Participation as Subscriptions: Re-examining participatory development practices

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Participation is one of the most ubiquitous terms in the field of development. Yet, despite of its inspiring and effervescent effect, its attainment has remained elusive and tenuous. This article argues that the concept of participation must be appreciated as an ideology – a prescription or a vision of what society ought to be rather than acute description of social relationships and dynamics. This article instead proposes the concepts of subscription, congruence and buying-in as alternative concepts that may account for discrepant realities. These concepts were gleaned from the experience of community organizing in Bagong Silang and member-organization dynamics of the Workers Cooperative in Caloocan.

Key words: participation, community organizing, participatory development

Defining Participation

Participation, along with peace and empowerment, is one of the most ubiquitous terms in the field of development. Its ubiquity lies not only in its robustness as an ideal, but also in its ability to affect inspiration and effervescence. It is a buzzword which perfectly encapsulates what ought to be in a democratic society. As White (1996) observes, "participation as a 'Hurrah' word [brings] a warm glow to its users and hearers." Development programs by both state and non-state actors claiming to promote or enhance participation often bear a veneer of legitimacy or approval. Yet, despite its effervescent effect, explaining participation in theory and achieving it in practice have proven to be rather difficult, if not, elusive. It can be everything while, at the same time, mean nothing at all (van Deth, 2001).

The elastic, if not problematic, nature of participation has yielded persistent and sustained attempts by academics, administrators and practitioners to unpack and achieve it. Sherry Arnstein's (1969) article, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," is perhaps one of the more popular descriptions and explanations of the concept. Contemporary attempts include the articles of White (1996) and Cornwall (2008). Both attempted to re-examine the concept in order to, using Cornwall's words, "realize its democratizing promise." In the Philippines, the concept of participation remains central in community organizing and mobilization (Manalili, 1990; Francisco, 1997) as well as in promoting people-centered governance models.

Notwithstanding the plethora of attempts to unpack the concept, it appears that participation continues to be promoted for its instrumental, and more importantly, transformative and empowering potentials. The enduring relevance of participation stems from its idealized and normative formulation; that is, (genuine) participation is often considered as "desirable" or "good" for the government, society and its citizens (Cleaver, 2001). The idealization of participation emerged from a critical reaction against centrally planned and technocratic administration of development. As a critical reaction, it called for increasing people's influence and control over matters that directly affect their lives (World Bank, 1996). By increasing influence and control, people escape from being mere objects of development and instead become active agents in shaping their own destinies.

The concept of participation suggests an ideal or aspiration for modern democratic societies. It harkens to models of direct democracy where "good citizens" are actively involved with the affairs of their community and their actions are guided by the common good. Scholars, confronted with the complexities of empirical reality, have provided nuanced explanations, models or typologies (Arnstein, 1969; White, 1996; Cornwall, 2008). Yet, they remain committed to this idealized form either by adopting a perspective where participation is as transformative, empowering and intrinsically good or, as an ideal-type – a conceptual yardstick to distinguish what is, from what is not. However, this commitment to an idealized concept of participation is not entirely unproblematic.

The problem of this idealization lies in the privileging of *what ought to be*. The achievement of this rather utopic idealization,

however, has proven to be difficult or, to borrow from Cleaver (2001), "partial, tenuous and reliant on assertions of [its] rightness… rather than convincing evidence." This has led some actors to either blindly rejoice in the supposed benefits of participation only to become deeply skeptical, if not frustrated, in the process, especially in the face of defeat. The limits of this idealization are further pushed when confronted with peculiar situations such as when actors teeter between the metaphorical "ladder steps" of Arnstein (1969) or when contentious and patronage politics appear to be "co-constitutive" (Auyero, Lapegna, & Poma, 2009)[1]. Hence, measuring up against this idealized concept does not only set elusive goals, but also lacks the robustness to explain the "heterotopia" of participation in real life (Chatterjee, 2004).

I argue that part of the problem with the concept of participation lies in the implicit and often ignored assumption that it represents an ideology rather than an acute representation of social life. Schwarzmantel (2008) broadly defines ideology as a "totalistic" perspective which "cover the central aspects of how society should be organized… it offers answers to the question of what kind of society is desirable." Participation is predicated on a fundamental belief that "the people" must be enjoined in the process towards their development. As Manalili (1984) has incessantly preached throughout the years, development must be "*mula sa tao, para sa tao*." As an ideology, this assertion is viewed intrinsically desirable. Yet, this is insufficient in providing us with robust explanations of social life and processes. Instead it provides us with a *pangarap* (dream) and systems of belief.

