

THE POINT OF NO RETURN FOR CSOs

GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS TOWARD COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Technical Report and Summary of Findings
September 2024

Beatriz C. Beato
Corazon "Dinky" Juliano-Soliman
Mary Racelis, PhD

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Published by

The International Center for Innovation, Transformation
and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov)
3rd Level Cyberpark Tower 1, 60 General Aguinaldo Ave,
Cubao, Quezon City 1109 Philippines
incitegov@incitegov.org.ph | incitegov.org.ph



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Writers

Beatriz C. Beato

Corazon “Dinky” Juliano-Soliman (+)

Mary Racelis, PhD

Editor

Mary Racelis, PhD

Layout by Verlie Q. Retulin

Book cover made with Canva

For Dinky, whose eternal guidance, even in her departure, continues to light our path.

Your love, wisdom, and strength are woven into every page of this report.

Foreword

We are proud and honored to present this report which represents the significant work done by our dear and beloved friend and mentor, the late Corazon “Dinky” Juliano-Soliman. She devoted the last two years of her life, with INCITEGov as her homebase, bridging understanding and relationships among civil society friends in the aftermath of the political division following the 2016 national elections.

This body of work would not have been possible without the help from many friends whom Dinky mobilized and drew support from, starting with her core team with Butch Abad, Rapa Lopa, Jing Karaos, and Mary Racelis who helped in the conceptualization and design of the generative conversations. She had Ipe Ramiro and Madette Virola who facilitated the series of conversations. She then got the support of a network of regional NGOs and leaders such as Cesar Villanueva, Jing Lopez and Geoanne Hernandez, among others to convene participants from around the country. We also thank the team of INCITEGov that assisted, led by Marj Ibanez and Shei Datinguino.

Dinky was concerned that civil society was losing its strength as a countervailing force due to the political division that worsened during the 2016 elections. She believed that a real conversation had to happen instead of avoiding discussions on the underlying conflicts that manifested in their varied choice of candidates. She noted that,

“These different perspectives have resulted in rifts between and among friends and strained once-solid working relationships. The failure to engage in direct conversations—caused in part by the social and physical barriers we have set up, as well as the echo chambers we have created with like-minded friend and colleagues—has had serious repercussions in our ability to engage most effectively in our work and move forward as an effective countervailing force to government, a role CSOs have traditionally fulfilled.”

Politics is a core and crucial element of civil society's work and should not be a taboo topic especially among old friends and fellow leaders in the civil society. Dinky wanted to create a safe space for everyone, "to bring about greater understanding of differing perspectives, a healthy respect for differences, and re-establishing connections."

We thank Dr. Mary Racelis, Beatriz Beato, Prof. Joey Sescon and Prof. Niño Leviste of the Institute of Philippine Culture for agreeing to take on the task of putting the various notes and proceedings from the Generative Conversation. We appreciate the CODE-NGO Board of Trustees for agreeing to publish this crucial body of work.

This report stands as a testament to Dinky Soliman's unwavering commitment to strengthening Philippine civil society as a political force. Through this project, she has left behind a legacy of hope, dialogue, and resilience. We dedicate this project to her memory, and hope it serves as an inspiration for all who continue to uphold the values of solidarity and democracy in our country's future.

Mardi Mapa-Suplido

Chairperson

INCITEGov

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**The Point of No Return for CSOs:
Generative Conversations
Toward Collaborative Action**

*Technical Report &
Summary of Findings
September 2024*

Generative Conversations

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OBJECTIVES

Origins

Corazon “Dinky” Juliano-Soliman is a name and a woman who holds a special place in the annals of Philippine social movements. As a “cross-over” figure from civil society to government and back, she empowered marginalized people to make their voices heard, and governments to listen and respond effectively to their calls. Her passion for social justice sustained her energy, whether as prominent NGO leader or as Secretary of Social Welfare and Development under two Presidents.

A year before her death in 2021 and back in civil society, she worried about the strained relations, even angry confrontations, that had developed among numbers of NGOs during the 2016 elections and continuing into the Duterte presidency. Calling attention to the problem, she proposed a serious study of the situation. Why had

this situation come about? What did key figures in NGO and basic sector communities think might be done to blunt the sharp differences so as to restore long-standing collaborative and action-oriented friendships? The causes of the disarray had to be understood, analyzed and serve to generate reflective NGO gatherings nationwide. It was time to re-establish their roles of contesting government policies and programs that undermined the lives of the poor and propose workable alternatives.

So was borne **Generative Conversations**. Supported by INCITEGov, the investigation got underway. Dinky formed her research team, supervising the data collection and reported on her preliminary analyses. Faltering health and ultimately, her untimely death, left the study unfinished.

The failure to engage in direct conversations—caused in part by the social and physical barriers we have built up as well as the echo chambers we have created with like-minded friends and colleagues—have limited our ability to engage most effectively in our work and move forward as an effective countervailing force to government.

