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Militant Politics and the Shrinking of Civic Spaces among Peasant Communities in Cebu and Bohol

Regletto Aldrich Imbong

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Cover Image Credit

"Community water tank in Toledo City. Captured during team field work, August 30, 2025."

Photo courtesy of Regletto Aldrich Imbong

Table of Contents

Key Highlights 1

Executive Summary 2

Development as a Dialectical Process 4

- Development as Alleviation 5
- Persistent Threats and Challenges to Development among Peasant Communities 7
- Militant Politics and the Need for Social Liberation 10

Militant Politics, Participation, and the Shrinking of Civic Spaces 12

Conclusion and Recommendations 16

References 18

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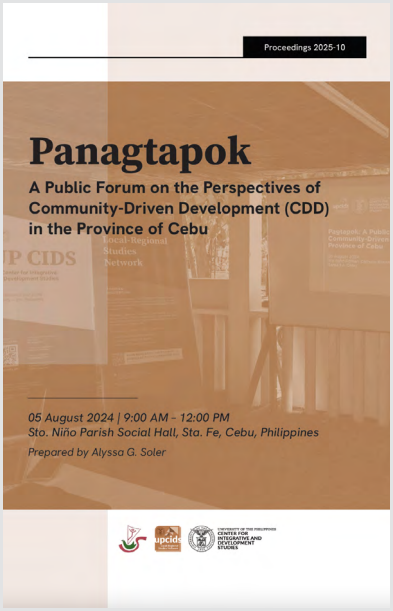

PROCEEDINGS

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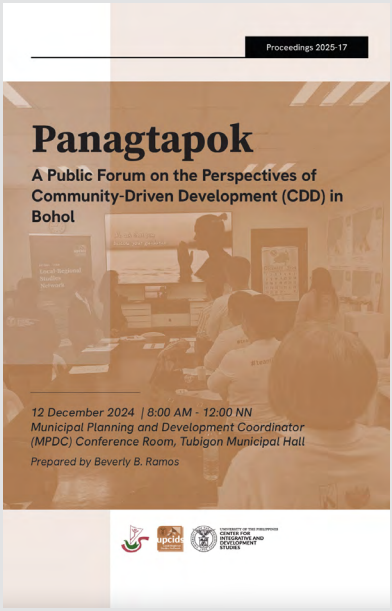
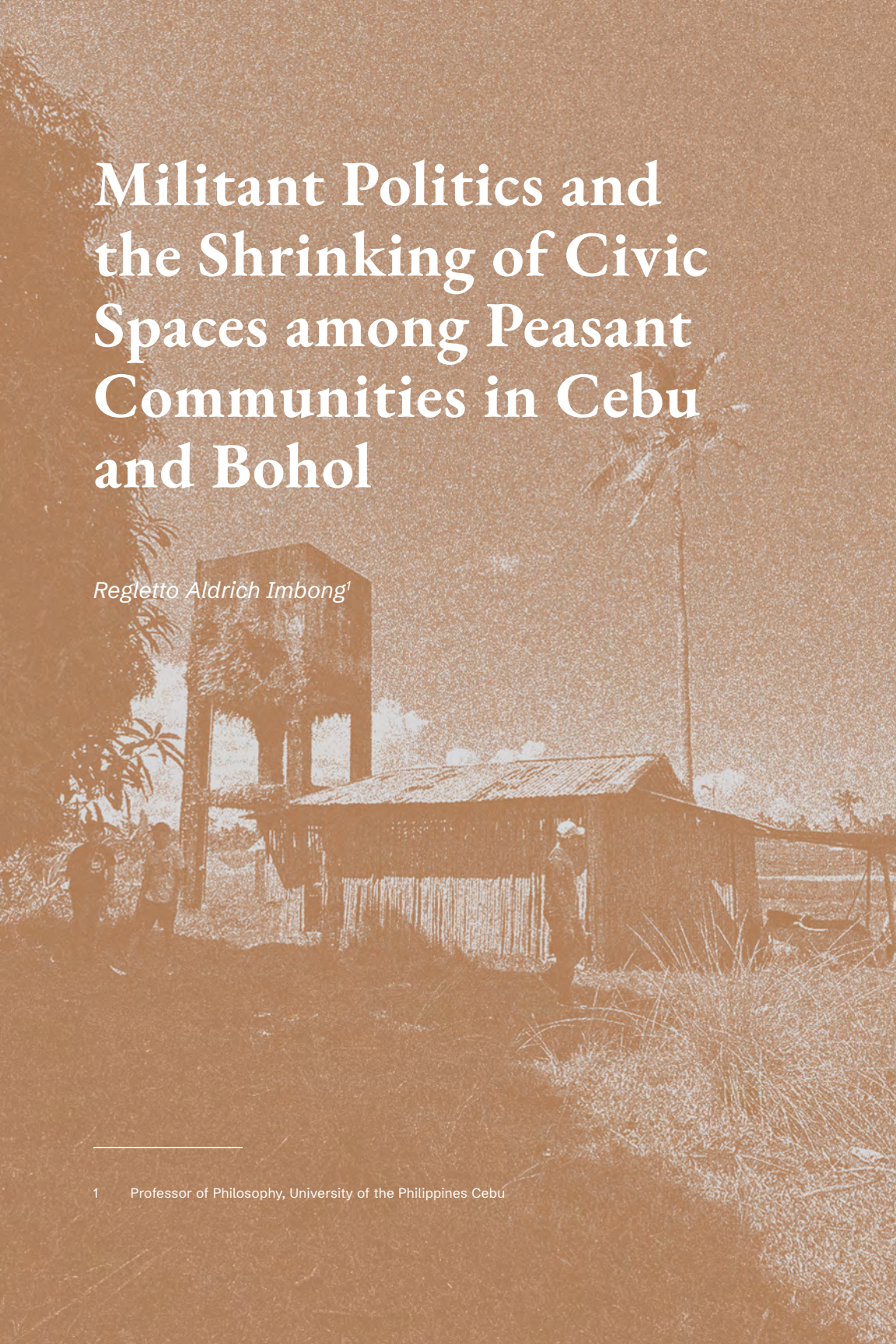


