
JOURNEY TOWARDS JUSTICE:

A Framework on Engaging Human Rights Victim-Survivors

Amanda Lee Centeno¹

Published by

Citizens for Promoting Human Rights (CFHR)

International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov)

March 2022



¹Amanda Lee Centeno is a feminist researcher whose work centers on gender, development, and other sociopolitical issues. She is currently a consultant to the UP Center for Women's and Gender Studies. She has a bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of the Philippines and acquired her master's in Social Anthropology at the Central European University. The Publishers would also like to acknowledge the editorial support provided by Shebana Alqaseer in the preparation of this report. Alqaseer serves as consultant on gender and human rights for various non-government organizations, including INCITEGov.

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I. Introduction

International human rights bodies have been alarmed by the scale of human rights violations since the implementation of President Rodrigo Duterte administration's anti-drug campaign, infamously known as the *war on drugs*, in 2016 (Amnesty International 2020; United Nations Human Rights, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Despite massive domestic and international criticisms, President Duterte stands by his decision to implement the war on drugs and takes full responsibility for the committed killings (Kine, 2017 and Punzalan, 2021). While the state stood as the proponent of the bloody illegal drugs crackdown, non-government entities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and social institutions reached out to the surviving families of extra-judicial killings (EJKs) and other human rights victims to provide support and services.

Background

The withdrawal of the state from some of its responsibilities created a “vacuum that NGOs try to fill” (Kajimbwa, 2006). The United Nations defines CSOs or NGOs as “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group organized on a local, national, and international level.” These entities are united by a common goal: to address critical social issues such as human rights, and offer a wide range of services, including capacity building, legal support, research and evidence generation, advocacy campaigns, psycho-social interventions, and livelihood and economic support. Described by Ramcharan (2010) as the “life-blood of the human rights movement” (p.103), CSOs also serve as a conduit between civil society and the government, and even international bodies.

The thousands of lives lost in the vigilante-style killings of President Duterte's anti-drug campaign highlights the indispensable role of CSOs in pursuing justice for the victims and supporting those who were left behind. For instance, CODE-NGO², the Philippines' largest CSO coalition for social development, together with other CSOs put pressure on government to uphold human rights in implementing the war on drugs (Rasay, 2016; and Holmes, 2017). This has led to President Duterte mandating the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency to lead the war on drugs, instead of the Philippine National Police who was accused of several human rights violations (HRVs).

CSOs have also been instrumental in bringing the case to the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Netipatalachoochote et al., 2018). Given the absence of credible and

² CODE-NGO represents more than 1,600 development NGOs, people's organizations, and cooperatives nationwide.

reliable data on the drug-related killings, CSOs and media organizations are at the forefront of documenting and publicizing the cases of EJKs (David et al., nd). The documents and appeals from various local and international NGOs served as the basis for the ICC to formally open an investigation into the war on drugs.

Faith-based institutions also play an important role in protecting community members from human rights violations. A study by Brooke et al., (2021) suggests that church presence in a locality contributes to a reduction of drug war violence. The authors identified five factors contributing to this reduction: “directly, parishes raise attention, offer sanctuary, and disrupt enforcement, while indirectly they shrink vulnerable populations and build local solidarity” (p.13).

Moreover, the Catholic Church has been one of the most vocal institutions in criticizing the war on drugs. Bishop Pablo Virgilio David asserts that the campaign targets the poor who have been the EJK victims, instead of curbing illegal drugs (Jeffrey, 2019). The church not only extended help to the victims but also offered protection to police officers who were willing to testify about their involvement in the war on drugs (Villamor, 2017). This showed the institution's commitment to restorative justice – holding offenders accountable and recognizing the importance of their rehabilitation.

Attacks against human rights defenders

In multiple public statements, President Duterte consistently vilified human rights defenders, even encouraging violence against them if they stand in the way of implementing his war on drugs (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This kind of rhetoric has institutionalized and strengthened the disregard for human rights, not only in his anti-drug campaign but also in the public consciousness.

President Duterte's anti-human rights rhetoric created an atmosphere that is perilous to human rights defenders and advocates. Since he took office in 2016, at least 180 human rights defenders were killed and 1,138 activists were arrested and detained (Gavillan, 2021; Gonzales, 2019, & International Federation for Human Rights, 2021). President Duterte also attacked the Commission on Human Rights (CHR). With support from his allies in the Philippine House of Representatives, they voted to give CHR a budget of Php 1,000.00 (~20 USD) but was later reversed by the Senate of the Philippines.

The incessant attacks against human rights defenders and CSOs helping the victims of the war on drugs did not deter them. On the contrary, they were more emboldened by the narratives of the human rights victims and determined to seek justice. CSOs

and socio-religious institutions remain steadfast in their commitment to advancing human rights.

Human rights amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted public attention. Consequently, critical issues, including human rights and democracy, have been sidelined. According to a report released by Human Rights Watch (2021), the war on drugs killings increased by more than 50% during the first four months of the pandemic and were executed with “total impunity” (p. 541). The state not only targets individuals whose lives involve drugs but also the human rights defenders helping them. The passage of the Anti-Terror Law during the pandemic, which some refer to as a “draconian policy,” further threatens the lives of human rights defenders and activists (International Service for Human Rights, 2020). The law provides a vague and broad operationalization of terrorism and even allows the detention of “suspected terrorists,” which can easily be used against human rights activists (Buan, 2020; CIVICUS, 2021 & Amnesty International, 2021).

There is a vital need to increase efforts in revitalizing public interest and discussion on human rights and the war on drugs to heighten much needed vigilance. While the recent decision of the ICC to investigate the HRVs in President Duterte’s war on drugs is a milestone, it is crucial to document existing initiatives of human rights advocates in terms of engaging and supporting bereaved families and communities of EJK victims. This documentation can serve as blueprint and policy framework for succeeding initiatives and mobilization.

It is imperative to craft a case study on how various CSOs and informal groups engage victim-families of violence and human rights abuses in the context of the war on drugs. The study should recognize the complexities involved, such as psychological trauma, economic difficulties, and social discrimination, among others, and explore the impact of the drug war on victim-families and communities to understand how loose and organized groups engage and provide support.