Some months later, INCITEGov decided that the information gathered was too valuable to leave unpublished. Moreover, as Dinky's last project, they want to honor her memory as a leader who cared deeply about civil society roles. They engaged the **Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC)** as research partner to compile, analyze and draw out the research conclusions to produce a final report. It invited political scientist Beatriz Beato to review the information gathered, analyze it in terms of lessons learned, draw out its program and policy implications for NGO reflections, and write the final report for publication.

Responding to the challenge and, assisted by Drs. Mary Racelis and Enrique Leviste of IPC, Beato took

on the project and produced this document. Entitling it "**The Point of No Return for NGOs,**" she underscored the need for civil society organizations to reflect seriously on their previous experience, recognize and confront the unresolved tensions within their ranks—and move forward. They would then be in a better position to revitalize and reunify their networks for meaningful partnerships with basic sector groups. This restoration became even more imperative with the results of the 2022 elections and looming political challenges ahead.

The next three paragraphs, with slight editing, take directly from the words of Dinky in 2021 on the conceptualization and objectives of the Generative Conversations project.

Rationale for the Study

by Corazon “Dinky” Juliano-Soliman, former Secretary, Department of Social Welfare and Development, 2021

The year 2020 proved to be a challenging time for our country on many fronts. On the other hand, 2021 offers us hope in the form of new, creative energies towards shaping a better tomorrow, despite the challenges that we continue to face as a people. One of the daunting challenges facing civil society organizations (CSOs) today is the social and physical distance that has sprung up between and among civil society groups, even prior to the pandemic.

Some CSO clusters supported and continue to support the current administration of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte. Other groups have taken on a heavily critical stance towards the government. These different perspectives have resulted in rifts between and among friends and strained once-solid working partnerships. The failure to engage in direct conversations—caused in part by the social and physical barriers we have built up as well as the echo

chambers we have created with like-minded friends and colleagues—have had serious repercussions. They have limited our ability to engage most effectively in our work and move forward as an effective countervailing force to government, a role CSOs have traditionally fulfilled.

Responding to these challenges, INCITEGov has partnered with CSO networks to offer opportunities for **“Generative Conversations”**—discussions designed to bring about greater understanding of differing perspectives, a healthy respect for differences and re-establishing connections within groups. The Conversations represent an invitation to renew the ties that bind, to revisit the values that have grounded our work all these years, and to come together arounds areas of concern for which we can collectively commit. Let us explore possibilities enabling us to work together for the sectors we serve and our nation as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

The Generative Conversations project used a qualitative approach in addressing the questions posed by Dinky. The former secretary, alongside the teams she selected in consultation with INCITEGov, conducted data gathering activities primarily in 2020 and 2021. They conducted twelve (12) interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with various civil society organizations (CSOs) from across Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Interviewees included Mindanao CSO leaders, political officers of NGO coalitions, peasant leaders, and members of the Sangguniang Kabataan. FGD participants were likewise from CSOs based in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao from a wide range of advocacies such as women's groups, urban issues and poverty, and social development. The team also conducted a separate FGD comprised of members of the Sangguniang Kabataan as well as two (2) FGDs with the board members, commission chairs, network directors, and coordinators of CODE-NGO. The aim was to reach a better understanding of their perspectives on the 2016 elections, their desired qualities in leaders, their current situation (e.g. lockdown, online work), and prospects for the 2022 elections.

These conversations established the following objectives:

1. Provide the affected groups an opportunity to reflect on and discuss differences in their choices of candidates during the 2016 elections, and why they voted as they did.
2. Exchange opinions on conversations related to leadership

In conducting FGDs with the CSOs, facilitators used the following outline:

1. Centering¹ and ground rules
2. Recalling 2016 as an election year, providing a realistic opportunity for reflection, discussion of voting preferences, and ideal qualities of leaders.
3. Navigating 2016–2021, a period which focused on the context of post-2016 elections up to the COVID-19 pandemic time)
4. Moving forward for 2022 and beyond

1 A "centering" process is a form of visualization, meditation, or prayer to help participants feel grounded and focused in the discussion.

The Conversations represent an invitation to renew the ties that bind, to revisit the values that have grounded our work all these years, and to come together arounds areas of concern for which we can collectively commit.

Together with the 12 generative conversations, an additional eleven (11) conversations with basic sector groups and current and former Duterte supporters formed part of the framework. RLR Research and Analysis, Inc. conducted the conversations with the following groups: Duterte supporters (men and women, both young and older), generation Z (men and women), millennials (men and women), displaced workers (men and women), and members of a Facebook group of former Duterte supporters. The process also served as a platform to touch base with these sectors and compare sets of information to identify strategies for moving forward.

