

SEEDS OF HOPE IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COLLECTIVE RESPONSES AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY BUILDING OF THE MASIPAG SMALL FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a health, food, and socio-economic crisis that impacted most especially the poor sectors in the urban and rural communities. It revealed the deep-seated problems in the public health system and the agriculture and food system, and the absence of adequate and accessible basic social services that have historically rendered millions of Filipinos poor, unhealthy, and food insecure.

In the midst of inadequate state support and the government's militarist approach in enforcing health and safety protocols, we witnessed communities responding to the needs of sectors hardest hit by the pandemic including vulnerable frontliners. We witnessed the collective action of basic social sectors and grassroots organizations that forged social solidarities in demanding for government's response to our people's urgent need for food, health, and social protection during the pandemic; stood with the people to resist and struggle against state attacks on human rights; and amplified the people's calls for quality public health, sustainable food systems, and fulfillment of basic human rights.

This paper aims to draw lessons from MASIPAG, a network of small farmers' organizations that creatively responded to this health, food, and socio-economic crisis. It seeks to gain insights from how these organizations of small farmers and women farmers nurtured and sustained their families, organizations, and communities through agroecological farming practices, organizing and organizational development work efforts, and networking,

alliance and partnership building for the common good. This study hopes to lead to a better appreciation of what social solidarity is, and the critical role of small farmers, including women farmers, in building social solidarity towards the promotion of sustainable agriculture and food systems.

This study is significant as it hopes to show how organized farmers, practicing collective/communal, sustainable, and agroecological agriculture serve as one of the foundations of alternative, people-centered, farmer-led rural and agricultural development and sustainable local food systems. It also shows that the basis of the social solidarity that surges during crises, such as this pandemic, actually results from long years of organizing and advocacy work and social movement building of people's organizations and grassroots communities towards radical social transformation.

Keywords: organizing, organizational development, social solidarity, care work, agroecological farming, farmer-led development

Organizing, agroecology, and social solidarity building as a response to the pandemic

The health issues, massive hunger, poverty, and insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the ineffectiveness of the neoliberal development framework which has compelled states to liberalize, privatize, commercialize, and deprioritize food systems, basic social services, and social protection over economic growth. This is the development paradigm that has rendered millions of Filipinos poor, unhealthy, and food insecure.

Liberalization of the Philippine agriculture and food system led to increased landlessness among farmers, feudal relations between landlords and tenants, backward agricultural technology and infrastructure, and unsustainable farming practices. Past and current government administrations have allowed the conversion of agricultural lands into big plantations and corporate farms producing for export rather than for the local communities, producing for profit rather than for food security. The entire food system has been commodified and commercialized—from state promotion of the use of imported seeds of high-yielding varieties, imported chemical agricultural inputs, and farming machinery produced by big multinational corporations, to the control of marketing and distribution systems by food cartels. International trade agreements have dictated agricultural policies that favor the production of high-value

cash crops rather than staples like rice. A strategic goal of our Department of Agriculture should have been towards achieving rice self-sufficiency. Instead, the Philippines is the biggest importer of rice in the whole world. As such, farmers suffer from low prices of their *palay* while consumers suffer from high prices of rice, vegetables, and other basic food resources. Research studies conducted by Ibon Foundation show that agriculture and agrarian reform were allocated an average of only 3.5% of the national budget from 2017-2020 (Guzman, 2020).

Food self-sufficiency does not even figure in the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022 (Guzman, 2020). The Philippines ranked 70th out of 117 countries in the World Hunger Index (UN World Food Program). This food crisis worsened during the pandemic. The September 2020 Social Weather Station (SWS) survey results showed that, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in the Philippines in 2020, 7.6 million Filipinos went hungry. This translates to a hunger incidence of 30.7%. For 2.2 million Filipinos, the hunger was even more severe (Rappler, 2020).

For decades, small farmers in the Philippines and other countries have been advocating for a shift to more sustainable agriculture and food systems, which is a growing demand among farmers worldwide. In 2009, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), a three-year international collaboration initiated by the World Bank, concluded that:

...the current approaches that focus on production for export, liberalised trade and technological, input-intensive agriculture are not working. Not only are they creating major environmental damage, but they are incapable of lifting people out of poverty or even ensuring basic food security. (IAASTD 2009, in Bachman, p. 5)

In 2013, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Trade and Environment Review 2013 was entitled “Wake up before it’s too late: Make agriculture truly sustainable now for food security in a changing climate.” It asserted the need for a paradigm shift from the “green revolution” model to an ecological intensification approach to agricultural development (UNCTAD, 2013). It also underscored the critical role of small-scale farmers as managers of agro-ecological systems. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 2 underscores the need for sustainable agriculture as the solution to ending hunger, achieving food security, and improving nutrition.

This pandemic exposed and affirmed what grassroots organizations and progressive movements have been saying all along—that the capitalist mode of production has intensified poverty; the chronic health and nutrition crisis; food insecurity; crisis of care for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere; a crisis of the reproduction of lives, especially in developing countries (Paulson, 2020, p. 233). It has also brought to the fore the crisis of patriarchy, climate change, racism, and intersectionality of all these crises (Chukunzira, 2020).

At the same time, this global crisis validated the relevance of existing social movements and saw a renewed surge of community/collective responses, of social solidarities, locally and globally. This renewed surge of collective actions and social solidarities during the pandemic is a “historical rupture” wherein we “collectively create alternative modes of living characterized by community and relationship building, by cultures of care for each other and the environment” (Paulson, 2020, p. 233). These social solidarities have been *broadened by vibrant, self-organised and fully bottom-up “networks of care and mutual aid”* (Martinez, 2020, p. 20).

