

Coming Together, Searching for Common Ground: The CPAR Experience in the Philippines

In the aftermath of a popular revolt in 1986 that toppled the Marcos authoritarian regime in the Philippines, several stakeholders in the peasant sector banded together to push for a new legislation on land reform. Thus was born the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform or CPAR. It was historic, as it marked the first time that peasant federations of all political persuasions came together for a singular issue – the passage of a land reform law that was acceptable to peasants. Confronted with diverse ideological orientations and a history of animosity among them, peasant groups within CPAR would have to work together and find common ground if they were to succeed. Yet, up to what point would groups be willing to compromise, to achieve a common goal. In hindsight, the CPAR experience showed that coalition building entails a constant search for common ground.

BRIEF HISTORY

The Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform (or CPAR) was a coalition that was made up of 13 peasant, fisherfolk and rural women's

federations. It represented the widest or most diverse coalition building effort working for agrarian reform in terms of ideological beliefs and traditions, a first in the history of the Philippine social movements. CPAR was born on May 1987 to push for a more acceptable land reform law based on a seven-point program that also served as the basis of unity (see box). Land reform was both a historic and emotional issue, the cause of many uprisings and even revolutions. Along with other reform bills and measures, the enactment of a new land reform law was necessary to address the widespread discontent that toppled the previous authoritarian regime under Marcos. Thus, the passage of a new land reform law was a priority thrust of the new government. The democratic space or environment created under the new regime challenged CPAR to use and test other methods and strategies for engaging the state, such as consultations, dialogue and congressional lobby action.

When Congress convened on June 1987, CPAR immediately lobbied for an agrarian reform law. The landlord-dominated Congress

People's Declaration of Principles on Agrarian Reform, May 1987

CPAR's 7-point agenda served as the basis for unity among peasant federations during its inception:

1. Land to the tiller and the complete abolition of absentee land ownership, access of small fisherfolk to water resources and the abolition of absentee proprietorship.
2. Comprehensive coverage of all agricultural lands regardless of classification, crops planted, existing tenurial form or farm size, water and natural resources.
3. The terms and conditions of land transfer must not be made burdensome to beneficiaries.
4. Full and genuine participation of agrarian reform beneficiaries in program planning, implementation and monitoring.
5. Full provision of adequate, timely and appropriate services for agrarian reform beneficiaries
6. Compensation to landowners should be based on selective and progressive schemes.
7. Preferential option for cooperatives and collective farms in the production, marketing and credit levels wherever and whenever possible.

however, while amenable to the passage of a new agrarian reform law, sought to block radical provisions forwarded by CPAR so as not to undermine their interests. The result was Republic Act 6657 or the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (or CARL), a law that was felt by many in the coalition to be below the expectations of the peasants. Others however believe that some radical provisions were inserted into the law, thus viewing CARL as a “compromise” law.

Over time, a number of peasant federations could not accept the new law and were back in confrontation with the state. On 25 June 1988, just two weeks after the passage of the CARL, the CPAR convened the “Multi-Sectoral Conference for a Genuine Agrarian Reform Program” at the Miriam College (then Maryknoll) Auditorium in Quezon City. The participants of the two-day conference, more than 600 from peasant and political

formations, cause-oriented groups and NGOs, approved the People's Agrarian Reform Code (PARCODE), the draft bill developed by the CPAR as the rightful alternative to CARL. Among others, the Joint Declaration called for the: (a) adoption and pledge to carry out the PARCODE; (b) launching a signature campaign with the purpose of conducting a massive education drive on the issue of agrarian reform and mobilizing the Filipino people; (c) supporting all forms of peasant initiatives to render the PARCODE effective such as land and fishpond occupation, rent and planting boycott, and other non-violent mechanisms.

In the next few months, CPAR would undertake a massive campaign to gather a million signatures to overturn CARL and ask Congress to enact PARCODE. But at the 1st anniversary of CARL the following year, where CPAR planned to present it to Congress, the

signatures amounted to about 60,000. With organizational problems besetting some of CPAR's member-federations and with public support for agrarian reform waning, some peasant federations contented themselves with the fact that its provisions were probably the best that could be achieved given the limitations of the landlord-dominated Congress. They focused their attention instead on the implementation of the law.

FACTORS FOR THE SUCCESS OF CPAR

External:

1. *Atmosphere of democratization* – CPAR was created at a time when the Philippines was undergoing a process of democratization. State-supported social reforms were seen as crucial in healing social wounds brought about by repression, elitism and insensible modernity that characterized authoritarian regimes. Along with the pursuit of peace with armed political groups and the creation of a new Constitution, pursuing a land reform law was crucial in the social reform agenda of the new government.
2. *Popular support* – an offshoot of the democratization process was the tremendous popular support that agrarian reform advocates received immediately after the EDSA People Power Revolt in 1986. Aside from traditional allies like labor and the studentry, the peasantry drew support even from those in high

society, the academe, various churches, business groups and government in support of the passage of an agrarian reform law. Thus, CPAR's campaign for an agrarian reform law – such as mobilizations, a caravan ("Agrarian Reform Express"), Congressional lobbying – were supported by many groups outside its ranks.

3. *Funding support* - many funders, both local and foreign, supported much of CPAR's activities. Aside from the fact that the coalition was unique and the first of its kind, the personalities involved in the coalition were credible and enjoyed the trust of the donor community.

