COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AND MOBILIZATION EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

Merlinda C. Cepeda

ABSTRACT

This article describes the community organizing and mobilizing efforts of students with the community residents who participated in the service-learning program. Results of these efforts showed that community work was not only an academic requirement but an opportunity for students to enrich their values of service. Working with various sectors in the community which included women, men, and the youth contributed to their feelings of satisfaction and personality enhancement. Following a set of activities that included community entry and integration, informal community study, core group formation, problem assessment, and planning of community activities, they implemented various activities with the community residents together with students from other disciplines. As their journals reveal, the students learned many significant lessons from these collective endeavors with the community which enhanced their values to serve and work with the common people.

Introduction

The Department of Social Work implements the block placement scheme in its community work program. This scheme requires senior Social Work students to enrol in only one 15-unit subject, which then allows them to live and integrate in the community and engage in a full-time development work with the residents for a period of at least five months. With the various community sectors, the students conduct community assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation activities in relation to the identified concerns and problems of individuals, groups, and the community in general. The faculty coordinators supervise the students. It is in the supervisory sessions that the students share their process recordings, case studies, and journal entries detailing the experiences they had in their community work. Their academic skills are further developed and enhanced in these discussions. The sharing also leads to a reflection on the satisfaction derived

from the community work, personality enhancement , and the value of civic participation. As the results of this program indicate, the partnership established between the students and the people in the community enriches the values for service and change on the part of the students and the community, respectively.

Under the current service-learning program, the community organization team was composed of two graduating students placed in the first semester and another two in the second semester of the same school year. This workforce was later reinforced by six community organization students composed of four engineering students and two junior Social Work students.

Barangay Maluay which has seven *puroks* was taken as a heterogeneous grouping of people with different concerns and interests. As such, the organizing work was conceptualized to be based on sectoral interests. Thus, the effort was towards organizing the women, men and youth sectors in the community. The women group was composed of the married women who were unemployed and had desires to develop their economic productivity. The men group was composed of the small scale fishermen in the barangay who expressed the need to improve the volume of their fish production. The youth group was composed of the out of school youth who also expressed desire to learn skills in income generation to augment the family income.

Activities

Community Entry and Integration. The students were formally introduced to the barangay council members through the Barangay Captain who, together with the council members, served as "gate keepers" of the community. The courtesy call was made to present the academic goals of the field placement and to introduce to the community the development goals that will result out of the partnership. Mutual agreement and support was generated through this activity. The community assisted the students in looking for the host family where the students could stay for the duration of their community work.

Informal Community Study. The community integration of the students was made easy by their living in the community. They conducted house to house visits to establish rapport and professional relationship with the community and to get to know and understand the conditions of the people, their problems, concerns, dreams, and aspirations. The informal interaction with the people facilitated the acceptance of the students by the community. The informal community study was conducted by sectors, resulting in three sectoral profiles — women, fishermen, and the youth.

The study, through informal interviews, focus group discussions, and observations revealed that all sectors shared the same assessment of their community problems as lack of income, lack of income-generating skills, poor health situation, lack of resources for education, lack of cooperation, and special needs of their children and the elderly. The informal interaction created the desire and will on the part of the sectors to organize and carry out collective action in relation to their community problems.

Core group formation. The students identified potential leaders in the process of interacting informally and integrating with the people during the community study phase. The contact persons identified served as the key persons in motivating others to join in the community mobilization to deal with their problems. The contact persons were those who were very receptive to the inputs of the students , displayed positive attitude, and believed that they can make changes in their situation through community action.

Community Problem Assessment. The students conducted organizational meetings with the core group of women, men, and youth who were willing to formally organize. The students initiated the sessions and obtained feedback on the results of the community study and the deeper experience of problem analysis through the "problem tree" exercise. The exercise provided the different sectors the opportunity to analyze the community problems through the identification of the "cause" problems and the "effect" problems.

