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FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

By

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It is interesting to note that in almost every important conference concerning problems in rural areas, all sorts of people are invited to speak, except the rural people themselves or their chosen spokesmen. A similar thing invariably happens in practically every important discussion of the rice problem. All other people are invited, government officials, scientists, experts, professors, foreign advisers, army officers and social welfare workers. But hardly anyone ever thinks of inviting the fellow who actually plants the rice.

In fact, it would be easier to bring into such a conference a plant or a rice stalk, especially of a new variety. The participants will look at it and examine it with keen interest. Or someone could bring a soil sample into the conference room, or a picture of a carabao. Nobody will question its relevance. But try to bring Mang Ando, the barefoot farmer from Barrio Talampas, Bustos, Bulacan - and all the participants will suddenly feel scandalized. In all probability, somebody will say that the conference has been infiltrated by the communists.

Many people, indeed, have their own reasons for disregarding or disliking the barrio farmer. He is barefoot, he is poorly dressed, he does not speak their language, and he gives very depressing answers to people's questions. Yet, much as many of us may want to, we cannot really afford to disregard Mang Ando. He does the actual planting of the crop.

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He does the plowing. If we talk of credit, no one but he must assume and pay the debt. If we talk of fertilizer, he must bear the cost and must actually apply the fertilizer to the field. If we talk of land transfer, it is Mang Ando who will buy the land and must assume the responsibility of paying its cost. We cannot assume these functions for the farmer nor are we willing to become tenants ourselves.

Hence, for the present at least, we cannot disregard Mang Ando. He is not only the end of our efforts but also the principal means for the accomplishment of our ends. More than that, we need him. We must listen to him. And we cannot teach him unless we first allow him to teach us.

But many of our so-called experts and scientists in the rural or agricultural field are not really scientific. This is true even among many of those who try to help increase the production of crops like rice. For, when a true scientist deals with a certain problem, he compiles and studies all the facts surrounding that problem. In the case, for instance, of the problem of increasing rice production, the scientist must study all the factors affecting rice production. Certainly, one of the most important factors directly affecting rice production is the person who plants the rice, whoever he may be, as well as his environment. The true scientist must study the rice farmer, his situation, his motivation, his capabilities, his assets, his liabilities, his habits, his psychology and his way of thinking. Even if we should disregard his person and his social, psychological, political and economic situation, we cannot disregard the elements that characterize his farm, his habitat and his particular environment - rainfall and sunlight, makeup of the soil,

changes in moisture, changes in temperature, the common pests, etc., that characterize his farm.

A laboratory experiment may reveal that a certain substance will be a very good fertilizer. But certainly, such experiment will not be of much help if the substance is say, found only in the moon, or is not reasonably available to the farmers whom we intend to help. Nor would it be of great assistance if in addition to that fertilizer, certain things have to be done by the farmer which are beyond his capability to do or undertake.

The problem being very complicated, the same may be divided into various phases or aspects and each aspect of the problem allocated for study and solution to one specialized group. But each of these aspects is also usually complicated. Even from the purely physical point of view, situations are not always the same for one and the same subject matter. This fact is really too obvious in theory to mention here, but we have to mention it because it is commonly forgotten in practice.

In medicine, where we rely so much on involuntary or automatic processes and reactions of the human body in the administration of cures and prescriptions, the doctors have to rely so much on the patient. In fact, it has often been said that the patient is his best doctor. With more reason is this true in the case of agricultural production, because very much more depends on the free and involuntary effort of the farmer himself. The agricultural scientists and technicians will have to depend not only on the information to be given by the individual farmer with respect to his farm and the results of agricultural methods in it, but also on the free acts of the farmer himself which are essential for

the implementation of any agricultural project for mass benefit.

It is obvious, then, that even from the purely technological point of view, we need the help of the farmer himself to solve his problems.

Even in the actual improvement of variety and methods, the same principle applies. No experimental farm can duplicate all the conditions obtaining in a number of farms even in the same municipality. Nor can we develop any variety or method that will be ideal for any conceivable situation or combination of situations. I do not think, for instance, that any variety of rice or type of fertilizer has been developed that will be good for all sorts of soil, all sorts of weather, all variations in water content, temperature, pests, etc.