Internal:

4. *CPAR's organizational structure* - the leaders of each federation made up the National Consultative Council (NCC), its highest decision making body. To backstop the NCC with its technical, funding and other requirements were 14 NGOs that constituted the Secretariat. It was the peasant leaders who made the decisions and the NGOs who implemented them, thus empowering the peasants in the true sense of the word.
5. *Leveling off* - the necessity for caucus discussions before major decisions were made enabled peasant leaders to level off and discuss other options. Because peasant leaders came from varied backgrounds, these sessions ensured that

they appreciated and understood the viewpoints and orientations of the other leaders and organizations in the coalition. This minimized stalemate or gridlock situations because leaders were able to craft alternative options during such caucus discussions.

6. *Consensus-building* – There was the culture of consensus building. CPAR made sure that the decisions the peasant leaders took was, to a large extent, agreeable to all and that respective members were consulted. CPAR avoided making any decision without consensus, otherwise the issue was not acted upon. This culture of consensus building pushed the leaders look for a common ground and thus achieve “unity in diversity.”

WHAT CPAR ACHIEVED FOR THE PEASANT MOVEMENT

1. *Increased institutionalization of peasant participation* – one of the biggest contributions CPAR achieved was that it brought to the fore the issue of agrarian reform in the Philippines. CPAR, through, its peasant leaders such as Jimmy Tadeo and Oca Castillo, personified the plight of landless peasants and their struggle for land reform. Likewise, CPAR placed land reform as the central focus of many developmental projects of the government, thereby instituting peasant participation in consultations on issues

and projects that would affect them. Even after CPAR folded up, peasant participation in inter-agency dialogues and consultations became a prerequisite for many government programs and projects .

2. *Valuable training and experience of peasant leaders* – The coalition work, advocacy and lobbying that CPAR undertook provided valuable training ground for peasant leaders. One, it enriched the experience of their leaders in attempting to unify the peasantry at the national and local levels. Two, it gave leaders an understanding of the ideological persuasions among peasant federations and the actions needed to build consensus and unity. Corollary to this, peasant leaders learned that engaging the state required them not just to articulate what they were against, but to precisely define those alternatives that they stood for. They entailed a lot of technical inputs, consultations among peasant federations and a common platform that would stand up to public scrutiny and be able to convince other partners especially from within the government.
3. *Recognition of fisherfolk issues* – An offshoot of CPAR was a coalition of fisherfolk called the Nationwide Coalition of Fisherfolk for Aquatic Reforms (NACFAR). They were able to raise awareness to the plight of fisher folk which was distinct to those of

peasants. The leaders were able to make the public recognize that fisherfolk was distinct from those of farmers.

FOLDING UP

Ironically, the factors that led to CPAR's success were also the factors that led to its demise. Having the broadest political spectrum underneath its wings also brought the ideological differences that became too much to bear. Because of their success in advocating agrarian concerns, many peasant leaders soon found themselves engaged heavily in government-sponsored consultations, technical working groups, inter-agency committees and in the preparation of summits meetings. While some peasant leaders saw these as a way of advancing peasant interests, others saw it as cooptation by the state.

During the Philippine presidential elections of 1992, CPAR was divided by different political positions and support for certain candidates that was simply unacceptable to others. This also erased the notion that there was a peasant vote in the country. While some peasant federations stood on the basis of principles, others chose on the basis of the candidates' "winability" as a way of advancing peasant interests. The brewing ideological differences were aggravated.

After the presidential election of 1992, CPAR's leaders called for a second congress to determine the coalition's future directions.

One federation, identified with the more radical elements of the Left, issued an open letter (*Pahayag ng Pagkabahala* or Statement of Concern) criticizing other federations for being: (a) collaborationist with the state by participating needlessly on the many consultative bodies created by the state; (b) receiving dole-outs such as livelihood funds and even asking to be appointed to government bodies that were implementing CARL. For them, concessions coming from the state should be the result of popular mass struggles.

Before the conflict could get any worse, CPAR decided to fold up in 1993. At the final meeting of the NSC, the peasant federations and leaders issued a joint statement declaring that they would keep open their communication lines and remain open to the idea of coalescing again in the future. □

by **Meynardo Mendoza**

SOURCES:

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The Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development is a regional association of 21 national and regional networks of non-government organizations (NGOs) from 11 Asian countries actively engaged in food security, agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture and rural development activities. Its member-networks have an effective reach of some 3,000 NGOs throughout the region. ANGOC was founded in Bangkok in February 1979, following a two-year series of village and national level consultations in 10 Asian countries, leading to the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD), Rome, 1979.

The complexity of Asian realities and the diversity of NGOs highlight the need for development leadership to service the poor of Asia - providing a forum for articulating their needs and aspirations as well as expression as Asian values and perspectives. ANGOC seeks to address the key issues related to agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture and rural development in the region.



The Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) is a regional, intergovernmental and autonomous organization. It was established on July 6, 1979 at the initiative of the countries of the Asia-Pacific region and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations with support from several other UN bodies and donors. The Centre came into being to meet the felt needs of the developing countries at that time as an institution for promoting integrated rural development in the region.

From the original six members, CIRDAP has now grown as a Centre of 14 member countries. The member-countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh (Host State), India, Indonesia, Iran, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

The main objectives of the Centre are to: (i) assist national action, (ii) promote regional cooperation, and (iii) act as servicing institution for its member countries for promotion of integrated rural development through research, action research/pilot projects, training and information dissemination.



The International Fund for Agricultural Development is a specialized agency of the United Nations dedicated to enabling rural poor people to overcome poverty. It began operations in 1978 in response to a resolution adopted by the 1974 World Food Conference calling for the establishment of an international fund to finance agricultural development programmes and projects primarily in developing countries. IFAD provides financing and mobilizes additional resources for programmes and projects that promote the economic advancement of rural poor people. The organization's activities are guided by three strategic objectives: to strengthen the capacity of rural poor people and their organizations; to improve equitable access to productive natural resources and technologies; and to increase rural poor people's access to financial services and markets.