COv2 – Community Organizing in a Virtual World:
Lessons from a Student's Field Experience during the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education in the Philippines prohibiting in person classes since March 2020. Social Work field education was conducted using virtual platforms in engaging with clients. This paper chronicles a social work student's experience in online community organizing (CO) among agrarian reform beneficiaries in Passi, Iloilo. Recognizing that community participation is essential in transformative development, the study describes how participatory approach is applied using virtual platforms.

The student's experience shows that the greatest challenge in virtual CO is related to digitalization and connectivity among farmers. Most farmers can be contacted only through SMS and phone calls. Internet connection is not stable and many areas in the community have very weak connectivity. Farmers who have access to digital technology were able to participate more actively and meaningfully community activities. The uneven level of digitalization creates a serious barrier between those who have access to ICT gadgets and community, as compared to those who did not.

The study recognizes the benefits of virtual community engagement to facilitate real-time exchange of information about community needs particularly during pandemic and in disaster situation. If not careful, however, the digital divide may result to a dilution of meaningful participation that is requisite to empowering and transformative social change. The paper surmises that there is no substitute for in-person community engagement to develop a professional helping relationship between the organizer and community members, which is a prerequisite to building the foundation for genuine community participation.

Keywords: community organizing; virtual organizing, online CO, community participation, participatory development, digital divide, agrarian reform beneficiaries

Background

Social workers served at the frontlines during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Not only did they address the needs of the sick, social workers also attended to the children whose parents were ill, and helped families who had lost their livelihood. More than a century later, they are again called to respond to the overwhelming demands posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely believed that the scope of the current pandemic is an "unprecedented disaster" due to the nascent and inadequate planning undertaken (Rosoff, 2008).

The pandemic has likewise unexpectedly disrupted Social Work field education in many countries, including the Philippines. On 16 March 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a state of calamity throughout the country and imposed an Enhanced Community Quarantine which prohibited mass gatherings, including face-to-face classes. It was especially challenging for Social Work field education, which is an important component of the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW). The supervised field instruction (FI) program is an essential medium of professional training which allows students to integrate theory and practice while acquiring an understanding of Philippine realities from exposure to existing economic, political, and socio-cultural situations. The FI program further aims to develop commitment to the people served (individuals, groups, communities) as well as beginning skills engaging with all types of clienteles—individuals, groups, families, and communities.

While most countries have partially or fully reopened schools to in-person classes, the Philippines has kept them closed beginning in March 2020. From the confines of their homes, faculty members from the University of the Philippines (UP) revised and adapted course syllabi and requirements as they shifted to remote learning modalities, both synchronous and asynchronous (Simbulan, 2020). The UP College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD) continued to offer Social Work 151 (Field Instruction II) even while the campus was closed for in-person classes. Social Work students shifted to virtual methods in their field education by utilizing a combination of online platforms to engage with clients. Students enrolled in Social Work 151 were expected to conduct community organizing (CO) using virtual methods of engaging with members of the community, the most useful of which were Facebook Messenger, mobile phone calls, and text messaging. The Zoom application was used only during the conduct of selected meetings and training programs.

Research Question and Objective

The study aims to illustrate the experiences of a BSSW student during his placement as a virtual community organizer in an agricultural community in Passi, Iloilo. It chronicles his experiences in undertaking CO in a purely remote setting, devoid of any face-to-face interaction. While such experience is unique as it happened at the time of the pandemic, it offers important insights on the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in engaging with communities to ensure the continuity of development interventions. The use of ICT helps ensure that communities remain connected and that their needs are being addressed through online engagement. Importantly, the article explores how principles of participatory development have been applied in online community engagement. In addition, the article attempts to probe into the role of online platforms in CO, and discuss their potential in facilitating meaningful discourse and community participation.

This article also describes the challenges and opportunities of purely virtual community organizing. It will attempt to probe answers to the question, "Will ICT, or the use of laptops, smart phones, social media and other online communication platforms eventually replace public spaces such as parks and community centers as a venue for open discourse about issues important to the community?"

The objectives of this article are to: (i) chronicle a social work student's field education experience in purely online community organizing (CO) work at the time of the pandemic; (ii) discuss insights about how community participation is applied in a virtual CO setting; and (iii)

explore the potentials of online platforms using ICT in promoting community participation.

Methods

The study examines the experiences of a BSSW student's placement as virtual community organizer who worked with Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) in Passi, Iloilo from 19 January 2022 to 25 May 2022. Using the case study method, the study relied on multiple sources like the student's daily journals, process documentation, weekly accomplishment reports, and transcripts of online meetings and training sessions with community members. Detailed observations and reflections of the intern with regard to his CO experience were drawn during the weekly field supervisory meetings and trialogue involving Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (CARRD) and the faculty supervisor. These were valuable in bringing to light the processes, activities, and dynamics in conducting virtual CO. Data analysis was carried out by weaving together emerging themes and identification of key ideas or units of analysis.

