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Wright, Sarah, and Ma. Diosa Labiste. 2018. *Stories of Struggle: Experiences of Land Reform in Negros Island, Philippines*. Quezon City, Philippines: University of the Philippines Press. ix, 165 pp.

On a tragic night in November 2018, human rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos was attacked and killed by "riding-in-tandem"¹ assailants in a Southern Negros city (Espina 2018). Ramos was the secretary-general of the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers–Negros Island and a long-time volunteer worker at the Paghidaet sa Kauswagan² Development Group (PDG), a nonprofit organization formed in 1987 that has worked with local farmers in Southern Negros. PDG was the main local partner of authors Sarah Wright and Ma. Diosa Labiste for the book *Stories of Struggle: Experiences of Land Reform in Negros Island, Philippines*. Ramos was a key contact. The book's dedication page was devoted to

1. Riding-in-tandem in the Philippine context refers to "two persons riding in a motorcycle who commit crime, usually robbery and paid kill" (Viray 2014).
 2. Paghidaet sa Kauswagan is Hiligaynon for "Peace in Development."

the commemoration of his contributions and legacy in the land reform history of Negros Occidental.

The book provides an overview of land reform program in Negros Occidental, specifically looking at sugar plantation communities. The authors used different case studies in different municipalities to describe the dynamics that farmers, together with partner nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs), need to navigate in order to achieve the end goal of land redistribution. It highlights the successes of agrarian change in the province by looking at the experience of PDG partner communities. They argue, through the case studies, that land reform in Negros has been more pro-landlord than pro-farmer, thus veering away from the program's core principle of social justice. In summary, the discussions are clustered around three main themes: (1) the central role of struggle in the land reform process; (2) the negative role of landlord resistance and the ongoing trend toward a market-led approach; and, (3) the need for genuine land reform that supports tillers beyond the distribution of the land.

Stories of Struggle contributes to the ongoing debate on the approaches toward a successful land reform program through the case studies which highlight the role of POs and their struggles in the land reform process. The book is divided into eight chapters. An introductory chapter is followed by one discussing the history of sugar and land reform. The third chapter is specifically concerned with the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Chapter four gives a narrative history of PDG. The next three chapters contain three specific case studies chosen by the authors followed by a concluding chapter that summarizes the findings of the book.

The first three chapters establish the overarching themes and situation that the case studies are boxed in, discussing relevant national laws, dynamics within government agencies, land statistics, and local history and politics. Chapter two is divided into a section focusing on the history of sugar in the Philippines and a section on how land reform was fought for after independence. Chapter three details CARP, identifying loopholes in the laws passed pursuant to the program and the mechanisms used by the landed elites to evade land reform. Chapter four features PDG, the organization that worked with the authors in doing fieldwork and interviews, along with its historical involvement in the areas visited. These chapters provide analysis of the land issues in the Philippines and Negros as a backgrounder for the case studies in chapters five to seven.

The case studies rely on oral accounts described by the authors. The authors provide a helpful brief synthesis to conclude each case study. Chapter five cites different struggles and challenges that farmers faced to gain access to land. Chapter six dissects the corporate schemes used by a politically powerful landlord to oppose the full implementation of land reform and harass farmers. Chapter seven showcases two communities with contrasting achievements on the struggle for land reform. The quotes taken from farmers highlight their views on what genuine land reform should be.

Generally, the first three chapters were very informative and provided sufficient data for understanding the case studies. These chapters brought forth commendable efforts to highlight loopholes within policies that threatened farmers trying to access or acquire lands to till. Notably, chapter three provides a clear distinction of the mechanisms on how land was distributed specifically in Negros and the agreements and options that can be pursued under the program, helping to set the tone in analyzing the succeeding chapters. However, the discussion in chapter two on the worsening land reform aspect could have been improved. Adding a section about the situation of sugar and how the worsening sugar economy aided the rise of insurgency in Southern Negros in the 1980s would have better established the chapter's connection to the themes of the later chapters. Such an addition would have provided reasons why some organizations mentioned in the case studies were red-tagged or labeled as affiliates of the communist insurgency. This would also connect to the general narrative of the case studies where Negros is left in a sorry state of land reform despite the debatable claim of doing "best efforts" from the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), the agency in charge of implementing CARP. The Negros Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW), for example, was cited as a good resource group for training and orientation for hacienda workers but was discredited through red-tagging. Such discussion would have provided a deeper context with regard to the results of the election of farm workers' union as discussed by Wright and Labiste:

