

PRRM. Philippines  
July 1999

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## Introduction

**THE PHILIPPINES CELEBRATED ITS FIRST CENTENNIAL** of nation building in 1998. Farmers contributed a big part in this brief history. Now and then successive governments would give them token recognition as the unsung heroes who worked the soil to feed the whole nation. And yet to this day farmers continue to struggle for land, livelihood and participation.

Farmers' associations are at the forefront of this struggle. These organizations have evolved over the years against the backdrop of social injustice and exclusion. They are the voice of grassroots participation in the countryside. They are the forces driving land reform movements throughout our history. They are the silent heroes who continue to make agriculture a solid base of the whole Philippine economy.

As the struggle for land took on many different

characteristics, farmers associations likewise evolved and performed various roles in keeping with emerging developments. Farmers associations in the Philippines have been key actors in the rural areas. They exist in the lowlands and in the highlands, as big national federations or as primary local organizations. They engage in socio-economic enterprises in order to raise incomes and do advocacy for policy reforms. The diversity of their organizations and activities reflect the complexity of issues and concerns confronting the farmers sector.

This paper looks at the diverse roles and the contributions of organized farmers in addressing old and emerging problems of Philippine development in the context of their struggle for rights and recognition.

## **Securing and improving tenure**

Securing and improving tenure has been a cornerstone issue in the farmers' struggles for justice and dignity. Farmers associations play key roles in realizing this objective by leading the campaigns for reforms in policy. Advocacy work has long been a distinct site of struggle for the organized farmers' sector. This follows from the perception that much of the oppressive condition suffered by poor and landless farmers is rooted in policy and legislation. Trying to improve the conditions of the farmers was a basic concern and positive state policy provided the environment to make it happen.

Successive agrarian legislations over the years dealing with improvements in land rent contracts and tenure were in one way or another responses to the clamor for reforms of the peasant sector. The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) is the existing program to transform land ownership structures in the Philippines. CARP was originally set for completion by 1998. Yet up to now only around 4.3 million hectares out of the adjusted target of 8.3 million hectares or around 53 % has been transferred to farmer beneficiaries. This is about 41 per cent of the original target of 10.3 million hectares.

CARP is now in its most difficult phase— acquisition and distribution of private agricultural lands (PALs) above the five-hectare retention limit. Figures vary but the estimated scope puts it at 1.5 to 3 million hectares of mostly coconut, sugar and other commercial farms located in the more productive parts of the archipelago. These private agricultural lands are probably the most expensive parts of CARP coverage.

Alongside land re-distribution, beneficiary development is another major objective of CARP . Towards this end, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) has developed Agrarian Reform Communities (ARCs) across the



country as a centerpiece strategy. ARCs are targeted as priority areas for development. By enabling these ARCs to get better access to much needed support services, the program hopes to transform these areas into self-reliant communities. The main organizational vehicles for this transformation process are ARC organizations. Close to 1,000 ARC organizations have already been established nationwide.

The role of farmers organizations in securing and improving tenure is apparent in at least two areas.

First, by organizing and representing sectoral interests they have been instrumental in pushing for necessary reform in state policies and programs. They catalyzed and spearheaded the broader multi-sectoral campaign for agrarian reform that gave birth to CARP. While recognizing the inherent flaws and limitations, many farmers associations continue to push for more effective implementation of the program. The continued advocacy of organized farmers and their allies help thwart attempts by some sectors to undermine program implementation and possible reversal of the gains. More recent advocacy positions have centered on ensuring adequate public and private spending support for the completion of the program.

Second, farmers associations like the ARC organizations are envisioned to institutionalize the participation of actual and potential agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) in program implementation. These ARC organizations are crucial in demonstrating the viability of agrarian reform in improving the lives of the farmers while striving for completion of land acquisition and distribution targets. A recent study however has pointed out weaknesses in the ARC organizations both in terms of organizational autonomy and capacity. They have not been able to encourage participation of actual or potential ARBs. Only around 55 % of the total number of ARBs are organized. Many of the existing ARC organizations work under a high degree of intervention from the state or dependence on external donors. At present, many of these organizations exhibit inadequate capacities to sustain their operations, implement projects and carry out decisions. Nevertheless, ARC organizations are important mechanisms for ensuring the success of agrarian reform.

