

SDRC Talking Points

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Seeing Solutions in Remote Possibilities

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De La Salle University-Social Development Research Center (DLSU-SDRC)
3/F William Hall Building, 2401 Taft Avenue, 1004 Manila, Philippines
Tel. No. (632) 8524-5351 / 8524-5349

Editor: Connie Jan Maraan

Creative Design/Layout: Maria Catherine D. Domingo

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Director's Message

Fording the Stream of Challenges in Doing Research Amidst the Pandemic

This year, our Center celebrated its 42nd anniversary in April 2021 with the theme “Seeing Solutions in Remote Possibilities.” Such a theme reminds the Center to be agile and innovative amidst this seemingly interminable pandemic. Despite restrictions to mobility, the Center has been able to withstand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the use of new technologies, the Center's research teams and staff are still able to conduct field activities nationwide without having to leave the comfort of their homes.

This issue highlights the experiences of the different research staff of some on-going projects lodged at the Center. It is a simple gesture to celebrate the efforts that they have invested in the projects despite the needed adjustments that they had to make – for example, some needed to be done quickly. Reading their narratives will definitely offer a lesson or two on how researchers can ford the stream of challenges, sometimes unsettling at that, as they conduct “fieldwork” in the cyberworld.

Let me share with you my thoughts about their experiences. Agnes, who is assisting in a project on online counseling, mentions that their project is very attuned to the current needs of children given the pandemic lockdowns. The project provides an online platform for remote counseling targeting children who are survivors of online sexual abuse and exploitation.

The online-based research activities similarly allowed Louise to ponder on issues related to technology. She reflects on how technological advancements have furthered the gaps between the haves and the have nots. She considers how such innovations have led to issues of access among people from different social and economic backgrounds.

Kaye, who is assisting in a project on social media bullying and harassment, has realized that innovating solutions is not entirely comfortable and easy. She also recognizes that innovation requires moving away from what is familiar. For her, the pandemic has taught her life lessons, including the need to be adaptive and to embrace change regardless of whether it be easy or difficult.

If there is anything that this pandemic has offered to Claire, it is the research opportunities that she was given, which she is thankful for. For her, the virtual work journey offered a view of a silver lining amidst the pandemic, where negativity is ubiquitous. Her work in the various projects at the Center has provided her new skills and knowledge. The online data collection set-up allowed her to perform numerous productive tasks, some of which have to be done simultaneously albeit stationarily. Her experiences allowed her to be flexible and be productive.

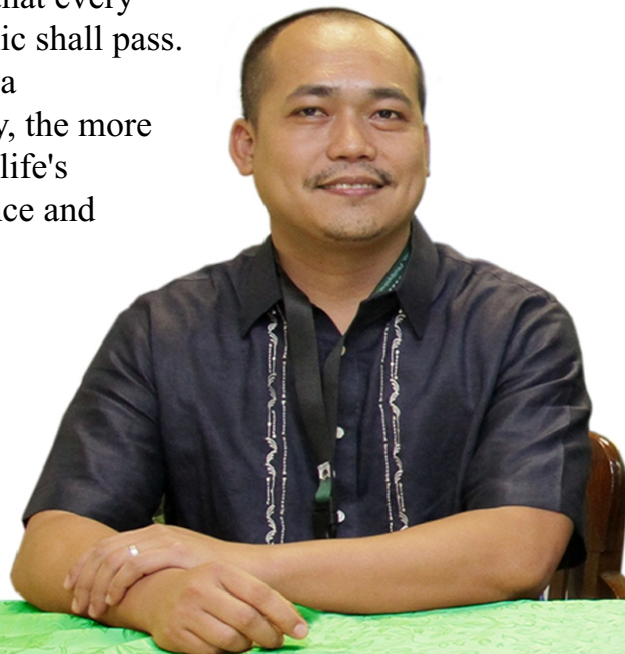
Lastly, Lorenzo's reflection revolves around the opportunities afforded to him as a result of his engagement in a project on the PhilHealth Z-Benefit Package. He witnessed how online data collection allowed people to be connected, which would have been a remote possibility if things were still done face-to-face. He ruminated over how the internet has eliminated the borders that disconnect people from forging meaningful relationships.

I hope that by reading this issue, researchers both new and long in practice will have the courage to overcome the vicissitudes of life. May this piece of inspiration provide you with the promise that every struggle we encounter during this pandemic shall pass.

I am reminded of the saying by Epicurus, a philosopher, that “the greater the difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it.” Let us celebrate life's challenges and overcome them with ardence and perseverance.


MELVIN A. JABAR, PhD

Director, Social Development Research Center



Doing Research Remotely: An Opportunity to Learn

by Agnes B. Villegas, RPsy

The current research project that I am part of is not my first job contract with DLSU-SDRC. I have been involved in a number of research projects in different capacities as a research assistant and now as a co-investigator under Dr. Caring Tarroja's lead. All of these studies aimed to examine and address important social issues affecting children, an area of research that I am interested in and

is related to the work that I do as a psychologist. The current research we are working on, “Development and Pilot Testing of Remote Counseling Protocols for OSAEC Victims/Survivors,” is very timely and relevant as it explores the feasibility of remote counseling for victims and survivors of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC).

While the issue of OSAEC has been prevalent even before COVID-19 “shookt” the world, it was reported that cases of OSAEC dramatically rose during the time of the pandemic. Children have no choice but to stay at home and rely more on technology and the internet to learn and socialize, which makes it easier for sexual predators to gain access to children. In the Philippines, the economic condition of Filipino families, which has worsened since the imposition of lockdowns, increases the vulnerability of Filipino children to online sexual exploitation. The irony is that the internet has become a vehicle to facilitate child abuse and exploitation, but it can also be used as a tool to reach out to them and offer the help that they need. The remote nature of the intervention that the study is trying to develop also has the potential to bridge the gap between mental healthcare providers and target service users.