The NFSW began organizing on the hacienda (Bino—one of the case studies). Of the 400 workers on the hacienda, 235 joined the union after the union familiarized them with the Labor Code that outlined their legal rights and entitlements as laborers. . . . [P]ropaganda was widely distributed labeling

the NFSW as a “red union” and the puppet of the CPP-NPA. The NFSW lost the election and was plagued with internal conflict. (80)

In the same chapter, the authors discuss specifics of how land reform was evaded, a particularly enlightening discussion for readers not familiar with land reform issues:

The loopholes in the law have been used by landowners to stall distribution or contest valuations in court. Corporations could evade land distribution if workers agreed to buy company stocks, as provided for by Executive Order No. 229 Private lands leased to domestic and foreign corporations were also exempt for ten years or until their lease expired. The law stated that, “In case it is not economically feasible and sound to divide the land, then they shall form a workers’ cooperative or association which will deal with the corporation or business association or any other proper party for the purpose of entering into a lease or growers agreement and for all other legitimate purposes.” This opened the door to notorious lease-back arrangements. (37)

The lifted quote describes how landed elites use their influence and access to legal expertise to subjugate land reform implementation. This establishes the initial proof of exploitation. Discussing the history of PDG in chapter four was a good complement to this, detailing how involved the organization and volunteer workers were with the local communities. This discussion provides a prelude into how NGOs or partner organizations should work to be effective in introducing programs in subject communities. PDG was established by volunteers; they were not funded by any external funding source/aid so their authenticity as an organization made the case studies even more interesting. They were deeply rooted with the community; they shared meals together, and the community willfully provided them food and other necessities (60-62).

Generally, the details provided by the authors paint a clear picture of the whole process by which the beneficiaries’ lack of access to certain resources are used against them by landed elites to evade the land reform process. Despite this abundance of details, the initial chapters still fail to provide a deeper analysis on why agrarian reform communities (ARCs), a sub-project under CARP, failed. The authors mention the

“government pouring its resources into this program, neglecting other aspects of CARP,” which came across to me as an important issue to look into in the land reform process. I was looking for something to explain this failure similar to how Elvinia (2011) problematized the loopholes and deficiencies of CARP implementation and provided context for those issues. The findings would have been useful in juxtaposing the successful and failed case studies tackled in the succeeding chapters.

A lot of issues analyzed in chapters five to seven were overlapping to a certain degree, like how the issue of ejection recurred among case studies and the similar legal troubles they had to overcome. In all, in each case study, farmers had to have access to legal aid to be able to support their cause for effective land reform implementation. One can assume that the claim from chapter one that each study is thematically distinct means that the three case studies are quite different, but their similarities in content and discussions are readily apparent. It was evident in the case studies that landlord resistance was always present and support for post-land redistribution was always lacking.

Chapters five and six both showcase the perception of the respondents as to how they viewed and understood “struggle” in their own perspective as derived from their experiences. The placing of these toward the end, though, was a bit misplaced as the definition of struggle derived from these responses should have been the primary theme of the chapters. The answers were very interesting; they could have become the basis of how the subjects saw and understood struggle. It would have added context to their responses and narration of experiences in the book.

These chapters best reflect the book’s title; the case studies described are distinct “stories of struggle.” The subjects of the case studies defined “struggle” differently as each of them faced different difficulties. Some struggled against violence. Some struggled against their fellow farmers. Some of them failed; others succeeded. The case studies are good references for future interventions by members of the civil society in extending help to farmers under the current land reform program or whatever succeeds it. Overall, the book is valuable for showcasing the rich personal experience of farmers as well as partner organizations (PDG, in particular) and depicts strong inequality and dependency of farmers to landlords even after land was distributed. As was said by farmers in the book, the struggle for land reform does not

end with land acquisition.—**JOHN EDISON UBALDO**, *KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION OFFICER*, *BANTAY KITA*.

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