



Strengthening the Role of Indigenous Peoples and Their Communities in Nature Conservation:
A Project Ensuring the Full and Effective Participation of Indigenous Peoples in the
Implementation of the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System

LEARNING MATERIAL

How to take your own notes during meetings

TONY QUIZON

Introduction

During meetings, many people do not take notes at all, which makes it hard for them to recall important details. Others take notes but do a bad job. Often, either they cannot listen and take notes at the same time, or else they write down irrelevant information.

This paper is written specifically for community leaders or representatives who may be invited to attend official meetings organized by government, civil society, or business groups.

The ability to take down meeting notes will help you remember more details and do your job better.

Why do we need to take down our own notes?

But why do we need to write down our own notes, when someone else is already tasked to prepare the Official Minutes of a meeting?

Taking notes at a meeting is a completely different task than taking minutes at a meeting. Meeting *notes* tend to be for your *personal reference*, while meeting *minutes* are for *official record-keeping* purposes.

Moreover, it may take some time before you are able to receive the Official Minutes.

Taking down notes serves other important functions:

- **Taking notes helps you remember**
- **Taking notes enables you to take immediate action.** If you take notes, you become immediately aware of the follow-up tasks that need to be done. It also enables you to report back immediately to your organization, community, or constituency.
- **Taking notes is your document of proof.** Your notes can back you up in case there are any doubts or questions about the items you discussed a week ago. If you take down notes properly, you can show enough details about the agreement or discussion that can silence the doubts.
- **Taking notes helps you point-out other issues.** Taking notes can help you see other problems that can affect your work, and issues that you might forget or miss if you just listen passively.

10 steps to effective note-taking

1. Start taking meeting notes even before the meeting

If you are not experienced with taking down notes, it is better if you can prepare even before the meeting starts. Ask for a copy of the meeting's agenda. Identify the objectives of the meeting. Establish what the meeting is all about, what matters are to be discussed, and what is the desired outcome.

Outline your notes before the meeting starts. Use the meeting's agenda to make an outline of the important points, leaving a space to fill in important details later for each point during the meeting.

Take down notes of the following:

- Date, time, and location of the meeting;
- Purpose of the meeting;
- Who is involved in this discussion;
- What should be accomplished;
- Any questions that need to be answered, especially concerns raised by or involving your constituents;
- Action items and next steps; and,
- Deadlines and milestones.

Sometimes, your invitation will contain all or some of these details. However, *informal* meetings may not come with a clearly written agenda. In such a situation, simply call the person inviting you, and ask him/her a few questions that will help you identify the purpose and desired outcome of the discussion.

Alternatively, you can use the written agenda of the meeting to make an outline of the important points, leaving a space to fill in important details for each point during the meeting. (See *Item 5*.)

2. At the meeting, know where to sit

Arrive at the meeting on time. Make sure you get to your meeting a few minutes before it starts. This will minimize the risk that you miss important information. It also allows you to select where to sit.

Do not sit in a far corner. Instead, sit in a place where you can hear the persons speaking, preferably with a desk for writing, and where you will have as little distraction as possible.

Have your notes out and ready so you do not have to rush to get your papers out.

Tips on what to bring: Bring a ballpen (blue or black) and a highlighter pen or ballpen of a different color (red). Use a notebook, preferably one with a firm cardboard cover (such as a stenographer's notebook) as this will allow you to write on a firm surface even without a desk. If you are using separate sheets of paper, keep it bounded in a firm clipboard.

3. During meetings, do not try to write down every word

For many people, it is hard to keep up writing and listening at the same time.

Moreover, people speak faster than we can write. Hence, do not try to write down every word as this is impossible and ineffective. Instead, focus on capturing the *most important* information. Use your own language. Write down key facts, ideas, and details *in your own words*. Taking notes in your own words actively engages your brain, helps you better understand the text, makes you more likely to retain the information.

Also, use your own language if this is more convenient and understandable to you. Even if the speaker talks in English, you may choose to write your notes in Cebuano, Tagalog, or in your own language if this helps you to understand and retain the ideas better.

It is suggested that you take notes by hand. Writing by hand forces note-takers to listen *and* to distill their thoughts in one take, as there is no way you can capture every word. This means you are analyzing content in the moment — which promotes mental retention.

Try to keep your sentences short. And write down only key words, decisions, and assignments. You may also write down emphasis lines or circles, arrows, sketches, or drawings that will help you write faster and understand your notes better.

