



## **Analyzing NGO Discourses: Probing the Institutional History of the Philippine Peasant Institute**

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article, NGOs are seen as discursive fields where different discourses emerge and converge, and competing discourses fight for dominance. NGOs may be caught up in the web of power of discourses on development and democracy, and are therefore constituted by it. However, their praxis can also be a site where the resistance to the constituting processes of these discourses can be found. Understanding NGO discourses become particularly relevant especially in light of persistent questions regarding the role of NGOs in social transformation. By revealing transgressive moments in NGO praxis as illustrated in the institutional history of the Philippine Peasant Institute (PPI), the debate on the role of NGOs in social transformation is reframed away from the dichotomy between progressive versus counterprogressive work into how NGOs could retain its transgressive character and maintain its relevance in the continuing struggle toward social transformation.

**KEYWORDS.** NGOs · discourse · Philippine Peasant Institute

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the 1990s, the debate on whether nongovernment organizations (NGOs) are the potential leading agents of social change in the post-socialist era (Hardt and Negri 2000) or the main capillary through which capitalist domination penetrates daily life (Petras 1997) raged within academic and social-movement circles. This debate remains particularly relevant today as NGOs, being one of the more concrete organizational forms of civil society, continue to be important players in the twin processes of development and democratization.

Eduardo Gudynas (1997) recognizes the important role played by NGOs in the struggle against authoritarianism in many countries in Latin America and the important role that they may still play in the

continuing effort toward democratization. He notes, however, that in the democratization process itself, many NGOs in Latin America tended to be preoccupied with the professionalization of their organizations, and retreated from direct participation in politics. Because of this tendency, their role in the democratization process became marginal. It is in this context that Gudynas (1997) poses his challenge to both the academic and NGO communities to conduct a critical evaluation of the trajectory of NGO development and of the role they play in ongoing projects of democratization.

James Petras (1997), on the other hand, is more critical of NGOs, especially those in Latin America. He considers these as the channels through which neoliberalism penetrates and dominates communities. He views NGOs as essentially indispensable tools for the promotion of neoliberal ideology, which deliberately reduces the role of the state in development. Thus, NGOs have provided an escape valve for imperialist interests, which were being besieged by protests from grassroots organizations.

Dorothea Hilhorst's (2003) dissertation argues against the premise that there is a single explanation to the formation and operations of NGOs. NGOs have multiple realities that are continuously created and recreated by the different stakeholders of NGOs as they operate under multiple discursive frameworks. Using an actor-oriented approach<sup>1</sup> to organizations and discourses of NGOs, Hilhorst (2003) viewed NGOs as processes rather than as discrete entities with fixed identities. Using an NGO in the Philippines as a case study, she probed the symbolic meanings held by various actors involved in "NGO-ing" and deconstructed several concepts such as land, gender issues, development, accountability, participation, and empowerment, in order to bring out the political nature of NGO work (Hilhorst 2003). From this perspective, understanding the diversity among and complexities of NGOs become more important compared to explaining the nature of NGOs.

This article also focuses on the complexity of NGO practices and the multiplicity of its discourses. By using Foucault's (1980) genealogical approach, the spaces for resistance that may be achieved through the facilitation of NGOs will be examined in trying to understand the role of "NGO-ing" in the pursuit of development and democracy.

## **DISCOURSES, DISCURSIVE FIELDS, AND NGOS**

Discourses are a set of statements, practices, and meanings that fuse together knowledge and power (Foucault 1972). They serve as frameworks

through which we explain the world we live in and justify the way we conduct our lives (Miller 1997). Discourses thus have the power to create a coherent social reality whereby objects and subjects are shaped (McNay 1994). But unlike ideology, discourses do not stand in opposition to something else that is posited as true and good (Foucault 1980). They are found in verbal and nonverbal “texts,” which may be accounted for by the themes that predominate in a specific sociohistorical context. Critical discourse analysis is the reading of these “texts” and their claims to truth (Prior 1997). The task of the researcher is to reveal the image of reality that the text projects and the origins of the various elements contained in the text. This theoretical position allows us to look at the institutional history of an NGO as a text, whose language can be read and interpreted by taking into account the context in which the text is produced and the forms of subjectivity that the text is imposing upon its readers.

Competing discourses that have varying degrees of power to allow or constrain the production of knowledge and dissent could be found in arenas referred to by Foucault as discursive fields (Estrada-Claudio 1999). In analyzing the multiple discourses in a discursive field, we inquire into the continuities and discontinuities within and between these different discourses, and into the ways through which these multiple discourses are employed in dealing with the practicalities of daily life (Miller 1997). In this article, NGOs are seen as discursive fields where different discourses emerge and converge, and competing discourses fight for dominance. Understanding NGO discourses becomes particularly relevant especially in light of persistent questions regarding the role of NGOs in social transformation, which are intertwined with the debates over the character of contemporary capitalism and the possible trajectories of political action within it.

