

# **Study - Food sovereignty : A feminist struggle ? The case of Mindanao, Philippines**

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The starting point of this study is a paradox : among social, institutional and political actors, peasant and family farming are gradually becoming established as legitimate and credible alternatives to an agro-productivist model that has 'run out of steam'. [1] They address both environmental and food-related challenges, are sustainable and successful in agro-economic terms, contribute to social change and operate on a human scale. This is one side of the coin.

The other side of the coin shows a darker reality : the 'good results' and 'good practices' of this type of agriculture are adversely affected by the operating logic and power relations within farming families (between sexes and between generations), the types of social determinism that prevail in communities and society.

Multiple experiences on several continents provide evidence of a positive correlation between agroecology and women empowerment. Women's status and autonomy can be boosted, but one does not automatically lead to the other. The transition to more sustainable means of agricultural production alone is not sufficient to guarantee improvements in gender equality.

Food sovereignty goals to which agroecology contributes and goals related to women empowerment overlap, but are thus not identical. The first issues that spring to mind when considering the struggle for food sovereignty are related to agriculture. But this area of activity and the rural communities most involved remain marked by macho culture and male domination in the North as well as the South, with variations according to regions, but also according to social, religious or ethnic background. Inequalities and overexploitation of labor (mostly unpaid) are factors that generally do not change.

However, an approach based on food sovereignty is not limited to agriculture alone. It has a far broader scope and greater potential to achieve emancipation. Food sovereignty is a key element in the fight for social justice, and part of a radical movement to change the neoliberal development model characterized by inequality in social and economic relations. Food sovereignty, by tackling several exploitative systems, therefore also seeks to bridge the gap separating men and women, rich and poor, North and South.

Food sovereignty is a social struggle, but must also become a feminist struggle. Promoting food sovereignty can advance women's rights and call into question the entrenched nature of the asymmetric division of labor based on gender, but only if organizers and actors involved in this

movement open their eyes and take on board feminist analyses and practices.

The purpose of the study we are proposing is thus to question, in a given context and with specific actors supporting food sovereignty, how and under what conditions a transition to sustainable production methods can contribute to women's emancipation. What are the benefits, but also the risks of such a change for women ?

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to understand inequalities between men and women, in this study we combined general gender analyses (common denominators, common ground in peasant women's experience of subordination and oppression, effects of modernizing agricultural policies on relationships between men and women) with a local qualitative approach. An approach centered on individuals and communities has potential to 'make the figures talk about a broader approach'. It also moves into new and different fields, 'beyond the presence of women in the capitalist economy' (Degavre, 2005). Moreover, it enables the complex relations and 'concrete arrangements' (Guétat-Bernard, 2014) between men and women to be better grasped and highlighted. What ordinary constraints and threats do women labor under ? What individual and collective strategies are developed by women within families, in the community, and within organizations for the rights of women and farmers to be taken into account, and with what results ?

The study put forward here is the result of a brief mission to the island of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines in March 2015. We collaborated with the NGO MTWRC (Mindanao Tri-people Women Resource Center) - partner of Entraide et Fraternité in Belgium - located in Cotabato, and received valuable support from Sindy Soler, which enabled us to make contact with partner organizations of the Mindanao Tri-people Program on Peace-building and Food Sovereignty. These are namely SUMPAY, DKMP, CONZARRD (Convergence of NGOs/POs in Zamboanga del Sur on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development), TRIPOD (Tri-People Organization Against Disasters Foundation). It also allowed to make contact with nearby organizations such as LAFCCOD (Lanao Aquatic and Marine Fisheries Center for Community Development) and KILOS KA. The information and data were gathered during three focus group meetings, each involving around twenty women and a few men from partner communities of DKMP, LAFCCOD and CONZARRD, and during discussions and interviews with resource persons.

In order to address our initial question on the potential for women's emancipation following a sustainable agricultural transition, our thinking process was structured in several stages. First, we placed the transition process in context, which entailed an analysis of its local, but also national and global dimensions. Next, we endeavored to understand the issues and motivations underlying this process, and the advances and constraints it leads to. Finally, since this agricultural production method essentially relies on family labor, it is necessary to consider the role of the farming family, which often resembles a 'black box' : not enough is known about private life, codes, practices, or the way it works. Misconceptions and ignorance tend to give a partial or idealized version of reality.

Once this backdrop is in place, a final stage will consist in identifying factors in the transition process that promote food sovereignty, and analyzing their impact on women. Aside from general principles and intentions, do the goals of food sovereignty and women empowerment coincide in reality ? What are the obstacles and limitations, and how can they be overcome ?

## NATIONAL AND LOCAL SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

The dual vulnerability of women farmers, as women and as peasant farmers, added to other discrimination factors that sometimes come into play, means there are numerous complex challenges to be faced. Before turning to internal issues specific to farms and the structure of the family, let us first review the external constraints (agricultural and economic context, development model) affecting small farmers in the general context of agricultural decline in the Philippines.

### **1. The illusion of development**

After fourteen years of dictatorship and a long dry period marked by economic stagnation and poverty, there has been a change in perception and some degree of optimism has reigned since President Benigno Aquino III came to power. The economic results recorded since 2012 are leading the country to setting itself up as the region's 'newly emerging market' and 'rising star', and to tend being recognised as such by the international community, the credit rating agencies and therefore the investors. That is in spite of a slowdown in growth during the first two quarters of 2015 when the Philippines recorded a 5.6% increase instead of the hoped-for targets of 7 to 8%.

