

Pebbles as nature's gift: But for how long?

By Rey J. Garcia

Tipan, Gutalac, Zamboanga del Norte – When the waves are calm in the early morning of the more than a kilometer long shoreline of this silent village, the pedals of the wooden hopper start rolling and the assembled plastic sieve of three different sizes also started to swing back and forth in short and quick motion. The pebbles placed in the wooden funnel positioned in the upper part of the wooden hopper beside the operator, will then slowly flow through the plastic sieves first to fall from the wooden hopper to the assign container are the smallest size to be collected or the size #5. On the second container, two feet apart from the first container the size #10 will fall, while the #12 size falls on the next container, the bigger pebbles which they will put back to the shoreline will fall on the other edge of the wooden hopper.

“Nakatabang gyud kaayo namo kining among pagpanguha ug pagpangayag og pebbles, kini ang nagbuhi sa among pamilya, maayo unta nga dili gyud ni mahurot hangtud-hangtud, kay hatag man kini sa kinaiyahan (Pebbles gathering and sieving really helps us a lot. As it sustains our family, we hope this will last forever, for this is a gift of nature), said Arnel Alo, 26 years old and single, while applying used oil on iron parts of his improvised wooden hopper, positioned beside a big stockpile of pebbles along the shorelines of Barangay Tipan.

Barangay Tipan, Gutalac which is the site of the pebble picking activities is situated 24 kilometers of rough roads from the Poblacion, Gutalac is accessible by habal-habal or 4-wheeled drive type of vehicle. The barangay has a population of almost 2,000 as of last year with 290 households and a voting population of 700. Most of their houses are made of light materials typical to other coastal barangays. Though very far from the Poblacion, the barangay was a recipient of various projects from the province like school buildings for elementary and high school. They also have a Fish Landing Center, a project funded by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), which is scheduled for turn-over this year. Tipan is one of the few coastal barangays of Gutalac facing the Sulu Sea, but it is the only barangay gifted with shorelines of fine to medium coarse silica quartz or the white and yellow beach pebbles.

The municipality of Gutalac is situated in the province of Zamboanga del Norte, in the north-central region of Zamboanga Peninsula in Mindanao. It is about 160 kilometers from Dipolog, the capital city of Zamboanga del Norte.

On that day, Arnel and his companions were preparing the materials needed, like empty sacks, plastic containers and stocks of gathered pebbles to start sieving, using an improvised wooden hopper for screening. Together with Arnel was Rogin Borling, 36, and Alfredo Gemitar, 58, both married and have long been gathering and sieving pebbles.

An improvised wooden hopper is a manually operated bicycle pedal that propels different plastic sieve screens to sizes in and out the pebbles to different products of #5, #10, #12 and #15, these sizes are prescribed by the buyers who are the ones also provided the plastic screen used in the wooden hopper to acquire uniformity. The products are loaded directly into empty sacks for packing and storage also in the shoreline.

An improvised wooden hopper for screening pebbles costs between P3,000 to P5,000, it is assembled by some carpenters in the area, the empty sacks are provided by the buyers and the

stocking of pebbles near the shoreline is done manually using empty plastic containers of motor oil or empty cans of edible oil (taro).

Arnel, who is still single is the breadwinner of his family being the eldest of the siblings said that if they earnestly work in gathering and sieving of pebbles, there are times when they could earn as much as P1,000 or more a day each of them, this during the time when there are huge volume of orders from the buyers who would bring the products to big cities like Cebu and Manila, where there are big demands of the products. Some residents engaged in picking pebbles said that part of it is exported to other countries such as Hongkong and Singapore. In Zamboanga del Norte, the income from taxes and other fees on sand, gravel, pebbles and other quarry products grew substantially by 65% to P23.6 million in 2017 from P14.3 million the previous year.