The belief in this *pangarap* constitutes a subscription to the ideology. The process of subscription to these "dreams" or ideologies is the foundation of transformation and change. It serves as the *pinagkakapitan* (moral handles) of "the people" and developmental agents alike. The subscription of this "dream" informs belief, practices and, subsequently contestations among other ideological "competitors." When "the people" subscribe to a participatory developmental configuration, they share this *pangarap*. This shared belief may be motivated or hampered by different factors—personal projects, altruistic beliefs, socio-political contexts. However, the subscription to this *pangarap* tends to teeter, if not appears to be

1 See Karaos (2006)

tenuous and, its transformative trajectories become difficult to predict. The teetering motions surrounding people's participation, I argue, are reflective of relationships characterized by exchange or reciprocal relations between particular and contextual actors and, more importantly, the congruence between their perceptions of development.

This article is an attempt to re-examine the concept of participation and, in the process, present a robust re-interpretation of it. This attempt somehow answers Cornwall's (2008) call for "clarity through specificity" – that is, "spelling out what exactly people are being enjoined to participate in, for what purpose, who is involved and who is absent." The article shall realize this attempt by examining the experience of community organizing in Bagong Silang and the case of the Workers Cooperative of Caloocan (WCC). Using these experiences as a platform, the article shall then attempt to provide a re-interpretation of the concept of participation. This re-interpretation represents an incipient theory which, hopefully, possesses the foundation for a robust and dynamic explanation of participation. The article shall end by outlining some implications to community organizing and development work in general.

It must be declared that this attempt requires the suspension of the idealized notions and normative ascriptions loaded within the concept of participation. This is to avoid conceptual traps characterized by elusive moral and normative categories (i.e. its desirability, rightness and essentiality) which partly define the concept of participation. These ascriptions to the concept of participation are reflective of a particular political position, an ideology or to borrow from Cleaver (2001), an "act of faith" which confuses any sober attempt to examine the concept.

For this article, I shall use the case of community organizing in Bagong Silang, Caloocan during the late 1980s until the early 1990s and the contemporary attempts by the Workers Cooperative of Caloocan (WCC) as a platform to interrogate the concept of participation. Data for the case draws from interviews with former and current community organizers in Bagong Silang, representatives of political organizations and local politicians. These interviews were undertaken for my master's thesis. The data for the case of WCC on the other hand

was borne out of my role as a faculty supervisor for the Department of Community Development's (DCD) Field Instruction Program (FIP)[2]. This role has led me to assume, among other things, a participant-observer position in relation to the organizational dynamics of the cooperative.

To the reader, what lies ahead might be a polemical re-interpretation of participation. If it is any consolation, this attempt is not without agony nor is it a denial of the transformative and empowering potentials of the idealized concept of participation. Despite the seeming deep-seated skepticism surrounding the article, I continue to believe in the "intrinsic goodness" of participation. It has served as my conceptual and political handle throughout my career as a development worker and in everyday life. Yet, this reaction stems from unsettling moments when neat and idealized categories do not fit with presenting realities. Hence, this is part of my own search for alternative explanations through conscientious reflection and incessant problematization.

The Case of Community Organizing in Bagong Silang

In August 1982, informal settlers along then Don Mariano Marcos Avenue[3] in Quezon City had their shacks demolished and were then loaded in trucks en route to Bagong Silang, a resettlement site located near the northern border of the city of Caloocan. The demolition was part of the Marcos administration's "last campaign" to rid Metro Manila of its so-called eyesores—the squatters (Karaos, 1993; Van Naerssen, 1993). Soon after, other informal settlers in Tatalon, Quezon City and Tondo, Manila had their shanties demolished and were subsequently transported to what was supposed to be a new birth ("bagong silang") or beginning for them. Instead, the relocatees were dumbfounded as they saw stretches of land dotted, not with houses, but with toilets. Without any basic services, many of the relocatees struggled for survival while others simply left Bagong Silang only to return to the precarious life in the city as informal settlers.

2 The Field Instruction Program (FIP) is considered the cornerstone of the undergraduate Community Development (CD) curricula. It was designed to complement theoretical knowledge and skills taught in the classroom by providing opportunities for students to apply basic CD concepts, principles, approaches, strategies and techniques in real-life situations.

