

**Monograph
Series**

2023-03



University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies
PROGRAM ON ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Re-Imagining Post-Pandemic Societies Alternative Practices across Southeast Asia

VOLUME 2

EDITORS

Eduardo C. Tadem
Benjamin B. Velasco
Jose Monfred C. Sy
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Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta
Honey B. Tabiola
Ryan Joseph C. Martinez



UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
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Ngamee Lup and ALLAFUM (All Loktak Lake Area Fishermen Union Manipur)

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Introduction: Post-Pandemic Southeast Asia: Systemic Perils and Peoples' Alternatives

Eduardo C. Tadem¹

By mid-2022, governments around the world began easing up on the severe COVID-19 restrictions and regulations that their peoples were subjected to. They also started opening their countries to visitors. These moves were motivated by the debilitating impact of COVID-related policies on the economies and social fabric of virtually all countries around the globe. Conversely, by early 2021, the COVID numbers appeared to be receding and stabilizing.

Most economies suffered a recession, companies went bankrupt, supply chains were disrupted, major stock markets indices fell, unemployment rose, job vacancies were at an all-time low, and global tourism suffered downturns (Jones et al. 2021). The Asian Development Bank (ADB 2022) calculated that COVID-19 “pushed 4.7 million more people in Southeast Asia into extreme poverty and 9.3 million jobs disappeared.” By far, the only businesses that prospered were the pharmaceutical corporations and other companies engaged in the manufacture and marketing of pandemic-related products.

Southeast Asian countries and economies were no exception to pandemic impacts. All but one country (Vietnam) suffered negative growth rates. For analysts, the region was “hit harder” economically than other parts of the globe (World Bank 2021).

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The United Nations (UN) World Health Organization (WHO), however, advised that countries can loosen restrictions and lift lockdowns only “if they have high immunity rates, their health care systems are strong and the epidemiological trends are going in the right direction” (Keaten 2022).

COVID-19 Cases and Deaths Continue to Rise

The easing up may prove to be double-edged, however. While economies recovered in 2022, with Southeast Asia estimated to have grown by 5.5 percent for the year (ADB 2022), COVID-19 infections and resulting deaths continue to rise. As Table 1 shows, the total Southeast Asian COVID cases rose from 20 million to 36 million, or an average of 78 percent in one year from 1 February 2022 to 1 February 2023.

Countries with the highest rate increases in infections were Brunei (407 percent), Vietnam (269 percent), Singapore (226 percent), Thailand (68 percent), Laos (53 percent), and Malaysia (50 percent). Except for Laos, these countries had been the top-performing Southeast Asian economies for many years. Those with the lowest rate increases were Timor-Leste (4 percent), Cambodia (7 percent), Myanmar (9 percent), and the Philippines (11 percent).

The high rate of increases may be attributed to the early easing of restrictions for Brunei (August 2020), Malaysia (August 2021), Vietnam (March 2022), Singapore (April 2022), Thailand (February 2022), and Laos (January 2022). The Philippines, on the other hand, with only an 11 percent increase in cases, declared a full lifting of restrictions only in January 2023 (Ombay 2023). Surprisingly, Indonesia eased restrictions early on in the latter half of 2021 but had a lower rate of increase in infections at 17 percent.

Deaths from the pandemic continued with the Southeast Asian fatality rate rising by 13 percent in one year between 1 February 2022 and 1 February 2023, or from 323,401 to 365,541. The highest percentage increases in deaths were registered in Brunei (96 percent), Singapore (75 percent), and Thailand (46 percent). Countries with the lowest rate increases in deaths were Myanmar (0.7 percent), Cambodia (1 percent), Indonesia (9 percent), and Vietnam (8 percent).

It must be pointed out, however, that these figures may tend to be underestimated or underreported. This would be true for countries with

underdeveloped health systems with inadequate mass testing and contact tracing capabilities. On the other hand, those with developed and more technologically advanced health infrastructures would probably have more reliable data on COVID-19 infections and deaths.

TABLE 1 ► Southeast Asia COVID Status, 1 Feb 2022–1 Feb 2023

Country	Total Cases, 1 Feb 2022	Total Cases, 1 Feb 2023	% Increase Cases	Total Deaths 1 Feb 2022	Total Deaths 1 Feb 2023	% Increase Deaths
Vietnam	3,120,301	11,526,522	269.00%	39,962	43,186	8.07%
Indonesia	5,457,775	6,730,537	16.72%	147,586	160,822	8.97%
Malaysia	3,367,871	5,037,242	49.56%	32,591	36,942	13.35%
Thailand	2,819,282	4,726,984	67.67%	22,809	33,392	46.40%
Philippines	3,658,892	4,073,504	11.33%	56,224	65,810	17.05%
Singapore	679,795	2,218,050	226.28%	986	1,722	74.64%
Myanmar	581,837	633,836	8.94%	19,356	19,490	0.69%
Brunei	51,516	261,440	407.49%	115	225	95.65%
Laos	142,237	217,289	52.76%	619	758	22.46%
Cambodia	129,078	138,320	6.74%	3,027	3,056	0.96%
Timor-Leste	22,584	23,375	3.50%	126	138	9.52%
TOTAL	20,013,168	35,587,099	77.82%	323,401	365,541	13.03%

Source: CSIS n.d.

Regarding vaccinations, Southeast Asia’s record remains uneven (Table 2). As of 1 February 2023, the average percentage of persons fully vaccinated (i.e., two doses) in the region’s total population remains low at 68 percent. Five countries, however, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, have high vaccination rates, ranging from 81 percent to 97 percent as of 1 February 2023. These numbers fall within the threshold range to achieve “herd immunity” (Brueck 2021).²

For those with the required booster shots, the number drastically falls to a low of 31 percent for Southeast Asia as a whole. Only Singapore,

2 The range of “herd immunity” status has been calculated by experts to be from 80 percent to 90 percent vaccination rate for the COVID-19 virus as of mid-2021 at the height of the Delta variant infections (Brueck 2021). The current herd immunity rate has not been determined for the now more prevalent Omicron variant.

3 Herd immunity is achieved “when most of a population is immune to an infectious disease,” thus providing “indirect protection—also called population immunity, or herd protection” (d’Souza and Dowdy 2021).

with 84 percent of its population fully vaccinated, has achieved the numbers required for herd immunity.³ In terms of vaccination doses per 100 population, the Southeast Asian average of 210 means that, in general, each person has had only two vaccine doses, instead of the mandated four.

TABLE 2 ► Southeast Asia Vaccination Status, 1 Feb 2023

Country	Persons Fully Vaccinated	% of Pop fully vaccinated	Persons booster + add'l dose	% of Pop booster + add'l dose	Vaccine Doses/100 pop
Brunei	446,323	97%	339,711	73.70%	294.26
Cambodia	14,620,423	86%	10,477,144	61.50%	272.82
Indonesia	172,693,321	62%	67,952,274	24.40%	162.44
Lao PDR	5,648,517	75%	2,359,576	31.47%	206.90
Malaysia	27,536,594	81%	16,296,842	48.00%	224.00
Philippines	73,960,026	62%	21,425,727	18.52%	155.15
Singapore	5,119,159	92%	4,595,884	83.63%	254.28
Thailand	54,077,454	77%	27,206,983	38.82%	198.92
Timor-Leste	797,351	48%	328,531	20.00%	152.33
Myanmar	27,545,329	51%	2,227,351	4.09%	118.64
Vietnam	85,868,733	86%	57,505,108	58.00%	272.93
TOTALS	468,350,000	68%	210,715,032	30.76%	210 Ave.

Source: Our World in Data n.d.

The Southeast Asian rate of vaccinations situates the region between the two poles that characterize the disparities between rich and poor that are reflected on a global scale. An Oxford University team calculated that at the extreme levels “as of Nov. 6, 2022, about 80% of people in high-income countries had received at least one vaccine dose compared to only 23% of those in low-income countries” (Wolf, Matthews, and Alas 2022). The inequalities become starker in the case of those fully vaccinated (75 percent vs. 19 percent) and those with booster jabs (61 percent vs. 1.4 percent). See Figure 1.

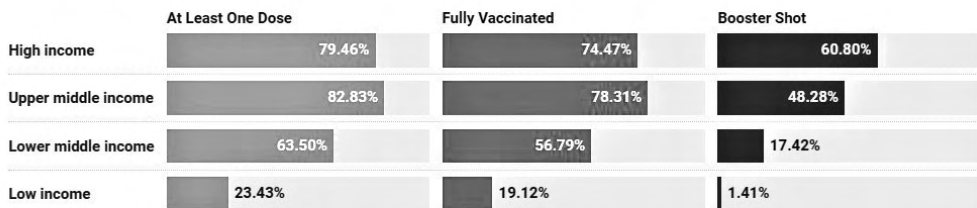
Access to affordable vaccines by poor and developing countries is crucial to strengthening efforts at curbing the pandemic. This need, however, is hamstrung by continuing refusals of developed countries and multinational pharmaceutical corporations to widen access to COVID-19 tests, vaccines, and treatment (Stiglitz and Wallach 2022). In early

December 2022, the United States, the European Union, and wealthy Asian nations (Japan and South Korea) successfully delayed a decision on a proposal by developing member countries to waive intellectual property rights held by multinationals on therapies and tests related to COVID-19. As Stiglitz and Wallach (2022) pointed out,

Pharmaceutical corporations' all-out efforts to stop the WTO from easing restrictions on the export of generic COVID-19 treatments and tests is the strongest evidence that doing so would make a real difference in generating affordable supplies of these critical medical goods. The flip side of greater access, though, would be a weakening of the drugmakers' monopoly power and a reduction of their profit margins.

Figure 1: Vaccination Status by Country Income Group

Income groups are based on World Bank income classifications.



Data as of Nov. 6, 2022.

Chart: U.S. News & World Report • Source: Our World In Data

U.S. News

Source: Wolf, Matthews, and Alas 2022.

On 30 January 2023, the WHO declared that “COVID-19 continues to constitute a public health emergency of international concern, its highest form of alert” and added that the viral disease “was likely in a ‘transition period’ that continues to need careful management to mitigate the potential negative consequences” (Reuters 2023).

Southeast Asia’s Economies

As a direct result of the easing of pandemic restrictions and the opening up of economies, the ADB (2022) estimated Southeast Asia’s growth forecast for 2022 at a higher 5.5 percent from an earlier estimate of 5.1 percent “on stronger-than-expected domestic consumption, exports and services, particularly tourism.” Much of this growth is attributed to Indonesia’s upturn, the region’s largest economy, with additional inputs from Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

Commenting on the Philippines' seemingly impressive 2022 growth of 7.6 percent, JC Punongbayan (2023), an economist at the University of the Philippines (UP), points out that this has to be viewed from the phenomenon of a "base effect." This means that "coming from such a low base in 2021" makes an increase for 2022 "register as a sizable growth rate." He added two other factors—revenge consumer spending from "pent-up demand" and the 2022 presidential elections. The "base effect" from a seemingly impressive growth rate could very well apply to other Southeast Asian countries, which, except Vietnam, Myanmar, and Brunei, suffered negative growth in 2020 and only grew mediocly in 2021.⁴

The ADB (2022) projects that such growth rates cannot be sustained for 2023 "as global demand weakens" alongside high inflation due mainly to rising global food and energy prices, rising interest rates, higher capital outflows, currency depreciation, and reduced government spending. Analysts also pointed out the indirect effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Southeast Asia as "collateral damage," which stems from the war's impact on European economies and the sanctions on Russia (Loh 2022). Accordingly, the regional bank adjusted forecasts for Southeast Asia's leading economies (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) to slow down to a 4.7 percent growth rate for 2023 (ADB 2022).

The Asia Society classifies Southeast Asian economies during the pandemic in terms of three primary waves (Fraser 2022). The first few months of 2020 constituted the first phase, "when most economies plunged into recession as borders and economies shut, tourism died, supply chains struggled, and global demand tanked." A cautious recovery in 2021 "was threatened by a devastating Delta wave." Economic recovery was more evident in 2022, even as the more infectious but milder Omicron variant emerged. The third phase is just starting in 2023, "one in which governments are having to navigate a sharply deteriorating global economic outlook marked by inflation, energy and food price shocks from the war in Ukraine, and lower growth in China." These are factors seen as dampening economic growth in the region (Fraser 2022).

As most Southeast Asian countries are classified as developing economies, a funding gap arises from the "almost US\$500 billion in collective debt reserving payments that are due in the next four years" (World Economic Forum 2023). In 2022, the Philippines and Thailand

4 Myanmar, however, registered a negative rate of 18 percent in 2021.

registered the highest Southeast Asian increase in the ratio of government debt to gross domestic product (GDP) (Agcaoli 2022). The debt-to-GDP ratio for Southeast Asia grew from 49 percent in 2019 to 63 percent in 2021, with Laos clocking 94 percent (Fraser 2022).⁵ As a result of pandemic-related debts, the Philippines reached a high 63.5 percent debt-to-GDP ratio by mid-2022—a significant jump from a low 39.6-percent ratio in 2019.

Of particular concern is China’s growing exposure in Southeast Asia’s development financing policies that see the region’s debt to China increasing. Cheong (2022), writing from the Yusof Ishak Institute of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), reports that since “China’s development loans in the region are “mainly debt-financed, rather than aid-financed,” interest rates are “substantially higher . . . than those of benchmark institutions such as the World Bank, and therefore generate higher returns for Chinese lenders.” While discounting the idea of a looming “debt trap” for Southeast Asian borrower countries, Cheong nevertheless concludes that China’s commercial-driven loans do not fit “Beijing’s self-image as a benevolent development partner.”

One particular case, however, points to certain problems that may arise from China’s lending strategies. The Laos-China Railway spans 1,035 kilometers, connecting Kunming in Yunnan province in China and Vientiane, the capital of Laos. It was inaugurated on 3 December 2021 (Takahashi 2023). With a total project cost of USD 6 billion, the railway is part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As of 31 January 2022, it had handled 10.3 million passenger trips and operated 20,000 passenger trains (Xinhua News Agency 2023).

China’s official news agency, Xinhua, “[praised] its role in facilitating cross-border transactions” (Takahashi 2023). The agency announced that the railway “has not only benefited the people of both countries, but also become a popular international public [good] and a platform for international cooperation” (quoted in Takahashi 2023). The number of passenger trips, however, may be misleading, since China had kept highly stringent COVID-19 cross-border travel restrictions throughout 2022. Thus, 84 percent of the passenger trips were logged on the Chinese side of the border alone (Xinhua News Agency 2023).

5 The standard measure of debt sustainability sets a threshold of 60 percent beyond which a debt crisis or a “debt trap” could arise. There are, of course, other more meaningful ways of determining the magnitude of the debt burden and its sustainability including several “hidden costs,” the practice of tied aid, sovereign guarantees, and social and environmental fallout (Tadem 2022a; 2022b).

Of the total project cost of USD 6 billion, China covered 70 percent, or USD 4.2 billion, aside from providing technology, equipment, and operational expertise. The remaining USD 1.8 billion was charged to Laos as loans. This amount is equivalent to 10 percent of Laos's GDP. The benefits for Laos from the project, however, will take 22 years for the country to recoup in a worst-case scenario and three years as a best-case (Takahashi 2023). The former seems more likely, given Laos' foreign debt of USD 14.5 billion at the end of 2021. It exceeded the country's 2022 GDP. In addition, Laos's currency, the kip, has been weakening (Takahashi 2022). Laos' total debts to China already comprise 65 percent of its GDP. It is considered "the highest in the world" and "raises concerns about a 'debt trap' that would leave Laos saddled with loans it cannot repay" (Takahashi 2022).

Southeast Asia and the World

Southeast Asia, through its regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has been actively engaged in extraregional international affairs. For the United States, Southeast Asia has become particularly attractive, given the discordant state of US–China relations. The US sees countries in the region as allies at best or as buffer states, at the least. For the European Union, Southeast Asian economies offer a respite from the battering its member countries have been receiving as a fallout from the Ukraine–Russia war and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Europe and the US are both keen to match or exceed China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia.

In November 2022, Southeast Asia hosted three major summits that lasted 12 days. These events were billed as a staging ground for "great power politics" (Obe 2022). These were the annual meeting of ASEAN leaders in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (8–13 November 2022), the Group of 20 summit in Bali, Indonesia (15–16 November 2022), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Bangkok, Thailand (16–19 November 2022).⁶ While the goal was officially to "foster deeper economic cooperation amid the lingering COVID-19 pandemic,

6 Formed in 1999, the Group of 20 members are the European Union, Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia, the United States, India, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, China, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. APEC is composed of 21 "member economies," namely Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, the United States, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, South Korea, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Chile, Russia, Peru, and Vietnam.

spreading inflation and the risk of a global recession, . . . the events were overshadowed by severe geopolitical tensions, from the Ukraine war to the U.S.–China rivalry and North Korea’s launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile” (Obe 2022). Aside from the joint meetings, there were one-on-one discussions between US president Joe Biden and Chinese president Xi Jinping. This was their first face-to-face encounter. In addition, Biden engaged in discussions with ASEAN, Japanese, and Chinese leaders, respectively (Obe 2022).

At the post-ASEAN round of meetings in Phnom Penh, Biden and the ASEAN heads of state “agreed to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership” agreement that “will institutionalize and expand cooperation in health, transportation, environment, energy, . . . promote connectivity in communications and infrastructure . . . [including] establishing integrated electric vehicle production ecosystems and supporting pandemic response efforts and measures to alleviate climate change and poverty” (Camba 2023). Earlier, in May 2022, Biden hosted a summit with regional leaders, where he promised “a new era in US–ASEAN relations,” pledging US\$150 million to fund programs in Southeast Asia (Camba 2023).

In what can be viewed as a Western-centric focus of the meetings, the “prolonged political crisis in Myanmar,” originally tabled as a priority agenda, “received relatively less attention than Ukraine . . . even as the military continues its repression” (Obe 2022). Myanmar’s military junta leaders were not invited to any of the summits because of its inaction on a previously agreed-upon peace plan.

ASEAN leaders and the European Union met on 14 December 2022 in Brussels to mark 45 years of diplomatic ties between the two regional groups. In “the first-ever summit between the two blocs,” they “resolved to cooperate more on everything from clean energy to security” while glossing over differences such as “human rights and the Russian invasion of Ukraine” (Shibata et al. 2022a).⁷ Vietnam received special attention for its “clean energy transition with a package of public and private financing worth as much as 17 billion euros (USD 18 billion),” which is planned to wean the country away from coal (Shibata et al. 2022). The

7 Europe has been severely hit by “the disruption of Russian energy supplies that have affected financial markets and driven up inflation,” resulting in skyrocketing consumer prices of essential goods and services (Associated Press 2022).

EU also announced financing worth “10 billion euros (USD 10.6 billion) for ASEAN-region projects under its “Global Gateway” program, which is something of a European answer to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Associated Press 2022).

In remarks reminiscent of Cold War language and an obvious dig at China, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas remarked, “In the global world that we are living in today, it is very important that we are connected to like-minded countries” (Associated Press 2022). Echoing this “us versus them” rhetoric, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. chimed in, “Although we come from very different places, we have a very similar world view of the challenges that we all face” (AP News 2022). The meeting was significant with the absence of Myanmar’s junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, who was disinvited even as other authoritarian leaders like Cambodia’s Hun Sen and Thailand’s Prayuth Chan-o-cha were welcomed.

Southeast Asian Politics

Southeast Asia may be a favored region of developed countries seeking to rebound from the pandemic and other economic problems. However, “when it comes to politics, . . . the region has been far from progressive.” It remains “largely a fortress of authoritarianism, with military-based regimes (Thailand and Myanmar), dominant single parties (Vietnam, Singapore and Laos), absolute monarchies (Brunei) and old-fashioned autocrats (Cambodia) dominating the political landscape” (Heydarian 2022). As for the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, despite “a decent record of relatively competitive and free elections, . . . all three have also seen the emergence of authoritarian populist forces and the continued marginalization of progressive parties” (Heydarian 2022).

There is no dearth of progressive social movements in the region, but their effectiveness has been blunted by extreme repression and their diminished ability to mobilize the numbers needed to galvanize the region’s marginalized peoples into adopting more radical alternatives. In Thailand and Myanmar, democratic movements led by young activists and students succeeded in bringing tens of thousands into the streets in protests against military power grabs. However, their efforts could not be sustained over a longer period. In the Philippines, the promise of the 1986 insurrection that toppled the Marcos dictatorship quickly dissipated with the ascendancy of corporate-driven liberal forces and the return of traditional dynastic politicians. To make matters worse, the May 2022 elections saw the total return of the Marcoses to power, with no less than

the dictator's son and namesake, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., handily winning the presidential race. As Heydarian (2022) pointed out, "Absent a genuine revival of progressive forces, the region is likely at best to produce democratically elected populists and at worst, regress into full-fledged authoritarianism."

Myanmar is the worst-case study for Southeast Asian politics. Since staging a coup against the government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing's regime has killed 2,940 people and jailed 13,763, according to human rights groups, while being totally oblivious to international condemnation (Okumura 2023).⁸ The Myanmar generals' intransigence may be fueled by the fact that the US, Japan, and the European Union continue to engage in lucrative trade deals with the junta, while Russia, China, and India supply it with arms and other military hardware (Okumura 2023).⁹ Western countries, as well as ASEAN, confine themselves to ineffective calls for the junta to reinstall Aung Saan Suu Kyi or token gestures such as disinviting the generals to international gatherings.

In December 2022, as a result of decades-long pressure from Islamist parties and conservative movements, Indonesia passed a highly controversial criminal law, the Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana (KUHP; *Book of Criminal Law*) that brings the Joko Widodo government closer to the Southeast Asian authoritarian norm (Llewellyn 2022). The new law limits the right to dissent; prohibits insulting the president, the vice-president, and government institutions; and criminalizes cohabitation, extramarital sex, and abortion. Furthermore, Article 188 of KUHP "states that any person who disseminates or promotes communism, Marxism or other understandings that violate Pancasila¹⁰ faces a fine or up to four years in prison" (Kusman 2022). Human rights groups in Indonesia and abroad have denounced the new code as discriminating and oppressive against women, minorities, the LGBT

8 "Other independent research and monitoring groups put civilian deaths at over 30,000, while hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people are believed to be cowering along remote borders" (Okumura 2023).

9 "Myanmar exports of garment products to the European Union, Japan, and the U.S. reached a record high of \$3.3 billion between January and September 2022, or about 1.6 times more than the same period a year earlier" (Okumura 2023).

10 Pancasila (or Pantjasila) is Indonesia's founding national ideology built on five principles: "Indonesian nationalism; internationalism, or humanism; consent, or democracy; social prosperity; and belief in one God" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2013).

community, “activists and regular citizens critical of government” (Llewellyn 2022).

Thailand continues to be ruled by a military junta masked as a civilian government (The Economist 2022). After seizing power from an elected government in 2014, General Prayuth Chan-ocha unilaterally declared himself Prime Minister and then sought legitimacy by calling for elections in 2019. But after an antimilitary party performed well, Prayuth had it dissolved, and its leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, was charged with *lèse-majesté*.¹¹ The new king, Maha Vajiralongkorn, is styling himself as an absolute monarch with the support of the military. Mass protests against military rule and the monarchy led by university students are routinely repressed, and its leaders were incarcerated or disappeared (Keating 2020).

Malaysia’s 19 November 2022 general elections may herald a turning point away from authoritarianism, with Anwar Ibrahim finally assuming the post of Prime Minister. Social movements generally welcomed this change. The country, however, has been stuck in a “middle income trap” due to “sluggish growth” stemming from weak fundamentals, low investments, setbacks in productivity, and “rampant corruption” under the previous Najib regime (Nakano 2022).¹² Politically, however, Malaysia’s *bumiputra* policy favoring Malays and the growing strength of Islamist parties may prove to be formidable barriers to overcome. To gain the premiership, Anwar had to enter into a coalition with the right-wing Barisan Nasional party long identified with one-party, semi-authoritarian politics.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the region’s “freedom ratings” continue to deteriorate, as tracked by Freedom House (Table 3). Overall, freedom has taken a further hit in 2022 with “the world’s population living in Free countries (taking) a dramatic fall in 2019 from about 40% to 20%. Those in Partly Free are 41%, and those in Not Free are 38%. In 2021, 25 countries became more free by at least 3%, while 60 countries became less free by at least 3%” (Silverman 2023). In Southeast Asia, six countries were rated Not Free—Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar,

11 Being charged with *lèse-majesté* means that one is charged with “an offense violating the dignity of a ruler as the representative of a sovereign power” (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “*lèse-majesté*,” accessed 13 February 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/l%C3%A8se-majest%C3%A9>)

12 “Over \$4.5 billion is believed to have been siphoned from sovereign wealth fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad, or 1MDB, while Najib was in office from 2009 to 2018” (Nakano 2022).

Thailand, and Vietnam. Four were rated Partly Free—Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. Only Timor-Leste got a Free rating, despite barely making it to that category.

Press freedom has been deteriorating as well. In Singapore, “authorities forced one of the city-state’s few remaining independent news outlets to shut down by suspending its license.” Thai authorities “issued a broadly worded regulation to expand their ability to prosecute individuals for distributing news deemed to incite fear in the public” (Freedom House 2022). In the Philippines, Nobel Prize laureate Maria Ressa, chief executive officer (CEO) of the independent online magazine, *Rappler*, was constantly harassed, intimidated, and swamped with libel and other court cases by the Duterte administration. In addition, the franchise of the Philippines’ biggest media network, ABS-CBN, was not renewed.

In 2018, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) ranked the Philippines as the “deadliest country for journalists in Southeast Asia and the worst offender in media impunity because of its high number of media killings” (Bagayas 2018).¹³ Other Southeast Asian countries that ranked high in the IFJ’s “impunity scale” were Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Timor-Leste (Bagayas 2018).

TABLE 3 ► Global Freedom Ratings, Southeast Asia, 2022

Country	Total Score and Status	Political Rights	Civil Liberties
Brunei	28 Not Free	7	21
Cambodia	24 Not Free	5	19
Indonesia	59 Partly Free	30	29
Laos	13 Not Free	2	11
Malaysia	50 Partly Free	20	30
Myanmar	9 Not Free	0	9
Philippines	55 Partly Free	25	30
Singapore	47 Partly Free	19	28
Thailand	29 Not Free	5	24
Timor-Leste	72 Free	33	39
Vietnam	19 Not Free	3	16

Source: Freedom House 2022.

13 The 2009 Ampatuan massacre in the Philippines that killed 32 journalists stands historically as “the single deadliest attack on the media worldwide” (Bagayas 2018).

The Social Situation

While Southeast Asian economies have been fast expanding in the last decade, wealth and income inequality, i.e., the gap between the rich and poor, has been equally growing. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reports that “Southeast Asia has seen inequalities widen, a setback to overcome if SDG [UN Sustainable Development Goals] Goal 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries) is achieved” (ASEAN Post 2018).

The ASEAN Post (2018) remarked on the disturbing wealth and income disparities in Southeast Asian societies.

The richest one percent in Thailand controls 58 percent of the country’s wealth and the top 10 percent earned 35 times more than the bottom 10 percent. In Indonesia, the four richest men there have more wealth than the poorest 100 million people, and about 50 percent of the country’s wealth is in the hands of the top one percent. In Vietnam, 210 of the country’s super-rich earn more than enough in a year to lift 3.2 million people out of poverty. The country’s richest man earns more in a day than the poorest person earns in 10 years.

In Malaysia, while only 0.6 percent of its 31 million people are living under the poverty line, 34 percent of the country’s indigenous people and seven percent of children in urban low-cost housing projects live in poverty. In the Philippines, the average annual family income of the top 10 percent is estimated at US\$14,708 in 2015, nine times more than the lowest 10 percent at US\$1,609.

Table 4 shows that two countries, the Philippines (42.3) and Malaysia (41.1) have crossed the borderline index of 40, which is seen as the danger zone for the Gini inequality index.¹⁴ Singapore (39.8), Laos (38.8), and Indonesia (38.2) are dangerously close to the borderline.

The UN ESCAP reports that Southeast Asia similarly fares badly in all but one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations to be achieved by 2030 (UN ESCAP 2021). The UN ESCAP reports that for Goal 1 (ending poverty), progress is hampered by a lack of social spending for health and education and natural disasters. Progress for Goal 2 (zero hunger) is slow, and food insecurity continues to affect 100 million people in the region. Regression is also observed in Goal 7

14 The Gini index (or Gini coefficient) ranges from 0 (or 0 percent) to 100 (or 100 percent), with 0 representing perfect equality and 100 representing perfect inequality.

(sustainable energy), Goal 13 (climate action), Goal 14 (life below water), and Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

TABLE 4 ► GDP Inequality in Southeast Asia (Based on the Gini Index)

Country	Gini Index	Year
1. Philippines	42.3	2018
2. Malaysia	41.1	2015
3. Singapore	39.8	2018
4. Lao PDR	38.8	2018
5. Indonesia	38.2	2018
6. Vietnam	35.7	2018
7. Thailand	35.0	2020
8. Myanmar	30.7	2017
9. Cambodia	26.6	2018
10. Timor-Leste	28.7	2014
11. Brunei	n.a.	n.a.

Source: World Bank n.d.; Singapore Department of Statistics 2022.

Meanwhile, UN ESCAP notes stagnation or lack of progress in Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 15 (life on land), and Goal 17 (partnership for the goals). It is only in Goal 9 (innovation, industry, and infrastructure) that Southeast Asia is on track. Southeast Asia also lags when it comes to bridging digital divides. While Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore have high rates of Internet users (84 to 94 percent), others (Laos, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste) have less than 30 percent of their populations having digital access.

In another report, the UN Social and Economic Council (2022) notes that social protection in Southeast Asia is similarly wanting, with some 62 to 88 percent of vulnerable populations deprived of benefits. The low proportions of the region's population covered by social protection systems are:

- (1.) Children receiving cash benefits (22.2 percent)
- (2.) Mothers with newborns receiving maternity cash benefits (28 percent)
- (3.) Older persons with pensions (37.8 percent)

- (4.) Unemployed receiving unemployment cash benefits (12.3 percent)
- (5.) Persons with disabilities collecting disability cash benefits (28 percent), and
- (6.) Vulnerable individuals receiving cash assistance (21 percent).

Of Southeast Asia’s total population, only 33 percent is covered by at least one social protection benefit. Corruption continues to be prevalent in the Asia-Pacific where, “like most of the world, scores have stagnated over the last decade, as noted by Transparency International” (Putz 2023). High levels of corruption contribute to rising uncertainty and exacerbate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and security and economic threats. Politically, corruption bloats the power of authoritarian rulers, adds to the democratic deficit, and marginalizes civil society organizations (Putz 2023).

Transparency International’s (2022) corruption perceptions index shows that six of the 10 Southeast Asian countries ranked¹⁵ are in the bottom half of the 180 countries surveyed (Table 5). These are Thailand (101st), Indonesia (110th), the Philippines (116th), Laos (126th), Cambodia (150th), and Myanmar (157th). In terms of scores, however, only Singapore registered an excellent 83 (out of 100) and ranked fifth among all countries even as it dropped two places from 2021. The nine other countries had scores below 50.

TABLE 5 ► Corruption Perceptions Index, Southeast Asia 2022

Country	Score	Rank	Change
Singapore	83	5	-2
Malaysia	47	61	-1
Timor Leste	42	77	+1
Vietnam	42	77	+3
Thailand	36	101	+1
Indonesia	34	110	-4
Philippines	33	116	0

15 No. of countries ranked = 180. 100 is very clean and 0 is highly corrupt. Brunei was not included in the ranking.

Laos	31	126	+1
Cambodia	24	150	+1
Myanmar	23	157	-5
Brunei	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Transparency International 2022.

Sustainable Tourism?

Southeast Asia has long been a preferred tourist destination due to its diverse and culturally rich settings, incredible sights, unique local cuisines, and affordability (Thenextepictrip 2022). For governments in the region, tourism is a major contributor to economic growth, “contributing at least 15% to 25% of each country’s GDP” and employing 40 million employees (TTG Asia 2020; ADB 2022b). The industry experienced major downturns at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with arrivals plunging by 82 percent. However, with the easing of restrictions and the opening of borders, visitors have begun flocking back to the region.

The ADB (2022b) sees the revival of Southeast Asia’s tourism industry as “an opportunity to fix structural issues that have plagued tourism over the years and rebuild it greener” given that “across the region, there are numerous examples of rapid tourism growth harming the environment.” Both ADB and the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) promote the buzzword “sustainable travel,” i.e., “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs n.d.). “Sustainable tourism” is one of the targets under UN SDG 8 (Promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all).

The question, however, is whether Southeast Asian governments will buy into the UN and ADB proposals “to counter excessive tourism” (Shibata et al. 2022b). Measures mulled such as “charging higher admission fees, limiting visitor numbers, and temporary closures of vulnerable areas like national parks and marine sanctuaries” have been met with a “barrage of opposition from the tourist industry and local government officials” (Shibata et al. 2022b). In the end, governments will have to choose between protecting the environment or increasing their gross domestic product, and achieving higher economic growth.

The portent of things to come may already be seen in Myanmar's Karen (Kayin) state along the Moei River that divides Thailand from Myanmar where a fantastic USD 15 billion "city of the future" called Shwe Kokko Yatai New City is being built (Faulder 2022). The project in Myanmar's insurgency-torn state was promoted as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and will feature "science and technology industrial parks, leisure and tourism areas, ethnic culture areas, business and logistics areas, and ecological agriculture areas, [and a] 'firearms training' facility." It was, however, disavowed by the Chinese embassy and questioned by the former government of Aung Saan Suu Kyi. After the military coup on 1 February 2021 that overthrew Aung San Suu Kyi, the project proceeded as planned.

Shwe Kokko is being billed as "Myanmar's Silicon Valley," but the real picture is menacing and sinister. Lying just north of Thailand's Mae Sot province, the high-tech site is actually "a known criminal hub used for online gambling, scamming and human trafficking" and the structures look more like "'penal colonies' with 4-meter concrete walls topped with coiled razor wire" (Faulder 2022). Its Chinese financier-operators with underworld reputations are fleeing Macao's now highly regulated gambling and illicit businesses.¹⁶ As if on cue, "more crime zones (are) springing up southward along the shallow, winding Moei River, which at the driest times of the year can be crossed on foot" (Faulder 2022).

Southeast Asian Peoples' Responses

In the context of the Southeast Asian situation, where governments and elites have been unmindful of the masses of poor and marginalized populations, it is instructing and inspiring to learn that alternatives that challenge the prevailing dominant modes are being constructed. Through practices embedded in the grassroots and going beyond state-centered approaches, Southeast Asian peoples and their organizations have been responding to their myriad problems and challenges in their

16 Faulder (2022) writes, "COVID-19 lockdowns and official clampdowns on casino junkets reduced Macao's gambling revenues last year to the lowest level this century. Casino financiers have been moving out of the former Portuguese colony since at least 2016 to less regulated territories, such as Sihanoukville and Poipet in Cambodia, and later over Thailand's borders with Laos and Myanmar, creating countless unregulated casinos beyond any rule of law. Online gambling technology and infrastructure has also been used for scamming, causing a *regional "scamdemic."* (emphasis by the author)

own creative ways. These are based on time-tested and effective traditional ways, as well as grounded assessments of their current situation and the ways they could provide a better life and future for themselves and their communities.

This current volume is the second in a series of monographs on alternative practices in Southeast Asia. It highlights 15 case studies of grassroots organizations and civil society groups in the Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar/Burma, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, and Manipur (Northeast India), as well as civil society organizations and cultural groups.¹⁷ Volume 1 (*Towards a Peoples' Alternative Regionalism*) focuses on Philippine cases.¹⁸ These are all a continuation of the ongoing work of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) to document and publish cases of alternative practices of grassroots communities in Southeast Asia. The case studies in this volume are divided into four categories, namely: (1) alternative trade and enterprise, (2) gendered activism, (3) peoples' participation in governance and development, and (4) cultural work and resistance. The following are brief profiles of these various peoples' initiatives.¹⁹

1. Alternative Trade and Social Enterprise

Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP: Lessons Learned Towards a Framework for Pandemic Response and Social Justice

The study centers on the community pantry phenomenon, particularly the Community Pantry and Pharmacy at the University of

17 Northeast India has been included based on the concept of a greater Southeast Asia where the eight Indian states are seen to have common historical, ethnic, and cultural similarities with mainland Southeast Asia (Scott 2009).

18 See Eduardo C. Tadem, Karl Hapal, Venarica B. Papa, Jose Monfred C. Sy, Ananeza Aban, Nathaniel P. Candelaria, and Honey B. Tabiola, eds., 2020, *Towards a People's Alternative Regionalism: Cases of Alternative Practices in the Philippines*, vol. 1 (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies), <https://cids.up.edu.ph/download/public-policy-monographs-towards-a-peoples-alternative-regionalism-case-of-alternative-practices-in-the-philippines-volume-1/>

19 These profiles of the 15 case studies contained in this volume are extracted and based mainly on summaries jointly drafted by UP CIDS AltDev program staff Honey B. Tabiola and Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta.

the Philippines at Diliman (UPD). The Pantry was a response to the economic and health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. It focuses on its organizers and volunteers' shared experiences and lessons learned. Through interviews and video documentation, it captures the experiences, challenges, and best practices of its participants and volunteers who are also individuals that are disenfranchised members of the UPD community and are greatly affected by the pandemic.

The objective of documenting the collective processes such as “emergence, coalescence, and consolidation” of community pantries aims not only to aid in the sustenance of disenfranchised members of the community and society, but also to strengthen concepts such as participatory approaches and the ethics of compassion. These are firm frameworks and foundations towards achieving a sustainable pandemic response towards social justice.

Building Sustainable Social and Solidarity Economy in Southeast Asia: Towards More and Better jobs for Women in the Informal Economy

The case study discusses the “social solidarity economy” (SSE) model as practiced by PATAMABA-WISE (Workers in the Informal Sector Enterprise), a community-based women-led social enterprise in Angono, Rizal, Philippines. This is situated in the broader advocacy of the regional network, Homenet, in promoting fair trade and a solidarity economy. PATAMABA-WISE members are involved throughout the stages of production, marketing, and fundraising. In order to maximize access to state resources, it also participates in local governance and taps into public funding for support services for its projects. The SSE practice of PATAMABA WISE is anchored on the three principles of “people, planet, and profitability.”

From the Community, For the Community: Exploring the Potential of Dakdae Social Enterprise in Laos

Going against the grain of profit-oriented commercial groups, DakDae is a social enterprise that supports local producers and communities through capacity building and market linkages. It also provides technical expertise on branding and product development to young entrepreneurs. DakDae fulfills its socially oriented venture by providing physical and online stores for high-quality local products;

contributing to the Community Development Fund of local producers and community partners; using local raw materials in its products from a sustainable and traceable production supply chain; and ensuring that producers set the prices for their own products, among others. The DakDae project, however, remains challenged by the usual constraints of a social enterprise. These include securing a reliable market for its products, including fully penetrating the local market, and the logistical demands of the export sector.

Burma/Myanmar's Gendered Political Economy and Women-led Empowerment: The Story of Conflict and Action of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group in Karen State

While the disenfranchised role of women has been well-documented in many societies, it becomes more prominent under military regimes. Such is the case of Thandaunggyi Women's Group (TWG) in Karen State, Myanmar under the Tatmadaw (military junta). Using the lens of feminist political economy and alternative development paradigm, the TWG brings into light the transformative role of its practices. TWG contributes to the welfare of women in Myanmar not only through their agricultural and social enterprises (e.g., coffee farming) towards women's economic empowerment but also through stepping up into leadership positions in the absence of their husbands and other male members of their families who are engaged in armed movements against the military regime. While TWG's efforts at contributing to economic empowerment and social recognition have been significant, there remain challenges, such as sustaining their enterprises, meeting the high cost of organic farming certification, and engaging with the government and military rulers.

Weaving through Pandemic Woes: T'boli Women Weavers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Lake Sebu Indigenous Women Weavers Association (LASIWWAI) works with Tboli indigenous communities of Lake Sebu, South Cotabato in southern Philippines, under conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that Tboli women lacked access to stable income sources. While they did the farm work, men handled the earnings.

LASIWWAI was formed to respond to the issues of women's rights by empowering women through its establishment of a social enterprise that aimed to provide an alternative source of income. The various social

ventures of LASIWWAI provided an image of grassroots development through the experience and perspective of Tboli women.

Collective Farming towards Workers-Owned, Workers-managed Enterprises: A Case Study on the Negros Farm Workers

The experience of the Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO) and Nakalang Farm Workers Association (NAFWA) depict how Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) are able to overcome the longstanding problems of rural landlessness, a flawed agrarian reform program, and landlord dominance. Utilizing the framework of social solidarity economy, AMANO and NAFWA collectivized their awarded lands and re-organized their organization into a cooperative-like undertaking with dividends regularly paid to members. This allowed them to run a highly successful worker-owned, and worker-managed enterprise which directly benefits the members, their families, and their community.

2. Gendered Activism

Women's Access to Justice through Legal Aid Clinics and Paralegal Formations: The Association for Development of Women and Legal Empowerment

This case study looks at the initiative of the Association for Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) with regard to handling violence against women (VAW) cases. It interrogates how the status of women in Laos society, which is deeply rooted in traditional social norms, impacts legal empowerment and access to justice. ADWLE Legal Clinics, which specializes in legal aid for women and paralegals, enable women to gain greater access to justice not only with regards to gender violence and family and property law cases. ADWLE also critically responds to the “cultural tolerance” of VAW and seeks to overcome the low awareness of women's rights in rural villages and peri-urban areas in Laos. The group developed program streams for education and training, empowerment of women's access to justice, and “advocacy for change” in select target villages.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Post-Independence Timor-Leste through Queer Solidarity

Arcoiris Timor-Leste is a support organization for lesbians, bisexual women, and transmen (LBT) in promoting the human rights

of the LGBTQIA+ community in Timor-Leste. It fills in the gaps in state programs and policies related to LGBTQIA+. A key initiative is building safe spaces in the capital of Dili to support the LBT community. Arcoiris knows that safe spaces against violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ in the country must be challenged, victim-survivors must be empowered, and institutions must develop the capacity in responding to LGBTQIA+ issues. While finally achieving independence from Indonesia, cases of gender-based violence and discrimination committed against the LBT are indicative of an unfinished struggle for justice and equality.

Pride and Solidarity: Notes on the Engagement of Camp Queer with the Zagu Workers

Camp Queer has been engaging with Filipino Zagu Workers–SUPER when the latter mounted a labor strike in 2019 against the management of Zagu company, which coincided with Pride Month. Camp Queer participated in, and lent continuing support for, the strike to show solidarity and deepen ties between workers and other marginalized groups. It explored the possibilities of “queering” trade unionism and establishing solidarity between queer and labor movements.

Challenging the Feminization of Garment Labor: The Case of Worker’s Information Center in Cambodia

The women-led Workers’ Information Center (WIC) in Cambodia strives to create for women workers spaces for empowerment, development, grievances, and for collective resistance in the garment sector. The WIC operates as a “non-union” to avoid government intimidation and union busting while still generating collective power for their demands. The WIC advocates not only for the rights of garment workers but also for equal access to public services for all Cambodian women. In order to do this, WIC works with other member organizations of the United Sisterhood Alliance in Cambodia.

3. Peoples’ Participation in Governance and Development

Promoting Citizens’ Participation in the Budget Process: The Social Watch Philippines’ Alternative Budget Initiative

Official budget-making in the Philippines is an opaque process, employing highly technical terms by economists and financial managers. It is also compounded by the general lack of knowledge and information

among the general public and the insufficient mechanisms for citizen engagement. In an attempt to make the budget more responsive to people's needs and promote citizens' participation in the budget process, Social Watch Philippines (SWP) advocates for "alternative budget proposals," which push for increased financing for social services in education, health, agriculture, decent work, environment, and other areas of social development.

SWP lobbies relevant government agencies and legislators to incorporate their budget proposals into national budget priorities. Over the years, there have been gains, as seen in the cumulative increase in the national budget for social services, among others. However, continuing challenges persist, such as the failure of certain budget items in the approved national budget to reach the people on the ground (i.e., the end users), resistance from legislators to institutionalize citizens' participation in the budget process, and the need to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to effectively undertake budget advocacy campaigns.

Asserting Inclusion in Housing and Urban Development: From the *Barikadang Bayan* (Community Barricade), Street Occupation, *Tumbalik* (Collective Home Restoration) to the Community Development Plan

Informal settlers in Sitio San Roque in North Triangle, Quezon City, Philippines, have experienced harassment and continuing threats of demolition and eviction. Their struggles are located within the broader problem of "accumulation by dispossession" that the urban poor face. The repression and harassment by state organs heightened during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To their credit, San Roque residents have defended their community and asserted their right to the city through various strategies, such as community barricades, reconstruction of houses, food gardens, and counter-proposal development plans.

Indigenous Lifeways as Grassroots Resistance and Environmental Preservation: The Experience of Fishers in Loktak Lake, Northeast India

The case study documents the struggles of fishers of Loktak Lake, Manipur in Northeast India. It reveals the hardships, environmental degradation, and economic dislocation they faced following the construction of the Ithai Barrage Dam in the wetland, and in the implementation of "development" policies and projects that seek to

dispossess the indigenous Meitei communities who call this wetland their home for hundreds of years. Fishers in Loktak have developed distinct ways of livelihood and habitation to suit the wetland ecosystem, creating a symbiotic relationship between Loktak and the indigenous Meitei communities. The unique lifeways developed by fishers in Loktak are founded on principles of environmental preservation and resistance to development aggression.

4. Cultural Work as Resistance

Reconnecting with our Southeast Asian Heritage: the Kontra-GaPi way

The *Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino* (Kontra-GaPi) is an ethnic music and dance troupe which draws inspiration from the diverse ancient artistic cultural diversity of the Philippines and Asia. With its contemporary dance, music, and theater, Kontra-GaPi exhibits the indigenous traditions rooted in Southeast Asian heritage, blending music and movement with health, healing, and communal rituals. This is in stark contrast to basic conventional music education in the Philippines, which heavily favors Spanish and American influences. The artistic work of Kontra-GaPi is entwined with its advocacy for advancing ecological conservation and human rights, particularly the rights of indigenous peoples. The group has performed in various continents including Europe, North America, and Asia.

Koalisi Seni Indonesia's Democratic Art-Making as Cross-Border Community-Building

For social movements, art is not only a medium of self-expression but also a weapon for advocating and promoting progressive ideas and principles of unity and solidarity among the oppressed. In Indonesia, art organizations have led the promotion of Indonesian art against the context of colonization. The Koalisi Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Art Coalition) (KSI) is an umbrella organization of artists established in 2012. Despite its young age, KSI has been very active in the promotion of the arts and their social relevance for the Indonesian peoples. The KSI case study describes and uncovers the activities undertaken by the organization, as well as the challenges and issues it underwent, in the context of the *reformasi* period in Indonesian history. Moreover, it frames

KSI's projects as an alternative not only to hegemonic art production but also to the ideological means of segregating and marginalizing societal sectors.

Conclusion

A number of principles, advocacies, and visions underlie the alternative development practices in this volume. They all represent the needs and aspirations of grassroots communities and basic sectors of Southeast Asian societies. At the same time, they also show what communities and civil society can accomplish if a different framework for development is adopted and undertaken seriously.

In the midst of an overwhelming health crisis, the communities exemplified sustainable pandemic response, social justice, and the ethics of compassion. In the economic aspect, social solidarity and socially oriented ventures, alternative community livelihoods, and a feminist political economy came to the fore. In politics, collective resistance and power, women's rights and empowerment, legal know-how and expertise, access to justice, creating safe spaces against violence and discrimination, queering of movements, and general advocacy for change were highlighted.

In the social sphere, the communities emphasized equal access to social services, citizens' participation in official policies and programs, the right to housing, community struggles, the preservation of indigenous lifeways against "development aggression," and solidarity between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples.

In culture, the need was expressed for reconnecting with Southeast Asia's rich and varied heritage through multiple musical forms coupled with the blending of health, healing, and communal rituals. Finally, art was seen as a medium for propagating and advancing progressive ideas and principles.

All these principles and advocacies can form the basic elements for an alternative vision of development and social change. There is much that can be learned from practices on the ground as well as grassroots-oriented frameworks for analysis and action.

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Alternative Trade and Social Enterprise

Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP: Lessons Learned Towards a Framework for Pandemic Response and Social Justice

*UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy¹
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Abstract

This study centers on the community pantry phenomenon, particularly the Community Pantry and Pharmacy at the University of the Philippines (UP). It aims to understand the significance of the Community Pantry and Pharmacy as a response to the economic and health crises brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. It focuses on the shared experiences of and lessons learned by the organizers and volunteers of the Community Pantry and Pharmacy of UP. As it abides by the principles by which it was established and continues its operations, the UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy seeks to yield a framework for pandemic response and social justice.

The project implements its community service through daily and scheduled operations. The UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy is a mobile pantry that goes around campus targeting communities that need the most assistance to limit mobility and properly observe health protocols. The project captures the experiences, challenges, and best practices among organizers and volunteers—who are also disenfranchised members of the UP community greatly affected by the pandemic—through interviews and video documentation.

The objective of documenting collective processes such as the “emergence, coalescence, and consolidation” (Blumer 1969) of community pantries aims to (a) broaden public service to aid in the sustenance of disenfranchised members of the UP community and society, and (b) strengthen the participatory approach and the virtue of ethics of compassion as frameworks toward achieving sustainable pandemic response and social justice.

1 The University of the Philippines (UP) Community Pantry and Pharmacy was established during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a mobile pantry, it went around the UP Diliman campus, targeting communities that needed the most assistance (mostly food and medicines) during the health crisis.

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Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP: Lessons Learned Towards a Framework for Pandemic Response and Social Justice

UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy

High transmission of COVID-19 prompted hard lockdowns and harsh protocols across the country, especially in highly populated urban areas like Metro Manila. Strict mobility restrictions, enforced through increased militarization and police presence, immensely affected the lives and the livelihood of citizens. The pandemic was not only a health crisis but also an economic crisis. Daily wage earners and sectors dependent on daily incomes first felt the great economic impact of the pandemic.

The University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman campus is home to multiple communities, including but not limited to students and employees. Likewise, it is home to residents who rely heavily on their daily earnings, such as jeepney drivers and vendors. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, these sectors—who have continuously provided food and transportation services to the UP community—had to cease operations when lockdown protocols and policies were implemented. Having lost their primary, and sometimes only, source of income, drivers and vendors had to seek help from various organizations for their daily needs.

The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP is an important platform for drivers, vendors, and other members of the UP community, many of whom live and survive on a day-to-day basis, and who have especially suffered during the pandemic. An ongoing response to health and economic crises, the project seeks to aid displaced sectors. This case study centers on the Community Pantry and Pharmacy as a source of mutual and psychosocial aid, seen from the perspective of its volunteers. Delving into the lessons learned from the project, this study foregrounds the importance of the Community Pantry and Pharmacy experience in yielding a framework for pandemic response and social justice

COVID-19: The Philippine Experience

Intended to be a fresh start to rise and soldier on amidst persisting challenges of the socioeconomic status quo of the country, 2020 was supposedly full of hope for Filipinos. However, in January 2020, the Department of Health (DOH) confirmed the first COVID-19 case in the Philippines after a Chinese national couple who traveled to Manila showed symptoms of the virus. Later in March, local transmission was

first detected in the country. The alarming rise of local transmission of the virus prompted then-President Rodrigo Duterte to place Metro Manila under a 30-day community quarantine, or “lockdown,” on 12 March 2020.² To limit mobility and prevent the continuous spread of the virus, Luzon was later placed under a strict lockdown, which lasted until 12 April 2020.³

The Duterte administration implemented strict quarantine protocols. A memorandum from then-Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea goes,

[A] strict home quarantine shall be observed in all households; movement shall be limited to accessing basic necessities; provision for food and essential health services shall be regulated, and there will be heightened presence of uniformed personnel to enforce quarantine procedures.⁴

Militarized lockdowns and strict protocols entailed not only restricting Filipinos to their homes, but also limiting individual mobility and activity for travel, work, school, and business. The lockdowns, especially the strictest Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), greatly affected service sectors. Public transportation and businesses were forced to cease operations due to low or zero sales. In addition, “mass public transport facilities including trains, buses, and jeepneys [were] suspended,” and “land, air and sea travel were restricted.”⁵

The National Capital Region (NCR) was the first to be hit hard by the rage of COVID-19. It was among the areas that the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on Emerging Infectious Diseases identified as “high-risk” communities.⁶ The “high-risk” classification of Metro Manila meant severe restrictions to mobility—no work and business for informal workers.

Republic Act (RA) No. 11469, or the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, was immediately signed on 25 March 2020. It provided financial aid to health workers who contracted the virus and subsidized low-income

2 Argyll Geducos, “Metro Manila Under 30-Day Lockdown,” *Manila Bulletin*, 12 March 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/03/12/metro-manila-under-30-day-lockdown/>

3 Argyll Geducos and Genalyn D. Kabling, “Entire Luzon Under Quarantine,” *Manila Bulletin*, 16 March 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/03/16/entire-luzon-under-quarantine/>

4 Geducos and Kabling, “Entire Luzon under quarantine,” *Manila Bulletin*, 16 March 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/03/16/entire-luzon-under-quarantine/>

5 Geducos and Kabling.

6 Cristina Eloisa Baclig, “TIMELINE: One year of Covid-19 in the Philippines,” *Inquirer.net*, 12 March 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1406004/timeline-one-year-of-covid-19-in-the-philippines>

households with emergency relief through the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). RA 11469 was supposed to “grant 18 million families aid ranging from PHP 5,000 to PHP 8,000. However, several households have complained that they have yet to receive cash aid from the government.”⁷

Despite the government’s pandemic response, increased virus transmission went hand in hand with worsening hunger and poverty. Even before the pandemic, hunger and poverty in the country was harsh and widespread. Social Weather Station (SWS) survey results showed that over the first three months of the pandemic, “hunger rates in Metro Manila were at an alarming 20.8 percent, from just 9.3 percent in December 2019. This means that one of five Metro Manila residents or an estimated 693,000 families experienced involuntary hunger from February to April.”⁸

Community Pantry and Pharmacy: A UP Response to COVID-19

Hunger and poverty were worsening amid a pandemic that the world was still trying to grasp. On 14 April 2020, Ana Patricia “Patreng” Non went to a former food park turned fruit stand in Maginhawa, Quezon City. She installed a bamboo cart with a cardboard sign that read “*Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan. Kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan*” (Give according to one’s means. Take according to one’s needs). Inside the cart were several *ayuda* (relief) items, such as rice, canned goods, vegetables, as well as basic hygiene items such as alcohol and face masks. Non brought these items straight from her personal pantry and pocket. This marked the start of what is now called the Community Pantry. Non’s Maginhawa Community Pantry was envisioned “to build a community that will give and take by their own volition, without the intervention of third parties.”⁹

The community pantry became a phenomenon that had a profound effect on communities across the country and abroad. Days after the first humble community pantry cart was installed, nearby communities set up

7 Baclig.

8 Gabriel Pabico Lalu, “Number of Hungry Filipinos Almost Doubles as Pandemic Rages – SWS,” *Inquirer.net*, 21 May 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1279086/number-of-hungry-filipinos-almost-doubles-covid-19-pandemic-rages-sws>

9 Iya Gozum, “‘Pagod Na Ako sa Inaction’: How a Community Pantry Rose to Fill Gaps in Gov’t Response,” *Rappler*, 17 April 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/moveph/community-pantry-covid-19-lockdown-april-2021/>

theirs as well. On 18 April 2021, the Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP was established. The pantry and pharmacy table were set up at a waiting shed by the Ilang-Ilang Dormitory inside the UP Diliman campus.

The UP Diliman campus is situated in Barangay UP Campus. The barangay covers about 493 hectares. According to the 2020 Census of Population and Housing, it has a population of 47,127, representing 1.59 percent of the total population of Quezon City.¹⁰ The UP community is not only composed of employees and students; it is also surrounded by residents of the barangay. A large part of the population are informally employed in the university as food vendors, jeepney and tricycle drivers, and other service workers—key aspects of students’ and employees’ daily lives. As daily wage earners, they are dependent on the daily operations of the University. The onset of the pandemic displaced the workers, many of whom were left to beg on the streets for aid.

When the UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy began its operations, vendors, jeepney drivers, faculty and staff, and students took part as volunteers. It provided support for disenfranchised UP community members, especially those whose livelihoods were affected by the pandemic. It reached out to private individuals and companies for monetary and in-kind support. It thus depended on the generosity of kindred spirits in this effort.

With continuous support and help, the UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy was able to continue, sustain, and expand support to communities within and outside UP. By 21 December 2021, the Community Pantry and Pharmacy distributed 7,000 ayuda packages. Beneficiaries of the pantry and pharmacy included residents from Pook Palaris, Pook Dagohoy, Pook Ricarte, Village A, B, and C, Pook Libis, Pook Arboretum, Pook Malinis, Area 17, and Daang Tubo. In addition, recipients included disenfranchised workers heavily affected by the pandemic, such as the UP transport groups (Ikot, Toki, Philcoa, Pantranco, Katipunan), UP *maninindas* (on-campus food vendors), UP guards, and maintenance personnel. The pantry has also extended its ayuda package distribution to residents outside UP, such as Old Balara, Kaingin, and Luzon Avenue. It also reached out to nurses and guards at

10 “U.P. Campus,” *PhilAtlas*, accessed 23 December 2021, <https://www.philatlas.com/luzon/ncr/quezon-city/up-campus.html>

the COVID ward of the Quezon City General Hospital, which is one of the pantry and pharmacy’s targeted beneficiaries. The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP continued to operate throughout 2022. It supported the victims of the UP Diliman Campus Village A and B fire—some of whom are UP employees—through cash assistance and relief packages.

Community Pantry: A Framework for Social Solidarity, Justice, and Change

The surge of COVID-19 infection in Metro Manila greatly added to the financial difficulties of many of its residents. Despite government responses, aid was sparse and insufficient, failing to reach many in need. This desperation is what drove Ana Patricia Non to say, “*Pagod na akong magreklamo. Pagod na ako sa inaction*” (I’m tired of simply complaining. I’m tired of inaction), according to a *Rappler* report.¹¹

The surge of the infection went hand in hand with the surge in community participation and action, creating ripple effects in the establishment of pantries nationwide. Fides Del Castillo and Mylene Maravilla define food pantries as venues that “serve vulnerable populations with high rates of chronic disease in other countries and thus be an ideal setting for community-based health promotion programs.”¹² They note that food pantries, as public spaces, allow people to avail of basic commodities, such as “food, hygienic essentials and medicines.” This way, people in poverty may acquire goods without spending much money. People may donate to the pantry, and they may also leave resources that others might need.¹³

Importantly, Del Castillo and Maravilla note that community pantries “invigorate the mental state and well-being of the community.” Community pantries contributed significantly to ensuring the health and well-being of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They provided people with food and medicine, which is especially important for those with limited or no income. They encouraged individuals and organizations to cooperate for the common good to give their resources to

11 Gozum.

12 Fides A. del Castillo and Mylene Icamina Maravilla, “Community Pantries: Their Role in Public Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Public Health* 43, no. 3 (September 2021): 551. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab154>

13 Del Castillo and Maravilla.

the pantry. For Del Castillo and Maravilla, the community pantry initiative “strengthens, supports and mobilizes partnerships to address the gaps in addressing public health issues in the community. In order to sustain this initiative, policies and systems must be put into place.”¹⁴

Del Castillo and Maravilla highlight an “ethics of compassion to public health” as an approach to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In relation to this, it is also important to resolve issues by ensuring that the operations of community pantries remain sustainable for the long term. Furthermore, Del Castillo reiterated the purpose of these pantries—“[r]esponding to the basic needs of the vulnerable,” “alleviat[ing] the poor condition of the people,” and “seal[ing] the gap of inequalities.”¹⁵

Alma Espartinez, on the other hand, turns to Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of hunger. Channeling this concept, hunger becomes the cause for “ethical giving displayed in the community pantries.” For her, these pantries serve as a “symbolic arena” where “leadership is questioned and the marginalized voices of the hungry poor are both mainstreamed and articulated.”¹⁶ She foregrounds the importance of the community pantry in relation to Levinas’ concept of ethical relations. As a “contestatory site,” community pantries make people remember how they lack the capacity to exhibit social responsibility and justice. Espartinez points out that food pantries become venues for both charitable actions and advocacy. In addition, community pantries in the Philippines exemplify how people have shown their dissatisfaction with how the government failed to provide food for the poor during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷

Espartinez highlights community pantries as platforms that “are grounded in theories of social change.” As such, community pantries entail dialogues that focus on people who suffer from hunger. They can help raise awareness of the situation in the community and establish spaces where people can become involved in envisioning a better future for everyone.¹⁸

14 Del Castillo and Maravilla.

15 Del Castillo and Maravilla.

16 Alma Espartinez, “Emerging Community Pantries in the Philippines during the Pandemic: Hunger, Healing, and Hope,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (October 2021): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110926>

17 Espartinez.

18 Espartinez.

Another important aspect of Espartinez’s argument is that community pantries are a form of “[e]mpowerment for social integration of marginalized groups.” Marginalized sectors—including senior citizens, people living in poverty, and persons with disabilities—can participate and provide input in those processes. Espartinez also points out the character of “the ethical relation between the community and the self,” which highlights how individuals are perpetually responsible for their communities. This ethical relation involves thinking about the reasons why the hungry demand food and why the community wants healing.¹⁹

Espartinez traces the etymology of the word “pantry.” The word comes from the French term *paneterie*, which is rooted from the French word *pain* and the Latin word *panis*—both meaning “bread.” She notes that the etymology of the word “pantry” reflects the purpose of the community pantry. Food pantries not only address hunger by providing bread; they also help people realize others’ suffering in the act of sharing bread. This is a significant function of the pantry, and for Espartinez, returns to Levinas’ concept of hunger: “our economic condition is immaterial to our responsibility to them. What is important is that we respond, not simply (and not always) in an economic sense, with all that we can give, even if giving runs us dry.”²⁰

Espartinez reiterates the significance of collective action and participation in setting up community pantries. People who formed and donated to community pantries openly declared how COVID-19 impacted their finances. They only had the “simplicity of their life and the sincerity of their heart.” Espartinez uses the widow’s mite as a metaphor to describe how Non gave her resources to the people in need. Her effort helped many people to experience “collective hope.” Espartinez notes how Non’s example ought to be treated as a lesson in inculcating social justice in education.²¹

Joseph Galang et al. point out the importance of including virtue ethics in the practice of public health. One of the important virtues is compassion, “where there is a show of sympathy toward the suffering

19 Espartinez.

20 Espartinez.

21 Espartinez.

of others.” Having compassion is important in addressing the impact of the pandemic’s “third wave.” Aside from compassion, solidarity is also important. Galang et al. note that “solidarity is not vague compassion on one side, nor is it shallow distress on the other.” Instead, solidarity helps people realize that they rely on each other.²²

Galang et al. emphasize that solidarity reminds people about the difficulties they face altogether and the importance of living better. It is “a reminder that everyone is in this crisis together. It teaches us how to live well in the face of hardship and distress. Solidarity points out that each is responsible for all, much like compassion.”²³

UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy: Solidarity and Compassion as COVID-19 Response

The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP was a significant platform for drivers, vendors, and other members of the UP community who receive wages every day. Through the pantry, they sustained their lives amid the pandemic. It responded to the health and economic crisis by aiding disenfranchised sectors.

By addressing current health and economic crises, the Community Pantry and Pharmacy tries to determine its role as a source of mutual and psychosocial aid by delving into the lessons learned by its volunteers. The study examines the importance of the community pantry and pharmacy experience in yielding a framework for pandemic response and social justice.

The previously discussed concepts establish a framework for sustaining community pantries and aiding the disenfranchised. The study uses as guiding principles a participatory approach, and the virtues of ethics of compassion and solidarity.

The study centers on the community pantry phenomenon and examines its emergence as a source of mutual and psychosocial aid

22 Joseph Renus F. Galang, Jose Ma. W. Gopez, Harvey Gain M. Capulong, Ivan Efreaim A. Gozum, “Solidarity as a Companion Virtue in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Public Health* 43, no. 2 (June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab024>

23 Galang et al.

through the experiences of its volunteers. It also seeks to evaluate the ways in which the community pantry movement developed from an individual effort to an avenue for collective action and participation.

Moreover, it examines the momentum of the community pantry and pharmacy, set up through the action and response of individuals, to better understand the role of collaborations with various groups, and utilize the skills and expertise of the volunteers. The community pantry is a platform for aid that will determine the maintenance and sustenance of launch activities, distribution, participation of volunteers, and donations. Its practice assesses the consolidation and integration of the efforts of service, which involves collaboration and advocacy from the volunteers, to sustain the pantry and pharmacy as a recourse.

The study evaluates the challenges and best practices, as well as the seeming decline, of this new platform of mutual aid and relief amid an emergent and persistent pandemic. It utilizes a quantitative process that involves gathering data from primary and secondary sources, such as reports and interviews. Interviews and focus group discussions, which serve as primary sources, were conducted with the volunteers to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP. Observation, another primary source of information, was done to better understand firsthand the actuality of the experience and event at the Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP.

The documentation of and data-gathering from the volunteers and beneficiaries were done on the ground. Groundwork documentation was conducted through one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions during donation drop-offs, donation supply repacking, and distribution. Scheduled interviews were done for focus group discussions, while confidentiality and ethical data collection were observed during the data gathering.