PROCEEDINGS

Panagtapok: A Public Forum on the Perspectives of Community-Driven Development (CDD) in Bohol

Militant Politics and the Shrinking of Civic Spaces among Peasant Communities in Cebu and Bohol

Regletto Aldrich Imbong[1]



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Key Highlights

- During the term of former president Rodrigo Duterte, civil society organizations have reported the shrinking of civic spaces resulting from intensified repression.

- The shrinking of civic spaces is confirmed by development workers in Cebu and Bohol where they reported having been subjected to various forms of harassment and intimidation, specifically terror-tagging.

- This discussion paper reconceptualizes development and development work, specifically the notion of participation, within the context of the shrinking of civic spaces.

- A dialectical conception of development will elucidate the militant politics exercised by grassroots peasant communities and organizations. The same militant politics will also be identified as the state's threshold of intolerance.

- Theoretically, the paper will engage with some of the dominant assumptions in development scholarship, particularly those advanced in community-driven development (CDD) and post-development (PD).

Executive Summary

Development and development work in the Philippines took a sharp yet unfortunate turn during the administration of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. As early as 2018, narratives concerning the shrinking of civic spaces of the country have been expressed, especially by development workers. In a 2018 article, Mariefe del Mundo (2018) of the Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO) described the deteriorating situation of "democratic practices, human rights, peace and order, and governance" since Duterte assumed office in 2016. The shrinking of civic spaces is later reiterated by CODE-NGO, which raised the alarm over continued and constant threats received by development workers as a result of their work and advocacies. The group called for "wider civic spaces" in order to fulfill the democratic functions of development workers "without fear of intimidation, harassment, or reprisal from State and non-state actors" (CODE-NGO 2024). The Council for People's Development and Governance (CPDG) has similarly raised the alarm over the country's shrinking civic spaces. In their CSO Manifesto for Enabling and Strengthening Civic Space in the Philippines, the CPDG positioned that "the current state of shrinking civic spaces" has significantly affected the work and operations of civil society and has likewise undermined civil society organizations (CSOs), especially in the exercise of civic participation and democratic governance.

The shrinking of civic spaces is equally expressed by development workers in Cebu and Bohol, the two provinces that compose the Central Visayas Region of the Philippines. Development workers have reportedly experienced increased cases of harassment and intimidation and have been subjected to red/terror-tagging. The latter is the malicious naming or tagging of an individual or a group as terrorists (Imbong 2023). While the Supreme Court of the Philippines (2024) has declared it to be a threat to the right to life, liberty, and security, it has been used with impunity by known state agents in the conduct of their counterinsurgency campaigns. Red/terror-tagging is legally complemented through the anti-terror law, a mechanism which, according to United Nations experts, has been deliberately misapplied in targeting development workers tagged as terrorists or their financiers (Chi 2024). Among the latest of what activists described as trumped-up charges, 27 development workers from the Cebu-based Community Empowerment Resource Network (CERNET) were accused of terrorism financing in 2024. This and other instances of harassment and terror-tagging led the Aktionsbündnis Menschenrechte Philippinen (AMP 2024) to conclude what appears to be a government crackdown against civil society. This shrinking of civic spaces is concretely experienced by development

workers, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and people's organizations (POs) in Cebu and Bohol.

It is in the context of the shrinking of civic spaces that this paper reconceptualizes development, specifically the notion of participation. It particularly asks the following questions. How is development conceptualized by grassroots organizations in Cebu and Bohol that are mainly the targets of today's political repression? At what point does the concept of development become dangerously subjected to state scrutiny and terrorist witch-hunting? How is participation reconceptualized given the experience of grassroots peasant organizations in Cebu and Bohol? The paper aims to make sense of what CSOs have described as the shrinking of civic spaces via a detour on an examination of how communities experiencing continued attacks and harassment conceive what development is. The detour aims to highlight that the shrinking of civic spaces is related with how communities understand development and participation. In these communities, the shrinking of civic spaces is particularly experienced through disenfranchisement and delegitimization.

