

# ***The Caucus of Development NGO Networks: The Philippine Experience in Scaling-Up NGO Impact***

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Over the past decade, non-governmental organizations in the Philippines have not grown in size and number, they have created a niche in public life. Government, business, academe, the church and even ordinary citizens have recognized the importance of NGOs. National life is no longer defined solely by the traditional power wielders. NGOs are grudgingly acknowledged as critical components in Philippine development.

Government records claim that there are more than 18,000 registered NGOs in the Philippines today. The number is a misleading mainly because the term NGO is loosely used as a catch-all phrase for all non-stock and non-profit organizations that do not fall into the neat categories of government, schools, business, and political parties. Before proceeding any further, it will be necessary to present a map of the Philippine NGO terrain so as to be able to focus on what has come to be known as the Development NGO community.

## **The Philippine NGO SPECTRUM**

Among the 18,000 registered NGOs, about two thirds could be categorized as voluntary membership organizations. These can further be subdivided into two major groups: people's organizations (POs) and civic/professional associations. POs are grassroots membership (unions, community associations, cooperatives, etc.) which function as primary groups, largely on a voluntary basis although as they expand in size and scope full-time secretariats usually emerge. On the other hand, civic and professional associations, while also voluntary membership organizations, are distinguished from POs mainly because of the non-grassroots nature of their membership.

The remaining organizations are what generally referred to as NGOs in the Philippines. NGOs are distinguished from POs largely on the basis of the fact that they are intermediate agencies or institutions that operate with a full-time staff complement and provide a wide range of programs and services for people's organizations. Of these there are also two major sub-groups: traditional NGOs (TANGOs) which refer to charitable, welfare and relief organizations and those that are generically referred to as social development agencies.

Over the past years, there has been a spectacular increase in the number of social development agencies, perhaps as a direct result of the twin factors of (1) an increase in foreign and local funding as well as (2) the ferment that developed from the anti-dictatorship struggle, the victory of the people-power revolution and the consequent frustration over the obviously failed promises of EDSA. These NGOs vary in size and therefore in reach from small agencies with less than ten members of the staff to big NGOs (BINGOs) that have fifty or more personnel.

Because of the mushrooming of NGOs as well as the relative ease in setting up and registering one, it is imperative that a distinction be made between those that are usually social development agencies. There are three major mutants that exist in the Philippines, all of which hide under the cover of development but are generally set up for more primary economic and/or political reasons. Because of the Filipino penchant for acronyms, they have each been baptized with appropriate names as follows:

1. **GRINGOs** (government-inspired or initiated NGOs) - most of these NGOs were formed after 1986 as conduits for both government and bilateral aid funds. They are viewed as being mere extensions of government, having been set up by politicians, government functionaries, and even line agencies of government. It is significant to note that most GRINGOs were created after 1987, at a time when it was becoming obvious that the Philippine government could not absorb a large chunk of bilateral assistance that flowed into the country after the spectacular ouster of the Marcos dictatorship. As a response to this, many foreign governments expressly required that a

portion of official development assistance be coursed through NGOs. In addition, even the executive and legislative branches of government formalized a policy that allowed government agencies to contract NGOs to undertake part of their programs. Finally, GRINGOs also became the main conduits for pork barrel funds that were granted to various local and national politicians.

2. **BONGOs** ( business-organized NGOs) - while there are corporations that are actually involved in social development activities, BONGOs refer to those that have been organized largely as either tax dodges or as institutions that are geared towards ensuring the basic stability of a corporation via projects that can help to quell labor unrest or create a benevolent image for the company.

3. **COME 'N GOs** (fly-by-night entrepreneurs) - these are basically paper organizations that were set up (the Securities and Exchange Commission can process an application for registration within 48 hours ), either never operated or did one project, and disintegrated. There are quite a huge number of such registered agencies and since there is no systematic monitoring of non-stock and non-profit organizations, they continue to be counted as NGOs. However, in addition to such agencies, there is also a growing number of NGOs who see the funding game as a lucrative opportunity. These NGO entrepreneurs have the ability to package beautiful proposals and charge enormous rates.

Approximately 2,000 agencies out of the 18,000 will remain if all of the above are excluded. These are what are referred to collectively as the Development NGO community. They are found all over the country operating through both salaried and volunteer staff, are largely dependent on donor agencies, and function as intermediate organizations that service the needs of primary people's organizations (POs).