But there are countless farmers and countless farms scattered all over the Philippines. It will be impossible for the scientist to get in touch with all of them individually and to study their individual situations. Therefore, it is necessary that the farmers themselves cooperate with the scientists and technicians. They should participate in the very process of experimentation and formulation of these methods. In this way, not only will the methods be likely to succeed but the farmers will not have to be convinced of the methods later on. But they can do all these only through organized action.

In the manufacture of pharmaceutical products for the treatment of ailments, one has to conduct trials on a great number of human beings. The help of physicians not only in one country but also in many countries of the world is utilized. And even when a certain formula has been adopted, the actual dosage and manner of administering the product will have to

be modified for each patient for no two patients are exactly alike. And one group of patients will differ from another.

How often I have asked the farmers whether they have planted this or that seed or have applied this or that method recommended by the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources or by some agricultural school or agency! And invariably, the farmers answer that they have, but that the results have been disappointing. And the matter ends there. It should not really surprise the true scientist that the results are disappointing. For how can an experiment conducted in one place be responsive to all the countless variations in environment of the millions of farms all over the Philippines? But if there was a system by which the farmers could report to the laboratory or experimental agency the results of their application of the recommended methods, and the scientists themselves had a chance to work out and transmit practical modifications to their original prescription, in time the right method will be arrived at for the particular farm or farms concerned. But this will necessitate a continuous process of communication and adaption between laboratory and farm. And considering the vast number of farms, we cannot hope to do it unless the farmers are organized.

Many people claim that the barrio farmers are resistant to change. But in my 13 years of work with them, I have found that they are not really any more resistant to change than anybody else. As a matter of fact, many of our national leaders, experts and scientists are more resistant to change than the ordinary barrio farmer. When the barrio farmer appears to resist change, it is only because he is a highly intelligent and pragmatic person

who quickly learns from experience.

We are like the birds in the air. And we look down at the fish swimming in the sea below us. Looking at the motions of the fish that move about in the water, we notice that they move about so slowly and so clumsily. So, we try to tell them how to move about more quickly and more efficiently. But we never try to find out how it is to be in the water. We are always in the air, and from the air we look at the problems of the fish in the sea. Not willing to leave our position in the air, we try to instruct the fish below how to move about, how to flap their fins, how to move their muscles and bodies. But no matter how the fish try to imitate the birds, and no matter how honest and sincere the birds are, the birds and the fish will die of exhaustion before either of them ever learn how to act as they are supposed to do.

That is exactly our situation. The birds curse the fish for being resistant to change. Actually, it is the birds that are resistant to change, because they do not want to change their point of view. They do not want to change their approach. They do not want to go down into the water, look at the problems of the fish from the view point of the fish. Now until we learn to go into the water, and look at the problems of the fish as the fish see them, we can never succeed in our efforts to help solve their problems. We are the ones who are most resistant to change. In fact, we are the most superstitious of all. For superstition simply means believing in the powers of a thing that it does not have. We naively believe our methods are so effective but in fact many of them are impractical within the context of the situation in which the people we want to help are in.

Let us take the expert, technician or technologist. He is given a salary of say ₱1,000.00 a month. He is given suitable housing in the agricultural research agency. The education of his children are well provided for. He is adequately insured, he enjoys social security, hospital benefits, transportation allowances, etc. Now this expert or technologist is supposed to help Mang Ando solve his problem.

Mang Ando lives in a leaning nipa hut that is ready to collapse before the fury of a typhoon. He has no salary whatsoever. The vagaries of weather may decide whether he will eat or starve in the next few months. He can never be sure whether any of his children can go to school next term. He has many debts, and his creditors are constantly pressing on him.

An experiment is undertaken in the research agency. Water supply is under full control. Labor requirements are determined and provided up to the last man-hour. The required fertilizer is also determined and applied to the last pound. Finally, a formula is arrived at. The formula is brought to Mang Ando and Mang Ando is expected to swallow it with complete faith!