Objectives

This policy case study aims to document and examine the experiences of CSOs in engaging with human rights victims of the Duterte administration’s war on drugs. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Surface the challenges and barriers experienced by CSOs in working with and helping victim-survivors of the war on drugs;

2. Identify CSOs' coping mechanisms and strategies in addressing problems on the ground;
3. Highlight the impact of CSO initiatives on the victim-survivors, the larger discourse of human rights, and on human rights defenders themselves; and
4. Recommend practical solutions and provide strategic guidance in engaging with human rights victims and in developing, strengthening and sustaining interventions.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and a focus group discussion (FGD). The respondents were selected purposively based on their work in engaging with the war on drugs victim-survivors. Due to the pandemic-induced mobility restrictions, data gathering was conducted remotely through video teleconference.

A total of 14 individuals (10 females and 4 males) from 10 organizations working with human rights victims and their surviving families agreed to participate in the study as key informants. The organizations, individuals, and institutions differ in their specializations and offer a wide range of services, such as legal, psycho-social, spiritual, livelihood, and economic assistance, community organizing, research and evidence generation, arts-based intervention, and capacity building.

The list of participating organizations are as follows:

1. AJ Kalinga Foundation Inc.
2. Baigani
3. Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking (CYAN)
4. Group of independent researchers
5. Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS)
6. NoBox Philippines
7. PILIPINA and Camarin
8. Religious for the Good Shepherd
9. Rise Up for Life and for Rights (Rise Up)
10. Solidarity with Women and Orphans (SOW)

The FGD served as a venue to present the initial findings of the research based on the conducted KIIs and have a deeper conversation on select themes. Participating organizations were selected purposively based on the nature of their work and expertise that touch on the crucial issues and challenges surfaced from the KIIs. During the FGD, the discussant provided a set of key questions to guide the

discussion. The result of the FGD heavily informed the recommendations of this paper.

A total of eight individuals (5 females and 3 males) from six organizations participated in the FGD. These organizations and institutions are as follows:

1. Active Vista/Dakila
2. Ateneo School of Government
3. Children's Legal Rights and Development Center
4. Commission on Human Rights
5. Karapatan
6. World Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation

A thematic analysis was used to process the data. The interview transcriptions were coded and grouped into themes to surface the recurring and distinct experiences of the CSOs. The surfaced themes informed the development of a framework on CSO engagements with human rights victim-survivors.

II. Findings and Analysis

A. CSOs and Human Rights Victim-survivors

Despite being front and center of the Duterte Administration’s national agenda, the human cost of the anti-drug campaign is improperly accounted for. The government’s official records of casualties are lacking. Evidence shows, however, that most victims were young male breadwinners who were alleged small-time drug dealers, users, and couriers – making the campaign anti-poor. Most of them were killed by police officers during buy-bust police operations, while others were killed by unknown assailants using similar tactics. The anti-drug campaign puts a toll on the poor families, particularly wives, mothers, and orphans, who were left behind. They are victim-survivors themselves – traumatized by having witnessed the deaths of their loved ones and left to fend for their families (Ateneo School of Government, 2018).

The national government failed to provide for the victim-survivors, even dismissing them as “collateral damage”, as its focus lies on the President’s mandate to curb illegal drugs by all means. Having recognized this glaring gap early on, civil society organizations (CSOs) stepped forward to provide support for victim-survivors. These CSOs can be classified into three types: (1) faith-based; (2) legal; and (3) social. They provide various services, including socioeconomic assistance, psycho-social and spiritual support, legal aid, and mobilization and community organizing.

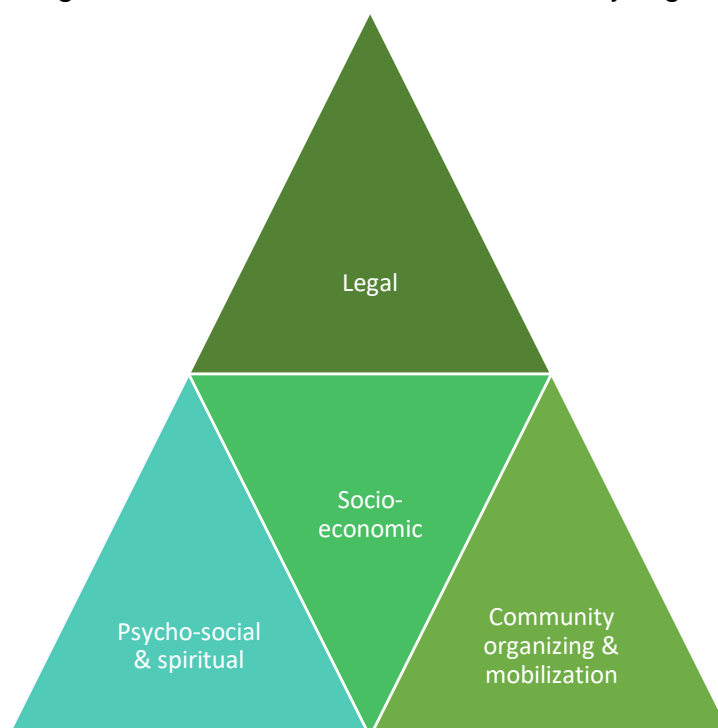


Figure 1: CSOs’ services to victim-survivors of the anti-drug campaign

Faith-based institutions

Given the victim-survivors' fear and lack of trust in government entities, and even suspecting them as perpetrators, it seemed natural for them to approach faith-based institutions, such as their local parish, for their immediate needs. For example, Fr. Flaviano "Flavie" Villanueva of the AJ Kalinga Foundation Inc. shared that wives and mothers approached their church for funeral and burial assistance. After the foundation provided this initial support, it realized that the victim-survivors had other needs left unaddressed, including psycho-social assistance and source of livelihood. Sr. Nenet of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (also known as Religious of the Good Shepherd or Good Shepherd Sisters), who initially provided prayer services and partial debriefing to families of EJK victims had a similar experience. Both faith-based groups reached out to other organizations to provide other types of support, such as legal assistance and livelihood opportunities.