Development NGOs are inextricably intertwined with POs and people's movements performing support functions and harnessing professional skills and expertise within the context of the assumed primary POs. Viewed

in this manner, it must be openly stated that the majority of development NGOs go beyond the usual platitudes of alleviating poverty and ensuring democracy. Development NGOs are involved basically in articulating poverty and undertaking concrete experimentations with paradigms and processes for an alternative social order. They make no pretense to political neutrality. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that while Development NGOs jealously guard their autonomy, most are at least ideologically, if not organizationally, related to existing political formations of whichever side of the political fence. However, it must also be emphasized that this does not make Development NGOs front organizations. Development NGOs have insisted upon their own autonomy in the same way that they have guarded the autonomy of people's organization.

It is also significant to note that especially after 1986, many political activists have consciously made the decision to use the Development NGO mechanism as a preferred route towards setting up an institutional base for change. This is due to a number of related factors among which are: the incipient apathy that seemed to be setting in after EDSA, the emasculation of many POs because of the naive belief in the miraculous solutions that the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship would bring, the realization that the creation and sustenance of POs are severely retarded by part-time and intermittent work, the galloping pace towards conservation of the Aquino government, a generation that had devoted years to political protest that could no longer find fulfillment in the state, a political traditional career, and the avalanche of financial support that started to pour in for NGOs.

It is an undeniable fact that over the years, the Development NGOs have developed a vast reservoir of expertise in dealing with people's problems. The creativity and dynamism of Development NGOs has been repeatedly proven and grudgingly accepted even by those who, as targets of POs and Development NGOs, have felt the discomfort of being the object of grassroots action. Even as government and the formal sector continue to speak of empowerment and popular participation in the planning and implementation of programs, Development NGOs have effectively employed collective and self-

reliant methods with both imagination and passion. Development NGOs have also demonstrated an urgency in confronting the problems of poverty, with a deep sense of commitment to the creation of alternative structures that would do justice to the plight of the poor without the strings of political survival that usually accompany the projects of politicians. In short, despite a few bad eggs and differences in perspectives and methods, Development NGOs can boast of a concrete track record of success rather than just a promise of service.

It is the development of NGO community in the Philippines that this paper will focus on, specifically on the 1,500 individual development NGOs that form the base of the ten networks that have coalesced into the Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO).

## **Key Issues that Confront Philippine Development NGOs**

The purpose of this section is to briefly review the issues that confront Philippine Development NGOs largely as a backdrop to what CODE-NGO is trying to achieve. The issues are divided into three interpenetrating levels: internal to the NGO community, those that are related to national life, and those that have to do with international linkages.

**Internal to the NGO Terrain.** The past five years have been witness to a growing concern for building bridges across Development NGOs and networks rather than a self-preservation ethic that was logically more marked in the past. This points towards a maturity that has been able to slowly confront dilemmas that in the past were simply taken for granted. The perception that Development NGOs of whatever stripe or color belong to one sector and therefore must look out for each other has led to increased dialogues and coordination among Development NGOs, culminating in the formation of the CODE-NGO. Despite these developments, a number of significant issues still exist that CODE-NGO continues to confront.

1. *flexibility vs. impact*- the basic strength of Development NGOs has been the capacity to creatively deal with situations largely because of smallness in size and operations. However, this very characteristics also means that activities are localized and, even when successful, affect a limited population. Because of this, many Development NGOs were treated as bit players in the national drama, left on their own by the powers-that-be because they are irritations that pose no real alternative to the status quo. In addition, their smallness also means that they could be accommodated within the prevailing order because they command no real power, even of numbers.

But for Development NGOs that passionately believe that their way of doing things is a viable alternative, the flexibility and creativity that are functions of size are very often undermined by the realization that they lack the capacity to influence policy and the drift of events, that they exist only on the wings of a larger stage which is dominated solely by those who wield power. The commitment of Development NGOs to empowering the poor therefore stands in stark contrast to the reality of their own powerlessness. As such, various attempts have been taken to create models whereby people's empowerment and effective intervention can be achieved without undermining the source of their very strength.

2. *BINGOs vs. networks*- two main models have emerged in the Philippine setting to respond to this dilemma. The first is the creation of BINGOs that have the potential to rival even the government bureaucracy while at the same time develop a strong enough institutional base that hopefully would make government sit up and listen, as well as to withstand the assault of yet another authoritarian regime. And yet there are two major criticisms that are usually levelled against the BINGO model.