Literature Review

Community organization is a "process" which begins with integration with the community, identification of the problem or objective, to the solution of the problem or attainment of the objectives identified by the community. It calls upon the organizer to develop a positive and purposeful relationship with the people in the community. It should be noted that, with the advancement of ICT, communities are no longer limited to those formed by locational or geographical boundaries. Within and outside spatial communities are other nonplace groupings. These communities are bonded by identity, profession, religion, ideology, interests, and other social bonds that represent a more amorphous type of community (Hardcastle, 2015).

Cambridge Dictionary defines the word "virtual" as "created by computer technology and appearing to exist but not existing in the physical world." It is "done using computer technology over the internet, and not involving people physically going somewhere" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Together with other social development practitioners and helping professionals, COVID-19 has pushed social workers into virtual, or partially virtual, interactions with clients and communities. It is worth noting that the experience has also exposed the important fact that human beings are wired to make connections and relationships using virtual platforms which include e-mail, telephone contact, chat and text, and video conferencing (Potter, 2020).

The emergence of online tools has likewise expanded the use of social media in community organizing, particularly in social action and advocacy. An article discussed lessons on utilizing social media technologies in community organizing practice particularly in promoting workers' rights. A highly virtual community-organizing effort led to the boycott of Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, Texas in 2013. The conclusions of the study noted that, while social media may not be a replacement for community organizing, it provides organizers with useful new tools for practice. The study further recognizes that social media has the potential for many more benefits than drawbacks in practice (Brady, 2015).

It is a known fact that social work is a relationship-based profession. The relationship between a social worker and the clients is recognized as the basis from which sustainable change can occur (Pascoe, 2021). In community-based field education, developing a relationship

between the social work intern and members of a locality is essential in building partnership. By taking part in the social and economic activities of the community, it is expected that a social work intern can conduct an evidence-based social investigation, as an important aspect in the CO process. Developing rapport with the people is key in promoting genuine community participation.

As a field placement in a community setting, Social Work 151 aims to apply various models of community organization in practice. A major reference is Jack Rothman's locality development model also known as the "community development" approach. The locality development model puts emphasis on development of indigenous leadership, local initiative, self-help, and participation by large numbers of community members. The roles of the change agents usually include those of enabler, coordinator, and teacher of problem-solving skills (Rothman, 1974 original article 1968). On the other hand, Rothman's social action model is highly influenced by the work of Saul Alinsky, which presupposes a disadvantaged segment of the population that needs to be organized, perhaps in alliance with others, in order to make adequate demands on the larger community for increased resources or treatment more in accordance with social justice or democracy. The social action approach is characterized by the use of contest strategies; change agent roles include: activist-advocate, agitator, broker, negotiator, and partisan (Stockdale, 1976).

In this context, community organizing is also viewed as a process in which local people, united by concern for renewing their own small territory, plan and act together from an organizational base that they control. It involves collective human effort centered on mobilization, advocating, planning, and the negotiation of resources (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003). As a method of promoting social justice and transformative development, CO empowers the ARBs to become catalysts and facilitators in setting up their respective landholding-based organizations that would advance their agrarian reform agenda and other development concerns.

At the core of community organizing is the principle of participatory development. The definition of participation is varied, depending on the user describing it. In social work, participatory approaches are geared towards effecting transformational change among communities. In this regard, participation is also viewed as a way of harnessing the existing physical, economic, and social resources of rural people in order to achieve the objectives of development programs and projects (Oakley, 1991). The concept of participation has been depicted by Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969) as a ladder which has eight steps (see Figure 1), each representing a different level of participation. At the lowest end of the ladder—manipulation and therapy—are forms of non-participation used by powerful segments of society to impose their agendas. Tokenism occurs when participants may say something about an intervention denoted as "input." However, the voices of participants are not heard and thus, participation does not lead to change. At the higher end of the ladder are forms of participation where citizens have more power to negotiate and change the status quo.

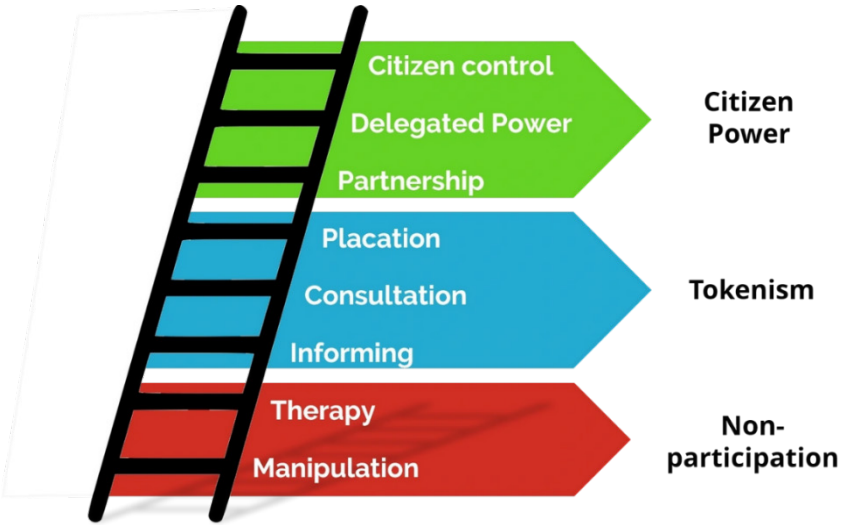

Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

In recent years, the concept of participation has been seen as an exercise to empower the poor and marginalized. Participatory processes help to break the mentality of dependence, promote self-awareness, and help people to examine their problems and to think positively about solutions (Oakley, 1991). Through these transformative processes, people develop a sense of control and power over issues which affect their lives. Participation has also been viewed as an interactive process where the social work intern plays the role of enabler and facilitator for community change.

