

# THE NGO EXPERIENCE IN NEGROS

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## Introduction

The pervasive presence of NGOs in the Philippines owes in part to the many transformative changes needed in the country's distressed sectors. Increasingly, questions regarding the capability of NGOs to undertake social transformation tasks have become a topic of inquiry. The number of NGOs is perhaps less important than the concern about their competence to initiate the sensitive and complex process of generating genuine and humane changes in people and communities.

This article focuses on some of the developments of NGO work and experience in Negros with the view of partly assessing the effectivity of NGOs in bringing about desired social changes. Given the social inequality long institutionalized in the hacienda system of the province's sugar industry, mechanisms of social control predominate, often beyond the individual awareness of NGOs and other change agents and of the beneficiaries of change. In turn, this situation adversely affects the implementation of NGO projects and the

institutional capacity of NGOs to pursue social development objectives.

This article thus aims to identify external and internal mechanisms of control which often are deeply-embedded in the consciousness of individuals and which limit rather than facilitate the process of change beyond the level of awareness. Alongside, the author discusses certain features of NGO organizations which are used by the leaders themselves to influence the achievement of desired changes.

## The Growth of NGOs in Negros

The popularized concept of an NGO as a non-profit, non-stock service organization gained acceptance in Negros as early as 1970 in the organization of the Negros Economic Development Foundation (NEDF). According to a publication (1990), the NEDF was formed by "men who were mostly economic leaders and representatives of key business operations in Negros to help in its diversified development." There was no other organization of

its kind at the time of its formation. The NEDF delivered socio-economic programs to the countryside and for many years pursued its activities with the support of sugar planters and private businesses.

The number of organizations which performed services for the poor slowly increased over the years. They were engaged mostly in rehabilitation activities (after the occurrence of disasters such as typhoons or droughts); the delivery of basic services (i.e. the construction of artesian wells); educational assistance; and the provision of free clinics and other social services.

A dramatic increase in the number of NGOs in Negros came about with the occurrence of the sugar crisis in the 1980s which brought the convergence of conflicting historical forces unparalleled in the history of the province and its sugar industry. Overproduction, the erratic price of sugar, militant unions, the insurgency, militarization and hunger, among others, further compounded the persistent poverty in the sugar haciendas with tragic outcomes. Deaths due to malnutrition especially among the young touched the sensibilities of the national and international communities and of NGOs, notably. As newspaper headlines highlighted the ravaging effects of the sugar crisis, NGOs descended hurriedly into the province of Negros.

For most of the international NGOs without local connections, the search for beneficiaries led them to channel their support through the existing civic organizations of Negros, the members of which belonged mostly to the sugar elite. There were claims that the sugar planters'

monopoly over donor funds gave rise to the proliferation of NGOs serving both the rural and urban areas of Negros. Still others claimed that, with the funds in the hands of the planters, the "haciendas" or private farms gained more from these than did the province's outlying barangays which were assisted by people's organizations or POs. From Negros, three existing NGOs in the 1970s which were the NEDF (Negros Economic Development Foundation, Inc. 1970), CFI (Chito Foundation, Inc., 1974), FFHDF (First Farmers Human Development Foundation, Inc., 1979), 35 additional non-government organizations emerged in the 1980s in response to the depressing effects of the sugar crisis.

By March 1987, the leaders of these NGOs felt the need to bond together and link their programs for a more effective delivery of their services. Forty-two Negros-based non-government and private voluntary organizations in various fields formed an umbrella organization to ensure coordination of their operations. The Associated Council for Coordinated Development (ACCORD-NEGROS) was organized with a heterogeneous membership of 52 NGOs and 12 selected POs. They differed in origins and in the nature of their services and approaches to development work.

By 1990, another umbrella organization called MUAD-NEGROS (Multi-Sectoral Alliance for Development-Negros) was formed. According to its Director, this alliance comprised mainly of a homogeneous group of independent service-oriented organizations, mostly POs which were engaged in grassroots community organizing for self-help socio-economic projects.

Other NGOs which had been working in the province's barangays even before the crisis also intensified their organizing work, while their entry into the hacienda communities (which traditionally had its doors closed to outsiders) became increasingly legitimized.

The resulting streams of NGO penetration in Negros seem to have followed the social fragmentation and configuration of Negrense society. The elites were initially favored with resources which they used to form foundations to serve the health and welfare needs of their own haciendas. The existing NGOs at that time were either invited to work with the sugar landlords in their farms or with POs and government organizations when projects required their expertise. In general, POs have concentrated their operations in the barangays. Although unspoken, these patterns of extending community assistance which were visible from the beginning continue to the present time.

