

The “Guia”¹ of **BAKAL**

By Edwin Tabora, CPE



Guia Bati-on of APL-Women and Edwin Tabora of CPE in front of the Quezon City hall.

Guia Bati-on is a coordinator and organizer of the Alliance of Progressive Labor-Women (APL-Women), and like most of her colleagues, she is new to the world of governance work and development planning.

“We were better at organizing women workers who are exploited in the workplace and at home as well,” related Guia. “We have been accustomed to marching in the streets and running, playing cats and dogs with riot policemen – the work entailed by facilitating community development planning seemed a radical departure for us.”²

APL-Women and the Center for Popular Empowerment (CPE) were the project partners under the Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran (BAKAL) project in Quezon City. Implementation was to be done in two

barangays, Pasong Putik and Bagong Silangan. As in other areas, the communities in Quezon City underwent the same processes on organizing, consolidation of their groups, and capacity building on development planning, among others.

Barangay Pasong Putik is in the northern portion of Quezon City. Dotted by gated subdivisions, it is still home to thousands of urban poor dwellers. Its own barangay hall even, is located inside a closed subdivision, and residents find it hard to approach their barangay in a very real sense because of this.

Barangay Bagong Silangan³, on the other hand, is located at the boundary with San Mateo Rizal, and is accessible only by a narrow dirt road that seems to wind down into undeveloped land and private subdivisions that are being constructed.



Children from Barangay Bagong Silangan³ at the boundary of San Mateo Rizal and Quezon City.

The presence of strong people's organizations and initial linkages with barangay officials made these areas suitable for the implementation of BAKAL.

Persuasion and healthy debates

However, in 2007 the barangay elections were held, with Fatima Cabanag, a leader of the Tala Estate Settlers' Federation (TESEF) going up against the eventual winner, Jess Dungca as Barangay Chairperson in Barangay Pasong Putik. It was the same story in Barangay Bagong Silangan, where the local community—members of the people's organization Kristiyanong Alyansa ng mga Maralitang Obrero (KAMAO)⁴—were in opposition to the Barangay Chairperson Armando Endaya.

Sitting with a cup of coffee during a break at the Facilitators' Training for the Barangay Development Planning through Participatory Learning and Action (BDP-PLA) in 2007, Guia wonders if their new venture would have a positive outcome at all.

"What can BAKAL do for us?" she wondered. "What can I learn from the project that hasn't already been covered by our trainings on organizing?" Guia was convinced there was nothing new to put into their work, coming as she did from the social movement. "My elder sisters, aunts and my mom are all already experts in organizing and mobilizing," says Guia, referring to her APL-Women family – Juliet, Dang, Fatima, Marlene and her mother Daday, who are all leaders of the federation.

The BDP-PLA Facilitators' Training produced 12 facilitators which would later on form the core group to oversee the BDPs of Barangay Pasong Putik and Barangay Bagong Silangan. Guia herself stood as head of the Secretariat. "It was hard," Guia lamented, "our workshop group during the planning was very quiet, they had to be coaxed into saying what they thought, and how they felt in order to really come up with an accurate picture of the community." "I felt drained already and it was just the first day of the planning," Guia recollected. But as she would later learn, it was part of the process. That it was, as CPE Executive Director Edwin Chavez would tell her, how engagements at the local were done. "You have to convince local leaders, change their opinion of what it means to participate in politics and governance," Edwin said.



Women's Day marchers protest the rising cost of food and other daily needs.

Guia would soon enough realize that through their development planning, she and their community would begin to know what the Gender and Development budget is about, how it is spent, how barangays are managed and governed, what powers barangays have under the Local Gov-

ernment Code, and what participatory governance looks like. It was not an easy lesson to learn. "It felt like we were punishing ourselves," said Guia. During the writeshop session where the two barangays were packaging their development plans, she recalls how the Barangay chairpersons in Bagong Silangan and Pasong Putik sat on their BDPs and refused to adopt them.

"In the past we would just march towards Mendiola and chant our slogans and grievances against government but in our governance work, you have to use persuasion and healthy debates to gain the confidence and trust of local officials, and be knowledgeable to convince barangay officials of the necessity of participatory development planning." "I saw this when we held the Pledging Session for the two barangays," recalled Guia. "Despite the opposition coming from the barangay officials, we sought out support from the level of the city government, with which we had engagements."

Morale boosting on city level

Knowing that their development plans had enough warm bodies behind these, the communities found the strength to collectively seek out support from allied barangay councilors, department heads from City Hall, non-government organizations and politicians.

