

Participation of Young Refugees in Programme Designing on Social Inclusion and Restoration of Cultural Normalcy in the Philippines

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Abstract

The Philippines has been continuously lauded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for its consistency in promoting international solidarity through the acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers, despite its economic and social instability. This paper intends to discuss the efforts of the Philippines, in its adherence to an international commitment to protect the fundamental human rights of refugees and asylum seekers, as one of the signatories of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. While the Philippines has proven its willingness to accept these communities for temporary shelter, the country lacks policies covering rehabilitative programs for refugees and asylum seekers; thus, this research is recommending the creation of a comprehensive policy that would cover aid in the restoration of cultural normalcy of these communities, through the participation of young refugees. The problematic refugee situation may incur cultural trauma and eventual loss of previously recognized customs and norms of the communities as they enter a new territory as temporary sanctuary from persecution. While the experience of cross-cultural environment for children or young refugees is a general concern during the process of seeking refuge, youth resilience is a distinguished factor in rehabilitating community life to normality. This paper recommends the formulation of an extensive policy, not only covering the acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers, and processing of application to the refugee status, but also extending support to rehabilitative programs, which encourage youth participation.

Keywords: Refugees, Participation, Children, Youth, Cultural Normalcy, Social Inclusion, The Philippines

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Introduction

Background of the Study

Fundamental human rights are considered universal—entitled to every individual, without prejudice of his or her origins, culture, religion, and social practice, among others. With this assumption, every State is expected to assume responsibility in preserving and protecting these fundamental and universal rights. However, once a State loses its capacity or will to protect its citizens, people are forced to leave their home country and seek protection from another country, under a different government than their own. As this situation becomes a possibility in today's international setting, the global community is called to actively submit to international law and standards in extending humanitarian assistance and in the protection of human rights, by providing refuge and temporary sanctuary to these individuals.

International standards were mandated and established by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), of which signatories of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees are compelled to comply and understand the needs of these specific communities. The Convention defined a refugee as a person with a “well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her (1) race, (2) religion, (3) nationality, (4) membership in a particular social group, or (5) political opinion; is outside his/her country of origin; and is unable or unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.”¹

In a more comprehensive definition to identify individuals as refugees, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa defined a refugee as “any person compelled to leave his/her country owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality.”²

Similarly, in the Cartagena Declaration in 1984, representatives from Latin America defined refugees more objectively as “persons who flee their countries “because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.”³

The extension of humanitarian efforts by the members of international community through the actualization and adherence to international laws and standards represent solidarity among states. However, there remains an individual approach in the rehabilitative programs offered to refugees by different host countries, despite the singular commitment to resettlement efforts for refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons. While the Philippines is continuing to pursue its national commitment towards refugees by establishing formal processes on the application of the refugee

¹ (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

and stateless person status determination⁴, the country lacks initiatives in formalizing policies on the protection of these communities' human rights through the restoration of their community life through progressive rehabilitative programs. With this, consultation with refugees, especially the youth, becomes a significant effort to create realistic and valid programs to address the issues of the refugee experience, specifically on social inclusion and re-establishment of cultural normalcy.

In accordance to the Convention on the Rights of a Child by UNHCR, adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly in 1989, Article 12 provides parameters to State parties in assuring that a (1) "child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child"⁵ and (2) "the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law."⁶

Research Problem

When there is fear of persecution due to the exercise of one's race, religion, nationality, etc. in a State, the consequences of forced-fleeing from one's home country may cause irregularities in mechanisms and social norms, and may result to deprivation of normal experience of social, economic and cultural environment.⁷ The life and development status of refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons are subjected to a disruptive environment, more so for the youth and children. One of the focal problems of a refugee situation is the development of the individuals and the community in rehabilitating their situation into regularity. The United Nations emphasizes "the conservation of culture and the right to take part in a cultural life are recognized as human rights".⁸

Despite recognizing possible traumas and conflict-resulted fears, the role of the youth and children is given prime importance. In a refugee situation the continuous experience of a youth member or a child of a cross-cultural situation given the cultural differences—from language to customs and norms of the local communities—of the host country, "children frequently 'lose' their culture much more quickly than adults."⁹ The existing "natural tendency for children to try to adapt and conform to a new environment"¹⁰ becomes a concept relevant in the idea of alienation and loss of culture among communities as the adaptation takes place.