What all this actually shows is a certain character to NGO operations in Negros: that the cultural boundaries drawn by hacienda life predefined the channels of NGO support in the province. This is somewhat contrary to the popular notion that fundamental principles of development work provide the sole rationale of NGO work and operations. While it is true that the process of extending community assistance assumes an intervention that is flexible to avoid disturbing ongoing community life, the dominance of the culture of patronage at the core of Negros' hacienda organization appears to render a certain quality to the form of NGO interventions in its countryside. This observation has innumerable implications to the nature

and state of NGO operation in Negros province.

### The Hacienda Culture

The Negros sugar hacienda has come to symbolize the power and wealth of the landed Negrense elite on the one hand, and the poverty of generations of contract workers who have toiled to produce an export commodity, on the other. Throughout its long history, the hacienda has conjured the image of a landed estate dominated by a well-entrenched relation of patronage between landlords and workers.

Regardless of size, a key feature of Negros hacienda social organization has been the dominance of strong patronage relations between the sugar planter and the worker. This system of patronage dates back to the mid-18th century when labor in Negros was scarce and highly mobile. Workers tended to move from one hacienda to another in search of better work conditions and pay, often leaving some haciendas short of labor. To minimize mobility and to keep labor in their own farms, landowners saw the value of extending immediate provisions to meet the subsistence needs of their workers and their families. This practice was institutionalized in the "cantina" (store) owned by the "hacendero" which became the regular source of goods for maintaining worker-families in the hacienda.

In time, this relationship defined the roles and obligations of hacienda participants. The planter or hacendero provided the necessities for the daily maintenance of workers and their families. Constant financial shortfalls due to low wages were covered by loans which the hacendero extended as regularly as he paid

the workers' wages. All these were in exchange for the workers' labor on the hacienda. In return, workers were committed to render work in any form required of them by the hacendero, whether in the formal work organization or within the informal life of the hacienda community.

A deep sense of gratitude or "kabalasnan" is known to characterize the acceptance of support by the worker which in turn predisposes him to make a non-equivalent return of unflinching loyalty to the hacendero and his family. Non-equivalent because the worker's return of obedience, loyalty and compliance to the demands or wishes of the hacendero can hardly be computed into an equivalent return for the goods and loans extended by the landowner. With options hardly available, a worker becomes very dependent on his landlord and this pattern has been neatly reproduced across generations of hacienda workers. This type of exchange is at the core of the patronage on which the enduring stability of the hacienda as a social institution has been attributed, albeit with intermittent periods of militancy.

NGO interventions on the other hand, confront the landlessness and poverty in the hacienda (Jesena, 1968; Lynch, 1971; Dungo, 1977; Gonzaga, 1983; 1985) where dependency (Dungo, 1977) has become second nature to individuals and workers residing in this traditional farming community. Control and oppression combined with benevolence (as shown by the low wages of workers and their access to loans and/or commodities) characterize the management of the hacienda. While there may have been some amount of improvement in the economic status of workers in some haciendas over the years

as a result of ongoing NGO efforts with planters themselves, the historical factors of patronage, poverty and dependency continue to determine the nature of NGO operations in Negros.

### **The Influence of Patronage on NGO Work**

In general, patronage remains the dominant mode of social relations that configures the work and operations of NGOs within the hacienda organization and the barangays of Negros. As a result of this, the formal organizational structures and goals of NGOs have been subsumed under the dominant informal organization of the hacienda which fosters traditional landlord-worker relationships and the dependency of workers. While there are a few cases where individuals slowly emerge from dependency into a more self-reliant direction, continuing poverty in the haciendas favors back-sliding into dependent behavior patterns, the intensity of which depends on the need of workers and the expectations that landlords have for the favors that they extend.

Similar to the national scene, two strains of NGOs have evolved in Negros: the developmental and the non-developmental NGOs. Developmental NGOs are said to have the capacity to release individual potentials for self-transformation and self-reliance and to evolve self-determining communities. Non-developmental NGOs on the other hand, are perceived to engage in dole-out/welfare activities with no possible transformative effects on individual capacities.

Because of the unique history of NGOs in Negros, the non-developmental ones have become the more visible in the province, with many of these assuming the

structure of "Foundations". The organizers are the sugar landlords themselves and the NGO structure duplicates the structure of the social organization of the hacienda. While there are efforts to combine their work with developmental NGOs and existing government services, their extension of assistance easily takes the character of mainstream patronage culture.

