



# HUMAN RIGHTS IN SURVIVAL MODE: REBUILDING TRUST AND SUPPORTING DIGITAL WORKERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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# **ACRONYMS**

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>CHR</b>         | Commission on Human Rights  |
| <b>CRN</b>         | Child Rights Network  |
| <b>EJK</b>         | Extrajudicial killing   |
| <b>FMA</b>         | Foundation for Media Alternatives   |
| <b>HR</b>          | Human Rights  |
| <b>HRW</b>         | Human Rights Watch  |
| <b>IDEALS Inc.</b> | Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services |
| <b>iDefend</b>     | In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement                             |
| <b>INGO</b>        | International non-government organization                                   |
| <b>LGBTQ</b>       | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer                                  |
| <b>MMP</b>         | Metro Manila Pride  |
| <b>NGO</b>         | Non-government organization   |
| <b>PAHRA</b>       | Philippine Alliance for Human Rights Advocates                              |
| <b>PMCJ</b>        | Philippine Movement for Climate Justice                                     |
| <b>Rise Up</b>     | Rise Up for Life and for Rights   |
| <b>TFDP</b>        | Task Force Detainees of the Philippines                                     |
| <b>UNHRC</b>       | United Nations Human Rights Council   |



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Key Findings

This report summarizes powerful research on the Philippines' human rights sector in "survival mode" under Rodrigo Duterte's violent regime. Historically known as the most active civil society in Asia, the Philippines human rights movement has faced an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy while burdened with the responsibility to advocate for the many victims of abuses. Drawing on interviews with human rights workers and their allies in journalism and the academe, this study captures diverse interpretations as to how human rights has become "broken," "tarnished," and "a bad word" within a short span of four years. It also describes sectoral, organizational, and generational conflicts in how seasoned veterans and younger activists have been strategizing differently in their efforts to win back public trust.

This study identifies the long- and short-term trade-offs behind organizational strategies of *frontlining* and speaking out on the human rights abuses of the Duterte regime versus more under-the-radar *backchanneling* work focused on service delivery and grassroots organization. Taking a strategic communication perspective and worker-centered approach, our study specifically places the voices of the communication and technology workers in the human rights sector at the heart of our analysis. **What our research uncovers is that despite their many creative experiments to connect with diverse constituencies, human rights organizations have still failed to invest material resources in sustainable communication infrastructures and empower their communication personnel.** Almost half of the organizations we interviewed still had no staff member dedicated to communication or branding; **communication workers continued to play peripheral roles in their organizations.**

The report invites sectoral inquiry into how to better provide capacity-building and mental health support for human rights workers, especially the communication and technology personnel who are important, if constrained, voices in overall organizational strategy. This report identifies ways they can be better supported within organizations and across broader coalitions. It also proposes ways in which donors can reorient programming toward helping global South organizations cope with targeted harassment, respond to disinformation narratives, cultivate new champions of human rights principles, and offer mental health support for the digital workers doubly burdened during COVID-19.

As a contribution to the broader **TaSC project "True Costs of Disinformation,"** this study analyzes how digital disinformation, online trolling, and conspiracy theories have been added to state elites' arsenal of "dirty tricks," such as enforced disappearances, imprisonment, and censorship in a global South context with weak democratic institutions. Because of the violent and insecure political contexts in

SUMMARY



which they work, and the cultures of political patronage and everyday corruption they must navigate—heightened by intra-sectoral conflict and dependencies on foreign donors seeking to influence local politics—human rights organizations are traditionally vulnerable to conspiratorial accusations of foreign control, local oligarchic elite capture, or alliances with alternative power centers. Investment in strategic and creative communication that can address conspiracies across digital and mainstream media is therefore paramount, just as there should be deepened commitment to listening to local communities and rebuilding public trust.

Meant as a helpful audit of human rights organizations' communication capacities, our analysis suggests that careful strategy and material investments should follow organizations' decision-making between frontlining versus backchanneling in a repressive global South context. Calling out the state's human rights abuses exposes an organization to new forms of targeted harassment and requires protecting the communication workers directly responding to troll attacks. Organizations avoiding publicity and seeking efficiency in their service delivery to grassroots communities still bear the brunt of reputational damage when the sector at large comes under attack.


## Six Key Lessons

1. Human rights organizations are handicapped in their ability to cope with information warfare under the current political environment as they have failed to make significant investments in strategic communication. They need to channel more resources into sustainable infrastructure and personnel.
2. Communication and technology personnel are often peripheral actors within organizations and individual programs. Human rights organizations should empower these workers and include their perspectives in organizational decision-making. There are opportunities for coalition-building with allies in journalism, advertising, and public relations, and the academe for listening projects as well as creative interventions.
3. Human rights organizations often treat communication as a tool rather than a real strategy. Rather than use communication as a mere add-on to direct community services, organizations should use communication and digital technologies to take control of the political narrative, connect with diverse audiences, correct disinformation narratives, and support their colleagues in peril.

4. Human rights organizations adopted different survival strategies: some became frontliners by bravely calling out government abuses, while others we call backchannelers distanced themselves from “human rights” as a label and focused on essential services. Human rights advocates must weigh the opportunities and “true costs” behind their survival strategies while mindfully helping those in harm’s way.

|                            | Frontlining  | Backchanneling  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Campaign strategies</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling out government abuses</li> <li>• Forming broad coalitions and aligning with high-profile personalities</li> <li>• Lobbying national-level legislators</li> <li>• Campaigns use “negative imagery” focusing on victims</li> <li>• Establishing relationships with news organizations and international allies</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on essential services to grassroots communities with limited media publicity</li> <li>• Minimizing visibility of staff</li> <li>• Lobbying local-level officials</li> <li>• Experimenting with communication aimed at younger audiences, local constituencies, and specific sectors (e.g., LGBTQ+)</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Opportunities</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brave acts serve as lightning rod or inspiration for the sector and its allies</li> <li>• High media publicity at national and international levels can build policy momentum, increase material investment, and catalyze support</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyday operations continue without direct intimidation of workers</li> <li>• Focus on less controversial / apolitical issues to appeal to new audiences and the “movable middle” demographic</li> <li>• Attracts donors supporting specific social, sectoral, environmental causes</li> </ul>  |
| <b>True costs</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse forms of targeted harassment from enforced disappearances to imprisonment to lawcraft</li> <li>• Digital attacks include disinformation, hate speech, conspiracy theory</li> <li>• “Negative campaigns” focused on abuses alienate the majority public supportive of the current Duterte regime</li> </ul>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smear campaigns against the sector affect local communities’ willingness to interface with them</li> <li>• Their frontliner allies feel betrayed if they do not express solidarity during crisis moments</li> <li>• Disavowing the “human rights” frame/concept may shield them from state attacks in the short term but may have long-term consequences on public perception of the sector</li> </ul> |

5. Donors have a key role to play in reorienting the incentive systems that shape programming. They can expand funding structures to include projects aimed at engaging mainstream publics, addressing disinformation and conspiracy theory, and cultivating new champions of human rights principles.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the centrality of digital media in connecting communities and shaping public conversations about human rights. The human rights sector needs to develop new ways of connecting with communities using digital media, bring attention to the plight of vulnerable communities, and challenge populist frames that promote a militarized response to a public health crisis.



Calling out the state's human rights abuses exposes an organization to new forms of targeted harassment and requires protecting the communication workers directly responding to troll attacks.

## Part 1.

# STATE OF THE FIELD

## The Human Rights Community in Crisis

As authoritarian nationalism and angry populist politics surge around the globe, the Philippines stands out in an alarming position in terms of safeguarding fundamental human rights and securing the personal safety of human rights advocates. The Philippines has fallen the furthest in the ranking of 113 countries surveyed in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index, particularly in the categories of Constraints on Government Powers, Fundamental Rights, Order and Security, and Criminal Justice.<sup>1</sup> Human rights advocates in the country are saddled with the double burden of extending help to the diverse victims of human rights abuses while justifying the very nature of their work against smear campaigns and disinformation narratives that paint them as anti-patriotic, partisan, and/or conspiratorially allied with local or foreign bad actors.

### Human Rights under Duterte

President Rodrigo Duterte has continued to enjoy very good trust ratings<sup>2</sup> from the public, even in the face of flagrant human rights violations and scrutiny from various international bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the International Criminal Court. Sociologists explain the continued popularity of Duterte’s angry populism as rooted in Filipinos complicitly entering into “a new social contract

with a strongman president who expresses little regard for civil liberties but who holds the promise of delivering peace and prosperity to all.”<sup>3</sup> While we agree that mainstream publics are not passive dupes and instead actively resonate with Duterte’s angry anti-establishment message, we also recognize that the government’s strategic deployment of legal intimidation and social media manipulation undermine liberal values and

<sup>1</sup> World Justice Project. World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2017-2018. [https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2018-June-Online-Edition\\_0.pdf](https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2018-June-Online-Edition_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Social Weather Stations. 2020. “Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Pres. Duterte’s Net Satisfaction at new record “Excellent” +72.” Social Weather Stations, 21 January, 2020. Available at: <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclidisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20200121185102>. The SWS has not yet released any presidential satisfaction rating survey for 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Curato, N. 2019. “Toxic Democracy? The Philippines in 2019.” In Southeast Asian Affairs 2019, edited by Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

influence public discourse<sup>4</sup>, favoring particular perspectives and silencing others.

The most alarming of human rights abuses stem from the government's anti-drug campaign that has claimed at least 6,500 lives according to the Philippine National Police.<sup>5</sup> Victims—often young male breadwinners from poor families—have been dismissed as “collateral damage” in a war meant to eradicate drug use and restore public order and safety.<sup>6</sup> Many victims are reported to be among the most impoverished and marginalized in society<sup>7</sup> and 101 of them are children.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the government has continued its attack on journalists, opposition politicians, and human rights defenders. After a year-long struggle against threats of closure due to alleged “business violations,” media company ABS-CBN lost its bid for a franchise renewal.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile,

Maria Ressa, founder of news site Rappler, and former Rappler reporter Reynaldo Santos Jr. were convicted of cyber libel last June.<sup>10</sup> In total, the National Union of Journalists reports that 15 journalists have been killed while 154 have faced attacks under the Duterte administration.<sup>11</sup> Senator Leila de Lima, one of the president's most vocal critics, remains in jail over bogus charges. Meanwhile, 134 human rights defenders have been killed in the Philippines.<sup>12</sup>

Such alarming human rights violations prompted the UN Human Rights Council to vote in favor of a resolution seeking an independent investigation of human rights abuses in the Philippines, particularly on the war on drugs.<sup>13</sup> In June 2020, the UNHRC finally published the results of their investigation and detailed the “serious violations of human rights” in the country, such

<sup>4</sup> We had previously conducted ethnographic research on the disinformation industry in the Philippines. Our recent study published by NATO StratCom examines the four work models of political trolling in the Philippines. See Ong, J.C. and Cabanes, J. 2019. “Politics and Profit in the Fake News Factory: Four Work Models of Political Trolling in the Philippines.” NATO Strategic Communication. Available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/four-work-models-of-political-trolling-in-the-philippines/40>. Our previous study involved interviews with actual “paid trolls” and authors of fake news.” See Ong, J.C. 2019. “When Disinformation Studies Meets Production Studies: Social Identities and Moral Justifications in the Political Trolling Industry.” *International Journal of Communication* 13: 5771-5790.