Church members and religious advocates eventually formalized their cause, as exemplified by the Rise Up for Life and for Rights, and the Solidarity with Widows and Orphans groups. What started informally, with church leaders and members' prayer gathering, signature campaigns, and awareness raising activities, Rise Up for Life and for Rights became a support community to victim-survivors for case documentation and human rights education. On the other hand, a joint project of Inang Lupang Pangako Parish, St. Vincent School of Theology, and de Paul House called Solidarity with Widows and Orphans became a community-based rehabilitation and livelihood program for families of EJK victims.

Services provided by faith-based institutions have mostly expanded, but given the nature of the organizations, their primary support to victim-survivors is spiritual healing and empowerment. Key informants believe that spiritual interventions play a critical role in encouraging the families to take legal actions, as trauma and fear inhibit them from participating in activities that involve authorities, such as case filing.

Legal organizations

In a country beset by EJK and a slow justice system, legal assistance is crucial for the anti-drug campaign victims' families to restore their dignity. Furthermore, CSOs' legal assistance to the victims' families has been instrumental for the investigation of the International Criminal Court on the war on drugs.

There are legal groups, such as the Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS), that extend their expertise as support to victim-survivors, which includes legal advice, legal remedies, legal research, case documentation, case filing, and relevant technical services.

CSOs that do not have legal expertise and resources partner with legal groups. For example, faith-based network Rise Up for Life and for Rights partnered with the National Union of Peoples Lawyers to conduct capacity-building activities for families who were ready to file their cases. Sister Nenet of Religious of the Good Shepherd shared how their partnership with Center Law has been instrumental in their filing of Writ of Amparo in the Supreme Court that eventually led to the stopping of the killings in the area where they worked.

Social groups

CSOs with different primary advocacies, such as women's empowerment, democracy, and human rights, unite in supporting victim-survivors of the anti-drug campaign. These CSOs collaborate among themselves and partner with other organizations, such as faith-based institutions.

Some groups prioritize the victim-survivors' physiological needs, including food, medicine, and financial support, while others facilitate therapeutic activities such as community camps for psycho-social support.

There are groups that utilize creative means to strengthen their call for justice and foster a support community among the victims' families. For example, youth-led non-government organization Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking (CYAN Pilipinas) produced three documentary films on EJK and the experiences of children, while another group of independent researchers documented and disseminated the EJK stories through evidence-based music. Arts-based materials on the war on drugs also reach a larger audience, as these cater to individuals outside formal institutions and even provide emotional relief.

Some feminist organizations also provide relevant trainings to wives and mothers. For example, Baigani conducts reproductive health education and gender sensitivity training. Other CSOs focus their efforts in combating misinformation and stigma surrounding the anti-drug campaign.

B. Approaches of CSOs

While CSOs offer similar types of interventions, they have varied approaches to engaging with human rights victim-survivors. Some CSOs integrate the principles that guide their other initiatives into their services for the families of EJK victims.

A group of independent researchers who wanted to examine the effects of the war on drugs in the community utilized a *non-extractive method*, which prioritizes community participation over technical research methods such as formal interviews. Non-extractive method requires the group to create the project with and for the human rights victim-survivors. A respondent from the group shared that they were able to build a community with the families through their non-extractive research. Long after completing the project with the community, the researchers still keep in touch with the victim-survivors.

Some organizations utilize a *holistic approach* in their interventions – addressing the multiple and cross-cutting needs of victim-survivors. After being cognizant of victim-survivors' complex needs, CSOs realized that healing and recovery could only happen when all of these needs are strategically addressed. For example, Father Flavie of AJ Kalinga shared how they designed their Program *Paghilom* (Healing) as an “integrated and holistic program aiming to help the widows and orphans of EJK victims,” which comprises three steps – psycho-spiritual program, legal documentation, and survival assistance. Father Danny Pilario of SOW also emphasized the importance of holistic approaches – interventions should not be a “one-shot deal”. Another organization that follows a multi-faceted approach is Rise Up for Life and for Rights, guided by the organization's principles – Respect for human rights, Restore and redeem, and Rise Up (3Rs) – Rise Up seeks to understand the injustices surrounding the war on drugs by engaging with affected communities. The organization responds to increasing HRV through rights education, legal missions, and inclusive documentation.

Another holistic approach is IDEAL's *Lawyering for Development Framework*. While the organization mainly specializes in providing legal services, they believe it is also necessary to address other needs of their clients, such as socioeconomic and psycho-social support. According to a member of the organization, they developed the framework after finding out that victim-survivors experience of trauma and stigma prevent them from coming out and pursuing cases. Thus, IDEALS have expanded their services from solely offering legal interventions to creating a “Social and Advocacy Work Team” for partnerships and psycho-social support.

NoBox employs the *harm-reduction approach*. As the organization primarily engages with ‘individuals whose lives involve drugs’, the “realistic, pragmatic, and humane harm-reduction framework” serves as their guide in understanding the situation of

persons living with drugs. According to NoBox Executive Director Ma. Inez Feria, this approach is designed to help them “unpack and understand the various factors surrounding drug occurrence.” For the organization, being cognizant of the social contexts of persons living with drugs and helping them understand their relationship with drugs are instrumental to mitigate risks in conducting interventions. The approach also allows the individuals and the organization to come up with a broader range of possible solutions.

The Religious of the Good Shepherd is guided by the principle of *restorative justice*, which believes that people must be given the opportunity to change and heal, regardless of circumstance. The group believes that illegal drug use is a medical problem, that illegal drug users should be rehabilitated, and that the war on drugs is problematic since illegal drug users are also victims of the culture of drug use. In San Andres Bukid, Manila and other communities, RGS educates illegal drug users on the health and security risks associated with drug use, and facilitates a 12-step program to help them overcome their drug addiction. They reached out to LGUs for a list of illegal drug users they could engage in the 12-step program. Sr. Net of RGS underscores that Christians or members of other religious groups should not side with killers, but notes that restorative justice should also involve the perpetrators.

