

Local Justice, Global Goals: The Tongtong Indigenous System and its Role in Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals in the Philippines

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Abstract

The Tongtong system is an Indigenous conflict resolution mechanism practiced among Indigenous Cultural Communities in Benguet, Philippines, guided by elders and grounded in communal values of reconciliation, fairness, and social harmony. This study examines the contribution of Tongtong to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, beginning with a quantitative survey of 455 respondents from five ethnolinguistic groups to assess perceptions of Tongtong's contribution to selected SDGs. Findings indicate that the system is perceived to have a very high overall contribution, with the highest rating observed for SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). To further explain these findings, qualitative data were gathered from 23 key informants and five focus group discussions. Thematic analysis identified several mechanisms through which Tongtong contributes to sustainable development, including equality and impartiality in justice processes, cultural familiarity that enhances accessibility, geographic proximity and contextual flexibility in dispute resolution, inclusive and consent-based jurisdiction, and participatory transparency through community oversight in deliberative proceedings. The findings suggest that Tongtong functions as a culturally embedded and socially legitimate justice system that supports fairness, accessibility, accountability, and social cohesion within Indigenous communities. The study highlights the potential of Indigenous justice systems to complement formal institutions and contribute to locally grounded pathways toward sustainable development in the Philippines.

Keywords: Community-Based Dispute Resolution, Indigenous Justice Systems, Legal Pluralism, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Tongtong system.

Introduction

Traditional justice systems have attracted growing scholarly interest within legal pluralism and hybrid governance, where state judicial systems coexist with community-based and customary mechanisms of dispute resolution. Rather than functioning as informal or residual institutions, these systems are increasingly recognized as culturally embedded governance structures that shape social order, regulate communal relations and facilitate conflict resolution. In the Philippines, Indigenous justice mechanisms remain important in geographically and socially marginalized communities where formal justice access is limited. One such mechanism in the Cordillera region is the Tongtong system, a restorative and community-oriented process facilitated by councils of elders through consensus-building and relational dialogue (1). Although previous studies have documented the cultural significance and procedural characteristics of Tongtong, limited

attention has been given to its broader role as a governance institution with implications beyond localized cultural practice (2–5). Existing scholarship has not sufficiently examined how Tongtong contributes to sustainable development outcomes or intersects with global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The continuing relevance of Indigenous justice systems is underscored by persistent challenges in formal justice institutions, including case congestion, high transaction costs, limited accessibility, and perceptions of institutional bias (6–9). These constraints disproportionately affect marginalized populations and reinforce the need for culturally legitimate and socially accessible dispute resolution mechanisms (10, 11). Indigenous and community-based justice systems have therefore been recognized not only as alternative forums for dispute settlement but also as institutions

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(Received 13th April 2026; Accepted 09th June 2026; Published 09th July 2026)

supporting reconciliation, social cohesion, and collective accountability (12). However, much of this recognition remains conceptually broad. Limited empirical attention has been given to the mechanisms through which Indigenous justice systems contribute to measurable or perceived development outcomes.

Sustainable development is broadly understood as the integration of social equity, environmental stewardship, and responsive governance (13–15). Within this framework, Indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly acknowledged as foundations for culturally grounded and ecologically sustainable development pathways (16–18). Research in the Cordillera has similarly emphasized that Indigenous knowledge systems remain central to environmental conservation, cultural continuity, and sustainable resource management (19). Indigenous Peoples (IPs) have long served as custodians of biodiversity-rich environments while preserving cultural heritage and maintaining governance and resource management systems that support long-term resilience (20–24). Although IPs comprise only a small proportion of the global population, their territories encompass a substantial share of the world's biodiversity and provide knowledge related to climate adaptation, food security, and sustainable resource management (25–30).

Indigenous justice systems intersect with several SDG dimensions, including SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 15 (Life on Land), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Yet, the empirical relationship between Indigenous justice systems and these SDG dimensions remains insufficiently developed, especially in relation to gender inclusion, environmental governance, institutional trust and inter-institutional partnerships. These systems contribute to social cohesion, conflict transformation and community stability through restorative and consensus-based practices that emphasize reconciliation, collective accountability and restoration of social relationships (31–34). Related work on SDG 16 similarly emphasizes that peace and justice depend on effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions capable of sustaining public trust and civic participation (35). In many Indigenous contexts, justice mechanisms extend beyond dispute settlement and function as

governance institutions that regulate conduct, reinforce norms and sustain collective responsibility.

Indigenous governance systems also contribute to SDG 15 through customary laws and traditional ecological knowledge that support environmental stewardship, biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management (36, 37). In the Cordillera region, the principle of *inayan* exemplifies the integration of social responsibility and environmental ethics, guiding communal behavior and resource management through culturally embedded norms and obligations (38, 39). Indigenous governance systems may also contribute to SDG 17 by fostering partnerships among Indigenous institutions, local governments, civil society organizations and state agencies, particularly in legally plural environments where customary and formal institutions coexist (40, 41). Despite increasing recognition of Indigenous governance systems in sustainable development discourse, the relationship between Indigenous justice systems and SDG-related outcomes remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. Existing scholarship has largely focused on cultural significance, procedural characteristics and alternative dispute resolution functions, with limited attention to how these systems operate as governance institutions that may contribute to justice, sustainability, gender inclusion, environmental stewardship and institutional collaboration. In relation to SDG 5, this gap is important because customary systems may provide accessible forums for dispute resolution while also reflecting gendered power relations. Indigenous women frequently encounter intersecting forms of exclusion associated with gender, ethnicity and socio-economic marginalization, which may shape participation and representation within customary governance systems (42, 43).

