

After Duterte's War on Drugs

**A Discussion on Rehabilitation, Treatment,
and Drug Policy Reform in the Philippines**

**Proceedings of the Roundtable Discussion: "Mixed Methods?
Responding to Drug Offenders in the Philippines"**

13 December 2022, 10:00 A.M. (Philippine Standard Time)

*Conference Hall and via Zoom
Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS)
University of the Philippines*

Compiled by Maria Corazon C. Reyes

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UP CIDS | PROCEEDINGS

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“Protest against the Philippine war on drugs at the Philippines Consulate General in New York City.”

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ABOUT THE PROCEEDINGS

The University of the Philippines Center of Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Social and Political Change (PSPC) organized a roundtable discussion (RTD), “Mixed Methods? Responding to Drug Offenders in the Philippines,” on 13 December 2022.

This event is the third part of a discussion series examining the Philippines’ anti-drug campaign. The previous roundtables explored the campaign’s goals and the soundness of its policies. In this RTD, the speakers spoke about the aftermath of the Duterte administration’s war on drugs, specifically on policing, drug use policy, and ways forward.

This event was documented by PSPC staff members Nathaniel P. Candelaria and Maria Corazon C. Reyes.

Introduction

A defining feature of Rodrigo Duterte's administration is the violent campaign against illegal drugs. Government reports indicate that police anti-drug operations resulted in the deaths of at least 6,000 individuals nationwide from 2016 to 2022. However, unofficial estimates suggest the death toll could be between 12,000 and 30,000 (Wong 2022). Regardless of the source, the significant number of fatalities led the International Criminal Court (ICC) to initiate an investigation into the Philippine drug war in 2018.

Unsurprisingly, the Philippine government has sought to terminate these investigations. However, in late September 2022, the ICC denied the Philippine government's request to halt its inquiry into the killings of drug suspects during Duterte's presidency. While the punitive measures, characterized by excessive force, are a prominent feature of the Philippines' anti-drug campaign, there are also rehabilitative efforts. The complexity of the drug issue necessitates a multifaceted strategy. A crucial aspect of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency's (PDEA) operations is providing treatment for drug users. By the end of 2016, a large drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation center was established in Nueva Ecija, accommodating up to 10,000 beds. Nonetheless, there are concerns regarding the coercive nature of these rehabilitation treatments (Lasco and Yarcia 2022).

Although a combination of strategies might be the most effective way to address the intricate issue of illicit drugs, evaluating the success of these various methods is difficult. Different nations have adopted distinct approaches. In many European countries, anti-drug policies emphasize harm reduction and the acceptance of certain types of drug use for both medical and recreational purposes. Conversely, in Latin America, the focus is on limiting supply channels and enforcing prohibition. In the Philippines, the drug issue is predominantly perceived as a criminal problem.

This webinar is the third part of a series of roundtable discussions on President Duterte's anti-drug campaign in the Philippines. The first one, held in December 2017, "Are We There Yet? What It Means to Win the Philippine War on Drugs," addressed the goals (or lack thereof) of the Duterte administration's anti-drug campaign. In November 2018, a second roundtable, "Planted Evidence: Is the Philippine War on Drugs a Sound Policy?" was held to discuss the soundness of the anti-drug policy.

Opening Remarks

■ **Maria Ela Atienza, Ph.D.¹**

Professor, UP Department of Political Science

Thank you, Associate Professor Robert Go, to our esteemed resource persons, scholars, students, as well as our friends from civil society, government, and the private sector joining us both in person and virtually. Good morning to all of you. On behalf of Professor Teresa Encarnacion Tadem, Executive Director of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS), welcome to today's roundtable discussion, "Mixed Methods? Responding to Drug Offenders in the Philippines."

This is the third roundtable discussion (RTD) in our series, "Are We There Yet? Roundtable Discussion Series on the Drug War in the Philippines." This series is organized by the Program on Social and Political Change (PSPC) of UP CIDS, where I am one of the co-convenors. Later, my co-convenor, Professor Jorge V. Tigno, will discuss the concept behind the entire RTD series, as well as the one we are holding today.

Allow me first, for those who are not familiar with the UP CIDS, to give some background about the Center. UP CIDS is the UP System's policy research unit. It was established in 1985 by the UP Board of Regents. It conducts activities like research, publications, lectures, and roundtable discussions on important policy issues. The Center's goal is not just to contribute to discussions of important

¹ Dr. Atienza is Professor and former Chair of the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman. She is the Co-convenor of the Program on Social and Political Change at the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS) at the time of this event.

policy areas, but actually be the voice of the University of the Philippines in influencing our policymakers, administrators, civil society, and other sectors. To achieve these goals, UP CIDS adopts a programmatic approach. It has a structure wherein a sizable network of scholars is brought together and maintained under specific research programs.

Currently, the UP CIDS is organized into twelve programs, with the Program on Social Political Change (PSPC) being one of these programs. We are proud to say that, aside from evolving and continuing to respond to the many issues that confront the country and the world through various national and international governance and administration, UP CIDS has managed to continue operating in the years of the pandemic by developing new venues and tools for research, discussion, and disseminating our findings. Up to now, it continues to evolve to meet the challenges and the mandate of the Center. Today, we are now experimenting with a hybrid format with both in-person and online participants in this RTD.

As for our specific program, the Program on Social and Political Change focus on burning social and political issues in the Philippines and in the world. The goal is to bring together scholars, civil society organizations, government agencies, and the private sector to focus on providing discussions on policy alternatives to solve these social and political issues from a multidisciplinary perspective. The program designs empirical studies, which form the basis for policy inputs and discussions at the local, national, and international levels. We disseminate our findings through academic publications, policy papers, discussion papers, policy monographs, podcasts, and videos. Currently, we have a number of projects, including: the Policy Studies for A Better Metro Manila, Constitutional Performance Assessment of the 1987 Constitution, the Ugnayang Migrante Podcast series, the Policy Studies for Political and Administrative Reforms, and of course, the Drug War RTD [Round Table Discussion] Series.

So, I look forward to a very informative and lively roundtable discussion this morning. Thank you very much.

Welcome Remarks

- **Jorge V. Tigno, D.P.A.²**

Professor, UP Department of Political Science

Good morning. *Magandang umaga sa ating lahat. Maraming salamat sa inyong pagdalo dito* [Thank you very much for attending here]. I join Ela [Atienza] in welcoming you to this event.

Just to give you a background of this RTD series, it is supposed to be a series early into the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. We all knew that the key policy pillar of this administration was going to be the bloody war on drugs. There was no doubt about the campaign promise he made—that Duterte would show a bloody campaign—and he delivered on that promise quite well, quite literally, I would think so. However, what was in doubt was its chance of success in ridding the country of illegal drugs. At first, Duterte promised to do it in six months. Later, he said he needed six years to do it. By the end of his term, Duterte had given up altogether, saying the drug problem is a never-ending one.

We're here to talk about this campaign. This campaign is not specific only to the Duterte administration. Previous administrations have undertaken anti-illegal drug campaigns of varying degrees of effectiveness. But in the case of the Duterte administration, we're seeing a different kind of approach—a bloody approach.

