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Dialogues of Development

Civil Society and the Communicative Foundations of Community-Driven Development in Cebu

Dominic D. Yasay

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Cover Image Credit

"Women farmers of the Kahugpungan sa Makugihong mga Maguuma sa Bato based in Bato, Toledo, Cebu talk about the wins and struggles of the farmers' organization during a focus group discussion."

Photo by Alyssa Soler/LRSN Cebu

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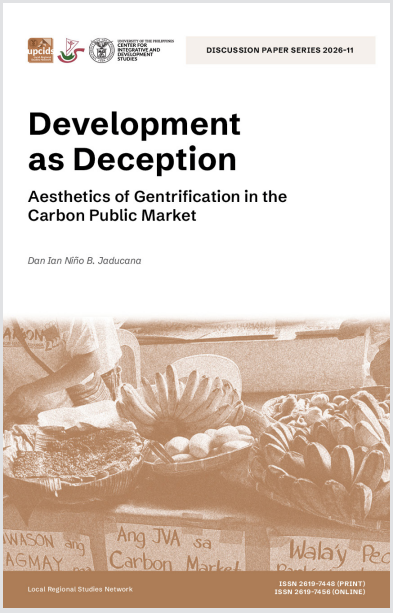

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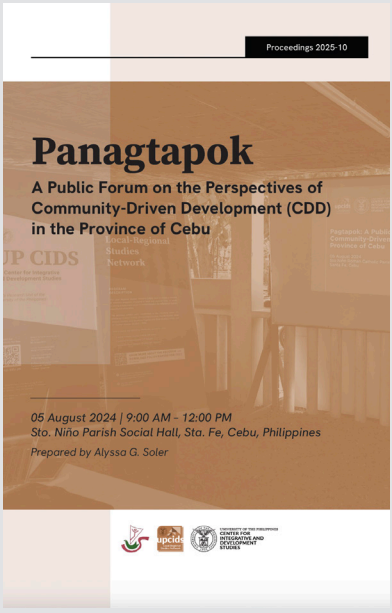


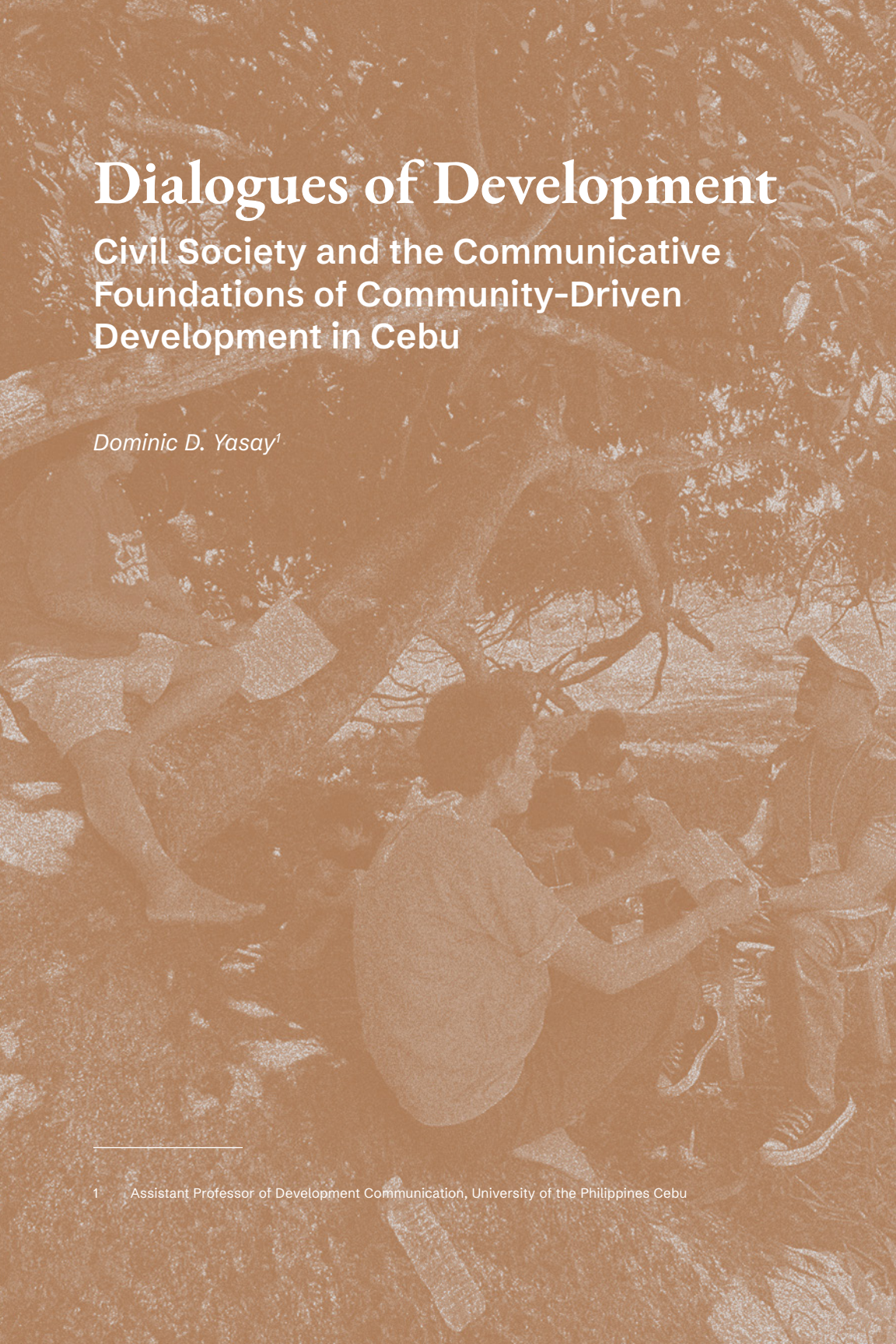
PROCEEDINGS

Panagtapok: A Public Forum on the Perspectives of Community-Driven Development (CDD) in the Province of Cebu

Dialogues of Development

Civil Society and the Communicative Foundations of Community-Driven Development in Cebu

Dominic D. Yasay[1]



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Key Highlights

- This paper argues that communication is not merely instrumental but constitutive of participatory and community-driven development (CDD). Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, it positions communication as the process through which communities transform individual concerns into shared claims, exercise collective agency, and engage in inclusive and deliberative decision-making.

