

*Annex A***Advocacy Among the Farmers:
From the Eyes of a Community Organizer**

Gani, in his late 20s, is a community organizer (CO) working with the RDI in Leyte. He has long been a CO, in search of a meaningful life and devoted to work among the rural poor. After all, he grew up and studied in Leyte. He had seen how poor farmers in the villages of Leyte worked like horses to earn their meals. Many of them, Gani knew, had long been leaseholders of the lands but never earned enough from the lands that they tilled as their own. The reason was that farmers had to share part of the harvest with the landowner, spend for the production, and bring their crops to the market, which more often than not had never been generous in giving a good price. The farmers' crops were also often hit by typhoons or floods that easily washed away the crops from the mountains and hills of Domonar, in Ormoc, Leyte. Ormoc is extremely denuded and a flash flood can easily wash away one's investments of hard labor in the fields.

While riding a *habal-habal* (the local term for a motorbike that carries passengers to remote areas in Ormoc) with Gani on the way to Barangay Domonar, I asked him how he got into his work at RDI. He narrated how at an early age, he was exposed to the hardships and the difficult life of farmers. He had worked with the PPI as a rural CO prior to his job at RDI Leyte. He liked the work and enjoyed being among the farmers. He has a feeling of fulfillment and absolutely feels good about what he does for the poor farmers. When PPI was transformed into the RDI, he applied as a CO. Because he worked with PPI before, it was easy for him to be accepted into the RDI. Information about the applicant, his track record, and familiarity with PPI and CO work, which the RDI shares strongly, as well as trust and confidence in the person and his ability, were the credentials that landed him the job.

Gani related to this researcher that a CO cannot just be in the community all the time. The CO has to learn to bring the stories of farmers into a level of ideas and disseminate these. The farmers' experiences and day-to-day ordeals need to be told and retold. In other words, all these things that a CO learns and observes from the community must be documented. The CO needs time to make a journal and to write his activities, the farmers' responses, and the outcomes of his dialogues and meetings with the farmers. A CO has to have skills in community integration, be able to adapt to the situation in the community and the farmers' schedules, and have the ability to communicate with ease. Knowledge of the dialect is quite important and crucial to community work. One has to have the openness to deal with and adjust to a difficult life. That's how it is in the community—to eat what the farmers eat, to be patient and to wait till the farmers are free to talk to the

CO, and sometimes, to join the farmers in their work. When all RDI staff come to meet together for an assessment of their work, the CO must be equipped to analyze events and situations, to make a decision when called for.

Gani narrated how the CO helped the farmers in Barangay Domonar decide to occupy the lands of an owner who refused to yield to the decision of the Department of Agrarian Reform. Sometimes, the CO also serves as consultant to the farmers who ask the CO what to do, what steps to take, and how to carry out plans. The CO is a "jack of all trades." The life of a CO is hard, but it is interesting, challenging, and not at all boring.

From time to time, Gani's dream of going back to school for further studies visits him. He said he wants to learn some more and gain new skills to become an even more effective development worker. But times are hard for the RDI. Gani is not optimistic that the RDI will be able to support him in his studies, although he hopes that through the RDI, there could be opportunities to learn and to grow as a CO and as a person. After all, life is about continuous learning.

As we moved across the rugged terrains of Domonar, up and down the dirt road, I warned Gani to make sure that I make it through the barangay with him. The roads were so bad and rough I feared I would fall off the *habal-habal* and that Gani would finally find himself reaching Domonar alone. He laughed. He recalled how five years or so ago, the RDI staff would come to Domonar trekking along untravelled trails. There were no dirt roads then; only grass and mud. No *habal-habal* could get in. People had to walk about three kilometers from the national highway. Gani said, "now, we should be grateful that there is at least this dirt road - no matter how rugged it is!" Two jeepneys regularly come to the barangay twice a day, overloaded with passengers and cargo, like a decorated Christmas tree. One jeepney driver is himself the operator and also happens to be the Chair of the cooperative in Domonar.

This cooperative is a member of the so-called BRAMO, Inc. BRAMO stands for *Benepisyario sa Reporma Agrario sa mga Mag-uuma sa Ormoc*. BRAMO has three cooperatives with a total of more than 600 members. The organization is registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). About 50 percent of the members are sugar farm workers, or those that are not even tenants nor leaseholders. They are wage earners, most of them earning as low as P70.00 per day. The highest paid worker gets P184.00 per day. During the lean months when there is no work, the farm workers have to leave the villages and find jobs elsewhere. Farm workers are really more marginalized than tenants or leaseholders. Nevertheless, according to Gani, all of them are impoverished.

