

ON PEASANT ORGANIZATIONS

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Peasant organizations provide additional dimensions in the implementation of development programs. It can be said that in this last decade, peasant organizations were given significant recognition for their contribution to the growth of the rural sector.

While before, the peasantry has always been kept an arm's length from power, they are now called upon to participate in problem identification and decision-making. They are now the focus of the "peaceful democratic revolution" and the locus of the "rebellion of the poor."

For the first time in the millenia, said Eric Wolf, humankind is moving *toward a solution* of the age-long problem of hunger and disease, and everywhere, ancient monopolies of power and received wisdom are yielding to human effort to widen participation and knowledge. In such efforts — however uncertain, however beset with difficulties, however ill-understood — there lies the prospect of increased life for increased humanity.

How to reach *this solution* is a question of struggle, a question of power — a political question. It is for this reason that the struggle against poverty becomes a struggle against the system that breeds poverty. This struggle leads to rebellion and revolution.

According to Barrington Moore, the process of modernization begins with peasant revolutions that fail. It culminates during the twentieth century with peasant revolutions that succeeded. No longer, he continued, is it possible to take seriously the view that the peasantry is an "object of history."

For those who savor historical irony, it is indeed curious that the peasant in the modern era has been as much an agent of revolution as the machine, that he has come into his own as an effective historical actor along with the conquests of the machine.

The peasant war in the Philippines is a part of the peasant wars of the twentieth century such as in Mexico, Russia, China, Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam which ushered in "the process of modernization." The tension that gave rise to it had all its roots in the past. It is the revolution of the largest sector of the Filipino people — the peasantry — against foreign domination and exploitation. This revolution is still in process today after taking various forms and functions, and its main instruments are the peasant organizations. Today's democratic revolution, the rebellion of the poor, is a function of the continuing revolution against an unjust agrarian structure which created a "throne of bayonet where the powerful exacts what they want and the weak grants what they must." This structure constitutes an "institutionalized violence" against the poor.

With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, said Dr. Umali (1979), we see now that over the last quarter century, we often mistook rural poverty and hunger as *the problem*. Today, we see that they are the symptoms or consequences of the real basic problems; the *unjust economic socio-political structures that distort and constrain the development process*.

The need for organization

In any society, the haves are as powerful as the have-nots are powerless so that perpetuation of power in the hands of the few

will always result in the perpetuation of poverty among the majority of the people.

To free themselves from the cycle of poverty and exploitation, the people must realize their potential strength and power and use it. To quote Umali (1979:8), "people cannot develop if they have no power, and development will occur if, and only if, the people can organize their own power in their own interests."

The sources of this power are resources and organization. Any organizational structure is a structure of power whether economic, political, social or cultural.

The rich are powerful because they are organized and have access to power. Institutional services and decision-making have generally been their monopoly because those who control the resources also control the economic, social and political power.

The poor, especially the peasantry, are powerless because the majority are still unorganized. According to labor statistics, only about 10 percent of the labor force including agricultural labor is organized.

To alter the basic power relationship and obtain greater access to society's benefits, there is, therefore, an urgent need for wider participation and higher level of performance among peasant organizations.

The role of peasant organizations

We have observed that it was only in this last decade that significant recognition was given to peasant organizations on their contributions to the growth of the rural sector. This recognition was brought about by four basic performances of peasant organizations. According to Wanashinghe (n.d.) these are:

1. Support or mobilization of local peasants;

2. Organizational capability;
3. Rapport with politico-administrative decision-making groups or individuals; and
4. Inter-supportiveness of peasant organizations in the area, the region, or the country as a whole especially for mass action or "agitational activity."

These roles in turn are influenced, he continued, by another four basic factors:

1. The genesis of the peasant organization (as a direct result of governmental policy).
2. The local power structure (economic, social, politico-administrative).
3. Levels of peasant awareness (the more aware peasants are of developmental and modernization trends and objectives of the country and the outside world, the higher their performance in support of mobilization, organizational capacity, rapport with decision-makers and intersupportiveness; the less aware, the lower the level of role performance).
4. The policy environment (government policy either strengthens or weakens the ability of peasant organizations in the performance of their roles).

To understand the roles of existing peasant organizations, let us view them in a historical context, in the genesis of their structure and functions.

The Federation of Agrarian and Industrial Toiling Hands (FAITH) Inc. and HUKBALAHAP Veterans Inc. (HUKVETS)

FAITH was initially organized as FARM in 1969. It was formally organized as FAITH on January 20, 1974. The HUKVETS, an affiliate of FAITH, was formally organized on November 30, 1975 (National Heroes Day), and recognized by the Government under P.D.

No. 1207 on October 7, 1977. Relative to the past, FAITH is the tip of an iceberg of various peasant organizations that gave rise to it.

In 1919, a sharecropper's union was organized by a communist leader, Jacinto Manahan. This was renamed in 1924 as the Katipunang Pambansa ng mga Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KPMP) the main objective of which was to fight usury and obtain equal share of 50-50 under tenancy (Huizer 1977:4-5).

In 1930, lawyer Pedro Abad Santos, the Socialist Party leader, though a wealthy landlord in Pampanga, created the Aguman ding Maldang Talapag-obra (AMT or Union of All Workers) in response to the grievances of farmers and workers. One of the leaders of Abad Santos was Luis M. Taruc who, during the anti-Japanese war, became the Supremo of the HUKBALAHAP.

