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Agrarian Reform as an Unfinished Conversation

Reflections from Farmers' Associations
in Cebu and Bohol

Alyssa Soler 



Local Regional Studies Network

Agrarian Reform as an Unfinished Conversation

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in Cebu and Bohol**

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Cover Image Credit

"A cornfield beside a dirt road in Toledo City, taken during the LRSN fieldwork in August 2025."

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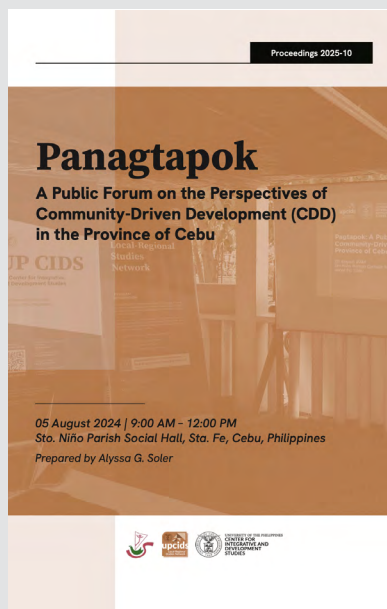
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DISCUSSION PAPER

Dialogues of Development:
Civil Society and the
Communicative Foundations
of Community-Driven
Development in Cebu



PROCEEDINGS

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

Agrarian Reform as an Unfinished Conversation

Reflections from Farmers' Associations
in Cebu and Bohol

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Key Highlights

■ Policy Landscape

- Agrarian reform policies in the Philippines remain largely state-led and top-down.
- Despite policy reforms, issues such as land conversion, bureaucratic inefficiency, political interference, and insufficient agricultural support services persist.

■ Main Argument

- Community-centered and participatory approaches are necessary to strengthen land tenure security, rural livelihoods, and democratic governance.

■ Methodology

- The paper uses a qualitative, community-level approach focused on farmers' lived experiences.
- Data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) with farmers' organizations in Cebu and Bohol.
- Participating organizations included: (1) San Roque Farmers Association (SRFA); (2) Kahugpungan sa Makugihong Mag-uuma sa Bato (KMMB); (3) Pangpang Farmers and Fisherfolks Association (PAFFO); (4) United Farmers of San Francisco (UFSF); (5) Nagkahiusang Mag-uuma sa Taytay og Monsuerte (NAGMATAMO)
- The study also utilized government reports, policy documents, and existing literature on agrarian reform and rural development.

■ Key Findings

- Farmers struggle to secure land ownership and, at the same time, receive little to no agricultural support.
- Agricultural lands are shrinking due to conversion into commercial, industrial, and residential projects.
- CARP is perceived by many farmers as favoring landlords and landed elites through loopholes and compensation mechanisms.
- Government agencies such as DAR and DENR are often viewed as slow, politically influenced, and unresponsive to farmers' concerns,

while NGOs serve as surrogate institutions, providing technical support, cooperative formation, and advocacy.

■ Policy Recommendations

- The government should pursue community-led agrarian reform to ensure genuine land distribution and pro-poor rural development.

Introduction

Land reform remains a matter of national significance in the Philippines, given that nearly half of the country's population lives in rural areas. While the term "land reform" is often associated with land redistribution, many of its programs primarily focus on landholding. This is because landownership underpins access to land, as well as the rights and responsibilities associated with its use and management (Azadi 2020; Holden & Otsuka 2014). In reality, however, many of the rural poor still lack real control over or ownership of land despite the implementation of several land reform programs in the past. In many cases, land reform has fallen short of its intended purpose. Less land was distributed than promised, and farmland was mostly converted into non-agricultural uses.

Almost all land reform initiatives in the Philippines have been state-sponsored, thus land distribution issues are often linked to the limitations of government-designed programs. According to Borras and Franco (2008), one key issue with such programs is their top-down approach. This has mainly taken the form of limited land redistribution, tenancy reforms, and resettlement, accompanied by the efforts to manage, co-opt, disempower, or suppress peasant¹ demands. These outcomes are shaped by powerful social groups and classes, whose influence extends both within and beyond state institutions. Another problem, raised by Sikor and Müller (2009), is that these initiatives often fail to gain community support because bureaucratic systems are too rigid to accommodate diverse meanings of land, different forms of land ownership, and varying political and economic contexts.

1 As noted by Borras (2007), the term "peasants" is highly contested in the literature. In this paper, "peasants" is used in a broad sense to refer to landless and near-landless farmers, farmworkers, and agrarian reform beneficiaries, regardless of whether they are tenants or laborers.