- Within the Philippines, state-led CDD initiatives such as KALAHI-CIDSS by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) provide structured and institutionalized mechanisms for participation. However, civil society organizations (CSOs) demonstrate more organic, adaptive, and context-sensitive approaches that are not captured by formal policy frameworks.

- The study employs thematic analysis of focus group discussions conducted with five CSOs in Cebu. These include farmers' associations, transport groups, and a nongovernmental organization engaged in grassroots development work. The approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the everyday communicative practices of the CSOs and their role in shaping participatory processes.

- CSOs construct and sustain "discursive infrastructures" (e.g., regular meetings, assemblies, home visits, participatory research) that foster mutual understanding, transparency, and accountability. These infrastructures enable farmers to assert land rights, the NGO to translate technical knowledge into accessible formats (e.g., comics, radio programs) for co-produced knowledge, and transport groups to adapt communication strategies to sustain communal deliberation amid external scrutiny and surveillance.

- The paper highlights the need to integrate inclusive, structured, and context-sensitive communication practices into existing CDD policies and institutional frameworks. It pushes for the recognition and institutionalization of discursive mechanisms that enhance participation, transparency, and collective agency to strengthen the sustainability of CSO-led initiatives, deepening long-term community empowerment.

CDD: Toward Inclusive Decision-Making and Participatory Development

For sustainable development to take place, development initiatives must emanate from the people. This involves treating local communities as partners in and actors of development, not as mere recipients of aid. From this philosophy, international lending institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and Asia Development Bank (ADB) crafted a participatory model of development known as "community-driven development" (CDD). Through CDD, communities possess direct control over project decisions and resources (Pham 2017). Having the autonomy to make decisions and manage their own resources ensures that development interventions are anchored in the immediate realities of the communities and are directly aligned with its members' actual needs and preferences (Holmlund and Rao 2021). As a result, communities implementing CDD can design their common future and construct a system of empowerment and accountability (Jaducana 2025).

CDD aims to reduce poverty, promote good governance, and ensure sustainability and inclusive development across impoverished communities (Pham 2017). According to a 2012 ADB report cited by Jaducana (2025), these objectives translate into societal improvements, including the delivery of "essential social services, infrastructure, resources, political structure, and transparency." Perhaps the most common development projects in many CDD-implementing communities are infrastructure projects such as potable water systems, farm-to-market roads, irrigation systems, schools, and health facilities. Through CDD, communities are also able to manage their natural resources (e.g., lakes and forests) and get access to cash and credit. Additionally, CDD programs are used to enhance a community's social capital, train communities to plan and manage their own funds, and equip their local governments with democratic and inclusive decision-making frameworks. For its CDD portfolio, the WB reported a total of 325 ongoing projects across 90 countries as of June 2020, amounting to US$33 billion of active financing (Imbong 2025).

CDD exists in various communities in the Philippines through the Department of Social Welfare and Development's (DSWD) Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan–Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (KALAHI-CIDSS). Established in 2003 based on Republic Act No. 11201, or the "Magna Carta of the Poor" (Jaducana 2025), the WB-funded KALAHI-CIDSS is branded as a poverty alleviation program of the Philippines government which seeks to "empower communities in targeted municipalities

to achieve improved access to services and to participate in more inclusive local planning, budgeting, and implementation" (World Bank 2020). According to a 2022 DSWD report, KALAHI-CIDDS has delivered projects in 71 provinces, 976 municipalities, and 19,166 barangays across the country (Imbong 2025).

Jaducana (2025) enumerates five ideals of CDD framed in the perspective of Amartya Sen's (1999) five types of freedom. Each of these freedoms may be considered as "products of implementing CDD in communities." In other words, each development project brought to fruition by CDD provides a person with the rights and opportunities that help advance their capabilities, boost their well-being, and empower them to make choices that improve their quality of life:

1. Political freedom gives people the broader capability to speak up, critique, organize, and participate in shaping society. Effective CDD expands these freedoms.

2. Economic facilities ensure that people have access to resources, participate in markets, and pursue livelihoods freely, leading them to thrive economically.

3. Social opportunities pertain to access to basic social services including healthcare, education, proper nutrition, sanitation, and welfare services.

4. Transparency guarantees that community members can conduct social, political, economic interactions in society with trust, openness, and accountability.

5. Protective security is about the presence of social security and support systems that protect community members from sudden crises (e.g., illness, calamities, unemployment) that can result in abject poverty.

CDD programs realize these freedoms through their core principles of transparency, participation, accountability, and inclusion. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) identifies these as "critical principles" that could be incorporated in political processes and leadership to augment development outcomes. In their analysis, Waddington et al. (2018) define these principles in the context of strengthening governance and service delivery in low- to medium-income countries like the Philippines:

1. Transparency: The disclosure and dissemination of information about public services or institutions, may it be processes, plans, rules, guidelines, prices, and actions. The underlying purpose is to create a clear and open interaction (e.g., dialogue and public deliberation) between community members, service providers, and public officials.

2. Participation: Development initiatives formalize and continuously promote citizen input in the planning, design, and implementation of public services, policies, and processes.

3. Accountability: The presence of accountability mechanisms that encourage community members to hold leaders, public service providers, and institutions responsible for enacting their powers and mandates according to specific standards.

4. Inclusion: CDD projects create opportunities that promote the rights and welfare of vulnerable and marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) individuals. More importantly, these projects should engage these groups in the decision-making process.