As the social and mental well-being of refugees mainly depend on the period of re-establishment of community life to regularity, the question which this study will mainly focus on is in the search for the rationale behind the critical role of children or

⁴ (DOJ Formalizes Rules and Mechanisms for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons, 2012)

⁵ (Convention on the Rights of a Child, 1989)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1994)

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

youth refugees in assuring the rehabilitation of the community towards cultural normalcy and social inclusion. While the stay of refugees in a temporary asylum forms a cross-cultural environment and forces adaptation and possible resettlement, the restoration of normal community life becomes a vital issue in social inclusion.

In the attempt to go back to the fundamentals of community development, especially in restoring abandoned culture vis-a-vis a refugee situation, youth resilience and participation becomes an adept and effective solution in designing programs for refugee rehabilitation to cultural normality. While the role of non-refugees such as international and non-government organizations, the government and other aid and humanitarian groups, the participation of refugee youth remain critical in pursuing efforts on the preservation of culture, despite the relative disappearance in a cross-cultural setting.

Significance of the Study

In recent events, people from war-torn countries and stateless people seek for an asylum and for an opportunity to be considered as a refugee. In the Philippines, the country which was lauded by the United Nations for its continuous and consistent efforts in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers such as the Rohingya Muslims (boat people)¹¹ and Syrians¹², humanitarian efforts directed to provide assistance and allowing the country to be the temporary destination of these communities have preoccupied government agenda. The Philippines is also the first in the Asia-Pacific region to formally establish a process for the protection of refugees and stateless persons during their application of the status.¹³ Driven by the country's international commitment, there is still a significant lack of laws, policies and practices that are intended for a comprehensive program design of activities for the rehabilitation of the community life of refugees and asylum seekers. These communities pursue efforts in finding a host country that would aid the restoration of regularity in their situation. As most refugees come from conflict-filled regions, especially in recent events such as Syrians, their search for humanitarian intervention from a host country remain vital in receiving due and sufficient assistance to restore and re-establish a method of cultural preservation, of which they left as per fear of persecution.

With conflict as one of the main factors of the influx of refugees seeking for asylum or a host country for as sanctuary, these communities, specifically the youth, can incur trauma and considerably alter their approach to community life. While this may be significantly challenging, it may be an opportunity to promote youth resilience through as effective survivors and activators of cultural normalcy in their respective communities. While the effects of fear of persecution and conflict may be adversely complex, resilience is a characteristic shared by the youth; thus, this may imply an opportunity for the youth as “central formulators of youth programming”¹⁴—a participatory approach to creating effective programs towards rebuilding the lives of refugees.

¹¹ (Pearlman, 2015)

¹² (Lee-Brago, 2015)

¹³ (PH is first country in Asia-Pacific to set up procedure to protect refugees, stateless, 2015)

¹⁴ (Sommers, 2006)

Scope of the Study

This research study is limited to the review of international experience young refugees' participation in the consultation, planning and implementation stages of rehabilitative programs for communities to restore cultural normalcy. The study will not discuss current restorative programs on humanitarian intervention in the Philippines due to the lack of practice. However, the study intends to justify the value of youth participation for the Philippine setting application and to be formalized humanitarian intervention with consultative and participative nature in a policy and practices initiated by the Philippine government.

Review of Related Literature

Overview

This research study intends to review and analyze materials on the justification of youth participation in the conceptualization of rehabilitative programs for restoring community life to regularity. While participation remains independent and situational, the planning and implementation (with consultation with young refugees) and the result to cultural normalcy are dependent on the level of commitment and participation by the community members. This review will investigate the relationship between two variables to support the hypothesis, in the attempt to answer the research problem.

