

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT WORK WITH INSTITUTE FOR SMALL FARMS AND INDUSTRIES (ISFI) PARTNER COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The study sought to establish baseline information on the possibility of involving college students in development work among the Institute for Small Farms and Industries (ISFI) partners. Specifically, the study was designed to elicit the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of 14 ISFI-partner barangay cooperatives on the proposed involvement of students in development/ community work. Expectations on knowledge, skills, and level of involvement formed part of the study as well as the potential areas of difficulty that might be encountered. The study employed a descriptive design, a universal sampling for the cooperatives represented by barangay cooperative representatives as participants. Qualitative data were gathered with the use of focus group discussion and interview methods from 14 participating cooperatives in 12 barangays, which were thematically grouped and analyzed, and interpreted. The perception and attitude of the respondents towards the proposal of student participation in development work in communities is favorable. While the results show positive learning, the expectations of the participants the students are a tall order and comprehensive as far as knowledge and skills are concerned, which also involve organizational management and technical skills. The expectations stem from the perceived current needs of the communities. The proposed strategy of involving college students in development work in 12 coastal barangays entails the social preparation of both students and community partners. With the expectations of the community on making this strategy a tool for sustainability, implementing mechanisms need to be put in place to maximize the partnership and the growth of both stakeholders.

Introduction

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasizes participatory development as the most important approach for realizing self-reliant, sustainable development and social justice (UNDP, 1999). Insights from the implementation of development projects have underscored the positive effects of community participation in the successful implementation of development programs and projects. Nongovernment Organizations (NGOs), government agencies, and international funding agencies no longer view communities as mere recipients of development programs, but as major stakeholders who have the right to participate in major decision making and the like (UNDP, 1999; USAID, 1994).

The Philippine Government employs an accreditation system as a scheme in the supervision of the higher education systems in the country (Arcelo, 2003). *Batasan*

Pambansa 232, which is the Education Act of 1982, provides for an educational program that will assist the development of an individual to its full potential as a human being, as an active citizen in the basic functions of society, and promote in each student a sense of national identity, cultural consciousness, moral integrity, and spiritual vigor. One of its mandates is to promote quality education, and devise and recommend plans, policies, priorities, and programs on higher education and research, and set minimum standards for programs and institutions of higher learning recommended by panels of experts in the field. There are eight areas that are evaluated for accreditation, one of which is social orientation and community development. It looks into how the school is able to integrate in the curriculum student participation and immersion in communities.

The Institute for Small Farms and Industries (ISFI) is an NGO that is consistently making a dent in the lives of the marginalized sectors in Mindanao, Philippines. It was organized in 1981 with the help of the Government of Belgium and the University of Louvain through the Association of Catholic Universities in the Philippines. ISFI has been implementing various projects for the marginalized sectors both in the rural and urban areas. Most of these projects are livelihood in nature, which are geared towards increasing the income of the project participants. These services are the provision of credit, community organizing, technology transfer, technical and management trainings, marketing assistance, linking, community-based planning, and enterprise development. Despite being school-based, the institute has not included in its organizational strategies the participation of students in development work, since the organization is committed to empowering the Filipino poor. However, these past few years, ISFI has been accepting students from Mass Communication and International Studies for a practicum training program, which allow students to visit the impact areas. As this shall be the future direction of the organization, ISFI intends to implement a program strategy where there is a meaningful participation of students, and where partnership is created between students and the communities.

The possibility of involving college students in development work is still at its conceptual stage. Data are not yet available to anchor its program design as well as serve as basis for the establishment of mechanisms and schemes where the students and the community can work together effectively. At this level, knowing the importance of its major client and believing in the importance of community participation, ISFI would like to involve students by gathering perceptions and expectations on how this program strategy can be best implemented.

Problem and Methods

The study sought to establish baseline information on the perceptions, expectations, and attitudes of ISFI community partners regarding the involvement of college students in the implementation of development projects. Further, the study also sought to determine the previous experiences of student involvement in development work in these *barangays* or *barangay* cooperatives, as well as describe the experiences. Moreover, the attitudes of the cooperative officers and members towards the involvement of students in development work and the expectations of the cooperative officers and members in terms of knowledge, attitudes, and skills of students participating in community work are determined should there be involvement in the development

programs of the cooperative. The program services offered by ISFI to the students as well as the areas of involvement are determined, as well as the potential areas of difficulty with the involvement of students in development work.

