

Participatory Action Research in Situations of Insecurity: Challenges in Empowering Communities vis-à-vis the Philippine Anti-Terrorism Act

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In the context of the intimidating effects of a recently passed Anti-Terrorism Law in the Philippines and based on the experiences of forumZFD, an international conflict transformation organization working with a variety of local communities, the analysis lays out the challenges for a community-based joint inquiry process that enables action rather than adding to apathy. Drawing on literature and previous engagements with partner communities, potential avenues to address these challenges, develop sustainable protection strategies, and critically engage with the law are discussed.

Introduction

In July 2020, the new Anti-Terrorism Act took effect in the Philippines. The law is expected to threaten already limited spaces for civil society, further escalate existing conflicts, and aggravate human rights violations against activists and conflict-affected communities. Passed in the context of the government's intensified counter-insurgency campaign, the law perpetuates and broadens emergency powers granted to the security sector under a recently ended period of regionally limited martial law. Particularly in the island of Mindanao, where a decades-old Communist insurgency is ongoing and the implementation of the peace agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Philippine government – the other major conflict line – is still fragile, the anti-terrorism law is expected to constitute another source of violence against communities already affected by conflict. The law adds to pre-existing trends of marginalization of indigenous peoples and Muslims and both direct and structural violence committed under the guise of counterinsurgency.

As an international organization supporting conflict transformation in the Philippines, forum civil peace service (forumZFD) must deal with the implications of this law on both the conflict context and its partner organizations. Based in Mindanao since 2007, forumZFD works with a variety of civil society, education, and government actors to transform structural violence, strengthen mechanisms to deal with conflicts non-violently, and achieve a mutual recognition of needs and interests of the different identity groups. Exchanges with forumZFD's partner organizations in the weeks following the ratification of the law revealed a significant knowledge gap regarding the provisions of the law and a resulting sense of insecurity felt by partner communities. Based on these observations and requests for further information, forumZFD initiated a process to further engage these communities with a view to closing the information gap and empowering them vis-à-vis the anti-terrorism law.

The paper at hand raises several challenges and dilemmas that emerged since forumZFD started engaging with and planning for the community-based set of activities. It is based on preliminary dialogues within forumZFD's working group on the Anti-Terrorism Law, observations of diverging expressions of need within partner communities, and continuous communication with these communities through other project activities. Through the deliberations laid out here, the working group hopes to identify and anticipate potential risks and obstacles in the next phases of the engagement. Employing a variety of participatory action

research literature as well as case studies from comparable contexts in Latin America, Northern Ireland, and other regions in the Philippines, the paper aims to explore these challenges and discuss potential ways forward. While drawing learnings from comparable contexts, there are naturally limits to the transferability of experiences due to the context- and issue-specific nature of participatory action research (PAR) that needs to be recreated in every social, cultural, and political context (Streck & Jara Holiday, 2015). The paper discusses how such learnings can be adapted to the specific context at hand and sketches out a potential way forward.

The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 and forumZFD

The Philippine Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 was passed in June 2020 after fast-tracked parliamentary debates. While proponents argue that the law gives teeth to Philippine counterterrorism efforts, critics point to the potential for abuse exacerbated by the changes it means for the Philippine counterterrorism framework. The law expands the security sector's power by allowing a longer period of up to 24 days of warrantless detention, increasing powers of surveillance and freezing assets, and removing procedural guarantees for terrorism suspects. These developments are particularly concerning given the extremely vague definition of terrorism employed by the law and the granting of extensive designation powers to the newly created Anti-Terrorism Council with little oversight. Observers including forumZFD have concluded that the law stands in violation with the Philippines' domestic and international human rights obligations. A petition to declare the law unconstitutional at the Philippine Supreme Court led to the Court repealing two of the law's provisions but keeping its main elements intact.