I am glad to be part of this intervention research because it has

the potential to create a significant impact on children's lives, and I get to work with fellow registered psychologists and child advocates. In this particular study, wherein a remote counseling program for OSAEC survivors is being developed and pilot-tested, being a psychologist-researcher offers a huge advantage. However, I need to be mindful of my own biases since I am working in an NGO that addresses similar child protection issues and is part of the child protection system.

The way the study is being carried out now is more challenging compared to previous projects. From the inception to its current phase, everything is being done remotely. All meetings and key informant interviews are being held via Zoom. While this work-from-home setup brings a certain level of convenience (e.g., it saves time and money), it also triggers anxiety. One of the reasons for this is that we are always at the mercy of our internet connection. Inevitable technical glitches and



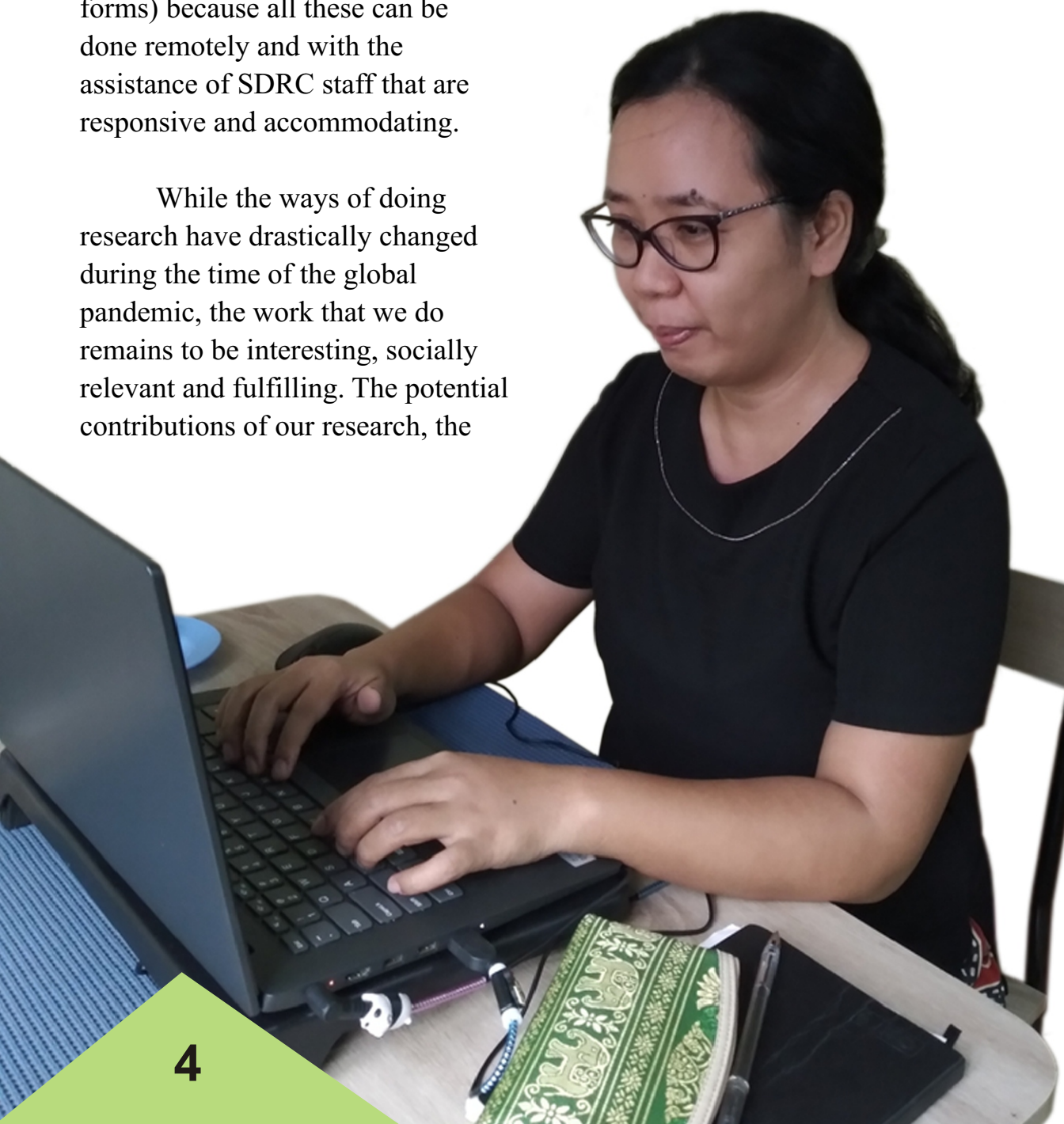
slow internet connection in the middle of an interview or important meeting are anxiety-provoking, so there must always be a back-up plan. Virtual team meetings are scheduled outside regular working hours, even on weekends. The latter is something I do not frown upon as this is a sacrifice the team is willing to make, yet I want to point out the obvious blurring of boundaries between work and home life in the current work setup.

Some of the advantages of doing research remotely involve the opportunity to learn to use online platforms, to address security and privacy issues, ways of securing informed consent online, to send tokens to our participants, etc. Doing research remotely also gives us the opportunity to experience and get a sense of what the target population (i.e., OSAEC victims/survivors) will have to go through once they avail of remote

counseling service. Another advantage is that the researchers need not go to DLSU to do the usual transactions (e.g., sign contracts, claim checks and BIR forms) because all these can be done remotely and with the assistance of SDRC staff that are responsive and accommodating.

