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UP CIDS DISCUSSION PAPER 2019-08

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Doing research with grassroots organizations: A participatory action research (PAR)-inspired approach

KARL ARVIN HAPAL,¹ MAUREEN PAGADUAN,² and VENARICA PAPA³

In 2017, we were invited to be part of the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS). AltDev, the brainchild of Eduardo C. Tadem, Ph.D. sought to usher in a new brand of regionalism in Southeast Asia. It argues that “Southeast Asian communities for many years and, on their own, have been engaged in [a wide range of] alternative, heterodox, non-mainstream [development] practices” (Program on Alternative Development 2017). And these attempts “do not figure prominently in national and international discourse,” nor are they given enough support (ibid.). On the other hand, inter-state engagements and business-centric agenda are the locus of Southeast Asia’s attempt towards regional integration.

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The program re-imagines an alternative model, one that is based on links and solidarities between and among people at the grassroots level.

Nonetheless, despite its relative marginality, isolation, or ideological differences, these practices share a critical position against mainstream development practices, a pro-people perspective, and a transformative aspiration for all. The program hinges on these shared values and aspirations as its basis of unity in its attempts to usher in an alternative model of regional integration. AltDev sought to realize its vision by documenting various alternative practices by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) in Southeast Asia. The outputs of the documentation shall serve as the basis for establishing links with broader networks of practitioners, scholars, and social movements. In turn, these will serve as "building blocks of a cross border peoples' alternative regional integration" (*ibid.*).

We came into the program with a sympathetic disposition. Yet, as academics/activists engaged in partnerships with various NGOs and POs, we also saw an opportunity to document our own experiences. In many ways, AltDev's immediate agenda coincided with our ongoing attempt to document and analyze our experiences in partnering with NGOs and POs through the Department of Community Development's (DCD) Field Instruction Program (FIP). The program serves as the cornerstone for the department's curricular offerings and is its main vehicle for organizing and rendering services to poor, oppressed, and marginalized communities. For nearly four decades, faculty and students have partnered with NGOs and POs to contribute to the realization of a development agenda that is people-centered, just, and empowering.

The intersection between AltDev's aspiration, our affinity to its vision, and mutual research interests led us to buy-in and invite our partners. However, we were confronted with several issues and questions as we began to discuss our approach. Our academic, activist, and personal standpoints led us to believe that documentation and research are not solely a knowledge generation

enterprise, nor does it strictly serve practical or utilitarian purposes. Instead, we were resolute with the belief that documentation and research must also be empowering for its participants. Given these, we asked: How do we approach the documentation process in such a way that our partners do not become mere objects of the study? How do we make our partners own the process and buy-in to the larger agenda of the program? How do we make the documentation process relevant to their work? How do we make the process enriching and empowering for our partners? To address these questions, we turned to Community Development (CD) and drew from participation action research (PAR) for inspiring our perspectives and strategies.

This paper outlines our experience of organizing and doing documentation and research with our FIP partners. This collaboration drew heavily from PAR methods that we have adopted in line with our community organizing and CD work. The discussion is divided into three sections. First, we outline our experience of doing documentation and research with partner NGOs and POs. Second, we share our understanding of PAR and explain the rationale for drawing inspiration from it. Finally, we conclude the discussion by drawing important lessons from this experience. We share our experiences because we treat this paper as an opportunity for us to be accountable with our ideas; that is, opening it to others so that they may interrogate or affirm our insights or, at the very least, begin a genuine discussion enriching research practices. In other words, this paper is an attempt to be reflexive and an invitation to further discourse. Moreover, it is an attempt to interrogate, if not challenge, theoretical perspectives, not only of PAR, but of research in general by juxtaposing it with local experiences drawn from our collective experience of organizing with the people.

Designing the research project

Originally, we invited three sets of FIP partners to join the project. These were *Bantay Kalusugang Pampamayanan* (BKP) and *Maigting na Samahan ng Panlipunang Negosyante sa Towerville* (Igting), POs

supported by CAMP Asia;⁴ *Kooperatiba ng Manggagawa sa Caloocan* (KMC); and *Kilusan, Kaayusan, Kaunlaran Action Movement Association* (K3-AMA) and *Phase IV United Servant's Organization Inc.* (PUSO), POs formed by and supported by NMAP.⁵ We have been partners with BKP, Igting, and CAMP Asia for seven years while the rest were relatively new partners—we have been partners with them for only more than a year. Representatives of all the mentioned POs attended the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/Asian People's Forum (ACSC/APF) in 2017 where the Program on Alternative Development was launched. The intention for inviting the POs to attend the conference was to expose them to a wider platform of engagement and inspire them to share their experiences. Yet, by the time of the implementation of the project in 2018, KMC, K3-AMA, and PUSO backed out, citing several reasons. For instance, the members of KMC felt unprepared to do research. K3-AMA and PUSO on the other hand were busy with their respective activities facilitated by NMAP. Hence, we were left with BKP and Igting as our partners for the project.

