

Alternative Law Groups: Empowering Communities Towards Greater Access to Justice in the Philippines

Alternative Law Groups Secretariat

THE PHILIPPINES witnessed in 2007 the 1,700-kilometer symbolic walk of farmers from Sumilao, Bukidnon in Mindanao to Manila in sixty days to reclaim their one hundred forty-four-hectare ancestral land. Lawyers of member-organizations of Alternative Law Groups (ALG) walked with them, a powerful action employed for and with the “powerless” aimed at pressuring the government to resolve the issue. After years of legal-political struggles, the Sumilao farmers succeeded in reclaiming hectares of rich land that they and their future generations could cultivate. Lawyers from ALG not only represented Sumilao farmers in the courts but also physically joined them in the streets to march to the Philippine’s capital. This is what alternative lawyering means for the ALG—it goes beyond what is meted out within the formal bounds of the judicial system. It means walking with the clients and the underserved. This kind of lawyering finds alternative ways of resolving issues when institutions fail. It is making the law work for justice, and lobbying for change when existing law does not advance justice for the vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Alternative lawyering means the dual work of empowering the marginalized and effecting justice system reform. This defines the core work of the ALG, a coalition of Philippine non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that use law or legal resources to attain social justice. ALG works with marginalized groups, identities and communities towards their empowerment and greater access to justice. The member-organizations of the network collectively work as they harness each other’s strengths in the developmental use of the law¹ and critical engagement of the legal system.

ALG believes that empowering communities entails enhancing the knowledge and capacity of their members in utilizing judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms to protect their rights. This component inevitably goes hand in hand with the pursuit of a favorable policy environment that promotes the rights and interests of those in the margins of society.

Staying true to the core of ALG's work, the network envisions a Philippine society that is democratic, just and humane, where there is equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, gender equality, and sustainable development.

History of ALG

The history of ALG is inspired by the experiences of lawyers and advocates who rallied together for the common goal of a dynamic and inclusive justice system. During the period when the Martial Law was in force and the Philippines was under the rule of a dictator (1972-1986) and prior to the creation of ALG, human rights lawyers mainly focused on civil and political rights, such as defending the victims of illegal detention and torture. When the dictatorship ended, other non-traditional and creative legal services became necessary.

In the 1980s, a number of NGOs were implementing legal programs (litigation, education and lobbying/law reform) that were known as "developmental legal aid," "alternative legal assistance," "legal resources approach" and other forms of legal support.² The main idea of these legal programs became the core idea of what was adopted in early 1990s as "alternative law," and these NGOs later on adopted the name "alternative law groups" or ALGs.

Lawyers and advocates of many of these NGOs met for the first time on 29 May - 2 June 1990 in Subic, Zambales province to discuss their respective programs and identify common goals and activities. They met again on 3-5 May 1991 in Puerto Galera, Oriental Mindoro province and articulated the idea of the then emerging concept of "alternative lawyering."³ They had a consensus that their NGOs were all formed for the "empowerment of basic sectors and other disadvantaged sectors such as the women, prisoners, laborers, fisherfolk, peasants, indigenous people, children, political detainees, and victims of human rights violations." They also defined the concept of alternative lawyering by stating that it "means the attainment of justice and development through the creative use of law" and taking a critical standpoint on the existing legal system. In the same workshop, Atty. Jose Aspiras of the Participatory Research Organization of Communities and Education Towards Struggle for Self-Reliance, Inc. (PROCESS) mentioned that the purposes of alternative lawyering were about facilitation of the empowerment of the basic sectors, promoting human rights, developing policy initiatives

including law reform, developing alternative law practice, and promoting it as a viable career among law students and practicing lawyers.

In this workshop, they also agreed to establish a network that would unify these NGOs and create a space for alternative lawyering in the Philippines.



First Alternative/Developmental Law Workshop, Zambales, Philippines, 1990.

The founders of the ALG were NGOs with lawyers and advocates who were active in various sectors such as labor, subsistence fisherfolk, farmers, indigenous peoples and issues such as environment and law.