Wary of its potential effects on conflict in Mindanao, forumZFD has been engaging with the topic since parliamentary debates about the law started. To build internal capacity and to make an informed assessment, forumZFD conducted an internal desk research about the then draft law between April and June 2020. The research report enabled forumZFD to take action by making a public statement on 2nd June 2020 cautioning against the passing of the law and later submitting its assessment to international procedures observing the situation in the Philippines. Based on this assessment, forumZFD expects the law to escalate conflicts in Mindanao in a number of ways. It adds to political violence by giving a legal basis to human rights violations already committed by the security sector and contributes to the pre-existing trend of

militarization of spaces and strategies. Given the widespread stereotypes against indigenous peoples as potential communist rebels and against Muslims as potential terrorists, implementation of the law is also expected to be marred with ethnic and religious profiling thereby adding to marginalization of these groups. Lastly, promoting a vague definition of terrorism in the context of frequent denunciation and attacks against critics and activists has already noticeably added to the shrinking and closing of spaces for civil society.

When the law was first passed and forumZFD published its statement, consultations with partner organizations revealed a need for further information on the law and its effects. The partner organizations in question, three indigenous people's organizations and a civil society network, found the law to be inaccessible due to its technical language and it only being published in English¹. Partner organizations stated that a better understanding of the law would allow them to prepare protection strategies in light of the additional harassment expected and engage government actors proactively about the law and its implementation. In subsequent activities, it became clear that the law has already had a chilling effect even though it has yet to be applied against the respective communities. Even large, well-connected organizations showed hesitation to discuss the issue openly as they were concerned about potential repercussions. Based on these observations and the communities' request, forumZFD plans to build on its internal research and further engage these communities with a view to empowering them to develop suitable protection strategies as well as strategies to challenge the law and advocate for their rights. A working group, formed for this purpose in September 2020, discussed providing a translation of the law in the communities' respective languages so that rather than following the interpretations of third-party actors, the communities could analyze and assess the legal text themselves. The translated law is to be embedded in a more comprehensive reference brochure that includes the main points of forumZFD's internal analysis as well as references to support organizations offering legal and psychosocial support for victims of state violence. Providing such written materials would also enable partner organizations to become multipliers and inform other community members. However, written materials face the challenge of summarizing the law while also conveying its complexity, its relation to more general counterterrorism

¹ While English and Tagalog (also referred to as Filipino) are the official languages in the Philippines, only a fraction of the population speaks English or Tagalog as their first language. Instead, over 100 different languages are spoken across the archipelago (Belvez, n.d.). The diversity of languages is also reflected in forumZFD's partner organizations with project activities regularly conducted in at least four different languages – Bisaya, Maguindanaoan, Tagalog, and English.

approaches and jurisprudence, and its embeddedness in the overall political context. Oversimplifications of the topic may add to the law's chilling effect on civil society, which is particularly rooted in the lack of nuance in its terrorism definition.

In order to respond to the need for information and guidance while simultaneously recognizing its outsider position and avoiding the promotion of specific strategies that might result in serious risks to the community, the forumZFD working group decided to plan for a joint inquiry process that is firmly rooted in the community, takes a strengths-based approach, and works towards uncovering untested feasibilities for community members to act as self-affirmed subjects. For forumZFD, this process also offers the opportunity to gain additional insights about the effects of the anti-terrorism law in these specific partner communities, augment the internal analysis of the law, and to adjust project strategies where needed. For both the partner communities and forumZFD the goal of the inquiry process is to deepen their understanding of the topic as practitioners and to let this deepened understanding inform subsequent action. Consequently, a participatory action research framework with its stress on iterative, issue-specific, and action-oriented processes is a suitable format.

Challenges to community engagement

A number of challenges emerged from the preliminary discussions within the forumZFD working group and through continuous exchanges with the partner communities. Months after the law took effect, it is still a highly sensitive topic with the concomitant hesitation to discuss it publicly. The challenge posed to the forumZFD team is therefore to engage with the community in a joint inquiry process that is empowering and enables avenues for action rather than discouraging them. This challenge plays out in three mutually reinforcing dynamics.