First, beyond a certain number of people, it becomes impossible to avoid setting up a bureaucratic/hierarchical structure that is not as flexible and creative as smaller organizations, are less capable of responding to specific situations, and certainly not as truly participative internally and in dealing with the people.

Second, because the underlying ethos of Development NGO work still remains to be the principle of participation, it goes without saying that a parallel value is the ability to decentralize operations, leaving to relatively autonomous regional groups the decision-making with regard to priorities. There is a perceived tendency for BINGOs to retard the development of autonomous Development NGOs and personnel because programs are developed at the center and donor agencies also take the easy way out by wishing to deal only with a few NGOs.

In response to these criticisms, most Development NGOs have chosen to adopt another option - setting up and strengthening networks and coalitions among networks. It is felt that networks which coordinate and collectively undertake programs across small and medium-sized organizations can create the desired impact while maintaining and developing the strengths of each individual NGO. Networks encourage decentralization, maintain the flexibility of size, maximize the development of talents all over the country and sustain a participative approach. At the same time, because various NGOs band together, impact can be achieved through common programs as well as by taking common stands on a wide range of issues.

3. *micro vs. macro*- one of the most common limitations of Development NGOs is the fact that they tend to be extremely localized in scope, investing a huge amount of resources on certain projects that are unreplicable. But more than this, many Development NGOs tend to be myopic, choosing to limit themselves to small issues, sometimes naively refusing to acknowledge that there are structural determinants that must be altered in Philippine society. They forget that the macro context invariably produces the problems they encounter at the community level. Even when Development NGOs attempt to influence policy and law through lobbying and various forms of advocacy, their localized character gives them very little clout.

4. *romanticist vs. ideological*- the tradition of Development NGO work has been to shun outright political work in an effort to remain faithful to a tenet of community organizing that the people should decide on all issues. This

romanticist perspective, which is also a direct reaction to political organizing, has resulted in NGOs that have tailed behind the people and failed to help broaden horizons because of the fear of crossing that all-important boundary between simple facilitation and outright manipulation. Over the past decade, more and more Development NGOs have faced up to the reality while remaining true to the principle of allowing the people to decide for themselves. Development NGOs also have the responsibility of clarifying their own visions of a more desirable future and sharing this with the people they work with.

5. *rivalry vs. unity*- while much has been achieved over the past few years, the painful reality is that the Development NGO community is still wracked by mutual suspicion and rivalry. This is exacerbated by a number of factors. First, government and donor agencies, primarily because of the funding issue, wittingly or unwittingly pit one against another in the battle for scarce resources. Second, unfortunate experiences of the past, including personal conflicts, breed their own dynamics. Third, and perhaps most important, the political nature of most Development NGOs. Whether it is individual NGOs or networks, these are somehow ideologically identifiable with distinct political forces/formations - national democrats, popular democrats, Filipino social-ists, democratic socialists, social democrats, liberal democrats, etc. Because of this, Development NGOs have a tendency to view each other as the inheritors of the accumulated historical baggage of existing political formations. In a very real sense, however, external factors like the emergence of GRINGOs, BONGOs and COME 'N GOs, the need for policy changes and threats to the autonomy of both NGOs and POs, greatly assisted the process of unity.

**Development NGOs and the National Arena.** The issues that plague the internal world of Development NGOs are largely within their control. However, the national scene cannot be disregarded, especially relations with government and the mode of participation of Development NGOs in national politics.



1. *government intervention*- the Aquino government, which was ushered into power on the shoulders of an anti-dictatorship people's movement, is not even a faint shadow of its encouraging beginnings. The emphasis placed on harnessing people power through a government by consultation, a bias for the poor, a policy of transparency, the release of political prisoners, the encouragement of political pluralism, the declaration of sovereignty, and the appointment of street parliamentarians to positions of political authority, have all been either severely eroded or completely reversed. Instead of a popular structure, what we have is the resurgent power of an unreformed military and civilian bureaucracy that allows only token consultation, turns a blind eye to human rights violations, attempts to limit the range of acceptable political perspectives, and projects a transparent subservience to the demands of foreign powers. Alongside this, we are witness to the tragic transformation of most street parliamentarians and NGO leaders, who are still in government, into domesticated and self-serving technocrats.

