# LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EXTENSION PROJECT IMPLEMENTERS AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE UNSPOKEN FRONTLINERS

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| **Received:** 30th March 2021 <br> **Accepted:** 14th April 2021 <br> **Published:** 30th April 2021 | | Extension project implementers ensure that activities and community linkages are not hampered by the challenges posed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This study presents the lived experiences of extension project implementers in providing community services in the midst of pandemic. Specifically, their experiences, reflections, and insights in the implementation of extension projects were enumerated. Eleven extensionists who were directly involved in and capable of conducting University extension projects were purposefully chosen as participants. Descriptive phenomenology research design was employed. Data were analyzed through Colaizzi's (1978) method. The experiences of the extension project implementers were themed as follows: difficulties in planning and implementation; support system; reflections and insights; and outstanding characteristics of the implementers. These experiences, as well as the extent to which extension projects have been implemented, will be taken into account in future planning, implementation, and impact assessments. |

## INTRODUCTION

Community extension projects through a variety of activities and services develop and support individuals and communities. Extension projects are the function of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to address social needs and to initiate community development (Mojares, 2015). These projects must continue to evolve through various strategies even in difficult times (Agricultural Training Institute, 2021). Its goal is to teach people things that will improve their lives, and communities are formed through relational actions that can be influenced by the knowledge gained through the extension project (Bowling & Brahm, 2002). Extension projects are intended to promote personal and social development (Rubio et al., 2016), and they assist individuals in learning and acquiring knowledge outside of the four walls of their rooms and homes (Abuyo & Roque, 2016).

Despite the numerous challenges, extension projects must still address the community's needs. In order to adapt to the new normal condition, extension project implementers must innovate potential methods of implementation (Agricultural Extension in South Asia, 2020). Extension projects and services should be maintained or improved in terms of skill trainings (Tacbas et al., 2010), as well as relevant seminar-workshops and capacity building. The Philippine Republic Act No. 8435 states that the extension projects shall cover major services such as training and demonstration services among others (Ammakiw, 2013), which demand face to face interaction. According to the Philippine Republic Act No. 8435, extension projects must include major services such as training and demonstration services (Ammakiw, 2013), which necessitate face-to-face interaction. The Western Philippines University encountered challenges in implementing its extension projects to partner communities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Face-to-face extension projects are typically conducted to facilitate a more effective transfer of knowledge and skill. There is a need to consider more innovative approaches to effectively carry out extension projects and

ensure that service delivery continues even in the face of health challenges. Davis (2020) added that more robust and effective extension projects that continue to function smoothly in the face of a crisis should be considered. As a result, this paper investigated the lived experiences of extension project implementers, in providing services during a pandemic. The findings would be useful not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, where experiences and practices will determine how extension projects will survive, but also in the preparation of post-pandemic plans, which will set the direction for extension implementers to deliver their services. Furthermore, findings will be important to the University in addressing the concerns of extension project implementers, and in providing a baseline data for future extension implementers on how to deliver effective and efficient extension services in challenging times.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study determined the lived experiences of extension project implementers who provided community services during COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically answered the following questions:

1. What difficulties did extension project implementers face in providing services during the pandemic?
2. What are the extension project implementers' reflections and insights gained during implementation?

## METHODOLOGY

A descriptive phenomenology approach based on Colaizzi's (1978) method was used to describe the lived experiences of Western Philippines University extension project implementers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, who included one University extension director, three college extension coordinators, and seven extension project leaders. These participants were chosen on purpose because they were directly involved in and capable of carrying out extension projects despite the new normal challenges. Each participant was sent an invitation letter in exchange for their permission to participate in the research via an interview. Every participant was informed of the interview's purpose.

Individual in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions based on the study objectives were used to collect data, and conversations were recorded with their permission. Participants were encouraged to speak up and share their stories in their own words. The researchers determined the level of data saturation. A mobile phone recorder was used to replay the conversation and aid in the transcription of the data. The steps below represent Colaizzis' (1978) processes for analyzing the data gathered:

1. Each transcript should be read and reread in order to gain a general understanding of the entire content.
2. Significant statements pertaining to the phenomenon under study should be extracted from each transcript. These statements must be documented on a separate sheet, with page and line numbers.
3. From these significant statements, meanings should be derived.
4. Sort the formulated meanings into categories, clusters of themes, and themes.
5. The study's findings should be incorporated into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under investigation.
6. Describe the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.
7. Finally, validation of the findings should be sought from research participants in order to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their own experiences.

Colaizzi's (1978) distinct seven-step processes provide rigorous analysis, with each step remaining close to the data (Morrow et al., 2015). The conversation was written down word for word. Significant statements were extracted from the transcript, meaning was derived from the transcript, organized into cluster themes, and the cluster themes were incorporated into descriptions (Wirihana et al., 2018). The themes were divided into two categories: general and related. To validate the report, the researchers confirmed these themes with the participants. Following Creswell's (2009) recommendations, an external reviewer verified the study's processes and outputs.

