

Original Article

Reframing Indigenous Governance and Environmental Stewardship in Kalinga, Philippines: Bridging Traditional Knowledge for Sustainable Resource Futures

Johnny D. Wayet 

College of Liberal Arts and
Social Sciences, Kalinga State
University, Kalinga, Philippines

Correspondence:
wayetjohnny@gmail.com

Abstract

Background: Indigenous knowledge systems are vital to environmental governance, shaping community stewardship, ecological resilience, and sustainable resource management within ancestral territories. In the Philippines, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is mandated under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act to protect ancestral domains and uphold indigenous self-determination. However, persistent gaps in FPIC implementation continue to threaten indigenous governance, environmental stewardship, and culturally grounded resource management in Kalinga Province.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive multiple-case study was conducted among indigenous communities in Balbalan, Pasil, and Tabuk City, Kalinga Province, Philippines. Data were gathered through purposive sampling using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and document review, and were analyzed through hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis. The study examined the implementation of FPIC by exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to FPIC processes and the factors influencing implementation across ancestral domains.

Results: FPIC adoption shows progress, yet barriers persist: erosion of traditional consensus-building, superficial consultations, political interference, opaque benefit-sharing, and unauthorized encroachment on ancestral land. These reflect broader socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts on indigenous autonomy, resource stewardship, and welfare.

Conclusion: FPIC in Kalinga functions beyond legal compliance as a culturally embedded mechanism for indigenous self-determination, customary authority, and environmental stewardship.

Keywords

indigenous people, FPIC, indigenous rights, environmental stewardship, sustainable development goals, environmental justice, UN SDG 16, peace, justice and strong institutions

INTRODUCTION

Humans are endowed with equal dignity and rights, a principle affirmed by the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \[UDHR\] \(1948\)](#). For Indigenous Peoples, these rights extend beyond individual protections to include collective rights over ancestral domains, cultural integrity, self-determination, and participation in decisions affecting their lands and resources ([United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

[UNDRIP], 2007). Within this framework, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) serves as a rights-based mechanism to ensure that Indigenous Peoples can meaningfully participate in decisions on development interventions that may affect their territories, livelihoods, and cultural heritage (UNDRIP, 2007).

In the Philippines, these protections are institutionalized through the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which recognizes the rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples (ICCs/IPs) to informed and intelligent participation in projects affecting their ancestral domains (Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act [IPRA] of 1997, 1997). Despite this legal framework, FPIC implementation remains contested in many indigenous territories, particularly in areas experiencing increasing development pressures from mining, hydropower, and other resource-based projects (Quitasol, 2025).

Previous studies have documented recurring challenges in FPIC implementation, including inadequate information disclosure, rushed consultations, weak representation, and political interference (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], n.d.). However, limited attention has been given to how these challenges interact with indigenous governance systems and customary decision-making processes in specific local contexts. In Kalinga Province, where customary institutions such as the bodong continue to influence collective decision-making, understanding how FPIC is negotiated, interpreted, and implemented is particularly important. This study addresses this gap by examining FPIC implementation in the indigenous communities of Balbalan, Pasil, and Tabuk City, with particular attention to consultation practices, customary authority, indigenous governance, and environmental stewardship.

The normative foundation of this study is grounded in the principles of human dignity, indigenous self-determination, and environmental stewardship articulated in the UDHR, UNDRIP, and related rights instruments. UNDRIP explicitly links FPIC to indigenous participation in decisions affecting lands, territories, natural resources, and development initiatives, positioning consent not merely as a procedural requirement but as a substantive expression of collective agency and self-determination (UNDRIP, 2007). This perspective provides a foundation for understanding FPIC as both a rights-protection mechanism and a governance process operating within complex interactions among state institutions, customary authority, and development interests.

The conceptual premise of this study is that FPIC should be understood not merely as a procedural legal requirement for project approval but as a culturally embedded governance institution through which Indigenous Peoples exercise collective self-determination, environmental stewardship, and authority over ancestral domains. Although FPIC is commonly discussed within legal and regulatory frameworks, emerging scholarship increasingly recognizes that consent processes are inseparable from indigenous systems of governance, customary authority, and socio-ecological relationships that shape decision-making over lands and resources (Howitt, 2010; Owen & Kemp, 2014; UNDRIP, 2007).

Within indigenous communities, governance extends beyond formal administrative structures and encompasses customary laws, traditional leadership systems, collective deliberation, and reciprocal responsibilities toward the environment. FPIC, therefore, functions not only as a safeguard against unwanted development but also as a mechanism through which indigenous communities negotiate power, protect territorial rights, and maintain culturally grounded resource governance systems (Humphries et al., 2023; Li, 2007). This perspective aligns with growing recognition that indigenous knowledge systems constitute important forms of environmental governance that contribute to ecological resilience, sustainable resource management, and environmental justice (Howitt, 2010; Humphries et al., 2023).

In Kalinga, these governance functions are reflected in bodong-based consensus-building traditions and customary institutions that regulate relationships among communities, territories, and natural resources. Consequently, the effectiveness of FPIC cannot be evaluated solely by procedural compliance with statutory requirements. Rather, it must also be assessed according to the extent to which indigenous decision-making structures, customary authority, and environmental stewardship practices are recognized and meaningfully integrated into governance processes. This study, therefore, reframes FPIC as an adaptive socio-ecological governance institution operating at the intersection of state law, indigenous self-determination, environmental stewardship, and development pressures.

Accordingly, this study examines how FPIC is implemented and negotiated within the indigenous communities of Balbalan, Pasil, and Tabuk City, Kalinga Province. Specifically, it explores the legal, cultural, and political factors that shape FPIC processes, examines their implications for indigenous autonomy, environmental stewardship, and community welfare, and identifies locally grounded strategies to strengthen culturally responsive and rights-based resource governance.