Seen for several decades as the 'problem child' of the area, the country has built a development model based on several pillars. The service sector [2] is the first one ; specifically the outsourced business support services that have made the country a major competitor to India for English-speaking call centres. Then come the property and construction sectors, and lastly the huge export of labor - to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in particular - that has been supported as a way of development for the country. The Philippines is the world's second biggest source of migrant workers after Mexico. Their number now stands at over eleven million, i.e. over 10% of its total population and about 22% of its working population. In 2013, The Economist estimated that money sent home by workers (remittances) amounted to 25 billion dollars, i.e. about 10% of GDP, against just 3.9 billion dollars in DFI for the same year, being the lowest level in the ASEAN member states

The current development strategy was set by the government in the last medium term Development Plan that forms the frame of reference for the period from 2010 to 2016. The watchword in this document, inspired by President Aquino at the start of his term of office, is 'inclusive growth'. Whilst the expression sounded promising at the time, it has since lost its aura, and well beyond the borders of the Philippines as well. The main flaw in this approach inspired by international circles and repeated over and over in numerous emerging countries, is that it does not propose any serious route to development. According to its instigators, the strategy, inspired by neo-liberal doctrine, would enable the whole population to share in the fruits of growth through the knock-on effect (trickle-down theory). In fact, 'wealth distribution has favoured only a few, encouraged mainly by deregulation, financialization, privatisation, the State's withdrawal from traditional areas of social protection and the increase in fiscal regressivity' (Alternatives Sud b, 2015).

Unfortunately, the Philippines has been no exception to what became the rule. Admittedly, a certain level of growth is observed, but the unbalanced and exclusionary nature of development policies has left rural areas on the margins and accentuated the divides that already existed between town and country and between rich and poor. There has been an acceleration in growth but not in steady and sustainable economic development, yet that was the new president's priority.

Bénigno Aquino, who enjoys a comfortable level of popularity amongst the population, has denied playing into the hands of the powerful and means to distinguish himself from his predecessors. As evidence of that, he puts forward the anti-corruption and anti-poverty campaigns initiated by his administration. He has indeed acted in a determined manner as regards anti-poverty, reinforcing a Conditional Cash Transfer programme right from the start of his term of office, so that it now covers

three million of the poorest families. These subsidy policies have undoubtedly enabled millions of Filipinos to keep their heads above water, but they have not allowed them to become engaged in or to participate in the country's emergence. According to data published in 2013 by the office of statistics, 27.9% of the population was still living below the poverty line, almost the same result as in 2009 (28.6%) and 2006 (28.8%). In terms of good governance, the government has also undertaken bold reforms that met with success at the start of the 2010s. But the scandal of the misappropriation by senators and members of Congress of funds intended for local development projects (the 'Priority development assistance fund') is a significant example - amongst others - of the limitations of the anti-corruption campaign and the sheer extent of a scourge that is deeply rooted within the country at every level of power [3].

There is a discrepancy between the declared intentions and practices of the government and its administration. Despite more affirmative policies aimed at greater redistribution, there has been no clear change of direction in economic terms. The team in power has subscribed to the continuity of neo-liberal policies implemented since the 1980s, following the Structural Adjustment Programme imposed by the World Bank and the IMF and reinterpreted, with varying degrees of force, during the terms of office of Fidel Ramos (1992-1998), Joseph Estrada (1998-2001) and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001-2010).

## **2. The pillars of an unsustainable development model**

### ***Debt 'restructuring' and repayment***

Given the country's debt level, the Structural Adjustment Programme was meant to improve the its financial position but was actually limited to a long list of painful cuts in expenditure. Debt repayment has radically redefined the shape of the economy. The State, which used to be the biggest investor, has 'pulled out' in order to devote everything to debt servicing, which has become the number one priority in the national budget. During the first three years of Aquino's term of office, 20-22% of the budget was allocated to debt repayment, compared with 8-10% for the 1986-1993 period. In accordance with the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxy, the Filipino State preferred 'to maintain the solvency of financial institutions and the integrity of the financial system at the expense of the well-being of its population and the environment' (Alternatives Sud b, 2015).

### ***De-industrialisation and disinvestment in rural areas***

The Philippines is a notorious example of de-industrialisation. The manufacturing sector accounted for 28% of the economy in the 1970s, before dropping to 26% in the 1980s and 24% in the 1990s. In 2011 and 2012, it represented no more than 22% (Aldaba, 2014). This phenomenon is even more striking as it goes against the overall trend in a region that, at that time, was seeing the rise of first generation newly industrialised countries (dragons) and second generation NICs (tigers). Growth in the sector has been negligible (0.3% between 1980 and 1990) to slow (3% between 1991 and 2000) and the difference in standard of living has widened between the countries in the area. In terms of employment, industry has failed to create enough jobs. Between 1990 and 2000, the sector covered just 9% of total job creation, whereas its contribution to total production was of 24% for the same period.

Another sector suffered a considerable lack of investment since the 1980s : agriculture. Several basic factors lie behind its decline (3.9% growth in the 1970s vs. 1.1% in the 1980s). The first one would be the adjustment policies that caused the melting away of the low public subsidies and investment from which the sector used to benefit. Then comes the agricultural agreement, implemented under the aegis of the WTO - which the country joined in 1995 - that has further weakened the Philippines' agricultural sector and the farming population who made their living from

it, especially by abolishing import quotas.

The leaders' intention was to restructure - 'to modernize' - the agricultural sector for greater liberalization, and to rely on industrial agriculture businesses and large plantations of products intended for export. Opening the markets, through the abolition of quotas and cost deregulation, resulted in a massive surge in foodstuffs coming from abroad. Within a few years, the country became a net importer of agricultural produce, whereas in the past it had been a net exporter [4]. Nationally, but also at a household level, the consequences of liberalization were reduction of food security; weakening of sovereignty and an aggravation of the problems faced by landless farmers (Zacharie, 2002).

In addition to the withdrawal of the State and the liberalization of the agrarian sector, which represented serious obstacles to development and agricultural production, a final determining factor was the absence of political good will and sufficient means to establish an in-depth agrarian reform that would guarantee the economic, social and cultural rights of Filipino farmers.