## FINDINGS

The transcripts on the various experiences of extension project implementers during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the following themes.

### Theme 1: Difficulties in Planning and Implementation

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementers were able to continue their extension projects. They did, however, admit to having difficulties and problems. Due to the constraints of face-to-face activities, participants 5 and 7 must forego one project each. The majority of the participants have seen a drop in attendance in extension activities. According to Gasmen (2020), safety protocols imposed by authorities to control the spread of the corona virus have generally limited the movement of people.

>P5 […] we were not able to implement one of our projects which is literacy because face to face not allowed…

>P7 […] one project not implemented it's because we don't know how to gather the children since they are not allowed to go out…

All participants confessed that there is initial personal hesitation to conduct extension projects through trainings because they themselves fear whether they may be infected by the virus (COVID-19) or they may be a carrier of the virus and infect the clients. It can be said that both extension strategies pose risk to extension workers as these require travels and face to face meetings. The self-sacrificing spirit of extension workers risking themselves can consider them as frontliners in the fight against COVID-19 (Gasmen, 2020).

*P3 […] with the Covid-19 Pandemic we have fear as extensionist as well as our clients to go out and implement because we may be get affected by virus*

*P5 […] fear of being infected by virus, we have doubts that we may be infected or we may transmit the virus to our clients…*

Participant 1 also experienced exhaustion due to the duplication of training-workshops. Instead of one session, projects have to be repeated twice or thrice in order to accommodate greater number of participants since limited clients are attending in one session. Participant 4 stated that their target participant of 50 has to be divided in to three training series in order to achieve their target clients, while Participants 7 and 9 agreed that when the same training has to be repeated all the preparations and requirements will also be duplicated.

*P1 […] tiring instead of one (1) session we need to repeat the activity batch by batch because of the limited participants allowed in one session…*

*P9 […] it is really difficult, because instead of one session we did it twice…*

*P10 […] we need to duplicate the training because only 15 clients are allowed in the venue…*

There are other implementation problems encountered by the participants such as the postponement of trainings due to restrictions brought by COVID-19 pandemic. One training was scheduled on the date when the national lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic was declared. It was postponed right away. Participant 4 also experienced postponement due to typhoon. Participant 11 experienced postponement because the clients declined to attend on the said training. These postponements wasted the whole preparation such as food, venue, invited resource person, attendees and approved papers for the training which has to be prepared again.

*P8 […] I do not have choice but to postpone the training due to typhoon, it's the President's announcement*

*P9 […] it's really difficult if the training postponed, the day of national lockdown I have 3 days series of training, […] the caterer of the food got mad…the invited resource speaker is already here…*

*P11 […] everything is ready you know, then they withdraw their attendance because of an emergency meeting so need to postpone it…*

Identifying the venue of the trainings has not been a problem at all because they need just enough for few. However, the challenging point is the preparation of the venue because it is not set for the new normal setup in accordance with the existing health protocols. A lot of additional preparation is needed in order to prepare the places such as health and hygiene equipment and materials, signage, seating arrangement as well as personal protective equipment. Furthermore, there are also difficulties in securing permission from the Barangay Officials and Local Government Units (LGU) to conduct trainings where there are stricter policies and more requirements to comply prior with the training implementation (Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases, 2020).

*P1 […] need to follow the protocol by our university and LGU…*

*P2 […] I think the challenge is wearing facemask and face shield while discussion is hassle…*

*P6 […] the participants and us (training team) need to wear facemask throughout the duration of the training…*

*P5 […] before wiping the table and chairs is enough, but now, we need to disinfect, included in the purchase request of facemask and alcohol…*

There was also a delay of materials needed for the training because the procurement office cannot purchase on time due to shipping and transportation difficulties. Being in General Community Quarantine means that the movement of people is largely limited to assessing necessities and work (Soliva, 2020). Mbah and Amechi (2013) recommended that extension support and training materials should be provided at all times for use by extension agents to enhance their performance. Extension has shown that extension workers' motivation, enthusiasm, confidence and credibility reduced when training materials are not made to them. With these existing problems, all the participants claimed that even though they were able to push through the projects yet they failed to reach the target clients to be trained.

*P1 […] my colleague is problematic, they said we don't have materials for the training…*

*P2 […] sometimes the materials like specialty paper for certificate didn't procure yet, but I understand because of pandemic…*

*P4 […] I spent almost one thousand pesos for the certificate and battery for microphone…*

## Theme 2: Support System

Most participants said that the administrative support both from the University and community partner (Barangay officials and LGU) does lighten the delivery of extension services. Indeed, the University must strengthen the wide network with various LGU and non-government organizations as it must enhance research and extension linkages (Mojares, 2020). It is noteworthy that sustainability of community extension projects does not depend entirely on sponsors and funders but mainly on the responsiveness of community and stakeholders (Llenares & Deocaris, 2018). Furthermore, the presence or availability of the supervisor was able to address the problems during the training specially those of need of immediate action. The trainings are efficiently and successfully delivered

because of collaboration and teamwork among the colleagues. It would also be better if participatory extension be promoted to make extension projects emancipatory and sustainable (Mojares, 2020).

