

FIGHTING HUNGER WITH HUNGER STRIKE: THE DANGEROUS LIVE OF A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER



Steffen Rudolph

29 years, Magister in Political Sciences, Modern History and Economic History, University of Mannheim, Germany; human rights observer with IPON in 2009/10.



Lukas Bauer

25 years, student of Political Sciences and Public Administration, University of Leipzig, Germany; human rights observer with IPON in 2009/10.



Irene Winkler

23 years, Diploma in Computer Sciences, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany; human rights observer with IPON in 2009/10.


Edna Sobrecaray works as a community organizer and spokesperson for Task Force Mapalad (TFM), a peasant-based movement for agrarian reform and rural development in the Philippines. TFM is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with the mission "to improve the quality of life of farmers and farm workers by supporting their initiatives for access to land resources and productivity development" (www.tfmnational.org). The organization works nationwide in nine provinces in the Philippines and counts around 25,000 members.

TFM helps landless farmers to acquire land through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). To push the process, they exert pressure on official authorities by arranging dialogues, organizing the farmers and if necessary by enforcing regional or even national campouts in front of the agencies concerned. As a last resort, they use hunger strikes to emphasize their legal claims and to gain nationwide media attention. Furthermore, TFM farmers are trained in legal facts and assisted by lawyers in case of prosecution. TFM believes in non-violent forms of struggle and acts in compliance with the law.

Edna Sobrecaray, 39 years old, started working for TFM in November 1999 just after the organisation was founded. As community organizer she supervises wide parts of TFM-related estates in Negros. In October 2000 she also became the spokesperson for TFM, making her the voice of TFM nationwide. Since 2002 she has been co-organising a weekly radio program in Negros where she speaks about current issues of the land conflict.

We interviewed Edna on 7th November 2009

when she told us more about her work with TFM, her motivation and the threats she has to face because of her work. In this article we relate her work for TFM to the Universal Declaration

 IPON | Community Organizer Edna Sobrecaray



ARTICLE 25.

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

of Human Rights, thereby showing that TFM members are human rights defenders. The term “human rights defenders” is used to describe people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights (see article by Sarah Potthoff in this volume). The aims of human rights defenders include not only political, but also civil and economical rights. TFM fights for human rights like the right to live, to food and a decent standard of living.

According to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, these should be especially protected. Nevertheless, Edna has been threatened several times personally. Once she was offered a monthly amount of money in case she would stop working for TFM. When she declined the offer, she was reminded of the fact that the money could also be spent on bullets against her. She was also followed by motorbikes and blacklisted at one farmland. In 2006, her fellow TFM community organizer Rido Adeva was killed. But even though she is afraid and often has to change residence, she has never wanted to stop. Fortunately, the number of threats against her has decreased because she is known and killing her would unleash unwanted media attention. “They know that I am well-known now” she tells us with some pride in her voice and continues that “they also know that the whole TFM will react when something happens to one of us.”

Still, Edna took more than just security risks. Taking serious health risks, she participated in three hunger strikes. One of these lasted 29 days and the people who took part were in severe danger of dying. “With my participation in the hunger strikes,” Edna says “I wanted to help the farmers and encourage them.”

She knew “that there was a risk of dying”, but she had a feeling that “I have to do it. It is my mission as the spokesperson of TFM.”

Conscious of her efforts, Edna sees herself as someone who fights for human rights. “So I am a human rights defender,” she deduces. “If the laws are not implemented properly, it is up to us to build pressure on the state authorities. It is a human right to have a fair trial in court,” she finalizes raising her voice.

In some cases the right to a fair trial by an effective and impartial court seems to be violated. Edna complains that the legal process is very slow when farmers are concerned but speeds

up considerably when an influential landowner files a case. One time she was accused personally, but the case had to be dropped. All she had done was to attend an official handover of land.

Her engagement is impressive, in particular when she reports that neither she nor her parents have an agricultural background and she had worked as a nurse before she started working for TFM. Asked about her motivation, she responds that during her nursing work “I also helped people, but now as a community organizer I can help people in economic, social, justice and educational ways.” Most important

ARTICLE 8.