As one of my informants shared:

Most NGOs don't have time to reflect ... on what their change agenda is.

The reflection is done by people like you who make us think for two hours in interviews like these. (Both of us laughed out loud.) It is true. We have our different roles to play. Because NGOs are normally busy implementing and generating funds so you can continue to implement, to provide relevant services to your constituencies. Normally NGOs reflect only during evaluations, which are funded by their donors ... (more laughs) and in moments like these when you are doing interviews and you're the subject of study . . . <sup>2</sup>

By revealing the transgressive moments in NGO praxis, the debate on the role of NGOs in social transformation is reframed away from the dichotomy between progressive and counterprogressive work. Instead, debate is framed on how NGOs could retain their transgressive character and maintain their relevance in the continuing struggle toward radical social transformation.

### **THE PHILIPPINE PEASANT INSTITUTE AND ITS DISCOURSES**

The Philippine Peasant Institute (PPI) is an organization that has been providing services to peasants' organizations and their communities since 1983. When it was established, the term NGO had yet to gain popular usage in academic and social movement circles in the Philippines. Back then, PPI defined itself as a support institution, whose main work was to conduct training programs and to provide research and publication materials to peasants' organizations. By fulfilling this mandate, PPI complemented the efforts of the organized peasantry in escalating its struggles for land redistribution. Another important task of PPI as a support institution is to gather support for the mass movement. Their main targets for support work were the middle forces in the urban areas and solidarity networks abroad.

PPI's discursive and nondiscursive practices that may be captured in its publications and specific projects become a rich source of insight for an analysis of discourses on development and democracy. An analysis of PPI's publication materials points attention to the interrelated discourses of a National Peasant Situation and genuine land reform, which PPI promoted in pursuing its tasks as a support institution. PPI promoted these discourses through advocacy work, which was mainly public advocacy. PPI's public, at this point, referred to the middle classes, specifically the intelligentsia; foreign support institutions; and the broad masses of peasants. PPI's efforts to develop training modules on more "popular" methods of teaching can also be considered as part of its public advocacy work. The impenetrability of the state structure during the period of Martial Law oriented PPI's advocacy work toward exposing and opposing the anti-people and anti-agriculture policies of the state.

#### **National peasant situation**

During this earlier phase of PPI's operation as an institution, the content of its research, communications, and training programs focused on presenting a national peasant situation. The National

Peasant Situation sought to counter the government's discourses at the time, which pictured poverty and hunger as results of overpopulation, the ignorance of farmers, and the general backwardness and unproductiveness of agriculture. The Green Revolution program in the 1970s, for example, which asserts that the backward and unproductive farming system of peasants is to be blamed for global hunger, had been fiercely criticized for its flawed logic of blaming the victim. PPI's National Peasant Situation presented an image of farmers as a group of people who suffer hunger and poverty and are exploited and oppressed by another group of people—namely landlords, usurers, traders, state officials, and foreign capitalists—on the basis of their monopolistic control of land and capital (see table 1).

PPIs' research and training materials present the structural roots of the problems of hunger and poverty to allow them to imagine their "personal troubles as public issues" (Mills 1959). They were no longer farmers or individuals who were engaged in the occupation of farming but were peasants, a class of people who stand in opposition to landlords. The narrative of a national peasant situation showed how peasants are structurally positioned in the relations of production and gave organized farmers a vocabulary with which to describe their experiences and create a shared interpretation of these experiences. It was on the basis of this shared grievance that PPI justified the need to wage a struggle for land. Thus, PPI's research and training materials also talked about the militant tradition of the peasantry not only in the Philippines but in other countries as well (see table 1).

### **Genuine land reform**

The dominant theme in PPI's advocacy regarding land reform is the demand for the immediate breakdown of the monopoly on land, even if this would necessitate resorting to confiscatory approaches (see table 2). Genuine land reform means a radical change in the pattern of land ownership through the confiscation or expropriation of lands. PPI sustained this theme even after Corazon Aquino was swept into the presidency by a people-powered uprising. Since the highlight of Aquino's bid for the presidency was the restoration of democracy in the Philippines, challenging the government's concept of democracy remained a key theme for PPI's public advocacy during her administration. Major research and publications of PPI on genuine land reform focused on discussing the difference between popular but elite democracy and genuine democracy. PPI argued that economic democratization, primarily through land redistribution, is a defining