The purpose of this article is to present lessons in virtual community organizing, based on the experiences of a BSSW student intern. It will also explore how principles of participatory development have been applied in online community engagement. In addition, the article attempts to probe into the role of online platforms in CO, and discuss their potential in facilitating meaningful discourse and community participation.

Conceptual Framework

Orlikowski's Structurational Model of Technology (Orlikowski, 1992) provides scholarly insights into the role of ICT in development. Based on Giddens' Structuration theory, the model describes the interplay between digital technology and human agents or institutions. Structuration is understood as a social process that involves the reciprocal interaction of human actors and structural features of organizations. Orlikowski describes the role of technology in terms of a mutual interaction between human agents and technology, and hence as both structural and socially constructed. Technology is created and changed by human action, yet it is also used by humans to accomplish some action.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the study, based on Orlikowski's Structurational Model of Technology—particularly how ICT influences quality and levels of participation. Three important components come into play to understand how community members adapt to virtual forms of engagement and participation.

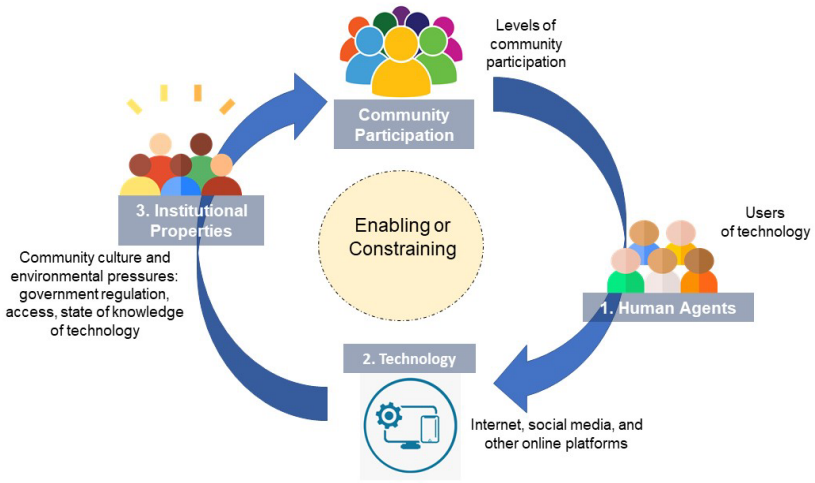

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

Firstly, the ARBs, as human agents, are technology users and decision-makers. Human agents use ICT in assigning shared meanings. Secondly, technology is the outcome of coordinated human action, and at the same time used by humans in carrying out social activities. Community members' access to ICT reinforces and shapes the institutional dynamics of organizations. In this case, technology is an important factor which influences community engagement and ARBs' level of participation. Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the institutional properties of organizations include not only organizational dimensions and community culture, but also environmental pressures, such as government regulation and the state of knowledge of technology (Zheng, 2015). Here, cultural factors and adapting to ICT as well as access to gadgets influence how ARBs participate in the organizing process. In addition, government policies on digitalization and the quality of Internet connectivity are important considerations. Human agents, technology, and institutional properties can be enabling or constraining factors in achieving a high level of community participation.

Referring to Arnstein's participation ladder, which was developed many decades before ICT started to dominate the way people interact, it is important to determine which level of participation can be achieved using purely ICT platforms. How does the interplay between human agents, digital technology, and institutions enable or constrain community participation?

Field Experiences: Virtual Community Organizing among ARBs

The Field Assignment

The community comprises of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) from Barangay Santo Tomas in Passi, Iloilo. ARBs are farmers who were granted lands under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law. The Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (CARRD) has been empowering ARBs by improving their security of land tenure and advancing their agrarian reform agenda. Through CO, CARRD has been supporting ARBs to expedite the process of parcelization and securing individual transfer certificates of land.

A landholding is classified as private or public agricultural land for redistribution under the country's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program. The nine landholdings were

properties previously owned by Santibañez Efraim and became part of the agrarian reform program through the laws[1].The guidelines on the parcelization of collective Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOA) are reflected in Section 25 of R.A. No. 6657, as amended by Section 10 of R.A. No. 9700 mandating the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) to "immediately undertake the parcelization of CLOAs over lands that are not collectively farmed or operated in an integrated manner" (DAR speeds up parcelization of collective CLOAs, issues guidelines for individual land titling, 2021). In addition, the DAR is mandated to fast-track the parcelization of Collective Certificates of Land Ownership Award (CCLOAs) and the eventual generation, registration, and issuance of individual Computerized Titles to the ARBs.

