

Book Review

Empowering the People

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A review of Horacio R. Morales, Jr., *A Call for People's Development*, edited by Cesar Cala and Jo Doñgail (National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1990), 182 pages.

A Call for People's Development has taken up the cudgels for the poor, the disenfranchised, the victims, the oppressed—those who, in the words of Robert McAfee Brown, an eminent American theologian, “until very recently have had no voice and consequently no power” (p. xiii). And no technical mind has expressed this concern and defense better than that of Horacio R. Morales, Jr., President of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM) and Executive Director of the Cooperative Foundation of the Philippines, Inc. (CFPI).

Looming in Morales' papers which make up the book is his proximity to the poor for whom he was held as a political prisoner for four years during the Marcos regime. Clearly, he underscores the fair sharing of the world's goods, the eradication of greed and domination, and the removal of the poor's burden: poverty. The result is a book incisively zeroing in on four themes: people empowerment; market capitalism and centralized government as an obstacle to people empowerment; the “baleful” presence of the United States; and the “disastrous effects” of the Third World debt.

Morales' viewpoints go against the long-held belief that the elite should take the cudgels for the poor. Instead the poor, he claims, “must get organized and create the democratic institutions at grassroots level” (pp. 55-56). They should be allowed to enter the door opened by the February Revolution.

But the Aquino government, continues Morales, was geared towards the free play of market forces which bred more monopoly or oligopoly. Thus, the wealth of the nation is confined to a privileged few who wield considerable economic and social power. A vicious cycle of underdevelopment eventually occurs. To counter this cycle, Morales suggests the following: people-powered development program; activist government to intervene in the market forces;

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decentralized policy formulation and program planning and implementation; an agrarian reform to include all farm types; a nationalist industrialization policy; and a foreign policy based on an independent and equitable relationship.

A key component in rural development that Morales supports is self-reliance and self-management. This can be realized if the farmers are empowered to have access to and control over, and to own resources such as land and facilities. Rural development support systems are therefore necessary to resolve the inequities and injustice. He further stressed the need to strengthen cooperatives and to establish a people's cooperative bank patterned after the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh to enable the poor to have access to economic resources.

Another vital force in development activities is the nongovernment organizations (NGOs) which are often involved in five key areas: enhancement of productivity capacity; social services delivery; participatory research; people-centered development planning; and mass-based organizing. The PRRM, the first among the NGOs, embarked on a community development program with a fourfold approach: education, livelihood, health care and self-governance. The author gives much value to the cooperatives because they show that democracy is at work as people are involved particularly in decisionmaking. He admits that the government has initiated legislative measures for the NGOs and has made consultations with them but Morales sees this as a ploy to marginalize the NGOs.

To empower people, the author proposes a program with a centralist alternative: mixed governance where the third sector is substantially represented; mixed economy where the private sector is involved; and the government providing social services and regulating the market mechanism. A Filipino First Policy provides the background for the author's proposals.

A pluralist and a developmentalist government, the author avers, plus the integration and institutionalization of people into the mainstream of development and governance would spell a successful program that can improve the people's lives.

The book presents an insightful study into the participatory or collaborative processes of governance with the people, particularly the poor, as the center of development plans. This book can be of operational value to economic managers, political leaders, administrators, social scientists, entrepreneurs, NGOs, POs, development workers or people in the corporate world who want to learn a thing or two about social justice and equity.

The book is a compilation of Morales' speeches on development issues and alternative strategies but the editors present it as a source book. This results in duplications of some topics. Nevertheless, the book is simple and coherent and it provides eye-openers to some social and economic realities the country is enmeshed in.

The author also persuasively demonstrates the necessity of fostering political pluralism, genuine agrarian reform and nationalist industrialization to wean the economy from foreign domination. His strategy for people empowerment to energize the Philippine social structure through a substantive rural development is worth applying. So is his prescription for an environmental policy that protects, regenerates and conserves the natural resources.

There is nothing to argue about the fact that economic progress is not only measured quantitatively but more so qualitatively. His objection to the Keynesian theory or the trickle down effect that the government has long been subscribing to will find many adherents. It is a fact that the resources of the country trickle down to only the privileged few. His suggested recommendations for a genuine agrarian reform that would encompass all types of land and the inclusion of support systems like "Isang Hektarya sa Kabuhayan," "Puhunan sa Kabuhayan" and "Teknolohiya sa Kabuhayan" are exemplary models which could solve the perennial agrarian reform problems. His food-first policy to attain self-sufficiency is undeniably one of the steps towards economic recovery. His suggested programs for nationalist industrialization and his objections to export-led industrialization are worth appreciating. However, in the light of today's globalism, this could ground the economy from being internationally competitive. Although he admits that exports are stimulants for economic growth, he sounds very suspicious and restricted in fostering the export-led industrialization scheme which he claims would place the country under foreign subjugation. He contradicts himself when he makes examples of Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Nevertheless, many would support his stand that the Philippines cannot anchor its fate on the vicissitudes of western economies, rather it should moor it on internal markets and national initiatives. In attaining self-sufficiency and self-reliance, the Philippines can ward off any foreign domination the author fears most when markets are open. Morales was also right when he opted for the removal of the United States Bases to be replaced with equitable and open bilateral relations.

In reading some of his articles, there is a need to be judicious in delineating some idealistic tendencies of the author's proposals vis-à-vis reality. While he favors an autonomous foreign policy that establishes mutually beneficial relations between the Philippines and all states regardless of ideology, his position on independent non-aligned foreign policy is vague. He has not expounded on what could be these beneficial relations. From what

could be gleaned, he does not mean this to be on the basis of economic relations as he is pessimistic about any economic trade-offs.

Morales has to temper his radical prescriptions of sweeping development changes. His severe criticisms of the Aquino government display a hurried outlook on change. Being in a hurry to institute changes, he does not consider a transition period for adjustments necessary in order to effect change. Not giving credit where it is due is also one of his weaknesses. Aquino may have missed so many opportunities like providing a better leverage for our external debt and institutionalizing a substantial land reform program, but we have to acknowledge her various contributions in preserving democracy. The 1987 Constitution promulgated under her administration institutionalized the NGOs and POs, a situation that paved the way for the Local Government Code of 1991. Decentralization and empowerment, which the author strongly advocates, have been integrated. It seems the government has attempted to subscribe to the author's concept of empowerment.

Another aspect which Morales misses is the attitudinal aspect of most Filipinos. While he touched on the elite Congress watering down pro-poor bills particularly the land reform law, he should have included reforms in the people's values which are a crucial segment in the people's development. As long as Congress is dominated by the landed elite, land reform may be expected to be mired. And who elected them in the first place? One value that could have been stressed is the value of maturity in the election process which could have resulted in having elective officials who are truly representatives of the people. Morales, with his rural development expertise, could have been an asset in the legislative assembly had he won in the senatorial elections.

On the other hand, his vision of a developmentalist government is laudable. His suggestions for strengthening the cooperatives, establishing cooperative banks patterned after the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh and his coming up with a cooperative system of production are meritorious enough to be looked into. In the same manner, the PRRM could serve as a model for the NGOs.

As a whole, the book can rouse the government into action, after it has weighed the book's analytical evaluation of the past and present economic trends and Morales' attendant recommendations.