Both the women and the youth groups identified their main problem as the need to develop their income generating capabilities in order to augment the income of their husbands/fathers, enhance their capabilities for cooperation and participation, and improve their health conditions. For their part, the fishermen group identified the presence of commercial fishing boats in their municipal waters as one of the major reasons for the depletion of the marine resources thus contributing to their low fish production.

Community Planning Activities. With the help of the students, the sectors conducted community-planning sessions based on the results of the community problem assessment made by the women, men, and youth sectors. The sectors identified the projects and set activities that were feasible for them to pursue given the available internal and external resources. The basic plan of action identified by the sectors was related to improving their skills in income-generation through skills training, actual operation of the income-generating project, and health-related activities. Through these sessions, the community experienced deeper and closer working relationship.

Community Implementation Activities. A number of planned activities were implemented by the sectors. The women group participated in the training and making of *pulvoron* and coconut jam. This is the result of their brainstorming on the possible skills the women can learn in order to generate income. *Pulvoron* and coconut jam making were readily identified by the women considering the presence of a woman member who can train them on the skills needed for cooperative production. This member, who learned this skill in Manila, became the resource person in the training for both productions. The women successfully produced delicious *pulvoron* through the demonstration training.

The women group decided to raise funds for their actual production of *pulvoron* and coconut jam. The source for their initial production was their membership fee, which

they decided to use as the capital for this venture. They were able to produce and distribute the finished products within the community and earned their first profit then.

Through the assistance of the Social Work students, the women group was able to establish a market for their products outside their community, such the Silliman University Cooperative Store and at university related activities like trade fairs in campus which are sponsored by the different student organizations. Meanwhile, the women secured a permit from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to officially distribute their food products to a wider market like Dumaguete City. This permit is required for food products which are commercially produced and distributed.

In another development, in order to strengthen their associations, the women, men, and youth groups participated in a series of training such as the self-awareness, and team-building training. These were carried out in coordination with the different departments that provided the technical expertise, such as the Department of Sociology and Anthropology for the team building and the Guidance and Counseling Office for the self-awareness raising seminar. The activities involved the participants in structured exercises and activities that allowed them to interact with each other and reflect on this experience particulary in assessing what they have achieved for themselves and each other. For many of the participants, this was their first experience of its kind.

Meanwhile, the students worked out with the association leaders the registration of their association with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in order to achieve a legal personality which will enable then to gain access to more organized services provided by agencies to accredited associations. An organization needs to be registered before it can be accredited as a people's organization. Once accredited, it is qualified to sit in the local government unit planning council. This is power in the hands of the community people.

The association is also getting recognition and support from the local government unit in the barangay and municipal levels. It is considered a partner in the implementation of government programs like the Technical Education and Skills Development Administration (TESDA) for further training in other income generating projects. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) was also approached for the registration of their *pulvoron* and coconut jam products for distribution to the general public as a food product.

Meanwhile, the Department of Health (DOH) was tapped for what services they could provide to infants and mothers. The Department of Welfare and Development (DSWD) was also approached for possible capital assistance and other technical training. All of these linkages are over and above the partnership provided by the different academic units from Silliman University implementing appropriate projects and activities in the community.

Problems Encountered and Mitigations

The problem solving process conducted by the community sectors with the assistance of the students had the goal of bringing about change and development in the community and enhancing the competencies of its members. However, this process did not prosper without problems. The problems the students encountered are relative to the community and inherent to themselves.

Problems Relative to the Community. Foremost, there was reluctance on the part of the community to participate in the initial activities. This is understandable due to the past experiences they had with previous agencies that came in and out of the community without achieving their expectations. The students observed that this initial difficulty was reinforced by the nature and value of rural people, that is their "wait and see" attitude. They would like to see first what the partnership will bring to them before really committing to it. It was noted that this attitude only changed with the local government's approval, support, and endorsement of the partnership first. It is also a fact in social

work practice that the acceptance and cooperation from the people have to be earned by the community organizers as they integrate and relate to the people. The students did not easily achieve this.

The other problem the students encounted was the people's lack of will power and confdence in their individual capabilities. This also explained their lack of spontaneity in problem analysis and community planning. The years of living in underdeveloped conditions have made people accept the situation as their lot which could no longer be changed. As a consequence, they had poor opinion of themselves, which constitutes a rationale for the need to build their capabilities at the early stage of community work.