CARRD has been working with farmers in forming grassroots organizations or NGOs and developing community leader-organizers that will genuinely represent the interests of the ARBs. The NGOs follow the framework which utilizes action-reflection praxis, by acknowledging the ARBs themselves as the primary agent to achieve transformative social change. The framework brings to mind Paulo Freire's popular education approach centered on dialogue as "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name [that is, to change] the world" (Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 1990 Original work 1970). While working with the peasants in Chile, Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he insisted that dialogical encounters develop critical consciousness of social, political, and economic contradictions so that they can take action against them. The goal of the problem-posing method is praxis, which is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 1990 Original work 1970).

There were 368 ARBs in the nine landholdings covering 794 hectares of land, planted to rice, sugarcane, and pineapple. For many years, ARBs in Barangay Santo Tomas, have been waiting eagerly to get their Transfer Certificate of Title (TCT), which is an official document that serves as proof of ownership of the land granted to the beneficiary by the DAR. Most of the lands in the nine landholdings under study have yet to be parcelized. The following table shows the distribution of the nine landholdings to the 368 ARBs.

Table 1. Land distribution per ARB

CLOA Title No.	Number of ARBs	Size of land in hectares
CT – 806	58	115.1796
CT - 1475	56	143.6984
CT-805	51	128.995
CT - 990	47	110.8386
CT - 1477	41	66.7591
CT - 989	39	87.8265
CT - 1473	31	62.4187
CT - 6336	30	45.4187
CT - 13704	15	33.4678

Source: Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development

[1]The guidelines on the parcelization of collective Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOA) are reflected in Section 25 of R.A. No. 6657, as amended by Section 10 of R.A. No. 9700

This article chronicles the FI experience of a social work student in organizing an agricultural community in Passi, Iloilo, using virtual forms of engagement. Based in Manila, the student intern was assigned to organize the ARBs into grassroots landholding-based organizations in the nine landholdings in Barangay Santo Tomas, in Passi, Iloilo.

With virtual CO as the interim approach during the pandemic, it was vital for the student to determine the connectivity of community members. From among the 74 ARBs interviewed, only 54 owned mobile phones, only 21 of which were smartphones. The rest of the 33 ARBs relied on basic mobile phones and could only be contacted through SMS or phone calls. Among the 54 ARBs who owned mobile phones, 11 shared the phones with other members of the family particularly with children who attended remote classes. Internet connection meant using either prepaid data or one-peso Wi-Fi which was not always stable. While pre-paid mobile data signals were not always reliable especially in bad weather. Overall, many areas in the community have very weak connectivity requiring residents to travel to another place to access internet connection.

Together with CARRD's area coordinator who is physically based in Iloilo, the student engaged with landholding representatives to encourage, organize, and mobilize the ARBS towards the parcelization of their collective title.

The CO Process

For the first time due to the pandemic, BSSW students from UP CSWCD were assigned to a purely virtual CO placement. Figure 3 presents the specific activities undertaken by the student intern, following the CO process.

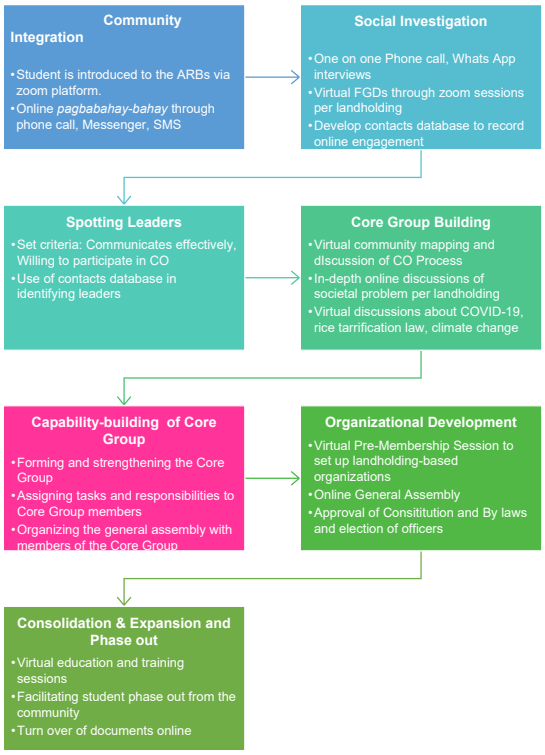

Figure 3: Virtual CO Process

Source: Student Intern

The following explains the online CO process undertaken by the student intern in the five major steps:

1. Community Integration

As the primary step of community integration, CARRD introduced the social work intern to the ARBs who represented the nine landholdings using a Zoom video conference facility. The landholding representatives were called to gather at the CARRD office where a screen was set up to stream video conference with the student who was based in Manila. The online session was meant to replicate community entry and was facilitated by a CARRD staff who was based in Passi. Recognized as community leaders, the landholding representatives presented themselves, speaking in a mix of Tagalog and the local dialect, Hiligaynon. As the discussions progressed, the intern noticed that some of the ARBs were inhibited in expressing their thoughts and opinions. It may have been the language barrier, or the unfamiliar remote set up requiring them to speak in front of the camera. It may also be attributed to the common Filipino trait of being *mahiyain* (feeling shy), which is an expected behavior during first meetings. The student was conscious that it was essential for him to establish rapport and build mutual trust and cooperation as part of community integration.