These social solidarities are also responding to the challenge of having to address the immediate survival needs of people while sustaining ongoing multisectoral discourses and broad multi-level advocacies for the ideological change required for systemic transformation (Chukunzira, 2020). We are witnessing progressive civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots neighborhood organizations distributing food and medicines, producing PPEs, giving shelter and protection to the homeless and women victims of domestic violence, while protesting against discriminatory, anti-poor policies during this pandemic. And in these acts of solidarity they:

...are challenging a top down conception of charity or humanitarianism, by spreading norms of solidarity that contrast with the extreme individualism of neoliberal capitalism. Through social interventions, they reconstitute social relations that have been broken well before the pandemic but they also politicize claims, shifting them from immediate relief to proposals for radical social change. (Della Porta, 2020, p. 356)

These new forms of social solidarity and social movements are validating and amplifying calls for local and sustainable “people-led” economies. These people-led economies are those that are spearheaded by self-organized communities and sectors that involve local production and

distribution initiatives oriented around basic needs, centered on principles of the commons/common good, promoting local autonomy and collective sufficiency, agroecology, food sovereignty, and the universal social and environmental principles of local and collaborative/networked governance (Liegey & Nelson, cited in Nelson, 2020).

Social movements researchers Fiedlschuster and Reichle explain social solidarity: a) “as (or based on) shared experience for shared identity or collective identification,” b) as “compassion and a moral duty,” and c) as “political practice,” as a relation of a shared struggle against oppression, a struggle for the same goals (Fiedlschuster & Reichle, 2020, p. 318).

Deriving from Marx’s letter to his comrades in England, Aaron Petcoff explains:

Solidarity comes not from an idealistic conception of justice, selflessness or humanitarianism. It’s not about just “being a better person” than others. Solidarity comes from the recognition that you have a real stake in the outcome of this struggle, too. (Petcoff, 2012)

In the Philippines, as soon as the lockdown in Luzon was declared, there were immediate, spontaneous actions of sharing and mutual aid from and across urban and rural communities, NGOs, civil society organizations, schools, churches, professionals, etc. In most cases, the basis and sustenance of the social solidarity that surged during the pandemic stemmed from the long years of organizing and partnership building, and the collective struggles of community organizations, sectoral mass organizations, working class movements, cause-oriented groups, and activists asserting the fulfillment of basic needs and rights of the vulnerable and marginalized sectors. The social solidarity that established community kitchens and community health teams emerged from organized women who have been asserting their right to basic social services and social protection from the state. Those who provided relief operations are CSOs, NGOs, and communities that have been struggling against development aggression causing environmental destruction and disasters. Those who provided legal and paralegal assistance to NGOs and CSOs whose members were red-tagged, arrested, detained, and killed are organized human rights defenders who have long been championing the rights of marginalized and oppressed sectors.

Scholar and social activist Laurence Cox observed that the greatest social movement surges during this pandemic come from countries “...where ‘independent historical action’—bottom-up self-organisation, social movements—have been strongest before and during the crisis” (Cox, 2020, p. 28).

The social solidarity formations from farmers’ organizations providing food to urban poor communities emerged from organized farmers and local producers that have long been asserting their right to land, to sustainable farming and food systems, to agroecology.

Indian scholar, environmental activist, food sovereignty advocate, and anti-globalization author, Vandana Shiva shares that agroecology is “real farming for real food that is a by-product of this economy of care by the farmers”:

Real farming is farming with nature. It leads to the rejuvenation of biodiversity, soils, water; a rejuvenation of small farms, real farms with real farmers who care for the land, who care for life, who care for the future and produce diverse, healthy, fresh, ecological real food for all. Real food is a by-product of this economy of care. It protects the life of all beings on earth and also nourishes our health and wellbeing. (Shiva, 2020, p. 4)

This study is a contribution to the literature on social solidarity building during the pandemic. It is about the social solidarity that is inherent in and emerges from the *bayanihan*, collective action, and social movement building towards the principles and practice of agroecology of the MASIPAG network of small farmers.

A MASIPAG farmer once said, “Even if one is practicing a full organic system with MASIPAG seeds, if he has no concern for other farmers and society, then he cannot be considered a true MASIPAG farmer” (Bachman, 2020, p. 8).

Research methodology

This case study focuses on the experience of the MASIPAG national network of small farmers organizations in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, of NGOs, and of scientists advocating and practicing agroecology.

As a resource person for the MASIPAG's Organizational Development (OD) program, and as a member of the MASIPAG Board of Trustees (BOT), I have been able to directly participate in various MASIPAG activities—education and training activities, advocacy campaigns, organizational meetings and discussions of the MASIPAG national and regional secretariats and the BOT, and in the farming and organizational activities of the small farmers' organizations of MASIPAG in various regions, prior to and during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, my engagement with the MASIPAG network was through online platforms. Data gathering for this study was done through autoethnography, ethnography, and participant observation—from my direct participation or as a participant-observer in various network activities, albeit via online platforms. Most of these were undertaken during the last two quarters of 2020, although some additional data were derived from focus group discussions (FGDs) and other people's organizations (POs) activities in the first quarter of 2021. Other secondary data were derived from various social media platforms—the MASIPAG Facebook Page and the social media platforms of international formations and alliances which they are a member of. Sources also included MASIPAG publications and articles sourced from the national and regional secretariats. The results of this study were shared with the members of the MASIPAG network.

MASIPAG: Collective responses of small farmers' organizations and social solidarity building during the pandemic

“The spirit of community and the respect for the shared world are always present in farming communities.” (MASIPAG Mindanao Facebook Page, 2020)

A few weeks into the lockdown of Metro Manila and other major cities in the country, alarming news of urban and rural communities going hungry and people's protests at the inadequacy and insensitivity of government's response to the pandemic flooded social media. This situation ignited waves of community responses and social solidarity among communities, civil society organizations, school organizations, parishes and churches, and social enterprises that launched fundraising activities to send food packs, medicines, and PPEs to poor communities and the most vulnerable sectors. Even more inspiring were the creative, innovative, and heroic responses of people's organizations in urban and

rural communities putting together their resources to provide food not only for their own families and communities but to also share these with those badly hit by the pandemic. One such organization is the network of small farmers organizations called MASIPAG.