Motivated by the desire to continuously advocate for justice more effectively and efficiently, the ALG was formally incorporated with the Securities and Exchange Commission as a non-stock, non-profit organization on 2 May 1995. The incorporation of ALG was also meant to streamline coordination between the member-organizations, the funders and the projects. In its earlier years, ALG rotated the convenorship among its member-organizations. The convenorship scheme ended with the establishment of the ALG Secretariat that served as support center and implementing body of ALG and filled the gap in the institutional needs of the network.

The potential of ALG as a budding organization working for the pursuit of justice was recognized by its earliest funders in the mid-1990s that included The Ford Foundation and The Asia Foundation. They provided assis-



The ALG Secretariat, 30th anniversary celebration.

tance to NGOs advocating the empowerment of the disadvantaged sectors. Their support strengthened the formative years of ALG, and even extended financial grants not just to ALG, but also to the member-organizations of the network.

Through the years, ALG provided significant contribution in capacity-building and strengthening paralegalism work that empowered communities. It has gone far in its grassroots work of bringing law into people's hands. ALG has also been pursuing policy advocacy by having a proactive role in drafting and advocating regulations on urban poor residential rights, indigenous peoples' rights, environmental and fisheries issues, anti-rape law, and agrarian reform.

Setting Roots All Over the Country

One of ALG's main thrusts as a network is to cover key urban and rural locations in the Philippines. ALG has presence in all the three major island groups of the country (Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao). This key feature serves as leverage as it brings more geographic diversity and inclusiveness,

like reaching far-flung areas of indigenous peoples, that goes together with the network's multi-sectoral work.

In Luzon, the largest island in the country, member-organizations are based in the Cordillera Administrative Region (North Luzon), Metro Manila (National Capital Region), Quezon Province, Bicol (South Luzon) and Palawan (Southwestern Luzon).

Meanwhile, members-organizations in Visayas are based in Cebu (Central Visayas), Leyte, Negros Occidental, Panay Islands, Samar, and Tacloban City.

In Mindanao, the southernmost part of the country, member-organizations are present in Davao and Cagayan de Oro.

The network is seen as a model by other legal resource organizations not only in Southeast Asia but also in other parts of the world. This is because of ALG's unique work that combines grassroots empowerment (primarily through education and litigation support) with policy reform work that engages different branches of government. Moreover, while there are similar legal resource NGOs in other countries, ALG has been successful in doing work as a collective body. This is evident in their work that combines the efforts and resources of the member-organizations towards collective action.

The following is the current roster of ALG member-organizations, their active programs, and sectors they work with:

- Ateneo Human Rights Center (AHRC) - AHRC is a university-based institution which was founded after the historic People Power Revolution that ended the twenty-year dictatorship of the tyrant Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. AHRC is involved in public interest litigation, research and publication, law and policy reform advocacy, education, and training for law students.
- Balay Alternative Legal Advocates for Development in Mindanaw (BALAOD) - BALAOD works with marginalized sectors and communities in Mindanao through alternative lawyering and paralegalism for the advancement of justice and gender equality, among others.
- Children's Legal Bureau (CLB) - CLB works towards the empowerment of children and communities while engaging with the different branches of government and the private sector to protect the rights of and promote justice for children in the Visayas region.