Subsequent activities between the intern and the ARBs involved one-on-one interaction through phone conversations and small group discussions. These clarified expectations about the relationship between the student as CARRD community organizer, and the ARBs. Termed as *sama-aralan*, the small group learning sessions allowed landholding representatives to share their personal experiences and understanding about the parcelization of their collective CLOA or CCLOAs. The DAR defines CCLOAs as existing and registered certificates of land ownership award issued by the Department to farmers' cooperatives, associations, other organized groups, or group of ARBs who are not yet formally organized.

In each interaction with community members—one on one or in small group sessions—the social work student needed to conduct a preliminary assessment with regard to the farmers' capacity to engage using online platforms. This was necessary to help him identify the level and quality of participation of the ARBs. Obviously, it was not possible for the intern to be part of everyday activities as in traditional CO where the social worker participates in economic activities, household work, group discussion, and social functions of the community.

A series of *sama-aralan* (learning together) sessions were organized to build awareness of the ARBs about the importance of becoming a leader-organizer in their respective landholdings. The virtual discussions helped ARBs recognize their strengths and appreciate the importance of communication and meaningful participation that will lead to forming grassroots organizations. A few times during virtual focus group discussions (FGDs), the intern struggled to understand what was being shared by the farmers due to the unsteady Wi-Fi connection. He had to ask the same question several times, which compromised the quality of the meeting outcomes. The onslaught of Typhoon Odette in December 2021 disrupted electricity in the area which resulted in the postponement of a few *sama-aralan* sessions.

2. Contact building and Social Investigation

Contact building done virtually was an essential part of building rapport with the ARBs. The traditional *pagbabahay-bahay* (home visits) took the form of phone conversations and text messaging. Organizing FGDs among ARBs required thorough preparations on the part of the student, together with the landholding representatives who were acknowledged as leaders in the community. As soon as the intern and landholding representatives agreed on the date and time of the meeting, the latter assembled other ARBS in one place where the student could facilitate the online interview while streamed from Manila.

The social investigation (SI) was undertaken through a series of one-on-one online interviews with community members. The student intern developed the following process for undertaking virtual interviews:

1. Prepare and pre-test SI guide;
2. Through SMS, agree on the date and time of the phone call. Specify the items to be covered;
3. Begin the phone interview by clarifying the objectives of the activity;
4. Ask the questions from the SI Guide noting not everything may be covered; and,
5. Post – Thank the ARB through SMS and provide a summary of agreement/s if there are any.

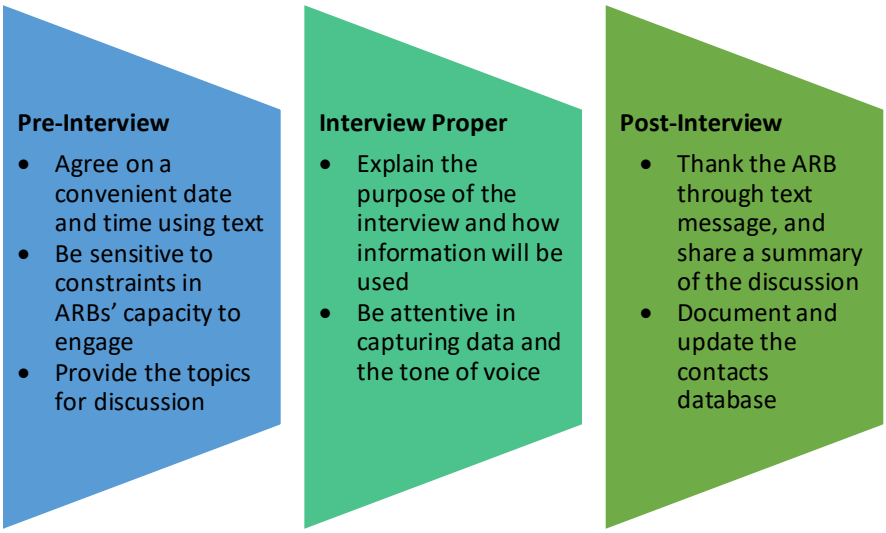

Figure 4. Process Flow in Undertaking One-on-One Interviews with ARBs

Despite the obvious difficulties in online interviews, the SI activities helped the student understand the life and struggles of the ARBs. It was evident that the most urgent concern of the ARBs was the parcelization of the collective CLOA. There were also boundary disputes with other ARBs which needed to be clarified. In addition, ARBs felt lack of government support for agricultural development. In all these, the landholding representatives who were recognized as community leaders played an essential role in getting the ARBs to participate in the interviews.

The intern recognized the need to reach out to as many ARBs as possible to gain more in-depth understanding of the situation and needs of the community. Out of the total 368 ARBs, the intern targeted 110 ARBs to engage with through interviews. However, out of 110, the student was successful in reaching out to 74 ARBs. The diagram in Figure 4 illustrates the process for organizing interviews with ARBs.

During most interviews, the ARBs sounded excited as they shared their experiences in working on the farm. Their voices would shift into a low and serious tone when they talked about the decrease in the price of rice believed to be the consequence of the rice liberation law. The farmers were also significantly affected by the pandemic. Crop production was affected due to restrictions to mobility in buying input products. They also had limitations in selling their products in the markets.