In 1988, shortly after the country's political opening, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), which initially provided for agricultural land over five hectares to be distributed among the landless, was set in motion. From the beginning, the majority of farming organizations criticized its 'pro-owner' and 'anti-peasant' nature (Borras, Franco, 2010). Amendments introduced because of pressure from the landed oligarchy rendered the text void of any substance. Many owners thus managed to avoid the redistribution of their land by 'legal' or 'extra-judicial' means, or to, at least, retain control of it. Moreover, under the CARP, the land was not actually redistributed, but repurchased by the beneficiary and the authorities who 'reimbursed' the owners so that they received 'fair compensation' (idem). The less well-off beneficiaries therefore did not obtain free land and in fact paid an allowance to the State.

The influence of the landowners' elite on Parliament and the administration allowed it to curb the CARP's ambitions and delay its implementation. However, the historical fight in favour of a land reform led by farming organizations allowed a partial and uneven programme to be applied, although not less significant. Approximately seven million hectares of land were redistributed to approximately 3 million peasant families, which represents roughly half of the total arable surface and two fifths of the country's farming community (idem).

One should therefore not throw out the baby with the bathwater, but this does not make criticism towards the programme less severe. After twenty years of reform and five additional years of an 'improved version' of the CARP (CARPER, Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms 2009-2014), the results in terms of redistribution were not obtained successfully [5], plus the fact that the programme was revealed to be ineffective in redistributing private land. Moreover, the agrarian reform failed to lead the peasants out of poverty. As we will see later in this study: the principle causes include land insecurity and the continuation of a semi-feudal set up in the countryside, as well as the shortfall in production, high costs and charges linked to borrowing and purchasing manure and pesticides.

Although not exhaustive, these three factors - withdrawal of the State, agricultural liberalization and failure of the reforms - are at the origin of the agrarian crisis today affecting more than 50% of the Filipino population. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry sector's average growth rate was of only 2.7% in 2012, whereas the Service sector reached 7.4% that same year. In addition to its magnitude, the crisis reveals the attitude of a government that turned its back to the countryside and considers that half the population 'is not a dynamic source of development' (FGS, 2014). Among the educated, English-speaking and better paid urban middle class, aspiring to a consumerist lifestyle inspired by the American model, [6] the countryside is viewed as a burden slowing down the country's economic



emergence.

Climate change is the last inescapable factor affecting the agricultural sector. The torrential rain and floods of 2012 and the super typhoons Pablo (2012) and Yolanda (2013) caused millions of dollars of agricultural losses and destruction (lost seeds and tools, damaged irrigation systems and storage, etc), took thousands of lives and plunged millions of people into situations of vulnerability and extreme poverty. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, typhoon Yolanda alone would have affected up to a million farmers and fishermen. This sort of disaster underlines the low resilience of vulnerable people's livelihoods to specific but recurring blows.

### ***Migration policies : a false solution***

On average, 4.624 Filipinos leave the country every day to work abroad, representing the equivalent of almost 1.7 million individuals each year (1.687.831 in 2011) [7]. Today the Filipino Diaspora represents 11 million people throughout the world. 75% of these are women, mostly hired as maids. Another four million Filipinos can be added to this crushing figure, covering those who have left the country without a legal work permit or travel authorization. With encouragement from the State and in a context of trade globalisation, the labor force became the Philippines' principal export 'goods'.

The emigration policies are not new. They appeared in the mid-1970s under Marcos dictatorship, but they started out in a minor and temporary fashion. They became permanent and sustained exponential growth in the wake of the structural adjustment measures of the 1980s, which had devastating socio-economic effects : job losses in industry and agriculture and salary reductions in the public services sector [8].

The absence of employment opportunities, low wages and massive poverty are thus among the factors pushing individuals to leave. The uninhibited authorities then see the 'selling-off of the population' (Carroué, 2004) as a way to counter the economic crisis raging throughout the country. The social problems and sources of instability are contained by 'delocalizing them'. The export of labor therefore is a counter-measure, but also a lucrative business thanks to the funds expat workers sent home to their families. The fund transfers help to compensate for low public expenditure on health and education, to cover budget deficits and to stimulate domestic consumption. The export of labor thus mitigates the State's shortcomings.

The institutionalization of the migration policies [9] is inseparable from the effects brought about by the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Program, but it took a new turn with the intensification of trade and the integration of the national economy to the global market. Its specific feature is having sought to model on the demand coming from rich countries suffering from isolated or structural labor deficit. Historically, the requirement for manual laborers from the Middle East and domestic service jobs in certain developed countries were first to appear during the 1970s (Europe, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore). In the 1980s and 1990s, the large markets of emerging economies in Asia (South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore) opened, while the post-industrial countries closed their borders. During the period 2009-2013, the oil-producing countries of the Near and Middle East combined with the Asian dragons represented the greatest share of the flow (table 3). Saudi Arabia alone welcomed 24% of Filipino migrants (2011).

#### ***• Women's migration : strategies and effects***

According to the Filipino Overseas Employment Administration, more than 70% of migrant workers are female. They accounted for only 12% of emigration in the 1970s, a little less than 50% in 1987 and more than 60% at the turn of the millennium [10]. Their majority (+ 60%) are aged from 25 to

34 [11]. They live and work in 197 countries, mainly as maids, but also as nurses, caretakers, office workers, sales people, etc [12] .

At the time of our stay in Mindanao, the majority of the families we met had one or more family members abroad. The funds sent home were counted among the contributions to household incomes.

Socio-economic factors and labor market were decisive in women's mobility choices at international level. These structural elements 'pushed' women to leave, but they could not be isolated from attractive personal or family strategies that 'pulled' women towards departure. On the positive side, migrations allowed 'to maximize gains, and above all, to minimize risks. They were the answer to logics for family revenue diversification and for insurance in order to fight the imperfections of local market' (Vause, 2012). These strategies responded to both survival and sustenance logics, as well as mobility and social climbing objectives for the family. Expatriation also drew many youths from rural areas in Mindanao, who saw an opportunity to leave their complex rural world and its dire outlook.