- Educational Research and Development Assistance Foundation (ERDA) - Erda focuses on assisting out-of-school youth, children in conflict with the law (CICL), children who are engaged in child labor, and those who live on the streets.
- EnGendeRights - EnGendeRights advocates the women's sexual and reproductive rights through domestic and international legal and policy advocacy, research and training, and impact litigation.
- Humanitarian Legal Assistance Foundation (HLAF) - HLAF advocates the proper implementation of the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act as they work towards the protection of the rights of persons deprived of liberty, especially those who are most vulnerable such as children, the elderly, women, the sick and the differently-abled.
- KAISAHAN Tungo sa Kaunlaran ng Kanayunan at Repormang Pansakahan (KAISAHAN) - KAISAHAN works to empower marginalized sectors, especially the farmers and farm workers in rural areas. To facilitate agrarian reform implementation and sustainable rural development, KAISAHAN provides legal and paralegal formation, education and information, policy research and advocacy, and project development services.
- Kanlungan Centre Foundation - Kanlungan focuses on direct service, advocacy work, research, and policy interventions for Filipino migrant workers who are survivors of human trafficking, illegal recruitment, and workplace abuse.
- Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center – Kasama sa Kalikasan/ Friends of the Earth – Philippines (LRC-KsK/FoE-Phils.) - LRC advocates the protection and promotion of indigenous and upland rural peoples' rights to land and other natural resources through strategic progressive legal intervention, research and policy development, and advocacy.
- Participatory Research Organization of Communities and Education Towards Struggle for Self-Reliance (PROCESS) Foundation-Panay - PROCESS-Panay focuses on community organizing to transform and empower marginalized sectors in Western Visayas. It has programs on community development, economic self-reliance, legal resource development, disaster risk reduction and management, and climate change adaptation.
- Philippine Earth Justice Center (PEJC) - PEJC is a group of environmental lawyers that promotes environmental justice and a balanced

and healthful ecology through legal assistance, policy research, policy reforms, and local capacity-building.

- Rainbow Rights Project Philippines (RRights) - RRights works towards a legal system that upholds the human rights of all and ensures equal opportunity for everyone regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC).
- Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panligal (SALIGAN) - SALIGAN specializes in developmental legal work with farmers, workers, the urban poor, women and local communities. It is one of the ALG's oldest members and has urban and regional offices in Bicol (South Luzon) and Mindanao (Southern Philippines).
- Tanggapang Panligal ng Katutubong Pilipino (PANLIPI) - PANLIPI, an organization of lawyers and advocates, is actively involved with development work among indigenous peoples in the Philippines. Its programs include: developmental legal assistance, legal education and outreach, institutional capability-building, ancestral domains delineation, and resource management planning.
- Tanggol Kalikasan (TK) - TK is a public interest and environmental law office and advocates for the empowerment of communities and institutions to manage their ecosystem through programs that encourage greater citizens' participation in environmental law enforcement and policy-making.
- Tebtebba Foundation (Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education) - Tebtebba promotes a sustainable and self-determined development of indigenous peoples. Its programs include: enhancing capacities for climate change adaptation and mitigation, effective promotion and implementation at the national, regional and global levels of International Human Rights Law using the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), among others.
- Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB) - WLB, a feminist legal NGO, engages in feminist legal advocacy with women's social movements and other progressive institutions in pursuit of greater access to justice. WLB works with rural women, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women, women with disability, women living with HIV/AIDS, and indigenous women, among others.

Collectively, the network's operations cover the entire country, with some members having nationwide coverage and operating in different areas throughout the country, and others focusing on operations in a particular locality or region.

ALG's work encompasses a wide area of concerns involving social justice and socio-economic issues. These include issues affecting women, labor, peasants, fisherfolk, children, urban poor, indigenous peoples, persons living with HIV/AIDS, LGBTQIA+ community as well as local governance and environmental issues.

Key Alternative Law Strategies

ALG's work can be categorized into six major components: 1) Legal education and paralegal formation; 2) Policy reform work; 3) Strategic litigation; 4) Internship; 5) Research and publication; and 6) Partnerships with other development organizations.

The network believes that these key strategies are vital to employing a collaborative and holistic approach to close the gap on access to justice, empower grassroots communities, and attain social justice.

- a. Legal education and paralegal formation
Through the years, community paralegal education and formation has been one of ALG's strongest pursuits. The member-organizations believe that community paralegals have historically been key players in advocating and forming concrete solutions to injustices in their communities. With this, the network maintains programs on developing and sustaining paralegals with constant training for their better understanding and knowledge of legal and metalegal ways⁴ of obtaining justice.
- b. Policy reform work
ALG is directly and actively involved in major legislative developments and policy advocacy in the Philippines. Member-organizations participate in Senate and House Committee hearings and various technical working group sessions. They also engage in crafting and criticizing proposed bills and other legislative documents.
- c. Strategic litigation

While most of ALG's programs and projects are anchored toward alternative means of lawyering, litigation is still seen as an essential arm for the attainment of its goals. Litigation is still viewed as one of the key ways to bring change at the grassroots level, especially when the marginalized sectors directly take part in it.