Collective Process

Community pantries are a nationwide phenomenon that spread like wildfire since the day the iconic cart was placed at Maginhawa Street. It is important to note that the community pantry went viral because government responses were deemed insufficient in addressing the worsening pandemic. The *Lawan* podcast, produced by the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative

Development (AltDev), was able to broadcast an episode discussing the community pantry.

The episode's first section delves into efforts to organize community pantries to resolve the peoples' concerns. Meanwhile, the second part aims to surface alternative ideas and practices behind organizing community pantries toward a society that values solidarity and mutual aid.²⁴

The discussion highlights the urgency of responding to the pandemic crisis as a significant factor in why community pantries went viral online and spread throughout the country. According to Stephanie Esperida, "*Nakita namin yung pangangailangan talaga ng mga na-displace nitong pandemya*" (We saw the urgent needs of people who were displaced by the pandemic).

The transition of community pantries from an individual effort to a means for collective action began as a response to the pandemic. As it was led by volunteers, community pantries led effort towards an organized collective action in delivering mutual aid. A clear manifestation of this is the Matiyaga Community Pantry experience. According to Elijah San Fernando, two days after the Maginhawa Community Pantry was set up, the Matiyaga Community Pantry was established, starting with *kamote* (sweet potatoes). San Fernando narrates during the *Lawan* podcast discussion:

Prior to Community Pantry, mayroon kaming proyekto na nagre-rescue buy ng mga gulay at mga produce ng mga network natin na farmer. Hindi nabebenta or pinapa-SOS nila na bilhin dahil nga mabubulukan sila dahil walang bumibili o dahil sobra yung pambabarat ng mga middleman. May ni-rescue buy kasi kaming 500 kilos na kamote sa mga magsasaka ng Paniqui, Tarlac. At noong nandito na ang mga kamote sa Matiyaga Community Pantry, naisip natin paano ito idi-distribute. It so happened during that time, pumutok at nag-viral na iyong Maginhawa Community Pantry. And so, we decided to extend solidarity doon sa Maginhawa Community Pantry na pinost ni Patreng Non. Doon na nag-boom. Kahit magsasaka ay kaisa dito proyekto ng community pantry.

(Prior to Community Pantry, we already had a vegetable produce rescue project from a network of farmers. [The] produce is usually unsold and left

24 Mon Sy, Ryan Martinez, Ananeza Aban, Stephanie Esperida, Elijah San Fernando, and Ma. Jovielyn Unlayao, "Community Pantries as Sites for People-to-People Solidarity," *Lawan Podcast*, UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development, YouTube, 8 October 2021, https://youtu.be/Rlwe80_Kd6Y

to rot because of cheap buyouts by middlemen. We had rescued about 500 kilos of sweet potatoes from farmers of Paniqui, Tarlac. As soon it reached the Matiyaga Community Pantry, we thought of distributing it, just like the Maginhawa Community Pantry was doing. And so, we decided to extend solidarity with Maginhawa Community Pantry, and it boomed. Even farmers are in solidarity with the community pantry project.)

San Fernando emphasizes that they learned to resolve two things: (1) increasing income for farmers because of direct buying, and (2) ensuring access to nutritious and healthy food in urban communities. “We link the demand from the communities to the capacities and supply of the farmers,” he added.

The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP experience is characterized by the network of UP community—staff, faculty, students, service workers, and residents. According to Stephanie Esperida, the UP community is at its best during crises because it provides quick responses in expressing solidarity. Esperida explains that the network of volunteers is diverse, representing many different sectors:

Tungkol sa networking, iyong mga nagbibigay bukod sa UP community ay mayroon talagang nakikitang malawak na range. Nakakatanggap tayo mula sa outside UP community at sa mga big companies. Siyempre, mas nakakataba ng puso 'yung mga contractual natin na mga empleyado, sila pa yung nangunguna sa pagbibigay ng mga kaya nilang ibigay. Kahit “no work, no pay” sila pero andiyan sila na tumutulong sa ating pantry. At iyon nga, ang paglunsad ng pantry ay mula sa ating mga kawani, representatives at faculty ng UP Diliman at UP System. May mga nagdodonate na hindi natin kilala at ayaw nang mapakilala. Pumupunta na lang doon sa waiting shed para mag-abot ng kanilang mga donasyon. Iyong sa mga companies naman, katuwang natin iyong UP Town Center, Ayala Malls, Puregold, Botika (a pharmaceutical company) na nag-donate, at Globe.

(There is a broad network aside from the UP community. We have received aid outside the UP community, including big companies. Of course, we appreciate seeing that our non-UP contractual employees are first to send help despite their “no work, no pay” conditions. The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP was established by staff, representatives, and faculty from UP Diliman and the UP System. There have also been donations from private individuals who wish to remain anonymous, many of whom would pass by the pantry to drop off goods. We were also in partnership with companies, such as UP Town Center, Ayala Malls, Puregold, Botika [a pharmaceutical company], and Globe.)

Consolidation

Patience and humility are virtues to always keep in mind in operating a community pantry. The rich experiences of the UP community pantry volunteers attest to these virtues. Being on-ground meant being firm in keeping order and, at the same time, being transparent, both of which required patience and humility. Myrna Bongolan, a volunteer from the *Samahan ng mga Manininda sa UP Campus* (SMUPC) (Union of Vendors in UP Campus), recalled in an interview that she and the others had to plan out a system in distributing the goods, letting people fall in line, observing proper health protocols, claiming the package, and exiting the pantry. A ticketing system was also established days after the operations began, especially when beneficiaries started to amass and incidences of abuse in claiming aid surfaced.

Encarnacion Canja, another volunteer from SMUPC, explained:

Para sa akin, iyong aral na natutunan ko doon sa pantry ay ang pasensiya, mahabang pasensiya. Intindihin 'yung mga taong pumipila, kasi gutom sila eh. Kahit isang kilong bigas, pinagtitiyagaan nila. Para hindi lang magulo iyong pila, hindi sila magalit, isang oras silang pipila para sa isang kilong bigas o anumang ibibigay natin, kaya sa isip ko kailangan talaga silang intindihin. Tayo na nagseserbisyo ay dapat tayo na rin ang mapagparaya at mapagkumbaba para maayos lang ang araw ngayon na namimigay na walang nasaktan, walang nagalit, walang high blood, kaya kailangan pala talagang intindihan sila. Tayong nagkawanggawa sa kanila, nagserbisyo sa kanila, sila pa ang intindihin natin. Hindi nila tayo naiintindihan sa sakripisyo natin, basta sila na nakapila doon, iyon ang pahabaan ng pasensiya.

(For me, what I learned from the pantry is patience, persistent patience. Understand that the people falling in line are hungry. They line up for hours just to get a kilo of rice. [I must understand them] to keep the queue in order, to make sure no one gets rowdy, and to just practice utmost patience. We serve them so it is expected for us to give utmost understanding and humility so that we end the day without anyone getting hurt, mad, or hotheaded. The people lining up don't understand what we are going through. They are just there to get some aid, so we should adjust and practice utmost patience.)

Community pantries transgress virtues of humility and patience—food pantries are sites not only of charity but also of activism, advocacy, and food justice. This highlights volunteer Bongolan's realization:

Hindi pala puwedeng sa gobyerno lang tayo aasa. Kailangan din natin magtulong-tulong, sumikap sa sarili, at saka umasa sa mga taong may puso

na handang tumulong sa mga nangangailangan, kasi ang gobyerno natin, kaya tayong tiisin. Kaya tayong panoorin na maglulupasay ka diyan sa kalye na walang makain. Kayâ sa mga taong may puso, diyan mo makikilala kung sino iyong nakakaramdam na kailangan mo ng pagkain, kailangan mo ang pinansiya. Kasi ang gobyerno, pinakita kung paano rin sila katigas at pabaya. Paano sila sa mga taong naghihirap, ang sa kanila lang ang magpayaman. Mabuti pa 'yung kapareho mong mahirap na ramdam nila yung hirap mo na ramdam mo ang hirap sa araw-araw.

(We cannot just rely on the government. We need to depend on ourselves and kind-hearted people because our government doesn't care for its citizens. [The government] can stand to watch its citizens struggle with hunger on the streets. During this time, one can truly see who cares to provide food and financial aid, while the government sees only how it can financially take advantage of the situation. It is only the poor that I can relate with because they know how it is to live and struggle day by day).

In the *Lawan* podcast, Esperida stressed that another important aspect of the pantry was to enlighten individuals by disseminating information on mutual aid advocacy. She further explained:

Tuwing mayroon kaming distribution, may binibigay kaming mga polyeto at nagpapaliwanag na rin on the spot. Alam natin na wala tayong masyadong ma-instill sa 5 to 10 minutes nilang pagpipila. Sa distribution, mabilis kasi talagang nangyayari ang distribution. Kahit 700 packs iyong hinanda mo, in a matter of 30 minutes, tapos na iyan. Pero iyong mismong polyeto at kaunting pagpapaliwanag ay isang malaking hakbang para sa amin na maging aware sila, bakit mayroon tayong pantry at bakit kailangan nating matugunan iyong pagkukulang na ito. Pangalawa, iyong direksiyon din na nakikita namin, dahil nga hindi lang naman iyong kagutuman ang gusto nilang ma-solve sa pagpipila, gusto rin nating tugunan iyong pagiging malasog sa panahon na ito. Sa notes na ginagawa ko, nakakakuha ako ng inquiries kung papaano sila makaka-network ng mga trabaho or makaka-access ng mental health services kung sino ang puwede nila makausap. Lyon ang next steps na nakikita namin na puwede naming ibigay sa pantry.

(Every time there's aid distribution, we disseminate flyers and discuss the pantry on the spot. We are aware that [our discussions] may not always get within the 5 to 10 minutes of staying in line. Distribution of aid finishes in 30 minutes even if we have prepared 700 packs of aid. However, we see that giving flyers is a big step forward in making fellow citizens aware about the pantry, and why it exists. Secondly, another direction that we are seeing about the pantry is not only resolving hunger, but also addressing wellness amid the pandemic. I have kept notes during our distribution, and based on that I have been getting inquiries on how they are able to access a network of jobs and mental health services. This is an issue that I hope we may be able to provide through the pantry).

Conclusion

Community pantries exemplify Levinas' point on the "concept of hunger" as a "symbolic arena" that interrogates leaders and spotlights the marginalized. San Fernando pointed out an important matter that relates to Levinas' concept of community pantries during the *Lawan* podcast episode:

Hindi pangmatagalan ang community pantry. Sa katunayan, ang community pantry ay direktang action ng mga komunidad sa kakulangan ng kasalukuyang sistema at estruktura na mayroon tayo. Iyong aktibidad, talagang matatapos at matatapos iyan, pero kami na iyong naniniwala na ang konseptong ibinukas ng community pantry ay ang tingin naming may pangmatagalang epekto sa kung papaaano natin tinitingnan 'yung mga development models and even the system itself. Ito ang mga long-term effect sa diskurso ng development models. And for us, community pantry serves as a building block in building alternative relations that cut across many topics like health, governance, and food.

(Community pantries won't last long. In fact, the community pantry is a direct response to [government] inaction and [the] lack of the current system and structure that we have right now. The activity will surely end but we believe that the concepts opened up by community pantry will have long term effects on how we perceive development models and even the current system itself. This is the long-term effect discourse on development models. And for us, [the] community pantry serves as a building block in building alternative relations that cut across many topics like health, governance, and food).

The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP experience is a telling narrative that expresses what Alma Espartinez stated about community pantries.

The community pantries are grounded in theories of social change, in which an essential requirement is dialogical processes geared toward recovering, centering, and foregrounding the voices of the hungry. The presence of community pantries can move toward the future, which involves consciousness-building and the creation of communicative or participatory spaces in which bodies and voices flow easily. . . . Empowerment for social integration of marginalized groups, such as the elderly, disabled, and poor, coupled with respect for each contribution, would significantly improve the participatory processes.²⁵

25 Espartinez, 3.

The Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP plays a vital role in ensuring that the education sector, especially the national university of the country, leads efforts to provide mutual aid. Following Espartinez, “educational institutions cannot teach anything less than this to make their pedagogy responsive to social justice.”²⁶

The effort of the Community Pantry and Pharmacy at UP, as well as the other community pantries in the Philippines, reflects what Gozum et al. described as “the virtue of solidarity,” which is “a reminder that everyone is in this crisis together. It teaches us how to live well in the face of hardship and distress. Solidarity points out that each is responsible for all, much like compassion.”²⁷

Moreover, it is also reflective of an important aspect of alternative relations, as explained by San Fernando in the *Lawan* podcast:

Nabi-build dulot ng community pantry initiative ay nagiging practice na ngayong komunidad na makapag-usap, makapag-resolve, makapagplano all by themselves, even without the traditional authorities and platforms na ini-impose sa mga komunidad. Ang tunay pala na kapangyarihan at kapasyahan para itakda yung nais nating komunidad na proyekto sa ating komunidad ay nandoon sa mga mamamayan. Hindi pala ito naka-asa kay kapitan. Hindi pala ito nakaasa kay mayor, kay congressman. The stakeholders of the community themselves can really enact changes all by themselves.

(What is being built through the community pantry initiative is the practice of volunteers and the whole community engaged in communicating, resolving, and planning all by themselves even without the traditional authorities and platforms imposed in communities. The genuine empowerment and decision-making are established by the people in the community itself. It is not through the barangay captain’s, mayor’s or representative’s decisions. The stakeholders of the community themselves can really enact changes all by themselves).

In this light, Esperida expresses that the experience of UP community’s effort during the pandemic is a continuing platform to provide service to the displaced. The pantry utilizes the concept of *tayo-tayo* (all of us for each other) in emphasizing the relevance of people’s solidarity, in which people will advance the development of its sector. At

26 Espartinez, 8.

27 Galang et al., e315–e316.

the same time, the people's movement will hold the responsible agencies accountable and will continue the struggle towards achieving genuine social change and justice.

Finally, as emphasized by Ananeza Aban during the *Lawan* podcast, community pantries, including the UP Community Pantry and Pharmacy, are: (1) part of a broadening network of alternatives not only in the Philippines but also in Southeast Asia; (2) part of a people-centered response that highlights the doers-actors of pantries; (3) the bearer of the "principle of commons" that reflects community-owned resources; and (4) defined by people-to-people solidarity that goes beyond charity and dole-outs.

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Building Sustainable Social and Solidarity Economy in Southeast Asia

Towards More and Better Jobs for Women in the Informal Economy¹

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Abstract

The case study discusses the “social solidarity economy” (SSE) model as practiced by PATAMABA-WISE (Workers in the Informal Sector Enterprise), a community-based women-led social enterprise in Angono, Rizal, Philippines. This is situated in the broader advocacy of the regional network, Homenet, in promoting fair trade and a solidarity economy. PATAMABA-WISE members are involved throughout the stages of production, marketing, and fundraising. In order to maximize access to state resources, it also participates in local governance and taps into public funding for support services for its projects. The SSE practice of PATAMABA-WISE is anchored on the three principles of “people, planet, and profitability.”

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- 1 Sections of this paper are derived from Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo, “Engendering Social and Solidarity Economy in the Context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda,” *Philippine Journal of Social Development* 11 (2019), https://base.socioeco.org/docs/ofreneo-sse_and_gender_equality_april_-_2019.pdf; and Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo, “Building Sustainable and Social Solidarity Economy in Southeast Asia: Towards More and Better Jobs for Women in the Informal Economy,” in *Building Peoples’ Movements in Southeast Asia: Towards an Alternative Model of Regionalism*, 2nd Southeast Asian Conference on Alternatives (Quezon City: UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 2021), 11–13, <https://cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2nd-sea-conference-alternatives-proceedings-online-ver.pdf>
 - 2 The Pambansang Kalipunan ng mga Manggagawang Impormal sa Pilipinas (National Network of Informal Workers in the Philippines) or PATAMABA is a national network of home-based and other informal workers defending and advancing the collective interests of such workers. WISE (Women in the Informal Sector Enterprise) is a community-based, women-led social enterprise in Angono, Rizal, Philippines. HomeNet Philippines is a broad coalition composed of 27 membership-based grassroots organizations and nongovernmental organizations with approximately 65,000 members. It pushes for social protection for all, and for the passage of the Magna Carta of Workers in the Informal Economy Bill, among other bills.

A solidarity economy is a quilt, a woven patchwork of many diverse economies that are centered on life-values instead of profit-values. Solidarity economics is the process of identifying, connecting, strengthening and creating grassroots, life-centered alternatives to capitalist globalization, or the Economics of Empire.

— Ethan Miller, “Solidarity Economics” (2004)

“Solidarity economy” emerged in Latin American countries when their economies were reeling from the impact of structural adjustment programs imposed by multilateral institutions. It grew elsewhere in the Global South as progressive social movements sought to respond to neoliberal globalization in diverse ways, responding to the context of their own values and experiences.

Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) movements have expanded throughout the world. It has reached more than 1.2 billion members, counting 2.94 million cooperatives employing almost 280 million individuals (Eum 2017). Cooperatives in Africa and Latin America have been revived, and social enterprises in Europe and Asia are on the rise. In South Asia, SSE takes the form of self-help groups, with India alone accounting for 2.5 million. Fair-trade producers and markets have also been expanding because of SSE, with its value reaching the USD 6 billion mark in 2013 (Utting 2013). Fair trade towns, schools and universities play an increasingly larger role in the campaign.

In terms of global presence, the RIPESS Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of SSE brings together continental networks committed to the promotion of SSE, with the Asian Solidarity Economy Council (ASEC) serving as its Asian base. Its goal is to promote the SSE, foster intercontinental cooperation, and advocate for the SSE at different levels. SSE has likewise been integrated in state structures, with SSE ministries and national secretariats established in Brazil, France, Luxembourg and Colombia.

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The United Nations (UN) created the International Labour Organization (ILO) SSE Academy and the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UN TFSSE) to raise awareness about the growth of SSE among international and policy making bodies. UN TFSSE defines SSE as

[t]he production of goods and services by a broad range of organizations and enterprises that have explicit social and often environmental objectives and are guided by principles of cooperation, solidarity, equity and democratic self-management. (UN TFSSE 2014)

Peter Utting (2015) further characterizes SSE as:

an attempt to reassert social control over the economy by prioritizing social objectives above profit maximization, recognizing key role of collective action and active citizenship for both economic and political empowerment of disadvantaged groups in society, and reintroducing notions of ethics, sharing, equality and democracy in economic activity.

Put simply, SSE is a form of economic democracy, wherein people learn how to manage the production of goods and services to achieve their own social and environmental objectives, autonomous from the state.

Overlapping Crises as Context: Women in Informal Economy as Most Disadvantaged

Overlapping crises have been generated by the current neoliberal development model. It has miserably failed in addressing the goals of sustainable human development as 45 percent of the world's population still live in poverty (Aguilar and Sumner 2020; World Bank 2018). The existence of extreme inequality is evident—26 of the extremely wealthy own the wealth equivalent to that of the poorest half of humanity (Pineda-Ofreneo 2019). Around 150 million children are stunted because of malnutrition and hunger (WHO 2018). Climate change has also engendered an eminent existential threat—an emergency that leaves humanity with only 11 years to avert global catastrophe.

Women are largely tied to the home; thus, the value of their reproductive work is statistically invisible, since it is generally not reflected in the National System of Accounts. Many women—almost 50 percent in the case of the Philippines—are classified as “housewives.” As such, they are considered outside the labor force and perceived as economically inactive. Globally, 48 women out of 100 are in the labor

force, compared to 75 out of 100 men (ILO 2018). For many of those outside the labor force, time spent on unpaid care work leaves women with little to no opportunity to engage in work that earns a clear and visible income. Termed “time poverty,” this phenomenon is more apparent among grassroots women in rural and urban poor areas. Many of these women have no access to basic utilities and social services, and are unable to afford hired help or labor-saving devices. This deprivation can have harmful effects on health, even on life itself. According to global data released by UN Women, 80 percent of household water collection—time-consuming and back-breaking work—is done by women and girls. Inefficient stoves, which use combustible fuel, result in harmful indoor pollution and claimed 4.3 million lives in 2012, 60 percent of whom were women and girls (UN Women 2018, 6–7).

Grassroots women engaging in productive work despite reproductive burdens are mostly informal workers who live in rural and urban poor areas. These include home-based workers, store owners, vendors, small farmers and fisherfolk, unpaid family workers in household farms and micro-enterprises, waste recyclers, domestic and service workers such as laundry women, massage workers, hair and nail care staff, and so on. This labor is akin to reproductive work. Their pay is usually abysmally low, as this work is often considered secondary to men’s productive work. Moreover, working conditions are substandard and social protection is lacking or completely absent.

Regional data on South and East Asia show that around 60 percent of those who work in the non-agricultural sector are in informal employment, ranging from 42 percent in Thailand to 84 percent in India (ILO 2014, 12). In the Philippines, more than 80 percent—33 million of 40.7 million—of employed workers are informally employed (PIDS 2018). Many employed women are in the bottom rungs of the informal economy. Their vulnerable and unprotected situation worsens the issues they face as both women and workers, deprived of the rights and benefits enjoyed by men and by those who are in formal employment.

The massive scale of informal employment, and the corresponding non-realization of rights, has prompted global discourse on transitioning from the informal to the formal economy, as seen in the 2014 report of the International Labour Conference. In the transitioning document, solidarity economy is identified as an important component of informal employment and as a strategy for facilitating formalization (ILO 2014).

In other words, it is seen as a pathway towards more and better work—one that is recognized and protected, productive yet sustainable, that pays more, is more regular and more marketable, and can provide flexibility in meeting family responsibilities while maintaining work-life balance (Pineda-Ofreneo 2014).

Advancing and Practicing Fair Trade and Solidarity Economy

Faced with the aforementioned challenges, informal workers, through networks like HomeNet Philippines and HomeNet Southeast Asia, have been pushing for fair trade and solidarity economy in the region for more than 15 years. HomeNet has “been active in various forms of fair-trade advocacy in collaboration with trade unions, business groups, and civil society organizations.” Promoting fair trade principles helps (1) create opportunities for disadvantaged producers and provides them fair prices for their products; (2) ensure workers’ rights to freedom of association, just remuneration, job security, social protection, occupational health and safety, and good working conditions; (3) respect and protect the environment; and (4) eliminate child labor and all forms of discrimination, while advancing gender equity and women’s empowerment.

HomeNet is currently working in six countries in Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, HomeNet focuses on organizing people with disabilities (PWDs) and people with HIV/AIDS as actors of development in a fair-trade context. In Thailand, HomeNet established the HomeNet Thailand Association, a membership-based organization with around 4,000 members from small producer groups. Around 80 percent of their members are women. In 2016, 25 producers’ groups planned together to establish “HomeNet Thailand Brand” as a social enterprise using the SSE framework.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, PATAMABA region 6 and its 1,200 members embarked on a homegrown microfinance system to be run by the members themselves. PATAMABA manages microfinance and other business initiatives on a regular basis. What began as a PHP 250,000 revolving fund is now a lending portfolio worth more than PHP 5 million. They also have 540 borrowers, whose loans range from PHP 5,000 to PHP 150,000. Their business initiatives include the production of molo balls and recycled juice bags, bakery management, organic gardening, and food processing and preservation.

A Community-Based SSE Model with BUB Support: The Case of PATAMABA Angono

PATAMABA chapters in the municipality of Angono, Rizal are found in two coastal barangays highly susceptible to flooding: San Vicente and Kalayaan. The Kalayaan sub-chapter was established in 1992 and San Vicente followed in 1995. At the time, majority of the women members were involved in smocking and embroidery for the export market. Eventually, when demand for smocking declined, other livelihood activities were explored individually or as a group, like making Christmas balls, doormats, round rugs, and beaded bags, among others.

The organizing stage of the sub-chapter in Kalayaan started in 1991 through a project on child labor. Data gathered from the project revealed the need to organize parents of working children in order to curb child labor. At the beginning, members underwent capacity building and leadership training to strengthen the newly formed organization. Later, livelihood training was introduced and included skills training on the production of peanut butter, candles, chocolate candies, and other products.

In 1998, the Chapter was introduced to gender concerns when it participated in paralegal training concerning violence against women (VAW). Knowledge on gender issues was deepened through an orientation on Gender and Development (GAD) conducted in 2004, and later through awareness-raising sessions on various topics, including national and local instruments that respond to gender-based violence.

The PATAMABA Rizal governance and advocacy framework consists of the following:

- (1.) Social Protection: focusing on social security, health insurance, security in the workplace, and access to justice;
- (2.) Human Development: conducting capacity and capability building;
- (3.) Asset Reforms: focusing on the issue of workplace security (land and housing, common area of production);
- (4.) Participation and Recognition: developing the voice of and representation for informal workers;

- (5.) Employment and/or Enterprise Building;
- (6.) Fostering “leaderpreneurship” to develop women’s economic empowerment; and
- (7.) Building community resiliency.

Disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) was originally not part of the advocacy of the organization, although the members live in coastal areas. Until 2007, flood cycles regularly occurred every ten years, but since Typhoon Milenyo (“Xangsane”) in 2006, massive floods due to typhoons and *habagat* (monsoon rains) devastate coastal areas on a yearly basis. Recurring and worsening experiences of flooding pushed PATAMABA members to address their vulnerability through DRRM training and practice.

PATAMABA members participated in the Zero-Squatter program of the municipality and were relocated to San Vicente. The plan was for them to avail of the community mortgage program (CMP). Unfortunately, in order to qualify for CMP, 80 percent of the houses should have been constructed in the area, a requirement which they were not able to meet. Currently, the PATAMABA Housing Association (HOA), which consists of 216 members, directly purchase lots from the owner. Increasingly, members have been awarded certificates for paying their lots in full. The HOA now enjoys a stable and accessible supply of water and electricity from service providers. This a vast improvement from when water had to be rationed and electricity bought through sub-meters. Moreover, they have promoted the development of urban gardens to increase food security in the area.

Backyard gardening is a normal practice in Barangays Kalayaan and San Vicente. However, it is not a primary source of income since these communities are flooded for 5-6 months of the year. But those who sell their produce find that they do not have to go to the market to sell, as the demand for vegetables is barely met among the community. Those who maintain gardens for personal consumption argue that planting vegetables helps reduce the food budget and at the same time assures the quality and freshness of what the family eats.

Focus on PATAMABA WISE

Angono producers are organized under the PATAMABA-WISE (Workers in the Informal Sector Enterprise), the livelihood arm of PATAMABA Rizal, a provincial local chapter of the National PATAMABA. It was registered with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the municipal government of Angono. It began with 29 members contributing PHP 200 each in 2009, and has since then expanded to 238—overwhelmingly women, with less than ten men. The strategy of PATAMABA WISE for expansion is through engagement in the Child Labor Protection and Elimination program (CLPEP) of the municipality and DOLE.

Angono, being one of the 1,233 poorest municipalities in the Philippines, was covered by the Bottom-Up Budgeting (BUB) program in 2013. The Angono BUB was spearheaded by the Local Poverty Reduction Action Team (LPRAT), composed of 28 members—14 from government and 14 from civil society organizations (CSOs). It was chaired by then-Mayor and current Vice Mayor Gerry Calderon, and co-chaired by Josephine “Olive” Parilla of PATAMABA WISE. LPRAT was mandated to facilitate the drafting, finalization, and approval of the Local Poverty Reduction Action Plan (LPRAP) of the municipality, primarily identified by CSOs. A Local Project Management Team (LPMT) was also organized to oversee the daily implementation of the LPRAP, including livelihood projects.

The LPMT is a smaller group headed by Sir John Arys Manaol, the Project Manager hired by the municipality. Members of the LPRAT include the BUB Cluster heads: Jocelyn “Josie” Lipio for the production of rags, Emilina “Emmie” Nacario for homecare products, Isabel “Sabel” Torres for store management, Nenie Amano for doormat making, Mary Dela Cruz for fashion accessories, and Efren Aquino for boxes, frames and eco bags. Five out of the six cluster heads are PATAMABA WISE members.

Participation in Livelihood Project Operations

PATAMABA WISE members are primarily involved in production, marketing and/or investment, which pertains to their initial contribution of PHP 200.

Membership requires a contribution of PHP 200, which is allocated for capitalization. Financial sustainability strategies also include buying

and using products of PATAMABA by its members, and promoting and marketing their products to non-members.

Quality control is done by the project team. Home care products were also tested and certified by the Bureau of Product Standards (BPS) of the Department of Trade Industry (DTI).

During peak operation, the products are sold with at least 30 percent mark-up. With the gross income, the organization can pay the monthly rental of the productivity center, administrative expenses, giveaways during Christmas gift-giving, as well as the compensation of the workers.

PATAMABA WISE managed to produce rags, doormats, homecare products, picture frames (from water lilies), *higantitos* (little giants), accessories, and ready-to-wear clothes. They conceptualized a tag line—buying a piece helps a lot of women. They managed to secure funds from DOLE, which further improved their capabilities and access to resources. As soon as the BUB was adopted by the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Angono in 2013, PATAMABA WISE became the leading organization partner of the LGU in the development of the municipality of Angono. They facilitated the formation of conduits for the local organization towards spearheading the economic activity of the municipality. PATAMABA is in charge of the local economy and economic activity for vulnerable and marginalized sectors in the municipality. PATAMABA leaders teamed up with the community training and livelihood office (CTLO) for the training and capacity building activities.

Marketing Networks

The main buyers are from the community—side street stores, employees of the municipality and friends. Some of the products are also bought by members and supporters of the Homenet Producers Cooperative, which has a store on Maginhawa Street, UP Village; *tiyangge* (street market) and mall patrons outside the community are also able to buy Angono fashion accessories marketed at the store. Two BUB-run kiosks provided by the LGU in the Municipality Ground Plaza, municipal entrance, and other strategic areas in the municipality, sell to retail buyers. The Angono CTLO and Employees Cooperative help market the products.

Members can also sell rags. They find buyers in Angono; for instance, from PESO (Public Employment Service Office), a “middle man” who

orders 1,000 pieces per week for a construction site in Batangas, and other wholesalers.

For home care products, the market consists of cooperatives like Homenet and another cooperative in Angono, as well as government agencies like PESO, CITECO, municipal offices, DOLE-Cainta. Transactions are largely based on a cash on delivery (COD) basis and a consignment basis. The municipal office helps promote products during events and on social media.

Buyers sometimes provide capital for pre-orders. They also help market products through social media, word of mouth, and partnerships with other cooperatives.

Adhering to a Multi-Stakeholder Approach

PATAMABA's participation in local governance facilitates access to state funding, resources, and support services. It helps that the Angono Municipality, which has won the Seal of Good Local Governance for four years and a Gawad Kalinga award, is committed to the BUB project process even after the exit of the Aquino government. The BUB was renamed to Assistance to Disadvantaged Municipalities (ADM) and now just Assistance to Municipalities (AM). Despite leadership turnover in the last local elections, continuity is evident in the operations of the municipality productivity center. Regardless of election outcomes, PATAMABA WISE was confident their production clusters could survive with or without government support, since many of these clusters had been in existence even before the BUB project began (Parilla, Nacario, and Amano 2019).³

For the Angono BUB, DOLE provided more than PHP 4 million in 2014, PHP 3.369 million in 2015, PHP 6.2 million in 2016 for livelihood funding support, including training on occupational safety and health. Aside from DOLE, the following agencies also provided support to the municipality:

- The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) conducted skills training in massage, hair cutting, automotive, solar energy, and so on;

3 The authors conducted an interview with J. Parilla, E. Nacario, and N. Amano on 31 March 2019, at the Barangay San Vicente Municipal Council Hall, Angono, Rizal.

- The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) provided training in water hyacinth production, entrepreneurship, and local economy development;
- The Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) focused on gender and development (GAD), which included the drafting of the Angono GAD Code;
- The Department of Agriculture (DA) assisted fisherfolk (fish cage and terminal), and farmers through a small irrigation project;
- The Department of Health (DOH) supported community health teams, barangay health workers, the dengue program and the epidemiology center;
- The Department of Education (DepEd) took charge of school facilities;
- The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) ran the 4Ps Sustainable Livelihood Development; and
- The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) provided a cooperative training program.

PATAMABA members in Angono benefited from many of these programs, projects, and activities.

For PATAMABA in particular, DOLE granted WISE PHP 1.4M for its enterprise building (training and production) in 2010, and livelihood activities, which included a bakery, food carts, and the production of home care products, rugs, and boxes. All these activities continued until 2015, except for the bakery, which was temporarily shelved due to the unavailability of a production site.

In 2015, PATAMABA WISE was tapped by the Angono LGU and DOLE Rizal to run a livelihood project under the child labor program. It began the production of homecare products and rugs, which engaged 175 individuals. This led to organizing the parents of child laborers in the municipality to become affiliates of PATAMABA WISE. As such, Angono was recognized as the “First Child Labor Free Municipality” in the country.

PATAMABA has also had good experiences relating with the private sector. For example, PATAMABA WISE established an agreement with Lafarge cement factory to use their waste materials to produce

higantitos souvenirs, which the Angono municipality used as giveaways to guests. Production, however, has stopped due pending payments of receivables from the Municipality (Parilla, Nacario, and Amano 2019).

With regards to partnerships with non-government organizations (NGOs), PATAMABA WISE arranged for Women in Sustainable Economic Action (WISEACT) to conduct training on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), Product and Plant Assessment (PPA), and product development to comply with the requirements of the Bureau of Product Standards.

WISEACT helped PATAMABA WISE develop the quality of their soap. From 2006 to 2007, WISEACT staff took members on a *Lakbay-Aral* and *Alay-Kapwa* to learn about soap packaging. They also visited the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) for packaging retail and wholesale products, and San Miguel Corporation for packaging and labeling.

Relations with academe have developed through the years. For example, the Department of Women and Development Studies of the University of the Philippines (UP) College of Social Work and Community Development (CSWCD) has fielded practicum students in the area since the early 2000s. This included partnerships for gender awareness training and GAD planning, organizational development, implementation of the anti-VAWC law, sexuality education for youth and older persons, feminist leadership, and social marketing. The Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU) engagement with PATAMABA Angono began with DRRM training and is now moving on to youth-focused skills training in livelihood development, such as the production of decorative boxes.

Triple Bottom Line

The social and solidarity economy practice of PATAMABA WISE is anchored on the triple bottom line of People, Planet, and Profitability.

People: Participatory Governance, Social Development, and Women's Empowerment

PATAMABA is a membership-based organization adhering to democratic principles. As explained in the case study,

it employs participatory governance in the management and operation of livelihood projects. The members own and govern their business because they are not mere members of the organization, but they are also the

investors who are themselves involved in the production, marketing and management of their business. (Parilla and Royandoyan 2017, 5)

Opportunities for members to develop themselves are implied in the statement of its President, Josephine Parilla: “In participatory leadership, I want everyone to shine, not just the leader” (6).

What holds the organization together is not the experience of increased incomes, which at best remains supplementary, but a sense of solidarity and belongingness—the values the members hold dear. Members know that they can rely on each other for mutual aid during critical times. They also embody the traditional Filipino value of *tangkilikan*, which is important for SSE success. Parilla explains *tangkilikan* in this manner: “We produce, we sell and buy our own products. In return we provide our members the opportunity to earn. The more the members sell and buy, the more they earn” (Parilla and Royandoyan 2017, 6).

PATAMABA has contributed to social development by ensuring that their products first address community needs. It provides fair compensation, encouraging incentives for product patronage, and flexible working conditions to women who also must contend with childcare and other family responsibilities. When working together in a common production center, producers ensure that there was space for children to play. Surplus is plowed back to the members in the form of mutual aid and educational funds. Members benefit from awareness-raising on gender sensitivity and GAD, the Reproductive Health law, the Kasambahay law, Exclusive and Continued Breastfeeding, among others. Some have also undergone certificate courses on dressmaking, welding, and solar energy provision through cooperation with TESDA. These courses offered better employment opportunities for the certificate holders.

PATAMABA WISE facilitates income augmentation for women, which helps increase family income. They provide economic, leadership, and management opportunities for women which allows them to feel a sense of empowerment. Women are also able to make decisions because they earn for their families. They now have decision making power on household expenses and personal items.

Aside from economic development, women also developed greater awareness about their rights. PATAMABA facilitates GAD trainings and awareness raising about violence against women and children for their

members. PATAMABA recognizes the inclusion of poor and socially disadvantaged sectors, such as elderly and young women.

Planet: Environmentally Friendly Products

Home care products of PATAMABA WISE are environment friendly, as they recognize the need to advocate for environmental protection, conservation and preservation. Home care products are biodegradable. Findings of the Bureau of Product Standards of the DTI show that WISE powdered laundry detergent soap and liquid dish washing soap have no hazardous chemical content. These are high quality community-based products. BUB home care products are made of coconut and sodium sulfate, and are safe for watering plants. Rags and doormats are made using recycled waste materials from nearby factories. Water lilies from the lake are made into picture frames and bags, while local waste from aggregates (*banlik*) are refashioned into higititos and key chains.

Profitability: Impact on Poverty Reduction

Through the efforts of PATAMABA WISE, women and men can generate income for their families. Members also learn to develop livelihood skills and work in teams. The livelihood projects available for their members offer alternative productive work and income for the unemployed. This allows different vulnerable sectors to participate in livelihood activities.

The spending capacity of their members also increased. They can now send their children to school, secure daily meals, and provide for the basic needs for their family. For the elderly, income generated from livelihood activities has encouraged financial independence from other members of the family.

PATAMABA leaders, however, admit that they still have a long way to go before they achieve economic sustainability. They are still reliant on grants; they need to move towards self-reliance and better marketing through product development and wider networking. They have had productive relations with national agencies, local governments, women's organizations, and academic institutions such as ADMU and UP CSWCD. Over time, and with the support of allies, they hope to truly achieve full SSE status.

Key Elements of the PATAMABA WISE SSE Model

In conclusion, the following may be cited as key elements of the PATAMABA WISE SSE model, which reflect those embodied in other SSE initiatives of the Homenet national and regional networks of home-based and other workers in the informal economy:

- Primacy of democratic and inclusive membership-based organizations—in this case, women in the informal economy—as the key actors ready to work with other stakeholders in the community;
- Sharing responsibilities and accessing resources from the public or state sectors, as well as from NGOs, civil society and private groups;
- Ensuring product quality and development, sustained networking for marketing, SSE promotion and advocacy;
- Participation in local governance, which facilitates access to state funding, resources, and support services (e.g., the BUB);
- Addressing the primary economic needs of the community, such as food and home care products;
- Recycling, environmental safety and conservation connected to DRRM and climate change adaptation;
- Integration of a gender perspective—recognizing and developing the productivity and potential of women in poverty towards their empowerment and gender equality;
- Readiness to improve, expand, develop, upgrade, upscale, and converge, to ensure sustainability, resilience, and plowing back of greater benefits to people and planet.

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From the Community, For the Community: Exploring the Potential of Dakdae Social Enterprise in Laos

Dakdae, Julianne B. Agpalo, and Ananeza P. Aban¹

Abstract

Right in the heart of the city of Vientiane, a small yet attractive store managed by young women sells edible and non-edible products generated from the local communities across Laos. This study explores the possibilities and opportunities of a women-led social enterprise in Laos called Dakdae. Founded in January 2018, it serves as a platform—a conduit to sell local or locally-made Lao products. In Lao language, Dakdae means “cocoon.” The founders chose this word for a name as it aptly serves its purpose as a “cocoon” to its partner community-based producer groups, who are well-equipped with different skills and who come from diverse backgrounds.

1 DakDae is a Lao women-led social enterprise that provides a market platform for high-quality, local handicrafts and food products from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, together with a range of professional services relating to branding and product development.

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In 2019, Aban, along with Angeli Fleur G. Nuque, former Junior Research Analyst at the UP CIDS AltDev, conducted field research, and interviewed Dakdae co-founder Anousone Phimmachanh, in Vientiane City, Laos.

For the founders of Dakdae, the cocoon represents the undeveloped potential of young and local entrepreneurs, artisan, farmers, and producers in Laos. At a glance, all cocoons seem to look the same. Overlooked, however, is a kind of inner beauty: abilities and a distinctive character that promise a picturesque visual presentation. One day, the chrysalis will split open to spread the wings of the insect, transforming to a butterfly that not only possesses natural beauty but also plays a key role in sustaining the ecosystem. The producers' eventual coming out in the process of developing this socially-oriented business is central to the operation of Dakdae.

By providing guidance and opportunity, Dakdae represents their budding partners, who will someday develop to become colorful butterflies that confidently showcase and share their talents, simultaneously generating income and providing positive social and environmental impacts (Dakdae n.d.; Authentic Lao Products n.d.).

As a social enterprise, Dakdae's main purpose is to support local producers and communities through capacity building and market linkages. It provides technical services on branding and product development for young entrepreneurs who have yet to break into the mainstream market. Through its consultancy services, it designs the branding and packaging of the products.

With a background in fair trade and product certification, Anousone Phimmachanh co-founded Dakdae with another friend, now in charge of branding and product design. Another woman manages the physical store in Vientiane City, while a team of volunteers assist in production design. They all work collectively to sustain Dakdae.

Both its physical store and online shop sell a multitude of organic, natural, and homegrown products, such as rice, tea, coffee, brown sugar, sesame, black pepper, as well as beauty and wellness products, handicrafts, and hand-woven fabrics. Its most celebrated value-added products so far include premium Phongsaly tea harvested from Phongsaly Province, an exceptional location where tea grows 1,600 meters above sea level; and Indian prickly ash (*Zanthoxylum rhetsa*), a traditional food spice popular among Lao people that is now becoming a sought-after perfume ingredient for export (Dakdae n.d.).

The United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and the Small Islands (UN OHRLLS) confirms the participation of Dakdae in this BioTrade initiative:

The company [Dakdae] trades its essential oil for the European fragrance industry, a new market that will allow its sourcing communities in remote villages of Huaphan province to increase their income from sustainably sourcing a native species. (UN OHRLLS n.d., 71)

The Travails of Social Entrepreneurship in Laos

Regionally, social entrepreneurship is becoming an approach in Southeast Asia to reduce income inequality, address social and environmental challenges, and empower women and girls. The younger generation stands out as the driving force of social enterprise (Thomson Reuters Foundation et al. 2018, 3).

While Dakdae is one among the many thriving social enterprises in Laos, the growth of social enterprises is not without its challenges. In 1987, as the country began to integrate its economy to the global market, Laos radically shifted from a centrally-planned policy to a market-oriented scheme through the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism. These changes eventually recognized the legitimacy of the market forces (Dana 2002, 209; Thomson Reuters Foundation et al. 2018).

However, Dana (2002) argued that in a market economy transition, success should be measured as influenced by historical experiences, cultural values and traditions. Lao people generally do not engage in business or entrepreneurship because cultural values and religious beliefs dictate the elimination of desire. As such, commerce and trade are perceived as actions to satisfy desire. More importantly, business activities are traditionally not associated with the upper class; thus, trading is usually the domain of those from inferior social standing, such as minorities and women, who often succeed in their endeavors (Homes and Kirkpatrick 2001 quoted in Dana 2002; Dana 1997 quoted in Dana 2002). The Chinese minority in Laos are particularly prominent in small-scale enterprises (Dana 2002).

With market becoming the spindle for the Laos economy, poverty and human development continue to be the government's key priorities. Social enterprise development has been the response among the local

population, especially marginalized communities. However, the social enterprise sector still faces a deficit of necessary financial and human resources. Likewise, the sector does not benefit from international attention, which other developing countries receive. This has produced a substantial gap in advancing the potential of social entrepreneurs in Laos (Thomson Reuters Foundation et al. 2018, 85).

A report from the International Labour Organization (ILO) also mentions that

the Laos Government has recognized the importance of SME [small and medium enterprise] development to the country's socio-economic development. However, there is still a lack of specific support programs to improve the managerial, technical, and entrepreneurial skills of SMEs alongside access to finance. (ILO 2015, 45)

Interestingly, in the case of Dakdae, the emergence of social enterprise as contributory to the socio-economic changes in Lao society can be reflected in the key role of local communities, especially women, in the social enterprise value chain.

Despite this gap at the national level, Anousone shares that Dakdae is committed to bridging marginalized groups, like ethnic women and young entrepreneurs of diverse ethnic origins, for their participation in social enterprises. During the field visit of University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development (AltDev), hand-woven fabrics made by ethnic women were displayed for sale in the physical store.

Meanwhile, the ILO reports that an entrepreneurial culture is significantly growing in Laos:

In a national survey, the SME sector account for 99 percent of the total registered business in the country, with small business accounting for 98 percent and the medium enterprise for less than 1 percent of the total enterprises. These SMEs employ up to 70 percent of the total workforce and contribute about 16 percent to the gross domestic product (GDP). However, many more active SMEs are in the rural areas and remain informal, thus not captured in the national surveys. (ILO 2015, 42)

The Limits of Existing Local Policy and Regulatory Framework for Social Enterprise

While the region has witnessed an enormous growth of socially-driven business, most of the ASEAN member states still do not have

specific legal frameworks for organizations engaged in profit-generating business activities while carrying a social mission, referring to the social enterprise sector (Thomson Reuters Foundation et al. 2018, 3).

In particular, the Lao regulatory framework lacks the flexibility to accommodate the concept and mission of a social enterprise in the context of a Lao perspective. Laos has no special regulatory frameworks specific to this “hybrid” model of a business. Otherwise, those in the social enterprise sector can use the two laws typically used for business operation: (1) Law of Investment Promotion of 2009, and (2) Law on Enterprise of 2013. However, these laws are more aligned to businesses solely geared towards profit making, which is not the only goal under the social enterprise framework, where many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-profit associations (NPAs) in Laos claim to be operating (Thomson Reuters Foundation et al. 2018, 85-107). As a result, several NPAs and INGOs limit their business activities only to their members; otherwise, they would be classified a business entity (106).

Considering the discussion above, what may be needed as a transition to support social enterprises is a regulatory framework that officially recognizes the complementary purpose of business and social mission under a single legal entity. This measure will acknowledge the role of social enterprises in reducing the burden of the Lao government to alleviate poverty and inequality (Thomson Reuters Foundation et al. 2018).

Private Business and Social Enterprise Differentiation Based on the Dakdae Experience

Pending a regulatory framework in Laos favoring social entrepreneurship, Dakdae prevails in order to pursue its social mission. Important elements in managing Dakdae’s operation deserve utmost attention. These can facilitate further understanding of how a social enterprise differs from a private business, and thus contribute to social transformation in general.

Product Selection, Enhancement, and Purchase

Contemplating on the founding of Dakdae, Anousone and her team stressed their discomfort in organizing as a nonprofit organization, which would make them dependent on donor funds. They decided to invest their own money to start the enterprise. Their approach is to bring the

products from the producers directly to the consumers. Product selection is undertaken by one of Dakdae's shareholders, and marketability is a factor taken into account. Dakdae either purchases the products in bulk on a wholesale price, or on a consignment basis. Directly ordered from the producers, products are both displayed at the physical store, and posted online through their Facebook account, Dakdae.

For producers under consignment, products are placed in-store and Dakdae pays the producers fifty percent of the cost upon delivery. Items such as household goods or handicrafts are sold on a per-order basis. The product samples are displayed in-store. Customers can request for customization, such as selecting a unique pattern or color. The order is then given to the producer. To improve quality control, Dakdae also designs and develops the initial products of producers. The enhanced product design is then presented to a producer or creator. Upon reaching an agreement on the refurbished design, production follows, and the innovated product is then sold in the store.

Dakdae also offers a wide range of professional services relating to branding and product development. One of its founder-shareholders is an architect who does consultancy work for graphic designs and product branding. Her professional service through technical guidance helps organizations and young entrepreneurs build their business.

Economic Empowerment for Community Producers

Importantly, one of the ways in which Dakdae contributes to the economic empowerment of producers is by allowing them to determine the prices for their own products. Anousone explains that in their pricing scheme, it is crucial to include the market value of the raw materials, even when some are sourced from the forest, as well as the labor cost. Then the Dakdae team will assist in calculations to arrive at a fair price.

Profit accumulation is not the ultimate goal of Dakdae. Instead of setting the prices to allow for greater revenue for Dakdae, it pushes its partner communities to set the prices by which Dakdae will procure the products. In this way, the producers are able to sell their produce at a price that properly compensates them for the labor and production costs of each product.

Even with products which Dakdae designs itself, it maintains and insists on a system where producers set the price of the finished outputs.

It also encourages the producers to take into calculation the time and labor put into making the products, considering the standard labor cost in the area and the cost of the raw materials. This system is also in place in the production of Dakdae's recyclable bags, which are made by women from the community.

Reasonable pricing not only ensures economic viability but is also an important factor in sustainable production. Hence, the products should be priced at an amount that can encourage and sustain continued production. This is necessary for the livelihood to be passed on to the next generation. Unlike for-profit corporations, which see the reduction of labor cost as a money-making device, Dakdae actively helps its producers come up with fair, reasonable and sustainable prices. When a product is offered to Dakdae at a low price, it leads them to investigate with the producers on whether the pricing is fair. This is all towards the goal of creating long-lasting relationships with the producers and helping them in capacity-building.

With the platform Dakdae provides the communities, it helps producers grow their market base. For instance, an individual producer of black sesame in Luang Prabang, when partnered with Dakdae, was able to grow the business two-fold. Initially, DakDae helped the producer in improving the product's packaging. After the product development stages, DakDae then sold the black sesame seeds through its online and physical store. These black sesame seeds were even procured on a wholesale basis for reselling by other intermediaries.

Collaboration with Other Local Social Enterprises

Apart from its community partners, Dakdae also partners with Ngam Té, Somneauk Laothang Factory, and Helvetas Laos. Like Dakdae, Ngam Té was founded by women, with a focus on skin care products. It aimed to preserve the wisdom of Lao traditional healers and elders. It produces health and beauty products, and provides sustainable employment and income to its employees and producers. Somnuek Laothang Tea factory similarly offers high quality tea products, organically grown in Phongsaly Province. The organization works with 150 tea farmers and families in Phayashi, Phongsak, Chaphou, and Phongsaly in the northern part of Laos (Dakdae n.d.).

Since 2019, Dakdae has collaborated with international organization Helvetas for the Regional BioTrade Project. The partnership was

established with the goal of promoting sustainable BioTrade² in Laos. Helvetas is an independent and international organization based in Switzerland and with affiliate organizations in Germany and the United States. In Laos, its focus is on ethnic minority communities living in the northern hinterlands of the country (Helvetas n.d.). DakDae and its current partners share a common vision of sustainability, environmental responsibility, and working closely with local communities (Dakdae n.d.).

Dacanay (2006, 9), citing other social enterprises across Southeast Asia, discussed that under the distributive philosophy of fair trading, marginalized producers and groups are given the opportunity to “access the world market using the fair trade principles.” Severing the layers of profit-oriented traders, social enterprise act as intermediaries to consumers.

The interconnectivity of social entrepreneurship, rooted in communities, upholds the fair trade principles, which include: payment to producers of a price higher than the competitive, profit-driven price; payment of fair wages; partial pre-financing of production; prompt payment of deliveries; and assurance of a long term business partnership (Gomez 2001 quoted in Dacanay 2006, 9).

“Name Your Basket”

A few months prior to the Dakdae launch in 2018, Anousone noted that the orders for gifts—a basket loaded with local products—became a motivating factor to finally open Dakdae. This signaled the start of working with a local community to produce “Name Your Basket,” a gift basket filled with Lao products, in time for the New Year. It includes a wide variety of locally sourced products, such as organic brown rice, organic mulberry tea, banana chips, turmeric powder, black ginger whisky, traditional lip balm, honey, and dried fish sauce. The baskets are sourced from weaving communities in Bolikhamxay Province, located south of Vientiane in Central Laos. Wildlife Conservation Society Global (WCS Lao PDR n.d., para. 3) lists Bolikhamxay Province as a “recognized biodiversity hotspot by many international conservation assessments, and containing one of the largest blocks of dry evergreen (or semi-evergreen)

2 Products which are collected, produced, transformed, and commercialized and are derived from species of native biodiversity under the criteria of environmental, social, and economic sustainability (UNCTAD 2020, 2)

forest in Indochina.” With environmental sustainability as one of Dakdae’s core values, support for the basket weaving is paramount. The baskets are made of bamboo sourced from a community-based sustainable allocation system, ensuring that the supply of raw materials continues to reach the next generation.

The use of a community-based sustainable allocation system in livelihood development is all the more important in supporting the conservation efforts in the province. During the first run of Name Your Basket, around 500 pieces were sold, mainly to companies and organizations as corporate gifts for the 2018 New Year. In its second year, the initiative received considerably more orders, thereby increasing the production of the basket-weaving communities. The demand for Name Your Basket has provided a steady income for the partner community. Now, Dakdae purchases all the baskets produced by the community. With the popularity of Name Your Basket, other organizations have also ventured into the gift basket business. This influx of demand, which comes from both Dakdae and its competitors, helps the partner community’s livelihood. However, contrary to competitors who offer the gift basket seasonally, DakDae is able to support the basket-weaving community by selling the baskets year-round.

Community Development Fund

Every purchase of Name Your Basket contributes to the Community Development Fund of the basket weavers. Dakdae pools the income generated from the sales, and a portion of the revenue is allocated to the Community Development Fund. Dakdae provides an initial amount to the basket weaver to fund the production of the baskets. The basket weavers have full control over the funds, empowering them to spend it however they see fit to develop their livelihood.

Apart from the Community Development Fund, Dakdae also provides monetary incentives to its basket weavers. The monetary incentive is not a fixed price but is estimated on a case-to-case basis, factoring in the pricing of the finished products and the quantity of the delivered baskets. The hesitance in fixing the incentive amount results from the reluctance to burden end customers with increasing prices. In the past, Dakdae provided 100,000 Lao Kip (USD 6.22) or 150,000 Lao Kip (USD 9.33) per metric ton. It is a way for Dakdae to reward the producers and encourage them to maintain production.

Dakdae TV and Dakdae Studio

One of the other core values of Dakdae is the traceability of its production supply chain. It is committed to proper documentation and transparency of the sources of all of its products. With this in mind, it also operates the Dakdae Studio and Dakdae TV, which publishes video productions on their Facebook page, Dakdae TV. It aims to present product stories through an engaging channel. One of the programs is DIY TV, wherein Dakdae conducts a video making workshop for children and features the products of Dakdae's partner communities. Dakdae TV also features representatives from different sectors to discuss their livelihood, as well as the entrepreneurship journey of the youth. Thus, from its original aim of showcasing the products it sells and markets, Dakdae TV has evolved into a platform to share stories of the producers themselves and other topics related to Laos. Dakdae TV reconnects the product with the producers to raise consciousness of their social enterprise to the consuming public.

Environmental and Organizational Sustainability

Dakdae ensures that it sources the raw materials that have sustainable and traceable systems. It also ensures that such systems are followed by its partner communities. Dakdae uses local raw materials to reduce their associated carbon footprint, and is committed to environmental packaging as part of its contribution to waste management (Dakdae n.d.).

Taking into account the price by which Dakdae purchases the products from its partners, it earns little to no income from reselling these products. From Dakdae's calculations, the income from the products covers only the rent of maintaining the store. Other overhead expenses are sourced from the income from its professional services. Its partners also help in minimizing costs. Helvetas, for instance, shoulders some of the export marketing cost of the products. Through these practices, Dakdae is able to sustain its social enterprise. In fact, apart from the initial investments, the founders have not invested additional capital since 2018.

With Dakdae as an example, a social enterprise is comprised of several elements contrary to the philosophy and principles of a market-oriented and profit-driven business. While it operates under a traditional for-profit commercial structure, its primary goal is the fulfillment of its

social function, which supersedes the quest for profit making heavily contingent on market forces. But unlike a non-profit organization, a social enterprise seeks to generate revenue. Yet sustainability conscientiously informs this revenue generation.

Social enterprises like Dakdae have limited funding for operations; their earnings are reinvested in the social enterprise to better serve the community and expand its partnership. Profit is simply a means to further sustain the projects supported by Dakdae.

A social enterprise is a venture that may be organized for profit or non-profit, and which uses an entrepreneurial approach to address a social problem or market failure, with the ultimate purpose of creating social benefits for change (Alter 2005).

In line with scholarly literature, Dacanay (2006, 3) observes that social enterprises have multiple goals, focusing on the study of wealth creation for development ends. The traditional business enterprise bottom line is profit, whereas social enterprises, in contrast, have many bottom lines. Scholars call this the “triple bottom lines” of social development—meeting the needs of people, ecological conservation, and economic sustainability, or the 3Ps: People, Planet, and Profit (Quiñones 2012 quoted in Padilla-Espenido 2014, 31; Dacanay 2006). Social enterprises may exist as a workers-owners collective whose joint objective is to improve their lives through collaborative, cooperative and prosperity-sharing mechanisms (Morato 1994 in Dacanay 2006, 3). On the other hand, Padilla-Espenido (2014) explains that some local initiatives come together for various and very specific reasons—livelihood, jobs and income, an opportunity for recognition and acceptance, or to discover their local function.

Dacanay (2006) elaborates that financial sustainability is not achieved through a singular goal defined only by capital and profit. Instead, profit is not an end in itself but a means to sustain the operation or expand outreach in order to provide positive outcomes to target stakeholders. Equally important in the process are social objectives, such as capacity development or empowerment of a sector or group, along with the improvement of their quality of life. The mindset towards environmental sustainability and the preservation of cultural integrity is another bottom line.

Where the traditional business entity is geared towards the accumulation of wealth, the social enterprise is distributive, emphasizing

wealth distribution. In the business operations of social enterprises, social and environmental costs are a crucial part of the equation in generating profit or surplus. Wealth generation is not concentrated but distributed to the broader society, instead of delimiting to only the individuals or families engaged in the business (Dacanay 2006). It is this mission-orientedness of those engaged in the social enterprise business model that makes it distinct from traditional models (Quiñones 2012 quoted in Padilla-Espenido 2014).

TABLE 1 ► Key Elements Differentiating a Social Enterprise from a Private Enterprise.
Source: Dacanay 2006, 5

	PRIVATE	SOCIAL ENTERPRISE
Primary Stakeholders/ Beneficiaries	Stockholders or proprietors: individuals, families who own capital and invest such in the enterprise	A sector, community, or group usually involving the poor/ marginalized sectors of society who may or may not own the enterprise
Primary Objectives	Single bottom line: profit	Multiple bottom lines: empowerment/improvement of quality of life of the poor/ marginalized; environmental sustainability or cultural integrity; financial viability
Enterprise Philosophy	Accumulative: Minimization of costs, maximization of profits towards enrichment of the individuals or families; social and environmental costs externalized	Distributive: Benefits distributed to a broader segment of society; profits are generated with due regard to social and environmental costs

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognizes that

social enterprises have developed from and within the social economy sector, which lies between the market and the state and is often associated with concepts such as ‘third sector’ and ‘non- profit sector’. (n.d., 1)

The corporation, on the other hand, is a legal entity whose personality is owed to the state, which then recognizes its existence through a positive law. With this legal personality granted by the state, it is endowed with certain powers and capacities. However, the profit-maximizing ideology inherent in every corporation often results in corporate excesses, posing challenges to its social responsibility.

These result in negative impacts on the social, economic, and political environment; distrust, dissatisfaction, and hostility; and a questioning of the corporation's role in society (Gutterman 2020). These circumstances also brought about the birth of social enterprises.

Under the private enterprise, stockholders or proprietors are usually individuals and families who own capital and invest it in the business (Dacanay 2006). A for-profit corporation usually has various sources from which to raise capital, and can dip into its internally-generated income. It can also rely on external sources, such as public and private borrowings or other secured indebtedness (Brierley 2005).

Market Intermediary Model

From the discussion above, the model that Dakdae adopts as a social enterprise is examined here. There are “nine fundamental types of business models for social enterprises which are feasible and widely implemented” (Alter 2005, quoted in Grassl 2012). Further, Alter (2005, quoted in Grassl 2012) explains that “social enterprises can be classified by their mission orientation, by level of integration between non-profit social programs and for-profit business, and by their intended target markets.” These three factors have different integrations when examined from the traditional categories of business: for profit, not-for-profit, and hybrids.

Derived from an Asian perspective of social entrepreneurship, Dacanay (2006, 7) observes four types of social enterprise development strategies present in the region: resource mobilization, social inclusion, empowerment, and intermediation. Each enterprise varies depending on its objective or intent of developing the project.

The following are the nine fundamental types of business models earlier stated:

TABLE 2 ► The Nine Fundamental Types of Business Models.

BUSINESS MODEL	EXAMPLES
Entrepreneur Support Model	Microfinance organization
Market Intermediary Model	Sells products or services of clients
Employment Model	Employs and provides job opportunities to its partners
Fee-for-Service Model	The social enterprise sells the services directly for a fee

<p>Low-Income Client as Market</p>	<p>Focusing on those marginalized sectors with limited access to services</p> <p>There are countries where the cooperatives formed amongst its farmers and tradesmen already become formidable players in their markets (Grassl 2012)</p>
<p>Market Linkage Model</p>	<p>“Social enterprises that facilitate the performance of target populations on markets, for example by providing training or loan guarantee” (Grassl 2012, 47)</p>
<p>Service Subsidization Model</p>	<p>“The worldwide Economy of Communion as a project of the Focolare Movement is a network of businesses that freely choose to share their profits according to three principles of equal importance—to grow their businesses, help people in need, and spread the culture of giving” (Grassl 2012 quoted in Gold 2010, 47)</p>
<p>Organizational Support Model</p>	<p>“Ethical investment funds and fair trade organizations” (Grassl 2012, 47)</p>

Source: Alter 2005, quoted in Grassl 2012.

Dakdae’s social enterprise primarily follows the Market Intermediary Model. Social enterprises with the Market Intermediary Model help the communities by selling or marketing the products for its partner-producers. Under the intermediation strategies, the enterprise is not owned by the community-based stakeholders—in this sense the community partners of Dakdae—but the entity “provide immediate access to services among the critical mass of these marginalized stakeholders” (Dacanay 2006, 7).

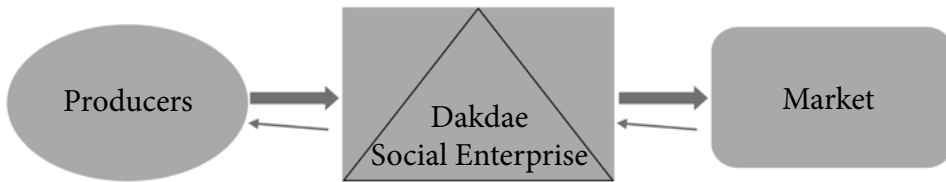
Although Dakdae follows the Market Intermediary Business Model, it also has the hallmarks of a Fee for Service Model through the professional services it provides to its partners in developing their products.

On the other hand, using Dacanay’s list of development strategies (2006, 7), Dakdae also fits the social inclusion type because it assists its partner communities who encounter marginalization due to their class, minoritization, gender identity, and other social circumstances. Dakdae becomes a channel “to restore their dignity and create avenues for their participation as productive members of society” (7).

Grassl (2012, 48), however, recognizes that “if more complex models are devised . . . the number of possible variations will increase.”

These complex models reflect the hybridity of businesses, which has the potential to increase the number of successful businesses. However, this number will remain limited because only a few from these complex models will be a viable option.

FIGURE 1 ► Dakdae Social Enterprise using Grassl's Market Intermediary Business Model.



Source: Authors.

Sustainable Social Impact

Sustainable social impact refers to an enduring or lasting impact. The overwhelming consensus is that it is correlated to the institutional sustainability of the social enterprise. Hence, there is sustainable social impact if a social enterprise can maintain its operation in the long term. Under this metric, an organization is able to maximize its impact and create lasting change by fulfilling its socially-oriented mission for the long term.

However, Alter (2006) posits that sustainable impact should be determined by whether or not a social enterprise is able to solve a social problem or market failure. In other words, social enterprises can leave lasting changes by addressing the root cause of a market failure. Certainly, in the case of Dakdae, the market failure it resolves pertains to the access of the producers to the market and being paid a fair and decent valuation for their products. Dakdae is able to address these market failures at the community level.

However, the challenge faced by Dakdae—finding a reliable market for the products—is an issue of sustainability. It is important to note that Dakdae relies on exports to continue marketing the products of its community partners. Admittedly, Dakdae is unable to successfully and fully penetrate the local market given the limitations of production. With the inherent limitations posed by the logistical demands of exportation, Dakdae is able to survive and serve its social purposes. At this point, it is

important to note the need for government support of social enterprises such as Dakdae. This assistance comes either through tax incentives or other viable programs.

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Burma/Myanmar's Gendered Political Economy and Women-led Empowerment: The Story of Conflict and Actions of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group in Karen State¹

Thandaunggyi Women's Group and Nathaniel P. Candelaria

Abstract

Feminist political economy looks at how gender can affect decision-making processes. Meanwhile, alternative development seeks to establish how people can empower themselves. These processes, though initially seemingly different, tackle overlapping issues. Feminist political economy also recognizes that it is also possible to change the status quo (Waylen 2000), as the framework of alternative development posits. Exemplifying this overlap is the story of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group (TWG) in Myanmar. The TWG is an example of an alternative practice that seeks to improve the economic prospects of its members. At the same time, it empowered women to have a stake in issues such as peace, a field that is normally considered by scholars as gendered, especially in Myanmar's case. The story of the TWG also exemplifies how gendered/feminist political economy works in challenging the status quo. While recognizing the strength of collective action in the pursuit of its goals, Mar Mar Cho (2019) has also acknowledged the necessity of ensuring that change is long-lasting and sustainable. Nevertheless, the story of the TWG should serve as an inspiration that women can indeed have an impact on their society.

1 The Thandaunggyi Women's Group is an association of women in the State of Karen in Burma/Myanmar. Established in 2008, the group aims to promote peace through the empowerment of women in terms of their economic well-being and decision-making capabilities.