The perspective of improving family living conditions is at the root of the migratory journey of many women (and youths !) but is not always achieved. The first pitfall : expatriation for several years can cause a decline in living conditions or the breakdown of the family unit. No official statistics were published, but some Filipino NGOs estimate that around 9 million children are 'left behind' by OFW parents. [13] Family dispersal has also led to many cases of broken marriages, conjugal infidelity, school dropouts, and juvenile delinquency.

Second pitfall : the family cannot be considered a cohesive unit contributing rationally and systematically to the development of the household, including economic. Power balance within households may favor the most influent members in terms of decision-making and income appropriation. Remittances sent to the family may be diverted for other means by an unscrupulous husband [14].

Furthermore, the void left by wives and mothers in the reproduction activities they oversaw (social relations, material sustenance, place of residence) is not systematically filled by husbands and fathers. In some cases, in order to have their cake and eat it too, men transfer household chores and care to the eldest daughters (or other women in the family), thus setting a social pattern in which women and girls hold subordinate positions.

The pivotal role women play in the migration process and the validation they feel from obtaining paid employment (though often flexible and poorly compensated) have only partially contributed to their empowerment, unlike modernization theories would suggest. These state that access to paid employment opened doors of opportunity for women, to 'free' themselves from the reproductive cycle and earn their independence. In fact, many migrant women have become multi-functional maids, docile and hardy 'machine-women', with no mobility and exposed to sexual abuse. By leaving their children to raise those of others, they find themselves isolated and exposed in a detached, disconnected, and segmented private, domestic sphere where their limited role is often reduced to mere subordination. Inserting women in the labor market has therefore not been a source of emancipation.

While the mother's departure destabilizes family relations and imperils social reproduction, her arrival in a new family and country is perceived by the latter as a gain. 'Host' countries and families profit from the situation. They exploit these women from countries 'lagging behind in their development' at low cost, improve the quality of their own existence without contributing to the reproduction of the workforce (health care, income security, regeneration of social links, etc.). Within the globalized economy, local patriarchy was replaced by neoliberal patriarchy. In the name of development based on the principles of accumulation and internationalized growth, Filipino

women have been kept at the bottom of the social ladder and have become the 'servants of globalization' (Roces, 2012).

- *OFW : the impasse of growth without development*

The policy of workforce exportation that began under Marcos and continued under the modernizing elites of subsequent governments has yet to be called into question. It continues to represent a core axis of the country's development strategy, despite its negative impact : 'Overseas Filipino Workers are honored by the government and the people for their sacrifice and dedication to work, family, and nation. We welcome their contribution. But we work towards a day when Filipinos no longer have to go abroad to work, when it becomes just a possible option for their career. [15].'

OFW substantially contribute to 'national development' and economy, but growth figures are false pretenses that fail to reflect the 'health' of the entire population. First, the process is unfair and inequitable : while the largest base of the social pyramid tends to improve its lot, at the cost of heavy sacrifices, the State upholds, with the least effort, a dual, illusory economic policy that mainly benefits international consortiums and local oligarchic elites. The process is not 'sustainable' either, as had promised President Aquino. The reproductive cycle problem has been completely ignored, despite the close link between 'reproduction and development' processes. Reproduction is a development resource, and 'there would be no development without reproduction' (Bahr, 2011).

The government's position on the emigration of women is particularly ambiguous. It states it wants to 'protect' the female population by promoting qualified emigration, the development of skills and the protection of women's well-being. It is a clever attitude, in good form, which enables the government to preserve the economic interest on the one hand – women are a highly demanded workforce and the State does not want to give that up – and on the other, keep up appearances by upholding the honor of a country sometimes compared to a 'nation of servants'. This desire to 'preserve national honor while encouraging emigration has constituted two contradictory government concerns leading to paranoid behavior'. [16]

The Filipino economy must find a new way, where the State would finally act as an agent of development and tackle the problems of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. The growth described as 'miraculous' is above all 'artificial' and 'unstable' (Ibon, 2014). It rests on exterior factors such as workforce demand and little on internal production – particularly in the agricultural and industrial sectors – that would help create value through the production of goods and services, as well as technological development and job creation. (ibid)

### **3. Agrarian policy and the peace process in Mindanao**

Overall, development policy guidelines have remained unchanged from one government to the next. Certain segments of the population and certain regions have benefitted from the gains of growth, but they have not trickled down to all levels of society and territory. Deep inequalities have formed in the distribution of wealth and have not been corrected by deliberate redistribution measures from the State.

The highest levels of poverty rates are found in Mindanao, in the south of the Philippine archipelago, particularly in provinces where the Muslim population is concentrated. The sustained lack of basic education and healthcare services, and the disrepair of power, transportation, water and sanitation infrastructures are some of the aspects of the low level of development in the region. Yet the island teems with riches in terms of natural resources. Mindanao produces 100% of the country's rubber, 87% of its pineapples, 78% of its bananas, 74% of its coffee, and it has major fishing resources and enormous mining potential (gold, copper, nickel, manganese, chromite, silver, lead, zinc, iron, as



well as gas and oil deposits). However, agribusiness multinationals, large mining companies, and a few local 'lords of the land' control this 'treasure trove of resources' (Revelli, 2015).

The climate of insecurity hanging over the island for over forty years seems to be the main reason for this precarious situation. It has cost the lives of more than 120.000 people, led to the displacement of two million more, and considerably disrupted the living conditions of the local population. The armed conflict between the government and the Muslim secessionist rebellion cannot be boiled down to a strict security problem whose only answer is a 'war on terror' [17]. The reverse of this interpretation is that it obscures the deep roots of the conflict and fails to take local issues sufficiently into account.

Historically, Mindanao was inhabited in pre-colonial times by Moro Muslims and indigenous peoples (animistic Lumads). The latter were still the majority on Mindanao in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Local leaders (datu) were key players in economic and political terms and were involved in resistance and/or integration processes with colonial authorities, first Spanish, and then American. They wielded recognized power. They controlled territory and regulated the use of the land and its resources. However, this position was compromised by dual development : the expansion of agribusiness and the massive influx of migrants from the islands of Visayas and Luzon.

