

A CASE STUDY  
OF  
PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH  
AMONG  
FARMER-SETTLERS  
IN  
SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

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I. General Characteristics of the Community

The subject of the study is a village located some twenty-one kilometers from the town center of a province in southern Philippines. The residents are migrant farmers from central Philippines whose desire to have their own land led them to settle in the plains of this village. The pioneer-settlers migrated to the village as far back as 1939.

Today there are about eighty to one-hundred families in the village. Majority of the villagers are Catholics. A small per cent are Protestants and members of a nativistic cult centered around Jose Rizal, the national hero. There used to be a complete elementary school from Grades I to VI with a faculty of nine. This was closed in 1958. Majority of the villagers finished only six years of elementary education. Only very few can afford to send their children to highschool.

Like most farmers in the Philippines there is widespread poverty among the farmer-settlers in the

village. Their average yearly income is ₱1,200. To supplement this meagre income they hire out themselves as agricultural workers in corporate farms and nearby areas during the period of transplanting or harvesting of palay or corn. Some do carpentry work in the village to add to the income. This is necessary for the survival of the families which on the average have eight to twelve children.

Their years of hard work has resulted in the clearing of around 957 hectares of what once was a thickly forested area. These lands they planted to rice and corn. From these lands they were able to produce enough for their families. But this period of self-sufficiency was short-lived.

In 1952 a corporation acquired legal title to the land. The settlers contested the claim through a court case. One of their objections was the manner in which the corporation acquired the title to the land. Public land laws require that an area first be declared as alienable and disposable before it can be privately owned. The land was declared alienable and disposable in 1953. The corporation got its title in 1952.

In the court case that followed, the settlers lost but they refused to vacate their lands. In the meantime, the corporation started cultivating the land and was able to plant fifteen hectares to rubber trees. By 1973, a total of sixty-five hectares had been planted to rubber.

To eject the settlers from the land the corporation secured a permit for the demolition of houses and confiscation of property. The settlers refused to give up their lands without struggle. In the process, there had been a series of killings in the village. Among the victims were the young lawyer of the settlers; the government sheriff and his eight military escorts who carried out the demolition order; and a settler-leader with two others who were shot to death in an early-dawn house strafing raid by military soldiers aided by the local civilian home defense force. The settlers' corpses were dragged by wooden sled to the military camp, rifles put on top of their bodies and photographed and publicized as rebels.

Due to the peace and order situation, many families left their homes to live in nearby areas accessible to their farms. In May 1979 only thirty-one

families remained in the village. However, with the easing off of tension, families started returning after four months. Today there are around eighty to one hundred families in the village. Despite the conditions the villagers have expressed their resolve to fight for their right to the land. They maintain that they will not abandon these lands.

## II. Origin of the Study

This case study is a description of how participatory research was used as a vital tool in rural organizing work.

The widespread depressed conditions in rural Philippines have given rise to a variety of rural development programs. Some of these merely reinforce the existing system; others are merely reformist and have led to the creation of new forms of dependency; and there are programs aimed at transforming the existing system through the building up of genuine people's organizations.

The subject of this case study belongs to the last category. The agency which initiated the program is a non-governmental organization which believes that development is a process that can not be brought

to the peasantry but it is an aroused and mobilized peasantry acting on their own problems which bring about a development process that is protective not only of their interests but also of nature and environment. It has tried to come up with rural development programs which are responsive to the felt needs of the peasantry. This is done through a continuous and on-going process of dialogues and consultations with local farmer groups and their friends from the different sectors of society.

One of its projects was to help support a rural organizers' development training program in southern Philippines in 1977. One of the participants in this training program was a farmer-settler in the village. He is one of the poorest among the settlers in the village but is looked up to as a natural leader due to his personal qualities, his educational attainment and his knowledge of town life. The conditions in his village, especially the land problem, motivated him to join the training program. He was hopeful that something could be done to help solve their problems in the village. After the six-month training program, the farmer-settler returned to his village.

### III. The Process

The research process was implemented in two levels, first, in the rural organizers' development program phase and second, in the village itself, after the completion of the training program.

Research skills is a basic requirement for rural organizers. It is regarded both as a phase of a long process of social transformation and a process in itself. Doing research work also means having a standpoint. The research process is conducted to bring into focus the features of a general or particular oppressive situation and to define the starting point of a liberating transformation. It is a mass undertaking involving not only the organizers but also the people to be organized.