While the ways of doing research have drastically changed during the time of the global pandemic, the work that we do remains to be interesting, socially relevant and fulfilling. The potential contributions of our research, the

commitment and dedication of the research team and the support we receive from SDRC make the challenges manageable and the sacrifices worthwhile.



Just Like How We Learned Our ABCs

by Mary Louise B. Rivera

It was the year 2007 when we had our first computer unit. At that time, my mama was already in her 50s and had no idea as to how it actually worked. She was used to writing handwritten letters and mailing through post offices, to recording and sending voice tapes and to connecting international calls to communicate with papa, so the introduction of the World Wide Web was life-changing— she did not

have to wait for days to hear from him again.

I'm sure those who are members of my mama's generation could relate to this as well.

I can still vividly remember the process it took for her to learn, and it also took a lot of patience to teach her the ropes. From how to start the CPU, how to turn the

monitor on, what the buttons are for, what certain icons meant, where to click, what to type, and how to create her own email account (among other technicalities). It was a struggle doing all these repeatedly for at least a week or two before I could leave her on her own with little supervision. Of course, she still called me to help her occasionally, but not to the point where I had to stand behind her back the entire time. What kept an impatient teenager like me grounded was the realization that it seemed as though I was teaching her the ABCs.

And all I did was to try to embody just how it was when she first taught us—with the right amount of patience, kindness, and just enough room for making mistakes and for trying again.

Researchers may have faced this familiar scenario since March 2020, albeit in the workplace setting. Not all people that we are working and will be working with have the same technology know-how and level of adaptability as we do. That includes our respondents / participants, given that most implementations are piloted and are

already done online. In addition, not everyone has a device, like a smartphone, tablet or laptop that can be used to connect to the internet. More often than not, although internet connection may be available, other concerns such as data privacy, limited connectivity and the proliferation of “fake news” or “inauthentic data” have come as difficulties.

But despite these challenges, what I have experienced personally and seen so far reminded me so much of that year 2007 with my mama—how people who are more technologically adept patiently guide those who have less experience in this area, how compromise plays a crucial role, and how kindness can go a long way in how we go about conducting our research.

This is true for the project that I am currently engaged in, “Digitization and Digital Asset Management of Archival Materials in the History of Leprosy in the Philippines.” Most of our team members are spread across NCR, except for the three locally hired staff doing archival work at the site in



Culion, Palawan. The team members are from different generations as well, and it is heartwarming to see everyone extending help when necessary. This ranges from workshops on how to, say, assess and approve images for ingest, to the simpler “Why is this certain error showing up on my screen?” They are patient enough to wait when one suddenly loses connection, and keep various communication channels open, especially through SMS for those with limited connectivity in Culion. They have been coming up with compromises in order to resolve issues as well, especially with time constraints.

The team members are also kind enough to understand when

circumstances in life get in the way. Personally, this kindness has been shown to me multiple times— as when my post-grad workload became overwhelming, when my laptop crashed with all the important files in it, and when I recently got sick after vaccination.

Instead of merely checking on work progress, members have had the chance to share how they are doing, by asking the others— Are the cases in their area rising? Have they been vaccinated? Were they feeling sick or anxious? Looking beyond the metrics, this humanistic approach to handling the project is something that I appreciate and am thankful for.

In the era of rapid technology advancement, the glaring disparity in the means of its accessibility, usability, and adoption between people across all social standings has become even more obvious. Add this to most of the population's growing anxiety as the pandemic continues with no definite end in sight. It's a mix that equates to a boulder that may have been hindering us from functioning to the optimum— whether that be

manifesting physically, emotionally or mentally.

However, with the right amount of patience, kindness, and just enough room for making mistakes and for trying again, we can always hope to learn from one another and ultimately find our solutions.

Yes, just like how we learned our ABCs.



A Life in Quarantine: Nostalgia, Hard Realizations, Drastic Changes, and Sincere Solutions

by Kimberly Kaye C. Mata

There was a strong feeling of nostalgia when the realization of graduation hit me. For four years, De La Salle University-Manila had served as my home, my hangout place, my favorite date venue (my beau goes to La Salle, too), and my teacher. Ambivalence was there—the desire to graduate, but at the same time to stay, to spend a longer time in my alma mater. As soon as I was given a chance by my beloved mentor, Dr. Caridad Tarroja, to work with her on a

research project, I did not think twice before taking it.

More than the opportunity to learn beyond a structured environment, I guess I was enticed by the idea that I would be staying in La Salle a little longer. Anything familiar is comfortable. I loved how, every morning, I would commute through the LRT Line 1 and beat the morning rush and have my piece of serenity while standing in a cramped space in

the train wagon. I loved taking lunches with schoolmates, who eventually became friends and co-workers at the Center. I loved how, every night, I would cap off the day with my favorite milk tea from nearby shops in school with my favorite person. Everything was just so beautiful, even ideal.

It seemed that my mentor felt my enthusiasm for overstaying in La Salle and, after one project, I was allowed to be part of a second exciting study— “How Filipino Youth Identify and Act on Social Media Bullying and Harassment.” The thought triggered so much happiness and excitement. First, I would be working with the great professors at the Department of Communication, and surely, there would be a lot to learn. Second, the project aimed to serve adolescents and young adults, the population close to my heart, as I had previously worked as an attending psychologist in a nongovernmental organization catering to disadvantaged groups of minors. Third, we would be working on a large-scale project funded by a known organization, and it would be a humbling opportunity to work for something that was for a great cause. Lastly, the thought of staying in La

Salle, a place I consider as home, was comforting.