P1 [...] in fairness, the management has full support...

P2 [...] the dean has a big role in extension services, I am thankful because she's very supportive

P4 [...] I saw the value of teamwork, from our university and our college, they are supportive

P 8 [...] if the boss is there, implementation is easier because I can ask him right away if there is problem, support from our supervisor is a great help already

Participants 3 and 5 said that the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) forms made the preparation of the report faster and easier.

P3 [...] no problem with the end-of-training report (ETR) because we have ISO template already, I need more time only to prepare it...

P9 [...] before implementation I gathered already the available documents needed in reporting, beside we have ISO form to be used...

P11 [...] ISO form helped me prepare the report easy...

## Theme 3: Reflections and Insights

All the participants described that the implementation of extension projects during the pandemic is greatly challenging yet contributed to a lot of meaningful realizations. Participant 1 shared that it is very fulfilling even without recognition. Additionally, Participants 4 and 7 expressed that it is very rewarding when the clients appreciate the relevant training they gained. It also brings joy and sense of fulfilment if you were able to accomplish your goal of community service, they added. However according to Mbah and Amechi (2012), special attention should be given to the development of specific reward system for extension workers. The University's Research Development and Extension Manual stipulates the granting of incentive to extension project implementers to encourage the publication and dissemination of results of extension activities and other related purposes.

P7 [...] it is very rewarding if you are appreciated by the clients and the community

P10 [...] in our college, cooperation evident among us, my big word is fulfilling because the clients are also happy...

P4 [...] fulfilling and rewarding, because you are not alone in this journey...

P1 [...] For my extension in community outreach activities experiences, happy, it's challenging actually no need to be recognize for the accomplishment...

Extension projects and services necessitate a significant amount of time and effort. There should be more time to prepare prior to the project's actual implementation, including compliance with health protocols and other constraints. Appropriate planning and strategies would facilitate extension work. It is necessary to embrace innovation and electronic platforms in the planning and implementation of extension projects rather than using traditional methods such as paper communication.

Webinars can be used as an alternative to face-to-face training workshops. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2020) acknowledged that the global crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has pushed us further into a digital world, and that behavioral changes are likely to have long-term consequences when the economy recovers. As a result, the Agricultural Extension in South Asia (2020) supplemented that in a context where technology transfer and information dissemination are also limited, going digital by exploring ICT options (mobile phones, interactive video calls, television, community radio, digital marketing platforms, social media, and so on) is to be considered.

P2 [...] the extension, aside from is challenging, we need to a lot time and more effort because it is not easy task anyway...

P7 [...] I need more time, a lot of things to prepare from planning to implementation

P11 [...] in extension, it really requires a lot of tasks...it demands time and exert more...

## Theme 4: Implementers' Outstanding Characteristics

Commitment and dedication are the foremost characteristics as acclaimed by most participants. These characteristics surmounted the challenges to pursue their projects. Love for the clients and service were also vital. Participant 3 shared that even in challenging times, denying oneself for the service towards countrymen is more meaningful. Williams (2020) averred that as an extension educator, care about the people in the community and passion for extension programming, are deemed necessary. The work of an extension agent demands the particular qualities of dedication, humility and hard work, and extension services should ensure that an agent is thoroughly prepared before he begins his extension activities (Oakley & Garforth, 1985).

Participant 2 stated that the extension project must be carried out with a genuine purpose rather than for the sake of compliance. According to Mojares (2015), the goal of extension is to improve people's abilities to solve problems. Furthermore, fulfillment or service with happiness will motivate the implementer to complete the task. Similar to Grage et al. (2004), the participants valued cooperation and collaboration with fellow extensionists.

P3 [...] Commitment and love for the clients, love for the countrymen... Commitment that even in this situation still we ne can extend or help in any way we can to people of the community...

P2 [...] I should go back to the conduct to the activity, to the goal of activity, I'm not doing this just for compliance but I'm doing this, because I love but I'm doing what do I love and do this extend help to other people.

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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the University was carrying out extension projects. These were made possible by the extension project implementers' love of service – the unspoken frontliners. Indeed, commitment and love for countrymen are the outstanding characteristics that implementers should have when providing extension services in the midst of COVID-19.

These unspoken frontliners see extension work in the new normal as difficult but rewarding. The major challenges faced by frontline participants were related to health protocols and the necessities of implementation, such as supplies and materials, as well as transportation requirements. To ensure that existing health protocols and policies are followed, they must be included in planning and budgeting.

Furthermore, the University's and partner communities' support are significant motivators for the extension projects to be carried out in the new normal. These extension project implementers are dedicated individuals who work under critical circumstances. They are entitled to continual support in carrying out their responsibilities as extensionist.

These interactions, as well as the extent to which extension programs have been implemented, can be considered in future planning, implementation, and impact analyses.

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