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

ARTICLE 10.

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

© TFM | TFM members on hunger strike, Manila





ARTICLE 17.

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

ARTICLE 22.

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

for her “is poverty reduction of the farmers, that they are no longer controlled by the former landowners and to bring an end to the human rights violations.” Her main motivation is simple, and she believes: “The farmers have the right to own land. This will help to reduce poverty.”

Edna and her companions hope that through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP)

of previously landless farmers improves when they get ownership of land because their income generally increases.

For the land reform in the Philippines in particular, Balicasan traced the quantitative significance of factors leading to poverty reduction. Besides the initial economic and institutional situation, agricultural terms of trade and the infrastructure, the implementation of the CARP program is a leading factor for poverty reduction (cf. Balicasan 2007b).

Without the support services, however, it will be very hard for the new landowners to cultivate the land productively. Poverty reduction in combination with security of life is a goal not only set by local activists but can also be found in the Declaration of Human Rights written more than 60 years ago.

According to Edna state authorities should be addressed. “They are the ones to protect and implement the law and ensure the security of the farmers”. Before she started to work for TFM her interest in politics was limited, but now she does everything to make sure that the law is implemented properly.

So far she still has confidence in some state authorities. In general Edna works closely with the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). With a little smile on her lips she admits: “In some cases they get angry with me” when she reminds them to do their job properly and according to the law.

Over the years she found some friends at the police warning her in case of threats. The small woman seems to grow in front of us while reporting about countless incidences when the local Philippine National Police (PNP) did not react to harassments, threats and violence by local men affiliated with the former landowner against TFM farmers. In those cases, TFM pressures the regional PNP to intervene. Still, she and the farmers fighting for their rights do not feel sufficiently protected, which violates the right of security of person.

There are not many things that can disconcert her, but she feels that the police acts slowly when farmers are concerned, but flashes into action when an influential landowner seeks assistance. Some of her farmers have made the experience



ARTICLE 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

the land will not only be distributed to landless farmers, but also that support services for Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries will be provided. The goal is to ensure the productive cultivation of the land by the new owners.

The correlation between land reform and poverty reduction has been discussed largely in social sciences (cf. Balicasan 2007a; Ballesteros 2008). It is broadly accepted that the situation

that “police only react to harassments when they are requested by the DAR.”

Edna also criticises that state actors coming from other parts of the Philippines seem more willing to intervene actively, “because as outsiders they are freer from exterior influences”. It is no coincidence that Negros is considered one of the strongest bastions of feudalism in the Philippines. Edna is proud of her work and rightly so: her greatest achievement was that through her work, nine farmlands have successfully been installed with support services. The work of TFM in the Region Negros

Occidental resulted in the handover of 89 of their 314 farmlands. However, a lot of work is still lying ahead of them as bureaucracy works slowly in Negros. “The biggest problem is slow implementation”, Edna knows. She endorses the passage of the bill for CARP with extension and reform (CARPER). “The new law helps us to pressure the state authorities. This is why we educate people so that they know their rights.”

The human rights defenders of TFM will continue to fight for their rights, even though they sometimes fear for their lives or feel discriminated in court. Edna hopes that one day

all private agricultural land will be distributed, that farmers with land titles can send their children to college and that everyone understands we are all equal in human rights.

SOURCES

- Assessment: Study on the Impact of CARP on Poverty Reduction and Prospects for Long-Term Growth. Quezon City: Department of Agrarian Reform.
- Balicasan, Arsenio M. (2007b): Local Growth and Poverty Reduction. In: Balicasan, A.; Hill, H.; et al.: The Dynamics of Regional Development: The Philippines in East Asia, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK.
- Ballesteros, Marife Magno; Cortez, Felino (2008): CARP Institutional Assessment in a Post-2008 Transition Scenario: Implications for Land Administration and Management. Philippine Institute for Development Studies. Discussion-Paper 2008-07.



ARTICLE 7.

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

