

# Creating Positive Actions Among Youth On The Issue Of The West Philippine Sea

**Sheryl R. Morales<sup>1</sup>, Rosalie A. Corpus<sup>2</sup>, Ryan B. Oliver<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Management Office, Polytechnic University of the Philippines – PUP Quezon City Branch, Philippines, <sup>2</sup>College of Education, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Sta. Mesa, Manila, Philippines, <sup>3</sup>National Youth Congress of 2013, Philippines.

Abstract	Article Info
<p>A prior study project, the second part of which is presented here, discussed the social backdrop of the issue of the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and how the youth may play a proactive role in assisting the government in conserving the maritime environment. The study's objective is to convey positive and collective stories regarding young people's responses to issues in the West Philippine Sea. The study employed participatory action research (PAR) qualitative methods. A series of structured activities was conducted during the duration of the forum reflecting the 5D phases of appreciative inquiry (AI) which were contextualized based on the issue to establish youth-led action points. The thematic presentation showed that youth engagement in WPS issues is concentrated on four areas: (1) their support action, (2) marine environment and marine life protection, (3) peace and conflict resolution advocacy, and (4) social awareness and citizen initiative. Government entities with mandates on the problem should engage youths in order for them to participate and collaborate effectively in community initiatives. Engaging youth in national issues not only makes them productive and responsive citizens, but also advocates for peaceful and cordial ties with neighboring countries in the disputed islands, and potential future leaders at the national and local government positions.</p>	<p><b>Keywords:</b> Youth and West Philippine Sea, Participatory Action Research, Youth Community Engagement, Marine Environmental Protection, Appreciative Inquiry.</p>

## INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the United Nations Arbitral Tribunal ruled that the Philippines possesses exclusive sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). As progress in the disputed islands has been made through increased marine activity, the Philippine government, under its new leadership, has had a number of bilateral meetings with other surrounding claimant-countries to discuss geopolitical realities in the region.

Former President Benigno S. Aquino III marked the West Philippine Sea (WPS) in 2012, by virtue of Administrative Order No. 29, Series of 2012, as the maritime area on the western side of the Philippine archipelago, which includes the Luzon Sea as well as the adjacent waters around, within, and adjacent to the Kalayaan Island Group and Bajo De Masinloc or the Scarborough Shoal (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2012).

The declaration was in principle the exercise of sovereign jurisdiction by the Philippines in its Exclusive Economic Zone stipulated under Presidential Decree No. 1599 (1978) and with regard to the establishment and use of artificial islands, installations, and structures; marine scientific research; the protection and preservation of the marine environment; and other rights and obligations provided for under the principles of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) (UNCLOS). The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the National Mapping Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), the Department of National Defence (DND), the Philippine Navy, and the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), among other government instrumentalities (Section 5, AO No. 29, s. 2012), are tasked with monitoring the assertion of sovereign rights over these islands and the promotion of the West Philippine Sea by educational institutions (such as the Commission on Higher Education and the Department of Education).

Though the assertion of our rights in the WPS is a matter of state concern, the role of the Filipino citizens especially our youth as future stewards in nation-building and peace process is inevitable in spreading awareness and civic consciousness on the adverse effects of not giving national importance in today's some pressing concerns, among others, (1) perspective of the marine environment and marine resources (Alcala, 2016); and (2) other claimants' actions on reclaiming the islands and allegedly constructing buildings which have great impact on the national security and economic survival of the country (Pitlo III, 2013), in the coming years.

In recent years, China's increasing assertiveness and the claimant states' quest for resources, the Philippines is a crucial actor in the South China Sea territorial disputes, which are becoming more acute. Meanwhile, the Duterte administration has taken a more pragmatic approach, which avoids confrontation with China in the expectation of gaining economic gains from the situation.

Apart from resolving maritime disputes and ensuring that natural resources are handled responsibly, responsible persons and government officials should consider the immediate assistance that students and young people may provide (Manaysay, 2015). Hence, former Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio (2019) encouraged Filipino youth to continue defending the West Philippine Sea. The youth who are engaging and responding nationalistically but peacefully and collectively on the current issues in the WPS is a significant and timely action as current stakeholders and future leaders.

The researchers believe that sharing positive and collective stories about actions taken by young people to raise awareness and civic consciousness about the current condition of the West Philippine Sea, as well as helping to promote the existence of national agencies with specific mandates, will enlighten and motivate the rest of the youth population to participate and collaborate actively in community engagements where the role of young people is critical, as well as encourage the establishment of national agencies with specific mandates, will enlighten and motivate the rest of the youth population.