4. Focus your notes on the issues, decisions, and action points

Focus on the purpose of the meeting. Focus your notes towards capturing the *issues, decisions, and action points* — as these are the reason why the meeting is happening at all.

Be sure to write down all actionable items, decisions, and recommendations—and sum them up in your own words to reinforce your understanding of what is supposed to happen next.

Write down items as they come up, rather than after the meeting when you start to forget what matters were discussed. This will ensure that you capture the information accurately.

On the other hand, many things are usually mentioned in a meeting that are not important and may be ignored. These may include long opening remarks, political speeches, and flattering remarks. Moreover, do not be distracted by people who are not the speaker.

5. Use a system of note-taking that works best for you

Choose a note-taking method that is best suited to you – to retain information and enhance your understanding of the topic being discussed. Presented below are some methods and tips:

- **Highlight the key points based on the agenda.** Plot the outline of your notes even before the meeting starts. A good starting point is to check the meeting's agenda. Ask the secretary for a copy so you can divide your notes ahead of time, according to the agenda's main points, even before the meeting starts. As the meeting rolls on, just fill in the important notes under each of the main points.
- **Write your notes directly on the agenda.** One of the easiest ways to take notes is to write on the agenda document itself because it should already have the main points listed. Any important information can be added next to the point on the agenda where it was discussed. The margins can be used to write questions or ideas that occur to the note taker as the meeting progresses, and this method saves time because much of the relevant information is already on the agenda.

6. Back up your notes with a recording

If the other meeting participants have no objections about being recorded, feel free to use your recorder for *backup* during any type of meeting. You may use a digital voice recorder or else use the recording function and app that you have if you are using a smartphone.

Recording is especially useful where you need to both be an active participant in the conversation and need to remember a lot of information. This will help you focus on asking the right questions and engaging in the discussion further, instead of scrambling to jot down notes.

However, you should continue to take down notes, even if you are recording. Do not rely on the voice recorder

completely, because the technology could fail. Again, note that your recording is only for back-up.

Also, if you have a camera or phone-camera, use it to take pictures of documents, attendance sheets, and of notes and diagrams that may be written on the whiteboard or else projected on-screen. You may also take pictures of the meeting itself, as this may help you recall later who attended the meeting and what was discussed.

Some practical tips

- **Be an active listener.** When note-taking, many people make the mistake of mindlessly taking down every word, without really comprehending what is being said. Instead, make an effort to understand the topic while you are writing. Instead of copying down line after line of information, listen carefully to what the speaker is saying and make an effort to understand the material. Once you have done that, formulate your own notes.
- **Keep your notes organized and dynamic.** Write everything in the right place in your outline so you do not have to organize your notes again afterwards. Highlight important items by underlining or circling them so you do not have to search for them later.
- **Make sure your handwriting is legible.** Taking notes will be a complete waste of time if you cannot read them afterwards.
- **Use wide margins.** Do not write too tightly. Leave a wide margin on the left-hand side. This will prevent the page from becoming too overcrowded and will leave you space to write in any additional information once you review your notes.
- **Draw on your notes, make diagrams.** Drawing your notes may actually help you remember better than writing them out. You do not have to draw every single thing, since that would take too much time. But you can draw out certain things in your notes if it will help you remember them better. You can also use signs and arrows in handwritten notes to save time. For example, instead of writing "Ka Oca should talk to the barangay kapitan" you can just write "Ka Oca → Kapitan."
- **Focus on decisions and action items.** It is usually not possible or productive to write down everything that is said in the meeting word-for-word. Be sure to write down decisions and action-items. Jot down key words and other information that you will need to use later. To help you focus when you review your notes after the meeting, use bullet points for general information and check boxes for action items.
- **Speak up in the meeting to confirm that your notes are clear and accurate.** If something is not clear, then speak out and ask. If the meeting participants seem to have made a decision, clarify what that decision is so you can record it in your notes. Similarly, if you have recorded an action item you need to complete, make sure you can write specifically in your notes what needs to be done and when it needs to be done.
- **Do not be afraid to ask questions.** When you come across something you do not understand, do not just jot it down and tell yourself that you will worry about it later. Ask the speaker for clarification especially if you feel that they have said something important.

7. Note down your observations

Do not limit your notes only to what is being discussed. Write down also any important observations that you might have. For example, if you observe that only two people have been talking during the whole two-hour meeting, then note that down. Also, you might note that there are only three IP community representatives out of the total 25 participants at the meeting.

