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TIPAWI

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The Kids Are Alright: 'Youth-Led' Initiatives on COVID-19

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The Kids Are Alright: 'Youth-Led' Initiatives on COVID-19

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With the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and severe restrictions placed on the movement of people, several community efforts have sprung up to provide relief to those who are in need. And some of these efforts are being led by the youth.

On March 8, 2020, the Philippine government declared a public health emergency, after confirming the local transmission of COVID-19 in the country. Exactly a week later, Metro Manila was placed under community quarantine.

This was just the start of a series of restrictions imposed by the government in the hope of curtailing the transmission of the virus in the country.

As soon as the news of the imposition of community quarantine was announced, various support programs were put in place by the government, from the national level down to the *barangay* (village). However, while the national government assured the people of aid through the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), not everyone was able to avail the said assistance and was left unsure of where to get their daily sustenance.

Local governments, as well as ordinary citizens, have stepped up to augment support and fill in the gaps. The *Sangguniang Kabataan* (SKs) and other student and youth organizations have mobilized their resources and introduced youth-led initiatives to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper investigates whether the SK has shown characteristics of being truly youth-led, looking specifically at the initiatives that SKs have undertaken in response to the pandemic.

Reforming Youth Participation: The Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) Experience

The role of the youth in nation-building has been recognized in Philippine laws. Young people comprise majority of the Philippine population. More than half of Filipinos are young people aged 15-30. The youth is one of the sectors whose participation is guaranteed by the Philippine Constitution. Youth organizing is one of the oldest sector-based organizing in the Philippines and the most successful in effecting change. Young Filipinos have always had the historical role of being the "hope of the motherland," having led the biggest movements that resulted to major turning-points in the country's history: the fight for independence, the struggle against Martial Law, and the removal of a corrupt president.

In recognition of the historical role of the youth in nation-building, their participation have been guaranteed by the State from the national to the community level. The National Youth Commission (NYC) was created to ensure that the youth participate in policy-making, and that youth concerns and issues are taken up in government policies and programs. There are numerous non-government and people's organizations comprised of youth and serving the youth.

The Sangguniang Kabataan is a mechanism for the youth to take part in governance. It is present in every barangay and federalized at the local, sub-national and national levels. SKs are supposed to be a mechanism for youth governance that address youth issues and concerns. Youth governance through the SKs has been mainly about implementation of projects (mostly infrastructure and services) and educational activities.

Since its foundation in the 1970s, the SK has been plagued with criticisms, including how it has become a breeding ground of traditional politicians and a venue to teach the youth about corruption, and for being ineffective in achieving its purpose of youth empowerment. It has yet to serve as an accountability mechanism that ensures that the services and programs of local and national governments are responsive to the youth and to citizens, in general.

Recently, there have been efforts from youth advocates to reform the SK. The SK Reform Law (RA 10742) was passed in Congress in 2016, strengthening the linkage of these Youth Councils to their constituency called the *Katipunan ng mga Kabataan* (Youth Assemblies), providing more extensive capacity-building for its leaders, and incorporating a groundbreaking anti-dynasty provision.

Three years after the passage of the SK Reform Law in 2016, the law has not been fully implemented. The Implementing Rules and Regulations lacks implementation details, and SKs and stakeholders have yet to be oriented about it. Most SKs have yet to comply with the requirements for them to receive and utilize their budget. There is confusion among SKs, local government officials and national government agencies on their mandates vis-à-vis the SK Reform Law implementation. The status of the SK budget is unclear, and the trainings conducted have been lacking in substance and form.

Government Watch (G-Watch), a national citizen action and research for accountability in the Philippines, has initiated a project called Empowering Youth to Lead Accountability (EYLA) that aims to enable the youth, particularly the Sangguniang Kabataan, in making key poverty-reduction programs accountable and responsive to the youth. G-Watch's engagement with SKs validates the idea that an enabling policy environment is crucial for this form of sectoral representation to perform well. The SK Reform Law is supposed to make SKs perform better, but we found out that it is nowhere close to being implemented. The efforts of SK reform advocates have resulted in some progress, but a lot still needs to be done.

