs Inc.*, video, 2020. <https://youtu.be/gSD-6aA1vLU> (accessed March 7, 2020).

<sup>68</sup>Sebiano, Interview by author.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

In order to reach out to the people in these challenging situations, they decided to begin two agricultural development projects—organic farming and pig farming—instead of planting a church.<sup>72</sup> As residents became involved in these efforts, they started bringing to Sebiano orphans and adults who had no place to go.<sup>73</sup> She then registered both the agricultural development projects in Gumatdang and a residential care facility for orphans, widows, children, and at-risk teens as the non-stock/non-profit Turning Point Development Programs, Inc., holding “Christ-centered transformation of lives, families, and communities” as its vision.<sup>74</sup> Over its seventeen year history, TPDPI has been growing to where it now conducts development projects in seven communities in the Province of Benguet, including Gumatdang.<sup>75</sup>

### Doing the Kingdom’s Business

TPDPI’s mission statement declares “Passion for Christ and Compassion for Others: Transforming Individual Lives, Families, and Communities as Followers of Jesus Christ.”<sup>76</sup> The latter part of that statement speaks to the approach and goal of what it does. Myers states that all actions to heal and restore body, mind, spirit, and community are the Kingdom’s business toward the best human future, which is “the unshakable kingdom of God and the unchanging person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, TPDPI’s efforts can be understood as Kingdom business actions designed to heal and restore broken/distorted individuals, families, and communities into the right condition, which was God’s original plan for human beings.

For instance, as already noted, TPDPI began its ministry in Gumatdang Barangay not with a church planting but with community service and agricultural projects in order to respond to the economic inequality of the barangay. It then founded Agape Church to serve as a platform for implementing its community development efforts. Today, Agape Church has farms that produce organic vegetables, fruit, poultry,

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Turning Point Development Programs, Inc., 2.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>77</sup>Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, chap. 6, sec. 3.

and tilapia fish. These farms are not only helping the church members' lives with their profit, but are also conducting seminars to introduce new agricultural technology to the community members.<sup>78</sup>

In the earlier stage of the ministry, TPDPI also taught financial management through microfinance.<sup>79</sup> Although such may not generally be considered a 'church activity', Rita Bayeng testifies that some people started coming to the church because of the agricultural projects and then became believers—and are still a part of the church.<sup>80</sup> Even if the spiritual transformation does not happen immediately, these activities to empower the people's livelihoods are valuable for the community not only because of their economic impact, but also because they help "save them from addictive vices and chaotic lifestyles, re-engage with education, improve behavior and results, improve sense of well-being, reduce anti-social behavior and enable safer streets, reduce re-offending, reduce hunger and improve physical health, improve family life, and reduce homelessness."<sup>81</sup>

Another area that TPDPI focuses on is education. In the author's interview with Sebiano, she said, "Education is the only way to escape poverty." Thus, TPDPI provides scholarships for the youth from its community-based projects, in addition to those children in TPDPI's residential care facility.<sup>82</sup> One of the scholarship recipients, who is studying agriculture, not only receives financial support, but also has the opportunity to further enhance his knowledge and skills at Agape Church's farms. In addition to the financial help through scholarships, TPDPI is attempting to establish an Educational Center at Agape Church in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Despite the alternative learning delivery potentials, the children in Gumatdang learn primarily via printed resources because of the lack of access to electronic media.<sup>83</sup> TPDPI realizes that a lack of internet

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<sup>78</sup>Copero, Interview by author.

<sup>79</sup>Sebiano, personal conversation with the author, Baguio City, Philippines, October 4, 2020.

<sup>80</sup>Rita Bayeng, Interview by author, Municipality of Itogon, Philippines, October 25, 2020. Rita Bayeng was one of the first converts when the ministry in Gumatdang began.

<sup>81</sup>Joel A. Tejedo, *The Church in the Public Square: Engaging Our Christian Witness in the Community* (Baguio City, Philippines: Sambayanihan Publishers, 2016), 34.

<sup>82</sup>Sebiano, Interview by author.

<sup>83</sup>Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education, "DepEd Prepares Self-Learning Modules for Education's New Normal."

accessibility, limited ability of parents to monitor and teach, and the lack of educational facilities like a library are ‘handcuffing’ the children’s and youth’s educational experiences and likely negatively impacting their opportunity to move up to higher education and/or to obtain a business career.<sup>84</sup> This Education Center will include printed educational resources plus computers and wi-fi connections for the children and youth in the barangay to use for their study.<sup>85</sup>

Although these present and planned actions may seem irrelevant to evangelism, according to Myers, transformation for a better future will be sparked in people’s lives if they are exposed to individual and community stories that shed light on God’s redemptive story, showing that they can experience his compassion, justice, and deliverance in their lives.<sup>86</sup> Such a new perspective will also help people discover their true identity and vocation as God’s children.<sup>87</sup>

### Being the Light of the World

Doing the Kingdom’s business is a testimony to God’s goodness. As the Scripture says, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

Nector Copero was a gambler when Sebiano and her friends started their agricultural development projects in Gumatdang.<sup>88</sup> His life and family were transformed when he accepted Jesus Christ. Today, he is a leader in Agape Church and also serves the barangay as an extension worker to respond to the residents’ needs.<sup>89</sup> He is a testimony of a life changed by the Lord—one who desperately needed transformation now serving his own people with a passion for Christ and compassion for others.

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<sup>84</sup>Sebiano, interview by author.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, chap. 6, sec. 3.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Sebiano, Interview by author.

<sup>89</sup>Copero, Messenger message to author, November 13, 2020.

TPDPI is also recognized by the barangay administration because it shows respect for the local authority. For example, Chairman Puguon appreciates the organization for its distribution of food packages to barangay residents during the COVID-19 pandemic lock-down in March 2020.<sup>90</sup> All of this suggests that, even though TPDPI has not directly engaged in the political realm, it has nonetheless successfully gained recognition and respect from both community members and authorities. Building trust and relationships like this is an important part of becoming one community.<sup>91</sup>

If TPDPI and Agape Church continue to put the salvation of Jesus Christ at the center of its development efforts, more lives will shine like Nector Copero's as 'the light of the world'. Christian development projects must point to the Deliverer, for the ultimate purpose behind all actions to restore equality is for the people who observe those actions to conclude, "Theirs must be a living God!"<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

This study found that there are socioeconomic and educational inequalities in the Barangay Gumatdang, not so much in a sense of the absence of opportunity, but rather as to the quality of opportunity. Such a condition can be hidden behind the numbers and proportions that might cause some scholars and organizations to be optimistic about the imminent resolution of those issues. However, even if true, this does not eliminate people's struggles today. Thus, it is reasonable for TPDPI to respond to the community's needs to achieve equality through its agricultural and educational efforts. It can also be said that Christ-centered development projects function as a testimony to the community.

This study was limited in scope to the issues regarding socioeconomic and educational equality identified through already-existing studies and face-to-face interviews with the leaders. Other aspects, such as practice, beliefs, and worldview of ethnic groups, can—and should—also be studied in order to more fully understand the people

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<sup>90</sup>Puguon, interview by author.

<sup>91</sup>Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, chap 8, sec. 3.4.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., chap. 10, sec. 1.3.

in the barangay. The gap created by different formats of self-learning modules (SLMs) should be continually observed and analyzed as well.

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