These deficiencies are evident in the case of Tongtong. Although its procedural dimensions have been documented, limited research has examined its contribution to sustainable development objectives, including institutional trust, environmental stewardship, inclusive governance, gender inclusion and inter-institutional collaboration. As a result, Tongtong has remained largely discussed as a localized cultural justice practice rather than as a potential governance mechanism for advancing sustainable

development. There is also a scarcity of empirically grounded studies that situate Indigenous justice systems within development and governance frameworks through systematic mixed-methods approaches (44). This methodological gap is significant because mixed-methods inquiry can show both perceived SDG contributions and how these are experienced.

Against this backdrop, this study positions Tongtong not merely as a dispute resolution mechanism but as a localized governance institution contributing to sustainable development through culturally grounded justice, social cohesion, institutional legitimacy, participatory governance and inter-institutional collaboration. It examines tensions surrounding gender equality, representation and power relations within Indigenous justice processes.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine perceptions of the Tongtong Indigenous justice system in relation to selected Sustainable Development Goals (45, 46). The design first identified quantitative trends and subsequently explained them through qualitative inquiry. This approach provided a more comprehensive and contextually grounded interpretation of the findings. In the first phase, quantitative data were collected from 455 respondents representing five ethnolinguistic groups in Benguet. The survey assessed perceived contributions of the Tongtong system to SDG 5, SDG 11, SDG 15, SDG 16, and SDG 17. This was followed by a qualitative phase involving 23 key informants and five focus group discussions. The qualitative phase elaborated on and contextualized the quantitative results. Integration occurred during the interpretation stage. Qualitative findings were used to explain patterns identified in the quantitative data, consistent with explanatory sequential mixed-methods logic (47). The qualitative phase was further informed by descriptive phenomenology. This approach emphasized participants' lived experiences and interpretations of justice processes within the Tongtong system (48).

The study was conducted in four municipalities of Benguet where Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) continue to practice the Tongtong system. These included the Kankanaey community in Sinacbat, Bakun; the Ibaloy and Karao

communities in Bila and Karao, Bokod, respectively; the Iwak community in Sitio Domolpos, Itogon; and the Kalanguya community in Upper Bashoy, Kabayan. The study sites were identified in consultation with the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP)-Benguet, Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs), and local government officials. Site selection was based on the continuing practice of Tongtong and the presence of recognized traditional governance structures.

The GPS coordinates of the study sites were identified using Google Earth: Sinacbat, Bakun, Benguet (16.84806203° N, 120.67401693° E); Bila, Bokod, Benguet (16.54925276° N, 120.81412567° E); Karao, Bokod, Benguet (16.51565786° N, 120.84220824° E); Upper Bashoy, Kabayan, Benguet (16.57340935° N, 120.85460685° E); and Tinongdan, Itogon, Benguet (16.38419152° N, 120.74896974° E).

For the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across ethnolinguistic groups, while purposive sampling was employed in the qualitative phase to select participants with direct experience and knowledge of the Tongtong system. The quantitative sample consisted of 455 respondents aged 18 years and above who were familiar with the Tongtong system, including household heads and household members. Sample size determination was guided by Yamane's formula using population data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (49).

Key informants for the qualitative phase were purposively selected based on their leadership roles and direct involvement in the administration, mediation, or preservation of the Tongtong system. These included councils of elders, Punong Barangays, Lupong Tagapamayapa members, IPMRs, and NCIP provincial officer. Their positions enabled them to provide informed, multi-level perspectives on how Tongtong operates within Indigenous and formal justice and governance contexts.

To complement these individual accounts, focus group discussions were conducted with elders from the five ethnolinguistic communities. The focus groups were intended to generate collective insights into the principles, procedures and continuing relevance of Tongtong as practiced within each community. Participants were selected

based on their familiarity with Tongtong practices, participation in community dispute resolution, and knowledge of customary norms.

The focus group discussions included 10 participants from Sinacbat, Bakun; 5 from Bila, Bokod; 9 from Karao, Bokod; 9 from Upper Bashoy, Kabayan; and 10 from Sitio Domolpos, Itogon. This composition ensured representation across the five ethnolinguistic communities and allowed community-specific experiences of Tongtong to be captured.

Data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide, consistent with the sequential design. The survey instrument underwent content validation by experts from NCIP-CAR, the Provincial IPMR of Benguet, and faculty members of Benguet State University. Additional validation was conducted during community research disclosures with elders and local officials. Their feedback informed further refinement of the instrument. Pilot testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.926, indicating very high internal consistency.

To ensure clarity, accessibility, and rapport with respondents, language accommodation was undertaken during survey administration. The survey questionnaire was translated into Kankanaey for participants who preferred to respond in the language. During the research disclosure process, participants from the Ibaloy, Karao, Kalanguya, and Iwak communities indicated that translation into their respective ethnolinguistic languages was not necessary, as they were comfortable responding to the questionnaire in English. However, to accommodate respondents who preferred a more familiar local language, the research instrument was also translated into Ilocano, which is widely used as a common language in Benguet. This procedure helped ensure that respondents understood the survey items while preserving the intended meaning of the instrument.

Moreover, the structured survey questionnaire included SDG-based indicators designed to assess respondents' perceptions of the Tongtong system's contribution to SDG 5, SDG 11, SDG 15, SDG 16, and SDG 17. The indicators were organized according to the selected SDGs and measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "not agree" to "very strongly agree." These responses were used to determine the perceived level of contribution of

Tongtong to each SDG. Weighted means were computed for each indicator and subtotal scores were generated for each SDG dimension to determine whether the perceived contribution was very high, high, moderate, low, or negligible.