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Introduction

The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military force, has primarily defined economic affairs in the country since its successful coup in 1962 (Cheetham 2021). Despite recent attempts to democratize (Odaka 2016), and its return to power through another coup in 2021 (Reuters 2021; Irrawaddy 2021; BBC 2022), the dominance of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's affairs remains the same. Myanmar's affairs are extensively controlled by men, and these have implications for women in the country. The Global Justice Center (2013) reports that the Tatmadaw does not allow women to join the military, thereby robbing them of opportunities normally accorded to the members of this institution.

Following the lens of gendered political economy—or feminist political economy—it was argued that the prevailing structures affect women and their welfare in general (Waylen 2000). As documented in Myanmar's examples, women's rights are negatively affected because they are usually relegated to the sidelines, whether in times of conflict or peace (Park 2021). Burmese women are also reluctant to participate in governance affairs because of these realities (Faxon 2020).

However, gendered political economy also acknowledges the possibility of eventually challenging these norms (Cook and Roberts 2000; Waylen 2000). Used in conjunction with feminist political economy, the alternative development framework can help in discussing how the status quo can be changed through the power of collective action (Pietersen 1998; Raina 1997). Both alternative development and gendered/feminist political economy are compatible. They both have acknowledged the role of the system against biases in the economy. To underscore how gendered political economy/feminist political economy and alternative development go together, these frameworks will be highlighted through the story of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group (TWG) from the Karen State, Myanmar.

The Thandaunggyi Women's Group was formed to promote the welfare of women, who are structurally disadvantaged (Mar Mar Cho 2019). The story of the TWG is an example of how women can rise to the challenge of breaking down barriers. At the same time, their story is also an example of how alternative development can work in changing these values and contribute to the welfare of Burmese society in general.

The Political Economy of Gender

Mainstream international relations scholarship highlights the dominance of liberalism in political economy. “Most international economic organizations and the economic policies of most states today are strongly influenced by liberal principles” (Cohn 2012, 77). In addition, Bedford and Rai (2010, 4) have asserted that “mainstream International Political Economy (IPE) has focused on states, markets, and the relations between the two.”

However, since most of these approaches cover the roles of states, and to some extent, international institutions in the role they play in political economy, other aspects need to be discussed, such as the role of individuals. Specifically, Bedford and Rai (2010, 4) have remarked that “structural and agential elements of social relations [are entangled] in ways that include an interlinked analysis of the capitalist processes of production, social reproduction, and exchange as well as resistance to and within the system.”

One approach that fills a gap in political economy analysis is feminist political economy, or the gendered political economy framework (Cook and Roberts 2000). As Cook and Roberts (2000, 4) explain, “gendered political economy can be used to improve our understanding of social, political and economic structures, and the way in which individuals behave within these structures.” This is because modern approaches in studying economics and political economy have treated individuals as “lying outside the realm of economics in the private sphere” (Waylen 2000, 19). Waylen further elaborated that household concerns like childcare are not usually counted as an economic activity. Thus, for her (2000, 19), there is a need to revisit these demarcations, as “women do enter the public sphere but are often constrained by their roles in the private sphere and frequently undertake activities in the labour market which are an extension of their activities in the private sphere.”

At the global level, gendered/feminist political economy is used in explaining how international legal norms have gendered layers, and how women-led non-government organizations have pushed for the recognition of these gendered issues in the labor sector (Elias 2010). One example in the discussion is the case of the Women’s Aid Organisation in Malaysia, which advocates for the recognition of “migrant domestic workers as workers in Malaysian employment law” (77). And at the local

level, different cases highlight the importance of recognizing gender issues affecting development. For instance, Shaver (2020) argues that even if women play a significant role in Africa's agriculture sector, men tend to benefit from such participation, since most of the opportunities are concentrated among men, thereby necessitating the need to address gender inequality to make economic growth equitable. Gendered/feminist political economy is also used in studying Myanmar's political situation. As Myanmar is beset with conflicts, Hedstrom (2017) discusses how the women of Kachin state contribute to the conflict by supporting their respective households as their husbands fight. At the same time, conflicts in Kayah state also contributed to the sidelining of women in governance affairs (Blomqvist, Olivius, and Hedstrom 2021).

Discussing the role of gender in political economy is an important gap that needs to be addressed, especially because most theories on political economy mainly highlight the role of the states and markets in the economy. In fact, even studies on modern state theory highlight the different components of the state—territory, population, government, and sovereignty (Heywood 2011). Highlighting the state as the amalgamation of these components indicates that it is not homogenous. Given these realities, feminist approaches are important in understanding the nuances in political economy.

Myanmar's Political Economy: The Domination of Men and Implications for Women of Myanmar

Myanmar gained its independence in 1948, and in 1962 the Tatmadaw deposed its civilian government (Cheetham 2021). Since that period, the Tatmadaw has exercised sovereign power in Myanmar, and called for an election in 1990. However, the Tatmadaw did not respect the results (Odaka 2016). However, Odaka (2016) notes that from that point, it took several decades before the Tatmadaw drafted a new constitution in 2008 that promotes a parliamentary type of government. Subsequently, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won Myanmar's by-election in 2012, gaining 44 out of the 45 contested seats (BBC 2012). In 2015, the NLD won a landslide victory in the elections (BBC 2015) and did so again in 2020 (BBC 2020).

However, before the NLD formed a government in 2021, the Tatmadaw seized control of the functions of the civilian government through a coup d'état. It rejected the outcome of the elections due to

alleged issues of fraud (Reuters 2021). The coup led to the arrest of officials of NLD, particularly the state counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the other leaders of the union (Irrawaddy 2021). As a result, people gathered to protest, and in return, the military junta responded harshly against the protesters (BBC 2022).

Despite the abrupt change in government, the development of political economy continued in much the same way. For instance, the Tatmadaw has had control over several businesses, particularly the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL), despite the civilian control of the government (Cheetham 2021). Because of the coup, the Tatmadaw's foreign partners have reconsidered conducting business with the regime. Some have pulled out, thereby changing the business outlook in the country (Oo and Liu 2021). In essence, the political economy of Myanmar has fallen extensively into the hands of the men.

This extensive control has implications for women. Because of the non-admission of women in the military, "women have been ineligible for the employment, education, business, joint venture and travel opportunities created by military status" (Global Justice Center 2013, 1). The Global Justice Center (2013, 1) has discussed that "the 2008 Constitution requires that the Defense Services appoint 25 percent of parliamentarians and guarantees that the Defense Forces will remain the integral and dominant political force of Burma."

Also, reforms on gender issues are often overlooked since states claim that they are not needed; however, the situation on the ground is different since there are manifestations of gender equality (Park 2021, 566–67). As Park (2021, 565–69) expounded, women are not invited to leadership talks, and it is difficult for women to enter the male-dominated sphere of politics. These instances are very pronounced in Myanmar. Land reforms have treated men and women differently since women are politically excluded and are paid less than men (Faxon 2020, 76). In Kayah State in Myanmar, for instance, the role of women and their experiences in maintaining peace within their households are significant. At the same time, they contribute to the maintenance of gendered structures (Blomqvist, Olivius, and Hedstrom 2021, 229).

Alternative Development: Definition, Modes, and Development in Southeast Asia

Because capitalism heavily defines growth and development in Myanmar, and because that growth only favors some sectors of society, there is a need for introspection on how to cater to the needs of the people. For instance, “alternative development has been concerned with alternative practices of development—participatory and people-centered—and with redefining the goals of development” (Pieterse 1998, 343). However, the viability of alternative development as a paradigm has been debated in scholarly literature. For instance, Pieterse (1998) has pointed out that there have been significant changes since the 1970s that challenge alternative development’s ability to remain tenable. Meanwhile, Raina (1997) has pointed out that it continues to remain important.

Despite the existing debate on the viability of alternative development as a paradigm, there is a strong impetus in Southeast Asia to pursue alternative modes of development. This idea was raised in the assessment of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF), wherein “individual ASEAN member countries have consistently resisted and vacillated as regards civil society participation and engagement” (Tadem 2017, 84). Because of the treatment of ASEAN states vis-à-vis civil society organizations,

ACSC/APF must now think and act outside the ASEAN box. It must develop strategies of engagement that go beyond mere assertions of its independence and autonomy from state agenda. It should lead the way and initiate the process of establishing a regional integration model that offers an alternative to the existing ASEAN process, one that is based on people-to-people interactions rather than state-to-state relations or purely market-oriented interactions. This is the way to overcome the frustration and vexation felt by CSOs at the lack of response and action by ASEAN governments towards ACSC/APF concerns. (87)

During ACSC/APF 2017 in the Philippines, the idea of alternative regionalism was extensively discussed (UP CIDS–AltDev 2020). According to the plenary statement,

The case for a radical transformation of ASEAN is irrefutable. Participants to the ACSC/APF 2017 firmly believe that such transformation will require taking decisive steps to ensure equitable distribution and sustainable use of natural resources, realize the full gamut of economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights for all peoples, and to reestablish itself along the principles of solidarity, cooperation, complementarity, and friendship

among nations. To this end, the ACSC/APF shall develop and adopt a new vision for engagement by civil society with ASEAN based on greater people to people interactions that will establish, expand and strengthen a new peoples' regional integration process based on the alternative practices of peoples, networks, and organizations across the region's societies. (ACSC/APF 2017, 2 quoted in Tadem et al. 2020, 15)

According to Tadem, cooperation must be pursued by “focusing on benefit, the idea of commons, and joint development” (quoted in UP CIDS–AltDev 2020, 4–5). For these reasons, the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) has been heavily involved in documenting examples of cases of alternative practices across Southeast Asia.

Alternative Development is for Women Empowerment

As a paradigm, alternative development does not only pursue peoples' empowerment under the confines of the economy, but also empowers them through “participatory and people-centered” means (Pieterse 1998). One of the areas that alternative development covers as a paradigm is the issue of women's empowerment. According to Tadem et al. (2020), women's empowerment is covered under political alternative practices, wherein

[p]olitically, informal and formal networks of civil society organizations and social movements have been operating for decades on issues related to environmental issues, women's rights, workers' and peasants' rights, human rights, human security, and many other concerns. (17)

There are examples of how the promotion of alternative development contributed to the promotion of women's rights in general. In the case studies collated by the UP CIDS–AltDev (Tadem et al. 2020), the research team identified several exemplary cases of women empowerment through alternative development across Southeast Asia. In the Philippines alone, for instance, women members of the Ayta community in Porac, Pampanga have organized themselves to advance women's rights in their community (Magaro et al. 2020). Another example in the Philippines is the case of the Towerville residents in San Jose del Monte, Bulacan, wherein they organized themselves as a cooperative due to the lack of availability of jobs in their relocation sites (Placido and Hapal 2020).

Apart from the examples in the Philippines, other cases of alternative practices were also documented across Southeast Asia. For

example, in Vietnam, the Center for Women and Development has contributed to women's welfare since they provide shelter for victims of gender-based violence (Aban 2020). In Indonesia, groups of single women have formed organizations that cater to the need of women-headed households and their families (Candelaria 2020). Another example of women empowerment is seen in Nusa Tenggara Timur (East Nusa Tenggara), also in Indonesia, where the Women Weavers Cooperative of Lepo Lorun was able to help women through weaving (Nuque 2020). What these cases show, in general, is that promoting alternative development complements the push toward the recognition of women's rights.

The Story of Thandaunggyi Women's Group: Origins and their Experiences in Promoting Women's Welfare in the Karen State, Myanmar

For this case study, the discussion focuses on the story of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group (TWG) in the Karen State of Myanmar. The research team conducted an interview to document the story behind the aspirations of the Thandaunggyi women. Regarding its origins, Mar Mar Cho (2019)² shared that the TWG was founded in 2008. Since Myanmar was deeply affected by conflicts, "the TWG was established as a way of not only providing livelihood in communities, but also empowering women to export and market their products to other countries" (UP CIDS 2021, 33). In an interview, Mar Mar Cho explained that they started the program because they wanted to grant women roles in peace- and decision-making initiatives. She further discussed that this is because they perceive that peacebuilding is dominated by men, a dominance deeply rooted in the culture.

To highlight how women can also oversee economic development, as well as peace-building activities, the TWG has ventured into a women empowerment program, seeking to address the issue of gender inequality. When asked about the role of women in the peace process, Mar Mar Cho (2019) remarked that, unlike men, women can speak about their problems. However, she has also pointed out that women also have difficulties with voicing their stance on some issues, such as domestic violence. For Mar Mar Cho, if women can get money for the family, then

2 The author and the research team conducted an interview with Mar Mar Cho in 2019, at Yangon, Myanmar.

it will also lead to the empowerment of the family. She also explained that women's empowerment is also crucial for peace. As highlighted, they can collaborate with other families within the community. They use whatever knowledge they gain to help the community, and eventually, state peacebuilding.

For the TWG, peace-building is the absence of conflict and the presence of peace, with an emphasis on internal peace among families and communities. There will be no conflict if their needs are met. For Mar Mar Cho (2019), this issue is one of the roadblocks to a successful peace process. This is because the allotment of natural resources is a big issue in Myanmar, especially in the Karen State. The Tatmadaw and the KNU are heavily involved in armed conflict, but a nationwide ceasefire was declared by the government in 2015.

Since the ceasefire, the group has had the opportunity to implement its action plan. Forty women are currently employed in the organization; they work on their coffee project, the cultivation of organic agricultural products, planting, and supply chain matters such as packaging and selling. The organization also educates women in the economic setting, particularly on coffee farming and processing. The organization, according to Mar Mar Cho, also plans to expand and sell eventually to overseas markets, thus extending job opportunities for the community.

The TWG also meets frequently with different sectors of Burmese society to establish rapport. They have been doing these initiatives since 2012, even if the fighting in the Karen State was ongoing, thereby making lives very difficult, especially for women. Because of the conflict, Mar Mar Cho mentioned that men were fighting in the war, and only women were left to do work for their community. Women, therefore, become community leaders working for the well-being of their community. Because of this, women's roles became indispensable to their community.

Despite these goals and plans, there are also challenges for expansion. Mar Mar Cho (2019) mentioned how the weather in Myanmar, particularly during the rainy season, makes it difficult for its businesses to thrive. She explained that tourists will not visit due to the rain. This, in turn, affects their income. At the same time, she argued that there should also be more government support to help them expand their business. She pointed out that coffee processing needs machinery. Another challenge is organic farming certification. The certification entails a high cost that is

normally unaffordable for a small venture such as TWG's. Lastly, there is also the need to establish linkages with the government and the military. If there are no good relations with either of them, challenges will ensue.

For Mar Mar Cho (2019), the TWG has to approach these issues one by one and discuss their initiatives. In particular, she mentioned that she has used her negotiating skills just to promote the well-being of their women association. One advantage that she thought of is the ability to use emotions. She explained that they use emotions when they engage in talks to emphasize the needs of the community.

Thandaunggyi Women's Group as an Example of an Alternative Practice towards Women's Empowerment

As discussed earlier, alternative development seeks the empowerment of people (Raina 1997; Pieterse 1998). As such, women's empowerment is clearly an issue that is within the purview of alternative development (Tadem et al. 2020). Apart from the TWG as an example of an alternative practice, it also exemplifies a practice supporting gendered/feminist political economy, following the arguments made by Cook and Roberts (2000).

Since most opportunities cater to men as heads of their respective households, as explained by some scholars, they decided the fate of their families (Park 2021; Faxon 2020; Blomqvist, Olivius, and Hedstrom 2021). This family dynamic is prevalent in Burmese culture, where women are not recognized leaders of their households (Park 2021).

At the same time, however, the case of the TWG is exemplary; the group is also an example of women challenging the male-dominated status quo. Cases like the TWG demonstrate that women can also be trailblazers of the economy. This is clearly an example of gendered/feminist political economy in action, as the TWG sought to improve the lives of women in their township. Furthermore, the group also emphasized that women can also be leaders, thereby challenging what scholars such as Park (2021) have documented regarding Myanmar's attitude toward women.

Despite the trailblazing impact of the TWG, Mar Mar Cho (2019) has recognized that to be fully successful in their endeavors, it needs a strong partnership with all sectors of Burmese society. Despite these challenges, the recognition of women's issues and their attempts to promote these

through alternative development are worthwhile endeavors. Furthermore, their story highlights that through collective action, change is indeed possible.

Conclusion

Feminist political economy looks at how gender can affect decision-making processes. Meanwhile, alternative development seeks to establish how people can empower themselves. These processes, though initially seemingly different, tackle overlapping issues.

In terms of the role of women in its governance, Myanmar still has a long way to go. Because of the takeover of the civilian government by the Tatmadaw, the country will probably take longer to recognize the role of women in governance. These issues, however, were already pronounced even before the transition to civilian authority, and the reversion to military rule. The literature extensively discussed how women are relegated to the sidelines, and how their resilience is seen as a way of further perpetuating these biases (Cook and Roberts 2000).

Nevertheless, feminist political economy also recognizes that it is also possible to change the status quo (Waylen 2000). Through alternative development, the goal of creating a better society is possible. Furthermore, it is also shown, through the story of the TWG, that women can organize and lead efforts towards social change.

The TWG is an example of an alternative practice that seeks to improve the economic prospects of its members. At the same time, it empowered women to have a stake in issues such as peace, a field that is normally considered by scholars as gendered, especially in Myanmar's case. The story of the TWG also exemplifies how gendered/feminist political economy works in challenging the status quo. While recognizing the strength of collective action in the pursuit of its goals, Mar Mar Cho (2019) has also acknowledged the necessity of ensuring that change is long-lasting and sustainable. Nevertheless, the story of the TWG should serve as an inspiration that women can indeed have an impact on their society.

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Weaving through Pandemic Woes: T’boli Women Weavers during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This case study narrates the woes and situation of the Tboli communities of Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides an image of grassroots development through the experience and perspective of Lake Sebu Indigenous Women Weavers Association Incorporated (LASIWWAI), a grassroots women’s organization.

1 The Lake Sebu Indigenous Women Weavers Association, Inc. or LASIWWAI is a non-profit community based organization in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, Philippines. The organization promotes *ikat* weaving not only as a source of livelihood for indigenous women but also as an integral part of their indigenous culture.

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A Short Background: The Tboli of Lake Sebu and the Global Economy

The Tboli, also known as Tagabili, are one of the 120 distinct ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines. Similar to the hill communities of Southern Mindanao, they dwell in the island's interiors, occupying an area of about 750 square miles (Manzano 2016). The name Tboli is a term believed to have been coined by the B'laan, whose language carries the exact term which meant "people at the other side of the mountain" (Non 1988). Indeed, the Tboli and B'laan are on demographically opposing sides, separated by the Roxas Mountain Ranges.

Much like other indigenous groups in the country, the Tboli was spared from Spanish occupation in the 16th century. Muslim Filipinos resisted Spanish military encroachment, thus isolating a huge part of the southwestern region of Mindanao (Mora 2005). It was in 1913, during the American occupation, when "[t]he authorities initiated the policy of relocating and encouraging people from the populated regions in Luzon and the Visayas to emigrate to the sparsely populated areas in Mindanao" (Non 1988, 190). According to Mora (2005), this strategy helped the Americans gain control over the Muslim population in Mindanao, as well as reduce overcrowded parts of central and northern Philippines. It also integrated Mindanao into the global economy through the development of export crops such as abaca, rubber, and palm oil.

In 1938, the resettlement program facilitated the entry of various economic projects in the Koronadal Valley under the Quezon administration. Market towns built by migrants "brought the lowland, as well as the American administration, closer to the T'boli" (Mora 2005, 13). The 1950s saw the decline of Tboli independence, as Visayans who were violently dispossessed of their lands by large-scale sugar farmers voluntarily relocated to Mindanao, which they regarded as the last frontier (Mora 2005). Soon after their settling, the Visayans used the same methods of dispossession on the indigenous Tboli, forcing them to evacuate from their lands and into the upland regions. This limited their agricultural production and resulted in their economic insecurity (Amanda 2010). However, transnational corporations and big landowners, with a mutually beneficial relationship with the state and massive socioeconomic capital, were the clear winners here: by the 1960s, they had acquired and aggressively developed significant patches of land to their benefit (Mora 2005).

Tboli Women

The daily life of a Tboli woman is determined by her duties to family, community, and her spouse (Amanda 1984; Manzano 2016). Tboli women often lack access to stable sources of income while men are conventionally the breadwinners and decision-makers of the household. This stark gender imbalance proliferated the myth and belief that women merely belonged in the home, where they must tend to children and house chores. Thus, there is no need to send them to school. This perception often results in domestic abuse, cases of which are rampant in Lake Sebu.

Tboli women are primarily in charge of farming, owing to the belief that their hands are blessed and better able (*hiyang*) to care for the crops. But despite the hard work put in by the women, men handle the earnings from the selling of crops. This is largely because of their dowry system. In Tboli culture, the dowry from the groom's family ensures the Tboli husband's possession over his wife. In fact, when a woman's husband passes away, she needs to marry the deceased husband's closest male relative, because technically, his family "owns" her.

Another way that Tboli women can earn to augment family income is through *t'nalak* weaving. T'nalak is a cloth with a distinct tricolor scheme (white, red, and black or deep brown) traditionally woven by respected Tboli women artisans. The patterns used in weaving usually reference Tboli folklore. In fact, the practice of *t'nalak* weaving finds its roots in a legend: it is of their belief that Fu Dalu, the spirit-guardian of abaca, appeared in the dreams of their ancestors and taught them to weave abaca strands into patterns. The spirit-guardian manifested in the dreams of a select few who were accorded the status of "dreamweavers" (Lim 2017).

Conventionally, *t'nalak* was used at home as pieces of clothing and blankets, and in special occasions such as weddings. While the *t'nalak* patterns originated from dreams, dreamweavers were allowed to share the designs with other women so they could recreate patterns for themselves. The craft of *t'nalak* weaving became a well-known art form following the naming of Lang Dulay as a National Living Treasure in 1998 (Lim 2017). As tourism increased in Lake Sebu, the Tboli began selling the abaca cloth by the meter to supplement their income. T'nalak soon made its way into the hands of contemporary designers and artisans, who used the cloth to make bags, purses, blouses, and other commercial items. While a handful of Tboli women frown upon the incursion of the market into their culture,

forcing them to engage in the selling of their indigenous crafts, they must nevertheless navigate the contradictions between producing t'nalak for selling and providing for their families.

Women Organizing: LASIWWAI²

Beset with issues of poverty, domestic abuse, and threats to cultural heritage, two women—one Tboli and the other, an Ilongga—noticed these trends and issues and recognized it as an opportunity to organize the women in their community. In 2000, Jenita Eko and Jelly Escarlote banded together to assemble Tboli women around the issues of women's rights and cultural heritage. This resulted in the forming of Lake Sebu Indigenous Women Weavers Association Incorporated (LASIWWAI). It encompassed three barangays in Lake Sebu: Klubi, Lamkade, and Lamdalag. While LASIWWAI's initial objective was to empower women by providing them the means to earn a living, it was equally important for them to strengthen their cultural heritage.

In its first few years, LASIWWAI attempted to get into poultry farming. The organization members, who were mostly mothers, were also taught more efficient ways of growing crops and vegetables like corn, rice, and abaca. After four years, LASIWWAI then attempted to venture into t'nalak weaving. Fully understanding how Tboli weavers have historically been subjected to market price injustice and often forced by their circumstances to sell a meter of t'nalak for merely PHP 30–70, LASIWWAI pledged to impose fair prices to ensure just compensation for their women members.

While LASIWWAI's t'nalak enterprise initially went well, they were soon met with a few problems. One contract with a designer brand required them to produce t'nalak cloths that measured exactly 22 inches. While this seemed like a normal request from a contractor, this proved to be a problem to the women members, especially since most of them lacked basic numeracy and literacy skills. This realization led LASIWWAI to start an Adult Literacy Training Program for their members. Unfortunately, the program failed due to low attendance. LASIWWAI then realized that most of the members were mothers who had to prioritize their children and their household over any other commitment. It also did not help that their husbands reacted negatively to the literacy initiative due to the long-

2 This section draws largely from Sapalo 2020.

held view about women and their inferior place in Tboli society. Not quick to give up, LASIWWAI thought hard about how to remedy the situation. Finally, in 2011, they decided to set up a kindergarten through the funds generated from their t'nalak enterprise. They saw a ripple effect as early as the first week of operation. Because the children were in school, the mothers suddenly had free time, finally, to focus on their weaving. Thus, they were able to produce more t'nalak. But more than the free time, LASIWWAI saw that the mothers were also learning basic literacy and numeracy—this time, from their children.

LASIWWAI soon understood how to mitigate the burdens that fall on their women members. They would need to address the problems of the community so that they can lessen the burdens of the women. After all, LASIWWAI members are not just weavers or entrepreneurs; they are also mothers. They worry most about their children and whether they will have enough food to eat. They worry about how and where to get a good supply of water. They worry about how to send their children to school. Paying attention to the needs of the community as a prerequisite to solving most problems that women experience made sense to them since it was the women who tend to bear these burdens the most.

LASIWWAI During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, LASIWWAI began nurturing relationships with a number of civil society organizations (CSOs). In particular, LASIWWAI worked closely with former Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Secretary Gina Lopez through her Loving Organizations for Village Economies (ILOVE) Foundation. Lopez's foundation aimed to transform disadvantaged communities into sustainable agroforestry, fishing, or ecotourism sites. Thus, they helped LASIWWAI develop and implement a plan to build homestays and agri-ecotourism farms.

Before the entire world was put on lockdown in March 2020, LASIWWAI was just about to finish the construction of their planned homestays. These modest huts were supposed to be an income-generating project. They wanted tourists to come and stay in the community, immerse with them, and join farming and planting activities so that they can understand and appreciate the processes involved in agricultural production. The agro-ecotourism facilitators, who are Tboli community members, were also expected to discuss and educate the tourists about

Tboli arts and crafts, as well as the issues that plague their communities. In turn, these activities were supposed to ensure a small fee for the Tboli men and women who facilitate the immersion, allowing them to earn on a daily basis. These plans, however, took a backseat when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Philippines.

As observers have stated, the pandemic revealed deep-seated social problems and has further exacerbated the prevailing social, economic, health, and environmental vulnerabilities of Indigenous peoples (IPs) (Halip, Oelz, and Pimentel 2020). Medical professionals have declared that IPs are threatened by poorer health outcomes, higher infection rates, a greater incidence of severe symptoms or death compared to the general populace (Cabatbat 2021). However, IPs are never passive actors in the face of dire threats. This is demonstrated by the many efforts of LASIWWAI during the first year of the pandemic. The succeeding sections discuss the threats and the creative responses of LASIWWAI.

Local Knowledge and Healthcare

Much like other indigenous communities, the Tboli's first line of defense against illness involves the use of traditional and medicinal plants. When experiencing cough, gas, headaches or flu, the *maton bu*, or traditional Tboli healers, boil the leaves, roots, and stems of local plants such as "yellow dots," *Kloonmugol*, and *Sukot lagembon* for the sick individual (Campilan, Tumamac, Dorado 2019). This practice of using traditional medicine was challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Eko, there has been serious distrust in the healthcare system among the Tboli. A significant number of community members are suspicious and doubtful of mainstream medical professionals after experiencing several barriers to accessing healthcare. Additionally, many Tboli elders and *maton bu* regard government regulations related to healthcare (such as childbirth) as highly restricting to their traditional healing practices and, thereby, a form of disrespect to their culture. However, in recent years, the local government and health office have aggressively persuaded the Tboli to solve their health problems, big or small, through constant medical consultations with professionals. She quips,

Sinanay kami ng gobyerno bago mag-pandemic na kahit ang hilot, kapag may pilay, ay dapat sa ospital, at dapat doktor ang gagawa. Dapat daw itigil na rin ang paggamit ng traditional o herbal medicine namin. Pero nu'ng

may pandemic na, binaliktad nila lahat, sabi nila sa amin, bumalik na lang kami sa aming mga katutubong pamamaraan dahil hindi na kami kayang tanggapin ng ospital.

(Because of their prodding, we got used to seeing medical professionals for injuries. They told us to stop using our traditional and herbal medicine. But when the pandemic happened, they reversed this and told us to go back to our indigenous healing practices because we cannot be accommodated in the hospitals due to overcapacity).

This backtracking on the previous health policy confused community members immensely. It sowed even more distrust in the mainstream healthcare system, which then affected their reception of COVID-19 vaccines.

Hence, LASIWWAI was faced with a great dilemma. How could they convince community members to get the vaccine? To this end, they held a series of community consultation meetings where they discussed about the vaccines and allowed other community members to ask questions about them. While not entirely discouraging the use of traditional or herbal medicine to quell symptoms such as cough and sore throat, they thoroughly discussed the benefits of getting vaccinated, as well as the expected side effects. Little by little, through these ceaseless information drives, they were able to convince a significant number of townsfolk to get jabbed. Although there still are a significant number of unvaccinated Tboli at the time of writing, LASIWWAI still tries to engage them in discussions.

Mobilizing the Community and Social Networks

On 24 March 2020, the Bayanihan Law was passed to reallocate the national budget towards the PHP 205 billion social amelioration program (SAP) for low-income Filipino families affected by the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown (Venzon 2020). Through this subsidy program, 18 million households were supposedly entitled to PHP 5,000 to PHP 8,000 worth of cash assistance per month from April to May 2020. However, the implementation and distribution of cash aid took months and was replete with blunders (Abad 2021). Having experienced the slowness of aid distribution in the midst of the pandemic, LASIWWAI decided to use their kindergarten's trust fund to help tide the community over the first month of the lockdown.

When their funds ran low, LASIWWAI attempted to inquire about the process for applying for the SAP, especially since some of their members were illiterate and had justifiable fears of bureaucratic processes. One of

these fears included signing intimidating forms written in English. They were disappointed to find out that a valid government identification card (ID) was required to be qualified for aid. As Eko recalled, “*Hinihingan kami ng ID, para sa assistance, para sa bawat labas namin. Eh karamihan sa amin kahit nga birth certificate, wala!*” (They were asking us for IDs for assistance, they asked us for IDs every time we go out of our homes. But we don’t even have birth certificates!).

Beleaguered but not defeated by their circumstances, Eko knew they needed to act quickly to be able to feed the community. Since the community figured that they were seemingly left to fend for themselves, they again sat down and reviewed the options available to them. Around April 2020, LASIWWAI decided to mobilize their social networks, mostly gained through interaction with civil society organizations. They sent sponsorship and solicitation letters to various NGOs and individuals. They did not expect to get enthusiastic replies, but were nevertheless amazed at the responses.

In two weeks, LASIWWAI was able to go around the community, survey the households in need, and distribute the aid without the usual bureaucracy. They understood that they needed to cater not only to LASIWWAI members but the community-at-large. As such, they were able to mobilize neighbors and friends to swiftly distribute “survival packs” to families in five sitios. This was made possible initially by another peoples’ organization named People for Accountable Governance and Sustainable Action (PAG-ASA), who sources funds from different generous and sympathetic organizations or ordinary citizens and funnels it into partner organizations. The financial assistance sent to LASIWWAI enabled them to assemble 170 survival packs, which included the usual packs of rice and some canned goods. Remarkably, however, the survival packs also contained fresh produce from Tboli farmers. Buying from local farmers allowed farming families to earn amid the non-flow of farm products during the lockdown. It also complemented the less nutritious but staple canned goods or instant noodles in the packs. For transparency, LASIWWAI sent sponsors a breakdown of their expenses, and their honesty propelled the former to raise more funds for them. Soon after, many other organizations stepped in and helped raise funds for LASIWWAI—enough to help them get back on their feet.

Eko remarked that it was these little acts of social solidarity, where both ordinary Filipinos and Tboli families were mobilized for the

good of their community, that boosted their morale and empowered them to continue doing work. She recalled, “*Isang movement kami. Kumbaga, ordinaryong mamamayan ang tumulong sa isa’t isa.*” (We were one movement. We were all ordinary citizens helping one another). She shares that these efforts spearheaded by LASIWWAI highlighted the role and importance of Tboli women in their community, thus encouraging young Tboli women to follow their example. Additionally, it ushered in the resurgence of the indigenous value of sharing among the Tboli.

Red-Tagging

While LASIWWAI was occupied with aid distribution around May 2020, Eko learned from a friend that she was red-tagged by state actors. This happened at the heels of heated debates regarding the Anti-Terror Bill (now the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 [Republic Act No. 11479]). Championed by then-authoritarian President Rodrigo Duterte, the Anti-Terrorism Act is branded as legislation to combat insurgencies and terrorism, but human rights groups such as KARAPATAN believe otherwise. They assert that the law, which allows suspects to be jailed for weeks without charge, can be weaponized and used against the administration’s political opponents (Agence France-Presse 2021).

Eko was told that many local officials suspected that she gave assistance to New Peoples’ Army rebels through LASIWWAI. Possibly to intimidate her further, she was also told by a local government official that in order to be allowed to continue distributing *ayuda* (aid), she needed to secure clearance from the local station of the Philippine National Police (PNP), their local barangay, and their municipal hall. Despite these threats and attempt to cower her, Eko persisted and continued to serve her community. She secured clearance from the pertinent offices, and asked allies from the local government to share testimonials about the important work of LASIWWAI.

Protecting Cultural Heritage

While the pandemic raged on, LASIWWAI was able to survive through the support of various organizations and their income generating or fundraising projects. But the pandemic did not only challenge them economically, but also in terms of protecting their cultural heritage.

Due to old age, the health of some of their women weavers had dramatically declined. Since the patterns used for t’nalak weaving heavily

relies on memory, LASIWWAI decided to hold a series of cultural heritage workshops among the older women weavers and the younger generation. These workshops facilitated and documented exchanges among the women, allowing the older ones to share not only weaving patterns but the folklore and wisdom behind them.

LASIWWAI as an Alternative Model of Development

LASIWWAI offers us a glimpse of alternative development, where “development is borne out of practice” and “is formulated by people” (Hapal 2020, 5). From organizing Tboli women around issues relevant to their realities in the early 2000s, to reorienting programs to serve community needs in the succeeding years, LASIWWAI has paved an empowering path for indigenous women. This is especially important in a context where IP women continuously face multiple and compounded layers of economic marginalization, social discrimination, and political disempowerment (Abano 2019). In the Philippines, Indigenous women are beset with systemic barriers to their access to education, healthcare, as well as control over land and resources. They are often discouraged, if not barred, from taking on leadership positions in their communities (LILAK and CHR Gender Equality and Women’s Rights Center 2022). Complicating this further is the increasing corporate encroachment and militarization of indigenous territories, subjecting IP women and their children to harassment and abuse. Within these alarming circumstances, LASIWWAI has bravely operated as a grassroots organization and custodian of culture ever since its founding.

LASIWWAI took initiative during the dreadful first months of the COVID-19 pandemic as well. By prioritizing the needs and interest of their constituents, and despite the attempts of the state to intimidate them, LASIWWAI members, mostly Tboli mothers, managed to aid their community through the pandemic by organizing community members and allies in their social networks. Through activating pre-pandemic networks and connections, LASIWWAI was able to pool funds and distribute food packs to hungry Tboli families. And while most indigenous peoples had trouble accessing accurate and timely information regarding COVID-19 (LILAK and CHR Gender Equality and Women’s Rights Center 2022), LASIWWAI’s information drives helped convince many previously hesitant townsfolk to get vaccinated. Previously relegated to the margins of Tboli society, LASIWWAI women have consistently challenged the gender roles assigned to them by taking on vital leadership roles amid

emergencies. According to Eko, their persistence through the years have made Tboli society more accepting of indigenous women leaders. This is evidenced by the number of activities and consultations organized by the local government and agencies which they were invited to.

While their efforts to fulfill the needs and address the issues of their community might not necessarily and directly challenge the existing mainstream development models, important lessons can still be drawn from their rich experiences. LASIWWAI has stepped up to prioritize care for community, especially during times of dire poverty and crises. In doing this, they have demonstrated the Indigenous values and ethics of reciprocity, trust, resourcefulness, and respect for culture.

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Collective Farming Towards Workers-Owned, Workers-Managed Enterprises: A Case Study on the Negros Farm Workers

*Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan and Nakalang Farm
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Abstract

The experience of the Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO) and Nakalang Farm Workers Association (NAFWA) depict how Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) are able to overcome the longstanding problems of rural landlessness, a flawed agrarian reform program, and landlord dominance. Utilizing the framework of social solidarity economy, AMANO and NAFWA collectivized their awarded lands and re-organized their organization into a cooperative-like undertaking with dividends regularly paid to members. This allowed them to run a highly successful worker-owned, and worker-managed enterprise which directly benefits the members, their families, and their community.

1 The Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO, Association of Farmworkers in Nolan) and Nakalang Farm Workers Association (NAFWA) are two farmer cooperatives based in Negros Island, Philippines. They seek to help farmers “...build better lives amid the failures of the Philippine government’s agrarian reform programs” (Tadem et al. 2023).

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Overview of the Philippine Agricultural Economy and Sugar Industry

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Philippines grew by 5.9 percent in 2019 (PSA 2020b). The gross value added (GVA) in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (AFF) was 9.2 percent, growing by 1.2 percent in 2019 (PSA 2020a). Meanwhile, the production performance in the same year increased by only 0.3 percent. However, the production of crops decreased by 1.0 percent, with crops including *palay* (rice), sugarcane, cassava, coffee, potato, and *monggo* (mung beans) mainly reflecting this change.

In 2019, fresh banana, coconut oil, and pineapple were the top export products of the Philippines. Fresh banana was exported to Japan and China, coconut oil to the Netherlands and the United States, and pineapple to the United States and China. However, the country continued to have a negative agricultural trade balance in the same year. While there was an agricultural trade surplus with Japan, the country continued to have deficits with other significant partners like Australia, the United States, Southeast Asia nations, and the European Union (EU).

The agricultural sector employs an estimated 9.72 million people, making up 22.9 percent of national employment. In 2019, the average daily wage for agricultural workers was PHP 331.10 in nominal terms (PSA 2020c).

From April to June 2021, 6.91 million metric tons of sugarcane were produced, up by 34.8 percent from the 5.12 million metric tons produced during the same quarter in the 2020. Among the entire sugarcane output, 98.2 percent was used to make centrifugal sugar, and 1.8 percent of the output was used for ethanol, panocha or *muscovado*, chewing, and *basi* (vinegar). With 3.24 million metric tons of sugarcane produced, or a 46.9 percent share of the total, Western Visayas continued to be the country's top producer. Northern Mindanao and Central Visayas were next, with 20.4 percent and 13.8 percent, respectively (PSA 2020d).

Negros Island

The Philippines' system of land ownership is a holdover from the days of the Spanish colonial era. This is especially pronounced in Negros, in which the island's land and resources are divided among a few rich

and powerful families (Cherniguin 1988). These landlord families, up to this day, hold control over vast amounts of sugar *haciendas* (plantations) (Wright and Labiste 2018).

Sugarcane cultivation had already begun in Negros prior to the arrival of the Spaniards in 1521, although not yet on a commercial level. The Spanish colonizers significantly furthered the sugar industry in Negros by establishing sugar haciendas and starting the commercial production and exportation of sugar. British Vice Consul Nicholas Loney played a pivotal role in introducing the Philippines to the global sugar trade. Through his intervention, port facilities were constructed in Iloilo, allowing sugar to be exported directly from Negros by 1859. The economy of Negros shifted towards becoming export-oriented, with sugar monocrop as its foundation (Cherniguin 1988).

With the expansion of sugar haciendas came the displacement of many small farmers. Some were killed for protecting their lands from the takeover. During this time, *mestizo* planters emerged as new elites that wielded control over the economy and politics of Negros (Sonza 1977; Wright and Labiste 2018). The *mestizo* planters' significant influence in the bureaucracy enabled them to manipulate the land registration process to their advantage, allowing them to grab land through legal measures. Additionally, strong-arm tactics, such as using violence, were used to remove farmers from their lands (Wright and Labiste 2018; Wright 2019).

The succeeding American colonial government mentored these new elites. They easily gained legislative seats in Congress and accessed the political programs of the American colonizers. These actions, in turn, allowed them to reinforce their existing economic power with political power. Despite the incessant demand for land distribution, the United States' colonial government's interventions led to higher concentrations of land in the hands of the new elites, effectively continuing the dispossession of farmers. Additionally, the hacienda system that the Spanish introduced was also adapted to the context of US colonization (Wright and Labiste 2018; Wright 2019). During the American period, the Philippines' sugar industry continued to flourish, eventually becoming "dependent on the US for its sugar quota and preferential rates" (Tadem 2022, 179).

Wright (2019, 6) noted that unequal land arrangements—and their resulting inequalities—upheld during the Spanish colonial era were

reinforced through the “period of US colonization, Japanese occupation, and the emergence and consolidation of neocolonial elites.” Throughout these periods, tensions over land escalated in Negros and other parts of the country, as the elites continued to conquer farmers’ lands and expand their haciendas and landholdings. Meanwhile, farmers working in these haciendas were subjected to exploitative arrangements. They had no access to land ownership, humane wages, security of tenure, or employment alternatives. In many instances, these farmers, along with their families, had lived and worked on the same haciendas for generations (Wright 2019). It was in this context that Negros eventually came to be known as the “Sugar Capital of the Philippines.”

Managing Agrarian Unrest

The Philippine government’s agrarian reform efforts, throughout the years, were not aimed at reducing and eventually ending existing inequalities, particularly those between farmers and elites. These initiatives were designed to diffuse emerging or existing agrarian unrest and peasant movements that demanded land distribution.

Agrarian reform laws have faced significant obstacles, such as infrequent passage in Congress, impotent and inadequate enforcement, and ineffective implementation (Overholt 1976; Kerkvliet 1974). This is because land distribution is contrary to the monied interest of landed elites who now govern the country’s political and social institutions. Kerkvliet (1974, 289) noted that “the Philippine government and its US advisors conceded only enough legislation . . . for agrarian projects to keep discontent at a manageable level.”

Those agrarian reform projects that “passed” and were implemented took on various forms throughout different presidential administrations.

Ramon Magsaysay administration. During Magsaysay’s presidency, an agrarian reform law was passed to distribute over 300 individually-owned lands and more than 600 hectares of corporate-owned land. However, this was barely enforced and was further hindered by a conservative Congress (UMA 2019; Wright and Labiste 2018).

Diosdado Macapagal administration. In Macapagal’s term, an agrarian reform code that restricted individually-owned lands to 75 hectares was adopted. However, this excluded most agricultural lands.

Despite banning farmer tenancy, the code allowed landlords to exact a land rental equal to 25 percent of the farmers' harvest, creating a new oppressive landholding system. Moreover, its enforced policies resulted in a sharp decline in farmers' produce prices and facilitated the further expansion of plantations for export crops (Wright and Labiste 2018).

Ferdinand Marcos Sr. administration. Following the declaration of Martial Law, Marcos Sr. implemented an agrarian reform program as a political strategy to gain the support of farmers and quell potential opposition to his regime, with the overall aim of mitigating escalating social unrest.

In the mid-1970s, the Philippine economy experienced stagnation and decline. Real wages in agriculture, in turn, were reduced by 30 percent. Foreign debt had also escalated to unprecedented levels due to the intervention of the US and the World Bank, as well as corruption and cronyism in the government (Wright and Labiste 2018). With the termination of the sugar quota in 1974, the Philippine sugar industry was forced to enter the competitive international sugar trading, exposing its weaknesses (Tadem 2022).

In an attempt to mitigate the situation, from 1974 to 1979, the US and Philippines signed a five-year agricultural development plan centered on land reform (Kerkvliet 1974). As Kerkvliet (1974, 289) stipulated, "Stability is necessary . . . for Marcos [Sr.] to stay in power more easily and to attract large foreign investments, and one principal attraction . . . is 'peace and order' in the Philippines."

Marcos Sr.'s agrarian reform program, however, focused solely on the distribution of rice and corn lands. It excluded vast plantations of commercial and export crops such as sugar, abaca, banana, pineapple, and coconut. Meanwhile, his other agricultural programs encouraged plantation crops and agribusiness venture arrangements. These exclusions left the landholdings of the largest landlords untouched by the agrarian reform program (Kerkvliet 1974; Padilla 1988; Wright and Labiste 2018; UMA 2019).

While the sugar quota was renewed once again in 1982, it was under less favorable arrangements. This resulted in the price of sugar dropping significantly. To further reduce losses, production was reduced, as well as the areas where the crop was planted. Numerous sugar mills closed, and

sugar workers were displaced. Those who were retained suffered massive wage cuts (Tadem 2022).

The crisis escalated to unprecedented proportions. Poverty became rampant, especially in rural areas. Landlessness intensified, and landless workers significantly grew in numbers (Wright and Labiste 2018; Tadem 2022).

The Failed Promise of Agrarian Reform

Republic Act (RA) No. 6657, or the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL), was a result of the peasant movement's persistent and unwavering struggle to achieve genuine land distribution, even after the ouster of the Marcos regime and the transition of power to Corazon Aquino. In the aftermath of the People Power Revolution, there was growing pressure for the new administration to enact land reform. The government, however, was formulating its program at a "snail's pace" (Padilla 1988, 21). Meanwhile, grassroots initiatives, in the form of land occupations and takeovers, had become widespread, with Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP)² taking the lead. By the end of 1986, approximately 48,768 hectares had been seized by peasant farmers all over the country.

In January 1987, thousands of farmers, led by KMP, marched along Recto Avenue towards Mendiola, demanding genuine land reform³ and fair wages. They hoped to have a dialogue with the then-President Aquino to voice their demands. However, instead of a peaceful resolution, they were met with violent dispersal by state forces, who fired at the approximately 10,000 farmers. This incident, which came to be known as the "Mendiola Massacre," resulted in the deaths of 13 farmers, with 39 others sustaining gunshot wounds and 20 receiving minor injuries (Seráfica 2017; Pagulong 2020; Cabello 2022). The tragedy of the 1987 Mendiola Massacre finally compelled Aquino to implement an agrarian reform program (Padilla 1988; Wright and Labiste 2018). A year later, in

2 Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) is a democratic and militant movement of landless peasants, small farmers, farm workers, rural youth, and peasant women. It leads a total of 1.3 million rural people with 65 provincial chapters and 15 regional chapters nationwide.

3 During her 1986 presidential campaign, Corazon Aquino made agrarian reform one of her major campaign promises. She also assured long-time farm workers that "*land-to-the-tiller* will not remain an empty slogan" (Padilla 1988, 6).

June 1988, CARL was signed into law, instituting the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP).

Unlike previous agrarian reform programs, Aquino's CARP aimed to "promote social justice," "move the nation towards sound rural development and industrialization," and give the "highest consideration to the welfare of landless farmers and farmworkers" (Section 2). It endeavored to implement agrarian reform over 10 years. The program has three major components, namely: land tenure improvement through physical land transfer and non-land transfer (i.e., improvement in tenurial arrangements of farmers); support services and productivity improvement (i.e., extension services such as credit and infrastructure support); and delivery of agrarian justice (i.e., settlement of cases that are related to landlord and tenant relationships and land valuation) (KMP 2008). Despite these goals, CARP falls short in delivering results due to inherent problems in its provisions, including:

- *Exemption of private lands and reduction of lands for distribution.* CARP prioritized the distribution of public lands, while haciendas, plantations, ranches, and corporate farms were excluded. This perpetuated the concentration of land to landlords and corporations (KMP 2008; Wright and Labiste 2018). The original 10.3 million hectares of land targeted for distribution in 1988 was also decreased to only 8.2 million hectares in 1996, further limiting the scope of the program (KMP 2008).
- *Circumvention of land distribution through non-land transfers.* The introduction of non-land transfers granted landlords and corporations greater flexibility to avoid land distribution altogether (KMP 2008; Wright and Labiste 2018; UMA 2019). In Negros, for instance, certain schemes were implemented as alternatives to the distribution of land. However, these have only further disadvantaged the farmers (Wright and Labiste 2018).
- *Inadequacy and inefficiency of support services.* Despite CARP mandating the provision of support services, numerous agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) had limited access to these services. This resulted in dire circumstances as ARBs faced crop failures or poor harvests (Tadem 2016; Wright and Labiste 2018). In these situations, ARBs often resort to borrowing from loan sharks, who impose exorbitant interest rates. In addition, the documentary

requirements and high interest rates are a few of the barriers preventing ARBs from loaning from formal credit institutions. In similar situations, ARBs working on plantations and corporate farms are also compelled to seek support from former landowners and corporations (Tadem 2016).

- *Failure to distribute lands freely.* The program mandated ARBs to pay for the lands awarded to them with a six percent annual interest rate for 30 years. If they failed to pay for three succeeding years, their awarded lands would be foreclosed. This financial burden on ARBs, who often do not have savings or capital, combined with the obligation to pay for real property taxes and purchase inputs and materials for land cultivation, makes it difficult for ARBs to meet their basic needs (UMA 2019).

Landlords and corporations also took advantage of the law through various means. For instance, they subdivided their landholdings into multiple titles to evade land distribution, as well as undervalued their land to avoid taxes or overvalued them to increase compensation (KMP 2008; Wright and Labiste 2018). They also utilized land grabbing and converted agricultural lands for nonagricultural purposes (e.g., real estate, corporate farming, tourism, mining, and special economic zones) to bypass the program (Tadem 2015; 2016; Wright and Labiste 2018).

CARP was extremely difficult to implement due to the strong opposition of landlords. Landlords used legal maneuvers and appeals to harass ARBs, creating obstacles even after the official distribution of land had taken place (Wright and Labiste 2018). They even resorted to violence in the form of evictions, intimidation, and even hiring hired goons to kill farmers (Tadem 2015; 2016).

While the 1988 CARP was an improvement from the agrarian reform policies, it became a legal instrument for the dispossession of farmers and continued injustices in the countryside (UMA 2019). The CARP was

hobbled by anti-peasant and pro-landlord provisions that allowed mere regulation of existing tenurial forms, including the nefarious stock distribution option and leaseback agreements, provided for an omnibus list of exemptions, established “fair market value” for landowner compensation, created a payment amortization scheme that was unfavorable for beneficiaries, set a high retention limit that could reach 14 hectares, mandated a long period of implementation, and generally ignored the role of beneficiaries and civil society groups in seeing the program through. (Tadem 2016)

The Cases of AMANO and NAFWA⁴

Farmers and farmworkers' struggle for land ownership has a long and arduous history marked by immense sacrifice. The *Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO)* (*Association of Farmworkers in Nolan*) and *Nakalang Farm Workers Association (NAFWA)*, two Negros-based farmer cooperatives, exemplify the ongoing efforts of farmers and farmworkers to build better lives amid the failures of the Philippine government's agrarian reform programs (Tadem et al. 2023).

AMANO and NAFWA, both ARB organizations, have been implementing a unique model of collective farming on approximately 400 hectares of sugarcane and other crops in Negros. Respectively established in 2000 and 2005, these organizations practice worker-controlled and worker-managed enterprises. Their collective farming model has proven to be a viable alternative to the one promoted by the Philippine government (UP CIDS AltDev 2022). The succeeding sections present the contexts of AMANO and NAFWA, and their successes in establishing this model.

Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO) in Barangay Mansalanao, La Castellana

FIGURE 1 ► AMANO's 14th General Assembly in 2020



Source: AMANO

4 From October to December 2020, a series of online interviews with farmer cooperative members of AMANO and NAFWA were undertaken by Micah S. Orlino and Honey B. Tabiola from the UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development. The document was validated and further substantiated by the Partido Manggagawa Negros in December 2022.

The members of the Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO) have worked in Hacienda Nolan since the 1980s. Hacienda Nolan in Barangay Mansalanao, La Castellana, Negros Occidental, was originally owned by Apolonio Sombingco. The 105-hectare hacienda was mostly comprised of sugarcane (65 hectares), coffee, coconut, banana, and *ipil-ipil* trees. In the 1980s, the daily wage was PHP 8. By 1992, farmworkers earned as little as PHP 45, compared to the PHP 46 per “bushel” price of rice. Farmworkers could not send their children to school because of prevalent poverty. They were forced to send their children to work on the hacienda.

Amid these conditions, some organizers from Partido Manggagawa (PM) and Bukluran ng Mangggawang Pilipino (BMP) helped organize the farmers’ union, Hacienda Nolan Farm Workers Union (HASNOFAWU). Like many employers critical of unions, the *hacienhero* (landlord) terminated workers who joined the union. In 1994, the farmworkers organized HASNOFAWU. They demanded higher wages, as male workers were paid only PHP 40 per day and women workers were paid a mere PHP 38 per day. At that time, the price of a kilo of rice spiked to PHP 45—more than what the workers earn in a single day. In response, the landowner terminated the farmworkers from the hacienda and stopped most of the farm operations. The farmworkers, assisted by BMP, filed a complaint for illegal dismissal before the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

Seventy members initially filed a complaint for illegal dismissal, as well as financial compensation for underpayment of wages. Enticed by the landowner’s offer to give them work in the hacienda, 30 members withdrew their claim. The remaining 40 pushed through with the legal battle. The farmworkers experienced economic hardships—they lost their work, which was their only source of income. While they looked for jobs in other haciendas, when the new landowner found out that they filed a labor complaint against their former employer, they were not hired.

While the complaint was pending, the NFSW organized the 30 workers who left the group, but their organization eventually disintegrated. In 1994, the land was offered for coverage under the government’s agrarian reform program via the Voluntary Offer to Sell (VOS) scheme. However, the landowner retained possession of the hacienda, with his grandson as the *arendador* or lessor.

In 1995, the illegal dismissal complaint was decided in favor of the farmworkers. They also won the financial claim, with each member awarded PHP 11,000 in back wages and other benefits. However, the claim was amicably settled at PHP 7,000 for each worker in 1998. The farmworkers' union applied for the hacienda's coverage under the agrarian reform program in the mid-1990s. BMP helped the union ascertain the status of the land in 1998. During the process, they discovered that the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) had already deposited PHP 13 million to the landowner. They also learned from DAR contacts that the Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA) for the land had already been issued and forwarded to the La Castellana Municipal Agrarian Reform Officer (MARO) Nilda Salmorin. In response, AMANO picketed the MARO office in La Castellana and demanded the release of the CLOA.

When the CLOA was released in 2000, the farmworkers took possession of the land. The landowner contested the CLOA. The landowner was allowed to finish his harvest before the takeover of the farm, and the beneficiaries resorted to a voluntary *dagyaw*⁵ system in undertaking the farm work. The CLOA contained 34 individuals, four of whom were "bogus" beneficiaries. One of them was the Barangay Agrarian Reform Council chairman, who did not work in the hacienda, while the other three beneficiaries already had individual farms, making them ineligible to be awardees in the CLOA awarded to AMANO.

The other 30 AMANO members who were legitimate CLOA beneficiaries opted for collective farming. DAR awarded them the entire 105-hectare hacienda. They retained the 65 hectares for sugarcane and distributed the slopes as home lots for individual members. While they waited for the first harvest and thus had no money to sustain their families, the group borrowed PHP 114,000 from a lending institution. They decided to adopt collective management of their farms as they did not have the financing for individual farming. As a collective, they could be in a better position to avail of loans. AMANO realized that they had to band together for the development of their community and land, believing in the principle of equal sharing of their produce. Additionally, individually, they stood vulnerable to the government taking back their lands, in case of violations of CARP policies.

5 *Dagyaw* is the Hiligaynon counterpart of the Tagalog term *bayanihan*.

AMANO’s members have no regrets regarding their decision to manage the farm collectively. They saw the fate of neighboring ARB communities that farmed individually and were thus vulnerable to the incursions of and the eventual loss of their lands to usurers or arendadors. In 2003, AMANO applied for a production loan from Altertrade Philippines Inc., a Negros-based development organization that works to “alleviate poverty and empower marginalized producers in rural communities” (Altertrade Philippines Inc., n.d.).

In 2004, they decided to transform the union into an association because a labor union could not avail of production financing. From 2000 to 2010, AMANO acquired two trucks (a 10-wheeler and a 6-wheeler), a welding machine, and a computer. They also paid their land amortization. The average dividend at this time was only PHP 32,000 because of low production due to inefficient management. AMANO had also constructed a 16×24-foot multipurpose center from its 2009 fair trade premium of PHP 50,000. A comfort room and kitchen were added to the building from a PHP 30,000 grant from the city government. All houses of the members are made of concrete, with galvanized iron sheet roofing. AMANO later acquired a tractor.

When Arsenio Villamento—the former Vice Chairperson and Chairperson since 2014—was appointed as a project manager in 2006, production improved, and dividends increased to PHP 35,000. The new management discovered that the association had missing vouchers and unaccounted funds. It addressed these concerns and corrected them. With improved operations, AMANO accomplished one of its targets, which was to empower each of the members to construct concrete houses. Dividends at that time increased to PHP 150,000 each.

FIGURE 2 ► Ka Arsenio during the 14th General Assembly of AMANO in 2020



Source: AMANO

In 2010, 13 members left the association and formed their own group, which they named the La Castellana Farm Workers Multi-Purpose Cooperative. Each of the 13 left the association with a PHP 150,000 dividend, a capital buildup refund, and their share of the association's assets (i.e., trucks). They left the association because they felt that the association and Altertrade were their new *amo* or masters, and they did not like receiving orders from the association or Altertrade with regards to farm management, budget allocation, and loan financing. The renegade cooperative has already disbanded, with its members eventually leasing their lands to *arendadors*. When the 13 members left in early 2010, AMANO was left with 17 members. When sugar prices surged to PHP 2,400 per bag at the start of crop year 2010–2011, 12 more members also left the association, leaving the remaining five members with only 11.57 hectares of farmland. Of the 12 who left, only four were successful, as they had capital for the farms. With only five members left in the association, they decided to include as members all their immediate family members who were of legal age to boost AMANO's membership. Thus, 19 non-CLOA holders were added to the membership of the association.

For crop year 2016–2017, AMANO posted a gross income of PHP 2.34 million. The association incurred expenses of PHP 1.17 million, including PHP 90,000 for expansion. The net income amounted to PHP 1.17 million. AMANO distributed PHP 147,000 in dividends to each of its five remaining members in April. Non-CLOA members received PHP 5,874 each as their share. This is the second year that the members were given a 5 percent share of the net profits of the association.

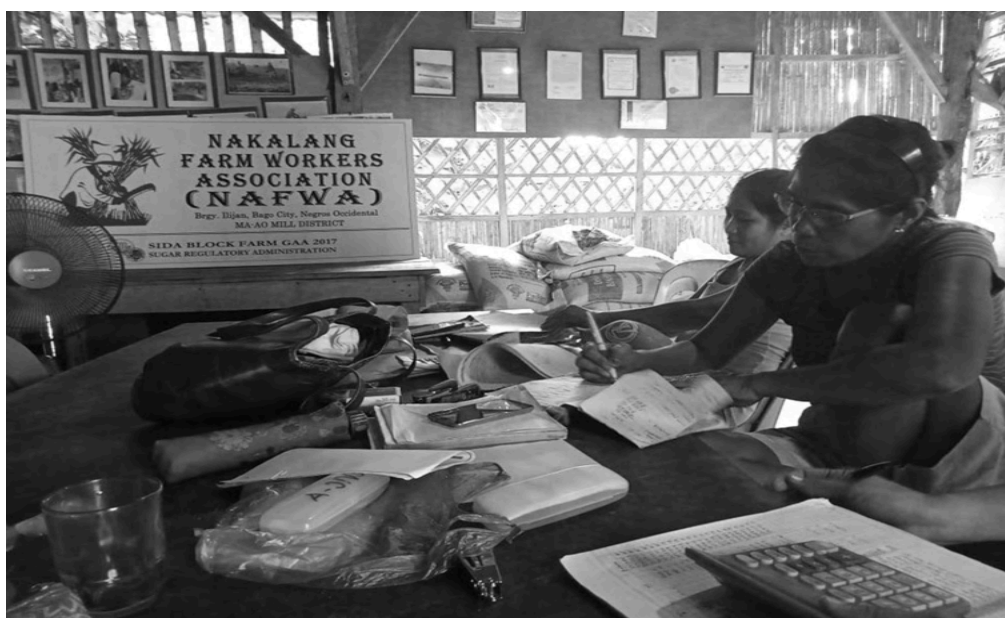
Nakalang Farm Workers Association (NAFWA) in Barangay Illijan, Bago City

Most of the members of NAFWA are native-born residents of Hacienda Nakalang, a sugarcane plantation located in Barangay Illijan, Bago City, Negros Occidental. The parents of NAFWA members were hacienda workers, with some members hailing from neighboring *sitios* who married residents of the hacienda.

When they were still working in the hacienda, there was not enough work for the whole year. It was difficult, as the policy was strictly “no work, no pay.” During *tiempos muertos* (dead seasons), they looked for work in neighboring farms, undertaking weeding, and harvesting of rice and corn.

In 1980, the NFSW organized the farmworkers into a union so that they could collectively demand redress for the underpayment of their wages in the hacienda. They launched a strike and picketed the hacienda. They filed a complaint before DOLE against their employer for underpayment of wages. The complaint was eventually decided in their favor. The children also joined NFSW and participated in mass actions, such as protest rallies and marches against the Marcos dictatorship in the early 1980s. When they organized, they were subjected to harassment. While they were on the way to attend an International Human Rights Day mobilization, their truck was stopped.

FIGURE 3 ► Women members of NAFWA



Source: NAFWA

In 2005, the Partido Manggagawa assisted in organizing the present association and registering it with DOLE. In the 1990s, representatives of DAR visited the community. The members did not know that the land was already covered by a CLOA in 1994, with dummy beneficiaries who were mostly relatives of the *encargado* (the person in charge of the hacienda). The *encargado* wanted to lease the land from the beneficiaries. However, the land would still be farmed by the landowner while the “beneficiaries” would remain workers.

The farmworkers opposed the CLOA. They organized the Nakalang Farm Workers Association to fight for just wages and to acquire the land,

which is due to them under the law. The land, at that time, was leased by a certain Angelica Lapore. The members secured a copy of the bank's foreclosure order on the land. When the lease ended in 2005, and after the arendador finished the cutting and harvesting of canes, NAFWA decided to occupy the land because they were emboldened by their supporting documents. During their time with ARADO, they hesitated to occupy the land because they lacked these documents. Pending the conduct of a general assembly, they formed an ad hoc committee to decide on important concerns.

Initially, NAFWA was composed of 40 members, but some backed out because they were misled into thinking that the association was "leftist." Each CLOA holder was awarded almost half a hectare of land (48,888 square meters). Claro "Boy" Fernando, the arendador, charged NAFWA members with forcible entry. NAFWA practically started from scratch, with no funds whatsoever. Initially, they grew the sugarcane on the land from ratoons of the harvested canes. Then they engaged in *dagyaw* (volunteerism) in the cultivation until the harvest of the canes. However, before the harvest of the sugarcanes, they were already processing with PM and AlterTrade Corporation the acquisition of a loan to finance their harvest operations.

Moving forward, in the crop year 2016–2017, the NAFWA posted a gross income of PHP 3.77 million, with a net income of PHP 1.5 million. Discussed and approved by the general assembly, the allocation of income were as follows:

- Forty percent or PHP 604,156.32 went to land share divided equally among 30 CLOA holders, regardless of area of individual land awarded to each;
- Twenty percent or PHP 302,078.16 went to dividend share divided among the CLOA holders and the nine pioneers, who were part of the land struggle but who were not included in the CLOA when the land was awarded to the beneficiaries;
- Twenty percent or PHP 302,078.16 went to capital buildup;
- 5 percent or PHP 75,519.54 went to land tax, and;
- Fifteen percent or PHP 226,558.62 went to the organizational budget (7.5 percent for workers' dividends, based on the amount of work rendered, and 7.5 percent for operations, such as meetings, medical assistance and loans, and educational loans).

If operations are favorable, they enjoy dividends at the end of the crop year—almost PHP 34,000 for each CLOA holder distributed last June 2017—which they mostly use to buy materials to build decent houses. The dividend income and members’ share are in addition to the weekly income they earn from working on their collective farm. Among the assets procured by the association are a cargo truck for hauling canes and organic fertilizer, two tractors, a rice thresher, a rice mill, a lemongrass oil distillery, a multipurpose building, and a warehouse. The rice mill was an investment from the association’s capital buildup fund. The multipurpose building was damaged by Typhoon Odette, but the association repaired it afterwards.

FIGURE 4 ► NAFWA's newly built building



Source: NAFWA

Collective Farms and the Negros Sugarcane Plantation Economy

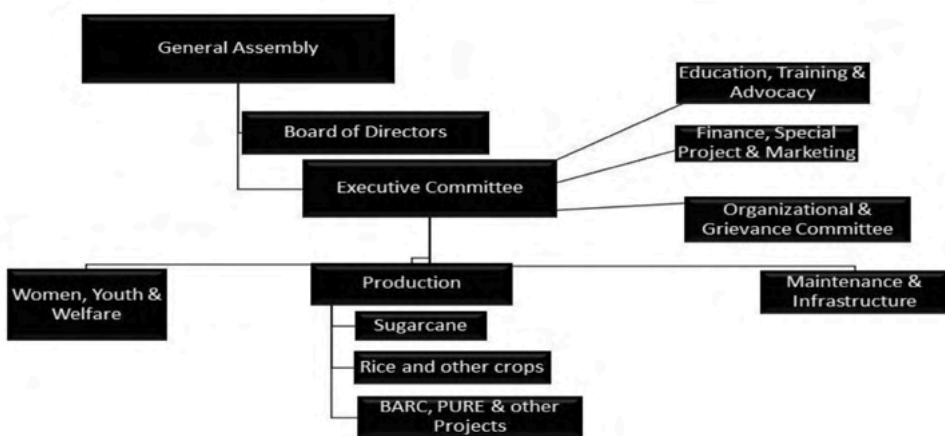
What makes the AMANO and NAFWA different from other agrarian reform beneficiaries is their practice of collective farming, or what they call “worker-owned, worker-managed enterprises.” This model of enterprising is “used to portray an economic union of social solidarity economy” (Quiñones 2014). The idea of a worker-owned, worker-managed enterprise, from the very name itself, describes an “enterprise co-owned and co-managed by many individuals who jointly establish, work together, and mutually operate the enterprise” (Quiñones 2018, 6).