d. Internship

The recruitment of young blood and second-liners in the field of alternative law is as important as maintaining strong and organized paralegals on the ground. Because of this, ALG has internship activities that engage young people and law students in the alternative lawyering work of the network.

e. Research and publication

ALG views research and academic endeavors as vital components of a successful approach in obtaining access to justice. Through the network's collective work in different fields and projects on legal empowerment, several publications have been produced on key issues in the country such as: Bangsamoro Law, justice reform, judicial philosophy, women in justice, and community-based dialogues on human rights promotion and protection.

f. Partnerships with other development organizations

ALG uses its vast linkages with other development organizations to create a more holistic approach to achieving its goals and endeavors. It harnesses relationships with other groups that have more in-depth expertise, services, and resources in matters that are outside the usual programs of ALG member-organizations.

ALG and Human Rights Education

ALG implements numerous projects that address multi-sectoral issues in society using the six key alternative law strategies. This unique approach is seen in its social justice and legal empowerment projects as presented below.

1. Human Rights (HR) Defense Project

With the support of the American Bar Association - Rule of Law Initiatives (ABA-ROLI), the ALG launched the Human Rights (HR) Defense Project in 2019. The overall goal of the Project was to enhance access to qual-

ity legal assistance and representation of vulnerable communities through the efficient management of a strategic funding mechanism for litigation and related legal actions that seek to protect and promote human rights.

The Project aimed to support human rights protection cases or human rights defenders (HR Defense Fund), build and strengthen a national network of paralegals for sharing and documentation of best practices, cross-learning and participation in regional activities in the Philippines, and build and strengthen pool of lawyers, law students and paralegals working on human rights issues (Legal Resource Build-up).

Human rights education component

Through the HR Defense Project, ALG organized public education seminars, trained paralegals, and participated in various forums involving human rights issues in the Philippines. The Legal Resource Build-up component of the Project had following activities:

a. Legal trainings

The legal trainings conducted by the ALG under the HR Defense Project aimed to develop basic knowledge and skills of the participants on laws that were relevant to the sector they were working with. For example, to be able to assist in handling cases involving child abuse and exploitation, CLB provided orientation on the Anti-Child Abuse Law,⁵ and other pertinent laws. Meanwhile, participants for the protection of women who are into abusive relationships were given orientation on the Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act.⁶ For the farmers who were into tenancy relations, they were given Agrarian Reform Law Trainings. The content of the trainings were developed based on the legal issues confronting the participants or the community they work in. Skills training was provided to participants who wanted to become paralegals. They were trained on basic skills such as legal interview, affidavit drafting and basic evidence gathering. On the learning methods used, the ALG has generally adopted the Popular Education Framework developed by Paolo Freire, with the participants as the center and context of the learning process. Training methodologies were participatory and fun with the employment of structured learning exercises such as games, storytelling, case studies, writing

workshops, among others. These exercises were also adjusted to the age, gender identity, regional affiliation, etc. of the participants.

In many cases, schedules and timing of the trainings were adjusted according to the routine and free time of the participants. For example, trainings of farmers were done in between farming seasons, while trainings of mother-participants were done after their children had left home for school, or during times that did not interfere with their chores. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic and with the advent of the online platforms, trainings were done in series and for a shorter period. As a result, the Paralegal Training on Anti-Trafficking was done for two hours every Saturday for four Saturdays.

Online trainings or webinars as learning platform created a problem between the trainer and the participants. The dynamics of having an open and interactive discussion among the participants and resource speakers and making the activity more transformative were reduced to powerpoint presentations; while many community-based participants found the use of online platforms challenging.

b. Fellowship program

The fellowship program was a platform for new lawyers or law graduates to be exposed to various human rights issues and cases handled by the member-organizations. The lawyers or law gradu-



Banasi Agrarian Reform Farmer Beneficiary Association members and leader (Randy Cirio) with SALIGAN staff.

ates participated in consultations, case conferences, legal clinics, and litigation of cases of vulnerable communities within their island group (Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao). They also worked for the establishment or strengthening of linkages between local communities, ALGS, law schools, legal aid offices, the IBP (Integrated Bar of the Philippines) Legal Aid office and Community Legal Aid Service (CLAS) programs, Public Attorney's Office (PAO), Philippine National Police (PNP), National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), and other justice sector stakeholders who were partners in providing legal assistance to the basic sectors.