G-Watch presenting its set of recommendations during the EYLA problem solving and dialogue with national government agencies in October 2019.

One of the outcomes of the project is a set of recommendations to concerned government agencies, namely NYC, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), the Commission on Audit (COA), the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and the Department of Education (DepEd) to act on the following demands in a petition:

- Form and regularly convene an inter-agency body on SK reform.
- Review the IRR to clarify mandates and accountabilities in implementing the law and the details of coordination among agencies and stakeholders in consultation with stakeholders.
- Properly orient SKs of the IRR and how it will be carried out, addressing any gaps in the guidelines upon implementation.
- Orient agencies and all government offices of their responsibilities and mandates in the SK Reform Law.
- Review and redesign trainings/ capacity-building programs that

build the capacity of SKs, making it more comprehensive, applied and rationalized.

- Allocate funds and conduct mandatory and continuing trainings for SKs (chairs, *kagawads*, secretaries and treasurers) and Local Youth Development Officers (LYDOs).
- Provide pro-active assistance to SKs in fulfilling their mandate, including in complying with the requirements to access and utilize their funds.
- Elect the new set of officers of the Sangguniang Kabataan National Federation (SKNF) at the soonest possible time.
- Ensure that the entitlements, benefits and privileges for elected SK officials stipulated in the SK Reform Law are provided.
- Set up a reporting/ feedbacking mechanism for the proper implementation of the SK Reform Law, especially to ensure that the problems of access to entitlements, benefits and privileges of SK officials in the Law are reported and responded to.
- Explore the creation of *Liga ng mga Kagawad* (League of Councilors) to ensure the active involvement of *kagawad* in SK governance.

The continuing challenges facing the SKs put to question whether the SK Reform Law has resulted in the reform and transformation of SK into being truly youth-led, instead of simply serving as training ground for next *trapos*.[1]

What Does Youth-Led Mean?

Working in 3 cities with around 40 SK leaders for a pilot-run, the EYLA Project validated that SKs can lead accountability in social programs, particularly in serving the youth beneficiaries of the program, through partnership and engagement.

The project also yielded a discourse on what youth-led means.

The project concludes that the initiative is youth-led if "the youth plays a central part

1 *Trapo* literally means "old rag" that is used to wipe dirt from any surface. Since after the People Power Revolution of 1986, the word *trapo* has been used to refer to "traditional politicians" in the Philippines.

in the said effort, if their ideas are heard, and if it has a youth perspective." It means that the initiative must be thought of, done by, and benefiting the youth themselves (*"isip, gawa at salita ng kabataan para sa kabataan"*).

Youth-led initiatives are characterized by youthfulness: enthusiastic, hopeful, resilient or able to persevere, devoted and fresh. Youth-led initiatives and efforts are done to achieve three objectives: (1) youth development; (2) nation-building; and (3) the creation of a far better future.

(For more on the EYLA project and the discussion on the meaning of youth-led, see https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/strengthening-sangguniang-kabataan-sk-accountability.)

This definition is consistent with what is said in some literature.

Jerusha Conner defines youth-led as where "the youth decide the focus of the campaigns they run as well as the strategies that will be used. Youth may also lead workshops, trainings, and support groups for one another."[2]

Melvin Delgado and Lee Staples define youth-led as placing "emphasis on youth rights and the power of young people to define their circumstances and the direction of intervention, as well as the degree to which adults are actively involved as allies."[3] Their Youth-Led Community Organizing (YLCO) approach means young people are placed in leadership positions to lead for positive community change, and become the "organizing core" of community activities, playing powerful and transformative roles in leadership, organizing, and social movement within their communities.

Delgado and Stables's YLCO is defined by the inclusion of ideas based on nine principles:

a) being inclusive, with the exception of the age of the leaders;
b) built on values of social and economic justice;
c) receiving support in the form of resources or encouragement;
d) opportunities for training, mentoring, and accepting leadership roles are inherent to the process;
e) can utilize aide from adults when necessary;

2 Conner, Jerusha. (2012). "The Value of Youth Organizing." Cambridge, MA: The Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Retrieved from: https://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/KBWTheValueofYouthOrganizing2012.pdf.