As will be discussed in more detail subsequently, what particularly distinguishes the concept of development shared by these grassroots organizations is how they portray it as a dialectical process. The paper will argue that for these groups, development is a dialectical process that responds not only to the most immediate concerns of their respective communities but also goes beyond the immediate to realize political requisites. What this means is that development comes to be seen as both alleviation from perceived community problems and liberation from more fundamental and systemic issues. Their depiction of development as both alleviation and liberation can be captured in their narratives regarding the concept of kalambuan.

The dialectical conception of development (as kalambuan) also informs two things. First, development and development work in the Philippines, at least in the communities investigated, would require being political. Here, development will be governed by what I will describe as militant politics (MP). As will be elaborated, development could not just be the mere socio-technical implementation of projects helpful in the alleviation of community problems. In implementing these projects, more fundamental and oftentimes political issues arise that the community needs to confront and resolve if it has to pursue its development objectives. Second, the political dimension of development or militant politics, where systemic issues such as landlessness are called into

question, is what the paper will identify as the threshold of state intolerance. It is a fact that not all development work and initiatives trigger state scrutiny or red/terror-tagging. The selective nature of such scrutiny and red/terror-tagging reflects a deeper political question of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable paradigms of development from the vantage point of the state and why such a paradigm is intolerable in the first place.

Theoretically, the paper will enrich the discussion of participation via a conversation with the literature on community-driven development (CDD) and post-development (PD). There have been various efforts to mainstream the CDD in the country as a development strategy. While the CDD consciously integrated participatory approaches in its development strategies, its notion of participation is limited to what will be described as participation in projects. The latter is examined through Mahjid Rahnema's post-development critique of participation (Rahnema 2010). The paper will contend that through MP, participation is reconceptualized as both participation in projects and participation in liberation, corresponding to the dialectical conception of development informed by MP. This reconceptualization illuminates the limits of state intolerance and sheds light on the shrinking of civic spaces in the country.

Development as a Dialectical Process

This section will examine the theory and practice of development and development work among peasant organizations and advocates in Cebu and Bohol. The research utilized one round of FGD in December 2024 and two rounds of FGDs in July and August 2025. Five POs from peasant communities of Cebu and Bohol served as participants for these FGDs. One key informant interview was also conducted with the executive director of the Manila-based NGO Sibol ng Agham at Teknolohiya (SIBAT), which has partnered on projects in the communities of Bohol. The peasant communities interviewed were coming from Toledo City and the Municipality of Aloguinsan in the Province of Cebu, and the municipalities of Ubay and Carmen in the Province of Bohol. For purposes of security, the names of the POs are withheld. Basic digital humanities, using the software AntConc, was also utilized in analyzing the transcriptions of the FGDs.

Development as Alleviation

In these peasant communities, water is a perennial problem, either as a source for irrigation or simply for drinking. One participant from Toledo City noted how it was a problem in the past to continue cultivating their rice fields without a regular supply of water, especially in an extremely dry season. The same is true with the community from Aloguinsan where one participant noted that water is important to the community, it is very useful during the dry season (*importante ang tubig sa katawhan diri, gamit gyud kaayo siya labi na kanang maghuwaw*). Through collective efforts, these Cebu-based POs were able to build water systems that have been operational for more than a decade already.

In the municipality of Ubay, Bohol, the two communities interviewed shared that they both have water systems for drinking. In one community, a water system was built, and it was funded by an international religious NGO. Emphasizing how water is more valuable in their community, one participant explained that they can eat three times a day (*makakaon mi og katulo sulod sa usa ka adlaw*), but water is more important because of their remoteness from its source (*tubig jud ang importante kay lagyo mi og imnanan*). In the other community, a water system was recently inaugurated in June 2025, giving its members access to clean potable mineral water. The said project was a collaboration between the local people's organization and the NGO SIBAT. In the municipality of Carmen, the community interviewed shared that they also have an ongoing effort for the building of a water system. Similar to the other community in Ubay, this community also collaborated with SIBAT for the building of a water system.

The communities where these respective water systems were built all share the idea that these projects have given them various forms of alleviation, from the ease of access to a relatively cheaper water service. This is particularly helpful for those unable to connect to commercial water services because of their relatively high prices, as narrated by all POs involved. The participants were able to contrast the difference between their situations prior to and after the implementation of their respective water projects and have recognized a relatively alleviated social condition with the implementation of the projects. One of the communities even shared how their water system not only responded to social and physiological needs but also augmented their organization's economic or financial capacities, as they are now able to generate income from the said project.