<sup>5</sup> The number of deaths in the drug war vary depending on sources and “PNP’s arbitrary categorization”: see Philippine Human Rights Information Center. 2020. “The Killing State: 2019 Philippine Human Rights Situationer.” Available at: <https://www.philrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WP-Copy-2019-HR-Sit.pdf>. Human Rights Watch estimates that over 12,000 have been killed in the anti-drug operations of the Duterte government; see Human Rights Watch. 2018. “Philippines: Duterte’s ‘Drug War’ Claims 12,000 Lives.” 18 January 2018. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/philippines-dutertes-drug-war-claims-12000-lives>

<sup>6</sup> Fernandez, M.C., Pangilinan, A. and Quijano, A. 2019. “Examining the effects of drug-related killings on Philippine Conditional Cash Transfer beneficiaries in Metro Manila, 2016 to 2017.” Preprint version. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336317469\\_Examining\\_the\\_effects\\_of\\_drug-related\\_killings\\_on\\_Philippine\\_Conditional\\_Cash\\_Transfer\\_beneficiaries\\_in\\_Metro\\_Manila\\_2016-2017](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336317469_Examining_the_effects_of_drug-related_killings_on_Philippine_Conditional_Cash_Transfer_beneficiaries_in_Metro_Manila_2016-2017)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2020. “Philippines: Lasting Harm to Children from ‘Drug War.’” 27 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/27/philippines-lasting-harm-children-drug-war>

<sup>9</sup> Cruz, M. and Ramos-Araneta, M. 2020. “ABS CBN loses franchise bid.” *Manila Standard*, 11 July 2020. Available at: <https://manilastandard.net/mobile/article/328330>

<sup>10</sup> Regencia, T. 2020. “Maria Ressa found guilty in blow to Philippines’ press freedom.” *Aljazeera*, 15 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/15/maria-ressa-found-guilty-in-blow-to-philippines-press-freedom>

<sup>11</sup> Rappler.com. 2019. “154 attacks, threats versus journalists since Duterte took office - media group.” Rappler, 19 January 2019. Available at: <https://r3.rappler.com/nation/246992-recorded-attacks-threats-vs-journalists-duterte-administration>

<sup>12</sup> Gonzales, C. 2019. “134 human rights defenders killed since Duterte assumed office - Lagman.” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 June 2019. Available at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1127091/134-human-rights-defenders-killed-since-duterte-assumed-office-lagman>

<sup>13</sup> Gavilan, J. 2019. “UN rights council adopts resolution vs war on drugs.” Rappler, 11 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/un-human-rights-council-adopts-resolution-against-drug-war-killings-philippines>

as “killings and arbitrary detentions, as well as the vilification of dissent.”<sup>14</sup> The report shows that Duterte’s drug war has involved the falsification of evidence in 25 operations that killed 49 people, where “police repeatedly recovered guns bearing the same serial numbers from different victims in different locations”—suggesting that guns have been planted among multiple crime scenes to implicate many victims.<sup>15</sup> The Duterte administration continues to reject calls for accountability and denies responsibility for the killings in the drug war.<sup>16</sup>

Duterte’s attacks against human rights defenders can be seen as part of the nationalistic, xenophobic, misogynistic, and explicitly anti-human rights agenda of many populist leaders.<sup>17</sup> Duterte has unequivocally expressed his opinion against human rights and its defenders by saying, “Do not believe these human rights activists. I’ll

kill you along with drug addicts; I’ll decapitate you.”<sup>18</sup>

Duterte’s criticism of human rights defenders is one strand of a broader anti-establishment narrative that insinuates that Manila’s liberal intellectuals who put forward human rights are out of touch with the daily brutalities of crime and drugs.<sup>19</sup> The administration’s supporters, including paid social media influencers and real political fans, amplify his vitriolic attacks in digital spaces following logics of “volatile virality,” where the loudest and most extreme perspectives aim to hack public attention, create distractions, and even earn profits.<sup>20</sup> Disinformation narratives circulating online insinuate that human rights defenders are criminal supporters, communist sympathizers, and conspiratorially aligned with foreign destabilizers.<sup>21</sup>

## Research Questions and Approach

This study takes stock of how human rights organizations and advocates in the Philippines have coped with this crisis of legitimacy and efficacy under the polarized political environment of the past four years. How do human rights workers perceive and characterize the challenges they face under President Rodrigo Duterte’s regime?

<sup>14</sup> UN Human Rights Council. 2020. “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in the Philippines. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/PH/Philippines-HRC44-AEV.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mercado, N. 2019. “Reply to UN by Duterte Administration: No rights Violations in PH.” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 September 2019. Available at: <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/180108/reply-to-un-by-duterte-administration-no-rights-violations-in-ph-reds-to-blame>

<sup>17</sup> Alston, P. 2017. “The populist challenge to human rights.” *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 1-15.

<sup>18</sup> Bencito, J.P. and Cruz, M. 2017. “Duterte vows to kill EU ‘rights activists’.” *Manila Standard*, 20 May 2017. Available at: <https://manilastandard.net/mobile/article/237140>

<sup>19</sup> Curato, N. 2016. “The Philippines cannot build a nation over the bodies of 100,000 dead in Duterte’s war on drugs.” *The Conversation*, 24 August 2016. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/philippines-cannot-build-a-nation-over-the-bodies-of-100-000-dead-in-dutertes-war-on-drugs-64053>

<sup>20</sup> Ong, J.C. and Cabanes, J. 2018. Architects of networked disinformation: Behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake news production in the Philippines. Available at: <https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Gavilan, J. 2017. “Human rights defenders call for safe environment online vs harassment, threats.” *Rappler*, 31 August 2017. Available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/human-rights-defenders-safe-environment-online-harassment-threats>

What structural changes or program adjustments have they implemented and experimented with in response to the growing number of human rights abuses while mitigating threats to their personal safety and security? Crucially, how do human rights organizations communicate with their target constituencies and mainstream publics, and respond to various political narratives and troll attacks that undermine the foundational principles of the human rights movement?

Stories and images about human rights advocates have real-world material consequences; representation matters insofar as it shapes how target communities and mainstream audiences actually trust and interact with human rights advocates. **This study is thus primarily concerned with the role of communication and technology in human rights organizations and campaigns. Communication technologies create new opportunities for interactivity, organization, and mobilization, extending the material actions of fundraising, donation, and street protests with exciting symbolic affordances (e.g., social media activism, mutual aid and support groups, backchannel communication, signing online petitions, and influencer advocacies).** At the same time, digital media platforms—

Human rights advocates in the country are saddled with the double burden of extending help to the diverse victims of human rights abuses while justifying the very nature of their work against smear campaigns and disinformation narratives that paint them as anti-patriotic, partisan, and/or conspiratorially allied with local or foreign bad actors.

primarily governed by the commercial motivations of private corporations rather than guided by public values—pose new risks for the human rights movement as they potentially amplify hate speech and compromise users' data privacy. This study reports on the ways in which human rights organizations in the Philippines have made practical choices navigating opportunities and risks of contemporary communication environments to fulfill their project aims and uphold liberal principles of the human rights movement.

The second approach of this research is a **creative labor perspective, which puts the voices of human rights workers (particularly, the communication and technology personnel within human rights organizations) at the heart of our analysis.** We are thus especially sensitive to power relationships within human rights organizations: the ways in which some people's voices are more sought and empowered in strategic decision-making while others are less represented and heard. We are also attuned to how these power dynamics often reflect how broader relationships across the sector are organized around capital and clout,



whereby organizations' specific programs and services are shaped by funders' priorities, timelines, and audit mechanisms. This report invites sectoral inquiry among local human rights advocates and local and international funders into how better and more strategic investments can be made in communication and technology programs that offer opportunities for engaging with mainstream publics, correcting disinformation narratives, and cultivating new champions of human rights principles across diverse groups and communities.

The study focuses on the opportunities and risks around human rights communication in the current context of information warfare. The report pays special attention to how human rights defenders can better navigate the contemporary communication environment, reach new allies, and (re)build trust with mainstream publics. We acknowledge diverse political economic and historical factors behind the crisis faced by the human rights sector, which have been discussed in important reports published by the United States' Department of State,<sup>22</sup> Philippine Human Rights Information Center,<sup>23</sup> and Human Rights Watch;<sup>24</sup> this report aims to specifically explore the understudied aspect of strategic communication and communication and technology workers' conditions in the sector.

## Methods

This study employed qualitative research methods to capture the diverse experiences of workers in the human rights space, as well as of affiliated experts with direct experience collaborating on human rights projects through consultancies and/or media engagements. We conducted in-depth interviews with respondents from December 2019 to March 2020, and follow-up interviews from May to June 2020 to check in with organizations about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their organizational objectives, work structures, and communication activities with their target constituencies.

Informed by the principle of maximum diversity, our sampling criteria aimed to capture similarities and differences in how human rights organizations and sectoral groups have experienced challenges of engaging publics under the Duterte administration, and compared global versus smaller local organizations in terms of investments in communication and technology infrastructure and personnel.

In consultation with The Asia Foundation, we settled on interviewing 41 respondents composed of human rights advocates and sectorial allies. The breakdown of respondents is presented in Table 1.

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<sup>22</sup> United States Department of State. 2020. "Philippines 2019 Human Rights Report." In 2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. US: Washington, D.C.

<sup>23</sup> Philippine Human Rights Information Center. 2020. "The Killing State: 2019 Philippine Human Rights Situationer." Available at: <https://www.philrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WP-Copy-2019-HR-Sit.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2019. "Philippines: Events of 2019." Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/philippines>

Table 1. Respondents' Organizations

|                        | Organization Type  | Number of Organizations |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Human rights advocates | Human rights organizations (international organizations and local NGOs and alliances, focused on human rights as their core mandate)                   | 17                      |
|                        | Sectoral organizations (defending rights of specific communities and sectors such as women, LGBTQ, farmers, children, and laborers)                    | 11                      |
|                        | Human rights government agencies (offices that are focused on monitoring and responding to human rights issues, such as state violence and harassment) | 2                       |
| Sectoral allies        | Mainstream media   | 5                       |
|                        | Ad and PR agencies   | 4                       |
|                        | Artists and activists  | 2                       |
|                        | <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>41</b>               |

Table 2 describes the designation of representatives interviewed. Most of our respondents are executive-level representatives who shared a broader view of their organizational activities and work structures. From them, we learned the extent to which communication and technology workers played central or peripheral roles in their programs. We met with communication and technology personnel who shared their experiences of interacting with workers across the organizational hierarchy. We also interviewed policy/advocacy officers and program officers who handle communication-related work in cases when the organization has no dedicated communication staff.

Table 2. Respondents' Backgrounds

| Category   | Count | Role   | Professional Background   |
|--|-------|--|---|
| <b>Executive roles</b><br><br>Designation:<br>Executive Director;<br>Secretary General;<br>National<br>Coordinator   | 18    | Oversees the direction of the organization and provides strategic oversight to the implementation of communication initiatives   | Prior roles: veteran development and human rights workers with 10 to 20 years of experience |
| <b>Communication staff</b><br><br>Designation:<br>Communication<br>Director/<br>Coordinator/<br>Officer/Consultant;<br>Information Officer;<br>Media Officer | 7     | Manages the entire communication work in the organization. Their responsibilities include (1) writing, editing, and distributing public-facing content, such as press releases, posters, and website and social media materials, (2) coordinating with journalists, and (3) managing online communities. | Prior roles: broadcast or newspaper journalist; ad and PR staff                             |
| <b>Advocacy/policy staff</b><br><br>Designation:<br>Advocacy Officer;<br>Policy Officer  | 4     | Prepares legislative proposals and manages relationships with lawmakers and stakeholders. They use communication materials as tools to facilitate lobbying. In organizations where there are no dedicated communication personnel, they design communication materials themselves.                       | Prior roles: legislative staff  |
| <b>Program/project staff</b><br><br>Designation:<br>Program and/or<br>Project Officer;<br>Project Coordinator  | 4     | Organizes community-level projects. In organizations where there are no dedicated communication personnel, they develop the content themselves.  | Prior roles: legislative staff  |
| <b>Others</b><br><br>Legal Officer;<br>Researcher  | 8     | Other staff in the organization contributing to communication work   | Prior roles: lawyers, researchers, journalists  |

Our ethnographically inspired approach to the interview process allowed us to capture our respondents' reflections about recent struggles of being a human rights advocate. Our approach is informed by both empathy and critical distance as we also tried to press our respondents and unpack their assumptions about populist publics, troll cultures, the digital environment, and how central or peripheral communication work is in their organization.

We followed strict anonymity protocols to protect identities of respondents, acknowledging the security risks they face under the current environment. We also recognize some of these workers' precarious positions within organizations and the power hierarchies they navigate. In our discussion below, we only reveal identifying information of organizations in the context of discussing "best practices," mindful that this information does not pose any harm.

## Preview of the Main Arguments

Our study has discovered that **despite their recognition of the central role of communication in the current human rights crisis, human rights actors continue to treat communication as a set of disparate tools, activities, or platforms, rather than as a long-term and cohesive strategy to take back control of broad political narratives and reshape publics' engagement with and perception of human rights.** While most organizations improvised and implemented "tweaks" in their public-facing communication, their lack of appreciation of and material investment in skills and people resulted in cosmetic, "one-off" efforts that handicap their ability to address the crisis effectively.

We discuss these findings in three empirical chapters. Chapter 2 explores the organizations' diverse characterizations of the root causes of the current human rights crisis and their improvised solutions to cope. In Chapter 3, we analyze the infrastructures and conditions of workers enlisted to do public communication in human rights organizations. We highlight the structural and social factors that make communication work peripheral and taken-for-granted within organizations. In Chapter 4, we outline different communication activities that organizations have undertaken to engage diverse audiences and constituencies under the current political climate. We annotate stories of each activity with analyses of their strengths and weaknesses, and discuss the trade-offs organizations have made in order to achieve certain goals. Finally, Chapter 5 outlines our recommendations consisting of 10 opportunities to develop strategy, structure, and solidarity in harnessing strategic communication to address the human rights crisis.

