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# RECREATING COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAM (COMREL) TOWARDS RESILIENCY UNDER "BAYANIHAN TO HEAL AS ONE", AND BEYOND

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#### Abstract:

The article promotes recreating Community Relations Program (COMREL) towards Resiliency under "Bayanihan to Heal as One, and Beyond" which focuses on the improved project in the communities, barangays, and private sectors in the implementation of RA 11469 to become a key player in the fight against CONVI 19 and beyond. On the other hand, it encourages individuals to participates in the change process of recreating COMREL in cascading technology community system through corporate managers must undergo conscientization workshops by sharing models of COMREL in communities with cross-cultural backgrounds, community leaders must be called to a meeting with corporate managers and define areas where they can work together, what the managers can do and what they cannot do for the communities, communities and the corporate managers must work together to set and pursue specific targets through creative solutions, develops machinery and processes that decrease costs of recreating COMREL, striking covenants defining roles, solutions providers who manage COMREL recreated "supply chains", Adoption of Artificial Intelligence (computerization) to speed up interconnectivity among communities, defining innovative socio-political and economic support mechanisms involving the multidisciplinary groups, establishing a team of independent consultants to monitor and evaluate impact of the recreated COMREL systems, government support for recreated COMREL towards institutionalization of "Bayanihan to Heal as One" notably establishment of structures intended to replicate steps.

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## 1. Introduction

During the unexpected long vacation under the COVID-19 Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) the experiences of the author in developing Community Relations (COMREL) Programs in Davao at a time when there was a prevailing socio-political uncertainty kept flashing back, (Blesia, et al., 2021, pp. 811-845). His immediate reaction was how to recreate those experiences and see how the tools that he learned in winning the hearts, minds, and hands of the community in Ilang, Davao City, could be used in developing a framework that can be translated into a draft bill which can be discussed by legislators. But he was warned by a colleague in the academe not to indulge again in a project that will entail heavy immersion activities which he may not be able to sustain considering that he will soon be turning 70 years old and may not have the endurance to match the millennials and the requirements of the computer age. Perhaps, *Growing Old Gracefully* was a better job alternative so that a sizable bulk of the population may be induced to participate in the change processes needed in the communities, (Eriksen, et al., 2021, p. 141).

What struck him most in his discussion with this academic person was the sustainability of the COMREL initiative. But he thought otherwise. The terms "sustainable" and "sustainability" are already outdated in the same manner that Corporate Social Responsibility is now being replaced by Volunteerism. The term "sustainable" or sustainability, indicates the "ability to sustain." Unfortunately, that momentum for working with the communes in the 90s when corporate foundations mushroomed and metamorphosed as public relations tools was missed. The value of enlightened self-interest was forgotten, (Jucutan, 2021). And so, the fast-running train was missed, so to speak, for a socio-economic and political change. In the last 30 years, the Philippine government has done a lot trying to help the poor help themselves; but more harm was done to the Filipinos' values of self-worth and the people were caught in that trap halfway to "dole outs" with various social palliatives contrary to principles of people empowerment. For instance, the "Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program" (4Ps) was intended as a social therapy towards gaining a trajectory for self-reliance but as years passed, perhaps unintentionally, it snowballed into dependence on perpetual government support. So today, whenever the country is confronted with the need for data to plan, to lead, to organize, and to evaluate certain interventions, we take footnotes to the 4Ps list of recipients as a statistical basis for distribution of social amelioration as in the case of the recently passed Republic Act 11469 otherwise known as "Bayanihan to Heal as One" Act. There is an uninterrupted ballooning budget to sustain the program in an honest attempt to alleviate poverty across the Philippine islands, (Soriano, Cabalquinto, & Panaligan, 2021, pp 84-111).