Given the different backgrounds of CSOs, it is only natural for them to employ varying approaches. It is a milestone for CSOs, with their different political leanings, priorities, and organizational histories, to unite under one cause – access to justice and holistic empowerment of human rights victim-survivors of the war on drugs. As they work towards a common goal, they also face similar challenges on the ground.

C. On-the-Ground Challenges and Solutions

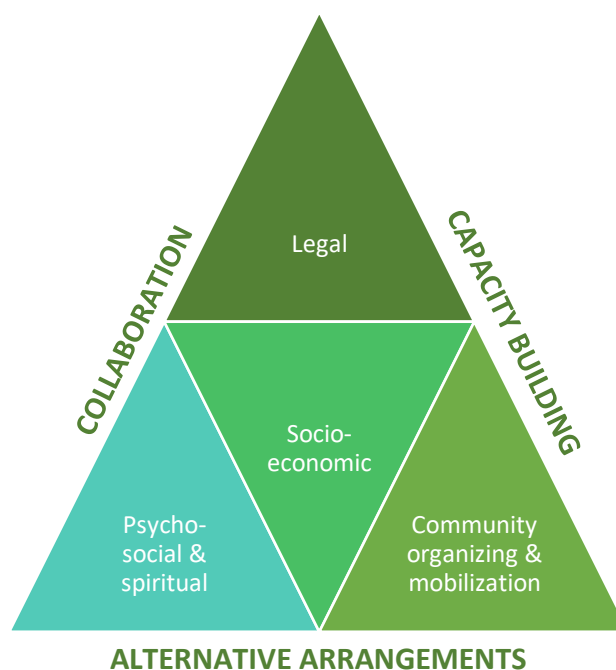


Figure 2: CSO's solutions to intervention challenges

The heavily entrenched misinformation on human rights and drug use has exacerbated CSOs' already complex and challenging work. According to the respondents, this can be attributed to President Duterte's rhetoric that condemns drug users and the individuals helping and protecting the families of his anti-drug campaign EJK victims. Entering the affected communities as strangers then was not easy – most organizations had to build rapport with the victim-survivors from scratch.

Psycho-social

CSOs shared how the experience of HRV has dramatically altered the mental well-being of victim-survivors. They developed trauma and fear that hindered them from seeking help and pursuing legal cases. Moreover, this study surfaced that even CSO members and volunteers have psycho-social needs arising from the nature of their work that heavily deals with actual life threats and narratives of abuse. Therefore, psycho-social support and services must be institutionalized into a more holistic intervention. However, even though it appears to be one of the most urgent needs of human rights victim-survivors, access to stigma-free quality psycho-social services is riddled with challenges.

Given the painful experiences of victim-survivors that they have yet to fully overcome, organizations had to immerse and prove their sincerity to gain the victim-survivors' trust. Aside from the challenge in approaching the EJK victims' families, CSOs also had to simultaneously adjust to other members of the community who have stigmatized and ostracized the victim-survivors. One of the significant observations of CSOs when they first tried to work in a community where EJKs happened was how the war on drugs fractured community solidarity. According to Cristina Palabay of Karapatan, when the war on drugs killings have started, "it was as if members of the community were pitted against each other." CHR Commissioner Karen Gomez-Dumpit cited an example where some community members intentionally cursed at the EJK victims to prove that they were not related to the victims. Other respondents shared that during the wake of EJK victims, the neighbors didn't sympathize with the bereaved families because they do not want to be associated with the EJK victims, their families, and those that seek to help them.

CSOs persevered to provide a safe space for members of the affected communities, especially the victim-survivors. Father Flavie shared that when he meets with surviving families of EJK victims for the first time, one of his first questions to them is whom they trust. He emphasized that trust is an essential element in helping people. A respondent inferred that victim-survivors could sense the sincerity of individuals reaching out to them and highlighted how they valued non-extractive methods to establish meaningful relationships with the victim-survivors, such as informal interviews for two-way conversations and continued communication long after completing a project or activity.

CSOs also gained the trust of affected communities through capacity building initiatives, such as livelihood projects and skills-based training. Some groups also bring victim-survivors together in out-of-town retreats to provide a comfortable space where they can share their thoughts and experiences. These retreats involve psycho-social interventions, such as therapy and counseling, for victim-survivors to better process their trauma and fear.

However, while they provide psycho-social support, CSOs themselves need support. Seeing the difficult situation of the affected communities first hand exacts a mental toll on the members and volunteers of organizations. Despite this, Ms. Lucita Lazo, the president of World Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation – Philippines, shared that there is a stigma against volunteers getting psycho-social support. While some groups provide counseling to their members, others do not have the expertise to do so. To address this, they collaborate with other organizations that are better equipped in this area and reach out to their own colleagues to provide moral support.

Efficiency

While most organizations are working with other groups through formal and informal means, they recognize that they lack an efficient and effective referral system. This challenge hinders them from providing appropriate and much needed services that are not within their scope and expertise. This also inhibits them from building relationships with victim-survivors who are discouraged when they reach out to organizations who cannot help them or refer them to alternative channels.

Misalignment of beliefs and objectives is a challenge to some organizations. A group shared that it encountered organizations who wanted to employ legal strategies that they found difficult to agree with. Another group observed that there are organizations who act as gatekeepers, making some tasks harder to achieve. There are women's organizations that have otherwise been working well with religious groups on collaborative projects but had issues when it came to providing reproductive health education and services to communities.

Bureaucratic challenges also make the work even more difficult for some organizations. They experienced reaching out to local government units (LGUs) and national agencies for crucial administrative support, such as providing them with lists of victim-survivors, only to be dismissed or denied help. LGUs cite various reasons for not being able to support, including unavailability of resources being requested and national policy restrictions. These national policy restrictions also adversely impacted the established communication systems some organizations put in place to gather data and information associated with the war on drugs. For example, "nightcrawlers" or photographers and photojournalists used to have informal agreements with cooperative police stations for the latter to alert them when there were new operations or relevant information. This became impossible when the Philippine National Policy banned media organizations from accessing daily reports of police stations in 2018.

To address these inefficiencies, CSOs continue to engage in dialogues and discussions among each other. They also continue to advocate for reforms and proactively reach out to national agencies to find opportunities for collaboration.