The program was initially a one-year program (October 2019 to September 2020). But due to the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was extended for three months. The Fellowship Program was hosted by SALIGAN-Bicol for Southern Luzon, PROCESS-Panay for Visayas, and BALAOD Mindanaw for Northern Mindanao.

Fellowship activities included the conduct of trainings such as basic paralegal trainings on gender sensitivity, and trainings on anti-violence against women and sexual harassment. The audiences for these trainings included university students and members of grassroots communities.

c. *Online legal help desk*

Meanwhile, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020, the ALG Secretariat also put up a 24/7 legal assistance line via the Facebook platform for those who have legal concerns on the enforcement of the Enhanced Community Quarantine and the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.⁷ This effort provided an opportunity for the public to pose questions when faced with a situation that put their human rights at risk.

This allowed the Project Manager of the HR Defense Program to assist and respond to different online queries. One case involved a local government worker asking about her right to refuse to report for work because of the risks involved, and whether she could opt not to become part of her office's skeletal workforce. Another was a query on how a detainee could be released in view of non-availability of court or legal officers and difficulty in travelling to check on the detained person. Other queries involved general ques-

tions about the Enhanced Community Quarantine and later on about the Anti-Terror Law.

In line with this, the Project also supported the development of an online application called e-SUMBONG app (a play on the Filipino word “isumbong” which, in this context, translates to “report to the authorities”). The online application served as a platform for reporting cases of domestic violence and child abuse in the community. It was designed to help report as well as build up cases, and to secure immediate response through direct referral to agencies such as the Social Welfare and Development Office, PNP, Health and Population Department, Metro Public Employment Service Office (Metro PESO), Department of Justice, and civic and non-governmental organizations. These agencies provided victims with medical, psychological, psychosocial, economic, legal and spiritual assistance services. The online application enhanced the existing mechanism of local governments in taking cases of violence against women and children (VAWC) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when access to remedies was limited by lockdown policies of the government. The e-SUMBONG app is an example of the ability to create innovative approaches that adapt to challenges, especially in terms of accessibility, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

d. Internship program for law students

The internship program involved training law students from different law schools in the country on human rights practice, strategic litigation, and transitional justice. Interns were assigned tasks such as drafting legal opinions and participating in training sessions to enhance their knowledge on human rights issues.

The ALG’s Internship Program has the general objective of exposing law students to alternative lawyering work as a possible future career path. The main period for the internship is the two-month summer break in between school years, although the internship may continue beyond the summer break, and throughout the entire school year.

The internship program operates at two levels. At the first level, interns gather for orientation by the Ateneo Human Rights Center (AHRC), an ALG member-organization. The Basic Orientation

Seminar (BOS) for the interns covers the overview of the human rights situation in the Philippines and the specific human rights topics involved, alternative lawyering, LGBTQIA+ rights, labor and migrant workers' rights, child rights, women's rights, indigenous peoples' rights, and environmental rights, among others.

At the second level, the interns are assigned to ALG member-organizations in different parts of the country where they work on different tasks and responsibilities (legal resource build-up, public education seminars, and other activities) specific to the sectors served by the member-organizations.

Currently, due to the limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ALG secretariat accepts interns who would directly apply to the ALG for internship. Interns are oriented and given weekly training on a specific aspect or sector of ALG's human rights work. After which, they are assigned to work on ALG projects involving case build-up, research, public education seminars, conferences and meetings, and similar activities.

Lessons learned

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a great hurdle to the implementation of the Project. Physical meetings were limited because of health and safety protocols. Digital divide arose as activities and



ALG interns and Secretariat meet with Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG) Chair Jose Manuel Diokno.