## Part 2.

# THE CRISIS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

## Diagnosing the Crisis

Many of the human rights advocates we met expressed a profound bewilderment as to how much their sector has been destabilized by the current political climate. Our interviews often involved our respondents puzzling out over continued popular support for a president who has admitted he’s “happy to slaughter” human rights advocates alongside drug addicts.<sup>25</sup> There is real reflexivity here, as they shared with us their diverse assessments about the factors that have contributed to the current crisis afflicting the sector, which we explain below. But first, we believe it is important to retell how human rights workers themselves describe how this crisis manifests in their professional and personal lives.

For many in the sector, **the crisis is characterized as a lack of trust among mainstream publics**, a sudden and dramatic shift within the past four years of the Duterte presidency. As one advocacy staff of a human rights-focused government agency expresses,

*Alam mo yung parang hinangin tayo, tumumba kaagad. Wala man lang resistance. Ang bilis [ng mga tao] makalimot. Aminin natin—these are people who go to church, people na nakapag-aral. So what happened? Where did we go wrong? (Advocacy staff)*

(You know it’s like a windstorm swept through, and we were all blown away. It’s like people didn’t care. And these people are those who go to church, who are educated. You gotta wonder where we went wrong.)

In this political climate, human rights NGOs found that community interventions they used to execute with little disruption are now harder to deliver. For instance, **organizations that conduct community education activities shared how they have occasionally felt unwelcome when visiting barangays (“villages”) and schools, as the term “human rights” seemed to trigger fear from ordinary people.** A social advocacy-focused human rights NGO recalled they were once shooed away

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<sup>25</sup> Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. 2019. “Philippines: I’ll Kill You Along with Drug Addicts – President’s Duterte’s War on Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines.” OMCT SOS-Torture Network, 28 February 2019. <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/reports/ill-kill-you-along-with-drug-addicts-president-dutertes-war-on-human-rights-defenders-in-the-philippines>

by school teachers in Davao City, while a legislative-focused NGO was refused by barangay officials because military forces had previously warned their community that human rights activists were advancing a communist plot.

Meanwhile, NGOs providing direct services to victims of extrajudicial killings (EJK) are more concerned about the lack of trust, not from grassroots communities, but from the middle- and upper-middle-class Filipinos who are more directly exposed to, and thus expected to resonate more with, the liberal and cosmopolitan values of the human rights movement. These NGOs found that their public communication activities targeting the middle classes did not trigger the social media engagement they expected. In their view, the middle classes buy into the government's dangerous disinformation narrative that the drug war aims to protect "human life and not just human rights."<sup>26</sup> They are disheartened by middle-class citizens gleefully sharing Duterte's dirty jokes about the human rights movement, as well as "fake news" shared by influencers such as Thinking Pinoy (RJ Nieto) and Mocha Uson. For human rights NGOs that have done research into the middle-class psyche, they perceive that middle-class citizens prefer to donate their money to causes that support vulnerable groups, but hesitate when topics become more directly political, such as extrajudicial killings.

**When we asked our respondents to reflect on the roots of the current crisis, they identified factors both extrinsic and intrinsic to the human rights movement.**

Local NGOs and respondents with more years of experience in the sector tended to attribute the crisis more to external factors that blame Duterte and his troll armies for tarnishing the image of human rights to the public. Meanwhile, respondents from international NGOs spotlighted long-running political divides and outdated, under-the-radar practices that have caught up with the sector in this populist moment. Younger respondents were particularly critical of veterans in the sector, whom they felt were too resistant to new ways of campaigning and communicating.

It is interesting to note that many of the factors they identified revolve around issues of communication. Human rights organizations acknowledge that fundamental problems of narrative strategy, audience engagement, and creative mobilization remain difficult to resolve, especially in the face of fast-moving information warfare under the Duterte administration. **This report argues that while there is much talk about communication challenges and speculation on the causes of the current crisis in human rights, there has been insufficient strategic investment in resources that could effectively respond to these and address the gaps in communication.**

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<sup>26</sup> Official Gazette. 2018. Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Third State of the Nation Address. July 23, 2018. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2018/07/23/rodrigo-roa-duterte-third-state-of-the-nation-address-july-23-2018/>

At the same time, we acknowledge there are other structural and material factors behind the human rights crisis—including “unlawful or politically-motivated killings,” torture and forced disappearance, and corruption in the government as detailed in the 2019 Human Rights Situationer by the Philippine Human Rights Information Center.<sup>27</sup> Our report gives focus to our respondents’ frequent references and perceptions about the role of communication in compounding the crisis in human rights.

## Extrinsic Factors

### 1 Duterte’s leadership

All our respondents referenced the role of Duterte in the crisis. But NGOs that have been on the receiving end of personalized attacks from Duterte, such as when he called one NGO an “organization of demons,”<sup>28</sup> are more likely to assign him a central responsibility for, in their words, “distorting” and “demonizing” human rights principles and advocates. These NGOs blame Duterte for normalizing the disinformation narrative that human rights advocates are supportive of criminals, addicts, or communists, and should therefore be distrusted. As one executive of a legislative advocacy-focused NGO says,

*Yung major challenge is si Duterte dahil dinemonize niya ang human rights kaya ang hirap na-i-counter ang narrative. Tuwing nagsasalita si Duterte deliberate yung distortion niya kasi nga gusto niya tumahimik ang mga tao at maperpetuate yung culture of fear and silence. (Executive)*

(Duterte is our major challenge because he demonized “human rights,” which is the reason why it’s difficult to counter the narrative. His distortion of human rights is deliberate: he aims to censor and perpetuate a culture of fear and silence among the public.)

Duterte’s administration has attacked human rights on different fronts. Organizations in Duterte’s direct firing line, such as the Commission on Human Rights,<sup>29</sup> Karapatan,<sup>30</sup> and Amnesty International Philippines,<sup>31</sup> have

<sup>27</sup> Philippine Human Rights Information Center. 2020. “The Killing State: 2019 Philippine Human Rights Situationer.” Available at: <https://www.philrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WP-Copy-2019-HR-Sit.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Esguerra, D. 2019. “Duterte Calls Karapatan ‘An Organization of Demons in the Philippines.’” Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2 August 2019. Available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1149408/duterte-calls-karapatan-an-organization-of-demons-in-the-philippines>

<sup>29</sup> Reuters. 2017. “‘Gay or pedophile?’ Philippines Duterte Attacks Rights Chief Over Drug War Criticism.” 17 September 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/17/gay-or-paedophile-philippines-duterte-attacks-rights-chief-over-drug-war-criticism>

<sup>30</sup> Esguerra, D. 2019. “Duterte Calls Karapatan ‘An Organization of Demons in the Philippines.’” Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2 August 2019. Available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1149408/duterte-calls-karapatan-an-organization-of-demons-in-the-philippines>

<sup>31</sup> Esguerra, D. 2019. “Panelo Hits Back at Amnesty Int’l: Don’t Parrot Bogus Drug War Info.” Philippine Daily Inquirer, 10 July 2019. Available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1140252/panelo-hits-back-at-amnesty-intl-dont-parrot-bogus-drug-war-info>



received personalized attacks during his speeches. Others face enormous pressure because of the government’s new administrative requirements to divulge confidential information such as sources of funding.

Some of our respondents received death and rape threats, while others were almost arrested for bogus allegations. All these attacks are experienced as “death by a thousand cuts,” as described by the communication staff of a research and social advocacy-focused human rights NGO. “By attacking us on many fronts, we are weakened, demoralized, and frustrated,” he added.

## 2 Troll armies and fake news

Human rights NGOs and sectoral alliances in Duterte’s firing line identified how they are affected by various disinformation narratives that undermine trust in the movement. NGOs believe the accumulation of “fake news” seeded by paid trolls as well as real supporters have affected the public’s view:

Of course, there are trolls and then there are people who are really beholden to those in power, but I think many of those who are supporters of the president are merely either blinded or led to a certain different set of facts. They’re being presented a different reality altogether. So that is a great challenge. (Executive)

A currently circulating **nationalist conspiracy theory insinuates that human rights actors are beholden to foreign funders out to destabilize the country.**<sup>32</sup> This narrative casts doubt on the integrity of human rights organizations’ and their focus on abuses of power by the Duterte administration; thus, their campaigns are seen as unpatriotic.

Another emerging narrative is that **human rights NGOs are more sympathetic to criminals and “pasaways” (disobedient citizens) in society** and do not care for the safety and security of the middle class. This smear campaign affects legislative advocacy-focused NGOs that find it difficult to get mainstream public support for bills such as the Human Rights Defenders Bill, which could better protect them from state abuse and harassment. NGO workers say they feel personally affected by trolls who say they don’t deserve protection because they support dangerous criminals that threaten the safety and security of the middle class.

<sup>32</sup> Ranada, P. 2019. “PH asks EU, Belgium to stop funding alleged CPP-NPA ‘fronts’.” Rappler, 13 March 2019. Available at: [https://rappler.com/nation/philippines-asks-eu-belgium-stop-funding-alleged-cpp-npa-fronts?fbclid=IwAR0kWFraMOXnRh\\_kKW3zrVyhfHqJsvld0BvT0jnBLNxYcCP1FzplHYrcxIM](https://rappler.com/nation/philippines-asks-eu-belgium-stop-funding-alleged-cpp-npa-fronts?fbclid=IwAR0kWFraMOXnRh_kKW3zrVyhfHqJsvld0BvT0jnBLNxYcCP1FzplHYrcxIM)

Online disinformation has taken a real toll on the **mental health** of the human rights workers we met, affecting their everyday work. Part of the burnout stems from having to confront the idea that public sentiment has turned against them, and seeing Duterte as a direct source of the online discourse that has unleashed the worst in the Filipino people. As the program officer of a research and social advocacy-focused human rights NGO shared,

*It's just so hard to contemplate... Itong trolls and other people online spreading fake news, nakakadagdag lang siya sa trabaho. Dumadami tuloy ang trabaho. Nakakaano siya sa health. Ako personally nung ako naghahandle ng Facebook page namin, talagang naha-highblood ako; the whole day sira na ang araw ko. (Program officer)*

(It's just so hard to contemplate. Trolls who spread fake news add to our workload. It has adverse effects on our health: whenever I handle our Facebook page, my blood pressure shoots up and my day is ruined.)

## Intrinsic Factors

### 1 “Preaching to the choir” and the failure to connect with diverse audiences

Many of our respondents from international NGOs use the terms “echo chamber” and “inbreeding” when critiquing how project collaborations always involve the “usual suspects” within the sector and campaigns always speak to “already politically engaged” educated classes. The executive of an INGO with an environment protection advocacy critiques the sector’s narrow focus on working with those already familiar with the issue:

We’ve been in some network activities and the way that they design activities is talking and teaching to the converted and rally at the park then those in attendance are the communities that they work with or groups that they work with. Then [they think it’s a] success because “we reached this many people,” but these people are actually already familiar with the issue. We’re not doing enough to speak to people outside the tent. (Executive)

**Respondents also point to how human rights jargon and a “preachy tone” potentially devalue the real concerns of the “masa” (the public) and alienate even the middle class.** A human rights staff of an INGO is worried that this condescending tone can be a real turn-off:

*Ganoon natin pine-present “We are the truth, the way, and the life; we can show them the light.” Ang hilig natin sa mga jargons - pasista, mga ganon. Sino nakakaintindi ng mga sinasabi natin? Sumisigaw ka diyan ang nakakaintindi lang ay tayo-tayo. (Human rights staff)*

(We present to them that “We are the truth, the way, and the life; we can show them the light.” We’re so accustomed to using jargon such as “fascist” but no one understands us. We’re talking only to ourselves.)

Junior human rights workers we interviewed share that their efforts to convince senior colleagues to adopt more “positive” hopeful emotions and move away from the tone used in traditional campaigns which rely on stoking anger and indignation, meet a lot of resistance. “[The older higher-ups] would always ask, ‘Where is the sharpest line here [in the copy]? We should be condemning and blaming the state instead of just saying ‘Stay safe!’”

**One of our respondents leading a sectoral group describes how an “us-versus-them” mentality at the root of the sector’s communication style limits the potential reach of the movement’s message.**

Human rights activists are all about building walls rather than bridging. They do not even want to talk to that legislator even though she is actually super sympathetic to their cause just because she is aligned with Duterte. Activists are all about, “You’re either with us or against us.” How are we gonna win with that kind

## 2 Romanticizing martial law heroes and the failure to evolve the narrative with the times

Some respondents from international NGOs and newer local NGOs reflect on whether the sector’s power hierarchies, organizational alliances, and communication styles have failed to evolve with the times, as seen in **a tendency to romanticize activist achievements of the 1986 People Power Revolution that overthrew the dictator Ferdinand Marcos**. Respondents think that some of the protest language aiming to incite public indignation against “Duterte as dictator” seems to merely recycle old slogans from the Marcos era; they also suggest that the sector should have focused on institutionalizing human rights education and history in public school and university curricula.