Communication as the Life-Giving Force of Development

The force that empowers communities to attain the five freedoms and translate CDD's principles into tangible results is communication. The success of any development endeavor hinges on the quality and effectiveness of the communication interventions governing the entire change process. Just as the heart circulates blood throughout the body to sustain life, communication circulates information, meaning, and shared understanding (Aruma 2018). In the process of achieving development, effective communication empowers individuals, coordinates collective action, and delivers services to the people who need them.

What pivotal roles does communication play in CDD? Aruma (2018) conceptualizes communication's roles from a functionalist and transactional perspective, seeing it as a continuous and reciprocal process of information and meaning exchange that facilitates coordination and collective action. Communication is seen as a vital mechanism—one that allows community members to express their ideas, articulate their needs, organize themselves

to achieve a common goal, and make decisions that improve their living conditions. From this view, Aruma (2018) specifies eight ways in which communication helps spur development: (1) conscientization by awakening individuals to recognize, understand, and act on their own problems and capacities; (2) provision of precise and relevant information that empowers communities to make informed decisions; (3) creating a dialogic space where community members and stakeholders exchange ideas, negotiate, issues, and co-create solutions to their problems; (4) building a shared learning process that allows communities to exchange ideas and experiences for participatory development; (5) creating mechanisms that support every stage of CDD initiatives ranging from awareness building and project planning, to implementation and evaluation; (6) connecting like-minded individuals and communities, coordinating their actions, and streamlining community efforts; (7) building a people-centered foundation for collaboration, conflict resolution, and implementation of development projects; and (8) motivating and inspiring communities to identify their needs, commit to action, and pursue common development goals.

Nugraha's (2010) concept of effective communication as a catalyst for community-driven development complements Aruma's view, while also deepening the theoretical grounding of communication in development practices. Nugraha positions effective communication in the CDD discourse as *sine qua non*—an indispensable condition without which sustainable development cannot occur. Nugraha (2010) asserts that one of the core objectives of development is to "enhance the knowledge, skills, and self-dignity" of community members. These objectives, however, cannot be met in the absence of communicative processes that allow people to define their problems, articulate needs, construct and exchange meanings, and participate in collective decision-making. Communication, therefore, is neither a mere technical input nor a delivery mechanism in CDD; it is the foundation of participatory and emancipatory community-driven development.

This perspective of communication ties strongly with Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action, which defines communicative rationality—interaction oriented toward mutual understanding (Littlejohn and Foss 2009)—from instrumental rationality, which is otherwise oriented toward control, efficiency, and goal attainment. While CDD initiatives are embedded in project-based, instrumental logics, Nugraha's (2010) emphasis on communication foregrounds a communicative mode of social coordination. Drawing insights from the Kecamatan Development Program (KDP) and Urban Poverty Project (UPP) in Indonesia, two of the World Bank's largest

CDD projects, Nugraha (2010) explains that communication transforms communities from passive beneficiaries into active owners of development processes. When people are provided with spaces to discuss priorities, clarify shared goals, and contribute to decision-making, collective action emerges not through incentives or coercion but through shared understanding. This is the ideal condition which Habermas identifies as communicative action.

In the context of CDD, communication is the bridge between project implementation and community empowerment. Communication enables development to be co-created rather than externally delivered. As a *sine qua non*, communication operates as a catalytic and constitutive process that activates and sustains what Pham (2018) identifies as the three key elements of development intervention: empowerment, human agency, and public deliberation. These elements are not outcomes that occur after communication; they are enacted through communication itself.

Empowerment involves expanding people's assets—particularly those of marginalized communities—so they can participate in negotiations, exercise influence, gain control over decisions, and hold institutions accountable for actions that affect their lives (Imbong 2025). The communication action perspective treats empowerment as inherently discursive. It depends on people's capacity to raise validity claims, express grievances, justify demands, and contest decisions through dialogue. Communicative conditions allow these exchanges, without which empowerment is reduced to tokenistic participation lacking real influence.

The WB defines agency as the ability to make choices and act on them without fear of violence, punishment, or intimidation (Klugman et al. 2014 as cited in Imbong 2025). Agency is also constituted through communication. People enact agency by interpreting their circumstances, articulating aspirations, and mobilizing others around shared meanings and goals. In Habermasian terms, agency is enacted when individuals, capable of contributing to consensus formation, claim their power as speakers in communicative processes. People with agency do not merely comply with externally imposed decisions.

A core pillar of CDD, public deliberation reflects Habermas's vision of the public sphere. Deliberative spaces are avenues for community members to collectively define problems, negotiate priorities, and make decisions together. For these spaces to serve their purpose, communication must be inclusive, guided by reason, and free from coercion—conditions that construct

Habermas's ideal of communicative action and are necessary for community-driven development to be genuinely participatory.

Altogether, Nugraha's perspective on effective communication in CDD and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action provides an integrative view of communication not only as an instrument for achieving development but as constitutive of the freedoms, agency, and participatory processes that CDD espouses. Communication realizes empowerment, enacts agency, and makes public deliberation fully participatory. This synthesis justifies this paper's framework by positioning communication as the foundation of community-driven development.

Donor agencies and government agencies acknowledge the indispensability of communication to successful CDD implementation. The WB created a practical guide to strategic communication for community-driven development to "provide a useful communication framework that can be readily applied to CDD operations" (Mozammel and Schechter 2005). The WB's strategic communication framework seeks to:

1. strengthen community decision-making by equipping people on how to identify their needs and resources, resolve conflicts, mobilize local resources, and make collective choices;

2. develop two-way communication channels that support learning, information-sharing, knowledge building, awareness raising, and behavior change for sustainable development;

3. amplify the voices of the poor by increasing their participation in public dialogue, community affairs, and in demanding better services;

4. widen access to useful information (specifically related to market, governance, and project information) so that communities are more engaged in markets and governance; and

5. build lasting communication channels and collaborative relationships within and across communities and with their local authorities.