It looks like corporations have been lost in the process of doing COMREL so much so that today, it is nearly classified as unfavorable as it had deviated from its original form. A number of corporate foundations have been legally registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission and other governing bodies but the concept of "conscientizing" corporate owners was relegated to licensed social workers who were paid to do a "hand-glove" relationship between the "haves" and the "have nots". As a result COMREL structure was still used as a component of money-making for which business organizations were established. Personally, I feel that the sustainability of COMREL was sugar-coated by the number of income-generating projects that were introduced instead of the holistic quality of life that it wanted to achieve, (Ordonez-Ponce, Clarke, & MacDonald, 2021).

# 2. Communities, Barangays and the Private Sectors

Mr. Yangzhong Hang, a columnist for Aljazeera (www.ajazeera.com/indepth /opinion/china-approach.coronavirus-replicated-2003230801545181.html), came out with an opinion that "China's approach to containing coronavirus cannot be replicated". This author begs to disagree. Reading the full text of Hang's opinionated manuscript shows that the political structure in China is not present in other democratic societies so the intended output or change may be difficult to achieve. He further claims that "even without considering the lack of policy autonomy in many democracies — because they do not have 'despotic power and must contend with the checks and balances of a democratic system—-effective implementation of those draconian containment measures would require a strong state to penetrate society and enforce its decisions." (Ali, Hassan, & Hossain, 2021, p. 137). This situation which he alleges cannot exist in a democratic society was what actually happened in the Philippines. And with the involvement of House of Representatives and the Senate, the so-called "draconian" measures were implemented. Initially, there was minor resistance as is normal in any change process but eventually, the citizenry cooperated with the frontline medical teams and the police force that manned the checkpoints and streets to control the free flow of people and prevent the local transmission of the virus in the outskirts of Manila. There was not much use of force in the implementation of policies to contain the spread of the CONVI19. It was as if RA 11460 was giving flesh and meaning to the Filipino values of neighborliness (Bayanihan) to surface at the height of the pandemic. The law was more of giving powers to the LGUs to adopt their interregional policies to implement the law. Indeed, it was a way of testing the meaning of empowerment among local executives as envisioned in the Local Autonomy Code of 1991, (Diokno-Sicat, Castillo, & Maddawin, 2021). If there were gains in this whirlwind of events, the next concern is how to appraise those bits and pieces of lessons and put them in the context of structural change. It is just a question of semantics, so it is guessed. China deals with communes just like how our Community Relations Programs should be working with the grassroots. From the grassroots are the Barangays, a part of the political structure which can be taken by Non-Government Organizations (NGO) as

partners in the democratic process. This pattern of a partnership between the Barangays and the NGOs, for instance, is embedded in the implementation of the Solid Waste Management Law (RA 9003) where this author feels that COMREL is the best way to institutionalize the intent and gains of the said law, (Dalugdog, 2021, pp. 25-38).

Moreover, Mr. Hang claims that "a recent study carried out by mostly Chinese scientists, attributes China's success in bringing down the number of new cases to effective intervention measures such as suspending intra-city public transport, closing entertainment venues, and banning public gatherings." Likewise, these measures were employed in the Philippines but done in a gradual manner. Interventions were initiated from the Metropolis and brought down gradually to the provinces giving way to what the Local Executives are capable of doing and what they cannot do as guided by general pronouncements from the national government. Of course, there are times when the national government withdrew certain pronouncements to align or calibrate competencies of the local executives over their inability to implement the RA 11469 taking into consideration the diverse and conflicting political orientation present in a democracy, (Gloria, 2021, pp. 56-83).

In COMREL, putting the NGOs and the Government Organizations together is a means for the local executives to interphase with corporate managers first, for the collection of data and diagnostics for a responsive intervention, and second, for the skills needed to confront challenges. The private corporations have a rich reservoir of well-trained technical people: the human resource, finance managers, production, and even marketing managers to assist the local politicians. Such was the case in the COMREL in Davao where the intervention started with "conscientizing" the corporate owners and getting them to rally behind the change process. It behooves upon these experts to reach out to the residents of communities contiguous to the areas where they operate for if they, the "haves" refuse or fail to cooperate, they will lose everything to the "have-nots" in the long run. How then can COMREL teams be recreated to help to implement RA 11469 to become a key player in the fight against CONVI 19 and beyond? (Basas, & Rubin, 2021).