For this type of NGO, community organizing is usually undertaken by community organizers (COs) invited from a planter-approved developmental NGO. The COs assigned to the hacienda organize the community through usual initial dialogues which eventually lead to seminars for value formation, leadership training, project management, and on to cooperative education. The process terminates with the formation of a cooperative which is sometimes partly funded by the landlord. Thereafter, the COs monitor the community and the persistence or weakening of the workers' state of dependency.

Issues arise inevitably. Since the NGO-initiated process of self-growth takes place within the traditional structure of the hacienda, the bad personal habits and tendencies of community members in the past easily intrude into the new process that is being introduced. Training seminars on self-discovery, values, etc. given for a week or two are simply insufficient to effect value-changes or the growth of personal autonomy.

Attitudinal changes have to be nurtured over time and often require a special commitment on the part of COs to monitor the required changes. But COs themselves have problems developing those attitudes and values which can help them professionalize their work and assistance

activities. The number of communities assigned to COs moreover, are more than what they can handle in terms of creating the required psychological, sociological and physical changes in the haciendas. Their work is further complicated by the visits of planters to their farms which subject workers to the old mode of authoritarianism, and runs counter to the values of independence and self-reliance.

One of the more popular activities of Foundations for example, is the holding of regular free-clinics which extend free medical diagnosis and treatment to beneficiaries. This is usually done in the hacienda and is combined with other activities like the distribution of crop seeds, old clothes, or canned goods, and the holding of special lectures from participating government agencies like the Department of Agriculture. While all these events are taking place, the hacenderos or their wives take the opportunity to talk to their workers. The day's multiple activities at the hacienda often end with an inspirational talk from the CO of the participating NGO.

Indeed, while non-developmental Foundations combine their efforts with other developmental NGOs and government offices, the whole process is coopted into the dynamics of a dominant hacienda culture where NGO staff members, although recognized as development experts, are only externally part of the whole system and viewed as mere visitors to the hacienda. Thus, while the NGO staff is officially invited to undertake the organizing processes in the community, their presence is overshadowed by the appearance of the landowner or the patron who turns everyone into a client during farm visitations.

Another Foundation which receives special funding from a major agency outside of Negros seeks to undertake a more wholistic approach to its NGO work. Its program covers a wide range of impoverished sectors from agricultural, land-based workers to non-landbased fishermen. Although its developmental program on paper adheres to the professional requirements of funding agencies, the implementation of this inevitably deviates from what is conceptualized as developmental by NGOs because patronage is so potent in influencing personal and social interactions and particularly, the extension of help or assistance to the poor.

Since patronage is endemic in the system, it invariably conditions the roles, relationships and activities of NGOs. If the head of the Foundation comes from a landlord-family, then its programs become dominantly dole-out in character often without the head nor the staff fully realizing this. The extension of assistance becomes a replay of tradition with the leader assuming the old patron's role towards the staff of the Foundation and the client-families in the communities. Assuming dependent-roles comes naturally to COs and other NGO staff since they feel they owe their employment to the head of the Foundation. Once the COs are out in the haciendas or communities, their interaction processes similarly assume the character of patronage, with the beneficiaries in the community falling back into a state of dependency.

As a social force in the expected transformation of Negros, non-developmental Foundations or NGOs reinforce rather than provide an alternative to the existing hacienda structure. The old tendencies remain as the paradigm of social relations: the leaders are landlords and

authoritarianism is the mode of leadership behavior while dependency prevails among followers, whether these be the COs, other NGO staff or community beneficiaries.

Non-developmental NGOs tend to reproduce themselves because NGO community workers come from poor households themselves. They therefore, also look up to the head of the Foundation as a patron to whom they owe their employment. Under these conditions, the chances for an alternative relation becomes almost nil despite the exposure of NGO members to training and re-training courses.

But although the patronage culture of the hacienda system has generally remained impervious to change, a few development NGOs may be gaining some headway in weakening this system through persistent efforts and by pursuing different activities and strategies. Landsharing for example, is the most common project or activity pursued by development NGOs and which in turn has gained the support of a few landlords or planters. Expectedly, landsharing, which requires the landlord to set aside least 3 hectares of hacienda land for the use of workers, is strongly opposed by most landlords.

Since workers are familiar with cane cultivation, most also choose to plant cane on the land provided them by the landlord using technology, funds and other assistance provided by participating government agencies and NGOs. Some supportive planters even allow the intercropping of peanuts or legumes with cane in the larger plantation. Given these opportunities, workers slowly gain control over their lives as their earnings increase from their landsharing projects.