3 Delgado, Melvin and Lee Staples. (2008). Youth-Led Community Organizing: Theory and Action. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

f) keeping a long-term change agenda instead of immediate gratification;
g) raise consciousness of individuals involved around issues of social injustice and oppression;
h) must include aspects that are fun in nature; and
i) sharing a common vision for achieving social and economic justice goals.

Youth can also receive support and guidance from accompanying adults, who play active roles as adult allies, investing in the youth. Jonathan Fox, in a paper on 'Indigenous Oaxacan Immigrants and Youth-led Organizing in California,' differentiates fully youth-led organizing from "'youth-adult collaborative partnership,' in which decision-making was shared."[4] Fox's paper learns from youth-led initiatives or "from young adults' developing commitments to civic engagement, even if their collective action and concern for the public interest unfolds outside of the mainstream public sphere."[5]

Seeing the Emergence of a Truly Youth-led SK

Being aware of their duty to serve their constituencies, various SK officials have taken the initiative to help with COVID-19 response. These initiatives range from helping to man checkpoints set up in their community to providing assistance in online enrollment for students. As their funds were limited, some SKs have even partnered with business establishments, or have conducted donation drives to support not just the youth, but everyone in their community. In April 2020, the Department of the Interior and Local Government issued Memorandum Circular No. 2020-074, allowing for the realignment and augmentation of the SK budget to provide funds for COVID-19 response.[6]

During the "Ako, Ikaw, Tayo May Pananagutan 2021" in Quezon City, SKs who have participated in the SK as G-Watch project shared the initiatives that they have done since the pandemic. Similar projects have also been organized by other

4 Fox, Jonathan. (2013). "Introduction: Indigenous Oaxacan Immigrants and Youth-led Organizing in California," in Voices of Indigenous Oaxacan Youth in the Central Valley: Creating Our Sense of Belonging in California. Oaxacalifornian Reporting Team/Equipo de Cronistas Oaxacalifornianos. CCREC Research Report No. 1, July. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California.

5 Ibid.

6 DILG Memorandum Circular No. 2020-074 (April 14, 2020). "Realignment and Augmentation of SK Budget to Provide Funds for Programs Projects and Activities (PPAs) Related to Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)." Retrieved from: https://dilg.gov.ph/issuances/mc/Realignment-and-Augmentation-of-SK-Budget-to-Provide-Funds-for-Programs-Projects-and-Activities-PPAs-Related-to-Coronavirus-Disease-2019-COVID-19/3198.

SKs all over the country. We have looked at all of these to explore whether and how SKs have shown signs of reforms towards being youth-led in the effort to respond to COVID-19. (See G-Watch's database here: http://bit.ly/SKInitiativesCOVID)

Education

One of the main concerns of the youth is education. With children forced to stay inside their homes, several SKs have provided them with learning materials such as books (through a mobile library) and other learning modules. Some have also conducted basic tutorial services, when it was safe for them to do so. There were also instances when they conducted socially distanced graduation ceremonies for students, using online and offline methods.

Incoming students, however, have faced difficulties before and during the school year. Mobile assistance desks were set up to help parents enroll their students. Following the Department of Education's decision to conduct remote enrollment and blended learning, many have expressed difficulties in participating due to problems with internet connection in their area. To help address these issues, SK Councils—with their limited budget—are giving out mobile load to some students, sometimes through online contests. Some SKs are providing free printing of learning modules. There were also SK Councils that were able to buy computers, printers, and WiFi modems to support the students in their community.

Manpower Support and Information Drives

As part of the barangay, SK officers and youth volunteers continuously provide additional assistance in the enforcement of curfew, manning of checkpoints, and distribution of relief goods and hygiene/ sanitation kits. The SK of Barangay

"eSKwela; Kariton Klasrum" project (left) and Edukhub (right) set up by the SK Council of Barangay Caragñag, San Andres, Catanduanes. (Photo source: https://www.facebook.com/Sangguniang-Kabataan-ng-Carag%C3%B1ag-San-Andres-Catanduanes-100764824642633/)

Batasan Hills (Quezon City), for example, established a Junior Barangay Public Safety Officer (Junior BPSO). In Barangay Bagong Silangan (Quezon City), a Sangguniang Kabataan Emergency Response Team (SKERT) was formed as counterpart of the Barangay Health Emergency Response Team (BHERT).