² Dr. Tigno is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman. He is the Co-convenor of the Program on Social and Political Change at the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies at the time of this event.

In December of 2017, we had our first RTD on this, “Are We There Yet? What It Means to Win the Philippine War on Drugs,” with speakers from different sectors and angles all looking at the drug problem. We had someone from Social Weather Stations speak on public perceptions of the war on drugs. We had a professor of philosophy talk about the notion of justice and violence. We also had Inez [Feria], who is also still here again with us from No Box Philippines, who touched on some case responses to illegal drugs. Then shortly after that, in May 2018, we came out with a policy brief—a short document outlining the key issues related to the Philippine war on drugs. In November of 2018, we had a second RTD, “Planted Evidence: Is the Philippine War on Drugs a Sound Policy?,” that looks at the war on drugs and the extent of how the drug problem has been blown out of proportion to justify the bloodiness of the campaign. We’ve had news reports on the number of drug users reaching millions. Whether or not this is reliable and, whether or not, this actually contributes to our understanding of the policy are another thing. We had speakers like Professor Clarissa David talk about the media coverage of the drug war fatalities. Professor Marielle Marcaida spoke about sharing data sets on the drug war. A speaker also talked about the experience in China.

Finally, we have this webinar, a hybrid event, “Mixed Methods? Responding to Drug Offenders in the Philippines,” dealing with drug offenders. We’re now left with a predicament where we have thousands who died or been killed and tens of thousands more arrested and in the custody of the authorities. So, the question now is, what to do with them? To tackle this and other questions that we have on this topic, we have a panel of distinguished experts from different fields and aspects surrounding the problem. It’s not very often that we get a chance to have this distinguished panel of experts, and to have a sober and sensible discussion on the issue. I think it’s the experts who should be controlling the discourse, the conversation, and not the politicians who simply want to validate their own narrative. I hope today’s discussion can bring us at least one step closer to finding a lasting solution to this societal problem.

Maraming salamat, at magandang umaga po.

Presentations

- **Filomin Gutierrez, Ph.D.**
Professor, UP Department of Sociology

Dr. Filomin “Ging” Gutierrez began her presentation by providing the context of her study on the Philippine War on Drugs. It focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of the police, and was based on a larger research project. She further explained that her data set included interviews with thirty-six police officers from four cities in Metro Manila, all of whom worked in the anti-narcotics field. Participants included a district director (who later became chief of the Philippine National Police or PNP), four station chiefs, six heads of anti-narcotics units, twenty members of these units, and five station police officers. The majority of the interviewees were men between the ages of 28 and 52 when the study was conducted. Dr. Gutierrez supplemented her interviews with an analysis of PNP and PDEA reports and records.

Prior to this study, Dr. Gutierrez interviewed twenty-seven arrested drug personalities in Metro Manila. She emphasized that there is no single face or perspective in the war on drugs. This diversity also extends to the police. While Dr. Gutierrez’s research typically lies in the sociology of deviance, crime, and the lived experiences of those working in the criminal justice system, this was her first study on police personnel. She noted that the police officers she interviewed expressed very different views that sometimes seemed contradictory. However, these perspectives, taken together, create a complex puzzle for understanding the experiences of police in the war on drugs.

According to Dr. Gutierrez, police officials commonly perceived President Duterte as serious and determined in his efforts to end the drug problem. The police also saw Duterte’s actions as a sign that someone was finally taking a decisive stance on the drug problem. Moreover, many officials believed the war on drugs was necessary because of the severity of the country’s drug problem. For them, the

campaign was effective in curbing drug trafficking and street crime. The police also recognized that drug war had public support. However, there were cracks in this narrative too. Dr. Gutierrez explained that some officials expressed that the drug war had exposed the alarming extent of police involvement in the drug trade. This suggested a degree of reflexivity, a recognition that the problem extended far beyond the streets and deep into the police force itself. Ultimately, what was remarkable was the willingness of individual PNP employees to speak with a researcher and point out their criticisms of the war on drugs.

Expounding more on her fieldwork, Dr. Gutierrez approached the PNP with an official request to conduct interviews and found them to be cooperative. The officers also noted that the war on drugs had been poorly planned and executed. They expressed a desire for more preparation before its launch. This was striking as it contradicted a common image of the police as simply following orders without critique. According to Dr. Gutierrez, the officers felt the war on drugs placed significant burdens and dangers upon them. Their work dramatically increased, often preventing them from seeing their families. They felt that resources were diverted away from other important policing duties. They argued that the drug problem is not the only crime that needs attention. Some officials also commented on deficiencies in the PNP's internal cleansing program and questioned why certain known corrupt individuals were not included. This was a direct criticism from within their own ranks, emphasizing that the war on drugs had made their career precarious. Officials also were concerned about internal affairs investigations, lawsuits related to their activities, and even the possibility of firing. These concerns also extended to the potential impact on their pensions and the well-being of their families.

Additionally, the officials also noted a trend toward leniency within the justice system. Prosecutors, lawyers and courts appeared more inclined to acquit perpetrators. However, this was seen as a positive sign. It suggested that despite the challenges, the criminal justice system still functioned as a checks and balances system. When the police's work was poor or the evidence was weak, the courts could mitigate the negative consequences by holding the police accountable.

In addition, the war on drugs drew attention to the deplorable state of detention facilities, which was overwhelmed by the sheer number of arrests. In one of the interviews, officers expressed their frustration to Dr. Gutierrez, stating, "We keep arresting people, but where do we put them?" Rehabilitation programs were indeed lacking.



- Dr. Filomin Gutierrez during her discussion about her research on policing during the war on drugs.

Within the study, Dr. Gutierrez also encountered police officers who emphasized the importance of including community affairs programs. They highlighted their own efforts in rehabilitation, leading Dr. Gutierrez to question if such activities should be the domain of social workers. The officers responded that without such intervention, the vicious cycle of arrests and recidivism would persist. They expressed hope that the focus on rehabilitation would be recognized by higher authorities.

Dr. Gutierrez also observed the alleged protection of allies of local politicians from being placed on watch lists. This may have contradicted previous statements about the effectiveness of the war on drugs in reducing drug trafficking. Although some officials initially claimed a decline in drug activity, many later admitted that drug use and trafficking continued. Their method for assessing this ongoing problem was simple: they would call known addicts, give them money to buy drugs, and measure turnaround time. Quick returns of purchased medications meant medications were still available. This reflects why the war on drugs is perceived to have anti-poor bias that disproportionately targeted marginalized communities.

For Dr. Gutierrez, she found the police officers' criticism convincing. Although they were government employees tasked with the war on drugs, the officers ultimately shared the same concerns as all Filipino citizens.

Dr. Gutierrez's also shared her findings from interviewing arrestees about torture, beatings and planting of evidence. When she confronted the police with these allegations of violent human rights violations—while maintaining a respectful approach— she was met with the expected rejection of illegal violence. The police stuck to familiar justifications, claiming that violence was only used in self-defense or that injuries resulted from the suspect's resistance against arrest.