### **Cooperation to improve productivity**

While agriculture account for 22 % of GNP and 47 % of the country's labor force, close to a million families dependent on it continue to earn on the average an income of only P68 per day (around \$2/day). This is way below the poverty threshold set by government.



Philippine agriculture remains plagued with problems. Landlessness is rising ever more. Agricultural lands are diminishing on account of their conversions into industrial enclaves, residential subdivisions and golf courses. The agricultural sector has up to now been unable to shed off its oligopolistic character. Capitalists and big multi-national corporations still largely control production, post harvest and marketing processes. Big traders continue to dominate the small farmer-producers. Poor infrastructure, the inadequacy of government support, rising cost of agricultural inputs and the inaccessibility of credit siphon the little income earned from tilling the land further undermining agricultural viability.

Increasing productivity has been always been a complex issue in the context of the many interrelated problems facing the country's agricultural sector. Productivity is a function of among other things, land, capital and technology. The skewed ownership and control structures of these factors makes it more difficult for the farmers to effect real changes in productivity.

Addressing issues of productivity and improved livelihood opportunities for farmers have traditionally been spearheaded by the farmers cooperatives. During the Marcos era, Samahang Nayons or SN (Rural Organization) were extensively organized in the rural areas to serve as the main beneficiaries of government productivity enhancement programs. This formations however became highly dependent on government support. With little social preparation, many of these SNs were soon saddled with falling incomes and severe indebtedness.

Today's cooperatives face greater challenges in raising the productive capacities of the farmers. They serve to pool scarce resources to enable farmers enlarge their stake in production, post-harvest and marketing processes. Many farmers cooperatives venture into socio-economic enterprises in an attempt to engage the market through their alternative schemes. They engage in projects ranging from delivery of micro credit to alternative trading and marketing.

Another rural institution that tries to achieve a multiplicity of functions related to increasing productivity is the irrigators association (IA). The IAs play a central role in the development and management of communal irrigation systems in the country. These formations directly engage government in its irrigation development program. They facilitate farmer participation in project appraisal, design, planning, implementation and management. Close to 5,000 local IAs form the National Confederation of Irrigators Associations (NCIA) which engage the national government particularly the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) in policy formulation.



## Box 1: Irrigators Associations - The case of the IMM-IA

*The Imelda, Mulawin, Masapsap or IMM (sub-villages in the municipality of Orani in the province of Bataan) Communal Irrigation System (CIS) is composed of six (6) sub-systems all drawing water from the Orani River. Although the areas share a common water resource, water distribution was a major problem*

*In all of the areas covered by the Communal Irrigation System (CIS), a system of “barakuhan” (bullying) prevailed prior to organizing work of the government. In order to ensure the flow of water to one’s area, intimidation and outright water thievery were resorted to. Needless to say, this system resulted in inequitable distribution of water, which led to, on many occasion deep conflicts among the farmers. Because this system was highly individualistic, the maintenance of the earth canals suffered as well. The concern of the farmers was reduced to creating their own diversions for their farmlands. All of these factors limited farm productivity as cropping intensity was reduced to once a year (irrigated areas normally harvest two times a year). Collective action was resorted to only during times of heavy rains or typhoons when threats of overflow and destruction of the individual diversions became apparent.*

*In 1992, the government as part of its implementation strategy for the communal irrigation development program (CIDP) organized three irrigators associations (IA) to facilitate program implementation in three sub-villages. The Imelda IA manages a sub-system covering 226 hectares and serving 181 farmer-beneficiaries. The Mulawin IA manages a subsystem covering 250 hectares and servicing a total of 145 farmers. The Masapsap IA manages another sub-system covering 95 hectares and servicing 82 farmers.*

