TCI Fellowship Report
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Mainstreaming psychosocial disability within the activist movement. This ambitious goal is proving to be very challenging as expected. I knew that it would be a long shot given the existing system and style of work in place. The sustained and intensified state attacks on our ranks aggravate the situation. Except for the leftist organization I am directly part of which is Bayan Muna (People First) Party list, my efforts to introduce the disability perspective to the activist movement are being met with a passive response. While all of the leaders and point persons I contacted would find the idea exciting and acknowledge the fact that indeed, it is a discourse they don’t talk about but should; their enthusiasm would not translate into commitment of time for a focus group discussion. While they declare they are open to it, I would often get answers that say, “We can't do it right now because our attention is geared toward the issues of our respective sector.” whenever I followed-up on them. I would normally corner them in rallies for an exploratory talk because it is practical to do so in these events finding a lot of them in one gathering. On a positive note, none rejected the proposal to learn about it.

Bayan Muna headquarters, which primarily consists of grassroots community organizers in the capital region, has heeded the call to take the disability cause as part of their primary advocacies. After undergoing their disability sensitivity orientation last 17 October 2018, they rolled out their own seminars in their respective chapters with me as the lecturer in the following months. These totaled 11 seminars and included over 200 participants. While Bayan Muna Representatives have been carrying disability issues in parliament in their various proposed legislation in Congress and successfully enacted some laws through the years, this is the first time these are incorporated in the organization’s community work. They also engaged local government office candidates to include disability interests in the latter’s electoral agenda in the recent election. Internally, the organization has been more careful now in utilizing psychiatric treatment for our distressed colleagues and warns them accordingly about the dangers of medications. They are practicing the non-medical enabling choices more.
Writing. On 29 November 2018, I submitted a written interview for the #WhatWeNeed Blog which the editors entitled, *Disability as an Intersectional Human Rights Movement – An Interview with Janice Cambri from the Philippines*.\(^1\)

Resource Person. Outside *Bayan Muna*, I was a speaker for a CRPD webinar hosted by Tina Minkowitz\(^2\). I continue to be a resource speaker in disability sensitivity and awareness seminars conducted by government agencies. In March, I served the Civil Service Commission Regional Office No. 4 and the Dept. of Labor and Employment-Human Resource Development Services. I was also a respondent to interviews for a Law thesis and an international research on legal capacity of persons with disabilities by Soya Mori, a deaf senior overseas research fellow of the Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization.

**Continued Collaboration with the Philippine Coalition on the UN CRPD.** Dr. Liza Martinez and I were the writers of the last submission to the UN CRPD Committee in late August prior to its State review of the Philippines in Geneva. These were the comments to the Reply of the State to the List of Issues as well as the recommendations for the Concluding Observations. I became part of the CSO delegation to the review. Most of the inputs we gave on various occasions during our stay were echoed by the Committee during the dialogue with the State and articulated in the Concluded Observations including the issue of the Mental Health Act and other relative domestic laws violating the rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities. To help peers from TCI AP prepare for their own future State Reviews, I have shared my experience during the Strategic Meeting of the group in Bangkok last March 2019. Unfortunately, after Geneva and despite the election of the new leadership in November, the Coalition started becoming inactive.

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\(^2\) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhIqbVg6FII](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhIqbVg6FII)
As part of the Deaf community since 2012, I actively helped peers lobby for the passage of the Filipino Sign Language Law which eventually happened in October 2018. On February 12, 2019, I have joined the group working on the drafting of its Implementing Rules and Regulations headed by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (Commission on the Filipino Language).

Continued Involvement with the Mental Health Legislation.

I was under no illusion that much could be changed in the coercive MH Act but I carried on participating in its legislative process to try stop any further damage its proponents could cause. As expected, most of our recommendations to the drafting of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) which took place in October and December 2018 were ignored but we managed to preserve our victory of preventing the explicit listing of ‘depression’ and ‘suicide ideation’ as incidents of psychiatric emergency warranting involuntary treatment and admission which mental health professionals tried once again to include. We thwarted their new attempt to encroach on patients in facilities’ right to accept visitors and receive communications as well as to create institution/hospital as a form of community-based mental health
care facility. Our efforts forced them to include the mandate, together with the Commission on Human Rights (NHRI) which we have collaborated with for writing the recommendations, to formulate guidelines for informed consent, supported decision making and exception to informed consent. It was also a strategic venue to introduce the CRPD voice in addressing institution owners and other sectoral actors who attended these consultations but were absent during the Congressional deliberations as well as to be presented as the representative of the sector which were both new in the mental health discourse in the country.

I met the head of the Task Force responsible for the IRR during the State review which enhanced my credibility. For the first time, government health officials acknowledged the CRPD and admitted that the MHA is not in harmony with it. She further explained to the big audience numerous times that it is precisely the reason why I have been relentless in asserting our rights and must be heard. I believe that these are relevant milestones in reclaiming our rightful place in policy making and shifting the paradigm that delegated expertise exclusively to mental health professionals.