Security threats

The first major challenge is posed by the ongoing violent conflicts that bring a number of security threats to the partner communities and to a lesser extent also to forumZFD. With an overall escalation of hostilities between the Philippine government and the insurgent New People's Army, armed encounters in the hinterlands of Mindanao including in indigenous territories occur frequently. In Central Mindanao, violent conflict continues with remaining armed groups that are discontent with the peace agreement, some of which have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Additionally, in the context of shrinking spaces and widespread violence

against activists, any critical engagement with the anti-terror law is perceived to run the risk of repercussions from the Philippine state.

Such threats to the physical safety of those involved necessarily reflects on ethical, methodological, and technical or practical considerations of the joint inquiry process (Gutierrez, 2016; Lundy & McGovern, 2006; Lykes, 1997). On a practical level, these challenges can be addressed by ensuring that the venue of the inquiry is as safe as possible. This may include holding meetings in a private setting that disallows overhearing from unknown people and in a neutral space not associated with any party to the conflict. Depending on the specific threat level it may be necessary to hold meetings outside of the community though this brings its own challenges as not all community members may be able to leave their daily tasks in the community behind to travel to a meeting elsewhere. Past experiences have shown that the gender distribution in meetings can be significantly impacted by the choice of venue and date of the meeting. In one community, women are unlikely to attend far away meetings because they are expected to care for children. In another community, several men were unable to attend a meeting because it coincided with harvest. These considerations need to be taken into account when choosing a venue and date that minimizes security risks.

In central Mindanao, the anti-terrorism law raises another security risk for community members who are former combatants in the transitioning conflict in Muslim Mindanao. As the agreed-upon amnesty guarantees have not yet been finalized, there is an assumption that the law could still be used against these former combatants resulting in a hesitation of addressing the issue at all. Lundy and McGovern (2006) report of a similar challenge when engaging with community members in Northern Ireland concerned that the information they provided may still be used to prosecute them. While the researchers in that case could assure participants that this would not happen, the forumZFD team cannot make such assurances. A practical implication of this risk may therefore be to simply pause engagement on the Anti-Terrorism Law until amnesties are guaranteed and no legal implications are to be feared from communicating openly about the communities' histories of struggle.

The unequal distribution of risks between forumZFD and its partner communities necessarily impacts the partnership. It should be noted that communities are facing differing threats not only from the Anti-Terrorism Law but also from the ongoing violence, the presence of armed groups as well as forms of structural and cultural violence. While trying to anticipate

threats to the inquiry process, there is also a need to recognize these ‘layers of violence’, not all of which may be visible to forumZFD members. This includes acceptance of the fact that not all threat situations will have a favorable solution (Williams & Lykes, 2003). Thus, forumZFD cannot and should not plan for risk mitigation on their own but needs to bring security threats into the communicative space of the PAR process. In fact, a PAR process conducted by a team of researchers and NGO workers in the Philippines pursued this avenue when faced with very serious threats to the physical safety of participants. After having facilitated a dialogue with the community, the community decided to withdraw from the risk by removing themselves from the situation (Estacio & Marks, 2010). In the case at hand, discussions about security threats must be a transparent, iterative process, as threats are not one-time events but embedded in the very situation that is being investigated.

At the same time, there is a risk that an investigation of vulnerabilities to develop protection strategies would reinforce damage-centered narratives thereby maintaining the marginalization of these communities. Centering damage also usually implies an exclusive focus on immediate remedies rather than transforming the violent structures causing the vulnerability or the threat (Sandwick et al., 2018). Sandwick et al. (2018) therefore recommend a critical bifocality on both a community’s wounds and its resistance in order to provide redress for the symptoms without losing sight of the root causes. Applying a critical bifocality to the process at hand could mean a sequencing of activities starting with protection strategies as immediate need and prerequisite to discussing the fundamental structures of the situation later on.