In particular, NGOs with human rights education as their core mandate acknowledge that the sector’s memorialization of the People Power Revolution was not internalized by society. **They think that many human**

**rights actors simply assumed that martial law abuses were discussed in history classes.** However, they now realize that they should have properly collaborated with the Department of Education and Commission on Human Rights to produce learning materials that could be used in public school curricula. These could have inoculated publics against viral revisionist narratives in social media, which attempt to recast Marcos as a hero and the martial law era as a “golden age” in recent Philippine history.<sup>33</sup>

Respondents also criticized that many human rights organizations have anchored education on political and civil rights in the martial law era, **but have not expanded to address economic and social rights issues that are more pressing and relevant to Filipino society today.** As the program officer of a research and social advocacy-focused human rights NGO shared, “Education is a right. Food is a right. But the public thinks that human rights is all these civil and political liberties only.” This failure to develop persuasive human rights narratives that meaningfully engage with the majority of the population makes it difficult for people to connect with the human rights sector, as they fail to address urgent concerns such as fair and livable wages.

Foundation for Media Alternatives’ current project on human rights education using digital media seeks to address some of these gaps in civic education. They aim to specifically educate communities about their right to privacy in the digital age.

**Respondents think that some of the protest language aiming to incite public indignation against “Duterte as dictator” seems to merely recycle old slogans from the Marcos era.**

### 3 Turf wars and failures of collaboration

Many respondents identify how long-running political divides, power hierarchies, and competitive “turfing” within the sector have remained obstacles to their work and thus have made them vulnerable to attacks from external enemies. A respondent calls this the “elephant in the room”:

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<sup>33</sup> Ong, J. and Cabanes, J. 2018. “Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines.” Newton Tech4Dev, p. 57.

when diverse organizations try to come together but fail to show solidarity with each other in moments of crisis. International NGOs with critical distance from local politics were especially candid in our interviews, saying:

I needed to become familiar with which kinds of organizations can play with whom. There are times when you can bring them together but there are times when they would rather talk to you in private. I had to be very conscious of their political delineation. There's a lot of resentment. And even those within political blocks also have bad blood. So you have to be very conscious of that. (Human rights staff)

Organizations under attack expressed feeling abandoned by their allies and wished the sector could consolidate resources to fight its common enemy:

*Kung kailangan pala natin ang isa't-isa, mag-usap tayo nang pantay. Huwag yung parang ang dating nag-iisa kayo. Magsama-sama tayo. Isolating kasi 'yun, baka mamaya magkaisa na lahat, tapos kayo lang maiwan na parang bahala na kayo diyen.* (Advocacy staff)

(If we are to unite, then we should talk as equals. We shouldn't feel as if we're on our own. It's important for us to come together. No one should feel isolated.)

The lack of solidarity also manifests when some human rights NGOs that do direct community service bar other organizations from participating in similar projects, which results in unnecessary competition. **A sectoral organization head we interviewed expressed dismay when her colleague received a letter from another organization that said: "You're encroaching on our advocacy."** She continues, "Can you believe that? Of course, it's all about the money. It says your funding should have been ours. It's tragic."

Organizations from different political blocs also compete with each other in their attempts to document human rights abuses with the aim of presenting a legal case to international investigators.

A sundry of material factors such as the growing culture of violence, oppressive policies, and a perceivable breakdown of the rule of law all contribute to the crisis in human rights. Yet as revealed by the organizations, the crisis is similarly compounded by communication challenges in the current political moment—the difficulty of reaching new audiences, the inability to speak the language of local communities, institutionalizing human rights discourse in the educational system—but, as we will explain later on, few have actually done any strategic investment to translate these diagnoses into practical solutions within their organizational and operational workflows.

## The Crisis in the Words of Their Allies

Human rights organizations frequently collaborate with partners in journalism, advertising and public relations, and the academe. Our interviews with representatives of these allied sectors involved them sharing many frustrations over the traditional ways of communication and organization practiced by human rights organizations. These partners highlighted intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors to the human rights crisis, as they emphasized failures of the sector to make strategic decisions in rebranding themselves and working more collaboratively with their allies.

Journalists highlighted issues of human rights workers' antiquated approach to traditional media, whereas advertising/PR agencies critiqued ineffective uses of social media.

**Journalists expressed particular frustration over human rights organizations' complex jargon and condescending tone during media interviews.** A television journalist admits he "blanks out" once human rights colleagues start using the words "piyudalismo, imperyalismo, all of these -ismos" (feudalism, imperialism, and all these -isms). The same journalist observes that human rights workers position themselves as "above everyone else" when they speak with an "indoctrinating tone." An artist-activist who has decades of experience working with the sector agrees, "'Diba meron kang feeling na, 'Mas alam namin 'to kasi matagal na kami dito... meron kaming ascendancy and therefore, kayo ang dapat na makinig sa amin kasi kami na 'yung namatayan.'" (There's this feeling of, "We know better because we've been here for a long time ... We have the ascendancy and therefore, you ought to listen to us because we've suffered and lost people in this movement.") A news editor we interviewed expressed his difficulty getting their quotes into his news articles when they would use "inaccessible" language and tone.

Meanwhile, ad and PR agencies observe that human rights organizations do not effectively use diverse media platforms to manage their reputation and challenge disinformation narratives. Ad and PR allies shared how their suggestions around social media activities were either rejected by senior human rights workers or relegated entirely to younger, less experienced staff, suggesting a disinterest on the part of senior human rights workers to learn and adopt digital communication skills. In addition, they observed that human rights organizations don't always have social media guidelines distinguishing their professional and personal pages, where some organizations' public pages tend to blur the lines between internal organizational meetings, holiday parties, personal opinions, and professional campaigns.

**Both journalists and ad and PR specialists have repeatedly suggested that human rights NGOs and alliances reframe their human rights campaigns into more "hope-based" and "positive" approaches.** They argue that negative imagery in human rights campaigns has had a numbing effect on the public, leading to desensitization rather than digital solidarity through online engagement or donations. One promotional marketing agency we met shared their attempt to convince HR organizations and alliances to adopt more positive messaging in their campaigns that are "not parang Hallmark greeting card but nakaugat pa rin sa konteksto" (not like a Hallmark greeting card but still grounded in context). However, this approach was shot down by human rights veterans.

Allies acknowledge they can all be doing more to stand up for their colleagues in the human rights sector. Journalists have expressed willingness to publish more human rights stories, while ad and PR allies are open to being invited as

resource persons to teach NGOs about the basics of advertising and public communication and to help them rethink their strategies. Some even expressed willingness to work pro bono.

**Allies do not expect that human rights workers should compromise their principles when**

**speaking with populist publics; instead, they hope for more flexibility and openness to experiment with how they communicate with the diverse audiences of today.**

## Coping with the Crisis: Solutions and Improvisations

How have human rights organizations coped with the current crisis? We observed two general strategies: some organizations stepped up to the frontlines to take up more or all-new responsibilities to address current human rights violations, while others turned away from direct confrontation with the government, pivoting to more under-the-radar service work and backchannel support for colleagues in the frontlines or for communities they work with.

International and national human rights NGOs and alliances often adopted the frontline strategy of calling out the government on its human rights abuses, namely EJKs, and its attempt to curtail dissidents. These organizations use public-facing communication in order to put pressure on national legislators and seek international legitimacy from experts such as United Nations rapporteurs. Meanwhile, organizations with a mandate to provide direct services to communities opted to work under the radar in order to carry out crisis interventions while evading criticism and threats from state forces and their supporters. We found that sectoral organizations also had some flexibility in distancing themselves from traditional human rights branding and adopted less controversial “positive” narratives when promoting their agenda. These enabled them to mitigate attacks when trying to reach mainstream public audiences.

**International and national human rights NGOs and alliances often adopted the frontline strategy of calling out the government on its human rights abuses, namely EJKs, and its attempt to curtail dissidents.**

**We observed that organizations with strategic communication infrastructures display flexibility and adopt strategies more appropriate for their specific campaign objective or the community intervention they are managing.** For example, human rights and



sectoral NGOs navigate between frontline and backchannel strategies to fulfill their objectives when they discreetly help local communities at the barangay level, but campaign on less controversial issues such as child safety and essential services in the mainstream public sphere.

Some organizations' human rights positioning began with a more frontline stance by calling out abuses at the onset of Duterte's presidency, but then **gradually switched to low-profile approaches once red-tagging and death threats became more rampant**. Organizations may also be motivated to shift gears when faced with obstacles in the frontlines, such as in the case of legislative advocacy-focused NGOs that decided to take a step back from lobbying high-profile bills at the national level to focus on backchannel lobbying of smaller-scale interventions aimed at stakeholders at the city or municipality levels. Alternatively, there were also organizations that distanced themselves from the issue at the height of the drug war but eventually assumed a more frontline approach as the killings raged on. **We interpret maneuvering between frontlining and backchanneling as strategic rather than inconsistent, as it shows an ability to select an appropriate communication strategy to align with an objective.**

We explain the rationale behind these strategies below.

## 1 Stepping up to the frontlines

Workers in human rights NGOs and alliances stress that the primary responsibility of the sector should be to stand up for victims of human rights abuses, even if it would mean heightened risk to their organization or even to their personal safety. Organizations with a mandate to provide direct services to victims of state abuses feel a heavy responsibility to call out Duterte himself as the source of these abuses, and to use all their resources and respond to them:

Now with extrajudicial executions, do we counter the rhetorics head-on or do we do pockets of engagements? Of course we counter head-on. That is what our comms person does with press releases, campaigns, and work with our networks. (Human rights staff)

Some organizations banded together to **form new alliances that can aggressively speak up against the drug war in the frontlines**. For instance, several months after Duterte assumed the presidency in 2016, a group of human rights defenders convened a new movement they called iDefend (In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity).<sup>34</sup> The iDefend movement enabled organizations to share manpower and resources and stand as a united front against the president's lethal war on drugs. This human rights alliance issued statements of condemnation that gained wide publicity and organized public protests. Human rights workers used the iDefend affiliation

during their media engagements as a way to draw potential threats away from any one particular HR organization or individual. One advocacy officer we met shares that iDefend has become a reliable resource for journalists on EJKs.

In a similar vein, different civil society and church groups collaborated to form Rise Up for Life and for Rights to address drug war-related human rights violations.<sup>35</sup> This new frontlining organization develops local community interventions with the specific aim to empower left-behind mothers of EJK victims, educate them with the vocabulary of justice, and mediate between them and the media and other relevant human rights duty-bearers.

Some sectoral organizations previously focused on assisting specific vulnerable communities, such as farmers or women, **realigned their mandate to help EJK victims and serve in the frontlines.** Organizations reallocated their resources to directly respond to the growing cases of abuse under the drug war. For example, one organization pivoted its focus on farming communities to help EJK victims, while another broadened its focus from helping victims of political persecution to serve victims of the drug war. The advocacy staff of an organization focused on legislative advocacy shared,

In 2016, we met with our board of directors and discussed how we should face this. There's so many [civil liberties] that the drug war will infringe on so we need to straighten our mandate to make sure we can help people on killings, torture, harassment from authorities. (Advocacy staff)

**Another aspect of the frontline strategy is to seek new international allies that could help stand up to the Duterte administration.** International NGOs well-versed with international legal instruments turned to international lobbying, in the hopes that the government will bow to global pressure. INGOs tapped foreign media outlets to raise global awareness and lobbied international bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) to officially probe into human rights violations.

These frontlining strategies entailed a high quantity of public-facing communication that include engaging the press, speaking out directly against President Duterte, and challenging fake news peddled by influencers. These organizations assume the risk of having to constantly be on the defence from

<sup>34</sup> Focus on the Global South. 2016. "A Historical Gathering of Human Rights Defenders." Focus on the Global South, 15 August 2016. Available at: <https://focusweb.org/a-historical-gathering-of-human-rights-defenders/>

<sup>35</sup> Karapatan. 2016. "Rise Up! For People's Rights, Stop Drug-Related Killings." Karapatan, 15 November 2016. Available at: <https://www.karapatan.org/Rise+Up+for+people%E2%80%99s+rights+Stop+drugrelated+killings>

Duterte and his supporters, and manage the emotional stress of political persecution, death threats, and legal scare tactics such as trumped-up perjury charges.<sup>36</sup>

For the brave people we met fighting in the frontlines, they see their experience of being red-tagged and vilified as insurgents as empowering them further, since they have nothing more to lose. As a respondent expressed,

Victims themselves are organizing and fighting back so it's embarrassing not to fight back when those who are less privileged are standing their ground. It's not enough to just sit around and say "Thank God, I'm okay." It can't be like that. (Executive)

## 2 Under-the-radar community interventions and backchannel communication

While their peers wage battles in the frontlines, some organizations opted for more under-the-radar approaches, such as limiting participation in mainstream public debates, pivoting to essential service delivery, and sometimes disavowing "human rights" in organizational brand and campaign advocacies. These organizations advance their organizational and project objectives while evading government persecution and online harassment.