On the ground, KALAHI-CIDSS uses various communication mechanisms embedded in each sub-step of the five stages of their Community Empowerment Activity Cycle (Adriano n.d.). The process begins with top-down information

dissemination and coordination with partner institutions. At this stage, program orientations, Memoranda of Agreement, and interagency committees set the communicative infrastructure as the program rolls out. As the cycle moves into community engagement, communication takes on a participatory and dialogic form. Community assemblies, situation analyses, and validation meetings are conducted with community members to surface issues, articulate needs, and define priorities. Within the project identification and planning phases, communication shifts to deliberative and consultative forms through workshops, stakeholder meetings, negotiations, and consensus-building. In the approval stages (participated mostly by community leaders and sector heads), communication takes the form of public deliberation and decision-making. It is in this stage that communities present proposals, debate priorities, and collectively decide on which projects to pursue. During the implementation phase, the communicative pattern shifts to operational, technical, and capacity building. When projects enter the operation, maintenance, and transition stages, communication becomes evaluative and accountability-oriented. Monitoring visits and community-based evaluations are a few of the communication approaches used in this stage. The cycle ends with transparency reports to ensure that information flows back to the community and institutions. Taken together, KALAHI-CIDDS's Community Empowerment Activity Cycle reveals a steady communication pattern that moves across the stages of dissemination, participation, deliberation, coordination, and accountability—one that emphasizes communication as the "connective tissue" that sustains empowerment, agency, and collective action in CDD.

While the communication frameworks outlined by the WB and KALAHI-CIDDS have been proven and tested across CDD projects in many communities, I argue that these strategies remain largely prescriptive and fail to capture organic, community-led communication. Since these frameworks are crafted for task managers and communication planners—professionals who, though community- and outcomes-oriented, remain outsiders to the communities they serve—they often overlook the sociocultural contexts, histories, and lived experiences of the people they aim to empower. Additionally, there is a palpable lack of scholarship investigating the grassroots communication practices of nongovernmental CDD initiatives in developing countries such as the Philippines. Existing literature about the institutionalization of CDD is concentrated on KALAHI-CIDDS. To have a well-rounded grasp of community-driven development, it is equally important to "account for and understand the CDD programs organically initiated by civil society organizations (CSOs)" outside of the scope of KALAHI-CIDDS (Imbong 2025). This gap provides the entry point for this discussion paper.

Drawing on Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, I conceptualize CDD as a deliberate process rooted in mutual understanding and non-coercive communication. By foregrounding the communicative practices of CSOs in the province of Cebu in Central Visayas, I argue for a reframing of CDD as a culturally grounded, dialogic, and participatory process of collective meaning-making.

Methodology

This paper employs thematic analysis to interpret data from focus group discussions (FGDs) with 17 leaders and members of four people's organizations (POs)—the San Roque Farmers' Association (SRFA), Kahugpungan sa Makugihong mga Maguuma sa Bato (KMMB), Bato Motorcycle Operators and Drivers Association (BAMCODA), and Balamban Trisikad Drivers Association (BATDA)—and one non-government organization (NGO), the Central Visayas Farmers Development Center Incorporated (FARDEC). These organizations are based in the municipalities of Aloguinsan, Balamban, Pinamungajan, and Toledo in Cebu. The FGDs were conducted on 9 August 2025 at the KMMB Training Center in Bato, Toledo. Participants were purposely selected to ensure diversity in geographic location, sectoral focus (e.g., agriculture and transportation), and organizational type. Data collection emphasized rapport-building, cultural sensitivity, and ethical care in engaging grassroots leaders and community members.

The semi-structured interview guide explored two main areas of inquiry: (1) how CSOs cultivate discursive spaces for inclusive dialogue and (2) how they foster participatory decision-making through dialogue-based collective action. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their communication practices, lived experiences, and organizational processes anchored in Habermasian concepts, including the lifeworld, ideal speech situation, communicative rationality, and emancipatory knowledge.

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and, where necessary, translated into English. The resulting qualitative data were coded using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. A companion coding scheme was developed in advance based on the conceptual categories derived from the theoretical framework, while allowing emergent themes to refine or expand the codes. Key codes include discursive spaces, inclusive dialogue, participatory decision-making, dialogic influence, voice inclusion, and communicative ownership.

Ultimately, this discussion contributes to a more grounded and democratic understanding of development—one that centers community dialogue as the core of empowerment and agency.

Building Community-Rooted Discursive Infrastructures for Inclusive Dialogue

To create discursive spaces for open and inclusive dialogue, CSOs in Cebu deliberately organize communication practices that orient participants toward mutual understanding. Instead of merely providing spaces to meet, CSOs organize meetings, assemblies, consultations, and home visits so that members can speak up, raise questions, and discuss matters related to their collective struggles (e.g., land disputes, lack of access to government support, threats to livelihoods, restricted routes, high and inconsistent permit renewal fees). Their everyday interactions transform individual grievances into group dialogue, where members are able to share knowledge, negotiate solutions, and unite in creating strategies for protecting their rights and livelihoods. Dialogue was the catalyst that led to the formation of KMMB, SRFA, and BATDA in 1992, 1993, and 2020, respectively.

Under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988 (CARL), or Republic Act (RA) No. 6657, the farmers were eligible to acquire ownership of the land through the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), considering that the land was large enough to be covered by the DAR's programs and that they actively tilled said land. However, individual farmers could not navigate this process alone. Private struggles such as uncertain land rights, risk of dispossession, and lack of formal recognition must be consolidated into a collective claim.

