HIRAYA

NOVEMBER 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An initial report from the Hiraya Learning Tour
on the situation of rural children in the Philippines



Introduction

The Hiraya Learning Tour (referred to hereafter as "Hiraya") was a project implemented in October and November 2026 to conduct psychosocial support activities to Filipino children living in communities at risk of child rights violations and to document their experiences.

Hiraya was launched out of concerns from global child advocates over agricultural underdevelopment and its social impacts on rural communities, including indigenous communities, which comprise the majority of the Philippine population. The outcome of Hiraya is this report, which aims to serve as a tool for public education and advocacy to the Philippine government and intergovernmental bodies.

The conduct of Hiraya was rooted in international solidarity and was organized by international human rights advocates in collaboration with grassroots organizations in the Philippines. The organizers of Hiraya include:

International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP)

A global network composed of faith-based groups, trade unions, lawyers, parliamentarians, academics, and human rights defenders.

Foundation for Filipino Children

A member organization of ICHRP based in the Netherlands. Hiraya is one of the several components of A Thousand Voices, a global campaign led by the Foundation for Filipino Children to amplify the voices of children in the Philippines.

Children's Rehabilitation Center (CRC)

A Philippines-based organization that has decades of experience in providing psychosocial support to child victim-survivors of human rights violations and documenting cases of child human rights violations.

Salinlahi Alliance for Children's Concerns

A Philippines-based progressive and nationalist alliance of child rights organizations with decades of experience in campaigning for the rights of Filipino children.

Methodology

More than 20 delegates from different countries and local child rights advocates and organizations were deployed across Southern Tagalog, Bicol, and Panay, focusing on areas with histories of development aggression, militarization, violence, and human rights violations.

The participants in Hiraya were mental health professionals, child rights advocates, and human rights defenders in their respective countries. Hiraya was designed utilizing CRC's therapy framework in the form of a Children's Activity workshop that includes psychosocial debriefing, creative games and activities, and psychoeducation. This provides children a safe space to collectively process and making meaning of their experiences. The Hiraya team coordinated closely with target regions, who invited child participants to the Children's Activities.

The delegates spent three days in the communities, documenting the situation of children through immersion, field interviews, and focus group discussions. They integrated with the locals by staying in their households, and observing, participating, and helping in their daily livelihoods through production work.

All findings were validated and consolidated by a central writing team. The team was composed of child rights advocates and social workers with long-standing records in children and human rights work.

The names of children, individuals and organizations interviewed, and the places visited are not mentioned in this report to protect the safety and security of those involved.

National Context

The national situation of Filipino children reflects the conditions the Filipino people face throughout the country, including the worsening crises of poverty, landlessness, and severe lack of basic social services and local infrastructure. There are an estimated 21.4 million poor, low income, and lower-middle class families in the Philippines[1], with nearly three million Filipinos unemployed and nearly 30 million not in the labor force[2]. Filipino children comprise over a third of the population, or about 39.6 million[3]. Many children are forced to stop going to school to work and help support their families[4], especially in the countryside where peasant families do not own their land and do not earn enough to sustain their children's education.

The dire economic situation Filipino families face puts children at higher risk of exploitation and abuse. The Philippines has become the global epicenter of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC), with reported cases rising from around 426,000 in 2019 to over 2.7 million in 2023[5]. One in four Filipino children under 5 years old is stunted due to hunger and chronic malnutrition[6].

There are regions with levels of stunting that exceed 40% of the population. In Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao 45% of children below five are stunted, in Southwestern Tagalog Region (MIMAROPA) 41%, Bicol Region 40%, Western Visayas 40%, and in the south-central Mindanao Region (SOCCKSARGEN) 40% [7].

The lack of access to quality healthcare and education further entraps Filipino children in cycles of poverty. There is a massive shortage of classrooms and teachers, resulting in shortened school days or school weeks and overcrowded classrooms. One in five high school graduates in 2024 were functionally illiterate, and 91% of children aged 10 struggle to read a simple text[8].

Peasant and indigenous communities in the countryside face intensified militarization by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), paramilitary groups, and private security forces of corporations. These communities are constantly are under threat of displacement, with corporations landgrabbing for mining operations, large-scale plantations, and so-called development projects. State military forces conduct Civil Military Operations in peasant and indigenous communities that allow children to hold and play with their rifles, reinforcing a culture of violence. With military present in communities, there are documented cases of state-perpetrated child rights violations, including bombing and strafing operations in which children were killed, abduction, torture, illegal arrest, and physical and sexual abuse.