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A TOOL

“When people focus on human ideals and achievement, peak experiences, and best practices (Mohr & Watkins, 2002) these things—not the conflicts—tend to flourish.” Learning from moments of excellence serves as the foundation of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). An article written by Watkins et al., (2011) mentioned that “by encouraging a broad range of stakeholders both within and outside the organization to ask certain kinds of questions, make shared meaning of the answers, and act on the responses”. Furthermore, it supports wide learning and renewal in the following ways: (a) through widespread inquiry—it helps the participants perceive the need for change, explore new possibilities, and contribute to solutions; (b) through customized interview guides—it focuses on moments of high performance dialogue and action within the organization; and (c) through alignment of the organization's formal and informal structures with its purpose and principles—it translates shared vision into reality and belief into practice (Watkins, et al., 2011). AI promotes self-organization and the creation of transformative process (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003).

A number of proponents of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) believe that the participation of large numbers of participants is a vital transformation lever (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003; as cited in Gallos & Schein, 2006). Traditionally, organization development comprises a small group of inquirers speaking with a large number of stakeholders to get their ideas and viewpoints on the problem. That small group's information is then examined and relayed back to the larger group (Bushe, 2011). Through the use of consultants and other professionals, new concepts confirmed by social science are brought into the system. AI, on the other hand, strives to unearth and inspire fresh ideas from system stakeholders; ideas that will, at the very least, be novel in terms of their current state inside the system. In an ideal world, all stakeholders are involved in the process of gathering and making sense of the ideas and viewpoints of other stakeholders, as well as participating as theorists, dreamers, and designers of the future (Bushe, 2011).

In summary, these related studies and literature on Appreciative Inquiry is a clear manifestation that when an organization focuses on the positive aspect and discover the best of what it is, the learning process and change will be long-lasting and effective. This will provide the youth the positive educational tools in stimulating them positively and allowing the increase of positive emotion, engagement, relationship building, meaning and achievement.

## ON YOUTH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

According to Shuayb et al. (2009), a survey conducted by the NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) indicated a scarcity of research on youth's perceptions on social cohesion and emphasized the need for additional research. Lewis (2007) wrote a similar study on community involvement, stating that Appreciative Inquiry is a technique well-known for creating high levels of community engagement and creativity. The article discusses the strategy and how it may be utilized most effectively in public involvement, as well as how to include it into their work.

While young people in the Philippines have stated that they are more of a follower in political matters and that they rarely act as the leader-initiator of resolutions, they have also stated that they believe they should be informed, involved, and consulted by other young people as well as youth leaders on matters related to youth development (National Youth Commission, 2010). Youth community engagement has significant development in recent years. As youth organizations respond to the importance of youth engagement, most have focused on youth's role in governance or other decision-making bodies to move in the right direction with you (Arnold et al., 2012).

The National Youth Commission conducted a similar National Youth Assessment Study in 2015, which reported a considerable increase in the number of young people active as members of organizations. Sixty-nine

percent of young people are actively interested in environmental activities, and 85 percent believe that their engagement in disaster response is critical.

The use of AI among young people will be as engaging as possible and involve young people at all stages of research. To achieve this, young people are trained to conduct appreciation interviews and are asked to interview their peers about community cohesion. This approach enables a large number of young people to participate in a short period of time. It is also hoped that such a process will create a dialogue among young people about community cohesion (Shuayb et al., 2009).

Instead of relying on previous behavioural approaches to increase youth participation in community decision-making, this study encourages youth to participate in community decision-making not to change their mindset, but to collaboratively investigate issues and determine the most effective solutions to address them. As a result, the study encouraged young participation and sought their opinions on their actions in relation to national issues. This will further encourage people to participate in the process of developing organizations and communities through collaborative discovery of the most effective ways for the community to work together in the most efficient manner.

## **METHODS**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a subset of qualitative research that is worth investigating and appreciating (MacDonald, 2012). PAR is conducted with the intent of taking action and implementing change with emphasis is on gaining an understanding of how individuals truly feel a certain problem or issue (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). With the goal of taking immediate action and bringing about change, PAR is carried out, with the emphasis being on acquiring an understanding of how persons genuinely feel about a particular situation or issue (Gillis & Jackson, 2002).

It is hoped that this study will encourage the use of participatory research methods as part of a community-based research approach, also known as action and participatory research. According to Gibson, Gibson, and MacAulay in 2001 (as cited in Bailey, 2002), participatory research methods are increasingly being used to develop and validate knowledge that will be useful to community needs and interests.