# 3. Conscientizing the Corporate Owners by learning from the grassroots

During his last years working at PHINMA, the author was reporting to Chairman of the Board, Mr. Ernesto O. Escaler (EOE) as Corporatewide Community Relations Director with functional responsibility over COMREL teams of the group of companies. He can recall certain quotes from the Chairman as follows:

"Tulungan mo ang mga tao sa paligid kung saan ka kumukuha ng ginagawang semento habang may naitutulong ka pa dahil kung mamatay sila sa gutom, sino pa ang bibili ng ginagawa mong simento"

"Do not always look at the bottom line because what you do for the least of your brethren will come back to you in so many other ways" "Kailangan alagaan natin ang mga halamang gamot; hindi magtatgal ay malaking pagkakakitaan yan ng mga taong nasa liblib na pook"

Hence, Mr. EOE would personally arrange forums where he shared experiences gained from the DUCC in so far as getting managers to come closer to their communities. He would bring along Community Relations Officers from the different cement and pulp and paper plants to share their experiences in a "storytelling" mode. Initially, there was some resistance from the line personnel as they claimed it was not part of their job descriptions to perform social work functions but because EOE was Chairman of the Board, he had the power to initiate a new paradigm in business ethics, especially so that most of the companies owned by PHINMA were located in the countryside where there was palpable social unrest. He would talk about social conscience or "*enlightened self-interest*" to encourage managers to participate in the change process, (Arvan, 2021, pp. 1-20).

## 4. The Process of Recreating COMREL

After having convinced the corporate managers of the need to share the experiences of the corporate group, PHINMA launched a corporate-wide documentation of the COMREL activities and hired social psychologists to launch the process of transferring and cascading the technology of community OD to various corporate groups. The academic community was tapped as a forum where top business executives would challenge the idea of "enlightened self-interest" as a strategy for survival. Organization Development Consultants were hired to come up with a framework for diagnostics and interventions at the community level, (Edwards, 2021).

**Step I:** Corporate managers must undergo conscientization workshops by sharing models of COMREL in communities with cross-cultural backgrounds.

This first step focuses on a "soul-searching" agenda, a discussion on selfexploration, the meaning of life, and the capability-building of corporate managers through well-planned but spontaneous activities.

- a. In recreating COMREL, conscientization may involve the social philosophy of business, justifications of the top management initiative, statistics on the number of CONVI19 victims, deaths as a result of the pandemic, paradigm shift, poverty plays, and political and socio-political realities. It may involve the history of pandemics, of SARS, MERS, and the seemingly uncontrollable CONVI19. It will also involve the fears of recession and depression as a result of lockdowns and the non-productivity of human and natural resources, (Burgess, et al., 2021, pp. 1335-1344).
- b. Together with this conscientization is a process of scanning the environment and sharing of experiences of medical experts, their struggles, the lack of materials as well as their joys of saving lives so that corporate managers may empathize or

sympathize with the frontline personnel, (Hui, et al., 2021, p. 110). Urban community regeneration and community vitality revitalization through participatory planning in China. *Cities*, *110*, 103072.

c. As a result of this orientation and sharing, corporate managers should be able to define specific skills that are needed to assist the frontline, the government, the communities, and the local executives. A simple action planning like "what now" will close this phase to "capture the present mindsets" their hopes and aspirations, their fears and anxieties translated into a language that is understood by line supervisors who possess a rich reservoir of management skills in problem-solving, planning, leading organizing and monitoring of any program, (Elías, 2022, pp. 1621-1645).

**Step II:** Community leaders must be called to a meeting with corporate managers and define areas where they can work together, what the managers can do and what they cannot do for the communities.