Overall, one of the serious constraints in conducting the virtual SI phase was the difficulty to develop rapport and facilitate reflective discussions with the ARBs. As the interactions were highly dependent on ICT, the quality of the phone conversations was often poor and tended to sound broken due to connectivity issues and the type and model of the mobile phones. Without face-to-face interaction, the bodily gestures of the ARBs which are important in effective communication were not visible to the student. The inability to be physically integrated with the community and to participate in social and economic activities served as a major hindrance in virtual CO.

3. Spotting potential leaders and core-group building

As a method, community organizing can serve as a tool for human development. It is a "process of unfolding the potentialities of persons to the level where they can exercise the faculties that will enable them to create, act and manage resources to live a decent life" (Dela Costa-Ymson, 1993). The series of online meetings and phone conversations helped the intern to observe the leadership potentials and capacity of the ARBs. The sense of volunteerism was evident in many instances. One of the ARBs offered his home as venue for the meetings and was willing to provide the device needed for the video conferences. Others offered to reach out to fellow ARBs in their homes to provide updates on the virtual CO process and solicit their participation. These simple voluntary efforts were crucial to reach out to a wide range of ARBs and promote more meaningful participation.

As part of building the farmers' leadership, the student intern assigned specific tasks to promote shared responsibilities in forming the landholding-based organization. Some ARBs were assigned to help coordinate the small group sessions and ensure that fellow ARBs were able to join the discussions based on an agreed targeted number of ARBs per landholding. The ARBs' involvement helped develop their self-confidence to lead. From the start, it was clear that the leader-organizer would represent the interests of the farmers in advancing their agrarian reform and development agenda through democratic processes. Building leadership translates to genuine participation from a wide range of ARBs.

4. Capability building of core group and organizational development

The student worked closely with the CARRD area coordinator and the landholding representatives in organizing capacity-building activities. The target number of ARB participants

for small group discussions was placed at at least 20% of the ARB population per landholding, or 74 ARBs in all nine landholdings. The focus was on encouraging the ARBs to participate meaningfully in forming a landholding-based organization. The sessions helped ARBs to identify important concerns and social problems particularly as these relate to the parcelization of land. Potential leaders together with fellow ARBs exchanged knowledge and insights towards finding a collective solution.

One of the group activities that helped participants to reflect about key issues was the preparation of a community map of their respective landholdings. Using the Zoom platform, the intern asked the ARBs to illustrate a map of their landholding by plotting their respective land areas. The farmers actively took part in the exercise by reflecting on the issues and problems in their respective landholding and illustrating these in the maps. The problem-posing approach allowed participants to reflect using their knowledge and experience as the starting point of learning and organizing. It served as a venue to share insights about the effects of the pandemic, the rice tariffication law, and issues in relation to climate change. In addition, the activity helped facilitate a more open and in-depth sharing about their collective goals as ARBs. In this way, the ARBs clarified the direction and goals of creating a landholding-based organization.

Conscientization, or the process of demythologizing reality and awakening critical consciousness among the poor (Freire, 1998), is essential in transformative CO. The student intern consciously made an effort to ensure that ARBs participated in the online discussions to the extent possible. This was necessary to progress to the next phase, which was the preparation of an initial plan of action. Using participatory processes, the ARBs were being prepared to set up a formal organizational structure and mobilize community effort/action to solve community problems (Dizon, 2012).

5. Consolidation of the landholding organizations, expansion, and phase out

After the series of group activities covering each of the nine landholdings, the student intern organized an online pre-membership session, which aimed to produce draft constitutions and by-laws that would serve as the legal basis and guide of each of the landholding-based organizations to be formed. A total of 99 ARBs signified their willingness to become members of their respective organizations. Together with the CARDD staff, the ARBs organized the general assembly where the constitution and by-laws were presented to the members. The members were informed about their rights as ARBs and their responsibility in developing their lands. The ARBs led the election of officers and the creation of committees in each of the landholding-based organizations. The success of the general assembly was made possible through the active participation of the ARBs, a number of whom then stepped up to become leader-organizers in their respective landholdings.

Key Lessons on Virtual CO

The following table presents key observations and insights made by the student in each phase of virtual CO. Typical activities in conventional in-person CO are presented in column 1. The second column outlines the activities undertaken by the student in implementing virtual CO, while the last column presents his insights and observations.