METHODS

Study Design, Setting, and Population

This study employed a qualitative descriptive multiple-case study design to examine the implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) among Indigenous communities in selected ancestral domains in the municipalities of Balbalan and Pasil and the City of Tabuk, Kalinga Province, Philippines, where FPIC processes had been undertaken for hydropower, geothermal exploration, mining, and other development-related projects. A qualitative descriptive approach was adopted to generate a contextually grounded understanding of how FPIC is implemented, interpreted, and experienced by Indigenous Peoples and relevant stakeholders across different ancestral domains. At the same time, the multiple-case design facilitated comparisons across communities without overlooking their unique socio-cultural, political, and environmental contexts. The study sites were purposively selected based on their direct experience with FPIC implementation. Using purposive sampling, a total of 75 participants were individually interviewed, including tribal leaders, elders, Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives, women leaders, youth representatives, barangay officials, personnel from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, local government representatives, civil society organization representatives, project-related stakeholders, and community members with direct knowledge of or involvement in FPIC processes. Eligible participants were at least 18 years old and were identified through established community entry protocols and referrals from customary and local leaders. Sampling sought maximum variation in gender, age, community role, customary authority, institutional affiliation, and perspectives on FPIC implementation. Participant recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with additional interviews undertaken to ensure adequate representation across the three study sites and stakeholder groups. The demographic characteristics of the interview participants are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed from the FPIC Researchers' Tool Kit and relevant literature on Indigenous Peoples' rights and participatory governance. The interviews explored participants' experiences and perspectives on consultation processes, customary governance, community representation, information disclosure, decision-making, benefit-sharing, conflict resolution, and the perceived social, economic, cultural, and environmental impacts of development projects within ancestral domains. The interview guide was translated into Ilocano and reviewed by local language experts to ensure conceptual equivalence, linguistic clarity, and cultural appropriateness. Interviews were conducted at participant-selected locations to ensure privacy and comfort and, with informed consent, were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations. To enhance data triangulation, relevant documentary materials—including NCIP records, Certificates of Precondition, Memoranda of Agreement, consultation minutes, project reports, environmental documents, policy issuances, media reports, and community resolutions—were also reviewed using qualitative content analysis. These documents provided institutional and historical context and corroborated and enriched the interview findings.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis following [Braun and Clarke's \(2012\)](#) six-phase framework, which involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the final analytical narrative. Inductive coding facilitated the identification of themes emerging from participants' narratives. In contrast, deductive coding was guided by the core principles of FPIC—free, prior, informed, and consent—and relevant national FPIC guidelines. Coding was conducted iteratively across all transcripts to

ensure analytical consistency and rigor. Documentary materials were analyzed separately using qualitative content analysis to identify patterns related to procedural compliance, consultation processes, customary governance, institutional practices, and FPIC implementation. Findings from the document analysis were subsequently triangulated with the interview data to enhance the credibility, confirmability, and overall trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and endorsed by the Kalinga State University Research Council for implementation. Prior to data collection, the necessary approvals and permissions were secured. Authorization was obtained from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) at both the regional and provincial levels, and community entry protocols were observed through consultations with tribal elders and indigenous leaders.

Prior to participation, all participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained before any data collection activities commenced. Interview materials were made available in both English and Ilocano and were read aloud when necessary to ensure accessibility and comprehension. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No incentives were provided. Confidentiality was protected through anonymization of transcripts, use of pseudonyms, and secure storage of research data accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

A total of 75 participants were interviewed in this study. Participants included tribal leaders and elders, women, youth, and elder community members, Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives, barangay officials, personnel from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, local government representatives, representatives of civil society organizations, and project-related stakeholders. This diverse participant composition provided multiple perspectives on FPIC across customary, community, institutional, and development contexts, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the processes, challenges, and outcomes of FPIC implementation in the study areas.

Participants were drawn from selected ancestral domains in Balbalan, Pasil, and Tabuk City, Kalinga Province. Balbalan contributed 25 participants from the Buaya and Mabaca ancestral domains, Pasil contributed 13 participants from the Balatoc ancestral domain, and Tabuk City contributed 30 participants from communities in Mosimos, Gaogao, Minanga, and Sabangan. Additional institutional perspectives were provided by seven NCIP-Kalinga personnel involved in field-based investigation and FPIC-related administrative processes. Overall, the study included 46 male and 29 female participants, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant distribution by Municipality or City, Ancestral Domain, and Sex

Municipality/City	Ancestral Domain(s)	Male	Female
Balbalan	Buaya and Mabaca	13	12
Pasil	Balatoc	9	4
Tabuk City	Minanga, Nanong, and Dallac	21	9
NCIP Kalinga	N/A	3	4
Total	—	46	29

Thematic analysis identified several recurring challenges affecting the implementation of FPIC in the study sites. These challenges centered on non-observance of the customary practice of consensus, inadequate representation, incomplete disclosure of information, lack of meaningful consultation, ambiguity in royalties and benefit-sharing, political and interest-group interference, unauthorized intrusions into ancestral domains,

and divergent community expectations. The themes and subthemes presented in Table 2 were derived through thematic coding of interview and focus group data. These themes represent recurring patterns and shared experiences identified across participant narratives and should not be interpreted as indicating the number or proportion of participants who expressed a particular view.