For KMMB, dialogue became both the problem and the reason that the organization was founded in 1992. Framing it as a communication problem, a participant from KMMB explained that Bato farmers individually faced land insecurity, and they had no effective channel through which to bring their grievances to DAR:

> *Mao to nga nagkahiusa [ang mga] mag-uuma nga mag-organisasyon kay una man gud pud nga gi-require sa DAR nga modawat man sila sa mga mag-uuma pero organisasyon lang. Di ka puwede moreklamo didto sa DAR kung dili mo organisasyon.* (That is why the farmers united and organized themselves, because the DAR required that it would only accommodate

> farmers if they were part of an organization. You cannot file a complaint with the DAR if you are not organized.)

In the case of SRFA, the farmers in Bonbon were cultivating a 16-hectare parcel of land that was deemed alienable, disposable, and untitled. This meant that they had no formal ownership of the land and were vulnerable to absentee landowners. One of the participants narrated:

> *[A]ng mga mag-uuma diha sa Bonbon, nagkahiusa sila kanang motukod og organisasyon tungod kay ang yuta . . . alienable ug disposable. Unya wa siya'y giila na way titulo. . . . Mao na ang mga maguuma, gisudlan mig mga NGO, sama sa FARDEC, nga gihiusa gyod mi nga magtukod og organisasyon kay yuta man gud among isyu unya ang yuta para gyod sa maguuma dili para sa agalong yutaan. . . . Ang organisasyon, sa 1993, subay sa akong nakuanan, kay akong amahan mao man toy chair gyod, didto na nagsugod ang mga ginikanan [ad] na magtukod og organisasyon kakuyog ming mga anak.* (The farmers in Bonbon came together to form an organization because the land was not theirs—it was alienable and disposable. No one officially recognized it or had title to it. So the farmers were assisted by NGOs, such as FARDEC, which really helped us organize because the issue was land, and the land belongs to the farmers, not landowners. . . . The organization started in 1993; as far as I remember, my father was the chair at that time, that's when our parents began forming the organization, and we, the children, joined them.)

Through discussions within families and neighbors, and facilitated by NGOs such as FARDEC, farmers exchanged information, expressed grievances, and negotiated a common understanding of their situation. The concerns that surfaced in these conversations had translated into a shared issue, which motivated collective action.

The formation of KMMB and SFRA is a clear example of communicative action in motion: farmers and their children coordinated and decided on leadership, agreed on organizing principles, clarified norms around land rights, cultivated mutual trust among members, and negotiated claims about what is fair and rightful under the DAR's agrarian programs. These actions, governed and sustained by dialogue, enabled both organizations to act collectively to assert their ownership and protect their interests.

Through these communicative practices, individual problems among farmers were transformed into shared, actionable issues that enabled participatory

decision-making. In Habermasian terms, communication in the shared context of KMMB and SRFA built a discursive space where validity claims about truth (the land belongs to the farmers), rightness (the land should be managed by those who till it), and sincerity (leaders act in the organization's interest) could be raised, tested, and mutually understood (Littlejohn and Foss 2009). This laid the foundation for participatory development for KMMB and SRFA.

KMMB and SRFA also use deliberate and structured communication to foster participation and ensure every member can be included in decision-making processes. Both organizations hold regular meetings (once a month for KMMB and all Saturdays of the month for SRFA) and, as needed, emergency meetings to tackle urgent concerns. They actively employ house-to-house visits and send letters to reach members who live in far-flung areas. Through personal home visits and written reminders, the organizations lower barriers to involvement. They ensure that each member has the opportunity to be heard, contribute to discussions, and stay informed about their organization's activities. This extensive effort to communicate suggests that participation in these organizations is not assumed but actively nurtured. This practice is consistent with Habermas's principle of inclusion in the ideal speech situation, wherein all voices are included, and everyone affected by a decision can participate in the dialogue (Littlejohn and Foss 2009).

Communication is also used to ensure there is accountability and mutual understanding within the organization. Officers of KMMB and SRFA conduct home visits to members who are unable to attend meetings, during which they ask members to explain the reasons for their absence. In these home visits, members are given updates on agreements and decisions and are asked about any problems they might have. They are also asked to pitch in their ideas and opinions on the topic under discussion. This practice enforces transparency and produces a sense of responsibility, which helps members to understand each other's circumstances. This communication mechanism is aligned with Habermas's concept of "procedural rationality" (Littlejohn and Foss 2009), where communication follows a group's agreed norms and decisions generated through discussion and consensus building, not coercion, one-sided decision making, or manipulation. Thus, communication in POs such as KMMB and SRFA is both inclusive and rational.

On the other hand, BATDA's communicative practices combine communicative and strategic action. Within the organization, BATDA's communicative action is oriented toward building mutual understanding, inclusion, and consensus. Their regular meetings exemplify these:

> *[N]aa ma'y regular nga adlaw nga mao gyud na'y among dumdumon bisag unsa'y petsa basta moabot nang adlawa, automatic mag-meeting gyud ang BATDA kausa sa usa ka buwan. Nya regular gyud na siya nga pahigayon sukad pagka-2020 hangtod karon padayon gyud na siya. . . . Katong wa makatambong ron, sa sunod buwan sila ang motambong.* (There is a fixed day that we always observe, regardless of the specific date. Once that day comes, BATDA automatically holds a meeting once a month. This has been a regular practice since 2020 up to now, and it has continued consistently. . . . Those who are unable to attend this month are scheduled to attend in the following month.)

The "automatic," predictable monthly meetings held since 2020 indicate that BATDA has established a coordinated and stable discursive space where its 89 members are aware when dialogue will happen. Their rotational attendance also guarantees anticipated participation among all members, which shows that BATDA is intentional in ensuring that no member is excluded from dialogue. On top of these, BATDA uses letters, phone calls, and text messages to disseminate information to members.