A descriptive survey design was utilized to gather the opinion of the community in terms of perceptions, attitudes, and expectations towards student participation in the development programs in the 12 coastal *barangays*. Six focus group discussions (FGD) and one interview were conducted to elicit perceptions and expectations on the proposed involvement of college students in community development work. The discussions were structured with the use of an FGD tool validated by experts. The respondents of the study were representatives of 14 *barangay* cooperatives who are in partnership with ISFI in the implementation of development programs. Planning was done with the ISFI Senior Staff after securing the approval of the Executive Director to conduct the study. ISFI facilitated the sending of invitation letters and other logistics needed for the activity. The ISFI Senior Staff made initial visits to the target areas and distributed invitations to the cooperative respondents, as well as explained the inclusion criteria to the board or officers of the cooperative and to the officers or members of the *barangay* cooperative directly involved in the implementation of development programs. Most of the cooperatives sent three representatives for the FGD and interview.

Framework of the Study

This study is anchored on the unconventional theory about participation (Kliksberg, 1993) and the service learning theory authored by John Dewey (as cited in Giles & Eyler, 1994). Kliksberg (1993) explains that “participation produces results.” Significant studies conducted and projects implemented with participation as its main approach, showed a radical change wherein goals were achieved by the projects. Furthermore, participation should not be limited to certain stages of the project. Effectiveness increases when it is present at every stage of the project. Serious problems will be encountered in the project design and implementation without consultation with beneficiaries.

Benefits of service learning include the development of higher learning skills; understanding of problems in a more complex way; a more motivated and inquiring attitude toward education, learning, and the world; plus the additional benefits of continued community involvement and a heightened consciousness of citizenship. Moreover, it is hoped that the student would imbibe the motivation to seek out more information independently, making educators also promote lifelong learning.

Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, the proposal to involve students in development work in the 12 coastal *barangays* is affected by the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of the community partners of ISFI in the said areas. The consultation with community partners serves as the first level of community participation approach, which is at the core of the ISFI poverty alleviation strategy. The results of the consultation will serve as baseline information where ISFI can anchor its program concept and design.

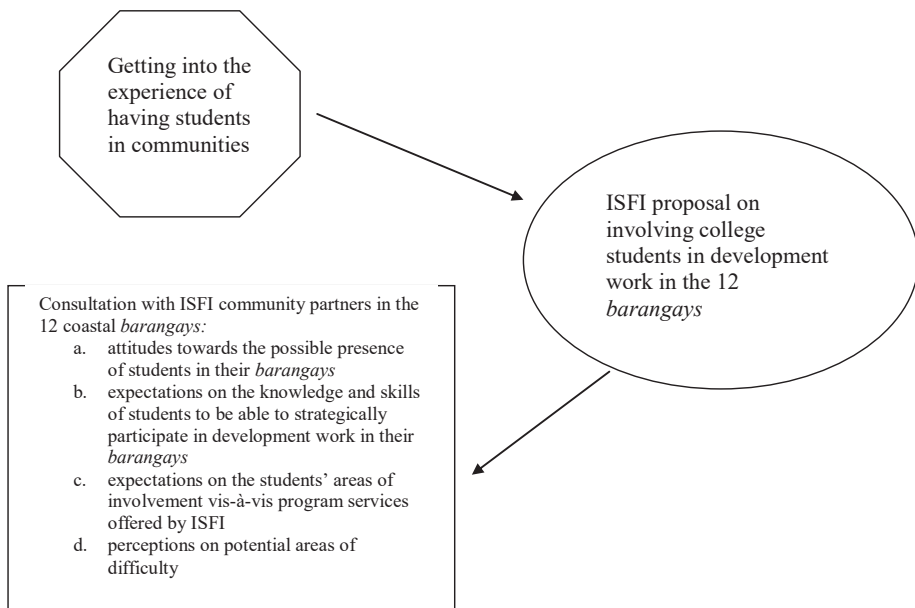


Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm of the Study

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study focused only on the 12 coastal *barangays*, which are currently assisted by the ISFI. It involved only the Board of Directors, officers, and members of the 14 cooperatives in the *barangays*, and who are implementing development projects in partnership with ISFI. The knowledge of the above participants about the past, present, and future projects of the selected organizations can provide substance to the problems that this study would like to address. The proposition is to expose students to areas that have ISFI presence. Furthermore, it focused only on eliciting the previous experience of the communities with student participation in community work on *barangays* or *barangay* cooperatives, as well as the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations on the proposal of ISFI to involve college students in development work in *barangays*.

