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COMMUNITY FOOD FOR
PLANETARY HEALTH

Reflections

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT *and* INVOLVEMENT

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Reflecting on Community Engagement and Involvement: Setting the Stage.

On January 7, 2025, the Western Philippines University (WPU) hosted a reflective session to analyze the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of the Community Engagement and Involvement (CEI) processes within the Global CFaH - Philippines Project. This discussion enabled team members to share unforgettable memories from the field, explore socio-demographic community characteristics, and highlight the significance of CEI in bridging the gap between research and local community realities in Palawan, Philippines.

The reflection activity also shared the diverse range of activities encompassing CEI, in particular, how these activities are developed and practiced to ensure meaningful participation and ownership from communities in relation to the intervention. It shares insights gained from experiences while working within or through the process, as well as techniques refined to facilitate appropriate engagement.

During this session, the team also discussed the impact of the project on the communities in terms of their involvement with the process, what was learned, and how those have set directions for the project. Considerations regarding the wider implications of CEI, for both the academic community and the community in general in reinforcing the position of communities as designers of sustainable development, were also deliberated.

The team further reflected on best CEI practices for sharing key strategies and lessons learned that could guide future initiatives. This session offered valuable insights into the interplay between research, engagement, and community-driven solutions for achieving better health and nutrition outcome.

Memorable Experiences in the Community

Engaging with diverse communities during our project has inspired and strengthened our commitment to creating meaningful change. Here are the key reflections from our experiences:

ACTS OF KINDNESS AND GENEROSITY

One of the most touching aspects of moments in the field was witnessing the overwhelming kindness and generosity of the communities. Families who struggled to meet their own needs still found ways to share their resources with the group. From offering fruits, vegetables, and meals during farm visits to welcoming the team into their homes, their hospitality left an indelible mark on our hearts. These experiences highlighted the strength of human connections and the resilience of the human spirit, even amidst difficulties.

CHALLENGING BUT REWARDING TRAVELS

The journey to these communities was often physically demanding—hiking mountains, navigating muddy or dusty roads, and traveling through isolated areas. While these challenges tested the team's endurance, it also deepened the appreciation of the strength and resourcefulness of the people living in such remote areas. Despite the hardships of travel, the warm reception from the communities made every struggle worthwhile.

INSPIRING STORIES FROM THE PEOPLE

Listening to the stories of community members was both humbling and inspiring. Many shared their struggles and triumphs, revealing the depth of their resilience and determination. We were particularly moved by their eagerness to participate in our projects, their love for farming or fishing, and their aspirations for a better future. These interactions highlighted the importance of the work and the impact it can have on the lives of others.

CULTURAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Visiting farms and learning about local food production processes offered a deeper appreciation for sustainable living. Some of the team were inspired to start own backyard gardens, realizing how planting and farming can sustain life. These experiences also gave renewed sense of gratitude for the resources and conveniences that was often taken for granted in urban life.

TEAM CAMARADERIE

The bond within the team played a significant role in making these experiences in the community memorable. Despite long hours, physical exhaustion, and unforeseen challenges, the team found strength in each other. The support, laughter, and shared moments of struggle turned difficult tasks into opportunities for growth and connection. The camaraderie within the team exemplified the importance of working together toward a common goal.

IMPACTFUL REALIZATIONS

These experiences prompted deep reflection on personal lives and privileges. Observing the struggles of families who thrive with so little fostered greater gratitude for what is held and a stronger determination to give the best in work. A realization emerged that the impact of efforts extends beyond data collection or research—it possesses the potential to transform lives and communities.



Portraits of Our Communities: Insights and Contexts

The team worked with diverse communities across Palawan, each with its unique characteristics and challenges:

PUERTO PRINCESA

Puerto Princesa's rural and urban areas have distinct lifestyles and access to resources. With their traditional diets based on local foods, rural areas foster sustainable practices due to their close connection to the land. Influenced by modernity, urban areas consume more local and imported goods, including fast food and processed items. This shift raises concerns about long-term health, especially in urban areas with limited access to healthy, affordable food.

EL NIDO

El Nido, a remote municipality, faces unique challenges due to its geographical distance. Residents struggle to access essential goods and services due to long and expensive travel to the city center. Overfishing that led to the decline in fish catches stresses the fisher's livelihoods as well as the local economy. Despite such challenges, El Nido is a tourist hotspot, creating an economic paradox in the communities.

Tourism brings revenue but raises prices of goods and services, making it harder for locals to afford basic commodities. Limited communication and transportation infrastructure exacerbates economic isolation, hindering trade, growth, and collaboration.

ABORLAN

Aborlan, with two study sites, Cabigaan (upland) and Poblacion (coastal), faces challenges in food security. Cabigaan residents produce food on their farms and consume fish products, but vegetables are expensive and insufficient. Poblacion primarily relies on fish for source of living, while vegetables and other essentials are costly and scarce. Both areas struggle with access to diverse and healthy foods due to reliance on imported processed goods, leading to nutritional imbalances and increased vulnerability to health problems. Intervention is needed to promote sustainable agricultural practices to increase production of local and nutritious food.

RIZAL

Rizal, a large municipality, faces unique challenges due to its distance from the town city center and inadequate access to communication. Long and difficult journeys to Barangay Bunog and Barangay Taburi hinder residents' access to goods, services, and healthcare. It was also noted that fishing and agriculture are vital livelihoods in Rizal, with Taburi focusing on fisheries and Bunog on a mix of both. Inadequate communication infrastructure, particularly in Taburi with poor signal and connectivity, isolates the community and impedes information sharing and access to external resources.