Table 1. PPI's themes on peasants

Themes from publications on the National Peasant Situation	Modules in training curriculum	Category
Central root of agrarian unrest—non-ownership of land by actual producers;	Political economy in the countryside: focus on the land question	Conflict of interests between landlord and peasants
Landlessness and exorbitant land rent prevail because land is concentrated in the hands of few big landlord-comprador, TNCs, government		Land monopoly versus landlessness, poverty, and hunger of peasants
Monopoly of farm trading and widespread practice of usury intensify rural poverty and farmer bankruptcy	Political economy in the countryside: on credit and capital; on trading and commerce in agriculture	Conflict of interests between traders and usurers
Control of trading and usury prevail because agricultural capital is concentrated in the hands of few big trader-usurers		Monopolies and monopsonies versus lack of capital and bankruptcy of peasants
Land monopoly intensified by fake land reform program of government that allows landlords to evade land reform through land classification, retention limit, substitute mechanisms to land transfer, land valuation and compensation; land grabbing		Conflict of interests between state and peasants  State is apparatus of ruling class
Low level of agricultural production under government's development policies of export-oriented industrialization that favors interests of agribusinesses rather than small farmers; increasing cost of production linked to green revolution that brought other forms of oppression	Cooperative movement	Flawed development model of the state

component of genuine democratization. Together with peasants' organizations, PPI presented an alternative definition of democracy that was based on the achievement of economic democracy rather than on the restoration of civil liberties.

But despite the participation of pro-peasant commissioners in the Constitutional Commission's Committee on Social Justice, the Aquino administration's Freedom Constitution, along with its land reform program, embodied in Republic Act (RA) 6657 or the

Table 1 (continued)

Feudal problem of monopoly is main problem of tillers in major crop industries: rice, corn, sugar, coconut		National character of peasant movement
Foreign control over land and agricultural production; bankruptcy and loss of farmlands due to import liberalization that is pursued in accordance with prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-World Bank (WB); foreign investment intensifies rural underdevelopment and strengthens colonial trade pattern	Agrarian Reform and the Peasant movement in oth countries—focus on socialist models in Russia China, North Korea, Cuba, and Nicaragua; compared to US models i Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea	Conflict of interest between foreign capitalists and peasants Nationalist content of peasant movement
Popular democracy should also be genuine democracy, which means empowerment and whose essential measure should be increased income and livelihood;		Democratic content of peasant movement Popular democracy is not necessarily genuine democracy
Peasants suffer political repression, human rights violations; they are victims of militarization and counterinsurgency campaigns of government		Democracy is not only about civil-political rights but also about economic rights
Historical continuity of peasant struggle at that time with Kalipunang Pambansa ng Magbubukid sa Pilipinas (National Federation of Peasants in the Philippines, KPMP) and Pambansang Kaisahang Magbubukid (National Union of Peasants, PKM)	Agrarian reform and the peasant Movement in the Philippines  Perspective of the peasant movement in the Philippines—focus on direction and tasks of PO	Militant tradition of peasant struggle

*Note:* Two sets of materials were analyzed to generate this table: 1) PPI Research Papers on the National Peasant Situation: The National Peasant Situation prepared for the National Consultative Assembly of Peasant Organizations on August 710, 1984; The National Peasant Situation: 1985; The Filipino Peasantry: Images of Poverty and Revolt; The 1987 National Peasant Situation; Walang Patid na Gutom, Walang Humpay na Pakikibaka Ang Pambansang Kalagayan ng mga Magbubukid; 2) LINANGAN Training Program.

Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL), was still riddled with loopholes that would favor the landed elite. Corazon Aquino, who is from a powerful clan of landlords—the Cojuangcos—and her administration was criticized by PPI for lack of political will to transcend class interest and immediately implement a redistribution of wealth and income through genuine land reform. Landlords’ evasive tactics—such as seeking exemption, extending retention limits,

Table 2. PPI's discourses on land reform

Themes from publications on Land Reform	Categories
Strongest hindrance to genuine democratic distribution of land is the provision that the peasants need to pay for the land	Land should be distributed for free to the tillers
Government schemes such as the option of stock distribution is against the land-to-the-tiller concept of land redistribution.	
Determining land valuation based on prevailing market prices makes land unaffordable to tillers, therefore evading redistribution of wealth and income that should be at the heart of a genuine land reform program.	
While the original provision was being watered down, the commissioners [of the 1986 Constitutional Commission] were at the same time strengthening the rights of the landowners	Government's land reform program is in favor of landlords' interests
Agrarian reform law protects interests of landed business elite: provisions for exemptions from land reform coverage, retention limits that goes against intention of redistribution of wealth, compensation for landowners rather than confiscation or expropriation of land	
Agrarian reform should not be treated as government expenditure; political will of administration to implement agrarian reform more decisive than availability of foreign aid	
Land reform is used by government as a tool for counterinsurgency	

demanding for just compensation (read: market-based land valuation), or proposing a stock-sharing scheme—were exposed and opposed because they circumvent the land-to-the-tiller concept of genuine land reform.