To ensure continuity of the project, training and re-training programs are undertaken by concerned NGOs and government agencies to develop the required skills for operating a cooperative which becomes the mechanism for managing and operating the workers' communal land within the hacienda. Basically, the cooperative constitutes the alternative structure through which self-help programs such as intercropping and landsharing are facilitated, and self-determining community slowly realized.

A quiet clash of forces therefore stand in opposition to one another in haciendas with landsharing arrangements. On one end is the traditional hacienda culture, and on the other is a persistent but subdued non-violent struggle against the existing structure of inequality in the hacienda.

Because landsharing between planters and workers is a new development, there are difficulties in its implementation. Even supportive planters have complained for example about workers using the hacienda's agricultural inputs on their own communal plots, or that they use hacienda-time to attend to their own cultivation, and that some even harvest came from the larger plantation. The tension generated by these problems requires NGOs to conscientiously monitor the implementation of landsharing schemes to sustain the trust and support of both landlords and workers. In general, these new landsharing experiments are slowly propelling the interaction of change forces towards a slow mode of social transformation (Garcia-Dungo, 1993).

### The Influence of Religion

Religious orientations of the evangelical type or those drawing from liberation

theology have also emerged as important forces influencing NGO activity in Negros.

The traditional parish religion which emphasizes rituals, catechisms and novenas for specific devotions to saints and which often conclude with a fiesta dulls the sensibility of people towards discerning the extreme social inequality prevailing in Negros. Such rituals fail to interpenetrate the lives of people and merely remain as routine devotional activities to objects of worship. This type of religiosity has been observed to preserve the hacienda structure. The dominant teaching that is highlighted is obedience to authority which is translated to passive conformity to the hacendero's requirements within the hacienda institution.

There are two emerging religious forms however which appear to be aiding the process of change in Negros. These are the evangelical and charismatic religious groups. The Basic Christian Community (BCC) which is charismatic in form, internalizes Christian principles through a daily ritual of reflecting on the teachings of the Bible and of the manifestations of these in people's everyday life. The evangelical group on the other hand, is committed to living as close as possible to biblical formulations. Both groups are similar in their commitment to adhere to biblical teachings, and are observed to have potentially transformative effects in Negros.

The BCC group is a church-initiated type of community organizing. As with other NGO social mobilization activities, seminars are routine interventions in the lives of BCC members and beneficiaries. The entry-point is one's religious fervor and how one lives this, as differentiated from non-church NGOs which use economic

needs as the pivotal point for their organizing activities.

Membership in the BCC requires members to read the Bible daily and to focus on specific readings which are then interpreted in the context of members' lives in the form of community worship. This type of devotion is held at the end of a working day when members gather together, not necessarily in church, but in an accessible place where they may find peace and quiet. Members meet to discuss and to interpret the meanings of biblical formulations in terms of what they have experienced during the day. For them, the Bible comes alive in their daily experiences and lessons from the prophets govern their own experiences. BCCs are essentially POs which draw their members from peasants in the interior upland communities of Negros.

As a form of religious organizing, BCCs focus on the integration of individuals into a community of "persons". The "person" is emphasized as a thinking, self-directed and confident being who believes in his own capacity and those of others to evolve a community where relationships are consciously directed for the mutual benefit of all members. According to interviews, BCC members undergo a slow process of personal transformation. From being passive, they begin to acquire an active self-image and gain confidence in their own capacities. The transformation flows through a process of living based on genuine sharing and support of one another in accordance with biblical teachings. It has been observed that in BCC communities, peasants act as "connected" individuals who are supportive of each other and aware of their pooled strengths. Once a BCC community has

evolved, it ventures into working for the welfare of the group, religiously, politically, economically and in all other dimensions of their daily life.

A major problem which confronted BCCs especially during the years of the sugar crisis was militarization. Suspected of supporting the Left, members suffered military harassments and intensive monitoring of their activities. As a result, BCC communities tempered their activities during those years, but they never became completely inactive. As peace efforts intensified, BCCs began to reactivate their communities which now constitute the base for peace zones in the province.

The evangelical religious group is exemplified by the "Born Again Christians" which have also emerged as a force of change in some Negros haciendas. Mr. L.'s farm in Northern Negros is often cited as illustrating the impact of evangelical religious groups on hacienda life.