Data collection was conducted from July to October 2024. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages and weighted means, to assess perceived contributions of Tongtong to selected SDGs. The qualitative instrument was subsequently refined based on quantitative results to ensure alignment with emerging patterns identified during the first phase. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving iterative coding, constant comparison and theme development (50). Final interpretation integrated quantitative and qualitative findings to identify convergence, complementarity and explanatory insights across both phases of the study (51).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards governing research involving IPs and human participants. The study integrated both international ethical principles and Philippine legal frameworks. In particular, the study was guided by the Belmont Report principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice. It also complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (Republic Act No. 8371), and relevant NCIP administrative guidelines.

Prior to fieldwork, a Certification Precondition was secured from the NCIP through the prescribed Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) process. This process involved coordination meetings, consultations with Indigenous elders and local authorities, and community conferences. During these engagements, the study's objectives, methods, and anticipated benefits were transparently disclosed. Participation was entirely voluntary. Memoranda of Agreement were also executed with participating barangays to ensure mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, and ethical safeguards.

Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants prior to data collection, including explicit permission for audio recording during qualitative engagements. Participants were likewise informed of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any

stage without penalty or prejudice. The study posed no more than minimal risk because it involved no physical intervention or harmful procedures. No coercion, deception, or undue influence was employed at any stage of the research.

Strict confidentiality and anonymity measures were maintained throughout the research process. All personally identifiable information was excluded from the datasets. Responses were anonymized using pseudonyms or coded identifiers. Data were securely stored in password-protected electronic devices and locked physical storage accessible only to the researcher.

Consistent with culturally responsive research practices, preliminary findings were returned to participating ICCs for validation. This process ensured accuracy, contextual integrity, and respectful representation.

This process culminated in the issuance of a formal

community validation certification. It reinforced both ethical accountability and epistemic reciprocity. Throughout the study, the researcher upheld the highest standards of academic integrity, ensuring accuracy, transparency, and proper attribution of all sources.

Results

Quantitative Data Findings

Table 1 presents the perceived contribution of the Tongtong system to the selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Overall, respondents perceived the system as having a Very High Contribution ($M = 4.34$). This indicates that Tongtong is viewed not only as a customary dispute resolution mechanism but also as a culturally grounded governance institution associated with broader community and development outcomes.

Table 1: Contributions of the Tongtong System in Addressing Sustainable Development Goals

Item	Mean	DR
SDG 5: Gender Equality		
Women and children can readily file complaints in the Tongtong council.	4.19	HC
Decisions made in the Tongtong are fair and unbiased, regardless of age or gender.	4.53	VHC
Women have the chance to speak during Tongtong sessions.	4.70	VHC
Tongtong focuses on reforming and reintegrating minor offenders into the community rather than imposing harsh punishments.	4.48	VHC
Women and children victims are justly compensated.	4.10	HC
Women can join the council of elders.	4.60	VHC
Subtotal	4.43	VHC
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities		
The Tongtong system:		
encourages open dialogue and understanding between different ethnolinguistic groups.	4.39	VHC
promotes peace and harmony within the community.	4.65	VHC
gives opportunities for people who are often left out (like those with low incomes or disabilities) to speak up about their concerns.	4.54	VHC
enhances the community's ability to withstand environmental challenges.	4.42	VHC
Subtotal	4.50	VHC
SDG 15: Life on Land		
The Tongtong promotes sustainable farming practices (e.g. use of eco-friendly pesticides) to protect the environment.	3.72	HC
The council of elders works with local authorities to monitor any exploitation of natural resources, such as deforestation or mining.	4.34	VHC
Tongtong decisions prioritize the conservation of natural resources.	4.37	VHC
The Tongtong imposes sanctions or penalties on individuals or groups found violating environmental regulations.	4.14	HC
The Tongtong helps coordinate with outside groups and government agencies to protect natural resources.	4.37	VHC
Subtotal	4.19	HC
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions		
All residents, regardless of their background, such as ethnolinguistic group, gender and income, receive fair treatment.	4.61	VHC

The Tongtong addresses concerns raised by both individuals and groups or organizations.	4.44	VHC
The Tongtong system offers easier, more familiar and readily accessible ways to solve conflicts.	4.55	VHC
The Tongtong understands and meets the specific needs of everyone seeking justice.	4.49	VHC
The Tongtong system allows or offers translation services to ensure that linguistic barriers do not hinder access to justice.	4.56	VHC
Subtotal	4.53	VHC
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals		
The documentation requirement of the Barangay Justice System was adopted in the Tongtong.	4.46	VHC
Every complainant is required to register or file his/her case to the Barangay.	3.69	HC
Lupon members participate in the Tongtong as representatives of the Barangay Justice System.	3.52	HC
A Lupon member can preside over the Tongtong.	3.53	HC
Elders are appointed to the Lupon.	4.55	VHC
Barangay officials are welcome to participate in the Tongtong.	4.46	VHC
Subtotal	4.04	HC
OVERALL	4.34	VHC

Note: SDG: Sustainable Development Goal, DR: descriptive rating, VHC: Very High Contribution, HC: High Contribution.

Among the SDGs examined, SDG 16 obtained the highest mean score ($M = 4.53$). This suggests that respondents strongly associate Tongtong with accessible justice, conflict resolution, institutional trust, and community order. SDG 11 and SDG 5 were also interpreted as having Very High Contribution. These findings indicate that respondents perceive the system as supportive of social cohesion, participatory governance and relatively inclusive justice processes. In contrast, SDG 15 and SDG 17 obtained High Contribution ratings. This suggests that Tongtong is perceived to contribute more strongly to governance and access-to-justice outcomes than to environmental stewardship and institutional collaboration.