We finally reached Domonar proper. We went to the houses of cooperative officers to inquire about cooperative members. One of them said that we came late for the meeting, so the other farmers had gone home. We decided to go to the farmers' houses and find out how many we could still gather and meet.

Domonar is a barangay located south of Ormoc. The place is planted mostly to rice, corn, and sugar cane. Some Japanese nationals claim that a portion of the barangay where the grade school is located is a graveyard of Japanese soldiers. The Japanese offered to relocate the school to another site so that they could improve the burial ground. The barangay folks however suspect that the Japanese are in fact interested in the gold bars rumored to be buried underneath the school building.

One farmer I met was Gregorio Marson. He was in his early 60s but looked older. Manong Gregorio was a leaseholder for many years until 1995. The land he tilled was part of a vast 114-hectare sugar land. His parents and grandparents were themselves leaseholders. In the 1970s, during the *Samahang Nayon* (Village Association) days, the Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Association (ARBA) went through a series of training under the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). In 1972, the DAR conducted a survey towards awarding Certificates of Land Transfer (CLT). The farmers took a loan from the Philippine National Bank (PNB) and offered the lands as collateral. With the farmers unable to pay their loans, the lands were foreclosed in 1978 and were taken over by the bank. From the 1980s to 1995, the farmers, including Manong Gregorio, went through difficult negotiations with the DAR and the PNB. In 1995, when PPI got involved, one of the demands set by the farmers and PPI was to review the remittances made by the farmers to the PNB. The farmers decided to form a cooperative to have leverage in the negotiation. Eleven barangays formed their associations and cooperatives and together federated into what is now known as BRAMO. All farmers are supposed to be agrarian reform beneficiaries. With the help of PPI and the Task Force Bagasse organized by PPI, the farmers had the strength to pursue the negotiation with the PNB.

The farmers approached other groups, including the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, the farmers did not get any support from the priests. Later on, the farmers learned that the church benefited from a land donation from the landowners years back so the priest did not want to take any action. The farmers learned later that the PPI had transformed into the RDI. Nevertheless, the RDI provided support by way of preparing and organizing petitions to the bank and mobilizing BRAMO members to negotiate with the PNB and the DAR. In Manila, there was also support from the PPI. Task Force Bagasse also helped to pressure the national and regional offices of DAR. BRAMO at that time was pushing for redistribution of the vast

landholdings, for DAR to facilitate the certification, and for DAR as well as the NGOs to help fund services so that the farmers can improve land productivity. In all these, RDI Leyte was very helpful. In fact, it was virtually the only organization that stood behind BRAMO. Later on, there was trainers' training for technical transfer of skills to farmers, which was also organized by the RDI and which hastened the support for land productivity.

Negotiation with the PNB dragged on for years and some farmers suspected there was connivance between PNB Administrators and landowners. On the other hand, the action of DAR was very slow. The farmers never gave up. But without the help of the RDI at that time, the farmers would not have known the processes of negotiation and of holding dialogues with administrators of PNB and officials at DAR. Many of the farmers do not know the complicated procedures of the system—both at the PNB and DAR. Before the RDI got in, the farmers were simply ignored by the bank. The RDI's presence offered a beacon of light shining through and guiding the farmers about what to do and where to go. Finally, after long hurdling with the bureaucracy, the farmers' remittances of payment with the bank were recognized and the lands eventually were awarded to the farmers.

Today, Manong Gregorio tends his piece of land where he practices diversified farming. He raises pigs and chickens in his backyard. He plants root crops and vegetables in between rice cropping season, and grows tilapia and carpa in a fishpond. He earns between P7,000.00 to P8,000.00 per month, a considerable increase from his farmer's income, which did not exceed P3,000.00 per month. The cooperative which decided to buy a piece of lot for solar drying, now plans to build a warehouse for grains. It intends to access funds from members of the cooperative federation to get a mobile rice mill. Labor would be the farmers' counterpart.

The cooperative committees are functional and active. It has a credit facility for members and a communal farm. The barangay now intends to donate 74 hectares for the use of the cooperative and to carry out the plan for a rice mill and solar dryer.