Mang Ando, of course, trembles a little because he knows nothing of the formula, and yet the trial is a question of life and death to him. Let his harvest fail and his family starves. At any rate, he tries it. He soon finds out that insofar as he is concerned it is impossible of implementation. The formula requires 300 kilograms of fertilizer to be applied within 3 days after transplanting? Well, he goes to the nearest FaCoMa, orders the fertilizer. He is promised the fertilizer within one week. It does not arrive in one year.

The formula requires 524 man-hours of work? Mang 'ndo starts applying his labor. Suddenly, one of his children gets sick. He has to get his carabao and cart and travel 7 kilometers to fetch the doctor. He has to borrow money to pay the doctor and buy the medicine. A week later, his landlord tells him to go to town to scrub the floor for the coming fiesta or for a celebration on the occasion of someone in the family passing a government examination. Thus, the schedule for the application of his labor in accordance with the formula collapses.

But, they say, these are Mang 'ndo's problems. He is supposed to solve them, not the scientist. True enough, but should not the scientist know these problems and take them into consideration, particularly when these problems are as widespread and common as any other element in the farmer's environment?

But this particular research agency's job is limited to just the problems of plant and soil! Yes, but whose plant and soil? Certainly, not the plant and soil of creatures in Mars or in the Sahara! How can a true scientist disregard the nature and situation of the particular creatures who raise and work the plant and soil?

At any rate, it will be seen that the barrio farmer is not so awfully "resistant to change". He now resists certain specific changes already proposed to him and tried by him - for a valid reason! They could not be implemented, given the situation the barrio farmer is in. But if the proposed change would be changed to suit his situation, if the scientists and experts should change their approach - perhaps the farmer will change.

Yet, even assuming that Mang Ando were able to follow the formula determined in the laboratory, the chances are his efforts will fail. Why? For very scientific reasons. The consistency of the soil in his farm is simply not exactly the same as the consistency of the soil in the experimental farm. The proximity of the river to his farm, the amount of water during the various parts of the year, the kind and amount of sun, the changes in the temperature, the kinds of pests that frequent his farm - these are not exactly the same as those found in the experimental farm in the research agency. So, as he has too often found out, the application of the formula recommended by the research agency fails or succeeds only in a very limited way.

Yet, regardless of the success or failure of the formula in the farm of Mang Ando, the expert or technologist continues to receive his salary, continues to receive his transportation allowances, continues to receive the housing privileges of his institution. His children continue to go to school. He continues to receive social security and other benefits. Mang Ando suffers the disaster alone! Back-seat driving can be extremely cruel. And that is what we have been trying to do to Mang Ando all these years!

But some of these methods are simple enough, like the planting of palay in straight rows. Sure enough, these can be adopted by Mang Ando. But while these simple recommendations may increase the harvest somewhat, they always necessitate some additional labor or capital. Moreover, inasmuch as the landlord will share in the increase, (at least in the arrangement which is now prevalent in spite of the abolition of the share

tenancy under the Agricultural Land Reform Code), Mang Ando will get actually very little of the benefit - at least not large enough to give him appreciable incentive. Then, there are the gambles he has to take, namely: floods, typhoons, rats and other pests. It is simply not so very exciting.

There was this crash program under President Magsaysay. There was this crash program under President Garcia. There was this crash program under President Macapagal. And now there are many more crash programs. They are like typhoons. They come and go. Mang Ando has no control whatsoever over them or sufficient warning of their coming, force or duration. They come at the most unexpected moments and, for a while, there is a lot of noise and excitement. But sooner or later, they all pass away, to leave Mang Ando to the tranquility of his accustomed life of bare subsistence.

Now, with all these facts and experiences, who is really unscientific - the farmer or the expert? Who is really resistant to change? Who is really intelligent? Are we not the ones who are really resistant to change, who are really superstitious? Since time immemorial, we have always mouthed the same prescriptions. Since time immemorial, we have always harped on seed selection. For several years, we have been stressing irrigation and fertilizer. There is nothing new about these technical methods. Everybody now believes that they are all good on paper. But we never learn to ask ourselves whether there might be other factors that must be considered before we can hope to apply these methods with real effect. We never learn to ask and consult Mang Ando about Mang Ando's problems. And yet, now we have the temerity to say that Mang Ando is resistant to change!