MASIPAG stands for Magsasaka at Siyentista para sa Pagpapaunlad ng Agrikultura (Farmer-Scientist Partnership for Agricultural Development). MASIPAG is “a farmer-led network of people’s organizations, NGOs and scientists working towards the sustainable use and management of biodiversity through farmers’ control of genetic and biological resources, agricultural production and associated knowledge” (MASIPAG website, 2013).

MASIPAG promotes an integrated approach of helping farmers develop and enhance their practices in sustainable agriculture and agroecology, and evolving farmer-led social technologies for organizing, organizational development, and social advocacy. This farmer-led network gives primacy to strengthening small farmers’ organizations towards the promotion of the welfare and rights of small farmers, genuine agrarian reform, agroecology, sustainable rural development, and food security/sovereignty.

Farmer-led emergency relief activities during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused much fear and uncertainty to small

MASIPAG by the numbers

As of 2016, MASIPAG has:

*512 member people’s organizations
41 NGO partners; 20 church-based development organizations
15 scientist-partners*

*Around 30,000 farmers reached in 63 provinces
188 trial farms (maintaining a minimum of 50 traditional rice varieties)*

Two national back-up farms

Eight regional back-up farms

More than 2,000 rice varieties collected and maintained:

- *600 traditional rice varieties*
- *1,299 MASIPAG rice*
- *506 farmer-bred rice*
- *12 flood-tolerant varieties*
- *18 drought-tolerant varieties*
- *20 saline (saltwater) tolerant varieties*
- *24 pest- or disease-resistant varieties*

70 farmer rice -breeders

12 farmer corn -breeders

More than 100 volunteer farmer-trainers

(MASIPAG website, 2013)

farmers who, even before the pandemic, were adversely affected by the Rice Liberalization Law, unabated Land Use Conversion of agricultural land, and intensifying militarization in the countryside. When the COVID-19 virus started spreading in the country, MASIPAG farmers' organizations were uncertain how they could continue to farm, market their produce, and sustain their organizing and advocacy work. Still, the need to secure food for their families and to respond to the growing hunger among urban and rural poor communities compelled the farmers to find creative ways to produce and share food.

Many MASIPAG farmers' organizations, through their disaster risk reduction management-climate change adaptation (DRRM-CCA) committees, conducted emergency relief operations. Farmers courageously ventured out of their homes and started their "mobile hot meals," community kitchens, and feeding programs. In the Visayas, MASIPAG farmers launched their "*Kampanya Kontra Gutom*" food relief programs. Some of the organizations were able to work with the local government for food relief operations and feeding programs, using the squash noodles, a healthier alternative, produced through the livelihood projects of several farmers' organizations. Others created mobile mini-stores which brought rice and vegetables to the doorstep of families who were "locked in" their homes. In other areas, farmers' organizations worked with their barangay officials to put up mini-hubs of organic produce in the barangay covered courts, so that people could easily access rice and vegetables at affordable prices. In Capiz and Roxas City, members of the national fisherfolk network, Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (PAMALAKAYA), had barter-trades with MASIPAG members, exchanging rice and vegetables for fresh or dried fish during the quarantine period.

Believing that the best way to address this health crisis is to strengthen people's immune system, MASIPAG farmers and organizers conducted health and nutrition seminars where they shared simple recipes for healthy and diversified meals using organic vegetables that can be easily grown in the backyard. Trainings were conducted online or, whenever possible, face-to-face, as a back-to-back activity of their mobile feeding sessions in various communities. They also had webinars on food processing that helped farmers add value and extend the shelf life of their organic produce.



Figure 1. MASIPAG Visayas' community feeding back-to-back with short orientation on health and nutrition during the pandemic

The network also intensified its trainings and advocacy for urban agriculture and backyard gardening. In Mindanao, their online trainings on backyard gardening led to the creation of a virtual community of urban gardeners and seed sharers through the MASIPAG Facebook Page. Their community radio program and podcast, *Juan Organiko*, continued during the pandemic and was maximized by many NGOs and CSOs for their education and advocacy work. MASIPAG and other NGOs promoting sustainable agriculture created the *Ecotalk* online video discussion that included various topics on organic farming and backyard gardening. These efforts helped many rural and urban poor communities grow their own vegetables in their backyard. For instance, MASIPAG Luzon farmers helped the Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihihirap (KADAMAY), an alliance of urban poor organizations, in setting up the Urban Poor Women Agroecology Garden in a resettlement site in Pandi, Bulacan. Aside from addressing food scarcity during the pandemic, the agroecology garden enabled the women to create programs for sustainable livelihood, resource and waste management programs, and strategies to reverse land degradation (Bulatlat.com, 2020). These agroecology or herbal gardens became their community's source of ingredients for homemade, natural remedies/herbal medicines for the common cold, headaches, body pains, stomach ache, and the like.

Nurturing their seeds, diversifying their farms, and other sustainable farming practices during the pandemic

The MASIPAG farmers remained resolute in their collective efforts to practice sustainable farming that was proving to be the most effective and practical way to provide sustenance to their families and communities during the crisis. Such efforts were captured in the Facebook posts of farmers—among them a woman leader of Katilingbangan Mangunguma kag Mamumugon sa Bongbongan (KAMMABO), a small farmers' organization in Sibalom, Antique:

Even during the lockdown, we were able to go to our farms which are planted to [*sic*] many kinds of food crops. We don't need to buy our food, we are also sure that our food is safe and chemical free. For us farmers, it is important that we have control over our seeds. (Translated from Visayan, MASIPAG Visayas Facebook Page, 2020)

Knowing fully well the importance of securing their rice and vegetable seeds, MASIPAG farmers diligently worked together to sustain their trial farms even during the pandemic. Maintenance of such trial farms is part of MASIPAG's CIMME program—collection, identification, maintenance, multiplication, and evaluation of cultivars of rice, corn, indigenous vegetables, poultry, and livestock.