*The committees established during the construction phase constitute probably one of the best gauges of farmers’ participation. Unlike in other infrastructure development projects, in CIDP the farmers through the committees become involved in every aspect of the construction. They are involved in the bidding process to make sure that the contracts are awarded based on merit, they assess the materials to make sure that these fit the specifications based on those outlined in the plan, and they monitor construction costs to make sure that everything is within the specified budget.*

*The active and zealous participation of the IA in the committees is driven by their desire to develop a good and efficient irrigation system. It also is a manifestation of the IA’s sense of ownership of the project.*

*To address the inadequacy of the system to service the entire area especially during the dry season and the possible conflicts that may arise because of this, the four IA’s were federated into an Irrigators Advisory Council (IAC). The council was organized to facilitate the water sharing among the 4 communal irrigation systems. It is made up of 21 members, all executive committee members of their respective IAs. The IAC regularly meets once a month to formulate plans for effective operations and maintenance of the entire system.*

*IAs serve as the main mechanism for farmers participation in every stage of CIDP from the pre-planning , construction and systems operations & maintenance. All three sub-systems were turned over to the respective IA in 1987. The IAs have been managing the systems since with some assistance from NIA.*



## Ensuring access to food

The food crisis that hit Mindanao, a major food-producing region in the country, as a result of the El Niño-induced drought in 1997-98 underscores the precarious food situation in the Philippines and highlights the increasing vulnerability of the country's traditional food producers — the small farmers and fishers.

In a paper written in 1990, British scholar James Putzel identified four main problems of the food system in the Philippines. First, and most important is the existence of widespread hunger and malnutrition; the second has to do with the skewed distribution of wealth and power and its relationship to pattern of food production and consumption; the third concerns the increasing power of transnational corporations over food production and consumption, and the fourth the use of food as a weapon against agents of change and transformation in the country.

These inherent vulnerabilities of the food system is further compounded by the ascendancy of market-based paradigms and approaches to food security. The broad definition of food security pertaining to access of an individual, community or nation to food has increasingly been interpreted in the context of trade and rapid globalization.

The Philippine governments approach to food security has generally looked at pursuing increased agricultural exports to finance food imports. This approach is consistent and adheres to the neo-liberal development model adopted by governments from Marcos to Estrada. The shift from staple crop production to cash crop production driven by this strategy has undermined the capacity of farmers to produce for their own consumption. Food became a commodity and access to this commodity reduced to a question of purchasing power.

In the absence of far reaching reforms in land distribution patterns, farmers are slowly losing the endowments necessary to feed themselves and their families. Control and decisions over production slowly slip out of their hands and into the hands of agribusiness companies and multi-national corporations. Their purchasing power on the hand continues to be suppressed by their lack of participation in post-production and marketing processes.

The farmers associations respond to this challenges in a number of ways. The first has to do with initiating and organizing survival strategies like the concerted effort of farmers groups in Mindanao to plant root crops to serve as alternative food source. Others engage in alternative livelihood projects to generate the much-needed cash for food



purchases. Farmers associations provide the mechanism for pooling together scarce resources akin to the development of what some refer to as institutional entitlements.

On another plane, farmers associations address the issue of food security by advocating for more far-reaching structural reforms in agriculture.

## Promoting Sustainable Agriculture

Adding to the social and economic problems confronting the farmers are the worsening ecological problems. In the 70's the government aggressively pushed the Green Revolution for adoption by lowland farmers. In the end these programs generally aggravated the farmers' dependence on expensive and ecologically destructive inputs and pushed the sector further down into the debt trap.

The negative experience brought about by the Green Revolution era has led to the emergence of organizations of sustainable agriculture practitioners. These organizations try to link the tenurial and productivity issues to the environmental issues.