### **Some organizations focused on immersing in local communities**

where EJK violations have happened, delivering essential services while avoiding media publicity. For them, surviving Duterte's presidency means choosing their battles and trading control of public narrative for serving the vulnerable. One executive from a legal resource human rights NGO illustrates this trade-off as limiting their media engagement to less controversial advocacies, such as road safety for children, livelihood, and basic provisions, even as they deliver direct services to families of EJK victims. He explained,

We create more stories but we don't need to say it's us. For example, CNN Philippines wanted to feature us [but we thought], if [we] do that, we would be exposed ... We really don't wanna go out there and say, "Hey, we're the heroes, we're the lawyers of those facing sedition charges." What we highlight in the media are [projects about] road safety for children—our cute campaigns. (Executive)

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<sup>36</sup> Ramos, M. 2020. "Edita Burgos, 9 more charged with perjury." Philippine Daily Inquirer, 5 March 2020. Available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1237049/edita-burgos-9-more-charged-with-perjury>

**Some international human rights and sectoral NGOs disavowed the term “human rights” altogether in their public-facing campaigns as they distanced themselves from the reputational baggage of the term.** For example, the executive of an INGO shared,

In the Philippines we try not to use on social media the term “human rights” because of its associations nowadays. The president is furious about human rights, so it’s not a bad rap per se, but among people who don’t understand it, they think it’s something bad. (Executive)

Instead of using the word “human rights,” this executive shared they have adopted the word “dignity” as it has a less negative connotation and could appeal better to Filipino publics. The communication strategist of a human rights alliance shared this same strategy in their promotion of children’s rights: “There are better ways to communicate human rights without saying ‘human rights.’” Their campaigns often involve the strategic use of different types of imagery and frames of messaging to directly engage with the fears and resentment of populist publics rather than asserting principles of human rights that the people may otherwise find unrelatable, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. Disavowing the human rights brand helps them achieve two things: (1) to continue with their work without fear and intimidation, and (2) to potentially broaden their audiences beyond the usual suspects and appeal to them using positive imagery. Sectoral organizations showed more flexibility in distancing themselves from the traditional branding and “negative campaign” communication style of traditional human rights organizations.

Our respondents also shared a backchannel tactic of retargeting their lobbying efforts aimed at high-profile national-level lawmakers to more local-level administrators who could offer protection to local communities.

[Backchannelers] opted for more under-the-radar approaches, such as limiting participation in mainstream public debates, pivoting to essential service delivery, and sometimes disavowing “human rights” in organizational brand and campaign advocacies.

In the case of the HR Defenders Bill, international and national human rights and sectoral NGOs campaigned heavily to national legislators but struggled to obtain support as lawmakers feared the ire of the president. They decided to change their strategy to talk with local government officials instead. This proved successful with three municipalities consequently adopting resolutions to protect human rights defenders. Organizations with a legislative advocacy mandate recognize how shifting target audiences from high-publicity national lawmakers to lower-level stakeholders can help them protect fellow human rights actors while biding their time until they return to lobbying at the national level.

This strategy of backchanneling does not always sit well with their human rights colleagues in the frontlines. **For some, at a time when civic spaces are rapidly shrinking, abandoning the public sphere to Duterte and his trolls is akin to “surrendering without a fight.”** As the advocacy staff of a government agency concerned with human rights argued,

It’s important for us that everyone carries the agenda of human rights. We’re asking groups to speak out even if they haven’t been directly affected. For example, which groups are speaking out on the issue of EJK? Labor groups should speak out. IP groups should speak out. Women’s groups should speak out. EJK shouldn’t just be an issue for the people of Tondo or Caloocan. The impression we give off is we look all splintered. (Advocacy staff)

## The Disconnect

Our interviews revealed that human rights workers are highly aware that communication and social media have shaped human rights practice and have contributed to how human rights has become “tarnished” and “a bad word”. It was apparent in our interviews that all organizations share struggles of reaching new audiences, harnessing digital media, recalibrating the human rights brand, and coordinating with other organizations during peak crisis moments such as troll attacks. However, despite this high reflexivity about communication-related issues, we found little evidence that organizations have made significant material investment in enhancing communication infrastructures that empower their colleagues to strategically execute campaigns.

As the next chapter elaborates, our research found that almost half of the organizations we interviewed (46%) still have no dedicated staff for their communication work. The next chapters will explain the barriers to this and how the sector can find ways to address them.

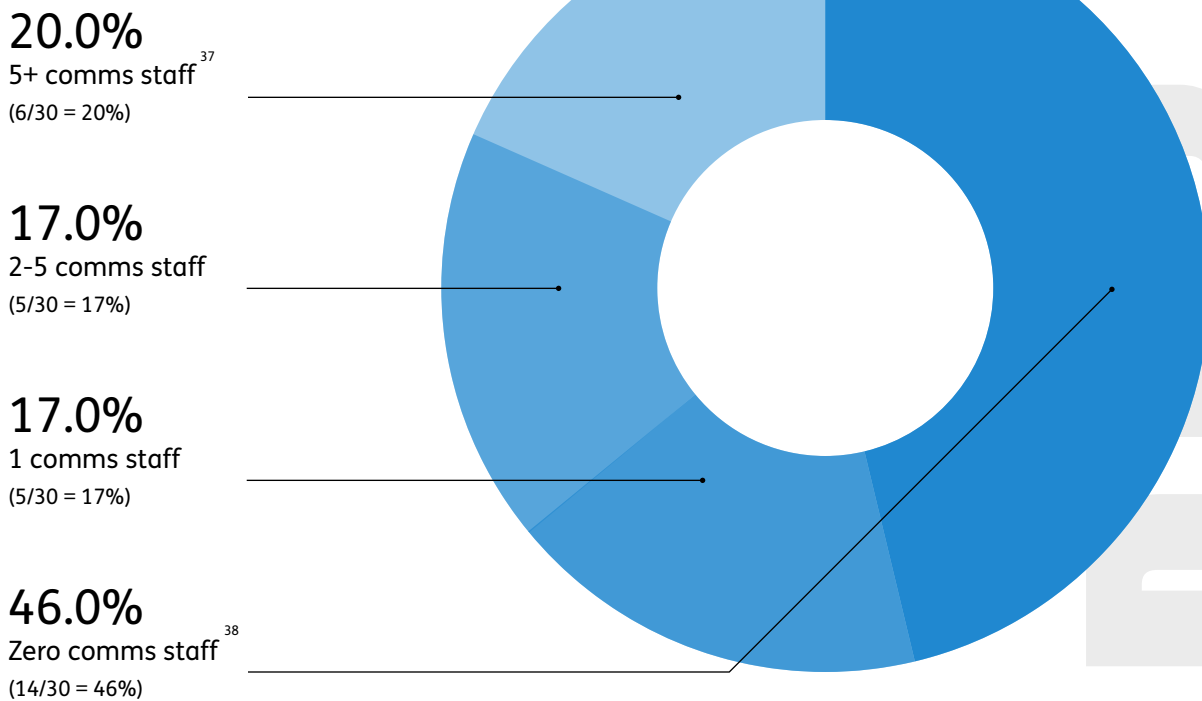
Part 3.

# EXPLAINING THE DISCONNECT

## Communication Structure and Capacities

While human rights workers diagnose the roots of the sector’s crisis quite differently, they all point to many communication-related problems. They all referenced social media as rewriting the “rules of the game” of human rights campaigning, but our research found limited evidence that structural investments have been made to support strategic communication in organizational practice and everyday work routines.

Figure 1: Communication Staff in Human Rights Organizations



<sup>37</sup> The highest number of communication staff is in one legal resource human rights NGO with 15 communication staff (four of these were hired to help boost digital activities to cope with COVID-19 challenges).

<sup>38</sup> Some of these organizations have no paid communication staff but rely heavily on volunteers enlisted to execute their communication initiatives.

We were surprised to discover that 46% (14 out of 30) of organizations we interviewed still have no full-time communication staff member. These NGOs assign communication as add-on work to either the advocacy officer responsible for legislative lobbying or the program officer responsible for community interventions. These staff members are rarely supported with additional training, equipment such as digital cameras, or bonus pay. They acknowledge seeking help from other team members for communication-related tasks, such as brainstorming content for their campaigns and social media posts and engaging in high-publicity news coverage. As one advocacy staff of a legislative advocacy-focused human rights NGO shared,

*Advocacy staff: We are very much lacking in labor. Kasi ako naglobby ako, hindi naman pwedeng habang naglobby ako [at] naglaunch ako ng social media campaign sabay-sabay. Magpapaforum ako dito tapos sa hapon may meeting ako with congressman or mayor tapos sa susunod na morning pupunta ako sa isang eskwelahan. Tapos a few hours later may radio interview.*

*Interviewer: May [communication] team ka ba na katrabaho?*

*Advocacy staff: Yung materials, we have another person in the consortium na gumagawa nun pero minsan ako rin yung gumagawa for some events.*

*Interviewer: Pero walang formal communication team?*

*Advocacy staff: Wala.*

(Advocacy staff: We are very much lacking in labor. I can't lobby and launch a social media campaign at the same time. Sometimes I host a forum here and then run to a meeting with a congressman or mayor elsewhere. The next morning I have to go to a school then a few hours later appear for a radio interview.

Interviewer: Do you work with a communication team?

Advocacy staff: We have another person in the consortium who produces the materials but sometimes I myself make it for some events.

Interviewer: But there's no formal communication team?

Advocacy staff: None.)

17% (five) of organizations we met employ only one member of staff responsible for communication-related initiatives. They get occasional support from advocacy officers or part-time project-based staff assigned to do creative executions or social media promotions. As the only communication staff member of a human rights alliance focused on legislative advocacy shared,

*Dahil isa lang ako nakafocus ako sa communication needs ng campaign. Pero I have also been wanting to create a team para natutukan din yung organizational branding kasi magkaiba yun. (Communication staff)*

(Since I'm by myself, I put a lot of focus on the communication needs of the campaign. I have also been wanting to create a dedicated team who can attend to organizational branding, because that's different altogether.)

Another 17% (five) of organizations we met have between two to five officers doing communication work, and a final 20% (six organizations) have five or more officers in their communication divisions. These teams are usually composed of a director leading junior creatives, PR/media officers, and content producers. The highest number of communication staff is in one legal resource human rights NGO with 15 comms staff (four of these were hired to help boost digital activities to cope with COVID-19 challenges<sup>39</sup>), followed by a government agency focused on human rights at 11 and then a social advocacy human rights NGO at seven.

Investigating whether communication teams grew as a response to the human rights crisis of the past four years, we learned that only two organizations—one government agency concerned with human rights and one social advocacy-focused human rights NGO—expanded their teams during this period. This meant that most of the organizations with communication staff had their personnel in place even before the challenges of the current political moment.

It is important to emphasize that quantity does not always mean quality. There are clear differences between communication teams that are truly empowered and have influence on organizational strategy and those whose communication activities are more surface “tweaks” or experiments.

**We define strategic communication as having: (1) communication worker/s in empowered leadership roles that direct campaign strategies, (2) creative and multimodal communication campaigns with messages taken forward in diverse and appropriate media platforms, (3) strategic organizational branding with flexibility when responding to crisis events, and (4) established and sustained relationships with allies in advertising/PR/academe in order to monitor disinformation and various communication activities.**

In Table 3 below, we outline the four kinds of communication investments of different organizations: (1) fully developed strategic communication, (2) in-development strategic communication, (3) tweaks and experimentation, and (4) no communication investment or change.

We categorized seven of the 30 organizations as exhibiting four key qualities of fully developed strategic communication, and we gather many (but not all) of the examples of creative communication campaigns in Chapter 4 from these seven organizations. We observed six organizations adopting several but not all qualities of strategic communication. Eight organizations have made tweaks in their communication initiatives, however, these tend to be one-off and tactical because there is no dedicated personnel to carry on the work of strategic communication planning. Nine organizations exhibit no qualities of strategic communication or even “tweaks” to their communication.

<sup>39</sup> As will be discussed later in Box Text 3, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the hiring of communication personnel, as delivery of direct services and promotion of social advocacies had to pivot to online platforms in place of traditional, face-to-face activities.