3 Now known as Commonwealth Avenue.

Deplorable living conditions and the lack of basic services made Bagong Silang a fertile ground for the politicization of the *masa* and community organizing. Community organizers, who were relocatees themselves, began to arouse[4], organize and mobilize people in Bagong Silang. Educational discussions (EDs), which exposed local problems and linked these with national issues, were vigorously conducted. Protests were mounted against the National Housing Authority (NHA) and other government agencies to demand for humane housing units and basic services. Demonstrations were likewise staged against then President Ferdinand Marcos together with other basic sectors[5]. Parallel to these mobilizations against the government were socio-economic projects and political education for the people of Bagong Silang. At the turn of the 1990s, people's organizations (POs) in Bagong Silang attained some degree of autonomy and self-reliance. This was evident in their ability to control or provide some basic services for the residents of Bagong Silang such as healthcare, water, and access to credit.

The post-EDSA Revolution context, however, seems to have marked the apex of community organizing in Bagong Silang. By the mid-1990s, community organizing in the resettlement site was remarkably different from its incarnation during the late 1980s until the early 1990s. When asked to describe this change Arnel, a community organizer in Bagong Silang, said "...before, if you go to your masa, they will voluntarily give you money for your transportation... it was more *madulas* (smooth) before... [during rallies] we could fill two mini-buses." The relative smoothness of community organizing was reflected in the palpability of support from the masses and the massive demonstrations staged by their group. However, Arnel, commenting on the transformation of community organizing in Bagong Silang remarked, "for the longest time we have been fighting. They sometimes think, 'here we go again'. The issues we are facing… it does not go away. That is why when we call for a meeting, it is very *makunat* (tough). Only a few attend."

What led to this change in community organizing? Some community organizers cited two main observations. First, there

4 The word arouse relates to the process of raising awareness and deepening critical consciousness.

5 Community organizers claim that back then, despite the inherent dangers in participating in such activities, they mobilized people by the thousands.

appeared to be a palpable lack or stark departure from the conduct of *basic mass work*[6]. In Bagong Silang, basic mass work took the form of agitating relocatees which, in turn, would lead to people's participation in demand-making activities, mobilizations and becoming part of a political organization. Basic mass work required intensive integration in communities and with the people. The departure from undertaking basic mass work was partly due to disruptive controversies faced by some POs such as accusations of particularism, mismanagement of resources and, intense debates on succession. These contributed to the thinning of some POs' membership base, fragmentation of old alliances and loss of support from donors. The "split" within the Philippine Left also had an impact. According to some community organizers, the "split" divided and planted mistrust and resentment among the mass base.

Second, some of the POs' members simply chose to focus on their respective *ekonomiya* or livelihood rather than attend various associational activities[7]. When some people participate, especially in political activities, Lando lamented, "sometimes, our community leaders go to where the resources are." The move to prioritize one's *ekonomiya* over political organizational activities was not limited to members of POs in Bagong Silang. For instance, some community organizers also adopted a rather "practical" approach given the increasing difficulties[8] of community organizing and the demands of their personal lives. Take Ronald for example. He and his wife shared how they distributed money for an aspiring politician during the 2013 elections. According to Ronald, "we had sacks full of money… people lined up in front of our house and we gave it all to them". Ronald maintains that he is still an activist but justifies his involvement with politicians to survive. The move by both members and community

6 See Manalili (1990)

7 It is interesting to note (randomly selected) respondents interviewed for a *victimization survey* in 2010 suggested that they face considerable difficulties participating in community or political activities as compared to economic and family-based activities. See Jensen, Hapal & Modvig (2013).

8 The difficulties of community organizing in Bagong Silang are many. Most of the community organizers interviewed began their work when they were in their 20s. This allowed them to lay their life "*para sa bayan* (for the nation)." Yet, as they began to age and have their own families, having a livelihood became a priority. For some, physical ailments have taken their toll. Those who continue to work as community organizers also face threats from the state or political rivals.

organizers to prioritize their *ekonomiya* is particularly interesting given the rich experience of community organizing in Bagong Silang--a historied past shared by people who, at some point in their lives, have attended intensive EDs, staged rallies against the NHA, and, fought alongside other basic sectors to end authoritarian rule in the Philippines.