Vivencia Gemitar, a cooperative chairman, guaranteed that the pebbles business brought hope to the Barangay Tipan. She said if there are no pebbles in their barangay, they would be hard to provide their family's daily needs; they are benefiting from the pebbles business especially these days where the buying rates are high at P35 per sack, a sack of pebbles could weigh 70 -80 kilograms.

Since 2014 the price of pebbles has increased, from **P12 per sack up to the current price of P35**. Vivencia admitted that the community has knowledge about the negative impacts if the shoreline of pebbles disappear, but she said that will not happen because they gather only about 30 to 40 sacks in a day and there are days of the week when they do not operate if the waves are strong.

What they observed in the past years until these present days in their shorelines is that the pebbles naturally replenished when the waves are strong. That every sunken portion of the shoreline due to gathering of the pebbles will be leveled or **go back as** it is the following day. "Hatag gyud ni sa kahitas-an," (It is really a gift from God) exclaimed Vivencia.

Tipan's Punong Barangay, Ms. Merlyn Elemia narrated that her family who is from Don Victoriano, Misamis Occidental transferred to Tipan, Gutalac sometime in 1987. She was 17 years old that time, and their livelihood was gathering chromite in the nearby mountain. It was sold at 10 centavos per kilo to a buyer from the other town. The shoreline of pebbles mixed with fine yellowish sand in Tipan was already there but nobody knows that it can be sold.

She said that they just pick the bigger white pebbles and piled it up near their houses, believing that someday they can sell it for they are only found only in their place and can be used for decoration. It was in 1990 when one of the strongest typhoons in the Philippines, 'Typhoon Ruping' (international name 'Mike') hit their barangay, their stockpiles of selected pebbles were all washed out by the strong waves.

The following year, in 1991, a **certain Rolly Laput**, a businessman who is said to be from Burias Island, came to Tipan and started buying the pebbles at P12 per sack. Mr. Laput is said to have knowledge about the pebbles in Gutalac before he went to Manila and subsequently contacted businessmen interested to buy the products. The residents of Tipan started to earn income from what they called, "gift of nature".

At this time also, upon learning that the community has a potential livelihood in the area, the provincial government thru the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA-Zamboanga del Norte) came to Tipan and encouraged the community to undergo basic trainings for them to form into cooperatives. After the trainings they are also assisted by the CDA to comply with the requirements

to become legitimate coops, based on filed copy of documents like Certificate of Registration to the CDA and Cooperative By Laws in the office of Barangay Tipan, there are five (5) cooperatives with an average of 15 members and complete set of officers were established.

The five cooperatives namely: Cultural Communities Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Imelda Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Salvador Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Tipan Farmers Multi-Purpose Cooperative and Pebbles Gatherer Multi-Purpose Cooperative were granted with pebbles picking permit by the PEMO-Zamboanga del Norte, allowed to extract pebbles with a volume of up to 24,000 sacks each annually from their designated areas consisting of 10,000 square meters. The coops bought the pebbles by sack from the residents and cooperative members and the outside buyers mostly businessmen from Manila thru their representatives will then buy from the coops.

Elemia, who was at that time engaged also in gathering pebbles, recalled that their family was tapped by one of the buyers. Huge amount of money was entrusted to her to be used for **cash advances** to the people who in turn would sell their pebbles regularly. The advance payment system was used so that those who had already collected their money in advance will not sell their pebbles to other buyer but to the one who give the cash advance. Grocery items are also stocked at their house including soft drinks and liquors funded by the same buyer from Manila.

“Niadtong higayona, ang among barangay bibo kaayo kay bisan ang mga kabataan dunay mga kwarta kay mahatagan sa ilang ginikanan, daghan pod niadto ang mga residente nga namaligya o nag-abli og tindahan kay kusog man ang palit” (Those were the days when our barangay was so joyful because even the children has money given by their parents, many residents started to open sari-sari stores for business to cater demands) Elemia said.