Table 3. Organizations and Their Communication Investments

|  | Role   | Count |
|--|--|-------|
| <b>Fully developed strategic communication</b> | These organizations exemplify all four qualities of: (1) communication worker/s in empowered leadership roles that direct campaign strategies, (2) creative and multimodal communication campaigns with messages taken forward in diverse and appropriate media platforms, and (3) strategic organizational branding with flexibility when responding to crisis events, and (4) established and sustained relationship with allies in advertising/PR/academe to monitor disinformation and various communication activities. | 7     |
| <b>In development strategic communication</b>  | These organizations have made investments in communication personnel but lack some of the other qualities of strategic communication.  | 6     |
| <b>Tweaks and experimentation</b>              | These organizations adopted “tweaks” to their communication activities as they experimented with diverse activities such as: (1) expanding social media presence (not only on Facebook but also on Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram) and adopting popular vernaculars of memes and humor, (2) hosting local community events targeting newer constituencies, and (3) creative campaigns experimenting in traditional media platforms.   | 8     |
| <b>No change to their communication</b>        | Some of these organizations are in the process of organizational restructuring during the time we conducted the interview.   | 9     |

The next section explains the challenges that organizations face that prevent them from effectively investing in strategic communication.

## Barriers to Investment in Strategic Communication

In this section, we want to explore why many human rights NGOs have yet to properly invest in strategic communication despite being saddled with many communication challenges. When we asked our respondents about the lack of dedicated communication staff or organizational strategy, we encountered a range of reactions from surprise to thoughtfulness to defensiveness. The common response was: “It’s not really an aspect that’s been fully considered but it’s a valid point of consideration,” as expressed by the advocacy staff of a human rights alliance. However, we observed that many of these statements are followed with a “but...” as our respondents then justify why this is not a priority area.

In what follows, we present their justifications and group them into (1) structural factors (organizational priorities and resources), and (2) social and organizational factors (worker relationships and perceptions of communication and digital technologies).

### Structural Factors

#### 1 Donors’ funding structure

Organizations struggled to convince potential donors to support any public communication initiatives, as donors have chosen to fund under-the-radar projects with discrete three- to five-year windows. Respondents shared with us that there are few to no donors they could actually approach to seek support to fund communication-related projects, personnel, and equipment, such as cameras or editing software, to build in-house capacity for communication. This means donors and the human rights organizations seeking to impress them would prioritize projects with quantifiable project outcomes and deprioritize investing in strategic communication with potentially long-term, qualitative impacts.

So the reality is—well, we’ve never really been able to craft a proposal solely on communication. So sometimes it depends on the donor if they will allow [to fund] a communication officer. But seldom do donors actually include a communication officer portfolio. So we prioritize program officers to be able to deliver the program. Then it’s up to our personal effort to do the communication work. (Executive)

With no funding support, some organizations use in-house or personal resources when doing photo or video shoots. Occasionally they seek out younger volunteers and creative professionals who can work pro bono to produce their campaigns.

## 2 Audit cultures and quantifying success

Another barrier appears to be NGOs' focus on measuring project impacts based on quantifiable outcomes. NGOs here apply the dominant logframe mindset in the sector, often set by donors' funding structures and audit mechanisms. This means that donors and their strict logframes end up supporting human rights initiatives with short-term quantifiable outcomes where project success is often measured in limited quantitative terms (e.g., number of ordinances passed or number of community members who attended), whereas funding to support in-house communication capacity of organizations or projects with potentially long-term but qualitative impact such as civic education, image-building, or correcting disinformation narratives, slips through the funding system and is thus deprioritized in the overall sectoral agenda. As one executive of a human rights alliance lamented,

The funders prefer logframe [laughs], projects with immediate results. Output needs to be counted. "How many is this? How many is that?" Of course you cannot measure human rights awareness. (Executive)

The measurement of project success in short-term quantitative terms influences workers' value judgments to what communication work represents for the sector.

## 3 Sectoral principles to first serve the most vulnerable

Human rights workers maintain that their primary responsibility is to help the most vulnerable in society. Communication activities aimed at mainstream publics are seen as less important, even superficial, when weighed against the imperative to provide legal assistance and essential services to the growing number of victims of human rights violations. As a respondent justified,

Instead of spending money in communicating what we did, we just do what we should do because that's our main line of work ... We can't afford to go all-out in our communication (Project staff)

Organizations with limited resources and time choose to directly respond to victims of human rights abuses, and withdraw altogether from engaging in the information warfare around the legitimacy of the human rights movement. As shared by the executive of a legal resource human rights institution, "That's the reality. There's a lot of issues, but a lack of human and material resources is always a given. But because there are too many issues, communication isn't prioritized."

Making essential services a top priority reinforced hiring patterns of recruiting program officers with experience in community intervention, rather than tech-savvy workers fluent in narrative strategy and campaigns.

## Social and Organizational Factors

### 1 Communication staff as second-class workers

Communication workers often occupy positions in the organization that have limited influence in overall decision-making. Many take their strategic direction from the program officer who tasks them with producing campaign collaterals for lobbying and community intervention work. Occasionally, they are assigned by the executive director to design mainstream public-facing campaigns so they could fill in their organization's social media pages with more content or release press statements against Duterte. One advocacy staff doing communication work in a legislative-advocacy focused human rights NGO shared that rather than incorporating his major suggestions in a new initiative their network was brewing, he was instead shut down. *"Sa loob-loob ko, 'Bakit niyo ako hinire, 'di ba? Bakit niyo ako tinawag dito?'"* (Deep inside, 'Why did you hire me in the first place? Why did you call me up here?')," he lamented.

Some organizations hire graphic artists and pro bono consultants to do communication work, but they also have little influence on overall strategy. For example, critical tasks such as deciding on tone and narrative strategy of human rights violations are outsourced to graphic artists on a per-project basis. **This means overall organizational strategy is rarely influenced by these external communication experts.** As shared by an advocacy officer of an international human rights alliance, "Most of the people involved with our branding are outsourced and it's not much of a priority for the organization."

### 2 Generational divides and skepticism around social media

Communication workers in the human rights sector are usually young people in their mid-20s to early 30s. Many were actively involved in student organizations while in university and come to the sector with idealism and enthusiasm. However, they retell many disappointing moments where older executives shot down their ideas when they suggested non-traditional campaign ideas. As a project staff in her late 20s shared about the generational power hierarchies in her organization, "Our leaders who decide our campaigns are older folks who prefer the rallying, activism, adversarial approaches."

Younger colleagues often disagree with senior colleagues on choices between "negative" and "positive" campaigning. **Younger human rights workers advocate for positive approaches designed to speak to a broader audience, while older executives stick with traditional negative**

**campaigning.** One respondent discussed his disappointment that the campaign for the HR Defenders Bill doubled-down on negative imagery which he thinks the public is tired of,

*Sa mga materials na lumitaw, parang ang lungkot maging human rights defender sa bansa ... Very monotonous yung narration, walang background music, dark yung background. Lalo pang madidiscourage yung mga tao kasi parang, “Shet, ang lungkot naman nito. Ang dami na naming problema sa buhay tapos magpapaka-human rights defenders pa ba kami?” (Advocacy staff)*

(The materials that we produce make it appear as if it’s so sad to be a human rights defender in the country ... The narration is monotonous, lacking in background music, and with dark visuals. Audiences might get discouraged and think, “Shit, this is so sad. There’s so many problems in life but we still want to be human rights defenders?”)

Some senior staff tend to look down on social media campaigns and see these as superficial forms of activism compared with “old fashioned ways of organizing” at the community level. As an executive of a human rights alliance argued, “While online spaces have a certain reach they can never supplement the old-fashioned ways of organizing at the community level.”

### 3 Communication as security threat and reputational risk

Chapter 2 previously discussed that organizations adopted backchannel communication strategies to mitigate personalized attacks from Duterte and his supporters. Human rights workers frequently referenced this when justifying how activities are better done with little media fanfare. As one respondent shared,

*Ingat na ingat kami sa social media kasi nafeel namin na baka atakihin ng mga troll or ng nagsu-surveillance sa military. Kapag nagpost kami, baka lumitaw pa kami sa radar ng military. (Advocacy staff)*

(We’re very careful with social media because we feel that we might be attacked by trolls or surveilled by the military. We might be monitored by the military when we start posting on social media.)

Other organizations think social media campaigns expose organizations to scandal and snafu. Some NGOs are concerned about reputational risk if their social media communication hit the wrong tone on particular issues, especially in today’s “cancel culture.” They would rather leave social media communication to people they perceive as experts, and they are first to

acknowledge that they are not at all fluent in popular vernaculars of new digital platforms:

There are those whose personalities are very media-savvy. For us, we prefer to just do things quietly. We're more tactical and campaign only on issues we have to campaign. (Executive)

This strategy is risky because it would actually leave organizations vulnerable to reputational damage if they fail to respond quickly to a fast-moving emergency that aims to tarnish their image to the general public.

## Characteristics of Organizations That Have Invested in Communication

It is important to understand the exceptional conditions in which several NGOs have managed to overcome barriers and invest in strategic communication. What is common among the seven organizations we ranked as displaying all qualities of strategic communication is that they had made their investments in communication infrastructures even before the current crisis. They recalibrated their campaigns and adopted strategic decision-making around frontlining versus backchanneling and positive versus negative campaigning based on their organizational and program objectives. Here are some of their organizational qualities:

### 1 They have in-house champions of communication

Senior executives play a big role in empowering communication workers in the organization and making sure their voices matter in strategy meetings. This can be observed in the experience of the communication strategist who is given responsibility for the overall direction-setting of campaigns of various NGOs united under a common legislative advocacy. He is hired at a consultant level and reports only to the network president. Apart from directing the overall messaging when they lobby for the passage of bills, he also has the flexibility to craft specific posts on social media without lengthy approval processes. In the process of coordinating with different member NGOs, he also helps build each member organization's capacity to develop their own messages that advance their organizational brands and eventually gain some self-sufficiency. When asked about how he is able to convince senior executives to trust his expertise, he stresses,

*Kailangan ipaunawa sa kanila yung importance of communication during strategy meetings and ipakita sa kanila kung ano yung magiging impact ng ganitong klaseng material. “Ano na yung uso ngayon?” Mahilig naman yung mga tao sa ganiyan. Ipakita sa kanila and strategize with them kasi importante din yung ownership nila dun sa mga mensahe at materyales. (Communication strategist)*

(We need to make them understand the importance of communication during strategy meetings and show them the impact of a particular material. “What’s the trend nowadays?” People are fond of learning about this kind of thing. We need to show them and strategize with them because it’s important they own the messages and materials.)

Though it was only in 2017 when one legal resource human rights NGO began to invest in strategic communication, the drastic move of putting communication at the core of their programs would not have been possible if not for the decision of their executive director, which attests to the importance of having organizational leaders who appreciate the role of communication in crisis interventions. In the past, this human rights NGO only enlisted communication personnel on a per-project basis. But upon realizing that information dissemination was severely overlooked in crisis events such as the Marawi Siege and the drug war, the organization’s executive responded by institutionalizing a formal communication division within the organization. While the organization’s project manager for media and communication admits to the struggle of scraping funds to enhance their communication resources, their executive has since made a deliberate decision to ensure that funding is always allocated for communication work.

**NGO workers tend to share the perception that promotional marketing principles are premised on deception and spin and to play that game would be to “sell out” human rights principles.**

## 2 They are professionally diverse

Organizations with professional diversity tend to foster an environment wherein various ideas, skills, and perspectives are valued, especially during brainstorming sessions. Such can be observed in one social advocacy-focused human rights NGO with a diverse roster of workers with professional backgrounds in education, media, activism, and advertising. As their executive shares,

*It's a kind of bayanihan: kung ano kaya mo, ilagay mo diyan. Tingnan natin kung ano magagawa ng isang poet at isang teacher together, or ano magagawa ng isang lawyer o group of lawyers kasama ang mga musikero. Ganun namin tinitingnan ang mga bagay-bagay. Laging open-ended: ano kaya ang magagawa, mangyayari. (Executive)*

(It's a kind of mutual cooperation: give whatever you're capable of giving. Let's see what a poet and teacher can do together, or what a group of lawyers can do with musicians. That's our perspective on things: to be always open-minded and explore what can be done and what can happen.)

## 3 Communication personnel are fluent in the vernaculars of development work

Organizations trust workers who share foundational principles of the human rights sector and demonstrate deep knowledge of social issues. This also makes them skeptical about colleagues who don't share these principles and speak the language of the market. NGO workers tend to share the perception that promotional marketing principles are premised on deception and spin and to play that game would be to "sell out" human rights principles. A communication officer of a legal resource human rights NGO shares,

*Ang napapansin ko kasi minsan kunwari sa mga [communication] ng ibang organizations, sige meron silang background as ahensya pero I'm not sure kung tali sila sa social issues na kailangan nila i-communicate. (Communication staff)*

(What I observed with other organizations is that though they have a background in [advertising] agencies, I'm not sure if they're grounded on the social issues they need to communicate.)