Analysis identified common themes in the transcripts of the generative conversations. A set of codes emerged (inductive coding) based on the themes identified in an initial read-through of the FGD and CSO transcripts. These codes were then applied to the transcripts, using ATLAS.ti to affirm or revise the common themes identified during the discussions.

The findings were presented to the INCITEGov Board of Trustees and the Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO) for their comments and validation in June 2023. Their insights are included below as rejoinders to the theme presentation.

THEMES AND FINDINGS

COVID-19 as the overarching context during the conduct of the conversations

It is noteworthy that since the data gathering happened during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the Philippines, that context came out in the participants' sharing. A majority of the CSO participants highlighted their own personal experiences during the pandemic, while referring at the same time to their interaction with the wider CSO network.

The 2016 elections as the “point of no return” for NGO relations

FGD participants did not have a clear consensus on the impact of the 2016 elections on society at large. CSO participants remained divided as to whether the elections had resulted in positive, negative or neutral effects on CSO relations. Most, however, felt that the 2016 elections had generated a negative impact. One even described it as “the point of no return for CSOs,” capturing the negative sentiments embedded in the conversations. Summarizing them reveals: (1) a polarized political environment; (2) narrowed space for engagement; (3) interaction categorized as “frozen,” “unmoving,” or “lumamig”; (4) information overload.

These insights from FGD participants are expounded on in the succeeding paragraphs. It was apparent from what they shared that the effects on CSO relations observed after the elections did not happen in isolation from one another. Moreover, not only were the negative effects of the 2016 elections on CSO relations viewed as intertwined but also compounded over time.

Polarization manifested in relationships with the communities with whom NGOs were working. For some participants, differing positions on these contentious issues led some NGOs to part ways with their partners on the ground.

Polarized political environment

"I lost the elections because I do not have connections with the grassroots nor a relationship with anyone in the community." – FGD participant and electoral candidate

FGD participants noted that the 2016 elections revealed a number of differences—from stances on issues to candidates supported by the various CSOs. These differences usually resulted in a polarized, "either-or" scenario in a highly contentious environment. This polarization surfaced both within the NGO network and between NGOs and the communities with which they worked. Within the NGO network, participants described how the personal stances of individuals made it difficult for them to work with one another. Many

had difficulty reaching consensus on issues such as the extrajudicial killings and the Anti-Terror Bill, some being strong supporters while others reflected strong dissent. Regional differences emerged prominently. The majority of dissenters and critics of President Duterte came from Luzon. Mindanao residents were largely supporters, while those from the Visayas appeared ambivalent.

This sense of polarization likewise manifested in relationships with the communities with whom they were working. For some participants, differing positions on these contentious issues led some NGOs to part ways with their partners on the ground.

Given the contrasting stances on contentious issues, they settled on one common solution: “*respetuhan na lang*,” or “simply respect one another.”

“Respetuhan na lang” – and the narrowed space for engagement

“We became aware of our inability to converse sensibly with our partners on the ground. It highlighted differences in literacies. It challenged our knowledge to read political junctures. In politics, there is a tipping point, a point of no return.” – FGD participant

FGD participants recognized that this polarized political environment had led to a narrowed space for engagement. Given the contrasting stances on contentious issues, they settled on one common solution: “*respetuhan na lang*,” or “simply respect one another.” Such sentiments emphasized how despite differences in political preferences, participants still wanted to retain close ties. By respecting one another’s choices without expecting joint activities, they could reduce tension levels and perhaps keep friendships intact. Thus, FGD participants would often hedge their sentiments by clarifying that although they ultimately respected the choices people had made in the 2016 elections, they would nonetheless highlight their own personal reasons for selecting certain candidates over others. The same orientation applied to favoring a certain position on a particular issue over another.

“There was no impact on relationships within us [their NGO], but the divide is with the other NGOs rabidly supporting Duterte. We used to be friends since we work in the same community, but after the elections, we were not comfortable with them since for them, everything Duterte does can be justified and defended.” – FGD participant

While the overarching position of participants in response to differing political stances was one of respect, there was a noticeable effect on relationships with the partner community as well as within the NGO network. FGD participants felt that when Duterte supporters were around, some topics were “off-limits.” Those who did not support former President Duterte felt uncomfortable around those who did, the latter implying that everything he undertook could be justified and defended. A related sentiment shared by one participant came from the inability or unwillingness to understand the outlooks their pro-Duterte partner communities were expressing. A negative effect of the elections on NGOs surfaced in regional differences, with the majority of Duterte supporters coming from Mindanao. His FGD defenders, including those in Cebu, recalled Duterte’s welcome branding, that is, his giving voice to those at the margins (“*kaming nasa ibaba*”). Mindanao-based NGOs shared that part of the success of Duterte’s campaign was the messaging that he supported legislations for women in Davao City.

