

A paper presented to the  
PRRM-sponsored "Forum on Rural Reconstruction:  
Philosophy from the Indian and Philippine Perspectives"  
August 2, 1989  
PCED, University of the Philippines

# Theory and Practice of Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines

Isagani R. Serrano  
Vice-President  
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

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*“The PRRM’s history spans a generation of change and constancy: thirty seven years (1952-1989) have been Presidential regimes from Magsaysay’s to Aquino’s, a political system that has gone from democracy to dictatorship and back, and a stubborn persistence, and aggravation, of age old economic and social problems.”*

***Sixto K. Roxas***

**RURAL RECONSTRUCTION IN THE PHILIPPINES IS** a classic story of a movement. Its embodiment, the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), speaks of a tradition that dies hard.

The PRRM story began where a nearly successful peasant rebellion ended. Its vision was to change the face of the Philippine countryside, to liberate the peasants from ignorance, poverty, powerlessness and disease. Such was a mission that would have denied the Filipino peasant every reason to revolt again.

**P**RRM had its moments of glory, as well as moments of decline and stagnation, throughout its thirty seven years of history. It can rightly claim close to two decades of pioneering work in integrated rural development. It reached a plateau around the late 70s, then hit bottom around the early 80s. By 1986, it was a “dead” movement.

But PRRM refuses to die. In just two years from 1986, when it was supposed to have been counted out, it bounced back into the mainstream of the Philippine NGO community. Today, as in the 50s and the 60s, PRRM is helping shape the course of development and democratization in the rural areas.

What keeps PRRM going should be an interest to development theorists and practitioners. Here’s one organization and movement that seems to defy the natural cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. It seems that PRRM would not disappear from the rural scene any more than the Filipino peasant would give up his own liberation.

### **Building on a tradition**

When PRRM started, it already had the benefit of three decades of rural reconstruction behind it. It needed only to appropriate, within the particular Philippine milieu, a tested approach to rural development. It was an approach that is integrated, universally applicable and for all season.

Tried and proven workable in China 70 years ago, this approach combines, in a mutually reinforcing dynamic, the aspects of education, self organization, livelihood and health.

This four fold approach predates by several decades NGO development work as we know it today. It is as valid then as now and will continue to be so until the countryside of the world, or the so called peasant societies shall have been rid of ignorance, poverty, disease and powerlessness.

**R**ural reconstruction actually began earlier than the experiment in 1919 in Ting Hsien, China. Its roots can be traced elsewhere. The setting was Europe during the First World War. The guru and prime mover was a Chinese scholar, Dr.Y.C. James Yen.

In Europe (1914 18), Dr. Yen got into contract with his hapless fellow countrymen, the Chinese coolies, who were exported to the warfront to dig trenches and build fortifications. These Chinese coolies were an illiterate mass and could hardly communicate back home. Deeply



touched by this pathetic condition, Dr. Yen labored to simplify the complex Chinese language, came out with his famous 1,000 character module, and taught the coolies to read and write.

That was the turning point. It began as a response to a human condition of ignorance. And from this was built the whole rural reconstruction philosophy and practice.

**D**r. Yen put the highest premium on education. To him, literacy and social awareness are a necessary condition for any development process. What he did for the Chinese coolies was an enduring contribution to popular education. Later, this would also form the basis of his international mass education movement (IMEM).

Once the movement took some foothold in the Ting Hsien social laboratory, it eventually developed into an integrated response to the endemic problems of rural China, suggesting, on the part of Dr. Yen, a clear recognition of the interlocking nature of such problems as ignorance, poverty, disease, and civic inertia.

But Dr. Yen was not explicit in asking why in the first place such problems exist. This point comes out quite clearly in his view of the world and the way to change it.

Dr. Yen sees the world as cut up in two societies. The one fourth represents the rich, the developed cities. The three fourths represent the poor, the underdeveloped countryside inhabited by millions of peasants. According to him, until this millions are liberated it is idle to talk of world peace and harmony.

The vision is clear and unassailable, but how is the liberation to take place? Dr. Yen puts forward the concept of "levelling up the three fourths, not levelling down the one fourth." Obviously he is prescribing an evolutionary process for his own revolutionary vision.

**T**he communists has a similar vision but sought a different path. A revolutionary one. They saw the social problems in feudal China as basically rooted in the land. They addressed this question not with a four fold approach, although they seem to have found this useful later, but with an agrarian revolution. The rest was history.

Dr. Yen was to realize, though rather late in the day, that land reform was of central importance to the development process. The Joint Commission of Rural Reconstructions (JCRR) which was a last ditch effort to save China from the communists had it as a centerpiece in its



agenda. Patterned after the Marshall Plan for Europe, the JCRR rescue operation in Southern China came too late and would only later find success in Taiwan.

What part Dr. Yen played in Taiwan remains a grey episode. It seems clear, though, that Dr. Yen's democratic bent did not sit well with a dictator, whether of a Mao or Chiang Kai Shek variety. Which was perhaps why, soon after, he would find his place in the Philippines.

## The Philippine Experiment

In contrast to China, the revolutionary challenge failed to achieve its end in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, Dr. Yen found a better setting to start afresh and launch a national movement. The country was supposed to be a democratic setup. The revolution had just been licked. And the same age old problems stalked the Filipino peasants.