ALG interns, Secretariat, and other ALG members in a Zoom meeting.

events were forced to go online. Indeed, technology became a double-edged sword, very helpful as well as obstructive. In many regions, poor internet accessibility and user comfort in navigating online platforms were significant problems. Moreover, solidarity between students and participants (created in face-to-face meetings) appeared to have weakened in the online context. Because of this, measuring the impact of the Project is more difficult because the factor of human interaction is eliminated.

Another major issue is the continuing violence and human rights violations during the pandemic health quarantine that could not be addressed by the affected communities due to difficulty of filing complaints caused by the temporary closure of courts. Even with online programs in place, like e-SUMBONG and online courts, communities could not access these platforms due to lack of internet connection. In addition, with only a few lawyers practicing alternative law, complainants with financial constraints had limited choices of counsel. These experiences amplified the need to further educate communities about their rights and also stressed the importance of promoting alternative lawyering as a valid and meaningful path to take for lawyers.

2. OMCT Project Support for Remedial Action

The ALG actively plays an important role in providing human rights education in the Philippines. Through the years, ALG has implemented various

human rights education projects for the empowerment of lawyers, community paralegals, members of law groups and human rights defenders (HRDs). The ALG received funding support from the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) for its human rights education projects for the October 2020 - September 2021 period.

Human rights education component

The human rights education projects of ALG cover various human rights issues. In the past three years alone, the ALG has implemented projects relating to extrajudicial killings, digital security, anti-terror law, women's rights, and access to justice.

The ALG engaged its partners in implementing the OMCT-supported project. Partnership with like-minded organizations is a key ALG strategy in providing a comprehensive array of services to human rights violation victims and their families. For example, while ALG focuses on the legal needs of the victims, other groups provide other services: the IDEFEND (In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement) network documents cases; the Medical Action Group (MAG) provides psycho-social support; the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP) provides other auxiliary services; and other organizations provide livelihood trainings and scholarship programs to the children of victims.

a. Legal and Practical Approach to Human Rights

The ALG uses various learning methods deemed appropriate to a particular objective, topic or audience. The projects of ALG are executed by way of paralegal trainings, education campaign seminars and webinars, practical skills trainings (e.g., affidavit-drafting and client interview), legal forums, meetings on proposed legal amendments, and sessions with members of communities to prepare for legal action or on pending cases. In this way, the educational projects of ALG cover not just the applicable legal frameworks, but also the practical aspects of the law.

For the paralegal trainings, the topics included transitional justice, criminal procedure and arrests, reporting human rights violations to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), rules on evidence, affidavit-drafting workshop, and legal remedies in extrajudicial killings cases. The participants were assisted by commu-

nity-based paralegals and members of ALG partners from the IDE-END network such as MAG, PAHRA (Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates), TFDP (Task Force Detainees of the Philippines), and AMRSP.

b. Human Rights Education Streamlined for Diverse Audience

The ALG promotes human rights in a comprehensive manner and aims to reach a wide range of audiences so that the human rights of various sectors of society are observed and respected. In this regard, the audience of human rights education projects also varies. ALG, for example, conducted an anti-terror law webinar for its member-organizations. The webinar dealt with the 2020 amendment to the 2007 Human Security Act that contained provisions which ALG deemed detrimental to human rights.

ALG also conducted paralegal training for community leaders to equip them with necessary skills in documenting extrajudicial killing cases in relation to President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. Case conferences were organized to build cases for future use by the families of victims if they would like to pursue accountability. Furthermore, ALG conducted trainings on client interview and affidavit-drafting for law students from various law schools in the Philippines. It also held training on access to justice to HRDs and government officials regarding jail management and penology.

In ensuring that its projects reach different audiences, ALG works to influence the legislation or revision of laws, to streamline the execution of the laws, and also to empower the community by providing information to grassroots communities and community leaders.

Lessons learned

The prompt initiation of an education campaign on the implications of the Anti-Terror Law allowed ALG to gain support from partners and community leaders in filing a petition to assail its constitutionality in the Supreme Court, which eventually struck down some provisions of the law. The investigation by the National Bureau of Investigation of the drug enforcement unit of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan province emboldened some victims to pursue cases against members of the police who were involved in the extrajudicial killings. The ALG also trained at least ten new paralegals

after holding the “Paralegal Training on the Documentation of Extrajudicial Killing Cases.”

