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Agrarian Reform in Negros Occidental, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Despite government implementation of agrarian reform programs, poverty and violence remain prevalent issues faced by communities dealing with agrarian problems. The dynamics of agrarian issues in Negros Occidental, a region rich in violent events related to agrarian reform policies, highlight the challenges. While the Philippine government initiated agrarian reform programs in the 1970s to redistribute land to landless farmers, aiming to promote wealth distribution and improve socio-economic conditions, implementation has not been successful. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and opposition hinder the reform process, leaving many vulnerable peasants economically insecure and in poverty. The complexity of agrarian dynamics in Negros Occidental involves strong opposition from landlords to agrarian reform, leading to systematic and structural violence. The engagement of various actors, such as the government, peasant communities, and corporations, in agrarian conflicts underscores the need for inclusive and sustainable approaches to agrarian reform in the Philippines for empowering marginalized communities and achieving social justice for peasants and rural peoples.

Keyword: Violence, Negros Occidental, Philippines, Agrarian Conflict.



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1. Introduction

This article examines the situation of farmers in the Philippines, especially in the Western region. In short, farmers have a marginal position in the region. The Philippines is one of the countries located in Southeast Asia and part of its territory is an agricultural area. That is why in historical records as conveyed by D.G.E Hall in "The Integrity of Southeast Asian History" the Philippines is not only a country with maritime wealth, it also has agricultural natural resources. It is not an exaggeration if the Philippines does not have maritime resources, its people can still live from its agricultural resources. From here we can see that the Philippines is a rich country and logically its people certainly have the potential to have a high level of economy and equal justice (Hall, 1973). The expected benefits of the

Philippines' natural potential are contradictory to the results obtained by the community, especially for peasants and rural people.

Although the agrarian program has been applied by the government, poverty and violence are still accepted by the community in dealing with agrarian problems. One of them can be seen from the agrarian dynamics in the Negros Occidental region which is rich in violent incidents related to agrarian reform policies. Historically, Negros Occidental was once a major center of sugarcane production, dominated by large-scale plantations controlled by wealthy landowners. The Philippine government initiated an agrarian reform program in the 1970s aimed at redistributing land to landless farmers, thereby promoting wealth equality and improving socio-economic conditions. Despite these efforts, the implementation of the reform has not gone well. Based on Tecson's notes (2006; in Rutten, 2010), in 2005, only 61 percent of the land targeted for redistribution in the Negros Occidental region was received, while about 30 percent of beneficiaries who received the Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA) had not been inaugurated on their land that was given, which ultimately caused controversy. This phenomenon occurred because it was constrained by an inefficient bureaucratic system and opposition forces who did not agree that the agrarian reform program was running as it should. As a result, many farmers are still economically vulnerable and have fallen into poverty and are often exploited.

In fact, this case has occurred several decades ago, but it is still interesting to study as an agrarian problem faced by the Filipino people. As part of the Visayas (central Philippines), Negros Island has a land area of 13,328 km² which is divided into two provinces: Negros Oriental in the Southeast and Negros Occidental in the Northwest. Politically and linguistically, the division of the island into two provinces is based on the existence of two ethnolinguistic groups (Smolicz, 1986; Billig, 2007). As the main sugar producing province in the Philippines, Negros Occidental Province has complex agrarian dynamics with strong opposition by landlords to land reform (Borras, 2007). The process of violence occurred systematically and structurally, some hypothesize that this violence was also masterminded by the government in power at that time. For example, in 1985 there was a mass massacre in Negros Occidental against people who fought for their land.

As one of the regions with the worst cases of land and space disputes in the agrarian reform program in the Philippines, this paper needs to look at the root of the problem and the actors involved in the chaos of the implementation of agrarian reform to the conflict that resulted in Negros Occidental. The method used to look at this agrarian problem is through a literature study approach and the author's personal experience. Although this case has occurred in the past few decades, it is hoped that it can provide an analysis that can be a practical consideration in the implementation of agrarian reform in other regions.

Roots of Agrarian Problems in Negros Occidental

The case of agrarian reform in Negros Occidental, Philippines, is a vivid example of the complex dynamics between social injustice, violence, and relentless efforts to empower marginalized communities. The region has been marred by a history of violent confrontations involving peasants fighting for land rights, highlighting the urgent need for robust empowerment practices specifically designed for disadvantaged groups. Most agricultural land in Negros is owned by large landowners. These landowners are paid by the Philippine government to have landless peasants work their fields. However, in practice, landowners often refuse to do so even when paid. As a result, peasants are unable to grow their own crops, and thus experience food insecurity. They depend on these agricultural lands for their livelihoods, but are denied the opportunity to grow crops even though they are beneficiaries. The problem is even greater because landowners are deeply involved in (local) politics (Hayami, Quisumbing, and Adriano 1990: 161).

