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ELF three-year impact evaluation: experiences and insights

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• Background

The Education for Life Foundation (ELF) is a non-governmental organisation working to strengthen grassroots groups for greater participation of citizens in democratisation. The aim is to create a dynamic civil society that is actively and effectively participating in public affairs and negotiating with local government, and other powerful players, to ensure they are more accountable to community needs.

ELF's main project is the Philippine-Danish folkschool (*Paaralang Bayan*). This carries out different leadership formation programmes for community-based grassroots leaders, through working in partnership with field-based NGOs, People's Organisations, and in some cases, local government units. They key principles that shape the programme reflect ELF's focus on democracy and local governance, agrarian and asset reform, sustainable development, gender equality, and environmental protection. Participants for the leadership programmes are selected on recommendations made by ELF's field-based partners.

Paaralang Bayan has five main activities:

- Life History Workshops: a five-day sharing of lessons from prospective participants' lives prior to a residential course. This serves to assess training needs and to screen and integrate prospective participants.
- General Leadership Course (GLC): a six-week residential course covering topics on communication, negotiation, conflict management, organisational development,

project development, culture, Filipino Psychology (see below), gender, ecology, popular economics, politics, health, leadership, and empowerment.
- Special Leadership Course: for continuing educational needs of graduates of the GLC (called leader graduates).
- Short Courses on specific needs identified by communities, groups or organisations, and which are open to anyone.
- A new program, Distance Education, has also been developed, initially for ELF-trained leaders.

ELF also supports graduates of the GLC with a program on popular economics and another on participatory evaluation and research.

Since 1992, a total of 709 community-based leaders located in 41 provinces, 174 municipalities and 412 *barangays* (villages) in the Philippines have participated in the GLC. This article describes a process of participatory evaluation that we undertook to assess the effects of the ELF leadership program.

• PME methodology

ELF recognises the importance of evaluation both as a learning tool for participants and as a means of ensuring appropriateness of trainings. Yet making sure that an evaluation adequately measures how much difference our program has made locally was not an easy task.

Our initial efforts in evaluation remained largely undocumented and lacked systematic measurement. Attempts at evaluation occurred immediately after trainings, during staff visits or reunions and provided anecdotes describing

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the positive impact of ELF leader-graduates on their organisations and communities. The stories were elating and encouraging but we had no way of determining how widespread these impacts were and if they were valid.

Besides this informal evaluation, we undertook a more systematic evaluation of the first phase of the program. The Phase 1 evaluation was implemented in collaboration with funding partners, the Philippine Psychological Research and Training House (PPRTH), ELF staff, and several leader-graduates. The results showed that ELF leadership formation activities, such as the GLCs, influenced the individual leaders positively, who in turn were able to more effectively serve their organisations and communities. While the studies provided positive feedback, we had no baseline against which to compare them and so could not easily learn what difference ELF had made on leader graduates and their organisations and communities. Therefore, we sought to improve upon these evaluations in terms of baseline data, comparison areas, and developing research skills among the leader graduates, who would become key players in subsequent evaluations.

In parallel with our second project cycle phase, we started a three-year longitudinal impact evaluation, spanning 1996 to 1998. By involving our leader graduates, we were moving towards making evaluation a more participatory process. We also helped enhance their leadership capabilities as the evaluation methodology can be used in their own organisations and communities. The evaluation process had the following objectives:

- to determine the impact of ELF's courses on its leader graduates;
- to determine the impact of leader graduates on their respective communities;
- to involve researchers from among the leader graduates and further build their competencies;
- to popularise and further develop indigenous methods and instruments of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino psychology, see below);
- to help individual leader graduates to be aware of their own development through involving them in the study and sharing the results with them; and,

- to contribute to theory-building on grassroots leadership in the Philippines.

- ## Stages of the impact evaluation

We are now in our second year of the three year process. In the first year, ELF worked closely with PPRTH to look at the design, indicators and sample size, identify and train leader researchers, develop data gathering methods, and gather the baseline data with the leader researchers. In the second year, the leader researchers have worked on community validation of the baseline data, follow-up training, and the second round of data gathering. The third and final year will be similar to the second year, with the additional activity of comparing the final round of findings with data from the first and second years.

