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From Numbers to Words

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Writing this article reminds me of those retreat days in college when your facilitator gives you a pen, a journal notebook, and a list of questions that you need to answer. These were called reflection sessions, where you must think deeply about the given questions. At some point, because you become deflated by the humid weather, you inevitably stare blankly into space with your thoughts drifting away. After a while, you have come to your senses and speak your mind about the topic at hand. Food and small talk with classmates are not the only memorable things about these sessions. It is the connection you make with your spiritual and emotional being that weighs the most. You are able to contemplate many things: your past actions, how to improve yourself and be a better person, your relationship with the Supreme Being, and, of course, your ideal future. It is an enlightening task. That is what this whole writing process was like for me. Over the past 12 months of reflecting on and writing this article, I felt like I dove into a frigid ocean and ascended in a different form. I really like this approach because it has shown me that I can write about anything.

I want to share my reflections on my work as a local researcher. I think that the title “From numbers to words” is appropriate because it is my first attempt at writing something that does not use the cliché words and phrases “*percentage*,” “*we can conclude*,” and “*statistically significant*” (the most dreaded phrase among economists if your numerical analysis goes awry). Since I am an economist by training, I analyze numerical data every day. Writing this article has afforded me a much needed and refreshing break from the mundanity of academic work. I have found the writing process challenging but fulfilling. I believe that I have come to know myself better because I spent so much time thinking about my life and career. It took me a long time to write this piece because I did not know what theme I wanted to focus on. However, there were moments when my thoughts surfaced precipitously like incessant rainfall. I will abandon the numbers for now and start describing my journey

as a Mindanaoan scholar.

I have always wanted to do research or development work. After graduating from college, I joined the Joint Ateneo Institute of Mindanao (JAIME) as a research assistant. It is a Davao-based Jesuit research institute that conducts policy studies on Mindanao's economy and environment. It was headed by Dr. Germelino "Boying" Bautista, a Professor Emeritus in the Economics Department of Ateneo de Manila University. He is a well-known economist for his research on environmental and resource management issues and policies. He also introduced me to various approaches to studying natural resource issues (e.g., mining and groundwater use), which provoked my interest in this topic. I am eternally grateful for his wisdom, humility, and generosity. My first task in the office was data inventory. Together with two other research assistants (Kevin and Karlo), we gathered socio-economic data about Mindanao and Davao City to determine the baseline situation in the region. Besides the typing and numerical skills, I realized that, to get through each task, serious patience and resourcefulness is required, and should be approached in much the same way as college algebra.

Based on official statistics, we know that some of the poorest provinces are in



Fishermen in the landing center of Lupon, Davao Oriental. They are loading their boxes with fresh catch.

Source: Official facebook page of the Local Government Unit of Lupon
(Retrieved on September 4, 2021)

Mindanao. Through our numerous research engagements in the institute, I realized that I want to explore poverty and income inequality. These issues are very relevant in the context of Mindanao's progress because poverty is a significant bottleneck in achieving human development goals. This is also a very personal endeavor because I grew up in a community where poverty was a part of daily life. Allow me to describe what poverty looked like in our town: a family having dried fish for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; kids who are going to school with an empty stomach; and a couple with five children who are barely scraping by because they depend on seasonal fishing. Because most people in our town rely on the sea or non-agricultural wage jobs for survival, their incomes are insufficient to cover basic needs such as nutritious food, clean water, or a decent shelter. I was a casualty of this perennial problem. Since my parents were not college graduates, they did not have stable jobs. They engaged in menial jobs that could barely put a roof over our heads. I reasoned that following the path of poverty research would not only involve exploring poverty and its causes, but also sharing my own experience.

Whenever Sir Boying or Ma'am Waka (our visiting researcher from UT) were in Davao City, they always treated us (the JAIME RAs) to a meal at "*Ramenikko*," a Japanese restaurant that offers the delectable *Mt. Apo Maki*. The dish consists of maki rolls that are stacked on top of each other to form a mountain-like structure and drizzled with Japanese mayonnaise. It tastes excellent, and is the restaurant's best seller. While joyously feasting on different Japanese dishes, we would share stories about our work, or talk about anything under the sun. I think that our discussions about conducting grassroots research stoked my interest in taking on poverty and environmental management research. I want to veer away from the mainstream research areas of economics such as macroeconomics or financial economics. With all these elegant economic and financial development models, I am frustrated because our society is fraught with many problems like poverty, hunger, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Thus, I believe that investigating these real issues would be more impactful because you explore social statistics that unmask people's actual situations.

Further, when I conduct research, I want to be close to people, hear their thoughts, and feel their emotions. That is why I want to combine narratives and

numbers in my work. While numbers can tell you that a rose is a rose using logic, narratives and perceptions can enhance the tone of your story by revealing that a rose has numerous varieties. In other words, I believe that economics is too straightforward. When I write, I do not want to engross myself too much with numbers. I desire some fluidity in my research. I prefer conducting field surveys and interviews because you can solicit important information from experts and lay people to test your theories and results. The critical approaches in sociological and anthropological research are equally valuable for describing social and environmental phenomena. Economists should learn from qualitative researchers and vice versa.



Interviewing a stall owner for our research on the social dimensions of traffic.

Being a researcher also has its fair share of challenges. These challenges include the decades-old issues of being overburdened with teaching and administrative assignments, difficulty in procuring funding, and a lack of experts in many fields. These are common problems faced by researchers and scientists in both public and private universities. I want to underscore the country's education inequality at the tertiary level. Only a handful of economists with advanced degrees choose to teach in Mindanao, compared with the number of economists in the top schools such as UP or AdMU. This is one reason why it is difficult to carry out my research goals because there are very few scholars in my university or the region who I can ask for guidance about my research interests. In general, if the government can incentivize

researchers who are working in state and private universities (i.e., through more funding and subsidies), it will greatly improve the overall plight of research and development in the country.

Studying Mindanao's problems or any topic is a process that enables a reflection on the past, as well as writing down your insights, making a prognosis about the next situation, and suggesting what can be done. As a truth seeker, I am always hopeful that my future work will, in some way or another, shed light on the reality of the poverty, inequality, and resource depletion that exist in the country and influence public discourse about policy alternatives in combating these problems. I envision and hope that in the future, researchers and scientists in the country are given the value and recognition they truly deserve to fully realize their potential as partners of development. Finally, everyone has their version of utopia. However, I feel that being visionary is not sufficient to solve the issues that limit our progress as a nation—what we need is commitment. I want to see a prosperous Mindanao where researchers commit to working in and for Mindanao.



Children enjoying the afternoon by bicycling along the coastal road of Lupon.