To prevent mass gatherings in public markets, mobile markets were also set up. For those who are not allowed to go out of their houses, such as senior citizens, various SK Councils have also set up '*pabili* services' to help them buy their groceries and medicines.

Known for being tech-savvy, SKs are also maximizing the use of various social media platforms to communicate and provide information and entertainment to encourage people to stay inside their homes.

The SK of Barangay Payatas in Quezon City, which was one of the participants of the *SK as G-Watch Project*, for example, introduced Project B.A.K.S. (Being A Knowledgeable Society) in order to fight disinformation and conduct consultations with the youth of their barangay through online platforms. The SK of Barangay Capri also organized an online *Katipunan ng Kabataan* Assembly, in order to identify and discuss the problems that they face in their community.

Fire Prevention Seminar and Training conducted by the SKERT of Brgy., Bagong Silangan, Quezon CIty. (Photo source: https://www.facebook.com/skbagongsilangancouncil)

Food Security and Entrepreneurship

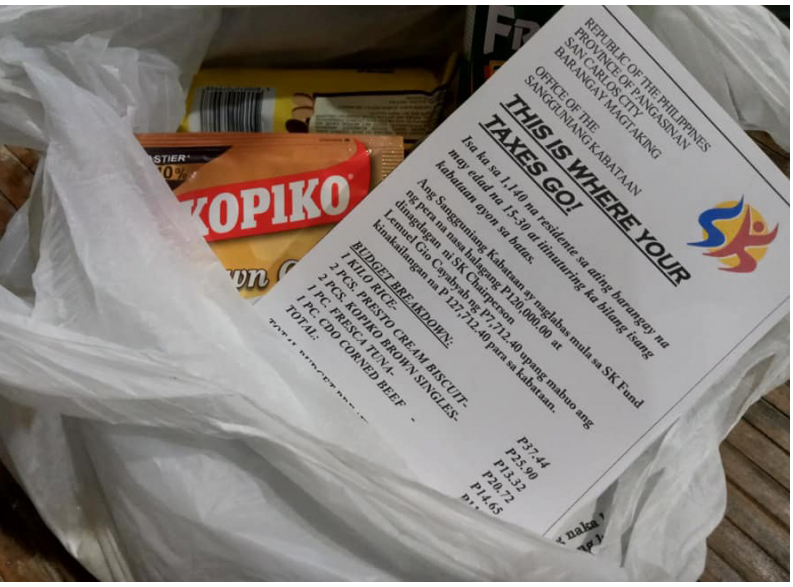
With restrictions in the mobility of people and recognizing the importance of eating healthy, the youth have taken this as an opportunity to promote backyard gardening, by distributing free seeds from the program of the Department of Agriculture. Furthermore, since local farmers are having a hard time transporting their goods, some SKs decided to buy their products to be distributed as relief goods and some helped them link up with mobile markets to help them earn.

To encourage young entrepreneurs, a Php5,000 (US$100) worth of grant was also offered by the SK of Barangay Santolan in Pasig City to selected individuals who submitted their business proposals. In Barangay Bagong Silangan and Barangay Capri (both in Quezon City), training and starter kits for the production of dishwashing liquid, fabric

softener, and lip tint, were provided for the youth to augment their income generating capacity.

Use of Transparency, Participation, and Accountability (TPA) Mechanisms

Aside from providing services to their constituencies, some SKs also practice transparency, participation, and accountability measures in their initiatives. For example, hotlines were set up by some SKs, such as the SK of Barangay Miranda from the Island Garden City of Samal to provide assistance to their community. The SK of Barangay Payatas and the SK of Barangay Capri in Quezon City have also encouraged youth organizations in their respective barangays to participate through online group discussions. Transparency measures, such as providing a list of relief goods people are expected to receive as well as a breakdown of donations, are also posted/provided. In Barangay Bagong Silangan, their SK Council have mounted a full disclosure board as part of their efforts to promote transparency in their barangay. In G-Watch, SK officials and other youth volunteers have also helped in conducting our own independent validation of the Social Amelioration Program in various G-Watch sites all over the country.