1. Preparatory stage

The first stage required careful planning, training of leader researchers, and design of the process with them. We were unable to involve the many hundreds of graduates, instead we selected a sample of 24 leader graduates and their communities from two GLC courses conducted in 1996. The leaders came from four provinces (Pampanga, Bataan, Zambales, and Mindoro). All the leader graduates were eager to participate, as they wanted to reflect on their own progress and possible areas for improving their leadership skills. A further 24 community leaders, who had not participated in any ELF course, were selected as a comparison group. By comparing baseline data with the findings after three years of the programme, we hoped to be able to assess what impact our program has had on the ELF-trained leaders, both personally and in the community.

Seven groups of people have been involved in the evaluation process, in many different ways (see Table 1). The table shows the level of participation of different groups at different stages of the research. ELF is now working to enhance the role that all groups can play in the entire evaluation process.

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Table 1. Level of participation, to date, of the different groups involved in the evaluation process:

Stages	ELF staff	PPRTH	LRs	LGs	LG Communities	Non LGs	Communities of non LGs
Planning	H	H	M	/	/	/	/
Training of LRs	H	H	H	/	/	/	/
Design	H	H	M	/	/	/	/
Data collection	M	M	H	L	L	L	L
Data collection/ analysis and validation	M	H	H	L	/	L	L
Data presentation/ report writing	M	H	L	/	/	/	/
Use of the evaluation findings	H	M	H	H	M	M	M
Assessment of the impact evaluation	H	H	H	M	L	L	L

Key to table: LRs = leaders researchers; LGs = leader graduates; non LGs = non ELF trained leader. Level of participation: H-High, M-Medium, L-Low, /-not involved.

During the preparatory stage, both leader researchers and ELF staff underwent a training on participatory principles and tools and *Sikolohiyang Pilipino.* As we will explain below, the Filipino cultural context was vital to the evaluation and therefore, awareness of the concepts and methods of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino,* was an important prerequisite. The leader researchers were also trained in qualitative data gathering, documentation, and analysis. They helped formulate key questions and were the main actors in data collection, collation, and validation.

PRA techniques will be used with the leader graduates in the latter part of the evaluation process. We believe that the PRA techniques will not only serve as a validation tool, but will also allow us to plan future activities with the graduates that may help them to further enhance their capability.

In the preparation stage, indicators at the individual LG and at the community levels were identified and developed by ELF staff and leader researchers. Two different types of indicators were chosen: those that assess personal changes at the individual level, and those that look at community level changes (see Table 2). Each of these indicators is being assessed annually between 1996 and 1998.

2. Linking data gathering to Filipino psychology

The data gathering methods were developed by PPRTH and the Psychological Association of the Philippines (*Pambansang Samahan ng Sikolohiyang Pilipino/PSSP*). They include: guided discussions, story telling, asking questions, observation, psychological assessments, surveys, and interviews. These methods, and the norms of validity of information used by the leader researchers, take into account the Filipino local culture and language.

Filipino psychology distinguishes eight levels of relationship between Filipinos and non-Filipinos which centre around the concept of insiders and outsiders. The relationships range from 'respectful civility' to 'oneness'. To gather valid and reliable data, researchers have to cultivate at least the sixth relationship level for mutual trust and rapport. Moreover, researchers are required to become insiders through staying and integrating themselves into the community: participating and being part of the natural flow and rhythm of life in the locality; being sensitive to and respectful of the values, traditions, norms, and taboos;

and being truthful about the purpose of her/his stay.

Thus, researchers initially required a contact person, a 'bridge', who could make the necessary introductions in the community and find a place for the researcher to stay. Once the researcher had been integrated into the community, discussion groups were organised or the researcher would sit in on one of the natural/regular discussions or storytelling sessions that are part of the oral tradition of information exchange in the villages.

3. Data collation and analysis

Tape recorded sessions were transcribed and the Key Judges method was used for content analysis and categorisation of the information generated. This methods clusters and labels the data provided there is consensus by at least three people. All the statements were sorted according to the set of indicators in Table 2. The leader graduates have been trained to do qualitative data gathering, documentation and analysis. All the results are being shared with the people involved in the monitoring project.