Table 2: In-Person and Virtual CO

1 **In-person CO Activities**	2 **Online CO Activities undertaken by the Student**	3 **Observations and Insights**
1. Community integration		
The student intern is introduced in person to the community as CO by the CARRD representative.	ARBs gathered in a venue in Passi where the student in Manila was introduced online by CARRD using the Zoom platform.	It was not easy for the student to develop rapport using online platforms. ARBs also struggled to use ICT during the meeting.
The student conducts house-to-house visits and participates in the community's social and economic activities.	The student gathered the mobile numbers of the ARBs and contacted them one by one. He introduced himself usually through SMS and explained his role as a CO.	In-person community integration allows COs to interact more openly with ARBs. The student would have optimized the professional use of self during face-to-face interaction with community members. In virtual CO, it was challenging to contact the ARBs using mobile phones due to connectivity issues. Some ARBs communicated through phone calls while others did so through SMS. The student did not get a chance to see the physical environment and observe the ARBs' body language. The language barrier caused misunderstanding between the student and ARBs. To ensure that the information exchange was clear, the intern would summarize conversations using SMS.
2. Contact building and social investigation		
The CO carries out informal conversations with community members to establish contact. Social investigation may also be conducted through face-to-face interviews, FGDs, and participant-observation methods.	The SI was undertaken through a series of virtual one-on-one online interviews and FGDs with community members. A detailed SI guide was developed to ensure that important information was covered during the SI.	In-person SI would have made it easier for the student to validate information and ensure its accuracy. Misunderstanding would be minimized and data more accurate. Observation of the actual situation of ARBs was not possible in a virtual set-up. It was difficult to facilitate reflective discussions with the ARBs using online methods.

3. Identifying potential leaders and core group building		
The student deepens professional relationship with community members in the process of spotting potential leaders and forming a core group.	The CO set a simple set of criteria in identifying potential leaders such as ability to communicate effectively and willingness to participate. The intern relied on the online exchanges which were stored in the contacts database.	The virtual method does not allow for a more thorough identification of leaders. It is highly likely that potential leaders were missed out due to the fact that they were unreachable online. ARBs who lacked ICT gadgets missed out on the opportunity to be part of the core group.
4. Capability building of core group and organizational development & management		
Capacity building is done through close in-person mentoring of the core group and participation in face-to-face training activities.	The student organized virtual capacity-building activities. The sessions helped ARBs to identify important concerns particularly as they relate to the parcelization of land. The ARBs exchanged knowledge and insights towards finding a collective solution.6	It is more challenging to facilitate reflective and in-depth discussions using online methods. It was likewise more difficult for the virtual CO to monitor participants' learnings. Through ICT-enabled online training sessions however, video materials were presented to the participants which were very useful. Another advantage of a virtual training program was that subject experts were easily tapped as resource persons.
5. Consolidation, expansion, and phase out		
The CO continues to work closely with the community leaders to strengthen and consolidate the organization. At this stage, the organization would have been established formally with elected officers and members.	After the series of group activities, the student intern organized the online pre-membership session, which aimed to produce draft constitutions and by-laws that would serve as the legal basis and guide of the landholding-based organizations. The ARBs led the election of officers and creation of committees in each of the landholding-based organizations.	The usual challenges in facilitating meetings online were present even during this phase. Through ICT, however, community leaders are able to contact the CO and other experts whenever guidance is needed.

Based on the student intern's experience, the greatest challenge in virtual CO was the struggle to ensure quality online engagement due to issues related to digitalization and connectivity among the ARBs. One out of four ARBs did not own mobile phones. Among the 54 ARBs who had mobile phones, only 21 (39%) were using smartphones. The rest of the 33 ARBs (61%) relied on basic mobile phones and could only be contacted through SMS or phone calls. Many areas in the community have very weak connectivity requiring residents to travel to another place to access internet connection.

Despite the difficulties, the student intern together with CARRD did not cease to fulfill the mandate of helping improve the lives of smallholder farming households in their pursuit of agrarian reform. While trying to adapt to the unexpected shift to online community work, agrarian reform remained a priority issue for CARRD. While based in Manila, the social work student provided the needed human resource to CARRD at the time of the pandemic. After the field placement, eight grassroots organizations in the nine landholdings were formed using virtual CO, with on-the-ground support from a CARRD staff. Active participation of landholdings representatives was essential in mobilizing ARBs to be part of the organization.

Using the conceptual framework, it can be surmised that human agent, technology, and institutional properties influenced the quality and levels of community participation, as discussed in the following sections.

Human Agent and Participation

Looking back at the conceptual framework, it can be surmised that the uneven level of digitalization among the ARBs, as users of technology, had created a barrier between those who had access to ICT gadgets and those who did not. Those who had better access to technology were able to participate more actively in online meetings pertaining to parcelization of land. They were able to express their views more openly and were able to take part in important decision-making activities. On the other hand, ARBs with poor access to ICT had difficulties communicating their thoughts effectively. Worse, many failed to attend meetings simply because they are unable to go online, or failed to receive any notice.

Technology and Participation

The reliance of virtual CO on technology also meant that the student intern was highly dependent on the quality of the mobile phones which were available to the ARBs. As mentioned, of the 54 ARBs who owned mobile phones, 33 ARBs (61%) relied on basic mobile phones and could be contacted only through SMS or phone calls. In addition, internet connectivity in the community was not stable especially during rainy days. This underscores the observation that the digital barrier may have unduly deprived some ARBs of having a voice to articulate their needs and aspirations in the organizing process. It is likely that farmers may have been left behind in the transformative CO process. The student's virtual CO experience has also shown that available technology has impacted the ARBs' level of participation.