BKP and Igting were POs formed resulting from the programs of CAMP Asia, a Korean NGO based in San Jose del Monte, Bulacan. CAMP Asia began as a faith-based organization, spreading the good news of the Christian faith. While it began work in Tondo, CAMP Asia's exposure in Towerville, San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan in 2010 proved to be a turning point for the organization. The appalling conditions of the relocatees in Towerville moved CAMP Asia's founder, Rev. Chulyong Lee, to pursue development work in the area. Initial surveys of Towerville revealed health and livelihood as the most pressing issues in the community. Later the NGO began its engagement with the Department of Community Development (DCD) in 2011 through its Field Instruction Program (FIP). Since then, faculty and students have been assigned to Towerville, to do community organizing, capacity building, and empowerment activities.

⁴ Center for Asian Mission for the Poor—Asia

⁵ Norwegian Mission Alliance Philippines

While both POs have since gained a degree of autonomy from CAMP Asia, the process leading to this state was not, to say the least, unproblematic. Both Igting and BKP were outcomes of CAMP Asia's flagship programs on livelihood and health. Igting began as an association of mothers who were recipients of CAMP Asia's livelihood program in the form of a sewing business. Initial batches of mothers received training and access to sewing equipment. In the beginning, to ensure the relative success of the sewing business, CAMP Asia subsidized wages and even the losses of the sewing business. BKP on the other hand began as a pool of health volunteers. Members of the association were responsible in assisting the community clinic established by CAMP Asia and in operating its health emergency response program called Emergency Transport Service (ETS). Like the members of Igting, volunteers received monetary and material benefits.

By 2015, however, both POs would face considerable difficulties as support from CAMP Asia—drawn mainly from foreign funding—began to drastically shrink as expected. This meant that the NGO could no longer subsidize Igting's failing business nor can it maintain BKP's volunteers. Consequently, members of both POs also dwindled. The remaining members of both POs nonetheless persisted and other strategies were pursued to maintain the sustainability of these programs. The remaining members of Igting began pursuing other business ventures (i.e., sub-contracting), networking with potential markets or sources of support, rationalizing their production process and wage system, and instituting a collective management system through a committee system. On the other hand, what was left of BKP began to take organizing seriously by pursuing house-to-house visits and tapping into common health interests among the residents of Towerville and its sectors. Throughout this process, FIP students supported both POs by facilitating what they call “empowerment sessions” to strengthen and maintain the integrity of the organization.

Currently, Igting is a self-sustaining and organized social enterprise with domestic and international clients. In general, members also earn more. The PO also has a strong collective leadership structure through its committee system. The leadership

system manages its business, organizational, and community-related engagements. On the other hand, BKP formally launched a network of 1,500 strong volunteers with various sectoral formations and interest groups.

Indeed, Igting and BKP have come a long way since they were founded in 2010. Yet despite the efforts of their members and victories achieved by the POs, arguably it was CAMP Asia who reaped most of the benefits in terms of greater funding and recognition. This is not to say that CAMP Asia has not reciprocated or recognized Igting and BKP's achievements. In fact, the NGO continues to provide vital resources to support both POs' operation and further development. Nonetheless, the asymmetry between CAMP Asia, on one hand, and BKP and Igting on the other, is undeniable. This asymmetry is manifested in direction setting, implementation of activities, and decision-making processes. This is further reinforced in moments where the narratives of Igting and BKP's experiences are framed, spoken, and written from the perspective of CAMP Asia using the Korean language.

Part of BKP and Igting's motivation to join the project was to frame and present their experiences in their own terms and language. Since the POs' inception, their stories were documented and told on their behalf; whether it was by CAMP Asia or Community Development students. While this motivation might be common in most organizations, we believe that this was an exceptionally important undertaking for the members of BKP and Igting given their recent attempts to expand their independence from CAMP Asia. Both POs intend to become a cooperative—a formal and independent entity which has interests that lie outside of CAMP Asia and where each member is a stakeholder. Partly, this was also a direct response from their painful experience of being overly dependent on CAMP Asia and the disdain over the volatility of NGO support that is mostly reliant on foreign funding. As one BKP member said, "*walang forever* [there is no forever]." Hence, the documentation and presentation of their collective experiences in their own terms and language is a symbolic act of claiming ownership and part of the larger agenda of achieving full independence.