While the description of some community organizers depicted a seeming decline of community organizing from *madulas* to *makunat*, others saw the change as a form of reconfiguration or a shift in terms of perspective and strategy (Hapal, 2017). According to some community organizers, democratization paved the way for the emergence of transformative and non-combative, albeit no less critical, engagements with the state. This discursive shift moved the attention away from community organizing geared towards self-reliance and autonomy and, instead focused on promoting democratic mechanisms and making governance structures work. According to Vicky, a community organizer, "Before, we were trying to make people angry. Now, it is different. Instead of keeping on hitting (*bira ng bira*), it is better to participate. That is my brand of organizing. That is how I raise their awareness (conscientization). I do not organize people so I could use them because I have a particular agenda. To understand the full extent of the problem you need to understand its inner workings (*kailangan mong pumasok*)." Democratization resulted in the widening of "political opportunity structures" (Tarrow, 1994) which consequently led to the "diffusion of organizing trajectories" (Hapal, 2017)[9]. The move to participate was further reinforced with the passage of Republic Act 7160 or the Local Government Code of 1991 which reinvigorated the role of barangay and city governments. This, together with the shifting priorities of donor agencies, supported the changing tide of development discourse and practice. Making government work and getting people to work with it was in vogue while support for community organizing from donor agencies became scarce (Hapal, 2017).

9 The diffusion of organizing trajectories has led to some peculiar situations (i.e. community organizers as political operators of some politicians while, simultaneously, claiming to represent the interest of communities).

The Case of the Workers Cooperative of Caloocan

The Workers Cooperative of Caloocan (WCC) began in 2009 with five founding members. These were all mothers who wanted to escape from being dependent on local loan sharks, commonly known as "five-six."[10] WCC also had a nucleus of community organizers who had decades of experience working with various urban poor communities. They began by initiating a system of *impokan* (savings) and lending it to needy individuals for one percent interest. The founding members began with a capital of PhP 5,000.00. After a year, the five founding members managed to recruit 50 members to their impokan and raise PhP 75,000.00. Expansion continued in the following years until, in 2012, the members of the *impokan* formalized their organization by establishing a (credit) cooperative. Soon after, the WCC launched other livelihood programs for its members which included a garments business, a *bigasan* (rice retailing business), and a school service for its members. In 2015, the cooperative launched a "housing program" for its members by attempting to access government services (i.e. the Community Mortgage Program or CMP). In 2016, the WCC claimed to have a net worth of around PhP 1 million and 500 members (mostly from the urban poor sector) in Caloocan City and in nearby cities.

The meteoric rise of WCC demonstrated the potential of a non-mainstream and solidarity-based means of generating wealth. However, despite the cooperative's remarkable experience, its organizational dynamics were not entirely unproblematic, especially regarding its members. A closer examination of the cooperative revealed a strong and decisive core of active members (Orlino, Hayashi, Abis, & Rico, 2017). These were members who actively engaged in the cooperative's programs (i.e., patronizing their products, depositing share capital, or loaning money) and participated in decision-making processes (Limbaga, Abis, Cimafranca, & Orlino, 2016). Outside of the core, however, the majority of WCC's members were perceived as inactive.

The inactivity of most of WCC's members was due to several factors: the geographical distance between its members and WCC, making it difficult for some to participate; the cooperative's

10 "Five-six" is an informal micro-lending system in the Philippines. In exchange for money or goods, creditors impose a 20 percent interest over the principal amount borrowed.

committees being non-functional; the centralization of activities; and the lack of local leaders in communities where members were present. In response, WCC attempted to decentralize the activities, instill the value of volunteerism, and continually engage its members through various educational discussions. Despite these measures, the degrees of participation by WCC's members remained varied.

The differing, if not fluctuating, degrees of "participation" by WCC's members became more evident in its "housing program." The cooperative's program, launched in 2015, sought to access a government housing program for poor and informal settlers living along danger zones[11]. The idea was for WCC to assume the role of a community facilitator to enable its members to access the government's housing program. Mass orientations were held among WCC's members and interested individuals. The membership base of the cooperative swelled thereafter. While WCC claimed that their role was simply to facilitate, many of the members were encouraged to participate because of the "promise" of eventually becoming homeowners.

The rather aggressive recruitment process for WCC's housing program was allegedly part of a larger attempt to broaden the constituency of its mother political organization. This, to say the least, was not well received by some people. A community leader remarked, "*Ayaw namin magamit sa rally* (we do not want to be used in rallies)." This remark was borne out of the militant tendencies of WCC's mother political group[12] and some people's experience in the past where they were "encouraged" to join rallies as part of their broader participation in a development program. Despite these reservations, many expressed their desire to join WCC's housing program and began to pay monthly dues.