The American government developed programs to support the establishment of farmers and laborers from densely populated areas in the north on the island of Mindanao. Concurrently, it rationalized land ownership by requiring that land be registered. Unclaimed land reverted to the government, which thus had land reserves to attribute at will. One part was granted to Christian migrants in order to strengthen and extend its authority and hold over these territories. Another was given to transnational and Filipino agribusiness, mining and logging companies.

The rush for Mindanao land, which continued after independence, had a considerable impact on the structure and operation of the agrarian society. Customary land management, marked by its collective aspect and the redistribution of lots by local leaders, had become incompatible with the individual concept of ownership now advocated by the government. With the growth of the plantation economy and the influx of Christian migrants, traditional leaders were marginalized, and the Moro population became a minority on its own territory. Original populations were dispossessed of their lands and relocated. They were also unable to 'benefit' from jobs offered by newly established companies, which preferred 'Christian-settler' workers.

The 1988 land reform (CARP), however, failed to change course by accounting for the historical complexity of land matters. Beneficiaries were ranked according to priority, with those who farmed the land at the top of the list. While seemingly fair, this decision disregarded the communities' earlier demands regarding ancestral domains. The reform thereby formalised the dispossession previously suffered by native groups, seeing fit to distribute 'their' lands - which were not registered - to other poor farmers, particularly Christians.

Inter-community rivalries gradually formed and became fiercer over time, in the political sphere and beyond. In part, the social transformation occurred in Mindanao - propped up by the State - explains the current makeup of society and the contemporary challenges. Many Moro and Lumad farmers - but also Christian farmers [18] - found themselves landless and struggling even more to survive, whereas newcomers - especially (multi)national companies like Dole, Del Monte and Sumifru - were able to receive support and thus consolidate their presence and their gains.

The violence punctuating the daily lives of Mindanao residents does not stem directly from identity or religion. More than that, the conflict is rooted in disputes, some old and some more recent, surrounding the issue of land. The government, in adopting unequal and discriminatory policies, as

well as policies focused on cultural differentiation, has distorted the principle of equality for all and rationalised the denial of rights to the oppressed native population. In addition, within Muslim governing bodies, neither the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) nor the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) have given priority to the issue of land in their political agenda or in their negotiations with the government. No action plan or redistributive reform proposals have been established to try influencing the concentration of wealth or the control of resources. As a result, fragmentation of the agrarian society along ethnic and class lines is unlikely to abate.

## **FAMILY FARMING AND GENDER**

### **1. Small-scale, sustainable family farming**

The Filipino government's inconsistent development strategies have had disastrous effects on rural areas, both socially and environmentally, jeopardising small farmers' living conditions. Faced with 'the only way forward', as it was presented to them, certain local players mobilised to pursue a vision of change and adaptation on the basis of their particular concerns.

Central to these concerns is the key issue of a lack of rights or opportunities to access the resources needed to survive. The resources in question include both tangible and intangible dimensions (knowledge, traditions and so on) resulting from 'a social, cultural or productive relationship' (Guétat-Bernard, 2014), of which the rules and conditions of access vary depending on the context.

Confronted with this lack of access, individuals and communities have developed 'compensatory strategies, also known as adaptive strategies [...] using resources available on a daily basis or during periods of crisis' which could prove 'reliable, sustainable and socially just' (Delcourt, 2014). Accordingly, these stakeholders are led to invest in 'the diversification of livelihoods and resources' to improve 'their safety and wellbeing' (idem).

The liberalisation of agriculture, attacks on development, as well as the armed conflict and natural disasters have affected the daily lives of Mindanao residents. In that context, small-scale and family farming systems have offered greater potential and a credible alternative in effectively addressing problems related to hunger, declining ecosystems and climate change.

Many farmer families have decided to engage in sustainable farming practices and have adopted a perspective based on change and adaptation. Hundreds of households, members of farmers' organisations (CONZARRD, DKMP, MTWRC, TRIPOD and SUMPAY), have embraced 'organic, eco-friendly crop production' (MTWRC, 2013) with the aim of achieving food sovereignty.

This agricultural model is especially modifiable to suit the limited needs and resources of small producers. It optimises family farms at a lower cost and builds on the existing capacity for innovation and traditional agricultural expertise. It avoids the use of costly equipment and external inputs (pesticides, fertilisers, plant seeds, etc.), thereby lessening the burden on household budgets. Thus, these practices have the capacity to reduce risks such as debt, to raise income levels and to strengthen the resilience of small farmers facing climate hazards. For these reasons, they ensure greater 'autonomy in relation to external economic constraints' (Delcourt, 2014).

Whilst this alternative path does not require much start-up capital, it is labor-intensive. This surplus labor may spur job creation, but may also constitute an excessive workload added to the daily chores, which household members already perform. The family-based and collective organisation of crop production presents undeniable strengths in building food sovereignty and provides positive benefits for the family unit as a whole. The sticking point is that the distribution of labor – both

productive and reproductive - is not divided up equally within households. As we mentioned earlier, the family is not a coherent and rational unit. Power relations can favour some family members while disadvantaging women.

## **2. Women's rights in the agricultural sector**

The Philippines is recognized as the star pupil in the Asia-Pacific region in matters of gender equality, representing an exception in an area marked by high levels of inequality. The country came in at 7<sup>th</sup> in a ranking published by the World Economic Forum in the Global Report on Gender Parity. However, the countries were ranked 'regardless of [their] prosperity levels', and the ranking should therefore be treated cautiously, as Delphine Lacombe has demonstrated (2014).

The period of democratisation which succeeded the fall of the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 allowed for a new constitution to be written and for legal reforms to be passed, a testament to the government's newfound commitment to formal equality (in civil, political and social spheres). As such, family, inheritance and property rights in the Philippines all appear broadly neutral ; women and men enjoy the same rights. Legal reforms, government policies and committees devoted to women's issues created in an optimistic climate - and influenced by the globalisation of gender politics through major global women's conferences - certainly enabled progress in terms of participation in power structures and decision-making, as well as in combating violence.