Variables: Participation

Participation of refugees or allowing them to “take back control of their own lives”¹⁵ becomes a primary element in the development and rebuilding lives of a community. By having direct influence in the planning of rehabilitative programs for their benefit, by providing local knowledge founded on their experience of seeking asylum and humanitarian intervention, it clears a positive reinforcement on their self-esteem. Through participation, the design of rehabilitative projects for the restoration of the community life to normalcy becomes consultative and collaborative in nature. Examples of consultation may involve decisions on the reconstruction of houses, preferences in food, and restoration of religious activities and practices.¹⁶

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees considers refugees as partners in rebuilding the community lives and encourage their participation in the process. Efforts of UNHCR include the encouragement of formation of refugee committees as formal representation of the communities, informal direct contact with communities, or through provision of employment opportunities to refugees, particularly posts that involve decision-making.¹⁷

Participation of youth is considered as a consultative activity to allow their inputs to be considered as insights on the specific areas of community life. According to Tolfree (as cited in the works of Boyden, Ling and Myers):

¹⁵ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1994)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

*“at the very least, the need to consult [young people] about their needs, problems and resources is an essential precondition for the development of programs designed to support and assist them. Programs based entirely on adult perceptions of [young people’s] needs and priorities are almost certainly destined to ‘get it wrong’ and hence waste valuable resources.”*¹⁸

Refugee participation may extend to several areas such as language maintenance, restoration of religious activities, cultural activities in the arts and recreation, and general community development. UNHCR suggests that the continuous practice and care for the mother tongue of refugees signifies a vital component, especially to young ones, in preserving their culture. The organization also emphasizes the crucial element of re-establishing cultural normalcy by renewing practice of religion. Practice of religious activities, as one of the obvious symbols of cultural development, aids younger refugees to understand their culture prior to seeking an asylum. It also plays significant role in solidifying the community spirit, through singular beliefs and practices. Arts and Recreational activities such as traditional music and dance, similar to religion, are critical symbols of culture that promote social cohesion of the refugee communities.¹⁹ All of these are particularly significant to allow a continuum of culture within the community and restore the community life they left due to fear of persecution. The regaining of cultural normalcy significantly depends on the efforts of participation of refugees, especially the children and the youth, as they are the next generation that will continue what their community initially left for a life of safety and protection.

While the support of the host government and humanitarian aid agencies or organizations remain vital in the intervention for restoration of cultural normality for refugees and asylum seekers, participation plays a key role in identifying the needs and issues of the communities through local knowledge of the community members, in order to effectively assist them to community life rehabilitation. However, insofar, UNHCR stresses “it is extremely important, in choosing operational partners, to make every effort to ascertain how an agency intends to support the culture and religion of the refugee community.”²⁰

Variables: Cultural Normalcy through Rehabilitative Programs

As emphasized by UNHCR, “the extent to which cultural normalcy can be restored will depend principally on the degree of fragmentation of the refugee population and on the willingness of the host government to permit refugees to determine their own activities. The following are ways in which the aid worker can assist refugees in rebuilding a healthy cultural life.”²¹ There remains two elements in attaining full restoration of normality for the refugees and asylum seekers, which are: (1) participation and level of social cohesion their community showcases; and (2) support of the host government of activities that will allow opportunities for the communities to continue accustomed activities.

¹⁸ (Couch, 2007)

¹⁹ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1994)

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Relationship

Design of rehabilitative programs is dependent on the level of participation refugees provide. Considering that youth participation remains critical in the restoration of community life, young refugees must engage in activities that would aid the communities in preserving the culture that was suspended due to the search for temporary asylum. An example of this is the engagement of Somali refugee children in Yemen in varied community activities.²² The following community development programs and activities were established to rehabilitate the community from the refugee experience:

- Teaching of social values and awareness, resiliency and self-reliance, and discipline by establishing Boy Scouts and Girl Guides
- Establishment of “Children’s Corner” to provide a platform for extra-curricular activities, which involves storytelling, quizzes, plays and other recreational and cultural activities

