

## PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION: AN INSTRUMENT AGAINST POVERTY

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During the past years not a few people have been engrossed trying to find out the relationship between power and poverty. The dichotomy of grinding poverty and human misery did not just happen. There is ample historicity of facts to suggest that poverty is to a large extent the result of oppressive relationships in a societal structure that gives a dominant minority the power to impose its will on a deprived majority. And there exists a complex network of social, economic, political and cultural relationships that strengthens this power.

### *The Plight of the Asian Masses*

To many Asians, the history of their countries is also the history of their exploitation and servitude. Their serfdom began when their indigenous economic, political, social and religious institutions were systematically destroyed and supplanted by the colonial empires of the West. Paralyzed by penury for centuries the masses of Asia were reduced to a condition of powerlessness and subhuman existence, a situation which was reinforced by a minority of local elites and neocolonialists who hold practically all the wealth and the power. In this context, the Philippines is no exception.

### *The Poor in the Philippines*

In the Philippines today, only 2.5 percent of the people own more than 60 percent of the wealth of the land. The remaining 97.5 percent of the population have to divide among themselves the remaining 40 percent.

In our country, contradictions can be so glaring. You can see plush villages and not too

far from these luxury subdivisions are straggly rows of *barong-barong* situated along filthy railroad tracks and smelly canals. Here, the wretched of the land live in make-shift shanties of discarded wood and rusty corrugated roofing until they are blown down by a typhoon, washed away by a flood or gutted by a fire.

When we see such extremes, we come to ask ourselves: Can we tolerate living in a society that allows only a few to wallow in wealth while so many live in anguished misery? Can we tolerate a system that has institutionalized violence by permitting such human misery?

If the answer is no, then change is inevitable. But what kind? Some say that change can be achieved just by a rearrangement of resources and cooperative efforts to share the goods of life with the less fortunate. Others venture the opinion that the only change possible is the restructuring of the total social system to make it more responsive to the needs of the impoverished majority.

The traditional method is the cooperative effort where all that has to be done to effect change is to get people to identify their needs and see if available resources are enough to meet these needs. If they are not met, this disparity can easily be remedied by assuming that those with ample resources will readily share some of what they have, with those who do not have.

However, an analysis of existing social conditions in the Philippines today shows that the desired change cannot be attained merely through "cooperation" because the political and economic structures are virtually under the control of a powerful minority and sweeping

reforms to correct the gross injustices of a system where the rich get richer while the poor become poorer are but mere lip service.

*Poverty and Power:  
Sharp Contrast*

Poverty is related to powerlessness; and we ask then, who are considered powerless and who are powerful?

In deciding who belongs to what group, we must perceive the sources of power. These sources are number, organization and resources. Who have these sources of power? On the other hand, who do not have them?

The poor in Third World countries are powerless because they do not have the wealth, influence and position. So how does man unshackle his poverty to gain power? Can we expect the powerful to fight poverty for the powerless?

History has proven otherwise. To fight poverty men who live in squalor must organize themselves. Their source of power is their unity because they have the strength of numbers. But numbers alone are not enough. They should have an organization. This organization can become effective through their own participation. It is not only a structure but a simple and functional one with a strong mass base.

*People's Organization*

What is people's organization? How is it different from other organizations? It is a departure from other groups which are program-oriented. A people's organization focuses on issues. The people are organized to get involved in issues which require urgency. Issues like the land problem in Tondo; the recent demolition of urban slum dwellers in Tafting, Malabon; landgrabbing case of Mangyans in Paitan, Mindoro; the land case in the forest reserve areas of Kibawe, Bukidnon; the Philippine Veterans Development Corporation (PHIVEDEC) project in Villanueva, Misamis Oriental; the *batilyos* of Navotas; the urban poor of Tatalon, just to name a few.

Around these issues, people are organized. They help other people forge a common front

against the powers that be. But this usually does not happen right away. It is a painstaking job of building their power to confront bigger problems by starting them with smaller issues. Issues which directly affect their daily lives at the moment: no water, poor drainage, malnutrition, inadequate health services.

To handle these issues, the people learn to negotiate with government and private institutions. It is a departure from the usual process of people waiting for help which at times never come, or if they do they were given too little and too late. People's organization, instead, present their demands. A victory experienced by the people in their negotiations becomes an instrument in building their self-confidence. They realize they are people with dignity, and with power. They can now articulate their demands. At the same time, they develop a critical viewpoint on things. They become bold enough to disagree. And they find out that they do not anymore have to conform to the status quo all the time.

Most of us are familiar with the plight of the urban poor. They have to be continuously organized otherwise they become the perennial victims of the so-called "impact programs." For instance, when beautification programs are envisioned, who are the first ones uprooted? The urban poor of course! But who benefits from this? This does not only happen in Greater Manila. It is also prevalent in other cities in the Philippines. In Cebu City, a group of urban slum dwellers are fighting for the right to stay in their lands where they have lived for so many years. Why? Because their land has to be converted into a sports complex. The people aptly expressed their sentiments by asking "*Ito ba ang tinatawag na development? Nasaan bang talaga ang priority ng pamahalaan? Ano ang mangyayari sa amin?*"

Villanueva, Misamis Oriental experienced a similar incident. Because of the PHIVEDEC project (developing the area into a Sintering Plant heavily funded by multi-national corporations) a number of families have to be relocated to another place. The Sintering Plant is a potential source of pollution and would ad-

versely affect people in nearby areas in the years to come. How can this be allowed for the sake of progress?

How many families have been dislocated because of the building of dams? The adverse effect of the Pantabangan Dam to families dislocated from the area is too recent to be forgotten. Now, another dam is being damned by many sectors of our society — the Chico River Dam Project. And who knows? The Mangyans of Mindoro may be the next victims of developmental programs.

*Researches: Utilized by People  
for their Benefit*

This time when the powerless groups are adversely affected by developmental efforts, their weapon is to organize themselves and demand participation in planning projects that will directly affect them. But planning needs data.

It is in this spirit that researches conducted by social scientists should be made available to the people. In most cases, researches fall into the hands of multi-national corporations or development agencies whose technocrats use people as cold statistics in their development plans.

Would there be a way by which the social scientists can make these research materials available to the poor to help them in systematic planning? After all, the poor, most of the time provide us the reason to engage in researches.

Moreover, what measures can be applied to curb the propensity of some social scientists to forget that their work has to be a commitment? For instance, the choice of a research

topic need not be solely based on the program of the source of funds but in its viable contribution to the people's development.

*Social Scientists' Involvement  
in People's Struggle*

At this point, let me stress that it is commendable for a group of social scientists to have taken the initiative to invite in this forum people who can best articulate their conditions. It is hoped that the task to fight poverty becomes a partnership of people who are poor and of people with resources to share.

I believe that in this mutual exchange, social scientists are helped not to work in a vacuum; That, they find meaning instead in their own endeavor in the academic world because learning cannot be divorced from the people. In the same manner the university has to be in a continuous dialogue with society.

The urgent issues are all around us! Let us not remain isolated from the reality world. Let us join forces with the poor because "... we must believe in their wisdom and the fallibility of unchallenged one-man leadership. . ."

*Power to the Powerless*

With the mass base organized, with more and more resources at their command, with increasing confidence and courage to fight, there is hope to reverse the present structure and thus fight poverty.

*Note*

At the time she read this paper, Teresita S. Palacios was with the Institute of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines.

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