FGD participants also reflected on the impact of polarized political stances on NGO relations. The sentiments expressed illustrated that NGO behavior had generally become “frozen”, “unmoving, or “*lumamig*” (cooled off); polarized stances were to blame. They also highlighted how difficult it was after 2016 to get consensus on anything, with some even saying they felt their discussions were moving backwards. Some Mindanao NGOs believed that the networks moved much too slowly on reaching agreement related to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Some even argued for disengagement, thereby delaying the anticipated peace outcomes.

Beyond citing the impact on NGO relations with one another and with their respective communities came the palpable fear of speaking out on human rights issues for fear of being red-tagged as Communists. That in turn had repercussions on the safety of individuals who raised those issues.

We used to be friends since we work in the same community, but after the elections, we were not comfortable with them since for them, everything Duterte does can be justified and defended.

Continuing collaboration and work on ‘safe’ versus ‘polarizing’ issues

“I remember that [participant’s organization] was asked to be a co-competitor of CODE-NGO against the ATL (Anti-Terror Law). I also remember that we don’t openly support such positions because we don’t want to be divisive especially with members from Mindanao. Respetuhan na lang sa posisyon ng isa’t isa (We respect each other’s positions).” – FGD participant

For several FGD participants, some aspects of their work collaboration remained unchanged. However, a dichotomy appeared between “safe” and “polarizing” issues. Safe issues—such as disaster risk and reduction management, women’s and children’s issues, and those pertaining to social development—proved easier to handle collectively. That contrasted with more sensitive issues like extra-judicial killings, the war on drugs, and other human rights issues. For some participants, the discussion of ‘safe’ issues linked closely with the notion of frozen and unmoving articulations. Further, nuanced answers revealed that while collaboration did continue on “safe” and “non-contentious” issues, the pace had slowed down compared to the previous years of collaboration.

Regional differences in identifying “safe” and “polarizing” issues.

Participants based in Luzon (specifically Metro Manila) shared feeling cautious in engaging issues deemed “contentious” out of a desire to not be divisive, leading them to be apprehensive in supporting CSO network-wide issues—thus relating to observed “frozen”, and at best slowed down pace of work among CSOs. Different participants uttered and repeated the phrase “*respetuhan na lang*” in relation to potential points of disagreement across the different groups interviewed.

The dichotomy between “safe” and “polarizing” issues similarly included ties with local governments. Mindanao-based NGOs insisted that they had continued to work effectively with LGUs so long as they focused on regional development agendas and remained nonpartisan.

Beyond citing the impact on NGO relations with one another and with their respective communities came the palpable fear of speaking out on human rights issues for fear of being red-tagged as Communists.

Making sense of technology, information, and disinformation

The processing of information from different sources drew attention, like the influx of information on social media and with it, the possibility of disinformation. In particular, participants described social media as having had a significant impact on the youth vote in 2016. Disinformation worries grew, particularly because the election of President Duterte featured an administration linked to trolls and disinformation spreading over social media.

Suggestions emerged that CODE-NGO intervene and be more proactive to help NGOs around the country make sense of various available technologies and information.

Nuancing “respetuhan na lang” during the initial presentations to INCITEGov trustees

The implicit compromise behind “*respetuhan na lang*” was validated during the presentation of this report to the INCITEGov Board of Trustees. Those present observed that while there were indeed arguments over political stances, the overarching mindset when dealing with contentious issues centered around “agree to disagree.” This passive stance was reinforced during events like the burial of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. at the Libingan ng mga Bayani. Further instances of avoiding difficult topics were cited, where “live and let live” or “to each his/her own” justified contrary positions when consensus could not be reached.

Trustees at the initial INCITEGov presentation pursued the notion that this mindset of “respecting differences” might stem from an aversion to being challenged for one’s positions. That orientation needed to be changed in order to clarify positions within established civil society networks like CODE-NGO. Respect, while important, should not serve as a reason to curtail discussions by avoiding controversial stances, but rather invite a willingness to settle divergent views. Similarly, for CODE-NGO Executive Director Sandino Soliman, while respect is important and listening to diverse positions essential, the endpoint should not be to set aside discussion. Rather, it should generate organizational processes that facilitate dialogue and build consensus around big and small issues.

Respect, while important, should not serve as a reason to curtail discussions by avoiding controversial stances, but rather invite a willingness to settle divergent views.

Branding as an essential element in the 2016 elections

The generative conversations called for analyzing the 2016 elections in terms of the different approaches taken by the candidates at the time. It also made sense to identify the various qualities that FGD participants sought in their candidates. In attempting to ascertain why certain candidates won over others, participants cited the importance of branding. Participants broadly defined branding as: (1) how candidates presented themselves, with particular importance given to those perceived as able to “get things done;” (2) how candidates approach different groups of people at different levels; and for former President Duterte specifically, (3) how his showmanship was able to capture the attention of those clamoring for change.

The next section details comparisons of themes generated by both the NGO and basic sector & current and former Duterte supporters across all the focus group discussions conducted. These highlighted: (1) desired qualities in a leader; (2) sentiments about former President Duterte; (3) notions of accountability; and (4) perceived post-election challenges.