While BKP and Igting had strong motivations to participate in the research project, we also needed to connect their desire to present their narratives to the over-all goal of the program; that is, to facilitate an alternative form of regionalism based on people-to-people engagements. Offhand, this connection was achieved through an iterative process which was only internalized by the end of the project. Immediately, however, we had to contend with the “how,” “who,” and “what” questions. How do we execute the research in a collaborative and participatory manner? Which people do we invite to participate? And what was going to be our role for the entirety of the project.

The “how” question was particularly important since we did not want the process to be alienating or overly technical as the other prospective participants thought it would be. To address the intimidating nature of research, we thought that its design must be *demonstrative* and *enabling*. Its *demonstrative* imperative stems from our intention that, throughout the course of the project, participants internalize that they can perform research. On the other hand, the *enabling* imperative of the research relates to the provision of the necessary tools, skills to re-collect, present, and frame their experiences. We decided to draw inspiration from the popular methods and techniques of community organizing (CO) to achieve the goals of the project. CO in this case also served as a “common syntax” between us and our participants given our seven-year partnership with them. Drawing from CO, we incorporated various participatory activities such as *kwentuhan* (storytelling), reflection sessions, and open discussions, which Igting and BKP members were well-accustomed to.

We sought to achieve the demands of the project while keeping in mind our *demonstrative* and *enabling* imperatives by dividing the documentation process in four stages. Each stage corresponds to a two-day workshop which will be discussed further later. The four stages involve the process of re-collecting and re-telling their experiences, writing about these experiences, framing experiences into conceptual themes, and finalizing or validating the final output. While these stages, as it is currently presented, appears to be neat and logical, we must admit that these were not readily apparent. In other

words, while the end of the project was in our sights, getting there required some creativity and navigation. These stages were influenced by prior experiences, a product of an iterative process as we engaged with our partners and, up to some extent, experimentation.

The default answer to the “who” question was the leaders of BKP and Igting—preferably those who have been there since the “beginning” or so-called *pioneers*. However, we also invited CAMP Asia staff who were directly involved in BKP and Igting’s work and, at the same time, sympathetic to their aspirations. The decision to invite some CAMP Asia staff was both strategic and utilitarian. First, we believed that CAMP Asia staff could provide the necessary technical skills required for the project like writing and facilitation of group discussions. More importantly, however, we believed that by inviting CAMP Asia staff to the project, we could also reinforce their sympathetic attitudes towards the POs by learning more from the experiences of the very people they often represent. Through this, we also hope to sway them more towards the direction of the interests of BKP and Igting and not simply the programmatic requirements of their NGO. Finally, we believe that enjoining CAMP Asia staff could strengthen what we envision to be a substantial form of partnerships; that is, a democratic and negotiated decision making process for both parties.

While in theory, we could have assumed the role of a facilitator throughout the course of the project, our position relative to our partners seemed to demand the assumption of several roles. For instance, the intimate knowledge we possessed about our partners meant that we could assume the role of a discussion partner when BKP and Igting recollect and frame their experiences. However, our position as proponents of the project also entailed certain expectations that we would provide the necessary knowledge and skills for our partners to perform the research effectively. These considerations led us to assume a dual role—one that is both an interlocutor and a resource person. While some might interpret this dual role as displaying both horizontal and vertical relationships, we thought otherwise. The ability to freely vacillate between that of an interlocutor or a resource person, for instance, we believe is largely owed from

our intimate and embedded relationship with the partners. In some ways, our unique relationship with them allowed for free and genuine discussions on one hand and assuming the role of a so-called expert without worrying about the integrity of the participatory process, if not condescension. We shall return to the concept of intimacy and embeddedness later.

Doing research with grassroots organizations: The Igting and BKP experience

As discussed earlier, the process of documentation was divided into four contiguous stages. These involved re-collecting and re-telling their experiences, writing about these experiences, framing experiences into conceptual themes, and finalizing or validating the final output. An abridged version of their outputs would then be presented at a regional conference on alternative development come November 2018.

The workshops began in May 2018 with six participants from Igting, BKP, and CAMP. The first workshop served to formally acquaint BKP and Igting members with the project and begin the initial process of documentation. This entailed the re-recollection and re-telling of their experiences and, in the process, roughly codifying them. Excitement and anxiety enveloped the participants as they expressed their expectations for the project. According to BKP member Marivic, “Where should I start with my story? I have some understanding of documentation, but I am anxious where to start.”⁶ For Weng, a member of Igting, “...documentation is very difficult because I have no prior experience. But it would be easy for me because I have experiences to share.” Yet, most agree that it was important to undertake this process as it may enrich them and, up to some extent, their immediate community. Weng added, “I hope we could surface the experiences of people from below...so I could

⁶ The stories/narratives were delivered and documented in Filipino. For this discussion paper, these have been translated by Karl Hapal.

enrich my knowledge and so that others could understand how our lives unfolded.”