Suppose, for a change, we direct our desire for a change at ourselves. Suppose, for a change, we ask Mang Ando to teach us, so that we can teach him effectively. Suppose, for a change, we try to depend on him not only for his energy but also for his innate wisdom. Let us try to find out how we can help him mobilize all his resources both material and personnel. We have always tried to establish and strengthen organizations and institutions outside the farmers to help and strengthen the farmers. For a change, let us help the farmers organize themselves, so they can teach us effectively, and so they can do for themselves as many of the things as possible which we are now trying so unsuccessfully to do for them.

While all of the foregoing is true with respect to the problems of the farmers from the technological point of view, it is even more true from the socio-political angle. It is commonly assumed that the only purpose of farmers or tenants organizations is to fight the landlords for a bigger share of the harvest. But farmers organizations have a deeper and more far-reaching significance from the socio-political point of view. In fact, we can say that a country like ours can never undergo a sound process of development unless the farmers are organized. This is true even in communistic countries. We will notice that all communistic countries have large scale organizations of farmers. It is true that these organizations are regimented and manipulated by the communist parties of these countries. But they are farmers organizations just the same. And the need of farmers organizations is even greater in a free society, where economic and social development must be undertaken without violating the freedom of the people, where goals have to be accomplished through democratic processes.

Democracy has been defined, as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. In other words, government is the tool or the instrument of the people. Government should serve the people. For this, it is necessary that the people direct and dominate their government.

But where the government is much better organized than the people, it will be the government that will dominate the people. The driver is supposed to control and direct the car. But when the driver is drunk or is unorganized, it will be the car that will dominate the driver and will bring him to the ditch or the bottom of the river. Hence, it is essential that the people themselves are organized, in the various forms of economic, professional, civic and political associations.

But quite apart from the purely political aspect, let us analyze the principle from the aspect of national planning and development. Since the acquisition of our political independence we have had a good number of plans and programs. But all these plans and programs have failed or have fallen far short of our objectives. What is the main reason?

It is not the lack of intelligent or brilliant leaders on top. We have enough geniuses on top. But the specific problem arises from the frustrating situation analogous to that of a brilliant brain unable to work with its hands and feet.

The eyes see the hand in the fire, the ears hear the sound of the flame and the hiss of burning flesh. Yet, the brain cannot feel the sensation of heat because the cells of the hand are not organized. In other words, the hand itself is not a healthy organ. The cells are separated from one another. They cannot crystallize and transmit the sensation to the brain.

That is exactly the situation obtaining in our country. The central authority is conscious of the fact that there is a rice shortage. It sees the rising price and hears the clamor for rice. But the central authority cannot get a complete grasp of the situation because the rice farmers cannot crystallize and transmit their problems and aspirations from their own point of view.

Some people say that there is no need to get information from the farmers themselves because the government already has other adequate sources and channels of information. It has agents and experts who study and analyze the situation. It has eyes and ears to inform it of the facts. But we can also say in the analogous situation of the burning hand that the eyes and the ears already perceive the situation for the brain. Yet, the picture they give to the brain is neither complete nor realistic, because there are certain sensations which only the cells of the hand can feel and transmit. In the same way, there are certain aspects of the rice problem that only the rice farmers can feel and transmit. There are certain aspects of business problems which only businessmen can feel and transmit. There are certain aspects of educational problems which only educators and students can feel and transmit. And unless the central authority listens to them, it cannot get a realistic and practical appraisal of the problem. Hence, it cannot draw up a practical line of action.

However, some people say, if we listen to all the people concerned, we will only get contradictory views and demands and end up being confused. It is indeed true that if we listen to all the people, we would get apparently inconsistent views. This is only to be expected, because problems

in this world are inherently complicated. Purely physical problems, like the structure of the atom, are extremely complicated. But even more complicated and baffling are economic and social problems. Hence, there is always the danger of over-simplification. Of course, an over-simplified view of a problem is extremely pleasing and reassuring. But this does not mean that we shall solve the problem. The problem indeed is complicated, seemingly contradictory and baffling. But only when we take into consideration all its various aspects can we hope to solve it.