The peasant organizations generally used non-violent methods: demonstrations, sit-down strikes to let everyone be arrested and sent together as a group into jail, and so on. Dramatic stage presentations and similar cultural activities were used to teach the peasants about the labor struggle, and to turn the strikes into public manifestations. By 1938, the AMT had 70,000 members who participated actively in mass actions.

The socialist peasant organization, AMT, had good chances to develop during the 1930's while the communist mass organization, KPMP, and the communist party were officially prohibited. Landlords organized armed groups or private armies such as the Kawal ng Kapayapaan (Soldiers of Peace) to oppose and clash with the socialists. This led to considerable violence in the rural areas in Central Luzon. When the socialists were also prohibited to hold meetings, the organizers used any kind of gathering, such as protestant religious meetings, to make propaganda for the peasant cause.

In 1938, the Communist and Socialist

parties merged and their mass organizations, the KPMP and the AMT joined a united front against Japanese fascism. On March 29, 1942 the merged peasant organizations created the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon (HUKBALAHAP). The aims of the HUKBALAHAP were to drive out the Japanese, cooperate with the allied armies, apprehend and punish collaborators, attain complete independence and establish a democratic government with land reform, national industrialization and guarantees for a higher standard of living (Huizer 1977:8).

The Huk resistance against the Japanese gained the support of the masses of Central and Southern Luzon that in many areas *de facto* political control and local governments were in the hands of the resistance forces which had their base in the peasantry.

Although the efforts of the Huks considerably facilitated the liberation of the Philippines from the Japanese by the American army, the relations between the Huks and the American army were never good. There was fear that the Huks would radically change the social order in the Philippines, if they got the chance.

After the war, the Huks joined a popular front with several other groups, such as the Democratic Alliance, the Pambansang Kaisahan ng mga Magbubukid (PKM) and the Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO) and supported Osmeña for the April 1946 election against Roxas, a former collaborator with the Japanese who was supported by the U.S. Supreme Commander, Douglas MacArthur. Roxas won the election with a slight majority. With him in power, three Nacionalista senators and six Democratic Alliance congressmen were unseated; including Congressman Luis M. Taruc and Jesus Lava.

As a result, the Huks lost hope in the Roxas administration. After several Huk leaders were kidnapped and assassinated, violence flared up again. The Huk problem was not solved by violence.

According to Secretary Conrado Estrella of the Department (now Ministry) of Agrarian Reform, land reform would have to be the answer to the Huk movement. Estrella (1961:13) says:

... One cannot question the validity of the objectives which the Huk presented to the Government. The Pambansang Kaisahan ng Mga Magbubukid (PKM) which was the Huk farmer's organization, presented to the Government in 1948 a program for agrarian reform. The organization asked for the end of tenancy and its replacement by leasehold. They also asked for rural cooperatives and credit facilities for farmers and, finally, they asked that the government expropriate the big landed estates and sell them to the tenants, particularly in Pampanga, which was at the time the center of the Huk movement. It couldn't have been otherwise, for more than 80 percent of the farmers of Pampanga were tenants.

The crisis generated by the continuing peasant rebellion and enlarged by student activism led to the declaration of a crisis government on martial law. When under martial law, government reforms were launched, specifically Agrarian Reform and Cooperatives development, former farmer and labor leaders released from prison were allowed to form their organizations in support of said programs. Thus FAITH and HUKVETS were organized in 1974 and 1975 respectively under the atmosphere of reform generated by the crisis government.

The Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) was formally organized in October 1953 by a group of Catholic Laymen following the break-up of the communist-led revolutionary movement in the Philippines. The FFF was to have reorganized the old communist-led peasant base into an organization "with a truly Christian and democratic leadership." But the fresh reminder of the communist-inspired program led many people to become apprehensive towards organizing future organizations viewing them as structures ultimately leading to violent

revolution and not to peaceful reform. Because of these prevailing attitudes, the FFF met only marginal success in terms of expansion and growth during the late 1950s and early 1960s. By mid 1960s attitudes began to change in support of utilizing farmer organizations towards affecting agrarian reform. And with this change of attitude support for the Federation of Free Farmers began to increase, allowing the organization to greatly expand.

The crisis government has promoted a favorable climate for the establishment of peasant organizations. So aside from the FFF and FAITH, another privately initiated organization, the FLRF (Federation of Land Reform Farmers), the third largest peasant organizations joined the ranks of non-government organizations.

Government agencies also took the initiative in forming farmers' organizations. The Bureau of Agricultural Extension organized the Federation of Farmers' Association, the BCOD organized the Samahang Nayon, the ACA organized the Compact Farms and the MAR organized the ARBA. The government-initiated associations above are considered as non-government organizations (NGO's).

Both government and non-government organizations concerned with development in the countryside adopt strategies promotive of participation. But participation in something which is already defined for peasants has not promoted development.

As development is a matter of institution building, the peasantry and their organization must fully participate in all aspects of activities — economic, social, political and cultural. This participation must assure for the peasantry not merely involvement in decision-making and control, but also in the benefits, in the equitable distribution of income and wealth.

This is the essence of democratization of wealth and opportunities. It includes the democratization of power. Without power, the peasantry and their organizations cannot be effective instruments of development.

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