Silencing

A related challenge is the silencing of marginalized communities that have long been facing the security threats mentioned above. The structural violence committed against these communities includes exclusion from public discourses as well as a diminished access to decision-making processes. Indeed, one of the objections raised against the anti-terrorism law is that the accelerated parliamentary process meant that no community consultations were held. Since then, the militarization and polarization of narratives has continued to silence critical voices. Particularly, the fear that criticism would approximate to a guarantee to be surveilled or otherwise targeted by the law causes even otherwise outspoken CSOs to be “too scared to move” (forumZFD, 2021b). In other project activities it was observed that participants were not

prepared to bring up the topic of the anti-terrorism law themselves but, when encouraged, shared many concerns. Lykes (1997) describes this effect as “silenc[ing] the population through terror” (p.727) as she experienced while conducting a PAR project in Guatemala, a context comparable to the Philippine in terms of the impact of long-lasting counterinsurgency campaigns on the civilian population. With silence as an adaptive strategy for survival, feelings of isolation and distrust are exacerbated and traditional ways of community organizing are interrupted. In the Philippines, this means that merely participating in a meeting about the Anti-Terrorism Act may trigger fears or actually bring about repercussions. As in the Guatemalan context, the framing of questions and processes matters in the Philippines because concepts, terminologies and strategies have been demonized in public discourses (Lykes, 1997). In a previous research process on the impact of martial law on peacebuilders, indigenous partner communities reported that specific words such as ‘solidarity’ or ‘organized group’ are avoided because they are associated with the Left (forumZFD, 2019). The same is true for concepts such as ‘human rights’ or in some contexts even ‘peace’. To a certain extent, this silencing effect is also felt within forumZFD itself. In a recent pre-workshop survey among forumZFD staff members, two out of four staff members that chose to answer an optional question regarding the impact of the Anti-Terrorism Law indicated that they felt limited by the overall atmosphere of fear and intimidation or by the concern of email communication being surveilled (forumZFD, 2021a).

As a response to these concerns, the forumZFD working group discussed reframing the activities so as not to mention the anti-terrorism law or human rights directly. While this may enable wider access to the activity and ease some of the concerns of community members, it also reinforces the silencing effects described above. By reframing the dialogue in a way that avoids the topic at hand, the facilitators would implicitly maintain the narrative that it is suspicious to discuss the law. This therefore raises the dilemma of how to open a space for the free flow of ideas when many of these ideas and voices are silenced and alienated. In fact, Gutierrez (2016) describes how a PAR project could not be carried out in some areas of Colombia because denunciation of the project as subversive in the media had caused fear in the communities. In this case, Gutierrez found that a participatory method alone did not succeed at opening a communicative space in a community that had been exposed to narratives demonizing the same strategies the research team was attempting to employ. Luckily this is not the case in the situation discussed here. The fact that forumZFD’s partner communities expressed a desire to tackle the

topic of the anti-terrorism law despite a similar denunciation campaign is a significant opportunity for the organization not to miss out on. As a process that is thus not only community-based and -placed but also community-driven², subsequent steps should be firmly rooted on this expression of need and relate back to it despite forumZFD having initiated the process. As an avenue for the articulation of excluded and alienated voices, PAR can enable exploration of the complex relations between silencing, silence, and voices and can open discussions about the sources and expressions of power implicit in these relations (Lundy & McGovern, 2006; Lykes, 1997). As shown in PAR projects in the Guatemalan context, reflections on the contradictions and fluidity of concepts, increased awareness of power differentials, and linking personal tragedies to collective narratives can be a means of reevaluating one's own relationship to the silencing situation (Lykes, 1997).