**Support servicing.** For the longest time, I have focused my efforts on national advocacy. To walk the talk of providing services, we have launched our own small initiative catering to our fellow activists as peer supporters. Systems are supposed to be in place within the movement to assist our comrades in distress but they do not always work and PDIP members know this from direct experience. We want to help fill the gap. In a time when political persecution against us by the State has gone brazenly vicious, anxiety and grief are at an all-time high. More and more lives are being derailed by assassination, disappearances, and harassment in the form of red baiting, intimidation, and being filed with trumped up charges. We formed our Quick Response Teams (QRT) guided by the *being-with-the-person* approach to offer support from accompanying families to Courts and detention centers; attending and helping organize solidarity events; facilitating legal consultation; helping them apply for a disability ID to simply sitting down with comrades; helping them with chores for a day; taking them for a walk, a bite to eat,
recreation or anything reasonable to get them their ‘mental health break’ as one peer puts it. We have adopted two pet projects namely the Oplan Political Prisoners and Oplan Save our Schools Support. Due to Martial Law in Minadanao, some internally displaced Lumads, our indigenous people from the Southernmost part of the country, have evacuated to Manila, the nation’s capital. 85 of their schools which housed around 3,000 students have been forcibly closed, burned down or occupied by the military and paramilitary accusing them for being communist fronts. Support groups here have established the Bakwit (vernacular for evacuee) school that students may continue their education. When I first volunteered there as a teacher in 2017, the children told me that what makes them feel better is being given a semblance of a normal life by attending a class so we decided we would be teachers/tutors to them on a regular basis.

Wellness get together. Our core group members are mainly consisted of militant activists who belong to different organizations within the movement. Aside from their tasks as activists, they put in extra efforts to our disability cause which at times could really take a toll. Most of us are not in the leadership so we remain a minority voice which can cause a lot of frustration. I have learned the hard way that self-preservation to sustain what we do is critical and I wanted to impart this lesson especially to our younger members so we established our monthly meet-up usually taking place at the end of the month. While this is our time to touch base with one another’s works as a group, much of the day is dedicated to a session of healing or rejuvenation.

Launching What We Need Campaign. Separate report on this was submitted in January 2019

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Promoting and supporting the right to participation in political and public life of persons with disabilities. 13 May 2019 was the day for national and local elections in the Philippines where citizens decided their senators, party list representatives, governors, congressmen, mayors, and other local posts for the next three years. Since last year, my comrades and I have been doing grass root level campaigning to encourage people to register so they can be eligible to vote. The registration is a limited period so it was crucial to get the word out. During the electoral campaign period, we gathered people for voter’s education. Historically, many voters are disenfranchised either because of not knowing how to use the ballot properly or not being able to vote at all. A lot of people with disabilities, especially those with physical and sensorial disabilities, have been discouraged to vote because of the hassles of going to the voting precincts. Families also did not include their members with disabilities for the same reasons. In addition to mass up, we conducted house to house voter’s education using the list of identified households with persons with disabilities in the communities, particularly the poor ones. It was either expensive or impractical for them to leave their homes to attend the bigger events. For those who did go, we made sure the activity was inclusive. By then, majority of our teams have undergone my trainings on disability sensitivity. To make sure that these persons with disabilities could vote, we have enlisted the aid of local village authorities and community organizations such as churches, clubs as well as benevolent residents who have their own vehicles to help transport persons with disabilities and serve as their assistants during the election day. Those who desired to be more active in the political process beyond voting were also trained how to be poll watchers. For a lot of them, it was either their first or first time in a long time to vote, serve as a poll watcher, or simply join the festivity of campaigning on the streets. They found these an exhilarating experience. Some became emotional and were in tears for finally exercising a fundamental right in democracy. It was also a momentous event where communities were mobilized to practice inclusion.

Mainstreaming psychosocial disability within the activist movement. After the election period, I shifted back to educating my comrades on disability. We managed to get the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), a national teachers’ union, to pledge commitment to have their ranks undergo disability sensitivity orientation. We rolled it out one union chapter at a time during the weekends since these are the one available days for teachers before the classes officially started in June and carried on until August.

Resource Person. Outside ACT, I continued to be a resource speaker in disability sensitivity and awareness seminars conducted by government agencies. Last May, I served the Dept. of Trade and Industry- Joint Information Systems Management Service and Planning and Management Service as well as the agency’s Export Marketing Bureau in July.
Involvement with the Mental Health Legislation. Officially, my last engagement was the acceptance of the Health Department’s invitation for a consultation on the development of strategy by the Philippine Council for Mental Health. In August, months after the Mental Health Act’s Implementing Rules and Regulations was signed and weeks after the Draft Guidelines for the Operationalization of Provisions regarding Informed Consent, Exceptions to Informed Consent, Advance Directives, Legal Representatives and Supported Decision Making were released, we launched a one-week long campaign on advance directive within the various Facebook-based peer support groups we were members of. Most people are oblivious to these developments in the law. We posted general discussion in the group pages and also reached out individually to introduce these safe guards, encourage, and assisted them in making the document when they wished to do so.

Support servicing. The crackdown against militants continues. It has gotten worse after the elections. Some of our peers (core members of PDIP) were literally forced to go into hiding because of the strategic roles they play in their respective sectoral organizations in the leftist movement. Though reduced in number, our Quick Response Teams (QRT) remains operational most critically during the abovementioned circumstance.

Wellness get together. This has been proven a major venue for respite for our members which motivated us to keep it going. ###