In Beirut, Lebanon, Palestinian youth in Shatila camp began with a youth center, wherein the initial planning started with a workshop involving the youth and adults for consultation and discussion of community needs and possible projects that will address these needs. The youth committee proceeded with further planning of community development activities to engage in.²³ Similarly, Sri Lankans who were displaced due to conflict between Tamil and Singhalese communities created social activities social events and with networks established, these will be used for relevant volunteerism activities or classes focused on the youth’s capacity-building activities and skills training, to equip them with proper competencies for future employment.²⁴

Theoretical Framework

Overview

This research study will use a theory of international relations, which is Constructivism, and align its concepts with a general development approach and methodology on capacity analysis, which is Participatory Rural Appraisal as the framework of the study.

Theory: Constructivism

While Constructivism, as an international relations theory, is known for its diversified intellectual perspectives due to different conceptualizations of its proponents, the theory has primarily centered its abstraction in the creation of social physical world—with norms, rules and institutions, through social interaction.²⁵ According to Alexander Wendt in his argument against the concept of neorealism, by the interaction between actors (people, States, organizations, etc.), it forms a process of

²² (The Refugee Experience)

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ (Adler)

collective identity and shared ideas between parties.²⁶ In the same way, participatory methods in designing rehabilitative programs for refugees depend on the interaction and exchange of expertise, ideas and perspectives to create a singular approach with shared results. Wendt claims that social interaction results to a structure of identities and interests.

The idea of constructivism is the alignment of perspectives into a collective knowledge that will establish optimized shared results. While refugees are the dependent variable in the equation of program designing for cultural restoration, their ideas and experiences shared through a process of participation can be considered valuable due to the authenticity of inputs.

Constructivists argue that the international system is socially constructed and this reflects how the group of actors and institutions are formed through common understanding, identities, interactions and influences to pursue a common goal. This makes the group of actors and institutions an epistemic community.

Framework: Participatory Rural Appraisal

The theory of Constructivism is aligned with an analysis approach called Participatory Rural Appraisal or PRA. Participatory Rural Appraisal is a set of approaches and methods that allows local people opportunities to contribute to program design through sharing and analyzing their local knowledge of community life, as well as to contribute in planning and implementation.²⁷ PRA encourages a multi-level approach to participation by tapping to grassroots level. In this context of designing programs to restore community life and cultural normalcy among refugee communities, refugees may play a critical role in planning and implementation of rehabilitative projects, especially the youth, with higher level of resilience on implications of intercultural exposure and social inclusion. While PRA encourages that the central role of development be dependent on local communities, in this case, the refugees, it empowers the community to provide authentic and valid information derived from local knowledge and experience on the refugee situation.

²⁶ (Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in world politics)

²⁷ (Morgan and Taschereau, 1996)

Operationalization of Constructivism

Concept	Definition	Operational Definition
Norms	They are standards of behavior that are generally accepted among a group of actors and serve as a guide to human conduct.	This refers to the international standards (e.g. universal human rights) by which states are compelled to accept and use as guiding principles in establishing their own caliber per standard, towards refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons.
Rules	Rules are social mechanisms that control the action and interaction of actors in the society.	This refers to the national laws and policies of the host country (specifically the Philippines) on the acceptance of refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons and the policies on comprehensive program design for their rehabilitation of community life (if any).
Actors	Actors are groups of individuals, institutions or organizations that participate in world politics.	Actors pertain to then involved parties such as the Philippine government, United Nations agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF, etc.) and non-governmental organizations.
Identities	Identities are specific understandings and expectations of one's self aligned with each role in society. It provides context and basis for interest.	This relates to the cultural identities and customs of refugees prior to seeking an asylum and, separately, the culture of the host country. Identities, in this context, may also refer to the specific roles expected of each actor, such as the government, NGOs, and refugees and asylum seekers.