In 2025, the Philippines was delisted from the United Nations' list of countries with grave child rights violations related to armed conflict. However, child rights violations remain largely underreported, especially those committed by the state.

National Context (continued)

While the AFP claims that children encountered in operations are treated as "victims and rights-holders" and the Department of Education promotes schools as Zones of Peace, discouraging their use for military purposes, child human rights organizations have documented cases that show otherwise: the military setting up camp in close proximity to schools, and children killed by military operations.

Child rights violations cause profound biological, psychological, and social consequences that shape Filipino children's overall development. When parents and communities are affected by militarization, poverty, or state repression, children inevitably suffer the impact.

State-Perpetrated Child Human Rights Violations under Marcos Jr. Administration (June 2022 to Present) Reported to CRC

Type of Child Rights Violation	Number of Cases Reported
Murder/Killings	21
Torture	3
Abuse (Physical & Sexual Assault)	11
Harassment	2
Illegal Detention	137
Abduction	11
Attempted Murder	7
Bombings	8
Aerial Strafing	6
Recruitment or Use of Children in Military Operations	2

Socioeconomic Crisis and Lack of Livelihood

Across urban and rural communities visited during Hiraya, families exist in a state of constant precarity, struggling to sustain the survival and proper nutrition of their children. In one area, community members described their situation as “Isang kahig, isang tuka,” which translates to “One scratch, one peck,” meaning that they are living a hand-to-mouth existence.

Parents work as farmers, fisher folk and minimum-wage workers, such as construction workers, factory workers, and tricycle/jeepney drivers. Families supplement their incomes in the informal sector as vendors (mostly women) to sustain the nutritional needs of the family and send their children to school. These families generally have contractual work, poor working conditions, no benefits, and low wages that do not keep up with the rising prices of commodities and basic services.

In this context, many children help their parents generate income, oftentimes in hazardous conditions. Children in Panay, as young as 7-8 years old, help their parents sell food in the market, or take up scavenging at a landfill. Many children also work as dispatchers, while going to school part-time two-three times a week. In Montalban, Rizal, families live next to a massive dumpsite. Children work alongside their parents, scavenging and reselling items and recyclable waste from the dumpsite.

Children working at the landfill and dumpsites do not receive education on hazards or risks, exposing them to dangerous elements which could impact their health and ability to learn in school.

Children help their families with farming, particularly planting and harvesting rice and corn. When they do not have classes, children gather honey from beehives and collect crabs and other crustaceans from the river to earn additional income. They start gathering honey during their early teens (age 13-17).

The socioeconomic crisis affecting rural families in the Philippines is multidimensional: low and unstable incomes interact with limited support services and frequent shocks such as displacement due to climate disasters and militarization. Rural households live in feudal conditions, facing shortfalls in income and basic needs, while unequal access to land and opportunity limit their ability to stabilize household incomes. Families live in precarity, dependent on insecure low-pay seasonal farming, fishing, or informal work. Economic shocks such as inflation on basic commodities leave little money for health or education. Farmers struggle with the high cost of seeds, fuel, and equipment rental to till the land and harvest rice. Typhoons, floods, and droughts cause displacement, damage crops, homes fishing livelihoods. Families with no savings have less capacity to recover, exacerbating a cycle of loss and poverty.

Land Grabbing & Land Conversion, Displacement and Right to Indigenous Self Determination

Rural and urban communities are under threat of displacement from development projects (bridges, power plants, land use conversion), climate events such as typhoons, mud slides and flooding, and militarization. In Bicol, seasonal climate disruptions during typhoons and heavy rains, aggravate economic difficulties.

Coastal communities in Panay face looming threats of demolition and displacement from the local government as identified “high-risk coastal areas”. Other areas saw displacement from agricultural land converted into commercial and residential use, including the construction of the Panay-Guimaras-Negros Bridge.

In rural Panay communities, land use conversion is forcing families into employment as utility, factory and construction workers in the city proper, as portions of agricultural land are increasingly developed for commercial and residential purposes.

Children from Aklan shared that their community is prone to flooding and subject to demolition because they live near the river. Children usually evacuate when the community is flooded. Evacuations interrupt classes and contribute to family’s economic difficulties.