Mainstream development models usually propose elements to ensure that when a development effort becomes participatory and not a mere interventionist exercise, especially by foreign financing institutions. For example, the World Bank community-driven development (CDD) approach has identified three elements that make such an effort participatory: the empowerment of actors, the exercise of human agency, and the conduct of public deliberation (Pham 2018). CDD has been institutionalized by the Philippine government through the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan–Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (KALAHI–CIDSS) of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Further, it has also recently been argued that development efforts beyond the jurisdiction of institutionalized CDD programs and within grassroots organizations have equally exercised empowerment, human agency, and public deliberation (Imbong 2025). Although development efforts done within the KALAHI–CIDSS are consciously, albeit externally guided by such technical metrics, grassroots organizations unconsciously but organically/spontaneously manage themselves according to the same participatory rubrics.

The same participatory approach can also be said of the grassroots organizations in Cebu and Bohol. The empowerment of members, exercise of agency, and regular collective deliberations are visible in their everyday development practices. While the projects were largely collaborative efforts between local POs and NGOs (funded by European religious institutions), the concerned POs collectively went through the process of identifying a problem and the most appropriate project. All the POs explain that they start with a series of public deliberations or meetings about their situation and discuss how they could set up specific measures to help alleviate their conditions. They share a sense of ownership of these projects as they not only realize what they have collectively decided but also respond to an objective and immediate concern of their own communities.

In building the projects, the respective POs mobilized themselves from doing the feasibility studies, to the procurement of a project's components and equipment, up to its actual construction. While the feasibility studies have some technical aspects that require external expertise, their completion would hardly be possible if not for the support of the local POs. As SIBAT executive director Ms. Estrella Catarata explained, every partner PO is involved both in the pre-feasibility studies and the actual feasibility studies. She further explained that the PO is helpful, especially in determining potential sources of water and in completing the community profile. The PO works together with the technical experts, like the engineers, in conceptualizing, designing, and

building the said projects. Also, SIBAT-funded projects do not include the cost of labor, as the budget is mainly for the electromechanical components. This means that the PO has to mobilize itself not only in the feasibility studies stage but also in the actual construction of the project to provide the needed labor. When the project is done, the PO in each community manages the said project based on collectively decided policies.

It can be said that these projects are nothing less than mainstream, especially in terms of how they responded to the most immediate concerns of the communities, which resulted in alleviation, and how they exercised collective participation that involved the empowerment of members, exercise of agency, and conduct of collective deliberations.

Persistent Threats and Challenges to Development among Peasant Communities

While the said community initiatives can be categorized as mainstream, they also transcend such a model as they confront political issues that allow them to expand the notion of development to include liberational themes. It is interesting to note that, because of the nature of the communities concerned, not only water but also land has been identified as a perennial, if not a fundamental, problem among the communities. The transcriptions of the FGDs of the five POs were subjected to computer analysis through AntConc and revealed the following most uttered terms during the conversations.

Table 1. Top 10 terms used by participants of the FGDs

Rank	Term	Frequency of mentions
1	*Yuta* (Land)	184
2	Project	172
3	*Miyembro* (Member)	172
4	Mag-*uuma* (Farmer)	157
5	*Tubig* (Water)	133
6	*Organisasyon* (Organization)	119
7	Meeting	98
8	*Problema* (Problem)	78
9	*Pamaagi* (Method/Means)	52
10	Pananglitan (Example)	52

As can be seen from the table, land (*yuta*) is the most uttered term during the FGDs. The participants have consistently raised their importance and centrality in their communities. These communities have differing property relations to the land they respectively are tilling. A few have exercised some form of communal control, while others are still subject to tenancy relations with a landlord claiming ownership over the land. Land areas also vary, from a few hectares to 168 hectares of contested agricultural plot. Tenancy relations are still predominant in the backward agricultural conditions of the country (Icamina 2018; Briones 2025) despite years of land reform.

A study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) assessed the 30-year implementation of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). It has been noted that while there are substantial achievements, especially in terms of land coverage and agrarian reform beneficiaries, the said program has also encountered difficulties, specifically in targeting and an efficient land record system. These difficulties make the program vulnerable to the interests of powerful landlords and local officials (Ballesteros et al. 2017). CARP itself has been criticized for becoming a mere mechanism by big landlords to consolidate control over their lands. Eduardo Tadem (2015) has emphasized how CARP and its continuation through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER) are compromises between conflicting social forces and are "hobbled by anti-peasant and pro-landlord provisions." Comparing the land reform programs in China and Korea from the Philippines, Ziyi Ma (2020) described that "land reforms [in the latter] had a twisted journey, reoccurring but superficial."