## **INSTRUMENT**

The Plan-Act-Reflect Model. Participants deliberately adopted an iterative cycle in which study and planning are followed by purposeful action in their activity, as demonstrated by their participation. The data acquired through intentional action then stimulates group reflection, resulting in the next stage of action planning (Ball Foundation, 2010). This framework enables the participants to make structured and systematic modifications in their actions as a result of their participation.

Plan (What is the focus of the inquiry): What government agencies are mandated to oversee the WPS? Act (How do we work this practice): What are the government positive actions on the WPS issue? And what stories can the youth share on what they could do?

Reflect (How do we know if these actions work): What shared images between the youth and the government can be created to work together? And what innovative ways can the youth and government collaboratively work on together as a way forward?

## **Participants**

Group of Youth organizations that are duly registered in Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and an active member of the National Youth Commission (NYC) since

2013, conducted a series of fora with regards to the issues in the West Philippine Sea. The researchers being part of the organization managed the entire activity together with core leaders in other member organizations. The participants were the respective members of each organization (school-based and out-of-school youth). The researchers sought a participatory and voluntary (convenience sample) response from the participants. Therefore, out of the 920 attendees, 57.60% or 530 chose to participate and submitted their reflective statements and joined the procedure.

## THE RESEARCH PROCEDURE

To introduce the Appreciative Inquiry process and gather data in an participatory action research framework, a series of structured activities was conducted during the duration of the forum. These reflect the 5D phases of AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) which were contextualized based on the issue to establish youth-led action points.

**1D Define Phase.** Identify government agencies mandated to oversee the WPS as focus of inquiry. The first step included identifying key resource persons from government agencies who are mandated to oversee the assertion of the sovereign rights of the country over the West Philippine Sea. These government agencies are: The Department of National Defence, Armed Forces of the Philippines-Civil Military Operations, The Philippine Navy-Palawan Command, Philippine Coast Guard-Marine and Environmental Protection Command, House of Representatives (2 Congressmen were invited), National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Invitations were also sent to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Bureau of Fisheries but they did not participate. Researchers also invited academicians and professionals: a scientist/professor from the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute and Language, Culture and Environmental Activist from Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Marikina. Professors from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines also served as AI Facilitators.

**2D Discover Phase.** Inquire into government agencies' positive actions. In this phase, key resource speakers shared stories on current initiatives the agencies are mandated on the issue of the WPS. The participants raised questions, interviewed key resource speakers on what is working well, what are the mandates of the agencies and institutions, and what they wish for (as officials) in the future.

**3D Dream Phase.** Youth shared stories of what they can do. The next phase involved participants dreaming and envisioning what can be improved in spreading awareness on the issues of WPS and key resource speakers either wholly affirmed or suggested improvements to participants' ideas. The participants explored the rights over the WPS and guided group discussions were undertaken. Group discussions explored what was needed for the survival of the community living in the disputed Islands (Pag-asa Island) and how to enhance living conditions or activities in the community. Provocative propositions were formulated after the group discussions.

**4D Design Phase.** Creating shared images of a preferred future. During this phase, participants created shared images of a preferred future. The provocative propositions from the previous phase were examined and then summarized in detail. Research questions were given to the participants to respond to. The following procedures were administered by AI facilitators:

1. First meeting with the students and out-of-school youth participants came up with Output #1.
2. Based on Output #1, facilitators developed themes towards Provocative Proposition #1.
3. On the day itself, facilitators summarized Output #1 and showed to participants and panel Provocative Proposition #1.
4. Participants were given 20 minutes to answer or write their reflections or thoughts on Provocative Proposition #1.



5. The key resource speakers were given 20 minutes to present their views on Provocative Proposition #1. Beforehand, the facilitators instructed the key resource speakers to give their answers in 5 statements; the facilitators took note of these as the speakers were discussing.
6. At the end of the forum, the AI Facilitators had noted four in four columns the responses of the participants: two from students-academe, and two from community-based.
7. Facilitators asked the key resource speakers (as panels) of their reactions to Provocative Proposition #1.
8. While they were discussing, their responses were again clustered as per #5.
9. Facilitators summarize Provocative Proposition #1 and opened the floor for Provocative Proposition #2 and gives the audience 20 minutes.

5D Deliver Phase. Innovate and collaborate ways to create the future. The final process seeks to create provocative statements as final output, which was classified into themes and action points. The participants actively designed their own programs and activities supporting the WPS. The participants have also committed to engage and collaborate with government agencies and other institutions. During the final forum, the themes and action points were shown to the participants and were affirmed to be implemented in the next coming projects and activities of the organization.