Resentment and frustration soon crept in as the housing program of WCC did not deliver tangible results. Some members asked, "*Nasaan na ang bahay? Hindi na ako nagbabayad dahil wala naman pinatunguhan* (Where are the houses? I stopped paying because there were no results)." This led many members to become inactive. However, several opportunities were opened as the Duterte

11 See NHA (2015)

12 In some instances, WCC and its affiliate political organization was perceived to be associated with other militant or left-leaning groups.

administration rolled out its own housing program for the poor. WCC also took the initiative to further study the government's housing program in the wake of the failures of its past attempt. In 2017, contact was re-established, re-orientations were conducted, and community profiling activities were undertaken. This reinvigorated the interest of old, albeit inactive, members and encouraged other individuals to become members of the cooperative. This led some inactive members to renew their participation in WCC's *impokan* and explore means to effectively participate in its activities.

Meanwhile, WCC's core group which had, in the past, steered the cooperative's organizational trajectory continue to face several challenges. A number of core group members have left the cooperative for various reasons--–interpersonal conflict within the cooperative, better employment opportunities elsewhere in the Philippines or overseas, disillusionment with the management, etc.-–leaving the WCC with only a handful of active members. Those who have remained remark that they continue to participate because they consider WCC their second home or family. This is not simply a romanticized remark, as most of the core group members of WCC belong to one or two families-–a fact that some members and affiliate organizations have pointed out as a criticism about the cooperative.

Framing the Bagong Silang and WCC Experience

Thus far, I have presented, albeit briefly, the case of Bagong Silang and WCC. These cases point to different historical moments and reflect different developmental or organizational issues. A keen reader might also notice that the issue of participation was not the main problematique during the process of inquiry and, subsequently, the "re-construction" of Bagong Silang and WCC's narrative (Etherington, 2013). For instance, the case of Bagong Silang discusses the transformation of community organizing and political activism. WCC's experience, on the other hand, demonstrates cooperative-member dynamics and broader organizational issues. Notwithstanding the seeming tangential relationship of these cases (in terms of the initial objective of inquiry) with the concept of participation, it still raises some interesting questions. For example, both cases illustrate people actively engaging in alternative political or developmental configurations. Yet, both cases also show the inherent difficulties and dilemmas surrounding participatory processes. Both also illustrate

various motivations which informed people's participation-–ranging from political activism, familial ties to rational self-interest.

In general, the Bagong Silang and WCC experience reflect a less straightforward path towards a vision of change and the variegated trajectories of participatory processes. These processes are subject, not only to socio-political developments or discursive shifts, but are also based on perceptions, personal contexts and social relationships (Cornwall, 2008; de Sardan, 2005). Reading the experience might yield questions pertaining to the participatory techniques used, the existence of platforms for engagement, the quality of the conscientization process, and even the integrity of the actors. These are all legitimate questions. However, these questions only serve the purpose of measuring these cases against an idealized version of participation, participatory processes and constituent principles. Treading this track leaves few insights for exploring the nuances of the concept of participation. How then do we make sense of this less straightforward and, to some extent, messy trajectory of developmental processes as illustrated in the cases above?

To answer this question, I draw inspiration from de Sardan's (2005) "Entangled Social Logic Approach." The approach, according to de Sardan is "centered on the analysis of the embeddedness of social logic." It departs from the populist or essentializing (ideological) tendencies of some development theories and, instead, adopts a social interactionist perspective (de Sardan, 2005). The approach aims to study "social groups and their interactions in the context of development" (Ervin, 2016) which may be useful in juxtaposing concrete and practice-based reality with broad developmental discourses. This perspective also departs from viewing "the people" as inhabiting the domain of normative political theory (citizens) and functionalist policy (populations) (Chatterjee, 2004). Instead, it views "the people" populating participatory processes in non-normative or idealized terms. From this perspective the case of Bagong Silang and WCC do not reflect the process of climbing the metaphorical ladder or the gradual attainment of citizen power. Instead, their experiences and participatory outcomes reflect a diachronic process "[developed] via discreet passageways, relays, extended or restricted networks of transmission, interfaces [that] proceeds through a wide range of multiple, embedded, overlapping, intertwined mediations" (de Sardan, 2005). Off hand, this process seems to yield a "rhizomatic" unraveling

of participatory trajectories-–a seemingly teetering or variegated motion between different typologies of participation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Drawing inspiration from the "Entangled Social Logic Approach," I introduce congruence, buying-in and subscriptions as non-normative and interactionist concepts or analytical tools to examine people's participation. These concepts depart from idealized and often linear notions of participation and participatory processes. Instead, they reflect the seemingly wavering motions or tenuous relationships between "social logics" of actors. Again, while these concepts were formulated and inspired by community-based practices, I must declare that these are a product of generalizations and re-interpretations of situated experiences. These interpretations reflect an incipient attempt to theorize and to characterize social interactions. As such, the cases presented merely serve as platforms to illustrate these concepts and further research is necessary to examine the potency and limits of these concepts.