The ALG aims to continue covering a wide range of existing and emerging human rights issues, such as extrajudicial killings and suppression of HRDs. The ALG will also continue to maintain its active ties with various sectors of the community (including the government) to ensure that its human rights education projects reach a diverse audience and create a wider impact on the society.

Finally, working with another network of human rights defenders such as iDEFEND, a grassroots movement that upholds and defends the human rights of Filipinos, allowed ALG to expand its activities and complement other on-going projects. The iDEFEND project on transitional justice for example benefited the ALG project in providing legal support to victims of extrajudicial killings, and vice-versa. iDEFEND provides services that the ALG could not do. This allowed the ALG projects to proceed more efficiently and effectively.



ALG Secretariat in front of the Supreme Court of the Philippines, 24 July 2020.

3. Community-Based Dialogue Sessions on Human Rights Promotion and Protection Project

The Community-Based Dialogue Sessions on Human Rights Promotion and Protection Project is a partnership project involving the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), the Armed Forces of the Philippines (through the AFP Center for the Law of Armed Conflict or CLOAC), the Philippine National

Police (through the PNP Human Rights Affairs Office or HRAO), PAHRA and the ALG, with support from the Hanns Seidel Foundation of Germany. The project aims to help improve the human rights situation by creating and strengthening venues for dialogue between the security sector and the civilian community where they can collectively discuss ways or strategies to address human rights-related issues and concerns.

The project was launched at the time when the Philippines grabbed the attention of the international community with an alarming rise in unresolved cases of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances under the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The government was prompted to initiate concrete actions to address the situation, and among the notable government initiatives related to the effort to curb unresolved cases of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances was the creation of human rights offices within the AFP and the PNP. These offices became part of the network of project partners.

The first phase of the project primarily focused on the conduct of a series of community-based dialogues (CBDs) in different areas nationwide. The dialogue sessions were a venue for the local partners (representatives of the CHR regional office, AFP and PNP field units, local civil society organizations) to come together, get to know one another, and discuss collaborative efforts to promote and protect human rights.

The partners collectively developed training handbooks on civil and political rights (CPR), and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). Using these training handbooks, the CBD partners launched regional trainings. The modules in the training handbooks were subsequently incorporated into the training programs of both the AFP and PNP.

The project led to the creation of Top Level Policy Dialogues (TLPDs) which evolved out of a need to discuss issues that were constantly encountered in the different regions and to deliberate on possible policy reform initiatives on the operating guidelines and procedures of the security sector.

Human rights education component

a. Training of Trainers on ESCR

The project organized a series of trainings and Training of Trainers utilizing the training handbook that was developed for a multi-sector audience from civil society and the security sector (military and police personnel). The module primarily contains

cases and materials involving economic, social and cultural issues that would enable the application of human rights principles to specific situations encountered by the civilians and the military/police officers.

b. Webinars during the COVID-19 pandemic

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its travel restrictions, most programs shifted to utilizing online platforms. Activities such as the CBDs, trainings/webinars, and Top Level Policy Dialogues, which were traditionally held as face-to-face activities, were implemented as online activities.



Human rights workshop, Region 10, Mindanao, Philippines.

4. Information, Education, and Communication (IEC)

Through information and publicity materials, ALG aims to bridge the gap between legal knowledge and the public through easily digestible infographic materials that would appeal to general audiences. Special Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials on different subject matters were created and posted on social media and distributed to local partners.

Human rights education component

a. Digital and online presence

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, ALG was active in publishing infographics and primers online as a way to



ALG's human rights workshops in key locations in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, Philippines.

engage citizens. ALG published materials ranging from Anti-Terror Law, Criminal Complaint Procedures and Rights When Arrested to issues concerning economic, social and cultural rights. On the other hand, ALG also conducted Zoom webinars featuring different topics on public interest law and human rights issues and concerns through its Facebook page.