After having pricked their social conscience, it is now time for the corporate managers to interface with the community leaders who represent the different grassroot areas or communes. This meeting of leaders in their own right is a dynamic and organic process where they get to know each other deeper considering the various experiences, fears, and anxieties during the height of CONVI19. A process of storytelling may accentuate actual and genuine happenings at the grassroots. While the corporate managers may consider this meeting a very elementary interface, they must have the patience to listen to stories as narrated by the community leaders who may not be as academically prepared as the managers in organizing their presentations. Corporate managers, at this stage, must learn to listen, read the body language of the poor and embrace the simple minds of the people and appreciate the tools that were used in their struggle to overcome their anxieties and challenges, (Leader, & Aplin, 2021, pp. 2135-2138).

However, it must always be remembered that in community organizing it is taboo to raise expectations of the communities. At any given time, corporate managers must possess the skill to level expectations with the participants to avoid false expectations resulting in massive frustrations in the communities, (Noel, et al., 2019, pp. 88-95).

**Step III:** The communities and the corporate managers must work together to set and pursue specific targets through creative solutions.

The corporate managers must be there to lead the community leaders in problemsolving analysis. Setting targets, prioritizing and SMART tools must be shared by the corporate managers while taking sensitive precautions against situations that embarrass their counterpart community leaders in the process of arriving at certain solutions together. A simple use of words to insult the representatives could turn off the free flow of genuine inputs to the process of creating indigenous solutions. This process will give the corporate managers a forum to validate their perceptions of the community leaders who originate from different sectors. On the other hand, the community leaders will get to know the corporate managers deeper as persons "with a heart" who are also as vulnerable as the elderly and community dwellers to CONVI19. After having molded the different participants into a coherent whole, an initial plan shall be crafted which will symbolize a covenant between and among the participants, (Funder, et al., 2021, p. 81).

**Step IV:** Develop machinery and processes that decrease the costs of recreating COMREL.

While Step III is a process, Step IV requires a structural design where the processes are intertwined with the machinery to prevent one party from giving up on the other. The commitment that evolved from Step III should be tested in various projects identified in steps I to III to determine whether both parties were sincere in their pronouncements or they were just lip service. For instance, the commitment to support the frontline in the fight for CONVI19 should not be left to the corporate managers alone who have the resources, but the community must also have a share in preventing the projects from retrogressing. This means that a menu of projects to sustain the commitment should be tested through various support projects such as in Health, Nutrition, Sanitation, Water Supply, herbal plant production, linkages with the academic community, cross-cultural interface via religious organizations, and other types of projects which, if not pursued could impede solutions as presented by the now developed partnership of the corporate managers and the community leaders. Without this exhaustive exchange of ideas, the process could revert to Step I, and then the cycle continues without any fruitful result. The result is a never-ending expenditure and costly endeavor for change. The machinery at this point may also consider the establishment of self-sustaining projects that may generate funds to support future interventions, (Luo, et al., 2021).

**Step V:** Striking covenants defining roles, solutions providers who manage COMREL recreated "supply chains".

Step V was perhaps missed by the COMREL teams in 1985 and this area was not included in the documentation. Perhaps, the team failed to foresee the interplay of various forces such as the expansion into corporate foundations, the creation of local and international linkages, the emergence of new laws, institutionalizing COMREL in the corporate structure, interconnectivity, and to some extent, international relations or influx of foreigners in the communities, (Khan, et al., 2021, pp. 404-418).

Indeed, recreating COMREL must consider a "supply chain" type of intervention in order to occupy a dominant role in the process of connecting one group to another, one barangay to another, one municipality or province, and even Sisterhood Agreements with other provinces as provided for in the Local Autonomy Code of 1991. The COMREL structure must establish an organization parallel to the government or to any foreign system that undermines the democratic processes. This machinery or structure must be prepared to balance the tendency of the democratic system to veer towards a monolithic or autocratic rule. The COMREL supply chain must be able to work with various groups: government, NGOs, cooperatives, religious groups, etc., and consider these units as part of the supply chain for socio-political and economic change. It must develop a core of experts who can influence the production of goods and services without undermining the duly established democratic institutions, (Qazi, Appolloni, & Shaikh, 2022).