Congruence, Buying-in and Subscriptions[13]

What accounts for this seeming "rhizomatic" unraveling of participatory processes? To unpack this "puzzle," I propose that we examine the interaction between actors and the implicit meanings surrounding participatory processes. Both cases illustrate moments of robustness and lethargy in terms of people's participation. I argue that the relative robustness or lethargy of people's participation is founded on the congruence between so-called development agents and *mga tao* (the people) or *masa* (masses). Achieving congruence relies on the viability of the perspectives and strategies development actors have to offer. More importantly, however, from the perspective of the people, congruence relies on their appreciation of their context; that is, their assessment of their socio-politico-economic situation and probable solutions to it. In other words, the congruence of perspectives relies on the relative compatibility of development configurations with pre-existing "social logics." The term "social logics" was defined by Glynos & Howarth (2007) as "the 'patterning' of social practices, where such practices are understood in this regard as a function of the contextualized self-interpretation of key subjects."

13 These concepts were partially developed and articulated in the analysis section of my masteral thesis.

Yet, the congruence of perspective and strategies between development agents and the people does not necessarily prompt participation or non-participation. Participation is prompted as a result of the process of "brokerage" or "intermediation" by development actors, the promotion of alternative perspectives and practices (de Sardan, 2005). The process of brokerage is consummated when there is a "suspension of disbelief" on the part of the people; that is, they must buy-in and assume that the alternatives offered by development actors are viable and realistic. The suspension of disbelief is "contingent on a process of appraisal or rationalization where pragmatic, personal, social and even altruistic motivations simultaneously converge" (Hapal, 2017). The process of buying-in, predicated on the congruence of perspectives, "may be likened to a **negotiated exchange**… 'successful' negotiated exchange between the two results in a **subscription** – a form of social contract… characterized by a reciprocal relationship between [the people] and developmental agents" (Hapal, 2017). The integrity and quality of the reciprocal relationship between "the people" and development agents rests on the participation of the former and the viability of the latter's developmental configuration.

In the case of Bagong Silang, the congruence between development actors (i.e., community organizers) and the relocatees was somewhat achieved when lived experiences of destitution and neglect resonated with the social analysis which reflected the themes of inequality, oppression and injustice. On the other hand, the resonance between WCC and its members relied on the common desire to seek alternative opportunities to save and, in the process, generate wealth. In Bagong Silang's case, buy-in was achieved due to the viability and palpability of the alternatives provided by the development actors and their respective organizations. These alternatives took the form of a comprehensive strategy to address their destitute situation, housing support, welfare services and, access to other forms of resources. The relocatees' subscription to these alternatives paved the way for engagements to a wider arena of struggle. In the case of WCC, the cooperative's meteoric success or "track record" became the foundation for prospective members to buy-in and register as members. Furthermore, WCC's benefits and, more importantly its perceived "promise" to facilitate the acquisition of homes/dwellings

through the government's housing program, proved to be a significant motivation to join the cooperative or eventually disengage.

However, one must not mistake the concepts of congruence, buying-in and subscriptions as characterizing a linear process. The congruence of the perspectives by development actors and "the people" is contingent on the fluidity of the socio-politico-economic context. In other words, its relative strength or weakness is contingent on the interwoven nature of social realities, perspectives and practices. An individual's milieu influences his or her assessment and subsequent actions. These shifts either reinforce or compromise pre-existing subscriptions which may lead to the impression that participatory processes surrounding any developmental configuration are fleeting, or at times, tenuous. Furthermore, such oscillation is due to its synchronic characteristic; that is, subscriptions are non-exclusive social contracts-–several subscriptions may be at play at any given point in time (Hapal, 2017). This is readily apparent in peculiar situations where patronage and contentious politics appear to have a recursive relationship; both may occupy the same space and may be performed simultaneously (Auyero, Lapegna, & Poma, 2009).