These developments have very definite implications for Development NGOs. Ironically, popular support for the ouster of the dictatorship has been transformed into a mandate for the Aquino government to define the role that Development NGOs and POs should play. In a tragic repetition of past history, the Aquino government almost immediately turned its back on the people's movement despite platitudes to people's empowerment and participation. Perhaps, this was only a reflection of the ruling class' deep-seated suspicion of the poor and its basically authoritarian character. Aggravating this was a vulnerability arising from the fact that the Aquino government lacked a cohesive vision for the future. Perhaps the arrogance that power breeds could only handle democratic processes for as long as the people meekly followed the decisions of leaders.

Whatever maybe the reasons, the reality is that the Aquino government treated POs and Development NGOs only as sources of warm bodies rather than as participants in the shaping of the future. As Development NGOs and POs started to flex their muscles in an attempt to influence the drift of events, the Aquino government started to define the roles that Development NGOs should properly play - that of mere implementors of government programs.

Congress and line agencies have also gotten into the act with various bills and policies that attempt to regulate NGOs through accreditation and more stringent government monitoring of NGO activities. Using the insurgency as its excuse, the Aquino government and its military have intervened by publicly labelling many Development NGOs as communist fronts while quietly pressuring foreign governments to extend support only to favored NGOs. And with the increasing trend for foreign assistance to be coursed through NGOs, more and more "GRINGOs" have been created.

**2. *autonomy vs. cooptation***- faced with the maneuverings of government, many Development NGOs confront the dilemma between preserving their autonomy or ensuring their survival by agreeing to be coopted by government. In the past, when Development NGOs were small groups that were hardly noticed by government and the larger society, autonomy was not an issue. However, once an NGO emerges from the cocoon of purely localist issues and begins to tackle problems that invariably result in face-to-face interactions with government, once an NGO participates in debates on national issues, once an NGO seeks to advocate for policy changes, once NGOs carve out a niche for themselves, the question of autonomy becomes crucial. Relations with government are always tricky. On the other hand, since every relation is one of give and take, Development NGOs have also found themselves in situation where they are forced into a compromise they cannot support.

At the same time, despite government rhetoric about the importance of role of NGOs, the relation is usually pegged to one that expects total support for government activities in exchange for resources and even security. The process of cooptation is smooth and gradual but invariably NGOs get trapped into becoming nothing more than extensions of government therefore eroding the very reasons for their existence. The Aquino government itself attempted to create an NGO movement (KABISIG) under the leadership of the president herself in addition to millions of pesos that government was alloting for NGOs.

3. ***the military vs. the insurgents***- since Development NGOs are legal entities that operate within the constitutional bounds, they are invariably caught in the crossfire between the military and the underground armed movement. The military is, of course, paranoid when it comes to any organization that insists on its autonomy, refuses to be a mere pawn in the political arena, uses participatory methods, articulates demands even when these are contrary to government policies, and engages in various forms of collective action. On the other hand, the insurgents are equally suspicious of NGOs that insist on working independently because their work is viewed as palliative that can only delay the revolution. As a result of this situation, Development NGOs have been harassed, some of their personnel have been threatened and even killed, especially in areas where both armed combatants are present. The situation, therefore, is nothing less than a tightrope that Development NGOs have to walk.

4. ***non-party politics vs. the electoral process*** - under a dictatorship, Development NGOs had the luxury to disregard rigid electoral exercises. Time and effort was spent on forming and sustaining viable POs and trying to win small victories through pressure politics and extra-legal methods. Under the present dispensation, however, the electoral arena has to be confronted. Development NGOs can no longer retreat into the obscurity of purely local issues especially if they wish to participate actively in the national debate. And yet because the electoral arena is heavily dominated by traditional elite political parties, Development NGOs face the reality that they do not yet have the political clout to make a difference in the electoral terrain. At the same time, the importance of safeguarding the autonomy of both Development NGOs and POs poses the very real problem of directly engaging in party-dominated electoral contests. The option of instituting non-party politics, de-ideologizing people's movements and creating a viable movement of genuine people's organizations that will have the capacity to democratically intervene in national affairs has been raised but this is still on the level of political discourse without a viable constituency to push it forward.

5. ***empowerment vs. seizure of power***- the opening up of the electoral arena has raised a more basic question: if Development NGOs are committed to

people's empowerment, why have they shied away from the issue of capturing state power? On a more practical level, this is simply a reiteration of an earlier issue between the goal of empowerment even as NGOs have remained effectively powerless. Should Development NGOs be forever doomed only to the roles of either acting as a perennial lady-in waiting ready to fill-in the limitations of the state or performing as constant critics and hecklers who see what is wrong and boast of alternatives but refuse to take on the challenge of political power? Where do Development NGOs draw the line between simply facilitating the empowerment of people and building a society where power is indeed in the hands of the people?