Nevertheless, objective limits remain at various levels. The neutrality of the laws is relative and demonstrates the partial impact of legislative tools. The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988 stipulates that female farm workers have the same rights as men in terms of land ownership and participation in advisory boards and decision-making bodies. In the 1992 bill about the role of women in the nation's development and construction, the trend toward equal treatment was reaffirmed in terms of land reform and land distribution programs.

When these measures were implemented, however, women were indirectly disadvantaged, as we were told by the women of Mindanao. In fact, the reform favoured two categories of people : the landless and permanent farm workers. Yet, according to local practice, men work the land 'full time' whereas women work it 'part time' or 'seasonally'. As a result, women were 'assigned' to the third position in the order of priority, and it was predominantly men who benefited from the redistribution of land. That said, a few years later (in 1996 and 2001), the Department of Agrarian Reform adopted new measures that reduced gender-based discrimination in selecting beneficiaries. Another major achievement : from that point on, the names of both spouses were listed on the property deed 'if [they] worked together and farmed communal arable land'. While the adjustments led to some improvements, they did not quite achieve equal treatment. Data from the Department of Agrarian Reform show that between 2009 and 2012, 26% of beneficiaries were women.

The conclusions of a comparative study done in 2011 by MTWRC on women's participation in farming in Mindanao reveal that 'only a small fraction of women from the three groups - migrants, Moro and Lumad - own land. Land ownership in rural areas remains dominated by men. Moreover, many women farmers are prohibited from owning land, a carabao, a house, farming tools or a motorbike. They nonetheless have access to loans and financial services'.

Another significant problem in the countryside is the fact that written law is not widely enforced. Egalitarian legal measures - particularly relating to property rights - have thus been ineffectual, in particular due to the prevalence of customary law and religious traditions in rural communities. Customary law is not inherently incompatible with land security for women, but the interactions observed in the Philippines between varying standards in a legally pluralistic context have broadly affected social relationships and gender relations through the reinforcement of male domination and

unequal gender standards.

In some parts of the country, especially on the island of Mindanao, Muslims – estimated at over 5 million individuals based on 2010 figures, or 5.5% of the national population [19] – refer to the Code of Muslim Personal Laws in matters of family relations. This code was enacted in 1977 as a concession by the regime of Ferdinand Marcos to pacify Muslim separatists. The confessionalisation of the legal framework of women's rights certainly presented difficulties and damaged the unifying character of the law.

Muslim women's groups [20] attempted to initiate a constructive dialogue about a process of legal reform within their community, but it almost automatically sparked a controversy from traditional and conservative elites regarding the lack of recognition for ethnic and religious identity. The laws, rules and customs Muslim women are burdened with render their status and living conditions especially precarious.

Thus, Muslim women are now somehow held hostage, commanded to choose between aspirations for equality and devotion to their religion. Until this is overcome – particularly by deconstructing traditional religious discourse – they are currently forced to obey their husbands to be able to farm the land or acquire property, and they are ineligible to become landowners.

The case of Moro women highlights the potential differences among women and the need to 'account for multiple intersecting identities which underlie the stigma facing an individual. Race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and place can be as much, if not more, of a determining factor in how women live and how they are perceived by society' (Alternatives Sud, 2015). To address the differentiated needs of women and men from diverse social groups, it is necessary to move beyond the simplistic view of reality, being two opposite categories : men and women.

Women's access to and control of land remains generally uncertain in Mindanao, mainly due to the complexity of land-ownership systems, legal pluralism and discriminatory land policies.

### **3. Women's double shift**

During our stay, workshops were organized with three groups of about twenty women and two or three men from the Christian and Moro communities, DKMP, LAFCCOD, and CONZARRD partners. Unfortunately, no workshops could be arranged with indigenous women. Without generalizing from lessons learned in focus groups at local level, these have enabled – in conjunction with scientific studies on gender inequality in agrarian systems – a better understanding of the complexity of relations and tangible arrangements between both sexes.

An early exercise proposed during these discussions consisted of drawing up a schedule of the types of everyday activities performed by women and men. Participants were asked to describe their day from the moment of waking until bedtime, and to evaluate how they spent time on average. The exercise was carried out on two occasions in rural Christian communities and once in a Moro fishing community. The nature of the activities performed by men was considerably different, such that they are recorded in two separate categories : Men I and II.





fatalism. They believe the situation can be improved and wish to see it evolve. For this reason, they organize and mobilize on the issues that affect them using the means at their disposal.

### 3. Agricultural transition and involvement of women

The second activity concerned the division of agricultural labor between men and women. The participants belonged to farming families that mainly produced organic rice. They decided to replace chemical cultivation - very expensive - with local organic techniques. This process often took place gradually and most farmers temporarily bolstered part of their production with chemical fertilizers.

Women's responses to the agricultural transition process toward more sustainable means of production are generally positive. The majority of women who participated believe that organic agriculture reinforces food sovereignty. They point out the good levels of agricultural production, low input costs (pesticides, fertilizers, etc.), nutritional benefits, health of families, and environmental conservation.