Table 2. *Emergent Themes and Subthemes on FPIC, Indigenous Governance, and Environmental Stewardship in Kalinga, Philippines*

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Challenges in FPIC Implementation	Non-observance of the customary practice of consensus	The findings indicated the non-observance of the customary practice of consensus during the FPIC process. Decisions were reportedly made without fully adhering to traditional collective decision-making mechanisms, limiting broader community participation.
	Inadequate Representation	Participants shared their experiences concerning community participation, representative selection, and leadership involvement during FPIC implementation.
	Incomplete Information Disclosure	Participants reported that information provided during FPIC consultations focused primarily on project benefits, with limited discussion of potential risks, project impacts, and other relevant details necessary for informed decision-making.
	Lack of Meaningful Consultation	Participants reported concerns about the inclusiveness of FPIC processes, particularly regarding stakeholder representation, opportunities for participation, accessibility of consultations, and the communication of official notices and agreements.
	Ambiguity in Royalties and Benefit Sharing	The narratives indicate perceived ambiguities in the agreement's provisions concerning the distribution of economic benefits derived from the project.
	Political and Interest Group Interference	Participants reported that political dynamics shaped community discussions and stakeholder positions on the proposed project, leading to varying perspectives and the formation of distinct groups within the community.
	Unauthorized Ancestral Domain Intrusions	Participants described instances where land-related activities were undertaken without adequate prior information or community consent.
	Divergent Expectations and Outcomes	The narratives indicate divergent community expectations and responses toward the project, shaped by differing perceptions of impacts, legal interpretations, and levels of support or opposition among stakeholders.
Socio-cultural, Economic, and Environmental Impacts	Social Impacts	Elders noted that some opponents were sidelined during consultations and that the benefits offered (scholarships, cheaper power) did not fully consider possible effects on youth and ancestral land, suggesting cultural concerns and leading some communities to consider withholding consent, while dissenting voices felt pressure to conform. Elders reported that learning about IPRA rights during the FPIC process catalyzed IPO and NGO formation and rights advocacy but also produced divisions, with some residents prioritizing compensation over assemblies, ancestral and environmental concerns sidelined, and preliminary assessments inadequately discussed, weakening communal cohesion and prompting domain realignments.
	Economic impacts	Economic impacts were generally perceived in terms of anticipated development benefits and long-term improvements in community welfare. Participants associated the project with infrastructure development, employment opportunities, improved social services, and livelihood support, with expectations of intergenerational gains. Benefit-sharing was also viewed as contingent on identified community priorities, as determined through consultation processes.

Table 2. continued

Theme	Subtheme	Description
	Environmental impacts	Environmental concerns centered on fears of ecological degradation and resource exploitation. Although Environmental Impact Assessments were conducted and submitted, participants reported that results were not fully disclosed or discussed in consultations, which tended to emphasize project benefits over potential adverse impacts. Opponents consistently identified environmental degradation as a primary concern, alongside perceptions of limited transparency in environmental information sharing.

Challenges to FPIC Effectiveness in Upholding Indigenous Rights

Non-observance of the customary practice of consensus

The findings revealed that majority voting has increasingly replaced customary consensus-building in the implementation of the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) process. Although indigenous governance systems are recognized under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, participants described how formal electoral procedures have taken precedence over traditional decision-making practices. Several participants observed that barangay officials, rather than tribal leaders, assumed key decision-making roles during the FPIC process.

"There are no tribal leaders in Buaya—only barangay officials." (Buaya Elder 1, Male)

Participants further expressed concerns regarding the legitimacy and inclusiveness of majority voting. While voting was presented as the basis for decision-making, some elders believed that the process did not adequately reflect indigenous customs or ensure meaningful consensus. As a result, community members' reservations were often set aside once the majority vote had been determined.

"The election wasn't ideal, but we had no choice except to accept the result." (Buaya Elder 3, Male)

The findings also showed that voting decisions were not always based on individual judgment but were influenced by family relationships and interpersonal pressures. Some participants admitted that they supported the project primarily because of the preferences of close family members rather than their own convictions.

"I voted 'yes' only because my children supported it." (Buaya Elder 4, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that the increasing reliance on majority voting has weakened customary consensus-building within the FPIC process. Participants perceived that the shift from traditional indigenous decision-making toward formal democratic procedures diminished the authority of tribal governance and raised concerns regarding the extent to which FPIC upholds indigenous self-determination.

Inadequate Representation

The findings revealed concerns regarding inadequate representation and political or interest-group interference during the implementation of the FPIC process. Participants described how customary leadership structures were not adequately represented in community deliberations, with formal political authorities assuming roles traditionally exercised by indigenous leaders.

"No tribal leaders—only barangay officials." (Buaya Elder 2, Male)

Participants also questioned the legitimacy of community representation, noting that clan representatives were not always selected through customary decision-making processes.

"Genealogist picked our clan representatives." (Balatoc Elder 2, Male)

Some participants further expressed concerns about unequal treatment during the FPIC process, alleging that benefits were distributed selectively among certain individuals rather than equitably across participants.

"Cash given only to elders—excluding other participants." (Balatoc Elder 3, Female)

Overall, the findings suggest that the limited participation of customary leaders, together with perceived political influence and selective distribution of benefits, weakened confidence in the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the FPIC process. Participants perceived that these practices undermined customary governance, raised questions about the authenticity of community representation, and contributed to distrust within the affected indigenous communities.

Incomplete Information Disclosure

The findings revealed that incomplete disclosure of information limited participants' ability to make informed decisions during the FPIC process. Participants consistently reported that project consultations emphasized the anticipated benefits of the proposed hydropower project while providing little or no discussion of its potential risks and adverse consequences.

"They presented only benefits, none of the disadvantages." (Mabaca Elder 5, Male)

"Only benefits were shared; risks were never mentioned." (Balatoc Elder 8, Female)

Participants also expressed concerns regarding the lack of essential information about the project proponents and their qualifications, suggesting that critical details needed to assess the project's credibility were not adequately disclosed.