CIMME ensures that collected species and varieties are maintained in an on-site seedbank for farmers' access. To date, through the CIMME, MASIPAG now has 188 trial farms managed by farmers' organizations. Trial farms have a minimum of 50 TRVs and MASIPAG rice varieties and are living community seedbanks. Farmers study and select adaptive varieties from the trial farms and design cultural management practices suited to their agro-climatic conditions. MASIPAG has two national and eight regional back-up farms where collected and saved seeds are conserved and improved. (MASIPAG website, 2013)

During the pandemic, MASIPAG farmers were able to share indigenous vegetable seeds from their trial farms with their neighbors so they could start their own backyard/communal vegetable or herb garden for an additional food source during the crisis.

Aside from their trial farms, MASIPAG POs also strived to sustain their communal farms and communal vegetable gardens which were the sources of organic and nutritious food and herbal medicines for their families and neighbors, as well as for their feeding programs and mobile hot meals during the pandemic. Some communal farms produced so much that they were able to sell their organic produce and gain some income during this economic crisis.

MASIPAG farmers were already practicing diversified and integrated farming systems (DIFS) in their individual farms as well as in their communal rice farms and communal vegetable gardens. DIFS is a farming system that promotes biodiversity rather than monocropping, nutrient recycling and management, soil and water management, appropriate pest management, among others (Guzman, Zamora, & Bernardo, 2015). Thus even during the pandemic, the practice of DIFS helped the MASIPAG farmers in ensuring a diverse and healthy food source. One of the farmer leaders/farmer trainers of SJONA, a member organization of MASIPAG in Solano, Nueva Ecija, said:

During the pandemic, we continued doing our seed exchange and DIFS, which guarantees that we have diverse crops and diverse sources of food. This is a more effective response to our need for food during this COVID-19 pandemic. We do not need to go out to buy food, our backyard is our “supermarket,” our source of food. We can even share our harvest from our backyard with our neighbors. (Translated from Filipino, MASIPAG Luzon Facebook Page, 2020)

Chemical-based farming and monocropping, promoted during the Green Revolution, had destroyed the practice of DIFS among small farmers. MASIPAG farmers are now reviving and popularizing the practice of DIFS as a more sustainable and healthier form of farming. DIFS enables farmers to plant diverse crops which can be harvested at different times and, therefore, providing them and their families with a steady source of vegetables and fruits all year round. DIFS also ensures a varied and healthier diet as well as diversified sources of income from the sale of organic vegetables and fruits, poultry, and livestock. As one farmer leader and sustainable agriculture practitioner of Sararong Inisyatiba nin Kahinwanmaan sa Wasakon ang Agrokemikals na Lasong-GMO (SIKWAL-GMO), Bicol stated:

We have long asserted that we don't need GMOs which is intertwined with the use of toxic pesticides and herbicides. We have our own traditional rice varieties and sustainable ways of farming. We have also established and developed our diversified and integrated farms which is our source of nutritious food, pride and freedom. (MASIPAG Facebook Page, 2020)

In DIFS, the agricultural inputs come from the farm itself. Therefore, it also reduces the cost of production and sustains the health of the soil and the environment.

During the pandemic, what sustained the farmers' hopeful spirits, their sense of community, and their sustainable agricultural practices was their *bayanihan*. *Bayanihan*—or “*dagyaw*” or “*alayon*” as it is called in other parts of the Philippines—is a communal system of labor where people come together to work on each other's farms and/or livelihood projects, either as reciprocal labor or for a portion of the harvest (Bachman, 2009). The trial farms, communal farms, and other organizational undertakings of MASIPAG small farmers' organizations have revived this *bayanihan* spirit of cooperation and solidarity among MASIPAG farmers and their communities.

Bayanihan was the theme of MASIPAG's participation in Green Action Week (GAW), a global campaign to promote sustainable consumption. In 2020, the GAW campaign theme was “Sharing Communities,” and featured stories from 50 groups in 30 countries that showed that “sharing” and “community” are not only possible but are the necessary response to crises like this COVID-19 pandemic. MASIPAG featured a film on “*Bayanihan*: A Filipino tradition of community sharing and unity,” and a webinar series “*Bahaginan*” focusing on appropriate seed technology, urban/backyard gardening, organic vegetable production and nursery management, seed rights, and the MASIPAG food security agenda. In the video, *bayanihan* was explained as:

...a spirit of community unity and sharing among Filipino farmers. Through the spirit of *bayanihan*, of community sharing and unity, our communities can be resilient, with safe, abundant and affordable food. We achieved all these through *bayanihan*. From harvesting to processing, we help each other. (MASIPAG Facebook Page, 2020)

Bayanihan is how these farmers are resisting the threats of climate change and unsustainable corporate controlled agriculture. (MASIPAG Facebook Page, 2020)

As the quarantine eased, the farmers slowly resumed their *bayanihan* to help each other in their family farms, in their trial farms and communal gardens, and in their organization's socio-economic projects which usually involved the processing of fruits or herbs into food and medicines that can be stored and sold. Seeing the benefits of this spirit of sharing, especially at this time of crisis when a sense of community and connectedness was much needed, other members of the community joined the MASIPAG farmers in their *bayanihan* practices.