PPI's discourse on Genuine Land Reform is thus also a discourse about the state. The state and other ideological apparatuses such as the mass media are considered as nothing more than instruments for domination of the ruling class. The state exercises domination by keeping the masses passive and subservient through a combination of deceptive and repressive policies. State policies and programs can only be exposed as fake and deceptive, which need to be opposed and rejected.



Table 2 (continued)

Clear emphasis of government's laws and policies toward maintenance of the large estates especially in sugar	Large estates of landlords should be parceled out
Vital economic interests of transnational corporations are contextualized within the entire range of policy decisions	Convergence of interests of landlords and transnational corporations
Bottom line for US officials was that agrarian reform must involve market-value compensation to landowners, thus making programs expensive and essentially nonredistributive	
Land reform as an economic principle and a social justice formula should not evade the possibility of confiscatory approach or expropriation at token amounts as a necessary mode of land distribution	Land reform is about social justice, it is moral responsibility of the state
Justness of land occupations	
Agrarian reform is essentially about empowerment, land redistribution, and increase in farm productivity	Agrarian reform broader than land reform

*Note:* PPI's publications on land reform were analyzed to generate this table. PPI's Land Reform Series include the following: *The Status of Land Reform under the Aquino Government: An Endgame Critique*; *Land Reform in the Proposed Constitution: Landmarks and Loopholes*; *Agrarian Reform Bill in the Senate and the Lower House: Not Much of a Choice*; *Critique on the Aquino Land Reform Program: Another Debacle in the Making*; *The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program: Can A Change of Guard Make a Difference?*; *The Aquino Agrarian Reform Program: A Twoyear Assessment*; and *The Politics of the Aquino Agrarian Reform Programme*.

Up to this point, it can be observed that PPI treated the discourse on land reform as mainly a discourse on justice. It has to be done because ending the monopoly on land will end the exploitation and oppression of peasants. The right to land is the right to own, instead of merely using the land. Land is seen primarily as a piece of property, and that the peasant question revolves around who has the right to own the land.

### **Emergence of competing discourses**

The mainstreaming of NGO participation in development coincides with the policy shifts within the World Bank in the 1990s, which placed equal emphasis on the non-economic aspects of development and on the benefits that may be derived from increased collaboration with NGOs. Changes in strategies initiated by James Wolfensohn and Joseph Stiglitz (Cammack 2003) called for the implementation of

social reforms that promote the idea of governance and participation. As a result, states and other global institutions have appropriated buzzwords such as participation, empowerment, poverty alleviation, and democratization which originated from the struggle of grassroots organizations.

In the Philippines, discourses such as democratic space, civil society, and governance became the defining character of the post-Marcos era. The end of Marcos's authoritarian regime in 1986 signaled the shift of the discourse from government to governance. Governance meant that the tasks of development and democratization entailed the active participation of nonstate agents, which included civil-society players, especially NGOs. The term NGO, referring to private nonprofit organizations engaged in service-oriented activities directed toward an identified target sector or community, gained currency after the people-powered uprising in EDSA that toppled the Marcos regime and installed Corazon Aquino as president. The term captured the different hues of organizations that either fought against or collaborated with the dictatorship. These included not only radical cause-oriented groups, but also the more conservative civic organizations of the church and the business sector.

The Aquino administration (and the Ramos administration that succeeded it) formally recognized and increasingly institutionalized NGOs' participation in governance. The enactment of the Local Government Code in 1991 continued to enlarge the stake of NGOs in development. By institutionalizing their participation in local government units, NGOs were offered the opportunity to take on the task of delivering various basic social services—low-cost housing, irrigation projects, among many others—that were traditionally the responsibility of government. The right and responsibility to decide on local land-use classification was also devolved to local government units.

Thus, PPI was seriously confronted with the challenge and opportunity of presenting viable policy alternatives for the new government, and the possibility of having these actually implemented. PPI, which was at the forefront of criticizing the deposed regime's land reform program and rural development strategy, now had to come up with its own viable model for reform and development in the countryside. The sociopolitical condition warranted that alternatives and not only critiques be put forth.

Toward the end of the 1980s, PPI started implementing new programs and reorienting its basic services of research, communications, and training. Its advocacy work began venturing into the arena of policy

advocacy. The Economic Democratization Department was constituted to handle PPI's new program on cooperatives organizing and project development. PPI also started to identify itself as a development NGO that promotes agrarian reform and rural development.

### **Policy advocacy**

It was also during this time that progressive individuals were either elected into Congress or were appointed to key positions in government. Thus, PPI ventured into policy advocacy, with the serious intention of creating a more favorable policy environment for the peasant movement. PPI came out with *Briefing Papers*, a policy brief series in English that specifically catered to the needs of policymakers.