"Incomplete information—no company details, no hydropower experience." (Buaya Elder 3, Male)

Several participants further alleged that information concerning project risks and technical assessments was deliberately withheld during community consultations.

"Project risks were hidden—there was no disclosure from proponents." (Balatoc Elder 6, Female)

"Risk assessments were concealed and not fully discussed in community meetings." (Balatoc Elder 7, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that participants perceived the information-sharing process as lacking transparency and completeness. The emphasis on project benefits, together with limited disclosure of potential risks and insufficient information about the project proponents, weakened the informed component of the FPIC process and raised concerns about whether community members could provide genuinely informed consent.

Lack of Meaningful Consultation

The findings revealed that consultation during the FPIC process was perceived as lacking meaningful participation. Participants described being excluded from key consultations, limiting their opportunity to contribute to decisions affecting their ancestral domains. One elder explained that the primary rights holders were not directly engaged in separate consultations.

"Real hosts were ignored; there were no separate consultations for us." (Minanga Elder 5, Male)

Another participant expressed surprise upon learning that their community had been omitted from the Memorandum of Agreement.

"We were shocked to learn that we were excluded from their MOA." (Minanga Elder 6, Male)

Participants also reported that individuals who opposed the proposed project were excluded from the FPIC process despite being directly affected by its potential impacts.

"Opponents were excluded from FPIC despite experiencing project impacts." (Minanga Elder 7, Male)

Beyond exclusion, participants identified procedural barriers that constrained meaningful engagement. Some noted that consultation meetings were conducted in locations distant from the affected communities, making attendance difficult.

"Elders' meetings were held far from our community." (Balatoc Elder 4, Male)

Others questioned the legitimacy of community representation, explaining that clan representatives were selected through processes that did not reflect customary practices.

"Genealogists selected our clan representatives." (Balatoc Elder 5, Male)

Participants also described language barriers during official consultations, which limited their understanding of project information and reduced their ability to participate effectively in discussions.

Overall, the findings suggest that consultation processes were not fully inclusive or accessible to all affected indigenous community members. Exclusion of rights holders and dissenting voices, procedural barriers, non-customary representation, and communication challenges collectively weakened meaningful participation and raised concerns about the legitimacy of FPIC outcomes.

Ambiguity in royalties and benefit-sharing

The findings revealed that uncertainty regarding royalties and benefit-sharing contributed to participants' concerns about the fairness and transparency of the FPIC process. Participants expressed that the agreements lacked clear provisions governing the allocation of royalties and the sharing of benefits derived from the proposed project.

"There is no clear provision on royalties and production sharing." (Minanga Elder 11, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that ambiguity in benefit-sharing arrangements weakened participants' confidence in the FPIC process. The absence of clear provisions on royalties and production sharing raised concerns about accountability, equitable distribution of project benefits, and the extent to which indigenous communities would retain meaningful control over the use of their ancestral resources.

Political and Interest Group Interference

The findings revealed that political dynamics shaped community perceptions of the proposed project and contributed to divisions within the affected indigenous communities. Participants described how politics influenced the dissemination of information and created competing positions regarding the project's potential benefits and risks.

"Politics divided us over the project's advantages and disadvantages." (Minanga Elder 8, Male)

Another participant explained that political influences contributed to misinformation and the formation of divided indigenous peoples' organizations.

"People were poorly informed, while politics created divisive IPOs." (Minanga Elder 9, Male)

Some participants further perceived that these divisions were intentionally fostered to facilitate project implementation.

"The division was politically orchestrated to pave the way for the project." (Minanga Elder 10, Female)

Overall, the findings suggest that political interference contributed to fragmented community perspectives, weakened social cohesion, and undermined collective decision-making during the FPIC process.

Unauthorized Ancestral Domain Intrusions

The findings revealed concerns regarding unauthorized access to ancestral domains during project-related activities. Participants reported that survey activities were conducted without their prior knowledge or consent, raising questions about compliance with the procedural requirements of the FPIC process.

"Surveyors entered our lands without our knowledge or consent." (Buaya Elder 4, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that participants perceived unauthorized entry into their ancestral lands as a violation of their customary territorial rights and the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. The absence of prior notification and community consent weakened confidence in the FPIC process and raised concerns about the protection of indigenous peoples' rights over their ancestral domains.

Divergent Expectations and Outcomes

The findings revealed divergent expectations and perceptions regarding the proposed hydropower project, reflecting differences in how participants assessed its potential risks, benefits, and implications for their ancestral domains. Some participants described seeking firsthand information before forming an

opinion about the project.

"I personally visited Ambuklao Dam to compare the advantages and disadvantages of hydropower."
(Mabaca Elder 2, Male)

In contrast, others strongly opposed the project, citing concerns about its direct effects on their community and ancestral lands.

"We reject this project because it directly threatens us." (Mabaca Elder 3, Male)

Participants also described contrasting institutional perspectives regarding the project's anticipated impacts. While one government representative maintained that the project would not adversely affect the affected communities,

"The project will not affect them." (NCIP Personnel 1, Male)

Other participants attributed community divisions to differing interpretations of indigenous rights and legal provisions.

"Different interpretations of IPRA have fractured our organizations and communities." (Minanga Elder 11, Female)

Participants further acknowledged that opinions within the community remained divided, with varying levels of support, hesitation, and opposition toward the proposed project.

"Some remain hesitant, while others strongly support or oppose the project." (Mabaca Elder 4, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that differing assessments of project impacts, contrasting institutional interpretations, and varied expectations regarding development outcomes contributed to fragmented community perspectives. These divergent views made it difficult to achieve a shared understanding of the proposed project and posed challenges to building consensus during the FPIC process.

Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Environmental Impacts of FPIC

The analysis also identified socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of FPIC implementation. As shown in Table 2, environmental impacts accounted for the largest number of coded references, followed by social, cultural, and economic impacts. These figures represent coding frequency only and are intended to indicate the relative prominence of themes within the qualitative dataset rather than statistical prevalence among participants.

Cultural Impacts

The findings revealed that participants perceived the FPIC process as having significant implications for indigenous cultural values, customary obligations, and the protection of ancestral heritage. Several participants expressed concern that individuals who opposed the proposed project were marginalized during decision-making and that their views received little consideration.

"Project opponents are sidelined from FPIC or ignored entirely. Non-consenters are marginalized." (Balatoc Elder, Male)

"Those not convinced of the project received little consideration and had to follow the majority." (Balatoc Elder, Male)

Participants also voiced concerns that consultations emphasized promised benefits while overlooking the potential consequences for future generations and the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage.

"They promised scholarships and cheap power but ignored risks to our youth and ancestral heritage."
(Mabaca Elder, Female)

Beyond concerns within individual communities, participants emphasized customary obligations of solidarity and mutual responsibility among neighboring indigenous groups. One elder explained that consent should not be granted if the project would adversely affect another ancestral domain.

"We will deny consent if the dam harms Mabaca's domain—we will not prosper at our brothers' expense." (Buaya Elder, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that participants viewed the FPIC process as extending beyond procedural compliance to the protection of indigenous cultural values and customary relationships. The perceived marginalization of dissenting voices, limited consideration of cultural and intergenerational impacts, and concern for the welfare of neighboring ancestral domains highlight the importance of ensuring that FPIC implementation respects customary norms, collective responsibilities, and indigenous cultural heritage.

Social Impacts

The findings revealed that the FPIC process produced both empowering and divisive social consequences within the affected indigenous communities. Participants acknowledged that the process increased awareness of indigenous rights and encouraged greater community organization in defending ancestral domains. Several participants explained that they first became aware of their rights under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) through FPIC-related activities facilitated by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP).

"We learned about our IPRA rights only during the FPIC process through NCIP lawyers." (Balatoc Elder, Female)

Others described how greater awareness of IPRA and FPIC strengthened community organizations and motivated collective action in protecting indigenous rights.

"IPRA and FPIC issues encouraged our associations to fight for our rights." (Minanga Elder, Female)

Despite these positive outcomes, participants also described increasing divisions within their communities. Some believed that the implementation of IPRA and FPIC contributed to the emergence of separate indigenous peoples' organizations and non-government organizations that, while promoting advocacy, also fragmented community relationships.

"IPRA led to the formation of IPOs and NGOs, but it also created divisions within the community." (Minanga Elder, Male)

Participants further observed a decline in collective participation and traditional community solidarity. They expressed concern that community members had become less willing to participate in assemblies and less attentive to issues affecting ancestral domains and the environment.

"People now ignore ancestral and environmental concerns and will not attend assemblies without compensation." (Balatoc Elder, Female)

One participant reflected on the weakening of customary bonds within the community.

"Unlike before, we no longer gather together in the same spirit of brotherhood." (Minanga Elder, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that while the FPIC process enhanced awareness of indigenous rights and strengthened community advocacy, participants also perceived that it coincided with increasing social fragmentation and the weakening of traditional solidarity. These contrasting experiences illustrate the complex social consequences of FPIC implementation, in which challenges to community cohesion and collective participation accompanied gains in rights consciousness.

Economic Impacts

The findings revealed that participants associated the proposed project with a range of anticipated economic benefits for their communities. Many viewed the project as an opportunity to improve future livelihoods and community welfare, with some participants expressing support for its the perceived long-term benefits for succeeding generations.

"We accept the economic impacts because we believe they will benefit our children's future." (Minanga Elder, Female)

Participants also described expectations that the project would provide infrastructure development, employment opportunities, and various forms of social and livelihood assistance.

"The project promised roads, schools, jobs, affordable electricity, health assistance, cash benefits, and livelihood programs." (Balatoc Elder, Male)

Others explained that the allocation of economic benefits was expected to reflect the priorities identified by the affected communities during the consultation process.

"Economic benefit packages depend on the priority needs identified by the consulted community." (Balatoc Elder, Female)

Overall, the findings suggest that participants perceived the proposed project as offering potential economic opportunities through improved infrastructure, employment, and community development programs. Expectations of these benefits, particularly those intended to enhance the well-being of future generations, influenced participants' views of the project and underscored the importance of aligning benefit-sharing arrangements with community-identified needs.

Environmental Impacts

The findings revealed that participants perceived the proposed hydropower project as posing significant environmental risks and expressed concerns about the limited disclosure of environmental information during the FPIC process. Many participants feared that the project would result in environmental degradation and the exploitation of natural resources within their ancestral domains.

"Opponents fear environmental degradation and the exploitation of natural resources." (Mabaca Elder, Male)

"For those opposed to the project, environmental degradation remains the primary concern." (Mabaca Elder, Male)

Participants also expressed concern that although Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) had been undertaken, the findings had not been adequately communicated to affected communities.

"Environmental Impact Assessments were conducted, but the results were never shared with the community." (Buaya Elder, Male)

"The assessment results were not fully discussed during community consultations." (Balatoc Elder, Female)

Several participants further observed that consultations focused primarily on the anticipated benefits of the project while providing limited discussion of its potential environmental consequences.

"They informed us about the project; however, the discussion emphasized its positive aspects. There was little information provided regarding its potential adverse effects." (Buaya Elder, Male)

"Although preliminary assessments were conducted, the findings were not comprehensively presented or discussed with community members during the consultative assemblies." (Balatoc Elder, Male)

Overall, the findings suggest that participants perceived environmental information sharing during the FPIC process as lacking transparency and completeness. The limited disclosure of Environmental Impact Assessment findings and the emphasis on project benefits over potential environmental risks constrained participants' ability to make fully informed decisions and heightened concerns about the protection of their ancestral lands and natural resources.