**NGOs and the International Arena.** POs and Development NGOs in Third World Countries, where resources are in the hands of the elite, are always confronted by the lack of both moral and logistical support to pursue their goals. This is where international linkages play an important role. Up to recently, most donors as well as Development NGOs viewed such linkages as being purely financial transactions. While this is still the basic relationship that exists, there are new inroads into transforming these linkages from simply being either charity or a funding mechanism to one that better expresses the aims of partnership and solidarity which CODE-NGO is trying to establish.

1. *externally-imposed priorities vs. funding needs* - an analysis of NGO concerns over the past two decades will show that many of the shifts in emphasis have been affected by "flavor of the month" choices or the priorities set by donor agencies. While there is no implication that these were irrelevant, it is only to prove the point that the concerns and ideological inclinations of donors have a very definite way of shaping directions of Development NGOs. Very often, Development NGOs are unaware of their own shifts of emphasis and when they are, they rationalize these either by convincing themselves that these thrusts are indeed important or by planning to piggy-bank more primary concerns on funds that have been granted. One way or another, because Development NGOs are dependent on funds, what is created is a fund-driven NGO that invariably is reduced to becoming either beggars or operators. Donor agencies, even with the best of intentions, fuel such a situation.

2. **partnership vs. subservience** - especially for Development NGOs that heavily rely on foreign grants for their sustenance, a disgusting relationship tends to develop for which both NGO and donor are to blame - the replication of the old colonial model. On the side of Development NGOs, even self-respect is undermined by fawning over representatives of funding agencies and easily agreeing to whatever the donor requires for as long as the grant is ensured. On the side of the donor, what originally was a grant supposedly given out of concern is transformed into a process of re-colonization where funds take the place of the sword, the cross or the gun. Such a relation is also apparent among northern NGOs that insists on sending their nationals to manage and supervise operations of southern NGOs as a condition for funding in much the same way as tied aid operates.

In contrast to such a relationship is one wherein partnership is not just limited to funds but to a commonality of framework and vision, not only between the donor and the NGO but also between the people's organizations that are beneficiaries of the grants and people in the donor nations who should know more about the manner in which their money is spent.

3. **dependence vs. self-reliance**- the earlier issue is exacerbated by the belief that Development NGOs will survive because funding will always be available. There is an urgent need for Development NGOs to think of mechanisms for self-reliance because for as long as they are vulnerable they will find it extremely difficult to set up real partnership relations on the international level. Ideally, NGO services should be supported by the very people who benefit from them. However, for southern NGOs it is unthinkable to expect the poor to shoulder the costs for their own empowerment. Perhaps, on the side of donor agencies that are equally concerned with building a relationship of solidarity, now is the time to seriously think of long-term solutions that will free Development NGOs from the ritual of forever applying for funding and donor agencies from the never-ending routinization of processing proposals.

4. **the spirit of voluntarism vs. basic needs of development workers**- the primary characteristics of people who enter the NGO world is commitment to

service. However, no amount of selflessness can sustain development workers if they have to subsidize their own commitment. Development NGOs, by providing alternative career paths, are able to ensure at least that their personnel do not have to be destitute to be of service to the powerless. Donor agencies therefore help to enable development workers to at least meet their basic needs and sustain their commitment. But because of differences in standards of living, the contraction of the employment market, and the thrust towards "professionalizing" NGO work, marked changes are euichring on the ground. As Development NGOs increase in size and become more institutionalized, higher salaries, more comfortable surroundings, and a hierarchy that parallels private business become natural outcomes. There is a valid fear, especially among those who pioneered in development work a decade or so ago, that these trends will start to de-emphasize commitment, attract people who view the work as merely a job, and undermine the very essence of NGO work. It would not be an exaggeration to predict that the moment the spirit of volunteerism is eroded, the Development NGOs will also surrender their essential contribution to society.