Statements and digital infographics were created on a need basis. While the ALG Secretariat and members stay on top of current events, suggestions were welcomed on pressing issues that should be analyzed and presented as statements, educational primers, or infographics for public consumption.

b. Publications

On the other hand, several publications were produced under the ALG leadership concerning transitional justice, environmental litigation cases, media training on monitoring the judiciary, judicial philosophy research in the Philippines, and court cases on different themes (labor, agrarian reform, extrajudicial killings, environment, and violence against women). These IEC materials were often produced in cooperation with ALG member-organizations and partners whose expertise on the topic involved was needed.

These publications are in digital and printed formats and have been distributed to partner communities and organizations.

Ways forward

Currently, the ALG secretariat and network are lacking the proper tools and system for a more streamlined and organized way of implementing its digital communications. With this, ALG has partnered with The Asia Foundation in its Initiatives for Advancing Community Transformation (I-ACT), a US-AID-funded project that promotes “public interest and citizen engagement in support of human rights in geographic priority areas and key audience segments.” With I-ACT, ALG aims to build and institutionalize a Strategic Communications Committee to guide the network in implementing its digital communications matters.

The ALG’s strength has always been its member-organizations. Diverse and autonomous though they may be, they are like-minded and support each other in many ways. Their lawyers and advocates have honed skills



ALG publications on court cases relating to human rights and a social media card about citizen's rights in case of arrest.

through many years of practice, and sharpened their understanding of what legal resource institution means, and how it can support and implement strategies to empower the partner communities.

Reflecting on the work as individual organizations and as a network, the ALG has come to realize that despite the differences in mandates, programs, and target partner sectors or communities, the member-organizations have common strategies that work well to empower the communities and close access to justice gaps. These strategies include: 1) Strategic litigation; 2) Paralegal development, and; 3) Policy reform advocacy.

The ALG will continue to use and hone these strategies.

References

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Committee of Alternative Law Groups and Structural Alternative Legal Assistance for the Grassroots (SALAG), Inc., *Proceedings - Alternative/Developmental Law Workshop II*. Makati: 1992.

Endnotes

1 The use of law on development issues is similar to the concept of rule of law and development, see Rule of Law and Development, United Nations and the Rule of Law, <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/rule-of-law-and-development/>.

2 Jennifer Franco, Hector Soliman, and Maria Roda Cisneros write that these terms can be used interchangeably because they all mean “the use of the law by the poor with the assistance of legal service nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or lawyers, so that the ends of justice may be fully served and the poor’s rights and entitlements fully realized.” See note 5 in “Community Based Paralegalism in the Philippines: From Social Movements to Democratization,” *Justice and Development Working Paper Series*, World Bank, 2014, page 15. The paper was republished as a chapter in *Community Paralegals and the Pursuit of Justice* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3 See workshop report, *Proceedings - Alternative/Developmental Workshop II*, Committee of Alternative Law Groups and Structural Alternative Legal Assistance for Grassroots (SALAG), Inc., 1992. SALAG organized the first Alternative/Developmental Law Workshop held in White Rock Resort in Subic, Zambales, Philippines on 29 May-2 June 1990 and attended by thirteen NGOs.

4 Metalegal ways (also known as metalegal tactics) refer to using legal measures that are outside the judicial system such as dialogue, negotiation, filing petition with administrative offices, and group pressure (protest march) to resolve issues. Franco, Soliman, and Cisneros provide another definition: “Legal-metalegal strategies involve a combination of purely legal work with actions that are lawful but not traditionally considered legal work. For example, when the lawyers are debating a heated proposal in Congress, their supporters could hold a public rally or demonstration outside, or even silently drop a banner in the gallery to support a certain advocacy.” Note 17, “Community Based Paralegalism in the Philippines: From Social Movements to Democratization,” op. cit. For a discussion on metalegal strategy see “Paralegal Training Manual for Protected Areas,” *Essentials of Protected Area Management in the Philippines*, Volume 12, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, October 2000, pages 1-5, <https://faspselib.denr.gov.ph/sites/default/files//Publication%20Files/paralegal%20training.pdf>.

5 Republic Act 7610 - Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act.

6 Republic Act 9262 - Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004.

7 Republic Act 11469 - Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.