8. After the meeting, review your notes immediately

Once the meeting is over, review your notes immediately. Note down any spots that need clarification or sections that you do not understand. Improve and expand your notes by writing additional details that you may deem important. Act quickly now, so that you will not forget later what your notes, drawings, and symbols were supposed to represent.

Expand your single words into phrases, so that each idea is made complete. For instance, if you wrote in your notes the word “PETITION” – you may need to clarify and write down who will sign the petition, to whom it should be sent, and the person who has been assigned for this activity.

All these will help you keep track of the details that are important to you.

When reviewing your notes, write a “keyword” in the left margin for every significant piece of information. The keyword can be a single word or short phrase that summarizes the information. For instance, you might write “Decision on the Project,” “Recommendations to the Council,” or “Financial Status.”

It is best to have different color pens or highlighters. This way, items that are especially important can be circled or highlighted to bring attention to them when the notes are being reviewed. Information such as deadlines or phone numbers are easier to keep track of amidst the vast amount of information if there is some way to highlight them.

9. Prepare a short summary report right after the meeting

Do not wait for the day to pass after the meeting. Prepare a short, written summary report based on your notes right away while everything is still fresh in your mind. Remind yourself of the most important takeaways from the meeting by writing a short summary. Keep it short (about 3-4 sentences). It will be easier to write a few sentences about the most important decisions, action items, and reference information when your mind is still fresh.

Even if you are not tasked to submit a formal report, you can use this document for your personal archive or as a proof in case a conflict about the discussion arises.

Record your meeting summaries in a different color or draw a box around them so that you can easily find them months later.

10. Put your notes into action.

Taking effective meeting notes and reviewing them is not enough. Address your action items by adding them to your to-do list. Put any deadlines or events discussed in the meeting into your calendar and file important information from your notes into the right place.

Use your notes to report back to your local group, organization, community, or constituency.

File and organize your notes for future reference. File your paper notes by date (or file the whole notebook later after you fill it up). This will help you retrieve information on what was discussed and retain that information long-term.

And next time, when there is a meeting on the calendar, take some extra time to prepare an outline. Taking effective meeting notes is an important skill that will serve you well. □

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The Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) a regional association of national and regional networks of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia actively engaged in promoting food sovereignty, land rights and agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, participatory governance, and rural development. ANGOC member networks and partners work in 10 Asian countries together with some 3,000 CSOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). ANGOC actively engages in joint field programs and policy discussions with national governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and international financial institutions (IFIs).

33 Mapagsanguni Street, Sikatuna Village, Diliman, Quezon City 1101 Philippines
Tel: +63-2 8351 0581 | Fax: +63-2 8351 0011 | Email: angoc@angoc.org
Website: www.angoc.org



The formation of Bukluran Para sa Pangangalaga ng Kalikasan ng Pilipinas (BUKLURAN, Inc.) or the Philippine Indigenous Peoples Community Conserved Territories and Areas Consortium (Philippine ICCA Consortium) is a nationwide network of community membership-based indigenous people's organizations (IPOs) of all ethnographic types. It is premised on bringing together indigenous peoples who assert and utilize traditional governance to protect community-conserved areas. Common to its members is the shared view that indigenous peoples' survival depends on the protection of valuable knowledge systems and the ancestral lands on which we thrive and persist. Our community-conserved areas can become the ultimate driving force in the conservation of biodiversity when our rights to our land and resources are respected and recognized.

Our main purpose is to carry out and realize the full recognition and respect for the rights, governance and self-management of our ancestral lands.

c/o PAFID: 71 Malakas Street, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines
Tel: +63-2 89274580 | Fax: +63-2 84355406



Philippine Association for Intercultural Development, Inc. (PAFID) is a social development organization which has been assisting Philippine indigenous communities to secure or recover traditional lands and waters since 1967. It forms institutional partnerships with indigenous communities to secure legal ownership over ancestral domains and to shape government policy over indigenous peoples' issues. PAFID works exclusively with the indigenous peoples' sector, specifically upon written or signed requests for assistance from indigenous communities or their representatives. PAFID envisions indigenous communities as responsible stewards of their resources.

71 Malakas Street, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines
Tel: +63-2 89274580 | Fax: +63-2 84355406
Email: pafid@skybroadband.com.ph | Website: www.pafid.org.ph