## **CODE-NGO: Confronting the Issues**

The Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO) is an attempt to respond to the specific situations that Development NGOs confront in the Philippines. CODE-NGO is the latest stage in a spiral of developments that is aimed at maximizing the impact of Development NGOs in the Philippines

For many years, individual NGOs operated quietly and singly, honing their skills and building up programs. As more NGOs appear on the scene, some reached out to each other while at the same time there were sometimes bitter feuds with each other. It was from this that networks emerged. These networks were venues for the sharing of experience and funds accessing. Networks reflect not only similarities in thrust and field of operation but also relative ideological cohesion. By 1988, there were ten major national networks with a combined membership of approximately 1,300 individual NGOs. Some of these networks already had relations with each other, six networks,

in fact, had ratified a common code of ethics for social development agencies.

At the same time, coalitions of sectoral organizations (peasants, workers, urban poor, fisherfolk, indigenous people, etc.) as well as issue-based coalitions (women, peace, foreign debt, US bases, environment, children, etc.) were emerging and the Development NGOs were active participants in all of these.

The experience with networking provided the bases upon which greater dialogue and debate were founded. More than anything else, each individual NGO and network, after years of relative isolation, came to essentially the same conclusion: Development NGOs, in partnership with people's organizations, have a great potential to be the bearers of an alternative future that places emphasis on people's empowerment, that is, the ability of communities and sectors to define their own problems, decide on their options, and determine their own future. Development NGOs are in the best position to help create, strengthen and sustain autonomous organizations that can relate to and debate with each other, advocate and lobby for policy changes, assess the options presented by political parties and forces, experiment with alternative production relations, concretize the vision of an alternative political order, and create participative structures that will no longer allow the elite and self-anointed parties and personalities to speak in the name of the people.

But this conclusion also brought with it the humbling realization that as single NGOs, even as individual networks, there was absolutely no way by which the potentials of development NGOs could be maximized and that Development NGOs would forever be relegated to minor roles that would ultimately just extend the poverty and injustice in the country.

We had to scale-up our impact, We had to confront the obstacles to development, We had to protect and enlarge the space within which we could operate. We had to consolidate our forces to be of greater assistance to the

people's organizations that were our reason for being.

It was fortuitous that at about the same time, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), was reviewing their country program for the Philippines. Through some of the networks, a series of consultations were held together with Canadian NGOs. Despite mutual suspicions, the Development NGOs forged a consensus on a mechanism that involved both funding as well as partnership relations with Canadian NGOs. This is what is now known as the Philippine-Canada Joint Committee for Human Resource Development. As a funding mechanism, it has a five-year life span with a Canadian \$35,000,000 fund. It is run by a joint committee of nine Filipino and four Canadian NGO representatives that plan and approve all activities. The program allocates the bulk of the funds to human resource development projects in the Philippines and a small portion to Canadian projects. The program is run by a Filipino Executive Director, decision-making is done either jointly (for joint pro-active projects) or by the respective country boards. In the Philippines, operations are decentralized to the regions and priorities are decided upon by NGOs and not by the donor agency.

This mechanism also became the major venue through which the networks were able to discuss other issues as well as agree on common stands. Realizing that we all carried ghosts of the past, the process was cautious and extremely slow. After two years, CODE-NGO was publicly launched at a conference on "The Role of European Governments and NGOs in Promoting Sustainable Development in the Philippines" in May 1990. By January of 1991, a secretariat was formed.

CODE-NGO was formed by the ten national networks, representing 1,500 individual Development NGOs existing in the country namely: Association of Foundations (AF), Council for People's Development (CPD), Ecumenical Center for Development (ECD), National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATCCO), National Council of Social Development (NCSD), National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies (PHILSSA), and the Philippine Partnership for the Development of Rural



Areas (PhilDRHRRRA). This governing board consists of one representative from each network and all decisions are made strictly by consensus.

**Consensus-Building.** To consolidate and strengthen CODE-NGO, much emphasis was placed on consensus-building activities that each tackled crucial issues affecting Development NGOs but also provided the venue for creating trust and mutual understanding (what we like to call our terms of endearment) and forging a minimum common vision that is based on a realization and respect for our differences.

The first conference was on peace based on justice. This covered a wide range of national and local issues and provided the opportunity to exchange views that were crucial components of our analysis of society and the alternative orders we were working towards. The Development NGOs' peace agenda was an input into a national peace conference which brought together all sectors of Philippine society.

The second conference focused on the roles of Development NGOs in the electoral process. Five major levels of participation were formulated: electoral education, electoral reforms, building a people's platform, support of candidates and direct participation through fielding of candidates. CODE-NGO agreed that each NGO should get involved in the first three levels and respect those that wished to go farther. The concrete result of this conference was the recognition and strengthening of Project 201, a coalition of NGOs and POs that is flexing its muscles for the coming elections in May 1992.