Another way to navigate the space between silencing and claiming one's voice is to employ joint teams of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Lundy and McGovern (2006) argue that the idea of 'insider' and 'outsider' is best reflected in a series of concentric circles rather than two opposite poles. In this model, so-called 'certificates of honesty' with the community signify entry into a closer circle increasing the 'insider' status. Within the complex context of community members constantly negotiating between being silenced and claiming their voices, it is expected to be beneficial to engage both an 'insider' who carries a familiarity of these experiences and an 'outsider' who has not been subjected to it and can contest the silencing situation from a different vantage point. Depending on the specific context this can involve mixed teams of Philippine and non-Philippine forumZFD team members or to have teams of a forumZFD member and a community representative.

Apathy

Thirdly, discussing the repressive effects of the Anti-Terrorism Law may add to feelings of apathy and fatalism already present in the community. While there is a vibrant and active civil society in many parts of the country, among some indigenous and Muslim communities, decades of marginalization and ongoing violent conflict have impacted the social fabric and their capacity

² Community-based inquiry processes are characterized by involvement of community members, while community-placed processes are situated in the community rather than with the community. Community-driven inquiry processes, on the other hand, entail that the topic that is to be investigated originates from the community itself (Perea, 2021).

to act. As explained by Freire (1970/2017), the oppressive reality of their situation submerges and domesticates the consciousness of these community members. The result of this is fatalism, passivity and alienation characterized by a distrust in oneself and a virtually magical belief in the invulnerability of the oppressor³.

As discussed by Freire, such a situation can be overcome by supporting the community to know their reality better and critically recognize its causes, which would then enable them to transform it. He argues that perceiving only the inhibitive force in a situation usually stems from not being able to see the totality of the situation and the interaction between its component parts. Thematic investigations into the Anti-Terrorism Law in its context would therefore allow the communities to pose component and related themes as problems, consider the socio-historical context of these developments, and to reflect on their own situationality in them (Freire, 1970/2017). Understanding the situation, its causes and parts more deeply while at the same time reflecting on themselves as subjects in this situation is expected to enable the communities to identify untested feasibilities and implied tasks in these limit-situations. In fact, this process of widening the lens was already observable in the forumZFD working group that developed from a focused analysis of the anti-terrorism law itself to a deeper understanding of the oppressive situation faced by these communities. Discussions in recent meetings as well as observations with partner communities have moved away from the anti-terrorism law itself and started to incorporate related phenomena such as red-tagging or religious profiling and other forms of discrimination. This organic evolution towards a broader focus should be supported in a systematic way that builds on the lived experiences of partner communities.

The process may then uncover local knowledge critical not only to further understanding the issue but also to developing or reviving strategies to engage with the law. Coburn (2005) defines local knowledge as knowledge rooted in the particularity of a place or the immediacy of experience and owed to common sense and thoughtful observation rather than professional techniques. In the case at hand such forms of knowledge would include oral histories of past resistance or areas and people associated with a specific conflict actor. As many of the communities have rich histories of resistance to colonial rule, a joined recollection of these

³ Neither forumZFD nor its partner organizations usually characterize the situation in terms of oppression. However, when using Freire's (1970/2017) definition of oppression as a situation in which one party hinders the pursuit of self-affirmation of another party it is certainly applicable to the structural violence experienced by these communities.

stories may be an appropriate avenue for centering the self-affirmed action of the community members as subjects. In fact, a participatory action research processes in a comparable situation in Colombia revealed untapped local histories of resistance in the form of an elder community member sharing her own story of struggling for social justice. Hearing such first-hand accounts of transformational action became an important stimulus for this community (Fals-Borda, 1987). As such, the process of reconstructing historical trajectories and analyzing these in the given context is hoped to lead participants to recover social and political creativity embedded in their histories and identities, reflect on what has worked in the past, and thus develop critical self-awareness and strength-based strategies for transformative action (Falkembach & Torres Carillo, 2015; Fals-Borda, 1987; Streck & Jara Holiday, 2015).