Collectively, the findings suggest that Tongtong is perceived as a multidimensional Indigenous governance system. It extends beyond dispute settlement and contributes to broader dimensions of community regulation, accessibility, participation, and social accountability.

Table 2 presents the interpretation guide used to classify the mean scores obtained from the survey responses. The table shows the corresponding item descriptions and overall contribution ratings for each range of mean values. This guide was used to interpret the weighted means in Table 1 and to determine whether the perceived contribution of the Tongtong system was very high, high, moderate, low, or negligible.

Table 2: Interpretation Guide for Mean Scores

Range of Mean Values	Item Description	Overall Description
4.21 - 5.00	Very Strongly Agree	Very High Contribution (VHC)
3.41 - 4.20	Strongly Agree	High Contribution (HC)
2.61 - 3.40	Moderately Agree	Moderate Contribution (MC)
1.81 - 2.60	Slightly Agree	Low Contribution (LC)
1.00 - 1.80	Not Agree	No/Negligible Contribution (NC)

Note: VHC: Very High Contribution, HC: High Contribution, MC: Moderate Contribution, LC: Low Contribution, NC: No/Negligible Contribution.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative phase was conducted to further explain the quantitative finding that Tongtong demonstrated its strongest perceived contribution to SDG 16. Specifically, the qualitative inquiry examined how equality and impartiality, cultural familiarity, geographic accessibility, inclusive jurisdiction, and participatory transparency shape

community perceptions of Tongtong. These themes collectively explain why Tongtong is viewed as a fair, accessible, participatory, and locally legitimate system of justice.

Equality and Impartiality as Foundational Principles of the Tongtong Justice Process

Participants consistently described Tongtong as a

justice mechanism grounded in fairness, equal participation, and impartial deliberation. Access to justice was perceived to depend not on social status, kinship affiliation, or ethnolinguistic identity, but on the circumstances of the dispute itself. Equality and impartiality therefore emerged not merely as normative ideals. They functioned as operational principles embedded in community practice.

Participants emphasized that fairness within Tongtong is sustained through equal opportunity to speak, balanced deliberation, and culturally embedded safeguards against bias. Rather than relying on rigid procedural formalities, fairness is maintained through social expectations that require elders, moderators, and community members to uphold neutrality. Procedural legitimacy is therefore reinforced not only by outcomes but also by the visible conduct of the proceedings. This perception was evident in disputes involving individuals from different ethnolinguistic groups, where justice was viewed as socially inclusive and collectively monitored. As articulated by P10:

“The Tongtong treats everyone equally, even if an individual comes from a different place or ethnolinguistic group...Even those who became part of the community through marriage receive the same treatment as local residents.” (P10)

The emphasis on equal treatment across social and ethnolinguistic boundaries suggests that Tongtong derives legitimacy from communal notions of fairness. Justice is framed as a collective responsibility in which parties are entitled to participation and recognition regardless of social affiliation. Similarly, P17 emphasized that procedural fairness is reinforced through uninterrupted participation and balanced consideration of opposing perspectives:

“There is equal opportunity for both parties to speak, without interruption...Decisions are based on both parties’ views of the situation.” (P17)

These accounts indicate that voice and participation are central to how fairness is experienced within Tongtong. The opportunity to narrate grievances openly and without interruption appears to strengthen perceptions that decisions are reached through balanced deliberation rather than unilateral authority.

Impartiality was further reinforced through practices of elder self-restraint and voluntary

inhibition in disputes involving kinship relations. As explained by P8:

“The elders do not want anyone to think they are showing partiality.” (P8)

The practice of voluntary inhibition demonstrates that neutrality within Tongtong is socially regulated and collectively expected. Impartiality is maintained not only through procedural rules but also through reputational accountability and cultural expectations surrounding elder conduct.

Participants also highlighted the role of neutral moderators and collective community oversight in preventing favoritism. Community members were not passive observers. They participated in safeguarding the fairness of proceedings, which suggests that accountability within Tongtong is distributed collectively rather than concentrated exclusively among elders.

These findings suggest that legitimacy within Tongtong is derived not solely from cultural continuity. It is also grounded in observable procedural practices that reinforce fairness, accountability, and collective trust. Rather than emphasizing adversarial determination, Tongtong reflects a relational conception of justice. This conception is grounded in dialogue, compromise, and restoration of social relationships. As emphasized by P20:

“The Tongtong process is different because the parties provide for mutual compromise...” (P20)

The findings indicate that equality and impartiality within Tongtong are sustained through the interaction of participatory deliberation, community oversight, and culturally embedded procedural safeguards.

Cultural Familiarity as a Driver of Justice Accessibility

Participants consistently associated the accessibility of Tongtong with its cultural embeddedness within Indigenous community life. Tongtong was described as a familiar and relational process grounded in shared language, norms, histories, and collective experiences. This familiarity reduces the psychological distance commonly associated with formal legal institutions. It also encourages more open participation in dispute resolution.

Unlike courts or barangay-based proceedings, which participants often described as formal and intimidating, Tongtong hearings occur within socially familiar environments. These proceedings

are guided by elders whose legitimacy is rooted in kinship, shared history, and communal trust. Participants emphasized that accessibility within Tongtong extends beyond physical access. It also includes emotional and cultural comfort, allowing disputants to participate without fear of intimidation or procedural alienation. As explained by P12:

“Tongtong has been part of our life from before I can remember...In Tongtong, I feel at home speaking my mind.” (P12)

Participants further noted that familiarity with the process allows disputants to communicate more freely. It reduces fear of procedural error or social embarrassment. Justice, in this context, becomes relational rather than bureaucratic. Rather than perceiving justice as distant or institutionally imposed, participants described Tongtong as an extension of everyday community life.