According to Chayanov (1991), one of the differences between collective farms and large-scale enterprises, in terms of labor organization and hiring workers, is that a collective farm is made up of members and workers of the farm themselves. Thus, all collective farm members are the owners of the enterprise as a whole, with absolutely equal rights.

AMANO and NAFWA, as worker-controlled and worker-managed enterprises, are examples of an expression of resistance of the landless Negros farm workers to the decades-old landlordism in the province—a feudal remnant that has perpetuated abject poverty, landlessness, and the continuing dominance of elites and hacenderos. The collectivization of land parcels awarded to them through the agrarian reform program of the government diverges from the government concept and mainstream practice of land parcelization into small, individualized farms—one that weakens the capacities of small farmers to organize and form unions or cooperatives.

Unlike any other profit-oriented enterprise, the highest decision-making body of AMANO is the general assembly or the membership. Meanwhile, the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee help in the supervision and implementation of the daily operations of the enterprise.

FIGURE 5 ► The organizational structure of AMANO



Source: AMANO

As discussed in the earlier sections, for many years, landlord families of Negros owned the large-scale sugarcane plantations on the island. Having absolute control over the means of production, these hacenderos lorded over the farmworkers. Wages were viewed patronizingly as an act of generosity. The landlords exploited farmworkers under the guise of favors, as a form of a lifetime debt of gratitude. The culture of indebtedness to the hacenderos made Negros farmer workers contain their dissent—resistance would cost them their livelihoods and residences.

The pitfalls of the CARP are evident in the continuing dependence of many ARBs on the owners of big landholdings who control the chain of production and market. Having no access to capital, technical knowledge, and the market, many CLOA holders could not make their land productive.

An Alternative Model of Enterprise in practice

Before AMANO and NAFWA were awarded their lands, they had to fight for them. After years of processing and waiting for their CLOAs, the farmer beneficiaries meticulously planned and prepared financially, legally—and, most importantly—socially for actual land occupation. When they finally began occupying the land, landlords, as expected, filed several cases against the workers, ranging from malicious mischief to illegal entry and even theft.

The association spent a large sum of their pooled funds for bail and legal counsel. With minimal funds for production, they relied on *bayanihan* (cooperation). Members of AMANO and NAFWA would work on rotation in other haciendas in order to share their income not only with their families but with other members as well. Despite their meager resources, they managed to prioritize and allocate funds for those who were ill and for emergencies. When they were able to finally take control of their lands, they had to address the challenges that came with a change in power relations—from farmworker to landowner. Now more than ever, they had to be productive to survive, while continuing to struggle for their land claims.

With *damayan* (compassion), *bayanihan*, and *tangkilikan* (patronage) as their core values, they transformed the farmworkers' union into a farmers-producers' association, wherein they divide their net income into the following: CLOA holders' dividend, labor/workers' dividend, members' dividend, land amortization, land tax, capital buildup, and organizational funds. They also provide a welfare fund that includes

educational assistance, burial and hospitalization, and an initial premium for Social Security System (SSS). They likewise provide a contribution to their communities for road projects, and water and irrigation systems. Moreover, they have a land redemption fund, as well as a solidarity fund for other organizations (UP CIDS AltDev 2022).

In the more than ten years that the ARBs of AMANO and NAFWA have been practicing worker-controlled and worker-managed enterprises, they have learned the importance of:

- (1.) Continuous education and training of current and next-generation leaders;
- (2.) Dynamic, transparent, democratic organizational practices among leaders and members;
- (3.) Networking;
- (4.) Deepening values of solidarity among workers and members;
- (5.) Crop diversification to combat the effects of the worsening sugar industry crisis and the climate crisis (drought, pests, flooding), and;
- (6.) Contributions to community and rural development, and environmental protection.

Considered to be a model of solidarity economy actualized at the local level, worker-controlled and worker-managed enterprises such as AMANO and NAFWA continue to significantly improve the economic and socio-political conditions of ARBs (UP CIDS AltDev 2022).

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Gendered Activism

Women’s Access to Justice through Legal Aid Clinics and Paralegal Formations: The Association for Development of Women and Legal Empowerment

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Abstract

This case study looks at the local initiative of the Association for Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) in handling violence against women (VAW) cases. It interrogates how the status of women in Lao society, which is deeply rooted in traditional social norms, impacts legal empowerment and access to justice. ADWLE Legal Clinics, which specialize in legal aid for women and paralegals, enable women to gain greater access to justice not only with regards to violence, but also across a range of other issues, such as family and property law cases. ADWLE, which utilizes women and community legal empowerment as an alternative socio-political practice, strives to address patriarchal and cultural gender norms and the subsequent recurrence of VAW cases. To critically respond to cultural attitudes towards women or the “cultural tolerance” of VAW, and the low awareness of women’s rights in rural villages and peri-urban areas in Laos (officially named Lao People’s Democratic Republic), ADWLE developed program streams for education and training, empowerment of women’s access to justice, and “advocacy for change” in select target villages.

1 The Association for Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) is a non-profit association based in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. It focuses on legal education relating to gender and national and international women’s rights laws and instruments; on capacity-building; and on the provision of free legal advice and assistance to female victims of gender-based violence.

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Introduction

The issue of violence against women (VAW) appears to remain “culturally tolerated” in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) despite growing global and domestic recognition of VAW as a “serious public health problem and a violation of women’s rights” (NCAW 2015, 3).

A *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey* conducted in 2006 revealed that 81 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years old in Lao PDR believe that the husband is justified in exacting physical violence against a wife or a partner when she does not conform to traditional gender norms and expectations (ADB and World Bank 2014). These include: “[going] out without telling him; [neglecting] the children; [arguing] with him; [refusing] sexual relations with him; and [burning] the food” (ADB and World Bank 2014, 58). The *Lao National Survey on Women’s Health and Life Experiences*,² another survey conducted in 2014, echoed similar findings and identified the “cultural tolerance” of VAW as one of the underlying factors for the persistence of violence against women and intimate partner violence (NCAW, 2015).

Patriarchal, traditional gender norms and stereotypes do not only impact societal attitudes and perceptions towards women, but also result in women being conditioned to internalize said cultural and gender norms and stereotypes. Such internalization was reflected in the 2014 survey, with 58 percent of women agreeing that “VAW was justified if women did not adhere to traditional gender norms” (NCAW 2015, 2). Alarming, the survey revealed that girls and boys aged 13 to 17 years old echoed the same belief that a woman “should tolerate violence to keep the family together” and that it is “acceptable” under certain circumstances, especially when reproductive and care roles are not fulfilled (NCAWMC 2018, 5). Girls and boys regurgitating such beliefs reflect how ingrained the construction of the “cultural tolerance” of VAW is vis-à-vis the regulation and operation of gender roles. Girls internalize women’s roles and identities as wholly connected to their ability to fulfil reproductive and care roles within their families.

Lao traditional and societal norms also severely undermine women’s leadership and control of decision making in the public

2 The *Lao National Survey on Women’s Health and Life Experiences* is the first national survey on violence against women in Lao PDR.

sphere, community, and home (UN Women 2016, 11). Challenges faced by ethnic women due to these norms are compounded by the lack of access to education and health services, limited economic development opportunities, and fewer resources for developing themselves and their families.

However, policies anchored on gender equality in Lao PDR have been largely market oriented and mostly focused on women's "livelihoods, motherhood, and economic participation" (Faming 2018, 116). This has ushered in "a new form of poverty within the market and money-based economy" (3). While policies address women's economic participation, "women's access to political power" (116) and public participation have been largely disregarded. Faming (2018) views this as the *phu nyai*³ concept still largely at play, which continues to subordinate and marginalize women and ethnic minorities in Lao society. Policies hinged on "big man" politics has created a "socio-cultural hierarchy among women based on differences in sex, ethnicity, and social class in Lao society" (117).

The complexities which continue to confront women in Lao society, including those among the ethnic communities, cases of VAW remain alarmingly underreported in Lao PDR. The main findings in the *Lao National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experiences* reported that 71.4 percent of women did not seek help from formal networks, agencies, or persons in authority (NCAW, 2015). Instead, Lao women turned to informal and immediate networks such as family and friends. Of the women who encountered physical and/or sexual violence, "only 28.6 percent . . . sought help from local authorities, 18.9 percent from local leaders and 11.7 percent from a Village Mediation Unit (VMU)" (NCAW, 2015). Only a "handful of women" approached women's organizations

3 Faming (2018) uses two translations for the word *phu nyai*: "big man" and "big person" (literal) (4). When explaining the "social world" of *phu nyai* and *phu noi* (literally "small person"), Faming referred to power relations and social hierarchy between men and women, and women and women. The social world of *phu nyai* and *phu noi* is "based on a patron-client relationship in a male dominant context, in combination with the kinship-like hierarchical relationship among women" (4). Faming also describes *phu nyai* as based on a "political order filled by individuals who are subordinates and followers" and a "hierarchical socio-cultural" system which places women and ethnic minorities in a "rigid caste-like system" (8). Emphasis was placed on the power dynamics present in such relationship, with a *phu nyai* not being exclusive to a man or woman or a person with economic power or wealth but a person "who should be given respect" (i.e., adults vs. children, teachers vs. students, seniors vs. freshmen, older siblings vs. younger sibling) (8).

(4.3 percent), the police (3.8 percent), or healthcare facilities (2.6 percent) (NCAW 2015, 88–89). The reasons for seeking help outlined in the survey were being unable to endure anymore (64.2 percent) and being encouraged by family or friends (39.7 percent). Some cited being badly injured or threatened with death by their husbands or partners (88). Other women did not seek help because of embarrassment or shame (36.6 percent), trivialization of the situation and thinking of it as unserious (35.3 percent), fear of ending the relationship with their partner, or being told by family and community leaders “to be patient and resolve issues at home” (88).

The lack of knowledge regarding the legal system was also cited as a barrier to reporting VAW cases (NCAW 2015). Only 16.9 percent of women in urban areas, 5.4 percent of women in rural areas, and 1.5 percent of women in rural areas without road access reported knowledge of current laws concerning VAW or women’s rights. Underreporting may also be due to having no systematic reporting system for monitoring domestic violence and limited services for gender-based violence in Lao PDR (ADB and World Bank 2014, 57).

Defining Violence Against Women in Lao PDR and Strengthening the Recognition of Women’s Rights: Domestic Legal Frameworks

Understanding the high incidence of VAW in Lao PDR, as revealed in the surveys, also underscores the need to comprehend how violence and women’s rights are locally understood and subsequently addressed. In Lao PDR, violence against women and children is defined as “any behavior that results in or is likely to result in danger; harm, physical, psychological, sexual, property or economic suffering to women and children” (Lao PDR National Assembly 2014). Article 29 of the *Law on Development and Protection of Women* (LDPW) defined “domestic violence against women and children” as “an act or omission committed by someone in the family which causes physical [or] mental impact on[,] or [which impacts on the] assets of[,] women and children in the family” (Lao PDR National Assembly 2004). The LDPW is one out of the two identified major laws in Lao PDR in relation to violence against women.

Enacted in 2004, the LDPW is considered a more comprehensive response to domestic violence and various forms of abuse faced by children. Although considered a landmark legislation in its own right

because of how it has defined “physical and mental impact on assets” (Article 29 to 32), outlined the rights of victims (Article 33, 38), and the responsibilities of the state and the society for the development and protection of women (Article 39 to 42), CARE International still flagged several concerns and limitations of the LDPW. These include: (1) the exclusion of unmarried couples and non-partner relationships, as the LDPW only covers violence between married couples; and (2) how it “does not specify marital rape in the context of sexual violence” (NCAW 2015, 8). Additionally, at the time of the report,

Lao PDR does not have pre-litigation measures to immediately stop violence, such as intervention orders to protect survivors or refer them to shelters/safe places as in the case in other ASEAN countries. The only existing pre-litigation action is resolution through VMUs. Fourth, the LDPW categorized levels of violence into ‘serious’ and ‘non-serious,’ with non-serious cases encouraged to go through VMUs and be settled through mediation (Article 35), which is likely to “cause a diversion from the court or criminal procedures and may remove the recognition of domestic violence as a human rights violation. (NCAW 2015, 10 quoted in CARE 2009)

The distinction between “serious” and “less harmful acts of violence” has been noted with concern as it could “socially legitimize violence and foster a culture of silence and impunity” (10).

The recognition of women’s rights in Lao PDR can also be seen in the government’s adoption of the *National Action Plan on the Protection and Elimination of Violence against Women and Children*.

International Obligations and Forming the Association for Development of Women and Legal Empowerment

At the global level, Lao PDR has an obligation to protect and promote women’s rights as a signatory to international human rights treaties and conventions. By virtue of ratifying the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 1981, Lao PDR is obligated to “submit a national report every four years” (NCAW 2015, 10) to account for their compliance with CEDAW principles and regulations.

Attuned to these commitments, the Association for Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) conducted a capacity assessment of the implementation of CEDAW in Lao PDR. ADWLE observed low awareness at the grassroots level, among leaders of international non-governmental organizations and non-profit associations, and levels of the

government of CEDAW (ADWLE 2016, 7). Other key constraints identified were insufficient human resources, weak governance, limited technical expertise, and limited funds allocated by the government to effectively implement the law (7–8).

The findings of ADWLE mirror that of the *Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic* on CEDAW released on 14 November 2018. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women raised concerns over women’s access to justice, citing “persistent barriers, including stigma, fear of retribution, deep-rooted discriminatory gender stereotypes and limited legal literacy, that deter women and girls from registering their complaints regarding gender-based discrimination and violence, including domestic violence, marital rape and sexual harassment” (UN CEDAW 2018, 4–5). The Committee has likewise taken note of how the “persistence . . . of discriminatory gender stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society” (10) continue to contribute to the “perpetuation of harmful practices, such as child marriage, and the high levels of gender-based violence against women and girls, including domestic violence” (7).

ADWLE finds its history very much entwined with CEDAW, with founding members belonging to the CEDAW Resource Pool. The organization was formalized as a non-profit association under the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2012 and was re-registered in 2017. ADWLE has emphasized the ratification of CEDAW and the corresponding obligation of the State to ensure that all standards are “applied throughout the country, including customary law systems” and discriminatory cultural practices.

ADWLE’s Founding Director, Inthana Bouphasavanh, in an interview with World Bank said: “I [have] been in the legal sector since 2001, when I started working at the National University of Laos Faculty of Law and Political Sciences. We were helping build the capacity of law teachers, and I volunteered to train the lecturers and the students on gender equality and [CEDAW]. During this work I came to understand that women in Laos lacked knowledge about the law and had limited access to the justice system. This gave me the inspiration to set up [ADWLE with its] formal registration completed in 2012” (World Bank 2022).

Lao Women and Legal Systems: Challenges in Access to Justice

Lao PDR's pluralistic legal system incorporates state and non-state systems, and their informal justice system is heavily influenced by customary rules (UN Women 2016). Thus, access to justice, as well as its underlying principles, increasingly becomes an important element in helping women exercise their rights, especially with regard to the issue of VAW in the country.

Access to justice is defined as “the ability of people to seek and obtain a remedy through formal or informal institutions of justice and in conformity with human rights standards” (UNDP 2011). A primary concept of access to justice “rests on the individuals’ equal capacity to find remedy regardless of the type of justice system accessed,” which includes finding remedies within formal justice systems or informal justice systems (UNDP 2011). This implies that assessments of access to justice look at both formal and informal means of justice to “ensure that poor, disadvantaged and marginalized populations gain understanding, knowledge, confidence, a voice, and the physical access to appropriate and effective means of meeting their justice needs and furthering their right” (19).

Lao PDR has three overlapping systems in practice: (1) the formal justice system, which is the state-sponsored formal justice system; (2) a semiformal justice system, comprised of informal practices recognized by the state; and (3) an informal justice system, based on customary laws and social norms, particularly prevalent in ethnic minority communities.

In documenting Lao women's access to justice in the context of customary rules and laws in ethnic communities, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) reports that women are “often victimized by the justice system which has been designed to uphold the values and customs of a given society” (2016, 9). Specific to the experience of rural women and women who are members of ethnic groups, traditional problem-solving methods remain the dominant conflict resolution mechanism in homes and communities because of the lack of access to information or services. However, the failure to include women in planning and information collection, coupled with men's significant influence over ethnic groups' traditional rules, means there remain significant gaps in understanding women's access to justice.

Laos remains a predominantly rural country, with around 85 percent of the population living in remote areas and exhibiting significant ethnic diversity. The men are traditionally recognized as the “stronger” beings, therefore entitled to leadership roles and decision-making in both the public and private spheres (UN Women 2016, 11). Ethnic minority women, as a result, face “high levels of economic poverty, limited livelihood options or capacities, excessively high workloads, very low voice in decision-making at any level, poor maternal health and nutrition status and the risk of gender-based violence and exploitation” (31). They remain largely marginalized in legal systems and in accessing justice. Socioeconomic factors and lack of resources, such as money and time, make them unable to access formal justice systems. Traditional, patriarchal social norms result in unequal access to informal justice systems.

The burden of unpaid care work has also been cited as disproportionately affecting women in many ways. Deviating from expected social norms makes them vulnerable to violence, with men using violence to “punish” women if work is not completed or if meals are not prepared on time (UN Women 2016). Women’s multiple burdens, brought about by unpaid care work, also affect their access to services, education, and justice mechanisms. As succinctly described by UN Women (2016), “women’s lack of free time, coupled with men’s control of time, prevents women from considering justice issues or seeking redress in any form” (41).

Ethnic minority women’s access to information also remains a challenge due to women’s low literacy rates and language barriers.⁴ Although printed information has been said to be available, it is mostly in common Lao language; written documentation and file claims with formal courts also require the use of Lao language.

Program Streams of the Association for Development of Women and Legal Empowerment (ADWLE)

The birth of ADWLE took significant notice of all these structural and systemic issues, which prompted Ms. Bouphasavanh and her colleagues

⁴ Women from ethnic minorities are limited to speaking their ethnic language and not Lao language, the language used in courts.

in ADWLE to design program streams. They kept in mind structural and socio-cultural barriers in accessing formal, semi-formal, and informal justice systems. ADWLE aimed to address the low awareness of CEDAW in both the grassroots and levels of the government through: (a) legal education on gender and applicable national and international women's rights laws; (b) capacity building activities with villages and communities to promote women's rights and community behavioral change towards women and girls; and (c) the provision of legal aid services to survivors of gender-based violence. It continues to envision a society "where there is gender equality—equal opportunities, women's participation in decision-making, and access to the legal system" (Australian Embassy Lao People's Republic n.d.).

ADWLE further elaborated that although Lao PDR has ratified CEDAW, Lao women have "limited ability to assert them . . . for a number of reasons, including illiteracy, lack of knowledge of above-cited laws, cultural norms, limited legal aid or lawyer's services" (ADWLE n.d.). This is the very reason why ADWLE's activities recognize that the issue of VAW is both structural (i.e., access to justice, legal education) and cultural (i.e., traditional gender roles, discrimination based on gender). Their three key activities focus on education and training, empowering women, and advocating change (Figure 1). ADWLE considers the material circumstances of the beneficiaries of their program streams, such as women's socioeconomic status—that affect their access to justice and education—and ethnicity.

ADWLE started with two staff, and in 2015, expanded to have six full-time administrators, three lawyers, twelve paralegals, twenty-four village gender trainers, two international and national volunteers, and seventy-two teachers and student gender volunteers (Australian Embassy n.d.)

In 2019, the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) visited ADWLE in Vientiane City, the capital of Laos. They interviewed Ms. Boupphasavanh, who shared the history of the organization, gave an overview of the situation of women and women's rights in Lao PDR, and discussed the program streams in detail. At the time of the interview, ADWLE operated one legal clinic to service 15 target villages in Xaythany District, Vientiane City. The pilot areas were primarily peri-urban areas, including ethnic minority villages, whose daily source of income were based on agriculture and handicrafts. The legal aid clinics

have been one of the major contributions of ADWLE in partnership with members of the legal community, including law schools and institutions, with the aim to strengthen the response to VAW, family conflicts, and divorce, especially for marginalized women. Ms. Bouphasavanh once said that ADWLE's initiatives helped it become a "leading training center on Lao women's rights and a model" that provides legal services to vulnerable women (Bielecki and Ertelt 2017).

Legal aid is the "provision of assistance to people who are unable to afford legal representation and access to the court system [and] is regarded as central in providing access to justice by ensuring equality before the law, the right to counsel, and the right to a fair trial" (BABSEACLE n.d.). The UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid recognizes legal aid as

[an] essential element of a fair, humane and efficient criminal justice system that is based on the rule of law and that it is a foundation for the enjoyment of other rights, including the right to a fair trial, as a precondition to exercising such rights and an important safeguard that ensures fundamental fairness and public trust in the criminal justice process. (UN ODC 2013, 2)

There is also the recognition of the use of "community-based sanctions and measures, including non-custodial measures," and the "[promotion] of greater community involvement in the criminal justice system" (UN ODC 2013, 4).

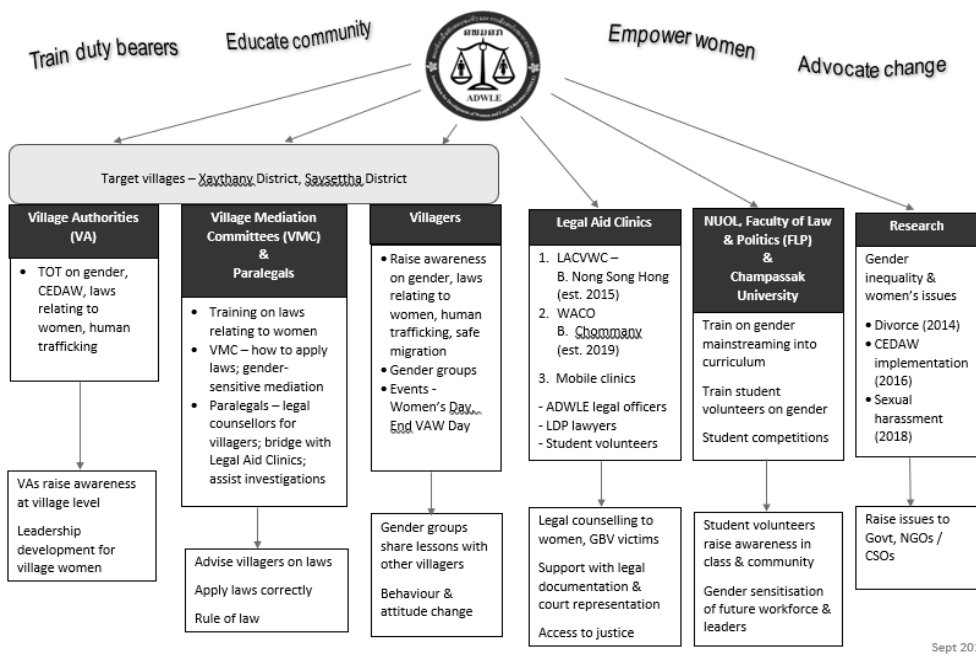
Principle 10, or "Equity in Access to Legal Aid" of the UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid, explicitly provides that "special measures should be taken to ensure meaningful access to legal aid for women, children and groups with special needs" and that "states should also ensure that legal aid is provided to persons living in rural, remote and economically and socially disadvantaged areas and to persons who are members of economically and socially disadvantaged groups" (UN ODC 2013, 7).

ADWLE decided to pilot their legal aid clinics in rural ethnic communities to "[gain a] deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women in rural ethnic communities and . . . support them [in their] access [to] their rights" (ADWLE n.d.). Gender disparities and vulnerabilities are particularly glaring in remote rural areas, with rural women and ethnic minorities facing more significant constraints in inclusion and access to services (ADB and World Bank 2014). Lao rural women are also more

likely to face “time poverty” constraints due to rigid traditional gender roles, which expect them to allocate the majority of their time in arduous but unpaid reproductive care and domestic work (UN FAO, IFAD, and ILO 2010).

Figure 1 above illustrates the persons involved in ADWLE’s program streams. In order to train duty bearers and educate the community, Village Authorities⁵ are given a “training of trainers” which focuses on gender sensitivity and perspectives, CEDAW, laws relating to women’s rights, and human trafficking. Upon accomplishing the training of trainers, the goal is for Village Authorities to raise awareness at the village level and “leadership development” for village women (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 ► ADWLE program streams and beneficiaries as of September 2019.



Source: Leaflet/briefer from ADWLE.

5 In the local level, Lao PDR is divided into three administrative tiers and corresponding units: first-level (province and prefecture), second-level (district), and third-level (village). Villages are administered by village chiefs or village authorities. (Chapter VIII, Article 75, Local Administration, Lao People’s Democratic Republic 1991 [rev. 2003]). https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Laos_2003?lang=en

Village Mediation Committees⁶ and paralegals are also capacitated on laws relating to women and how to apply formal laws (versus customary laws) and implement gender-sensitive mediation. Paralegals, on the other hand, serve as legal counselors for villages and assist in investigations. Capacitating Village Mediation Committees and paralegals on laws to protect women’s rights and gender-sensitive mediation ensures that villages will also be advised on such laws, that laws are applied correctly, and the rule of law is upheld. Village Mediation Units (VMUs) are categorized under the semi-formal justice system (UN Women 2016). The state has given jurisdiction to local authorities (i.e., village chief, village administration) through VMUs “to collect information and evidence, educate complaining parties and perform mediations of local low-level disputes” and “some judicial control to administer justice based on both the formal and informal justice systems” (24).

Efforts to capacitate Village Authorities on laws on women’s rights and gender sensitivity is essential to ADWLE’s program streams, especially taking into consideration that village-level mediation is a traditional dispute resolution method used by Lao people and “conducted by elders or the head of the ethnic group based on the relationships, traditions and social norms of the group” (24). “Mediation” is used to reach a compromise in order to maintain good relations and social harmony within the community. However, gender-blind mediation and the nonrecognition of unequal power relations may inadvertently cause harm to women who are victim-survivors of violence. Women may be forced to suffer in silence to “maintain” the harmony within the community. Moreover, women’s political leadership and representation remains low in Lao PDR, with only one percent of village chiefs being women (UN Women Factsheet quoted in UN Women 2016, 32).

Moreover, Ms. Bouphasavanh narrated the challenge to persuade Village Mediation Committees to “apply formal laws, instead of customary laws that have been used for many centuries,” a change which may be

6 In 2016, Lao PDR “had adopted the *Prime Minister Decision on Village Dispute Resolution Committees* to formalize village mediation services and integrate local dispute resolution” and in 2018, the “Prime Minister approved the Legal Aid Decree to expand legal aid offices across the country” (Wassel 2019). Village mediation remains as “an effective and . . . preferred way to resolve many local disputes” but formal mechanisms are “sometimes necessary to protect the individuals’ full rights under the law.”

critical for women to be “properly heard and given access to fair justice” (World Bank 2022).

ADWLE operated the legal aid clinic as a pilot project to respond to women’s need for access to justice based on its research findings of their report, *Attitudes of Lawyers Towards an Increase of Divorces in Lao PDR* in 2014. At that time, ADWLE only had one lawyer assistant to serve the target villages.⁷ ADWLE, however, was unable to retain the lawyers who were charging commercial rates. While ADWLE was able to partner with law firm Law and Development Partnership (LDP), which offered to support the project and have in its roster a lawyer who specializes in human rights, “the part-time services of one or two lawyers were never going to be nearly enough to meet the demand for legal services in the areas that ADWLE had in mind” (GJG 2019). ADWLE eventually had to change their strategies due to the minimal and limited funding available to them and the equally limited number of practicing lawyers.

As such, paralegals play a crucial role in ADWLE’s program streams. Paralegals “served as a bridge between vulnerable people and the justice system” (GJG 2019). As seen in Figure 1, paralegals are trained on laws relating to women, serve as legal counsellors for villages and the bridge with Legal Aid Clinics, and assist in investigations. Paralegals are volunteers and “ordinary approachable people in society . . . trained to be available to listen to people’s concerns and grievances with confidence.” ADWLE ensures that the work of volunteer paralegals does not prevent them from carrying out their main jobs.

Tapping “ordinary” citizens as paralegals addresses the fears and intimidation rural women might feel when approaching legal institutions and law enforcement. Identified concerns include whether they will be able to articulate their concerns eloquently due to language barriers⁸ and experiencing bigotry and discrimination (GJG 2019). The role of paralegals, however, is not only limited to bridging the gap between women and the formal justice system. Paralegals in the community also

7 It is important to note that in 2019, the Government of Laos established government-run Legal Aid Offices under the Legal Aid Decree. ADWLE’s Legal Clinics continue to specialize in legal aid for women and complements the established general Legal Aid offices of the Ministry of Justice at the district and provincial level.

8 Language barriers stemming from unfamiliarity with the language used in formal settings like courts.

monitor informal dispute resolutions and the processes by which these mediation forums operate within their communities. If something is remiss in how the dispute is handled, paralegals turn to the lawyers at legal aid clinics for legal assistance.

Villagers are also included in the program streams of ADWLE to exact “behavior and attitude change”⁹ towards women and for a deeper appreciation of women’s human rights. Activities include awareness-raising activities on gender, laws relating to women, human trafficking, and safe migration (Figure 1). “Gender groups” are also formed to share lessons with other villagers and events like Women’s Day and End “Violence Against Women” Day.

On the provision of direct service, ADWLE legal officers and pro-bono lawyers are tapped to provide legal counseling to women and GBV victims and provide support with legal documentation and court representation.

Legal academic institutions are also tapped to conduct seminars on including gender in educational curricula and train student volunteers on gender. The goals of the activities under this program stream are to capacitate student volunteers to raise awareness in the class and community and the “gender sensitization” of future workforce and leaders (Figure 1).

ADWLE’s research stream focuses on gender inequality and women’s issues—specifically divorce—CEDAW implementation, and sexual harassment. They use their research to raise gender issues to the government.

Legal Education and Empowerment in Lao PDR as a Socio-political Alternative Practice

In documenting alternative practices, UP CIDS AltDev has generally categorized such practices according to four types: political, economic, social, and cultural (Tadem et al. 2020). Political alternative practices are “politically, informal and formal networks of civil society

9 This is taken from the authors’ work and from information/data taken from field interviews and review of related literature.

organizations and social movements . . . operating . . . on issues related to environmental issues, women’s rights, workers’ and peasants’ rights, human rights, human security, and many other concerns” while social alternative practices take the form of “self-help groups [that] have long existed, and local networks [that] have coordinated their social protection activities” with “peoples’ empowerment [as] a guiding principle and primary goal” (17–18). Using the aforementioned definitions, this section will look at how the program streams of ADWLE may be categorized as a socio-political alternative practice.

FIGURE 2 ► Persons involved in program streams and activities of ADWLE.

WHO IS INVOLVED?	WHAT ACTIVITIES?	
Paralegals Women Village Authorities Village Mediation Committees Villagers	Awareness raising Women leadership development Advise villagers on laws Strengthening rule of law	Individual Village
Academe ADWLE Legal Officers Legal Aid Clinics Student Volunteers Paralegals	Legal counselling Court representation Access to justice Gender mainstreaming	Legal Practitioners/ Legal Institutions
ADWLE	Research Lobbying Promotion	NGOs and CSOs Government

Source: Leaflet/briefer from ADWLE.

FIGURE 3 ► ADWLE program streams as a socio-political alternative practice.



Source: Leaflet/briefer from ADWLE.

Figure 2 illustrates the actors involved and the nature of activities, clustered by the unit it targets (i.e., individual, community, social institutions, organizations, government).

During the interview with UP CIDS AltDev, Ms. Bouphasavanh explained that program streams are focused on working together with district and Village Authorities to strengthen the services available for local communities.

A noticeable strategy employed by ADWLE is involving both individual women and various social institutions and administrative units in their program streams. There is also an explicit recognition that addressing the root causes of violence against women is also the responsibility of the community and the state, and not for women to bear alone.

As reported in the *Lao National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experiences*, the majority of women turned to informal and immediate networks instead of formal networks, agencies, or persons in authority. With its focus on the village as a community rather than the individual, ADWLE's approach takes advantage of existing informal networks of support for intervention. However, formal reporting mechanisms must still be strengthened, and low reporting rates be addressed.

ADWLE also implements a two-pronged approach of addressing immediate needs through direct service provision and, in the long term, realizing strategic gender interests.¹⁰ Acknowledging the difficulty in accessing legal services, ADWLE organizes legal aid clinics and mobile clinics, provides legal assistance, and offers court representation, which

10 Moser (1993) borrows from Molyneux's (1975, 38) definition of gender interests as "those that women (or men for that matter) may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes. Gender interests can be either strategic or practical, each being derived in a different way and each involving differing implications for women's subjectivity." Gender interests move beyond the assumption of homogeneity in women's experiences and take into consideration women's intersectional identities, socio-economic contexts, class, ethnicity, religious structures, and power relations. Strategic gender interests or needs, when met, "transform" existing unequal power relations between men and women relating to "gender divisions of labour, power, and control and may include issues such as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages, and women's control over their bodies" (Moser 1993, 39). "Meeting strategic gender needs" also "challenges women's subordinate position" in society by changing existing roles (39).

would otherwise not be a viable option for women because of their material circumstances (i.e., the lack of financial resources, knowledge of the law protecting women's rights, confidence and self-esteem, social stigma, and low educational achievement).

In the long term, what ADWLE works on—as seen in its focus on capacity building activities, gender groups, training of trainers, and leadership development—is transforming the gendered cultural and societal attitudes towards women that lead to the tolerance of VAW, addressing the entrenchment of patriarchal beliefs and values within families and structures in local villages, and strengthening the protection of women's human rights from the rule of law to social institutions like the community and family. For ADWLE, strengthening the rule of law means applying it fairly and with due consideration to women's subordinate position because of traditional, heterosexist gender norms.

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Addressing Gender-based Violence in Post-Independence Timor-Leste through Queer Solidarity

Arcoiris, Ananeza P. Aban, and Angeli Fleur G. Nuque¹

Abstract

Arcoiris Timor-Leste is a support organization for lesbians, bisexual women, and transmen (LBT) in promoting the human rights of the LGBTQIA+ community in Timor-Leste. It fills in the gaps in state programs and policies related to LGBTQIA+. A key initiative is building safe spaces in the capital of Dili to support the LBT community. Arcoiris knows that safe spaces against violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ in the country must be challenged, victim-survivors must be empowered, and institutions must develop the capacity in responding to LGBTQIA+ issues. While finally achieving independence from Indonesia, cases of gender-based violence and discrimination committed against the LBT are indicative of an unfinished struggle for justice and equality.

1 Arcoiris Timor-Leste is an LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) organization-based in Timor Leste and shelter that supports members to leave violent situations. Arcoiris ensures a safe space for LGBTI peoples, practicing “safety” not just as a shelter but also as a platform for lobbying for LGBTI rights.

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Aban and Nuque conducted field research in Timor Leste in 2018 and interviewed the founders of Arcoiris Timor-Leste, namely Bella Galhos and Iram Saeed, along with Natalino Guterrez of the Timor Leste youth group, Hatutan.

Introduction

The prominence of heteropatriarchy in Timor-Leste began during the dark episodes of coloniality under the Portuguese regime, and the Indonesian military occupation strongly shaped the proliferation of many forms of gender-based violence (GBV) over the course of Timor-Leste's nation-building process. GBV is becoming a serious concern, given the severity of violence. This was revealed in the country reports mentioned in this chapter, and an eye-opening chronicle prepared by Arcoiris Timor-Leste² founders, derived from testimonials of queer peoples' personal lives. The situation, therefore, poses a health hazard for women and the LGBTIQ+,³ as well as a continuing challenge to this country's nationhood (Haider 2012; Saeed and Galhos 2017).

Timor-Leste takes pride in finally achieving independence from Indonesia through a referendum in 1999. However, the stories of GBV committed against the LBT (lesbians, bisexual women, and transmen) community are indicators and reminders of an unfinished struggle, hard-fought it might have been, towards national liberation (Pires quoted in Saeed and Galhos 2017). Timorese women also claim their exceptional roles in the anti-colonial struggle and resistance movement. However, feminist scholars posit that the struggle for women's emancipation was subsumed by the broader struggle for national independence (Niner and Loney 2020). A major drawback of the post-independence period lies in the undervalued recognition of women's contribution to the armed resistance and clandestine networks. The gendered recognition of war veterans and their corresponding social pensions underscored this issue (Niner 2013; Niner and Loney 2020). Moreover, the lack of recognition of ordinary women's participation in the struggle is an injustice (Gonçalves 2016 quoted in Ma'averu 2020).

The present status of Timorese women, in particular, poses the question of how gender equality is seriously recognized and protected in the face of sexual violence and discrimination experienced by women, including members of the LBT community. As Niner and Loney (2020, 874) note, the post-conflict period in this country "is significant for the

2 Will be interchangeably used with its shorter name, Arcoiris.

3 LGBTIQ+ stands for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, intersex, queers, and other forms of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

status of women and the struggle for gender equality. Women today face cultural and political pressure to conform to patriarchal demands, driven by a complex history of conflict, colonialism and changing customary practices.”

The persistence of GBV among peoples of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE) is horrific and unsettling. It all the more bolsters the importance of unmasking the complex history of Timorese society and its impact on current sociocultural norms and gender relations. Niner and Loney (2020) elaborate on the central role of Timorese women in the liberation movement:

We argue that a better understanding of the history of the women’s movement, forged within an anticolonial, nationalist independence movement, alongside a conceptualization of the intersecting structures that have shaped the capacity for East Timorese women to effect social change in their communities and nation, is necessary to fully realize the movement’s goals and potential. (874)

Addressing Violence Against Women and the Challenges for the LGBTIQ+

This paper critically examines the situation of women in both domestic and public spheres in order to clarify the intricate connections that link them to the status of LGBT in Timorese society. It is guided by the premise that women’s and LGBTIQ+’s first brutal encounters with GBV are at the hands of some family members and local communities.

In an effort to address the prevalence of domestic violence—including sexual violence within marriages—and criminalize it at the national level, female parliamentarians and the women’s movement in Timor-Leste pushed for the enactment of the Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV) in 2010. A product of “years of national consultations and revisions” (Hall 2017 in Niner and Loney 2020, 892), this was a substantial response to the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) *Chega! Report 2005*, which documented 853 cases of sexual violence committed against Timorese women and girls during the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999. The CAVR reported that during this period, most complaints of violations involved rape (CAVR 2005, ch. 7.2.2 quoted in Haider 2012; Niner and Loney 2020; Ma’averu 2020). Yet, disturbingly, incidents of domestic violence, including

intimate partner violence and family violence, have surged in the post-independence period (Harris-Rimmer 2009 quoted in Haider 2012). This situation has been normalized in many locations across the country (Alves et al. 2009 quoted in Haider 2012).

Supplemental research and reports also shed light on the degree of violence based on gender. The Demographic and Health Survey of 2009–2010 disclosed that “38 percent of women aged 15 to 49 experienced physical violence” (NSD⁴ and ICF Macro 2010, 228 quoted in Haider 2012). In the 2002–2003 International Rescue Committee study of Joshi and Haertsch (2003, 6 quoted in Haider 2012), 51 percent of married Timorese women said that “they felt unsafe in their relationship.” On the other hand, police reports between 2000 and 2009 revealed that domestic violence was the most frequent among the category of gender-based crimes (Harris-Rimmer 2009 and 2010 in Haider 2012).

This historical injustice to women implies the legacy of violence—the failure to address past crimes contributes to continuing violence and trauma in the contemporary period (Haider 2012; Niner 2022). These deep imprints of violent masculinities throughout history demonstrate that GBV “does not conform to the timelines of peace treaties and ceasefire but endures” beyond this period (Niner 2022, 3).

Feelings of insecurity among colonized and subsequently occupied populations—due to the devastation, massive displacement, prevailing conflict after the 1999 referendum, and the eventual closure of refugee camps—have contributed to the exacerbation of GBV (Haider 2012; Niner 2022; Hanung and Castañeda 2017). The overarching patriarchal culture is influenced by indigenous cultural practices embroiled in the legacy of Portuguese colonization, Roman Catholicism’s binary-gendered categorization, and militarized masculinity during the Indonesian occupation. This has legitimized gender inequality and reinforced GBV. The combination of these heteronormative values, which frame women as “properties” of men, fortified the belief that violence is a “normal” phenomenon or an acceptable response of a husband to “discipline” his wife (Haider 2012; Niner 2022; Hanung and Castañeda 2017). A symbolic representation can be witnessed in the *barlake*⁵ transactions—marital

4 NSD stands for National Statistics Directorate of the Ministry of Finance, Timor-Leste.

5 *Barlake* is the local term for dowry or bride price during marriage.

arrangements that are traditionally practiced among the locals (Haider 2012). Over time, this perception strengthens the rationale that violent masculinity intends to “educate” and “correct” the behavior of LBT peoples who refuse to conform to dominant heteronormative gender norms (Niner 2022, 3).

Groves, Resurreccion, and Doneys (2009) argue that during Timor-Leste’s transitional period from conflict to nationhood, GBV remained within the margins of the international (e.g., United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor regulations) and local governing systems (i.e., the colonial legal system as mandated by Indonesian law and other local judicial systems). They add that women who were active during the resistance movement were excluded from the democratic process of electing new leaders, despite their demands for inclusion. As a consequence, during Timor-Leste’s transitional period, “the security of the transitional state sidestepped the security of individuals and thereby [led to] security bereft of a gender perspective [and] oblivious to escalating violence based on gender” (188).

In relation to the human security discourse, GBV proliferates when it is viewed as a private affair and security is seen as a “responsibility of the head of household” (188). This perspective, however, becomes problematic because it creates a space “where domestic violence can go unsanctioned, since the perpetrator of violence, usually the male head of household, monopolized the means of coercion within the household—a space where state protection was both unwelcome and illegitimate” (190). Therefore, GBV, especially in the context of family violence and when inflicted upon a marginalized sector, results from multiple layers of inequalities and injustice.

The structural violence of poverty and the economic dependence of women on men have also silenced them. This results in their reluctance to access the formal justice system. Social stigma hounds them through the unwritten rule that GBV should remain a family matter; otherwise, bringing that in public destroys domestic harmony by putting the family reputation to shame (Haider 2012; Niner and Loney 2020).

This culture of silence and its underlying factors are reiterated in the pioneering action research on the status of LBT peoples in Timor-Leste, conducted by Arcoiris founders Iram Saeed and Bella Galhos (2017). Around 86 percent of the research participants said that they experienced

“both physical and psychological violence,” and noted “zero intervention by any outside agency” (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 3). A feeling of shame, social embargo, fear of abuse, and various socioeconomic reasons were identified as key factors for a large number of them in hiding.

Comparatively, the reasons for incidents of GBV in Asia

have been identified as family-based, the notion of women as male property, the social construction of gender and sexuality and the ideological role of religion that governs women and men’s moral behaviour. (Bennette and Manderson 2003 quoted in Groves, Resurreccion, and Doneys 2009, 192)

Domestic and International Policies Affecting the Status of LGBTIQ+ in Timor-Leste

The 26th session of the Universal Period Review (UPR), conducted from 31 October to 11 November 2016, by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), featured a review of the human rights policies for LGBTIQ+ persons in Timor-Leste. It reported that “[w]hile Timor-Leste has taken some steps to protect the rights of LGBTI persons,” it still does not have “any laws that explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of [SOGIE] and intersex status” (Kaleidoscope Australia and Sexual Rights Initiative 2016, 1; Niner 2022; Destination Justice 2018). Based on the Second Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review⁶ for Timor-Leste in 2016, stakeholders cited the connection between the recurring discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community and the scarcity of antidiscrimination laws on the basis of SOGIE (Destination Justice 2018). The absence of antidiscrimination laws places LGBTIQ+ people in a disadvantaged position “in all areas of life where gender information is required, including employment, healthcare, education and access to justice” (179).

“Sexual orientation” was initially introduced by members of the Constituent Assembly during the drafting of the Timorese Constitution in 2001, a move to ensure that the Constitution would be inclusive (Saeed

6 The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) “is a process which involves a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States. It is a State-driven process, under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, which provides the opportunity for each State to declare what actions they have taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to fulfil their human rights obligations” (UNHCR, n.d.).

and Galhos 2017). However, only 13 voted in favor of its inclusion, with 52 voting against it and 14 abstaining. They argued that its inclusion will incite “conflict with the church;” that Timor-Leste was not ready to deal with this subject, and that “it will give people ideas” (4). Unfortunately, because the majority had voted against its inclusion, the 2002 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste does not explicitly forbid discrimination based on SOGIE. (Hanung and Castañeda 2017; Saeed and Galhos 2017).

As such, the domestic legal framework for the human rights of Timorese LGBTIQ+ persons lies in Section 23 of the Constitution. It “calls for all rights in the Constitution to be interpreted in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Belun 2018), forbidding discrimination of any kind. The general nature of the clause has, in turn, led to the failure to protect LGBTIQ+ persons from high levels of violence and discrimination (Kaleidoscope Australia & Sexual Rights Initiative 2016). Under Article 52 of the Penal Code, higher penalties are given “if a person commits a crime motivated by discrimination on the grounds of ‘gender’ and ‘sexual orientation’” (Government of Timor-Leste 2019, 78; Saeed and Galhos 2017; Kaleidoscope Australia & Sexual Rights Initiative 2016; Belun 2018; emphasis added).

However, crimes “motivated by bias on the basis of *gender identity or intersex status* are not subject to any penalty enhancement under the Penal Code” (Kaleidoscope Australia and Sexual Rights Initiative 2016, 2; emphasis added). Furthermore, because the Penal Code does not treat gender identity as an “aggravating factor within Article 52,” it fails to deter “physical and symbolic violence and hate crimes in Timor-Leste” based on gender identity (2).

There is also a lack of legal gender recognition. There are no existing “laws or policies [to date] that allow transgender persons to change their gender identity on identification cards and legal documents,” which will have “significant [discriminatory impacts] . . . when their gender information is required” (e.g., employment, health care, education, and access to justice) (4).

Timor-Leste’s National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) has an Office of the Provedor for Human Rights and Justice⁷ that opened in 2006.

⁷ Also known as *Provedoria dos Direitos Humanos e Justiça* (PDHJ).

The said office is a legal body that has the mandate to advance, promote, monitor, and investigate human rights frameworks, issues, and/or abuses. This *Provedoria*, however, has “hardly been used by the LGBTIQ+ community due to poor information on procedure and moreover lack of trust.”⁸

As far as domestic legal frameworks are concerned, there are notable positive initiatives by Timor-Leste, like the decriminalization of same-sex sexual conduct and making the age of consent the same for heterosexual and same-sex intercourse. In the area of employment, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) 2002 Labor Code prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment. However, Belun (2018, 1) reports that this is not the case for the 2012 Labor Code currently in force. Timor-Leste’s current legislative situation, specifically the 2012 Labor Code, has left LGBTIQ+ workers vulnerable and “open to discrimination and harassment and interferes with their right to work” (Kaleidoscope Australia and Sexual Rights Initiative 2016, 4).

Internationally, Timor-Leste has committed to upholding the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons. It has ratified relevant human rights instruments and has voted in favor of establishing a UN Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (Destination Justice 2018, 214–15). A timeline of international commitments can be seen below:

2008 Timor-Leste signed the United Nations Statement on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, which “condemns human rights violations based on sexual orientation.” Timor-Leste and 65 other UN Member States “reaffirmed that human rights apply to *all* human beings and called on all states to protect these rights.” They also “express[ed] concern about the violations of rights on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity” (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 4).

8 Iram Saeed mentioned this in her presentation and the conference book of abstract for the 1st Conference on Alternatives in Southeast Asia: “Rethinking Cross-Border Regionalism” last October 2018 in Manila, Philippines.

2010 During the UN General Assembly, Timor-Leste reaffirmed its commitment to promote equal rights without distinction and reiterated its positions as a signatory of the statement on sexual orientation and gender identity. (Saeed and Galhos 2017)

2011 Timor-Leste signed a joint statement entitled, “Ending Acts of Violence and Related Human Rights Violations Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” This statement was adopted during the general debate of the UN Human Rights Council in March 2011. Timor-Leste is the only Southeast Asian signatory (Kaleidoscope Australia and Sexual Rights Initiative 2016; Saeed and Galhos 2017).

Timor-Leste cosponsored the first-ever resolution of the UN Human Rights Council. The resolution called for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to “document discriminatory laws and practices as well as violence against persons based on sexual orientation and gender identity” (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 5).

2013 Timor-Leste voted in favor of the Asian and Pacific Declaration on Population and Development. It “stated that the members of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific will ‘work to reduce vulnerability and eliminate discrimination based on sex, gender, age, race, caste, class, migrant status, disability, HIV status and sexual orientation and gender identity, or other status’” (Kaleidoscope Australia and Sexual Rights Initiative 2016, 2).

2016 Timor-Leste voted in favor of an Independent Expert on the “protection against violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity” (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 5).

The first LGBTIQ+ conference in Timor-Leste was also held on 9 September 2016. This conference was organized by CODIVA with support from ISEAN Hivos, UN Women, PDHJ, Hatutan Youth Council, and the *Partidu Unidade*

Dezenvolvimentu Demokratiku (PUDD; Democratic Unity Development Party). The conference was followed by the country's "first" Pride event. *Arco Iris*, or Rainbow Association, was also established "with [a specific] vision of addressing human rights issues among LGBTIQ+ people," different from earlier programs that have been integrated into HIV/AIDS-related programs and advocacy (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 3).

2017 Timor-Leste accepted two recommendations of the UNHRC on SOGIE, which were made during the November 2016 Universal Periodic Review regarding human rights in the country. They recommended "strengthening the country's the legal framework to ensure gender equality and ban discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity [and the] development and adoption of legal and administrative measures to investigate and punish acts of discrimination, stigmatization and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 5).

On 29 June 2017, Timor-Leste also held its "first" public Pride March. More than 500 people were estimated to have attended. Attendees also witnessed then-Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo (NBC News 2017) reading a statement of support for the LGBTIQ+ community and their rights, saying,

Everyone has the potential to contribute to the development of the nation, including members of the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender).

Discrimination, disrespect and abuse towards people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity does not provide any benefit to our nation. (Araújo 2017)

Despite such public political support, there was no mention of the human rights issues faced by LGBTIQ+ Timorese during the parliamentary elections held on July 2017 (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 4). ASEAN SOGIE Caucus noted:

Timor-Leste's current parliamentary body reflects a dominant centre-left ideology, which values social

equality. Ideally, this would translate in/to support for initiatives that protect and affirm equal opportunity, such as anti-discrimination legislation for vulnerable groups and related policies. But as of this writing, the incumbent political parties have taken no explicit stance in support of LGBTIQ+ rights. (Hanung and Castañeda 2017, 4)

Despite the existence of domestic and international legal frameworks and “political commitment to the cause of non-discrimination on the basis of SOGIE,” the challenge lies in the effective implementation and enactment of various legal provisions on the ground level (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 5; Destination Justice 2018). The report of Destination Justice concluded,

In general, Timor-Leste has demonstrated its willingness to address the concerns and recommendations expressed by various States. However, HRDs [human rights defenders] and LGBTIQ people may still be vulnerable to ill-treatment in practice . . . [Nevertheless,] there would appear to be several promising avenues through which to engage with Timor-Leste on improving conditions for its LGBTIQ community and HRDs working on LGBTIQ-related issues. (2018, 186)

Queer activists, however, cautioned that “Timor-Leste’s government has a tendency to sign everything in order to increase the country’s reputation in the United Nations, but that these [sic] commitments have not translated very well into practice in national affairs” (Hanung and Castañeda 2017, 6).

Tensions and Opportunities for the LGBTIQ+ in Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, tension exists between LGBTIQ+ visibilities and the confluence of Roman Catholicism conservatism, pervasive traditional and cultural values, and the nonrecognition of gender-based violence from the State. Through the years, Timorese who identify as Catholics have grown, and are estimated to be around 90 percent of the country’s population (Raynor 2018).

During the drafting of the Timorese Constitution, one of the reasons cited by proponents against the inclusion of SOGIE was the possibility that it would “create conflict with the church” (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 4). Similar to the Philippine advocacy on the Anti-Discrimination Bill, some

conservative legislators believe that a bill protecting the civil rights and legal privileges of LGBT persons is an affront to people's rights to exercise their religious freedom (Senate of the Philippines 2018). Nevertheless, the Catholic Church in Timor-Leste has not been homogenous in its position on LGBTIQ+. There were occasions when "queer individuals have . . . found support within the Catholic Church" (Renaldi 2019). Despite taking no "official stance in support of LGBTQ+ rights," some congregations have showed their support for the community and even attended the 2017 Pride March (Renaldi 2019).

Culturally, pervasive heteronormative traditional and cultural values that shaped the reaction to homosexuality, have been especially devastating for the queer community in Timor-Leste. This is one reason behind the 2017 action research conducted by Saeed and Galhos, who observed a scarcity of information on the lives of LBT persons in the country.

The University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) met and interviewed Saeed and Galhos in Dili, Timor-Leste in 2018. Galhos is a well-known Timorese human rights activist who was active in the nationalist movement for Timor-Leste's independence. She is one of the brave personalities who publicly shared her personal experience of violence from her father and the Indonesian military. Her moving testimonies of struggle and survival have encouraged many other LBT peoples to come out and bring their stories to the public with the aim of building solidarity and continuing the fight for gender justice. She emphasized the need to empower and organize new LBT representatives and added that other LBT persons must build the courage to speak and publicly support LGBTIQ+ rights. On the other hand, Saeed, who considers Timor-Leste her home despite being born and raised in India, is an international development professional who has researched on many categories of gender and women's rights and has extensive links to several international organizations.

The purpose of that 2017 study was to support the LBT community, who have suffered from sexual abuse, discrimination, and other forms of violence from their families, community, and society. It elaborated on how the complex relations of gender, religion, tradition, and human rights in Timor-Leste have been woven into the fabric of LBT lives. The research findings also highlighted the impact of the high incidences of physical,

emotional, and mental abuse—often inflicted by family members—the lack of reporting from the LBT persons themselves, and the community’s poor socioeconomic status. It noted that culturally, GBV committed inside the household is often considered a “private” family matter. Therefore, most LBT persons do not report and seek outside help (Saeed and Galhos 2017).

In the study, one of the extreme types of sexual violence committed to the LBT community is “corrective rape.” Corrective rape, Chasin (2015 quoted in Doan-Minh 2019, 170) explains, “is a punishment for the gay woman’s perceived violation of both heteronormative masculinity and femininity in an institutionally heterosexual society.” The LBT population is vulnerable to corrective rape, as it is a weapon used by men to teach lesbians how to become “real” women (Brownworth 2013 quoted in Doan-Minh 2019, 169), because “they [lesbians] undermine antiquated notions of masculinity and heterosexuality” (Swarr 2012 quoted in Doan-Minh 2019, 169). In this sense, “sex is reframed through the grotesque prism of rape” (Brownworth quoted in Doan-Minh 2019, 172). This scenario portrays the LBT population as victims at fault who should be “corrected” (Doan-Minh 2019).

Banking on collective memory both as a research approach and an advocacy and organizing strategy, this study, which was well-recognized and widely shared, subsequently raised public awareness at the national level about LBT persons’ suppressed identities, continuing marginalization, and human rights, as well as their proposals to address this prevailing social problem (Saeed 2018; Aban and Sy 2022). The report strengthened the informal gathering of LBT persons that eventually created Arcoiris Timor-Leste, becoming the first LBT support group in the country (Saeed 2018).

Seeing a Ray of Hope Through Queer Solidarity

Arcoiris Timor-Leste is an organization that was “established with the vision of addressing human rights issues” among the LGBTIQ+ community in Timor-Leste (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 3). In the absence of strong support systems and legal frameworks, they fill in the gaps by sharing their research findings and encouraging LBT persons to share their testimonies—of violence and neglect by their families, communities, and the State—joining and organizing human rights advocacy campaigns and core issues of the LGBTIQ+ (3).

One of the key initiatives of Arcoiris is building safe spaces in the capital Dili to support the LBT community. Saeed (2018) explains that these spaces are “a venue for deep-seated solidarity where they meet, share, accept, connect, validate, or just for homestay.” Galhos and Saeed’s home is even one of them. During the interview, they mentioned the lack of safe spaces for LBT persons and in response, how they offered their own home, and eventually, how they set up a safe house for LBT persons who have been abused and threatened. However, safe spaces are not enough. The normalization of violence against LGBTIQ+ persons in Timor-Leste must be challenged, and victim-survivors of violence must be empowered through the facilitation of leadership-building opportunities, formation of support groups, and “initiatives for skill-building and income generating opportunities” (Saeed and Galhos 2017, 23). Arcoiris recognizes the huge task ahead, so it continues its work. It provides job experience and capacity-building opportunities for the growing number of LBT persons coming to its center.

Arcoiris has also been instrumental in organizing the first Pride March in Timor-Leste, which officially began in 2017 in Dili. The importance and capacity to organize a Pride March has been lauded by various international media outlets and international organizations. Natalino Guterres, a well-known gay activist in Timor-Leste, underscores the importance of queer public spaces through Pride Marches that become venues where LGBTIQ+ persons are given visibility (Stella 2013). In an interview with him in Dili, he acknowledges a protracted journey towards gender equality; nevertheless, the Pride March becomes an avenue for the LGBTIQ+ issues to be increasingly talked about in Timor-Leste.

Similar to the experience of Moscow Pride in Russia, an activity that was banned by local authorities and received “homophobic violence” (Stella 2013), the Pride March was organized to “[articulate a] queer space . . . by explicitly politicizing the appropriation of city space as queer, and by giving the parade unprecedented visibility and media exposure, both nationally and internationally” (459). In the case of Timor-Leste, a number of international media organizations covered the event and lauded the young country. Galhos, however, cautioned against such romanticization and the acceptance at face value of Timor-Leste as a “safe haven” for the LGBTIQ+ (Rahmani 2018).

Guterres underscores the importance of visibility and Pride Marches as a source of empowerment for marginalized, harassed, and

bullied members of the LGBTIQ+ community to “go out on the street and feel safe, proud to be themselves” and “start a conversation that isn’t happening in [Timor-Leste]” (Rahmani 2018). Stella (2013, 459), however, problematizes the “notion of visibility as empowering and shows the limitations of political strategies based on claims to visibility and minority rights that are well received internationally but enjoy little support locally.” She speaks of this in the context of Russian anxieties over queer and homosexual visibilities that have become intertwined with nationalist discourse, with the former (i.e., queer visibilities) being “linked to permissive sexual mores, declining moral values, and western influence” (462). This has led to conservative backlash and anti-LGBTIQ+ legislation. Timor-Leste sees the tension between homosexual visibilities and its society’s entrenchment with Catholicism and traditional patriarchal values. Stella (2013, 462) further argues that Pride Marches as “‘collective coming out’ are premised on the idea of visibility as a key strategy in gaining recognition and challenging societal prejudice.”

Arcoiris emphasized the need for more initiatives for community education and the socialization of State agencies—such as security forces, the judiciary and law agencies, and education and health service providers—to be more familiar with the constitutional and legal rights of the LGBTIQ+ community. The 2017 action research gave six recommendations:

- (1.) Stronger evidence-based research for advocacy;
- (2.) Formulating stronger responses to physical and psychological violence;
- (3.) Facilitating environments for stakeholders toward ensuring the human rights of LBT persons;
- (4.) Building safe spaces to support LBT persons and end their social isolation;
- (5.) Heading leadership-building opportunities and forming support groups for LBT persons; and
- (6.) Developing and strengthening initiatives for skill-building and income generating opportunities for LBT persons, especially taking note of the prevalence of violence, trauma, and economic insecurity among LBT persons.

Crossing Borders as a Modality of Queer Intersectionality and Solidarity

Arcoiris' activism navigates beyond the boundaries of the gender discourse. Although bearing scars from past wounds of violence and discrimination, Arcoiris refuses to see them as barriers to offering humanity and solidarity to others in need in times of emergency. When Dili was ravaged by Cyclone Seroja in 2021, Arcoiris volunteered as a frontline response team by organizing a community kitchen and distributing basic essentials for the affected population (Bernardo 2021). This act of kindness and their sense of social responsibility led to a feature by UN Women. It was a form of solidarity that queer communities can offer even when social discrimination persists.

Arcoiris has created “horizontal solidarities” that “[cross-cut] the usual boundaries between issues” and advocacies the queer communities deem important and that of other oppressed groups who also need help and support (Drucker 2018 quoted in Aban and Sy 2022, 158). The volunteers of Arcoiris stated, “It is critical to save and support others in times of crisis, setting aside differences” (Bernardo 2021).

This concept of “queer solidarity” continues to be reimagined, reappreciated, and rewritten, given that queer politics in the Global South also concerns poverty, global hegemony, neoliberalism, and other issues of development (Drucker 2018; Kinsman 2019 quoted in Aban and Sy 2022). However, this concept becomes more meaningful through the living experiences of communities who continue to fight for social justice. To offer a fresh narrative, the reflections of Azu during Arcoiris' post-disaster intervention are words to ponder:

With big hearts, we are happy that our sense of solidarity is seen as we help the community. This act of love is bigger than anything else. From all these activities, we would also like to tell the community that we will continue to contribute to the community, and this can only get stronger if we are also respected. (Bernardo 2021)

Making a Green Village

Aside from facilitating Arcoiris, Saeed and Galhos also extend their queer activism to sustainable rural livelihoods and community empowerment. They founded the Leublora Green Village (LGV) in the

district of Maubisse to help empower rural women, children, and the youth. The farmland, which Galhos inherited from her grandmother, is being transformed into becoming a web of sustainable farming, alternative education, and an ecologically connected lifestyle. In the long term, Galhos hopes to develop the land into a model for self-sufficiency (LGV, n.d.).

LGV is a rural-based initiative to address key social, economic, and environmental issues facing the country. It believes that empowering women, children, and youth to become active agents of change also enhances the quality of life of Timorese communities. Its ultimate goal is to inspire the possibilities of sustainable transformation. Below are the key elements of this eco-village as introduced on LGV's website:

Integrated in this Village is the Leublora Green School, the signature project which is a social development and environmental education center that offers programs free of charge. Pending full accreditation as a school, it has already provided free courses and initiatives for students. It aims to train the younger generation to become leaders who promote sustainable agriculture and inculcate the value of respect for all life. It is hoped that this model will be replicated across 12 districts of Timor Leste.

The more socio-economic-focused project is the Women's Organic Farming Cooperative. This has been set up to empower the local community through increased agricultural skills, generate economic opportunities and financial independence especially for the women farmers, so they be able to achieve self-sufficiency in the process.

The produce from the organic farms in the eco-village is supplied to the organic restaurant, while portions are also sold locally. Interestingly, the women's cooperative also distributes a year-long monthly provision of 'nutrition packets' harvested from the organic farm to the 10 poorest families in the community.

The eco-village also boasts of the Leublora Green Villas, the transient homestays for those visiting Maubisse and who opt to be close to nature. All income from the Green Villas and the restaurant are reinvested in the school and the women's cooperative. Saeed and Galhos aspire that in the next few years, the generated revenues will fully fund LGV's social initiatives. (LGV, n.d.)

The initiatives of Arcoris and the work of the women in the Leublora Green Village are ties that bind a significant form of queer alternatives from below—one that is grounded on people-to-people relations, and that can contribute to the overall struggle to overcome social inequalities and towards social transformation (Aban and Sy 2022). Communities from

the margins, for as long as they “embrace the principles of solidarity, social cohesion, cooperation, sharing and caring,” (Tadem et al. 2020) can generate effective collective action to address social issues and concern—even during crisis or a period when democratic space shrinks. These people-led and people-centered initiatives illuminate marginalized peoples’ capacity to intersect their own struggle with the broader struggle of the whole of society (Tadem et al. 2020).

The Leublora eco-project becomes a symbol of hope for queer activists like Saeed and Galhos to forge a better future for the country that has been shattered by centuries of coloniality, conflict, and worsening poverty.

Challenges Ahead for the Timorese LGBTIQ+

In the 2022 national elections, Dr. José Ramos-Horta (2022b) was elected president of Timor-Leste, his second term in office.⁹ The issues and struggle of the LGBTIQ+ was brought to light in his address to the Parliament of Timor-Leste on 20 May 2022:

Addressing gender-based violence, the President stated that per data from the Voluntary National Review put forward by the government and violence committee of the sustainable development goals, about 35 percent of the total female population faces sexual and physical abuse. The report recommends approval of the Domestic Life Act and the action plan on gender-based violence to combat domestic violence. . . .

Speaking of the LGBT community in Timor-Leste, the President noted that “several reports indicate that violence and discrimination against the LGBT community continues to happen in Timor-Leste. Of 128 people interviewed in Timor-Leste who identify as gay or transgender, 25 percent report having faced physical aggression, and 35 percent verbal abuse. [While] 31 percent have been refused medical services and 25 percent medical assistance. (Ramos-Horta 2022a)

And in his inaugural speech on 20 May 2022, he spoke about ending discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ in Timor-Leste:

Our consciences demand that we do everything to eliminate malnutrition, reduce extreme poverty (which affects 40 percent of our population), social exclusion, and fight corruption. . . .

9 The 1996 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. José Ramos-Horta (2022b) won the Timor-Leste presidential election for a second term in April 2022. He was prime minister from 2008 to 2008. He then served as president from 2008 to 2012.