#### A. The Research Process in the Rural Organizers' Training Program:

The training program lasted for six months. Provisions were made in the planning so that there were phases devoted to data gathering and other phases to data analyses and inputs on the research process and organizing work. The program was divided into the following phases:

Phase 1 - preliminary survey of respective areas.  
4 days.

- Phase 2 - General awareness seminar. 10 days.
- Phase 3 - Comprehensive survey of the community. 2 weeks.
- Phase 4 - Structural analysis of society. 4 weeks.
- Phase 5 - Actual organizing work. 4 months.
- Phase 6 - Continuity phase. Follow up.

The training emphasized that data gathering is not just for study or research purposes but for community action. Its main purpose is to get a picture of the different groups and classes in the community so as to have a firm basis for realistic planning and action.

It was also emphasized that data gathering is biased in favor of the oppressed. This means that sources of information are the oppressed. The organizers will obtain this data by living with them, talking with them, eating what they eat and working with them. It also means that data gathering is to be used for and by the oppressed so that they can build self-reliant Christian communities.

The trainees were introduced to different methods of data gathering such as data gathering meetings, the house-to-house survey and interviews. Sample

questions for interviews and surveys were formulated by the trainees. Guidelines for interviewing were also presented, discussed and practiced. The need for recording data and events was also emphasized.

Data analysis of the preliminary survey was done in Phase 2 of the training program. The data gathered was discussed and analyzed in the context of the discussions on the concept of man and society, property, people's organization, collective leadership and people's power.

Further data analysis was made in Phase 4 after the trainees went through a more intensive data gathering based on the concepts and tools they learned in Phase 2. The data gathered was analyzed through a dialogical process and workshops. The main framework for analysis was based on the following questions: In the economic-political-cultural situation - What is oppressive? What is not? Who are for us? Who are against us? How is it against us? How is it for us? How are the economic, political and cultural situation interlinked both on the micro and macro levels?

Phase 5 involved actual organizing work through

a process of getting contacts, forming core groups and building up indigenous structures. Phase 6 was a follow up program through visits, exchange and consultations with experienced rural organizers.

#### B. The Research-Organizing Process in the Village

When the farmer-settler returned to his village, he replicated the process of data gathering and analysis. In the beginning, he was able to recruit seven local partners who were also the elders and recognized natural leaders in the village. In turn these seven partners were able to recruit their own partners. Groupings usually followed kinship lines or depended on common province of origin.

Data gathering and analysis was done through informal discussions, conversations, house-to-house visits, during social occasions like baptisms or weddings. Different settings and occasions were made use of: while farming; during lunchbreaks under the shade of the trees when the farmers rested; on the way to the market; while washing the laundry in the river or while hunting.

Formal meetings where the data gathered is collated and analyzed were also made by the core group and the

various groupings. These meetings were not only study sessions but also business meetings where they discussed their plans of action.

This process was gradual and continuous. Evidence of the work bearing fruit was seen not only in the growth of the number of recruits but also in the transfer of research and analysis skills to other farmer-settlers.

The group decided to conduct a three-day seminar on structural analysis to have deeper understanding of their problems and to discuss alternative measures. This time it was on a large-scale level instead of the usual small study groups. Rural organizers in a nearby area who have longer work experience were invited to facilitate the seminar. During the seminar, they studied the interlinkages of the economic-political-cultural structures on the local, national and global levels.

Some of the conclusions they came up with in the seminar were the following: They saw that the prevailing socio-economic-political situation in the country escalated their problems. Any mobilisation or organizing work was apt to be interpreted by the government

as subversive and the settlers as rebels.

During the seminar they saw how the government agencies and officials were acting for the corporation as against the settlers. The corporation had easy access to the Bureau of Lands and the Bureau of Forestry, because a high official was a relative of the owner of the corporation. So was the judge who tried the case. The incumbent mayor during the election campaign period assured the settlers that he will support their land claim. After he won he tried to persuade the settlers to vacate the land in compliance with the court decision.

The Ministry of Agrarian Reform advised them to sign leasehold agreements with the corporation. This was interpreted by the settlers as a trick to make them desist from claiming the land as their own. They also foresaw that accepting the leasehold agreement would mean paying back rent to the corporation which they could not afford. In fact they have consistently refused to pay rent to the corporation since the conflict started in the 1950s. This refusal was one of the reasons why they were being harassed and threatened by the corporation.

As a result of the seminar the perception of the settlers as to who are for them and against them became sharper. Their plans of action were necessarily determined by this analysis.

#### Utilisation of the Analysis

Through the process of research-analysis-action-analysis process the villagers coped with events and came up with alternative measures and programs.