Sustainability

Although organizations recognize and want to address the gaps in their interventions, they are confronted with resource constraints. Some organizations lack adequate funding, which puts sustainability of their initiatives in question. A group, for example, noted that there is an unwritten guideline to merely praise their work. This verbal compensation reflects the organization's lack of funds. Other groups point out the discrepancy between the needs of affected communities and

organizational capacity. For example, IDEALS shared that they are equipped to provide initial legal response measures to families of EJK victims, but they need support from other organizations that offer litigation services. However, these organizations could not assist given their limited capacities.

Financial issues of victim-survivors also impact the organizations' operations, as families cannot attend activities and devote their full attention. Organizations that also face financial difficulties themselves have to find ways to support affected communities who seek their assistance on basic needs. Some organizations are frustrated that they could not provide alternative sources of income or livelihood projects and worried about the sustainability of families' reliance on donations. To address this, they try to find creative means to raise funds, such as donation drives through gigs and events. At times, they had to pool their own resources to cover their groups' operational expenses.

As a sustainability measure, some CSOs conduct capacity building activities, such as paralegal and livelihood training, and approaches and interventions in addressing problems related to drug use. Capacitating individuals at multiple levels translates to more coordinated and systematic interventions. Another significant benefit of these capacity building activities is the sense of agency and empowerment it provides, which reduces the excessive dependence of victim-survivors on organizations.

Security

Organizations engaging victims of human rights violations, particularly the victim-survivors of the war on drugs, face serious security risks. Their members are red-tagged, put under surveillance, interrogated, and intimidated with death threats. In some cases, their members die. Those who help become victim-survivors themselves.

A respondent shared how she was interrogated by *barangay* officers when the latter learned that she was immersing with a family of an EJK victim. The *barangay* officials probed her about her organization, asked for her contact information, and looked her up on Facebook. Terrified, she called her parents for help. A member of the Religious for the Good Shepherd received death threats over the phone.

Organizations also bear the burden of increased security risks for the families of EJK victims they seek to support, as some families report unexpected police visits and illegal detainment. As precautionary measures, they sometimes utilize alternative physical arrangements, such as conducting interviews away from the victim-survivors' neighborhood to avoid scrutiny. Some groups also provide capacity building trainings, such as self-defense. For example, RGS provides human rights

education to affected communities so that members can better defend themselves when authorities try to intimidate or illegally detain them.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Movement restrictions and loss of livelihood among families of EJK victims brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the existing challenges for organizations to strengthen their engagement with affected communities. Organizations had to adjust their strategies and even hold off their planned activities. As an alternative arrangement, some CSOs shifted to online channels. While this worked for some, others found this a challenge since this entailed cost to victim-survivors.

D. Impact of CSO initiatives

By the time the EJKs have become more rampant and systematic in 2016, most CSOs have started reaching out to victim-survivors. Since then, the concerted efforts of CSOs and their community volunteers have contributed immensely to the victim-survivors' healing and recovery process. Almost all the respondents shared accounts of positive changes in the victim-survivors' lives. CSO members also acknowledge that their work in supporting EJK victim-survivors has shaped the current human rights network as well as their personal lives.

On Human Rights Victim-survivors

CSOs' interventions shifted the perspective of human rights victims and their families. They were *conscientized* – made aware of the social and political underpinning of EJKs. This was crucial because some surviving families believed that killing drug users and dealers was justifiable. They were made to think that, to an extent, their loved ones met a brutal ending that they deserved. One respondent shared that initially, the victims could not connect the violations to the state. Another respondent noted that most of the victims they encountered were supporters of President Duterte.

As the CSO's interventions exposed victim-survivors to a more nuanced discussion on drugs, fundamental human rights, the role of the state and government, and the need for justice and accountability, their way of looking into the war on drugs pivoted. They are no longer oblivious to the human rights violations accompanying the anti-drug campaign of the Duterte administration.

Human rights victim-survivors were also able to regain their sense of justice and overcome stigma and fear. When the CSOs first reached out to them, the victims were initially overwhelmed with powerlessness and fear. They wanted to seek justice but do not know where to begin or how to hold accountable the people behind the killings. Now, they are cognizant of their fundamental rights and the need to demand justice accountability. This awareness translated to concrete actions, such as active participation in legal documentation and stronger involvement in case filing. The respondents remarked that the ICC decision to open a formal investigation into the killings made the victim-survivors more hopeful that justice would be served.

Another vital contribution of CSOs and the community volunteers is the feeling of solidarity among victim-survivors – knowing that they belong in a community where they are recognized, safe, and supported in their pursuit of justice. For instance, a respondent shared that their presence gives victim-survivors the space for their narratives to be heard and recognized. Since surviving families used to feel isolated and ostracized because of the stigma surrounding the death of their loved ones, having this safe space has immensely contributed to their well-being.

CSO's interventions empowered the victim-survivors and helped them regain their sense of dignity. Almost all the respondents shared that human rights victim-survivors have regained a sense of agency and empowerment through wide-range interventions and sustained community engagements. Victim-survivors have started to reclaim their spaces through various forms: some victim-survivors became community volunteers, ran for local government positions, and actively advocated for themselves; others can already publicly articulate their stories and demand state accountability. While the key informants recognize that there is still much to be done to achieve justice, they acknowledge that guiding human rights victim-survivors to a place of healing and recovery is a crucial first step.

On Human Rights Network

The scale of human rights violations that accompanied President Duterte's war on drugs has altered the human rights landscape in the country, including the organizations working to promote and uphold human rights. Some of them shared how difficult it was at first to comprehend the scale of violence and impunity happening in the country. As a result, they remarked that engaging with human rights victims has made them reflect deeply about human rights and its growing relevance in the current Philippine political landscape. A member of PILIPINA shared how reframing human rights was crucial for the network to effectively increase awareness on the issue.

A key informant shared that their involvement with other human rights organizations contributed to a more honest conversation about drugs. For their organization, it is essential to have a nuanced and contextualized discussion of drug use among organizations engaging with human rights victim-survivors and the community, which then feeds into the human rights-based policy recommendations of the network.