Likewise, there will be no room in our society for discrimination and exclusion of the sons and daughters of the LGBT Rainbow community. All are children of God and children of the Nation who contribute with intelligence and total devotion to peace, security and community well-being. (Ramos-Horta 2022c)

President Ramos-Horta's particular articulation of the LGBTIQ+ community and the inclusion of their issues and struggle in his speeches signifies a new trajectory in Timor-Leste's nationhood. Whether the intersectional issues of gender be a crucial part of the national agenda, this is something to be examined in the proceeding chapters of the new government. However, what was rather clear is that the continuing activism of queer groups, such as Arcoiris, has somehow influenced the speeches of the president. To conclude this study, the current development in Timor politics extensively mirrors a popular call of Timorese activists, "*A luta continua!*" (The struggle continues!).

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Pride and Solidarity: Notes on the Engagement of Camp Queer with the Zagu Workers

Camp Queer and Raymund Luther B. Aquino¹

Abstract

Camp Queer was engaging with Filipino Zagu Workers–SUPER when the latter mounted a labor strike in 2019 against the management of Zagu company, which coincided with Pride Month. Camp Queer participated in, and lent continuing support for, the strike to show solidarity and deepen ties between workers and other marginalized groups. It explored the possibilities of “queering” trade unionism and establishing solidarity between queer and labor movements.

1 Camp Queer is an organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender nonconforming (LGBTQIA+) Filipinos that embrace solidarity with other oppressed classes as one of its core values.

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On 6 June 2019, workers of Filipino pearl shake chain Zagu, organized under the labor union Organization of Zagu Workers–Solidarity of Unions in the Philippines for Empowerment and Reforms (Organiza–SUPER), launched a labor strike against their employer to protest abusive labor practices, specifically union-busting and illegal contractualization.²

The strike saw the support of a diverse group of allies. Among the first to speak up was Camp Queer, then a newly established organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender nonconforming (LGBTQIA+) Filipinos that embraced solidarity with other oppressed classes as one of its core values. Camp Queer welcomed the strike, which coincided with Pride Month, as an opportunity not only to support the Zagu workers in their specific demands but also to deepen solidarity between queers and workers. That whole month of solidarity efforts culminated in the participation of the Zagu workers in the 2019 Metro Manila Pride March.

As one of the original members of Camp Queer, I was a participant in these efforts at building queer–labor solidarity. In what follows, I aim to: (1) introduce Camp Queer and the ideas behind its founding; (2) provide a firsthand account of Camp Queer’s solidarity work with Zagu workers in 2019; and (3) reflect on the achievements and shortcomings of such an attempt at queer–labor solidarity, as well as the possibilities it points toward, vis-à-vis Jodi Dean’s notion of “reflective solidarity,” which allows for the building of a communicative “we” of strangers.

Queer Theory and Camp Queer

Camp Queer was founded in 2019 with the goal of “creating inclusive spaces for LGBTQIA+ people to share and archive their narratives, form communities grounded in solidarity and mutual aid, and mobilize for our vision of queer transformative politics.”³

I was one of the first members, recruited by friends who were longtime queer activists and who had previously been associated with other LGBTQIA+ groups. From the onset, we at Camp Queer did not see

2 Katrina Hallare, “Zagu Workers Go on Strike to Protest ‘Union Busting, Contractualization,’” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 7 June 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1127908/zagu-workers-go-on-strike-to-protest-union-busting-contractualization>

3 Camp Queer, “About,” Facebook, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/campqueerph/about>

ourselves as an ordinary advocacy group that made demands and issued calls on a range of issues that mattered to us as queer folk, even though such work is naturally important. We envisioned “queering” advocacy and activism itself, where our work was not taken for granted as “queer” simply because we were queer, or because the issues at hand concerned queer people.

In other words, Camp Queer aims to provide a space for queer people as queer people in their full humanity—people who cannot be reduced only to their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). We also seek not only to amplify the specific political demands of queer people, but also to surface these demands through the very “voices of queer and trans people that have been suppressed throughout history.”⁴ Surfacing these voices thus means allowing for the recognition of the full experience of queer people in the flesh and blood. This necessarily includes aspects pertaining to SOGIE, but also all other categories such as class, race, culture, and so on. This emphasis on the multifaceted character of queerness constitutes a key feature of Camp Queer’s work as a queer-led movement, “using a queer and trans intersectional lens [to work] for a world without repression, cis-heteropatriarchy and class inequality.”⁵ Camp Queer pursues this work by upholding five key principles: queer and trans community, queer and trans memory, queer and trans power, queer and trans radicalism, and queer and trans solidarity.⁶

This self-understanding informs Camp Queer’s project of queering. The organization “believe[s] in the necessity of queering structures of power that are based on exploitation, marginalization and othering: cisheteropatriarchy and class. Our goal is to build a society that is inclusive, just, and nurturing of all people.”⁷

The theoretical underpinnings of such work, including this notion of queering, draw from pioneering proponents of queer theory, as well as local queer scholars that Camp Queer has engaged with from the very start. For us, queering, among other things, involves not only undoing

4 Camp Queer, “Camp Queer Planning Seminar Minutes,” 11 August 2019.

5 Camp Queer.

6 Camp Queer.

7 Camp Queer, “About.”

and dismantling the material manifestations of the patriarchal order, but also challenging dominant ideas ensconced and valorized in culture by a compulsory and normalized heterosexuality that insists on the gender binary.⁸ Challenging the deeply rooted ideas propagated by compulsory heterosexuality also requires deliberately breaking from established and accepted patterns of thought and action. One of the hallmarks of the society of compulsory heterosexuality, for example, is the expectation that anything and everything that can be identified as “queer” should be kept isolated within close and impermeable limits, demarcated as nothing more than a small smattering of deviants necessarily kept from view of polite society.

Queer theory, which has a long history in intellectual and activist traditions, inspired in large part the formation of Camp Queer. For decades, theorists have pointed out that sexuality, in its predominant manifestation, often serves only to reinforce dominant social relations. Michel Foucault argues that sexuality, as a deployment of power in modern society, fashioned sex to be a means to wield power over life. In modern society, sex “was tied to the disciplines of the body: the harnessing, intensification, and distribution of forces, the adjustment and economy of energies,” as well as “to the regulation of populations, through all the far-reaching effects of its activity.”⁹ The Foucauldian diagnosis casting sexuality as a deployment of power sheds light on how sex in modern society has been reduced in most cases to a disempowered choice. As Foucault warns, “We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality.”¹⁰

Foucault’s analysis on the place of sexuality in modern society is shared by scholar-activists from the 1970s and 1980s, who interrogated the relationship between the global economic system and minoritized sexual identities, such as homosexuals. Jeffrey Weeks, for example, notes that the organization of sex in capitalist society “becomes an important way of organising the body politic,” and reveals a double concern: “with

8 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006).

9 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 145–46.

10 Foucault, 156–57.

the life (and especially the sexual life) of the individual, a necessary concomitant of the emergence of bourgeois society; and with the life of the species, a concern with the population which itself is a result of the vast demands made upon the social order by the development of industrial capitalism.”¹¹ Against this backdrop, various attempts to regulate homosexual behavior took place in the West over the past decades: legal approaches such as the institution of sodomy laws, medical or psychiatric interventions such as the characterization of homosexuality as “degeneration” and “congenital madness,” and so on. Weeks states: “The ideologies and the social practices which began to define homosexual behaviour . . . was part of this wider concern and regulation of sexual behaviour.”¹²

With such regulation, however, also emerged “the possibilities of a resistance and transformation, as individually and collectively we define ourselves in and against these categories.”¹³ This resistance would evolve from more straightforward attempts at the validation of gay identities to what may be considered precursors of queer theory. This consists of attempts to challenge the very necessity of identities. In this spirit, Weeks exhorts that “the strategic aim of the gay movement must be not simply the validation of the rights of a minority within a heterosexual majority, but the challenge to all the rigid categorisations of sexuality.”¹⁴ “What we must affirm ultimately,” Weeks says, “is not so much the rights of the homosexual, but the pleasures and joy in all their multiform ways of the whole body. It is not just the end of the homosexual or the heterosexual we must demand but the end of the ideology of sexuality. We must dethrone King Sex, and replace him with the possibilities of pleasure and sensuousness which exist in the human animal.”¹⁵

These earlier investigations into the status of sex and sexuality in contemporary society paved the way for the emergence of queer theory, and indeed revealed the necessity of queerness as a strategy against the oppressive deployment of sexuality in society. In opposition to

11 Jeffrey Weeks, “Capitalism and the Organisation of Sex,” in *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, ed. Gay Left Collective (New York: Verso, 2018), loc 242, Kindle.

12 Weeks, loc 217–42.

13 Weeks, loc 242.

14 Weeks, loc 285.

15 Weeks, loc 294–303.

the rigidity of sexuality as a deployment of power, largely in the guise of compulsory heterosexuality, queerness emerges—to quote a well-known characterization by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically.”¹⁶ Queerness, then, appears as the dissolution of the manufactured unity of sex, gender, and desire insisted on by the dominant order of compulsory heterosexuality.¹⁷ It designates an open space of possibility, a historical breakthrough (or, perhaps, a revived historical tradition rescued from the colonial graveyard) that imbues those who embrace queerness the creative impulse to reclaim their lives and redefine their very relation with the world. Such theorizing—without claiming it to be homogenous—does not ignore material conditions but instead also questions the very signification of material conditions. In this sense, queer theory is an exercise that can dispel the illusion of inevitability and total victory that cloaks present oppressive material conditions. This extends from the domain of sexuality to all other oppressive material conditions, from the economy to harmful constructs like race and borders. Such is the emancipatory dimension of queer theory—as it offers glimpses of alternative worlds, it refutes the inescapability of the present one.

This spirit of creative resistance animates queer ruminations on the world, such as on time and space, as seen in Jack/Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*. Halberstam confronts the contingency, the fleetingness of queer time in relation to the AIDS epidemic, among others, and how meaningful queer relationships flourish outside the confines of linear time as prescribed by the heteronormative ideal upheld by such institutions as the family.¹⁸ Relatedly, Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological interventions attempt to locate queerness in how bodies depart from their prior orientation toward each other and toward objects amid existing social arrangements. This amounts to reorientations and/or disorientations that disrupt commonly accepted spatial and temporal relations and discard worn and weary paths.¹⁹

16 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

17 Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, by Judith Butler, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3–44.

18 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Queer theorists have, perhaps unsurprisingly, also posed questions at the level of the body and its supposed uses and pleasures. Paul B. Preciado sees in the body a very site for experimentation toward the creation of a new world, where the possibility of new economies of desire, liberated from a naturalized phallogentric sexuality, herald the concomitant destruction of old economies of desire reliant on capitalist and heterocolonial culture.²⁰

This emancipatory dimension to queer theory naturally links up this intellectual tradition to other movements with similar liberatory commitments—not only with that of the workers’ movement, but also, for example, with the movement for racial justice and with decolonial movements. Many contemporary queer theorists will find the work of María Lugones illuminating, for instance, given the way she highlights the coloniality of gender, i.e., the way gender itself has served as a tool for colonial subjugation and oppression.²¹

In the Philippines, this intersection between queer and decolonial theory often finds expression in research into native and/or precolonial experiences of gender variance, whether from a historical perspective, in the linguistic domain, or in sociological or (auto)ethnographic surveys locally and in the diaspora.²² It also manifests in artistic creation. In the Bikolnon gay, trans, and queer poetry anthology *BKL/Bikol Bakla*, poet and scholar Jaya Jacobo emblematically writes in the preface that the artistic work “disemvowel[s] imperial chronicles on our region as well

19 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

20 Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

21 María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209.

22 J. Neil C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahisto to MSM*, Queer Asia (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); J. Neil C. Garcia, “Nativism or Universalism: Situating LGBT Discourse in the Philippines,” *Kritika Kultura*, 28 February 2013, 48–68, <https://doi.org/10.13185/KK2013.02003>; Jaya Jacobo et al., “The Bakla, the Agi: Our Genders Which Are Not One,” *Revista Periferias*, no. 3: Alternative Experiences (July 2019), <https://revistaperiferias.org/en/materia/the-bakla-the-agi-our-genders-which-are-not-one/>; Kevin L. Nadal and Melissa J. H. Corpus, “‘Tomboys’ and ‘Baklas’: Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Filipino Americans,” *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 4, no. 3 (September 2013): 166–75, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030168>; Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006); Bobby Benedicto, *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene*, Difference Incorporated (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

as subsequent post-colonial historiographies that narrate how we have, by turns, assimilated and resisted empire through our artistic practices” and “essay[s] the various possibilities where we can traverse the chasm between planetarity and personhood through this geopoetic, or if one wills, ecocritique.”²³

Longer and more comprehensive histories of queer theory and queer movements in the Philippines need to be written to fully account for how queer theory, of an undeniably Western provenance despite its later willful decolonial repurposing (or, indeed, queering), came to take root in these islands and came to be embraced by certain groups of Filipinos and made their own. Such will be part of the history of Camp Queer. In any case, speaking from the perspective of a Camp Queer member, we attempted from the very beginning to queer the very engagements our fledgling group was entering. This could be seen from our earliest events, where forms of thought and action usually coded as queer, such as drag performance, were applied to political issues concerning the general public. For example, in its first few months of existence, Camp Queer held a drag night ahead of the 2019 Philippine elections. Participants were asked to mock and parody administration senatorial candidates in drag.

Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER

Camp Queer desired to bring this sort of queering to all its relationships, even in cases where its commitment to solidarity would bring it in contact with other sectors that were decidedly outside the traditional ambit of those called “queer.” As such, we welcomed trade unionism as an act of queering if it were to be strengthened by an alliance between queers and workers. In this alliance, the traditional macho image of the trade unionist would give way to one who would speak openly and readily for the rights of queer people even in the very conduct of union work.

Often, it was not very clear what concrete form “queering” would take, and looking back, it is not very clear whether Camp Queer’s engagement with the Zagu workers hewed close to the vision of queering that we had. Nevertheless, there was no doubt to us that this engagement was a worthwhile and important task, not only for the immediate

23 Ryen Paul Sumayao and Jaya Jacobo, eds., *BKL/Bikol Bakla: Anthology of Bikolnon Gay Trans Queer Writing* (Naga City: Naga Goldprint INC, 2019).

material achievement of spreading the Zagu workers' cause in the queer community but also for the much less immediately tangible achievement of building solidarity between queers and workers. We saw it as a kind of solidarity that would go beyond the atomism that oftentimes results from the most limiting manifestations of identity politics. Instead, it would make space for difference and create a more inclusive "we" that has room even for those whose voices we often fail to hear in our immediate vicinity.²⁴

Having faith in this fresh vision and taking seriously Camp Queer's commitment to solidarity, I thought at that time that it was only natural for Camp Queer to engage with labor and other marginalized sectors beyond the immediate LGBTQIA+ community. That is why, when news of the Zagu strike broke, I did not hesitate to invite fellow Camp Queer members to express support for the strikers.

It is worth mentioning that personal circumstances played a role in the way the solidarity work would be carried out, and in how Camp Queer came to support the Zagu workers in particular. After all, strikes are not all that rare in the Philippines, and there could have been many other labor unions that Camp Queer could have supported. However, a confluence of factors led specifically to Camp Queer's engagement with Organiza-SUPER. One factor was that Organiza-SUPER launched a strike during Pride Month, and when news of it broke, I invited fellow Camp Queer members to support the strikers as I saw the news as a challenge to live out the principles Camp Queer claimed to uphold—especially during Pride month. Another factor was more personal. I was friends with some of the organizers of the Organiza-SUPER strike, and this prior relationship simply facilitated the eventual meeting between Camp Queer members and the Organiza-SUPER strikers.

Thus, not long after an online discussion between Camp Queer members on the same day that Organiza-SUPER launched its strike on 6 June 2019, Camp Queer issued an online statement expressing support for the strikers:

Zagu is a corporation built on the blood and sweat of its workers, and yet it would sooner see its workers live in constant precariousness than meet their demands for humane employment. However, as queers whose lives

24 Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2018).

have also been treated cheaply by the dominant powers, we know all too well that there is power in fighting back—and in fighting together!²⁵

Camp Queer’s statement, while not very widely circulated at 52 Facebook shares, reached workers and unionists. Soon after, a visit to the picket line was organized for the next day.

The following day, on 7 June, at least four Camp Queer members went to the Zagu picket line for a solidarity night. There, Camp Queer members sat down with Zagu workers at the picket line to interact and hear more from each other. The Camp Queer members and the strikers spent some hours listening to each other’s stories. The workers talked about Zagu’s unjust labor practices, and how the strike was launched in protest of the workers’ poor conditions. Camp Queer members, who brought signs that said “LGBTQ+ support Zagu workers!” and “Pride means fight together!”, talked about how we, too, as ordinary wage earners, fully embrace the Zagu workers’ cause because it is a cause worth pursuing for any worker. Camp Queer members also talked about the specific attacks we have had to endure in our personal lives due to our SOGIE. In a social media recap of the solidarity night, Camp Queer later posted that there was “a shared acknowledgement that queers and workers are in it to #ResistTogether for justice.”²⁶ (#ResistTogether was the official theme of the 2019 Metro Manila Pride.)

Camp Queer members continued to show up to the picket line in the succeeding days, especially given that there were numerous attempts to break the strike. Camp Queer also continued to call for warm bodies to come to the picket line in support of the workers, all the way until July.²⁷

A culminating event in the engagement between Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER came about when we invited the workers to march with

25 Camp Queer, “Camp Queer Stands with the Striking Workers of Zagu Foods Corporation! #StandWithZaguWorkers,” Facebook, 6 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/campqueerph/posts/2477305198984566>

26 Camp Queer, “Camp Queer Stands with the Striking Workers of Zagu Foods Corporation! #StandWithZaguWorkers,” Facebook, 6 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/campqueerph/posts/2477305198984566>

27 Camp Queer, “Let’s Show up for the Striking Zagu Workers!,” Facebook, 7 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/campqueerph/posts/2478771658837920>; Camp Queer, “Urgent: We’re Calling on All Our Friends to Show Their Solidarity with the Striking Zagu Workers and Join Them at Their Picket at 52 West Capitol Dr. Brgy. Kapitolyo, Pasig, amid the Imminent Threat of Dispersal,” Facebook, July 8, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/campqueerph/posts/2537427652972320>

us in the 2019 Metro Manila Pride March. The Zagu workers, joined by allies from their labor federation SUPER and the socialist labor center Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP), marched shoulder to shoulder with Camp Queer members, who in turn were joined by friends from its wider network.

The Zagu workers' participation in the 2019 Metro Manila Pride March was announced online by Camp Queer on 26 June, a few days before the actual march, in its concluding statement for the 2019 Metro Manila Pride. In the statement, Camp Queer said that its activities for Pride Month were in keeping with the radical spirit of Pride, as expressed in the Stonewall Riots that were then marking their 50th anniversary: "Our participation at the Metro Manila Pride March this Saturday, June 29, will be an homage to the radical roots of Pride and our pledge of commitment to that radical legacy for as long as the present oppressive conditions exist."²⁸

"We take heart from the valiant work of our predecessors around the world, from the Gay Liberation Front to ACT UP to local pioneers such as The Lesbian Collective, ProGay and the Metropolitan Community Church," Camp Queer said, evoking earlier LGBTQIA+ organizations in the Philippines that engaged in acts of solidarity with other sectors. After all, shining past examples of queer and labor solidarity exist here and abroad. For instance, during the 2015 Metro Manila Pride March, striking workers of Tanduay Distillers, Inc. marched with the LGBTQIA+ group Kafederasyon.²⁹ In the 1980s, the renowned Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners campaigned in support of striking miners in the UK. This effort culminated in the miners' participation in the London Pride March of 1985. Camp Queer continued in its statement:

They will be our inspiration when we link arms this Saturday with the striking workers of the union Organiza–SUPER at Zagu Foods Corp., who we had previously joined at the picket line. We will march hand-in-hand on the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots with the conviction that trans + queers have a stake in workers' liberation, in the same way that workers have a stake in trans + queer liberation.

28 Camp Queer, "#ResistTogether: Camp Queer Pays Homage to Pride's Radical Roots," Facebook, June 26, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/campqueerph/posts/2515167368531682>

29 Michael David dela Cruz Tan, "Ang Usaping Manggagawa Ay Usaping LGBT' – Claire," accessed 10 August 2022, <https://outragemag.com/ang-usaping-manggagawa-ay-usaping-lgbt-claire/>

The Zagu workers turned out to be a distinctive presence in the 2019 Metro Manila Pride March, which had its biggest attendance in history at 77,000. Among the chants that the Camp Queer- and Organiza-SUPER-led contingent chanted throughout the march in Marikina City were “*Queer at manggagawa, magkasama sa paglaban! Queer at manggagawa, magkasama sa paglaya!*” (Queers and workers, together in struggle! Queer and workers, together in liberation!), “*Pasismo, biguin! Duterte, patalsikin!*” (Defeat fascism! Oust Duterte!), “*Bakla at lesbyana, nangunguna sa paglaya!*” (Gays and lesbians, at the forefront of liberation!), “*Queer, bi at trans, lumaban, lumaya, baguhin ang lipunan!*” (Queer, bi and trans folk, fight, be free, transform society!), and “*Katahimikan ay kamatayan! Pakikibaka ay kalayaan!*” (Silence is death! Resistance is liberation!).³⁰

At Metro Manila Pride’s invitation, Camp Queer was also supposed to lead a discussion on queer and worker solidarity at the Pride festival grounds on the same day,³¹ but this was cancelled due to bad weather.

A moment of spontaneous solidarity that occurred during the march proper was when another progressive contingent led by the organization Bahaghari, which was marching close to Camp Queer, chanted in support of the Zagu workers, as well as for the workers of Peerless Producers Manufacturing Corp. (Pepmaco), who had also just been reported to have gone on strike. Spontaneously, led by Bahaghari, the two contingents chanted together: “*Boykotin, panagutin, Zagu at Pepmaco!*” (Boycott and hold Zagu and Pepmaco accountable!).

Coming off the inspiration of the historic Pride March event, and faced with the need to intensify the Zagu workers’ struggle on multiple fronts given the lack of progress in negotiations with management, Camp Queer joined a newly organized support group for the Zagu workers called the Boycott Zagu Coalition. Launched on 1 July, the coalition was composed of several organizations that called on “the general public to #StandWithWorkers by boycotting all Zagu products in order to show its

30 Luther Aquino, “Some of Camp Queer’s Calls alongside the Striking Zagu Workers at the 70,000-Strong Metro Manila Pride March Yesterday,” Facebook, 30 June 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/lutheraquino/videos/10219393177638123>

31 Metro Manila Pride, “Mga Mahal! Come Join Us at the HangOuts Tent Tomorrow...,” Facebook, 28 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/mmprideorg/photos/a.929283243764935/2849594681733772/>

management, and every other company that keeps its workers in precarity, that this way of doing business is not acceptable.” The campaign asserted that the Zagu management continued to refuse to meet even the union’s most basic demands to regularize contractual workers and to allow the union to exist in peace.³²

Unfortunately, even though the boycott campaign would gain some measure of support from several organizations in the following days, Organiza–SUPER would suffer bitter defeats from late June to July 2019. The National Labor Relations Commission issued a temporary restraining order against Organiza–SUPER’s strike on 26 June.³³ The month-old picket line was also finally destroyed during a clash between the strikers and pro-management employees on 8 July,³⁴ never to be reestablished as the Zagu management retook control of the facility. The boycott movement would soon lose steam, and after a few months, the Boycott Zagu Coalition would cease to meet. Communications between Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER died down. The strike, unfortunately, was defeated.

Achievements, Shortcomings, Possibilities of a “we”

The heartbreak of a defeated strike notwithstanding, the bond forged between Camp Queer and the Zagu strikers endured far beyond the specific acts of solidarity that started the relationship between the two groups. The engagement between Camp Queer and the Zagu workers was a lesson in solidarity, and provided important insights as to how queerness, as a revolt against oppressive norms and structures, necessarily pointed toward solidarity with other oppressed classes, even if such classes’ interests might seem of a totally different character than queer people’s own. Such an engagement thus pointed towards the possibility of finding

32 Boycott Zagu, “The Boycott Zagu Coalition, Composed of the Undersigned Organizations, Declares Its Support for the Striking Workers of Zagu Foods Corporation, as Well as for the Millions of Filipino Workers Suffering from the Effects of Precarious Work Conditions and Attacks on Their Basic Right to Self-Organize.,” Facebook, 7 July 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/691347004712124/photos/a.695018947678263/695027364344088/>

33 Enrico Berdos, “NLRC Issues TRO against Zagu Strike,” *Rappler*, 28 June 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/sports/football/234118-nlrc-issues-tro-against-zagu-strike/>

34 Enrico Berdos, “‘Hindi Kami Aalis!’ Union, Pro-Management Workers Clash at Zagu Factory Strike in Pasig,” *Rappler*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/video/daily-wrap/234966-workers-clash-zagu-factory-strike-pasig-july-2019/>

and building a “we” much larger than each separate group’s initially posited “we”—a solidarity of erstwhile strangers, to borrow Jodi Dean’s language.³⁵

Indeed, Camp Queer and the Zagu labor union’s very encounter disrupted the prior self-characterizations that may have defined the two groups’ prior identities and modes of action. After all, Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER both have clear and apparent identifications that predetermine their respective memberships. Camp Queer identifies as a queer organization, while Organiza–SUPER is, by its very lawful definition, a labor union. Both groups, therefore, attract members who base their decision to join on the “pertinent” identity—queer people, in the case of Camp Queer, and workers, specifically Zagu workers, in the case of Organiza–SUPER.

The primacy respectively afforded to these two identities within these two groups seems natural, given the two groups’ very self-identification. Nevertheless, identification also logically means exclusion, however inadvertent and incomplete. The primacy afforded to a specific identity may translate into the partial or total effacement—or at least consignment to irrelevance—of the other identities that members of either group may also have. A queer person who is part of Camp Queer is necessarily not only a queer person; they could also be a member of the working class, be disabled, or be a member of a discriminated ethnolinguistic minority. Conversely, any member of Organiza–SUPER cannot simply be reduced to a unionized worker of Zagu, though it is certainly by dint thereof that they are a member of the union. That proletarian identity notwithstanding, the member could also be a queer woman, a transgender man, or a woman facing the responsibilities of motherhood. The possibilities are as varied as the very number of workers belonging to Organiza–SUPER.

This points to a reality that may not always be immediately apparent during any initial encounter between two groups as seemingly different as Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER. There exist not only two disparate groups, but also an uncountable number of smaller groups of members in various combinations grouped according to what they share in common, regardless of original membership. Instead of two large, disparate circles (Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER), what instead emerges is a diagram

35 Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers*.

of innumerable intersecting circles, representing the shared identities and identifications that constitute several interlocking “wes” beyond just the two separate “wes” of Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER if taken solely by their apparent self-identification (i.e., queer people and workers). Indeed, the encounter between Camp Queer and Organiza–SUPER dismantles the illusion of such discrete and separate “wes.” From the perspective of Camp Queer, just as from the perspective of Organiza–SUPER, there aren’t only two “wes,” or an “us” and a “them.” Instead, there are many “wes,” already connecting us beyond any specific identification highlighted by our specific group membership: “wes” of smaller and bigger sizes, and perhaps, as is as likely, a larger “we” of us all.

This larger “we” that emerges from such an encounter is the communicative “we” that Jodi Dean speaks of in her elaboration of what she calls “reflective solidarity.” Dean defines reflective solidarity as “the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship,”³⁶ which accounts for how a “we” can come to be out of the many “I’s” of pluralist, modern societies. Simply put, the “mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship” requires that each “I” be able to interact with each other all while considering the larger group’s interests and “expectations from the [point of view] of a situated, hypothetical third” that cannot be reduced to or identified with any specific, actually existing “I.”³⁷ Such considerations of a situated, hypothetical third mean that the discursive interactions between each individuated “I” is always in flux and never static, so much so that the resulting “we” will also always be discursively in process. According to Dean,

This means that the expression “we” must be interpreted not as given, but as “in process,” as the discursive achievement of individuated “I’s.” Such an opening up of the notion of “we” makes possible a change in our attitude toward boundaries, a change which requires that each individual view group expectations from the perspective of a situated, hypothetical third.³⁸

In other words, in the discourse between you and me—two individuated “I’s”—Dean asks us to make room for a third: a hypothetical third that must be constructed in our desire to be inclusive, a hypothetical

36 Dean, 3.

37 Dean, 3.

38 Dean, 3.

third that serves as room in the “we” for others who might be significantly different from our “I’s.” As Dean says,

Rather than presuming the exclusion and opposition of the third, the ideal of reflective solidarity thematizes the voice of the third to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusionary ideal for contemporary politics and societies.

By doing so, this “we” that is communicatively constructed expands discourse and makes it more inclusive and welcoming to those who one might not even have thought to initially include. Such a communicative “we” “enables us to think of difference differently, to overcome the competing dualisms of us/them, male/female, white/black, straight/gay, public/private, general/particular.”³⁹ This “we” breaks through the rigid identities that became the pitfall of earlier identity politics, which, while important for having provided oppressed groups a vehicle to push forward their claims for justice and recognition, also presented consequent difficulties through the way that group identities were ossified. This has sometimes led such group identities to be exclusionary in their own turn by glossing over internal differences, or sometimes letting such group identities be kept minoritized and thus stigmatized.⁴⁰ In contrast, the communicative “we” hopes to overcome such traps that often lead to the undoing of identity politics-based movements. As Dean quotes Kathleen Jones,

If gender, race, class, and sexual preference are not to be used as mere ‘markers to describe the race [etc.] of the respondent’ nor as disciplinary devices to police the borders of identity—either by keeping some ‘outside’ or by insisting on the faithful being inside’—then we must abandon the search for sovereignty through any of them, or even all of them in combination, and work toward solidarity.⁴¹

That, precisely, is the sort of work that Camp Queer hoped to do in its engagement with the Zagu workers—work towards a solidarity that makes space for a deep and lasting encounter, overcoming boundaries and breaking up the rigid identities that too often hole us up in our own boxes and separates the struggles of queers and workers. Such an encounter must not be romanticized as being easy or natural—nor

39 Dean, 3.

40 Dean, 4–6.

41 Kathleen B. Jones, *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993), quoted in Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers*, 8.

should that necessarily be the aspiration. After all, reflective solidarity and the communicative “we” it engenders should be strong and deeply rooted enough to be able to survive—and even flourish from—dissent, questioning, and disagreement.

This must be affirmed given that Camp Queer never harbored any illusions that all workers will immediately understand and sympathize with the queer struggle, in the same way that many LGBTQIA+ activists will probably not immediately understand the relevance of the workers’ struggle to their welfare as LGBTQIA+ persons. After all, as queer activists in the Philippines, we are aware of the deeply conservative character of many segments of Philippine society. The Philippine working class will not be magically exempt from this by virtue of its oppressed character. As such, one of the later fruits of Camp Queer’s engagement with the Zagu workers, a module on the intersection of LGBTQIA+ and labor issues produced for Metro Manila Pride, indeed explicitly acknowledges that labor unions must also do the work to create union spaces that are conducive to the free expression of queer identities, and where, for example, LGBTQIA+ workers are able to come out and talk openly about their issues. “The union should be an avenue for informing workers of the need to confront biases and practices that discourage LGBTQIA+ workers from coming out,” the module said as one of its recommendations.⁴²

In any case, while our engagement with Organiza–SUPER in 2019 may be considered a short-lived exercise in solidarity, it was not without its achievements. Of course, our material contributions, addressing immediate material needs then, are foremost. We provided material support in the form of warm bodies at the picket line, even if for just a few hours in total cumulatively. We spread the Zagu workers’ cause within our queer circles and beyond. On Solidarity Night, we were able to emphasize the shared struggles of queers and workers. Our encounter shaped each other and brought about a desire not only to root ourselves in each other’s struggles but also to nourish each other through our respective struggles.

Rafael La Viña, a BMP labor organizer, shared his personal account of the engagement with Camp Queer. He co-organized the Zagu strike and was present during the first solidarity night and the consequent actions,

42 Marianne Faith B. Sadicon and Luther Aquino, “Queering Labor” (Metro Manila Pride, February 2021, <https://mmpride.org/learning-materials>)

such as the Pride March mobilization and the organization of the Boycott Zagu Coalition. He said,

[T]he active efforts of Camp Queer to support and popularize the Zagu strike bolstered their morale and assured them that they were not alone in their struggle. This was important in keeping their spirits high while maintaining and defending the picket line from management attacks.⁴³

The Zagu workers, too, saw themselves mobilizing in support of the queer struggle. La Viña continued,

[The workers'] engagement with [Camp Queer], especially their participation in the 2019 Metro Manila Pride march, also empowered the unionists to see themselves as part of a broader movement fighting for justice and social change. Being given a platform to speak about their situation in an event like Pride helped them understand the relationship and commonalities between their struggles as workers and the struggles of LGBT+ folk.⁴⁴

The shortcomings of the engagement are not hard to see, however. The fact is that the strike was defeated, and it is hard not to think that we could have done more as allies. In the end, too, Camp Queer was faced with the limitations of being a new organization. Its membership then was still very low at less than 10 persons. Also, the actual social interactions between Camp Queer and Organiza-SUPER were rare and insufficient to fully flesh out the solidarity that was built into plans of action or future projects. In the end, while the urgent situation of the workers meant that we usually knew what we could do to help them, when it came to us, we did not know what sort of acts of solidarity we could have asked of them, beyond their landmark participation in the 2019 Pride March.

There are promising possibilities, however. Camp Queer's experience with the Zagu workers made engagement with labor an indispensable part of our identity as an organization committed to solidarity with all oppressed classes. Thus, our initial engagement with the socialist labor center BMP through the Zagu strike was followed by a commitment to further explore how queer and labor struggles could unite to support each other. This was the theme of a webinar organized by Camp Queer and BMP in June 2020, called "Making It Werq: Intersections of Queer and Labor Struggles from Rhetoric to Practice." Among other topics discussed

43 Rafael La Viña, Telegram instant message to author, 25 August 2022.

44 La Viña

during this webinar was how the labor union could be a venue to advance the rights of LGBTQIA+ Filipinos.

In addition, Camp Queer continued to engage Metro Manila Pride on the issue of labor. Drawing from and reflecting on its engagement with the Zagu workers, Camp Queer produced and delivered the aforementioned module on the intersection of LGBTQIA+ and labor issues. This module was initially produced for Metro Manila Pride training sessions and is now publicly available on the Metro Manila Pride website.

In any case, the possibilities for queer and labor solidarity in the Philippines do not start and end with Camp Queer. After all, our engagement with the Zagu workers is far from the only encounter between queer people and other oppressed classes in the Philippines that paved the way for solidarity. The very history of the Pride movement in the Philippines, for example, had its beginnings not only in the audacity of queer people to proclaim our existence, but also to express solidarity with larger Philippine society amid numerous social issues.⁴⁵ As previously mentioned, there was the joint march of Kapederasyon and the Tanduay workers during the Metro Manila Pride march in 2015. One of the leaders of that march was a trans woman union leader.⁴⁶

Globally, too, there are other sterling examples of such solidarity between queer people and workers, and other oppressed classes, apart from the emblematic example of the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners campaign in the UK. In Southeast Asia, for example, Aban and Sy have identified solidarity between queer Southeast Asians and other oppressed citizens of the region as counterhegemony against the market-oriented and profit-driven agenda of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁴⁷ Aban and Sy contend that such a counterhegemonic strategy, in the form of an alternative regionalism, is necessary, given the shrinking space for civil society engagement in ASEAN. This shrinking space is due not only to the tokenistic deployment of supposed civil

45 John Andrew G. Evangelista, "Mula Sa Kinaroroonang Ideolohiya: Kontrobersya Tungkol Sa 'Unang' Pride March Sa Pilipinas," *Saliksik E-Journal* 6, no. 2 (2017): 265–96.

46 Tan, "'Ang Usaping Manggagawa Ay Usaping LGBT' – Claire."

47 Ananeza P. Aban and Jose Monfred C. Sy, "Queering Solidarity: Civil Society at the Fringes of ASEAN Regionalism and Alternatives for the LGBTQ+," *Philippine Journal of Public Policy: Interdisciplinary Development Perspectives*, 2022, 156–57.

society organization (CSO) engagement mechanisms in ASEAN but also to the limiting effect of a largely human rights-based discourse that tends to preserve preexisting heteronormative biases on whose rights should be respected.⁴⁸ Such counterhegemonic examples of queer solidarity already exist in Southeast Asia, with Aban and Sy citing the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, the lesbian, bisexual and trans man (LBT) group Arcoiris in Timor-Leste, and the artistic gathering 100 percent Yogyakarta in Indonesia as examples that show “how queer solidarity with poor, oppressed, and marginalized sectors take the shape of political, social, and cultural alternatives.”⁴⁹

Camp Queer’s engagement with labor in 2019 was a truly formative experience in building solidarity, that is, in finding a larger “we” than our own immediate “we.” None of it would have been possible, of course, had we not had the kind of comrades we had at Organiza-SUPER, who showed sincere concern for our own struggles as queer people. From our joint experience, it became clear that such engagements will only be fruitful and meaningful if the engaging partners become fully invested in each other’s victories, in each other’s struggles, and even in each other’s defeats—that is, if the engaging partners are able and willing to see themselves as a larger group and are able to enter discourse as a “we,” able to dissolve the boundaries that delineate queers/workers, and all other such pairings that might be posed, such as feminists/farmers, artists/indigenous peoples, and CSOs/grassroots communities. Such discursive processes of building reflective solidarity will hopefully not only build solidarity between different groups but also bring all such groups together to the larger “we” of all people in the world committed to liberation.

It is with this larger “we” that we can best hope to effect real, lasting, and meaningful change and pave our way out of cis-heteropatriarchal global capitalism. It is thus imperative that there be an intense multiplication of efforts to build solidarity between seemingly disparate, disconnected groups of oppressed peoples. As Allan Bérubé says, “the only real change will come out of a solidarity that can reach across and dismantle the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality—a solidarity

48 Aban and Sy, 144–49.

49 Aban and Sy, 157–62.

that can engage intellectuals, activists, working people, and artists in its struggle.”⁵⁰

Such a commitment to solidarity will continue to shape Camp Queer’s path. If there is one thing that we have learned from our engagement with the Zagu workers, it is that queering our way to liberation—seizing new possibilities and embracing new orientations—also means making the queer time and space to make friends and comrades of all those who cisheteropatriarchy had seen fit to estrange from us. Queering our way to liberation means making the queer time and space to make encounters that had not otherwise happened, happen.

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Challenging the Feminization of Garment Labor: The Case of Worker’s Information Center in Cambodia

*Worker’s Information Center and Bianca Ysabelle Franco*¹

Abstract

The women-led Workers’ Information Center (WIC) in Cambodia strives to create for women workers spaces for empowerment, development, grievances, and for collective resistance in the garment sector. The WIC operates as a “non-union” to avoid government intimidation and union busting while still generating collective power for their demands. The WIC advocates not only for the rights of garment workers but also for equal access to public services for all Cambodian women. In order to do this, WIC works with other member organizations of the United Sisterhood Alliance in Cambodia.

1 The Worker’s Information Center (WIC) is a women garment workers-based association which seeks to empower garment workers. It helps them plan collective action, and seek a broad range of services and support such as counselling, peer networks, training, and basic healthcare and legal advice.

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Introduction

As a self-organized association of women workers in the garment industry, Worker's Information Center (WIC) caters to the collective needs and issues relevant to workplace rights violations. More importantly, it provides space for grievances, training, leadership development, and empowerment—necessary tools in making a difference in women's lives. In most parts of the world, the garments industry thrives on the back of female labor. Though it provides much-needed employment, especially for the rural poor, challenges remain, particularly with regard to the current global capitalist production regime and its practices, and gendered assumptions about women. The journey of Cambodia's women garment workers exemplifies these contradictions. For this reason, WIC's story is important in understanding collective resistance and transforming the narrative of garment workers.

Cambodia's Garments Industry

The garment manufacturing industry has been a “key driver of growth” of Cambodia's economy for nearly 30 years (Rastogi 2018). It accounts for 16 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and 80 percent of its revenues from export (ILO 2017). The European Union is its biggest market, followed by the United States, Canada, and Japan, making the garments sector a vital aspect of the globalized economy (Rastogi 2018). In 2018 alone, the garments and textiles industry comprised over 60 percent of total exports (AQF Team 2019).

These figures are a result of Cambodia's massive efforts to rebuild its economy after the civil war in the 1990s. After independence in the 1950s, Cambodia's economy relied on the agricultural sector. With much of the country reeling from high poverty levels, especially in the rural areas in the 1980s, economic transformation became an urgent issue. The 1990s were also the period in which much of Southeast Asia pursued rapid industrialization to catch up with their East Asian neighbors, such as South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. Under the auspices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Cambodia embraced the neoliberal growth model by reforming its laws to attract foreign direct investments (FDIs) amid the promise of cheap labor and other incentives. Via its Law on Investment in 1994, the Cambodian government promised a competitive business environment for FDIs despite the challenges

inherent in a developing country (Bargawi 2005). Thus, the preferential access provided by the United States catalyzed the growth of the industry (Ear 2013). Despite liberalization and the abolition of the Multi-Fiber Agreement in 2005, the industry remained competitive throughout the years and contributed immensely to Cambodia's economy (Yamagata 2006).

Garment factories in Cambodia are foreign-owned and controlled. Exporters mainly come from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea (Rastogi 2018), a situation made possible by Cambodia's strong bid for overseas capital and investments. Under Cambodian laws, foreign exporters based in the country can expand their businesses. This legal framework also allows foreign investors to skirt their own countries' quota, thereby capturing a bigger share in the global market (Hall 2000).

Alongside this conducive business environment, Cambodia has one of the lowest wages in Asia, according to a recent report (AQF 2019). While attractive to investors, this has been a source of tension between workers and employers, resulting in strikes and deaths. In 2014, three workers were killed when police gunned down protesters demanding a pay hike (BBC News 2014). Studies and reports indicate the negative impact on workers' health (Yamagata 2006). Likewise, there are reports of job stress, isolation, and depression (McKay and McKenzie 2020). The Human Rights Watch (HRW) has similarly noted various types of labor rights violations, such as forced overtime, sexual harassment, and anti-union discrimination (HRW 2015). While Yamagata (2006) finds that the employment provided by garment factories has been beneficial in terms of poverty reduction, the job is vulnerable to fluctuations in demand and crises in importing countries. Using statistical analysis, Yamagata also observes that the wage gap between men and women rises when demand decreases. Therefore, these findings indicate the vulnerabilities and uncertainties that garments workers face amid already precarious work.

Women's Work: Global and Local Gender Norms

The brief overview above would be incomplete without discussing the role of women workers in Cambodia's garment industry. Garment and textile industries employ large numbers of women in the developing world. Cambodia exemplifies this point—workers are usually women from rural areas. While some argue that the country's bid to globalize

its economy offers rural women jobs in the cities, their situation is problematic from the standpoint of feminist literature on globalization and women's work in the manufacturing sector.

According to the literature on feminist political economy, low wages are not necessarily the reason why foreign companies employ women workers (Elias 2008). The lure of women workers in the global assembly line is a result of constructing garment labor as feminized, a role usually ascribed to women (406). In their analysis of women's work in the Global South, Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that women are attractive to exporters because of their "nimble fingers," docility, and the assumption that their income is secondary to their husbands—socially constructed traits that are beneficial to international capital. In other words, companies discern that not only is it more efficient to hire women because of their perceived 'natural' trait in garment work, but also that women are not keen to unionize and are therefore less likely to disrupt the production cycle.

Aside from the links between global factories and women's work, local meanings behind women's work in Cambodia are also instructive. Studies indicate that the figure of the "good daughter" within the family is central to the deployment of young women to garment work (Hall 2000, 128). When demand for women's work increased in the 1990s, daughters' exodus from the rural areas to the cities was largely equated to their role as their "family's saviors" from poverty. However, given the expectations from their families, this becomes problematic as this might also prevent women from asserting their rights and grievances at the shopfloor.

For these reasons, and the discussion and overview above, the work of the WIC compels us to look at the ways in which women workers collectively transform their lives given the constraints placed upon them.

The Worker's Information Center: Collective Resistance and Empowerment

The Worker's Information Center (WIC) is an association of women garment workers (GWs) in Cambodia that promotes women's workplace rights. It advocates women's leadership, particularly in addressing issues that pertain to the garment sector, and offers space for GWs to express their grievances. The WIC also provides capacity building opportunities

for women to gain knowledge that can be used to realize their workplace rights. Legal assistance and healthcare are available for urgent concerns. The issues addressed by the WIC include “low wages, hazardous working conditions, sexual harassment, discrimination, short term contracts, and limited social security provisions” (WIC 2015).

The WIC is part of the United Sisterhood Alliance in Cambodia. The United Sisterhood Alliance “evolved from an organization established in 1999 called the Womyn’s Agenda for Change (WAC),” to address the issues of women and other marginalized groups (ESCR-Net n.d.). The WIC started as a project on Women Garment Workers’ Empowerment of the WAC. The issues that emerged from this project led to the establishment of the WIC as an association in 2009 (ESCR-Net n.d.).

The WIC is a worker-led organization—one that is by the workers and for the workers. It has what are called “drop-in centers” in factories. A drop-in center is a place where workers can meet with one another and discuss their grievances. Workers discuss issues on both working and living conditions. They often come to the drop-in centers after work (Aliyah 2019).²

The WIC also facilitates discussions between workers and their employers. In an interview conducted by the researchers of the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) at the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) with a garment worker named Aliyah, who works at the Saulen Factory, she shared that these discussions are used to lobby the GWs’ concerns to their employers. For instance, initially factory workers were only given 50 percent of the wages indicated in their contract. In response, the workers started a thumbprint petition and demanded they be given the salary they are due. That petition is a success story amid the horrifying conditions faced by garment workers.

2 Researchers of the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) at the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) conducted an interview with Aliyah, a garment worker at the Saulen Factory in Cambodia. The interview took place after the workshop on “Alternative Practices of Peoples in Southeast Asia Towards Alternative Regionalism” at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference / ASEAN Peoples’ Forum 2019, September 11, 2019, Bangkok, Thailand. AltDev researchers include Honey Tabiola, Nathaniel Punongbayan, and Jose Monfred Sy. Focus on the Global South – Cambodia provided translation.

According to Aliyah, while the typical working day is eight hours, garment workers cannot find the time to rest or go to the restroom due to the high targets set by factory managers. They must work nonstop to meet the targets or risk verbal abuse from the managers. To make matters worse, if the already high target is met, that target is increased the following day. “They don’t care about the worker, they just care about finishing the work,” said Aliyah (2019).

Further, factory owners employ illicit strategies to maximize profit at the cost of the garment workers. Factories in Cambodia can run for nine years tax-free. To avoid paying taxes, factories close down and start back up again under a new name, which means that all factory workers lose their jobs. And since the minimum wage increases yearly, factories end up hiring fewer and fewer workers to minimize costs. This means that the workload of each worker increases without any significant changes in salary. Meanwhile, workers cannot demand the recognition of their rights because they are not regular employees of the corporation. Contracts only last for three to six months, and after such time, workers must find new jobs. The WIC urges corporations to abide by Cambodia’s labor laws and grant each worker the benefits they deserve.

The WIC does not only lobby for garment workers’ rights but for all Cambodian women’s access to public services. These include farmers and sex workers. One of the main issues faced by these workers relates to the privatization of social services. The WIC is advocating for policy change because public services become inaccessible when controlled by private corporations (Aliyah 2019).

The WIC works in cooperation with the other member organizations of the United Sisterhood Alliance. The three other alliance members include the Messenger Band, a musical group that performs songs that portray marginalized and impoverished groups in Cambodia; the Women’s Network for Unity (WNU), which caters to the needs of sex workers and promotes their access to social services; and the Social Action for Change (SAC), which advocates for smallholder farmers and other marginalized groups to social services such as affordable medicines. These four organizations make up the United Sisterhood Alliance.

The WIC also monitors the implementation of labor laws in the garment and textile industry. To build awareness about the issues in the garment industry, the WIC published a report in March 2017, “The Reality

of the National Economic Backbone,” which details the plight of garment workers in Cambodia. The report discusses the garment workers’ access to health and hygiene, security and safety, and the standards of their accommodation.

The report is based on a series of consultations conducted by the WIC with the GWs (WIC 2017). They conducted interviews with 75 GWs and focus group discussions with 90 GWs from three locations in Cambodia, namely Chak Angre Krom Commune, Posenchey District, and Teuk Thla Commune. The issues found by the WIC study pertain to health, security, and the accommodations available to GWs.

Among the health issues found by the WIC include the fatigue experienced by GWs due to long working hours, unhygienic workplaces, and food that contains harmful chemicals. GWs are forced to work eight to twelve hours a day at the factories to maintain the high cost of living in the city. “I feel exhausted,” said a garment worker (WIC 2017, 11). Within these eight to twelve hours, workers must work extra hard to meet the productivity quota of their respective factories. Given these conditions, it is no surprise that workers reported developing poor health since they started working in the garment industry.

Women flock to the cities to become GWs to provide better lives for their families. The salary they earn from working as GWs barely covers their rent in low-cost tenements in the vicinity of the factory. The rooms do not have access to sunlight, and the water available to them contains limescale deposits. As a result of a rusty tank, GWs must also pay an extra USD 1 per month to their landlords for the water supply. Some GWs have reported finding fingernails and strands of hair in the food provided to them by their employers (WIC 2017, 11). They do not have access to running water, and the public toilets at the low-cost housing buildings are often clogged, with soap unavailable. Among the WIC’s respondents for this study, 43 percent of GWs use public toilets, while 57 percent have private bathrooms in their rental rooms. The public restrooms are unsanitary since they are located in the open yard. In cases where there is stored water available, it is often “dark and muddy and [smells] really bad,” revealed workers from Chak Angre Krom Commune (WIC 2017, 13). There is no proper waste disposal mechanism. Lastly, while there are available state hospitals for medical concerns, long working hours mean that GWs choose to visit private clinics close to their workplace.

There are also several security issues faced by GWs. The walls and doors of the low-cost housing buildings are made from substandard wood, which means break-ins often occur. Theft is commonplace, especially since clothing are hung to dry. The locks on the doors are poorly maintained, and the GWs cannot afford to buy better locks. The GWs in the WIC study likewise reported that they fear going out at night due to violent gangs. More than half (57.7 percent) of the WIC's respondents observed the presence of violent gangs in the vicinity of their neighborhood. Many have also reported experiences of sexual harassment—38.9 percent have been sexually harassed in the form of catcalling and received no help from local authorities. “If I could, I would not want to go out at night,” a worker commented, referring to the dangerous neighborhood in which they live (WIC 2017, 19).

Gambling is also common, with 78.9 percent of respondents reported having observed gambling activities in their area. Violence and gambling are not controlled because there are no police around low-cost housing buildings. Majority (83.8 percent) of the WIC's respondents also noted the absence of fire extinguishers in their buildings. This is alarming, especially since the buildings are poorly ventilated and made with substandard materials—an obvious fire hazard.

GWs in Cambodia live in workers' blocks or compounds with more than 50 rooms in each building. Some buildings have more than 300 rooms. The rooms range from 2.5 to 16 square meters, with walls made from substandard wooden panels. While there is a policy that mandates employers to provide accommodation to their GWs, this is poorly implemented. Employers who provide support give less than the minimum rental fee, so workers are forced to rent the cheapest rooms in the poorest conditions. In most of these workers' blocks, GWs only have access to public toilets. These toilets are poorly maintained, often clogged, and provide no proper waste disposal to users. Tenants of more than 300 rooms must share 16 public restrooms. GWs also reports that rent is high while salaries are low, and rent is fixed and usually non-negotiable.

Complaints about landlords were also common among the respondents of the WIC. Only a small fraction (4 percent) of GWs reported having contracts with their landlords regarding rental contracts. This means that landlords have the discretion to forcibly evict their tenants at any point. When tenants are delayed in paying rent, landlords verbally abuse them. “The landlord can get the room back any time and I do not

know what to do,” said one worker when asked about rental contracts. Another worker reported that their landlord did not return deposits the tenants made for electricity and water, even though they agreed to do so.

Based on the findings of their report, WIC research team and the garment workers participating in the research crafted recommendations for the Royal Government of Cambodia, landlords, workers, and employers. They recommended that the Cambodian government and the landlords adhere to the country’s Special Lease Law, which guarantees that “all parties understand contracts, rent increases, accommodation standards, and rents” (WIC 2017, 29). The WIC further advised that the government engage with the GWs to listen to their grievances. The government should also encourage employers to provide adequate living conditions to GWs. Additionally, the WIC recommended that landlords secure the premises of their property and cooperate with the local government in thefts and robberies. Lastly, the WIC encouraged workers to continue reporting crimes of theft, robbery, and sexual harassment. Workers must also cooperate in terms of keeping their living conditions satisfactory.

The Reality of the National Economic Backbone is an example of the WIC’s worker-led campaign (ESCR-Net 2020). It is a bottom-up approach that exemplifies the garment workers’ expertise over their own experiences—an expertise that cannot be embodied by researchers and academics. A team of thirty workers implemented the study from conceptualization to designing the questionnaire and conducting the interviews with their fellow garment workers. The objective of the report was to build awareness about the realities of garment workers. Upon publication, the results were presented to stakeholders to negotiate the conditions of the garment workers. The workers themselves used the data gathered through the study to lobby their concerns to local government authorities and community forums.

Recommendation

The story of WIC is the journey of Cambodian women’s admirable goal to uplift their lives. While Cambodia’s economic transformation has brought livelihood to its young women, it also comes with its contradictions. Even as women find employment in foreign-owned factories, the precarity of this work, on account of gendered assumptions of women’s labor, remains daunting. With much of the world linked to

global capitalist production and its discontents, the WIC has remarkably managed to make a difference.

Nonetheless, it would be beneficial in the long-term for the WIC to look beyond rights. While the rights framework has certainly gained traction among multinationals, owing to advocacy and shaming campaigns from transnational civil society and the media, there are other ways to move forward. Robinson's (2006) global care ethics might be a step in the right direction. It espouses veering away from looking at the women as 'workers' and instead viewing them as people with sets of care responsibilities outside of work. This framework takes a hard look at the unequal division of care work for men and women, and compels companies to consider this in designing programs that combine both productive and reproductive roles of the two sexes in the household. As Robinson notes, this is not necessarily out of the range of multinational companies, as some have already incorporated these themes in their corporate social responsibility. For instance, work-life balance has already entered the lexicon of corporate jobs. Concepts such as 'fair trade' and 'clean clothes', among others, have recently entered popular discourse. The idea is to combine productive and reproductive work in company ethics and involve men and women in both spheres.

Conclusion

The garment sector is one of the motors of the Cambodian economy, luring foreign capital with low wages and weak protection of workers' rights. Workers, most of whom are women, navigate the tensions between foreign capital and labor protection, and brave the challenges that come with garment work. The feminization of garment work is shaped not only by the garment sector itself, which is often associated with women and women's perceived docility, but is also influenced by local gender norms that often construct women, especially daughters, as "saviors" of their families from poverty.

Amidst the backdrop of the gendered political economy of garment work in Cambodia, workers at the WIC, most notably the women workers, carved out an alternative space where workers can exercise more agency and address the issues and concerns of their sector. Contesting conventional expectations that women usually do not collectively organize to claim what is due to them, members of WIC demonstrated that they can collectively act to confront the issues that plague the garment sector.

As an association of women garment workers, WIC is a formidable force in the promotion of women's workplace rights and women leadership; championing workers' access of legal assistance, healthcare, and some public services; and addressing issues related to low wages, hazardous working conditions, sexual harassment, and other grievances. With its "drop-in centers," WIC cultivated a safe space for workers to acknowledge their concerns, discuss their issues, and work towards solutions. WIC, as a "non-union" form of organization, is unique in that it attempts to skirt the possible intimidation that governments and businesses usually throw at unions while still generating the collective power that can exert pressure to advance their demands.

Moreover, this work has been enabled by a solidaristic network of organizations under the United Sisterhood Alliance, one that collectively confronts and overcomes challenges of women in various sectors, namely impoverished groups, smallholder farmers, sex workers, and garment workers, proving that the struggles of many working women across various sectors are interconnected and can be addressed with collective action.

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Peoples' Participation in Governance and Development

Promoting Citizens' Participation in the Budget Process: The Social Watch Philippines' Alternative Budget Initiative

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Abstract

Official budget-making in the Philippines is an opaque process, employing highly technical terms by economists and financial managers. It is also compounded by the general lack of knowledge and information among the general public and the insufficient mechanisms for citizen engagement. In an attempt to make the budget more responsive to people's needs and promote citizens' participation in the budget process, Social Watch Philippines (SWP) advocates for "alternative budget proposals," which push for increased financing for social services in education, health, agriculture, decent work, environment, and other areas of social development.

SWP lobbies relevant government agencies and legislators to incorporate their budget proposals into national budget priorities. Over the years, there have been gains, as seen in the cumulative increase in the national budget for social services, among others. However, continuing challenges persist, such as the failure of certain budget items in the approved national budget to reach the people on the ground (i.e., the end users), resistance from legislators to institutionalize citizens' participation in the budget process, and the need to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to effectively undertake budget advocacy campaigns.

1 Social Watch Philippines (SWP) monitors social development commitments of the government, and seeks to influence policy decisions through participatory public finance. It has annually put forward a strategy of advocacy, awareness-building, monitoring, organizational development and networking.

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Introduction

Principles on Financing Social Policy

Citizens generally “aspire to live a life of dignity and well-being” (Raquiza 2021, 19) throughout their lives. This requires, at the minimum, access to “quality social services that are adequate, affordable and available as well as decent work.” This aspiration is within reach if there is a strong developmental government, working hand in hand with a mature polity that includes vibrant engagement of citizens’ movements, subaltern groups, the private sector, and individuals towards a shared vision for transformative change.

Financing social policy is a contract between the State and its citizens. From a rights-based perspective, the State has the duty to provide these services, and the citizens have the right to claim these. Financing the provision of services comes from a variety of sources, such as taxes, private sector schemes, or out-of-pocket spending by individuals, and some sources will be utilized more than others depending on several factors such as a country’s fiscal space, administrative capabilities and as importantly, the policy regime (e.g., welfare-oriented or neoliberal). The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) puts it succinctly: “the amount of resources invested in social policy—and how they are spent—is largely determined by a country’s policy regime” (UNRISD 2010, 209). However, the UNRISD also contends,

Mobilizing resources is, however, only part of the battle. Decisions about revenue policies and the allocation of public funds are the result of political processes, often dominated by elite groups. Consequently, such policies may not lead to the best outcomes in terms of providing public goods and reducing poverty. . . . Furthermore, institutional capacity, including the quality and efficiency of public administration and service providers, influences how successfully resources are translated into social outcomes. . . . (2010, 207–08)

The type of policy regime as a primary determinant of a country’s level of social spending does not negate the importance of fiscal space. As is widely believed, fiscal space is highly dependent “on a country’s economic performance, including its capacity to produce income and savings and to produce government revenues” (UNRISD 2010, 207). Many developing countries find sustaining fiscal space difficult. For instance, the Philippines, whose economy is services-led, suffers from

low agricultural output and underdeveloped industries, including its manufacturing sector. The country continues to be plagued with a long-standing balance trade deficit. In the context of declining and worsening agricultural production and marked deindustrialization in the last few decades, the role and impact of overseas workers' remittances and the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector have served to keep its economy afloat.

The use of financing instruments are based on “normative principles of individualism or solidarity” (UNRISD 2010, 211) as these may be “distributionally progressive” (e.g., “redistributing from rich to poor” including favoring disadvantaged and socially excluded groups); “neutral or regressive.” “Progressivity” implies “that those who have more will give more in society;” hence, “the rich must pay a larger proportion of their income to taxes,” which is contrary to the imposition of indirect taxes (e.g., value-added tax), user fees, and increasing levels of out-of-pocket spending for basic social services (UNRISD 2010, 211; Briones 2008, 12–13; Raquiza 2021, 19–20). In particular, the “most regressive and individualistic” financing schemes “are those in which people provide for themselves (self-provisioning) or that require out-of-pocket payment such as user fees” (UNRISD 2010, 211). Conversely, the most progressive source of financing public goods is via “direct taxation of personal and corporate income, including property” (212). Meanwhile, the principle of solidarity “emphasizes collective responsibility for individual well-being” and involves fostering “social cohesion and coalition-building among classes, groups and generations, working against different types of divisions in society,” (1370) an enduring feature of universal social policies.

Power relations within and among different groups in society significantly shape the content and process of public decision-making on policies and programs. Thus, they largely determine social and economic outcomes. Power relations are, therefore, “at the core of development” (UNRISD 2010, 284). Many governments, including the Philippines, rely on technocrats to run the economic and more technical aspects of governance including the area of public finance. While they may have an arsenal of policy tools to address myriad development problems, oftentimes, its efficacy remains the subject of intense debate in some policy, academic, and activist circles. What is incontrovertible is their tendency to “[insulate] policy making from public scrutiny” and their aversion to messy but democratic processes of citizens actively

participating in the various stages of public decision-making (284). This is however necessary because studies show that development outcomes oftentimes result in a significant reduction of poverty and inequality if subaltern groups—those who are poor and socially excluded—are able to influence public policymaking (286). This means that subaltern groups participating in the process of shaping policies—especially on matters that affect their lives—is not only rights-based but also makes economic sense.

This however necessitates a deliberate shift in the balance of power so that access to public decision-making processes is not concentrated to those with economic, political, and technical/bureaucratic clout. Active citizenship towards more participatory and democratic governance, especially of subaltern groups, makes for better policies and developmental outcomes.

Furthermore, increased and sustained spending for social and sustainable development occurs when policymakers view these types of expenditures as a “social investment that can generate multiple positive impacts, from reducing poverty and income insecurity in the short-term to enhancing the country’s productivity and capacity for innovation in the long term” rather than as mere expenses. (Raquiza 2021, 21; UNRISD 2010, 162).

To underscore the point that social spending is not only a function of fiscal space, there are in fact many countries with lower levels of GDP compared to the Philippines that run more universal social programs like in Bolivia, Lesotho, and Namibia (Raquiza 2021, 21; UNRISD 2010, 210).

A Policy Climate Not Conducive for Participatory Budgeting

During the Martial Law period, the Philippines’ public finance structures and practices were governed by a law that did not provide avenues for citizens’ participation, as Presidential Decree (PD) 1177 concentrated all budgetary powers to the President. When liberal democracy was restored in the country after the 1986 People’s Power Revolution, the government that was installed under the leadership of President Corazon C. Aquino adopted PD 1177² as part of the country’s Administrative Code.³

2 Presidential Decree No. 1177 (1977), “Revising the Budget Process in Order to Institutionalize the Budgetary Innovations of the New Society.”

It is noteworthy that the 1987 Philippine Constitution gave importance to citizens' participation in public policymaking. In particular, it contained provisions such as Article II, Section 23, which stipulates that “[t]he State shall encourage non-governmental, community-based, or sectoral organizations that promote the welfare of the nation.” Moreover, Article XIII, Section 16 provides that

[t]he right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political, and economic decision-making shall not be abridged. The State shall, by law, facilitate the establishment of adequate consultation mechanisms.

Under Philippine laws, the Executive Branch prepares the budget, and the President formally proposes it to Congress; the President's budget is referred to as the National Expenditure Plan (NEP). Congress is not allowed to increase the total budget amount proposed by the President unless it identifies additional revenue measures. Since legislators oftentimes do not do so, they usually operate within the President's budget ceiling. Thus, the budget adjustment in the legislative phase was essentially a zero-sum game, where increased funding for one program means budgetary decrease in another. In this light, it was not enough for SWP budget advocates to identify what program budgets they wanted to increase and by how much; they also identified programs for budget cuts so that freed up funds could be realigned to programs which they perceived as needing additional funding.

As is sometimes practiced, the previous year's budget is reenacted if the House of Representatives and the Senate are unable to agree on a final version of the budget before the preceding year ends. Furthermore, as stipulated in Article VI, Section 27 of the 1987 Constitution, and ratified in *Araullo v. Aquino* (2014), the President has a line-item veto power on the budget. This means that s/he can subject certain budget items to direct veto and conditional implementation, without affecting the entire budget.

The Philippine budget process consists of four phases: (1) budget preparation, (2) budget legislation, (3) budget execution, and (4) accountability. Each phase is distinctly separate from the other, with each stage simultaneously happening each year.⁴ In theory, civil society

3 Executive Order No. 292 (1987), “Instituting the Administrative Code of 1987.”

4 This was ratified in *Araullo v. Aquino*, 737 Phil. 457 (2014), G.R. No. 209287.

organizations (CSOs) can intervene in the budget process in all phases—for example, by engaging with the national agencies in the budget preparation and execution stages, lobbying with legislators in the budget legislation phase, and participating as citizen auditors in certain audit engagements. In practice, the Social Watch Philippines–Alternative Budget Initiative (SWP–ABI) actively intervenes in the first two phases, with very limited experience in phases three and four.

Official budget-making is generally an opaque and non-transparent process exacerbated by a public that is generally unaware of the mechanisms, rules, and activities involved and insufficient mechanisms for citizens’ engagement. Adding to the opaqueness of the process are the use of technical language and protocols mostly accessible only to technocrats and policymakers. The public is usually made aware of the uses and abuses of the national budget during the budget legislation phase as media, both traditional and social, banner stories of wastage and corruption during the annual budget deliberations in Congress. Towards the end of the year, the public is then presented with the General Appropriations Act (GAA), signed by the President. The GAA contains the country’s fiscal program, budget priorities, and budget ceilings formulated by the Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC)⁵ and announced via news reports.