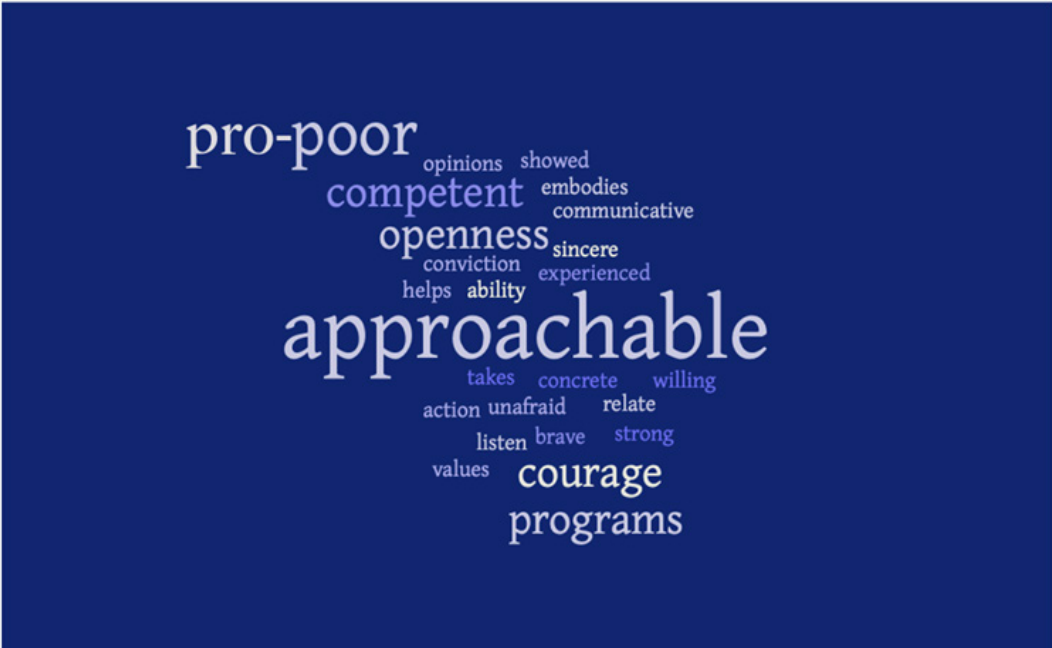


Figure 1. Word cloud containing the most commonly repeated words of NGO FGD participants when asked about their preferred qualities in a leader

Qualities in a leader (NGO participants & basic sectors) reflected in word clouds

The generative conversations included commentaries on leadership and qualities desirable in a leader. These transcripts were placed into a word cloud generator in order to bring out the most commonly repeated leadership qualities preferred by the participants. Interestingly, “approachable” ranked highest among the qualities cited. Although popularly associated with the basic sectors, being approachable was also cited by the NGO participants

as an important quality in a leader. This perspective may stem from their experience of liaising with different initially unknown communities. Other qualities in a leader identified as important included a proven track record of performance, sincerity, ability to embody their constituents’ values, and having strong opinions. All stressed the importance of implementing strong and concrete pro-poor programs.



Figure 2. Word cloud containing the most commonly repeated words of FGD participants from the basic sectors when asked about their preferred qualities in a leader

Figure 2, on the other hand, showcases the basic sector participants' most commonly favored qualities in a leader. Among these, being "hardworking" and "madiskarte" (resourceful) were most frequently repeated by participants. Not far behind appeared "being competent" and "being caring". "Brave" also stood out in leaders who stand up for their beliefs, as elaborated in the word, *paninindigan*).

Interestingly, while none of the NGO or basic sector participants indicated a preferred gender for a leader, the

term "fatherly" came up in the word cloud created by the basic sector participants. This choice could be attributed to their apparent preference for a more masculine, strong-man and authoritative leadership as exhibited by former President Duterte.

For both the NGO and basic sector participants, these desired leadership qualities were reflected in the candidates whom they voted in the 2016 elections, such as former Vice President Leni Robredo, former Senator Mar Roxas and former President Duterte along with Vice President Sara Duterte.

Sentiments on former president Duterte in 2021 (NGO participants & basic sectors)

“Nabudol-budol tayong lahat na sumuporta kay Duterte...” (All of us who voted for Duterte were all double-crossed...) – NGO FGD participant

For both the NGO participants and the basic sectors interviewed, their sentiments on former president Duterte need further nuancing, since no consensus emerged. NGO leaders’ sentiments break down into two main viewpoints. The non-supporters of former president Duterte strongly opposed his platforms throughout the campaign, followed by continuing criticism of his policies during his administration. The NGO supporters of former president Duterte nonetheless expressed a sense of disappointment focused on unfulfilled campaign promises relating particularly to the war on drugs and indigenous peoples’ development.