Several literature reviews were used for this study, namely, *Agrarian Case in Negros Occidental* published by Amnesty International in 2006 and *History of Southeast Asia*, one part of which focuses on agrarian disputes in Occidental. In general, the results of the above studies show that Occidental farmers in the process of farming to meet their livelihoods initially proceeded naturally without any interference from any party. However, after state intervention, the position of farmers was in a marginalized social position, and it was not uncommon for farmers to fight back in fighting for the land they previously owned.

One of the most striking aspects of agrarian conflict in Negros Occidental is its connection to violence. Tragic episodes have occurred such as the Escalante massacre in 1985, which highlighted the brutal repression of farmers protesting state policies. There were also horrific incidents where the police indiscriminately attacked protesters, both armed and unarmed. These atrocities were not isolated incidents; rather, they were a recurring pattern of violence directed against activists seeking redress for unfair land ownership. This constant threat of violence significantly hampers the ability of farmers to organize effectively to meet their demands for fair treatment and security of tenure over their land. As human rights advocates have argued: the culture of impunity perpetuates the cycle of violence, undermining efforts for peaceful resolution (Amnesty International, United Kingdom, 2006). The Philippine Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was seen as a vehicle for change to create a new synthesis built on the role of the state in facilitating economic growth and benefiting the poor (Isaac, et.al, 2017). However, in its implementation and execution, the program, which was supposed to facilitate more equitable land distribution and improve agrarian efficiency in the Philippines, by setting maximum landholding limits and transferring landholding rights beyond these limits to tenants for compensation, has instead given rise to many problems (Otsuka, 1991; Diprose and McGregor, 2009). One of the factors that caused the failure of this program was due to strong

opposition from the elite (many of whom were large landowners themselves), the absence of strong interests from tenants, and the lack of political will to resolve class conflicts (Otsuka, 1991).

The Agrarian Reform Program enjoyed widespread popularity, but the implementation and practical implementation of the program often failed. So it can be said that as the person responsible for implementing the program, The Central Office of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), and the Local Department of Agrarian Reform (LDAR) as the implementing agency, have failed to see the problem locally, as mentioned by Hirtz (1998), that local bureaucrats need to translate the agrarian reform code into local dialects and cultural backgrounds.

Actors in the Agrarian Conflict in Negros Occidental

If we look deeper, the conflict that occurred in the sugarcane plantation area in Negros Occidental, illustrates the implementation of agrarian reform from the application of The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988, in addition to producing resistance from landowners, it has also given rise to divisions among landless workers in determining rights to large areas of land. As found by Rutten (2010), that to see the intra-poor conflict (competition between groups) and the rejection of landowners that occurred, it is necessary to see it from a multi-actor perspective that considers the interaction of agricultural workers with state institutions, landowners, agricultural worker movements, NGOs, and various categories of landless poor people, with a focus on the determining social ties and legitimizing discourses in the various social fields in which agricultural workers are involved (state, market, social movements, landowner patronage, and plantation communities).

To see the multi-actor perspective in the agrarian conflict in Negros Occidental, it is necessary to see the role of each actor in their interaction:

1. The government as the initiator.

As happened in the first location, Lapad, Cagayan De Oro, the implementation of CARP was initiated by the government because it saw the reality of inequality in the area. The community did not play a dominant role in the process, even from the beginning in that location the community did not organize themselves to demand their rights to land. Through CARP, some people received ownership rights, but some also received land cultivation rights. Conflict resolution was dominated by the courts with coercive force in the form of the military or police. Finally, production management was carried out together through cooperatives with full assistance from DAR.

It can be understood that in every case study of the implementation of agrarian reform, the relevant state actors have an important role in realizing land redistribution. As Prasetyohadi (2007) found, in the case of Negros, although President Arroyo had suggested that DAR together with the

military help place farmers in redistribution areas (under pressure from NGO networks and farmers), city-level officials were ambiguous, because in such important events, these officials tended to be influenced by landlords. Officials actually have a positive possibility to resolve tensions by taking on the role of negotiator or mediator, rather than obstructing the land reform process.

2. Community as initiator of movement.

Regional and ethnic diversity and long-standing conflicts have played a significant role in the resistance to redistributive reform in the Philippines, giving rise to the notion of a rural Filipino cultural ethos that is generally at odds with the depiction of peasant activism or rebellion (Riedinger, 2018). It is interesting to see the findings of Prasetyohadi (2007), that the social movement by Nagasi barangay's peasants has a broad social movement with a wide range of strategies with various tactics for long struggles. Many of these Nagasi peasants have long continued to fight for distribution even though they know that the land will not be left alone by the landowners, while facing internal problems from rival farmers who are pro-landlord. Starting in 2000 with land occupations and harvest actions, this has lasted for years with various clashes, retreats by farmers, forming alliances, re-mobilization, which continue to repeat.