Material World	The Material World is a collective term in Constructivism used to describe the systems and institutions that shape actions and interactions. It is also perceived as common understanding.	In this context, Material World is represented by the institutions and systems under the host country, particularly the Philippine governance, as it adheres to international laws and standards on the acceptance of refugees and the protection of their fundamental human rights.
Intersubjectivity	Intersubjectivity provides context in the common understanding and shared idea of actors involved with a common interest. It forms the network of communication among involved actors.	In this study, this pertains to the resulting communication between parties (refugees / asylum seekers and other actors) through participation. The common understanding would pertain to the refugee situation and the result of the communication, which are proposals for effective rehabilitative program designs.
Epistemic Communities	Epistemic Communities refer to knowledge-oriented groups that are considered norm entrepreneurs, responsible for identifying standards and policies to be adhered to.	This refers to the actors (knowledge-oriented), including the government, NGOs, international organizations, and even refugee and asylum seekers community that define social arrangements towards an epistemic and singular result, which is a comprehensive and effective rehabilitative program towards restoration to cultural normalcy of refugee communities.

Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram (Constructivism)

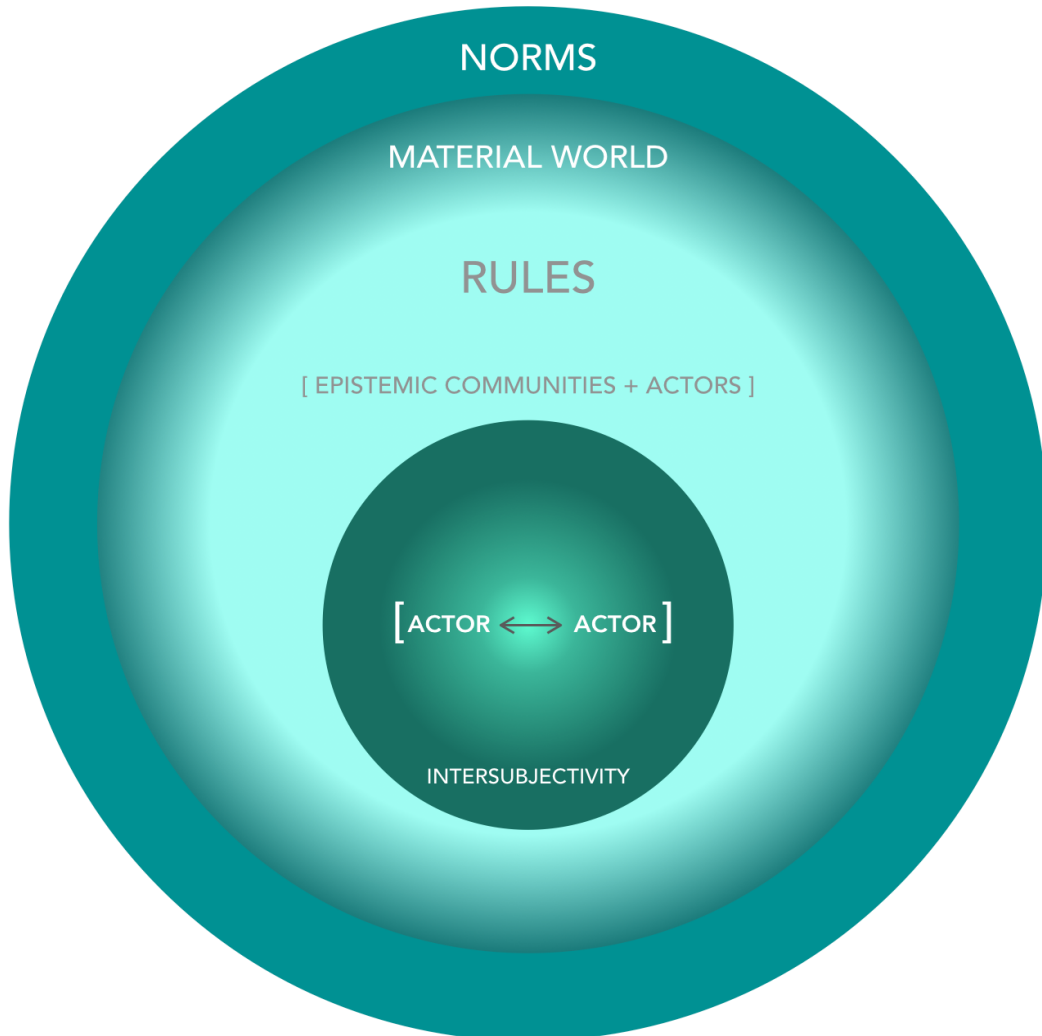


Figure 2: Operational Diagram (Constructivism)