These findings suggest that cultural familiarity functions not only as a source of trust. It also lowers psychological barriers to participation and strengthens perceptions of accessibility and legitimacy within the justice process.

Geographic Proximity and Contextual Flexibility as Enablers of Accessible Justice

Participants identified geographic accessibility as one of the strongest advantages of Tongtong, particularly in geographically isolated communities where access to formal justice remains difficult. By situating hearings within or near local communities, Tongtong reduces transportation burdens, financial costs, and procedural delays associated with formal legal processes. As explained by P4:

“Roughly 70-80% of the cases here are resolved by the Tongtong system...because it is located right here in the community.” (P4)

Participants described distance not merely as an inconvenience. They described it as a structural barrier that shapes whether individuals are able to pursue justice at all. Accessibility was therefore understood not simply in spatial terms. It was also linked to mobility, time, cost, and environmental conditions affecting participation in formal justice processes. The flexibility of Tongtong venues allows hearings to adapt to local realities. It does not require communities to conform to fixed institutional infrastructure. This was evident in the account of P5:

“The barangay hall is at least 71 kilometers from where I live....when it rains, the road becomes dangerous.” (P5)

Participants emphasized that bringing dispute resolution directly into the community allows conflicts to be addressed more immediately. It also reduces procedural burdens. In this context, venue flexibility increases physical accessibility. It also reinforces the community-centered character of the justice process by situating hearings within familiar and socially accessible environments.

These findings suggest that accessibility within Tongtong extends beyond physical proximity. It also includes procedural flexibility and reduced social intimidation. Together, these features enable more immediate and community-centered forms of dispute resolution.

Inclusive and Consent-based Jurisdiction as a Mechanism for Community-based Justice

Participants described the Tongtong system as operating through an inclusive and consent-based form of jurisdiction that allows a broad range of disputes to be addressed within a single community forum. Unlike formal legal institutions, which classify disputes according to procedural and jurisdictional categories, Tongtong accepts cases primarily on the basis of mutual willingness to participate in communal resolution processes. As articulated by P1:

“In Tongtong, as long as both parties agree, we can move forward and resolve the dispute.” (P1)

Participants viewed this openness as one of the defining strengths of the system. It minimizes fragmentation across multiple legal venues and allows disputes to remain within the community sphere. Rather than separating disputes according to rigid legal classifications, Tongtong emphasizes collective engagement and negotiated participation. Several participants further noted that even serious disputes may be resolved through Tongtong where collective consent exists. Participant 14 explained:

“Tongtong does not turn people away based on case type —truth is the jurisdiction, not the case label.”

Similarly, P22 noted:

“Courts divide cases by category. In Tongtong, we accept them by consequence, because harm is not a classification —it is something we face and settle together.” (P22)

These accounts suggest that jurisdiction within Tongtong is understood less as a technical legal boundary. It is understood more as a socially negotiated process grounded in communal responsibility and consent. The system therefore enables disputes to remain within the community sphere while reinforcing local participation and collective ownership over conflict resolution.

These findings indicate that jurisdiction within Tongtong is socially negotiated through collective participation and consent. It is not defined solely by rigid legal categorization.

Participatory Transparency and Community Oversight in Tongtong Deliberative Process

Transparency emerged as a central feature shaping perception of fairness and legitimacy within Tongtong. Participants emphasized that hearings are typically conducted in open communal spaces. Community members are able to observe proceedings and intervene when unfairness is perceived. This openness allows justice processes to remain publicly visible and collectively monitored. It also reduces opportunities for secrecy, favoritism, or hidden decision-making. As explained by P20:

“It is open to the community. Anyone can attend and listen.” (P20)

Participants viewed this openness as an important safeguard against favoritism, secrecy, and hidden agendas. Because hearings are publicly observable, elders and moderators remain accountable not only to disputing parties but also to the wider community. This was emphasized by P5:

“Both the plaintiff and defendant and the entire community have full knowledge of the case.” (P5)

Transparency was further described as participatory rather than purely observational. Community members actively monitor proceedings and challenge perceived unfairness. Accountability within Tongtong is therefore maintained through shared vigilance and public participation rather than solely through formal authority structures. As noted by P17:

“If we see something unfair, we are going to speak up.” (P17)

Similarly, P3 explained:

“As observers, we share the responsibility of ensuring that justice is achieved.” (P3)

The findings indicate that transparency within Tongtong operates both structurally through open

hearings and socially through community oversight. Together, these mechanisms reinforce confidence in the fairness, accountability, and legitimacy of community-based dispute resolution processes.

Interface Between Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative findings identified SDG 16 as the area in which Tongtong demonstrated its strongest perceived contribution. Respondents consistently associated Tongtong with accessible justice, fairness, institutional trust, and conflict resolution. The qualitative findings explain these quantitative patterns by identifying the mechanisms through which Tongtong operationalizes justice within Indigenous communities.

The themes of equality and impartiality, cultural familiarity, geographic accessibility, inclusive jurisdiction, and participatory transparency collectively explain why respondents perceived Tongtong as strongly aligned with SDG 16. The qualitative narratives showed that fairness within Tongtong is reinforced through equal participation, balanced deliberation, elder self-restraint in kinship-related disputes, and collective community monitoring. Accessibility was also explained beyond physical proximity. It was shaped by cultural familiarity, reduced intimidation, and venue flexibility.

The integration of findings also helps explain the high quantitative ratings associated with SDG 5. Qualitative narratives emphasized equal opportunity to participate in deliberations and impartial treatment regardless of gender or social affiliation. These findings suggest that respondents perceive Tongtong as supporting relatively inclusive and participatory justice processes within the Indigenous community context.