After the election in 2004, the province was under the new administration of Governor Rolando Yebes who completed three terms or a total of nine years, the mayor of Gutalac that time is Mayor Mariano Candelaria. Elemia who was then elected as barangay kagawad had ceased in the pebbles business, said that it was on this period of almost a decade that the five cooperatives were not allowed to renew their pebble picking permits by the provincial government. Tipan is known as bailiwick of the opposing political party of the winning governor. The pebbles extraction was operated by individuals connected to the governor and the sitting mayor of Gutalac. Most of the residents were not given a chance to gather and sieve pebbles for they are from the other political party not inline to the mayor. [ANY STATEMEN FROM THESE OFFICIALS? (I cannot locate these former officials, when they step down from their post, they transferred their residency.)]

According to Elemia, some residents of Tipan had stopped gathering and sieving because they are not paid in cash for their pebbles by the operator that time, the brother of the mayor, Pembot Candelaria. During those nine years, from 2004 to 2013, the rate of laborers who hauled the sacked pebbles from the stockpile to the pump boat are at P3.00-P4.00, royalty fee for the permit holder cooperative is only P2.00, a sack of pebbles were at P12.00 only, hauling by pump boat from Tipan shoreline to a pier in Labason is at P20 per sack and the Delivery Receipt [THIS NEEDS TO BE EXPLAINED] is at P25.00. Based on an existing ordinance of the province on extraction of natural resources like pebbles, sand and gravel, Delivery Receipts (DRs) are fees to be paid by the buyers/operators before they haul out the products from any part of the province

Elemia, who is a barangay councilor that time, noted that Barangay Tipan did not receive any share from the Delivery Receipt on that long nine years and they have not purchased even a single curtain

for the barangay hall. She believed that there's no payment being done by those operators and the DRs shown in every hauling of pebbles from Tipan are just reproduced. If payments of DR's are really made, their barangay should have received its share of 40% [BASED ON? The 40% share for the barangay is based on the existing ordinance of the province on extraction of natural resources.].

Another election came in 2013, and the province had another governor, who is in his second term presently, a known businessman turned politician Governor Roberto Y. Uy. Pursuant to DAO No. 30-A Series of 1992, upon assumption in office, the new governor increased the rates in the pebbles business and allowed the cooperatives to get back to business by issuing permits to those who complied and completed the requirements. The pebbles gathering continued but under the new traders/financiers, one of whom is the younger brother of the governor, Pedoy Uy based in Dipolog City and a certain businesswoman Elsie Cuenca based in Labason, Zamboanga del Norte. It is said that this time, PEMO implemented strict regulation so they pay regularly the DRs before they haul the pebbles from the area and Barangay Tipan has once again got their share. [WHAT ABOUT THE COOPERATIVES?]

Elemia showed records of the barangay on how they benefited the pebbles extraction under the new administration, since they received back their share from the Delivery Receipts (DRs), additional projects for the barangay were implemented, funded from their share like road rehabilitation, communal comfort rooms which the residents have benefited.

Sometime in 2016, a group from Social Action Center (SAC) in Dipolog showing concern on the pebbles extraction issue, requested the office of the governor to allow them to conduct inspection in Tipan, while in the area, they found nothing irregular and unusual in the community and in the shorelines of pebbles. The residents also assured the group that they benefited the pebbles gathering. PEMO-ZN personnel have conducted regular monitoring and inspection in the area and declared that extraction shall continue for the deposit of pebbles is vast.

At present, a sack of pebbles of any number of size, weighing 70-80 kilograms are bought by traders at P35.00 and an additional P20.00 to the so called "royalty fee" for permit holder cooperative where half of it will be for the cooperative chairman exclusively. For hauling the sacked pebbles by large motorized bank from Barangay Tipan to a pier in Lawis, Labason where cargo ships docked, haulers are paid at P35.00 per sack. The buyer shall pay the so called 'Delivery Receipts' first at the Provincial Treasurer's Office at the rate of P50.00 per sack, before transporting the pebbles out from the site. Out of the 100% of the amount paid by the buyers for the Delivery Receipts (DR) the barangay has the biggest share at 40%, the Municipal has 30% and the Province got the share of 30%.