The pro-market critique also argues that state-led land reform is invariably unsuccessful because it relies on coercive land acquisition methods, such as expropriation and land-size ceilings. Deininger and Binswanger (1999) note that such ceiling laws are costly to implement, encourage landowners to avoid them, and lead to problems such as corruption, unprotected land rights, and excessive bureaucracy. According to Borras (2007), these reforms were implemented within inward-oriented development strategies that tended to benefit politically powerful landowners while placing heavier burdens on small farmers. The pro-market critique further argues that state-led land reform fails not only because of its redistributive mechanisms but also because it is embedded in a policy environment that limits small farmers' capacity to develop and sustain their livelihoods (Borras 2007; Binswanger and Deininger 1997).

This paper argues that agrarian reform in the Philippines remains incomplete because state-led and top-down approaches fail to address the lived realities, political vulnerabilities, and institutional marginalization experienced by agrarian reform beneficiaries. Drawing from farmers' organizations in Cebu and Bohol, the paper advances the need for a more community-centered approach to land reform grounded in local participation, tenure security, and rural empowerment. In this perspective, land reform is understood as something that is continuously shaped and negotiated at the community level, where farmers, communities, and their organizations serve as active actors in defining how land is accessed, used, and protected.

Theorizing Community-Centered Approaches to Land Reform

The growing emphasis on “community” in land reform is not unexpected, as global policies on natural resource management have increasingly shifted away from state-centered models toward community-based approaches (Agrawal & Gibson 1999). This shift reflects broader debates in development and governance literature that emphasize decentralization and participatory resource management. Elinor Ostrom's (1990) work on common-pool resources, for instance, challenged dominant assumptions that collective action necessarily leads to resource degradation, showing instead that communities can effectively self-govern shared resources under certain institutional arrangements. Similarly, Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of “access” highlights that control over land and resources is not only a matter of formal rights but also of the ability to benefit from them through social and political relations.

In the context of land reform, these theoretical perspectives have influenced policy discourses that frame communities as capable stewards of land and natural resources. However, scholars such as Li (2007) caution that the “community” in development practice is often an “assembled” and governed subject rather than a naturally cohesive unit. In her analysis of development interventions, Li argues that community participation is frequently shaped by external actors, who define its boundaries and legitimate representatives.

Similarly, Borras Jr. and Franco (2012) emphasize that land reform processes are deeply political, involving struggles between competing social forces rather than the neutral implementation of policy. They argue that redistributive land reform must be understood in relation to broader agrarian structures and power relations, including resistance from landed elites and uneven state capacity. This is consistent with Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011), who show that land control is constantly negotiated through overlapping claims, authority structures, and economic interests.

In the Philippine setting, these tensions are particularly evident. While legal frameworks such as the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act institutionalize community-based ownership, their implementation often reveals disparities in representation, intra-community inequalities, and contested authority over land claims (MacDermott 2001). Thus, community-centered land reform must be critically examined not only as a policy innovation but also as a site of ongoing struggle over rights, recognition, and power.

Philippine Land Reform Throughout the Years: Its Imperatives and Initiatives

The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was established through the passage of Republic Act No. 6657, or the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL) of 1988², nearly four decades ago. The program serves as an expansion of earlier land reform programs implemented in the country since the mid-1930s. Similar to earlier land reform initiatives, CARP combined both developmental and redistributive components. The developmental component focused on the distribution of alienable and

2 Republic Act No. 6657: Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988. An Act Instituting a Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program to Promote Social Justice and Industrialization, Providing the Mechanism for its Implementation, and for Other Purposes.

disposable (A&D) public lands to encourage the cultivation and settlement of frontier areas, while the redistributive component involved the redistribution of private agricultural lands and the abolition of agricultural or share tenancy arrangements (Ballesteros et al. 2017).

A key objective of CARP is to transform tenants, farmworkers, lessees, and other agrarian beneficiaries into landowners. This is carried out through the issuance of land titles, such as the Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA)³ or emancipation Patent (EP), to qualified beneficiaries. These titles recognize beneficiaries as registered property owners in the Philippines. In general, beneficiaries prefer land titles issued individually in their names. However, collective titles may also be preferred when beneficiaries belong to a cooperative, association, or family-based farming arrangement. In previous years, collective CLOAs (CCLOACs) were commonly issued to accelerate the transfer of land titles to beneficiaries, particularly when delays stemmed from land subdivision approvals and title transfers. Under this arrangement, the CCLOA functions as a “mother title,” with the names of individual beneficiaries listed within the title.

In terms of scope, CARP initially aimed to redistribute 10.3 million hectares of land to approximately four million peasants. However, in 1996, the program’s coverage was reduced by 21.7 percent, bringing the target scope down to 8.1 million hectares due to significant reductions in both private and public land coverage. More recently, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) reported that the CARP scope stands at approximately 5.423 million hectares. Based on 2013 estimates by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (DENR–NAMRIA), the existing CARP scope already covers around 48 percent of all privately owned alienable and disposable lands, including areas designated for residential, commercial, and industrial uses (Ballesteros et al., 2017).