The SWP–ABI was a pioneering effort where ordinary citizens engaged the the national budget-making process in a systematic and sustained manner. These advocates pushed for increased spending for social, agricultural, and environmental programs that would lead to better social services, livelihoods, and a healthier environment. SWP–ABI sought changes to the proposed budgets of some national government agencies so that public funds would be realigned to specific programs that would benefit the poor and the socially marginalized more. This initiative enhanced the capacities of citizens to autonomously influence national budget-making, challenging the government to practice their oft-repeated

5 The Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC) is an interagency body composed of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), the Department of Finance (DOF), Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), and the Office of the President, with the DBM as Chair. According to Executive Order No. 292 (1987), “[t]he role of the DBCC is primarily to review and approve the macroeconomic targets, revenue projections, borrowing level, aggregate budget level and expenditure priorities and recommend to the Cabinet and the President the consolidated public sector financial position and the national government fiscal program.”

principles of transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. Reception to SWP's program and budget proposals varied across government agencies and legislators, with some more open to integrating elements of the proposals into department budgets compared to others.

In numerous cases internationally, social movements and citizens' networks were able to sufficiently influence the orientation of politicians and policies to benefit the poor. They catalyzed actions between government actors and citizens for the democratic distribution of resources that do not only favor the market and the conditionalities of donors (UNRISD 2010, 261–99). UNRISD cited some best practice cases, such as in Costa Rica, where farmers founded the National Association of Coffee Producers to “defend smallholders’ interests on prices, taxes and credit” (297). In Mauritius, the peasantry and agricultural labor force converged to “[wage] active campaigns for labor rights, wage increases and improved working conditions” (297–98). Finally, in the State of Kerala, India, the institutionalization of networks of CSOs, unionization that includes the informal economic sector, and social pacts among the government, the labor sector, and the business sector led to better conditions and wages for workers (298).

An Attempt to Transform the Budget Landscape: Institutionalizing Citizens' Participation

SWP–ABI Background: How It Began

SWP was established in 1997 as part of the international Social Watch network. It focuses on addressing causes of poverty and promotes equity and the fulfillment of human rights. It monitors governments' progress around the world on the delivery of international and national commitments for social development, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also creates spaces for multistakeholder dialogues on financing for development and people's engagement in governance. SWP has been at the forefront of civil society groups' movement that calls for higher spending for social development, including the SDGs. SWP works amid a political environment where governments invoke fiscal and administrative constraints, including low absorptive capacities, as reasons for low social spending or the inability to increase allocations.

Early on, SWP advocates realized that while many politicians and bureaucrats spoke of the importance of social development such as in the areas of health, education, and social protection, oftentimes they did not match their passionate rhetoric with allocating the corresponding funds from the national budget. As is often the case, social spending is often viewed from the lens of fiscal constraints (except when it came to debt repayment, where technocrats would even engage in additional borrowings in order to service the country's debt). This is because, as earlier mentioned, social spending was seen more as an expense rather than as a "right" and a "social investment" that would contribute to increasing the country's productivity and capacity for innovation in the medium to long-term (UNRISD 2010, 162). Fortuitously, SWP actively participated in the series of preparatory meetings that led to the 2001 United Nations Financing for Development (FfD) Conference, which provided a rights-based policy framework to promote funding for the Millennium Development Goals.⁶

From then on, it was just a matter of time before SWP took their financing for development advocacies to the very heart of Philippine development—that is, to the engagement of the national budget. In 2006, SWP initiated the formation of the Alternative Budget Initiative (ABI), which began as an alliance of 20 CSOs but has since then ballooned to, at its peak, 200 organizations.

SWP-ABI was initially conceived in 2006 during a meeting among some civil society leaders and a number of legislators who were part of the political opposition at that time. The meeting was focused on the underfunding of social development programs, as well as the need to ensure that the national budget would be more responsive to the needs of the poor and socially excluded. The legislators of the minority bloc and civil society groups proposed the formulation of what they termed as an "alternative budget" to be presented to both the House and Senate members and various policymakers during Congressional budget deliberations.

6 The FfD principles outlined at that time were the following: 1. "Mobilization of domestic financial resources for development;" and 6. "Addressing systemic issues on the coherence and consistency of the international monetary, financial and trading systems in support of development" (UN 2002, 3–15).

This approach is akin to the participatory budgeting (PB) model developed in the 1990s in the City of Porto Alegre in Brazil and replicated in various localities globally. In Brazil, PB was characterized by communities taking center stage and actively working with government experts in identifying budget priorities and designing implementation plans. The communities are given the power to vote for or endorse plans for implementation by government authorities.

SWP-ABI Engagement of the National Budget-Making Process: How It Works

SWP-ABI usually kicks off its budget advocacy work by analyzing macroeconomic data and government targets, interrogating budget assumptions, as well as development trends. It does so using social equity lens, figuring out how various budget items and its increase or decrease may hurt or enhance the state's capacity to address the needs and interests of subaltern groups.

The SWP-ABI alternative budget proposals, for example, include, among others, increased financing for more classrooms and teachers; alternative learning systems for out-of-school youth and adults; increased access to health services for the poor; more reproductive health services; more farm-to-market roads and support for farmers through irrigation, post-harvest facilities and seeds; livelihoods and economic opportunities for victims of typhoons such as Yolanda ("Haiyan") in 2013 and Ondoy ("Ketsana") in 2009; support to biodiversity and conservation efforts; increased support for persons with disabilities (PWDs); and increased funding for social protection programs for implementation at the local levels (SWP 2016, 5–6).

SWP-ABI analyses of macro-economic trends, government targets, budget assumptions and alternative budget proposals for select departments are compiled in what is referred to by Social Watchers as the "Orange Book,"⁷ which is submitted to the Philippine Congress for each fiscal year. It contains relevant data and information, as well as research done by SWP-ABI, to provide evidence justifying the need for increased spending on critical social, agricultural, and environmental services. The Orange Book has also served as a reference for decision-makers,

7 It is referred to as such because its front and back cover are colored orange.

executive officials, legislators, and mass media in assessing the President's budget (the NEP), which is deliberated on and revised during the budget legislation phase, as well as understanding and supporting the SWP-ABI budget advocacies during this period.

The SWP-ABI composition largely determines the thematic clustering—education-focused CSOs organize themselves into the Education Cluster, social protection-related CSOs comprise the Social Protection Cluster and so on. As such, the SWP-ABI had the following thematic clusters—health, education, social protection, agriculture, and environment. It was a different case for NGOs run by persons with disabilities. They organized themselves through a two-pronged manner: they joined the various thematic clusters given the intersectionality of their issues with education, social protection, health and the like, but they also organized themselves into a distinct group called the Persons with Disabilities Cluster to address their other issues beyond the thematic areas provided by the SWP-ABI. The Cluster on Persons with Disabilities actively promotes its advocacies across different departments. Working with the various SWP-ABI thematic clusters, it seeks to ensure that their disability rights perspectives are integrated when engaging the various relevant departments. Finally, there are other themes, such as gender equality, older rights of senior citizens, child protection, and climate change, which are often also taken into account by Cluster members when drawing up the alternative budget proposals.

The Budget Preparation Phase. Here, the various national government agencies draw up its proposed programs and budgets for the following year. During this period, each thematic cluster analyzes the proposed programs and budgets of the relevant agencies; for example, the Health Cluster engages the the Department of Health, the Education Cluster engages the Department of Education, and so on. Each SWP-ABI thematic cluster generally advocates revisions to the proposed budgets of the agency which they are engaging. They push for increased allocations for certain items which they think should be prioritized. Likewise, they propose reducing the budgets of certain programs or items which they think are either unnecessarily bloated, redundant or are too vague, which make them vulnerable to corruption.

These “alternative budget proposals” are advocated to departmental executives during this phase. Their cluster proposals are primarily based on data, feedback, and analyses generated from local community and

national CSOs groups whom SWP-ABI work closely with, as well as from data from other sources like the academe and policy think tanks. It is in this context that SWP-ABI budget proposals can be viewed as more attuned to social equity considerations and therefore are more responsive to peoples' needs. Many national organizations with a grassroots membership base comprised the Clusters and through democratic consultations with other relevant partners, generate the SWP-ABI proposals. These are then presented to various national government agencies.

As previously mentioned, the SWP secretariat analyzes the entire budget and looks for items therein that seem redundant, superfluous, or just vulnerable to plain corruption. The secretariat envisions that the budgets for these can be realigned and "freed up" so they can be utilized for the proposed budgetary increases of the different SWP-ABI clusters. As such, when cluster advocates are asked by legislators where will they get the money for the proposed increases in the budget of select departments, the SWP-ABI is ready to provide a list of possible sources of financing identified in the NEP where budgetary realignments can be made. A favorite source of budgetary realignments identified by the SWP-ABI advocates are the Special Purpose Funds (SPFs), which have been a staple feature in the budgets across administrations.

According to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) (2013, 1), SPFs are "budgetary allocations in the General Appropriations Act (GAA)" that "are usually lump sum in nature, as the recipient departments or agencies and/or the specific programs and projects have not yet been identified during budget preparation and legislation." However, precisely because of the vagueness of the allocation of these budgetary allocations, many analysts believe that these can sometimes be highly vulnerable to corruption. As such, SWP-ABI advocates would oftentimes identify certain SPFs as possible sources of funding for their proposals seeking higher allocations, like in the areas of education and health, or for the needs of PWDs and senior citizens. As such, these advocates are proud of the fact that they not only propose increased funding for certain budget items but that they also identify possible sources of funding within the NEP.

The members of the various SWP-ABI clusters lobby the relevant departments to incorporate their budget proposals—or what is simply referred to as "alternative budget proposals"—into the agency budget

proposals which are submitted to the DBM. Some agencies are more receptive than others, where the former will incorporate certain ABI budget proposals into the agency budget. The DBM, in consultation with other departments, further refines and consolidates these departmental budgets and submits these to the President for scrutiny and approval. After approval, the President then officially submits what is now referred to as the National Expenditure Plan (NEP) to Congress during the ceremonial State of the Nation Address (SONA). As soon as the President submits the Executive's proposed budget to Congress, budget-making is now in the hands of legislators, which signals the next phase of the budget cycle.

The Budget Legislation Phase. Here, SWP-ABI members continue their lobbying and advocacy work, particularly for the many proposed budget items that were not incorporated during the budget preparation phase. This time, lobbying efforts are targeted at legislators, both at the House and Senate, for them to incorporate the SWP-ABI budget proposals into the various agency budget which they will eventually approve at their level—now referred to as the General Appropriations Budget (GAB)—and recommend to the President.

During this phase, SWP-ABI advocates usually partner with specific legislators who have pet advocacies consistent with SWP-ABI policy and budget agendas. The latter are encouraged to become their policy champions in Congress.

Furthermore, SWP-ABI members realized that to make the budget more responsive to peoples' needs and to promote citizens' participation in the budget process, certain legislative reforms were necessary. Therefore, SWP-ABI decided to work with certain legislators in the crafting of certain bills and lobbied for their enactment. A case in point was House Resolution No. 1376, "Urgent Resolution Allowing the Active Participation of Bona Fide People's Organization in Public Hearings in Congress Annual Budget Deliberations." Filed in 2006, this law was championed by Congressman Lorenzo "Erin" Reyes Tañada III and co-authored by Congressman Teofisto Guingona. It was then adopted by the entire House of Representatives in 2007. Afterwards, Senator Panfilo Lacson filed a similar bill in the Senate.

Unfortunately, the passage of this bill has consistently seen rough waters. Despite its continuous refiling in Congress across various

administrations, it has not prospered. Indeed, the legislative attempt to institutionalize CSO participation in budget-making was not adopted due to fierce opposition by many political leaders. They viewed the CSOs' involvement as encroachments on their policy domain. Based on informal interviews with congressional staff, SWP-ABI advocates were informed that the long-running opposition to institutionalizing CSO involvement in the budget-making process was fueled by fears among politicians that this would make many of them vulnerable to public exposure on the possible misuse of public funds.

Some Political Gains, Victories

In 2007, the year after the formation of the SWP-ABI network, alternative budget proposals from civil society, highlighting proposed increases in social development, agriculture, and environment expenditures, were officially presented by CSOs for the first time and discussed during the budget deliberations in both the House of Representatives and Senate. Former House Minority Floor Leader Teofisto Guingona III stated,

Today, we think it is time for change. A change for a more dynamic Philippines; a change that will usher in genuine people's participation in the budget process. This will bring in a new perspective, and will make our system a more participatory democracy. This alternative budget has undergone a series of consultations among various groups. This is a clear indication that the opposition does not only confine itself to criticism but also proposes meaningful alternatives. (SWP 2010, 27)

Representative Douglas Cagas similarly observed,

[W]hat the minority has done is something that is necessary in a democracy. This is the beginning of a constructive way of doing things. In fact, in all major issues that confront Congress and the coming Congresses, any opposition group should present an alternative proposal, especially the case of an alternative budget. (SWP 2010, 27)

Meanwhile, then-Senate President and Finance Committee Chair, Franklin Drilon, immediately met with the SWP-ABI consortium in order to review the alternative budget proposals, covering every item. During his sponsorship speech during the budget deliberations at the Senate, he physically held up the Orange Book for all to see and stated,

Let it be said that we are crafting a national budget that does not focus solely on the imperatives of economic growth, but a national budget that pursues growth with equity. We are proposing a national budget which has as its core the welfare and development of every Filipino man, woman, and child. (SWP 2010, 28)

In 2008, the House Committee on Appropriations once again invited civil society groups to participate in the budget deliberations in Congress and included the SWP–ABI alternative budget proposals in the national budget. The then-chair of the committee, Representative Edcel Lagman, said in his opening statement,

This morning, we are going to break traditions. For the first time, we are giving non-government and people’s organizations that opportunity to present their views, comments and recommendations on the General Appropriations Bill which they call the alternative budget. (SWP 2010, 28)

From 2006 to 2016, some of the SWP–ABI proposals were either adopted at the agency level during the budget preparation phase or championed by certain legislators during the budget legislation phase and eventually integrated into the the General Appropriations Act resulting in a cumulative increase of about PHP 66.9 billion in the national budgets for social services. The sector on health received the largest cumulative budget increase of at least PHP 24.906 billion. It was followed by the other sectors: education (PHP 11.666 billion); agriculture (PHP 11.07 billion); environment and climate change (PHP 9.078 billion); PWDs (PHP 2.285 billion); and social protection (PHP 178 million). This does not include the reported aggregate increase for health and agriculture in 2007 amounting to PHP 5.2 billion, as well as the aggregate increase for the sectors of education and agriculture of at least PHP 7.7 billion in the 2009 budget (SWP 2018, 3–6). Meanwhile, lobbying continued to include other strategic issues, like campaigning for the rationalization of special purpose funds (SPFs) and calling for the enactment of the bill to institutionalize CSO involvement in budget making. Budget gains from 2017 and onwards were not as far-reaching as in the previous years.

For fiscal years (FYs) 2019 to 2021, the SWP–ABI was able to incorporate increases for social protection for children as a result of their strong public advocacy campaign in partnership with UNICEF, Save the Children, and the Children’s Right Network, to name a few. The Child Protection Program under the Department of Education (DepEd) was given a dedicated budget item since 2018. In particular, notable budget

increases were granted to the Last Mile Schools Program in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), the School-Based Feeding Program, textbooks and other instructional materials for children with disabilities, training on positive discipline for teachers, and the Data Interconnectivity Program.

The budget increases on child labor profiling; compensation for community facilitators, encoders, and enumerators; and livelihood assistance to beneficiary parents/guardians of child laborers contributed to the implementation of the Child Labor Prevention and Elimination Program (CLPEP) under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic caused many budgets meant to benefit children to be reallocated to COVID-19 response initiatives. Examples of suspended and reallocated projects to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic are: (1) the building of 361 schools in GIDAs under the Last Mile Schools Program of DepEd, at around PHP 5 billion, and (2) the allocation of PHP 30 million allocated for profiling of child labor to be undertaken by the DOLE (SWP and Save the Children 2020, 1-14; GAA 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

As earlier mentioned, the SWP-ABI members worked with national government agency personnel, as well as legislators. The collaboration has yielded sustained partnerships. For example, in 2012, the Department of Health (DOH) institutionalized civil society participation in its budget formulation process through a Department Order requiring CSO consultation on its annual proposed budget. Since then, the agency has been annually presenting its proposed budget to the SWP-ABI Health Cluster and other CSOs for comments and inputs. Through this process, many of the proposals of the SWP-ABI Health Cluster's People's Health Agenda have been considered and accommodated in the DOH budget prioritization process (SWP 2017, 11). Throughout the years, SWP-ABI has actively participated in the budgeting processes of the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the DOH, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), DepEd, and other government agencies and institutions, as well as in the formulation of Annual Investment Plans (AIP).

Moreover, the SWP-ABI members' common resolve to work for a budget that responds to the needs of the people and to promote

participatory budgeting inspired the institutionalization of citizen–government partnerships at the local level through ordinances and Memoranda of Agreement in selected local government units (LGUs). SWP–ABI forged partnerships with local executives and organizations of diverse marginalized communities in influencing local budgeting and public finance processes within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from around 2010 to 2015. These communities include the upland and lowland farming communities in Guimba, Nueva Ecija; coconut farming communities in Baao, Camarines Sur; fishing communities in marine protected areas in Dauin, Negros Oriental; small fishing communities in Hinigaran, Negros Occidental; urban poor communities in Tondo, Manila and Quezon City; indigenous peoples communities in Magpet and Makilala in North Cotabato; Muslims in displaced communities in Tulumun, North Cotabato; and selected disadvantaged municipalities in Pangasinan.

Even prior to the formation of SWP–ABI, the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC) institutionalized the participation of CSOs in Local Development Councils from the barangay all the way to the provincial level.⁸ This means that theoretically, CSOs should be in a position to meaningfully participate in development planning and budgeting of LGUs. Thirty years after the LGC was implemented, however, studies show that this provision is more honored in the breach than in the observance (Guce 2020, 72–75, 81–83, 86–92).

There are some good executive measures implemented, however, in more recent years. For example, transparency, accountability, and participation in budgeting were incentivized through the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) Seal of Good Housekeeping in 2010, and later, the Seal of Good Financial Housekeeping (SGFH). This program recognizes LGUs that spent and audited their public funds along the principles of transparency, accountability, performance, and people’s participation. This includes the areas of local legislation, development planning, resource generation, resource allocation and utilization, customer service, and human resource management and development, and good governance. Good Financial Housekeeping is a requirement for an LGU to receive the Seal of Good Local Governance (SGLG), which aims to push for local investments, employment, environmental safeguards, social protection, and disaster preparedness.

8 Republic Act No. 7160, Sections 2, 25, 107 (2), 111.

However, a 2020 assessment on the implementation of the SGLG revealed that this program is generally out of reach to many of the poorest LGUs, i.e., those belonging to the fifth- and sixth- income classes, as they were unable to pass the requirements for the SGLG. Indeed, more than 30 percent of LGUs in Bicol Region, Eastern Visayas, and Central Visayas did not pass. The study also showed that it takes at least two years for many of the lower-income class LGUs to comply with the SGLG requirements. Furthermore, the study revealed that some local government officials were unaware of the SGLG. A significant number of projects were delayed, and development funds were poorly utilized. Hence, the challenge is to design the SGLG by income class or regional location, undertake capacity building for improved governance, and conduct a thorough evaluation of development plans (Diokno-Sicat et al. 2020, 23–24).

Further, with the citizens' clamor for transparency in the budget process, the DILG issued the Full Disclosure Policy, which requires local governments of barangays, municipalities, cities, and provinces to fully disclose the financial transactions of the LGUs to their constituents. This includes informing the public of how the LGU managed, disbursed, and used public funds.

In addition to influencing policy reforms, the ABI was also able to influence the public narrative on the budget process through its partnership with journalists. For example, according to Malou Mangahas, Executive Director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), in *Retake the People's Purse: The Role of Media and Civil Society*,

Thanks to Social Watch Philippines and its associates in the Alternative Budget Initiative (ABI)—the network of civil society groups that have demonstrated a curious passion for fleshing out, breaking down, scrutinizing and reordering the GAA—journalist[s] have started to get firmer and sharper handles for reporting better on the national budget. Or at the very least, for doing stories that are more accessible, or less Greek to the taxpayers from whose sweat and brow the national budget draws major sustenance. (quoted in SWP 2010, 126)

Aside from the news releases, feature articles, and in-depth studies to aid investigative journalism, SWP-ABI conducted capacity-building activities on understanding and reporting on the budget for journalists. SWP's regular media briefings deepened the media's appreciation and understanding of ABI's work and the results it wants to achieve. This influenced the narrative on burning issues on the budget and promoted

CSO-mass media partnerships for a transparent and accountable budget process (SWP 2010, 128–30). Furthermore, Mangahas observed that before SWP–ABI, most journalists found the budget to be an “inscrutable mystery” and “colossal riddle.” She said, “More than just a numbers game, the ABI has sufficiently impressed on journalists the policy and development content and implications of the GAA” (125–27).

SWP–ABI and Building Capacities

Effectively building the capacities of SWP partners in understanding the process, protocols, and procedures of creating the national budget entails undertaking efforts to do so. Here, it is imperative to note that the then-Lead Convenor of SWP, Leonor M. Briones, is a trained and nationally recognized fiscal expert with the distinction of having served important roles in government, civil society, and academe in the area of social development and public finance. As such, Briones played a decisive role in training SWP–ABI advocates to undertake budget advocacy work. Through workshops, lectures, and on-the-job training, SWP–ABI members learned how to advocate for an inclusive budget in a new terrain, Congress. These training processes included how to read and assess voluminous, technical budget documents using a social equity lens and gauge its effect and impact on poor farmers, women, children, persons with disabilities, senior citizens and the environment. As importantly, the SWP–ABI advocates had to learn how to draw up proposals to increase allocations for certain departmental budget items based on certain budget assumptions that would measure up in the face of departmental and congressional scrutiny. Part of the CSOs’ capacity-building included learning protocols on how to dress, what language to employ in parliament, and many other procedural rules. The former SWP Convenor and former DepEd Secretary recalled,

From the start, I had no apprehension at all because we thought that it was a very simple thing to do. It turned out to be very difficult because we needed to do capacity building for the members and briefings for the legislators. ABI demanded more time than I really anticipated. (SWP 2010, 35)

Alongside honing their capacity to understand the finer and more detailed aspects of the budget and its attendant processes and procedures, SWP–ABI members also developed their networking skills with policymakers and legislators who championed their advocacies.

This partnership also helped deepen the understanding and appreciation of many legislators and government executives on the role of citizens' groups in public finance. Furthermore, Briones' public role in this CSO initiative helped "open the doors" to many legislators, as her reputation as a fiscal expert was publicly known, and some of the policymakers, including their staff, were her former students during their university days. Apart from being an authority on the topic, Briones had the ability to popularize a technical subject like public finance to a broad audience. Therefore, she became a favorite interviewee of many journalists; this, in turn, provided a public spotlight to SWP-ABI's budget advocacy work.

As can be gleaned, the SWP-ABI clusters became a channel to reach out to many CSOs and train them to call for increased public spending for their existing advocacies, whether in education, health, or the environment. The process also helped amplify the perspectives of those in vulnerable situations, such as those living with disabilities, in conflict-afflicted areas, in disaster-prone communities, in informal settlements, and in urban poor communities.

As previously mentioned, enabling citizens' engagement in the budget process extended to some local community processes. For example, Luz Anigan of Action for Economic Reforms and an active SWP researcher, narrated,

In the beginning of ABI, the education cluster conducted several workshops in the National Capital Region, Central Luzon and Western Visayas focusing on budget monitoring. The training activities proved effective in enhancing the participation of more groups in formulating the alternative budget for education and in generating interest among the local constituencies. The education cluster also prepared a set of research modules which served as guidelines for conducting budget research and analysis focusing specifically on basic education. The modules were effective in encouraging local partners in conducting local budget analysis. (SWP 2010, 74)

Adding to this perspective is Patrick San Juan, an erstwhile member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), one of the organizations leading the SWP-ABI environment cluster. He stated,

Budget advocacy for the environment and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is a pioneering work and something out of the usual. Members of the environment cluster were able to incorporate their advocacies within the context of ABI and the national budget. Engagement in the ABI complemented CSO work on the field. (SWP 2010, 3-4)

SWP-ABI's engagement with budget-making processes was comprehensive. According to Janet Carandang, Head of the SWP Secretariat,

We analyzed various programs and budgets of the national government and proposed policy, program and budgetary recommendations; we undertook lobbying and networking with a broad range of actors like policymakers, the media and grassroots groups, and we built our capacities along the way. (SWP 2010, 23)

Formidable Challenges to Citizens' Participation

SWP-ABI's engagement with the national budget process was never a steady or linear process. Support for their budget advocacies also depended on the political dynamics among policymakers and which side of the political aisle they were on. For example, in the formative years of SWP-ABI, most of its fiercest allies, like legislators Tañada and Guingona, were part of the political opposition against the Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) administration. Tañada and Guingona, along with the opposition during President Arroyo's regime, authored many of the budget reforms bills supported by SWP-ABI and other citizens' groups. However, when President Benigno S. Aquino III assumed the presidency in the next administration, the SWP-ABI advocates found that many of their ally-legislators during the GMA regime were now allies of the new President and were part of his majority group in Congress. It was in this context that SWP-ABI members noticed that many of these same legislators, who were proactive in championing many of their advocacies in the past, were now more cautious in pushing for the same budget reforms. Upon reflection and informal discussions with some of these legislators, one important reason that emerged for this more cautious approach was not so much a "change of heart" of their stand on these issues. Rather, it was because they now found themselves ensconced within the new ruling coalition in Congress, and there was increased political pressure on them to uphold the proposed budget of the President. For SWP-ABI, this signaled the need to diversify their allies in Congress across political persuasions, and work with any and all legislators on an issue-to-issue basis depending on whoever was receptive to their specific advocacies.

There was also formidable resistance from a good number of legislators to institutionalizing citizens' participation in the budget process. The legislative measure "Allowing the Active Participation of Bona Fide People's Organization in Public Hearings in Congress Annual

Budget Deliberations,” which was originally filed in 2006 and refiled in subsequent Congresses, continues to languish. The participatory approach of granting CSOs a formal role in the budget process was never enacted into law due to opposition by many legislators. In fact, some of the legislators were downright and explicitly hostile, as they viewed CSOs’ involvement as encroaching on their turf. At worst, it would mean making some of them vulnerable to the public exposure of less-than-aboveboard deals. According to Jessica Cantos, Co-Convenor of SWP and former Chief of Staff of Congressman Erin Tañada,

The furthest the provision for citizens’ participation in the budget process ever reached was its inclusion in a Budget Reform Bill under the Duterte Administration. There were reports, however, that the inclusion of this specific provision in the bill was met with resistance from some government officials and was eventually deleted. (Cantos 2021)

Furthermore, SWP–ABI advocates began to wonder: once the budget was enacted into law, how was it utilized? This was of particular concern for those budget items that they had successfully pushed for through their champion legislators and which were eventually incorporated into the GAA—referred to by them as “budget wins”—through effective lobby work and that constituted political gains in and of itself. Rene Raya, also one of the convenors of SWP, wondered about “the integrity of the money trail” when he asked,

Were the increased budgets for national programs, say in health and education, properly and efficiently channeled to the end-users such as local schools, clinics, including barangay health stations and in a timely manner? (Raya 2021)

This line of questioning led SWP–ABI to the notion of “paper victories,” that is, getting certain budgets increased in the GAA, but which may not have much substantive meaning if not properly allocated to its targeted end-users, such as local schools and barangay health stations. As such, the SWP–ABI piloted a “budget tracking” exercise on a limited basis in 2008. For example, the SWP–ABI Education Cluster was one of those who tried to follow the “money trail,” so to speak, by checking whether the budgetary allocations from the national budget were properly allocated to local schools—in this case, those in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental. At that time, the Education Cluster researchers tried interviewing some local school officials but, unfortunately, were met with significant difficulties. According to Raya, they soon found out that

the national budgetary allocations for elementary schools were allocated at the Division level of DepEd and that the GAA only reflected specific allocations for national high schools. This made it difficult to determine how much funding from the GAA were actually funneled to each of the public schools at the local level.

Furthermore, the researchers found out that their interviewees were only willing to answer the more qualitative questions, such as on the effects of increased school budgets on school performance. They were wary of answering questions that had to do with hard budgetary amounts (e.g., How much was your budgetary allocation from the national government? Did you receive the entire amount? When did you receive it?). One respondent even asked with hostility what authority did the researchers have to ask questions on public funds. Given the degree of resistance and in some cases, even downright hostility, on the part of the respondents, some researchers reported feeling unsafe and decided not to pursue this line of questioning. After several attempts of trying to get information on hard budget data of local schools allocated by the GAA, the SWP-ABI Education Cluster researchers gave up and concluded that there was a pervasive lack of trust and transparency to share information of this nature by the respondents. As such, their objective of ascertaining the integrity of the money, in this case, the education budget for some local schools in Dumaguete, remained unmet.

It must be noted, however, that this is one only case and therefore generalizations cannot be made. Moreover, the SWP-ABI network also found out that there have been instances when certain budget items already embedded in the GAA were not always released to the end-users for various reasons. This is another issue that needs to be further explored in future research.

The need to strengthen CSO capacities to effectively undertake budget advocacy remains an ongoing challenge. On the one hand, the advocates across the various clusters have relatively “mastered” the intricacies of the specific agency budgets that they are focused on. Many of them now have the ability to effectively work with agency officials, a process that has somehow been “ritualized” given the annual engagement of SWP on the national budget. However, the role that Briones played—providing holistic analysis of the entire national budget, including engaging the macro-economic assumptions that underlie it, and problematizing how this squares with overall developmental and fiscal

trends from the lens of poverty and inequality—is a capacity that further needs honing among the current crop of budget advocates. Performing these tasks entails going beyond sectoral budget engagements and developing the ability to contextualize budget-making within a broader political and economic framework that is rights-based, developmental, and inclusive. This remains a work in progress.

SWP can be credited for sustaining citizens' engagement with the national budget, even during periods where they are unable to access financial support from donors for this endeavor. This speaks of their abiding commitment to push for increases in pro-poor, pro-people and pro-environment public spending. As the vignette with the partnership with other pro-children's groups to increasing funding for children's protection has shown however, SWP-ABI efforts can be more focused and sustained through collaborative endeavors.

Concluding Remarks

Outcomes that reduce poverty, address inequality, and promote inclusive development are more likely to happen when subaltern groups, through various channels and strategies, can influence public policymaking at national and local levels. Historically speaking, while the Philippine policy climate has not been conducive for ordinary citizens to actively participate in the national budget-making process, the country's 1987 Constitution and many other laws that have been issued since then have recognized their value in public life. SWP, through its ABI initiative, has engaged the Philippine bureaucracy for over a decade and a half—in particular, select government agencies as well the legislature (both House and Senate)—by pushing for budgetary increases of certain agency programs of select departments. This is done with a view to making the national budget more responsive to the needs and interests of poor and socially excluded groups as well as reducing wastage and corruption. During the budget legislation phase, this requires advocating to legislators realignments in the budget allocation so that certain programs are prioritized while reducing the budget of other line items.

Throughout the years, SWP-ABI advocated for increased budgetary allocations for certain programs and activities of DA, DSWD, DOH, DENR, DepEd, and other government agencies and institutions during the budget preparation and legislation phase. When certain agency officials are receptive to incorporating SWP-ABI proposals into the departmental

budget plans or when some legislators decide to champion such proposals, it facilitates the chances of integrating these measures into the GAA. This constitutes a political victory, from the perspective of SWP-ABI advocates. However, they also realize that these budgetary increases in the GAA does not automatically mean that these funds will be eventually channeled to the envisioned end-users, such as barangay health stations and local schools.

SWP-ABI advocates found out that, based on their experience, some budgets embedded in the GAA, for various reasons, were never released and downloaded by the national government. Second, even if these were released, the integrity of the fund releases still needa to be ascertained. As in SWP-ABI's limited budget-tracking research for education for some schools in Dumaguete show, questions about the correctness of the amounts of fund released and the timeliness of its release to end-users remained unanswered due to the opaqueness of the budget execution process and the lack of respondents willing to give information on actual amounts received.

Indeed, the fight over public funds—who wins, who loses—is, at heart, an extremely politically contentious process. Tipping the balance of power so that more public funds are allocated to underserved and marginalized groups will depend on a number of factors, including how developmentally-minded are policymakers, the state of play and the balance of forces within the Executive and with the legislature, the political strength of civil society and social movements, and the quality of partnerships forged between and among these groups, among others. As shown by the SWP-ABI experiences, certain legislative allies may be champions of their budget advocacies in one political season, but not necessarily the next. As such, the need to diversify political allies among legislators and those in the Executive on an issue-to-issue basis served as a more pragmatic approach to networking and alliance-building.

As the SWP-ABI experience underscores, politicians have successfully resisted the enactment of bills that would institutionalize citizens' participation in the budget-making process. This has occurred across three administrations: Macapagal-Arroyo, Aquino, and Duterte. This underscores that the prevailing ideational and policy climate for citizens' participation in budget-making in the legislature generally remains uncondusive.

SWP–ABI advocates realize that, because the fight over public funds is essentially resolved in favor of who has political power, it is not enough to draw up a developmental, social-equity driven agenda proficiently formulated. Such an initiative must also be backed up by a formidable political force. The latter can be done by strengthening and expanding SWP–ABI linkages with subaltern organizations with a clear mass base. Likewise, strengthening and diversifying alliances with key sectors—the media, academe, bureaucrats, and legislators—will strengthen their flank and multiply platforms for budget advocacy.

The need for active citizens' participation in the budget-making process to promote a people and environment-centered development agenda remains more urgent than ever given the intensifying social, economic, and environmental crises that pervade peoples' realities nationally and abroad. The continuing relevance of SWP–ABI work is clear. The urgent task of strengthening their political and technical capacities, and working with other CSO groups, social movements, and developmentally-minded policymakers, to generate the political momentum needed to make the public budget work better for people and planet are obvious next steps.

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Asserting Inclusion in Housing and Urban Development

From the *Barikadang Bayan* (Community Barricade), Street Occupation and *Tumbalik* (Collective Home Restoration) to the Community Development Plan

*Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap - San Roque,
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Abstract

Informal settlers in Sitio San Roque in North Triangle, Quezon City, Philippines, have experienced harassment and continuing threats of demolition and eviction. Their struggles are located within the broader problem of “accumulation by dispossession” that the urban poor face. The repression and harassment by state organs heightened during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To their credit, San Roque residents have defended their community and asserted their right to the city through various strategies, such as community barricades, reconstruction of houses, food gardens, and counter-proposal development plans.

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- 1 Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (National Alliance of the Urban Poor) is an urban poor mass organization that engages in interrelated issues concerning the urban poor sector: land, housing, human rights, livelihood, wages, and others.

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Following the fall of the Marcos dictatorship and the restoration of liberal democracy in 1986, segments of the urban poor movement in the Philippines, at that time, maximized the opening of limited political spaces to advance urban land reform and housing for the urban poor. The strong clamor and lobbying from urban poor coalitions resulted in the creation of various programs and laws, such as the Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor (PCUP), Community Mortgage Program, and the landmark legislation, Urban Development and Housing Act (UDHA; RA No. 7279). Particularly, the passage of UDHA in 1992 made up for the absence of an urban policy in the Philippines (Karaos 1993; Porio 2002).

UDHA recognized the urban poor's right to housing by aiming to "uplift the conditions of the underprivileged and homeless citizens in urban areas and resettlement areas by making available to them decent housing, at an affordable cost, basic services, and employment opportunities" (RA No. 7279, Section 2a). Along with the Local Government Code (RA No. 7160), UDHA provided a strong foundation for "the development and institutionalization of community-based upgrading strategies for informal settlements" (Galuszka 2013, 2). This encourages the people's participation in decision-making processes and marks the shift from state-led to "participatory development."

However, the UDHA also allowed for the paradigm shift from a heavily subsidized housing approach to one that is market-oriented (Ballesteros 2009). Even with the pro-people and progressive mandates in the UDHA, it is still largely a product of compromise between the urban poor and politicians who protect the private property interests of landed elites and developers. According to Arcilla (2008), while the process of privatization of socialized housing started with the creation of the National Housing Authority (NHA) in 1975, the UDHA codified privatization and financialization of socialized housing.

Hardships in the Relocation

"Access to land and housing by the underprivileged and homeless citizens" is one of UDHA's objectives in its mandate to "provide for the rational use and development of urban land" (RA No. 7279, Section 2b.5). However, in the lived experiences of urban poor communities, the UDHA has encouraged and legitimized the ejection of informal settler families (ISFs) from their homes and into off-city relocation sites (Ortega 2016a).

Although there is a myriad of required documents for conducting eviction activities, there is no proper monitoring of noncompliance to such requirements. This obscures the violations committed by the proponents of demolitions, and as a result, impinges on the rights of the urban poor, who are invisibilized.

Off-city relocation sites are mired with several issues that compromise the urban poor's living conditions. The lack of basic utilities, such as water and electricity, substandard housing materials or unfinished houses, and unreasonable amortization packages have been reported in multiple off-city relocation sites. Relocatees also experience a decline in income and rampant unemployment, even in relocation sites that have received livelihood assistance. This adds to the inaccessibility of long-term rental or mortgage agreements for them (Villarin 2016; Arcilla 2018).

Furthermore, those who have held on to their metropolitan work also experience increased transportation costs and commute time, lessening of the worker's time for family, friends, rest, and recreation. As such, many choose to spend their workdays in the metropolis, near their livelihood, and return to their families during the weekends. Greater food insecurity and diminished budget for healthcare and education are among the derivatives of this which push the urban poor into precarity (Collado and Orozco 2020).

Site selection, employed in this housing provision model, displays an absence of sufficient assessment on livability (e.g., economic potential, employment opportunities, transportation, and access to basic social services). The suitability of relocation sites for socialized housing is determined merely by adhering to specific technical and environmental requirements. Even with the prescription for onsite development "whenever possible" embedded in UDHA, mechanisms in the same law enable the circumvention of *in situ* housing provision and development. Existing land valuation also made it economically inaccessible to the urban poor.

Often invisibilized, but highly important, is the social cohesion and mutual help already existing in urban poor communities. Everyday practices of solidarity (e.g., helping with chores, sharing food, and lending various tools and appliances) are crucial to the urban poor's subsistence and wellbeing (Seki 2020). Displacement destroys this along with the sense of community they have fostered throughout the

years. According to Ortega (2016a), relationships based on kinship and neighborhood ties are replaced with those hinged on payments of fees and mortgages.

In the absence of humane living conditions in the off-city relocation sites, many relocatees choose to leave their new community and return to their former urban poor community or transfer to a new one. As a result, relocatees selling their off-city housing units have also become rampant. The pervading relocation model creates a violent cycle of ejection, relocation, and return to the metropolitan experienced by ISFs (Ortega 2020a).

Attempts for consultation with ISF target beneficiaries are grossly devalued (Alvarez 2019), and participation of the people is restricted to choosing from a selection of mainly off-city relocation sites (Arcilla 2018). Developers, being partners with the shelter agency, emerge as the most decisive in the housing provision and relocation process (Racelis 2018). Since the implementation of UDHA, the chronic housing backlog has steadily risen from 3.9 million units in 2001 (Subdivision and Housing Developers Association 2015) to 6.8 million in 2022 (Congress of the Philippines 2021).

Accumulation by Relocation

UDHA's land use and housing provision are hinged on the highest and best use framework apparent to urban planning practice in the Philippines, creating a condition in which urban land and socialized housing are deemed a commodity to be peddled, and thus must yield the highest returns and create maximum profit in its development and production. Socialized housing in peri-urban areas now becomes a key figure in the accumulation of real estate, fulfilling the prerequisite for a demolition (Ortega 2020). As Ortega (2020, 9) stipulates:

What has emerged is a condition of accumulation by relocation, wherein relocation is critical to legitimize demolition, since it illustrates state support for housing. Allowing demolition in the metropolis concomitantly accommodates new urban projects.

In 'accumulation by relocation', private developers, shelter agencies, metropolitan local governments, and peri-urban local governments reap different benefits. Private developers are now able to construct their high-end projects, dispossessing the urban poor. They are also given various tax incentives from shelter financing and production: capital gains tax on

raw lands developed for the socialized housing project, value-added tax for the project contractor; transfer tax for the completed housing projects; and donor's tax for lands authorized by the peri-urban local government to have been used for socialized housing (Ortega 2016b; Arcilla 2018). Following the collaboration, they are rewarded with partisan perks and future projects. Qualifications and accreditations are also streamlined to encourage their participation (Ortega 2016b).

Having secured prime real estate, state agencies and metropolitan local governments stand to gain from arrangements agreed upon in their joint ventures with private developers. Because peri-urban local governments usually own the land where the relocation sites are located, socialized housing projects are “opportunities” for them “to increase both tax base and political [influence]” (Ortega 2020, 1183). Contrary to the intention of the urban poor movement, with UDHA, the urban poor ceased to be considered as participants in development but rather as pawns that sustain and maintain the real estate boom, serving as potential homeowner consumers of off-city housing projects (Ortega 2016a). Market-oriented development, codified in UDHA's mandate to undertake urban development and housing provision through public-private partnerships (PPPs), has sustained the ever-increasing housing backlog and typified the gentrification of Metro Manila's urban landscape (Ortega 2016b).

Under regimes of PPPs, what is legitimized is the spatial, economic, and political displacement to project an image of an “informal-settler free” and “globally-competitive” Metro Manila that would attract profitable development (Ortega 2016a). In an interview with Ellao (2012), Bea Arellano, chairperson of the urban poor group Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (Kadamay)³–National said that the UDHA, since its effectuation, “has not served the interest of the poor but that of [the] capitalist” and has only provided “steps on how to drive away poor families from their homes.” Opposition to off-city relocations persists today among many urban poor communities, resisting their displacement to “death zones” (Ortega 2020).

3 Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap roughly translates as National Alliance of the Urban Poor. It is an urban poor mass organization that engages in interrelated issues concerning the urban poor sector: land, housing, human rights, livelihood, wages, and others.

Excluding the Community from Development

Sitio San Roque is a large urban poor community with an estimated 16,000 families residing at its peak; presently, this number is down to 6,000. Situated at the heart of Quezon City, it is within walking distance to government offices, shopping and commercial malls, transportation hubs, public hospitals and health centers, schools and universities, and employment opportunities.

The community started as a resettlement area for surrendering HUKBALAHAP (*Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapón*, People's Army Against Japan) soldiers. Soon after, poor peasant migrants driven by landlessness in the rural areas settled in the community, then still a remote grassland. The early residents of the area cultivated the land—planting vegetables and rice for family consumption and sale. From the 1980s until the 1990s, its population grew tremendously, with evicted ISFs from other urban poor communities transferring. This eventually paved the way for its adoption to Barangay Bagong Pag-asa of Quezon City. It has developed organically and incrementally: residents built their own semi concrete or shanty houses; cemented their roads; created their water and electric networks; and established their institutional, recreational, and commercial spaces (e.g., chapels, mosques, and stores) over the years. The majority of its residents are essential but precarious low-wage workers, without whom the city cannot operate: construction workers, laborers, vendors, transport workers (e.g., pedicab drivers, tricycle drivers, and jeepney drivers), home-based workers, and other workers in precarious employment (e.g., commercial security guards and store assistants, among others). It “is a community that was [developed] by its residents in the absence of a state that can provide proper housing and affordable basic services” (KD–SR and SSR 2019; Cunanan 2020).

As Sitio San Roque thrived, and real estate land values in the area surged in the 1990s, various entities interested in the area's development emerged. With both the government and the private sector attempting to project “global competitiveness” in Quezon City, Sitio San Roque has consequently become embroiled in intense speculation and development, leading to what would become decades of aggressive assault on the urban poor residents by combined strengths of developers and state agencies.

This violent process of accumulation by relocation and exclusion from development in Sitio San Roque started in 1987 when then-President

Corazon Aquino issued Memorandum Order No. 127, which reserved the 53-hectare lot in North Triangle, Quezon City for commercial use and authorized the National Housing Authority (NHA) to sell the area to the private sector through public bidding. This was reinforced by Executive Order (EO) No. 58, issued by then-President Fidel Ramos, and was concretized with the issuance of EO No. 106 in 2002 by then-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (PGMA). The authorization of the sale was advanced with the conceptualization of the 250-hectare Quezon City Central Business District (QC CBD) in 2006 (Ortega 2016a; KD-SR and SSR 2019). Aiming to transform the city into a “center of gravity for business and collective good of his constituents,” the Quezon City Local Government Unit (QC LGU), then headed by Mayor Feliciano “Sonny” Belmonte Jr., came up with the CBD proposal. To determine the feasibility of such a development, the QC LGU sought assistance from the World Bank. In its self-funded technical study, the World Bank identified the North and East Triangles as “the center of gravity of all commercial activities in the coming years” (World Bank Technical Study quoted in Gonzalez and Calugay 2018, 37). Together with Japanese urban development consultant ALMEC Corporation, the World Bank conducted another study that served as the foundation of the QC CBD’s overall framework.

In 2007, PGMA authorized the project through the issuance of EO No. 620 and 620-A, creating the overseeing body Urban Triangle Development (TriDev) Commission. This agency is headed by the Chairman of the Housing and Urban Development Council (HUDCC), co-headed by a representative from the Office of the Mayor (OCM) of QC LGU, and has as its members the General Manager of NHA and a representative from the Office of the President. The master plan developed thereafter aimed to convert the North and East Triangle districts into a “well-planned, integrated and environmentally balanced mixed-use development” (Crisologo 2011 quoted in Yambot 2011).

In anticipation of the huge economic potential of the North Triangle district being part of QC CBD, NHA jumped on a joint venture agreement (JVA) with Ayala Land Inc. (ALI) in 2009. Their PPP materialized into the 29-hectare Vertis North project that will refashion Sitio San Roque into a central business and lifestyle district. In its plan, 60.6 percent of the project area will be developed for commercial and office space; almost a quarter of the 29-hectare sprawl for residential development; and the remaining will be for hotel, retail, hospital, school, and other

public facilities. Meanwhile, NHA intends to fulfill its socialized housing production and financing function through the utilization of its earnings from the JVA, acting on its mandate to “harness and promote private participation in housing ventures” congruent with UDHA’s relocation model (PD No. 757, 1975, Section 3.3). This, however, stipulated the eviction and relocation of thousands of urban poor families in Sitio San Roque to NHA-sponsored socialized housing projects. Apparent in Vertis North’s master plan was the exclusion of residents in its planning process, despite UDHA’s stipulation for people’s participation in development. While the NHA has a relocation program for those to be displaced by the project, only 1,924 out of 6,485 remaining families—roughly 30 percent—in Sitio San Roque are qualified by the housing agency, citing budget restrictions with the 1.8-billion relocation fund provided by ALI under the JVA. Moreover, six out of the seven housing projects under the NHA relocation program are in peri-urban areas, outside the metropolis (KD–SR and SSR 2022).

ALI officially unveiled Vertis North to the public in 2012. Looking to profit from Vertis North, Surestre Properties, Inc. (SPI) in 2015 purchased 15.7 hectares from NHA’s share of land in the JVA for PHP 1.98 billion (PHP 126,142 per square meter). SPI is the development arm of

4 The succeeding sections highlight testimonies of Sitio San Roque residents drawn from focus group discussions and interviews facilitated by SSR between 2019 and 2021.

In April 2019, a focus group discussion was held to learn about the practices of community barricades and collective home restoration in Sitio San Roque. KD–SR members (Melanie Marsaba, Carol Nonay, and Inday Bagasbas) who had experience with these practices participated in it.

Pedro Matukan and Inestora Tanio, KD–SR members who were then relocated but had returned to Sitio San Roque, were interviewed by SSR about their difficulties in the relocation sites. These interviews took place in July 2019 when there was an impending NHA-initiated demolition in Sitio San Roque.

Margie Balwarte, Fe Seduco, and Alma Esteban, residents of Area J, were interviewed by SSR in May 2021 after the eviction efforts of NHA-ALI and SPI in the priority area escalated following the lifting of the lockdown that year.

KD–SR community leaders from different areas in Sitio San Roque participated in a face-to-face focus group discussion (FGD) in August 2021 wherein they tackled the experience of the community with the eviction practices of the NHA-ALI and SPI alliance, resistance strategies of KD–SR, and their continuing campaign for the San residents’ right to the city. For this the following community leaders were present: Weng Nacubuan, Anestea Gole, and Gelyn Rosilio of the Dubai area; Inday Bagasbas of the Balicanta area; Fe Seduco of Area J1; and Alma Esteban of Area J2.

Bloomberry Resorts Corporation, which owns and operates Solaire Resort and Casino.

Removing the Poor from Their Community⁴

Since then, and most notably after the JVA, the community has dealt with and survived a myriad of accumulation-driven eviction tactics: 2 large-scale demolitions, 5 fires, and 7 large-scale demolition attempts/threats. In 2010, the community saw the demolition (including forced and coerced) of over 50 housing structures along the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) that left more than 120 families homeless. This was carried out by the demolition team assisted by around 300 Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) and police personnel. Gelyn Rosilio, a vendor and resident of Sitio San Roque, remembers her grave memories of the demolition. “Unang demolisyon ‘yun sa San Roque. Maraming nangyari . . . nataranta kami dahil sa likod na ng bahay namin mismo nakatayo ang backhoe na gagamitin sa pag-demolish ng kabahayan dito. Desperado ang NHA para mapalayas ang mga tao dito sa komunidad.” (That was the first demolition I witnessed in San Roque. Many things happened. My family and I were panicking because the backhoe they were using was already at the rear end of our house.)

The large-scale demolition in 2014 was an overkill with guns, tear gas, and brute force employed by around 1,000 SWAT and police personnel that resulted in the destruction of homes of more than 300 families. Another resident in Sitio San Roque, Line Nalangan recalls the state violence she witnessed. “Mas malala ang nangyari, ang daming pulis at SWAT ang pumasok pa sa barikada at pilit pinapalabas ang mga lalaki. Ang mga tao, natakot sa dami nila. Hindi pa nakontento. Naghagis ng mga tear gas at maraming bata at indibidwal ang naapektuhan. Karumaldumal talaga!” (It was more frightening because more police and SWAT personnel were deployed to assist the demolition. People were really scared of their sheer number. They even broke through the community barricade and were arresting the men in it. They were not content with this and even threw tear gas canisters at the residents which also affected many children in the community. What they did to us was extremely detestable and foul!)

What followed was a slew of foiled demolition attempts/threats from 2010 until 2021. While these attempts/threats were not able to translate into the destruction of homes in the community, upon closer inspection,

these have fulfilled their objective to create a climate of uncertainty and fear among residents. Those without organizations who have received notices of demolition are highly vulnerable to NHA's "self-demolition" scheme and eviction to off-city relocation sites. The intentional use of fire as a tactic to facilitate eviction has been observed and validated in multiple historical accounts, with either the government or the developers often held responsible by residents (Ortega 2016a). Sitio San Roque's several fire incidents with planted arsonists as renters appear to be the effective approach for this tactic. In 2019, the community again experienced a fire incident that burned down a part of the community, affecting over 260 families. It was reported that a day after the incident, NHA personnel were distributing survey forms which at first appeared to be assistance for the fire victims, but were later discovered to be consent forms for eviction.

For the urban poor, demolitions pose a grave threat not only to their homes and livelihood, but also to their aspirations for social mobility. For Inday Bagasbas, a community leader of Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap–San Roque (KD–SR), their predicament is located within regimes of dispossession. She says, "Bakit nanatili kaming mahirap? Umaasenso na kami, pero ano ba'ng ginagawa sa amin 'di ba? Dinudurog ang mga bahay namin kasama ang kabuhayan namin. Laging sinasabi na unlad ang lugar namin. Pero kaninong pagpapaunlad?" (Why is it that we remain poor? Because of the destruction of our homes along with our livelihood. We are already thriving in the community, but this is what they incessantly do. The housing agency repeatedly says that our land will develop. But who will benefit from this? Development for whom?) (SSR 2021b, 0:52)

Basion Verza, a vendor and unorganized resident of Sitio San Roque, notes that given the huge scale of the Vertis North project, onsite housing should be allocated for residents of the community, emphasizing that the housing units will not be free but will be paid for. According to her, "Ang laki nito [lupa ng Sitio San Roque] . . . May matitirang dapat para sa mga tao. Ang gawin nila: gawan din nila ng bahay para pagtirhan. Babayaran naman. Basta dito [na] malapit sa trabaho" (The land of Sitio San Roque is expansive. What the authorities can do is create housing for the residents on it. We will pay for it as long as it is here where work is available.) (Ringia 2017, 0:03).

Highlighting the importance of access to livelihood in settlements, she continues: "Ang pinaka-importante ay 'yung trabaho. Number one ang trabaho. Hindi naman tayo nanghihingi [ng libre] sa gobyerno. Basta may

trabaho, maayos na trabaho. ‘Yun lang naman ang hinihiling namin’ (The most important factor to consider in housing provision is livelihood. We are not asking the government for free housing. We can pay for it as long as there is work, decent work.) (Ringia 2017, 0:19).

Residents of Sitio San Roque did not simply stand by and watch the eviction take place. They found and utilized creative ways and strategies available to them to defend their community from being razed. In the early parts of their struggle, these took the form of mobilizations, protest marches, noise barrages, prayer vigils, and most significantly, community barricades. The position of settlement-based people’s organizations (PO) and even unorganized residents in Sitio San Roque, then, was clear: reject off-city relocation and assert onsite development for socialized housing. The strength of marginalized groups, for Verza, is found in their unity and that collective action is key to forwarding their demands to authorities.

Kailangan sama-sama tayong lahat para magkaroon tayo ng lakas. ‘Yung pagkakaisa natural ‘yan sa ‘tin dapat [na mahihirap]. Parang walis tingting [tayo], ‘di ba? Pag isang piraso lang, walang puwersa. Kailangan buo, marami. Kahit anong dami nila, kahit sino pa ‘yung kaharap natin, kaya natin silang walisin.

(We need to come together and unite for us to have strength. Unity should be natural for us marginalized peoples for we are like hard brooms, weak and brittle when isolated, but strong when we are many and bonded. Their numbers and their positions would not matter, we can stand up to them.) (SSR 2021c, 4:25)

On 23 September 2010, the power of unity, solidarity, and collective action was demonstrated in the fierce resistance put up by Sitio San Roque through their *Barikadang Bayan* (community barricade). KD–SR (previously Anakpawis–North Triangle), San Roque Community Council–North Triangle Alliance (SRCC–NTA), Nagkakaisang Naninirahan sa North Triangle (N3T; United Residents of North Triangle) Alliance, United Muslims Association (UMA)—POs in the community—set aside their varying ideological leanings and combined strengths with nonaffiliated residents to collectively assert their rights. With both the QC LGU and NHA dismissing their appeals for a dialogue to suspend the impending demolition, Sitio San Roque was compelled to put up a community barricade. Prior to 23 September, the community leaders of the four POs collectively designed a coordinated community defense

plan, with KD–SR in the lead. Each organization was assigned to defend a specific access point, and women were designated as human-chain frontliners. Friends from the media, church groups, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and social movements were requested to support and cover the event. Residents also filed a temporary restraining order that was ruled in favor of the community by Quezon City Regional Trial Court Judge Ma. Luisa Padilla (Ellao 2010).

Failed by the housing laws, pushed to their limits, and without other resources to defend themselves, the residents instinctively fought using whatever is at their disposal, may it be rocks, bottles, debris, and in some circumstances, plastic bags filled with feces and urine, and fish intestines. Residents were able to occupy EDSA and halted traffic in the capital for hours. Heavy traffic was felt up to the international airport. Recalling her experience as a mother and a formerly unorganized resident who decided to join the human-chain frontliners at the 2010 *Barikadang Bayan*, Melanie Marsaba says,

Hindi pa masyadong buong puso ang puso ko nung nagtawag ng barikada pero nakisama ako. Nagkaroon ng batuhan habang kaming mga nanay ay naghahawak-hawak kamay. Sa barikada, kaming mga babae ang nauna. Sa gitna ng gulo, nagbitawan kaming mga nanay . . . nanakit na ‘yung mga pulis. Binugbog kami ng mga pulis. Pinukpok kami ng mga batuta. Kami rin nakibato na [sa kalaunan]. Pero alam mo, kapag may nagsabing magbarikada, ang dami—mga kabataan, halos lahat ng nandiyan, sumasama.

(I had reservations about joining the community barricade. But when my fellow residents called for aid, I decided to show my solidarity and support. There was an intense clash between the police personnel and residents in the barricade, while we mothers were at its front with our hands linked to each other. When the skirmish intensified, we mothers released our hands. The police advanced and repeatedly struck us and beat us with their clubs. We eventually fought back. But you know, when your community is threatened by demolition, residents show up for each other. Almost everyone is present, even the youth.)

The resistance of Sitio San Roque compelled then-President Benigno Aquino III to declare “a three-month [nationwide] moratorium” on demolitions of urban poor communities, and consequently, brought the right to housing and in-city housing advocacies in policy discussions (Arcilla 2022, 7). Bagasbas, who was president of the September 23 Movement and later became chairperson of KD–SR, notes that the

community barricade also allowed Sitio San Roque to gain sympathy from other urban poor communities, church groups, and from the public: “Nakakuha din ng simpatya sa [aming] ginawa . . . wala namang hangad kasi na iba [ang mga residente] kundi bahay; pati simbahan, sumuporta.” (We also gained sympathy from our collective action. Our aspiration for decent housing has been strongly manifested in the community barricade; even the church has given its support.)

Community leaders, up to this day, recall the community barricade in 2010 with a sense of heroism in their collective unity and sacrifice (Arcilla 2020). Anestea Gole, a community leader and a former member of Anakpawis–North Triangle, highlights the inherent solidarity prevailing in the community at the time. “Nag-barikada ako, siyempre! Lahat naman kasama [doon]! Bakit kailangan pang mag-isip [kung sasama], eh andiyan na ‘yung demolisyon?” (Of course, I joined the barricade! Everyone was there! We do not have to think twice about joining because the demolition team is already there.) Momentarily, Sitio San Roque triumphed over the monied interests of the NHA–ALI. In the succeeding years, many urban poor communities in the country utilized and replicated community barricades to resist forced evictions, inspired by Sitio San Roque’s earlier success.



SOURCE: Jennifer Chan / Bulatlat

In spite of the victory in 2010 and the good that has come from it, the community in the following years has been subjected to divisive conditioning by state agencies. This is characterized by the production of

disciplined subjects detrimental to Sitio San Roque's collective resistance which has resulted to the: (1) selective inclusion in state engagements, (2) implicit categorization of residents into "productive/law-abiding" and "unproductive/disobedient," and (3) internalization of differential citizenships reinforced by the state (Arcilla 2020).

It was the confrontative *Barikadang Bayan* on 23 September that opened spaces for democratic participation of POs in Sitio San Roque. However, inclusion was limited to POs that were deemed "productive/law-abiding"—those who conceded to better-than-off-city-resettlement after 2010, such as SRCC-NTA, who, after succeeding dialogues with the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), were implicitly instructed to tone down their demands for onsite housing and not participate in community barricades and protests against QC CBD. From their initial onsite socialized housing proposal, they shifted their demands, and eventually, in 2014, the group split into two: the SRCC-Magic Circle Housing Cooperative (SRCC-MCHC), which settled for in-city row housing, and SRCC-Multi-Purpose Cooperative (SRCC-MPC), which asserted for off-city single attached housing (Arcilla 2020).

On the other hand, POs that continued to struggle for on-site housing were deemed "unproductive/disobedient." KD-SR and UMA fell into this category. KD-SR was even subjected to intense surveillance and policing. In 2011, security guard outposts were installed in the main thoroughfares of Sitio San Roque for convenient monitoring of activities in the community. With the inadequateness of state housing resources becoming more apparent to POs and residents, community politics in Sitio San Roque significantly changed with POs and residents internalizing a morality convenient to the interest of state-private interests—one that demonizes and delegitimizes the exercise of militancy by POs that typically assert the urban poor's inalienable right to housing. Exclusion embedded in the housing policy and neoliberal governance "has facilitated the political hostility and factionalism amongst POs" in Sitio San Roque (Arcilla 2020 quoted in Save San Roque 2020; Luna 2021). Despite having a common experience of marginalization, disunity and competition became almost inevitable within neoliberal arrangements of state housing systems, leading to POs in Sitio San Roque severing the unities they forged early in their struggle for onsite housing.

This vilification and morality, assimilated into the residents, are highly evident in the experience of KD-SR. Fe Seduco, a community leader

of KD–SR, says, “Wala ‘yang pabahay na makukuha kasi disqualified ‘yan sila—gagamitin lang tayo niyan. ‘Ta mo, rally sila nang rally. Masakit [ang sinasabi sa ‘min], pero ‘di namin inaano” (They will not be successful in attaining housing because they are disqualified. They will only use us for their gain. Look at them . . . they always protest. It is painful for us [to hear such words from fellow residents], but we pay no attention to these remarks.) (UST AngeliCOMMunity 2021, 3:01).

The fragmentation in Sitio San Roque is further manifested in the divergent, uncoordinated, and independent strategies the POs undertook after 2010 in pursuit of accessing state housing resources and in confronting demolitions. When another demolition attempt came in 2014, KD–SR found themselves deserted by other POs and alone in defending a large section of the community from being razed to the ground. Bagasbas recalls, “Noong 2014, kami na lang [ang nasa barikada]. Wala na talagang SRCC na nakilahok. Ang UMA, sumaglit lang din. ‘Di na katulad nang dati na ‘yung laban talaga nung 2010 . . . bumabad talaga [ang lahat]. Walang nag-respond [dito]” (During the 2014 demolition, we were all alone at the community barricade: SRCC did not join at all while UMA had very minimal participation in it. What happened was very different from 2010 when all residents and POs were there. No one, aside from us actively participated).

The climate of fear and panic that spread throughout Sitio San Roque, manufactured through the continuous threats of demolition and fire incidents, made the remaining POs and residents all the more susceptible to forced eviction and displacement.

Incremental Evictions

Responding to the tenacity of residents and the success of their *Barikadang Bayan* in 2010, developers and state agencies changed their eviction approach from large-scale to incremental demolitions. This strategy, while conventionally employed by the urban poor in acquiring basic necessities of life (e.g., land for housing and livelihood, and access to public spaces and utilities), has been co-opted by NHA–ALI and, later, SPI in evicting the residents of Sitio San Roque. With a combination of coercion, the capitalization of community fragmentation, surveillance, intimidation, and harassment, it takes the path of least resistance—gradual and silent—to ensure the incremental eviction of residents and clearing of segments in the community (Recio and Dovey 2021).

These machinations are visible in how SPI, abetted by NHA, conducted its eviction activities in the protruded segment of the community to prepare the area for the construction of Solaire Resort and Casino in Vertis North. Their operations are said to have started in 2017, two years after the purchase from NHA, but have greatly leveraged off the damage done to the area in 2010. This segment, which includes the Samanaka and Sebastian areas, has been identified by SPI as a priority area for demolition, and has been referred to by the residents as Area J.

To easily clear the priority area, from 2017 onwards, SRCC–MCHC members, which comprise the majority of structure owners here, were prioritized to be transferred to their resettlement sites. SPI, to hasten this process, has also offered a compensation package to structure owners who will agree to voluntarily dismantle their housing units. This package includes an increased financial offer and a relocation to public rental housing.



SOURCE: Ricky Indicio / Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap - San Roque

However, structure owners who refuse to “self-demolish” are threatened by NHA personnel with exclusion from subsequent compensation packages or socialized housing programs. Renters who may still be residing in these units are rendered homeless and excluded from any compensation, fueling the division created by the limiting of rights-claiming to structure owners enforced by NHA. Marsaba, a former resident of Samanaka area, recalls her experience with this violent scheme,

Twenty eighteen ng Oktubre nang giniba ang bahay namin sa San Roque. Tinanong ko ‘yung may-ari ng inuupahan namin kung bakit siya pumayag. Sabi na lamang niya na siya ang masusunod kasi siya ang may-ari. Sa tagal na naming magkasama, sa halos anim na taon naming nangungupahan, ganito ang nangyari. Pinuntahan namin ang NHA . . . baka matulungan nila kami, pero wala. “Palaban-laban pa kayo, pero pupunta pa rin pala kayo at makikiusap,” sabi ng taga-NHA. Sabi ko, “Kanino ba kami lalapit? Hindi ba ang National Housing Authority ang dapat na magbigay-solusyon sa aming mga ginibang bahay?” Hindi ba sila ang responsible sa amin?

(It was October 2018 when our home in San Roque was demolished. I asked our landlady why she agreed to this. She said that because she was the structure owner, the decision is hers fully. Even though we were together for almost six years, she allowed this to happen. We went to the NHA in the hopes that they could help us, but instead we were mocked when we arrived there. I exclaimed to them: Is it not the role of the National Housing Authority to give solutions to our demolished houses? Are they not the one responsible for what happened to us?)

These vacated areas are immediately fenced and sealed to prevent the reconstruction of housing units. In some cases, private security guards were stationed in newly enclosed areas to bolster security. Margie Balwarte, a former resident of the Sebastian area and currently a resident of Area J, notes that SPI also uses the gradual intrusion of fences to pressure persisting residents into moving out of the priority area. She explains this particular method of SPI security personnel, “Nananakot [muna] . . . tapos andiyan na ‘yung bakod. Inunti-unti na nila ‘yung bakod sa mga bahay, hanggang mabakuran na talaga.” (They first try to frighten the residents . . . then they set up these fences that incrementally move towards the houses until they are enveloped within.) The increasing number of “empty patches of concrete flooring” and the “sense of dereliction” pervading also create a dismal effect that diminishes the hopes of those who remain (Recio and Dovey 2021, 809).