Likewise, the strong rating for SDG 11 is supported by qualitative evidence showing that Tongtong contributes to social cohesion, communal accountability, and conflict de-escalation. These are achieved through consensus-based and community-centered approaches to dispute resolution. Participants consistently described the system as reinforcing collective harmony and sustaining social relationships within Indigenous communities.

In contrast, the relatively lower rating for SDG 17 may be explained by the more selective and uneven integration between Tongtong and formal

governance structures. Respondents acknowledged collaborative practices involving barangay officials, Lupon members, and councils of elders. However, the qualitative findings suggest that Tongtong continues to operate primarily as a community-centered Indigenous institution. It is not yet fully institutionalized as an extension of formal governance systems.

Taken together, the convergence between quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that respondents' positive perceptions of Tongtong are not based solely on cultural continuity. They are also grounded in concrete procedural and governance practices that shape everyday experiences of justice. The integrated findings therefore indicate that Tongtong functions as a culturally grounded and socially legitimate mechanism for accessible, participatory, and community-based dispute resolution.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Tongtong functions as a culturally grounded and socially embedded justice mechanism. It is strongly aligned with several dimensions of Sustainable Development Goal 16. Across both the quantitative and qualitative phases, respondents associated the system with fairness, accessibility, participation and institutional trust. This suggests that the perceived legitimacy of Tongtong is shaped less by formal legal authority than by socially recognized procedural practices.

The findings relating to equality and impartiality align with procedural justice scholarship. This body of literature emphasizes that fairness, voice, and neutrality shape institutional legitimacy and acceptance of dispute resolution outcomes (52–55). The results also reflect restorative conceptions of justice grounded in participation, dialogue, and collective legitimacy (56). Like judicial recusal practices in formal legal systems, these culturally embedded safeguards minimize perceptions of bias and reinforce confidence in decision-making. The findings therefore support broader scholarship arguing that Indigenous justice systems derive legitimacy not only from cultural continuity but also from their ability to operationalize fairness and accountability within socially recognizable frameworks (57, 58).

The findings concerning cultural familiarity and accessibility suggest that justice processes grounded in shared norms, language, and social

relationships make dispute resolution less intimidating and more accessible to participants. These conditions facilitate broader participation. Consistent with Indigenous governance scholarship, culturally grounded justice systems strengthen legal agency by situating justice within Indigenous lived realities and relational forms of governance (59–61). Existing literature similarly indicates that culturally grounded justice systems are more likely to be perceived as legitimate because they resonate with Indigenous worldviews, lived experiences, and community-defined priorities (62–66). Such systems therefore operate not only as dispute resolution mechanisms. They also function as culturally embedded governance institutions that sustain social cohesion and local accountability (67, 68). Geographic accessibility and venue flexibility also reduce structural barriers associated with formal justice systems. This is particularly important in geographically isolated contexts where transportation costs, distance, and procedural complexity limit participation (69). This supports broader discussions on access to justice, which emphasize that justice institutions become more effective when they are socially and geographically accessible to marginalized populations (70).

At the same time, the findings indicate that Tongtong operates through an inclusive and consent-based jurisdiction. This prioritizes communal participation and relational accountability over rigid legal categorization. Existing scholarship similarly suggests that Indigenous justice systems frequently adopt holistic approaches to dispute resolution. These approaches are grounded in restoration, accountability, and community cohesion (71–73). Tongtong provides a single community-based forum where disputes can be resolved collectively, instead of requiring parties to move across several institutional venues.

Transparency and community oversight further contribute to perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. They ensure that hearings remain publicly visible, collectively monitored, and socially accountable. Consistent with procedural justice literature, open and participatory processes reduce perceptions of arbitrariness and strengthen trust in decision-making institutions (74). This finding is further supported by recent scholarship showing that transparent and

participatory procedures strengthen perceptions of institutional legitimacy and collective trust (75). The findings suggest that the perceived effectiveness of Tongtong emerges from the interaction of procedural fairness, cultural embeddedness, accessibility, inclusive jurisdiction, and participatory transparency. These dimensions do not operate as isolated features. They function as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that produce a locally grounded and socially legitimate form of justice. Within this context, Tongtong demonstrates how Indigenous justice systems may contribute to SDG 16 through participatory, community-based, and culturally embedded approaches to dispute resolution.

To synthesize the integrated findings, Figure 1 presents the Tongtong Indigenous Governance Pathways Framework for Sustainable Development. The framework illustrates how culturally embedded justice mechanisms within Tongtong contribute to governance outcomes associated with SDG 16. It also demonstrates broader linkages to SDGs 5, 11, 15, and 17 through participatory, accessible and community-based forms of dispute resolution. This framework highlights the pathways through which Indigenous justice systems may contribute to sustainable development at the community level.