For the basic sector FGD participants, on the other hand, the spectrum of sentiments mentioned about the former president highlighted the more favorable aspects of his

administration. Gaining the greatest approval were his strong stances on the war on drugs, infrastructure (Build, Build, Build) programs, initiatives for labor and, in particular, ending contractualization. Noteworthy in their views were the promises for increased social insurance and social protection.

However, the basic sector FGD participants nuanced these favorable judgments of the Duterte administration by contrasting them with faulty implementation. These included the war on drugs and police abuses (“*nanlaban*” or fought back), the perceived deference to the People’s Republic of China, the unequal implementation of justice (e.g. clamor for stronger penalties for drug lords), as well as unfulfilled campaign promises relating to ending contractualization (*endo*). Further, the context of COVID-19 also loomed over the conversation—emphasizing for some participants their disappointment at how the Covid pandemic crisis was being handled, together with its negative impact on education.

Notions of accountability (NGO participants & basic sectors)

Following the sentiments of former and current (as of this writing) supporters of former president Duterte, the conversations also revealed notions of accountability that reinforced the stances of individuals. For example, while the NGO participants felt that they were “double-crossed” or “swindled” by the Duterte campaign promises, they also felt there was no alternative but to elect former president Duterte. After all, the other choices at the time of the election were deemed unsatisfactory. One participant felt that even if one were not a 100 per cent supporter of former president Duterte, former senator Mar Roxas was a “hard sell,” a difficult choice. Noticeably, former president Duterte was still being held accountable for his unanswered campaign promises. Again, contractualization came to the fore as a major sticking point. There, he has failed to fulfill his promise, which was also linked to weak development in Mindanao.

Interestingly, the basic sector participants did not hold former president Duterte as directly responsible for the unfavorable aspects of his governance. Rather, the blame went to the corrupt officials surrounding the president. For example, participants strongly criticized former Health Secretary Francisco Duque’s lapses, the “*mañanita* general” General Debold Sinas’ flagrant violation of the lockdown prescriptions, and the long drawn out COVID-19 restrictions. Disastrous though these lapses were judged, they were not directly attributed to former president Duterte.

Post-election contemporary challenges (NGO participants & basic sectors)

Both the NGO and basic sector participants emphasized post-pandemic recovery, poverty and underdevelopment as key issues and challenges that lie ahead. This is probably because the participants' sharing was embedded in the context of the 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns. Still unresolved by the administration were issues of resource availability, unemployment/loss of income, mobility, connectivity—all highlighting government's inability to handle these issues effectively. Further, NGO representatives decried the lagging state of development and poverty reduction; they regularly experienced firsthand their impact on partner communities. For the basic sector representatives, the stringent lockdowns and economic downturn added traumatic memories of their pandemic experience..

Both sets of participants agreed on greater attention to the youth agenda and linked political issues like the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) elections. Law reform, education, and voter registration and education, federalism, and peace and order also emerged as issues of concern.

The basic sector participants did not hold former president Duterte as directly responsible for the unfavorable aspects of his governance. Rather, the blame went to the corrupt officials surrounding the president.

Post-elections and beyond: Defining civil society—NGOs and People’s Organizations (POs)—as countervailing forces for democratic governance

The Generative Conversations enabled cogent discussion and interrogation of the roles of civil society in moving forward. Featured, in particular, were the challenges faced by those in the NGO sector. A number of key themes related to NGOs emerged.

Recognition as partners in engaged governance

NGO participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of presenting a workable development agenda for the next administration. That highlighted their key role of exacting accountability through government. Some participants went so far as to emphasize that civil society needs to “offer alternatives” instead of simply acting as fault-finders. That would entail ensuring that national and local government structures and deliberations make space for civil society.

One concrete example during the FGDs stressed the importance of local governance service delivery during lockdowns. For participants, a capacitated LGU can determine

whether or not services will be delivered efficiently to citizens. Some CSO participants paid great attention to local governance as a “battleground” for political organizing. They cited the importance of engaging with local government units as a parallel, perhaps even more strategic objective to engaging the national government. Emphasis on the local level also related to the participants’ desire to move forward effectively. Hence, community-level interaction that was weakened during the pandemic needed to be re-established and strengthened. This applied particularly to those NGOs which had earlier disengaged from their community partners.

Internal commitment to democracy

Given that one source of tension raised in the discussions derived from conflicting political stances, the NGO participants posed the question of “how to reconcile differences within organizations?” Discussions suggested that the time had come to link personal stances to organizational and advocacy mandates. Respectful reconciling of differences was now crucial. The subsequent conversation resisted limiting discussions to “*respetuhan na lang*” as that would not likely generate productive conversations on inclusive development and NGOs roles in that process.