At the Pledging Session, Guia remembered how they worked out the smallest details to give their guests a good overview of what the BAKAL project had. They set up photo montage displays around the Quezon City Hall's Legislative Session Hall showing pictures of neglected roads, dirty creeks, clogged sewages and unlighted lampposts, data on women, children, etc., and pictures of APL Women in action, planning, meeting and organizing as a response to the dire situations in their barangays.

The Pledging Session was a symbolic gathering, occurring as it did in City Hall's own legislative room, signifying the city's openness to people's participation. Leaders from KAMAQ, TESEF, other people's organizations, barangay councilors were all on hand, together with officials of Quezon City, and an appearance by the Vice Mayor, Hon. Herbert Bautista himself.

Guia sighed in relief as she recalled the satisfaction coming from the successful Pledging Session where key offices of the city government—Public Employment Service Officer, Sikap Buhay Entrepreneurship and Cooperative Office (SB-ECO), Gender and Development Officer's Office, and others—all pledged to contribute capacity building and other support for the two barangays' plans. "It was morale boosting, especially to see the Vice-Mayor give us that kind of attention," Guia recounted.

"It felt like all the fatigue went away, hearing these officials tell us that what we were doing was the right thing, and that we had every right to claim these openings in governance in order to empower our people," said Guia.

It certainly helped that at the city level, CPE and APL-Women were also involved in gaining entry into structures for the meaningful participation of civil society organizations and people's organizations. CPE sat as the Convenor of the City Development Council (CDC) NGO-PO Council, and the two project partners were involved in the advocacy for the passage of a Participation, Accountability and Transparency (PAT) Ordinance. In the process they gained working relationships with policy champions, like Councilor Bolet Banal and the office of the Vice-Mayor helping them push for the integration of participatory approaches in governance in Quezon City.

But the process would not stop with the Pledging Session. They had to submit the plans to their respective barangays, for the adaptation of the BDPs, and they would have to advocate for the convening of the Barangay Development Council (BDC) to aid in the implementation of their plans. It was there that the antagonism of the Barangay Chairperson proved insurmountable as the plans were ignored, and the BDC was not convened at all.



Empowered community **overcomes the odds**

“It was finally the real fight,” said Edwin to Guia. “Taking the battle for our communities’ rights from the footsteps of Mendiola to the gates of their barangay halls.”

“And knowing that the Barangay Chairpersons would not accept the barangay development plans, we had to rely on the strength that our communities have gathered as a result of organizing to see to it that they could still see their development plans into fruition,” explained Guia. And when it came to pass that the BDPs were ignored and not adopted, Guia said “The experience offered a very practical lesson – that people’s organizations had to be very solid in their pursuit of change in the face of immovable opposition.”

“But if together the communities on their own mobilize to repair their roads and drainage, contribute towards saving money for a common enterprise, they can still realize their plans,” affirmed Edwin. “The immediate task for us is to consolidate TESEF and KAMAO to convince them that the BDP is not dead.”

“We need to show that despite the lack of support from the Barangay Chairperson, our people have the capacity to demonstrate an essential component of good governance which is an empowered, mobilizable community,” he added.

“Looking back it helped me appreciate the link between what we were doing at the national [level] with our engagement at the local level,” discussed Guia. “It was not enough that we exposed and opposed issues at the societal level, it was also necessary to respond to the daily, pressing needs of our members when they go back to their community

Residents of Barangay Bagong Silangan 3 raise funds to build their chapel by playing in a bingo game.



Guia agreed with Edwin that in both arenas, so solidarity among people’s organizations was key. “We hope that through our engagement with the CDC, the plans and the mechanisms for people’s participation could be mainstreamed into the consciousness of policy makers,” said Edwin. “Even though Quezon City has a better track record in people’s participation than other metropolitan governments, the presence of the CDC alone does not guarantee responsiveness and transparency in the local government.”

“Further we are advocating for the PAT Ordinance because this would give teeth to the City Development Council, as its sitting local sectoral representatives would have a say in the city’s plans and allocation of budgets,” added Edwin.