Before the campaign period for the 2016 election started, one of the highlighted political issues raised is the controversy of pebbles extraction in Tipan. A political party against the sitting governor of Zamboanga del Norte and mayor of Gutalac alleged that the extraction of pebbles in Tipan was monopolized by the brother of the governor. It is said that some businessmen attempted to engage in pebbles business in Gutalac but was not given permission by provincial LGU. One commentator in a local radio station in Dipolog also raised an issue that Mayor Coma of Gutalac is receiving 1 peso for every sack of pebbles hauled from the municipality.

Onesimo Coma Jr., the mayor of Gutalac, who was dragged into the issue of monopolizing the operation of pebbles, said he never interfered with the pebbles business since the time he was

elected in position in 2013. He was shocked to see his name included in a confidential report submitted on February 17, 2017 by National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) to the national office of Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) on the alleged illegal quarrying of pebbles in Gutalac. The mayor reacted that his name was dragged to the issue because of his political color for he is under the political party of Governor Uy.

He further claimed that though his name appeared in every permit to transport issued by his office, he never received even a single centavo from it. The mayor confirmed that their municipality received share, under the administration of Governor Uy, that is the 30% out of 100% of the Delivery Receipts paid by the buyers to the Provincial Government and it was used to implement some infrastructure projects of the municipality.

Alleged illegal extraction of pebbles

On the 3rd day of February of last year, a certain Jeanette F. Moling, Project Officer of Philippine Misereor Partnership, Inc. (PMPI) sent a letter to the then DENR Secretary, Ms. Regina Lopez endorsing a copy of a petition from the community of Tipan, Gutalac in Zamboanga del Norte concerning 'massive quarrying of pebbles in the beach area of the community'.

The Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office (PENRO) of Zamboanga del Norte through PENR Officer Salahuddin A. Kaing in an interview said that they supported the quarrying of pebbles in Barangay Tipan, Gutalac since the cooperatives operating in the area acquired their pebbles picking permit from PEMO and that he believed they secured all the requirements for the application and paid the corresponding fees for it. He added that PEMO and other government agencies would have inspected and assessed the area if there is available deposit of pebbles to quarry before they release the permit to applicants.

The allegation cited that the people of Tipan laments that the natural protection of their community is being extracted by contractors and that they suffer the consequences as they are no longer protected from strong waves in case strong typhoons hit their barangay. They fear that further quarrying activities will endanger their lives and livelihood and they are also saddened that porters of these pebbles are paid a meager P10.00 per sack, thus the community came together through a petition. A copy of the letter dated February 3, 2017 of the PMPI was furnished to the office of the Punong Barangay of Tipan, but was not attached with the petition itself, list of the petitioners and signatories.

PMPI is a social development network of church/faith based groups, people's organizations (POs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Misereor, the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Germany based in Aachen, Germany.

Two weeks later, a Confidential Report dated February 17, 2017 from the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) also reached the Secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) regarding 'alleged illegal quarrying of pebbles in Gutalac, Zamboanga del Norte'.



Acting on the petition letter from PMPI and Confidential Report forwarded by NICA, the Under Secretary of DENR and Concurrent MGB Director, Mario Luis J. Jacinto, provided an instruction to the Regional Director of Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) Regional Office No. 9, to conduct an investigation on the alleged massive and illegal quarrying of pebbles. They are also ordered to render appropriate actions as may be warranted by the circumstances and submit pertinent report within 15 days to the Department from the receipt of the memorandum.

In response, to the memorandum from the Office of the Secretary of DENR, a team from the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB-IX) conducted an investigation started on the first week of April, 2017.

As observed by the MGB team, the deposition of “white pebbles” in the shoreline of Barangay Tipan, Gutalac was caused by wave action brought about by the sea current from Sulu Sea. The favorable geology and the presence of natural forces that constantly bombarded the barangay Tipan’s 1,530 meters shoreline continuously deposited this rare fine to medium coarse silica quartz.