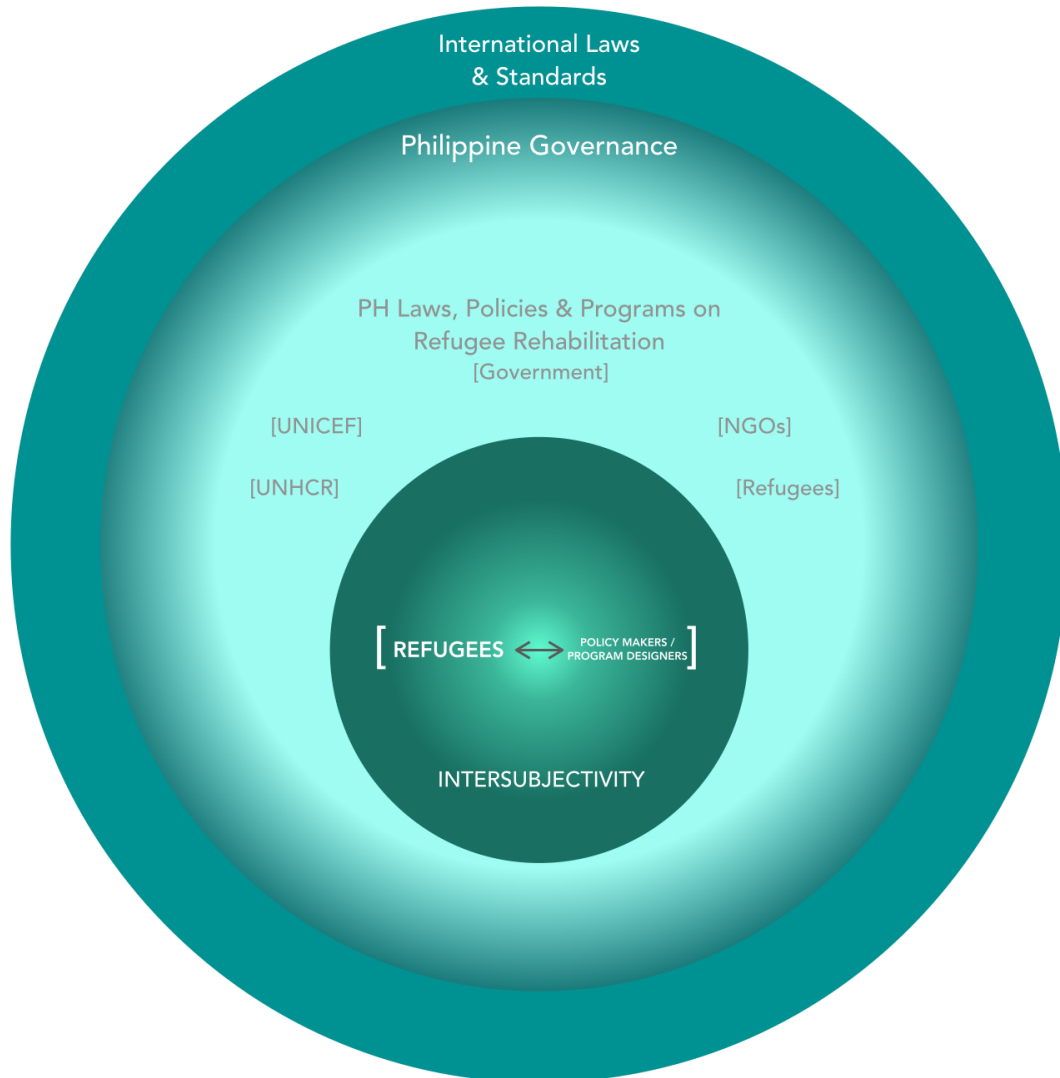
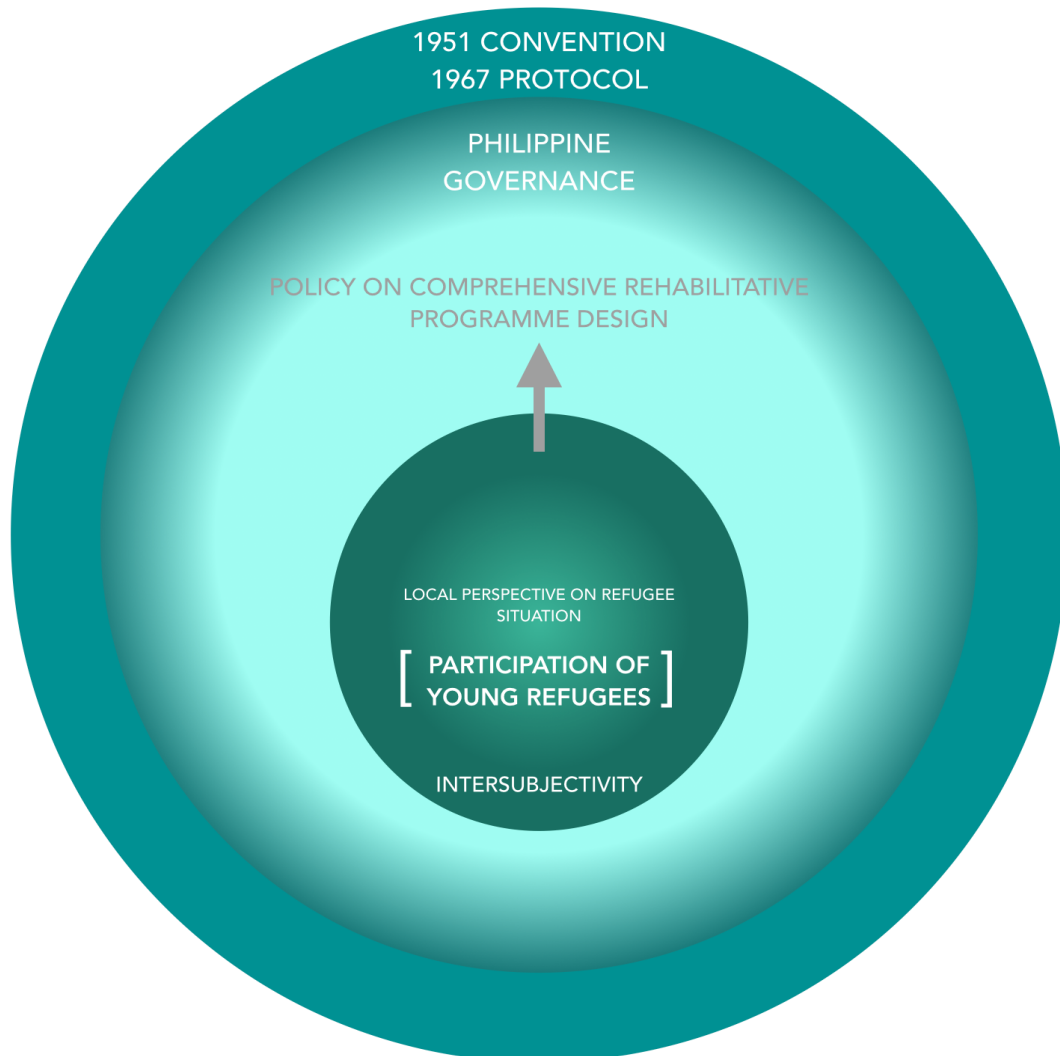


Figure 3: Operational Diagram (Application of Constructivism to Participatory Rural Appraisal Analysis)



Methodology

Overview

In facilitating the collection of data, this research will use the review of literature and practices in related to participation of young refugees towards restoring cultural normalcy, achieving community social cohesion and social inclusion in the country of asylum. Due to the limited data available in the Philippines on policies and practices on the rehabilitative program designing for refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons upon acceptance to such status, the research aims to recommend and justify best practices on the development achieved from multi-level participation and partnerships.