The government has provided training and assistance to improve farming practices and introduce sustainable techniques, generating excitement among residents in Bunog and Taburi as they implement these developments.



Portraits of Our Communities: Insights and Contexts

CUYO AND MAGSAYSAY

Cuyo and Magsaysay, located on a remote small island with long travel time from the city center, face transportation and goods delivery challenges that lead to higher prices. Despite these obstacles, their agricultural and fishery industries thrive, with impressive vegetable production. However, over-reliance on inorganic farming methods and flooding during the rainy season hinder sustainable practices. Some communities experiment with organic farming, but limited knowledge and resources hinder its widespread adoption. Fisheries struggle with declining catches due to overfishing and external pressures, and adapting to changing environmental conditions like unusual weather patterns and degraded habitats.

ARACELI AND DUMARAN

Araceli and Dumarán have island-setting remote communities that have potential in fisheries and agriculture production though lack some structure to support sustainable practices. For instance, a formal association of farmers is lacking, hindering long-term strategies for community-food production. Despite access to agricultural resources, the community needs a collective approach to sustain efforts. Government programs have been well-received, especially in terms of education on farming practices. However, a sense of sustainability is missing, and further support is needed to sustain practices beyond immediate interventions. Despite challenges, the people of Araceli and Dumarán are eager for change. They are excited about projects and growing interested in improving agricultural practices for long-term sustainability.

These communities represent a mix of rural, urban, and remote areas with varying levels of development. Common themes include:

- Challenges in communication and transportation, especially in remote areas.
- Over-reliance on unsustainable practices, such as inorganic farming and overfishing, which puts pressure on local resources.
- Eagerness for improvement, especially in farming practices and sustainable resource management.
- Health concerns in urban areas due to poor dietary choices.



FROM DIALOGUE TO IMPACT: ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN ACTION

1. Consultation and Participation in Decision-Making:

Barangay Captains and Local Officials participated in the site selection and participant identification process for various surveys, ensuring that the community had an opportunity to contribute to the selection of areas involved in the study. Local leaders assisted in the random selection of participants, ensuring that the representation of community members was fair and equitable..

2. Collaborative Identification of Gaps and Issues:

Through community discussions and engagement, the group identified gaps in food production, consumption, and health. For instance, some areas lacked vegetable consumption, while others relied on unsustainable farming methods. To understand these challenges, the team conducted surveys on biodiversity, farming practices, and nutrition with active participation from community members.

3. Stakeholder Engagement for Solution Development:

Communities actively participated in the process of identifying potential solutions to the challenges they were struggling with. Sustainable farming practices and enhancing local food production are key areas of focus. Collaboration with local governments and other stakeholders, including NGOs, has been instrumental in providing resources and support to address community concerns. This has included improving farming techniques and introducing innovative practices like backyard gardening.

4. Training and Capacity Building:

Workshops and training sessions were organized to involve local community members and stakeholders. For instance, in areas such as Puerto Princesa, the project team conducted training sessions on innovative farming practices, food consumption, and proper farming techniques. Also, resource speakers were invited to share their expertise and knowledge, thereby enhancing the capacity of local residents and leaders in adopting improved farming and food production methods.

5. Collaboration with Local Government Units (LGUs):

Local government officials actively supported the initiatives by facilitating logistics and resources, and ensuring that community needs are aligned with government support systems. In some areas, local leaders were encouraged to take ownership of the interventions, fostering community continuation of practices beyond project completion.

6. Ongoing Monitoring and Feedback:

The community was actively involved in monitoring efforts to ensure the sustainability of interventions. Feedback from community members was collected to make necessary adjustments and guarantee long-term success.



WHY IS CEI ESSENTIAL FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY CHANGE?

For Academic and Research Needs

Understanding Local Contexts:

CEI enables researchers to uncover intricate community dynamics, including local resource management and socio-cultural factors, that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Ethical Research Practices:

It ensures that academic efforts respect community values and are designed to meet their actual needs.

Policy Relevance:

Research conducted through CEI informs policy development, creating systemic change that benefits communities in the long term.

For Communities

Ownership and Input:

CEI ensures that communities are active participants, not passive recipients, in the research and intervention processes. This fosters a sense of ownership and accountability.

Contextualized Solutions:

Community involvement ensures that interventions are relevant, practical, and sustainable within their unique contexts.

Empowerment Through Engagement:

Involving communities empowers them to take charge of their development, equipping them with the knowledge and tools necessary to sustain positive change.

A Place-Based Focus

CEI underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to specific locations. The insights gained from this place-based focus make interventions more meaningful, ensuring that they address the root causes of issues rather than applying generic solutions. By grounding research and projects in local realities, CEI helps achieve lasting impacts that resonate with the community's identity and needs.





The insights we've gained from the Community Engagement and Involvement (CEI) processes highlight just how powerful collaboration can be in our work. By bringing together thoughtful strategies, a solid ethical foundation, and a lively culture of sharing knowledge, CEI has created exciting opportunities for meaningful partnerships between researchers and local communities. This teamwork doesn't just enhance the importance and impact of our project; it also empowers communities, giving them the tools they need to pursue their own sustainable growth. Together, we're building a future that's not only sustainable but also fair and vibrant for everyone involved.

MEET THE TEAM

The team is composed of dedicated researchers and field practitioners who conducted community assessments, facilitated interviews, and actively engaged with local stakeholders. Their efforts played a crucial role in understanding community dynamics, identifying key challenges, and contributing valuable insights that shaped the project's initiatives. Through their collaborative efforts, they played a vital role in shaping impactful and sustainable interventions.



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