The spirit of *bayanihan* flourished not only within the organizations and communities of the MASIPAG farmers but across the entire network. When a series of storms hit Bicol, Isabela, Rizal, Quezon, and other provinces in Luzon towards the last quarter of 2020, the MASIPAG farmers from various parts of the country expressed their *bayanihan* by sending their support to those badly affected by the typhoons. MASIPAG Luzon posted this in their Facebook Page to express their gratitude to those who helped:

As part of the ongoing support for the rise of farmers affected by the storm, farmers delivered corn, vegetables and rice to farmers in Bicol, Northern Luzon, Southern Tagalog, and Central Luzon. These is [sic] in addition to the wide-open pollinated varieties purchased from

Seeds are at the centre of MASIPAG's work. For these farmers, seeds are respected as a common good and heritage, not as commodity. With the help of innovative farmer breeders, the MASIPAG network has developed an impressive number of rice varieties well adapted to local conditions which have the potential to adapt to future challenges. The promotion of diversity on farm helps farmers to reduce production risks. Furthermore, the sustainable agriculture promoted by MASIPAG avoids CO₂ emissions since it relies on local resources, avoids the use of fossil energy and prioritises local markets. With such strategies, farmers prepare themselves to challenge the impacts of climate change and give a convincing example of what agriculture should look like in times of climate change. (Bachman, 2020)

donations from Ambagan sa Sakahan (Contribute to the Farms) fund drive campaign. Every contribution will be a great help to the rising of the farmers hit by the storm. Overwhelming gratitude from MASIPAG Luzon. (MASIPAG Luzon Facebook Page, 2020)

Organizational development and consolidation during the pandemic

Let us not be disheartened during this crisis. Let us strengthen our organizations so that we can help each other in producing healthy food for our communities. Let's start with our own vegetable gardens, our own food processing. We are farmers, we are the ones producing food, we should not go hungry. (Translation from Filipino from a MASIPAG woman farmer leader/farmer trainer of KCFA, Quezon Province; MASIPAG Luzon Facebook, 2020)

The collective life in both the organizations and the communities of its member-farmers is key to MASIPAG's strength as a farmer-led network. The Organizational Development (OD) program of the network is its main strategy for building the capacity of farmers for organizing and for sustaining their collective life. For MASIPAG, OD is a collective and participatory process of developing and enhancing the various elements of each member-organization—their vision-mission-goals, structure and systems, programs and strategies, leadership and management system, membership, organizational culture, resources, and capacities and skills. OD deepens their appreciation and practice of collective and participatory leadership, shared tasks and responsibilities, by helping them internalize and institutionalize cycles of participatory planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and organizational learning. MASIPAG's OD program was evolved through a participatory process and continues to be a farmer-led undertaking (MASIPAG Training Module on Organizational Development).

Continuing the farmer-members' organizational life in the midst of the pandemic was difficult as travel, meetings, and gatherings were restricted by stringent health protocols. In some areas where there were fewer COVID-19 cases, farmers' organizations started meeting face-to-face, while still observing health protocols. However, mobility was still very limited and so the farmers had to learn to use online platforms for communicating and coordinating. The costs of using the internet, limited gadgets, and unstable signals posed a big challenge for the farmers' continuing organizing and organizational development work.

Faced with these challenges, the MASIPAG network found creative and innovative ways to sustain their organizational life. For instance, in MASIPAG Visayas, the “food hubs” previously used mainly for the marketing of organic produce were turned into physical and virtual spaces for the farmers to sustain their organizational meetings, education and training sessions, and social advocacies. During the pandemic, these hubs provided access to PCs, laptops, and internet connection, so that the farmers and community members could come together—for some face-to-face, and for others virtually through online platforms and social media.

During the pandemic, the MASIPAG farmers’ organizations were likewise able to keep their members actively engaged and connected through the committee system. The committee system or “*sistemang komite*” is a way of institutionalizing shared responsibility, participatory leadership, and organizational management. Through this means, all members are actively engaged in organizational activities via the various committees for sustainable agriculture, livelihood, DRRM-CCA, education/OD, membership, etc. The committee system harnesses the collective capacity and wisdom of the network, and promotes a sense of collective ownership and shared responsibility. One of the women leaders shared that it was their organization and *bayanihan* that helped them provide food for their families and sustain their health (even their mental health), as it was during *bayanihan* sessions that they could talk about their fears and anxieties and find collective solutions to their concerns.

MASIPAG also sustained the farmer-members’ community/collective life through intensifying collective aid and partnership-building among the mass organizations and NGOs from the local to the national level. Peasant groups worked together with civil society organizations and mass organizations to promote MASIPAG activities in their locality. The pandemic became an opportunity for MASIPAG to show even more strength as a network of farmers, scientists, and NGOs.

Women’s critical role in care work and agroecology

Recognizing the critical role of women in sustainable agriculture and in providing care work that sustains their families, organizations, and communities, MASIPAG has strengthened its efforts to promote greater participation and leadership of women farmers. The pandemic brought to light just how much this “invisible and undervalued” responsibility of nurturing and caring is shouldered by women, despite limited basic social

services, especially during crises such as this. Women worked harder to sanitize their homes and enforce health and safety protocols, over and above their already multiple reproductive, productive, and community roles. Women prepared the daily meals of the family despite scarce food resources, concocted herbal medicines and home remedies for family members who fell ill, and volunteered as community health workers. In an FGD conducted by the MASIPAG OD staff with women members of farmers' organizations in MASIPAG Visayas, the women shared that:

Aside from our usual daily home chores and farm work, we now have additional responsibilities to our children who are going to school from home. Our children are now going to school via online platforms or through the “modular” approach wherein students study on their own using the modules provided by the school. In this arrangement, we have also become their teachers and tutors at home. This is difficult for those of us who are not familiar with computer programs. Some of the mothers have not been able to go to school themselves, so how can they teach their children? (MASIPAG FGD with women farmers, 2021)

Women also initiated and sustained community kitchens and community feeding programs which became opportunities for them to also conduct health and nutrition sessions. Women farmers worked together on their backyard and communal vegetable gardens which they relied on for their family's food and for their community's feeding programs especially during the pandemic. To earn some additional income, women also engaged in various livelihood projects such as sewing of face masks and PPEs, food processing, and marketing of their surplus backyard produce.