### Box 2: Sustainable Agriculture Advocates and Practitioners: KALIKASAN-NE

*The Kalipunan ng Magbubukid para sa Likas Kayang Pananakahan sa Hilagang Nueva Ecija or Kalikasan-NE (Society of Farmers for Sustainable Agriculture) is an organization of farmers engaged in alternative rice production.*

*The organization seeks to raise the incomes and improve the quality of life of its members through alternative production pattern (APP), promotion of ecological farming, an alternative system of trading and marketing, development of alternative sources of rural finance, and the establishment of farmer-managed post-harvest facilities.*

*KALIKASAN (or nature) started out in 1992 with 7 adoptor members. Adoptor-members have since increased to 223.*

*By relying on low cost, bio-organic inputs KALIKASAN realize savings of up to 30% of total production costs per year. Farmers income have increased by 14 % due mainly to their use of organic fertilizers and their direct marketing to consumers.*

### Carving political space

Many experts have pointed out a state-bias against small farmers in particular and agriculture in general. This bias is manifested in policies and programs that favor rapid industrialization at the expense of agriculture; derail and circumvent implementation of agrarian reform; speed up the pace of liberalization, etc. It is likewise manifested in the low public spending on agriculture. Government expenditures for



agriculture which averages around 10 percent of total expenditures has consistently been lower than the other sectors despite its enormous contribution to the economy.

Up until recently the bias against agriculture has also been manifested in the lack of farmers participation in government programs.

The approach of many government programs has been mainly top-down. Results were mixed but generally negative from the perspective of the small and landless farmers and their allies. Program implementation, much less planning had virtually no farmers' participation in the real sense.

Many government initiated programs supposedly for the benefit of the farmers and the rural communities while oriented by social justice, equality and rural development fail to get the support of small farmers and landless workers because of the perceived or real bias against farmers in these programs.

Given the domination of the rich and landed class in government, particularly more pronounced in Congress, it is easy to understand why this bias persists.

One recourse for farmers' associations to address this negative bias is to enter into the political struggle. Advancing this has been the goal of farmer-based political parties that engage in electoral projects. Recently, sectoral political parties were able to secure seats in Congress through the party-list elections.

Another course of action spearheaded by farmers associations in addressing the bias is through maximizing participation in government bodies created through their own lobby work. The Magna Carta for Small Farmers of 1992 was an important piece of legislation in the effort to institutionalize farmers participation in government decision making bodies. Basic sector representation is likewise enshrined in the policies governing the National Anti-poverty Commission (NAPC) of 1997.

## **Conclusion**

What is evident from our review of the life history of farmers associations is the dynamism of a sector struggling to remain relevant against the forces that undermine its voice and important role in development.



Throughout history, whether in the context of the oppressive conditions of the colonial period or under today's realities farmers associations have come to represent the aspirations of ordinary rural citizens. These formations continue to play a crucial role in channeling the energies, ideas and emotions of the dispossessed and disempowered into programs and actions that could advance their aspirations.

The strength of the organized farmers sector clearly lies in organizing and advocacy work. This had been exhibited in countless campaigns and citizens actions waged for the sake of land and livelihoods. The farmers' sector in the Philippines can be considered one of the more politicized segments of society. The level of consciousness coupled with its capacity to encourage broad based multi-sectoral participation has been crucial in building public support and mobilizing the numbers necessary for the pressure-politics of advocacy work.

The Estrada Administration's agricultural development thrust has once again cast the Filipino farmer in the limelight. Although farmers remain enduring figures in agriculture, the unresolved problems and issues that continue to hamper agricultural development in the country have been pushing the farmers sector to the margins and shutting the doors to their effective participation in development processes.

The struggle for reform continues. While a lot still needs to be done both in terms of undoing flawed policies and programs and blocking new policies that negate the gains achieved in the past, the greater challenge facing the farmers sector lies in making the most of the accumulated venues for participation that they themselves helped create over time. The previous campaigns for reforms have taken place to a large extent in the margins of the development process. The emerging opportunities for engagement with the state and to some extent the market extends the farmers' campaign inside the corridors of power so to speak.

Farmers associations in the Philippines have come a long way. But their struggle for land justice is far from over. There is still much unfinished business, unresolved issues that need to be addressed. The 'parliament of the streets' strategies proven successful in the past should now be complemented by programs that aim to increase the farmers' capacities for critical engagement of the state and market forces. Farmers' associations should once again take the lead in expanding the spaces and potentials of inclusive democracy.





## 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.