Indeed, discussions with some of forumZFD's partner communities revealed narratives of both successful and unsuccessful strategies employed in the past. In at least one community, stories of the repercussions experienced when the community challenged its situation proactively actually led it to choose more adaptive survival strategies. There is therefore a risk that inquiries into a community's past may focus on such narratives of repression and leave the community apathetic. In order to avoid this, the forumZFD team plans to connect the communities' lived experiences not only to their own historical narratives but also to other examples of successful resistance. It is through the systematization of experiences that recognition of similarities with other contexts becomes possible, therefore enabling learning from best practices from these contexts or linking the community's experiences to theoretical concepts. In fact, the dialectic between a deep understanding of the specifics of a situation and placing it into a wider framework can be facilitated by critically linking the systematized experiences with theory or in this case forumZFD's previous assessment of the anti-terrorism law (Falkembach & Torres Carillo, 2015).

In this context, forumZFD's partnership approach including its long-term commitment to its partner communities takes on an important role. While the narratives that immediately come to mind may be disempowering, continuing the process in an iterative way while also caring for the community members' immediate needs may allow communities to go beyond the limiting narratives on the surface towards untapped stories that only come to the fore later on in the process. Moreover, forumZFD's long-term commitment to the partnership may lift the burden of being solely responsible for the process, enable a deeper involvement of the partners, and

increase credibility and reach of the project (Green et al., 2001). A limiting factor to the partnership may be the framework conditions of forumZFD's work as set by donor regulations, forumZFD's vision, mission, and principles, as well as the given requirements for operating as a registered non-governmental organization in the Philippines. As pointed out by Minkler (2005) challenges may arise when a community aligns with a broader political agenda or when it wishes to move into action quickly as may well be the case with a threat as significant as the violence already committed under the pretext of the Anti-Terrorism Law. While it can be assumed that forumZFD's working principles have been previously communicated to partner organizations, it is necessary to clearly articulate limits to the partnership such as when a partner community employs violent means or pushes for a broader policy not compatible with forumZFD's working principles. It should be noted that joined recollection of history may also trigger conflicts especially when it comes to validating differing memories of community members (Lundy & McGovern, 2006).

Conclusion & Outlook

Several of the challenges described above translate into a dilemma between adapting to the circumstances to minimize risks thereby reinforcing repressive narratives and dynamics or attempting to overcome these limit-situations but potentially risking the security of the community. While the inquiry process should eventually contribute to developing action-based responses, this needs to be balanced with the risks taken in pursuit of these responses. The right balance or, if possible, sequencing of these processes needs to be determined in the specific context of each community. As the challenges appear to be present to differing degrees in the four partner communities, a community readiness assessment is planned to analyze the specific situation of each community with regards to their recognition of the issue, their motivation to act, and the stage of their decision-making processes. The community readiness model developed by the Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research comprises nine stages ranging from no awareness to professionalization of the developed program (Borrayo, 2007). Using this model enables a further contextualization of methods that fit the particular circumstances of a specific community. While expressions of the need for information on the Anti-Terrorism Law already signify recognition of the issue at hand, communities appear to differ in the depth of their understanding of the law, their readiness to engage with it, and their need for further guidance on strategies and ways forward. The degree to which the above-mentioned challenges are present

would be reflected in the community readiness assessment as well as additional factors such as prior knowledge of the law, legal literacy or level of organization. Rather than taking the previously written internal background analysis as a starting point, this first step will ensure that the communities who identified the Anti-Terrorism Law as an issue are the reference point in subsequent steps as well.

Based on this assessment, the forumZFD team can then adapt the further process including formulating the specific objectives and determining which members of the community should be present in the dialogue meetings. As all communities require balancing between addressing immediate needs and planning for a long-term iterative process, the general framework of the process should be discussed with the community. This process should build on the strengths discussed above including the community-driven nature of the process, the long-term commitment of forumZFD characterized by subject-to-subject partnerships and an established relationship of trust, and lastly the combination of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in the team.

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