However, BATDA employs strategic action—practices that produce concrete effects rather than mutual understanding with external actors (Littlejohn and Foss 2009)—when communicating externally in response to surveillance, suspicion, and potential control by their local government unit (LGU) and political organizations. According to a participant from BATDA, anonymous individuals would loiter around their meeting place and start collecting information, asking whether the group is recognized by the LGU, or what the purpose of the gathering is. These individuals would ask who is leading the organization and take down names. To avoid attracting suspicion, BATDA limits the number of attendees, rotates participation on a monthly basis, and holds meetings in different members' homes.

> *Para dili mi madistorbo, amo lang ibahin-bahin kay para di kaayo mi init ba kay mangutana mang barangay nganong pirti mang daghana diha sa usa ka lugar nga mao'y meetingan. . . . Ang among meetinganan balay raman gud nya itesting namo nga ibalhin-balhin namo, diri ming balaya ron, basin sa sunod nga meeting kay didto napod mi sa pikas nasad kay naa man mag-question ba kon nganong sige ang tapok diha, kon unsa ba'y kalihokan diha.* (We divide the attendance into batches so that it does not become too crowded. Barangay officials might also ask why there are so many people gathering in one place. . . . Our meeting place is usually just someone's house, and we deliberately rotate locations. We might meet in this house now, and in the next meeting we move to another house, because

> people start questioning why there are repeated gatherings in one place and what activities are happening there.)

It is important to note that BATDA's strategic action does not compromise or replace communicative action. Rather, it protects it. Responses like splitting attendance, rotating meeting locations, and controlling their visibility are practical adaptations to safeguard their discursive spaces from intimidation and disruption.

Like BATDA, nongovernment organization (NGO) FARDEC has created a deliberative public space for the POs they are supporting through their annual assembly. This assembly is scheduled and serves as an organized consultation attended by members of people's organizations across all locations in Central Visayas. One participant from the NGO said:

> *Niabot og 152 atong POs sa Central Visayas, nya gikan gyud pagsugod hangtod lately, naningkamot gali gyud ta'g reach out nila. . . . Diha gani kausa nga didto sa Bohol no, para daghang makatambong didto. . . . Ang last nato October, represented jud ang PO leaders, pero ang niabot, Cebu ra ug Bohol.* (At one point, we had 152 people's organizations in Central Visayas. From the very beginning up to recently, we have really made an effort to reach out to them. There was even one time when we held it in Bohol so that more participants there could attend. In our last assembly in October, the PO leaders were properly represented, but those who were able to attend came only from Cebu and Bohol.)

Despite their efforts to increase participation among their partner organizations, economic and logistical constraints interfere with FARDEC's communicative processes. At times, high transportation costs and geographic distance become barriers to participation as they limit who can attend onsite deliberations. Nevertheless, FARDEC's assemblies function as "public spheres" where the communicative lifeworld is renewed and communities of farmers sustain a shared understanding of their realities amid dispersed geographies.

Communicative Action in Community Organizing: Dialogue, Deliberation, and Strategic Adaptation

The histories and experiences of KMMB, SRFA, BATDA, BAMCO, and FARDEC demonstrate that communication is not only a technical instrument or facilitative tool of development. The varied testimonies of the FGD participants reveal that communication is a constitutive social force that produces collective action, legitimacy, and organizational agency.

FARDEC's CDD initiatives exemplify how communication can operate as a moral and epistemic process. As a moral process, the NGO conducted a religious discourse with farmers that was grounded in shared cultural and ethical narratives. Invoking biblical principles on land stewardship, FARDEC and their partners from the church translated abstract development goals into moral arguments that resonated with the farmers' experiences. This allowed farmers to reframe their understanding of land, labor, and inheritance as responsibilities to carry across generations, rather than mere commodities. A participant from FARDEC shared:

> *Gikan sa pagsugod hangtod karon, sikit gyud gihapon na sa FARDEC ang mga advocates sa mga taong-simbahan. . . . kay sila baya'y gaingon nga ang naa daw sa bibliya nga ang yuta kuno nga umahon nimo, fifty years ra, nya ibalhin na pud after fifty years nga imong gigamit. Ihatag nasad nimo sa lain nga mag-uuma. They (farmers) realized nga dili gyud magpanag-iya ang usa ka tao sa yuta forever. Mao nang gibasehan sa Bibliya. Ang mag-uuma gyud, mao na gikan sa ilang lolo, adto sa anak, adto napud sa apo.* (From the beginning up to now, FARDEC has remained closely connected with advocates from the Church. These are church people who point to what is written in the Bible—that the land you cultivate is only yours for fifty years, and after that, it should be passed on to another farmer. They realized that no one can truly own land forever. This belief is grounded in biblical teachings. Farming is something passed down from grandparents to children, and then to grandchildren).

As an epistemic process, FARDEC used research-based communication to link farmers' lived experience to collective action. The NGO commissioned a study to investigate corn consumption, water scarcity, and mango value chains in Cebu, Bohol, and Negros Island. Findings of the study were then communicated back to the farmers through assemblies. FARDEC also used

creative means to popularize their findings and engage the farmers in the knowledge production process through community-based comics they called *Lugas Comics*, *Kabaw Ka?*, and *Plow Share*. The NGO also disseminated the research findings through their own radio program *Pugasan sa Kahanginan* which aired on Sunday mornings on DYHP (the farmers' radio station of choice).

> *Dako gyud tong (comics) nga output gyud to gikan sa farmers, gikan sa research sa per topic, per program, per project, per issue. Naa gyud didto tanan, unya nakatabang gyud tong Plow Share sa advocates nato nga nakakuha tag support nila. Nya ang katong Lugas Comics ug katong Kabaw Ka?, sus-ag man to, so na-spread out gyud from farmer to farmer nga makomunikar nila ang giunsa nila ang ilang problema diri. . . . [Farmers] gyu'y gi-research, [farmers] pu'y gi-interview sa ilang direkta nga kasinatian.* (These were substantial reading materials that were genuinely produced from farmers' experiences, based on research conducted per topic, per program, per project, and per issue. Everything was there. Plow Share in particular greatly helped our advocates gain support. Meanwhile, Lugas Comics and Kabaw Ka? were shorter and more accessible, so they really spread from farmer to farmer, allowing them to communicate how they were dealing with their problems . . . The farmers themselves were at the center of this process. It was the farmers who were researched, and they were also interviewed based on their direct, lived experiences.)