Farmers organizations are essential not only for the formulation of practical farm policies but also for purposes of implementation. In the analogous case of the burning hand, even should the brain decide to pull away the hand from the fire, it cannot do so because there is no working connection between the brain and the hand. Nor can the hand move as an organ because it is not organized. It cannot act as one. It cannot respond to the brain. The brain becomes powerless. It becomes frustrated, and the hand continues to burn. Even in most totalitarian regimes like in Nazi Germany or the communists countries, mass organizations are required to implement government programs. With more reason do we need big scale organizations to implement projects and programs in a free society, where we rely not so much on the tyrannic power of dictators but on the free acts of the citizenry.

To illustrate all these, let us take the case of the rice shortage. If we examine the measures given priority so far, they are the measures considered most important from the viewpoint of landlords, government officials and their experts. They consist mainly of technological measures.

Considered in the abstract, they are quite convincing. But on the practical level, they cannot be implemented effectively unless certain factors, which are important from the viewpoint of the barrio farmers, are first taken into consideration and attended to.

Let us consider the case of seed selection. During the incumbency of President Magsaysay, the government embarked on a program of seed selection and development. After spending much time, effort and money, the government was able to develop a seed. With considerable effort and resources a sizeable amount of these seed was produced. The seeds were then distributed to tenants. Do you know what the tenants did to the seeds? They ate the seeds!

Why did they eat the seeds? When a person eats palay seeds, there is only one reason: he is hungry. Why is the farmer hungry? Because he got very little share of the last harvest. His children cry at night of hunger. He has the palay seeds in the house. He knows they are for planting. But he cannot help but cook them and feed them to his hungry children.

So, from the viewpoint of the tenant, seed selection is not the first measure. The first measure is equitable sharing - which is provided for by law. Hence, to the tenant, it is more urgent to enforce the Agricultural Tenancy Law than to improve the seeds. But the enforcement of the law is distasteful to the landlords. Hence, to the landlords, the enforcement of the Agricultural Tenancy Law should be made to wait. But to the tenants it is of the first priority. And yet, for reasons which will be too long to explain in this paper, tenancy laws in this country cannot really be enforced without effective farmers organizations.

Then, let us take the problem of rice importation. Everybody admits that for the Philippines to import rice is extremely deplorable. The landlords and their economic experts have a proposal: allow the price of local rice to go up. This will increase production. Eventually we will not have to import. This, of course, will greatly benefit the landlords who have a large surplus of rice to sell. But from the tenants' point of view, this will aggravate their misery. For the tenants have no surplus to sell. Yes, they sell some rice right after harvest - at a relatively low price. But during the planting season, they have no more rice, and they have to buy - at a high price. Thus, to increase the price of rice is, at best, of neutral value to the tenant.

Indeed, the rice problem or the problem of rice importation can never be solved unless we first remedy this basic anomaly in our country: that the rice farmer is a rice buyer. The person who plants rice in this country has to buy rice. In this situation, we will always import rice. For in this situation, he who is supposed to be the strongest opponent of rice importation is actually its strongest advocate - or just a silent bystander.

How then can we stop this anomaly wherein the rice farmer is a rice buyer? We can stop this anomaly by giving the rice farmer a more equitable share in the harvest so that he will have enough of the rice to eat plus a little more to sell. Then, we may allow the price of rice to go up. All this can be done within the framework of present national policies and laws, particularly the Agricultural Tenancy Act and the Agricultural Land Reform Code. Unfortunately, the aspects of our policies and laws relating to equitable sharing are not given due importance in implementation because

those who are most vocal and most effective in our society are not the farmers or tenants but the landlords and their experts who think that these aspects are harmful to their own interests. In this situation, the policies and laws granting equitable share and similar incentives to the tenants and farmers cannot be implemented. But the rice shortage can be solved, at least in a gradual and progressive manner, if the farmers and tenants can push the implementation of our tenancy and agrarian laws. And they can push the implementation of these laws effectively only through organized action.

