Huy-anan nan Bajau: Blue-Green Housing for Indigenous Community

Submitted By: Local Government Unit of Surigao City



Organization Profile

Organization Name: UN-Habitat Philippines

Organization Type: Subnational government

Website: https://unhabitat.org.ph/

Practice Details

Country(ies): Philippines

City(ies): Surigao City

Start Year: 2023 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Social Housing
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing & Climate Adaptation
- Housing Policy, Legislation & Governance

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

In Surigao City, Sama Bajau families face precarious housing, poverty, and systemic exclusion, worsened by climate risks. Their nomadic life leads to stigma as "outsiders" excluding them from mainstream housing programs. Philippines has strong legal frameworks such the Urban Development and Housing Act and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, implementation fails to address their cultural needs. Existing housing policies follow a one-size-fits-all approach, prioritizing land-based relocation that severs ties to the sea, undermining identity and survival. The gap leaves Sama Bajau trapped in unsafe coastal settlements, vulnerable to monsoon and typhoons. The policy challenge lies in the absence of culturally sensitive housing that integrates tradition with resilience, solutions that promote inclusion, dignity, and alignment with sustainable development goals.

"All we ask is a home where our children are safe, close to the sea that gives us life, and treated with dignity" - Sama Bajau

Solution Developed

The Huy-anan nan Bajau sa Surigao project is a transformative initiative that reshaped Surigao City's approach to inclusive urban development. It is a multi-dimensional resettlement and community development initiative that addressed the urgent housing, security, and inclusion needs of the 132 Sama Bajau families. The practice concretely responded by granting secure tenure in an ecovillage, building climate-resilient stilt housing adapted to their coastal traditions, and linking families to services such as legal identity, education, and livelihood.

Its objectives were to: (1) provide adequate, culturally appropriate housing; (2) secure recognition and protection as IP migrants; (3) enhance resilience to climate and disaster risks; and (4) promote inclusive governance in urban development.

The solution's effectiveness lies in its innovations: social - the People's Process enabling families to co-design their homes; institutional - formal participation of the Sama Bajau in housing and planning; and environmental - integration of nature-based solutions, including mangrove rehabilitation and circular livelihoods, aligning with SDG localization and the New Urban Agenda.

Implementation

The implementation of Huy-anan nan Bajau sa Surigao is a multi-stakeholder, community-led process that turned housing delivery into empowerment and policy reform. Actions covered participatory planning, development of a coastal ecovillage, construction of climate-resilient stilt houses, and installation of renewable energy and water systems. These were complemented by livelihood and circular-economy programs and nature-based solutions (mangrove rehabilitation and community waste management).

National agencies aligned sectoral policies: DENR provided secured tenure; NCIP granted legal identity as IP Migrants; and Surigao del Norte State University institutionalized admission policy for Sama Bajau tertiary students. These reforms removed long-standing barriers to recognition and opportunity. The City Government provided policy leadership and co-financing, while private partners contributed resources and technical support. The People's Process, ensures cultural fit and ownership. The Sama Bajau gained seats in decision-making bodies, embedding their role in governance.

Timeline (2023–2025): groundwork and policy harmonization; housing construction; integration of livelihoods and participation in governance. This whole-of-government, whole-of-community approach shows that even with constrained resources, inclusive, resilient, dignified housing is achievable through institutional innovation and community ownership, laying a replicable model for indigenous housing globally.

Enablers & Obstacles

The project faced initial resistance from existing informal settler families (ISFs), who held misconceptions about the Sama Bajau's culture. This obstacle was addressed through facilitated dialogues and stakeholder collaboration enabled ISF participation in complementary projects, turning potential conflicts into opportunities for solidarity, which built trust and enabled peaceful coexistence.

A major enabler was the strong commitment of Surigao City Government, the Mayor has emphasized that the project played a crucial role in guiding the city government on social preparation needed for the Sama Bajau community. The People's Process ensured their voices shaped decisions. Women played an active role, participating in carpentry and masonry training, monitoring construction, and identifying livelihood opportunities, strengthening both resilience and gender inclusion. These combined efforts created an enabling environment for long-term empowerment.

Results & Impact

The Huy-anan nan Bajau provided 132 Sama Bajau households (approx. 660 people) in Surigao City with secure tenure and climate-resilient stilt housing, designed to respect cultural traditions while reducing disaster risk. Livelihood initiatives in marine-based enterprises increased average household incomes by 20–30%, and community-led waste systems improved coastal protection and environmental sustainability. Indirectly, over 1,200 neighboring households benefited from reduced disaster risks, healthier ecosystems, and stronger social services.

The integration of the Sama Bajau into a planned, government-supported ecovillage will not only provide physical space but also ensure long-term environmental stewardship, promote community-based resource management, and enhance the city's efforts in mangrove protection, and marine biodiversity conservation. By embedding the Huy-anan model in Surigao City's

Comprehensive Land Use Plan and SDG Localization roadmap, it now informs the Local Shelter Plan, DRRM Plan, and Solid Waste Management Plan, with commitments to expand the approach to 500–700 households in coastal barangays by 2027. This participatory, climate-responsive model secures continuity and positions the practice as a sustainable governance innovation while advancing SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 13, and 16. “This is more than a housing project—it’s a model of how cities can build dignity and inclusion into their landscapes.” - Surigao City Planning Office

Replication & Scale Up

The practice will be replicated in Caraga through its upscaling project. AECID recognized its success rooted in Sama Bajau ownership, holistic design, nature-based solutions, and circular economy. It fostered convergence among government, academe, private sector, and civil society, creating strong partnerships that uplifted and empowered the Sama Bajau. Business groups donated materials for an additional quadruplex house, while a foundation supported a learning center, showcasing the project’s power and sustainability, and offers a powerful blueprint for other LGUs across the Philippines.

UN-Habitat built strong collaborations with regional and national partners, drawing attention to the Sama Bajau. Once “invisible” and marginalized, they are now prioritized in city and national programs. Their voices are heard in planning, and resources are directed to their needs. This shift in governance focus provides the foundation for scaling up, ensuring that housing, livelihoods, and services for the Sama Bajau are sustained and replicated across Caraga and beyond.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has been fully adopted into formal policy frameworks and legislation, and is being implemented at scale with institutional support.

The “Blue-Green Recovery” goes beyond aid, it is catalytic capital advancing nature-based solutions, circular economy, and inclusive housing through Huy-anan nan Bajau sa Surigao. Financing serves as a platform for systemic transformation. Through the City Development Investment Program, every peso is aligned with the Comprehensive Development Plan (2023–2028) and CLUP (2023–2032). Results-based budgeting ensures measurable outcomes - flood-resilient housing, greener spaces, and digital inclusion - positioning Surigao as a leader in climate-smart, equity-driven urban growth.

Lessons & Takeaways

In hindsight, greater emphasis is needed on livelihood diversification and long-term financing to sustain gains. Strengthening partnerships with academe and private sectors will anchor program sustainability. It is also vital to address the cultural history of the Sama Bajau to push

NCIP toward tailored programs, recognizing their unique housing, livelihood, and cultural needs. As one of the most marginalized IP groups, their inclusion must be elevated from the bottom of the hierarchy to the center of development.