Additionally, Dr. Gutierrez recognized the importance of being aware of the methodology she chose. She understood that in-depth interviews are primarily about narratives shaped by the speaker's desire to be understood in a certain way. She explained that this reflected the work of scholars such as Martha Huggins, who examined violence and torture related to policing and military atrocities in Brazil. Direct admissions are rare, and it was not Dr. Gutierrez's goal to force them from respondents. However, she could sense discrepancies in the officers' narratives. The officers often suggested that such abuses could occur elsewhere, by others, but not by themselves or within their jurisdiction. Some admitted that certain police officers might use force if they were morally convinced of a suspect's guilt. Others suggested the possible existence of an elite unit dedicated to extrajudicial killings.

Dr. Gutierrez also acknowledged the importance of triangulation.³ Evidence of violence could be found across multiple sources: the narratives of the arrested, ethnographic studies (like those by Anna Warburg and Steffen Jensen)⁴, and investigative journalism that exposed death squads with ties to the police⁵.

³ Triangulation is mainly focused on validating the results of a study such that stakeholders who make use of the research findings take informed decisions. Source: Bans-Akutey, Anita, and Benjamin Makimilua Tiimub. "Triangulation in research." *Academia Letters* 2 (2021): 1-6.

⁴ Anna Bræmer Warburg and Steffen Jensen, "Ambiguous Fear in the War on Drugs: A Reconfiguration of Social and Moral Orders in the Philippines," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, no. 1-2 (2020): 5-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463420000211>

⁵ Clare Baldwin, Andrew R.C. Marshall, and Manuel Mogato, "The Davao Boys: How a Secretive Police Squad Racked Up Kills in Duterte's Drug War," Reuters, 19 December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/philippines-drugs-squad/>

She also noted the officers' numerous criticisms aimed at the PNP's internal cleansing program.

Dr. Gutierrez observed a shift in police directives from aggressive, direct force to a more cautious approach. This change likely stemmed from *motu proprio* ("on his own impulse")⁶ investigations into police shootings. However, these investigations raised concerns among officers about the possibility of facing legal consequences. In particular, the police officers expressed anxiety about potential lawsuits, the lack of access to good legal representation, and the risk of career damage. There was also a clear sense of reflection regarding their job security. Police work, particularly for those from lower economic backgrounds, represents a path toward a stable government position and a future pension.

Dr. Gutierrez continued that the war on drugs also mandated drug testing within the PNP. This, coupled with counterintelligence measures and targeted watchlists, led to an atmosphere of paranoia. She argued that this heightened sense of precarity within the police force could logically be a factor in the suppression of information about officers involved in the drug trade. Eliminating potential witnesses fits this climate of fear.

Dr. Gutierrez also made observations about the police's perspective on human rights but decided to reserve the bulk of these insights for later discussion. Nevertheless, she noted that some officers expressed frustration, saying that only perpetrators appeared to have rights, while any harm done to police went unacknowledged. These feelings were expressed through cynical jokes and aphorisms. Some officers said, "*Ang may rights daw ay yung mga offenders* (The ones who supposedly have rights are the offenders). If the offender suffers, that's human rights. If the police gets killed or *matamaan kami* (we get hit), it's alright." Dr. Gutierrez also recalled questioning a clear, memorable statement by an official about the applicability of human rights in the Philippines. She asked the said officer which foreign country or culture such a concept came. The officer replied, "*Ma'am, parang hindi yan applicable sa bansa natin? Saang bansa po yan*

⁶ *Motu proprio* is a Latin term meaning "on his own impulse." In legal contexts, it refers to an official act taken without a formal request from another party. Specifically, in Catholic canon law, a *motu proprio* is a document issued by the Pope on his own initiative and personally signed by him. Source: <https://definitions.uslegal.com/m/motu-proprio/>

nanggaling ma'am? (Ma'am, I think that is not applicable to us. From what country is that from, ma'am?)” This exchange prompted Dr. Gutierrez to recognize the concept of human rights as a point for further exploration as a social researcher. She then highlighted some of the possible issues in how human rights are understood, practiced, and legitimized in the Philippine workforce, particularly in the police force.

Dr. Gutierrez also argued that the prevailing atmosphere surrounding the war on drugs ideologically supported the idea of violence as a solution to the drug problem. She emphasized the power of a head of state as commander-in-chief, that is, someone who has a legitimate state apparatus and is able to authorize the use of force.

Additionally, Dr. Gutierrez theorized that the war on drugs energized new mechanisms of instrumental coercion. She argued that the close collaboration between local barangays and police in surveillance and intelligence gathering creates the potential for watch lists to effectively become target lists. Moreover, she highlighted existing scholarships that focus on the history of the PNP. She posited that the war on drugs reactivated a militarized culture within the PNP. This culture treated civilians as enemies and revived a latent history of extrajudicial killings. She cited the work of scholars such as David Johnson and Franklin Zimring, particularly their studies of the death penalty and extrajudicial killings as solutions to crime or as a form of swift justice. According to Dr. Gutierrez, that violence suggests a resurgence of a perhaps dormant—nonetheless, persistent—culture of violence within the police force. Ultimately, the war on drugs increased violence by seizing old practices and intensifying new ones.

Dr. Gutierrez also pointed out that while official police operations related to Oplan Tokhang have decreased over time, deaths attributed to the war on drugs have persisted. She highlighted that the most significant area of violence is located within what she termed “the gray zone.” These instances are often labeled as “deaths under investigation,” which are attributed to rivalries between drug syndicates, vigilante groups, or extrajudicial killings involving police. Dr. Gutierrez emphasized that although official police operations have lessened, this “gray zone” remains a large and puzzling area that demands further understanding. She encouraged deeper reflection on the driving forces behind this form of violence.

Finally, Dr. Gutierrez suggested examining the PNP's militarized history and long-standing problems with political patronage to gain deeper insight into its role as a law enforcement and violent actor in the war on drugs. She noted that while the People Power Revolution attempted to transform the PNP into a civilized, professional force, its old structures and culture, including a military hierarchy, largely remained. This deep-rooted culture of violence within its ranks, shaped by decades of martial law, previous wars, and even colonial periods, must be recognized. It is also important to note that the PNP's top leadership often comes from the Philippine Military Academy (PMA), which has a history of extrajudicial killings, police brutality, torture and human rights abuses.

Nevertheless, Dr. Gutierrez also observed a counterforce within police culture—a capacity for self-reflection and criticism that provides a sense of hope. She had planned to elaborate on this matter during the open forum discussion.

■ **Gideon Lasco, M.D., Ph.D.**

Senior Lecturer, UP Department of Anthropology

Starting his presentation, Dr. Gideon Lasco highlighted the recent surge in academic studies on the Philippine drug war. He reiterated Dr. Gutierrez's observation about the optimism found in various sectors. Additionally, he stressed the significance of this new wave of critical academic research, which brings renewed focus to the topic of drugs after a prolonged period. Despite the longstanding presence of drugs in the Philippines, scholarly interest has notably risen during the Duterte administration.