The team noted that uncontrolled removal of pebbles may reduce the barriers and expose the houses to danger as the area is highly susceptible to storm surges and tsunamis. Some residents, including barangay officials said they noticed that the shoreline of Tipan has reduced its width for about 20 meters or more as compared to 20 years ago, but said every time big waves struck the shoreline; it brought new volume of pebbles.

The extraction of pebbles has been started 20 years ago. As per MGB-IX record, there were 5 Area Status and Clearances (ASC) issued by the agency to five cooperatives namely: Cultural Communities Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Imelda Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Salvador Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Tipan Farmers Multi-Purpose Cooperative and Pebbles Gatherer Multi-Purpose Cooperative. The ASC and the Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) issued to these cooperatives according to Manuel Berberio, Jr., the Chief of Provincial Environment Management Unit (PEMU)-Zamboanga del Norte has no expiration, but can be cancelled when any of the conditions in not complied. At one time, all of the cooperatives which have an area of 10,000 square meters, allowed to extract up to 24,000 sacks of pebbles per year, are operating depleting the resources considerably.

An inquiry from Provincial Environment and Management Office (PEMO-Zamboanga del Norte) Office-in-Charge Levy H. Lagutin, Jr. and Fernando Borgonia showed that as of date, Pebble Picking Permits were granted only to Imelda Multi-Purpose Cooperative and Pebbles Gatherer Multi-Purpose Cooperative after compliance with all the mandatory requirements. PEMO Zamboanga del Norte conducted field evaluation/assessment on the availability of pebble deposits along the beaches/shorelines as basis for allowing the continuity of pebble picking operations in the area.

As part of their investigation, Ramil B. Mundo, Engineer III of MGB-IX, and his team appeared in the regular session of Barangay Tipan, Gutalac held on April 12, 2017. In the said session, Barangay Captain Elemia and the barangay councilors belied the allegation of massive extraction of pebbles as there are only two (2) permittees approved compared to five (5) approved before during the time of Governor Yebes. All transactions this time are covered by Delivery Receipts (DRs) which are properly documented and monitored by personnel from the Barangay, Municipal and the Province.

Being a long time barangay leader, Elemia has been a member of the Provincial Mining Regulatory Board (PMRB-Zamboanga del Norte) since 2013 representing the small scale mining sector.

Elemia further vouched for the positive economic impacts of the pebble extraction to their barangay where its share from the operations have funded the construction of Barangay Hall, Library Building, outdoor stage, purchase of computers, sound system, kitchen utensils and 2 hectares of lot to serve as a relocation site of the community in case of calamity.

Engineer Mundo also asked the barangay officials about the negative effects of the operation as it endangers the houses built along the shoreline of Tipan, they acknowledged the negative effects but for them the benefits brought to the barangay outweighed the negative effects. It is established that there was an attempt to smuggle out pebbles by some members of the cooperatives from un-renewed areas for economic reasons but was foiled by the monitoring personnel of Barangay Tipan, Municipal and PEMO-ZN.

The team from MGB-IX concluded that based on statements given by Barangay Tipan officials led by Elemia, there is no illegal and massive pebble picking activities in the barangay because at present, there are only two (2) cooperatives operating in the area unlike before when there were five (5) MGB-IX team noted that all transactions are covered by Delivery Receipts (DRs) issued by the Provincial Government of Zamboanga del Norte.

The shares generated from the pebbles operation have funded several Barangay projects and purchased of Barangay Hall and office equipment. The barangay officials did not disclosed the exact figure of the share but they recalled that about over a million pesos they received from DRs sometime between 2014 and 2016. As per record, in 2014 they have purchased 2 air-conditioning unit, 1 set desk top computer, 1 unit Olympic typewriter, 1 unit steel cabinet, 1 set of Disco lights, sound speakers, buzzer & CDR, water meters for the barangay water system and two hectare of agricultural land. Funded the improvement and repair of public market, session hall and daycare center, construction of a library building inside the Tipan National High School and barangay police out-post.