Amidst the urgent and growing demand for them to act, the human rights network had to introduce changes within their cohorts to effectively accommodate and respond to human rights victim-survivors. The organizations had to scale up collaboration, resulting to the expansion of its pool of experts. A respondent shared that their concerted efforts culminated in a more systematic response in legal documentation as well as socio-economic and psycho-social assistance.

On CSO Members as Individuals

When asked to identify and share their key learnings and reflections in engaging with human rights victim-survivors, most respondents allude to being transformed and deeply humbled by their work. RiseUp described this experience as a "two-way process of doing grassroots work," where community volunteers and organization members were also empowered and equipped in the process of helping victim-survivors. Father Danny shared how helping orphans and widows gave his personal and ministerial life meaning.

A key informant detailed how this line of work is like a calling – a life devoted to the service of other people. According to her, the work impacted many aspects of their lives because every story of injustice has a lingering effect. A few respondents noted how they underestimated the effort and mental toll that their line of work would take. It took up space – both professionally and personally. Despite the myriad of setbacks, the respondents believe that the experience made them more compassionate individuals.

On Inspirations and Aspirations

CSOs and their community volunteers remain steadfast in seeking justice for the human rights victims. When asked to share what keeps them committed despite the threats and challenges, the answers lead them back to the victim-survivors and their desire for justice and healing.

Some respondents shared that once they got to know the victim-survivors and individuals whose lives involve drugs on a deeper level - hearing their stories and clamor for justice and accountability - being oblivious is tantamount to being

inhumane. A member of NoBox highlighted how these individuals are also ordinary people who were unfortunately defined by their relationship with drugs. For this reason, he noted that genuine interaction with the community motivates their work, “knowing not just their horror stories and experiences with drugs, but also their interests, passions, and hobbies.”

A key informant summed up their work in the core belief that “regardless of one’s status in life, every person needs to live with dignity.” This principle fuels the organizations and community volunteers to continue engaging with human rights victim-survivors in holding the perpetrators and state accountable for the killings and structural injustices.

III. Framework

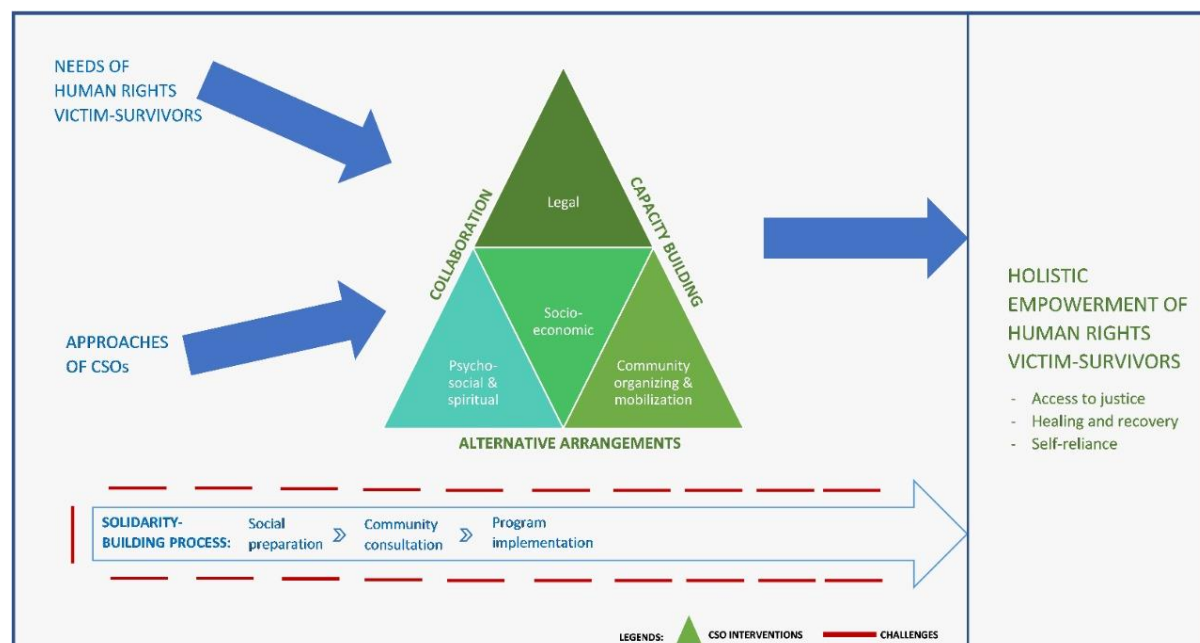


Figure 3: CSOs' interventions for the holistic empowerment of human rights victim-survivors

The war on drugs disrupted community solidarity, as some community members ostracized human rights victim-survivors, leaving the latter alone to deal with their grief and the socioeconomic impact of their loss. In the process of engaging with communities, CSOs were building solidarity, contributing to the achievement of holistic empowerment of human rights victim-survivors, as showcased in the framework (figure 3), which was developed using the narratives and themes presented in the preceding chapter.

Solidarity building is a key process in ensuring the sustainability of efforts and interventions. Solidarity building is a continuum: from the social preparation in entering the community; to consulting and interacting with the human rights victim-survivors; to successfully implementing the interventions. Given this nature, the process does not offer a prescriptive chronological order that leads to holistic empowerment, but gives its readers an idea of the crucial phases involved in solidarity building.

The process typically starts with **social preparation**, where organized CSOs or loose groups signify their intention to engage with human rights victim-survivors and execute necessary preparations to **ensure a smooth entry into the communities**. First, they need to identify the community they want to work with. Then, they familiarize themselves with the community through ocular visits to map available

institutions and identify and coordinate with community gatekeepers – individuals regarded as authoritative figures in the community, such as church leaders. Community gatekeepers can directly connect CSOs with victim-survivors or provide channels to do so. In cases where victim-survivors have directly reached out to organizations and individuals for help, CSOs still need to identify the gatekeepers as formal points of entry in the community. However, when groups such as faith-based institutions within the community are the ones who are directly involved, members can already head straight to consulting with the human rights victim-survivors.

