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Building Inclusive and Sustainable Societies: A PRRM Perspective

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NEITHER DEMOCRACY NOR DEVELOPMENT IS INCLUSIVE enough to have a space for every poor rural village in the Philippines. But democracy and development *for all* is attainable and worth striving for. It is not an impossible vision.

Such was the view and conviction of PRRM's founders when they organized this mass movement in 1952.

The PRRM founders—mostly prominent citizens from non-poor, from the upperclass of society, in other words, the “included”—believed there were potentials out there, innate among the poor themselves, waiting to be released. All that's needed was a movement that could trigger and assist the liberating process. And so they set out on an ambitious mission of mobilizing the non-poor to help the poor help themselves learn their way out of social exclusion.

This, in gist, has been the story of PRRM. Forty eight years down the road, PRRM has been doing just that—helping the poor to develop themselves in their chosen ways and become important actors in building inclusive rural societies.

Today, PRRM is a movement of over a thousand civic-minded men, women from diverse professional background and perspective. Among them are some 350 hired workers running a variety of programs in 20 of 77 provinces of the Philippines. The rest are members making all sorts of voluntary contribution—symbolic and material—to the success of the mission. Together they strive to make democracy work at the grassroots and become a voice of influence in public policy.

In the local communities where it has taken deep roots over time PRRM has enabled the organization of some 600 village organizations with a membership base of over 30,000 poor farmers, fishers and indigenous peoples and rural youth. These primary organizations have now formed themselves into federations to leverage their strength and voice. They have achieved a level of capacity for self-governance, for addressing poverty on site and for asserting their right to participate in shaping policies that affect their own communities and the larger society.

PRRM's community-based programs are supported mostly by European donor-partners, like NOVIB (Oxfam-Netherlands), German Agro-Action, IPADE of Spain, the EU, among others. They include the organization's time-tested four-fold approach of **education, health, livelihood and self-government** combined with community-based natural resources management or CB-NRM. Projects range from municipal fish sanctuaries to baywide co-management of coastal resources; from advocacy of budget allocation for reproductive health to setting up a primary health care system in a number of villages; from organizing savings and credit groups to establishing a rural bank; from installing potable water systems, solar energy and micro-hydro units to watershed management. The list is long.

Around these programs and projects PRRM has built partnerships with local communities and, together, they have demonstrated a different way of doing development. Based on project experience they engage government, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, and private corporate interests in dialogs on poverty reduction, social and environmental justice, citizen participation and good governance.

But building inclusive societies and realizing sustainable development in a rapidly globalizing world is a far more complex story. The PRRM story is but one small episode in a complex web of strivings to find clues and learn the ways out of social exclusion and unsustainability.



How inclusive is an inclusive society? To poet Emily Dickinson *"The soul selects its own society/ then shuts the door."* This suggests that any society can be inclusive only to the extent that individuals choose and are chosen to belong there. It makes a strong case for freedom of expression and sovereignty of the person. More, it implies that the moment we begin to select based on any criteria or set of values we already begin to exclude.

An inclusive and sustainable society is as much a dream as a world without poverty.

Is there any historical parallel for this kind of society? In their book ***For the Common Good*** [1989] Herman Daly and Rev. John Cobb alluded to some bygone era of enlightened feudalism. Under that system, every member of the community enjoyed work, there was more sharing and caring than in either capitalism or socialism. One need not worry about joblessness and lack of old-age security and everyone was assured the basic needs and means to live in dignity.

Today's world has strayed far too much away from that medieval society. Yet current discourses on sustainable development have again brought back on the table the concept of community. This seems motivated less by a romantic return to the past than by a strong revulsion to the pervasive breakdown of social consensus and social cohesion. The primary driving forces are the civics—individuals and associations of high civic consciousness and civic activism—which include NGOs and social movements, and other concerned actors in society, in government, in the corporate world. They have proved to be the critical elements against negative globalization and for redirecting this seemingly inexorable process away from the race to the edge.

The notion of community is far from being clear-cut and uncontested. It cannot be assumed as self-evidently good. A racist or fascist community is also a product of choice of some kind. Or it could be the case that a community whose expression of their right to be left alone might be as absurd as exercising their right to clear cut their communal forests or even commit collective suicide.

The positive meaning of community needs stressing here. In PRRM discourse and practice, bias and focus of programs on the poor is deliberate and meant to achieve inclusiveness in divided communities. Efforts to help the poor reclaim their power to decide on their own is balanced by education for solidarity. People are being made to realize that self-governing and self-sufficient communities are a pipedream if



not linked to many other similar strivings to bring about greater social cohesion and well-being for all.

The ways of social exclusion are many—poverty, color, sex, faith and belief, language, ethnicity, culture, destruction of living environments, even advances in information technology.

At once, in Asia-Pacific alone, almost a billion are excluded because they cannot earn one US dollar a day. But also in parts of this region, it has been demonstrated that absolute poverty could be eradicated by a combination of economic growth and effective catch-and-provisioning approach. Core poverty was gone in South Korea, Singapore, and elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia until their economies were hard hit by the 1997 crisis.

Poverty seems easier to reproduce than reduce. The recent Asian crisis proved that on a grand scale. This is also proved every day at the micro level. From PRRM experience livelihoods are hard to create and sustain but easy to lose, especially when the macroeconomic situation is choppy and unstable. Cash incomes are hard to come by and easy to flow out of communities that buy from the outside most of the means to live and enjoy life. Cash income is one's passport to inclusion in today's world. You need it to get you a c-phone and get connected to globalization. But a c-phone will cost you several harvest seasons in your one-hectare farm or hundreds of kilos of fish from already depleted fishing grounds.

Partnerships and cooperation are urgently needed to make progress along the goals of social inclusion and sustainable development. Different modalities do exist already and need only to be strengthened. For example, PRRM's ongoing relations with its European partners must continue to flourish and produce more positive outcomes. There are many more throughout the region and within Europe itself.

Asia and Europe have much positive experience to build on. The urgent test really is how a new resolve in Asia-Europe cooperation will result in finally eradicating poverty, in more sustainable livelihoods, in broader citizen participation, in more inclusive societies.





About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