SPI security personnel also explored various methods to coerce persistent residents into leaving the area: offering jobs in construction or food service, establishing close “friendships,” and in some cases, courting *nanays* (mothers) in the area. When these efforts do not materialize, they resort to other methods that aim to sow distrust among residents and make the area unlivable (e.g., publicly defaming community leaders, spreading unfounded gossip in the area, setting up pig pens adjacent to housing units, and interfering with their livelihood as informal workers). According to Seduco, who is also a resident in the priority area, SPI engages in the deliberate degradation of the living conditions in the area to drive out residents. She explicates,

Ang kinakaharap namin, bukod sa pandemic, ay ‘yung demolisyon lalo na sa Area J . . . ongoing ‘yung construction ng Solaire Casino dito sa area namin. Kaya kami pinapalayas, pilit pinapaalis, ginigipit ngayon, binabakuran na kami . . . para na po kaming hayop dito na binabakuran. Isa na lang [ang] dadaanan namin papuntang EDSA at palengke [sa Agham] . . . bundok-bundok, nasa tabing-sapa pa. Nagbabanta na rin sila na tatanggalan din ng kuryente. Ito ang mga paraan nila para gipitin at harassin kami: para susuko kami at aalis kami dito.

(What we are facing right now, besides the pandemic, is demolition, especially in our segment of the community, Area J [priority area] where the construction of Solaire Casino is ongoing. This is why we are being forced to leave. They are treating us like animals as they are closing in on us with their fences, limiting our movements and our access points into and outside the community. They are also threatening us with disconnection of our electricity source. These are their means to further marginalize and harass us into submitting to eviction.)

These would later escalate after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic with the “gradual assimilation of personnel from the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)” into Sitio San Roque’s community affairs (SSR 2021a, 11). Following the national government’s implementation of a militaristic response to the pandemic, Sitio San Roque experienced a heightened presence of state forces, which started with them conducting their own humanitarian aid initiatives (e.g., the distribution of meals and other relief goods), and squeezing themselves into collective activities organized by POs in the community (e.g., PO meetings, clean-up drives, community kitchens, and community-based health response efforts). They went on to make regular rounds in the community, supposedly to ensure health protocols and promote proper mask-wearing.

Community leaders, particularly those of KD–SR, since then, have experienced multiple visits from state forces for various “interviews” and “consultations.” Community meetings and orientations organized by them have also become rampant alongside red-tagging, harassment, and surveillance of community leaders and politically-active residents in Sitio San Roque. According to multiple accounts from community leaders of KD–SR, state forces are now coordinating with NHA–ALI security guards and SPI security personnel in maintaining ‘peace and order’ in the community. Gole attests to this, “Konting ano [activity] lang dito [sa priority area], magtatawag na sila.” (When there is an activity/movement in the priority area, NHA-ALI and SPI would almost immediately call upon state forces to meddle and intervene.) Scaling up their “peace-building efforts,” state forces have also moved towards forcibly organizing residents into “organizations” and offering assistance to settlement-based and sectoral POs in the community. Under the Retooled Community Support Program (RCSP), the primary program of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) Basic Services Cluster, state forces intrude into the developing housing and livelihood campaigns of POs in the community. A narrative from Alma Esteban, a vendor and member KD–SR, who currently resides in the priority area, elucidates how efforts to evict them have intensified and amalgamated after the COVID-19 outbreak. Explaining how these eviction tactics are not only dispossessing them of their homes but are also depriving them of making a living, she said,

Grabe na ang panghaharass ng mga ‘dayuhan’ dito sa San Roque . . . nagsanib-puwera na ang MMDA, Task Force Disiplina, at Solaire. Ang gusto [naman] ng mga militar ‘di na daw ako magtitinda dito. Kahit araw bawal daw magtinda. Nasa mga 20 mahigit sila [noon] . . . andami nila. Pinalibutan nila yung poder. Nakakatakot. Tinatangalan na kami ng tirahan, tinatangalan pa kami ng kabuhayan, at ang masakit dun ay hindi nga kami pinapatay sa mga matataas na baril pero pinapatay kami sa araw-araw na panggigipit sa amin

(The harassment of “foreigners” in San Roque is already unbearable. MMDA, Task Force Disiplina, and SPI even joined forces [in harassing us]. State forces deployed in our community, at one point, even prohibited me from selling even at daytime. More than 20 of them surrounded my store. It was extremely frightening. We are being evicted from our homes, and denied of our work. Although they are not raising their guns at us to kill us on-the-spot, they are already doing so by tormenting us every day.)

Persistent Resistance



SOURCE: Save San Roque

Despite the incessant eviction tactics and constant violence employed at Sitio San Roque, residents in the community continue to struggle for the right to the city and inclusive development, albeit in different capacities. Unquestionably the most militant in rights claiming are members of KD-SR, a local chapter of Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap in Sitio San Roque. Unlike the other settlement-based POs in Sitio San Roque, KD-SR has welcomed renters and those who have been disqualified from NHA housing programs into the organization. The organization recognizes that housing rights transcend shanty ownership or census status and should be afforded to all.

Initially, KD-SR relied mainly on defensive and confrontative strategies in asserting rights (e.g., community barricades, mobilizations, and protest marches). These disrupt gentrification projects, criticize the commodification of socialized housing (Arcilla 2022), expose the market logic underlying the assembled operations of developers and state agencies, and argue for the urban poor residents' right to the city. According to Seduco, KD-SR's persistent militancy has benefitted not just their members but also the remaining residents in the community.

Alam po namin ang ipinaglalaman namin. Pati nga po sila ay nakikinabang sa laban. Noong 2010, kung hindi lumabas ang mga tao sa bahay nila, wala na po ang San Roque. Washed out na. Pero 'ta mo hanggang ngayon, andito pa rin ang San Roque. Dahil naninindigan at nanatili ang mga tao dito sa San Roque, at unang una andiyan ang organisasyon namin na talagang nag-push, nagiit sa karapatan sa paninirahan dito.

(We know what we are fighting for. Other residents also benefit because we continue to struggle. If the people did not go into the streets, Sitio San Roque would have ceased to exist. The community remains intact because the residents are persisting, and our PO has been steadfast in leading the resistance and advocating for the housing rights of Sitio San Roque.) (UST AngeliCOMMunity 2021, 3:13)

Following the success of the 2010 *Barikadang Bayan* were consecutive “fire incidents” in the community. Due to Sitio San Roque being a highly-dense community, at the time, arson was evidently the most effective way to evict residents. Residents firmly believe that it is those with vested interests in Vertis North who are behind these fires (San Andres and Viray 2012). In response, KD–SR organized what they call *Bantay Sunog* (Fire Prevention) teams in different areas of Sitio San Roque. Every night, a team composed of 10 to 15 members, mostly women, makes rounds in the whole community to keep watch for any suspicious activity. After patrolling, they usually stand guard in the densest areas of the community. *Bantay Sunog* would start at 11 p.m. (the time that most residents have gone to bed) and end at 4 a.m. the next day (the time that most residents are beginning to wake up). This program, however, came to an end in 2014.

KD–SR’s approach started to incorporate more offensive and negotiative strategies into its repertoire of resistance strategies after the 2014 *Barikadang Bayan*. The strategies they employ vary depending on the current organizational capacity, intra community politics, and political climate—both at the local and national levels. These are conceptualized and collectively refined in exchanges during community meetings, planning sessions, capacity training, and educational discussions—practices of KD–SR that Arcilla (2022) refers to as “invisible insurgent housing practices.”

Although the community barricade in 2014 fell short in derailing the violent demolition, displaced residents, with the leadership of KD–SR, launched a counteroffensive. More than 300 families, whose homes were demolished, occupied Agham Road (in front of the community) and built makeshift shelters from whatever light material they could rummage from piles of debris that once were their homes (Quijano 2014). Residents had nowhere to go and lacked the means to transfer to another urban poor community. For these reasons, they saw the occupation as a viable solution at the time. The majority of the affected families are renting households disqualified by NHA from its relocation program and are KD–SR members. On the other hand, despite being automatically entitled to

a relocation, affected structure owners from KD–SR also camped out in solidarity. Their occupation, which lasted for a week, served as a protest against the inhumane eviction and an exposition of the exclusionary relocation policy of the NHA. Because of this offensive strategy, the NHA was compelled to include the previously disqualified renters in their relocation programs in Gaya-gaya in San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan and Montalban, Rizal. Former KD–SR members transferred to these resettlement areas, up to this day, continuing to be organized and active in the urban poor movement.

When the voluntary dismantling scheme of NHA became rampant in the following years, KD–SR responded by defending its renter members’ rights and negotiating with the housing agency that they be allowed to have their previously rented rooms/housing spaces rebuilt after partial demolition. Members call this effort of collective rebuilding out of the rubble of demolished housing units as *Tumbalik*, a portmanteau of the words *tumba* (tumble) and *balik* (reerect/restore) (Cunanan 2020). To execute the *Tumbalik* (collective home restoration), members of KD–SR had to carefully monitor the actions of the demolition team to ensure that they would not completely tear down houses. Marsaba recalls participating in *Tumbalik* during Typhoon Rosita in November 2018. She says, “Nagtipon-tipon kami . . . mga nanay, mga miyembro, mga lider. Nagpaulan kami. Lahat kami, nagpaulan lahat. Inayos namin ‘yung mga sirang bubong at tinayo ang giniba nila.” (Everyone gathered [for *Tumbalik*]: mothers, members, community leaders. We were all drenched after the demolition was carried out during a typhoon. Collectively, we restored what they had demolished.) KD–SR continues to use this strategy in the case of a swift illegal demolition of its members’ houses.



SOURCE: Ricky Indicio / Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap - San Roque

Another strategy it developed was the assertion of temporary shelters. This started in 2018 when the clearing operations of SPI

intensified in parts of the project area—known to the residents as Samanaka, Sebastian, and later on as Area J. To ensure that residents would still have a space in the community, KD–SR negotiated with SPI to secure the transfer of its members, and subsequently, unorganized residents to shelters constructed by SPI. KD–SR considers this defensive strategy to be a last-ditch effort, only to be utilized in (1) situations wherein KD–SR does not have the organizational capacity to militantly defend the residents and (2) after *Tumbalik* has already been done. While the temporary shelters are significantly more spacious, residents have expressed sadness about having their original houses demolished. They are also concerned for their security of tenure. They are aware that SPI is pursuing them and would eventually need the land on which the shelters have been built on. Additional costs also further burden transferring residents as they spend more or less than PHP 10,000.00 in order to make the shelters livable. Upon turnover, these shelters are only ‘core houses’ with walls, columns, and a roof. KD–SR has responded to successive attempts of SPI to evict residents from the shelters with militant protests and condemnation—on the ground and online.



Source: Save San Roque

Recognizing the limitations of defensive strategies to provide security of tenure and responding to the hopes of the persisting residents for a more concrete housing program, in 2019 KD–SR adopted an offensive and negotiative strategy in the form of the People’s Proposal, later renamed the Community Development Plan (CDP), KD–SR’s interpretation of the “People’s Plan.” Bagasbas, in an interview with Beltran (2021), reiterates that persisting residents will not give up

doing community barricades; she says it will always be used as a “tactic of last resort.” However, she also notes that “the community must create newer and broader forms of struggle” so as to get their message across in multiple arenas. As this new direction was being pursued by KD–SR, Save San Roque (SSR), a network of professionals, students, and urban poor advocates, was formed in 2019 to aid residents with their alternative housing proposal as well as to amplify the campaign to assert it.

The emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 has also opened a new space for solidarity to emerge in spite of community fragmentation. Due to the greater marginalization (i.e., unemployment, hunger, and vulnerability to the virus) that Sitio San Roque has experienced, formerly divided POs in the community once again worked together to run collective self-help projects (e.g., relief operations, community kitchens, community food gardens) (Faminiano et al. 2021). In pandemic times, Sitio San Roque integrated the land assertion and resistance agenda in their COVID-19 mitigation initiatives (Rosilio et al. 2022; Recio and Shafique 2022).



SOURCE: Save San Roque

This did not last long, however, as heightened militarization and operations of the NTF-ELCAC furthered the intra community conflicts and rifts through co-opting the development process of other POs. While the potentiality of these to bring forth continuous solidarity among different POs in the community was severely limited by the intervention of state forces, these community initiatives garnered favorable attention from the public and the media. This allowed for the re-formation of a positive image for Sitio San Roque, the strengthening of advocacy networks outside the community, and the creation of bigger openings for sustained state engagements with the QC LGU and other government agencies.

Participating in Development through the CDP

Because existing state housing programs available to residents exclude the most disadvantaged, fail to recognize the unalienable right to adequate housing and the right to development of all residents, and do not serve the welfare of its “beneficiaries,” the community itself has taken the initiative to create one. Initiated and led by KD–SR, the CDP is a proposal as much as it is a grassroots campaign and assertion for an alternative housing program that espouses the residents’ aspirations to participate in development, continue living and working in the urban center, and access services and resources of the city. As Seduco reiterates,

Ang CDP ay pagbuo ng mga taga-komunidad sa ating pabahay...i-didisenyo natin nang disente, abot-kaya, pang-masa . . . para sa lahat. Dapat nating igiit ang ating karapatan sa paninirahan, trabaho, kabuhayan, at serbisyong panlipunan. (The CDP is the community making its effort to craft its own housing program that is decent, affordable, and inclusive to everyone. We need to assert our right to access housing, livelihood, and basic social services.)

The CDP, as a technical endeavor, has three key components—profiling, mapping, and planning—that were carried out from April to December 2019. For the alternative housing program to embody the aspirations of the community, the residents should lead the processes of designing and deciding. A community-based participatory design process was employed to ensure their genuine participation in the crafting of the CDP. Profiling was geared towards producing an in-depth survey of the varying socioeconomic conditions of residents. This component ensures that the alternative housing program would correspond to their particular financial capacities and basic needs for living with dignity. This was accomplished through the teamwork between the co-participants—residents and SSR volunteers—in conducting house-to-house interviews. SSR volunteers encoded the data and returned it to the community leaders for analysis and, later on, for validation of affordability.



SOURCE: Save San Roque

To plot and study (1) the community's spaces, (2) the extent of encroachment and demolition by the NHA-ALI and SPI alliance, (3) and the effects of eviction activities on the residents, counter-mapping was undertaken. Data gathered from the activity was also used in piecing together the spatial and social information of the community, and forming connections among oral histories and personal accounts of residents. Having done so helped participants gain a deeper understanding of the emergent purposes of these spaces, the conditions in different areas, and the continuing history of Sitio San Roque. Esteban recalls her experience participating in the counter-mapping,

Doon tayo nagtukoy ng kung san 'yung dating mga lugar [sa Sitio San Roque]. Mahalaga kasi inalala 'yung memories. Nakakalungkot kasi nawala na sa mapa . . . parang sa 'yo na tapos biglang nawala. Kumbaga, may dumating na bagyo na hindi mo aasahang babaha, pero inanod lahat.

(Through it, we identified the spaces that were no longer existing. It is important because it's as if we commemorated them. It was saddening because these spaces were erased from the map of the community like a typhoon that people weren't expecting to be strong but managed to wash away everything.)

In planning the physical design of the CDP in its initial version, a series of participatory design workshops were conducted to assist the residents in designing their envisioned housing units and community site plan. These ensure the genuine participation of residents in planning the development. The workshops are as follows: (1) Dream House, (2) Vision of Inclusive Development, and (3) Medium-Rise Building (MRB) Unit Floor Plan, Building Floor Plan, and Site Development.

The Dream House Workshop helped residents identify their individual needs and wants when it comes to housing, communicate their ideal housing typology, and assist in consolidating individual needs and wants to collective ones that they agreed upon (KD-SR and SSR 2021). Esteban reflects, "Nakita ko 'yung kahalagahan noon kasi nakukuha ang ideya na gusto ng mga residente. Hindi yung sila [taga-labas] ang masusunod; kailangang kami ang masusunod. Kami naman ang titira eh." (I saw the importance of the activity because it surfaced what we wanted. It is important that we are the most decisive in the design of our house because we are the residents.)



SOURCE: Save San Roque

Inclusive development, for many residents, has been abstract and unimaginable and continues to be for some. In an attempt to remedy this and create a visual representation, the Visioning Workshop was conducted. This is not only to create visuals for inclusive development but also to strengthen the residents’ shared vision for Sitio San Roque.

Ang Sitio San Roque ay isang komunidad na binubuo ng mga masayahin, marangal, at nagkakaisang mamamayan para sa isang malinis, payapa, disente, abot-kayang on-site na pabahay na mayroong kabuhayan, murang bilihin, at iba pang pangunahing pangangailangan.

(Sitio San Roque is a community built by and composed of cheerful, honorable, and united citizens for a clean, peaceful, decent, and affordable housing that has access to livelihood, affordable goods, and other essential needs.)



SOURCE: Save San Roque

Subsequent planning sessions with community leaders and residents delved into identifying a speculative portion for on-site development and a fitting socialized housing typology. Following these discussions, the third series of workshops were designed to concretize the agreed-upon onsite MRB housing.

These workshops assisted the residents in identifying the particular needs of groups and sectors in the community, designing a housing unit that is responsive to their context, and making an informed decision in determining the floor layout of the MRBs and its arrangement in a speculative portion of Sitio San Roque (based on the zoning of spaces in the Vertis North Master Plan).

For Weng Nacubuan, these participatory design workshops have been extremely helpful in assisting residents in reimagining Sitio San Roque and drawing the possibilities of an inclusive development. She continues, “Importante itong proseso sa pagbuo ng CDP. Alam ng mga tao ‘yung kung ano at kung paano: kasi sila mismo ang nagdisenyo at nagpasya” (This process is important in crafting the CDP. [Through it], the people know what the housing is and how to make it a reality because they are the designers and decision-makers).

CDP as an Alternative Housing Model

Inclusive. There are still 6,485 households remaining in Sitio San Roque according to NHA’s records in 2019. Among these households, 4,561 are disqualified from NHA’s relocation program. In addition, 1,024 of the 1,924 “qualified” households are structure owners (KD–SR and SSR 2022). Embedded exclusions in accessing the state housing resources, in the case of Sitio San Roque, divided residents based on shanty ownership as well as census status and undermined the rights of renters and households who were not included in the census (i.e., senior citizens, single-parents, and LGBTQ+).

Surfacing the plight of renters within the neoliberal arrangements of socialized housing, Esteban says, “Di kami magkaron ng bahay kung walang CDP. Lalo pa’t kaming mga renter dati, hindi pinapansin [sa housing] . . . doon talaga [kami] umaasa” (We will not be granted any housing if we do not fight for the CDP. Renters, specifically, have been sidelined from the housing program. We are depending on the CDP). Thus, according to her, when KD–SR was still conceptualizing the CDP,

renter members, which comprise a bulk of the membership, asserted that their situation be given due importance.

Relocates, on the other hand, also experience exclusion from the housing program, having already been a “beneficiary.” Those who were compelled by the inhabitability of off-city resettlement sites to return were often viewed with disdain by residents, reflective of the “professional squatters” frame embedded in the UDHA. However, in the account of Pedro Matukan, a member of KD–SR and returning relocatee, the status of relocates as “beneficiaries” is clearly unmasked. It is elucidated here that they are “victims” not just of accumulation by eviction and the market-oriented socialized housing program but more so of greater social inequalities.

Nagparelocate ako dahil may sakit ‘yung asawa ko; wala akong pambayad sa ospital. Pag-relocate, araw ng Miyerkoles ‘yun, iniwan ko lang ang pera [sa kanya] para mapasok siya sa ospital. Ubos agad ‘yung ₱5,000.00 na bigay [bilang financial assistance]. Ang dinatnan namin doon [sa relokasyon], parang talagang walang-wala. Pag-ikot ko pang ganyan, may patay na nilagay sa sako. Nagbabalikan ako [sa trabaho sa Quezon City] . . . nahirapan ako. Pagkalayo naman kasi! Sabi ko, uuwi ako sa San Roque. Umuwi ako talaga; nagtinda ako ng balut.

(I was compelled to relocate because my wife was sick, at the time. I was transferred there on Tuesday; I just left the financial assistance that came with the relocation package to my wife so she could have herself admitted in the hospital. The PHP 5,000.00 was almost instantly used up. When I got to the relocation, nothing was there. I even saw a dead body in a sack when I walked around the site. Still, I tried to continue my job in Quezon City, but it was extremely hard given the distance of the relocation to my place of work. I said to myself that I will leave the relocation and return to Sitio San Roque. I did and continued selling *balut* here.)

While it is apparent that the inclusion of relocates to the CDP requires a further collective study on the technicalities and particularities of each individual case, CDP, in principle, recognizes that all residents are rights-bearers and should not be barred from participating in the alternative housing program. Bagasbas empathically expresses, “Dapat walang maiwan na maralita . . . kailangang isama sa programang pabahay.” (No one should be left out . . . all urban poor residents should be included in the alternative housing program.)

Decent. Because the current state housing program lacks sufficient assessment of the livability of resettlement sites, and because the default option for relocation has been mostly off-city, relocatees experience myriad problems that ultimately compel them to return to the city center or to the urban poor communities they originally come from. Inestora Tanio, a member of KD–SR and returning relocatee, makes clear the deterioration in the quality of life experienced by those evicted to Montalban, Rizal, one of the earlier designated relocation sites for Sitio San Roque. “Ang karanasan namin doon [sa relokasyon] . . . ang buhay, nahirapan kami. Walang trabaho. ‘Pag magkasakit ka doon, walang ospital. Hirap kami sa tubig, sa ilaw.’” (Our experience in the relocation... livelihood is non-existent there and so we had difficulty in providing for ourselves. When people get sick, there is no hospital they can go to. Water and electricity are also difficult for us.) She continues, “Kaya kadalasan, binebenta [nila ang bahay . . . tapos] babalik sila. Nanungupahan dito.” (That is why most of the time, relocatees resell their housing units and return to Sitio San Roque, but this time as a renter.) Gole, in her experience in “trippings” (visits) to the more recent relocation sites, shares a similar sentiment with Tanio,

Nag-tripping kami . . . sa Morong, Rizal . . . mga 2018 ‘yun! Ang layo! Naligaw nga kami eh! Hindi nga nila [NHA] alam kung san [ang relokasyon], nakakabuwisit! Nakarating kami, pero hapong-hapon na, eh ‘di hindi kami nagtagal. May tao sa pabahay, pero kokonti lang. Pangit siya na bahay! Bitak-bitak. Kailangan mag-process pa sa tubig at koryente kaya wala pa. Walang nagparelocate doon [matapos ang tripping]. Bagsak ang kondisyon kasi malayo: malayo sa eskuwelahan, trabaho . . . malayo sa lahat!”

(We went on a tripping to a relocation site in Morong, Rizal in 2018. It was extremely far! We got lost on the way! Even the NHA personnel who were with us did not know where it was. We arrived but it was already late in the afternoon. There were only a few residents still living there. The houses were substandard! Walls of the housing units already had cracks. Water and electricity still had to be processed. No one from that tripping agreed to relocate there. The conditions were very poor because it was far from work and school—everything that was important!)

As such, CDP posits that “decent” housing goes beyond the housing units’ quality of materials and construction, it must include the following:

- (1.) *Proximity to livelihood.* A perennial problem identified in off-city relocation sites is its distance from the livelihood of relocatees.

Residents must be close to their workplace for them to be able to afford the housing units (presuming it is within the range of what is affordable to them), utilities, and other necessities.

- (2.) *Availability of utilities.* Because it has been a standard practice of water and electric companies to connect their services only after a majority of housing units are occupied, these utilities have been difficult for relocatees, especially those who were evicted much earlier.
- (3.) *Access to basic social services.* Nearness to schools, hospitals, markets, as well as affordable means of transportation are all essential in ensuring decent living—indubitably, the majority of off-city relocation sites fail to provide these within its vicinity.
- (4.) *Security of tenure and safety.* Assurance and safety from eviction are some of the aspirations of residents which stem from their trauma induced by constant threats of demolition and fire incidents. As Bagasbas points out, “Ang gusto namin ay bahay na aming matitirhan habang kami ay mabubuhay. May bahay na matatawag na hindi ka mangangamba na ikaw ay itaboy sa malayong relokasyon.” (What we want is housing where we can live while we are alive. A house wherein we would not have to worry if we will be evicted to far-flung relocation areas.)

Quality housing units, proximity to livelihood, availability of utilities, access to basic social services, security of tenure, and safety are emphasized in the CDP as vital elements in achieving “decent” living that will secure an improved quality of life for urban poor residents.

Affordable. Livelihood displacement and increased cost of living—from added transport costs and loss of support networks—are among the most probable adverse effects of relocation without consideration of livability. These pose negative risks to the net household income of relocatees. These may diminish their financial capability and worsen the inaccessibility of socialized housing, furthering the substantial gap between the set prices of socialized housing and the urban poor’s actual capacity to pay.

The CDP recognizes that households in urban poor communities have varying incomes and capacities. For the poorest of the poor to be able to afford socialized housing without compromising their basic needs, income-based subsidies will bridge the gap and must be part of

the alternative housing program. The initial version of the CDP specifies that financing for the subsidy may come directly from the national budget through the Government Appropriations Act (GAA) provisions on the funding of socialized housing agencies (i.e., NHA, Social Housing Finance Corporation [SHFC], and Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development [DHSUD]) or may be sourced from the QC LGU's Socialized Housing Tax (Ordinance No. SP-2095, S-2011), and Idle Land Tax.

What is affordable for the urban poor, according to the CDP, is contingent on a particular household's capacity to pay. Being employed in informal work, (1) with often low pay, (2) under precarious labor arrangements, and (3) having little to no access to social protection, will have implications on their capacity to pay as they are inherently vulnerable and even more at risk, especially during economic crises. These conditions of informal economy workers must be seriously considered and taken into account in the government's programs in housing finance and socialized housing. The CDP acknowledges that affordability is central to claiming the right to adequate housing.

Community-centered. The CDP aims to reach out to as many residents as possible and to enjoin them in asserting an alternative housing program that will allow the majority of Sitio San Roque residents—those who are renters and those who were disqualified or not included in the census—to access decent and affordable housing. Although the initial version of the CDP was primarily an onsite housing proposal, it has since developed a degree of flexibility but will continue to give primacy to the collective welfare of Sitio San Roque residents, due significance to the most marginalized, and adhere to the persisting residents' interpretations of what is inclusive, decent, and affordable.

This inclination towards collective welfare is clearly illustrated in the outcome of the series of participatory workshops SSR conducted alongside the community leaders of KD-SR. In the said workshop, these residents were asked to illustrate their vision of an ideal community given a limited plot of land. Results from this were remarkable as they designed the allotted space collectively and with the interest of the majority in mind. When asked why they decided to utilize tenement buildings as housing units, Weng Nacubuan, “Nasa instinct nalang namin . . . para magkasya ang mga tao sa maliit na espasyo.” (It is our instinct to ensure that people will have their own share of the small space.) Robustness of solidarity and collective power, precise community situational analysis,

and effective grassroots campaign and assertion now play crucial parts in the development of its form that can accommodate the broadest masses of the residents. The CDP also strives to integrate the residents' livelihood capabilities, particular needs, culture, and social networks present across different segments of the community (e.g., vendors, transport workers, daily wage laborers, elderly, women, children, religious and ethnolinguistic groupings).

Prospects of Continued Resistance

On 9 December 2019, the residents from Sitio San Roque, led by KD-SR, with SSR, handed over the CDP to Mayor Joy Belmonte after holding a fiesta-themed protest march and mobilization outside the Quezon City Hall. Representatives from the community and SSR engaged in a dialogue with the mayor to discuss the alternative housing program, its process, contents, and prospects.

Belmonte reiterated her earlier promise to review and investigate the joint venture between the NHA and ALI, particularly if the “Balanced Housing” requirement from UDHA had been followed. The mayor guaranteed that no large-scale demolition will take place in Sitio San Roque, vowing that should NHA move to renew its Certificate of Compliance (COC) on Demolition or Eviction, she will dismiss it (as the Chairperson of the Local Housing Board), and she will ensure that the residents are heard. She also called for the cooperation of state agencies and developers to achieve a “win-win situation.” Moreover, she reaffirmed that “people are not the enemies of progress and development” and vowed to review and consider the CDP of Sitio San Roque.

Beyond the technicalities, the CDP is an instrument for the residents' empowerment and political engagement. It reframes them as co-participants in reimagining their community, reclaiming their role as agents of change and not as mere “beneficiaries.” It also improves the co-participants' critical consciousness and understanding of their shared marginalization, and capacitates co-participants into collective action toward inclusive development. Bagasbas reflects,

Malaking bagay sa amin [‘yung CDP] kasi natuto kami. Sa tingin namin, may tiwala sa amin kasi pinayagan kaming gumawa nung pabahay. Masaya nga nung nakita namin yung nabuo namin. Nararamdaman ng komunidad na kami ang kailangan dito sa development. Dapat isama ang maralita sa pagpapaunlad!

(The CDP is a huge deal for us because we learned from it. We were trusted to be part of the planning and development of our housing. We were very happy when we saw the initial renders of our design! In the CDP, we felt that we were essential to the development. The urban poor should always be included in development!)



SOURCE: Quezon City Local Government / Facebook

On the 11th anniversary of the *Barikadang Bayan* in 2021, Sitio San Roque residents flocked the NHA headquarters to condemn the NHA-ALI's efforts to evict them amid the pandemic. They also proceeded to conduct a short program in front of the Quezon City Hall. Mayor Belmonte, during the program, addressed the residents, saying: “Ang gusto ko pong adbokasiya ay sana lahat ng walang paninirahan o katiyakan sa paninirahan, o tahanan [sa Quezon City], imbis na ma-relocate po sa mga lalawigan at mga probinsya, dapat sa Quezon City po tayo titira. Kasama na po ang inyong grupo na kabilang doon sa mga magiging benepisyaryo ng mga in-city housing programs po ng ating lungsod (My advocacy is to ensure that those who have no homes or no security of tenure in Quezon City will not be relocated to off-city relocations in the provinces but will be given housing here. Your group is included in the beneficiaries of Quezon City's in-city housing programs)” (Save San Roque 2021d).

The continued assertion of the residents, led by KD-SR, pushed the QC LGU and Mayor Belmonte to take a more progressive stand in housing provisions. This translated into the Quezon City Housing Community Development and Resettlement Department (HCDRD) recognizing the members of KD-SR, renters, and sharers as rights-bearers and rightful beneficiaries of the QC LGU's housing program.

Through the CDP, a space for democratic participation opened for residents who were previously sidelined, an avenue for the negotiation of an alternative housing program was created, and continuous engagement with the QC LGU was established. This form of resistance is, in a way, a success for the residents of Sitio San Roque because it was able to slow down the process of large-scale demolitions, highlight the immense skill and capability of the urban poor in deciding for their collective welfare and participating in development, and gather support and recognition from inside and outside the community. At its core, the CDP remains to be a platform where residents can continue collectively broadening their struggle and advancing an alternative housing program that is decent, affordable, community-centered, and most especially, includes those who are most marginalized. Despite the continuing eviction tactics that threaten the residents, their continued inventive resistance and struggle for inclusive development have furthered the possibilities for more humane and just housing alternatives whether onsite, near-site, or in-city.

Annex

Table 1 shows the recorded eviction efforts in Sitio San Roque, ranging from executed demolitions, fire incidents, and attempts for demolitions from 2010 to 2019. These were compiled by the Authors from the following: Suarez and Abella (2010); Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (2010a); Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (2010b); Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (2011); Silverio (2011); Ellao (2012b); San Andres and Viray (2012); Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (2013); Ellao (2014); IAI (2017); The Science Scholar (2018); Save San Roque (2019); Pedrajas (2021); and Kadamay (2019).

TABLE 1. Recorded Eviction Efforts in Sitio San Roque

Executed large-scale demolitions	Fire Incidents	Demolition attempts/ threats
Date/Period of Incident	Date/Period of Incident	Date/Period of Incident
2010	2010	2010
	2011	2011
	2012	2012
		2013
2014		
	2017	
		2018
	2019	2019
		2021

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Indigenous Lifeways as Grassroots Resistance and Environmental Preservation: The Experience of Fishers in Loktak Lake, Northeast India

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Abstract

The case study documents the struggles of fishers of Loktak Lake, Manipur in Northeast India. It reveals the hardships, environmental degradation, and economic dislocation they faced following the construction of the Ithai Barrage Dam in the wetland, and in the implementation of “development” policies and projects that seek to dispossess the indigenous Meitei communities who call this wetland their home for hundreds of years. Fishers in Loktak have developed distinct ways of livelihood and habitation to suit the wetland ecosystem, creating a symbiotic relationship between Loktak and the indigenous Meitei communities. The unique lifeways developed by fishers in Loktak are founded on principles of environmental preservation and resistance to development aggression.

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Situated in the valley districts of Bishnupur and Imphal West of Manipur, Loktak Lake is one of the largest inland freshwater lakes in India, and is the largest freshwater lake in the Northeast region of India, presently encompassing an area of 246.72 km² (SAC 2009). It has a “direct catchment area of 980 km² and an indirect catchment area of 7157 km²” (Thakur 2020). Loktak’s catchment area comprises nine sub-catchments: Imphal, Iril, Thoubal, Khuga, Nambul, Kongba, Heirok, Sekmai, and Western (Khwairakpam et al. 2021). There are also three zones in Loktak—the central zone, northern zone, and southern zone. The open water areas are mainly located in the central zone, but there are also a few patches of water bodies in the northern zone. Meanwhile, the southern zone is the site of the Keibul Lamjao National Park. Fourteen hillocks that arise as islands are also located in the central and southern parts of Loktak (Singh and Shyamananda 1994).

Phumdi

“Floating vegetative mats” (Khoiyangbam 2021), locally referred to as phumdis, are one of the most prominent features of Loktak Lake. Phumdi is a heterogenous biomass composed of living and decaying aquatic and terrestrial plants, soil, and other organic matter. It is created through the accumulation of water plants with suspended silt, and grasses. The large amount of vegetable matter contained in phumdi results in high buoyancy that allows it to stay afloat. It has been observed to have an average thickness of eight feet, and it floats on the lake with four-fifths of it under water, and one-fifth above the water surface. However, phumdi regularly changes shape, location, size and thickness, responding to the changes in season (Singh and Khundrakpam 2011).

This floating biomatter plays a vital role in the ecological processes of the lake, such as nutrient absorption and carbon sequestration. It also serves as a mechanism for governing the water and nutrient dynamics, and functions as a source of biofertilizer in Loktak (Kangabam et al. 2018).

Biodiversity

The Loktak Lake is a biodiversity hotspot, with 425 animal species—249 vertebrates and 176 invertebrates—inhabiting the area (Trisal and Manihar 2004). These include 186 fish species, 106 bird

species, 42 mammal species, 117 butterfly species, 6 amphibian species, 150 arthropod species, 10 mollusk species, 16 annelid species, 186 zooplankton species, 43 aquatic and semi-aquatic plants, 25 amphibian flora, and 120 rotifers (Kangabam et al. 2015).

The adjoining rivers bring nutrient-rich sedimentation to the Loktak Lake and the phumdis. Phumdis in the lake contribute to local biodiversity, as many species of aquatic, semi-aquatic and semi-terrestrial plants inhabit the phumdis. Due to its rich biodiversity, Loktak Lake was declared as a wetland of international importance by the 1990 Ramsar Convention and of national significance by the 2011 National Wetland Conservation Programme of the Government of India (Khoiyangbam 2021).

Lifeline

As many as 220,017 people, or 9 percent of the total population of the State of Manipur, are located in 65 villages inside and around the area (Census Organization of India 2011; Thaoroijam 2017). Loktak Lake provides food, livelihood, and shelter to the indigenous Meitei community, who depend on the vast resources present in the area.

Forty-seven phumdi plants are utilized by the indigenous Meitei community for various purposes: food, medicine, fodder and fuel, handicrafts, and habitation (Meitei 2014).

1. *Food.* There are 27 phumdi plants used in the indigenous Meitei community's food preparations. Furthermore, the edible parts of the various plant species growing on the phumdi—the whole plant, shoots, roots, leaves, and fruits—are also a component of the primary diet of the Manipur people (Meitei 2014).
2. *Medicine.* Twenty-five phumdi plants are used by the Maiba (i.e., traditional healers) for different medicinal purposes. The Maiba create extracts, powders, and pastes from these plants and use them to treat a variety of ailments, including wounds, cough, asthma, fevers, boils, and even rheumatism, hemorrhoids, epilepsy, stomach disorders, blood diseases, skin diseases, liver troubles, and nervous disorders (Meitei 2014).

3. *Fodder and Fuel.* Phumdi plants are also used by the indigenous Meitei community as feed for their domestic animals, which include buffaloes, cows, goats, and pigs. There are also 4 plants commonly used as fuel (Meitei 2015).

Loktak was the largest fishery resource of Manipur prior to the 1950s, contributing 60 percent of the State's total fish production (Devi et al. 2012a). Loktak Lake is considered the “lifeline” of the Manipur people due to its contributions to the ecological, social, economic, and cultural life in the state (Trisal and Manihar 2002). However, despite its importance to the life of both Loktak indigenous fishing communities and the people of Manipur, the lake has suffered severe degradation over the past decades.

The Impact of Development Projects

The Government of India, under the Ministry of Irrigation and Power, initiated the Loktak Multipurpose Hydroelectric Power Project in 1971. The project was then transferred to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Limited (NHPC) and was commissioned in 1983. The project's objectives were to: “(1) generate uninterrupted hydroelectric power supply, (2) control floods, (3) reclaim land, (4) provide lift irrigation, and (5) ensure water supply for various purposes” (Khoiyangbam 2021). As such, the Ithai Barrage was constructed at the junction of the Manipur and Khuga Rivers, which also necessitated redirecting the water from the lake to an open channel (Singh 2015). The Ithai Barrage converted Loktak into an artificial water reservoir, creating catastrophic shifts in the area's hydrology and ecosystem, and displacing human populations.

1. *Alterations in Hydrological Regimes.* Loktak was previously comprised of 63 smaller lakes. It experienced regular water level changes, and its breadth and depth varied with the seasons. In the dry season, when water levels were low, the separation of these lakes was evident. Smaller lakes would only merge into one water body in the rainy season, when water levels were high. Loktak Lake's inflow comes from various rivers that are connected hydrologically (Singh and Khundrakpam 2009). However, the Barrage blocked Loktak's outlet in the Manipur River, which drastically changed its normal flow, effectively

making the Barrage function as a water gate (Singh 2015). Since then, Loktak Lake has become a stagnant, single water body that is continuously flooded and regulated through the Barrage (Thakur 2020; Singh and Khundrakpam 2009).

2. *Flooding and Submergence of Land.* Since the water level of Loktak Lake is kept at 768.5 meters above the average sea level throughout the year—higher than the altitude of normal water level of Loktak—there has been frequent flooding in the upstream areas, especially during the rainy season. The refusal to open the shutter gates of the Barrage to maintain water levels has resulted in the flooding of vast productive agricultural land and settlement areas. About 83,450 hectares of arable and habitable land have been submerged since the construction of the Barrage (Singh 2018).
3. *Phumdi Degradation and Proliferation.* Seasonal shifts in Loktak Lake's water level trigger the natural life cycle of phumdis—in the dry season, the phumdi sink to the lake bed, thus absorbing nutrients; and in the rainy season, phumdis float on the surface of the lake (Kangabam et al. 2018). Through this cycle, the phumdis take in nutrients brought to the lake by the adjoining rivers. After the Ithai Barrage was constructed, there was an increase in water level, which kept the phumdi permanently suspended, depriving them of essential nutrients for growth and reducing their thickness (Thakur 2020; Khoiyangbam 2021).

Alongside thinning due to lack of nutrients, phumdi numbers have massively increased, as they have been unable to float away due to the blockade in the outlet of the lake created by the Ithai Barrage (Singh and Khundrakpam 2009).

4. *Threats to the Survival of the Sangai Deer.* In the southern part of the Loktak lies the Keibul Lamjao National Park (KLNP), the last remaining habitat of the Sangai deer. The phumdis provide food and shelter to the Sangai deer. Its continuous thinning is dangerous for the Sangai deer—thin phumdis are not able to support the weight of the deer (Tuboi and Hussain 2016). The Sangai deer's hooves are also more prone to getting stuck in thinner phumdi (Singh 2014). Both typically result in the deer's drowning.

Mani Mohan, a forest guard from the KLNP, explained that the disruption of the phumdi cycle by the Ithai Barrage has not only caused the thinning of the phumdis, but also left it without much nutritional value. He says, “The [Sangai] deer’s habitat has become affected. The thinning of phumdis [also] means less food for the deer . . . their numbers have been dwindling” (The Naked Eye Films 2017, 02:19).

5. *Loss of Biodiversity and Fish Resources.* After the construction of the Ithai Barrage, the diversity and population of migratory and resident animal species of the Loktak Lake have severely declined. Thirty-five animal species, which were previously abundant in the area, are increasingly becoming extinct (Trisal and Manihar 2004).

Moreover, adverse changes in the lake have caused a decline in the production of edible aquatic plants, which are primary vegetables in the diet of the indigenous Meitei community in and around Loktak (Singh 2015). About 30 species of these plants have become extinct in Loktak (Singh 2018).

Migratory fishes from the Chindwin-Irrawaddy River system in western Myanmar have also disappeared from the lake. These constitute 40 percent of the captured fishery in Loktak Lake. Twelve species recorded in the past have not been seen again (LDA and WISA 2003). As the Ithai Barrage blocks the fishes’ migratory pathways, fish resources in Loktak have sharply declined both in diversity and quantity (Singh 2018; Khoiyangbam 2021). A fisher from Loktak laments the sharp decline of fish resources: “We used to have plenty of fish in Loktak. Fishing was always a good [livelihood] option. We could catch fish at will. But after the Ithai Barrage was constructed, it became more difficult.” The lake’s contribution to the total fish production of Manipur has gone down from 60 percent to 11 percent (Trisal and Manihar 2004).

6. *Changes in the Traditional Pattern of Indigenous Meitei Communities’ Livelihood and Habitation.* Before the Ithai Barrage was commissioned, indigenous Meitei communities

in the area were farmers who also engaged in fishing. They engaged in rice farming during the dry season and harvested their produce before the start of the monsoon. During the monsoon, they would shift to fishing activities and gathered edible aquatic plants. As such, fishing huts constructed on the phumdis were largely temporary.

Oinam Thoiba, a fisher from Loktak, narrates: “Since my childhood, I have been living in the lake. I have farms in the lake periphery . . . but the Ithai Barrage submerged them. And so I shifted to fishing in the lake. Again, the Ithai Barrage has caused the tremendous increase of phumdis, which hinders our boats’ movement . . . and fish catch has [also] come down” (The Naked Eye Films 2017, 02:47).

About 83,450 hectares of agricultural land are said to have been affected by the Ithai Barrage (Singh 2015). When the indigenous Meitei community in the area lost their agricultural land, traditional settlements, and livelihood following the barrage construction, they were forced to become increasingly dependent on the lake and their livelihood became limited to fishing (Khoiyangbam 2021). This has become evident in the increase in the population of lake dwellers. According to Khoiyangbam (2021), only 28 floating huts were in the Loktak Lake in 1985, but this number has increased to as much as 733 in 2001. The barrage destroyed their traditional pattern of livelihood and habitation, and decreased their earning capabilities (Rajesh 2020).

Indigenous Communities

The Indigenous Meitei community residing in Loktak have socio-economical, cultural, and ecological connections with the lake (Singh 2019). Communities living inside and at the periphery of the lake have been living here for hundreds of years, and have been utilizing its resources: the fish and vegetation for food and livelihood. The entire water body and its peripheral areas can be regarded as their indigenous territory (ICCA Consortium 2020, 01:12:00).

Records from the Gazetteer of Manipur dating back to 1886 show that the indigenous Meitei community have inhabited Loktak for fishing

(Wangkheirakpam 2014). These communities have taken the role of custodians of Loktak, caring for the waterbody and surrounding forests and hills. They also play a crucial role in the cycle of phumdis. When the water levels are low during the dry season, they gather the phumdi in heaps and burn them. During this time, the lake is also utilized by the indigenous Meitei community as grazing ground for their livestock. The movement from domestic animals helps in disintegrating the phumdis, which make them easier flushed down the Khordak channel, which connects Loktak to the Manipur River system when water levels rise. Additionally, when the water levels are high during the rainy season, indigenous Meitei communities cut the phumdi into strips and transport them to where the water channels can deliver them to larger bodies of water outside of the lake.

The Ithai Barrage has gravely harmed the peaceful co-existence of communities with Loktak. As a result, the communities were compelled to re-configure their livelihood and habitation in the area to adapt to the barrage-induced changes.

1. *Habitation.* At present, the indigenous Meitei community residing at Loktak can be found at three locations: (1) inside the lake, (2) on the islands, and (3) at the lakeshore (Singh 2019). Those who dwell inside the lake build huts locally called Phumsang on the phumdi. These huts can transfer locations and respond to changes in water levels. A Loktak fisherman explains their process of building on phumdi: “We first check the phumdi by shaking it . . . we choose the sturdiest one. When the thickness of phumdi is uniform, we can build a hut over it. To make it more bouyant, we can put wood beneath [the phumdi]” (Soub 2016, 03:51).

A typical Phumshang has a floor area of 0.5 square meters and can accommodate 4 to 5 household members (Takhell 2021). The flooring should be around 2 to 3 meters and is made by layering wooden planks or bamboo with phumdi layers. For stability, wooden pillars or bamboo, which are used as frames, are drilled into the phumdi. To ensure that the huts are light, only straw or reeds are used for its walls and roof. Bamboo poles help position the hut to the desired location for fishing and keep it secure from strong winds (Meitei 2014). In recent

times, due to the thinning of phumdis, the indigenous Meitei community have had to adjust by using lighter materials, such as tin sheets and tarpaulins, to further reduce the load. The local fisherman adds: “If we don’t use the appropriate materials, the huts will be blown away on a stormy day” (Soub 2016, 04:15).

Communities living in Phumshangs inside the lake can be further classified into three categories: permanent, temporary, or migrant. However, a great majority of those living inside the lake are permanent dwellers who do not have a house elsewhere (Trisal and Manihar 2002). They navigate Loktak and the adjacent areas using plank-built canoes, replacing the traditional dugout canoes. Plank-built canoes are more economical and easier for the indigenous Meitei community to build. These canoes are made by connecting wood planks together using a special mixture of adhesive made from kerosene, sawdust, and Mekruk (*Vatica lanceaefolia*) powder.

2. *Fishing*. Traditional fishing has been practiced by the indigenous Meitei community in Loktak since they inhabited the area (Bharati et al. 2017). Fisherfolks exhibit their local knowledge, accrued through the years, in their fishing activities: (1) they observe wind direction to predict fish accumulation; (2) they monitor the color and temperature of water to foretell fish availability; (3) they formulate various traditional feeds to catch fish; and (4) they devise a wide array of fishing tools and methods appropriate to the season (Devi et al. 2012b, 2013).

According to the Manipur Science and Technology Council (n.d.), the state has 5 distinct seasons: summer (May–June), rainy/monsoon (July–September), autumn (October–November), winter (December–February), and spring (March–April). While the fishers have basic fishing tools which they use throughout the year—such as the *Nup-il* (lift net), *Longthrai* (scoop net), *Long* (spear fishing), and *Taijep* (box trap)—they also utilize seasonal fishing tools only used in certain seasons. During the summer season, fisherfolks mainly use the *Il-jao* (dip net), *Khoisang thakpa* (longline), *Moonamba* (drag net), *Khoi Choppa* (pole line), *Moirang lang* (encircling net), and *Long-ooop* (plunge cover-basket). During the rainy/monsoon season, they use the *Sora-lu*

(conical trap) and *Kabo-lu* (tubular trap), but still keep the *Il-jao* and *Khoisang thakpa*. During the autumn and winter seasons, they use the *Moirang lang* and *Long-ooop* (Devi et al. 2013).

3. *Athaphum*. Indigenous Meitei communities in Loktak have invented a distinct fishing method that utilizes *phumdi*, known as *Athaphum*. This fishing technique was developed as a response to the drowning and loss of their agricultural lands because of the Ithai Barrage (GSAR India 2020, 16:50).

Athaphum fishing involves two phases: (1) *Phum thaba*, or the preparation of “circular enclosures,” and (2) *Phum namba*, or “the harvesting phase” (Singh and Shyamananda 1994). *Phumdis* are cut into narrow strips, typically 1.5 to 2.3 meters in width and 5.0 meters in length (Khoiyangbam 2021), then placed on the water in a circular formation, typically 200 to 250 meters in circumference (Singh and Khundrakpam 2011). This is used to lure in fish by dropping feeds inside the circle (Khoiyangbam 2021). When fishers observe that enough fish have been trapped, the dip nets (i.e., *Il-jao*) are cast around the enclosure. A team of 30 to 40 fishers is needed to drag up the nets. Collected fish are kept half submerged using the box traps (i.e., *Taijep*) until they are transported to the market. Fish harvesting typically happens twice a year, between October and February. Fishers earn more income from the *Athaphum* method compared to other fishing methods. They can harvest 100 to 180 kilograms of fish per cycle (Singh and Khundrakpam 2009).

Alongside traditional fishing, utilizing *Unjas*, or middle persons, has long been a practice for indigenous Meitei communities in Loktak. Fishing households typically have a partnership with an *Unja*, one that usually starts through loan provisions.² They have a unique role in the trading system of fish resources caught in

2 Loaning through financial institutions is difficult for fishing households as these necessitate formal documents and other related paperwork, which make the requirements improbable and the process tedious for fishing households in Loktak. *Unjas* make loan services accessible to fishing households, albeit with (a) very high-interest rate and/or (b) conditions that borrowers can only sell to their lender.

the lake—they are typically in charge of procuring fish resources from the lake, which are later sold at markets (Devi et al. 2012a).

The indigenous Meitei community's local knowledge of building floating huts and fishing exemplifies their deep and intrinsic relationship with Loktak Lake. These traditional practices, distinct only to the indigenous Meitei community of Loktak, are born out of their age-old co-existence with the lake.

Loktak Development Authority

The Loktak Development Authority (LDA) was created by the Government of Manipur in 1986 for the “management” and “improvement” of Loktak (Government of Manipur 2006). In particular, it aims to “check the deteriorating condition of Loktak Lake” and “bring about improvements on the lake ecosystem along with development in the field of fisheries, agriculture, and tourism while conserving the catchment area involving concerned Departments of the State [Manipur] Government” (LDA 2012). The LDA also envisions the “conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands for ecological security and livelihood improvement of local communities” (LDA 2012).

In 2006, the Manipur Loktak Lake (Protection) Act was enacted by the Government, empowering it to constitute an executive body, the LDA, that exercises the following functions:

- (1) administer the affairs of the Loktak Lake, and to protect and improve the natural environment of [the] lake; (2) regulate by granting of approvals or otherwise requests for commercial utilization or bio-survey and bio-utilization of any resources; and (3) to do such other things as may be incidental or conducive to the efficient administration for protection and improvement of the lake. (Government of Manipur 2006)

The Act, however, was hurriedly passed without consultation from the indigenous Meitei community residing in the area, independent scientists, and environmental experts (ALLAFUM 2016). Likewise, the members of the LDA are heavily dominated by government officials, with no representation from local stakeholders (PRDA 2016). Thirty-seven out of the 40 positions in the committee of LDA are reserved for government officials. The remaining 3 positions are non-official members, who are nominated by the Government of Manipur.

The following provisions ratified in the Act place the moral principles and integrity of the LDA, as well as the Government of Manipur, further into question:

1. **[Section] 2. Definitions:** In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires:

(g) “Occupiers” mean a person who dwells in huts or houses on the phumdis or uses the phumdis;

2. **[Section] 5. Previous approval of the Authority.** — (1) No person shall without the previous approval of the Authority obtain any lake resources or knowledge associated thereto for research or for commercial utilisation or for bio-survey and bio-utilisation.

(2) No person shall, without the previous approval of the Authority, transfer the results of any research relating to lake resources.

Explanation: For the purpose of this section, “transfer” does not include publication of research papers or dissemination of knowledge of any seminar or workshop if such publications are as per guidelines issued by the State Government or Authority.

3. **[Section] 20. Prohibition of certain activities in Core Zone:**

No person or occupier shall

- (i) discharge or emit any sewage or domestic waste into the lake;
- (ii) plant or cultivate Athaphum;
- (iii) deposit or fix any stones, bamboo, log, net etc., into the lake for the purpose of rearing fish;
- (iv) build any hut or house on phumdis inside the lake;
- (v) engage in Athaphum fishing in the lake;
- (vi) use any fishing feeds and pesticides into the lake; except with the prior permission of the authority constituted under this Act.

4. **[Section] 29.** Power of the State Government to take measures to protect and improve the natural environment of the lake: Subject to provisions of this Act, the State Government shall have the power to take all such measures as it deems necessary or expedient for the purpose of protecting and improving the natural environment of the lake.
5. **[Section] 31.** Right to fisheries: The Authority may, with the approval of the State Government and by notification in the Official Gazette, declare any part of the Lake, to be a fishery, and no right in any fishery so declared shall be deemed to have been acquired by any person or group of persons, either before or after the commencement of this Act, except as provided in the rules framed under this Act.
6. **[Section] 33.** Protection of Action taken in good faith: No suit, prosecution or other legal proceeding shall lie against the State Government or any officer or other employee of the State Government or the authority constituted under this Act or any member, officer or other employee of the authority for anything which is in good faith done or intended to be done under this Act.

Indigenous Meitei communities residing on floating huts as well as fishing on Phumdis are categorized as encroachers; their rights to access the lake and its resources are erased. Altogether, all the activities both living and livelihood activities are outlawed. Concerningly, along with these prohibitions, the indigenous community's right to seek judicial remedy—in the case of state-perpetuated human rights violations—as local stakeholders are also removed. Censorship is also conducted through requiring research endeavors related to Loktak to be approved first by the LDA.

Moreover, the Government of Manipur, through the LDA and the Act, has maliciously framed the indigenous Meitei communities—who have been custodians of Loktak—as polluters of their own territory. The degradation of Loktak is primarily due to the Ithai Barrage. This framing has adversely affected the indigenous Meitei community's livelihood options, earning capabilities, and their habitation. However, under the guise of “conservation,” the LDA has escalated their efforts to dispossess and evict indigenous Meitei communities of Loktak from their indigenous territory.

For Babloo Loitongbam, Executive Director of Human Rights Alert, a human rights organization based in Manipur, the LDA is making a distinction between the people who are living in Loktak and Loktak as an ecosystem. Underscoring this point, Loitongbam added: “This [approach to conservation] is snatching away Loktak from the people who have been guarding it—those who have been the guardians [of Loktak] for thousands of years” (Ngamee Lup 2021, 01:19).

Heightened Attacks

“The plans and initiatives of LDA in Loktak Wetlands are not for the people” (CRA Manipur 2015, 09:04), said Heisnam Chaoba, a community leader in Loktak. This orientation of the LDA has become more evident for the indigenous Meitei communities of Loktak in the years that followed.

In November 2011, officers from the LDA and the Manipur State Police carried out deliberate arson of 777 Phumsangs inside the Loktak Lake. Fishing tools of the indigenous Meitei community were burned together with all their belongings, leaving them no means for food and shelter. A measly 40,000 Indian Rupees (USD 524) was offered as compensation to the arson victims.

Speaking against this atrocity of the Government of Manipur and LDA, Heisnam Ashangbi, another Loktak community leader, said: “What is LDA? Why is the government forcefully bringing down people’s homes and driving us to misery and death? Why is the government destroying peoples’ floating huts in Loktak? We can’t sleep peacefully. We can’t work freely anymore. We feel unsafe. How can we live in dignity when there is merciless harassment from the government?” (CRA Manipur 2015, 04:40).

When the indigenous Meitei community of Loktak mounted a women-led mobilization in December 2011 in response to the incident, they were mercilessly dispersed by the Manipur State Police. Arson victims who took part in the protest were subjected to police brutality: physical assaults, baton charges, and firing of guns, wherein at least 10 women were seriously injured (Schertow 2011).

Violent demolitions in Loktak continued to be carried out by the LDA despite the prohibitions of the Gauhati High Court, through (1) a court order issued on January 25, 2012, prohibiting the clearance of floating

huts, and (2) a subsequent contempt notice issued on February 16, 2013, ordering the Government of Manipur to cease their eviction drive in the area (AHRC 2013).

From January 2012 to March 2013, the Authority demolished 70 Phumshangs and destroyed Athaphum fishing ponds in the lake (PRDA 2016). Similar attempts to evict indigenous Meitei communities in Loktak have persisted in 2015 and 2016 (Seema 2016).

However, new threats to Loktak and its indigenous Meitei communities came in the form of policies and “development” projects advanced by the Government of Manipur with the private sector through public-private partnerships. These policies seek to “unlock” the potentials of Manipur, and particularly Loktak Lake, for profit-making.

In 2014, the Government of Manipur unveiled its Tourism Policy, which aims to “promote sustainable tourism as a means of economic growth, social integration, and to promote the image of Manipur as a State with a glorious past, a vibrant present, and a bright future” (Government of Manipur 2014). It intends to “harness the tourism potential of Manipur, attract tourists and investments” through Public-Private Partnership (PPP) (Government of Manipur 2014). In this policy, Loktak Lake and its surrounding vicinity were declared a Special Tourism Area for integrated development of tourist circuits and destinations, and was included in the Government of Manipur’s first phase (2014–2017) of creating tourism infrastructure. The vision for the area was for it to be developed and beautified into the Loktak Lake Wetland Complex, a major ecotourism attraction with time-share resorts, restaurants, spas, and yoga centers; facilities for recreational fishing, cruise tourism and water sports (e.g., canoeing, kayaking, rowing, boat rides); and infrastructure for a cable-car and ropeway project (Government of Manipur 2014).

With the objective to continue the “successful implementation of the previous projects and to push the Inland Waterways Transport sector to its full potential” (LDA and Government of Manipur 2019), the Loktak Inland Waterways Improvement Project was proposed by the Transport Department, Government of Manipur and the LDA to the Ministry of Shipping and Inland Waterways Authority of India, Government of India. The proposal was approved in November 2019. The project fundamentally aims to: “augment the existing machinery and equipment to deal with the growing menace by clearing the waterways” as “all the machinery of

LDA are no longer capable of dealing with the growing problems” (LDA and Government of Manipur 2019). It aims to achieve this through the (1) augmentation of machinery; (2) construction of infrastructure for waterway clearing; and (3) improvement of designated routes, through the removal of Phumdis and other aquatic vegetation, and the deepening of shallow portion of waterways.

Building on the vision for Loktak in the Manipur Tourism Policy 2014, the Government of Manipur in November 2020 invited tenders for the Loktak Lake Eco-Tourism Project. The project aims to (1) develop Loktak as a world class tourist destination in Manipur; (2) undertake catchment treatment of the area; (3) construct embankments or footpath around the lake; and (4) build tourism infrastructure (e.g., golf courses, amusement parks, artificial beaches, integrated ropeways, water sports, adventure sports, home-stays, and accommodations) (Government of Manipur 2020).

The symbiotic relationship between Loktak and the indigenous Meitei community is erased in the policies and “development” projects of the State. These policies and “development” projects that aim to “uplift” the condition of Loktak have been fraught with misinformation, failing to address the root cause of the lake’s deterioration and vilifying the people, the fishing activities, and the biomass (phumdis)—all of which are integral components of Loktak. It has only increased the precarity of the indigenous Meitei communities and has continued to disturb the ecological balance in Loktak.

1. *Deterioration of Water Quality.* The heavy use of mechanized equipment in the removal of phumdis, the promotion of motorized boats, and construction of tourism infrastructure run the risk of oil spillages and other pollutants in the waterbody.
2. *Eradication of Usable Aquatic Plant Species.* The indiscriminate removal of phumdis in Loktak to “develop” the area may result in the eradication of both edible and non-edible aquatic vegetation, which are utilized by indigenous Meitei communities for everyday life.
3. *Disruption in the Ecosystem and Decline of Biodiversity.* The speed and noise of motorized boats may drive away the remaining fish

and bird populations in Loktak. Fish movement may be greatly impeded if traditional dugout canoes, which are amicable to the species in Loktak, are phased-out in favor of motorized boats. These motorized boats also damage aquatic vegetation and cut across fishing nets casted by indigenous Meitei community for their livelihood. Moreover, degraded water quality, coupled with elimination of phumdis, may worsen the imbalance in the lake's ecological processes. Vast changes in the landscape of Loktak may result in accelerated ecological ruin and further loss of biodiversity in the area.

4. *Disruption in Migratory Water Bird Movement.* The increased volume of human intervention in the Loktak Lake area, along with proposed development projects of the Manipur Government in the lake, threatens the passage and feeding ground of the long-distance flying migratory water birds. Loktak wetlands are situated along two significant international flyways, namely the Central Asian Flyway and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Increased human activities may cause declines in the water bird population, and this may prove negative to the Ramsar Convention criteria on significant numbers of migratory water bird population and species to be classed under the Convention as a "Ramsar Site."
5. *Economic Displacement Livelihood and Dispossession of Indigenous Territory.* Massive PPP projects such as these would not only cause adverse effects to Loktak's ecosystem and biodiversity, but would also lead to the privatization of the lake, which for generations has been a common resource for indigenous Meitei communities in the area. Privatizing Loktak would mean limited access to the lake and its resources. The indigenous Meitei communities who until now are the stewards of Loktak may be deprived of their livelihood and habitation. These would increasingly convert Loktak and its resources into commodities for corporate and government bodies to exploit and from which to extract maximum profit (Yumnam 2014).

Avli Verma, an Environmental Researcher from the research center Manthan Adhyayan Kendra, asserts that these two "development" projects are "in complete contradiction to each

other” (Joshi 2022). The distinctive phumdis and lifeways of the indigenous Meitei community are tourist attractions of Loktak, but both projects seek to erase them in replacement for tourist circuits and destinations.

Resistance

The construction of the Ithai Barrage and the enactment of policies and ratification of “development projects” have brought an assortment of difficulties to the indigenous Meitei community and ruin to the ecological balance of Loktak. As such, resistance and conservation strategies have been an inevitable recourse for the indigenous Meitei community in Loktak.

There have been numerous efforts from the indigenous Meitei community and advocates to organize resistance against development aggression. In 1985, the Loktak Flood Control Demand Committee was formed by 15 indigenous Meitei communities affected by agricultural land floods caused by the Ithai Barrage. Indigenous Meitei communities, together with social scientists and activists, formed the Action Committee–Loktak Project Affected Areas, Manipur in 1991. The following year, in 1992, the Loktak Khangpok Fisherman Association was formed by the indigenous Meitei community in Thanga, one of the island villages inside Loktak. At the same time, various organizations and progressive government allies formed the All Manipur Ithai Barrage Peoples Organization (PRDA 2016).

The Government of Manipur has no comprehensive plan to include the local people in the conservation or rehabilitation of Loktak. Further, the policies and “development projects” imposed on Loktak ignore indigenous rights, territory, knowledge, and culture. In 2011, 27 villages around Loktak formed the All Loktak Lake Areas Fishermen’s Union Manipur (ALLAFUM) as a response to escalating threats brought by the Manipur Loktak Lake (Protection) Act 2006. ALLAFUM’s creation was motivated by the indigenous Meitei community’s desire to save Loktak by bringing the people together to: (1) create awareness and build capacity for the conservation of Loktak (e.g., conserve migratory birds and fishes, rejuvenate the aquatic vegetation, improve the lake ecosystem); and (2) to fight back against eviction and dispossession of indigenous territory.

The indigenous Meitei community under the ALLAFUM banner have been at the forefront of conserving the natural resources in Loktak, defending their rights to the indigenous territory, and resisting the profit-oriented and exclusionary model of development imposed by the government. ALLAFUM has since engaged in various actions:

1. *Educational Discussions.* To empower the indigenous Meitei community, ALLAFUM conducts regular grassroots-level learning sessions about the interconnecting issues they face, such as changes in the lake ecosystem after Ithai Barrage, the depletion of fish resources and edible aquatic vegetation, and the loss of migratory birds and other species in Loktak, among others. Through these, union members are capacitated to discuss these issues to their fellows and potential allies outside of Loktak.
2. *Awareness Campaigns.* The government's smear campaign—their efforts to pin the deterioration of the lake onto the indigenous Meitei community—means that an important undertaking for ALLAFUM is to hold different activities to dispel these false statements. This is done by reaching out to community members outside the union membership and attracting allies to support their struggle. Public consultations, along with clean-up activities and dugout canoe rallies, are regularly held. Significant days, such as World Wetlands Day, World Water Day, International Rivers Day, and International Day for Ecological Diversity are observed by ALLAFUM. The Loktak Arson Commemoration is also annually organized by ALLAFUM and allied civil society organizations from 15th to 23rd of November, to remember the inhumane acts of the government against the Loktak's indigenous Meitei communities and to further engage in active political participation.