The force of change in Mr. L.'s farm began in 1965 long before the notion of NGOs became popular. Mr. L. initiated a cooperative education program for his workers when he realized how dependent the workers had become. Although he had envisioned that his 80-hectare hacienda would be transformed into a collective farm for his workers, only 20 hectares were eventually owned by 10 to 12 worker-families who had grouped themselves into a cooperative. The process of sustaining the cooperative proved to be turbulent over the years as cases of corruption and irregularities occurred in-between periods of smooth and orderly operations. At one time, the losses of the cooperative reached 1 million pesos when its leaders malversed the group's funds. Known as a devout



Christian, Mr. L was not discouraged by the turn of events. He simply took over the administration of the workers' farm and restored it to normal operations. The next set of coop officers consciously worked to get their cooperative off-the-ground and have recently succeeded in restoring its financial viability.

Other completed cases of landsharing or actual transfer of limited land ownership has been reported in other haciendas where workers went through the same slow and gradual process of growth, and away from the paternalistic tendencies of the traditional hacienda. Following their Christian principles, landlords in these cases consciously decided to deconstruct their monopoly of land in their haciendas.

In brief, traditional religious practices which tend to reinforce patronage relations in the haciendas run alongside new and emerging religious forms that have the opposite effect of spurring genuine and authentic transformation in hacienda life. The BCCs act as a social force that builds peasant communities capable of discerning options and directing their activities. Landlord followers of Born Again religious groups on the other hand have initiated land transfer and cooperative programs to rectify the social inequalities of the hacienda system. Their experience demonstrates how cognitive religious reflections underlie a hacendero's decision to allow workers to assume ownership and management of part of the hacienda land.

### **Concluding Notes and Observations**

The foregoing discussion points to some lessons that can be learned from NGO development work and activities in Negros. One of this is that NGO institutions and

personnel who are linked to hacenderos are less likely to succeed in initiating changes in the haciendas than those not coming from a hacendero's nexus of relationships. This is so because of the strong patronage culture of the hacienda which can subvert the social transformational goals of NGOs and impinge on their relationships with the workers' families in the hacienda. COs and the other staff of NGOs that are supported by landlords may come to feel a sense of gratitude for their own employment to the landlord, and unwittingly replicate the same patron-client relationships in their work with communities. Case studies of NGO activities in Negros indicate that NGO personnel must consciously and continuously examine their working roles and relationships to ensure that they do not reinforce traditional patronage and dependency patterns in the haciendas.

A second observation has to do with new and emerging religious forms which appear to have aided the process of change in the province. One of these are the BCCs which have advanced the goal of building grassroots peoples' organizations and communities in the interior barangays of Negros. Drawing from Bible teachings, BCCS aims to nurture communities by first recognizing the individual worth and capacities of peasants and building their confidence in their pooled strengths. BCC approaches have proved most effective in building self-propelled communities. The other religious form is the charismatic Born Again movement which has drawn a number of followers from among Negros' landowning elite. Similarly inspired by Bible teachings, landlords committed to living their lives as Christians have initiated landsharing or land transfer schemes in their haciendas to enable their workers to have their own source of income.

These landsharing schemes have likewise provided a basis for new cooperative and community efforts in the haciendas.

Generally speaking, the community organizing undertaken by BCC-POs appear more viable and sustainable than those undertaken by non-church/religious NGOs. In part, this is due to the emphasis placed by BCCs on the development of a sense of community among peasants before attention is given to the material basis for cooperative-building. From a communal religious sharing, BCCs propel themselves to tackle the economic, political and other social aspects of community living. The cooperatives that are eventually set up by BCCs therefore, are not imposed structures but are an expression of the people's common need to improve the living conditions of all.

Non-church/religious NGOs on the other hand, tend to address the economic conditions of peasants as early as possible in the process of organizing. While they offer seminars for values and self-discovery to make beneficiaries realize their innate and hidden capacities, these are done hurriedly and immediately directed towards the organization of a cooperative, even before a spirit of community has evolved among the peasants. Hence, the community spirit which supposedly serves as the natural anchor of cooperatives is hardly present. In these cases, cooperatives often emerge as imposed and unsustainable structures.

Finally one notes that while the sugar crises of the 1980s did not lead to a complete change in the patronage culture of Negros' haciendas, this nonetheless ushered in new experiments by NGOs and other social forces that may yet improve the impoverished conditions of sugar workers

and weaken their dependence on landlords and the haciendas. Along with the improved prices of sugar and the recovery of the sugar industry and the other emerging arts and crafts industries of the province, the presence of NGOs, BCCs and landsharing schemes can be expected to shape subsequent socioeconomic and political developments in the province.

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