Little did I know that with this opportunity, the situation I considered “comfortable” would take a 180-degree turn.

On the evening of March 16, 2020, travel restrictions were put in place in Metro Manila after health authorities raised the highest COVID-19 alert level. Prior to this, several schools had been imposing suspensions due to the growing number of COVID-19 cases in the country. I initially thought that it was just going to be a swift break and that work would resume soon after, but I was wrong. This time it was no longer just class suspensions and prohibition of mass gatherings. Travels were suspended, and all establishments, except for those providing essential services such as food and health care, were ordered to be closed. All modes of public transportation were shut down. I, as well as my family, was forced to stay at home. There was an assumption that this would probably take weeks, but the community quarantine went on and on.



looming problems call for a concrete solution and compared to mine, theirs are more pressing.

On a macroscopic level, the pandemic has highlighted the major divide amongst Filipinos, reinforced by political ideologies. While others passionately call for concrete plans from the government to handle the pandemic, staunch administration supporters call for support and cooperation. The nation has been divided by how people perceive the government's response to the global health crisis, which is continually taking away many lives. Peeling off another layer has exposed how dire the nation's health care system is and how the health care workers who are risking their lives are being compensated, given their poor working conditions. The struggles are here and are there, sociologically and psychologically. While the pandemic forced many front liners to bear their unjust working conditions to be able to serve their fellowmen, they are also dealing with all the days and nights that they have to be away from their families.

The possibility of doing fieldwork in different parts of the country was gone. What happened was frustrating, worrying, and confusing. I thought that I would have the research experience of my life, but it turned out that I was stuck at home and our team was left to re-design previously conceptualized strategies on how to go about doing our research. As we were left with no option but to work at home, I gradually realized that we were privileged to be in this situation. The pandemic affected people on different levels, and many are still struggling to get by. While I am struggling with nostalgia, many are battling for survival. While I am frustrated with all the adjustments, others are grateful for whatever food they can put on the table. Many

Meanwhile, more and more people are losing their jobs. The retrenchment rate has reached 45 percent, leaving many with a churning stomach and the feeling of helplessness of not knowing whether they could feed their family in the coming days. In other developments, extrajudicial killings are still rampant, taking the lives of human rights activists and even ordinary Filipinos who yearn for a better life. Indeed, the pandemic can be likened to a kaleidoscope of the life of quarantine, only this time, darker. Every turn reflects a dark surface tilted at an angle, further showing the different faces of struggle and suffering. If there is any symmetry in it, it is the pattern of pain and anguish of every Filipino hoping for this pandemic to end. Having these realizations has made me feel ashamed but motivated.

On a microscopic level, life in quarantine has been difficult for each individual. The pandemic forced people to work from home, do away with social gatherings, and stop traveling. It has restricted the lifestyle that most people are used to. The pandemic has imposed an invisible barrier, creating distance between

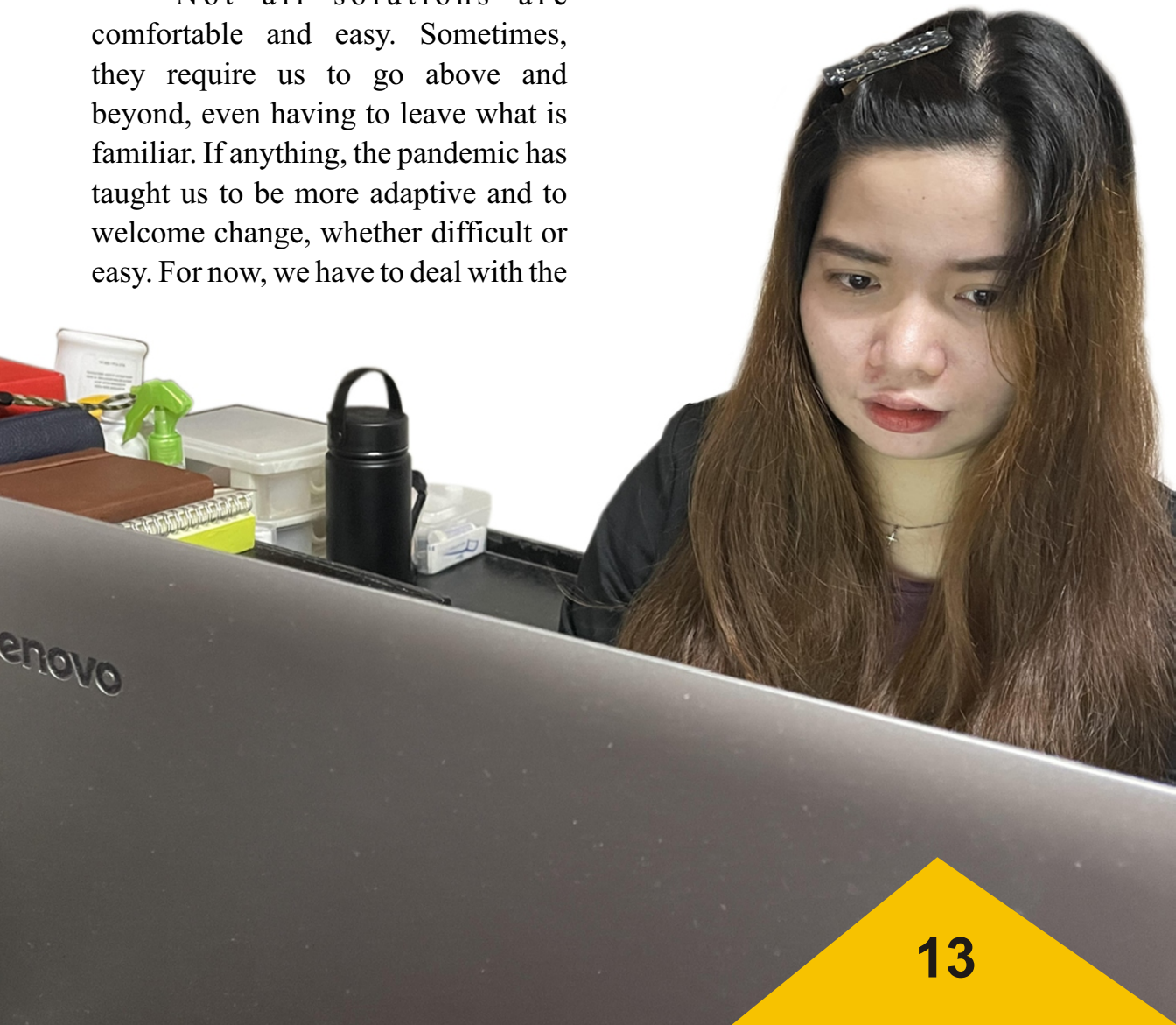
people, more than ever before. Beyond the lifestyle changes, it has forced people to be isolated from the rest of the world, and deprived them of social interactions. Some might think that quarantine means more time for family and self, but for others, every day is a series of torments from living with their abusive loved one or perpetrator. Every day could be a constant battle between one's depression and isolation. Every day could be an episode of trauma and re-traumatization. Every day could drive someone off the edge of sanity.