Peasant organizations have continually criticized CARP/ER as a "fake and failed reform program" which has only aided in the persistence of widespread landlessness (Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas 2021). The independent think tank Ibon Foundation explained that landlessness persists and is even worsened over the years. For example, it noted that 7 out of 10 land parcels are not fully owned. In 2022, 2.4 million parcels (28.4 percent) were fully owned or 28.4 percent. This has dropped from 3.6 million a decade earlier. The decreasing number of fully owned land parcels contrasts with the increasing number of tenanted farms from 1.5 to 1.6 million within the same period (IBON Foundation 2025). Land precarity, if not landlessness itself, continues to confront the majority of the peasant population of the country.

One participant from Bohol particularly traced the problem of land monopoly (*pagmonopolyo sa yuta*) and how conflicts arise (*diha nagsugod ang bangi*). Land monopoly could be traced back to the colonial times in the encomienda/

hacienda systems, continued in the postcolonial era, consolidated in the Marcos Sr. dictatorial regime, and is persistent even up to the present (Ibon Foundation 2017b; Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas 2025; Ziyi 2020; Tadem 2022). What the peasant organizations observed is not a mere local or regional phenomenon but a national, systemic, and postcolonial problem of landlessness rooted in the landlords' consolidation of vast agricultural lands through their strong political power (Tadem 2015, 2022). Ziyi pointedly argued how land reform in the Philippines has, in fact, been beholden to the interests of the landed elites. He explained how the failure of superficial land reforms in the country is highly correlated with the landlords, yet despite this, "the Philippine government carried out no policies to challenge landlords' monopoly." This made landlords even more consolidated and stronger (Ziyi 2020), both economically and politically.

Another issue that the peasant organizations have consistently raised in relation to the precarious nature of their land tenure is the ongoing and more aggressive schemes of land use conversion. One participant shared that the threats against peasants are continuing (*gapadayon lang gihapon ang hulga karon sa mga mag-uuma*), especially in how the government has intensified land use conversion (*hilabi na sa karon nga pagpakusog nila sa land use conversion*). In 2021, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) released Administrative Order 3, Series of 2021, which essentially shortened the process of converting land usage. The real estate industry particularly welcomed this development. For example, the Chamber for Real Estate Builders' Associations, Inc. (2021), in their article entitled "New Land Conversion Rules to Boost Economic Recovery," described as "chokepoints that delay the processing of conversion applications" the clearances and certifications of the Department of Agriculture, National Irrigation Administration, and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. In the new rule, clearances from these government agencies are no longer required. Free market advocates, like the Foundation for Economic Freedom (FEF), have long lobbied the government for a faster process of land conversion. In advocating for a more intensified urbanization, FEF called on the government "to free up land" to be used for "commercial, residential, and industrial purposes" (quoted in in Ignacio 2019). Land conversion and its concomitant project of rapid urbanization have worsened the problem of landlessness and land precarity among the peasant population in the country (PCIJ 2022; Ibon Foundation 2017a).

Militant Politics and the Need for Social Liberation

The precarious state of land tenure is a national issue that peasant communities in Central Visayas are also confronting. This precarity expresses itself in prolonged land contestations and disputes. Peasant communities perceive these contestations as the continuous attempt by the landlords and/or the latter's representatives to totally dispossess the former of the land they are tilling, either by legal actions, land conversions, or outright harassments and threats. Many of the communities trace the beginning of their collective assertion for land in the 1900s, making their fight a generational yet elusive struggle for social justice. Since then, they have faced legal battles, been threatened with evictions, and even suffered imprisonment. Land contestation is especially heightened in communities that have exercised some form of communal control over the land they are tilling. Two of the five peasant communities interviewed have shared that they have reached some form of communal control and farming. One of the two communities described their communal farming as *alayon*, a Bisaya term which usually means "mutual help."

The precarity of land tenure expands the concept of development among peasant communities to involve themes that touch on discussions on unequal class relations and the need for social liberation. One recurring theme among the communities involved is how they see the necessary connection between development (*kalambuan*) and the defense of the land (*depensaan ang yuta*). To speak of development as a defense of the land is to expand the notion of development to also emphasize the necessity of peasants to be liberated from tenancy relations resulting from the entrenched and systemic problem of precarity of land tenure. This is where the notion of development begins to cross from mere alleviation to liberation and assume a political dimension. The peasants recognize that all the gains they have reached in the mainstream model of development would be put to waste if they lost the land they are tilling. Inasmuch as for these communities, water is life, they also assert how both water and life are fundamentally tied to the land itself.

Kalambuan, as articulated by the peasant communities, is informed by a militant politics (MP). MP has three important elements: confrontational, subject-constituting, and overcoming of locality. First, its confrontational nature governs both the internal dynamics of their organization and their relation to various political actors. A recurring theme among the conversations with various communities is how they allow the conflict of ideas among their members, especially in the exercise of democratic decision-making processes. One participant narrated that conflict of ideas is inevitable in

their organization (*di gyud malikayan nga magbangi og ideya*), and another explained that it will eventually be resolved (*magbangi og ideya, pero maayos ra man*). This confrontational method can also be seen in how their organizations confront various actors and state agencies, especially those they believe play a significant role in the issue of land reform. While the organizations maximize avenues for dialogue with various levels of government instrumentalities, they are also known to have consistently joined in more militant forms of protests that demand genuine agrarian reform, national and food sovereignty, comprehensive and pro-people programs, and an end to militarization, to name a few. The organizations recognize that through more militant forms of mass protests, the government can better hear their demands.