Having collected and exchanged these first impressions, various groups were asked to describe in details the different stages of rice production, from seed selection to product sale, and indicate which tasks are performed by men or women.

|                             | Men | Women |
|-----------------------------|-----|-------|
| 1. Seed selection           |     |       |
| 2. Planting                 |     |       |
| 3. Weeding                  |     |       |
| 4. Harvesting               |     |       |
| 5. Post-harvest processing  |     |       |
| 6. Marketing                |     |       |
| 7. Seedling selection       |     |       |
| 8. Seedling preparation     |     |       |
| 9. Seedling transplanting   |     |       |
| 10. Weeding                 |     |       |
| 11. Harvesting              |     |       |
| 12. Post-harvest processing |     |       |
| 13. Marketing               |     |       |
| 14. Seedling selection      |     |       |
| 15. Seedling preparation    |     |       |
| 16. Seedling transplanting  |     |       |
| 17. Weeding                 |     |       |
| 18. Harvesting              |     |       |
| 19. Post-harvest processing |     |       |
| 20. Marketing               |     |       |
| 21. Seedling selection      |     |       |
| 22. Seedling preparation    |     |       |
| 23. Seedling transplanting  |     |       |
| 24. Weeding                 |     |       |
| 25. Harvesting              |     |       |
| 26. Post-harvest processing |     |       |
| 27. Marketing               |     |       |

From the outset, it appears that women are involved at all levels of production (soil preparation, planting, harvesting, and processing). By virtue of the tasks they perform, the time they dedicate, and the decisions they make, women surpass the role of helper, in which they would be limited to giving their husband a hand. Women have therefore gained responsibilities - a trend observed in family farming as a whole [21] .

From a positive perspective, the new roles women play have imbued the knowledge they possess with value as well as allowed them to become key players in production processes ('seed selection') and the methods of ecosystems and environmental conservation. Seen from a more negative angle, this additional responsibility has also led to work overload. The 'opportunity' to take on responsibility should in fact be looked at taking into account 'concrete capabilities' [22] (Sen, cited in Guétat-Bernard, 2014) and the available time that women actually have. Assuming both reproductive and productive roles, 'they have a limited time budget compared to men, and are therefore at a disadvantage' (Guétat-Bernard, 2014).

Although, during discussions and within certain groups, women sometimes confusingly tended to minimise their role or not to make obvious the duties they were in charge of. For example regarding organic rice production, they did not mention their involvement in the production of vermicompost or the multiple roles they play at the post-harvest stage, like in commercialization. Nor did they spontaneously bring up in discussions the 'little tasks' they perform during the day, which they seemed to regard as an extension of their domestic chores. It was only during visits to the farms or in discussions held where they live that certain responsibilities were acknowledged : 'Hey, who's

looking after the vegetable garden near the house ? 'Who feeds the animals here ?' etc.

There is no de facto link between the feminisation of agriculture and the advancement of women. In order for agriculture management to become 'shared', it is essential that women gain better control over the means of production on the one hand, and on the other, for their 'capability' or 'power to act' to be strengthened.

### ***Advances and limits in terms of food sovereignty***

MTWRC and its partners set out various levels of demands : social, political, environmental, gender-based, etc. They champion the idea of sustainable family farming in a context marked by the stresses of development, and combine this action with the promotion of greater gender equality in social relations within families.

After several years of action aimed at this, MTWRC and its partners have managed to demonstrate the positive effects that result. Several hundred households now follow organic or environmentally friendly farming practices. The 'Tri-people' programme destined to build peace and food sovereignty has facilitated the development of sustainable methods and technologies ; introduced training sessions and campaigns on gender and food sovereignty, carried out political lobbying, etc. Moreover, the actions implemented have increased land tenure security and helped to consolidate peace.

However, these positive initiatives are limited, on the one hand by being confined to a local scale. The 'organic' farms are like little 'lost' islets in the midst of land stretching as far as the eye can see, farmed using conventional methods, with heavy reliance on pesticides, herbicides and other chemical fertilisers, and aimed at the export market. On the other hand, the 'gender and food sovereignty' programme remains fragile because of its dependence on external financing.

For several years now, the Filipino government has however been promoting organic farming - through law 10068 - and has financed a national programme worth several million dollars a year. President Benigno Aquino III has also adopted a position in favour of the benefits of organic farming, judging it to be 'the way of the future, not only to address hunger, but also to sustain health and environment' . State support for organic farming is a positive factor, but nonetheless demonstrates the inconsistency of a government policy that is playing 'pyromaniac fire-fighter', defending the interests of agribusinesses that cause harmful effects, and then claiming to remedy them through a programme of under-financed actions.

In addition to the lack of strong policy, organic farming is also meeting resistance from small farmers. Despite the acknowledged advantages, the risks posed by the transition process are real and often deemed too great as they are thought to jeopardize family income and means of subsistence. Resistance is linked to the rather high production costs - except for self-provision of compost and processing of organic fertilisers ; to the 'enforced rest' period for the decontamination and remediation of the soil, during which nothing grows ; to the time needed to reach production levels equivalent to those achieved with conventional farming ; to the 'human' and time costs to compensate for the non-use of herbicides ; to the risks posed by the renewed outbreak and 'invasion' of insects, etc.

The causes of such resistance are therefore numerous and found at several levels, thus curbing the potential offered by this alternative agricultural model. There is still much to be done, but it seems clear that the implementation of sustainable forms of family farming will not be possible if it does not benefit from proactive public intervention, clarifying their role and place. The creation of a national programme within the Department for Agriculture is a move in the right direction but is still

not enough to bring about lasting change to the political positions in terms of agriculture.

### ***Advances and limits in terms of equality between men and women***

In the programme conducted by MTWRC and its partners, women have shown to be key players in rural development. Owing to their central role as regards their family's food and well-being, they have demonstrated a keen interest in the dietary and health advantages offered by organic farming. Consequently, they have often taken initiatives and sought to convince their husbands to switch over to sustainable techniques. However, they have met with strong objection in cases where the husband was not a member of one of the organisations himself and therefore did not have access to information on this type of agriculture. Within the context of organic rice production, we noticed that women played multiple roles at each stage in production and had increased their level of responsibility.

Through this process, women's burden has however increased, since men do not take on an equivalent share of the domestic work in return. Asymmetry in the division of household tasks and caring duties has persisted, and so has male domination in household matters. 'For women, the restrictive nature of a system based on overworking them has reproduced patriarchal and unequal practices and attitudes within families, practices and attitudes that have themselves been patiently built up and strengthened by the subordination of women in social relations throughout the history of agrarian societies'.