For some, the end of the pandemic could mean an improvement in their socioeconomic status—regaining their jobs and earning decently for their family. Others have been motivated by their dreams of traveling and reuniting with their loved ones. Some wish to survive, not just to live through the virus but to heal from the trauma and all the psychological wounds obtained while locked away from the world. After all, this pandemic has to come to an end. People will emerge stronger than ever.

There were many reflections and hard realizations arrived at during the quarantine. Our project kept going—everyone tried their best to adapt to the unprecedented times. We were able to come up with a remote work design to be able to gather data, meet with our participants and stakeholders, and submit a report. While it was a drastic change, it was nevertheless welcomed.

Not all solutions are comfortable and easy. Sometimes, they require us to go above and beyond, even having to leave what is familiar. If anything, the pandemic has taught us to be more adaptive and to welcome change, whether difficult or easy. For now, we have to deal with the

“new normal.” It might not be the development trajectory that everyone is longing for, but norms adapt and evolve. What remain are our determination, efforts, and resiliency to welcome each day with hope. Standing by the goal of the project—that is, to seek lasting solutions—we, too, can contribute. Every day is a chance to offer sincere solutions, whether at the personal, familial, or societal level.



Remote Arrangements and Silver Linings: My Experiences of Being a Research Assistant in an Online Setup

by Anne Claire S. Simpao

The past year was a year that only a few would see as a time full of opportunities. There were a lot of missed activities, hindered socialization, shifts in accustomed routines, and unfortunate events that happened over a short period of time. In my case, the past year was a crucial year in which I thought I could achieve great things. It was the year I graduated from college, I started on my master's degree, and I began working full-time. I had big

hopes for the year, but the pandemic made everything difficult and almost out of reach, at first.

My virtual work journey has had its downsides due to the barriers in working remotely, but it has also had its silver linings. I have achieved many things, I have taken on numerous research projects and sidelines, and I have been able to enhance my skills and broaden my knowledge. It was difficult in the

beginning to manage all of these, but after some time, I was able to work everything out smoothly.

It was my first term in pursuing my master's degree when the quarantine measures started. I had also started doing some research work, gaining experience from the academe and development sector under projects in the Social Development Research Center (SDRC). At the same time, I got accepted as a full-time researcher in an IT company. Since I work and study at home, I was able to manage time for my studies, full-time work, and sideline research work.

Accomplishing research work has always been my interest since I was an undergraduate. I looked forward to the research projects that I would be joining after graduation, but it was quite saddening having to do everything—from the project conceptualization stage, to the data collection, and to the finalization of the report—online, since there was no chance for face-to-face interactions and travel opportunities.

On the brighter side, the remote setup allowed me to be flexible with my work schedule. Aside from handling research projects such as the most recent study I was involved in at SDRC, I also juggled my postgraduate coursework, full-time job, and other sidelines.