4. Data validation

After collating the data, meetings were held to discuss the findings with the ELF trained leaders and their communities and the comparison groups, who had not had ELF training. These were facilitated by the leader graduates. The results of the discussions have shown that leaders, even in comparison areas, found the evaluation a positive learning process. One participant said "It is good to know these things. We had no time and opportunity to discuss these in the past because we were busy at work. But now, we are here and have a deeper understanding of our community".

Table 2. Indicators for ELF's participatory evaluation of leadership training

Individual level indicators	Community level indicators
their notions and practices of "democracy, citizenship, gender roles, community development, environmental protection, active and effective participation of community members in public affairs" their capacity to manage projects their livelihood their household income their self/perceptions in terms of being a leader selected personality characteristics including self/esteem.	community member's notions and practices of "democracy, citizenship, gender roles, community development, environmental protection, active and effective participation of community members in public affairs" livelihood and household income level and quality of participation of community members in public affairs level of government services provided in response to community action capacity of grassroots organisation to manage projects community members' perceptions of leader's capacity to manage projects community members' perceptions of leadership qualities in their leader community members' perceptions of their leader's personality characteristics, including self-esteem

5. Report writing

Report writing for each year is being carried out by PPRTH.

- **Lessons and insights**

ELF expects to learn about the effectiveness of its program for training leaders for democratisation and development. More importantly, it hopes that the leaders and graduates will become more aware of their own progress and can identify areas for improvement. It plans to bring the lessons and experiences from the evaluation to exchanges with grassroots leadership practitioners and researchers from other NGOs, POs, and academics. One important forum is the annual Conference on Grassroots Leadership that encourages more understanding of leadership in the Philippines context.

For the leader researchers, leadership qualities have taken an added dimension. Leader researchers view their new competencies as directly contributing to their development as individuals, and as leaders of their organisations and communities. The leaders have learnt from each other. During a presentation at a Grassroots Leadership Conference, organised by ELF, the leader researchers said the experience of looking into the lives of other leaders was like looking into themselves: *"We understand ourselves as leaders, our organisation and community more now. It is just like 'researching' on ourselves".* For the communities, the evaluation provided them opportunities to discuss issues like democracy and gender which they had not discussed in the past.

Methodologically, the project is significant as it is the first longitudinal study to use the orientation and methods of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*. This makes explicit the link between the quality of data gathered and the relationship between researcher and participants, and implies that there are no short-cuts to good quality data.

An important and positive factor was the participation of leader researchers in the evaluation process, because they have a grounded grasp of realities at the grassroots.

Even though they come from different areas in the Philippines, they are easily integrated into new communities and can understand the issues, concerns, and opinions shared. The leader researchers are able to gather data from fellow leader researchers who could otherwise be uncomfortable with ELF staff or unfamiliar researchers. This further enhances the validity of data gathered.

Constraints

We have, of course, also experienced a number of constraints related to data collection, collation, and analysis. For example, due to the sensitivity of the Filipino culture, discussions, conversations, and storytelling often took different directions in different contexts. The leader researchers had to be creative in focusing the discussions to gain relevant information, without appearing discourteous to their hosts.

The tape recorded discussions had to be transcribed manually which was a laborious process. For fear of losing relevant information, the researchers included data almost word by word. This led to an enormous mountain of field data that had to be sifted. We learned that it is a skill to be able to summarise data into appropriate units for content analysis.

As our data handling and analysis process had many steps (e.g. transcribing, coding, writing codes onto paper and sorting, grouping together for the 'key judges' method) and involved many people, some data loss was inevitable. This was mainly caused by processing the voluminous data through a not so systematic computerisation procedure within limited time.

In the future, we plan to minimise the constraints in data collection by providing additional trainings for leader researchers on facilitation, small group discussion and exercises on writing, summary, and synthesis. To address constraints of data collation and analyses, a full time data encoder and a systematic approach to data handling will be needed.

The participatory evaluation process is an important step for ELF's learning and sharing program. ELF recognises that the ongoing

evaluation is focused on assessing the effectiveness of training activities but further research is needed to evaluate the efficiency of these activities.

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