Review of the VYRE: Voices of Young Refugees in Europe

The Voices of Young Refugees in Europe, also known as VYRE, was officially launched in 2008 in Budapest. In the two meetings co-funded by European Youth Centre (EYC) and UNHCR, conclusions were made on the participation of refugee youth leaders and refugee workers; there is a need for skills development for the improvement of capacity-building activities and for the reinforcement of their participation in the society.²⁸ Participants of the VYRE included humanitarian aid workers and young refugees aged 18-25, who were residents of the Council of Europe member states who are particularly interested in displacement issues and social inclusion dilemmas.

In Europe, VYRE became a focal network for young refugees to share their views and experiences regarding their situation. With VYRE, concerns on discrimination and challenges on social inclusion are mainly brought up in sessions. These issues exclusively restrict refugees in general to access participation opportunities in the society—“sometimes met with ignorance, sometimes prejudice, racism, patronizing attitudes.”²⁹ VYRE is able to establish a network, “in which members can acquire new skills and strengthen their capacities” in Europe, aimed at establishing social cohesion and intercultural harmony.³⁰

VYRE facilitated a set of sessions that focused on vital questions to answer that are founded on the idea of young refugee’s participation in developing approaches, mechanisms, frameworks, projects and programs for their community to address issues on cultural normalcy and social inclusion. While the refugee status involves social and mental well-being rehabilitation, the participation of young refugees is considered a primary source of valid expectations on programs through their well-founded experience and local knowledge of the situation.

With the support of regional and international organizations in Europe by creating a strong platform for young refugees to facilitate changes into their situation, there exists a productive planning and implementation of rehabilitative programs that are collaborative in nature.

Ladder of Youth Participation:

According to sociologist Roger Hart, the concept of “ladder of participation” for youth involvement is a model that conceptualizes participation of young people as a “continuum from manipulative through tokenistic participation to forms of participation in which young people are involved in initiating activities and sharing decisions with adults.

²⁸ (European Youth Centre Strasbourg, 2009)

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Figure 4: Ladder of Youth Participation



Analysis

Insofar, studies show that participation of young refugees may improve on youth's resilience. With the opportunities of meaningful participation, the resilience of young people is enhanced through their contributions, which in turn allows opportunities of independence, autonomy, and social competence. By strengthening the resilience of the young refugees, a capacity-building opportunity facilitates a positive approach to regaining control of community life and reverting to cultural normalcy.

Recommendation and Conclusion

With the influx of refugees that the Philippines has declared to be accommodating in recent events, such as the Rohingya Muslims and Syrian refugees, it is more than critical to establish policies and practices on rehabilitative programs that involve the participation of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly the young ones.

Despite the formal procedure offered to refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons by Philippine Law through the Department of Justice's Refugee and Stateless Person Processing Unit, which protects the applicant from deportation prior to the determining of results, the Philippines lack policies on restorative program design for refugee's rehabilitation of community life. While this is the case, the research recommends that the Philippines establish a clear policy on rehabilitative and participative program designing for humanitarian intervention to cultural normalcy, encouraging the involvement of the youth in providing valuable inputs on the refugee experience. Due to the authenticity of their local knowledge, valid recommendations on community needs and issues will be communicated for proper planning and implementation with aid organizations and experts. As based on the review of practices in Europe and Australia, and other countries, where they have their own share of extending humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum seekers, the role of children and youth is given prime importance in restoring not only cultural normalcy, but also enhancing youth resiliency and social cohesion.

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