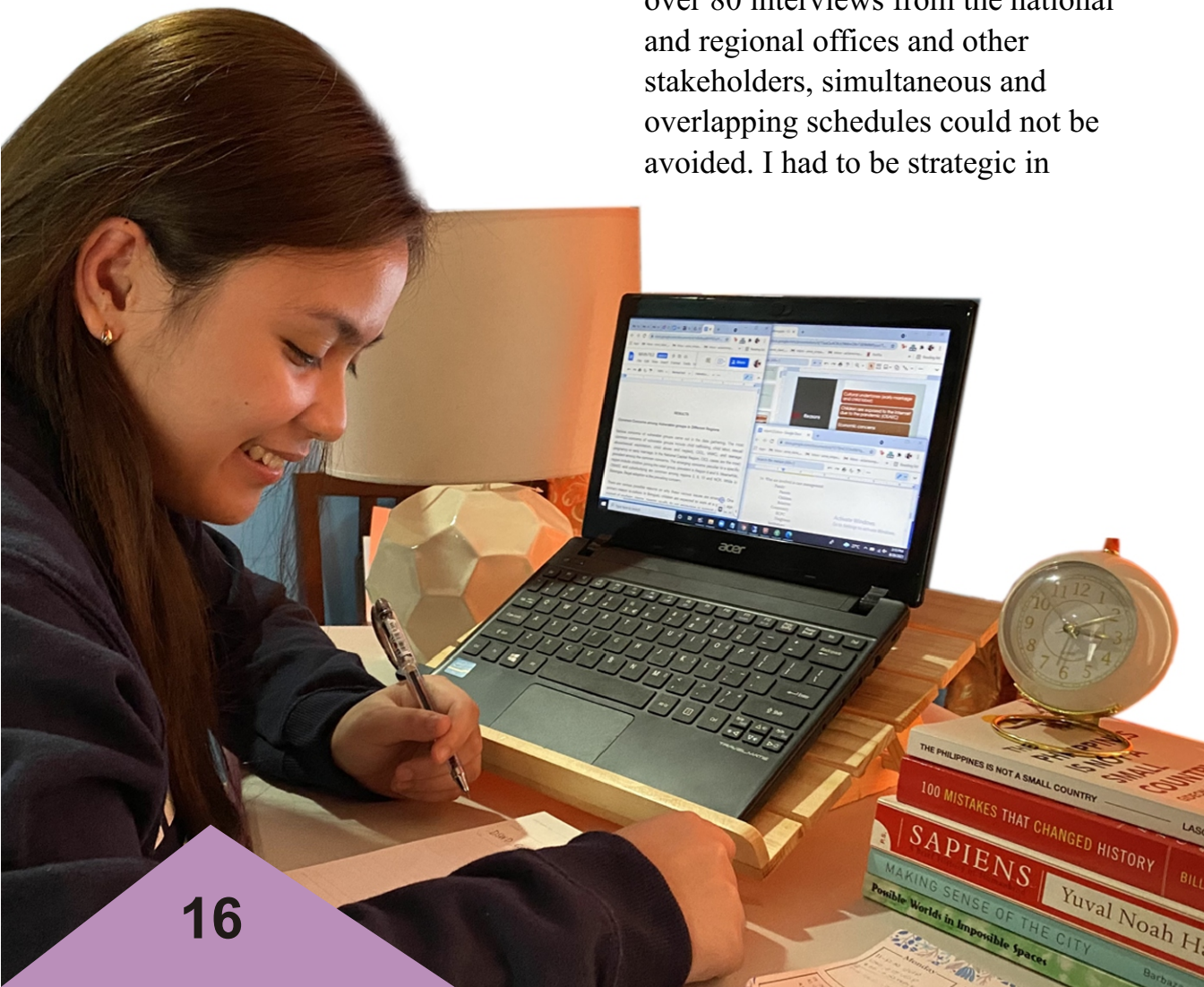
The “Comprehensive Mapping, Assessment and Enrichment of the DSWD Case Management System and Practices” project under SDRC is one research project I will never forget. It was the shortest engagement I have had so far, but it can't be denied that I learned a lot from that experience. When I received an invitation from my previous undergraduate and graduate professors to join this research project, I was thrilled. I had the chance to work with authorities from DSWD, one of the departments that are in charge of numerous programs that cater to the needs of Filipinos, especially in this time of the pandemic. I also got excited when I knew I would have something to contribute, no matter

how small, to the devolution that would happen the following year.

Aside from the feelings of excitement that I had, there were also doubts. Before the start of each project, I would ask myself, “What will I get from this?”, “Will I really learn something from it?”, “Would it be worth it to be included in these projects while also doing my master’s degree and full-time work?” During the project

implementation and after the duration of my engagement in it, I realized that I gained a lot from the experience, even if everything was only done online.

Similar to all of the research projects I had engaged in earlier, everything was done online. I joined the team when the data collection was already ongoing. Doing fieldwork online has its advantages and disadvantages. As there were over 80 interviews from the national and regional offices and other stakeholders, simultaneous and overlapping schedules could not be avoided. I had to be strategic in



being present during the majority of the interviews, so I maximized the devices available at home and used those for all ongoing meetings, especially when I had meetings for my other commitments and engagements.

It was also expected that there would be issues that I could not control such as connectivity problems and power interruptions for several days. There were likewise weeks when I struggled to finish multiple tasks. Aside from accomplishing different tasks, I also took up different roles throughout the duration of my engagement in the project. I was an assistant to the principal investigator and national-level interviewers, an observer and co-facilitator of key informant interviews and focus group discussions, and a coordinator for transcribers, regional-level interviewers, and participants from the national-level offices. Because of the tasks that I accomplished and the roles I took on, I was also able to develop my soft skills that include, but are not limited to, patience, coordination, critical thinking, keen observation, decision-making,

adaptability, and most importantly, time management.