**Step VI:** Adoption of Artificial Intelligence (computerization) to speed up interconnectivity among communities.

In the 1990s the use of the internet was not as efficient as it is today. In fact, it was even very difficult to connect from Davao to Manila using long-distance calls or fax machines. The sneaker mail was the most effective way of communicating among COMREL teams. Therefore, the prompt submission of reports was almost impossible, especially for teams located at the grassroots. Interconnectivity was very expensive and inconvenient among teams located in the countryside, (Pan, & Zhang, 2021, p. 122). Today, with internet connections and paperless communications, communities can easily correlate technical, socio-economic, and political information at various levels and can easily determine risk factors and support strategic decisions, (Jiménez-Luna, et al., 2021, pp. 949-959).

**Step VII:** Defining innovative socio-political and economic support mechanisms involving the multi-disciplinary groups.

COMREL teams that are exposed to the communities have the tendency to absorb the culture of complacency. Often, transference, or the danger of acting like one of their clients, is an enemy of the COMREL worker. There is therefore the need to reenergize and expose the team to other competing societies so that they will see for themselves new and evolving paradigms of leadership, new technologies, the emerging balance of power, and all other factors that impede or support COMREL programs. The teams will need alternative mechanisms to transition from their present situation to a better and more challenging environment. At this stage, innovative techniques should be developed so that processes and structures will be more responsive to any and all challenges of the time, (Mann, Loft, & Hernández-Morcillo, 2021, p. 52).

**Step VIII:** Establish a team of independent consultants to monitor and evaluate the impact of the recreated COMREL systems.

With a growing number of clientele nationwide, there is a need to create a group that could look at the successes and failures of the recreated COMREL from the outside. These consultants should stay at the balcony, so to speak, detached from the players of change so that their observations, findings, and recommendations will not be influenced by the COMREL on the floor. They must be people who speak their minds, are corrupt-free, values-based, and are not influenced by any political order.

This is the "think-tank" group that may include respectable persons from the academe, from research institutions, and even from outreach centers with a proven track record for fearless organization development (OD), (Peck, & Elligson, 2021).

**Step IX:** Government support for recreated COMREL towards institutionalization of "Bayanihan to Heal as One" notably the establishment of structures intended to replicate Steps I-VIII.

"Bayanihan to Heal as One" is considered a palliative, temporary relief to the problems resulting from CONVI19. Sooner or later, scientists will be able to develop a vaccine to prevent a future similar pandemic. But as the world evolves, so are viruses and bacteria. That was why we had the SARS, the MERS, etc. The structures built and the lessons learned from this exercise should not be thrown away if economic managers want to see the "return on investments" from this process. It is suggested that COMREL will be there to institutionalize the processes, structures, offices, values, budget, human resources, and other variables that will come into play, (Jadina, 2021).

#### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### About the Authors

Atty. Irineo F. Martinez, Jr. was named the Father of Community Relations (COMREL) in 1985 by the Personnel Management Association of the Philippines, while he was employed as Personnel and Administrative Director of the Davao Union Cement Corporation in Ilang, Davao City. He presented a paper entitled The Pagtambayayongay of Davao: A COIR Model which was eventually published by the International Labor Organization (Community Organization and Industrial Relations: The DUCC's Approach to Community Development, 1985). The paper discussed grassroots approaches in setting up COMREL programs that influenced other PMAP members nationwide to organize corporate foundations in an attempt to neutralize the sociopolitical environment. Atty. Martinez was inspired by the business philosophy and teachings of the late Mr. Ernesto O. Escaler, Mike Magsaysay, and Ting Paterno who were instrumental in organizing forums where the experience in DUCC and the PHINMA group of companies were shared in a storytelling mode. Rene as he is called in the communities was also a faculty of the Evelio B. Javier Foundation Inc., an NGO with a special focus on political education. Rene holds a degree in Political Science from the University of the Philippines, Diliman, 1970. He is the current Chief of Staff of Senator Ronald Dela Rosa. The views and opinions of the writer do not necessarily reflect those of the Honorable Senator.

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