Dr. Lasco continued to offer an overview of public perceptions surrounding drugs. This, he argued, is crucial for understanding how the Philippines approaches the drug issue and for critically examining longstanding societal views on drugs even before the Duterte era. According to Dr. Lasco, in terms of the genealogy of how drugs are perceived, 2016 is undeniably a significant moment, particularly when Duterte entered the picture and embarked on a genocidal drug war. However, it could be argued that the drug policy is actually a continuum. The year 2016 represents more of an escalation than an exception to the drug policy in the country.

Continuing, Dr. Lasco continued and inquired if the audience could identify the sources of the quotes he intended to display in his PowerPoint presentation. The first quotation reads:

Illicit drugs are a menace to society. Our country has no future if our children are addicted to drugs. Because drug creators are ruthless or children being ruthless, back to them is not a bad thing... It may be necessary to have casualties...If there are deaths, that is normal.⁷

Although the quotation might evoke memories of a former Philippine president for the audience, Dr. Lasco later disclosed that it was actually from Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Prime Minister of Thailand, in 2003. Another quote reads:

Drug abuse is proven to have damaged the future of the nation in any country, extraordinary damage, damage to human character, physical damage, and public health damage, and in the long-term great potential to disrupt the competitiveness and progress of the nation...⁸

While the quotation might also remind the audience of the discourse from the Malacañang from 2016 onwards, Dr. Lasco later revealed that those words were from President Joko Widodo of Indonesia from 2015.

⁷ CNN (Cable News Network), "Amnesty: Thai Drug War a 'Shoot-to-Kill' Policy," *CNN*, 21 February 2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/02/21/thailand.drugs/>

Human Rights Watch, *Thailand: Not Enough Graves: The War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS, and Violations of Human Rights*, C1608, 8 July 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/hrw/2004/en/34653>

⁸ Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia, "No Mercy Anymore, President Jokowi: Catch and Arrest the Dealers and Distributors of Drugs," *Setkab*, 26 June 2015. <https://setkab.go.id/en/no-mercy-anymore-president-jokowi-catch-and-arrest-the-dealers-and-distributors-of-drugs/>

Dr. Lasco presented another quotation, which reads:

Victory in the War on Drugs is good. They may blame the crackdown for more than 2,500 deaths, but this is a small price to pay. If [we] failed to curb [the drug trade], over the years the number of deaths would easily surpass this toll.⁹

Surprisingly, according to Dr. Lasco, it was from the revered King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, who said it in Dec. 2003 after several months of Thaksin's drug war.

Additionally, Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina drew inspiration from Oplan Tokhang in 2018, and stated that:

Drugs destroy a country, a nation and a family... We will continue the drive, no matter who says what.¹⁰

Finally, Dr. Lasco showed another quotation from the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) in 1972, which reads:

But a country whose youths are mental and physical wrecks will be hopelessly doomed to ignominy unredeemable until, if that is possible, a new and strong breed will rise up from the ruins. These are the worst saboteurs and are worthy of the highest punishments. For they destroy the youth, the hope of the land.¹¹

⁹ King Bhumibol Adulyadej, "Speech of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej on the Auspicious Occasion of His Majesty's 76th Birthday Anniversary, December 4, 2003," *The Golden Jubilee Network*, 4 December 2003, <http://kanchanapisek.or.th/speeches/2003/1204.th.html>

¹⁰ Ruma Paul and Krishna N. Das, "Bangladesh Defends Deadly Anti-Drug Crackdown as Death Toll Nears 200," *Reuters*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-drugs-killings-idUSKBN1KX0V4/>

¹¹ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Statement on Drug Abuse," *CBCP Online*, accessed 11 June 2024, <https://cbcponline.net/statement-on-drug-abuse/>

Soon after, Dr. Lasco discussed a paper he coauthored with sociologist Jayeel Cornelio, Ph.D., titled “*Morality Politics: Drug Use and the Catholic Church in the Philippines*,”¹² They analyzed the rhetoric used by Philippine bishops when discussing drugs. Their discourse reveals a shift in perspective, from amorality to one emphasizing redemption after 2016. Historically, legal pronouncements cast drug addicts as dangerous, useless, and even deserving of the death penalty. The Philippine Supreme Court also upheld this view in the 1980s. According to Dr. Lasco, these statements reveal the complex and evolving societal attitudes toward drugs in the Philippines. While Duterte’s violent policies were extreme, such views are shared by segments of the population. Despite major disapproval of the Tokhang killings, a significant minority endorsed extrajudicial violence. It is important to note that human cultures have used psychoactive substances for millennia. The criminalization of substances is determined by changing cultural and historical factors. This is evident with the Philippines’ long history of consuming various psychoactive substances—from those now celebrated to those resulting in harsh prison sentences.

Expounding on the historical aspect of drug or psychoactive consumption, Dr. Lasco narrated his research outside the Philippines. During a long-term scholarly stay in Mexico after the 2021 pandemic, he discovered *tubâ*, a traditional Filipino beverage, being sold in the state of Colima. *Tubâ* was introduced by Filipino sailors to the area between the 16th and 18th centuries. Interestingly, Mexicans applied the same fermentation technology used for *tubâ* to coconut, which was also brought by Filipino sailors, and later to agave. This led to the development of tequila and mezcal, which are now deeply associated with Mexican identity. According to Dr. Lasco, this example highlights that the use of intoxicants and psychoactive substances is a long-standing human practice. What becomes deemed illegal, bad, or evil is culturally constructed and is subject to change. Tequila, for example, is celebrated while substances like cannabis face varying legality and acceptance globally. In the Philippines, however, even possessing minimal amounts of cannabis can result in lengthy prison sentences. Dr. Lasco asserted that this situation demonstrates societal ambivalence toward illicit drugs, as reflected in policies. He suggested that it would be interesting to explore the historical

¹² Jayeel Cornelio and Gideon Lasco, “Morality Politics: Drug Use and the Catholic Church in the Philippines,” *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 327–341. <https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2020-0112>

development of psychoactive substance use in the Philippines, considering examples like tobacco, *basi*, *lambanog*, and even the mildly psychoactive practice of betel nut chewing (*ngangá*). These changing attitudes can be linked to the global drug control regime of the 20th century. For example, coca, which was traditionally consumed as tea in Latin America, became the precursor to cocaine and thus a strictly controlled substance in most parts of the world, albeit not exclusively in its countries of origin. Dr. Lasco added that many scientists agree alcohol ranks first in terms of addictive potential and associated health risks when considering the extent of harm caused by various substances.

Moreover, according to Dr. Lasco, historians like Ambeth Ocampo have provocatively suggested that even revered national heroes like Jose Rizal would not be safe from the Philippines' war on drugs. This speculation stems from Rizal's casual reference to trying hashish, a cannabis used in the Middle East, in his correspondence¹³. Dr. Lasco continued that advertisements such as the Ginebra billboards, which promote alcohol consumption while simultaneously condemning drug use, underscores the irony of the war on drugs. The historical reference to Rizal and the advertising example raise the question of why some substances are celebrated while others are forbidden. If harm were the sole deciding factor, authorities would regulate tobacco and alcohol more strictly than currently illegal drugs.