PPI believes that concrete gains for the cause of the peasantry could be won by engaging the state. For instance, even if PPI was part of the broader movement that rejected the government's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) as fake and inutile, it continued to demand from government the full and immediate implementation of the emasculated CARL. Its policy advocacy agenda included the immediate redistribution of private agricultural lands that are covered by the program, which were eventually referred to as "CARP-able" lands.

Whereas PPI's position papers on issues before were mainly propaganda-education materials that aim to raise the political consciousness of peasants and the intelligentsia, its position papers now are also policy proposals to persuade policymakers to prefer a particular policy option. With this end in view, compromises may be entertained in relation to issue analysis and policy formulation, as long as their proposed policy provision is adopted. PPI has veered away from the "expose-and-oppose" orientation of a peasant support institution. It now perceives its role as a catalyst for the forging of consensus among the different players in the development process. Its policy advocacy work was reoriented into the "expose, oppose, and propose" mission of an NGO.

Seriously pursuing policy advocacy entailed several paradigmatic shifts on the part of PPI, which were not necessarily clearly expressed at the time. For instance, it had to transcend the views that the state is an incorrigible tool of the ruling classes (Miliband 1993), or as the factor that coheres the ruling system (Poulantzas 1978). Instead, it had to look at the state as an arena where some of the struggles of the exploited and the oppressed can be fought and won by taking advantage of cleavages within the ruling bloc (Skocpol 1994). The

Table 3. Discourses on agricultural situation and rural poverty situation

Themes from publications on agricultural situation and rural poverty	Categories
Government should show preferential treatment to small and medium agricultural producers	Rural development should be pro-small producers
Increased production did not translate to increased income; shift of government policy from agriculture-centered development to enclave industrialization	Rural development should be pro-agriculture Unsustainable development strategy of fast-track industrialization is biased against agriculture
Man-made disasters, urbanization, agrarian reform reversals induced by industrialization program	
Anti-agriculture bias of government policy, and trickle-down approach failed	
Fast-track development embodied in Medium-Term Agricultural Development Plan-Key Production Area essentially limits lands devoted to food, promotes monocropping.	
Critique of trickle-down approach to poverty alleviation	
Undermining agriculture, recommendations for the government.	
Unsustainability of growth model of development and failure of traditional development models; prevalence of poverty in the countryside; root of poverty: landlessness, unemployment-underemployment, declining productivity, inefficiencies in marketing system and structure, trade and foreign policies biased versus agriculture, flawed industrialization program, lack of infrastructure, exhaustion of land frontier	

hegemonic character of the state (Gramsci 1996) makes possible for it to decide against the short-term interests of the ruling classes if sufficient pressure is brought to bear on it. By detaching the state personnel from the state apparatus that they occupied, PPI saw an expansion of the “public,” or the clientele, of its research and publication materials to include policymakers.

Table 3 (continued)

Skewed development framework, flawed land use; alternative: industrialization within frame of redistributive justice in agrarian reform; shun antiagriculture bias	
Emasculation of Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law directional thrust of Ramos government as embodied in Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan	Rural development should be based on an equitable distribution of wealth and resources
Loopholes and limitations of Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program: stock distribution option, commercial farms deferment, leasehold arrangement, and production for profit scheme	Government is evading agrarian reform
Option of stock distribution versus land to the tiller concept of land ownership, land valuation	
Farmers not as victims because they negotiate for themselves, but contract farming is still biased in favor of big business, since contracts are on a per-individual basis, there is no collective bargaining, essentially disempowering, no technology transfer	Empowerment means enhancing collective bargaining capability

*Note:* Based on PPI's Briefing Papers: Philippine Agricultural Situation in 1991; Dynamics of the Philippine Rural Economy; Issues in Philippine Agriculture in 1992; Converting Lands, Wrecking Lives; Philippine NIC-hood: Stunting Fast-track Growth; Agriculture Situation in 1993; Contract Growing and the Agro-Industry in South Cotabato.

### **Agrarian reform and rural development**

In 1989, PPI implemented the Foodwatch Research Project (Foodwatch). It was a research project that aimed to trace the prevailing structure of food marketing in Luzon. It sought empirical evidence on the extent of surplus extraction from the rural areas through trade and marketing by revealing the modalities of this extraction. Foodwatch traced the marketing systems for vegetable in the uplands, and rice in Luzon. Through this research project, PPI exposed the existence of several layers of trader-usurers from the farm gate all the way to the consumer market. These trader-lenders extorted profits from farmers by underpricing the farmers' produce through various schemes, then overpricing the produce when these are finally sold to consumers. Foodwatch also described the institutionalized operations of a Binondo-based cartel in rice marketing that extracted more profits by controlling

the supply of rice in the market, an exposé that prompted a Senate inquiry on the issue in 1990. Findings of the Foodwatch Research Project confirmed the existence of a powerful bloc of trader-usurers who exercised power over farmers not through their ownership and control of land but based on their ownership and control of cash, farm inputs, postharvest facilities, and farm-to-market equipment. They extracted profit from farmers not through ground rent but through usurious lending rates and schemes of underpricing and overpricing. In short, their power was based on capital. This confirmation provided PPI with the confidence and the justification to pursue socioeconomic work in the countryside.