Budget breakdown included in the relief goods distributed by SK Council of Brgy., Magtaking, San Carlos City, Pangasinan (Photo source: https://www.facebook.com/sk.magtakingsccp/)

Beyond COVID-19

Unfortunately, the youth is not just battling the pandemic, but they are also dealing with various challenges like the leadership of the National Youth Commission (NYC) and the problematic Anti-Terror Law.

Four years after the passage of the SK Reform Law, some SK Councils all over the country are still facing challenges regarding their fiscal independence. In addition to this, the NYC, which is the country's lead agency for youth affairs, was flagged by the Commission on Audit for excessive spending and poor performance in 2019.[7] Months before the release of the COA report, at least 120 Sangguniang Kabataan

7 Antonio, Raymund. (2020). "'Excessive Spending' at NYC Rapped; Group Calls for Chair to Resign." Manila Bulletin. August 29. Retrieved from: https://mb.com.ph/2020/08/29/excessive-spending-at-nyc-rapped-group-calls-for-chair-to-resign/.

SK officials submitting their petition against the Anti-Terror Law/ (Photo source: https://twitter.com/dannyboypata

and student organizations called for the resignation of NYC Chairperson Ryan Enriquez, citing the agency's failure to truly represent the youth. According to them, NYC has been silent on the issues affecting the youth sector, such as mental health, unemployment, and issues with online classes.[8] Various youth leaders have also called out the Commission for not consulting with them on the statements that they issue. In August 2020, a national campaign was then launched during the World Youth Day, reiterating their call for the NYC Chair to resign, and calling for better representation of the youth. Aside from being mum on how the pandemic has been affecting the youth, NYC has also been criticized for keeping silent about the attacks on youth activists red-tagged by the government.[9] This is especially worrying with the current passage of Republic Act 11479, or the Anti-Terror Act of 2020.

Even before it was signed into law, the Anti-Terror Act has been widely criticized, not just by law experts and human rights groups, but also by a wide range of people all over the country. Acknowledging the harm that this will bring to the youth, several SKs have also been educating the public about the consequences of this law, and have been vocal in expressing their opposition. While a big number of youth groups have led protests—both online and offline—against the passage of the law, the NYC on the other hand has actively endorsed this law as can be seen in their social media posts.

Signed into law last July 3, the Anti-Terror Act of 2020 is now one of the most challenged legal measures in the Philippines,

8 Bravo, John Philip. (2020). "Youth Groups Demand NYC Chair Resignation." Rappler. June 8. Retrieved from: https://rappler.com/moveph/youth-groups-demand-immediate-removal-national-youth-commission-chairperson-2.

9 Arroyo, Loreta. (August 14, 2020). "Youth Groups Demand Genuine Representation in National Youth Commission." Rappler. August 14. Retrieved from: https://rappler.com/moveph/youth-groups-unite-better-nyc-demanding-genuine-representation.]

with 37 petitions against it. Among the list of petitioners are SK officials and youth leaders from Luzon and Visayas, who have argued that the law violates constitutional safeguards.[10] The SK Federation of Cebu City has also passed a resolution expressing their opposition to the law, which they submitted to the NYC, as well as local officials and representatives.[11] In December 2020, the City Council of Dumaguete approved a resolution written by their SK Federation, through their president, urging Congress to enact a human rights defenders protection law.[12]

With these challenges, the youth—SK officials, youth volunteers and youth organizations—continues to be indispensable not just in dealing with the public health emergency, but also in holding the government into account.

Issues and Challenges

While the youth sector, particularly the SKs, remain active in providing assistance to their communities during the pandemic, a survey conducted by the Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking (CYAN) from April to May 2020[13] show that governmental support for SKs are still wanting.