While human rights workers' skepticism to "*kapitalista*" (capitalist) industry allies has deep structural roots, it's important to interrogate the roots of this bias. As a former media executive-turned-sectoral NGO worker shared with us,

Activists and media people are sometimes so ignorant of each other's values. What we need is more dialogue. If we say, "Oh, we can't work with them because of this or that," we're just making the world smaller. "Only I can be an activist. Only I can be queen"---that [kind of thinking] is not okay. (NGO worker)

The communication strategist of a human rights alliance attributes his background in activism as being central to how he gained the trust of colleagues in their network. "It's a huge thing for communicators to have that activist spirit. It's important that you pour your heart into your work."

## 4 Exposure to professionalized communication work processes

A final characteristic of organizations with investments in strategic communication is that they tend to have exposure to professionalized communication work processes. International human rights and sectoral NGOs tend to have familiarity with the structure of having a communication plan with target audiences, a central message, creative execution, and media planning.

For instance, INGOs routinely adhere to head office standards when conceptualizing their campaigns. As shared by the human rights staff of an INGO, they often consult their HQ when developing campaigns for a target audience they're not familiar with. While international NGOs have direct access to HQ-level experts on branding and campaigning, this does not mean that local NGOs are not exposed to professionalized communication work processes. For instance, one local NGO with climate justice advocacy learned its strategies from frequent collaborations with ABS-CBN journalists and PR professionals who trained them on promotional marketing and media engagement practices.

## Part 4.

# **REVIEWING COMMUNICATION**

# **INTERVENTIONS:**

# **ACHIEVEMENTS AND**

# **OPPORTUNITIES**

This chapter presents an overview of organizations' successful communication activities undertaken in the current climate. We retell each activity, analyzing both their strengths and weaknesses as well as the organizational resources that support them.

## **Engaging Vulnerable Communities and Victims of Human Rights Violations**

Engaging communities is the main mandate of organizations such as Alternative Law Groups, Balaod Mindanaw, Likhaan Center for Women's Health Inc., Medical Action Group, Karapatan, and Amnesty International Philippines. These organizations have had to work hard to build or regain the trust of local communities increasingly fearful to testify to abuses and associate themselves with the sector. Below are examples of successful frontlining campaigns that effectively created spaces for survivors to tell their stories and bring them together as a community.

One notable organization that empowers families of drug war victims is Rise Up for Life and for Rights, a frontlining organization established in 2016 to cater to the human rights issues of Duterte's war on drugs. Despite the lack of dedicated communication personnel, Rise Up for Life and for Rights developed effective community interventions to empower women who lost relatives in the drug war. Rise Up for Life and for Rights facilitators meet women survivors, provide them psycho-social support and legal advice, and mediate between them and media partners and investigators—should they choose to come forward with their stories. While their activities are quite local and sustained only by church networks'



fundraising, they have helped educate survivors with the human rights language of justice and accountability. As the executive of Rise Up for Life and for Rights shares:

*Paano sila tumitindig? Sa pamamagitan din ng pagtulong sa iba, kapares ng documentation, pag-encourage na magsalita. Sasabihin nila, “Alam mo dati takot din ako eh. Ngayon takot pa rin ako tsaka nalulungkot pa rin.” [Sasabihin ng iba sa kanila] sana nag-aasikaso ako ng mga papel [evidensya] kaya lang wala akong maituturong pumatay sa anak ko. Pero kasi ‘pag may isang nanalo sa Rise Up, yung isang nanay mandalo [sa kaso], parang nanalo na rin ako. (Executive)*

(How are they coping and surviving? By helping others, documenting, and encouraging others to speak. They’ll say, “I was afraid back then. And I’m still afraid and sad.” Then some others will say, “I regret not preparing the documents and gathering evidence and I could not identify the killer of my child.” But if someone here in Rise Up or if a mother wins a case, then it’s as if I have won myself).

Another example of empowering left-behind families of the drug war is IDEALS Inc.’s community newsletter focused on survivors’ own storytelling and self-representation. This newsletter gathers stories of survivors written in their own words, often describing how they have coped with their experiences of loss. The newsletter presents these stories alongside helpful legal information and spiritual advice columns to educate and connect survivors with each other. IDEALS Inc.’s newsletter adopts a more grounded, backchannel approach as the newsletter does not explicitly aim to gain broader publicity and is meant to be circulated within local communities.

These interventions provide powerful opportunities for survivors to speak and listen to each other’s stories using different emotional registers of grief, hope, and indignation. While getting the narratives of the survivors across and bridging them to the media is a component of these initiatives, their success ultimately lies in empowering victims and affirming their fears, hopes, and anxieties. As shared by one of IDEALS Inc.’s communication workers:

*Through the Dignidad newsletter, naiisip nila na di sila nag-iisa, maraming stories na kagabi nila na pwede silang lumapit sa ibang organizations para matulungan sila. Yun talaga siya, yung pag-appease nung fear ng mga tao sa paglapit [sa authorities]. Survivors mismo nagsusulat tapos bibigay nila samin—parang isa siyang psycho-social na “We’re getting my story out.” (Communication staff)*

(Through the Dignidad newsletter, they realize they’re not alone. Reading these stories can make them realize they can approach organizations to seek help. The newsletter helps appease the public’s fear of approaching authorities. The survivors themselves write their stories, then submit these to us. It serves a psycho-social purpose: “I’m getting my story out.”)



Figure 2: Sample Front Page of the Dignidad Newsletter

As EJK survivors become empowered, these activities potentially yield long-term impact for the human rights sector's ability to expand its reach. However, the trade-off of this approach lies in its limited scale. Given that direct community engagements entail substantial time and resources, it would be challenging for human rights organizations to replicate these approaches in the many communities where human rights violations are rampant.

## Engaging Mainstream Publics Using Creative, Multimodal, and “Positive” Communication

A break from traditional jargon-filled and doom-and-gloom campaigns is the “positive” and creative communication approach that fueled the campaign for the SOGIE (sexual orientation and gender identity expression) equality bill. Led by an alliance formed by Lagablab, Babaylanes, Metro Manila Pride, and others, the campaign lobbied for a bill to protect individuals from being discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The success of this campaign is evident not solely on legislative success, with the bill having undergone its first reading in the Senate, but on the mainstreaming of LGBTQ rights among the broader Filipino audiences. The campaign’s hashtags have trended in social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and gained the support of high-profile corporate brands, celebrities, and mainstream media. Even conservative schools once silent on LGBTQ issues expressed their official support for the SOGIE bill.

Transgender media producer Melo Esguerra is the architect behind the “Love is All We Need” campaign, which she describes as being premised on principles of universal love and inclusion. She describes her own behind-the-scenes process of organizational collaboration and lobbying as similarly inspired by these principles.

I worked with the [sectoral national alliance] and slowly learned about the many factions within the activist community. “Oh we don’t work with this congressperson ‘cause she’s with Duterte, we don’t work with this priest either because of this.” (Media producer and LGBTQ rights advocate)

Convinced that “the street is not the only place to protest,” she focused her campaign



Figure 3: Unpaid Posts by Celebrities and Performers for the “Love is All We Need” Campaign





efforts on organizing diverse celebrities and influencers on social media who could embolden people to express their solidarity using the same hashtag. This viral campaign encouraged ordinary people to post their own “love letters” while tagging the social media accounts of prominent anti-SOGIE legislators. For Esguerra, while there is so much that needs to be done as the bill has since stalled in the Senate, the lesson that the campaign has for human rights activists is the need to build bridges and temporary alliances around important issues.

**Nevertheless, some veterans in the sector criticize this historic viral campaign for “working with the enemy” (i.e., allies of Duterte in Congress) and lacking the language of protest and accountability.** Even officers of Lagablab Network acknowledge tendencies of the campaign to lean too much into positivity:

*Ang danger lang din of trying to make it relatable is masyado nang nagiging pa-cute. Like masyado namang malabnaw. Kailangan mahanap natin yung balance of making it relatable without trivializing it. (Executive)*

(The danger of trying to make it relatable is that it becomes too cute and loses its meaning. We need to strike a balance between making it relatable without trivializing it.)

Esguerra herself admits that while the campaign made waves to mainstream LGBTQ equality in the public sphere, the harder work might be for the human rights sector to mainstream inclusivity in work collaborations: “Queens hold court in the activist circle as if they own it. Many feel entitled to make all the decisions and expect others to seek their approval. We need to change this mindset.”

## Engaging Local Duty-Bearers

Legislative advocacy-focused human rights organizations employed a successful backchannel approach that earned them important allies at the local level while deflecting attacks from headline-grabbing pro-Duterte pundits and “trolls.” Some NGOs redirected their national lobbying work for local lobbying and focused on securing commitments in the form of ordinances at the barangay, municipality, and city levels. One notable example here is FIND’s thoughtful strategy behind their campaign for the Human Rights Defenders Bill. FIND has no dedicated communication staff, but the policy advocacy officer successfully lobbied stakeholders in different provinces, which led to successful ordinances being passed in Malay in Boracay, Puerto Princesa in Palawan, Tandang in Surigao, Masilad in Isabela, and Kalibo in Aklan. For him, **this represents a bottom-up strategy where building a mass base of support could snowball toward national-level lobbying success:**

*So they started with the local government units tapos inakyat nila nang inakyat hanggang sa naipasa siya sa Kongreso. Kasi kapag marami nang sumusuporta, minsan nagboboost din yan ng clamor at ng traction for the legislation.*  
(Advocacy staff)

(So we started with the local government units then elevated until it was approved by Congress. If there’s a lot of support and clamor, then the legislation gains traction.)

One trade-off of local-level lobbying is that it takes considerable time and effort to achieve small-scale victories. Another risk is that it also exposes NGO workers to security risks at the local level: human rights workers have been declared as persona non grata by some localities and even fear abduction and disappearance in going to remote areas.

## Engaging Youth Leaders and Cultivating New Human Rights Champions

Another backchannel approach that was premised on long-term goals rather than short-term results is to train the younger population to become human rights champions in the future. This approach emphasizes partnerships with public schools to develop new curricula or integrate human rights discussion in alternative and formal classroom settings (done by Philippine Human Rights Information Center, Ateneo Human Rights Center, CHR, DAKILA, and Active Vista), and collaboration with entertainment professionals and filmmakers who could use storytelling as a tool for moral education aimed at young audiences (also done by Active Vista and

DAKILA). The aim is to introduce human rights principles and impart leadership skills to youth representatives they could possibly tap in the future. As an executive of Active Vista shares,

[Youth] are action-takers. They're a potent force because that's one-third of the population. That's 30 percent of the voting population for the 2022 elections or perhaps even more. (Executive)

With their strong strategic communication investments, Active Vista assigned four communication staff to work with volunteer human rights advocates to launch the youth-oriented civic education program titled *Ibang Klase!* (Different Class). This program offered free short courses titled *Pagpapakatao 101* (Being Human 101) and *May K!* (Have the Right!) to college students in alternative classroom settings in the forms of seminars and brownbag discussions. These courses adopt an everyday life approach in human rights education, emphasizing how heroism, equality, justice are experienced by or denied to marginalized sectors in society. Active Vista also organized the Heroes Hub, a fellowship program that seeks to empower youth leaders attending public and private universities across the country. With speakers coming from the creative industry, celebrity human rights advocates, and artist-activists, the program mentors youth participants on human rights-based governance and strategic communication, with the aim of tapping these youth allies for the 2022 presidential election.

Active Vista also advanced cinema for social change by supporting the production of original documentaries such as *On the President's Orders* and public screenings of socially relevant films such as *Heneral Luna*. Active Vista pointed to a public statement from Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo that their documentary is “overdramatized” and “reeks with malice”<sup>40</sup> as evidence of project impact.

Figure 4: Active Vista’s Heroes Hub

<sup>40</sup> Merez, A. 2019. “Palace Slams US Release of ‘Overdramatized’ Docufilm on Duterte’s Drug War.” ABS-CBN News, 17 September 2019. Available at: <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/09/17/19/palace-slams-us-release-of-overdramatized-docufilm-on-dutertes-drug-war>



Cultivating human rights champions through civic education helps broaden their support base and allow emerging leaders to carry the human rights cause and influence their peers to do the same. Workers from Active Vista acknowledge however that the project impacts will likely be seen long-term and hard to quantify.

## Engaging Populist Publics and Addressing Their Fears Directly

One risky yet potentially effective communication approach is directly engaging with the anger and resentment of populist publics when advancing a relevant human rights intervention. **Unlike traditional communication approaches premised on rationally asserting traditional liberal principles of human rights, this approach requires affirming people’s “deep stories” about their experiences of disenfranchisement as real and legitimate before presenting actionable goals.** The advantage of this approach is it brings human rights campaigning closer to the mainstream publics by speaking their language and meeting them where they are, but this is risky too as the approach emphasizes the need for speed and flexibility when engaging in dynamic dialogue.