The teetering motions surrounding the concepts of congruence, buying-in and subscriptions draw from the assumption that "the people" are discerning and calculating agents; that is, they constantly appraise their context and appropriate possible alternatives. This assumption departs from the homogenizing tendency of some theories on participation which views groups of people as aggregates (i.e., class, *mga tao* or *masa*). This tendency is often guilty of pre-determining their attitudes and interests instead of interrogating interactions and meanings surrounding them. From this perspective, subscriptions are deliberate and calculated acts. As result, the motivations to participate vary depending on one's assessment, and the subsequent economy of actions rests on the perceived viability of the developmental configuration. Subscriptions, therefore, may be seen as founded on the constant process of appraisal (*pagtantya*), opportunity-seeking (*diskarte*) and allocation of efforts (*pagtaya*) inasmuch as it is an outcome of participatory processes and techniques.

The variegated characteristic of people's subscription to any developmental configuration is apparent when the case of WCC, in

particular its active and inactive members, is examined further. Active members continue to engage in WCC's activities for several reasons. For example, while most active members continue to participate because of the perceived benefits, other members, especially some women, see their engagement as an opportunity for self-development or, in some cases, a means to become less dependent on their husbands. This example is very simplistic and tends to generalize the complexities of the case. The point however, is that each member appraises their engagement differently. The result of this appraisal may consist of a set of intertwined beliefs or justifications which, in turn, reinforce their continued engagement with the cooperative. However, these beliefs or justifications may be reinforced or challenged depending on relative successes or failures of WCC. The cooperative's failure to facilitate the process of acquiring houses from the government by some of its members appears to be an example of this. While the disengagement of some members may be viewed as the outcome of WCC's failures or as manifestations of fence-sitting attitudes, it may also be appreciated as an attempt to lay one's energies where it would matter. As in the case of the relocatees of Bagong Silang who eventually disengaged from organizational activities, the inactive members of WCC might as well have applied their energies to their respective livelihoods or to other activities which could grant them other opportunities. Yet, their disengagement does not seem to be equated to the severance of their subscription to WCC's programs. Rather, their engagement is simply suspended-–only to be reinvigorated when new and appealing opportunities come.

Notwithstanding the wavering tendencies of subscriptions, these may be maintained or deepened thereby giving them an enduring characteristic. Apart from the viability of developmental configurations, subscriptions may be reinforced or challenged by social relationships and histories such as kinship ties, *utang na loob, pinagsamahan* and, *pakikisama* (Jensen & Hapal, 2015). The maintenance and deepening of subscriptions may also be achieved through political education or conscientization. This may result in higher levels of political commitment or "elevated" forms of action. The maintenance or deepening of subscriptions also reveals an important point about their "transformative" (albeit non-normative) potentials. While subscriptions are influenced by people's appraisal of their context, it also assumes a structuring function by challenging prevailing perspectives and practices. Its structuring function lies on

the contestations within the reciprocal relationships in any given form of subscription. The congruence of perspectives and practices does not equate to agreeability; rather, it simply suggests the potentiality of people buying-in and subscribing to a developmental configuration. The relationships borne out of subscriptions constitute a gradual process of reinforcing or challenging perspectives and practices. The results of this process, depending on one's political position and principles, may reflect positive change or its opposite. In any case, the ever-changing socio-politico-economic context and constant appraisal of individuals makes the task of maintaining subscriptions an imperative, especially for political, ideological or developmental agendas requiring a broad constituency.

Subscriptions and Development Work: Tentative Implications

At this point, I have briefly discussed the concepts of subscription, congruence and buying-in. These concepts, I argue, provide a robust and situated re-interpretation of people's participation compared to its idealized counterpart. I have argued earlier, that these idealizations must be appreciated as ideologies or prescriptions of what society ought to be, rather than an accurate representation of social reality. The inherent limitation of the idealized concept of participation to represent social reality is the locus of this attempt to provide a critical reaction and, subsequently, a re-interpretation of the concept. Yet, despite this critique and re-interpretation, one may legitimately ask: What are the implications of these concepts to community organizing and development work in general? What I offer below are tentative answers to a question regarding an incipient theory.

Perhaps the most basic implication of these concepts is directed to one's perspective about "the people," the *masa* or *tao*. The concept of subscriptions, congruence and buying-in underscores an implicit rejection of viewing people as aggregates or, as I have mentioned earlier, "the people" as inhabiting the domain of normative political theory (citizens) and functionalist policy (populations) (Chatterjee, 2004). Instead, it adopts an agent-centric perspective where "the people" are rational, appraising or calculating actors. Moreover, these concepts suggest that "the people" are not mere objects of conscientized education, but are appropriating agents--that is, the appropriation of developmental configurations is contingent on their perceptions, social milieu, personal histories, relationships benefits, disadvantages,

etc. The concepts also imply that the people are multi-dimensional, ever-shifting and not monolithic entities. Their subscriptions, which involve the process of appraisal (*pagtantya*), opportunity-seeking (*diskarte*) and allocation of efforts (*pagtaya*), reflect a dynamic process reminiscent of Goffman's (1959) co-constitutive, interactive and shifting "frontstage" and "backstage" behavior.