Moreover, the people were mainly preoccupied with activities that pertained to the satisfaction of immediate family needs. Such concerns often got in conflict with the community activities for assessment, planning, training, and implementation. This is the usual "egg and hen issue" in development work. The potential solution that may be gained from community meetings and mobilization is often overshadowed by the priority given to the pursuit of the satisfaction of basic needs. This vicious cycle can be broken with intensive legwork and education inputs to enable the community to see in perspective the place and value of community mobilization in the attainment of future quality of life.

Their pessimistic attitude in achieving their dreams and aspirations due to the belief in their destiny and acceptance of their fate is one of the obstacles for mobilization. They needed to see even small victories in the attainment of some of the goals they set before they would be inspired to move.

Problems Inherent to the Students. Understandably, many of the students lacked self-confidence for engaging in a beginning professional practice. Basically, their reluctance was due to their fears and anxieties about their initial practice. Still trying to gain confidence in applying the theories learned in class in the community, they were often times too cautious in relating with the community people. Moreover, they needed more determination and persuasive skill in undertaking the different activities. This

was the reason why they were not able to achieve results in a given span of time.

Lacking in professional skills in the beginning practice especially in the use of principles, techniques, and strategies, they had to make conscious efforts to apply the theories into practice because they were aware that this was not the case of hit and miss or trial and error. There was then the need for regular supervisory discussion with the faculty supervisor in processing their experiences and learning from their practice. The students failed to produce the needed process recording, case studies, journals for the supervisory sessions which hampered the integration of learning.

The students also tended to be more task-oriented in their community mobilization work. More concerned with finishing the activities even if the people were not ready to do them by themselves, they often ended up doing things for the people rather than making the people do things for themselves. In their impatience to make community people do the activities they need to do and to appreciate the value of the activities for their own good, development workers often succumb to the temptation doing the things themselves. On the other hand, what should be emphasized in development work is the experience of growth and change in the individuals as they undertake the collective and cooperative efforts in order to achieve some concrete outputs. The service learning laboratory is the best place to weigh the pros and cons of the process versus the task goal achievement.

Finally, the students failed to install within themselves the discipline to regularly document their experiences in community work. Needless to stress, this regular documentation of the events in the community and reflecting on them through role recordings and analysis is immensely important as basis for future and consequent actions. As an essential aspect of academic training, this makes the practice very scientific and professional. However, the documentation was more historical than actual. This was fine for reflecting on the insights and learning in relation to the service

objective but more was needed in relation to the achievement of the academic objectives.

Accomplishments

Although these are not ultimate indicators of the success of the community organization and mobilization works of the Social Work students, the accomplishments achieved to date need to be further pursued and sustained. Foremost, the courtesy call which resulted in the granting of permission by the local leaders for the students to proceed to do community organization work and their commitment of support in the future mobilizations by the students and the people is noteworthy because everything starts here. In fact, this resulted in the establishment of a professional partnership between Silliman University Service-Learning Program and the leaders and residents of Maluay.

This partnership was further enhanced by the informal study which led to the establishment of a closer working relationship with the people, the development of initial trust and confidence, the development of a community profile as the basis for their development planning in the areas of livelihood, health, education, and the elderly needs. It led to the decision to organize sectors like the women, men, and youth.

The community problem assessment phase also established among the sectors deeper understanding of their problems and concerns. As a result, they were able to prioritize their needs in relation to the needs' interrelationship with each other. For example, they were able to identify their priority problem as economic which is related to the improvement of their health and education status. It established community consciousness of their problems and provided them with the opportunity to come together and collectively discuss their concerns. This experience of collective discussion of community problems led to the establishment of a wider community involvement in the planning and implementation of plans related to their problems.