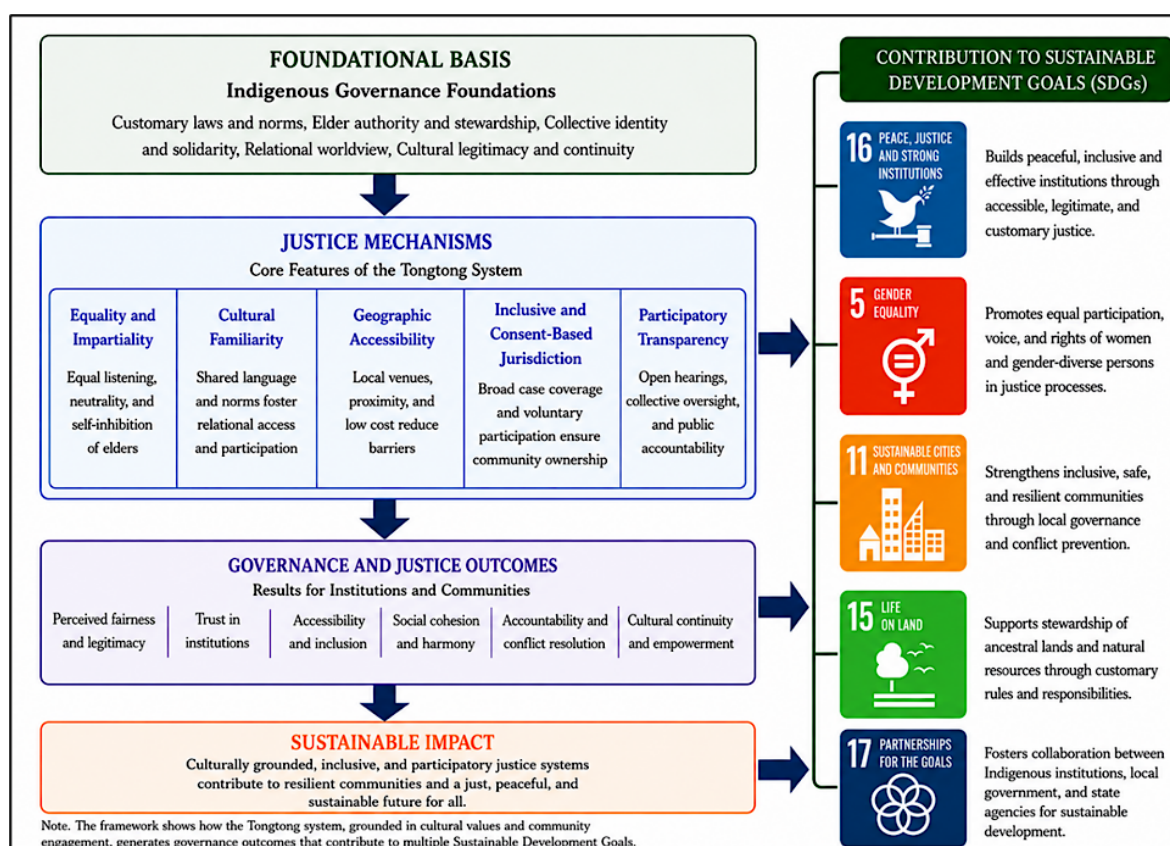


Figure 1: The Tongtong Indigenous Governance Pathways Framework for Sustainable Development

The framework is organized into four interrelated levels. The first level, Foundational Basis, represents the Indigenous governance principles that sustain the Tongtong system, including customary laws, elder authority, collective identity, relational worldviews, and cultural legitimacy. These foundational elements shape the social norms and community expectations that guide decision-making and dispute resolution within Indigenous communities.

The second level, Justice Mechanisms, reflects the

five major themes generated from the qualitative findings: equality and impartiality, cultural familiarity, geographic accessibility, inclusive, and consent-based jurisdiction and participatory transparency. These mechanisms collectively explain how Tongtong operationalizes justice in ways perceived by participants as fair, accessible, participatory, and socially legitimate.

The third level, Governance and Justice Outcomes, represents the resulting community-level effects of these mechanisms, including perceived fairness

and legitimacy, trust in institutions, accessibility and inclusion, social cohesion, accountability, and cultural continuity. These outcomes demonstrate how justice processes within Tongtong extend beyond conflict resolution and contribute to broader forms of community governance and regulation.

Finally, the framework situates these outcomes within the broader context of the Sustainable Development Goals. While the findings indicate that Tongtong contributes most strongly to SDG 16, the framework also demonstrates its relevance to SDGs 5, 11, 15 and 17.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for strengthening Indigenous justice systems and improving access to community-based dispute resolution. First, the high perceived contribution of Tongtong to SDG 16 suggests that Indigenous justice mechanisms should be recognized as important local institutions for promoting peace, fairness, and accessible justice. Local government units, barangay justice actors, and relevant national agencies may strengthen coordination with councils of elders while respecting the autonomy, cultural protocols, and customary authority that sustain the legitimacy of Tongtong.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of procedural fairness in maintaining trust in the Tongtong system. Practices such as equal opportunity to speak, elder self-inhibition in cases involving kinship ties, neutral moderation, and open community participation should be preserved and strengthened. These mechanisms help prevent perceptions of bias and reinforce community confidence in the fairness of the process. Capacity-building activities may therefore focus on supporting elders, moderators, and community justice actors in maintaining impartiality, transparency, and culturally appropriate facilitation.

Third, the findings show that one of Tongtong's strongest advantages is its location within the community itself. This allows disputes to be addressed in familiar and accessible spaces without requiring residents to travel to distant formal institutions. Practical support should therefore focus on preserving this community-based accessibility while addressing logistical

needs identified by the communities. Local authorities and relevant agencies may provide culturally appropriate support, such as documentation assistance, safe and neutral meeting spaces when requested, transportation support for elders or vulnerable participants, and coordination mechanisms for cases requiring referral. Such support should strengthen, rather than formalize or bureaucratize, the Tongtong process so that its accessibility, flexibility, and community ownership are maintained.

Fourth, the relatively lower rating for SDG 17 indicates the need to strengthen partnerships between Indigenous justice institutions and formal governance mechanisms. Collaboration between councils of elders, barangay officials, Lupong Tagapamayapa members, IPMRs, and NCIP may be enhanced through culturally appropriate referral systems, documentation practices, and regular dialogue platforms. These partnerships should complement rather than replace Indigenous justice processes, ensuring that formal institutions support Tongtong without weakening its cultural foundations and community legitimacy.