Finally, a series of network-based and region-based conferences were conducted which culminated in the First National NGO Congress last December 4, 1991. This was attended by more than a thousand delegates from all over the country to ratify the Covenant on Philippine Development. The Covenant contains our common principles, thrusts, stands and responsibilities. The Covenant contains the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, our goals and commitments, and an NGO Code of Ethics.

**The Rationale for CODE-NGO and Illustrations of Concrete Activities.** After three years, it is easier to look back and try to systematize what was in reality an evolving rationale for CODE-NGO. The factors that led to the formation of CODE-NGO are both reactive and pro-active. Reactive because CODE-NGO was a direct response to situations and problems that were already impinging on the Development NGO community. Pro-active because CODE-NGO is also the umbrella organization that charts the future of Development NGOs in the country.

1. *claiming our space* - CODE-NGO is a concrete response to the proliferation of mutant NGOs which devalue and debase the work of Development NGOs. The creation of CODE-NGO is thus an attempt to redefine who we are, distinguish ourselves from others, and create our niche in Philippine society. To claim our space does not only mean defining who we are but also creating a unity that is the only basis for common action. By so doing, CODE-NGO, whose membership at the moment covers about 75% of all Development NGOs, is able to speak out as a sector, represent a wide range of NGOs in negotiations with government (local and foreign), international agencies, donors, and counterpart NGOs.

In addition, it is imperative that Development NGOs have a self-regulating mechanism. In the case of CODE-NGO it is the Code of Ethics, in order to ensure that Development NGOs subscribe to set of principles and practices even as they may respond differently due to specific realities in their areas of operation.

2. *creating national impact* - in response to the dilemma between the micro approach and the need for national impact while maintaining the flexibility of NGOs, CODE-NGO has been able to test out mechanisms that approximately is a balance among all these without creating a bureaucracy. Together with other sectoral coalitions, an alternative trading scheme has been set up that directly links grassroots producers with consumers. By eliminating the middlemen, we are able to buy from peasants at higher prices while we sell to labor and urban poor groups at prices lower than the market rates.

Another experiment which is run by three of the networks is the Livelihood Revolving and Capability-Building Fund for Poor Women that has been able to reach out to beneficiaries without creating a bureaucracy to run the program (the LRFW staff is composed of six people). Essentially this program provides access to poor women through Development NGOs in their respective areas which follow the same scheme in each individual community. The success of this program is encouraging because it serves as a model through which Development NGOs can create national impact while maintaining their scope of operations.

**3. *sharing of information and expertise*** - related to impact is the sharing of experiences. CODE-NGO provides the venues within which Development NGOs can learn from each other. Instead of individual NGOs re-inventing the wheel, work is more effective when it builds upon previous experience. In addition, joint training programs, the transfer of skills from one NGO to another, and the exchange of expertise, while facilitating better work also serves to allow NGOs to focus on specific issues and hone their skills rather than for each to try to develop expertise in almost every concern. Finally, the process of learning from each other also helps to further consolidate CODE-NGO.

**4. *experimenting with concrete alternatives*** - NGO work would be relegated to stop-gap solutions if they did not try to link their work to larger issues of social structure. Part of the sharing process is also a mechanism whereby alternatives are catalyzed. In addition to the more conceptual formulations with regard to visions of a more desirable order, there is a conscious effort to weave together both concrete gains as well as failures in order to flesh out a blueprint for the future. Small scale experiments that are then tested out on a national level are ways of providing the people with a glimpse of an attainable future.

**5. *increasing "advocacy"*** - the successes of Development NGOs are not sustainable if these do not result in policy changes. Such changes are made possible through advocacy. Our experience has shown that Development NGOs are taken seriously by policy makers only when we speak with one voice. CODE-NGO has provided that strength. Whether it be with our own government, with donors or with international agencies, the fact that Development NGOs are organized and can take a collective position on issues, means a greater voice. This has been shown in various ways - representation in various government bodies, negotiations with donor agencies, representation in public hearings on various laws, lobbying for the revision and/or enactment of laws, etc. The point is simple, for as long as NGOs are a disparate group, it will be easier for those in power to disregard our viewpoint because they can always point to another NGO that posits a different position.