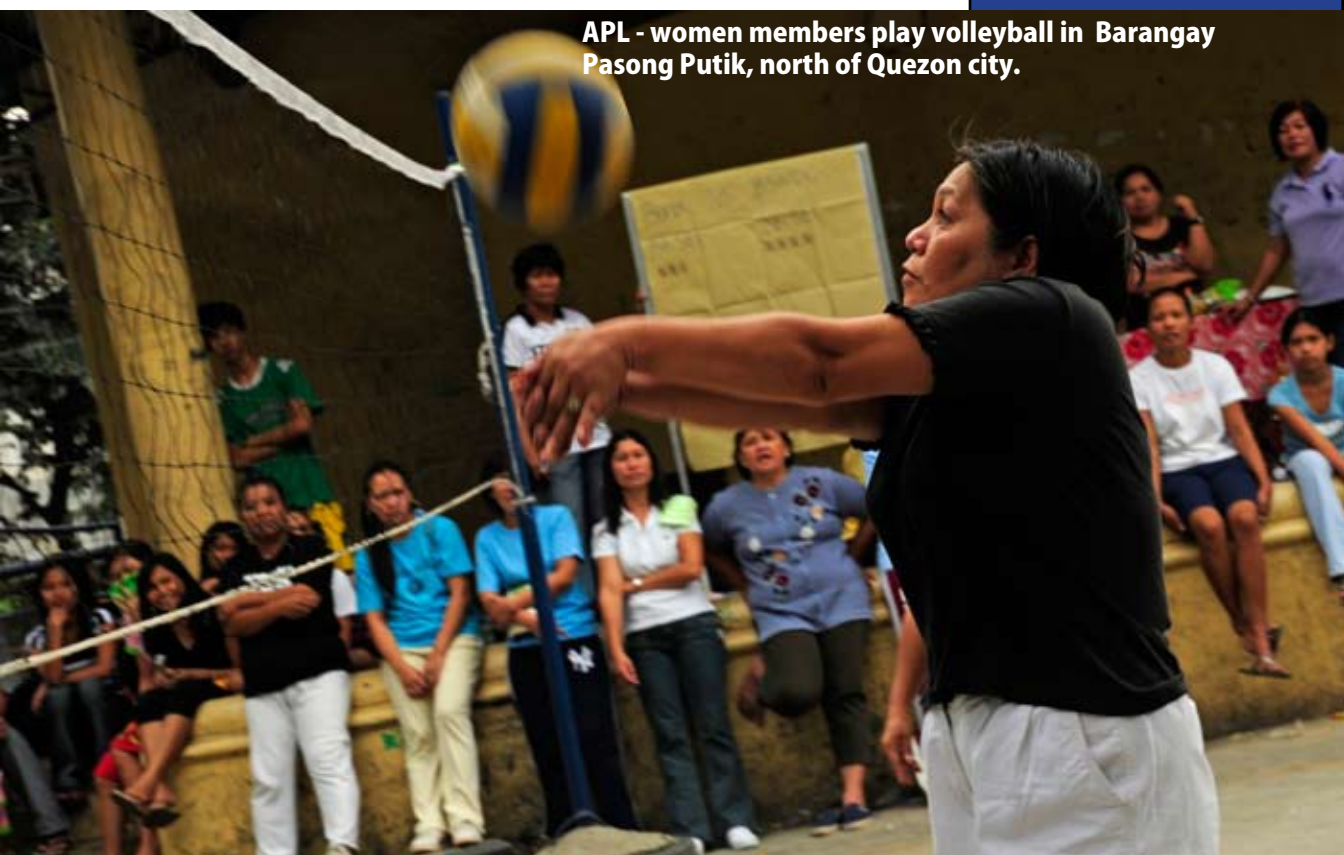
“The pressure we exerted from ‘below’, that is, engaging our barangay officials, combined with what we were doing at the city level or from ‘above’ certainly complemented each other,” said Guia. “The combination of these strategies has resulted in positive developments. For example, while our barangay chairpersons in Bagong Silangan and Pasong Putik will not admit it, some

of their projects such as installation of street lights, adding barangay peacekeeping forces, et cetera, are actually demands first brought to light under our BDPs.”

The resolve of the people’s organizations involved with the BAKAL project in Bagong Silangan and Pasong Putik became evident with the formation of the Task Force BDP, which included CPE, APL-Women and key leaders and the facilitators. The ad hoc body seeks to find ways to realize the contents of the communities’ plans, with or without support from their barangay leaders. “We have seen the beginning of APL-Women members mobilizing some capital to jumpstart a livelihood project on rag-making,” said Guia. “We have seen the communities respond effectively to a recent flooding in Bagong Silangan, and from the looks of it, there are still prospects for the plans laid out in the BDPs to still be pursued.”

“I began to understand that our governance work certainly expands our work in APL- Women,” added Guia. “Bayanihan is indeed key, an indispensable guidepost to winning the larger battle for our people’s rights.”

APL - women members play volleyball in Barangay Pasong Putik, north of Quezon city.



- 1 The name “Guia” derives from giya, the Filipino term for guide or buoy.
- 2 Quotations lifted from conversations and interviews with Guia and other project partners in the Tagalog language.
- 3 Pasong Putik roughly translates as ‘dirt road’ or a narrow passageway of loose soil, while Bagoing Silangan literally means ‘New East’.
- 4 Loosely translated as Christian Alliance of Poor Workers.
- 5 “Packaging” is the term commonly used by BDP-PLA facilitators to mean writing the Barangay Development Plan.