DISCUSSION

FPIC Effectiveness in Upholding Indigenous Rights

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is a legally recognized principle under international and national frameworks that requires Indigenous Peoples to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their ancestral domains. Its effectiveness is commonly evaluated through procedural integrity, meaningful consultation,

legitimate representation, and the quality of information disclosure. In this study, several challenges indicate that FPIC implementation in Kalinga remains uneven, particularly in relation to customary consensus-building, representation, consultation, political influence, benefit-sharing, and unauthorized access to ancestral lands.

One of the most significant concerns is the apparent shift from customary consensus-building toward externally mediated or administratively convenient decision-making processes. In Kalinga, collective deliberation traditionally derives legitimacy from customary practices and recognized leaders such as the papangat. However, findings suggest that majority voting, government-mediated selection, or externally influenced representation may weaken the “free” and “prior” elements of FPIC by replacing culturally grounded deliberation with processes that are easier to document but less reflective of indigenous decision-making norms. Similar concerns have been reported in Southeast Asian and Latin American contexts, where bypassing customary forums has been associated with contested consent, community conflict, and weakly enforced agreements (Aznannya, 2024; Klein et al., 2025; Steffen, 2023).

Closely related to this issue is the problem of inadequate representation. Participants reported instances in which barangay officials, selected proxies, or externally favored representatives appeared to speak on behalf of communities despite questions regarding their customary legitimacy. Such practices may undermine FPIC, as consent should emerge from leaders and representatives recognized through community-based processes rather than for administrative convenience or external influence. In the Philippine context, similar patterns have been described as part of a broader tendency to prioritize economic or project-related interests over meaningful indigenous participation (Aznannya, 2024; National Commission on Indigenous Peoples [NCIP], 2006; Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2021). When legitimate customary leadership is sidelined, FPIC risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, weakening community trust, internal cohesion, and the authority of indigenous governance institutions.

The findings also highlight persistent gaps in meaningful consultation and information disclosure. Participants described consultations that were perceived as incomplete, inaccessible, or insufficiently responsive to community concerns. Meetings held away from affected communities, the exclusion of dissenting voices, and the limited discussion of environmental and social risks all weaken the quality of consent. The NCIP Revised FPIC Guidelines emphasize that consultations must be culturally appropriate, community-based, and conducted under conditions that allow participation without coercion or exclusion (NCIP, 2006). When communities receive incomplete, delayed, or highly technical information, their capacity to evaluate trade-offs, project risks, grievance mechanisms, and long-term consequences is compromised (Daytec-Yañgot, 2016; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2016; Martin et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with critiques that FPIC processes can become shallow formalities when full disclosure, cultural depth, and ongoing dialogue are not ensured (Amnesty International, 2024; Aznannya, 2024).

Political and interest-group interference further complicates FPIC implementation. Participants described divisions within communities linked to local political dynamics, competing interests, and contested leadership. Such interference may fragment collective deliberation, weaken indigenous autonomy, and create uncertainty over who legitimately represents community interests. Previous studies similarly note that local political patronage, coercive pressures, or strategic alignment with particular leaders may shape consent processes in Philippine mining and development contexts (Daytec-Yañgot, 2016; Martin et al., 2025). These dynamics suggest that FPIC cannot be strengthened only through procedural checklists; it also requires safeguards that protect indigenous decision-making from external pressure and ensure that participation remains genuinely voluntary, inclusive, and culturally grounded.

Ambiguity in royalties and benefit-sharing arrangements also emerged as an important concern. Unclear information about royalty amounts, benefit distribution, and monitoring mechanisms may generate confusion, mistrust, and disputes among community members. Divergent expectations regarding employment, infrastructure, scholarships, livelihood programs, and other promised benefits can influence project acceptance or rejection, particularly when the timing, scope, and allocation of benefits are not clearly communicated. Such conditions may deepen internal divisions and weaken customary decision-making, especially when communities have unequal access to information or differing livelihood priorities. Similar concerns have been documented in FPIC and development contexts, where unclear institutional arrangements

and uneven benefit distribution contribute to contested outcomes and reduced collective negotiating power (Aznannya, 2024; Daytec-Yañgot, 2016; Klein et al., 2025; Martin et al., 2025; Wengle et al., 2025).

Finally, unauthorized surveys or project-related activities within ancestral domains raise serious concerns regarding the enforceability of FPIC protections. Such incursions disregard indigenous authority over ancestral lands and may contribute to environmental harm, cultural disruption, and social tension. Philippine jurisprudence and related studies emphasize that project activities conducted without prior consent undermine both IPRA and the ethical foundations of FPIC (Simpórios, 2024; Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2022). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of FPIC depends not only on the existence of legal safeguards but also on their translation into enforceable, community-centered practice.

Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Environmental Impacts of FPIC

Beyond its legal function, FPIC operates as a governance process that shapes social relations, cultural authority, economic expectations, and environmental management within ancestral domains. The findings suggest that when FPIC is implemented without sufficient attention to customary governance systems, it may contribute to shifts in traditional decision-making, tensions over representation, and uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of consent outcomes. Participants described instances in which customary deliberative practices were complemented, altered, or replaced by alternative procedures, with possible implications for the authority of traditional leaders and the continuity of indigenous political institutions. Similar concerns have been raised in studies of governance change, externally influenced consultation processes, and development-driven decision-making in indigenous contexts (Amnesty International, 2024; Eco, 2025; Garming, 1981; International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2025; Julião, 2025; Owen & Kemp, 2014; PIDS, 2026).