**Babaeng MASIPAG,
Babaeng matatag**

Figure 2. *Babaeng MASIPAG, babaeng matatag*

One of the posts in the MASIPAG Facebook Page showcased the network of small women farmers' organizations, Kababaihang Nagtataglay ng Bihirang Lakas (KNBL):

Davao Women farmers under KNBL pack almost 200 to 300 kilos of assorted organic vegetables weekly. This will be delivered to Davao City families under lockdown. Despite the troubling times, one thing is certain—our food security frontliners are always ready. (MASIPAG Facebook Page, 2020)

KNBL is a federation of 13 peasant women's organizations affiliated with MASIPAG. With their weekly harvest of organic vegetables from the individual backyards of their members as well as their communal farms, the members are able to provide healthy and nutritious food for urban poor families while generating some income for the peasant women during the crisis. Through the help of MASIPAG and METSA Foundation, Inc., an NGO-partner of MASIPAG based in Davao, KNBL learned virtual marketing of their produce and online networking with schools and universities which became hubs for their organic products.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, the women continued with their backyard organic gardening and food processing. During their celebration of Nutrition Month and the ongoing campaign against GMO and Golden Rice, a woman member of Gabay sa Bagong Pag-asa (GBP) Managos in Bayambang, Pangasinan said:

As much as we value our health, we must also take care of nature/our environment. Healthy, nutritious and accessible food is important for us women. GMO food is not something I would recommend. (MASIPAG Facebook Page, 2020)

Our association's livelihood projects should not only look at the earnings, but also the benefits that the buyer can get. Aside from being safe and affordable, (our products) are not made of dangerous GMO. (MASIPAG Facebook Page, 2020)

Women also actively participated in managing their trial farms even in the midst of the pandemic. In commemoration of the 2020 International Day of Rural Women in October 2020, MASIPAG Luzon posted this in their Facebook Page:

Mothers, women and members of the association of farmers in New Pag Asa, Barangay Macayocayo, Bayambang, Pangasinan are waking up early. Their mission is to go to their association's small farm where they record their observations from their Rice Trial Farm with 50 varieties of organic rice using Simplified Evaluation Sheets. Some of these activities are measuring the height or bottom from tree to tree, counting grains per stalk, knowing the speed or duration of ripening and also collecting data on knowing insects around their communal paddy field. Farmers, women and men, are learning to systematize their production and farming systems which will lead them to sustainable farming. It's undeniable that women play a huge role in food production and reforming the corporate-controlled agricultural system. So it's only right to recognize their unique contribution to agroecology and food security! (MASIPAG Luzon Facebook Page, 2020)

In areas with heightened military operations, women are among the victims of military harassment, red-tagging, illegal arrest, and even extrajudicial killings. For March 08, International Women's Day 2021, MASIPAG Visayas released a statement in their Facebook Page entitled "Collaborative action, courage and determination: Women's great advocacy in the midst of crisis and oppression." This statement gave recognition to "the courage, enthusiasm and determination of women in MASIPAG and many others who have been victims of violence and oppression, but continue to fight to achieve a just and humane society" (MASIPAG Visayas Facebook Page, 2021).

The statement also recognized the women leaders of the Women Development Center (WDC), an NGO in Bohol Province who, together with some farmers, are being prosecuted for various crimes to silence them and prevent them from serving and being in solidarity with the struggles of small farmers in the province. It likewise lauded the women who, even in the midst of the pandemic and military attacks, continue their campaign against the use of GM corn and rice in the province (MASIPAG Visayas Facebook Page, 2021).

Asserting farmers' rights, food security/sovereignty and agroecology as the response to the food crisis

Despite and because of the crisis, the advocacy work and protest actions of MASIPAG continued in light of the intensifying militarization and attack on farmers' rights.

In the Visayas, farmers' organizations have continued their protest actions and advocacy campaigns in relation to state attacks on Paghiliusa sang Agricultural Workers kag Small Fishermen nga may Inisyatiba sa Barangay San Juan (PAWIS), a local farmers' organization in Negros affiliated with MASIPAG. In October 2020, 56 members of PAWIS were served warrants of arrest and five were subsequently detained in relation to their collective efforts to assert their rights to the land as agrarian reform beneficiaries. In December 2020, synchronized operations by the police and military led to the massacre of nine members of the Indigenous People (IP) of Panay Tumandok. Seventeen others were arrested, and hundreds of the Tumandoks were displaced due to the heavy militarization in their community. The Tumandoks have long resisted the construction of the Jalaur Mega Dam in Iloilo and the Panay Mega Dam in Capiz, as these would displace many IP communities and destroy their ancestral lands. In Aurora and Nueva Vizcaya, protest actions continued against the open-pit mining of Oceana Gold in Didipio. In Real, Infanta, and General Nakar, farmers and indigenous communities continuously campaigned against the ongoing construction of the Kaliwa Dam that threatens to destroy farming lands and indigenous communities.

Farmers participated in multi-sectoral campaigns, online and face-to-face localized protest actions against the Anti-Terrorism Law (ATL) and the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) which promoted the importation of rice, despite the pleas of small famers to their local governments to buy their harvest so that they could earn some income during the pandemic.



Figure 3. MASIPAG campaign against the Rice Liberalization Law during the pandemic

Regrouping as an organization and re-engagement with the local and larger community were urgent and critical, given that many farmers and organizers of the MASIPAG network were targets of red-tagging and harassment by the military and police. The network had a series of community, regional, and national educational sessions on human rights and paralegal work, forming of Quick Reaction Teams (QRTs), and formulation of security protocols. They also held community orientations on mental health as the pandemic and the escalating militarization of communities caused anxiety and panic attacks among the staff and farmers.