While banner slogans during protest actions denounce the existence of monopolies, PPI, through its publications and training programs, tried to put the concept of monopsony into mainstream activists' discourse. The phenomenon of monopsony in the countryside—the monopoly and control of buyers over the marketing process—eventually became a key target for PPI's socioeconomic work. By venturing into socioeconomic work, PPI engaged the Aquino government in the discourse of relieving rural poverty and hunger by breaking not only the monopoly on the ownership of land but also the exploitative and monopsonistic structure of trade and marketing in the countryside.

Although the struggle for land remained as an important agenda for PPI, it was also redefined as only one among the many important components of a genuine agrarian reform program. The themes from these publications show that land reform became only one of the vital components of what came to be defined as The Peasant Agenda, which is agrarian reform and rural development (see table 3). For PPI, the issue of land reform became too narrow to encompass the complexities of the problems in the rural areas. Besides the question of land ownership, the issues of agricultural productivity and sustainable growth became focal aspects of the campaign for agrarian reform and rural development. PPI's handling of the discourse on land reform had eventually shifted from a discourse on justice into a discourse on economic productivity and efficiency. Land reform had to be implemented not only because it was just, but also because it would propel economic development. PPI's discourse on land reform also shifted from the issue of justice to the issue of sustainability, or from morality to rationality.

### **Social infrastructure building**

The global fascination with the promise of civil society was expressed in the increase in available funds for area-based development projects

sponsored by civil-society players. As mentioned earlier, with the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, foreign funding agencies began to shift their funding preferences from training and advocacy to area-based development projects. The availability of funding for socioeconomic work in the rural areas that would look for alternative paths to development served as a decisive impulse for PPI to venture into socioeconomic work.

The socioeconomic projects of PPI take on the discourse of economic empowerment, defined as the building of a countervailing force to the power of the state and the business sector. PPI believed that measurable gains could be made in socioeconomic work even before a fundamental social transformation is realized. Within this framework, PPI seriously pursued efforts at engaging the state to influence policy and at enhancing the power of nontraditional powerholders.

In 1989, PPI ventured into socioeconomic work through its Integrated Peasant Credit Cooperative Program (IPCCP). The program provides loans for production, consumption, and livelihood at interest rates that are lower than the prevailing lending rates to help farmers accumulate capital. Formal lending institutions do not normally lend money to poor and landless peasants because it is considered a risky investment. On the other hand, informal lenders, or local loan sharks, lend money to the poor at exorbitant interest rates, thereby trapping poor peasants within the deadly cycle of landlessness and lack of capital, poverty, and hunger in the rural areas.

PPI encountered several problems in the process of implementing IPCCP. One problem concerns the easy repayment package in which low interest rates are combined with low amortization plans. PPI's partners were pushing for lower interest rates, while PPI's project implementers are concerned with pegging the interest rate at a level where the project can still be sustained given its limited resources. Another problem concerns the policy regarding membership of the cooperatives. Peoples' organizations (POs) that were PPI's partners believed that the cooperatives should be organized along class lines, and that priority for membership should be given to landless peasants. PPI's project implementers, on the other hand, were open to area-based organizing, which allows for accommodating rich peasants or even small landlords, for example, to join the cooperatives. These problems reflect the tensions between the imperatives of successful project implementation from the perspective of a professional NGO, on the one hand, and the imperatives of successful political organizing

and mobilization from the perspective of a particular ideological agenda, on the other.

In 1993, after careful reflection, PPI reoriented its socioeconomic work from providing cheap credit to organizing and training peasants' cooperatives. PPI realized that the responsibility of providing social services is primarily government's responsibility, and that NGOs should not let government abdicate on its responsibility by assuming this task. PPI redefined its task as a development facilitator by focusing on enabling communities to effectively claim from government the resources and services to which they are entitled, thus reorienting its socioeconomic work into a strategy of claim taking. This complements its efforts at policy advocacy at the national level, which then included the need for radical changes in the rural credit delivery system as a social service that government should provide. PPI is demanding government to intervene in the eradication of the prevailing bias of formal lending institutions against small and landless peasants.