Another cause of displacement is militarization. Civil war and military exercises, including Balikatan, cause temporary displacement, suspension of classes, and interruptions to fishing and farming activities. Residents in Bicol hear live-fire exercises and experience fear, particularly children. Armed personnel, raids, threats, or fighting can leave children anxious and fearful, and may affect sleep and emotional well-being.

For Indigenous children, militarization, land grabbing and displacement can threaten more than a home. Ancestral land supports a community’s food, livelihood, culture, health practices, and identity. Indigenous children suffer from the collective traumas inflicted by private corporations and development projects that displace them and violate their right to free, prior, and informed consent.

In Abra de Ilog (Occidental Mindoro), Pieceland Corporation violently demolished the homes of the Mangyan-Iraya community in June 2026. It seized their land, cut down their crops and source of livelihood, killed and starved their farm animals, and enforced a food blockade by restricting the community’s access to their farm lands.

Land Grabbing & Land Conversion, Displacement and Right to Indigenous Self Determination (continued)

The Dumagat community from Tanay, Rizal face the threat of displacement due to ongoing construction of the New Centennial Water Source - Kaliwa Dam project in a decades-long struggle to defend their ancestral domain.

Separation from ancestral lands make it harder for children to maintain their language, traditions, histories, and relationships with the land from elders. Indigenous self-determination means protecting communities' ability to make decisions about their territory and ensuring children can access education, safety, health care, and their culture.

Militarization and Harassment

Across all regions, children and their families reported accounts of experiencing militarization and different forms of harassment, intimidation and violence perpetrated by state security forces, the AFP, the Philippine National Police (PNP), and even with government intelligence officers and private security forces.

These include establishing military encampments in schools, setting up military checkpoints and the prevalence of red-tagging, surveillance and direct threats against children and their family members to coerce them into sharing information on their parents or falsely associating them with the New Peoples' Army (NPA).

In Tanay, Southern Tagalog, the AFP 80th Infantry Battalion has set up an encampment at a local elementary school. Several children from Tanay were not able to attend the Hiraya Children's Activity because they were not able to pass strict military checkpoints in their community. Child participants further recounted experiences of alleged sexual harassment and abuse at the hands of personnel from the PNP, AFP, and private security forces.

These experiences have forced families to flee their homes and communities and exposed children to traumatic events. The children also reported feeling anxious and uncertain for their family and their own safety.

These accounts illustrate how state-perpetrated militarization and harassment damage children's physical and psychological well-being, disrupt their daily lives, and destroy their sense of security. Child rights advocates face red-tagging and harassment from the state, as well as children themselves who organize and advocate for children's rights.

Psychological and Emotional Distress

Human rights violations impact children, families, and entire communities. Experiencing or witnessing militarized violence and other rights violations causes profound biological, psychological, social, and spiritual consequences that shape Filipino children's overall development.

Children in visited communities were found to have suffered severe trauma.

Children reported experiences of fear, loneliness, bullying, and discrimination. Some exhibited signs of psychological distress, including difficulty concentrating, distressing memories, heightened responses to external stimuli, and difficulty trusting adults.

Children of human rights defenders are affected by redtagging through the constant change in address, lifestyle, experiences of threats, harassment, surveillance, and intimidation, as well as the constant or frequent feeling of anxiety and distress. Indigenous children, who face constant threat against their ancestral lands, face a particular trauma as the lands inform their cultural traditions. Long term affects of the trauma faced by children include the feeling of powerlessness, and sometimes even denial or resorting to fantasy to make sense of the violence they have experienced.

Delegates of Hiraya identified a need for continued psychosocial support, as the impacts of human rights violations against children remain ongoing.



Case Study

Context: The following is a direct testimony from a case identified in the Hiraya Learning Tour. Major issues documented in Hiraya, especially land-grabbing and displacement of communities, were often found to be accompanied by military presence that targeted children, as seen in the case below.

Testimony from Participants in Panay

"I was only 16 years old when I was arrested in April 2020. Eight of us [including 5 minors] were gathering honey in the mountains when we were apprehended. We were apprehended near a river and then taken back up the mountain where we saw a [dead] body. Despite our young age, we were subjected to torture by the military and forced to carry the soldiers' bags. The military pointed guns at us. After our arrest, we walked for approximately four hours [to a different province]. We were detained at a military camp for four days. Four of us were placed under the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) custody and quarantined for seventeen days. Now, I am easily angered and frequently anxious. I remain emotionally affected by the arrest, but I tend not to think about the experience. The military continues to return to our church and communities."