Institutional Properties and Participation

Lastly, with the ARBs' average age of 57, it was challenging for them to shift to ICT-enabled methods of meeting with the organizer and fellow ARBs. In terms of the quality of engagement, in-depth reflective discussions were difficult to achieve due to the numerous technical challenges in virtual engagement. On occasions where Zoom platforms were used in meetings, the ARBs' obvious discomfort in speaking before a computer screen was observed. Culturally, farmers tend to be timid to speak in front of people, especially when there is a language barrier between the Filipino and English-speaking student and the ARBs who spoke mostly in Hiligaynon. A purely online community engagement may lead to marginalization of people without access to such technology, particularly in a country like the Philippines where the digital divide is a serious

concern. In fact, more than half of total households in the country lack Internet access. In addition, fixed and mobile internet penetration in the Philippines fares relatively low, compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors (Conoza, 2021).

Levels of Participation

The above-mentioned factors, namely human agents, technology, and institutional properties, shaped the quality of and level of participation of ARBs in the CO process. Overall, the level of participation was high during the consolidation phase of the landholding organizations. This took place after a series of learning workshops and an online pre-membership session. Here, the community leaders organized the general assembly where the constitution and by-laws were presented to the members. The organizers also led the election of officers and creation of committees in each of the landholding-based organizations. From partnership with the student intern and CARRD staff, the level of community participation escalated to citizen control, referring to Arntein's ladder of participation.

The improved level of participation may also have resulted from a series of *sama-aralan* sessions which helped raise awareness among the ARBs about the importance of becoming a leader-organizer. The online discussions aided in recognizing their strengths as leaders in forming grassroots organizations. In particular, the preparation of a community map of their respective landholdings helped them reflect on the issues and problems in land tenureship and other developmental concerns. It also provided an opportunity to share insights about the effects of the pandemic, the rice tariffication law, and issues in relation to climate change. The discussions likewise helped clarify the direction and goals of creating landholding-based organizations.

However, given the enormous connectivity challenges experienced by most ARBs, it can be surmised that participation was "tokenism" for users who lacked access to technology. Combined with cultural factors, the advanced age of most of the ARBs, and the language barrier, it is certain that the voices of many community members were not heard. Environmental factors such as unstable connection and lack of government support for digitalization were contributory factors for the uneven participation among ARBs. This limited form of participation cannot lead to meaningful change. In sum, those with better quality gadgets and access to the internet had more opportunities to be at the higher end of the participation ladder, where they have more power to negotiate and change the status quo.

Conclusions and Moving Forward

Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the worldwide web, says that COVID-19 has exposed the importance of internet connectivity as a basic right, saying that, it "has proven to be a lifeline that allows us to adapt and carry on" (Cellan-Jones, 2021). Similarly, virtual CO offers opportunities to engage communities and promote participation especially in situations where face-to-face interaction is not viable, such as during a pandemic or disaster situation. Using online platforms for community engagement allows exchange of information in real-time and offers opportunities to facilitate the delivery of social services to far-flung communities.

As more people use the internet, however, access to its use is uneven. This is especially true in the Philippines where nearly 60% of households do not have access to internet, and

therefore are unable to reap the benefits of digitalization which include information, telehealth, among others (World Bank, 2020). Yet, the use of the internet has expanded rapidly in the country from 23 million internet users in 2010, to 73 million in 2020 (Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview, 2020).

In the context of the ARBs' experience and given the available technology, as well as environmental and cultural considerations, the field placement has shown that, in the current situation, there is no substitute for in-person community integration to build rapport and mutual trust with community members. In-person participation in socio-economic and political activities develops a professional helping relationship between the organizer and community members. These are prerequisites to building the foundation for genuine community participation that is empowering and transformative. In addition, a purely virtual community engagement may result in uneven participation and dilution of meaningful participation. If not handled carefully, online platforms may be used as forms of social tyranny in which one or more elements of the community can impose their own beliefs and interests on others in that community (Gournay, 2002).

By experience, rural communities, like the ARBs in Passi City, are not prepared for a purely virtual CO. It is emphasized, however, that online forms of engagement should be encouraged in carrying out selected community activities, using a blended approach. The benefits of ICT in development include facilitating real-time exchange of information about community needs particularly during crisis situations such as a pandemic or a natural disaster. Digitalization has also made medical and other social services more accessible through telemedicine, online registration for vaccination, and availability of important sources and knowledge products. The judicious use of ICT opens up access to information, freedom of expression, and participation. In the case of the ARBs in Iloilo, legal experts were available virtually to provide education to ARBs on important topics related to agrarian reform. Social workers should therefore adapt to new forms of online community engagement, learn to maximize their use, while also exercising caution against undermining genuine community participation. The question remains: Is the social work profession prepared to adapt to a new and blended community organizing approach, or CO version 2 (COv2)?

Social justice-oriented social work should be centered on transforming those forces within society which cause inequity and oppression (Espenido, 2020). At the macro level, social workers should advocate to narrow the digital divide which continues to perpetuate unequal development. Digitalization is largely constrained by the country's poor high-speed broadband penetration, which lags behind neighboring middle-income countries. Interestingly, the United Nations General Assembly passed a non-binding Resolution in 2016 that "declared internet access a human right" (Barry, 2020). The right to internet access is an important advocacy to the profession which puts a premium on freedom of expression, dialogue, and participation.

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