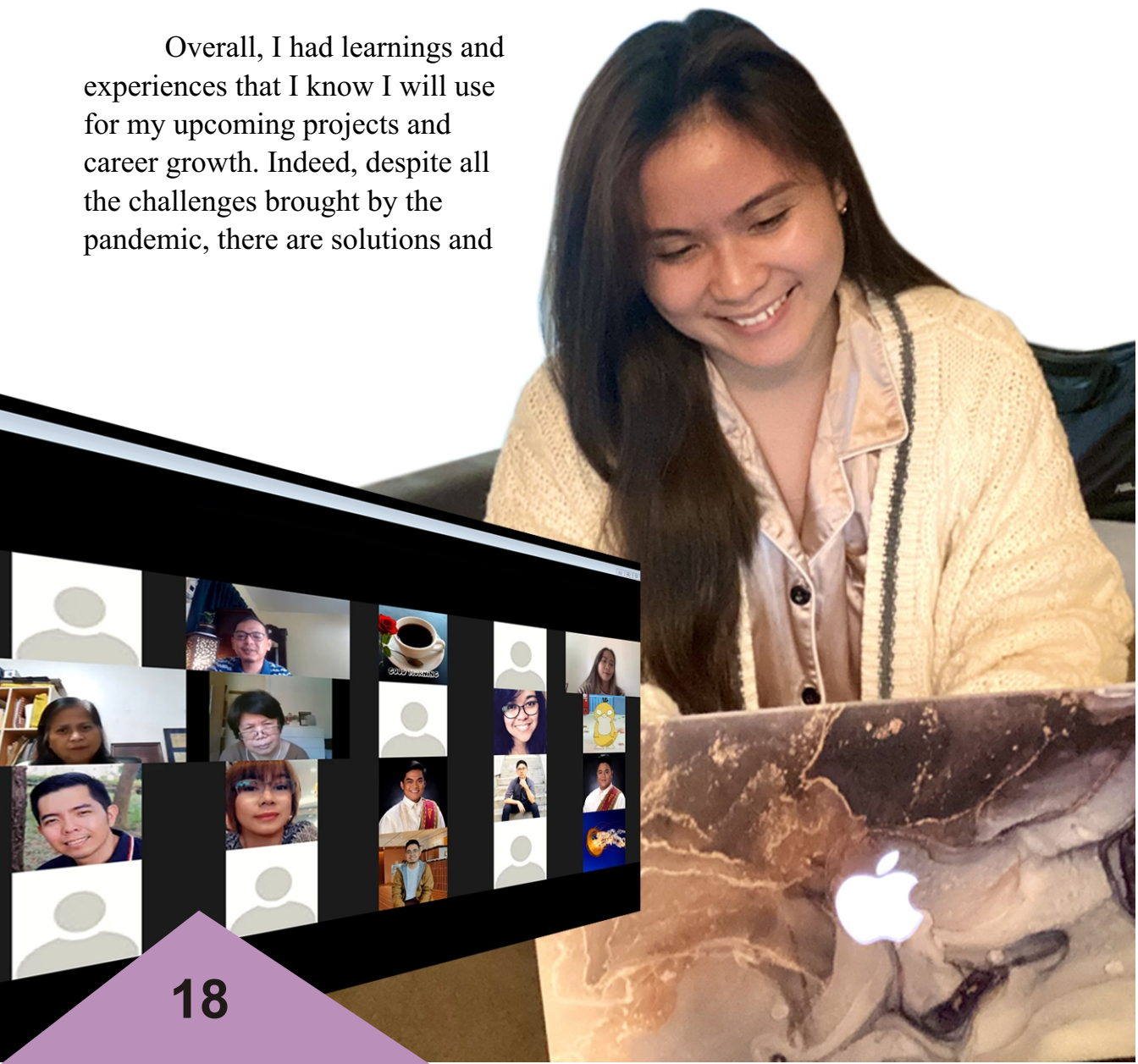
The duration of my contract was only for a month, but the vast experiences I gained made it feel like I'd been engaged in the project for a year or more. I learned more about the systems, processes, and practices in the DSWD, which led me to some realizations about how offices in Philippine government agencies work. Moreover, through the observations I did for the KIIs, I also learned how to conduct interviews better, especially since the interviewers were very much used to the procedures. I have had conversations, exchanged experiences and become close to the main team as a result of how we worked together.

Generally, I enjoyed the project on “Comprehensive Mapping, Assessment and Enrichment of the DSWD Case Management System and Practices” with the core team composed of Dr. Homer Yabut, Dr. Melvin Jabar, Dr. Zaldy Collado, Prof. Maeyet Lapeña, Mrs. Norma Aguilos, and Ms. Lyka Lucena. I am extremely

grateful for having belonged to such a supportive team. The lead investigators and coordinators were very helpful and responsive. The national and local level interviewers were good at what they do and they shared some tips and experiences to help me grow as a researcher as well. The tasks were mostly new to me, but they were manageable.

Overall, I had learnings and experiences that I know I will use for my upcoming projects and career growth. Indeed, despite all the challenges brought by the pandemic, there are solutions and

remote possibilities. We may have everything online and we might have barriers due to the virtual setup, but there are still silver linings and opportunities if you strive hard. In the face of challenges, we endure. Despite the hardships, we still succeed. And regardless of remote arrangements, we find opportunities.



At the Precipice Do We Evolve

by Lorenzo Manuel G. Ereñeta

“But it's only on the brink that people find the will to change. Only at the precipice do we evolve.” - Professor Barnhardt, The Day the Earth Stood Still (2008)

The pandemic has put a stop to much of the world's normal proceedings, but that does not mean the world has stopped spinning; people still need to work, lives still need to go on, and problems still need to be solved. Research has been no exception. But given the situation, data collection—

especially fieldwork—has had to change. Particularly, we have had to rely more on this wonderful technology called the internet. So, as a research assistant for the “Social and Behavior Change Communication Strategy for the PhilHealth Z-Benefits Package for Premature and Small Newborns,”



I would like to share two of my most notable experiences and my humble observations and opinions on them.