The social consequences of FPIC implementation are similarly complex. While FPIC can increase awareness of indigenous rights and support collective mobilization, it may also generate social differentiation when communities become divided over project approval, benefit distribution, or leadership legitimacy. Participants noted that divergent interpretations of FPIC and uneven perceptions of project benefits may contribute to mistrust and strained relations within ancestral domains. These findings align with the literature, which shows that FPIC implementation, when poorly managed, can produce internal tensions and uneven distributive outcomes that affect community cohesion and collective action (Daytec-Yañgot, 2016; Julião, 2025; Minority Rights Group International, 2023; Owen & Kemp, 2014).

Economically, FPIC is intended to support equitable benefit-sharing between project proponents and affected indigenous communities. However, the findings suggest that promised benefits such as roads, scholarships, employment, affordable electricity, livelihood support, and other forms of assistance may also shape community expectations and influence decision-making. When these benefits are vaguely defined, inconsistently communicated, or unevenly distributed, they may become sources of misunderstanding and grievance. Similar observations have been made in previous studies, which note that development incentives can affect community perceptions of project value while also contributing to disputes when anticipated outcomes are delayed, unclear, or unequally realized (Owen & Kemp, 2014). Transparent communication, clearly defined benefit-sharing arrangements, and inclusive decision-making are therefore essential to maintaining trust in FPIC processes.

Environmental concerns were among the most prominent issues raised by participants. Indigenous Peoples in Kalinga continue to exercise environmental stewardship through customary systems such as the Lapat, which guide the protection and sustainable use of natural resources within ancestral domains. However, participants reported that Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) findings were not always fully disclosed, adequately explained, or meaningfully incorporated into community deliberations. Limited access to environmental information reduces the ability of communities to assess risks, compare potential benefits and harms, and exercise informed control over development decisions. This supports broader calls to strengthen transparency in environmental assessment and integrate indigenous knowledge systems into environmental governance (Stanimirova et al., 2024). Evidence from other Philippine contexts, including mining operations in Didipio, similarly illustrates how weak FPIC implementation may intersect with concerns over watershed quality, land-use change, and forest disturbance (Daytec-Yañgot, 2016).

Reframing FPIC as Indigenous Governance and Environmental Stewardship

Taken together, the findings suggest that FPIC in Kalinga extends beyond its conventional interpretation as a procedural safeguard for development approval. Rather, it functions as a governance mechanism through which Indigenous Peoples exercise collective authority, negotiate development decisions, and protect ancestral territories. This interpretation aligns with scholarship emphasizing that indigenous governance is grounded not only in formal institutions but also in customary laws, collective decision-making processes, and culturally embedded relationships with the environment (Howitt, 2010; Humphries et al., 2023).

From this perspective, the challenges identified in this study, including weakened customary consensus-building, inadequate representation, political interference, incomplete information disclosure, benefit-sharing disputes, and unauthorized incursions into ancestral domains, reflect broader tensions between state-centered regulatory systems and indigenous governance structures. Similar patterns have been observed in extractive and infrastructure development contexts where FPIC is reduced to an administrative requirement rather than a meaningful expression of indigenous self-determination and community governance (Klein et al., 2025; Owen & Kemp, 2014).

The findings further demonstrate the close relationship between governance and environmental stewardship within indigenous communities. Participants consistently linked concerns regarding consultation quality, representation, and transparency with the protection of ancestral lands, environmental integrity, and resource sustainability. These observations support arguments that indigenous knowledge systems and customary institutions constitute integral components of socio-ecological governance rather than separate spheres of environmental management (Howitt, 2010; Humphries et al., 2023). Consequently, when customary decision-making structures are marginalized, the effects extend beyond procedural non-compliance. They may weaken community cohesion, reduce trust in governance institutions, and constrain collective stewardship of ancestral domains.

Altogether, these findings support a growing body of literature that positions FPIC as an institution of indigenous governance rather than merely a legal safeguard. By reframing FPIC as a mechanism through which Indigenous Peoples exercise self-determination, maintain customary authority, and govern socio-ecological systems, this study broadens prevailing understandings of consent beyond regulatory compliance. It also highlights the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge, customary governance, and culturally grounded decision-making into sustainable development and environmental governance frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in Kalinga functions as more than a procedural requirement for development approval. The findings suggest that FPIC serves as a culturally embedded governance institution through which Indigenous Peoples exercise collective self-determination, customary authority, and environmental stewardship within ancestral domains. Consequently, the effectiveness of FPIC depends not only on compliance with the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) and related regulatory frameworks but also on the meaningful recognition of indigenous governance systems, traditional knowledge, and customary consensus-building processes. The challenges identified, including limited representation, inadequate consultation, political interference, incomplete information disclosure, and tensions surrounding benefit-sharing, therefore reflect broader governance issues rather than solely procedural deficiencies. These findings underscore the need to view FPIC as an adaptive socio-ecological governance mechanism operating at the intersection of indigenous rights, environmental stewardship, and development decision-making. By reframing FPIC in this manner, the study contributes to scholarship on indigenous governance, environmental justice, and participatory resource management while highlighting the importance of strengthening culturally grounded governance systems to achieve more equitable, legitimate, and sustainable development outcomes.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical Approval

This research was approved and endorsed for publication by the Kalinga State University Research Council. The approval of NCIP was sought and certified as outside the ambit of IKSP, hence, this research output.

Competing interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

Data will be made available by the corresponding author on request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence Use

The author acknowledges the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process to further enhance the outcome of the study, such as Perplexity and ChatGPT. The author reviewed the results thoroughly to see to it that the original context is not obliterated and/or its substance changed.