Another source of insight is PPI's Village-level Coco Processing Plant Project (coco project), which is a major component of PPI's Special Socio-Economic Projects. The coco project tested the viability of a rural industrialization initiative that challenges the dominant structures in production and marketing. It was supposed to provide farmers with an alternative to selling nuts and copra. Using the wet-process technology for coco processing,<sup>3</sup> farmers could mill nuts bought from members of the cooperative and process them into refined oil, which they could sell as cooking oil or as raw material for other oil-based commercial products within the village. A major problem that PPI encountered in implementing this project was the inability to find sufficient supply of nuts from the cooperatives' membership who were mostly tenants and were compelled to sell their produce to their landlords. Thus, the project's successful implementation depended on winning the struggle for land tenure improvement. If tenants became leaseholders at least, they would gain control of their produce and the power to choose where to sell them.

PPI's Peasant Cooperative Organizing and Education Program (PCOEP) and Special Socioeconomic Projects tried to fulfill the social-infrastructure building (SIB) component of PPI's agrarian reform and rural development formula. PPI recognized that there are a host of players in development, and that micro projects can only survive the onslaught of globalization, which tends to marginalize small players, by enabling the latter to compete against elite economic and political power in the open market. Thus, building a network of supporters who



could provide expertise and specialized services to enable them to improve their products, as well as federating to promote economies and politics of scale, could become vital empowering mechanisms for poor communities. A cohesive federation would also make it possible to reduce production costs and collectively negotiate for a better deal, thus leveling the playing field a bit more.

The concept of SIB originates from the discourse on social capital, which regained international attention after the publication of Robert Putnam's (1993) influential book. After the concept was adopted and hailed by the World Bank as the key prerequisite to development (Harriss 2006), social capital became the buzzword in development circles. The discourse on social capital highlights the importance of nurturing cooperation, solidarity, and trust in a social structure to enable it to eradicate all impediments to development, especially corruption. It promotes the view that people should be seen as resources rather than as recipients of development. Social capital argues that people and their set of social networks, rather than the availability of capital in its conventional economic sense, are the more important determinants of development.

But while social capital buildup may be a valid agenda for grassroots organizations, the discourse also tends to downplay the crucial role of economic and political structures in impeding the buildup of social capital (Harriss 2006; Schuurman 2002). For instance, as PPI realized on hindsight, while the intention of the coco project was to build the capacity of the poor to compete in the market through an alternative production and marketing system, the premise of the coco project model is that the farmers' struggle for land has already been resolved prior to project implementation. In other words, the project is not designed for the poorest of the poor. Insights from PPI's experiences present a different version of social capital buildup among the poor. Social capital entails investment from government and other institutions into the economic activities of the poor. PPI realized that the role of NGOs like them is to compel government and other institutions to do so.

But PPI's discourses are relatively silent on the character of contemporary capitalism. It has yet to formulate a coherent critique of contemporary capitalism and its implications for Philippine agriculture. In tackling global issues—such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)-World Trade Organization (WTO), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area (AFTA), for example—the

discussions slide to government ineptness that tends to preclude the constituting powers of global capital. PPI's discourses tend to be silent on the way global capital has redesigned the rural areas and redefined the concerns of rural folks in recent years. In a way the discourse on localization tends to misidentify the enemy (as only those government officials who are corrupt and inept) and to obscure the role of the capitalist imperial machine (Hardt and Negri 2000) in the death of agriculture and small farmers. Thus, PPI could choose to address in the future this blind spot.

### **Land rights**

Starting 1999, PPI's strategy of claim taking focused around the concept of "rights." PPI's discourse on rights is not confined to invoking those already mandated legally. It also involves the invention of rights where necessary. For instance, PPI supported the view that the right to land of seasonal farmers should be recognized as equal to those of farmers and regular farmworkers. PPI campaigned against several court rulings that exclude seasonal farmworkers from the legal arena, an act denying them of the right to be a land-reform beneficiary based on their lack of a "juridical personality."

PPI's encounters with the discourse on indigenous peoples started when it implemented its area-based programs in Mindanao and the Mountain Province in the early 1990s. The dilemma was how to pursue a class-based struggle for land and agrarian reform in the context of a parallel struggle for self-determination. Current efforts of PPI that relate to the cause of indigenous peoples focus on Mindanao. In PPI-initiated conferences, the tri-people development framework for Mindanao was formulated. The tri-people framework came about as *Lumads*<sup>4</sup> and Muslims<sup>5</sup> challenged the applicability of the concept of a homogenous "Filipino people" in Mindanao. The tri-people framework recognizes that, at present, Mindanao is home to at least three large groups who all claim a distinct ethnic identity. Christian migrant settlers;<sup>6</sup> different indigenous ethnolinguistic groups such as Manobos, Bagobos, Mandayas, and B'laans, among others; and Muslims, who are subdivided into different ethnolinguistic groups, the largest four of which are the Tausugs, Samals, Maranao-Ilanuns, and the Maguindanaons (Gowing 1979) assert their right to land in Mindanao.