The re-collection and re-telling process began with a simple *kwentuhan* (storytelling). We asked each participant to share how they became members of either Igting or BKP. We told participants they could begin their story from any point in time that they deem relevant and that they could tell their story freely. For Belen, a member of Igting, she began with a tragic story that happened prior to their relocation in Towerville. Belen shared,

Our family was from Romblon. We went to Manila to find work. We then settled in Bagong Silangan, Quezon City. Unfortunately, our area got flooded when typhoon Ondoy [hit Manila]. Around 70 people died... We had to live in the covered court for a month and we were dependent on noodles, canned goods, and rice from DSWD. For our safety, we decided to leave and go to the relocation area in Bulacan offered by the government. When we got to Towerville, the house given to use was not properly built. It was cramped, hot, and the fixtures were defective.

These stories of personal tragedies were not uncommon for the members of Igting and BKP. However, despite these tragedies, the participants also shared stories of struggle and transformation as they became members of their respective POs. Belen shared,

...when a livelihood opportunity was introduced by CAMP, I immediately availed. I thought the project would not be pursued. I was very glad that the sewing center in Towerville was established.

Weng added,

I believe that even if I was not able to finish my education, I will not remain poor. Because of our PO and CAMP, I was able to improve myself especially from the seminars and other activities I have attended...From these, I applied it in my daily life, so I can improve.

The *kwentuhan* session accomplished several things. For us, their stories painted a rough picture of the events and actors to be documented. Likewise, it also gave us an idea about emerging themes that may be used to frame these events. However, for the participants, the act of storytelling is not new. In many ways, it is part of their repertoire whenever they engage with other actors such as Korean donors, visitors, or UP students. Working with each other on a daily basis, the participants were also familiar with each other's stories and its intersectionality with their own experience. Nonetheless, the *kwentuhan* session served as an exercise to recollect significant events in their personal and organizational lives. The recollection of these events was crucial for the next activity which took the form of a timeline. Populating the timeline was the first step in documenting their story—a rough documentation of events in a chronological manner (see Figure 1 below). As the participants wrote and plotted significant events in the timeline, key milestones became apparent. These milestones, in turn, served as the basis for an outline that guided them in writing their story for the project. In the end, we believe

FIGURE 1 Marivic summarizing the timeline of BKP drawn from the *kwentuhan* session



that the processes undertaken during the workshop *demonstrated* a key activity in the field of documentation; that is, the organization of events, places, actors, and the relationships between them.

Apart from the *kwentuhan* sessions and timeline, inputs were given to the participants regarding the various forms of documentation. Among the forms shared to the participants were journaling, interviewing in triads, and photo and video documentation. Based on the outline they have produced and brief inputs on documentation, we asked the participants to formulate a plan on how to approach the documentation process. Both Igting and BKP planned to do focus group discussions, journaling, and photo documentation.

The second workshop was held a month after with nine participants. The aim of the second workshop was to write the contents of the outline they have produced during the first workshop. As material, the participants will use the data they have gathered through the focus group discussions, journaling, and photo documentation. For instance, Igting members mostly pursued journaling as their main data collection technique. During the second workshop, they used the journals written by the members. An example is an entry by Rosalinda which discusses her experience with Igting and its positive experience on her. She wrote,

Through the trainings, I learned how to be part of an organization. Now, we operate the business. However, the process we underwent was not easy because we are not professionals running a business. Despite this, we did not waver. We sought to preserve our business. Now, we continue to make the business work. We continue to learn how to run it. If before I was just a sewer, now I am a leader.

Using the data that they have collected, participants were then asked to review them and to try to write short summaries—about six to eight sentences long—for each section in their outline. While we were worried that this might be a daunting task for the participants, we were surprisingly met with enthusiasm. As Weng said, “For me, the objective is how to put all of these together... the thing that you

said about writing. I am excited about it.” For us, the ambition of the writing exercise was not to produce a manuscript, nor a perfect product. Instead, we appreciated it for its demonstrative potentials; that is, acquainting participants with the idea of writing their stories and doing it together. In many ways, the workshop is a structured learning experience (SLE). We hoped that the experiences and lessons drawn from the workshop by the participants may become the foundation for fine-tuning and finalizing the draft manuscript in future activities. In the end, the participants managed to write several paragraphs about their context (i.e., their situation in the relocation area) and description of some of their activities. Below is an excerpt of what BKP members wrote about their experience of relocation:

The process of relocation was very difficult. It was far from the promises made by the government that the relocation site would be suitable for living. It was like a desert, far from civilization. Most struggled with their new situation—they did not know where the market was, it was far from the hospital, and they did not know under which administrative jurisdiction they were under. The people were very confused and did not know where they could turn to. Adding insult to injury were statements by an official which said, “you are like garbage thrown here in San Jose del Monte.” Moreover, they were accused of perpetrating theft and criminal activities. That is why the morale of the people in the community was down.