The most common problems cited by the 60 SK respondents were the lack of hazard pay (78%)[14] and PPEs (75%). These problems might also be due to the lack of budget of the barangay to cover the costs for these. This is worrying especially since the most common support provided by SKs require physically reporting to work, which makes them and their family vulnerable to catching the virus (i.e., repacking & distribution of relief goods, manning of checkpoints, information dissemination,

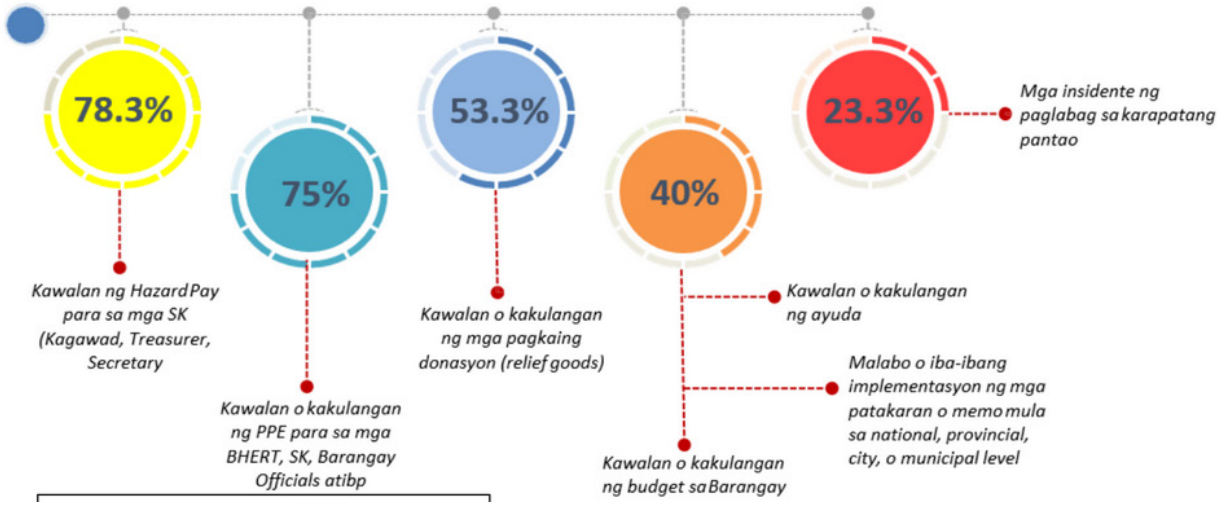
10 Patag, Kristine Joy. (2020). "SK Officials, Youth Community Leaders Join Legal Fight vs. Anti-terrorism Law." Philstar. August 19. Retrieved from: https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/08/19/2036417/sk-officials-youth-community-leaders-join-legal-fight-vs-anti-terrorism-law.

11 Sitchon, John. (2020). "Address Terrorism but Not at Expense of Human Rights, Cebu City SK Urges." Rappler. June 16. Retrieved from: https://www.rappler.com/moveph/cebu-city-sk-urges-address-terrorism-not-expense-human-rights.

12 Sangguniang Kabataan Pederasyon ng Dumaguete. (2020). "City Council of Dumaguete Approved Resolution Urging Congress to Pass Human Rights Defenders Protection Law." December 9. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/SKDumaguete/posts/1301127616931422.

13 Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking (CYAN). (2020). SalikSK Results and Analysis. Retrieved from: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f-5FdRdeXeXEI70eVxDGxTrBULwnHARI/view.

14 Office of the President Administrative Order No. 26 (March 23, 2020) "Authorizing the Grant of Hazard Pay to Government Personnel Who Physically Report to Work During the Period of Implementation of an Enhanced Community Quarantine Relative to the COVID-19 Outbreak." Retrieved from: https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200323-AO-26-RRD.pdf.



Issues faced by SKs in their barangay. (Photo source: SalikSK Results and Analysis by CYAN)

etc.). Furthermore, the respondents also noted that they themselves do not receive enough relief goods and *ayuda*.