Second, the subject-constituting element of MP organizes a collectivity that reconceptualizes agency and empowerment within their struggle for land. The communities traced the establishment of their organization as a response to the need to defend their lands. A participant shared that what challenged the establishment of their organization (*ang nakahagit jud kon nganong nakatugkod og organization*) is the heightened oppression of the landlord against the peasants (. . . *pagpanglupig sa tag-iya sa yuta sa mga mag-uuma*). Another participant narrated how they recognized the need to form an organization because of their land issue (*magtukod og organisasyon kay yuta man gud among isyu*) and land is for the tiller, not for the landlord (*ang yuta para gyud sa mag-uuma dili para sa agalong yutaan*). One participant pointed out how only through organizing can they strongly defend themselves against threats of displacement from powerful landed interests (*mao ni nga . . . gitukod ang usa ka organisasyon aron may kusganon gyud nga moatubang unya sa panahon nga tandugon mi kay naa ni plano nga tandugon mi diha*).

Third, MP overcomes the localized scope of development in terms of organization and political strategies. On the one hand, the organizations interviewed shared that they are all part of a larger federation of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, n.d.), a group that describes itself as "a democratic and militant movement of landless peasants." The organizations recognize how their local subjectivity could effectively confront a systemic and national problem if bound together under a national peasant movement that struggles for genuine land reform. KMP (n.d.) aims to coordinate "the farmers' local struggles and campaigns at the national level" in order to "confront repulsively unequal class relations." While militant in their demands, these organizations struggle for reforms within the limits offered by the state. So, while critical of the current state as largely dominated by landed interests, the organizations are likewise hopeful that, through militant actions, pressure

could be exerted to push the government towards implementing more radical reforms that especially address the national issue of landlessness and precarity of land tenure. In other words, the militant peasant organizations still recognize the political significance of a state, in contrast to CDD and PD, as will be shown subsequently, as the very mechanism where reforms could take place.

Militant Politics, Participation, and the Shrinking of Civic Spaces

Participation has been a popular jargon in development work and studies, especially starting in the 1950s. According to Rahnema (2010), participation became a popular alternative then because of the obvious failures of top-down development approaches that tend to exclude and simply reduce the people on the ground to "recipients." Its introduction in many development strategies aimed to empower communities that are left out in the process of planning and executing development projects. Because of its popularity, even the most repressive regimes then, like those of Pinochet and Mobutu, were known to have used it in their narratives (Rahnema 2010).

Even with its introduction, it still carried with it a limitation, as it is always already understood as participation in projects. As Rahnema (2010, 128, emphasis added) assessed, "it was found that whenever people were locally involved, and actively participating, in the projects, much more was achieved with much less, even in sheer financial terms." Three problems arise from this model of participation. First, it limits participation within the process of project implementation and management. In other words, participation is narrowly constrained within the socio-technical aspects like public deliberation, feasibility studies, community mobilization, canvassing and procurement, and the actual management of the implemented projects. This is the case of KALAHI–CIDSS projects, as attested by many studies (Adriano 2016; Araral and Holmemo 2007; Imbong 2025; Jaducana 2025). By limiting participation in the socio-technical dimensions, development is constrained and made to appear as something that can be brought about simply by implementing community-based projects.

Second, this model subjects participation and empowerment to external rubrics that are oftentimes invented by funding entities alien from communities that they intend to empower. Rahnema (2010, 138) cautions against "conscientizing from without," where external actors could wrongfully use "conscientization or participatory methods, simply as new and more subtle

forms of manipulation." Again, this is visibly practiced among KALAHI–CIDSS communities. In the latter, participation is measured by how much communities commit themselves to and volunteer for the implementation of projects. As Bulloch (2017) observes in several communities, participation is ironically required from the village members for them to be able to get the needed project funding. Bulloch (2017, 153, 155) further noticed how participation has almost become a "religious commitment" from villagers, yet at the same time only used to legitimize a community response "shaped by suggestions from the facilitator" and, in the first place, limited by "things that would not receive funding."

Third, the participation-in-projects model tends to reduce the involvement of the state in organizing nationalized development programs as efforts are either assigned to individuals (through a moralistic demand for self-transformation) or to communities (like the CDD). Explaining the origins of WB's CDD in Indonesia, Scott Guggenheim (2024, 333) remarked that "much of what is needed to design a community development project is for state agencies to do less rather than more." This development strategy reconciled the drive towards localist initiatives with participatory approaches, where "much more was achieved with much less" state involvement. This erosion of state involvement towards development is not an isolated strategy but is rather part of the larger neoliberal scheme of denationalization, where states are divested of their involvement if not functioning towards development and place this burden on local communities, if not on individuals.