Considering the participants’ problematic experience in 2016, they felt that NGOs and POs needed to reconstitute clear organizational processes and stances to resolve divisive issues. Recommended were processes enabling each organization to have a clear rationale for making leadership choices in electoral campaigns. That orientation would extend to other politically contentious situations. Relying on evidence illustrating effective leadership rather than sheer personality, will get the country back on the road to democratic governance.

NGOs and POs needed to reconstitute clear organizational processes and stances to resolve divisive issues.

Non-partisan versus active advocacy in the politics of democracy

A related point of discussion was the question as to whether civil society should remain non-partisan. Or should it adopt a more “active” role in struggling for democracy? Participants diverged in the search for a clear consensus on this question. Some affirmed that their success in engaging the local government likely prospered because they had remained non-partisan; others advocated for a way forward that would field credible candidates or publicly endorse candidates committed to promoting community priorities.

However, participants did emphasize that during the then still coming 2022 elections, they could take advantage of opportunities to build consensus and campaign publicly for chosen local or national candidates who were putting forward the NGO or sector’s advocacy.

Elections and beyond

RESPONSES & WAYS FORWARD

The Generative Conversations intended to open up renewed dialogue among NGOs aimed at achieving better understanding, empathy and collaboration with their partner communities. The data and themes culled here highlighted the importance of nuancing the stances of individuals and organizations. The polarized 2016 political environment exemplified the case in point. It had created a conflictive black and white mindset fixated on differences and divergence instead of seeking areas of common concern to foster collaboration and convergence.

Moving forward, the remaining question stands: **How can civil society networks from here on in prosper and take action?** The Generative Conversations have brought out the crucial question: **What it will take to get nationwide NGO and PO networks to work together again in common cause?** Answers must be found. The stakes are high for continuing democracy in the Philippines!

INCITEGov and CODE-NGO reflections on Civil Society directions beyond the 2022 elections

The open forum following the presentation and analysis of the data to both the INCITEGov Board of Trustees and the CODE-NGO network last June 2023 focused on the following themes as especially relevant to the question of how to move forward.

Social media as boon and bane to development work

Social media played a crucial role in both the 2016 and 2022 elections. Attendees at the Generative Conversations feedback session cited their impact. Facebook, for example, significantly influenced the results of the elections. Since information on candidates came primarily through social media, concerns over embedded trolls and disinformation demanded serious attention.

The Philippines was listed as part of a global trend of disinformation; its consequences leading to the rise of populist leaders. Concern was raised over saturation within the information ecosystem. Add to that power structures that reward untrammelled controversy and raucous disagreement rather than nuanced democratic discourse. Given these trends, INCITEGov leaders raised questions on how civil society network members in attendance could tackle disinformation and the oversaturation of information on social media, particularly within their own networks.

For CODE-NGO, the discussion on social media and new information technologies included the benefits to NGO relationships with grassroots communities. While the advent and prevalence of social media generated challenges related to disinformation, the organization also recognized their usefulness to development workers. Access to Facebook, in particular, has facilitated and enhanced communication with communities. That benefit became particularly clear during the COVID-19 lockdowns in allowing continued connectivity. Nonetheless, even as these gains from social media use were cautiously celebrated, attendees noted that access to technology and internet connection still do not reach many communities.

Civil society's role in Philippine politics

Civil society must empower communities while engaging effectively with the local and national governments and the private sector.

Responding to questions on the roles civil society are expected to play in Philippine politics and governance, both INCITEGov and CODE-NGO attendees reviewed the prospects for CSOs involved in political work. A persistent question remained on how to “level up” and “redefine” civil society roles. Expanding the range of answers would undoubtedly challenge current CSOs satisfied with their “comfort zones.”

While data from the Generative Conversations revealed a desire to focus CSO efforts on the local, INCITEGov participants also recognized the challenges of balancing local and everyday concerns with transcending to the national level. This systemic interaction would enable CSOs to claim and make demands at both ends of the spectrum. CODE-NGO attendees, on the other hand, emphasized prioritizing local level partnerships, arguing that engaging local governments produces significant outcomes in CSO work. An ongoing theme, therefore, must be civil society's role in helping to empower communities while engaging effectively with the local and national governments and the private sector.

Enhancing community engagement and opening spaces for reflection

For the attendees from both INCITEGov and CODE-NGO, enabling community engagement was key to moving forward. The questions remained though: How to improve communications and how to continue expanding on the themes identified by the Generative Conversations?

For INCITEGov attendees, high on their agenda was how to enhance their understanding of leadership concepts that emerged from the basic sector community partners. An added question focused on the role of INCITEGov in continuing to comprehend CSO relationships post-2016 together with the steps it might take to revitalize their alliances.