By translating complex development issues into accessible formats such as comics and radio programs, FARDEC enabled farmers to engage with validity claims about their immediate realities. These communication materials allowed farmers to reflect on and discuss issues that affected them. This illustrates comprehension and reason-giving which are at the core of communicative rationality. Overall, FARDEC's application of participatory research, popular education materials, and radio broadcasts illustrate how development knowledge is produced within the life-worlds of farmers, with their lived experiences as the backbone of problem definition and collective action. Importantly, farmers are treated not as passive recipients of knowledge but as co-producers of meaning—an essential condition for the community to be engaged and empowered to gain control over development decisions (Pham 2018).

In the midst of uncertainty and surveillance, BAMCO strives to uphold participation in their decision-making processes. Similar to BATDA, their face-to-face meetings serve as deliberative spaces where they jointly identify

problems they encounter in their livelihood, assess gains and losses, and deepen their understanding of their social realities as motorsikad drivers and operators. Routine assessments like these ensure that their decisions remain rooted in each other's lived experiences.

BAMCO's communicative action emphasizes political education and consensus-building. One participant, a leader of BAMCO, highlighted that leaders maximize meetings to explain to members the invaluable role of uniting as an organized community in forwarding the calls of their sector. Their educational discussions are often situated within the broader context of *motorsikad* drivers' livelihood practices, rights and welfare, and social legitimacy. Together, they also examine pressing challenges such as taxation, vulnerability to government regulation and surveillance, rising costs of permit renewal, and intra-group conflict among others. These meetings are also avenues to remind members that despite their group's lack of recognition from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), their job of transporting passengers is their service to the community. Conversations like these allow BAMCO to construct a shared interpretation of their work as socially valuable. In effect, this shared meaning guides their collective decisions, such as asserting their rights and exploring the process of registration with DOLE to gain access to state assistance.

BAMCO also cited surveillance as a threat to their assembly. Unidentified individuals showing up at their meetings and asking questions about the nature and origin of their organization, its leadership, and the space where they hold meetings points to an external gaze that regards collective discussion as a possible threat. One BAMCO participant shared:

> *Mao tong nikalma sa mi karon pero nipadayon lang mis amo mga meeting kay naa man pud mi mga miyembro gud nga miyembro pud sa laing organisasyon, nga ang ilahang presidente, polis. Maabot gyud nila kung unsa amo meetingan. Syempre, kung muhisgot na gani ta'g kita nga mga yanong kabus nga nanginabuhi nga mura'g layo ra kaayo sa pagtan-aw sa gobyerno, lain na ang ilang pagsabot ana. Mura bitaw'g kanang supak man ni sila sa balaod sa gobyerno. Lahi na ilang pagsabot. Pero, padayon gihapon ang amoang pag-meeting.* (Because of that, we lay low for a while, but we continued with our meetings. Some of our members are also part of other organizations, including one whose president is a police officer, so they would really find out what we were meeting about. Of course, when poor people like us talk about livelihood—something that seems very far from how the government views things—their interpretation changes.

> It becomes as if they see us as going against government laws. Their understanding becomes different. Still, we continued our meetings.)

BAMCO leaders openly discuss such matters during their meetings. Because they are aware that their organization is subjected to external scrutiny and monitoring activities, members were able to collectively decide to adjust their meeting strategies (keeping a low-profile presence and gathering in trusted venues). The participant from BAMCO said the surveillance has caused some members to hesitate on attending meetings, but the open dialogue they had established remained steadfast and member participation unfragmented.

Communicative action also played a vital role in helping BAMCODA sustain their livelihood, legitimacy, and social cohesion as one of many competing groups within the transportation landscape. At present, BAMCODA is facing pressures from all sides: tricycle drivers asserting franchise rights, fragmented transport groups seeking advantage, and the government's plans to introduce modern jeepneys. BAMCODA turns to discursive coordination and collective reasoning in navigating these pressures, as well as sustaining internal cohesion. A BAMCODA leader underscored clear leadership, unwavering unity, consistent deliberation, and providing support to prospective members as strategies they employ to remain resilient as a group in the face of systemic pressures.

> *[A]kong giingnan akong mga kauban nga usa ra gyud sa atong buhaton kay palig-unon nato atong organisasyon kay kung huyang ta, makita nila nga kita wa ta nagkahiusa, ila gyud tang pangitaa'g pamaagi nga mangawala ta. Nya, karon, ang mga driver man diay karon ang magtunhay, thirty kapin. Ang uban, wala pa nagpamiyembro kay naniid pa ba.* (I told my colleagues that there is only one thing we must do: strengthen our organization. If we are weak, they will see that we are not united, and they will definitely look for ways to dissolve our organization. Right now, the drivers are the ones holding things together, more than thirty in number. Some have not yet become official members; they are still observing.)

Here, communication functions not only to build consensus among members of the organization but also to gel people together based on principles of unity, co-existence, fairness, and livelihood protection.

In SRFA's case, communicative action is structured around routine, dialogue-based meetings also aimed at building mutual understanding rather than mere

information transfer or transmitting instructions. Their regular Saturday meetings are discursive spaces where plans, goals, and purposes are discussed, and particular decisions are explained by leaders to members. One participant shared:

> *Kanunay [mi] gameeting matag Sabado. Mao na nga ipasabot namo sa mga tawo nga kini na atong buhaton ug pamaagi. Nya sa di pa magmeeting ang organisasyon, mag-meeting sa ang mga opisyales nga ang gi-meetingan sa opisayles ipakanaog sa organisasyon nga mao ni atong buhaton ug giusahan.* (We regularly hold meetings every Saturday. That is where we explain to the people what we are going to do and what our approach will be. Before the bigger meeting, the officers convene first, and whatever is discussed by the officers is then cascaded to the organization—this is what we will do and what we have collectively agreed upon).

