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Beyond the limelight of Apo Whang-od: Exposing the face of social service delivery and access of older persons in the Philippines

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This study examined the access to social services for the elderly population in Tinglayan, Kalinga, Philippines, which is the home of Apo Whang-od, a globally renowned traditional tattoo artist. The case study explored the challenges and opportunities that elderly individuals encounter in accessing social services within geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA) and how these dynamics have been influenced by the artist's popularity.

The research presentation provided an overview of Tinglayan's elderly demographics and the associated barriers to delivering social services to the community, such as lack or limited access to employment, higher education, transportation, basic infrastructure, and health services. Whang-od's popularity played a role in publicising these challenges, with thousands of tourists sympathising with these difficulties, subsequently gaining the attention of local and national policymakers. More significantly, it also exposed how older individuals like Whang-od used their ingenuity, traditional crafts, and resourcefulness to support their families and communities, even in their advanced years.

Additionally, the role of traditional and cultural practices in shaping access to social services was examined. It was argued that Tinglayan's community resilience, strong sense of respect, social cohesion, and mutual support played a critical role in aiding the elderly population. However, conflicts with neighbouring communities, stemming from tribal disputes, also hindered access to social services for the general population.

However, the identified challenges can be addressed by favourable policies aimed at enhancing access to social services for the elderly population in GIDAs. Moreover, investments in education, transportation, and healthcare infrastructures, expanding social safety nets, and promoting intergenerational solidarity to provide support for the elderly while considering the unique cultural and social contexts of local communities are recommended.

Overall, beyond Whang-od's limelight is the realisation of the challenges and opportunities to improve social service delivery in rural communities while preserving beneficial cultural practices, and the necessity for targeted policies and programmes to support the elderly's well-being must be given emphasis.