CODE-NGO's concerns, on the other hand, focused on enhancing engagement with their community partners. A particular question voiced by one participant asked how the network could continue to engage their respective basic sector communities in various ways. One was

through the delivery of vital support services, while also addressing issues of misinformation and deepening the discourse on democracy and human rights. Emphasis also went to questions of how to continue facilitating dialogue and interaction with community partners that bring out their sentiments. One participant queried whether development work can actually surface genuine sentiments from community partners. What if community partners are oriented towards *"kung ano ang tansya nila na maganda pakinggan para sa atin"* (or what they think NGO partners want to hear)?

Closing comments of the participants expressed appreciation for the space which the Generative Conversations had opened up for serious reflection on the challenges facing civil society. Moving forward meant opening up spaces for reflection, interrogating old while creating new forms of engagement to address crucial social issues.

Synthesis

MAKING SENSE OF RELATIONSHIPS
WITHIN THE CSO NETWORK AND
HOW THIS TRANSLATES TO
PHILIPPINE POLITICS

Moving forward meant opening up spaces for reflection, interrogating old while creating new forms of engagement to address crucial social issues.

Central to the Generative Conversations was the opening of spaces for CSO stakeholders to discuss and process the events succeeding the 2016 elections. The findings highlight the urgency of studying changing relationships within the CSO network and their relevance to Philippine political realities.

A summary of the themes identified can enhance forthcoming reflection sessions in NGO networks: (1) the 2016 elections as a point of no return for NGO relations particularly in the polarized political environment that emerged; (2) the rise of technology and disinformation, (3) the common & differing notions of desired qualities in leaders, sentiments on former Pres. Duterte, and definitions of accountability, post-elections challenges for NGO participants and basic sectors alike; and (4) the defining (or re-defining) of civil society NGOs and POs as countervailing forces for democratic governance.

These themes imply active examination of relationships spanning not merely interaction between basic sector partner communities and NGOs, but NGOs relationships within their own networks. The results promise a potential to revitalize civil society roles, needed in the Philippines today. INCITEGov and CODE-NGO, as seen above, have already begun the process of reflecting on the results and identifying ways forward but this is surely just the beginning of a long road ahead in understanding, redefining, and revitalizing civil society in the Philippines. The Generative Conversations have thus heralded the need for continuing reflection, dialogue and insights so as amplify and transform these benefits into action for inclusive development.

Looking down from above, Dinky Juliano-Soliman is surely cheering us on with ***“Thank you! Mission accomplished!”***

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Beatriz C. Beato (Trixie) is an Instructor at the Department of Political Science, Ateneo de Manila University. She is also a Research Associate at the Institute of Philippine Culture at the same university.

She received her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in 2017 at the Ateneo de Manila University where she graduated honorable mention and as the department's program awardee. She received her Master of Arts in Political Science, major of Global Politics at the same university in 2021.

Her research interests include Philippine democracy, people's perceptions, human rights, and community organizing & participation.

Corazon "Dinky" Juliano-Soliman (+) was a social development practitioner with over 40 years of experience in designing, implementing and evaluating social protection and community empowerment programs in the non-profit/ NGO and the public/ government sector. She was skilled in coalition-building, facilitation, and collaborative mechanisms in crafting the delivery systems of a program.

Dinky was shaped by and rooted in people-driven development through her 10 years of direct community organizing work with farmers, fishers, women agricultural workers, indigenous people and children. Her leadership skills and style were honed by initiating and leading national coalitions of civil society organizations (CSOs) and coalitions of people's organizations, and by serving as Minister/Secretary in two administrations of the Philippine government in the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

Dinky received her bachelor's degree in social work from the University of the Philippines Diliman, and her master's degree in public administration at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She was formerly the lead person for social protection and community driven development of INCITEGov. She passed away on Sept. 19, 2021.

Mary Racelis, PhD is a Research Scientist and former Director of the Institute of Philippine Culture, and Senior Professorial Lecturer at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, Ateneo de Manila University and the University of the Philippines Department of Anthropology. Outside of the academe, she is best known for her partnerships with NGOs and urban poor people's organizations (POs) engaged in community organizing. She writes frequently about the capacities of women in informal settlements to mobilize effectively for the wellbeing of their children, families and communities.

Active in civil society affairs, she has served on several international boards like Oxfam America and the International Institute on Rural Reconstruction, and national NGO Boards like Community Organizers Multiversity, Urban Poor Associates, and INCITEGov. She also assumed key leadership positions in UNICEF (senior policy specialist in family/child welfare, women's development and community participation and regional director for Eastern and Southern Africa) and Ford Foundation (country director), and was a social development consultant for various national and international organizations.



Democratic Politics
Good Governance
Development Outcomes

INCITEGov is a policy research and advocacy center that catalyzes and provides support to democratic movements and reform initiatives in the Philippines. It firmly believes in just, peaceful, and inclusive democracy as the bedrock of Philippine society. INCITEGov was founded in August 2005 by a group of former senior government officials as a membership-based, non-profit organization. It draws its members from civil society, the private sector and the academe, most of whom have experience crossing over to the public sector and back to their respective civic communities.