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. (2025, January 9). Philippines: Nickel mining projects approved despite inadequate consultation and serious risks to communities' health and environment. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/philippines-nickel-mining-projects-approved-despite-inadequate-consultation-and-serious-risks-to-communities-health-and-environment/>
- Aznannya, S. H. (2024). Beyond formality: Transforming FPIC into a tool for indigenous empowerment. *Sinergi International Journal of Law*, 2(4), 325–337. <https://doi.org/10.61194/law.v2i4.724>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Eco, C. (2025, April 15). Indigenous peoples raise alarm over rising rights violations. *Bulatlat*. <https://www.bulatlat.com/2025/04/15/indigenous-peoples-raise-alarm-over-rising-rights-violations/>
- Daytec-Yañgot, C. L. (2016). FPIC: A shield or threat to Indigenous peoples' rights? In *Indigenous peoples' experiences on free, prior and informed consent: A collection of case studies (Philippines)*. UN-REDD Programme. <https://www.un-redd.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/Indigenous%20Peoples%20Experiences%20on%20Free%2C%20Prior%20and%20Informed%20Consent%3A%20A%20Collection%20of%20Case%20Studies%28Philippines%29.pdf>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2016). Free prior and informed consent: An Indigenous Peoples' right and a good practice for local communities: Manual for project practitioners. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/i6190e>
- Garming, M. B. (1981). The dynamics of leadership in Kalinga. *Aghamtao*, 4, 26–32. https://pssc.org.ph/wp-content/pssc-archives/Aghamtao/1981/07_The%20Dynamics%20of%20Leadership%20in%20Kalinga.pdf
- Howitt, R. (2010). Sustainable indigenous futures in remote Indigenous areas: Relationships, process and failed state approaches *GeoJournal*, 75(5), 555–559. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-010-9377-3>
- Humphries, F., Morrison, C., Lawson, C., Kolesnikova, A., Laird, S., and Wynberg, R. (2023). Survey of access and benefit-sharing country measures accommodating the distinctive features of genetic resources for food and agriculture and associated traditional knowledge. First revision. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 133, Article 102623. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102623>
- International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. (2025). The Indigenous World 2025. <https://iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/5773-the-indigenous-world-2025>
- Julião, C. (2025, June 19). Indigenous knowledge is a living science, stop stealing it. *Eco-Business*. <https://www.eco-business.com/opinion/indigenous-knowledge-is-a-living-science-stop-stealing-it/>
- Klein, L., Muñoz-Torres, M. J., & Fernández Izquierdo, M. Á. (2025). Free, prior, and informed consent and human rights impact assessments: Lessons from Repsol's operations in Wayuu territories in La Guajira, Colombia. *Resources Policy*, 106, Article 105554. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2025.105554>
- Li, T. M. (2007). *The will to improve: Governmentality, administrative exclusion, and the practice of politics*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389781>
- Martin, E., Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation, & Bradshaw, B. (2025). Expectations for meaningful free, prior, and informed consent: An exploration by the Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 23, Article 101653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2025.101653>
- Minority Rights Group International. (2023). Minority and indigenous trends 2023: Focus on water. <https://minorityrights.org/resources/minority-and-indigenous-trends-2023-focus-on-water/>

- National Commission on Indigenous Peoples. (2006). The free and prior informed consent (FPIC) guidelines of 2006 (NCIP administrative order No. 1, series of 2006). <https://ncip.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ncip-ao-no-1-s-2006-fpic-guidelines.pdf>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d). Consultation and free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/consultation-and-free-prior-and-informed-consent-fpic>
- Owen, J. R., & Kemp, D. (2014). 'Free prior and informed consent', social complexity and the mining industry: Establishing a knowledge base. *Resources Policy*, 41, 91–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2014.03.006>
- Philippine Institute for Development Studies. (2026, March 11). Indigenous peoples and nation-building: Lessons in leadership, sustainability, and peace. <https://pids.gov.ph/details/event/indigenous-peoples-and-nation-building-lessons-in-leadership-sustainability-and-peace>
- Philippine Institute for Development Studies. (2021, November 16). Revisit, assess law protecting indigenous peoples—PIDS study. <https://www.pids.gov.ph/details/revisit-assess-law-protecting-indigenous-peoples-pids-study>
- Quitasol, A. (2025, September 14). Kalinga elders move to halt FPIC for hydropower projects. *Daily Tribune*. <https://tribune.net.ph/2025/09/15/kalinga-elders-move-to-halt-fpic-for-hydropower-projects>
- Simporios, L. L. (2024). Silenced narratives: Assessing the human rights situations of indigenous peoples in the Philippines. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 2 (5). <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2024.0062>
- Stanimirova, R., Harris, N., Reyta, K., Wang, K., & Barbanell, M. (2024). Mining is increasingly pushing into critical rainforests and protected areas. *World Resources Institute*. <https://www.wri.org/insights/how-mining-impacts-forests>
- Steffen, P. B. (2023). Michael G. Layugan SVD: From mission to Missionary Church. *Divine Word Missionaries in the Philippines 1909-1957. Asia Pacific Mission Studies*, 5(2), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.13185/2704-3339.1006>
- Supreme Court of the Philippines. (2019) Rules and regulations implementing Republic Act No. 8371, "The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997". Supreme Court E-Library. <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/11/46070>
- The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997. Republic Act 8371 (1997). <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1997/10/29/republic-act-no-8371/>
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 A (III), U.N. Doc. A/RES/217(III) (December 10, 1948). <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations General Assembly Resolution). (2008). United Nations. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf
- Wengle, S., Girardi, D., & Veneziani, R. (2025). Expectations, authority, and divergent market transitions. *World Development*, 196, 107105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.107105>

How to cite this article:

Wayet, J. D. (2026). Reframing Indigenous governance and environmental stewardship in Kalinga, Philippines: Bridging traditional knowledge for sustainable resource futures. *Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 14(2), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.32871/rmrj2614.02.05>