It is difficult to understand why practically all enlightened people in this country do not realize the need of farmers organizations. Our Constitution recognizes and protects the right of association. The right of association certainly includes the right of laborers and farmers to self-organization. We have many laws protecting and encouraging the exercise of the right of workers to self-organization. Thus, we have the Industrial Peace Act, the Anti-Scab Law and the Peaceful Picketing Law. For the present organizations, we have, moreover, the Agricultural Tenancy Act, the Agricultural Land Reform Code, and Commonwealth Act No. 213. These are all in the statute books. But they are not yet really found in the conviction or conscience of the recognized leaders in this country. In most cases, landlords and government officials voice oral support for farmers and tenants organizations. They would even cite laws and policies to prove their support. But in actuality, they oppose or support these organizations or they help only those organizations which they themselves have helped to create or which they themselves are able to control.

There are, of course, many reasons to explain the resistance or indifference to the organization of tenants and farmers on the part of landlords, government officials and their experts. But the most fundamental is a matter of attitude. To have the tenants and farmers organized means that they will become strong enough not only to stand on their own feet but also to assert their rights and interests even as against ours. This we fear or dislike. Anything else will do; but not this.

It is alright for the tenants to come respectfully to our homes or offices and to ask for this or that favor. It is alright to strengthen the peasant as long as we are sure that he will always be within lecture distance, as long as we are sure that he will not dislodge us from our ultimate position of domination or security. But to help make him strong enough to criticize us or accuse us of injustice or tell us public servants what to do - why, that is simply unacceptable! Yet, if we really believe that our tenants are our equals, if we believe that in a democracy sovereignty resides in the people, if we believe that scientists must be objective, we must change our attitude towards peasant organizations.

Another objection raised against the organization of peasants is that it would promote class conflict. If we go to the jungle and recommend the organization of sheep and other weaker animals, the lion will object. He will tell us that the jungle is peaceful and we should not agitate the poor, ignorant sheep. We would only be promoting class hatred.

Yet, we should realize that the whole universe is based on conflicting forces. All the planets are held in their orbits by the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces. The stability of the atom itself is based on the forces of electrons tending one way and protons tending the other way. But there is stability because the opposing forces are more or less equal in strength. And the resultant stability is dynamic. If we want absolute peace, a total absence of conflict, there is only one place - the cemetery. But certainly there is no movement, no progress, no dynamism in the cemetery, for in the cemetery there is no conflict - therefore, no life.

Life itself is in fact a conflict. The human body itself is a bundle of conflict and tension - between the blood and the muscles, between the muscles and the nerves, between the muscles and the bones, etc. The conflict and the tension must not and cannot be eliminated. It must only be controlled and regulated in order to produce dynamic harmony. And the best way to do this is by maintaining equilibrium between the opposing forces.

In fact, when one element or portion is too strong and the other too weak, the whole system becomes diseased or collapses. This is what is happening in our society today. A few people practically monopolize the wealth and the socio-political power in our society. The masses, the vast majority of which are peasants, are extremely poor and socially and politically weak. The peasants must be strengthened not only for their own sake but also for the sake of the entire nation. For it is necessary to strengthen the peasants to restore the balance and

proportion and therefore the stability and strength of our social and political structure. Moreover, the peasants are rightly called the backbone of the nation; and we know that the strength of an organism depends on the strength of its backbone. But the peasants cannot strengthen themselves unless they are organized.

That it is extremely difficult to have the peasants organized is true. But it is not nearly as difficult and expensive as to be revolving in the vicious circles we find ourselves in every year. And if we refuse to face this difficulty, we shall sooner or later be forced to face a much greater difficulty; for as surely as night follows day, the "Vietcongs" will come. They will organize the peasants. In fact, some of them are already here and they are already organizing the peasants. And although they have not brought with them any certified seed, cans of sardines or irrigation pump, many of the peasants have rallied to their cry and now stand ready to follow them till death.

In fact, we should have learned a lesson twenty years ago. Magsaysay bought us time so dearly to enable us to learn and change. We have squandered the time and have resisted change; and now we are probably in a worse situation than we were before he was able to turn the tide of subversion.