PRRM was practically alone in the field when it started. The setting was perfect for an evolutionary process of social transformation.

As in China, Dr. Yen found a sufficient number of subscribers from the upper and middle classes who were willing to come down "from the ivory tower to the mudhouse." These prominent citizens formed the first core of volunteers who dared to "enter the tiger's den," the erstwhile Huk territory of Central Luzon.

In no time at all, hundreds of volunteers enlisted to train in the four fold approach. After six months of intensive training at Nieves, San Leonardo, Nueva Ecija, these volunteers would be deployed to areas which had been cleared by the military of any significant trace of rebel influence. Here they would teach the peasants how to combat ignorance, civic inertia, poverty and ill health.

**P**RRM was so successful that in every village that it reached, some measurable changes took place. Plant and animal production increased. Buying clubs were organized. Peasants become functionally literate. Houses now had toilets. Primary health care was put in place. Men, women, and youth associations were formed. Barrio Councils were set up as units of self government. Model families and model communities were built as showcases for others to emulate.

What is left of these achievements after three and a half decades is yet to be ascertained. But what is clear is that poverty and inequality in



the Philippine rural society have remained. Worse, instead of getting reduced, they, in fact, have worsened over the years.

**T**he Philippines continue to have one of the worst land tenure situation in the whole Third World. Of the four million agricultural families, 2.5 million do not own the land they till and therefore remain as tenants and farm laborers.

During the last 37 years, successive Philippine government have launched five major land reform programs, one of them coming close enough to similar successful programs in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. Their aggregate incremental achievement amounts only to 400,000 hectares, equivalent to 5 percent of 8 million cultivated hectares, transferred to some 175,000 families or roughly 7 percent of landless households.

Production at a farm level on a per hectare basis remains low. The gross value added per 1985 prices comes up only \$655 as compared to \$2,500 in China, \$5,000 in Taiwan, \$7,000 in South Korea and \$10,000 in Japan.

Around seventy percent of the population, mostly peasants, are under the poverty line. There are more poor people in the Philippines today than at any time in recent history. This poverty situation is exceeded in Asia only by Bangladesh.

**O**n top of this, the Philippines is now facing a serious environmental degradation. In the last 54 years it has lost 10.3 million hectares of its primary forest, and 8 million of this only during the last fifteen years when government let loose the big loggers and exporters of food products in a mad rush to earn foreign exchange to repay the country's ballooning external obligation.

Soil erosion, siltation and sedimentation have been continuously destroying our farmlands, fishing grounds and water sources. These continue to exert pressure on an already declining food supply.

The poverty groups are hit the hardest. The vulnerability is increased even more during natural disasters whose devastating effects are multiplied due to environmental destruction.

Social conflicts have intensified over the last two decades. The continuing failure of government to address the roots of social discontent, its inclination towards a military solution, and the existence of the new



revolutionary challenge are all contributing to turn the whole situation into a full blown civil war.

Altogether, these form a good part of the current Philippine reality as it has evolved in the last 20 years. The reality of the previous two decades, also the glorious years of PRRM, comes out as a mere footnote to the further aggravation of the social and economic problems.

The present situation demands a different response. PRRM cannot continue to live in the 50's and 60's.

## **Rethinking Rural Reconstruction Strategies**

The validity of the four fold approach is beyond question. However, its impact on social transformation needs a long and hard look. Right now, nobody knows what imprint was left on the hundreds of rural villages whose lives were touched by PRRM. It could be that these same villages are now again part of the revolution which thrives on the failure of Philippine development.

**P**overty alleviation strategies and local self reliant development are increasingly being proven to be inadequate. In a crisis situation and under a hostile policy environment, any improvement in the quality of life and Filipino peasant cannot get far afield.

Community building, as PRRM saw it in the past, is not equal to empowerment. Field intervention, no matter how integrated, will leave very little behind after withdrawal if it does not result in the reacquisition by the poor of the power to control the resources within a defined ecosystem.

Sustainability of micro level development is impossible without a supportive development climate at the macro level. For this, an aggressive policy advocacy is necessary. Such effort entails drawing up a comprehensive policy studies agenda alongside activating a broad network of pressure groups that will put forward policy alternatives.

The continuing policy failure of a succession of Philippine governments has put the whole mainstream development process on the chopping block, as it were. NGO's and popular movements now see the need to extend the advocacy for a comprehensive alternative development strategy.



Translation of policy alternatives into state policy and legislation takes time and tremendous efforts. The critical mass required for this can only be achieved through sustained social preparation from the ground up leading to the building of national networks of NGO's and social movements.

Policy advocacy and networking has an international dimension as well. The existing terms of North South relations have to change. The net outflow of resources from the South must be reversed. Development assistance from the North needs to be reviewed from the perspective of just, sustainable and democratic development. For this, an international network of NGO's and social movements will have to be built.

**S**ince 1986, PRRM has played a major role in all these initiatives. And this would not have been possible if it did not adopt a strategic orientation that combines a bottom up empowerment approach with policy advocacy.

Such perhaps could be considered as one of PRRM's contributions to the theory and practice of rural reconstruction.



PRRM  
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement  
Conrado Benitez Institute for Sustainability



## 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.