PPI claims that at the heart of the struggle of indigenous peoples to self-determination is the struggle for land (Royandoyan and Atillo 2001). While the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands

are legally recognized by international and local governing institutions, actual control over their lands has not yet been returned to indigenous peoples. This problem is not only a result of government incompetence in implementing its own laws like the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act but is also a conscious political act to favor the business interests of mining corporations, real estate firms, and tourism promoters inside ancestral domain areas.

By framing the land problem in this manner, PPI tries to diffuse the brewing conflict between the three peoples who are locked in battle against each other on the issue of land rights in Mindanao. PPI highlights the collusion of the state and business in marginalizing poor landless Christians, Moro-IPs, and indigenous peoples as the root cause of the unresolved conflict in Mindanao.

PPI's discourse on claim taking that insists on the responsibility of government to leverage its resources in favor of small farmers counters the discourse on rolling back the state that is implicit in dominant global discourses on social capital and good governance. The state could relegate the delivery of agricultural support services to the private sector, but the responsibility of land distribution and the prevention of reversals in land redistribution rest primarily on the state.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through this study, I tried to show how power operates through discourse. By following the twists and turns of PPI's continuous process of becoming an NGO within the context of competing discourses on development and democracy, I established how NGO discourses emerge, and how these are able to organize institutional life. By tracing the genealogy of PPI's discourses, I offered a critical analysis of its current discourses and change agenda, and celebrated PPI's ability to reveal the limits of the discourses that constitute it.

PPI underwent several discursive shifts as it struggled to maintain its institutional relevance by claiming different organizational identities in the context of a changing environment. From a peasant-support institution in the early years of its formation, PPI claimed the label of an NGO in the latter half of the 1980s when it expanded its work to include policy advocacy, socioeconomic projects, and region-based program implementation. It underwent another discursive shift in the late 1990s when it chose to refocus its attention from the discourse on peasants, in favor of the discourse on small farmers in defining its institutional mission.

Although PPI has assimilated the discourses of the ruling classes, its continued adherence to the cause of the marginalized made it more conscious of the limits of these discourses. Thus, it continued to “expose and oppose” the discourse of neoliberalism, which veered the state away from activist intervention in the economy and relegated the state into the role of a nightwatchman, promoting an anti-agriculture and anti-peasant development framework. PPI’s praxis carefully (if not controversially) straddles the thin boundary between working within the system and transgressing the system. PPI has consistently invoked the rights of the poor (food security as human rights, the right to land as economic and political right, right to self-determination as cultural rights) to compel government to govern in favor of the poor. It has tried its best to speak the language of the powerful by appropriating dominant global discourses (civil society, social capital, governance) to be able to translate into mainstream discourse the concerns of the powerless (landlessness, hunger, poverty, minoritization), and to forge new compromises in favor of the poor even under persistent conditions of inequality.

The question of development and democracy in the Philippine context cannot be divorced from the struggle for land, especially in the rural areas. Dominant discourses on development and democracy evade the issue of land redistribution by subsuming it under broader discourses, such as rural development. PPI’s twenty-year praxis on the land question has shown the many forms through which the collusion of landed elites and the state have prevented a radical reform in the country’s system of land ownership.

PPI’s discourse on the question of land ownership has been formed by multiple discourses. Marxist discourses (conflict of interests and class struggle, socialist ownership of the means of production, among others) have clearly influenced PPI’s critique of successive state-sponsored land reform programs. More recently, this discourse has been enriched by the discourse of indigenous peoples on communal land ownership. The concept of communal land ownership brings to light the view that land should be seen as a public good. Thus, the rights of individuals to use land rest upon the assumption of the responsibility to render the land productive not only for themselves, but also for the community and for the communities of the future.

The NGOs’ transgressive character is best preserved by continuously reflecting upon their change agenda. An important aspect of this project is the conduct of a reflexive self-evaluation to gain a critical awareness of the discourses that it employs. As NGOs become

important players in the twin processes of development and democratization, groups like PPI need to maintain their transgressive character, and to continue to provide the movement for change with relevant tools for reflection. ❀

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## NOTES

1. Hilhorst cites Giddens (1984) and Long (1992).
2. Interview with Mel, September 25, 2003.
3. The prevailing system in coco areas is the dry process in which coconuts are steamed to produce copra. Not only is copra considered a low-value added product, it is also losing out to other oil sources because of its high aflatoxin content. The wet process yields refined oil, which is considered as a high-value added product, and without any aflatoxin.
4. Indigenous peoples in Mindanao, who are distinguished from Muslims and Christians, are referred to as *Lumads*.
5. Muslims are also referred to as Moro-Indigenous Peoples.
6. Christian settlers, who migrated from different parts of the Philippines into Mindanao after World War II, are the ones who are referred to as Filipinos.

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