One of the most memorable instances of data-gathering was our online interview with Dr. Beverly Ho. The interview itself was quite uneventful, but it stood out to me simply because we were even given the opportunity to have the time and presence of quite a high-status person. She holds a director-level position in a key branch of government, is often sought after to appear on nationally disseminated media, and she's well known for her many achievements— she's a person that not everyone can get the chance to meet. This instance may not seem relevant, but I think it shines a light on a great thing

about conducting data collection through the internet: In the broadest sense, I think it gives researchers the opportunity to reach people they couldn't have otherwise. Indeed, it may seem obvious how the internet creates a world “without borders,” but most often that idea is associated with reaching out to people horizontally, i.e., to people who share one's status.

But vertically, I think this also applies especially with data gathering. Normally, reaching out to important people comes with a lot of friction. There are things like slack caused by logistics, security issues, getting approvals, and so on.

But because of the internet, all these frictions seemed to be lessened and I think this gives researchers more possibilities to reach out more vertically.

Another memorable instance of data gathering was our focus group discussion with less fortunate pregnant mothers in Laguna. Since one of the main objectives of the project was to help pregnant women, it was vital that we got their thoughts and experiences. And more often than not, the types of women who need the most urgent help come from less fortunate circumstances, so it was also imperative that we talked to those who were specifically less fortunate. These factors combined made this instance one of the most memorable because it forced us to be creative, but it was also one of the most challenging. Given that they didn't have the necessary resources, the most practical way we thought of to interview them was to gather the women in the municipal hall, then have a few of our team members be present physically to bring the gadgets, while the rest were present

digitally. Despite having face-to-face contact with them, the team present virtually was still greatly involved in talking with the mothers; we were able to ask a lot of questions, we were actively listening for opportunities to probe, we would moderate the flow of conversation as needed, and so on. As such, I would still consider this as an instance of online fieldwork, and a successful one at that.

But as I mentioned, it was challenging. It was challenging enough to bring the gadgets, but there were also some technical issues, and the flow of conversation could have been more natural if we weren't limited by the internet. I think this also highlights a great limitation of online fieldwork; in our day and age, many still don't have the capacity to be online. And as such, not everyone can be reached through the internet. If researchers want to rely on it, it's still possible, but only if some creative measures are in place.

From my small but exceptional sample of experiences, I would like to be bold and say that there is definitely space for online fieldwork to become the norm. Although it is not without its challenges, my experiences have shown me that these challenges may just be outliers. And as technology is becoming more accessible, these challenges may also soon come to pass. Moreover, the potential of the internet to easily connect people is already a well-trodden idea. But beyond that,

it's shown me that there are more benefits than disadvantages that people should give it credit for, especially in terms of reaching out to people vertically. This pandemic may have forced this change upon us, "but it's only on the brink that people find the will to change." And now that we've seen the possibilities, my hope is that online fieldwork becomes the norm, and that society may push the possibilities of it further.



SDRC Director and Research Staff

Melvin A. Jabar, PhD
Director

Relly P. Limliman
Assistant for Administration and Budget

Connie Jan Maraan, MA
Coordinator for Publications and Research Dissemination

Rommel M. Billena, MSMedSc
Coordinator for Visiting Researcher
and Student Support Services

Lyndia E. Navarro
Disbursement and Operation Liaison Officer

Maria Catherine D. Domingo
Research and Information Assistant

Klarizze V. Siddayao
Research Associate

Ailene G. Agang
Secretary/Office Assistant

Reynaldo V. Porsuelo
Assistant for Equipment Maintenance
and Messengerial

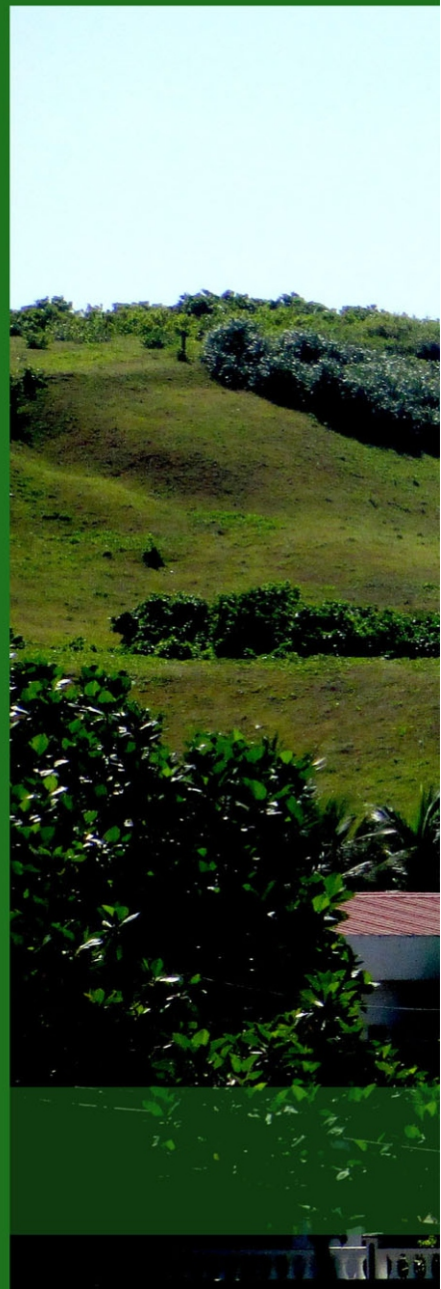
**De La Salle University
Social Development Research Center**

2401 Taft Avenue, 1004 Manila, Philippines

Tel. No. (632) 8524-5351 / 8524-5349

<http://www.dlsu.edu.ph/research/centers/sdrc>
or www.sdrc.org.ph

Email : sdrc@dlsu.edu.ph



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