This participation in projects corresponds to development as alleviation, represented by mainstream development models. As was explained earlier, even the development strategies informed by MP in the peasant communities follow, in a way, mainstream development models. However, through MP, their notion of development goes beyond the participation-in-projects model to realize what can be called participation in liberation. Through MP, participation is assumed as always political, as it is not only a participation in the implementation of a project but also a participation in the historic and political struggle for the liberation of the tiller from landlessness and land precarity. Participation in liberation corresponds to the notion of development as liberation.

The conception of development as also including political issues and liberational themes contrasts the peasant communities from mainstream initiatives, as in the KALAHI–CIDSS. The latter consciously portrays itself as a neutral development technology. As cited in its knowledge and resource center, its lead

agency, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD, n.d.), envisioned "to advance CDD as a technology and further develop modalities that are responsive to the ever-changing needs of the Filipino people." Hannah Bulloch (2017, 148) explained how DSWD has presented CDD as "the logical outcome in the progressive sophistication of application of social science to development problems," where it is utilized as a "social technology" that is "objectively observing and responding to the mechanical workings of society." For the peasant communities interviewed, development could not take place from a neutral and objective exercise of a social technology. In the first place, no amount of social technology could uproot a systemic issue reinforced by the economic and political power of the landed elites. Consequently, the defense and struggle for land could never appear neutral, especially as it requires confronting political and economic powers, demanding radical reforms that overturn asymmetrical relations, and overhauling a state to genuinely respond to centuries-old demands for land reform.

Through MP, the peasant communities' notion of development transitions from alleviation to liberation. Consequently, their notion of participation also goes beyond the mere involvement in the socio-technical aspects of project implementation and management. Reflecting their dialectical understanding of development, they view participation as a process where they involve themselves both in socio-technical activities and political movements that are fundamental to the question of their liberation from land tenancy and the precarity of land tenure. MP allows the peasant communities to exercise both participation in projects and participation in liberation.

The communities perceive how MP becomes the threshold of tolerance, where state scrutiny and harassment begin to take place, and where civic spaces of targeted organizations and communities start to shrink. MP is often expressed by the participants' concept of *pakigbisog* (militant struggle). One participant shared that wherever the struggling peasants are (*kung asa ang mag-uuma nga nakigbisog*), military presence is indeed there (*naa gyud ang presensiya sa militar*). The military presence in the communities interviewed varies, from regular visitations to the setting up of military encampments, as in the case of one community, which shared that their locality has sustained over three years of continued militarization. The most prevalent form of harassment the participants shared is red/terror-tagging by state agents. One participant shared how they are accused of being rebels by state agents (*pasanginlan man mi ato nga rebelde kuno mi*). Another narrated how they are made to believe that those who organize militant groups are rebels (*kana lagi kunong magtukod og mga organization, mga rebelde*).

The series of harassment and intimidation through red/terror-tagging has undermined the organizations' mode of participation. It has been observed that military presence in the peasant communities aims to aggressively de-organize them and weaken their collective strength. The participants shared how the military aggressively wants them out of the organizations they are in—organizations that have consistently bannered their militant stance for land reform. The scheme to de-organize peasants can be seen in two separate yet mutually reinforcing strategies: disenfranchisement and delegitimization. Disenfranchisement is a strategy that targets individuals with the aim of forcing them out of their organizations. Participants shared many instances when state agents visited them and asked them to "surrender," implying that what they are involved in is something illegal and criminal. The human rights alliance Karapatan (2023, 2025) has monitored almost 4,000 incidents of what they described as forced/fake surrenders, from July 2016 to June 2022, and over 500 cases from June 2022 to June 2025 during the administrations of Duterte and Ferdinand Marcos Jr., respectively. Forced/fake surrender is considered a manifestation of red/terror-tagging. It is described as forced/fake because "supposed surrenders reported by the military are not of actual NPA armed combatants, but rather of those the military calls 'supporters' or of members of activist or sectoral organizations which the military has connected to the communist insurgency" (Buenaventura 2025).

The participants shared that they have neighbors who were once active members of their organizations but who, after the process of "surrendering," have either expressed regret, have altogether lain low, or are now actively becoming assets of state agents. The process of disenfranchisement has a double effect, as it not only deprives individuals from freely participating in organizations of their own choice but also denies the organization its right to a strong and active membership. Communities coming from Bohol narrated how their organizational strength has faltered due to the relentless attacks and disenfranchisement its provincial federation has suffered, especially at the start of the Duterte administration. Many provincial leaders have been forced to surrender. Consequently, the number of committed members in their organization declined.