In addition, there is also Pakisama (a farmer organization), which has shown how the community struggles for land rights in the Philippines. This struggle certainly has an impact on the social ties of the community there. However, internally, specifically in its geographical base in the Province of Negros Occidental, among social democrats, it was agreed that the land reform campaign formerly pursued by PAKISAMA was then taken over by a new group called 'Task Force Mapalad'; the latter used relatively more radical forms of action compared to PAKISAMA and was more consistent in its advocacy (Borras & Franco, 2009).

The weakness of donor agencies in strengthening organizations on strategic options open in conflict situations can be a problem for CSOs to advocate for farmers in agrarian conflicts (Van Leeuwen, 2010). This is also an obstacle faced by movement communities in maintaining their struggles.

3. Government-Corporate Cooperation

No less interesting, in the last location, namely the Del Monte area, we see that the redistribution of state land for laborers or plantation workers is correct. However, private sector intervention is still very dominant, especially in the management of production after land redistribution. Cooperatives formed by beneficiaries are also not free from corporate domination. Meanwhile, the multinational fruit company DelMonte took advantage of the leaseback provisions to make long-term leaseback agreements with unsuspecting farm workers, who were locked into receiving very small rental payments of PhP1,500 per hectare per year (equivalent to US\$25 in 2004) — an agreement that received praise from the government (Borras & Franco, 2005). While the permanent agenda of the

domestic landowning elite continues to prevent and reject any redistribution of land-based wealth and power, multinational companies are taking a new approach and starting to push for the takeover and redistribution of plantations that they previously controlled through lease agreements.

In addition to the multinational fruit company DelMonte, there is also Hacienda that has taken advantage of the government's attitude. based on Rutten's findings (2010), that as a small plantation company (between 50-150 hectares) owned by a family company, Hacienda has long been the backbone of the sugar industry. It is known that the government has regulated the use and control of hacienda land through Torrens certificates, land tax requirements, and legal and police protection of private land ownership. However, since 1988, the state-led agrarian reform program (CARP), intended to radically change control over hacienda land, making Negros Occidental one of the 'hot spots' of agrarian reform, with conflict and violence.

4. Opposition by landlords

As previously explained, the conflict that occurred over the implementation of agrarian reform in Negros Occidental, made opposition by landlords something that emerged on the surface. The major setback in the completion of land redistribution is inseparable from opposition by landlords. Either by violence or through legal action, beneficiaries of agrarian reform have experienced many cases of physical violence, such as murder, rape. Even in 2016, there were still murders of beneficiaries of agrarian reform or prospective beneficiaries and many cases of harassment related to agrarian reform in Negros Occidental, as found by Drbohlav et, al (2017), that this was a result of resistance from landlords who had access to state machinery (mobilizing trucks filled with army personnel) to protect the land they controlled.

In fact, this cannot be separated from the long history of the Negros sugar hacienda in carrying out land grabbing since hundreds of years before (Haggard & Kaufman, 1995), to the image of the plantation dominated by a deep-rooted patronage relationship between landlords and workers. Although there are some cases where individuals slowly emerge from dependence and move towards a more independent direction, continued poverty in the hacienda tends to lead to behaviors of re-dependence, the intensity of which depends on the needs of the workers and the expectations of the landlords for the assistance they provide (Garcia-Dungo, 1993).

2. Conclusion

The agrarian situation in Negros Occidental, Philippines, shows the complex dynamics of social injustice and violence faced by farmers in their struggle for land rights. Although the government has launched an agrarian reform program, many challenges have been faced, including resistance from landowners and bureaucratic failure in proper implementation.

The implementation of the agrarian reform program actually has a noble goal, namely to create

justice and welfare for the people in Negros Occidental through the distribution of land to the community. This land distribution aims to be a place to fulfill the livelihoods of people living in rural areas. However, this policy often harms those in power, both formal legal power (institutionalization) and non-formal legal power (institutionalization). This injustice is exacerbated by farmers' dependence on land that is mostly controlled by large landowners, who often engage in violent practices to maintain their power. In addition, the political and social impacts of this conflict have resulted in divisions among the farmers themselves, who struggle to define their rights amidst internal competition. In a broader context, this land conflict reflects the need for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to land reform in the Philippines to combat and empower marginalized communities. Thus, despite land redistribution measures, deeper structural challenges must be addressed to achieve genuine social justice for farmers in Negros Occidental.

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