MASIPAG farmers maximized social media to intensify their local, national, and international advocacy campaigns. But whenever possible, the network undertook face-to-face but localized, small protest actions against policies and programs that violated farmers' rights, destroyed the environment, and threatened food security. For instance, in November 2020, farmers trooped to the national and regional offices of the Department of Agriculture to officially file a petition to stop the Golden Rice experimentation and production. Golden Rice is a genetically modified rice touted by corporations to be the solution to Vitamin A deficiency and malnutrition, and is being promoted by corporations and states in many countries in Asia. The farmers were joined by members of the Stop Golden Rice! Network (SGRN) which initiated a petition by more than 117 consumer groups, church organizations, chefs, members of the academe, entrepreneurs, urban poor, and medical doctors to halt the commercialization of Golden Rice. This protest action is part of an ongoing international campaign against Golden Rice, following the historic uprooting of Golden Rice in Pili, Camarines Sur led by 400 Bicolano farmers, consumers, and food rights advocates in 2013. This ignited similar protest actions and struggles in Asia against Golden Rice and other corporate-controlled GMOs led by the SGRN, a regional campaign network of 30 organizations of small farmers, scientists, and NGOs in Asia.

In September 2020, various farmers organized fora and protest actions against the Anti-Terror Law (ATL). The MASIPAG statement explains why their member-farmers are protesting against the ATL:

To constrict development work is to further deprive an already hungry nation its right to genuine social, economic and cultural development. And this is what the Anti-Terror Law is doing by

legalizing acts of intimidation, terror-tagging and extra-judicial killing against development workers and their organizations. (MASIPAG statement on the Anti-Terror Law, September 18, 2020; MASIPAG Facebook Page)

Media reports have shown that, since the beginning of the Duterte administration in 2016, 277 farmers have been killed, many have been illegally detained, and many leaders of NGOs and farmers' organizations continue to be red-tagged and harassed. Therefore, MASIPAG, along with other NGOs and CSOs that are members of the Council for People's Development and Governance, filed a petition in the Supreme Court to repeal the ATL, one of at least 37 petitions against the said law.

MASIPAG was also active in various international campaigns advocating for sustainable agriculture. The network participated in the 16 Days of Global Action on Agroecology 2020, the annual global campaign initiated by the Pesticide Action Network – Asia Pacific (PAN AP) held every October 01-16 to promote agroecology as an alternative to chemical-based, corporate farming and a sustainable way of achieving food sovereignty. Their online campaign showed a series of photos of MASIPAG farmers wearing facemasks and holding up posters and banners with messages such as: “Food and rights now!,” “Farmers fight for food system change!,” and “Agroecology now!”

A major ongoing social advocacy campaign of MASIPAG is its Six-Point Food Security Agenda with its hashtag: “Adequate, safe, accessible, affordable food, right now!” (English translation). Along with other organizations such as the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), National Federation of Peasant Women in the Philippines (AMIHAN), Bantay Bigas, Gabriela, Philippine Network of Food Security Programmes (PNFSP), and SUKI Network, MASIPAG launched the “*Salu-Salo*: National People's Food System Summit” through an Agro-Eco fair in Quezon City. “*Salu-salo*” is a year-long campaign that is a build up to the People's Summit, a parallel activity to the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021.

Lessons from MASIPAG's practices on sustainable agriculture, organizing, and social solidarity building

On sustainable food production and agroecology during the pandemic and beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of our food systems and the urgent need to shift to a sustainable, farmer-led agriculture and food system that addresses the food and nutrition needs of people and not markets. Worldwide, farmers, people's organizations, even international bodies such as the UNCTAD have extensively talked about the destructiveness of industrial/commercial farming/chemical-based farming (UNCTAD, 2013). In the midst of this crisis, small farmers have found creative ways to sustain their organizing work and sustainable agriculture practices such as their *bayanihan*, preservation and exchange of indigenous seeds, communal farming, and DIFS—which enabled them to also creatively respond to the food and health needs of people badly affected by the pandemic, as well as help build the social solidarities and social movements asserting people's right to food. Their contribution was through their daily practices and advocacy for agroecology.

Worldwide as well, agroecology is now seen as a contraposition to industrial/chemical-based farming that has destroyed the environment and food systems. It is a scientific approach and a socio-political movement creating new ways of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption that is based on harmonious relationships with nature and within peoples in society (CIDSE, 2017). Agroecology is now recognized as the only way to produce socially and environmentally healthy food that respects the cultures of indigenous peoples, traditional populations, and peasants (Navdanya International, 2020).

Farmers' organizations, social development practitioners, and social activists assert that agroecology can only be actualized collectively by peasants (Navdanya International, 2020). And so, local food producers—small farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous communities, rural women—should be the decisive frontliners of agroecology. While the rights and critical role of small farmers are enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas, farmers and advocates of sustainable food systems need to assert farmers' rights to and decisive role in sustainable agricultural development. There should be concerted, multisectoral efforts to help strengthen the organizations and networks

of small farmers, to help build their capacities and their indigenous knowledge and practices in organizing, organizational development, networking, and advocacy work, as well as in community development and collective governance.