Finally, the findings suggest the need for greater attention to gender inclusion and representation within customary justice practices. While respondents perceived Tongtong as relatively inclusive, further efforts may be undertaken to ensure that women, children, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups can safely participate, file complaints, and be heard during proceedings. Strengthening these safeguards can enhance the contribution of Tongtong to inclusive, accountable, and community-centered governance.

Conclusion

This study examined the contribution of the Tongtong system to selected Sustainable Development Goals, with particular attention to how Indigenous justice practices are perceived and experienced within participating communities. Tongtong operates as a culturally grounded, community-based mechanism for facilitating equitable access to justice. Its effectiveness is anchored in interrelated procedural and socio-cultural features. These features enable disputes to be addressed in ways perceived as fair, inclusive and socially legitimate. Through open participation, elder self-inhibition, neutral facilitation, transparent hearings, and consensus-

oriented deliberation, Tongtong translates Indigenous norms into procedural arrangements aligned with principles of fairness and legitimacy. The study contributes to the literature by positioning Tongtong not merely as a localized cultural practice but as an Indigenous governance mechanism with relevance to sustainable development. It demonstrates that Indigenous justice systems may support SDG-related outcomes through culturally embedded forms of accessibility, accountability, participation, and social regulation. In particular, the study contributes to discussions on SDG 16 by showing how community-based justice mechanisms can foster fairness, trust, and conflict resolution outside formal legal institutions while remaining socially legitimate within Indigenous contexts. These findings also suggest broader relevance to SDG 5, SDG 11, SDG 15, and SDG 17 through gender-related participation, community cohesion, environmental stewardship, and inter-institutional collaboration.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, Indigenous justice systems can complement formal legal structures by expanding access to justice in geographically and socially marginalized communities. Second, Indigenous governance institutions may serve as partners in sustainable development rather than merely as informal alternatives to state-based justice systems. Given that detailed recommendations are presented in the preceding section, this conclusion emphasizes the broader implication that Tongtong should be supported in ways that preserve its autonomy, cultural legitimacy, accessibility, and community-based character. Rather than positioning justice as an externally imposed institutional process, Tongtong situates it within relational and communal practices. Outcomes are co-produced and socially validated. This embeddedness enhances acceptance of decisions and strengthens the system's function as a locally grounded mechanism for conflict resolution.

However, the study has limitations. The findings are based on perceptions of respondents and participants from selected Indigenous communities in Benguet. They may not fully represent all Indigenous justice practices in the Philippines. The study also focused on selected SDGs and did not measure long-term institutional or behavioral outcomes. Moreover, while the study

identified perceived contributions to gender inclusion, environmental stewardship, and institutional collaboration, these areas require deeper empirical examination beyond the scope of the present research.

At a broader level, the findings indicate that Tongtong contributes to key dimensions of SDG 16. It mitigates structural and socio-cultural barriers that constrain access to formal justice systems, including geographic remoteness, financial costs, and institutional distance.

Future research may build on these findings by conducting comparative studies of Indigenous justice systems across different ethnolinguistic communities and geographic contexts. Further studies may also examine the long-term outcomes of Tongtong decisions, the participation of women and marginalized groups in customary justice processes and the evolving relationship between Indigenous justice institutions and formal state mechanisms. Comparative statistical analyses across ethnolinguistic groups may also be conducted to determine whether perceptions of the Tongtong system vary by cultural community, location, or governance context. Such research would help clarify the conditions under which Indigenous justice systems can more effectively contribute to inclusive, accountable, and sustainable governance.

The integration of cultural norms with procedural principles of fairness, impartiality, accessibility, and transparency underscores the role of Indigenous governance systems in advancing pluralistic justice frameworks. In summary, Tongtong represents a locally legitimate yet analytically relevant model of community-based justice. It contributes to the broader objectives of inclusive, accountable, and sustainable institutions by supporting peacebuilding and social cohesion at the community level.

Abbreviations

FPIC: Free and Prior Informed Consent, ICCs: Indigenous Cultural Communities, IPMRs: Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives, IPs: Indigenous Peoples, NCIP: National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

Acknowledgement

The writer expresses deep thanks to each of the Punong Barangay Leaders, Indigenous Peoples

Mandatory Representatives of Barangays (IPMR's), Lupon Tagapamayapa Members, Elders who participated in this research for the gift of their time, insights and help towards completing this project. In particular, special thanks go to the panglakayen of Sinacbat, Bakun; kapanguduwanan of Bila, Bokod; yangkaama/yangkabakol of Karao, Bokod; nangkaama/nangkabakol of Upper Bashoy, Kabayan; and dakay/ba-kul of Sitio Domolpos, Itogon for their valuable shared contributions during the Focus Group Discussions. Additionally, full recognition is given to other members of the community for their involvement and cooperation that made this study possible.

Author Contributions

The author affirms full responsibility for all aspects of the work, including the study's conceptualization and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results and preparation of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of the study are openly available in the Database of the journal. Other data will be made available upon reasonable request to the author.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

This paper used Grammarly in improving overall grammar, clarity and coherence. AI was not used in conceptualizing, analyzing and interpreting data nor did it affect the overall results of this study. The authors take full responsibility for the content's originality, interpretation and accuracy.

Ethics Approval

The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University of Northern Philippines (approval number A-2024-300; October 30, 2024).

Funding

This research was partially funded by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED)-Scholarship for Staff and Instructors' Knowledge Advancement Program (SIKAP).

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How to Cite: Gano CB. Local Justice, Global Goals: The Tongtong Indigenous System and its Role in Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals in the Philippines. *Int Res J Multidiscip Scope*. 2026;7(3):473-489. DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i03.012326