Community Conservation

The indigenous Meitei community's efforts to save and protect Loktak's remaining ecological resources are necessary to offset the loss of biodiversity and devastation of natural resources caused by the Ithai Barrage. The union, in response, undertakes a variety of conservation strategies:

1. *Creation of a Fish Sanctuary.* ALLAFUM has designated a portion of the lake to be a community-controlled and -administered “fish sanctuary” to control excessive fishing of immature fish, promote a “closed season” for fishing from the months of May to July, and allow the spawning of fishes during this three-month period (Rajesh 2020).
2. *Exploration of Livelihood Alternatives.* To augment the income loss during the closed season, ALLAFUM is exploring other livelihood alternatives (e.g., poultry, light crops, weaving). The union has also started to plant seeds of edible aquatic plants for their own consumption and for sale in the markets (Rajesh 2020).
3. *Protection of Migratory Birds.* Recognizing the importance of biodiversity to the Loktak ecosystem, ALLAFUM has created a team of union members to guard the stopover sites of migratory birds and protect the birds from poachers, especially during the months of October to February.
4. *Ban on Night Fishing.* Since 2016, ALLAFUM has imposed a ban on night fishing in Loktak from the months of December to March. The ban is imposed for two reasons: (1) fingers grow into mature fishes during this season, and overfishing may quickly deplete the fish population; and (2) migratory birds visit Loktak during this season and it is critical that they are not disturbed, particularly at night. In their latest announcement of the ban in 2022, ALLAFUM also banned the use of poison and dynamo in all seasons.
5. *Broadening of the Struggle.* To build broader resistance and a larger platform, the indigenous Meitei community saw the need to extend the collective efforts to those outside of Loktak, but residing in interrelated wetlands. These communities will also be negatively impacted by the Loktak Inland Waterways Improvement Project and the Loktak Mega Lake Eco-Tourism Project. ALLAFUM started this process by visiting different villages located in the periphery of Loktak and at the adjacent wetlands. Through these efforts, Ngamee Lup was formed in 2019—a federation of fisher unions and other association of Loktak and surrounding wetland areas (i.e., Pumlun, Ikop, Kharung, Khoidum, Lamjao, Wiathou, Ngakrapat, Biraharipat, and Ungamelpat). At present, it functions as a body formed

by executive members of different fisher groups in Manipur. The union has also started to tap advocates outside of the lake, bringing educational discussions and awareness campaigns to spaces such as civil society groups and the academe, where potential allies can be organized to support the struggle of the indigenous communities in Manipur.

6. *Assertion of Rights.* Because of the policies and “development projects” of the government, the indigenous Meitei community—spearheaded by Ngamee Lup and in coordination with Indigenous Perspectives and Environmental Support Group—formed the following demands:
 - a. “Wetlands International, Switzerland must withdraw the ‘Loktak, Manipur: An Integrated Plan for Wise Use (2020-2025)’ unconditionally and immediately.
 - b. The Government of Manipur must withdraw “Loktak Inland Waterways” and the “Loktak Eco-Tourism Project” projects.
 - c. The draconian Manipur Loktak Lake (Protection) Act of 2006 must be repealed. In its place a law must be enacted after deep and widespread consultation with the Loktak region people to ensure their traditional rights and livelihoods are protected and they continue as custodians to protect and conserve this biodiversity rich wetland complex for posterity.
 - d. The Loktak region must be declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in acknowledgment of the living heritage that fishing and farming communities here have shaped over centuries.
 - e. The Loktak region must be declared a ‘Community Conservation Area’ as per the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and as a ‘Biodiversity Heritage Site’ in accordance with the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. As a first step towards this goal, statutory mandates to constitute Forest Rights Committees and Biodiversity Management Committees must follow.
 - f. All fundamental and traditional rights of indigenous communities living in the Loktak region, particularly their

right of domicile, right to housing and right to livelihoods, must be recognised and with due dispatch.” (ESG India 2022)

The collective actions of the indigenous Meitei community have been and are continuously informed by these demands. In 2013 and 2014, ALLAFUM submitted the memorandum to government leaders demanding for the repeal of the Manipur Loktak Lake (Protection) Act 2006. The union, together with Ngamee Lup, has been relentless in urging the government to repeal the Act.

In 2018, ALLAFUM urged for the implementation of a new Act governing Loktak—one that is community-centered and environmentally-friendly—and urged for the formation of a Wetland Development Board. At the same time, the union appealed for the government to include the affected indigenous Meitei communities in the process of creating these.

ALLAFUM has also been consistent in countering disinformation from LDA and other government agencies concerning the Loktak and the other wetlands, and in exercising opposition to the government’s repressive and tyrannical strategies to evict the community residing in Loktak and the adjoining wetlands. Their continuous collective actions have led to substantial wins for the indigenous Meitei community.

In 2019, the High Court of Manipur issued an order that prohibits the Government of Manipur from taking up any new project or development program concerning Loktak without the authorization of the Court. The order also required the Manipur State Wetlands Authority (MSWA), Forest and Environment Department and Water Resource Department of the Government of Manipur, and the LDA to file an affidavit identifying all the actions they have undertaken. The MSWA and LDA were also ordered to reveal how they have utilized the government funds concerning projects in Loktak (The Imphal Free Press 2019).

In 2020, when the High Court of Manipur gave LDA its approval to move forward with the bidding process for the Loktak Inland Waterways Improvement Project and the Loktak Lake Eco-Tourism Project, ALLAFUM swiftly filed a review petition against this court order (The Imphal Free Press 2020).

Following this, and at the continuous urging of ALLAFUM and Ngamee Lup, in 2022 the High Court of Manipur reaffirmed its 2019 court

order that no “development” in Loktak can proceed without the court’s permission (Mathur 2022).

“What we have been demanding of the Government of Manipur is [for them] to honor and recognize the traditional livelihood and fishing rights of communities in Loktak. People should be allowed to fish . . . floating huts, [which are] a timeless heritage of Loktak, should be allowed” (CRA Manipur 2015, 09:50), explains Oinam Rajen, Secretary of ALLAFUM. He further highlights that the future of the indigenous community of Loktak lies in the healthy regeneration of the water body’s ecosystem, to which their lives are entangled. The indigenous communities thriving in Loktak have no other option but to resist and fight back for their right to life, right to housing, and right to livelihood (Rajesh 2021).

For the people of Loktak, who have been gravely affected by the Ithai Barrage and subsequent development aggression, the ways in which they live and thrive are their grassroots development alternatives to preserve the ecology of the wetlands. These alternatives—together with their repertoire of resistance strategies, from conducting educational discussions and awareness campaigns, executing community-led conservation initiatives, building broader networks of solidarity, and proposals of alternative community-centered policies—comprise the ways in which indigenous Meitei communities resist aggression, advocate for their rights, and protect the wetlands.

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Cultural Work as Resistance

Reconnecting with our Southeast Asian Heritage: The Kontra-GaPi Way

Kontra-GaPi and Ronald B. Escanlar¹

Abstract

The Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino (Kontra-GaPi) is an ethnic music and dance troupe which draws inspiration from the diverse ancient artistic cultural diversity of the Philippines and Asia. With its contemporary dance, music, and theater, Kontra-GaPi exhibits the indigenous traditions rooted in Southeast Asian heritage, blending music and movement with health, healing, and communal rituals. This is in stark contrast to basic conventional music education in the Philippines, which heavily favors Spanish and American influences. The artistic work of Kontra-GaPi is entwined with its advocacy for advancing ecological conservation and human rights, particularly the rights of indigenous peoples. The group has performed in various continents including Europe, North America, and Asia.

1 The Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino (Kontra-GaPi) is the resident ethnic music and dance ensemble of the College of Arts and Letters, University of the Philippines Diliman. Kontra-GaPi expresses music and kindred arts from indigenous well-springs, drawing on the depth, wealth and cultural diversity of the Philippines and her Asian roots.

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We live in a country where nature sings to us—birds with familiar melodies, the breeze whispering in a familiar manner, the seas gurgling to a familiar tune, and even the monsoon rains falling sing-song on tin roofs in a familiar refrain. Nature is rarely quiet, and amid acacia trees in the olden fields of Diliman some 15 kilometers away from Manila, drums and gongs rhythmically beaten by young musicians accompany the twirling feet and hands of young dancers as they join the musical fray of nature.

The edifice that gave birth to an alternative way of learning Philippine indigenous music and dance has burned and turned to ashes, but the spirit of the Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino, better recognized by its members and fans alike as Kontra-GaPi, continues to burn brightly amidst the pervasive identity crisis of the Filipino.

Among Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines, with more than seven thousand islands, remains the most culturally disparate and heterogeneous. It is proud of its cultural flexibility as a former colony of the Spanish empire and the United States of America. Nevertheless, we are more culturally related to Indonesians and Malaysians, than to the Chinese to our west or the Japanese to the north. Historian Samuel K. Tan says,

Consequently, much of the cultural forms or patterns in the Philippine archipelago were directly traceable to the filtered elements of Southeast Asian cultural points like Indonesia and the Malay peninsula which had earlier been subjected to civilizational pressures from India, China, and mainland Southeast Asia. This indirect nature of influence on the Philippines made the Filipino more akin to their neighbors south of the archipelago culturally or otherwise. (Tan 1987)

As a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Philippines continues to be somewhat culturally distant from its neighboring countries. This is despite possessing a similar countenance and appearance, even having the same basic staple of rice. Kontra-GaPi sets out to encourage its members and its audience to recognize, and eventually deepen, this connection with rediscovery, exposure, and actual firsthand experience with Southeast Asian concepts of dance, music, and theater.

Started From a “Dream”

As a music and dance ensemble, Kontra-GaPi is called by many names—a neoethnic band or even a theater group. Founder and leader

Professor Pedro “Edru” Reyes Abraham, Jr. introduces the concept of Kontra-GaPi to its audiences as the total theater experience—“music as dance heard; dance as music seen.”²

In 1989, Dulaang Unibersidad ng Pilipinas (Dulaang UP), the cocurricular performing group for theater of the University of the Philippines, decided to stage *A Dream Play* by the Swedish playwright, novelist, and poet Johan August Strindberg (1849–1912) (Brückner, 2016). The play, possessing a “cyclical form rather than a linear one,” has been said to be “always fearfully difficult to produce on stage” (Brustein 2001). The play was written by Strindberg in 1902, and Dulaang UP translated the play into Filipino, *Isang Dulang Panaginip*, for their 1989 theater season.

Dulaang UP asked Professor Abraham, Jr.—fondly called Professor Edru—to provide an original score for the play. The only guideline in composing the music was to create a sound that was uniquely Filipino and Asian.

Art Studies Professor Edru holds a bachelor’s degree in Speech and Drama, and he earned a master’s degree in Art History. Before beginning his academic career as an instructor at the University of the Philippines (UP) in Los Baños in 1976, he was a professional performer with the Filipinescas Dance Company, which was founded and directed by Philippine National Artist for Dance Leonor Orosa Goquingco (1917–2005). From 1979 to 1981, he toured North America with the ensemble of *Himig ng Lahi—The Story of the Filipino People in Song* as its choreographer and stage director. Yet another Philippine National Artist for Music, Felipe Padilla De Leon (1912–92), led the ensemble. From 1982 to 1983, Professor Edru went on a Southeast Asian tour with the UP Filipiniana Dance Troupe, the resident folkloric dance company of the university. In 1983, he was granted an ASEAN scholarship. He then studied Southeast Asian and Indonesian performing arts under the famed pioneering Indonesian artist Bapak Bagong Kussudiarja (1928–2004) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

During the theater run of *Isang Dulang Panaginip*, audiences hailed the play’s musical accompaniment for its “stunning exotic appeal”

2 Prof. Edru always says this during performances and is included in the group’s website. Kontra-GaPi, “What is Kontra-GaPi,” <https://kontragapi.wordpress.com/aboutkg>

(Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino, n.d.). The score was originally composed and arranged by Prof. Edru with an ad hoc ensemble of college students using various Philippine indigenous instruments. Emboldened by the recognition, the ensemble, now calling itself “Edru Abraham at ang Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino,” continued with its musical experiment. By August 1989, the former Heritage Arts Center in Cubao, Quezon City invited the ensemble to perform in their first concert.

In February 1993, Prof. Edru’s home college, the College of Arts and Letters (CAL) at UP Diliman, recognized the cultural efforts of the group. They were appointed as the college’s resident ethnic music and dance ensemble. Three years later, Kontra-GaPi received the Outstanding Achievement in the Arts Award in the Performing Arts Category from the chancellor of UP Diliman.

Despite retiring from the academe in 2012, Prof. Edru continues to perform with Kontra-GaPi in various engagements. During the 30th anniversary of the group in 2019, Prof. Edru formally announced the appointment of former member Erwin F. Rafael as associate director. Rafael is currently an Assistant Professor with the Department of Sociology at the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy at UP Diliman.

What is Kontra-GaPi?

On its website, Kontra-GaPi defines itself:

The Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino is a troupe that draws inspiration from an ancient and profound source nurtured and sustained by the depth, wealth and cultural diversity of the Philippines and her Asian roots. Widely identified by its acronym Kontra-GaPi, the group strives to express music and kindred arts from indigenous well-springs, reaping from the people and giving back to them in new form “as magical as the moonlight and constantly changing as water. (Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino, n.d.)

In the Philippine Performing Arts Directory of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), Kontra-GaPi is listed as “the resident ethnic, music, and dance ensemble of the College of Arts and Letters of the University of the Philippines, Diliman” (Philippine Performing Arts Directory n.d.). Today, still under the directorship of Prof. Edru Abraham, Kontra-GaPi continues with its commitment to promoting artistic excellence as an official student performing group of UP. It has brought its art to where the people are, to where they can, or to where they choose to come together. They have traveled in the Philippines extensively and are regularly invited

to major international arts and music festivals in various continents including Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America.

Everyone is Welcome to the Gamelan

What is a *gamelan*? Most Filipinos are unfamiliar with the term—more familiar are the *rondalla* and the brass band. Philippine National Artist for Music Ramon Santos writes,

Instrumental music in the countryside is usually performed by the brass band or its replication in bamboo instruments, the *rondalla* (plucked string ensemble), and various smaller combinations of string and wind instruments. The repertoire consists of hymns, marches, pasodoble, medleys of popular folk tunes, as well as longer compositions such as overtures and one-movement concertant pieces. The latter are usually played during band competitions called *serenata*. The town band is quite indispensable in religious activities such as processions and funerals, and it also assists local theatrical productions like the *komedya* and *senakulo*. The smaller ensembles are often utilized to accompany the singing in churches. (Santos 2017)

In the online edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the gamelan, also known as *gamelang* or *gamelin*, is “the indigenous orchestra type of the islands of Java and Bali, in Indonesia, consisting largely of several varieties of gongs and various sets of tuned metal instruments that are struck with mallets” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2011). Merriam-Webster Dictionary, on the other hand, defines the gamelan as “an Indonesian orchestra made up especially of percussion instruments (such as gongs, xylophones, and drums)” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

I learned about Kontra-GaPi from my classmates when they performed at my high school during my freshman year. This was secondhand information since I was not at school at that time. As a first-year college student at UP Diliman, I saw a recruitment notice. My journey as a Kontra-GaPi member started with that photocopied poster that same afternoon.³

Applicants are treated with a short performance during training orientation. In my case, it was my first time seeing them perform. In high

3 I joined Kontra-GaPi as an applicant-trainee in the second semester of academic year 1995–1996. It was their second recruitment drive—during that time, there was a recruitment drive every semester.

school, I had joined a basic theater workshop during the summer break, where the trainer introduced us participants to Joey Ayala and his band, *Ang Bagong Lumad*. Fascinated by the percussive nature and indigenous rhythms Ayala and his band played, I was sold on the idea of using bamboo instruments as percussive accompaniment for one-act plays in school.

Training as a Kontra-GaPi applicant consisted of thrice-a-week sessions after office hours, since our practice area then was in front of the office of the CAL College Secretary. As the resident ethnic music and dance ensemble of CAL, Kontra-GaPi was allotted a small room to store the *banig* (mats), costumes, bamboo instruments, varisized metal gongs, and sundry equipment. The room was on the second floor of Rizal Hall, better known as the Faculty Center, near the college office.

Anyone, regardless of age and background, could join to train and become a full-fledged member. The underlying principle comes from the name of the group itself—Kontra-GaPi, which can mean opposing oppression. *Kontra* in Filipino parlance means to counter, while *gapi* means defeat. In his *A Guide to the Gamelan*, Neil Sorrell says,

Perhaps the most positive fact is that the *gamelan* attracts people from all walks of life, all social backgrounds, and all varieties of musical training, from rock musicians, to classically-trained artists, to (best of all) those whom our divisive culture would label “nonmusicians.”

...

One point which has always delighted me is that gamelan turns so many preconceptions about “talent” and “musicality” on their head. Perhaps this proves only that such notions are specific to our particular [Western] culture and should not be considered absolute or universal. Even so, this enthusiasm for “other” musics represents an important step in breaking down outdated Western hegemonic dogma, and there is no doubt that the gamelan has been consciously adopted for this purpose by academics, notably in the ethnomusicology programs of colleges in the United States. (Sorrell 1990)

Kontra-GaPi has two types of members—residents and alumni. After successfully completing training and passing the requirements of training season, members become residents. These are active members who regularly attend rehearsals. Some resident members graduate from college but are invited back for rehearsals and general assemblies. These are the alumni members. Both residents and alumni can join performances.

Based on their skill sets, some alumni are occasionally invited to join performances and other activities.

A lot of UP students have passed through the doors of the Faculty Center, spending many afternoons and early evenings sitting on the banig and tinkering with indigenous instruments, all while listening to Prof. Edru speak about Kontra-GaPi and its advocacies. Among former members are the Eraserheads, broadcast journalist Joseph Morong,⁴ and Kim Atienza, to name a few.

The private Facebook group of active and former members of Kontra-GaPi lists 272 members as of November 2021. In my personal experience as a former Kontra-GaPi trainer, we usually started the semester with around 40 applicant-trainees, ending up with only around 8 to 10 who go on to become active members. The hard part of Kontra-GaPi life is non-stop recruitment and training. Thankfully, there is an ample supply of talent on campus.

Who Joins Kontra-GaPi?

I held an informal survey among Kontra-GaPi members who are part of this private Facebook group, “KG Connection.” I ran the short, simple survey through Google Forms for two weeks in November 2021 and received responses from 51 individuals. Among the respondents, 57 percent consider themselves musicians, 31 percent are all-around performers, 10 percent are dancers, and 2 percent are singers. Only 10 percent identify themselves as belonging to an indigenous peoples’ group.

Regarding training during their application period, I asked the respondents to rate their training between 1 to 5, 1 being easy and 5 being difficult. Among them, 39 percent found their training as 3 (average), 33 percent rated their training as 4 (slightly difficult), while 14 percent rated their training as 5 (difficult). Rehearsals are a different thing, though—37 percent found rehearsals as resident members as 4 (slightly difficult), while 29 percent of the respondents rated rehearsals as 3 (average). Twelve percent of the responders rated rehearsals as 5 (difficult). Asked to rate themselves as performers during Kontra-GaPi gigs, 51 percent gave themselves a rating of 4 (slightly great), while 27 percent rated themselves

4 I personally handled the training of the batch of applicants which Morong joined.

as 3 (average). Only 22 percent evaluated themselves with a rating of 5 (great).

Most respondents (69 percent) came to learn about Kontra-GaPi through an event, e.g., a campus recruitment campaign, a workshop, or a show. Asked to choose among a set of options what made them stay with Kontra-GaPi, almost all of the respondents picked “friendship and camaraderie.” The remaining options were:

- Academic scholarship
- Love the music
- Love the dance
- Domestic and international travel

Rituals in the Contemporary Setting

Among Southeast Asian cultures, music is related to health, wealth, and even recognition of authority (Spiller 2004). Music, more than being a mere form of entertainment and an accompaniment to dance, is vital in creating a safe space for healing and blessing rituals. Even the modern concept of wellness requires background music to soothe one’s senses and reconnect with the self (Lockard 1998).

Music and dance are central to the ritual of the Filipino. It is but natural for a Filipino to sing and dance, whether in celebration or mourning. Our ancestors, who were discriminated as pagans when Christian missionaries came, sang and danced to the spirits of their environment—to the seas, to the trees, to the sky, to the rivers, and to the mountains. They were praying for guidance, praising for blessings, and begging for material and spiritual wealth.

Savoring this ritual was a communal undertaking. It involved everyone—the old and the young, the barren and the fertile, the feminine and the masculine. It was a personal experience with the community basking either in the sunshine or under the moonlight. It was not a private affair to be enjoyed within the confines of a closed, dimly-lit room.

Those who belt out loud with their bass-thumping stereos and larger-than-life videoke machines are somehow reconnecting with our ancient rituals, absent gods to raise praises to, and perhaps even the midnight

raves of the youth are also expressions of reconnecting with ancient deities.

In the context of the Philippine educational system, specifically the defunct New Elementary School Curriculum and the Secondary Education Development Program, basic music education among Filipino youth was centered around basic music literacy, with the repertoire primarily descending from Spanish and American colonization (Borromeo 2015). This has greatly contributed to a musical preference heavily favoring Western influences.

Despite 333 years of Spanish colonization and the subsequent American regime at the turn of the 20th century, music belonging to the Southeast Asian musical traditions persisted, connecting spiritual needs with their immediate environments (Baes 2015). Two distinct “types” of Southeast Asian music are present: those found in (a) the Cordilleras in the highlands of North Luzon, and (b) those found in Mindoro, Palawan, and in Mindanao and Sulu, as well as other Southern Isles. The distinction clearly shows in the gongs found among these groups—the flat gongs of the Cordillera stand in stark contrast to the embossed ones found in the South.

According to Santos (2017), there are two unique groups in the oral traditions of the country—indigenous traditions rooted in Southeast Asian cultures, and folk music, which evolved among rural Christians. These traditions can be broken down into vocal, instrumental, a mix of the two, and forms that combine these elements with “physical movement, space, dance, and theater” (Santos 2017). Furthermore, indigenous traditions are mainly involved in celebrating birth, mourning death, contemplating the vagaries of work, and performing various rituals, especially among indigenous peoples in the highlands of Northern Luzon.

In creating contemporary dance, music, and theater, members of Kontra-GaPi draw from this well-spring of indigenous traditions rooted in Southeast Asian heritage, in an effort to reconnect Filipinos who have been alienated from these traditions.

Dynamic and Flexible—A Commune of Performers

Given its contemporary nature, one challenge that Kontra-GaPi members constantly wrestle with is the documentation of its dance repertoire and notation of its musical pieces. Sorrell (1990) writes,

“Gamelan music is essentially an oral (or aural) tradition, but in the last hundred years various notations have been devised, firstly as a means of preserving compositions and now as part of the teaching process.”

With regards to ensembles where members come and go, some musical compositions are considered “canonical” since these form part of Kontra-GaPi’s basic repertoire. Aside from the history and concepts of music, applicant-trainees are rigorously taught these compositions:

- *Ating Pilipinas sa Timog Silangang Asya* (Our Philippines in Southeast Asia)
- *Mabuhay Aprika* (Long Live Africa)
- *Sayaw Mapanukso* (Daring Dance)
- *Sayaw Pinoy Sayaw* (Dance, Filipino, Dance)

Simultaneously, applicant-trainees are introduced to the plethora of instruments that our Southeast Asian culture—and by extension, our Philippine indigenous culture—can offer to present-day Filipinos. The training of Kontra-GaPi applicants derives much from the ways in which indigenous knowledge is passed onto the next generation—by oral tradition, mimicry, or social osmosis. It becomes imperative that active membership be organizationally sustained, whether by deliberate action such as refresher training sessions, or by spontaneous activities such as jamming sessions.

Refresher training sessions are implemented to enhance and sustain knowledge of the repertoire pieces among active members, guided mostly by only memory. Instant jamming sessions usually occur before rehearsal or training sessions. Members pull drums and set up gongs, much like the way indigenous communities slap their sets of *gangsa* or strike their *kulintang* during communal celebrations. Many of the group’s original pieces came from spontaneous jamming sessions. In 2018, Kontra-GaPi presented a slew of new musical compositions in a concert entitled *Lakbay Alaala*, performed at the UP Integrated School.

Some musical compositions of Kontra-GaPi serve as base pieces that can be slightly “tweaked” for a performance. Contemporary as Kontra-GaPi is, the ensemble still adheres to gamelan principles by composing musical pieces that are modular and cyclical. Some pieces do have an intro, a chorus, and even a bridge, but many pieces are modular with sections that can be rearranged. For example, the lengthy instrumental

piece *Ating Pilipinas sa Timog Silangang Asya* can be shortened by omitting some sections. This piece also has a chanting section that enjoins the audience to participate. The chant “*Kalayaan! Katarungan! Kapayapaan sa bayan!*” can be substituted with other phrases especially adapted for the audience or the occasion.

The music of Kontra-GaPi is almost always intertwined with dance and theater. *Ritwal ng Buhay*, a suite of music and dances inspired by precolonial Filipino customs, centers around the banig as the essential witness of birth, youth, courtship, leadership, community affairs, aging, and finally, death.

Banig on Carpet and Concrete

The banig, the native woven mat, is a vital component of a Kontra-GaPi setup. The banig sets up the sacred space where the instruments are laid out. Applicants are taught during training to remove their footwear when setting foot on the banig. Writing about the Indonesian gamelan, Sorrell distinguishes it from the Western symphony orchestra:

An important distinction is often made between the gamelan and the Western symphony orchestra. The gamelan is a set, housed in a special place. The players come to it empty-handed and depart likewise. They will probably remain anonymous, whereas the set of instruments will usually bear a name—a personality which is special to it and serves to identify the whole musical event. The Western orchestra is a collection of individuals (even of individualists!) most of whom bring their own instrument. The musicians are generally specialists in one instrument, whereas a good gamelan player is expected to be proficient in most, if not all, instruments. (Sorrell 1990)

The banig becomes the “special space” that Sorrell refers to, especially since Kontra-GaPi is a performing group that goes to where it is needed. It comes to its audience as teachers, advocates, and ambassadors of Philippine culture, albeit in a contemporary manner.

Over the years, the ensemble has presented more than a thousand shows for audiences of all types and age-groups in all kinds of venues, much more if one includes lecture-demonstrations, workshops in music, dance, mime and other types of engagement. From the state-of-the-art theaters of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, hotel pavilions and lobbies, school auditoriums and yards, church naves and parks, to make-shift stages, barangay or community all-purpose halls, basketball and other sports courts, private residences, rice fields, the streets, and marketplaces,

Kontra-GaPi has brought its art to where the people are or to where they can or choose to come together. The troupe has gone on road tours to virtually all the regions of the Philippines. The provinces of Agusan del Norte, Bataan, Batangas, Benguet, Bontoc, Cagayan, Cavite, Cebu, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Isabela, Camarines Norte, Kalinga, Laguna, Misamis Oriental, Masbate, Mindoro Occidental, Nueva Ecija, Nueva Vizcaya, Palawan, Pampanga, Pangasinan, Rizal, Sorsogon, Tarlac, Quezon, and Zambales have all played host. (Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino n.d.)

During training, applicants are taught the basics of playing indigenous bamboo and metal instruments from the troupe's extensive collection. Clang Sison, a former member, describes his experience as such:

Every performance is an event. Each member artist gets to play as many as 10 instruments in the gamelan, 'the quintessential orchestra of Southeast Asia.' Most people assume the group plays authentic indigenous sounds—but what we play are actually contemporary pieces built on the original modes and patterns of indigenous sounds. (Sison 2019)⁵

5 Sison was one batch ahead of me; he joined Kontra-GaPi during the first semester of 1995, while I joined during the second semester, but we were both freshman students. At the time, we were enrolled at the College of Engineering—he was majoring in computer science, while I was taking computer engineering. He was elected as a spokesperson of Kontra-GaPi—the leader among active members. Possessing great percussive skills, Sison was someone I considered as one of the most creative of our time.

Original lyrics in Filipino

 by *Domingo G. Landicho*
Koro (ulitin nang dalawang beses)

Kaya ng Pinoy! Kaya ko!

Hoy! Hoy! Hoy! Kaya mo!

Sa gitna ng ating mga suliranin
 Dapat lalo tayong magbigkis ng giting
 Huwag pagagapi anuman ang dumating
 Sama-sama tayong ito'y haharapin
 Dinanas na natin ang lahat ng hirap
 Sa dayuhang lakas, tayo'y nakihamok
 Bayaning diwa ay nakipagtuos
 Upang ang lahi ay ating itampok
 Sa isang panahon ng kamay na bakal
 Pinoy ay tumayo, matapang, marangal
 Baril at kanyo'y hinarap ng dasal
 Pagkakaisa'y ating itinanghal
 Ang buong daigdig sa ati'y humanga
 Pagkat demokrasya'y inangking payapa
 Pag baya'y nabuklod sa isang pithaya
 Lakas na kanila'y lakas ni Bathala
 Mga pagsubok dumating, umalis
 Sinusukat tayo, parang tinitikis
 Sa lindol at bagyo, huwag maghinagpis
 Lakasan ang loob, tibayan ang dibdib

Kaya nating Pinoy ang anumang hirap
 Mga kabiguan'y lilipas din tiyak
 Magkakawil-bisig damayang balikat
 Kung dusa ng isa ay dusa ng lahat

Kaya nating Pinoy, lahi ng magiting
 Lahi ng bayaning umalis, dumating
 Pilipinas, Pilipinas, iluklok, mahalín
 Sama-sama tayong bukas ay lakbayin
 Ang kinabukasan ay bayang payapa
 Lupa at pabrika, mayamang biyaya
 Hayan na ang bagong araw ng ating adhika
 Pilipinas kong mahal, sagana't payapa

Koro

Kaya ng Pinoy! Kaya ko!

Hoy! Hoy! Hoy! Kaya mo!

Kaya ng Pinoy! Kaya ko!

Hoy! Kaya ng Pinoy!

English translation

 by *Ronald B. Escanlar*
Chorus (repeat twice)

The Filipino can! Yes I can!

Hey hey hey! Yes you can!

Amidst all the problems that we are facing
 We should all unite with all our courage
 Let us fight on with all our strength
 United we shall face these problems head-on
 We have suffered through all the pain
 In the face of foreign powers, we fought on
 Our heroic spirit valiantly battled on
 In a noble effort to honor our race
 In the dark time of iron-fisted rule
 Filipinos stood, brave and proud
 Guns and cannons faced whispered prayers
 Our strength of unity was for all to see
 The whole world was amazed
 Democracy peacefully prevailed
 When a nation is united towards one goal
 Their strength of purpose is the strength of
 God
 Challenges and crises came and left
 A frustrating cycle of trials that test us
 Against storms and quakes, do not despair
 Be patient and be strong, take heart
 We Filipinos can face any hardship
 Our many struggles will definitely end
 Hand-in-hand with our arms locked
 The suffering of one is the suffering of all

We Filipinos can, the race of the brave
 The race of heroes who have gone but came
 back
 Philippines, Philippines, raise up and love
 Together, let's journey towards the future
 Our bright future is a peaceful country
 Land for all, work for all, blessings for all
 Here comes the new day we've all been
 waiting for
 The Philippines we love, blessed and peaceful

Chorus

The Filipino can! Yes I can!

Hey hey! Yes you can!

The Filipino can! Yes I can!

Hey! The Filipino can!

Kontra-GaPi advocates for human rights, the rights of indigenous peoples, and ecological conservation. Each performance is voluntary—a gig schedule is posted, and members can choose which performance they want to join. Performances range from corporate events, government forums, school celebrations, and social gatherings, to protest rallies with militant groups. Audiences from few dozens to thousands are not unusual. For example, the group performed at the 2007 Mead Johnson National Sales Conference held at the Baguio Country Club in Baguio City, an event directed by actor-singer Raymond Lauchengco (n.d.). The next year, in 2008, during the height of the National Broadband Network (NBN) scandal involving former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Kontra-GaPi performed at the Liwasang Bonifacio before a crowd of around 10,000 protesters, as reported by alternative media outfit *Bulatlat* (Remollino 2008).⁶ The Commission of Human Rights (CHR) of the Philippines has appointed Kontra-GaPi as its resident performing troupe.

One of the most popular pieces of *Kontra-GaPi* is the song “*Kaya ng Pinoy*” (The Filipino Can), written by Domingo G. Landicho (1939–2021), a poet, writer, and professor emeritus at the University of the Philippines (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2021).⁷ Set in a lively, rhythmic beat that fuses the flat gongs of north Luzon and the embossed gongs of Mindanao, as well as the bamboo instruments of central Luzon, the song encapsulates the Filipino experience in the upheavals of history.⁸

Bringing the *Banig* Abroad

Compared to other performing groups, Kontra-GaPi’s mission abroad is nothing short of a logistical challenge. Dance troupes and choirs have to only think about costumes or instruments that they may

6 This is just one documented case. Former members attest that they also joined the march from Diliman to the EDSA Shrine in the 2001 protests against former president Joseph Estrada, playing gongs along the way. The protests, considered the second EDSA Revolution, led to the installation of then-vice president Macapagal-Arroyo as president.

7 “*Kaya ng Pinoy*” is a popular piece, with its rap-like lyrics and percussive character. Dancers perform along with the singer, and with large audiences, two singers take turns. Kontra-GaPi always performs this piece during People Power commemorations.

8 The song, as recorded in the album *Gong at Ritmo: Lunggating Pilipino* by Kontra-GaPi (2020), can be heard here: <https://youtu.be/uXFeDATzlg8>. The male part is sung by Prof. Edru’s son, Apollo, while the female part is sung by Florian “Ryan” Abrecea, former Kontra-GaPi spokesperson. At present, Apollo is a voice and commercial actor, while Ryan is a disc jockey at a Manila-based radio broadcasting station.

need to bring. Kontra-GaPi, on the other hand, has to bring costumes and heavy metal, wood, and bamboo instruments, along with the members' personal items, when boarding a plane whenever the ensemble goes on an international tour.

The group's first international tour was a seven-and-a-half-month tour of Europe and North America in 1997. Months of preparation involving music and dance rehearsals, on top of visa processing and instrument packaging, went into what was considered the first-ever global travel of a Philippine-based gamelan. Sison shares, "Apart from my orchestra duties, I would help him email proposals and mail outs for the group—via a 56k modem which was fast at the time. I helped plot logistics for the world tour" (Sison 2019). From April to November 1997, Kontra-GaPi performed before a variety of crowds across Europe and North America, the members being hosted by sponsor families. At the same time, members who had stayed behind, including me, Sison, and Rafael, continued performing as Kontra-GaPi on the home turf, using spare instruments.

This is a partial list of the international tours, covering twenty-five countries, undertaken by Kontra-GaPi through the years:

- April to November 1997: European and North American tours
- June 1999: Laos and Vietnam tours
- November 2003: Australian tour
- May to October 2010: Philippine Pavilion, Expo 2010 Shanghai China, Shanghai, People's Republic of China
- May to July 2013: European tour
- July 2016: 21st Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 2018: Seoul, South Korea
- July 2019: Thailand
- December 2019: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Fire and Fortune—the 2016 Faculty Center Fire

At around midnight of 1 April 2016, tragedy struck the UP Diliman community as the Faculty Center burned to the ground, along with irreplaceable manuscripts and materials kept by college departments

housed in the building. As reported by *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the guard on duty had alerted authorities when the fire started from the third floor of the four-story building.

The faculty center is gone. Lost many books, furniture pieces from my parents and grandparents, paintings from friends and former students, precious memorabilia. *sic transit gloria mundi*,” said poet-professor and UP Assistant Vice President for Public Affairs Jose Wendell Capili in his official Facebook account. (Corrales and de Jesus 2016)

Prof. Edru, whose room was on the second floor, also lost a lot of cultural and research materials in the inferno.

Kontra-GaPi members who were living near the campus were alerted of the ongoing fire and immediately proceeded to retrieve the costumes and instruments. Were it not for the timely arrival and the heroic actions of the members, a lot of ensemble property would have been lost to the fire, and Kontra-GaPi would have had to start from the ashes, akin to rising like a phoenix.

At present, the ensemble holds training and rehearsals at Pavilion 3 of Palma Hall, a few meters away from the new Faculty Center—a risen phoenix that started construction in 2019 (Romualdo, 2019).

Kontra-GaPi and its Contemporary Legacy

In 2017, the group was commissioned to do their own rendition of a popular Western musical piece, distilling the cold, grandiose Occidental composition into a warm, mystical Oriental arrangement. Sky Cable Corporation had asked Kontra-GaPi to interpret the opening theme of the popular cable television series *Game of Thrones* to complement the marketing efforts of the company for the latest season. One of the comments on the YouTube video said, “This is the best GOT [*Game of Thrones*] theme cover . . . the fact that they used indigenous instruments (seldom used nowadays) is amazing!” (Sky Cable Corporation 2017).

Kontra-GaPi and its advocacy work have given birth to cultural workers who continue to nurture the development of the Filipino identity with their respective endeavors. Alumni founded the nonprofit organization *Sanghabi*. The group’s primary focus “is to give workshops on the appreciation of Philippine cultural diversity through the use of indigenous musical instruments” (Sanghabi 2012). Another group is the

power world music collective *Anima Tierra*. The group describes itself as “driven by earth-shaking percussions and enchanting vocals inspired by traditional musics all over the world” (Anima Tierra 2018). Kontra-GaPi inspired many more groups.

More than three decades have passed since the ensemble’s first performance in the urban concrete jungle that is Cubao, Quezon City. The group’s cultural work remains as relevant as it was when the audience first heard the mesmerizing melodies of a contemporary gamelan accompanying a Filipinized Swedish play that revolves around the dream of a daughter of an Indian goddess. As we commemorate the quinentennial anniversary of the Spanish arrival and the subsequent Christian conquest of our disparate islands, it should not be forgotten that we are still in the process of knowing ourselves as Filipinos in a Southeast Asian context. Yet as we meander cultural paths and its challenges, Prof. Edru and the rest of Kontra-GaPi—residents and alumni alike—will continue their work. Some Filipinos may stumble on the Southeast Asian path toward identity, and Kontra-GaPi will be there to help them, keeping Southeast Asian connections in a dynamic, flexible, and uniquely contemporary manner.

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Koalisi Seni Indonesia's Democratic Art-Making as Cross-Border Community-Building

*Koalisi Seni Indonesia, Nathaniel P. Candelaria,
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Abstract

For grassroots communities and social movements, art is not only a medium of self-expression, but also a weapon for propagandizing progressive ideas and principles of unity among the oppressed. However, trends in culture and the arts are shifting based on the demands of capitalist economies. Southeast Asia, for instance, is seen to be geared towards the commodification of the arts through the creation of centers for the arts, with Singapore as a prime example. Indonesia is also seen as a rising art center in terms of its cultural experience. Indonesian art history is rich, developing from colonization under the Dutch to independence. After Indonesian independence, three crucial periods have been identified in scholarly literature: Sukarno's guided democracy, Suharto's New Order, and post-Suharto's reformasi period. These periods in Indonesian history have implications for the development of its arts and culture. Art organizations in Indonesia have led the promotion of Indonesian art against the context of colonization. This paper will focus on the discussion about the *Koalisi Seni Indonesia* (Indonesian Art Coalition) (KSI), an umbrella organization formally established in 2012. Despite its young age, KSI has been very active towards the promotion of arts into social relevance for the Indonesian peoples. This case study describes and uncovers the activities undertaken by the organization, as well as the challenges and issues it underwent, in the context of the reformasi period in Indonesian history. Moreover, it shall frame KSI's projects as an alternative not only to hegemonic art production, but also to the ideological means of segregating and marginalizing societal sectors.

1 Koalisi Seni Indonesia (KSI) is a non-profit organization working toward artistic freedom and a healthier Indonesian arts ecosystem. It advocates for policies on art, supporting the establishment of the arts endowment fund, and strengthening the knowledge management as well as fostering the network of the organization members.

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Introduction

Social movements, grassroots communities, and civil society organizations have engaged in artistic practice for the longest time. Contrary to bourgeois framings of art as a mere instrument of self-expression, art is an integral part of society-building as it reconstructs, propagandizes, supports, or questions certain economic and political realities within a certain territory (Demirel and Altinas 2012, 444). Echoing Bertolt Brecht's famous statement, since art is a "hammer" that can shape society, it is utilized both by governments, non-governmental organizations, and peoples' movements to promote their interests. On the part of the state, art is recognized for the role it plays in promoting culture (Lockard 1996, 149–55; Jones 2012, 147–48; Jones 2013, 4–7). Moreover, art and culture have been utilized as tools of foreign policy, one that that some states are able to wield efficiently (Otmazgin and Ben-Ari 2012, 4–5). Countering the hegemonic practice, progressive and peoples' formations utilize art-making to advance their own visions of development. "Artivism," a neologism combining art and activism, does not only entail activism for the artistic community, but to mobilize art itself as a channel for advocacy (Jordan 2016).

Due to the richness and diversity of Southeast Asian artistic traditions, governments have conscripted artists to create works to signify what the state asserts as the nation's identity. For instance, Singapore invests heavily in art to promote its relatively new national identity (Chong 2010, 146). Singapore's investment towards the development and promotion of its art is not an exception, but rather a norm among states. Other Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia have also used art to express its national identity (Sasaki 2012, 7). In this regard, it can be said that states engage in art-making only insofar as it benefits the ideologies and identities recognized by the hegemon. However, the degree of support for the arts varies among different states in Southeast Asia (Lindsay 1995).

In contrast, civil society organizations, who are at the forefront of political processes, have always utilized culture and the arts as tools to propagate their advocacies. For instance, scholarly literature has recognized the importance of music as a "dominant sociocultural force and enjoys extraordinary influence all over the world" (Lockard 1996, 149–50). In the Philippines, for instance, music was used to express political views during the Marcos dictatorship; it was also used by other Southeast Asian states for different purposes (Lockard 1996, 164–70). Outside Southeast Asia, other states all over the world use art to express

political views and a sense of identity, as seen in the Caribana in Canada (Jackson 1992), and other civil society groups in Argentina and Uruguay (Camnitzer 1994).

While art contains the promise of progressive ideas, the capitalist economy preys upon its potential, rendering it a market commodity. In this context, Indonesia is considered a rising star because of the growing demand for Indonesian art in different art fairs abroad (Sasaki 2012, 5–6). Indonesian art is also used to promote tourism, despite the apprehension of some sectors of Indonesian society (Grimm 1993, 11–12).

However, Indonesian art is not limited to the purview of the state. For instance, artist groups such as *Persagi* forwarded the cause of local artists against Dutch colonialism (Sasaki 2012, 7). The theme of resistance in Indonesian art runs parallel to attempts to commodify it and use it for hegemonic purposes. Emerging art groups in Indonesia, such as the *Koalisi Seni Indonesia* (Indonesian Art Coalition) (KSI), are also at the forefront in the promotion of the role of artistic relevance in the society. This paper therefore seeks to document the organizing and art-making efforts of KSI towards the promotion of art in society. Moreover, it will also explore the case of the KSI as an example of an alternative practice that is defined by Raina (1997, 13–18) as a heterodox practice against mainstream development ideas in order to change the society. More specifically, we suggest that KSI's art-making practices bind their participants and audience, who are part of marginalized Indonesian sectors, in a sense of community that fosters solidarity.

Protest Art Towards Community-Building

Understanding KSI's activities as a cultural alternative that imbibes principles of solidarity call for an appreciation of protest art and its potential to shape political behavior, thereby incorporating art into political action. We can go further and say that, as philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009) proposes, art both necessitates and creates communities.

This position on the relevance of art combats the bourgeois consideration of producing art for art's sake. "Art for art's sake" reifies bourgeois values of individualism and liberalism, wherein artists code themselves as geniuses of society that can produce objects which others cannot (Guillermo 2001). It is bourgeois not only in terms of orientation, but also production. In a capitalist economy, the value of an artwork

depends on the economic value placed onto a particular piece (Sasaki 2012, 23). Aside from its economic value, art that is produced for art's sake seeks to differentiate art that has "class"—that is, fetishized commodity value—and differentiate it from existing popular culture, or the culture of the masses (Chong 2010; Guillermo 2001). Governments that brand themselves as big patrons of the arts force their populations to become audiences that passively observe works that are commissioned and curated to cement reigning ideologies and identities (Lindsay 1995, 662–63). Given this potency of cultural norms, scholars have argued that culture and the arts are used by states to forge a national image (Jones 2013, 22–23; Otmazgin and Ben-Ari 2012, 5).

In the context of Southeast Asia, governments commission artists for part-time work; in Vietnam, the government even subsidizes and sponsors the entire art industry (Lindsay 1995, 666–67). Governments, moreover, alter the behavior and preferences of audiences by opposing popular culture and art, despite acknowledgement that popular art is a legitimate art form (Otmazgin and Ben-Ari 2012, 20). Other states in the region also sponsor the arts and usually give grants for artists; however, governments retain control over the kind of art produced, as well as its expression (Lindsay 1995, 668). Singapore, in particular, is known to practice and promote this type of behavior with regards to art (Chong 2010; Sasaki 2012). The government exercises power in determining what kind of art is useful for its survival and its specific interests, which was seen when the Dutch occupied Indonesia until the New Order period under Suharto (Jones 2012, 149–50). Aside from survival, states also sponsoring art and culture to build national identity and project power. As pointed out by Otmazgin and Ben-Ari (2012, 16), culture is used as an example of "soft power" (Nye 1990). For instance, in the context of East Asian politics, they note that South Korea, Japan, and China have been at the forefront of deploying art as soft power (17). States remain the dominant agent in the promotion of culture and the arts, but this has been overlooked by researchers of international studies (Reus-Smit 2019).

However, culture and art are not under the purview of only the state. While states and markets co-opt art to circulate hegemonic ideologies, organizations that advance alternatives to current structures and relations of power utilize art to foster resistance. Social movements engage in what Jordan (2017) calls "artivism," where art-making is incorporated in activism. This culture-based activism co-opts art as a form of protest. In foregrounding progressive ideas that interrogate the state, politically

committed art historian Guillermo (2001, 68) proposes that protest art operates at three levels: (1) protest art is “declarative,” exposing the social contradictions and ironies of the existing socio-economic order; (2) it is “interrogative” in that it elicits questions about such a system; and (3) it is “imperative” in that it imparts messages of social reform and encourages both participants and audiences to become agents of social change. In art-making processes of protest, artists craft exhibitions and performances, utilizing their own bodies as tools to shape public discourse, as well as to send a strong message against specific actions (Jordan 2017). Other instances where art is used for the promotion of politics can be observed in Latin America. In the case of Argentina, for instance, art was used to convey political messages and as a means for people’s emancipation (Camnitzer 1994, 39–43). In Uruguay, art was a strategic instrument for the *tuparamos*, an urban-based guerilla movement (Camnitzer 1994, 39-43). The *Tuparamos* are officially known as the Uruguayan National Liberation Movement (Camnitzer 1994).

We forward that the operations of protest art, from declaring messages to eliciting action as an imperative, advance a sense of community built upon shared principles, ideas, and advocacies. Culture and the arts have been utilized by states—for economic reasons, for identity-building, and to manifest their power (Jones 2013, 9-16). Lindsay (1995, 656) remarked that cultural norms are “linked to a sense of social and national identity.” For Rancière (2009), the formation of social or communal identity is the primary dimension of aesthetics itself. In his proposal of the term “community of sense,” Rancière argues that communities are “felt”; thus its members are collectively shaped by “some common feeling” (31). This commonality can be disseminated and consolidated through common forms of intelligibility, whereby objects and practices are understood through the same meaning—this, for Rancière, is aesthetics itself. Thus, art and art-making are inherently linked to community. Communities can only exist if they share a similar “regime of identification” that renders their collectivity sensible to members (32).

These regimes of sensing and identification can either support the state’s hegemonic aesthetics—that is, the state’s use of art—or dissent from it. Dissenting mainstream visions of both art and development can be done by installing new communities of sense through counter-hegemonic art forms (Rancière 2009, 38). This is where protest art comes in—through propagating resistant and progressive ideas (Guillermo

2001), art-making can break away from mainstream relations of production and market orientation in order to advance solidarity with the oppressed.

We propose that such an operation takes place in the art-making practices of KSI. Through their assortment of art-related activities and cultural work, KSI engages in what White (2013, 128) calls “cross-border art activism,” wherein state-sanctioned borders, identities, and territories are interrogated so as to foreground empathy, collectivity, and more importantly, solidarity. To make this case, members of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) conducted fieldwork in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2018. The team was composed of Assistant Professor Karl Hapal, Assistant Professor Venarca Papa, and Assistant Professor Nathaniel P. Candelaria. The documentation of KSI’s projects was conducted and validated with the assistance of the organization itself.

Historical Development of Indonesian Art

Art in Southeast Asia has roots in creating an identity that is distinct from other states. Singaporean art has been recognized as a way for the state to forge its own national identity, in accordance with Singapore’s economic interests (Chong 2010). Indonesia is also geared towards the promotion of Indonesian art as a source of national identity (Sasaki 2012, 13-14; Grimm 1993, 9-10). However, this particular trend is not only limited in Southeast Asia. In Latin America, art was able to influence its people (Camnitzer 1994, 39-43). In Canada, the Caribana festival is tied to the idea of identity-building efforts of different groups living in the surrounding area (Jackson 1992, 130-151). Ultimately, art and culture encourage and connect ideas by bringing communities together through the notion of shared identity.

Indonesian art, in particular, is a product of its historical development. To briefly discuss how Indonesian art developed through time, we firstly need to discuss its development vis-à-vis the development of the modern Indonesian state through different historical epochs.

Before the colonization of western powers, Grimm (1993, 3-6) states that Indonesian art was mostly influenced by Hindu and Islamic traditions. However, at the onset of Dutch colonization, Western values began influencing Indonesian art (Grimm 1993, 6-8; Sasaki 2012, 12-

16). Western dominance briefly ended during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia at the height of the Second World War; however, its impact on Indonesian art is minimal (Grimm 1993, 8).

The rise of Sukarno after Indonesian independence paved the way for art to flourish—art schools in Bandung and Jogjakarta were established, and artist organizations such as Persagi were formed to promote issues of political freedom (Grimm 1993, 9).

This changed under the Suharto dictatorship. Under Suharto's control, government powers became highly centralized, including the management of culture and the arts (Cook 2018). The government provided little support for contemporary arts, instead focusing on traditional arts and crafts (Grimm 1993, 10). The Suharto regime censored art considered unsuitable for the Indonesian National Identity Project (Del Vecchio, Good, and Good 2008 quoted in Sasaki 2012, 16). Government agencies such as the Directorate of Culture controlled the content of artistic works in Indonesia, monitoring the political, moral, and stylistic approach of artistic production (Yampolsky 1995 in Jones 2012, 156). Aquino Hayunta (2018a) also shares that the government controlled freedom of expression. Hayunta (2018b) expounds that publications such as comic books must first be registered in the directorate before publication. Artistic development is likewise disjointed, as the culture of the Javanese, the largest ethnic group in Indonesia, is equated to the whole Indonesian culture (Jones 2013, 11–13).

B.J. Habibie—who succeeded as president following the fall of Suharto—and subsequent presidents Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri did not achieve much in terms of government reforms and addressing corruption; only moderate reforms were implemented during the term of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (Jones 2012, 161–62). Post-Suharto reforms in the sector of culture and art are thus viewed as a time of decentralization, as public demands to end artistic licensing regimes increased (164–67).

Aside from these domestic developments, there are also issues pertaining to the impact of globalization in Indonesian society. Some Indonesian artists are concerned with how Indonesian art will thrive amidst increasing globalization (Sasaki 2012; Grimm 1993, 11–12). Currently, government support for art is lacking, with artists relying on market demand for artistic production (Sasaki 2012, 26). The commodification of Indonesian art has lessened identity-building efforts

and increased the use of art as a means of promoting tourism (Grimm 1993, 11–13; Jones 2012, 167). Notwithstanding this reality, different movements have underscored the need for Indonesian art to be more inclusive through the inclusion of non-Javanese cultures and traditions (Jones 2012, 170–73).

Art, Politics and Society: Koalisi Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Art Coalition)²

KSI emerges from the historical development of Indonesian art. Documenting KSI's genesis and development, we suggest that the organization builds a "community of sense" (Rancière 2009) based on solidarity through "artivism" (Jordan 2017). This practice of artistic activism consists not only of producing protest art but also of organizing artists for policy change and teaching necessary art skills to other groups. These activities unify both participants and audiences in common frames of meaning-making, where empathy and social justice are crucial themes.

KSI is an umbrella organization composed of both individuals and organizations that was established to support development and art in Indonesia (KSI n.d.). KSI's efforts to mobilize as an organization was initially conceptualized in 2010, formally institutionalized in 2012, and recognized by the Government of Indonesia's Ministry of Law and Human Rights as an incorporated association in 2013. Presently, the membership of KSI spans 18 provinces in Indonesia (Hayunta 2018a).

A large part of the reason why KSI was formed to respond to the Indonesian government's dearth of support for culture and the arts (Hayunta 2018a). Hayunta shares that the vast majority of the arts budget fund Muslim artefacts, pointing to the reality that artists in Indonesia must support their own craft. Given this reality, he noted that the KSI focuses on contemporary art, but the organization does not discriminate insofar as artistic style and content. When members of the organization propose activities that include education and human rights, KSI provides monetary and material support implement these projects.

2 On 11 October 2018, the research team conducted an interview with Thomas Aquino Hayunta, former member of the secretariat team, and current member of the Koalisi Seni Indonesia, at the KSI office in Jakarta, Indonesia.

However, Hayunta (2018a) clarifies that the projects and initiatives implemented under the KSI are activities done by individual members of the organization. The KSI's role is to serve as the secretariat and facilitator of individually implemented projects, thereby decentralizing efforts across different provinces, cities, and communities in Indonesia. Despite this set up, the organization is nevertheless able to cater to the needs of society, particularly of children, in terms of education and promotion of the value of human rights.

Policy Changes for the Recognition of Indonesian Art Development

One of the advocacies of the organization is legislation on culture and the arts. As Hayunta (2018a) mentions, KSI has been at the forefront of pushing for the recognition of art through Indonesian law. For instance, Indonesia's Cultural Promotion Act No. 5 of 2017 mandates the government to convene an Indonesian Culture Congress to formulate a policy framework on Indonesian art (Tempo.co 2018). When asked by the government about what KSI can do in terms of policymaking, Hayunta responds that art should be a priority of the state because the law was stalled for more than thirty years before it was enacted.

Despite its enactment, the 2017 Culture Promotion Act No. 5 has not yet been implemented; the policy has yet to reach local government units (Hayunta 2018a). To bridge this gap, local communities and KSI have collaborated to implement the said law, as the national government is currently beset by internal disagreements on how to implement this policy. Hayunta further explains that KSI is also involved with lobbying work for the implementation of these art-related activities. The organization recognizes and considers the role of culture and art in promoting democracy in Indonesia.

That democracy is a major theme in KSI's advocacy is meaningful in their activism. In KSI, democracy unfolds in two ways: (1) in pushing for a law for Indonesian art that recognizes the efforts of artists and cultural workers towards nation-building, and; (2) in using art itself as a method of advancing the struggle for artists' rights to exhibit the potential of art in democratic practice.

Art Activities in the Communities

Hayunta (2018a; 2018b) believes that KSI recognizes that art is a platform for social change. As such, many activities have been

implemented by individual members of the organization to promote peoples' issues and instill empathy among Indonesian audiences. Aside from national policy on culture and the arts, the organization has also implemented projects that aim to promote the welfare of Indonesian society through art.

Education and Skills Development. Contributing to its democratic practice, KSI has been heavily involved in education and training. Allowing art-making knowledge to be learned by more people, especially the youth, frames art not as a commodity, but as a way of democratic participation in nation-building and identity formation. For instance, members of KSI conduct lectures and trainings for photography. As mentioned by Hayunta (2018a; 2018b), participants are not only taught technical skills, but also taught to capture images that reflect the reality of Indonesian society.

Aside from photography lessons, another collaboration of the KSI is the *Sanggar Anak Akar*, which was established in 1994 (Tempo.co 2017). *Sanggar Anak Akar* is a kind of studio that aims to provide education for children through art and performance (Hayunta 2018a; 2018b). Under this studio, students are empowered, as they are part of the decision-making process in the school (Tempo.co 2017). Hayunta (2018a; 2018b) notes that the children who undergo this training eventually become teachers in formal schools; the activity also creates trust among different people in the community.

Another project that the KSI implemented is the *tanoker*, an education center that caters to both parents and children (Hayunta 2018a; 2018b). Under *tanoker*, parents and children are taught about human rights education through theater, songs, and sport. Moreover, *tanoker* aims to cater to the needs of children abandoned by their parents for employment. Through art, children are taught about theater, music, and the stilt festival. Hayunta (2018a) shares that this project has been implemented in Jember, East Java. A special activity implemented in *tanoker* is the *egrang* (bamboo stilts), a kind of performance wherein stilts are used to perform dances during the festival in *tanoker* (Boediwardhana 2015). The *egrang* represents a medium for social change—it allows children to move freely. Mothers also participate in *egrang* to practice collaborative parenting in the community (Hayunta 2018b). Likewise, it attempts to improve the lives of children who are socially isolated due to their parents working overseas, thus affecting their quality of life (Boediwardhana 2015).

Finally, the KSI has also supported the *Mari Berbagi Seni*, an initiative that aims to provide quality art education and bring out students' creativity through its curriculum (Ganara Art n.d.). In its teachings, *Mari Berbagi Seni* also emphasizes the idea that art is meant to be shared (Hayunta 2018b). Its core programs are the following: critical thinking and social inclusion, creative teaching, and creative events (Ganara Art n.d.).

Indonesia still has difficulty in providing quality education, since the education has stagnated and is lower than what is recommended (Dilas et al. 2019). Given the inherent problems in the education sector, organizations such as the KSI provide alternative sources of education to the public. The learning components are also different from conventional lessons, as KSI is focused on art and its role in society. Aside from its focus on the arts, KSI's activities foster solidarity due to the organization's emphasis on the idea that art should be shared with whole population.

Local Peacebuilding Efforts. The KSI is also involved in keeping peace at the community level. One of the activities that the organization has worked on is local peacebuilding, as seen in *Komunitas Pedati* in Sulawesi. Hayunta (2018a; 2018b) discusses that the *Komunitas Pedati* incorporates traditional songs and local stories in the performance of the people. These performances critique and discuss social issues relevant to their target communities. The project was implemented in the pedati community to address fighting amongst the community. In order to mitigate further infighting, KSI has maintained contact with the community in an effort to help them through art, organizing the community through collective performances. Although Hayunta (2018a) recognizes that this is not a permanent solution, *Komunitas Pedati* offers an alternative to continuous fighting and disagreement among community members.

Peacebuilding is not always a progressive or democratic notion—it can be either “positive” or “negative.” Negative peace is the absence of conflict, whereas positive peace entails the presence of cooperation in the community, the promotion of values on equality and equity, and the presence of cultural dialogue (Galtung 2011). For many countries in Southeast Asia, the absence of conflict is imposed not through empathy or solidarity but via restrictive and authoritarian political processes, such as silencing activists and social movements (Bello 2021). The peacebuilding efforts implemented by KSI are an example of positive peace; art helps

people in the community realize that there are valuable things that can be learned from the experiences of others. This activity is also an example of an alternative practice—instead of people sitting around negotiating tables to discuss peace processes, the members of KSI have incorporated creative practices to help people realize that they can live together peacefully despite their differences. Art paves the way to peace—peace as solidarity, not silence.

Theater. Hayunta (2018a) states that KSI has been at the forefront of supporting different theater initiatives across Indonesia. One of these is the *Lab Teater*, a theater activity implemented in Thousand Islands, Indonesia. For this particular theater, the inmates, guards, and warden perform together. The program aims to revive the old culture of their elders. As Hayunta (2018b) further explains, the lab collects oral history through songs, stories, myth, culinary arts, and traditional arts and sports. Another theater-related project of the organization is *teater satu*, a theater aimed towards educating the public on conflict resolution local level.

Other forms of theater are also implemented by the organization. One example of this is the 100 percent Yogyakarta, wherein 100 people are involved in a play. Done in cooperation with German directors, the project aims to “bring communities together by discussing hard hitting issues with the intention of increasing social tolerance” (Gokkon 2015). 100 percent Yogyakarta has another purpose: polling on stage, as the 100 people participating in the play represent 1 percent of the population (Hayunta 2018a; 2018b). In the 100 percent Yogyakarta, participants are residents of Yogyakarta themselves, represented by different sectors of the Indonesian society (Gokkon 2015). During the play, the participants are asked questions on different issues; the answers given by the participants help them become aware of the viewpoints of other people. The play also deepens people’s awareness of other perspectives, as they can encounter and know people of different positions. Similar community theater projects have been launched in cities such as Vienna and London; Yogyakarta is the 27th city in the circuit.

Through this particular art form, people are engaged and made aware of ideas that are contrary to theirs, which helps them realize each other’s humanity and right to dignity despite differing. Aside from fostering better relations in society and promoting peace, these theatrical activities also help people regain their sense of history and identity amid a world driven by forces of the global market.

100 percent Yogyakarta demonstrates the potential of cultural alternatives, as it seeks to increase a group's awareness of the crises faced by other sectors. The production allows marginalized sectors to share their stories with each other within a framework of mutual understanding, thus building a sense of community. The exchanges performed by the sectors onstage shine a light on the potential of empathy and solidarity in forwarding social justice. Through this project, KSI presents an alternative by building solidarity among the marginalized, not only in Indonesia but across the entire Southeast Asian region.

Koalisi Seni Indonesia and Alternative Community-building

Despite the lack of support of the Indonesian government in promoting Indonesian art, civil society organizations such as the KSI have been at the forefront of this advocacy. These organizations are stepping up to fill in where government is absent, promoting art as a space for expressing collective identities, problems, and action. KSI makes art to express and spread messages of human rights. Their democratic practice operates through art—it is not only limited to educating the Indonesian people about the wider world, but also their capacity to change society, as well as the existence of different realities.

The activities implemented by the organization are geared towards the direction of using art to change society. Hayunta (2018a) discusses that KSI is active in promoting human rights and education through the medium of art. Aside from public education, KSI is also involved in local peacebuilding efforts, wherein they utilize art as a tool for conflict resolution. As mentioned earlier, through pedati, the organization helped the community cooperate with one another, offering an alternative to petty infighting.

KSI engaged with various stakeholders to realize their goals and promote their activities; for instance, the organization actively engages with the government, and some government staff are supported by the KSI (Hayunta 2018a). Aside from the support given by the state, the KSI was also successful in lobbying for a national policy on the arts, even if it has yet to reach the local level. KSI's projects and initiatives are clear examples of alternative practices that should be documented and supported as people-centered activities, running counter to mainstream models of development promoted at the international level (Raina 1997, 13–18). That KSI uses art as an instrument for the improvement of Indonesian

society indicates that it is alternative in nature, as they seek to promote the welfare of all sectors in society in spite of paltry government support.

KSI's activities promote art, education, and community integration through collective art-making. We can understand this series of cultural activities as an attempt to build communities that sense the world through solidarity. Firstly, their trainings are open to all interested in utilizing art for social justice. Secondly, their peacebuilding efforts recognize the need for unbarred democratic participation among the Indonesian people. Thirdly, their theatrical performances, unquestionably belonging to the protest art tradition, promote dialogue across sectors of Indonesian society. Rancière's (2009, 42) case for art resonates well with these operations: "art is summoned thus to put its political potentials to work in reframing a sense of community and mending the social bond." The borders, identities, and territories imposed by hegemonic ideologies are interrogated, and the public is encouraged to act by overcoming social borders and establishing an society that recognizes the equal rights of all. Borrowing from White (2013, 119), the "cross-border groupings" of these art-making activities bring forth an alternative world of possibility, where the marginalized can produce art as anyone else can—a world, in other words, of democracy.

Conclusion

Art is an important tool in forging a national identity. There continue to be debates on how art should be interpreted and appreciated in society. On one hand, art is recognized as an industry under a globalizing economy, where governments are framed as important patrons of art. Governments have the resources to promote and support the art industry; states are likewise keen to use art to promote hegemonic ideas of society, as seen in Singapore (Chong 2010). On the other hand, art is also used to promote people's expressions, to help shape socialization, and to highlight social realities through any artistic medium. There are multiple examples of art being used to highlight on-the-ground realities—Latin America (Camnitzer 1994, 39–43), Europe (Jordan 2017), and East Asia (Otmazgin and Ben-Ari 2012). Despite differences in opinion on the role of art in society, it nevertheless has a significant role in social transformation, particularly with regard to its capability to build identities and send messages to the public.

Indonesia's rich culture was shaped through different historical epochs. While art was initially used to promote Indonesian values, Sasaki (2012) discusses that there has been a shift towards the promotion of art for economic purposes. However, this does not stop organizations from promoting art as a medium for transmitting different values. The case of the KSI is clear in this regard. It was able to promote values of human rights, camaraderie, education, and other positive learnings by focusing on art and its impact on society. The KSI exemplifies the workings of alternative practices—they promote values contrary to the demands of the global economy (i.e., producing art for economic value) and highlight the different artistic practices across the nation, as Indonesia is not defined by a singular identity.

By conducting different art-making activities in different areas across the country, the KSI foregrounds that Indonesia is an amalgamation of different cultures. KSI's interventions, which include protest art, move beyond producing art for the sake of art itself. Promoting education, peacebuilding, and dialogue among sectors of Indonesian society shows that artistic and cultural alternatives frame art-making as part and parcel of a just and democratic society. To produce both art and artists—including the students taught by KSI and the audience-participants of 100 percent Yogyakarta—demonstrates the possibilities of forming communities of solidarity across borders.

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The **Program on Alternative Development (AltDev)** aims to look at paradigms, policies, practices, and projects that are largely marginalized and excluded from the mainstream. The program aims to bring these alternatives out of the margins and into the mainstream to level the playing field so that they may be regarded on an equal footing with dominant discourses and thus offer alternatives to the existing system.

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