

Reclaiming People's Dignity: Some Reflections

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When the economic meltdown began to unravel in 2008, Asean grassroots organisations and urban poor movements immediately gathered to confront this, realizing that the interlocking global crises of financial collapse, climate change and food insecurity would have profound impact, not on the banking institutions, but on the lives of the poor. Thereafter, a regional conference in Manila among key civil society networks in the ASEAN took place. There was concern that the crises would worsen the pervasive poverty, inequity and insecurity in the region as a result of neo-liberal globalization.

Despite strong growth rates in most Asean countries, the trickle-down effect of neo-liberalism is a fantasy in a rigid socio-economic system that prevents the poor from escaping poverty altogether and the not-so-poor from effectively staving it off. Work has moved from the formal to the informal sector. There is massive unemployment and millions are working in precarious conditions for long hours and poverty wages. Having nothing to fall back on in times of contingencies, they are forced into a vicious cycle of debt and deprivation.

The meeting became a process of re-examination that convinced them of the need for public awareness-raising and mobilization towards a social protection agenda that is strategic and transformative. A network called Transformative Social Protection Network that would campaign to reclaim people's dignity was formed.

The campaign agenda is a life of dignity for all by putting in place the universal right to life, health, food, education and work, including a sustainable ecological system, and other essential services and social security provisions that will allow people to live as human beings — free from insecurity and free to explore their full potential.

The modifier “transformative” is important to emphasize that this agenda will address the structural causes of poverty and bring to light the redistributive elements of social protection. The agenda will go beyond targeted resource transfers and push for an activist, people-centered State that will institutionalize the universalization of entitlements and devise a national-level system of social protection. Universalized social protection will address the power imbalances in society and create a policy environment conducive to pro-poor development and growth, as well as accountable and responsive governance.

This is in contrast to the WB framework for social protection which, on the other hand, believes that markets, e.g., micro-credits and micro insurance, are the best solution to the vulnerabilities and risks of the poor. The role of the state is limited to providing an enabling regulatory mechanism for

financial markets and institutions, as well as safety nets in situations of crisis. While the WB framework seeks to address the effects of poverty, it barely looks at the structural causes of poverty, and does not question the role of corporate power and state strategies that have led to labour market inflexibility and indecent work.

This WB framework happens to dovetail the neo-liberal policies of the Philippine and Asean states. The network recommended the need to challenge the governments and the Asean to abandon their skewed corporate-driven paradigm for one that is kinder to mankind and the planet. So far most Asean states have offered only minimalist and palliative welfare measures; they have to be obliged to universalize social protection as a democratic and human rights response to the crises.

In the Philippines, the Alliance of Poor People's Movements, a broad cross-section of society's poor and marginalized communities, has initiated consultations with workers, farmers and women's groups, and political formations and NGOs on transformative social protection. These exchanges eventually led to KAMP, a movement called Makataong Pamumuhay, which translates to "Movement for A Life of Dignity."

The campaign is concerned not only with the issue of entitlements but with the overarching question of building an alternative socio-economic system based on the principles of justice, equity and sustainability. The answers to this question are urgent in this country where half of 90 million Filipinos are poor, hungry, homeless and waterless, while billions of pesos are spent on upscale property development like malls, condos and hospitals for the rich, while the poor continue to live in hovels and die just because they don't have access to basic health care.

The campaign sees collective participation and action as the cornerstone that will strengthen grassroots movements and consolidate their power to become effective agents of change. This endeavor will not be complete without the presence of progressive members of the academe, media, church, parliament and civil service.

A public awareness campaign will educate and mobilize Philippine society, especially the poor, about their entitlements. Many Filipinos are not aware of these rights which are guaranteed by international human rights instruments that States are signatories to. Instead, they look to the politicians for social protection, which then becomes leverage for votes and entrenches more deeply patronage politics. Institutionalizing mechanisms for universal access to basic services could de-link social programs from traditional politics.

Universal social protection should be the main thrust. The State should be compelled to serve as a state of and for its citizens, and fulfill its role as the ultimate underwriter of social protection. If it cannot provide these basic entitlements to work, food, health, education and other essential services and security mechanisms, it should be dissolved.

Anything less than the universalization of the basic rights is piecemeal and isolated. However, many forms of social vulnerability can still be addressed at the local level, e.g., within the community or enterprise. The campaign sees the active participation of the poor in the local arena as an empowering experience. Along the way, opportunities present themselves for the people to exercise collective power and achieve small victories that will help dispel their sense of powerlessness and raise their self-confidence, as well as skills.

The campaign realizes that the challenges are tremendous. But significant advocacies and successes towards universalizing social services in some developing countries have given them cause for hope. Examples are Venezuela, Brazil as well as Mexico where an unconditional citizens income has been instituted. A well-known activist-scholar from India is coming at the end of April so that the network

members can learn from the experiences and insights of Indian social movements on the Right to Work and Food Campaign and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

The campaign is utopic, they have been repeatedly told. The time and conditions against universalizing entitlements are not right because of the unavailability of resources. Nonetheless they know from their years of activism that the power of collective mobilization and action could push the limits of existing routes and open new pathways. Progressive economists like Walden Bello who support the campaign say that with enough political will and imagination, there could be creative ways to generate domestic resources.

Aside from budget redeployment, they advise to look into progressive and redistributive taxation and the restructuring of current fiscal and macro-economic policies. The reigning framework of neoliberal restructuring has stagnated the Philippine economy over the last 30 years. Thus the priority given to debt repayment; trade and financial liberalization; privatization and deregulation; and export-oriented production should be reversed to make financing of these social services possible.

These scholar-activists further remind us that the effort to overcome the crises is beyond the ability of one State. The multiplicity and global nature of the crises demand immediate action on regional and international level. It has been proposed for example that for the Asean, a regional social protection fund could be installed, financed by a trade tax similar to the Tobin tax on international capital flows. Military expenditure can also be reduced, with the savings to go to this regional social protection fund.

The involvement of civil society is crucial on all platforms. The project of constructing alternative futures requires a vigilant citizenry, expressed in an active civil society. An example is what we are doing right now, for which we acknowledge the organizers.

In closing, let me share with you the plea of Evo Morales for a dignified life for all through an alternative world order: For us, what has failed is the model of “living better”, of unlimited development, industrialization without frontiers, of modernity that deprecates history, of increasing accumulation of goods at the expense of others and nature. For that reason we promote the idea of “Living Well,” in harmony with other human beings and with our Mother Earth.

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