Child Rights Network’s (CRN) campaign that successfully challenged the legislative initiative to lower the age of criminal responsibility in 2019 is the best example of this communication approach. Maneuvering between frontline and backchannel strategies to evade state attacks while pushing for their legislative agenda, CRN has an effective communication infrastructure where a communication consultant directs overall strategy while giving network members flexibility to produce their own creative materials. CRN’s communication strategist explained to us that they strategically combined legislative lobbying with strategic communication that would “create public clamor” and put pressure on legislators. CRN’s long-term investment in promoting the hashtag #ChildrenNotCriminals paid off for them as they mobilized public outrage around the legislation to be channeled in strategic and actionable ways.

The message they advanced in their communication involved engaging with, rather than dismissing, populist fears’ and anxieties around rising criminality by presenting statistical evidence that lowering the age of criminal responsibility will advertently lead to more, rather than fewer, heinous crimes. As their strategist shared,

*Ito yung klase ng isyu na hindi mo kaagad kakampihan ang mga bata kasi ito yung klase ng mga bata na iscratch yung kotse mo, na mathre-threaten ka kapag pumapasok sila sa jeep. Kailangan naming tapatan yung fear ng tao at yung mensahe ni Duterte tungkol sa mga batang ganun. Kailangan namin maging kakampi ng tao at ipakita na nauunawan namin sila. (Communication strategist)*

(This is the kind of issue where you won't immediately take the side of the children because these are the ones who might scratch your car or make you feel threatened if they sit beside you in the jeepney. We needed to address the public's fears and Duterte's message about those children. We need to become the allies of the people and show that we understood them.)

CRN deployed this calibrated narrative using memes, images, and celebrity advocacy across multiple platforms. They avoided the trap of personality-oriented attacks against Duterte and legislators while correcting various "fake news" and disinformation around "tambays" (bystanders) and "pasaways" (disobedient citizens) by using emotionally

resonant messaging that is not condescending to either the middle-class or the *masa*.

By offering concrete solutions to issues, CRN developed a grounded, nuanced, and flexible campaign on a specific human rights issue. **They actively responded to late-breaking news and developments and exerted control over the public narrative of the issue.** Through affiliations with member organizations in their network, CRN also enlisted celebrities and influencers involved in children's rights advocacies to amplify their hashtag and engage mainstream publics.



Figure 5. CRN's #ChildrenNotCriminals Campaign

center, has similar plans to address the fears and anxieties of populist publics. INCITEGov's listening project called "Community Conversations" aims to dialogue with middle-class Duterte supporters to gain insight into their beliefs and behaviors and identify their positions on specific government policies. They aim to use their research findings to develop communication interventions addressing mainstream publics in an effort to make human rights principles relatable to their audiences' everyday life. **Certainly, the human rights sector needs to invest in more research on the sentiments and grievances of populist publics so they can address these head-on through their communication and storytelling.**

We also found out that INCITEGov, a policy research and advocacy



Figure 6. UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Anne Curtis’s Solidarity Post for CRN’s Campaign against Lowering the Age of Criminal Responsibility

## Engaging the “Trolls”

Most human rights NGOs do not have official social media guidelines on how to deal with trolls’ hate speech and/or disinformation narratives. NGOs such as Medical Action Group and the Commission on Human Rights shared with us experiences of deactivating their organizational accounts on Facebook because they were overwhelmed by angry posts.

The social advocacy-focused NGO DAKILA stands out for having a codified social media protocol premised on what they call “radical empathy” and “disruptive kindness.” Unlike organizations that try to “fight fire with fire,” their main aim is to interrupt cycles of hate and confrontation when engaging with angry commenters. Their protocol is to engage commenters with a respectful tone and presenting to them facts and evidence. **Their operators are prohibited from using a condescending tone, sarcastic humor, and naming-and-shaming, or mobilizing their own fake accounts to respond to troll comments.**

Social media guidelines also help communication officers cope with the emotional toll of engaging with troll behaviors as they are able to depersonalize what could be a traumatic experience.

Child Rights Network has a similar protocol in place when dealing with trolls, particularly on deciding when to remove the comment of a troll and when to engage. Moreover, their consultant also created an answer sheet or script that was disseminated to their member organizations to equip them with consistent statements to use when responding to questions or troll attacks. Again, this is more evidence that good results can come from pooling resources:

I remember when we were starting, our members wanted a Facebook page but they didn’t know what to do. And then when it was bombarded with negative comments, we had to devise a strategy for it to be an effective communication channel for us. (Communication strategist)

CHR mentioned that they have learned from past experience and have since developed new protocols of carefully monitoring their accounts, filtering comments, and selectively engaging angry comments.

## Engaging the International Community

Another effective frontliner strategy employed by NGOs such as PAHRA, Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International Philippines, Karapatan, and TFDP is engaging the international community in the hopes that international watchdogs can put pressure on the Philippine government and hold leaders accountable for human rights abuses. There are indications that Duterte has been pressured by international agencies’ investigations: After the release of UNHRC resolution that sought to investigate human rights violations in the Philippines, Duterte threatened to withdraw the country’s membership from the council back in 2019.<sup>41</sup> With the passage of the Magnitsky Act in the United States, Duterte retaliated by terminating the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).<sup>42</sup>

The strength in engaging with the international community is that **it has validated the work of human rights workers and has granted them a layer of protection against threats by the Duterte administration.** However, a risk this strategy poses is that it fans the flame of nationalist narratives that insinuate human rights organizations are beholden to foreign destabilizers.

## Human Rights Communication in the Pandemic Moment

The state's militarized response to the pandemic led to new human rights abuses that positioned human rights workers in the state's direct firing line. With chilling effects to political dissent further deepened by the passage of the Anti-Terror Bill and the ABS-CBN shutdown, the sector once again finds itself dealing with unprecedented new risks.

We reconnected with our respondents in June 2020 to check on the experiences of human rights workers in the pandemic moment and to examine how communication and digital media have become integrated into their professional and personal lives. Only 12 of the 30 organizations responded to our follow-up messages. A common theme among the responses we collected is the acknowledgment that communication and digital media are not just important but a necessity during the pandemic. Organizations mandated to do community interventions realize they have no access to their constituencies without digital media and need to find ways to (re)connect with local communities. We observed that organizations with existing strategic communication infrastructures have coped with the challenges of working in the

pandemic moment better than those with limited communication infrastructures.

Organizations with existing communication capacities have further accelerated efforts to expand their teams as they quickly transitioned their services and campaigns online. For example, IDEALS Inc., which exhibits all the qualities of strategic communication investments, hired an additional four communication staff. IDEALS Inc. funds their new staff from recent grants focused on health communication initiatives. They tell us that 80 percent of their interventions have transitioned online. Another example of an effective and smooth online transition is Metro Manila Pride, as they have just come off a successful Pride Month featuring diverse educational webinars, quarantine parties, and celebrity performances. Some organizations quickly expanded their original mandates to include public health and wellbeing challenges in the pandemic, such as Greenpeace Philippines' #BetterNormal campaign that spans initiatives from safe urban transportation to agriculture and DAKILA's psycho-social campaigns. Meanwhile,

<sup>41</sup> Esguerra, D. 2019. "Duterte mulling Philippines' withdrawal from UN rights body." Philippine Daily Inquirer, 16 July 2019. Available at <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/178002/duterte-mulling-philippines-withdrawal-from-un-rights-body>

<sup>42</sup> Smith, Tom. 2020. "Rodrigo Duterte terminated a military agreement with US – why it could push Philippines closer to China." The Conversation, 18 February 2020. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/rodrigo-duterte-terminated-a-military-agreement-with-us-why-it-could-push-philippines-closer-to-china-131812>

other community-focused organizations such as Karapatan wait for funding that can help them restart local interventions once quarantine guidelines loosen up.

Many organizations worry about data protection and privacy breaches in the “new normal” of online operations. One organization shared their experience of being targeted by heightened surveillance by state officials. To mitigate these, they now have plans to “learn about cybersecurity [and] data privacy”—a new initiative for the organization.

While we have not received any reports of layoffs in human rights NGOs, we learned that there have been resignations due to activist burnout. One organization reported five resignations from junior employees who have felt burnt out in the past three months. A junior human rights worker told us, “Personally, it’s quite interesting that [our colleagues] chose to resign. Jobs are very scarce nowadays.” Risky conditions of human rights work as well as professional difficulties in maintaining work-life balance while working from home contribute to these feelings of burnout. We learned that junior staff members who were perceived to be more fluent in the digital environment were assigned added responsibilities of teaching senior colleagues how to work with online platforms and organizing public webinars—with no extra pay.

We learned that at least one organization has offered financial support and benefits to employees by helping them access government

financial assistance funds (from the Social Security System and the Department of Labor and Employment) and offering extended leave for their staff. Another organization mentions that their senior executives announced they would forego their annual salary increase as a cost-saving measure.

A few human rights organizations also acknowledge that it is also their turn to stand in solidarity with their allies in journalism and the creative industries as the administration has increased efforts to attack freedom of the press. They point to opportunities to launch campaigns promoting human rights of free speech as a way they could demonstrate this.

## Part 5.

# **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This report invites broad sectoral inquiry into how human rights organizations can make strategic use of communication in responding to the urgent challenges of today’s polarized political environment. Our review of organizations’ communication campaigns revealed mostly short-term “tweaks” and experiments with new digital platforms; control of political narratives was yielded to angry populist attacks and disinformation, which ultimately undermines foundational human rights principles. Our analysis of organizational work structures of human rights organizations sheds light on how communication and technology personnel have remained peripheral to both overall organizational strategy and delivery of specific programs.

In a time of information warfare, human rights organizations need to exert control over political narratives and engage with mainstream publics. We outline 10 recommendations below, organized into three key areas where organizations can improve by investing in sustainable infrastructures, sound strategy, and sectoral relationships based on solidarity.

## **Structure**

- 1 Human rights organizations should invest in sustainable communication infrastructure: material resources to produce communication activities, as well as human resources to employ, train, and provide mental health support for communication personnel.
- 2 Organizations should engage donors to integrate communication into program calls and challenge the dominant logframe mindset, which reproduces misleading logics that communication activities have no public impact just because they are not immediately quantifiable.
- 3 Consider assigning communication specialists with the responsibility for managing the overall narrative around a key human rights issue. The Philippines’ Child Rights Network offers an effective model for a coalition with both the material infrastructure and creative capacity to conduct timely, flexible, and creative communication activities directed by overall strategy.
- 4 Organizations should have in-house champions of communication who are invited and empowered to weigh in on overall strategy. These personnel must be fluent in human rights vocabulary and public issues rather than assigned a technical role.



## Strategy

- 1 Human rights organizations must engage with, rather than avoid, the public sentiments of the populist political moment. Rather than simply double-down on liberal progressive values, or personalize the issue to Duterte, human rights organizations can invest in more listening projects that deepen their understanding of populist publics' fears and anxieties. Insights from these projects should inform strategies behind organizational branding, issue campaigning, reaching out to diverse potential allies, responding to "trolls," and/or correcting disinformation narratives.
- 2 Organizations must acknowledge when and how their own normative principles of serving the most marginalized communities and immersing in the grassroots are often used to justify their own dismissal of various sectoral shortcomings: their own bias against public communication, their lack of understanding for the middle-class support of Duterte, and their occasionally narrow work objectives that favor local community work rather than engaging new communities (youth, middle-class, LGBTQ, etc.).
- 3 The sector can balance their predilection for gloom-and-doom and attack narratives with more hopeful, issue-based campaigns that can mobilize broader communities. By painting vivid images of a common future that must be desired and the practical goals that can lead toward that, organizations may be able to inspire mainstream publics to take part in human rights work.
- 4 The COVID-19 pandemic moment all the more underscores the need for the sector to invest in communication strategy and technological infrastructure. The pandemic brought to the fore the centrality of digital media in connecting communities and shaping public conversations about human rights. The human rights sector needs to deepen its engagement with communities by using digital media, and should not allow populist leaders to control various narratives around public safety, the "*pasaway*" (disobedient citizens), and the plight of vulnerable communities in the pandemic moment.



## Solidarity

- 1 Human rights organizations can extend solidarity to their fellow advocates under attack, not simply through public statements of social support and principled condemnation against the state, but by sharing their communication resources and/or helping them reshape the narrative around human rights.
- 2 Human rights organizations must be able to trust, collaborate, and foster a working relationship with (1) other human rights organizations outside their political affiliations, (2) advertising and/or public relations agencies, (3) media organizations, (4) academic researchers and ethnographers, and (5) duty bearers (e.g., local governments, law enforcement agencies) in order to advance their human rights agenda. It is important for HR organizations to receive capacity-building training from allies on how to break down jargon, simplify language, affirm and address the publics' fears and anxieties, and broaden the reach of their messages. Sharing best practices and maintaining a database of effective communication campaigns are important steps to grasp the nettle of communication work and develop central strategies to cope with today's information warfare.

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