More than thirty military personnel were reportedly present during the arrest. The soldiers asked whether they had been recruited by the NPA. One of the participants presented their identification, but the military still accused them of being a member of the NPA. They were slapped and subjected to verbal abuse. One individual was punched almost to the point of death. Another participant reported drinking alcohol everyday to cope and losing their motivation because they were branded as troublemakers who came down from the mountains.

The participants asked the international community to help amplify their calls:

- Dismiss the cases filed against them that affect their ability to find employment and continue their education
- End the attacks against their community and stop red-tagging
- Defend their right to continue gathering honey in the mountains so they can sustain their livelihood

Conclusion

Based on our findings from Hiraya, serving 124 children through Children's Activities in three regions in the Philippines, the situation of children remains severe, especially for those in rural areas. Children are born into a social context in which their communities are suffering from intense poverty and struggling for land rights and livelihood. The majority of children in the Philippines come from rural -- including indigenous -- communities in the Philippines who are facing land disputes with corporations, large landlords and the Philippine government. These communities constantly experience displacement, and the threat of displacement as commercial, residential, and mining projects are prioritized over the rights of the communities. These land grabbing schemes are accompanied and backed by the AFP. Rural communities remain subject to displacement, noise and fear from live fire US military exercises near their homes.

The number of large-scale projects destroy the lands, exacerbating the effects of climate disasters in already vulnerable communities. The combination of land grabbing militarization forces families into even more dire economic conditions and precarious work.

The situation of Filipino children is born out of these conditions in the Philippines and is therefore dire.

Under the current Marcos Jr. administration, grave violations of child rights and international humanitarian law are widespread in rural communities; basic rights to food, water, and living wages are denied Filipino children amid the economic crisis; the presence of military, both AFP and US troops, causes trauma, wrongfully subjecting children to fear, intimidation, physical beating and sexual assault.

Inviting international delegates to learn how to conduct Children's Activities in the Filipino context, hear directly from child victim-survivors of rights violations through Children's Activities, and experience firsthand the conditions Filipino children face provided a unique and meaningful opportunity to build genuine solidarity and raise the issues and campaigns of Filipino children to the international community.

Children should not experience poverty, abuse, exploitation, or any form of rights violations. As children with hopes and dreams for their future, as well as the future of their families and communities, they play a vital role in changing society. As state forces are responsible for violations of children's rights, it is critical that all mechanisms of accountability be used to make the dreams of the Filipino children a reality. Land must not be arbitrarily obtained without Free, Prior and Informed Consent, environmental protections must be upheld, and state forces such as the AFP should leave the communities.

Recommendations

01 Strengthen third-party monitoring mechanisms and reporting for child rights violations. Ensure community entry in conducting independent investigations of child rights violations and relief operations, including providing psychosocial support to victim-survivors.

02 Review the tasks and composition of existing monitoring bodies, such as the Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-Agency Committee on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, and the United Nations Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting. Strengthen relevant monitoring bodies to ensure that cases are filed, independently investigated, and that appropriate actions are taken.

03 Investigate how the existing law to protect children in situations of armed conflict is being implemented and if it is working to protect children: Republic Act No. 11188: An Act Providing for the Special Protection of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict and Providing Penalties for Violations Thereof.

04 Pull out the AFP, PNP, paramilitary forces, and private armed security from communities where they have committed child rights violations.

05 Abolish the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) which facilitates red-tagging and surveillance in communities. This will help put an end to threats, harassment, intimidation, and chronic surveillance of militarized communities.

06 Hold accountable state actors who have committed rights violations against children and restrict foreign military aid to violating AFP units.

07 Mobilize the international community to support and uplift campaigns for Filipino children through continued solidarity visits, awareness raising, educational events, and gathering resources.



Footnotes:

1. https://www.ibon.org/tl/three-year-high-inflation-rate-for-bottom-30-bbms-inaction-hits-poorest-hardest-ibon/
2. https://www.ibon.org/en/jobs-crisis-deepens-as-ph-unemployment-surges-becomes-worst-in-the-region-ibon/
3. https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-under-18-are-there-in-the-philippines/
4. https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/working-children/node/1684083839
5. https://chr.gov.ph/chr-releases-human-rights-situation-report-on-the-online-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-of-children-in-the-philippines/
6. https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2248404/study-1-in-4-filipino-kids-under-age-5-stunted
7. https://www.manilatimes.net/2025/07/14/regions/malnutrition-prevalent-in-bicol/2148407
8. https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/195634/education-crisis-in-philippines