MASIPAG's statement during Earth Day in April 2020 asserted the following:

Agroecology goes hand-in-hand with the people's call for food sovereignty; it gives priority to local economies to be able to respond to local needs and (it) puts farmers first in the agenda. Agroecology places farmers and the people's right to food at the center of policies, and the people as active participants in the attainment of their right to food. (MASIPAG statement for Earth Day, April 2020)

On valuing women's care work and contribution to agroecology

This global public health crisis, food crisis, and socioeconomic crisis is actually a "crisis of care"—a crisis of caring for people, for the environment, and for the public good. This crisis validated what farmers, environmentalists, social development activists, and women's rights activists have long been telling us:

- The profound global crisis in social services/social development/care work (health, education, and social protection) has the most devastating impacts on women—health workers, public school teachers, mostly women; mothers and daughters who simultaneously take care of the home, small children, the elderly, sick members of the family, their vegetable gardens, their farms, and their income generating projects. It is especially difficult for women in urban and rural communities who do not have access to basic social services;
- "...the nexus between social and ecological reproduction" (di Meno-Roma, 2020, p. 112): Women have always been dependent on the environment for their reproductive work/care work—caring for the family, managing homes, family/community health care, food production but industrial capitalism has reduced the environment AND WOMEN/WOMEN'S LABOR into a free resource which it has exploited for profit (di Meno-Roma, 2020). Today, the collapse of the

ecosystems has had dire impacts on the health of people (hence, the COVID-19 pandemic). And this health crisis, which could not be effectively addressed by the fragile and unsustainable global healthcare systems, has had a devastating impact on women;

- *“The centrality of reproductive work/care work in the private and public sphere, in social and economic development”* (di Meno-Roma, 2020, p. 110): During this pandemic, millions fell ill and starved to death, mostly those from the poor sectors and communities. Industries, businesses, and economies shut down. But organized sectors and communities have been able to sustain themselves and help provide for the health and food needs of others because of the care work of women—as volunteer health workers, as managers of community kitchens and community alternative schools, and as human rights defenders.

As a woman leader of Kiday Community Farmers Association (KCFA), an organization of peasant women in General Nakar, Quezon, said: “I am proud to be a peasant woman, because I produce food not only for my family, I produce food for our people” (FGD, March 2021).

In light of these, social development practitioners and social activists must further amplify the call for development processes, programs, and policies that recognize and value the critical role of women in reproductive, productive, and community work. We need to support efforts in strengthening the organizing of women, in asserting their active and decisive roles in their organizations and communities, at all levels of development planning and processes of governance, in social development, and economic development.

Economic development must serve, must work hand in hand, with social development—the care and development of people which, historically, has been a responsibility relegated to women. And while we recognize and support the critical roles and contributions of women in reproductive work/care work, ultimately the calls for accessible, adequate, effective infrastructures for care work—quality public healthcare systems, community clinics, public hospitals; quality education in public schools; quality childcare services; support and care for the most vulnerable—must be the development agenda of all.

On small farmers' organizing, social solidarity, and social movement building

Central to the MASIPAG farmer' beliefs and practices is the importance of *bayanihan*, sharing, community building, collective action, and social solidarity building which have helped sustain many farmers and rural and urban poor communities during the pandemic. Witnessing the inspiring practices of the small farmers' organizations of MASIPAG, I come to the following lessons and recommendations:

1. As we—social development practitioners and social activists engaged in social solidarities with grassroots organizations and communities—try to address the needs of those hardest hit by the pandemic, we need to transform and sustain these social solidarities into social movements. These social solidarities and social movements must demand from the state/government its responsibility, as the primary duty bearer, to fulfill people's basic human right to health, food, social protection, and education, especially during this pandemic and beyond.
2. Now, more than ever, these social solidarities must be forged as a refuge and source of strength for people whose rights have been violated and as a movement of human rights defenders frontlining the struggle for justice. Thus, for instance, the MASIPAG network is currently forging local, regional, national, and international alliances that expose the human rights violations and injustices perpetrated by state mechanisms on the farmers, development workers, and activists of Negros, and on the IP leaders of Panay Tumandok. MASIPAG is forging solidarity formations with churches, schools and universities, sympathetic government officials and progressive legislators, even international solidarity groups to undertake investigations into these illegal arrests and killings and bring justice to these victims of state violence.
3. The challenge for our social solidarity formations and social movements is being able to balance addressing immediate urgent needs and still anchor these social movements to the strategic agenda of radical social transformation. Seasoned organizers and social movement activists know that our daily praxis of organizing and advocacy works on all fronts contributes to the radical and long-term social transformation process. Social revolution is born out of this daily praxis—action, reflection, action on all fronts and all levels. Looking at the experience of the MASIPAG farmers, their daily praxis is addressing the immediate needs of their families, organization and communities; their daily

praxis is transforming relationships into more principled relationships, into mutuality, working for the common/collective good, building communities. Their continued organizing, education, advocacy, and networking activities are planting the seeds of human needs-centered, healthier, sustainable agriculture and food systems.

The MASIPAG farmers, even as they continue to respond to the urgent needs of small farmers arising from this pandemic, have remained resolute and persistent in their strategic struggles for land, for seed control, and for farmers' rights. This is what the woman leader of Alay Bayan-Luzon of San Fernando, Pampanga province said in the Facebook post in commemoration of Nutrition Month in August 2020 and as part of their online protest actions against GMOs like Golden Rice: "We in Alay Bayan-Luzon Inc. believe that our call for Sustainable Agriculture must be connected to our call for Genuine Agrarian Reform. Small farmers like us promote this and we can achieve this" (MASIPAG Luzon Facebook Page, 2020).

And this is echoed by other farmer leaders of MASIPAG:

"By taking control of our seeds, we begin to liberate ourselves from corporate control." (Farmer Leader from Alegria, Surigao del Sur; PowerPoint presentation, Mindagat Sustainable Farmers' Organization Bigas Conference, 2009)

"We must rely on the organized and collective strength of small farmers. If we want genuine social transformation, we must create this process of genuine social transformation." (Farmer Leader, Mindagat Sustainable Farmers' Organization; PowerPoint presentation, Mindagat Sustainable Farmers' Organization Bigas Conference, 2009)

In the midst of the pandemic, the small farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous people, and rural women sustained their families and communities with their care work and local and sustainable food production. In so doing, they are living the kind of communities we envision. And so, we continue to link arms with them and all basic sectors and communities in building social solidarities that continue to resist the neoliberal framework of commodifying food systems and infrastructures of care, and assert healthier, sustainable, people-centered food systems, and structures of care.

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