Meanwhile, the community planning activities resulted in the formulation of a community development plan which became the basis for the development of the appropriate plan of action of other disciplines like the College of Nursing, Department of Medical Technology, Department of Physical Therapy, College of Business Administration, and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. The community plan included the need for community organization capability building inputs, the inputs on the development of income-generating skills and income-generating activities such as *pulvoron* and coconut jam production and marketing, health education and interventions especially in the areas of dengue epidemic and parasite control and family planning, and the inputs on cooperative development in relation to their income-generating activities.

The training resulted in the mobilization of a local talent as the trainer, showing the possibility of internal resource mobilization that makes implementation faster. It provided them the chance to work together, which is the discipline and value that must be developed in order for the groups to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, the implementation of the income-generating planned activities resulted in the experience of collective mobilization between the women and the community organizers, which further strengthened their trust and partnership. It developed in the women group the confidence to relate to external people and organizations, which is the source of their empowerment to pursue and sustain the activity. It also raised the needed amount which they got as their share from the profit generated based on the policies they established.

The series of training exposed the participants to group dynamics and interactions, which is the way in making their association achieve the goals of sustainability. They experienced fear and overcoming such fear, experienced lack of self-confidence and the realization of being able to make things happen as they cooperated and participated in the activities. It also provided the students the opportunity to process the experience with the actual

participants and strengthen their confidence in their capabilities to facilitate. In doing so, they developed a commitment to the methodology of training.

The formalization of the organization in the community resulted in further empowerment of the community in asserting their right to access what is available and accessible to them in the form of support services provided by government and non-government agencies. In all these, the students realized that community work is a serious task that demanded their patience, commitment, and expertise. It led them to realize that the achievement of the academic goals required the application of a body of knowledge which they had to consciously apply and learn from. They saw that the community service objective was easier achieved and could be the source of inspiration to achieve the other. Finally, as the results of this program show, the integration of the different disciplines in the university in responding to the expressed need of the community is an initiative worth sustaining and expanding.

Analysis of the Reflections of Students

The one year experience of students under the service-learning program of the Department of Social Work in community organizing and mobilization in Maluay made them realize some vital issues in community work. The experience taught them more lessons in dealing with community people for collective endeavors. The enhancement of their values to serve and work with common people were also evident in their reflections. From their journals and the discussions during the regular processing sessions of their experiences, the following observations with regards to how their service-learning have affected them are analyzed here.

Specifically, the students realized that:

◆   The value of sharing time, talents, and expertise in dealing

with the concern of improving the quality of life of the people, albeit difficult, is challenging and very self-fulfilling.

♦ Students must overcome their inhibitions and fears in order to establish initial relationship and develop meaningful partnership. Their fear of rejection should be balanced by their desire to contribute their expertise in helping people help themselves thus giving them the impetus to commit themselves to the job.

♦ For community work to yield significant impacts demands application of theories, principles, and value systems which should be consciously applied. Furthermore, results should be studied and reflected for adjustments and flexibility. In the application of the methodologies, open-mindedness on the part of the students is a must.

♦ Documentation of community work, indicating the lessons, insights, roles, and the reflections derived from the experience, is important in comprehending the process of change in the person (student and community) and in their relationships as they aspire to create changes in their socio-economic life. This is one aspect for which the students must develop the necessary skills and the corresponding discipline to do them at the right time.

♦ Resources for mobilization in relation to the community priorities may not be enough especially in rural communities. However, this should not hamper the enthusiasm of the community and the students. The creativity and imagination of the students and the community can play a vital role in expanding these opportunities. It is one of the values that can be developed among the students and the community people.

♦ Mobilization of internal resources and starting small can be the initial strategy for use in the community to develop the

attitude of internal reliance and direct control of the processes. There should be a constant belief in the capabilities and potentials of the community people.

- Leaders are developed and the ways to develop them involve giving them the actual opportunities to do things with minimum assistance from the change agent, if possible. This develops their sense of responsibility and their capability in doing them.

One of the most valuable lessons students involved in this field work learned is that only when the motive to do community work comes from the heart, rather than from external factors like grades, will the use of strategies and approaches become spontaneous, creative, and imaginative. In this case, students reported that that their field work time had passed quickly and productively without their knowing it.