### Qualitative Data Analysis

When teaching and learning about research and study, a large number of people use qualitative methods (Divan et al., 2017). Some of the epistemologies and theories utilized by these approaches may be new to those with a background in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), for example (Rowland & Myatt, 2014). Sherry Marx (2017), on the other hand, looked at how qualitative research methodologies and researchers' narratives could assist STEM education be more fair and equitable to people of all backgrounds, as well as more sustainable. Her next point was that disparities in the STEM field can be addressed through a variety of qualitative methods, including participatory action research (e.g. the method implored in this study), Indigenous research, and critical ethnography.

Using data from participatory action research to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and create new knowledge is a collaborative strategy that makes it possible to generate and analyze data in a group setting (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2012).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reflects the youth reflections that were initially coded and the four themes that were identified. The outcomes were categorized into themes, definition and action points. These were also aligned with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (United Nations Security Council, 2017) which is the first resolution on youth, peace and security adopted by 193 nations worldwide. It emphasizes the importance of youth as agents of change in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. The resolution also highlighted the five pillars for youth action and contribution to peace processes and conflict resolution: Participation, Partnerships, Prevention, Protection and Disengagement, and Re- integration.

It must be mentioned here that these are youth reflections and perceptions that would be rich inputs towards actions of the proper authorities. The fora managed by the researchers sought to bring the youth's voices and feelings to the fore towards nation building.

### Reflection on the process from the participants (themes generated):

(Theme 1) **Support Action.** The participants defined this as the promotion of sustained institutional and organizational projects among youth organizations such as activities to support human and economic activity and its development in WPS.

Action points were as follows: (a) join organizations helping WPS, (b) conduct meetings/consultations involving the youth in the community, (c) conduct seminars/discussions fora regarding WPS, and (d) actively participate in programs concerning WPS.

Jacoby & Associates (1996) defines service-learning as "...a form of experiential education in which students participate in activities that address human and societal needs and are provided with structured opportunities for reflection to attain desired learning outcomes." Since participants are members and leaders of different school and community organizations, the act of service and organizing in community is a quick action point among them, and actualizes service learning.

(Theme 2) **Protection of the Marine Environment and Marine Life.** The participants defined it as the promotion of sustainable utilization and conservation of the marine environment and its resources of the WPS.

Action point to be forwarded to partners and stakeholders such as the Philippine Coast Guard Marine and Environmental Protection Command was "to strengthen the marine security to ensure equal economic productivity in the region.

The leadership among participants in terms of political engagement is obviously apparent. Their idea on providing strategies to negotiate and diplomatically engage on other claimants surface may be useful inputs to the Department of National Defense, Armed Forces of the Philippines Civil Military Operations.

(Theme 3) **Peace and Conflict Resolution Advocacy.** The participants defined the theme as promotion of equal observance of people's rights within the community in the WPS maximizing the Social Media and Citizen's Charter.

Action Point was to create comprehensive strategic approaches on policy making on WPS.

It was made clear to all participants that the Philippines has limited defense capabilities, making the commitment to peacefully resolve the conflict essential not only for the protection of those islands but also for the security of the people who live on them. Therefore, these considerations have been forwarded to the Department of National Defense and the House of Representatives for consideration and possible action.

(Theme 4) **Social Awareness and People's Initiative.** The participants defined the theme as promotion of equal observance of people's rights within the community in WPS.

Action points identified: (a) create a website that will help spread information on WPS, (b) post facts on social networking sites and government websites, (c) share news on WPS through social media sites, (d) increase awareness by reading and sharing information on WPS, (e) moral and spiritual support through prayers and vigils.

Understanding the digital self of the participants made us realized that their battle on a certain issue would not always be on street. The youth of today uses technology as a powerful tool to disseminate information massively to the audience they want to reach.

### **Importance of Stakeholders' Participation**

United Nations resolutions have addressed issues such as youth-inclusive policies and initiatives, as well as ways to encourage youth participation in social and economic development (United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Programme on Youth, 2011). The Youth as stakeholders play a significant role in setting up priorities and objectives on addressing the issues on WPS. Stakeholders' involvement brings in clarifications on action points which may not be within the grasp and expertise of the youth when it pertains to local knowledge (Lenart, 2018).

Different types of stakeholders can contribute to the process in different ways (Vain, 2021) and in most cases, inputs from a broad variety of stakeholders will complement the process of resolving conflict issues. The stakeholders' interests exist at different levels, in different perspectives, and in different aspects. The ideas of the young people provided help and inputs on the sustainable development to ensure relevance and appropriateness of the policies (Asker & Gero, 2012) being created.