The lack of training for SKs, particularly in the handling of their budget, has also added to the challenges that they currently face. It was only in 2021 that the Commission on Audit started the online training regarding the SK Financial Transactions[15] and even for this, SKs were required to pay a fee to attend.

Aside from lack of support for SKs, 23% of the respondents have also expressed concerns about the continuting human rights violations in their communities. For example, curfew violators—among them are children and youth—are subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment for violating restrictions,[16] with some even resulting to death.[17] Killings in the country have also persisted. In April 13, 2021, Renzo L. Matienzo, an SK Official from Lumban, Laguna, was gunned down by unknown assailants. His death prompted the SK of Siniloan, Laguna to call for justice for him and all other victims of extrajudicial killings.[18]

15 Sangguniang Kabataan (2021). "Breaking | COA Finally Starts Online Training for SK Financial Transactions Handbook." February 11. Retreived from: https://www.facebook.com/NYCSangguniangKabataan/posts/1863876650430765.

16 Conde, Carlos and Wurth, Margaret. (2020). "Philippine Children Face Abuse for Violating COVID-19 Curfew." Human Rights Watch. April 3. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/philippine-children-face-abuse-violating-covid-19-curfew.

17 Mallari, Delfin and Subingsubing, Krixia (2021). "Lockdown enforcement turns into 'torture' - CHR." Inquirer.net. April 14. Retrieved from: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1418678/lockdown-enforcement-turns-into-torture-chr.

18 ABS-CBN News. (2021). "Pulis tinitingnan anggulong pulitika, droga sa pagpatay sa SK president sa Laguna." ABS-CBN News. April 15. Retrieved from: https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/15/21/pulis-tinitingnan-anggulong-pulitika-droga-sa-pagpatay-sa-sk-president-sa-laguna.

Concluding Thoughts

As previously mentioned, "youth-led" pertains to full participation of the youth in matters concerning them—from planning to monitoring (*"isip, gawa at salita ng kabataan para sa kabataan"*). Youth-led initiatives and efforts, furthermore, are done not for the sake of compliance, but for youth development, nation-building, and the creation of a far better future. Taking into consideration the needs and demands of the youth results in the implementation of more meaningful and substantial measures that benefit not just young people, but also the community in general.

Despite being branded as a "breeding ground for traditional politicians," various SK Councils have continuously shown signs of reform to being truly youth-led, as illustrated not just in their COVID-19 response, but also in their participation in advocating for good governance and nation-building.

Though DILG has provided a supporting policy for the SKs' COVID-19 response, many SKs have taken immediate actions even before any supporting policy. Their response incorporates their own analysis of the needs of their constituency, especially the gaps in ongoing efforts of the rest of the government and other sectors. This is despite all the other issues that they face, such as the lack of training on SK financial transactions, as well as the lack of hazard pay and PPEs.

The SKs' initiatives went beyond youth development and have also delved on good governance and nation-building. The application of TPA by some SK initiatives show that there is a growing constituency within SKs that advance and mainstream accountability. The engagement of some SKs on the campaign against the Anti-Terrorism Law is significant because it is a rare engagement of SKs on policies that are not immediately about youth development but could affect youth activism. This also shows that SKs can take actions that are totally against the national government's policy if they view the policy as a threat to human rights.

Despite limited resources and other constraints, SKs have taken the initiative to seek partnership with different youth groups, including other civil society organizations, in order to provide relevant and timely support to their community. They have also demonstrated fresh and innovative ways to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic by maximizing the use of online and offline materials available to them. Adult allies who know how to collaborate with the youth in a way that maintains youth leadership prove to be key in enabling and sustaining youth-led initiatives by SKs. This is echoed in G-Watch Quezon

City's "Ako, Ikaw, Tayo May Pananagutan 2021" event, wherein SKs acknowledge the need for further support through capacity building activities such as leadership and accountability trainings.

The existence of programs on health, education, business, mobility, and food security shows an SK that is grounded on the realities faced by, and responsive to the needs of their peers. Moreover, with their youth activism, we also see an SK that participates in nation-building and having a say about their own future.

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