Additionally, there are numerous negative assumptions about people who use drugs. They are often conflated with criminality, and commentators, such as Duterte through his "colorful language," employ extreme, stigmatizing rhetoric. In radio shows, discussions of heinous crimes often include the presumption that only an addict would be capable of such violence. While the majority might not advocate for the violent killings of the war on drugs, its support by a significant minority is concerning. The tendency to conflate terms like "user," "pusher," "addict," and "offender" creates problematic generalizations and reduces individuals to their drug use. This language further fuels the societal assumptions and attitudes that drive problematic drug policies.

¹³ Ambeth R. Ocampo, "Rizal the User," Philippine Daily *Inquirer*, 19 August 2016, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/96604/rizal-the-user>

Dr. Lasco then emphasized that historical analysis reveals that authoritarian figures have often used the perceived threat of drugs to justify restrictive measures. In 1972, as Ferdinand Marcos Sr. consolidated his power in the Philippines, he invoked both the threat of communism and a manufactured drug crisis to justify the imposition of martial law. This tactic created a sense of moral panic, garnering support from actors like the Catholic bishops. Films like *Kill the Pushers* (1972) reflected and reinforced this societal anxiety (Cornelio and Lasco 2020).

Additionally, Dr. Lasco cautioned that it is important to understand that drug use exists on a spectrum. There is nonuse, beneficial use, lower-risk use, higher-risk use, and abuse. A singular focus on problematic drug use obscures this nuance. Discussions about drugs serve multiple social and political purposes. They provide a vocabulary for stigmatizing marginalized groups, particularly the urban poor, and articulate anxieties about threats to societal order. This is especially pronounced in cultures that are highly protective of young people, such as the Philippines. Politicians also consider positioning themselves as tough on drugs to be an effective strategy. They attempt to mirror the success of leaders like Duterte, who retained popularity throughout his term despite his brutal tactics. Dr. Lasco suggested that the mobilization of anti-drug rhetoric is likely to continue as a tool for political gain.



- Dr. Gideon Lasco during his discussion on drug use and rehabilitation in the Philippines in relation to the Duterte administration.

Dr. Lasco also discussed a paper¹⁴ he coauthored with lawyer, physician, and social scientist Lee Edson Yarcia, which explores the complexities surrounding drug rehabilitation in the Philippines. Their findings reveal a dominant narrative of redemption, where rehabilitation is framed as a means of healing and salvation for those who have become dependent on drugs. However, this narrative often overlooks the potential for human rights abuses within rehabilitation centers, as well as a lack of critical oversight in determining what constitutes success in rehabilitation programs. During the Duterte era, rehabilitation was presented as a more humane alternative to the controversial killings associated with the drug war. This framing led to a general acceptance of rehabilitation programs, even if the specific practices and conditions within these centers remained subject to less scrutiny. The creation of a mega rehabilitation center in Nueva Ecija exemplifies this approach.¹⁵ While public attention was on the violence of the drug war, the policy involved other elements, including an increased emphasis on rehabilitation and drug testing within schools.

According also to Dr. Lasco, the existing drug rehabilitation protocols often provide prescriptive instructions for sessions and activities within centers. However, there is limited critical analysis of the efficacy of these protocols and a lack of in-depth exploration into the experiences of individuals undergoing rehabilitation. He asserted that further research into the narratives of those who have been through these programs is needed. Moreover, assumptions about the necessity and efficacy of drug rehabilitation are widespread, even among political figures. For example, Ka Leody de Guzman, a labor rights activist, claimed in a January 2022 Facebook Live that mere suspicion of drug use warrants immediate rehabilitation. This statement reflects a common belief that all drug use necessitates institutionalized treatment,¹⁶ an approach supported by nearly all political candidates. This also

¹⁴ Gideon Lasco and Lee Edson Yarcia, "The Politics of Drug Rehabilitation in the Philippines," *Health and Human Rights Journal* 24 no.1 (2022): 147–158.

¹⁵ Presidential Communications Operations Office, "Duterte Inaugurates Mega Drug Rehabilitation Center," *Presidential Communications Operations Office*, 29 November 2016, https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/duterte-inaugurates-mega-drug-rehabilitation-center/

¹⁶ Jamil Santos, "War on Drugs Should Not Focus on Killings but Be Treated as a Health Problem – Ka Leody," *GMA News*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/819163/war-on-drugs-should-not-focus-on-killings-but-be-treated-as-a-health-problem-ka-leody/story/>

creates a false dichotomy between extrajudicial killings (EJKs) and rehabilitation. While figures like Leni Robredo have suggested community-based rehabilitation alternatives, these have been met with criticism and highlight the deeply ingrained belief that only institutional rehabilitation is effective.

Nevertheless, Dr. Lasco observed that there are signs of positive change. Initiatives promoting harm reduction and references to alternative approaches are emerging within the government and even in public statements by figures like Senator Ronaldo “Bato” dela Rosa, who discussed decriminalization¹⁷. There is value in examining successful international examples, including harm reduction strategies for *shabu* (methamphetamine) use, to inform these evolving approaches in the Philippines.

Dr. Lasco highlighted the importance of harm reduction initiatives, suggesting that another panelist, Ms. Inez Feria, would be well-positioned to elaborate on this perspective. He stressed the need to actively challenge the assumptions held about drugs, drug users, and rehabilitation. Failure to do so carries the risk of perpetuating policies like Oplan Tokhang, which continue to appeal to politicians seeking to draw political capital from such approaches.

Additionally, Dr. Lasco emphasized the importance of amplifying the voices of those who have direct experience with drug rehabilitation programs. To illustrate his point, he shared an anonymous letter received from a former patient in a rehabilitation center. This letter, read with permission, detailed an experience during the height of Duterte’s drug war. It highlighted involuntary admissions, unclear treatment plans, erratic schedules, and the use of former patients as counselors, some of whom had relapsed. The letter also described instances of temporarily concealing deficiencies within the facility to pass accreditation standards.

Dr. Lasco concluded his presentation by emphasizing the need to listen to more firsthand accounts, like the one in the letter he read. The goal is not to disparage existing rehabilitation programs but rather to develop a critical understanding of which practices are effective and which fall short.

¹⁷ Maila Ager, “Bato dela Rosa Now Having Second Thoughts on Legalizing Drug Use,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 25 November 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1697832/bato-dela-rosa-now-having-second-thoughts-on-legalizing-drug-use>

■ **Ma. Inez Feria**

Founder and Director, NoBox Philippines

Ms. Ma. Inez Feria's presentation centered on the topics of misconceptions about drugs and drug use, the spectrum of drug use, and the inadequacies and harms of current drug policies. She also covered rethinking treatment and rehabilitation, and more humane alternative approaches to address drugs as a societal issue.

To start her discussion, Ms. Feria reflected on previous presentations, drawing a parallel to the common childhood question, "Are we there yet?" This highlights the impatience that often accompanies long journeys with a clear destination and roughly known distance. Ms. Feria then questioned whether the commonly held goal of a "drug-free" society is achievable or even desirable. She noted that this goal needs to be reconsidered and explained, as it is based on assumptions and sometimes deliberate misinformation about drugs.