Delegitimization takes place when the legitimacy of an entire organization is outrightly undermined by establishing a new and altogether separate organization. The new organization oftentimes opposes the existing organization. This is the case of at least three of the communities interviewed, where they saw some of the older members who have "surrendered" being mobilized to organize a new group. In one of the communities, a participant

observed what she termed as the process of *pagkamang*, that is, a subtle creeping of state agents into the newly formed organization, promising its members benefits, livelihood, entrepreneurship, and scholarship. She recounted how the said organization later disintegrated. In another community, one participant shared how the leader of the newly formed organization, who was once their own leader, has actively convinced the other members of the community to surrender to authorities. Delegitimization is always accompanied by a political smear campaign through red/terror-tagging of the organization. All the communities interviewed have shared how state agents have consistently red/terror-tagged their organizations. So, while organizations may still be allowed to exist and sustain themselves, they are doing so under intense threats, risks, and uncertainties.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The shrinking of civic spaces in these peasant communities is manifested in the cases of disenfranchisement and delegitimization, processes that are driven by the politics of fear sown by red/terror-tagging. While the peasant population is among the most marginalized sectors in the country, with the ongoing efforts of disenfranchisement and delegitimization, there is a worrying trend that they will become more marginalized and will lose whatever gains they have in building a collective strength that will supposedly leverage themselves as a class in a society that is predominantly ruled by landed interests.

Further, the shrinking of civic spaces equally marginalizes the concept of development that these peasant communities have been bannering. It marginalizes a model of development that is informed by a militant politics that aims to uproot the systemic issue of landlessness by undermining the rule of landlords through land reform. In his comparative study of the experience of land reforms in China, Korea, and the Philippines, Ziyi has recognized how the landed interests have been the main obstacle to agricultural improvement and national industrialization. For Ziyi, economic prosperity could only be possible if landlord power is eliminated through genuine land reform or placed under absolute control by a central authority (Ziyi 2020). The peasant communities' model of development is not just one that promotes their own interest as a class but actually advances the interests of a nation struggling to achieve agricultural improvement, industrialization, and economic prosperity. Seen from this perspective, the shrinking of civic spaces has an unfortunate impact not only on peasant communities but also on the Philippine society in general.

One short-term solution to address the issue of the shrinking of civic spaces is for the government to take urgent measures to prohibit red/terror-tagging. There have been attempts in Congress to pass into law the criminalization of red/terror-tagging, the earliest of which was filed in 2021 in the 19th Congress. Another bill was filed this year, yet, as of this writing, it is still pending for deliberation at the committee level. Given both the local and international pressures for the government to salvage the shrinking civic spaces of the country, it has to expedite the passing of a law that criminalizes red/terror-tagging. In this way, POs, NGOs, and other actors can be more protected against unwarranted labelling and smear campaigns.

Another short-term solution is to represent peasant organizations and advocates, even with militant orientations in various levels of local development councils. This proposal requires that, on the one hand, the said councils genuinely accommodate these groups despite or precisely because of their more militant views. There should be no room for smearing or vilification campaigns against these groups within and outside the said councils. On the other hand, POs and NGOs maximize these councils as another platform to exercise their agency as political subjects and, where necessary, expose the limits of these councils in helping realize genuine land reform.

A long-term solution to address the shrinking civic spaces is to modify the country's counterinsurgency program away from a purely militarist orientation. Especially during and after Duterte's administration, the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF–ELCAC) has solely organized the country's counterinsurgency program. The problem is that the latter has been known to have actively red/terror-tag legitimate organizations that banner militant politics, especially among peasant communities. There have been demands from both local and international institutions to abolish the NTF–ELCAC, yet it continues to be funded by the Marcos Jr. administration. An alternative model of counter-insurgency program involves civil society itself to tackle and address the root causes of the ongoing communist insurgency. Veering away from a purely militarist model, this model orients itself with how insurgency can be addressed through social justice. A social justice rather than a militarist model of counterinsurgency is in keeping with the ideal of the 1987 Constitution that provides for the promotion of social justice, especially of the marginalized groups. In its organization, this model can involve the most marginalized groups, like the peasant population through their federations, unions, peace advocates from ecumenical groups, development workers, social scientists, engineers, and other technical experts.

The notion of militant politics among the peasant population is not an altogether new phenomenon. The renowned historian Renato Constantino has similarly traced a militant politics across the history of the peasant movements in the country. although equally emphasizing how many peasants likewise joined counter-revolutionary groups. He argued that the provinces that first revolted against Spanish colonialism did so in response to the growing agrarian unrest then. These peasant movements would later develop in terms of their consciousness, politics, and organization throughout the 20th century when gigantic peasant federations were established to mount militant movements against the persistence of the land problem (Constantino 1975). The question is not how to eradicate militant movements like those of many peasant organizations in the country, but how these movements are properly integrated in mainstream politics, allowing them to be adequately represented in various government instrumentalities, in contrast to how they are currently marginalized and vilified. Militant politics is basically an echo of unhealed sociopolitical traumas of the past, which manifest in unrelenting and determined collectivities.

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