**6. *assisting in the formation/strengthening of regional alliances of NGOs*** - especially because of the archipelagic nature of the Philippines and because of the tradition of Manila-centered power, Development NGOs outside of Manila have always been at a disadvantage. In fact, even the ten networks in CODE-NGO are Manila-centered. The task is to strengthen region-based alliances so that they can develop more development workers, determine their own priorities and counterbalance what may very easily be the domination from the center. This is consistent with the principles of decentralization of decision-making as close to the ground as possible.

**7. *building a successor generation*** - because the Development NGO community is relatively young, the "leadership" of most NGOs is still in the hands of those who pioneered in the field. CODE-NGO places emphasis on developing the next generation of NGO leaders so as to transfer the vision smoothly, sustain the unity through time, and check whatever excesses may arise because a few leaders have ensconced themselves at the helm. Building a successor generation across the nation, therefore, is aimed at effecting a democratization of leadership.

**8. *standardizing NGO benefits***- because Development NGOs are at various levels of size and operations, NGO personnel enjoy a wide variance of privileges and benefits. This puts smaller NGOs at a disadvantage because there are more attractive packages in larger NGOs. CODE-NGO realizes that this situation "must" be remedied. Discussions have been underway to find some ways of standardizing operations especially in the light of the absence of a viable social security system in the country. Representations have been made with various agencies in order to work out a package of benefits that will be within the range of most Development NGOs in order to standardize benefits for personnel.

**9. *avoiding cooptation and ensuring autonomy*** - realizing that there are tremendous obstacles that lie in our path, it is obvious that moves have to be made to ensure that Development NGOs maintain their autonomy. On the level of funding, CODE-NGO had built upon the successes of the PCHRD in

order to implement similar mechanisms with donors. At the moment, the Australian government has approved a similar package, an endowment fund for NGO activities related to the environment has been approved by the USAID, and negotiations have been started with the European Community for a similar set-up. The intention is to ensure the autonomy of Development NGOs through funding mechanisms that are basically run by local NGOs. Negotiating as a group, it is easier to approach donors. At the same time, because the networks have a better grasp of what is happening in the whole world, scarce resources are more equitably distributed.

In relation to government, cooperation is minimized when we relate to each other as two cohesive groups. It is not as easy as to dangle funds in exchange for support when one has to deal with an umbrella like CODE-NGO. Finally, CODE-NGO also provides a pressure mechanism against cooptation and a support group for greater autonomy.

10. ***creating partnership relations*** - much of the developments with donor agencies have been achieved because CODE-NGO linked up with counterpart NGOs in donor nations. There is an urgent need to relate to northern NGOs both for advocacy on ODA, joint action on global issues, as well as sharing of experience and skills. Equally important is the building of partnership relations among southern NGOs. CODE-NGO has recently made contact with a few counterparts in Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Linkages with the South Center headed by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere are expected to facilitate such relations. It is important for south NGOs to relate to each other since we share a similar reality and can move, together with north NGOs, in effecting some changes at the global level.

11. ***safeguarding our security*** - because of the crucial role that the military plays in putting development workers at risk, CODE-NGO has worked out a liaison mechanism with the military that allows us to resolve conflicts at the early stages. The formal memorandum of agreement is due to be signed in a month or so. While this will not eliminate the usual threats to our security, it will hopefully facilitate relations so that undue harassment is minimized.

CODE-NGO is an experiment in scaling-up NGO impact. Consistent with the very principles that governs grassroots organizing for the empowerment of people, communities and sectors, Development NGOs have organized as a sector and as a community. In the "process" we have sown the seeds for strengthening and expanding individual NGOs, undertaking national programs without centralizing power, encouraging the emergence of popular and autonomous people's organizations, participating in and influencing local and national structures, and providing an alternative and grassroots-based path towards development which is not limited to small localized areas.

CODE-NGO is a phase in our own development. We continue to grapple not only with national issues but more importantly with the specific contours of the roles we have set out for ourselves. Questions about the specific process of structural change, the pros and cons of our participation in national politics, the resolution of constant tension between our own ideological commitment and the autonomy of POs, the apparent ease of the state in coopting NGO leaders once they are placed in positions of power (we are conducting a study of those among us who became part of the Aquino government), sustaining a pluralist unity, etc. continue to occupy us. They years will give us the answers. In the meantime, we continue in our search hoping that even if we are proven wrong, we would have at least assisted in the process of developing strong people's organizations that will, in the final analysis, determine our common future.

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