Ms. Feria also emphasized that drugs are inanimate objects with certain predictable pharmacological effects. However, it is important to recognize that the experience of drug use is not solely determined by the drug itself. The individual's mindset ("the set") and the environment ("the setting") in which the drug is consumed significantly shape the experience. Using alcohol as an example, Ms. Feria illustrated how consumption patterns and intentions can lead to very different experiences and risks, even with a familiar substance. By promoting a critical approach to any media or narrative about drugs, she hopes to ensure that factors related to the individual user and the context of drug use are consistently questioned.

Additionally, Ms. Feria emphasized the importance of considering factors such as type of drug, dosage, and possible interactions with other substances when discussing drug use. She noted how this understanding is reflected in careful adherence to medical orders. Ms. Feria gave a real-life example of a woman without formal employment who deliberately used shabu (methamphetamine). She understood her body's responses and used them strategically to suppress hunger and sleep, allowing her to work longer hours as a laundress. She managed possible side effects by mentally preparing herself, eating beforehand, and drinking fluids. She stopped taking the drug every day to give her body time to rest. Ms. Feria stressed that this scenario shows the need for nuanced discussions about drug use rather than blanket generalizations.

As a counterpart to this example, Ms. Feria described a hypothetical case involving shabu use and possible underlying mental health conditions. This highlights the danger of overlooking such diseases when focusing solely on drug control. Ms. Feria also reported another case involving a person who initially turned himself in to the police because he feared he would become a target of the drug war. However, it was later discovered that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. In doing so, Ms. Feria argues for understanding individual motivations and contexts, and emphasizes the “set and setting” model often used in harm reduction frameworks. This approach focuses more on the different effects of drugs on people and avoids a one-size-fits-all mentality. Understanding “set and setting” helps identify and better address potential risks associated with drug use.

Ms. Feria also challenged common assumptions around drug use, emphasizing the need to critically examine policies and programs built upon these beliefs. She questioned the implications of national survey figures (like the Dangerous Drugs Board’s estimate of 1.7 to 1.8 million users), which typically reflect instances of usage within the previous year. She pointed out that surveys and government reports indicate the majority of those who try drugs ultimately discontinue use. Their findings contradict the fearmongering narrative that paints all drug use as an immediate and ongoing threat. She also emphasized that the vast majority of those who use drugs do so in a nonproblematic way. Data from international agencies support this observation. For example, the 2021 United Nations (UN) World Drug Report estimated that 87 percent of drug users do not experience substance use disorders and require no intervention.¹⁸ Despite this, policies and narratives tend to focus excessively on problematic use.

Ms. Feria argued that it was illogical to blame drugs when only a small percentage of drug users have problems in which drugs play a role. Substance use alone is not the same as problematic use. This argument emphasizes the need to shift the focus away from the drugs themselves and toward understanding the circumstances and context of the individual. Refocusing would enable interventions that address underlying problems and not just target drug users. Ms. Feria claimed that the current focus on drugs leads to an unfair perception of drug users, making it difficult for those who truly need help to access interventions.

18 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2021* (Vienna: United Nations, 2021), <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021.html>

Ms. Feria then proceeded to question the true nature of the “drug problem,” suggesting that it stems more from the caricature of persons using drugs than drug prevalence itself. She underscored systemic problems within the criminal justice system, such as the high percentage (90 percent) of drug-related incarcerations (often under Sections 5 and 11 of Republic Act (RA) No. 9165 or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002)¹⁹ and the widespread reports of practices like *tanim-droga* (planting evidence), *areglo* (arrangements) (e.g., money and sexual acts in exchange for lowered charge or being released) and *palit-ulo* (substituting arrests). This casts serious doubt on the legitimacy of many arrests and incarcerations.

Ms. Feria also critiqued the practice of incarcerating individuals for possession of minuscule amounts of drugs (0.01–0.02 grams) for extended periods, sometimes even for life. This, coupled with severe overcrowding in jails and prisons (some close to 3,000 percent of intended capacity), raises serious ethical concerns. Conditions were described as inhumane. Around thirty people are crammed into cells measuring 2 meters × 2 meters.²⁰ Such small spaces are meant for a fraction of that number of prisoners.

In addition, Ms. Feria emphasized the use of drug lists in which individuals can be included based on mere suspicion or association. These people lack the ability to question their placement. These lists are used to force people into treatment and rehabilitation programs. This raises a fundamental question: If combating drug use is a health problem, why are coercion and lack of individual choice involved? She argued that a more humane and effective approach would provide welcoming, non-judgmental spaces with services tailored to individual needs. Furthermore, evidence and practice suggest that volunteering is more effective than the current fear-based approach.

¹⁹ Republic Act No. 9165, or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002 in the Philippines, has two key sections: Section 5 addresses the sale and distribution of dangerous drugs, while Section 11 deals with the possession of such drugs.

²⁰ The reference was an estimate in relation to the regulation that requires 4.7 square meters per person, highlighting the issue of over congestion.

Ms. Feria pointed out the importance of collaborative harm-reduction, which is built on basic human decency. This approach requires identifying the sources of risk within the “drug setting” and working with the individual’s goals and priorities. She questioned the obsession with drug testing, explaining that it offers no meaningful insights into a person’s character or behavior. Random drug testing, particularly in schools, is framed as turning educational institutions into extensions of the police force. It focuses on catching people rather than offering genuine support. Linking back to treatment, Ms. Feria questioned the use of drug testing as a requirement for community-based programs, arguing that decisions around personal health should be made collaboratively, not coercively.

Ms. Feria emphasized the importance of trust and therapeutic alliance as key factors for treatment success. She called drug testing a waste of resources. Instead, open communication within a trusting relationship would naturally lead to a person disclosing relevant substance use. This approach allows for nuanced discussions about the potential role of drugs in a person’s life and supports them in making decisions that are consistent with their goals. Ms. Feria expressed concern that the current focus on treatment and rehabilitation could lead to forced interventions. She referenced a news article that mentioned that alleged drug offenders being sent to rehabilitation centers, questioning the rationale and potential for dehumanizing treatment.²¹ According to her, it is important to ask whether rehabilitation programs are effective, for whom, and under what conditions. With limited oversight mechanisms and a lack of evidence-based practices in rehabilitation centers, Ms. Feria then compared the situation to that in hospitals, which have established protocols and clinical research backing their methods. She then shared accounts of involuntary rehabilitation experiences, both recent and historical, as examples of the problematic practices that continue.

In addition, Ms. Feria emphasized the need to critically question the entire treatment and rehabilitation landscape. She advocated for a range of services tailored to community needs, ethical standards, and a supportive environment.

²¹ Philstar.com, “PNP Chief: Drug Surrenderes Will Be ‘Taken Care Of’ at Recovery Facilities in Drug War Finale,” *Philstar*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/11/22/2143048/pnp-chief-drug-surrenderes-will-be-taken-care-of-recovery-facilities-drug-war-finale>

This requires fundamental change—decriminalizing drug use, drug possession and even selling in minimal quantities—as these stem from underlying socio-economic problems. Those currently incarcerated for non-violent offenses and small-scale possession should be released and connected to appropriate support services. Ms. Feria also called for a comprehensive approach to solving the “drug problem.” She emphasized the need to clearly define the core problem and develop a range of treatment, health, and development services that integrate seamlessly to prevent individuals from “falling through the cracks.”