After preparing, CSOs seek participatory inputs through **community consultation**. During this phase, CSOs or groups have already been formally introduced to victim-survivors. Through trust and rapport building, CSOs become more cognizant of victim-survivors' actual and varying needs. This opens an opportunity to conduct a thorough needs and gaps assessment. Conducting such assessment through consultations and community immersion is important in ensuring **interventions are informed by actual needs**. These mostly range from basic socio-economic and psycho-social needs, and mobilization, to more technical needs such as legal assistance.

Once interventions have been designed and developed based on actual needs, the **program implementation** ensues. Given the varied organizational frameworks that govern CSOs, they employ different approaches to program implementation. These approaches inform and guide their socio-economic, psycho-social, community organizing and mobilization, and legal interventions. However, CSOs must keep in mind that it is essential to **integrate the identified needs of victim-survivors with their respective organizational frameworks and approaches**. Some CSO approaches identified through this study are harm-reduction approach, lawyering for development, restorative justice, integrated and holistic approach, and non-extractive approach.

Throughout the process of engaging with human rights victim-survivors, CSOs **encounter multiple and intersecting challenges**. Based on the findings, these include concerns on (1) efficiency, (2) sustainability, (3) security, (4) psycho-social, and (5) COVID-19 pandemic. To address and mitigate these challenges, organizations must **develop strategies and employ coping mechanisms**, such as strengthening capacity building, exploring collaborative engagements, and developing alternative arrangements.

This whole process of engaging with victim-survivors and their larger communities, along with the challenges it brings and solutions it necessitates, contributes to achieving the human rights victim-survivors' holistic empowerment – access to justice, healing and recovery, and self-reliance.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study showed how CSOs effectively worked to fill in the gaps left by the government's lack of action. The experiences of CSOs in engaging with human rights victim-survivors of the Duterte administration's war on drugs are varied, unique, and complex but at the same time connected by common threads. In the process of engaging with communities, CSOs were building solidarity, contributing to the achievement of human rights victim-survivors' holistic empowerment.

The challenges that CSOs experienced were shaped by the structural arrangements at the national level and the nuanced and context-specific arrangements at the community level. As a result, they had to develop and employ strategies and coping mechanisms that effectively addressed the challenges and mitigated some risks. Often, these interventions were products of meaningful interaction and consultation with the human rights victim-survivors and their larger community.

Through the accounts of participating organizations, this study highlighted how CSO initiatives have contributed to the healing and recovery of victim-survivors, allowing them to regain a sense of agency and dignity, which are critical in their journey towards holistic empowerment. CSO members and community volunteers also found themselves transformed by the whole experience – becoming more compassionate and humane individuals committed to achieving justice and accountability for the victim-survivors.

In the same vein, this study featured how the war on drugs has dramatically changed the Philippine human rights landscape and network. While human rights have always been core and fundamental to society, the organizations realized how their work became more crucial amidst the proliferation of misinformation. Hence, the human rights network must develop more effective ways to frame human rights issues.

This study contributes to the growing literature on the importance of sustaining CSO efforts in addressing social issues, particularly the heavily entrenched impact of the war on drugs not only on human rights victim-survivors but also on the larger society. While this paper offers practical and strategic recommendations to guide CSOs in engaging with human rights victim-survivors, it recognizes that the state must be the main entity in upholding, protecting, and promoting the rights of all individuals. Therefore, as we equip our civil society with knowledge and build their capacities, it is imperative to continue demanding state accountability to ensure the sustainability of efforts in ushering victim-survivors to complete healing and recovery and attaining holistic empowerment.

Strategic Recommendations	Practical Recommendations
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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Strengthen advocacy campaigns<input type="checkbox"/> Establish a safe and secured functional referral system<input type="checkbox"/> Systematize documentation and evidence preservation<input type="checkbox"/> Support psycho-social needs of members and volunteers<input type="checkbox"/> Promote holistic, rights- and evidence-based approaches<input type="checkbox"/> Establish an endowment fund | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Listen well<input type="checkbox"/> Be creative<input type="checkbox"/> Build personal and organizational resiliency<input type="checkbox"/> Continue to Engage Partners |
|---|--|

Strategic Recommendations

The recommendations outlined in this section is a product of the concerted input from key informants and focus group discussion participants of this study. Their rich and invaluable experiences at the grassroots level combined with their expertise informed these recommendations.

1. Strengthen advocacy campaigns

The misinformation on human rights and drug use has become deeply entrenched in public consciousness. To reclaim the discourse on human rights and pivot the discussion on drug use to the right direction, strengthening advocacy campaigns is paramount. Advocates must highlight the intersectionality of human rights and drug use to combat disinformation and dehumanization. CSOs and communities must explore different ways of framing the issue, which can be more palatable and appealing to stakeholders and duty bearers that can also bring in more funding to support their causes.

2. Establish a safe and secured functional referral system

Organizations and institutions vary in strengths and limitations. Some organizations provide victim-survivors with legal support, while others focus on community organizing, psycho-social interventions, research and policymaking, economic and livelihood assistance, and capacity building. This range of services can be fully utilized if a referral system is available for stakeholders, service providers, and duty

bearers. An open-source referral system can also be used by the war on drugs victim-survivors seeking help.

The referral system must include a list of organizations involved in helping victims of the war on drugs and the services and interventions they offer. The availability of an effective and efficient referral system can help eliminate duplication of services, foster a more collaborative and systemic response from stakeholders, and ensure that human rights victim-survivors are matched with appropriate agencies and organization to access adequate and holistic services.

However, while this greatly benefits the stakeholders, this might also generate added risks of being exposed. Thus, CSOs can call on the Philippine Commission on Human Rights to lead the development of a secured referral pathway for human rights victim-survivors of the war on drugs to ensure immediate support. The system should connect the victims to different CSOs that can provide necessary services. Establishing a robust referral mechanism contributes to building the ecosystem of CSO support, which allows them to be more connected and strengthens their capacity to request support and service augmentation without difficulty.