For us, the outputs like the excerpt above was no less than remarkable and served, in some ways, as proof of our concept. However, the participants were not able to write summaries for all the sections in their outline. Notwithstanding the assistance of CAMP staff, the outputs of the workshop made it apparent that the process of writing was difficult and required more time. As such, the decision was made to pursue writing when they return to their communities (see Figure 2 on page 14). We also agreed to provide some assistance through periodic visits and consultations. However, it was mostly CAMP staff who facilitated the discussion and writing process.

FIGURE 2 BKP members and CAMP staff writing session



Despite agreeing to pursue writing once they have gone back to their communities, it often took a back seat to pressing personal and organizational matters. This of course is understandable. However, the pressure to produce the deliverables was also a difficult reality that was slowly making itself apparent. At this point, we have not gone over the second stage of the documentation process. A critical decision had to be made; that is, to wait until the participants have finished writing or to pursue the next stages of the documentation process. We agreed to pursue the third stage of the process by September 2018. We hoped that after several months the participants would be finished with their outputs. Nonetheless, we came to a resolution that we would proceed with the third stage regardless of the state of their documentation.

The next stage was supposed to facilitate the framing of their experiences and the drawing out of themes. Earlier iterations sought to facilitate another writing exercise. This time, however, the participants will be asked to write about the lessons that they have identified as a result of a reflection process. Based on the lessons that they have written, themes shall be drawn. As facilitators, we agreed that writing

exercises were too tedious. As such, we thought writing exercises were not as important as surfacing lessons and generating themes.

Designing the process of framing proved to be difficult. Process-wise, we wanted this to be as evocative as possible—we want them to own the analysis of their experiences instead of its being imposed on them by authoritative figures such as academics. However, our intimate knowledge of BKP and Igting's history suggested possible themes that cut across both POs and are important points, especially in relation to the concept of alternative development. In other words, it would be easier, at least for us, if we simply presented these themes to the participants and have them work around these. But, on the other hand, we also wanted them to realize these themes by themselves and own these discoveries. Meanwhile, the deadlines of the project were becoming imposing at this point.

We attempted to resolve this dilemma while maintaining the integrity of the project through three steps. First, we mentioned the themes that we think were important based on their experiences. These were: the importance of a democratic and participatory *samahan* (organization), collective leadership, and accountability. Second, while these themes were mentioned, participants were not instructed to work around these in terms of analyzing their experiences. Instead, we presented familiar but fictitious scenarios (*see* Box 1 on page 16 for an example) where the participants may exercise analyzing these themes and, up to some extent, relate them to their own experience. To facilitate this exercise, we conducted debates based on the scenarios. A question was posed, and participants were asked whether they agree or disagree. The question, however, only served to deepen the discussion. By the end of the debate, we synthesized the main points raised and asked how it is relevant to their respective organizations.

The debates led to very colorful and passionate discussions about the themes. For instance, the discussion about Nanay Rosa yielded interesting points. Some participants agreed that Nanay Rosa is a good leader insofar as her capability is concerned. They pointed out, being a good leader entails developing one's skills and that capacity building is

BOX 1: Scenario on Leadership**Nanay Rosa the Leader**

Nanay Rosa is always busy. She is always occupied and seems exhausted. She knows and talks to a lot of people. Nanay Rosa is always at the forefront of the activities of their organization. She speaks first and is very articulate. Nanay Rosa is truly admirable. Dependable and always ready to help. She is a leader.

Question: Is Nanay Rosa a good leader?

an important dimension of building an organization. This, according to them, is similar to their experience as many of them continue to aspire to be as capable as Nanay Rosa. However, they yielded to the other group's point that Nanay Rosa is not a good leader since she seems to dominate the affairs of their organization. According to them, a good leader draws from the strength and wisdom of their fellow members. Another group raised an interesting point by arguing that Nanay Rosa should not be examined out of context; that is, her characteristics as a leader might be due to the environment where she operates. As demonstrated by their responses, the examination of Nanay Rosa's case yielded important, if not nuanced points, on sustained capacity building efforts and collective leadership. We hoped that through the debates, important lessons will surface as in the case of the discussion on Nanay Rosa's leadership acumen and that these lessons would be embedded in the consciousness of the participants when they continue writing their respective outputs. Furthermore, the debates also served to acquaint them to a rather abstract analytical process. The scenarios given to them challenged their own views by applying it to hypothetical situations, forced them to look beyond their own experience and to test these views in analytical terms (i.e., answering the why and how questions). After debating about the themes, we agreed to finalize the outputs before the fourth and final workshop on October 2018.