Community Participation

Mathbor (1999) describes community participation as a phenomenon that is shaped by social relations and community structures. It is not a natural process but a

social construction. Social processes are the perception of how people behave in response to problems viewed within a framework of values and goals. In the context of development, community participation refers to an active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receive and share of the project benefits. One of the principles for effective intercultural community work is to start where the people are. This requires an understanding of the existing interests, the ideology, and the perceived needs of the people.

Community organizations that involve youth decisions and “leaderful” strategies as an approach to build better communities contribute to more sustainable and effective communities than those who do not consider the strategy. The active participation of the youth is essential to reenergizing and sustaining the civic spirit of communities. Working with the youth served to enhance the commitment and energy of adults to the organization. Adults felt more effective and more confident in working and relating with the youth. Adults came to understand the needs and concerns of youth, and became more attuned to programming issues, and more likely to be generous to reach out and share new knowledge and insights to other organizations, gaining a stronger sense of community connectedness (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development [ICCYD], 2003). Perception plays a critical role in the success of program/project implementation. Human behavior is largely a function of individual perception, a combination of learned material, the environment, and the physiology of the individual. It is also the overriding determinant of human behavior (Species up, 2006). Attitude plays a very powerful force in any organization. Thus, the perception and the attitudes of the community about a particular situation are influenced by the above. And, for the NGO to succeed in the implementation of its development programs, the perceptions and attitude of the people it would like to partner with should be deemed important in all aspects of the project cycle.

Youth Participation in Community Work

Youth participation can be defined as involving the youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with the opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others. There is mutuality in teaching and learning (between youth and adults) and where each group sees itself as a resource for the other and offers what it uniquely can provide (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000).

The most common level of youth participation was in an advisory capacity where the youth were included in discussion at the committee level or at regular meetings. In half of these organizations, the youth had voting privileges. All respondents indicated interest in some type of youth involvement in organizations. However, there was a lack of agreement on the type and extent of responsibility that the youth should assume (Rasmussen, 2003). Most organizations found that young people help clarify and bring focus to the mission of the organization, and in some cases, make this a formal role to the youth. Boards with youth members tend to be more connected to organizational operations and better able to match programming efforts to youth needs. Direct involvement of the youth in organizational decision-making strengthens the organization by making the work more relevant to the lives of the youth (ICCYD, 2003).

Results and Discussions

Majority of the partner cooperatives of the ISFI had previous experience with students participating in community work. Student involvement in the *barangays* had various objectives. Most students conducted interviews regarding the way of life and means of livelihood to residents. One of the respondents assigned a student in a Moslem community in response to the student's willingness to know the way of life of people practicing Islam. This is one of the ways the respondents can assist students to fulfill school requirements. Some students could be seen helping restore the mountains, encouraging the youth, and assisting the cooperatives in technical and administrative work. Students provided direct assistance to the *barangays* through tree planting, processing the application for business permits, working on values formation of youth, and providing technical assistance. In the above case, the students were able to respond to the actual needs of the *barangays*.

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The fishers in the *barangays* were anxious that the objective of the visit was to apprehend those engaged in illegal fishing. There were varied impressions from the barangay cooperative respondents. Students were either seen as recruiters of white slavery or law enforcers out to arrest those engaged in illegal fishing.

There were several speculations and reactions to the students' community work. Some residents found the situation embarrassing, as the visit of the students was sudden and the objectives of the visit were not clearly stated. In most cases, students came to the communities without prior notice. Some *barangay* residents thought the visit was invasive because questions usually pertain about income and way of living. The purpose of the visit was therefore, interpreted as simply a requirement in school. These impressions were changed when the objectives of the visit were explained, as evidenced by how the *barangay* residents treated and accommodated the students. Other *barangay* residents were caught unaware by the visit because of they failed to link with the *barangay*. The community members thought that the students would be coming back to help, but it turned out otherwise. Ten *barangay* cooperatives thought that the students played a role in community work. Students served as role models for the youth of the *barangay*. Students became observers, donors, supporters, leaders, and student while doing community work.