3. *Systematize documentation and evidence preservation*

The ICC's decision to open a preliminary investigation of the war on drugs is a milestone built on the organized and systematic legal documentation of human rights violations associated with the anti-drug campaign. CSOs and trained community volunteers diligently assisted in documenting the narratives of surviving families of EJK victims, preserving evidence, and ensuring the integrity and credibility of these documents. These processes are critical in the fight for justice.

However, documentation is not limited to legal matters directly concerning human rights violations. CSOs and volunteers can also document the barriers they encounter, such as bureaucratic hurdles (e.g., refusal of government agencies to cooperate) as well as the experiences of victims in accessing assistance. Documenting these accounts can serve as concrete evidence when demanding accountability from state actors and inform the formulation of response and services provided to the victims.

4. *Support psycho-social needs of CSO members and volunteers*

This study surfaced the mental health toll on human rights workers and defenders, with some key informants revealing their members have either underestimated the negative impact of their work on their own health or invalidated their expressed need for psycho-social support.

The Philippine Republic Act No. 11036 or the Mental Health Act states that access to mental health services is a fundamental right. The full and quality implementation of this legislation is critical in supporting human rights victims and individuals working with them. The law stipulates the establishment of a community-based mental health care facility, funded by the Philippine Department of Health, to provide rights-based mental health care services at the provincial and municipal levels. While the government must be made accountable and responsive to the mental health needs of its constituents, the services are lacking if not unavailable.

Therefore, advocacy campaigns that aim to destigmatize mental health issues must also be strengthened. Human rights workers must be encouraged to seek psycho-social interventions. The Philippine Commission on Human Rights should also make its wellness center accessible to human rights defenders and workers to foster solidarity among individuals and organizations.

In pushing for the institutionalization of mental health services to ensure sustainable access to psycho-social support and intervention, there should also be a recognition that addressing structural gaps is impossible to achieve overnight. CSOs must explore other means to expand their network of service providers, such as partnerships with faith-based institutions that are often the immediate provider of psycho-social support to victim-survivors and their families.

CSOs and community volunteers have also witnessed the power of solidarity in supporting the mental well-being of their members. Solidarity among human rights victims provided them a strong support system, as they did not feel judged and ostracized. This collective offers victim-survivors a safe space to meaningfully engage with other people and help in their healing journey.

5. *Promote holistic, rights- and evidence-based approaches*

Data should be the lifeblood of any intervention, and human rights principles the heart that pumps its circulation. A holistic, rights- and evidence-based understanding of problems associated with drugs is critical in developing practical and effective solutions and interventions.

Rights- and evidence-based policies have a lower margin of error in their implementation. Key informants from this study bring to the policy table the importance of involving human rights victim-survivors and persons whose lives involve drugs in the policymaking process. They must be consulted without fearing for their safety. NoBox particularly highlights evidence-based policymaking that puts a premium on the safety and well-being of individuals directly affected by the issue, and underscores that effective drug-related policy must put persons whose lives

involve drugs at the center. When the affected become active agents in policymaking, the probability of human rights violations is lessened.

6. *Establish an endowment fund*

This policy case study affirms the indispensable role of CSOs in promoting and advancing human rights. CSOs took the initiative to provide support for EJK victim-survivors and their families that should have otherwise been the government's duty. Despite the heavy lifting, most CSOs remain vulnerable and financially dependent on funders and donors. To continue their programs and projects, CSOs constantly search for potential funding sources. The lack of funding and resources threatens the sustainability of their initiatives.

To address sustainability concerns, this policy case study recommends that funding institutions and donor organizations explore the establishment of an endowment fund for groups helping human rights victim-survivors of the war on drugs. The private sector can also be tapped to assess its viability. Simultaneously, CSOs need to strengthen its collective call to increase funding support, given the financial cost of supporting human rights victim-survivors in a repressive political environment.

Practical recommendations from CSOs

The accounts of milestones and setbacks shared by key informants offer a spring of invaluable lessons for individuals who wish to advocate for human rights, particularly in engaging with victim-survivors of the war on drugs. CSOs offer practical recommendations that can guide those who want to join the cause:

1. *Listen well*

Engaging with human rights victim-survivors and individuals whose lives involve drugs entails listening to their narratives – the side of the story often gets lost amidst the stigma and disinformation. Listening is vital to fully understand what the families are going through. It also builds trust and helps community members feel safe and secure to communicate their needs.

2. *Be creative*

As organizations will encounter plenty of roadblocks ahead, being creative in their solutions and interventions will help overcome these challenges. Creativity in problem solving means approaching the problem from different angles and identifying possible consequences. Organizations must think outside the box, be

open to non-conventional approaches, and foster creativity by creating spaces where people can come together and openly share their ideas and beliefs.

3. *Build and develop personal and organizational resiliency*

On top of security threats, CSO members and community volunteers are exposed to countless narratives of injustices, rejections, and disruptions, which inevitably take a psychological toll on them. Therefore, resilience plays a key role in sustaining not only the members but also the organizations' programs and activities. Resiliency is the ability to bounce back despite adversities. To realize this, organizations must be prepared for setbacks by developing appropriate interventions and introducing mitigation strategies.

4. *Continue to Engage Partners*

Human rights workers often find themselves faced with uncertain and complex situations. To overcome these, it is essential to keep the lines of communication open among members and their volunteers. The human rights network can also foster a more productive collaboration by establishing transparency mechanisms and creating spaces to learn from each other's experiences and collectively plan future endeavors.

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About the Citizens for Promoting Human Rights (CFHR)

CFHR as an organisation raises funds to provide aid to victims of human rights violations. It is designed as a mechanism to receive individual and group donations from Filipinos (and others) who desire to exercise their civic duty in upholding human rights. Further, it intends to build networks that collaboratively deliver support on the ground to human rights victims and their families. Among its key activities are fund-raising, partnership building and strengthening the public discourse on human rights.



About the International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov)

The International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (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 the democratic process and the rule of law as the bedrock of the Philippine society.

INCITEGov applies the P-G-D lens in its analysis of key national issues and underscores that Democratic Politics (P) must be linked to Good Governance (G) to ensure that Development Outcomes (D) will secure the interests of the poor and marginalized.

Contact us at incitegov@incitegov.org.ph.