The fourth and final workshop was relatively straightforward. The goal was to finalize and validate the outputs. Much of the time was spent in supplementing and finalizing their documentation and

preparing for the upcoming regional conference. Come November 2018, Igting and BKP attended the conference and presented an abridged version of their output. Through their presentations, they were able to share their experiences to other grassroots organizations from Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and similar organizations in the Philippines. More importantly, they were able to connect with like-minded organizations and realize that their issues transcend national borders. This intersectionality of issues and strategies inspired them to learn more about other's practices and hopefully be exposed to them. Beyond the conference, we are currently in the process of editing their documentation work. Unfortunately, we have not discussed with them various possibilities of utilizing their work nor did we had time to reflect on the process we have undertaken in 2018. Meanwhile, there seems to be a growing interest with the participatory documentation processes we have undertaken.

Interrogating the research process

In many ways, the research process has not yet run its full course. For one, we have not yet produced the final output. Likewise, there are various activities that we, together with BKP and Igting, could pursue in the immediate future to maximize its *demonstrative* and *enabling* potentials. Furthermore, we have not also explored how to popularize their outputs in concrete terms. In other words, it is still a work in progress. As such, we believe we are not yet able to discuss its impact to both grassroots organizations. Nonetheless, we believe that what has been undertaken and accomplished thus far can already be subjected to reflection. By thinking of our experience in conceptual terms, we think we can provide some preliminary lessons in terms of doing research, especially with grassroots organizations. In the beginning, we mentioned that this process drew inspiration from PAR and our own community organizing experiences. In this section, we dwell deeper on the underlying theory of the documentation process. This shall begin by discussing PAR; its definition, theory, and features. We then juxtapose it with our understanding of what it means to do research with the poor.

Drawing inspiration from PAR seemed to be the *natural* choice given the aspirations of the program, our personal biases, and competency. But what is PAR, and more importantly, why? Kondon, Pain, and Kesby (2007, 9) defined PAR as “a collaborative process of research, education and action explicitly oriented towards transformation.” While Kondon, Pain, and Kesby’s (2007) definition captures the essence of PAR rather succinctly, a cursory review of literature reveals a wide range of interpretations and applications. These draw from critical discussions about epistemology, liberative, emancipatory, and empowering agendas (Freire 1984), and people-centered models of development work (Chambers 1997).

While we loosely agree with the broad range of interpretations concerning PAR, we appreciate the approach more as a standpoint in terms of privileging people’s knowledge and voices, and its inherent connections with community organizing. This privileging directly connects with its use of participatory approaches for data collection and analysis, and continuing action and advocacy towards a pro-people transformative agenda.

As a standpoint, PAR privileges local and subaltern knowledges that are otherwise subjugated by mainstream discourses. This privileging argues that local knowledges are legitimate and are critical to the totalizing tendencies of mainstream discourses. This bias for local knowledge puts poor people and their communities as potent sources and articulators of knowledge. PAR further argues that as bearers of knowledge, they can and are able to present and frame their situation. This runs against conventional models of knowledge generation where so-called experts have monopoly of representing and interpreting reality; interpretations that are made on behalf of poor people where the powerful “guide” their decisions and actions.

Given these, the main imperative of PAR is to de-monopolize knowledge and accommodate voices from below. From a Foucauldian perspective, this de-monopolization of knowledge as suggested by PAR has profound effects to power and its maintenance. According to Foucault (1980, 180), “Truth is linked in a circular relation with

systems of power which produces and sustains it, and to effects of power which it induces, and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth.” PAR’s privileging of knowledges generated by and for the people and communities is a challenge to truth claims from conventional and mainstream sources. And this challenge is, in a Foucauldian sense, an expression or assertion of agency and power.

In PAR, the process of producing and privileging of local knowledge is realized through a collaborative and participatory process between researcher and communities. Some interpretations of PAR even require the dissolution of the distinction between researcher and its participants. These collaborations may have practical purposes such as addressing a local problem or it may possess an acute political character by challenging dominating narratives or bringing to fore alternative interpretations of events. In any case, the key in this collaboration lies in the process of setting the agenda and facilitating the process of data collection and analysis. PAR dictates transparency between the collaborators and a parity of all actors during discussions and decision-making.