The presence of students provided the cooperatives an opportunity to upgrade organizational and technical management skills. The students treated the *barangay* cooperative respondents as contemporaries, as well as taught and served as a role model to the youth. The tree planting activity was seen as another benefit because it helped in the community's reforestation program. Students taught those working at the *barangay* cooperative how to do inventory, bookkeeping, and recording, organizing of business permit application. They also shared ice breakers that can be used during activities. Students also taught community residents *bangus* management, giant clam management, herbal processing, identifying diseases of fish, and identifying income-generating

activities. The knowledge contributed by students was technical, administrative, and value-oriented. The *barangay* cooperatives were taught filing and documentation, and *bangus* culture. There was loss of inhibition brought about by students' encouragement that resulted in the community residents' change in self-perception. The skills contributed by students focused on bookkeeping, recording, reading, and writing (for the children in the *barangay*), cooking, tree planting, and herbal processing.

Community residents appreciated the professionalism of the students in teaching skills to the *barangay*. It instilled a realization that one is equal to the other. Everyone in the *barangay* agreed that students displayed a good attitude towards the community.

In terms of skills, students were perceived to be more effective and useful in delivering competencies in the areas of organizational management, community organization, environmental management, financial management, enterprise development and management, and self-preservation. At the *barangay* level, students were expected to provide schemes and strategies in managing a *barangay*, and teach the *barangay* residents new ways and new knowledge. No specific ways or knowledge was identified by the respondents. Expectations with regards to how students would relate with the *barangay* residents were also aired by the respondents.

At the organizational level, students were expected to help in improving the cooperative, provide additional technology that the organization can benefit from, assist in the preparation of financial statements and download skills in the recording of financial transactions, and help the organization identify additional income-generating activities. The coming of students is seen by the cooperative respondents as a venue for continuous capability-building of the staff in financial management. Specific skills that students should incorporate to effectively mainstream themselves in this area are recording, preparation of financial statements, accounting, and inventory.

The 14 *barangay* cooperative partners of ISFI are engaged in the implementation of various enterprise activities. More than half are into gasoline vending, followed by rice trading. Other income-generating activities include seaweed production, goat dispersal, and fishing supplies. Expressed problems arising from the above projects focus on collection of credit, market identification, internal control, financial analysis, and capital. Students are expected to get involved in helping solve these problems. Students were expected to be involved in business management. The cooperatives hope that students incorporated skills in enterprise development and management. Specifically, technical skills are needed to help the cooperatives identify other income-generating opportunities.

The cooperative respondents showed concern for the health and welfare of the visiting students. It was expressed that it is impossible for the community to always look out for the students. With this situation, it is hoped that students would have the initiative to be more self-reliant.

Accepting the cultural practices of the community, having a helping/facilitating and an abiding attitude are the dispositions that the respondents would like to see in the students. At best, the acceptance of the practices does not necessarily mean embracing exactly what the community residents are doing. It means not being critical and choosy about things and being sensitive and open-minded towards the practices of the people in the *barangay*. There seems to be a desire among the communities that students respect and be flexible towards the daily practices of the residents. Students are expected to show a helping attitude not only towards the cooperative officers and members but to the entire

community. Skills that could help show the above disposition are counseling, managing people, listening, facilitating, and development, as requested by the respondents.

All of the 14 cooperatives believe that the involvement of the students in development work would benefit the *barangay* in many ways. As models of good values, students would be helpful in encouraging community leaders to be active members of the family. As part of the youth sector, students can help encourage the youth in the *barangays* to go to school. As part of an institution that is highly regarded with quality education, the presence of its students can help the community identify good attitudes and behaviors useful to the *barangay* and the cooperative. Student participation is seen as a tool for organizational growth. Involvement in the affairs of the cooperative would enable the officers and members to learn appropriate ways in managing the organization. Other venues where students can facilitate organizational growth include participation in the conduct of house-to-house visits to encourage nonactive cooperative members to participate in the activities of the organization, direct involvement in the information, education and communication (IEC) campaign, organizing of cooperative records and reports, downloading of technical skills in farming, fishing, and handicrafts, and linkage-building for fund sourcing. At the *barangay* level, the presence of students can also find meaning by developing projects for the youth, strengthening camaraderie among *barangay* residents, assisting in the review and formulation of ordinances, and as sourcing of funding for the projects of the *barangay*. As donors, students can directly fund the project and even directly help the communities with road improvement by donating bags of cement.