Other farmers in Domonar narrated their experience of occupying some 20 hectares of sugar lands which were the subject of Compulsory Acquisition under the agrarian reform law. Thirteen farmers were involved in the land occupation move. Despite the resistance of landowners, the farmers and their families forcibly occupied the sugar lands and are presently considered the owners-tillers of the property. Today, the farmers plant sugar cane, peanuts, and vegetables on the land.

Manong Gregorio spoke about the ordeals and the benefits of their enduring advocacy on the land, Gani shared the hard work behind the scenes.

According to Gani, entering the village for the first time was not only difficult because of the inaccessibility of the place, but also because in the beginning, the farmers were suspicious about the motivations of the CO. Through patience and hard work, the COs were finally accepted, and are presently treated as members of households in Domonar. The negotiation with the DAR and the PNB gained recognition, according to Gani, because of the collective support extended by the school and the barangay council. The endorsement by the City councilors in Ormoc also helped gain the attention of DAR and PNB officials. Looking back at the experience, Gani wished there were better links with lawyers and with media people specially during the dialogue of the farmers with landowners. There were some organizations in the City that supported the farmers, such as St. Peter's Parish, St. Benedict's School which used to host meetings of farmers, the Visayas State College of Agriculture, and the City Cooperative Development Council. Until 1997, consultations among NGOs such as PPI, Aksyon, VICTO, and other members of the Task Force Sugarland, did help the RDI in its strategy for exerting pressure on the DAR and PNB.

After the success at barangay Domonar, the allied institutions of RDI Leyte expanded considerably. Supporters of its plans and actions regarding agrarian reform and rural development now include the following agencies:

- Department of Health
- Department of Trade and Industry
- Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)
- Department of Agriculture
- Cooperative Development Authority
- Department of Environment and Natural Resources
- Department of Labor and Employment
- Department of Agrarian Reform
- Land Bank of the Philippines
- City Veterinarian's Office (Ormoc)
- Cooperative Development Council
- Pearl S. Buck Foundation
- Leyte CODE (Code-NGO)
- Pagtinabangay Foundation
- Aksyon
- VICTO.

There is strength indeed in coming together and in providing support in every way possible. The modest support mustered by the farmers' cooperative meant so much to the farmers, and this kept them going. "The taste of success such as in Domonar inspires a community organizer," says Gani. It meant more than just the fruits of hard work; it also meant a better life for the cooperative members.

Now that cooperatives have gained some headway, both the farmers and the COs think about strengthening the BRAMO as a federation.

According to Gani, the training programs he went through under the auspices of RDI Leyte helped equip him for his work. These include training on paralegal work, advocacy, agrarian reform, rural development, documentation, monitoring and tracking the movement of Land Tenure Instrument, participatory rural appraisal, gender sensitivity, and sustainable agriculture. Gani finds all these training topics useful, but he still wants to learn more, to grow, and to be empowered as a leader in development work.

Final Observations

The CO needs to be a “jack of all trades, but should also be a master in effecting changes in the community and in the lives of the poor.” “Effecting changes in the community and in the lives of the poor” after all, is the meaning of advocacy in this case. The competence and skills of a CO are a mix of smartness (being street-smart to be precise) and increasingly of a learned or acquired wisdom on the science and art of governance, community leadership, and values (specifically of patience, commitment, and hard work). Knowledge on governance and community leadership increasingly becomes an imperative. These refer to added knowledge and ability for organizing and facilitating collaboration between community leaders and local government people, who when able to work together, could bring about substance to governance, to agrarian reform, and other changes in the community or municipality. Basic knowledge on the workings of governance, local government, and effective citizen’s leadership are evident in the case of Leyte. Effective citizenship in this case refers to the ability of community leaders and the followers to engage with authorities on matters that affect the citizens. It means the ability of community leaders to assert themselves and the views of those they represent, thereby registering the voice of the ordinary citizens through responsibility-based action. But the ability to be citizens-leaders needs to be developed. This is something to address in planning for capability building.

The values of hard work, patience, and endurance to hurdle the bureaucracy and its red tape, even its pitfalls, are classic, are still necessary. Going back to such training in values is still relevant and could be done. It also helps refresh the NGO on its favorite slogan: “commitment and genuine agents of change for the poor.”

Building a wide network and linking with the broadest support as much as possible—perhaps a work of science on this could be invented or reinvented. It is a matter to think about.

Lawyers, legal assistance, paralegal work do still matter in dealing with the government system particularly on agrarian reform. Agrarian reform is a field so shrouded with technical legalities. Skills and competence on legal and/or paralegal hurdles are crucial to agrarian reform and rural development.