Concluding her discussion, Ms. Feria emphasized the importance of creating a political and social environment that destigmatizes and decriminalizes drug use. This would promote greater support for individuals, families, and communities living with substance use-related issues.

Open Forum

■ Jan Robert Go, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, UP Department of Political Science

The first set of questions came from Zoom's question and answer (Q&A) box, which was sent out in bulk.

Some questions focused on understanding support for the war on drugs, including: "Why do some people, even those who lost loved ones to Tokhang, still support Duterte's war on drugs?" and "What are the possible reasons for this?" There were also questions about the search and validation of respondents, specifically addressed to Dr. Gutierrez: "How did you recruit participants who were willing to discuss sensitive topics, such as the drug war and personal drug use or past involvement in the drug trade?" and "What methods did you use to ensure the validity of their accounts?" Moreover, a research dissemination question was raised: "How do you communicate your research findings and their implications to the public to challenge existing narratives?" Additionally, one participant asked whether people should stop using drugs: "The speakers mentioned that many people stop using drugs on their own initiative; What specific medications are these?" Finally, Dr. Jorge Tigno also asked whether coffee is considered an intoxicant.

The first one to answer was **Dr. Lasco**. He drew attention to the data provided by the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) and the Dangerous Drugs Board, as well as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), to point out that most drug users eventually stop on their own. Dr. Lasco also offered a personal anecdote. He shared that he had used cannabis and coca leaf in the past without becoming dependent. His experience reinforces the self-evident notion that many people can use drugs without developing problematic use patterns.

Addressing the inquiry on coffee, **Dr. Lasco** explained that although it might not be considered a strong intoxicant, caffeine has psychoactive effects. It is pharmacologically classified as a drug, alongside other substances found not just in coffee but also in yerba mate and chocolate.

Finally, **Dr. Lasco** addressed the question regarding research availability. He mentioned a book he edited, *Drugs and Philippine Society* (2021),²² published by Ateneo de Manila University Press. The book includes a chapter by Dr. Gutierrez, “*Walang Kalaban-laban: Counternarratives of Arrested Persons in the War on Drugs*,” that draws inspiration from the work of NoBox Philippines and Ms. Feria. Dr. Lasco clarified that research on drug-related issues can also be found in various journals, and encouraged those interested to reach out directly to them or Dr. Gutierrez for access.

Second to address the questions was **Dr. Gutierrez**. Dr. Gutierrez first addressed the question of why some relatives of those killed during Oplan Tokhang still approve of Duterte’s war on drugs. She claimed that this support is not only true for relatives but also for those who were arrested themselves, after having interviewed them. According to Dr. Gutierrez, people have internalized the moral panic about the severity of the damage caused by drugs. They have also experienced the negative effects of addiction firsthand. For instance, the behavior of an addicted family member might victimize the rest of the family by stealing from or assaulting them. Thus, having the police or the state deal with the relative is seen as a quick and easy solution. People do not realize that it takes work to help someone who is addicted.

Answering the inquiry on community-based intervention programs, **Dr. Gutierrez** stated that these programs are often considered too demanding. People do not want to miss workdays to attend them. In addition, there is no political will to support them. She stressed the importance of changing the way drugs and addiction are discussed. There is a need to decriminalize drug use and possession, as well as investing in treatment and prevention programs.

²² Gideon Lasco, 2021, *Drugs and Philippine Society*, Archium.ATENEO, <https://archium.ateneo.edu/dev-stud-faculty-pubs/81>

Dr. Gutierrez then answered the question about how she found participants who had been arrested in the war on drugs for her study. She stated that she asked permissions from jails; apparently, some inmates were willing to share their stories. Of course, there were risks involved. She explained how she safeguarded the participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Explaining why the participants were willing to share their stories, **Dr. Gutierrez** stated that they wanted to have a voice. The participants in her study wanted to explain why they were using drugs and why they do not consider themselves criminals.

Regarding how she enlisted the participation of the police officers, **Dr. Gutierrez** said that she asked permission from the Philippine National Police (PNP), who then referred her to various police districts. She was surprised by their willingness to participate, believing they wanted to be understood, clear their names, and explain their work.

For her conclusion, **Dr. Gutierrez** learned that police officers are complex individuals with their own motivations and experiences. They are also much of a reflection of their organization.

Third to address the questions was **Ms. Feria**. She addressed the question of engaging with incarcerated women on drug charges, highlighting the powerful effect of being truly heard. According to her, women in these situations often form support groups because they lack safe spaces where they can talk about their experiences and feel validated.

Ms. Feria then returned to the earlier question about coffee and psychoactive substances. She emphasized that the body cannot differentiate between legal and illegal substances; it simply reacts based on the substance's pharmacological effects. Understanding these effects and how they are influenced by an individual's mindset ("set") and environment ("setting") is crucial.

Furthermore, **Ms. Feria** noted that the distinction between legal and illegal substances should be addressed. She cited a 2015 household survey that stated, "Jail detention is not recommended for users as they are the victims, not the

perpetrators” (Dangerous Drugs Board 2016, 56),²³ indicating that earlier research had already recognized the ineffectiveness of criminalizing drug use and incarceration.

Ms. Feria then reiterated the importance of drug education. She highlighted that existing assumptions and belief systems shape actions, policies, and programs. Drug education should start as early as elementary school to combat stigma. She explained that the current drug education efforts by law enforcement and the government often focus on stigmatization rather than providing useful information.

Finally, returning to the coffee question, **Ms. Feria** emphasized self-awareness in the context of drug education. For example, people understand that consuming coffee later in the day might disrupt sleep. This awareness and open conversation should replace attempts to hide information about substance use.

An unnamed professor from the UP Department of Political Science, who has a background in researching political violence in the context of the war on drugs, joined the open discussion. She expressed interest in how different disciplines frame the issue. She contrasted her own research perspective, which views the drug war not as crime control but as a political campaign designed to bolster popularity, gain power, and rule through fear and coercion. According to her, evidence of this was seen in Davao City and later reflected in Duterte’s rise to the presidency. She asked the panel to consider this alternate frame. If the drug war is a tool of political control, then concerns shift. The focus expands beyond the killings to include the ongoing effects of incarceration and rehabilitation efforts. For her inquiry, she asked the panel to comment on the situation in jails, particularly overcrowding and rehabilitation programs. She also asked about the potential role these elements play in a broader political strategy where the goal is not crime control, but rather popularity and coercive rule.

Dr. Gutierrez agreed that the emphasis on criminalization, incarceration, and disciplining the population carries a strong political and theatrical element. This tactic, built on public anxieties and fears, provides a seemingly dramatic and

²³ Dangerous Drugs Board, *2015 Nationwide Survey on the Nature and Extent of Drug Abuse in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Dangerous Drugs Board, 2016), 56.

direct solution to perceived threats. This explains why Duterte's narrative proved to be effective, propelling him to the presidency. She referred to data from opinion survey agencies like the one from SWS,²⁴ which highlights an interesting disconnect in crime victimization rates that were declining when Duterte came to power. However, fear of crime was actually rising. This disconnect highlights a struggle to define the problem and its solutions. The political appeal of a punitive criminal justice strategy carries momentum. This easily sidelines approaches like harm reduction, which can be misconstrued as weak or overly accommodating, in favor of the seemingly strong, populist solutions championed by Duterte. This underscores the importance of understanding the moral panic driving the current atmosphere.