This rather dynamic re-interpretation of the characteristic of "the people" has some impact to alternative development configurations and, up to some extent, political strategy. The concept of subscriptions does not only imply a congruence between "the people" and alternative development configurations; more importantly, it underscores an exchange and reciprocal relationships.[14] For this exchange to be consummated, from the perspective of "the people," it must pass the metaphorical test of confidence or their appraisal. On the other hand, developmental configurations must ensure that what they have to offer are timely, relevant, beneficial and congruent with prevailing belief systems. This suggests the adoption of a seemingly entrepreneurial attitude on the part of development agents; that is, ensuring that alternative development models remain relevant and, for a lack of a better term, appealing.[15] This requires the constant re-construction or re-imagining of development systems and models to suit the rapidly changing socio-politico-economic landscape. In many ways, these concepts ultimately imply that the elegance of any given developmental configuration or political ideology matters only as much as people's appraisal of it, the breadth of its subscribers, the depth of their buy-in, and the actions that it may entail. [16]

The implications discussed thus far seem to reflect a rather instrumentalist or pragmatic perspective about people's participation.

14 The consummation of these exchanges has a different dynamic when coercion, violence or the threat of violence is involved. Elsewhere however, we have described these reciprocal relationships and subscription to informal bureaucratic practices in operation between the police and residents of an urban poor community where violence or the threat of it was clearly a currency which informed the exchange. See Hapal & Jensen (2017)

15 The remark about development agents adopting a seemingly entrepreneurial attitude was inspired by Prof. Maureen Pagaduan's observation that community development and community organizing is in the "business ng *pagbebenta ng pag-asa (business of selling hope)."*

16 While this might reflect populistic undertones, recent political events in the Philippines and the rest of the world (i.e., the rise of populist regimes with authoritarian tendencies) arguably lend some credence to this assertion.

But what about participation as an ideology or a prescription of "what ought to be" in society? Earlier, I mentioned that this article must not be mistaken as an attempt to undermine or dismiss the idealized concept of participation. Furthermore, I continue to maintain that the idealization of participation is not necessarily incompatible with the concepts of congruence, buying-in and subscription. Given these, the concepts of subscription, congruence and buying-in must be appreciated, not as prescribing normative standards, but rather as analytical tools to interpret social relationships and dynamics between and among actors. However, as Manalili (1984) argued, an acute reading of society without an inherent bias, especially for the poor, oppressed and marginalized, is *baog* (impotent). The implicit ideology in the idealization of participation therefore sets the "what society ought to be" that the concepts of subscription, congruence and buying-in could not possibly provide.

Conclusion

I end this article, not by providing a synthesis, but through a reflection inspired by the philosophy of Deleuze & Guattari. In their book, A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze & Guattari (1987) developed the concept of the "tree" and "rhizome." In simple terms, the authors used the tree as a metaphor for "centered systems" or "hierarchical structures" which "plots a point, fixes an order (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)." The rhizome, however, stands in contrast to the "ordered" nature of the tree. As they write

> a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo… unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point… it brings into play very different regimes… it constitutes multiple multiplicities (p.21)

One may ask, why end this article by alluding to "trees" and "rhizomes"? The purpose of this allusion is to point out that perhaps, when we think of participation we frame it in the image of a tree. Just like the gradual unraveling of a tree's structure, we look for patterns of the organic growth of people's participation akin to that of a plant. We look for neat definitions, hierarchies in terms of typologies, indicators or a semblance of precision in theory and in techniques. However, these are challenged when we find that social life is complex, messy and, at times, incomprehensible. This is perhaps

the rhizomatic manifestation of the processes of participation and life, in general; a manifestation that is not structured, dualistic and causal but spontaneous and complex. Perhaps another point, however, is to look beyond the duality of "trees" and "rhizomes" and view both as co-constitutive. As Deleuze & Guattari (1987) point out, "the root-tree and canal-rhizomes are not two opposed models." The idealization of participation and the concept of subscriptions answer different questions and may serve different purposes. However, both concepts are crucial in attempts to de-construct and, more importantly, re-construct participatory processes.

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