The most crucial problem of the villagers is the land question. On the part of the corporation they expected the settlers to vacate the land. They had a court permit for the demolition of the houses and confiscation of property. Their alternative offer to the settlers was for them to become tenants of the corporation.

The settlers are adamant on the stand that they will stay on the land. Because of the circumstances they embarked on a twofold step of fighting a legal battle on one hand while at the same time fighting by arms in self-defense as a result of the violent incidents in which the settlers were victimized.

In both cases the decision of the villagers was to rely on their own resources and their creativity and talents to respond to the situation. Despite the killings that have taken place their decision is to pursue their

court case and to follow this up. While some of the villagers are still hopeful that they can win the case, there are those who believe that they will win the case but not under the present conditions. The latter believe that the land can only be theirs if they will all work together to transform the oppressive system. This means strengthening not only their peasant organization but helping other communities build up genuine people's organization.

To retaliate against the corporation the settlers relied on their indigenous arms, as well as by mobilizing their soldier sons who were serving the army, and a roving bandit group in a nearby area. They were able to prevent the corporation from expanding the rubber plantation by uprooting the rubber trees by one or two inches from the ground so that these will die.

The escalation of violence in the village led to pressures from the church and other groups for the government to take action. The governor sent a fact-finding team which investigated the situation. However, no recommendations were made nor measures taken.

At present no more violent incidents have taken place but the situation is volatile. Probably as an

offshoot of the situation the government has distributed some 80 to 100 hectares to ten families who were given certificates of land transfers. To the villagers it was very significant that the ten families singled out were those friendly with the corporation.

The settlers have also tried to come up with economic projects like communal farming, collective marketing and putting up a collective rice thresher. The communal farming project was not pursued due to the tense peace and order situation then. It was not safe for the settlers to be seen together in groups. When the situation had eased off the villagers began thinking of economic projects that could help solve some of their immediate economic problems. With continuing analysis they are able to identify whether particular projects are helping them transform the system or reinforce it.

Another instance where analysis is used is in their community health program. Health is a perennial problem among the villagers. The doctor is too far away and his fees expensive; so are the Western medicines he prescribes. The problem of health is further aggravated by malnutrition. That the situation is but part and parcel of the system that has to be transformed is

realized by the villagers. An alternative measure which they utilized is to popularize the use of herbal medicines and to produce these in their home gardens. This of course necessitated the process of research both by field work and library work. These meant interviewing the local healers about the use of herbal medicine and collating these. Contacts were made with persons who have access to libraries and agencies to help gather more data on the use of herbal medicine. These knowledge was disseminated among the villagers.

#### IV. Description of Outcomes

Basically it can be said that there are two principal outcomes - the ongoing transformation in their perception of society and the gradual transformation of certain components of the social structure in the village.

Transformation of their perception of society was made possible by a transfer of research and analysis skills to the grassroots level. This was a deliberate task to move away from the previous practice where awareness-building among peasants were a monopoly of external agents - intellectuals, students and others. Such awareness-building has merely led to creating new dependency patterns.

In terms of the land question the perception of the problem was localized in the beginning and the standpoint was that they were fighting for their legal rights which are being denied to them.

Through the dynamic process of research-analysis-action-analysis process this perception gradually changed. They now realize that the struggle for land is part of a much wider struggle which has national as well as global implications. They have also realized that it is not only their legal right but also their moral right to fight for their land as rooted in the gospel message of justice.

Theological perceptions of Christianity is also undergoing change. Biblical study and reflections are always part of discussions and dialogues among the villagers. The concept of the church as the community reaching out for liberation is one important theme of their discussions.

They have also began to see the dynamics of social-economic-political-cultural interlinkages. Whereas before they blamed the corporation for taking the land away from them they now realize that it is the existing system of society which made it possible for the corporation to claim the land and have that much power to keep it.

Militant observation of what is happening around them is another important outcome. Where, in the past, events were taken for granted, at present, events in the village and elsewhere are discussed and analyzed.

The fabric of social structure is also changing. Before, the cohesiveness of the village was based on kinship lines and common province of origin. Today, cohesiveness has gone beyond this, to a cohesiveness born out of their common struggles and their common vision as to how society should be transformed. Unity has also transcended geographical boundaries. Fellow oppressed peasants and others beyond the village who work to transform the oppressive society are also their friends and comrades.

Reliance on traditional social and political leaders has weakened and has been substituted by a burgeoning self-reliance based on political power and decisions being made by the settlers themselves.