PAR’s claim about knowledge and its use of participatory approaches relate to its transformative agenda. Broadly, it argues that local knowledges are valid, and their practices may be considered as legitimate models for development. These knowledges and practices often assume a critical position to mainstream models of development. If applied, these knowledges and practices may be key in solving local issues or problems in a manner that is timely, relevant, and effective. More importantly, utilizing these transforms people and communities from passive objects to agents of their development (Korten 1990). The efficacy of local knowledges and practices in addressing developmental concerns has been presented through the works of development scholars like Robert Chambers (1997), Lito Manalili (1990) in the Philippines, and other development practitioners. However, the articulation and use of local knowledge through participatory means are not only tangentially related to changing conditions in the community or society; the exercise of articulation and utilization of local knowledges is PAR’s transformative agenda—people having the confidence with their knowledge and contesting other claims.

While PAR possesses liberative and emancipatory visions, from where we stand, it appears that the approach has largely failed to gain traction in terms of penetrating the ivory tower of the academia flailed with its grand theories. But that is an entirely different matter—the politics of research—which warrants its own discussion. However, if one might surmise, the relative marginal position of PAR may also relate to the practice itself and the *modus operandi* embedded within it. Doing participatory research with grassroots organizations is a difficult endeavor. Alluding to the first point, the notion that doing research is an exclusive domain monopolized by learned people like academics continues to prevail. Wittingly, or more importantly unwittingly, for PAR practitioners, this perception is reinforced by both researchers and the people, either through the methods that they use or the relationship the process produces. This is particularly evident in participatory research processes which end up assuming a researcher-respondent relationship despite of the use of participatory data gathering techniques. In this configuration, it is as if that the research process is “brokered” by experts to generate knowledge. Activities are introduced to demonstrate a veneer of participation, with its quality anything but suspect. The product of this brokered process is a re-telling and re-interpretation of people’s reality that is, more often than not, intelligible or catered to so-called experts and their audiences, rather than the people who participated in them. We understand that this is not a new issue, not only in participatory research, but in the field of knowledge generation in general. Likewise, grassroots organizations have already recognized this issue as many feel the need to tell their stories in their own terms.

PAR attempts to mitigate these tendencies by putting premium on processual issues like agenda setting, building consensus, and maintaining substantial participation amongst the people involved. Yet, we think this is quite problematic. Focusing on processual matters is problematic since this “solution” seems rather prescriptive; that is, participatory research should be implemented like this or like that; as if doing research is predictable and all it takes is following steps marked by milestones. Inscribed in the prescriptiveness of participatory research is, what appears to us, an essentializing tendency that all PAR projects must be implemented conforming

(more or less) to a mold. That is not to say that this essentializing tendencies are no less progressive. Indeed, PAR's principles uphold critical and liberative agenda of democracy, equity, and empowerment. However, we believe these are reflections of how things ought to be and not how things are. And it shows its limitation when confronted by complex and dilemma-filled scenarios.

How then should we think about participatory research? In our experience, we learned that more than the process itself, the most important ingredient for doing PAR was our embeddedness with the BKP and Igting, resulting to intimate knowledges and relationships. In community organizing jargon, this meant that prior to the research itself, we were integrated with the POs and its members. By the term "integrated" (or integration) we refer to a process or an attempt to possess an intimate knowledge or understanding of the milieu of people, not only from observation and by experiencing their life, but in terms of how people understand it. This process of putting oneself in other's shoes, walking it, and trying to see from the vantage point of said shoe is a foundational skill and practice in community organizing and CD. Yet, it is often forgotten that the reciprocal equivalent of an organizer's move to integrate with the community is as equally important. In other words, integration embeds an organizer to the community inasmuch as the community is embedded in an organizer's life. In this process, the dynamic between the integrator and the integrated is blurred and, in theory, creates an intricate web of relationships that allows for free and genuine discussions. In our minds, it seems impossible to conduct PAR with BKP and Igting—if we were going to be true to its principles and not simply "broker" its implementation—without this foundation. And this point becomes readily apparent if we consider KMC, K3, and PUSO's response to our invitation to collaborate which they ultimately turned down—the partnership was there but there is reason to suspect its depth. One might say that we were not embedded enough.