In addition, studies on "participation paradigm" for young people are more optimistic because they look at new forms of political participation that young people like and use more often (Weiss, 2020).

### **Importance of Community Engagement on Youth Development.**

Young people nowadays tend to engage in a variety of activities that take up a significant amount of their time. It is possible to optimize the adaptability, youthfulness, and inventiveness of these young people in order to assist them in realizing their full potential as individuals and as builders of nations. The series of forums on the WPS helped us learn how they collaborate to produce ideas and provide unique insights to government entities in the process of resolving the issue at hand. This is especially true for engagement in community service activities, which has been shown to have the largest influence on the competencies of young people (Pittman, 1991; Zeldin et al., 2003; Latendresse & Blanchet-Cohen, 2010).

Providing the youth avenues to divert all their inert energies through community participation will make them more positive, engaged and mindful of a meaningful life (Iwasaki, 2015). It is important to remember that youth-guided activities and approaches that are carried out in collaboration with adults and other members of the community serve as an important reminder to adults and other members of the community that the actions, ideas, and perspectives of youth must be recognized and heard as valuable contributions to the community and. These collaborations can help to further promote inclusivity and mobilize people to be more global (Ramos & Schleicher, 2018) so improving living conditions in their own communities while also contributing to the development of a more just, peaceful, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable world for everyone.

### **IMPLICATIONS TO THEORIES AND PRACTICE**

The use of Appreciative Inquiry Facilitation with a large group of participants requires tremendous efforts on the part of the researchers. However, if facilitated properly, valuable results are evident. For future researches, a grounded theory may be used on a similar undertaking. It is further suggested that AI Facilitation procedure is used depending on the youth's interests and one should be able to assess when to use AI methodology among the youth depending on the type of sector they are engaged and associated with.

### **CONCLUSION**

Youth and government can and should work cooperatively on WPS issues. Youth as our future must be informed and consulted in order for them to be as participative as possible, and their perspectives on prospective national initiatives such as the WPS should be appreciated. Appreciative Facilitation is a useful tool to "mine" the youth's innovativeness and well-being in understanding community cohesion with the rest of the members of the world they live in.

The act of service and organizing in the community is a quick support action point among youth. For the protection of the marine environment and resources, the youth may be able to propose alternative approaches and strategies in the negotiation and in the diplomatic engagement with other claimants. The youth recommended that one method to advance peace and conflict resolution advocacy in the WPS is to define, identify, and recognize the critical nature of promoting equal observance of the rights of peoples and communities who reside in the WPS, as well as the critical nature of promoting equal observance of those rights. Also,



the use of social media and citizen's charter can be maximized to promote understanding on the issue. Both of these concepts when utilized properly may ensure the security of the disputed islands and would greatly impact people who are living there. Promoting equal observance of peoples' and their communities' rights to live in peace and harmony despite the disputes in the islands would be one of the important and salient points of social awareness and people's initiative. The principle of "do no harm" is fundamental and youth awareness and active avoidance of negative consequences that misinformation can inadvertently create must be fulfilled.

It is important to understand that setting up priorities and objectives on stakeholders' involvement is paramount in ensuring success to resolve issues. However, the diverse characteristics of stakeholders must be taken into account. Different types of stakeholders contribute to the development of priorities and objectives on different levels and phases of the program as each stakeholder has a particular interest in the process in every phase and level of entry and can be viewed from different entry point's phases and perspectives.

In the end substantial time and efforts to engage youth in various nation-building activities must be provided in which their youthfulness and creativity can be maximized. Of course, it is given that without the necessary experience and resources, all the youth's actions may only be termed within the "dreaming" phase. They dream of a better and more sustainable future and are anxious for their voices to be heard. Their ideas must in turn be transformed positively into avenues where they can divert and focus their energies and creativity to be able to integrate and participate in community activities making their lives more meaningful and productive.

Most importantly, the government must be aware that there are youths who are selflessly willing to devote and volunteer their time and efforts to help the government address issues of national concern on a youth-level. It is noteworthy to mind that our youth and community leaders look up to the government in the protection, preservation, and promotion of sovereign rights in the WSP. Engaging youth in national issues not only makes them productive and responsive citizens, but also advocates for peaceful and cordial ties with neighbouring countries in the disputed islands, and potential future leaders at the national and local government positions.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The author(s) disclose no potential conflict of interest(s).

### **Ethical statement**

Everything carried out in this study that involved human participants was in accordance with institutional and/or national research committee ethical standards, as well as the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments, or comparable ethical standards as determined by the author(s).

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