The phrase "*Ipasabot namo sa mga tawo*" (we explain to the people) indicates a coordinated effort on the part of SRFA officers to construct shared meaning with members. It also signals that officers regard everyone in the organization as competent, reasoning participants capable of accepting or rejecting ideas and concepts on the basis of shared understanding. The intent to "*ipakanaog sa organisasyon nga mao ni atong buhaton ug giusahan*" (cascade to the members what we will do and have collectively agreed upon) indicates a conscious effort to re-center authority on communicative rationality and preserve consensus instead of enforcing compliance. The officers' practice of convening separately and subsequently taking up decisions with the members reveals a hybrid communication structure. The officers' meetings may integrate elements of strategic action (convening among themselves first to ensure efficient planning and coordination), but the decisions remain provisional until they are discussed and collectively agreed upon by the members.

SRFA's communicative action is not limited to building mutual understanding and consensus. Public deliberations translate to collective labor such as plowing shared farmland, planting during the rainy season, maintaining their training center, and clearing communal areas. This also shows that deliberation does not remain at the level of exchanging ideas, constructing meanings, and finalizing decisions—more importantly, it allows SRFA members to coordinate their actions, maintain solidarity, and act toward common goals. Therefore, communication in the organization does not stop at agreement, but it becomes the mechanism that turns individual farmers into an acting, functioning collective.

Strengthening Community Voices for CSO-Led Development in Cebu

Despite the existence of various CDD programs across regions in the Philippines, including state-led CDD initiatives such as KALAHI-CIDSS, community communication frameworks used by such initiatives largely emphasize procedural implementation, infrastructure delivery, and top-down planning. While these frameworks banner participatory elements across all touch points of communication, they overlook culturally grounded and everyday communication practices that communities use to organize, deliberate, and act toward common goals. Moreover, empirical research on CSO-led CDD initiatives remains limited, specifically about the ways communication strategies emerge and operate organically within marginalized communities to cultivate collective agency, accountability, and participatory decision-making.

The discussion above highlights that communication is the cornerstone of participatory development in CSO-led CDD in Cebu. CSOs deliberately construct discursive infrastructures (through assemblies, home visits, consultations, and regular meetings) that transform individual struggles into shared claims, using them as a basis for collective action. Farmers' organizations such as KMMB and SRFA demonstrate that dialogue consolidates struggles on land insecurity, limited access to social services, and livelihood challenges and expresses them as a shared grievance, enabling engagement with and access to DAR's land programs. FARDEC's initiatives illustrate that participatory research and creative, community-based media are effective ways to translate technical information and development concepts into locally resonant knowledge. In this knowledge-building process, community members are co-producers of knowledge and active participants in decision-making, increasing accountability and ownership of the development process. For BATDA and BAMCO, adaptive communication practices (rotation of meetings and managing visibility in the presence of external surveillance) sustain deliberative spaces in the midst of a challenging political and social landscape. Taken together, these community experiences reveal that structured, inclusive, and adaptive communication empowers communities to articulate their needs, openly deliberate on solutions, and act collectively toward a common vision.

For CSOs as well as government agencies that aim to strengthen participatory development, an integral shift is necessary in how communication is imagined and embedded within development initiatives. CSOs must depart from the

notion of communication as a supporting activity attached to projects and treat it as a necessary condition within which collective judgment, legitimacy, and coordinated action occur (Nugraha 2010). This condition is actively cultivated. It requires structuring discursive spaces where community members can articulate concerns, make sense of their circumstances, and redefine their priorities over time. Participation in this condition must be measured not by the number of meetings and consultations held, but by whether communication processes enable members to shape the direction and outcomes of development initiatives. Internal coordination and meetings among leaders are necessary. However, decisions must be rendered provisional until they are discussed among the wider organization. Embedding consensus-based dialogue—one that aims to explain decisions, address objections, and explicitly articulate agreements—within CSOs' communication infrastructures not only upholds genuine participation but also reinforces accountability within organizations.

How knowledge flows in and out of organizations must also be examined. Research outputs, decision-making processes, meeting minutes, policy discussions, etc., must be properly documented and made accessible to members. These knowledge products should not remain in the domains of leaders or experts. CSOs can translate research findings and other technical information into comprehensible forms that communities can use as subjects for dialogue, reflection, and even debate. This allows community members to apply the information and connect it to their everyday experiences. Development becomes genuinely participatory when communities are positioned not as recipients of information (or aid) but as meaning-makers whose knowledge actively shapes collective decisions (Nugraha 2010).

Civil society organizations operating in surveilled or politically charged environments must adapt communication strategies that help insulate them from intimidation, harassment, and external control. While strategies such as decentralizing meetings, switching meeting venues, or rotating participation do little in changing political landscapes, they help preserve deliberative spaces and protect the collective agency of organizations.

Overall, flexible, community-based, and context-sensitive communication equips CSOs to maintain dialogue, solidarity, and collective action. These communication practices enable organizations to survive even in conditions fraught with constraint and uncertainty.

The above recommendations can be integrated into existing policy frameworks. These include the Local Government Code of 1991 (RA No. 7160), the

Magna Carta of the Poor (RA No. 11291), KALAHI-CIDSS' communication frameworks, DOLE regulations for informal workers, and even Freedom of Information mandates. By embedding grassroots-led communication in CSO- and state-led CDD programs and governmental policy, marginalized groups are better poised to assert their rights, navigate structural issues, and work together in charting paths for inclusive development.

Declaration of Generative AI And AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In preparing this work, the author used ChatGPT to summarize findings, improve sentence structures and word choices, and condense content into more concise paragraphs. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the paper.

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