Perhaps, also one measure of embeddedness is language. While conventional participatory research theory would suggest the blurring between the researcher and the researched, we believe that it is important to recognize that there are inherent differences in terms of

how the two articulate knowledge. This is especially apparent in the language they use. For instance, a PO member might say, “*gusto kong matuto*” (I want to learn), we might refer to it as capacity building; or “*kailangan makisangkot sa usapin ng pera at pamamahala*” (there is a need to be involved in the affairs of money and governance), we might associate these with accountability and empowerment. In these cases, their languages seem to point to distinct, albeit related, imperatives—that is for the former to describe (*pagkukwento*) and the latter, conceptualize. This example is quite simplistic, but the point we wish to put across is that in participatory researches, languages often intersect, interact, and in some cases, contend with each other. Perhaps, the key skill here, resulting from embeddedness, is the ability to understand and navigate through each other’s language given its inherent differences and logic. Without this understanding, we believe, researchers undertaking participatory researches may find it difficult to navigate the terrain.

Hence, despite already possessing agenda targets, schedules, and outputs prior to formally engaging BKP and Igting, it seemed that it was not much of an issue since our embedded position allowed both of us to be forthcoming regarding the project; we understood each other’s language and agenda. While an understanding of the participatory research process in terms of embeddedness and competing languages might be useful, it does not provide any guidance on how to act. One may argue that it is bereft of principles to guide researchers on how to navigate the research terrain. In our experience, we found it useful to be reflexive or, in other words, subject ourselves and the process we undertake in constant scrutiny. For instance, we constantly ask ourselves: What position does [my] language occupy? How does it relate to other people? Have we preserved our *demonstrative* and *enabling* agenda? These processes were significant to us since it allowed a re-examination of our practice. It allowed us to avoid languages that merely represent a research process informed by transactional relationships. Instead, these reflective moments allowed us to re-configure and iterate our practice to enable us to engage BKP and Igting in an interactive manner. The goal was not necessarily to build consensus for consensus’ sake. Instead, it was to interact and engage with BKP and Igting regarding the process and the knowledge

generated in a meaningful manner. Part of this reflexive process is recognizing and dealing with realities such as project deliverables, schedules, and deadlines that, while inconvenient, affect the entire process of doing research. For instance, we had intense debates about the design of the research. Due to years of partnerships with our partners, we already possess vast information about their history. At least 14 reports about BKP and Igting written by our students were already in our possession. We entertained the idea that writing the experiences of BKP and Igting might be a matter of synthesizing these reports and have members validate them. Given this knowledge, we also had a good idea on how to frame these experiences into concepts and important lessons that might enrich further and contribute to the discourse of alternative development. However, we concluded that our role was not of a historiographer and assuming so would run against the desire of BKP and Igting to write their own stories.

Hence, we settled our role as facilitators and enablers of this writing process. However, this was also not without complications. In varying capacities, we have served, not only as “sparring partners,” but as resource persons to our partners’ work. In many ways, this relationship possesses a vertical character—to say the least our relationship with our partners, especially in the realm of research, was asymmetrical. This does not imply that we have not aspired and worked for parity. However, we had to contend with the general tendency of our partners to look on to us for direction or guidance especially in the field of documentation and research.

Yet, despite of this issue we believed that it should not dissuade us from undertaking the project. And while the project provides us with a pre-set agenda, activities, and outputs, these can be treated simply as a point of departure for the collaborative process that will ensue. However, more important than the process as a point of departure, we thought that it was important to create spaces where both of us could be forthcoming, candid, and honest throughout the collaboration. This, we believe, is a test and an exercise of our embeddedness to one another. As such, activities like the identification of a topic, methods of documentation, and the form of its presentation was subjected to open and free discussions or debates. Likewise, the pre-set targets

of the project did not prevent us from infusing capacity building components to further develop both individual and organizational capacities. We believe that this approach allowed us to formulate a collaborative research project where our partners are not mere respondents. Moreover, it also allowed the pursuit of transformative agenda apart from the project's documentary and investigative imperatives.

In the end, ultimately, the use of participatory approaches was guided by our bottom-lines for the project. In the end, we want our partners to tell their stories instead of perpetuating the tendency of most research projects that re-tell people's stories on their behalf. We believe the moment of telling these stories and the processes leading up to it will provide our partners with moments of reflection where they can draw inspiration, lessons, and future directions. We also believe that this moment is a symbolic act of owning their experiences and victories. Reflecting on our experience, we thought of the research process in terms of embeddedness, competing languages which required constant reflexive moments to realize a common agenda; that is, to surface the voices of Igting and BKP and have them tell their stories in their own terms, an agenda that is shared both by us and the organizations. Nonetheless, we had to account for our own positionality, and instead of ignoring it, acknowledge and deal with it. While our attempt to emulate participatory research methods does not pretend to be perfect, we believe that we have contributed in laying down a perspective that is grounded more not in essential categories in dealing with the complexities of doing research with grassroots organizations.

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