Moreover, improving the status of women in organic farming happens at 'the local level' (Bertrand, 2011). There is a general tendency to associate women with their immediate locality and indigenous provenance and there would subsequently be the risk of restricting them to this local scale. At present, one of the challenges still to be taken up, lying within the scope of actions taken by MTWRC to promote peasant farming and food sovereignty, is for women to succeed in going beyond the local boundaries to give their actions more visibility and more publicity. This expansion phase could be carried out at an area level but also through collective actions by linking up with other social movements and networks - female and mixed - with converging interests. One of the targeted objectives is for these women to 'come back', strengthened by their experiences, and to politicise the domestic sphere and community by challenging the views, habits and ideologies that contribute to gender essentialism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The inconsistency of the development strategies drawn up by the Filipino government has hit rural areas and had a lasting adverse effect on small farmers' living conditions. Faced with what was presented to them as 'the way to follow', local players of both sexes rallied together in the objective of transformation or adaptation, based on specific concerns and the areas they live in.

Working to increase food sovereignty goes beyond the realm of agriculture alone. Fighting for greater social justice, it allows one to tackle the various forms of exploitation and oppression that share common ground, notably inequalities between men and women. Sustainable family farming is a possible route to sovereignty but it is not gender-neutral. In order to get past this stage and not reproduce an agrarian society built around the subordination of women (in the family, community and society), promotion of this alternative agricultural path must be backed up by the championing of fair social relations within families. The family nature of farming is crucial, but much consideration must be given to this organisation in order for it to be more supportive of gender equality, particularly in 'negotiations' to divide the excess farm work.

Demands for greater equality have often been written off, wiped out in the face of 'urgency' or 'priority' of fights of a more generalist nature, etc., like food sovereignty (in the narrow sense of the concept). It is up to women to repeat, again and again, so it is finally appropriated by everyone, that compartmentalizing demands and putting forms of oppression into some kind of hierarchy can only be counter-productive to a plan destined to build a society that is truly emancipatory and respectful of everyone's rights.

**Aurélie Leroy**

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## P.S.

\* Cetri. 2 mars 2017 :

<http://www.cetri.be/Food-sovereignty-a-feminist>

\* Translated by Translators without Borders.

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## Footnotes

[1] De Schutter O. in

[http://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2014/04/29/olivier-de-schutter-notre-modele-agricole-est-a-bout-de-souffle\\_4408689\\_3244.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2014/04/29/olivier-de-schutter-notre-modele-agricole-est-a-bout-de-souffle_4408689_3244.html)

[2] In the Philippines, growth is boosted by the service sector that represented 57.8% of GDP in 2014. (31.5% for industry and just 10.7% for agriculture).

[3] According to the Transparency International organisation, the Philippines is ranked 85<sup>th</sup> out of 175 on the Corruption Perceptions Index, which ranks countries by the perceived degree of corruption in their public administrations and political class. In the last three years, the country has improved this ranking from 105<sup>th</sup> place to 85<sup>th</sup>, but its score is still low at just 38/100.

[4] The country went from a surplus of USD 292 million in 1993 to a deficit of USD 764 million four years later. "Increasing importation of competitive agricultural produce in key sectors of the Filipino economy harmed exports and affected domestic production. The traditional agrarian sector (rice, corn, coconut and cane sugar) lost ground and non-traditional sectors (meat, fruits, vegetables, etc), supposedly those favoured by liberalization, only experienced negligible profit compared to the increase in chicken, frozen beef and fresh vegetable imports ". (Tardif, 2013)



[5] Mid-2013, approximately 700 000 hectares had still not been distributed.

[6] The middle class is estimated at 10 million people, around 10% of the total population, and is primarily concentrated in Manila and Cebu.

[7] <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ar/AR2011.pdf>

[8] Teachers and the nurses in particular saw their wages decreasing appreciably, which lead to a number of them volunteering themselves for emigration.

[9] The term Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) was made official during Fidel Ramos' presidency, in order to recognize minimum legal and economic status to the millions of Filipinos involved. " The installation of a migration program, the establishment of migration infrastructures, the extension of social and political rights to the migrants, the deregulation of the migration industry and the appreciation of the migrants' economic contribution through a number of public activities represent the Filipino government's primary strategies for encouraging and facilitating the migration of its citizens " (Fresnoza-Flot, 2008).

[10] <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/73403/pinoyabroad/overseas-migration-has-taken-the-face-of-a-woman>

[11] <http://www.pcw.gov.ph/statistics/201405/statistics-filipino-women-and-mens-overseas-employment>

[12] <http://www.poea.gov.ph/stats/2010%20Deployment%20by%20Occupation,%20Destination%20and%20Sex%202010%20-%20New%20hires.pdf>

[13] <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/ispeak/59044-strength-sacrifice-ofw-women>

[14] We heard of such instances several times throughout our stay.

[15] This excerpt from President Arroyo's speech during the sixty-second session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 28, 2007

[16] <http://didel.script.univ-paris-diderot.fr/claroline/backends/download.php?url=L0NPVVJTMylBc3VuY2lvbl9GUkVTTk9aQV9GTE9UL0NoYXBpdHJlNlRoZXNlX0ZyZXNub3phLUZsb3QucGRm&cidReset=true&cidReq=47PM5034>

[17] A loyal ally of the Bush government in its war on terrorism, the Arroyo government attacked the extremist fringes of the Islamic opposition, such as the Abu Sayaff group, as early as 2002.

[18] A majority of Moro and Lumads, but also Christians who failed to sustain their land use (sometimes due to the lack of infrastructure on the island) or who could not be absorbed by the labor market.

[19] <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/2014%20PIF.pdf>

[20] <http://www.wluml.org/fr/node/531>

[21] Women assume an increasing role in peasant farming that can be perceived as 'an extension of their domestic work and responsibility for feeding the family' (Elson, 2010).

[22] “A capability is, according to the definition Amartya Sen proposes, the actual possibility that an individual has to choose various combinations of functions ; in other words, an evaluation of the freedom they actually enjoy” (Guétat-Bernard, 2014).