In matters involving the management of the financial resources of the organization, students are to coach finance staff on bookkeeping and recording of financial transactions, organize financial records, and analyze generated financial reports. Membership participation in the activities of the cooperative has been recognized as a core problem. A strategy has been identified and students are expected to be directly involved in the implementation of this strategy. Students are to assist in the preparation of IEC materials, and join in the house-to-house visits of nonactive members. With the positive feedback from one cooperative whose accreditation papers were processed successfully by visiting students, other cooperatives are expecting the students to assist in the processing of papers and/or requirements for projects that the organization would undertake. There is an implication that the organization needs more advice to grow as an organization. This can be done by teaching the respondents how to formulate resolutions and pinpoint to whom resolutions should be submitted, help organize the management of the cooperative's business, provide advice on how to effectively manage an enterprise through additional techniques and strategies, and organize records to develop a financial statement.

The cooperative respondents are concerned with the accommodations of students and their financial implications. With the absence of lodging houses in the *barangays*, one of the issues is where the students would stay and who is going to shoulder all the expenses. The respondents were honest enough to point out that the safety and the security of the students is the most crucial part of the program. The peace and order situation may be safe for the students, but nevertheless, the residents still worry about it.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The positive experience of communities with student involvement in development work in terms of provided assistance and general attitude of students towards the people in the community contributed to the favorable attitude the respondents have on the proposal to involve the college students in development/community work in *barangays* and *barangay* cooperatives. The length of stay and regularity of visits affected the perceptions of the respondents in terms of benefits received from the students. The attitude of respondents towards the possible presence of college students in *barangays* is favorable.

The expectations of the respondents in terms of the knowledge, skills, and attitude of the students are comprehensive and are anchored on current needs and future plans. Students need to be equipped with necessary organizational, administrative, and technical skills to have substantial and meaningful participation. Skills in community organizing are critical for students in order to be accepted, build rapport, and interact with the community. Except for provision of credit, students should be involved in all aspects of ISFI program services. This implies fielding of students from various courses to be able to respond to the current and perceived needs of communities. The type of students who can be most helpful are those who have knowledge and skills in administrative and financial management, program management, policy formulation, enterprise development and management, capacity-building, and people management.

Communities are expressing the need for sustainability in terms of assistance. This stems from the lack of skills and educational qualifications to manage the organization. Perceptions of respondents on the potential areas of difficulty are realistic and can contribute to the formulation of a program design on the participation of students in development/ community work in the identified *barangays*. Installation of policies and mechanisms can help in mitigating the identified potential areas of difficulty. Communities need to be assured that the students would not be a cause of a financial burden to the residents. Finally, student attitude is seen as an important factor for community acceptance and integration.

It is recommended that prior consultation with the communities be organized should there be plans to involve students in *barangays* and cooperatives. Implementing schemes, protocol, and policies between schools and communities should be formulated to contribute to sustainability and long-term partnership. Moreover, assessment and review of student community immersion objectives should be aligned with the needs and expectations of communities. School-based social development arms should be made to participate in the formulation of student community immersion objectives and plans to maximize student-community benefits, as well as partnership. The major stakeholders should be involved in the program planning phase of the proposal-making to ensure that the various perspectives and expectations of students, ISFI partner cooperatives, school management, *barangay* officials, and ISFI are brought to the table, discussed and decided upon the group. The students should undergo a Basic Community Organizing Skills Training in preparation for community work. This said training should be made a prerequisite to community work to ensure that students are prepared to interact with communities. Where possible, the training should be incorporated in the curriculum to form part of the package for community exposure, customized according to the verbalized needs and expectations of respondents. The area of assignment should be

reflective of the pressing need of the cooperative or the *barangay* and the technical knowledge and skills of the students. The identified procedural concerns, nonparticipation of community residents and *barangay* officials, and biases towards visitors as potential problem areas should be incorporated in the program planning either in the form of policies or implementing mechanisms. Finally, it is important that community representatives communicate and validate agreements during the program planning to promote acceptance and ensure ease of entry for students.

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