Ms. Feria also addressed the inquiry on how the drug war is framed and discussed by emphasizing that ample evidence exists to address the drug issue. However, the lack of public discussion around drugs prior to 2016 made it a convenient political tool, as its negative connotations resonated strongly with the public. She expressed concern that this problematic mindset perpetuates in current conversations about treatment and rehabilitation, where the focus remains on "fixing" the individual rather than understanding the underlying causes. This mirrors the mentality that fueled the killings—seeing those with drug problems as broken and needing to be fixed. Therefore, addressing this deeply ingrained mindset is crucial. Though substantial evidence exists, it becomes irrelevant if the underlying agenda is not grounded in a genuine desire to solve the issue.

Moreover, **Dr. Gutierrez** highlighted a previous article she wrote about precarity. She noted that a significant portion of *shabu* users are precarious workers. She was inspired by a research that examines marginalized young men in the Port Area, Manila and how *shabu* helped them cope with physically demanding labor. Her own research revealed that *shabu* use extends beyond marginalized youth and encompasses a broader range. This includes informal workers, a substantial portion of the low-income formal workforce, and construction workers from young to middle-aged men. *Shabu* use has become widespread over the years, enabling people to work in unpredictable, difficult, and demanding jobs.

²⁴ Jonvic Mateo, "Fear of Crimes Despite Decrease in Victims," *Philippine Star*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2019/11/02/1965235/fear-crimes-despite-decrease-victims-sws>

Dr. Gutierrez also argued that the government deflects from its failure to adequately address the needs of the labor sector or the proletariat by blaming individuals. The government would blame people for their unwise decisions and perceived weaknesses rather than address the root causes of these issues. Therefore, according to her, finding an enemy and a solution without focusing on the underlying social and economic problems is ultimately a political matter.

Since the political context was brought up, **Dr. Tigno** also contributed to the discussion. He highlighted how social media and mass media shape public understanding of the drug problem, observing that portrayals of drug users typically focus on negative stereotypes of addiction, criminality, and violence. He noted the lack of portrayals in movies and mass media that attempt to understand the world from the perspective of a drug user, a sentiment echoed in earlier discussions. He argued that society's existing judgment of drug users has, in a way, justified the punitive actions taken by the state. Consequently, he wondered if changing how we perceive and approach the drug issue could lead to better solutions.

Dr. Gutierrez later posed a question for Dr. Lasco and Ms. Feria. She inquired about viable or acceptable scenarios for decriminalizing drugs. She pondered an ideal scenario, using alcohol as an example for context. She asked if substances like methamphetamine would be openly sold or if regulation is necessary. Finally, she raised the issue of side effects, acknowledging that such substances can cause sleeplessness, impulsiveness, and difficulties with self-control, even for those who claim they can manage their use. She wanted to know how Dr. Lasco and Ms. Feria envision managing access and mitigating side effects if drugs like shabu were decriminalized.

Dr. Lasco acknowledged that he does not have the expertise in operationalizing decriminalization for substances like *shabu*. However, he emphasized the vital first step of removing penalties for use and releasing prisoners from inhumane, overcrowded jails. This echoes what Thailand did as part of its cannabis decriminalization and legalization process. Dr. Lasco further stressed the need to make health services for drug-related issues readily available for anyone who needs them. He used the term "*nabubungo*" or "skull-like" to describe the physical effects of prolonged *shabu* use that he observed in Thailand. Currently, fear of prosecution and even death deters people from seeking help. Therefore, making assistance accessible is crucial.

While admitting that the economic and regulatory aspects of a decriminalized system are complex and need further development, Dr. Lasco acknowledged the importance of advocating for these changes. To gain public support, people need a clear picture of a comprehensive alternative to the current punitive approach.

Additionally, **Ms. Feria** agreed that deeper discussions on decriminalization are needed, emphasizing that it will not be a one-and-done process. She stated that there is room for different strategies tailored to specific contexts. She pointed out that this approach has been discussed in the Philippine Senate. For her, it is time to take a close look since the current punitive system is failing and harming the most vulnerable. She listed potential benefits, such as access to health services without fear, open conversations about drug information instead of a blindly enforced “drug-free” narrative, and discussions with young people free from suspicion and the threat of drug testing or expulsion. She also raised the possibility of regulating the supply of drugs, acknowledging that the unregulated market is a major source of harm. She recalled her visit to a regulated dispensary in Colorado, United States where clear dosage and ingredient information was available.

Ms. Feria also stressed that access to treatment does not mean forcing people into programs based on mere suspicion of drug use. Instead, she envisions a system of open discussion, perhaps even in schools, where guidance counselors could offer support instead of immediately resorting to punitive measures. This would require developing competence and knowledge around substance use.

Crucially, **Ms. Feria** argued that a focus on social and economic support could replace the law-enforcement-heavy approach in areas deemed high in drug activity. She cited data showing a correlation between drug arrests and informal settlements lacking essential services. Understanding drug issues as part of a larger social system is crucial for real progress. Finally, she called for honest, interagency discussion and collaboration, looking toward a future with more comprehensive and humane approaches.

Closing Message

- **Jan Robert Go, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor, UP Department of Political Science

Thank you very much. I think there's a lot more to unpack with this issue because it's like a moving target. So if we want to answer "Are we there yet?" we first have to identify the direct target. This discussion is a start and is going to be very helpful in identifying the path we need to take action.

At this point, we would like to thank our panelists for giving us a very nice discussion. Thank you very much to Professor Filomin Gutierrez, Dr. Gideon Lasco, and Ms. Inez Feria. We have also prepared some tokens. We have Professor Maria Ela Atienza to hand the certificate of appreciation. These certificates are signed by Dr. Atienza and Dr. Tigno for the presenters. We will send them to your offices.

Thank you very much to all our attendees, both online and on-site. I hope you learned a lot from this discussion. Also, thank you to UP CIDS and the Program on Social and Political Change for organizing this roundtable discussion.

Once again, I am Jan Robert Go, your moderator. Thank you very much for streaming.

Are We There Yet? Roundtable Discussion Series No. 3 on the Drug War in the Philippines:

MIXED METHODS? RESPONDING TO DRUG OFFENDERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

December 13, 2022 (Tuesday) | 10:00 AM - 12:00 NN | Hybrid Event
UP CIDS Conference Hall Open Space and Zoom Webinar
Registration for Online Participation: <https://bit.ly/3Finefu>

Presenters:

Ms. Ma. Inez Feria
NoBox Philippines

Prof. Filomin Gutierrez, PhD
Department of Sociology, UP Diliman

Dr. Gideon Lasco, MD, PhD
Department of Anthropology, UP Diliman

Moderator:

Asst. Prof. Jan Robert Go, PhD
Department of Political Science, UP Diliman

- The publication material of the RTD.

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