In 2015, they have funded the repair of barangay public market and barangay hall, the construction of staff house, BNS center and Supreme Student Government building in the school. They also have purchased a one unit generator and additional accessories of lights and sounds of the barangay. For the year 2016, Tipan have purchased household wares for the barangay hall, funded the improvement and repair of daycare center and session hall, construction of stock room in the barangay hall, public cemetery, comfort room in session hall and slop protection (Riprap), Full Disclosure Policy Board and fabrication of sign board for BDRRMC.

Their share from DRs are used to fund projects in 2017, they have started the construction of barangay stage and two units of MRF mini building, they have funded the improvement of day care center and a school building of Tipan Elementary School, they also have purchased 2 sewing machines for women's livelihood and rescue equipment and accessories. The barangay officials have included in their plan of action for the year 2018 numerous projects for implementation.

Some disgruntled members of cooperatives who have not renewed their pebbles picking permit had tried to smuggle pebbles for economic reason but was stopped their operations and further prevented by the monitoring personnel of the Barangay, Municipal and Provincial Environment and Management Office (PEMO).

The same team from MGB-IX recommended that pursuant to DAO No. 30-A Series of 1992 (*Guidelines for the transfer and implementation of DENR functions devolved to the Local Government Units-LGU*) and DAO No. 28 (*Guidelines in the issuance of Special Permits for Pebble Picking along Beaches*), the Governor, thru the Provincial Environment and Management Office, Zamboanga del Norte shall ensure that environmental damage is not inflicted on the source of pebbles operation and continuously monitor the extraction of pebbles in the un-renewed areas to stop the illegal extraction.



It is further recommended by the MGB team that PEMO-ZDN shall strictly control the extraction of pebbles in the area and not renew any permit to any area overly extracted until such time that field evaluation/assessment showed enough replacement of quantity of pebble deposit along the beach/shoreline and the feasibility will allow continuity of pebble picking operation.

Lastly it is highly recommended by the MGB team to the LGUs concerned, to establish no built-up zone along Tipan's shoreline and possibly implement relocation of the existing houses to the designated barangay relocation site located at the higher ground and continuously conduct information, education and dissemination campaign regarding the threats of storm surge and tsunami.

Arnel and his neighbors in Barangay Tipan are used to gathering and sieving pebbles for a long time and relied also on other livelihood such as farming and fishing for their daily needs. They believed that the shoreline of pebbles will never disappear because the nature will replace it naturally.

They noticed also that the present administration in the province has implemented strict monitoring and control on pebbles extraction by reducing the number of operators and increasing the rates of fees and other charges. These days, 30–40 sacks of pebbles are extracted from the shorelines of Tipan, but the local government units of the barangay, municipality and the province receive the big amount of shares due to increased fees.

Stock pile of sacked screened pebbles was almost totally covered by new volume of pebbles after strong waves at high tide bombarded the shorelines of Barangay Tipan. Photo by Rey J. Garcia

The shorelines of white and yellow pebbles in Barangay Tipan, Gutalac, Zamboanga del Norte, facing the west. Photo by Rey J. Garcia

Arnel Alo, operating an improvised wooden hopper for screening the pebbles to different products sizes of #5, #10, #12 and #15 before it is loaded on empty sacks for packing and storage. Photo by Rey J. Garcia



Tipan Punong Barangay Merlyn Elemia



Gutalac Mayor Onesimo Coma, Jr. (center)



The shorelines of white and yellow pebbles in Barangay Tipan, Gutalac, Zamboanga del Norte, facing the east. Photo by Rey J. Garcia



An improvised wooden hopper for screening pebbles into different products sizes, tied up on higher portion on the side of the shoreline when waves are strong. Photo by Rey J. Garcia