Despite these reductions in scope, CARP can be considered relatively successful in terms of land distribution. According to the most recent data from the Philippine Statistics Authority, cumulative accomplishments in land distribution and registration from 1972 to 2022 reached 4.85 million hectares of agricultural land. This represents an accomplishment rate of 88.8 percent of the revised national target scope of 5.42 million hectares (PSA, 2023).

3 Republic Act No. 6657, sec 24: Award to Beneficiaries.

Table 1. Land Distributed in the Philippines (1972-2022)

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Scope of Land Distribution (CY 2022, in ha) | 5,463,825 |
| Land Distributed (in ha) | 4,853,810 |
| Accomplishment of Land Distribution (%) | 88.8 |

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023. Agricultural Indicators System: Government Support in the Agricultural Sector

These figures suggest that agrarian reform in the country has made substantial progress, albeit at a relatively slow pace.

Under the current administration of Marcos Jr., DAR field offices are conducting simultaneous field validation, land surveying, and the distribution of land titles, in coordination with partner agencies including the Land Registration Authority (LRA), DENR, Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP), and local government units (LGUs) (DENR, 2025). These initiatives, according to DENR (2025), are designed to expedite the documentation process and facilitate the issuance of individual land titles through the Support to Parcelization of Lands for Individual Titling (SPLIT) Project.

Objectives and Approach

While many studies have examined both the successes and failures of land reform, much of the literature has focused primarily on policy assessment and on agricultural and socioeconomic effects. Less attention is given to what actually happens to landless and near-landless peasants on the ground, particularly how they experience agrarian reform in their everyday lives (Salmerón-Manzano and Manzano-Agugliaro 2023). In the Philippines, initial evaluations of CARP mostly examined its economic factors and outcomes. Borras (2007) argues that one may mistakenly conclude that land reform is successful because “land-reformed estates” appear economically productive and competitive, when in reality many of these estates remain under the control of landowning elites despite the official claims of reform. Jadina et al. (2025) refer to this as a “top-level analysis”, and such approaches often reduce land reform to a simple “success or failure” judgment, which overlooks the complexity and unequal outcomes of the reform (Borras 2007). Along the same lines, community-level studies further contend that it is often too early and too simplistic to classify land reform as either a success or a failure, given that its outcomes are shaped by diverse social and political conditions (Jadina et al. 2025).

This paper, therefore, employs a qualitative, community-level analysis, focusing on the perspectives and experiences of farmers and farmers' associations in Cebu and Bohol after years of land reform implementation. As discussed in the previous section, land reform measures were intended to be developmental and redistributive; however, farmers remain among the most marginalized groups in society. Accordingly, the paper aims to deepen understanding of why the effectiveness of land reform appears to remain unresolved, often feeling like a never-ending conversation. This paper then discusses how farmers themselves view the promises, challenges, and contradictions of agrarian reform based on their everyday experiences in their communities. This also emphasizes the important role of nongovernment organizations and their community-led initiatives in defending land rights, supporting rural livelihoods, and pushing for more genuinely redistributive and pro-poor reforms.

Revisiting Agrarian Reform through Farmers' Experiences

The discussion in this section is based on the transcripts from the focus group discussions conducted with Central Visayas Farmers Development Center, Inc (FARDEC)- and Visayas Primary Health Care Services, Inc. (VPHCS)-affiliated People's Organizations (POs) in Cebu and Bohol, specifically the San Roque Farmers Association (SRFA), Kahugpungan sa Makugihong Mag-uuma sa Bato (KMMB), Pangpang Farmers and Fisherfolks Association (PAFFO), United Farmers of San Francisco (UFSF), and Nagkahiusang Mag-uuma sa Taytay og Monsuerte (NAGMATAMO). A review of government documents, studies, and existing literature on agrarian reform and rural development in the Philippines further supports these accounts. From these sources, the discussion surfaces the critiques, contradictions, and tensions embedded in the implementation of agrarian reform, as articulated through the farmers' narratives.

Unfulfilled Agrarian Reform Promises

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews is a gap between the intended objectives of land reform and the actual outcomes experienced by farmers. In principle, the program is expected to improve the lives of landless and near-landless farmers and support the development of Philippine agriculture. However, based on farmers' accounts, issues such as land ownership disputes, the reduction in cultivable farm area, and ongoing financial difficulties remain prevalent.

Farmers Still Struggle to Secure Land Titles

Even after land has been acquired under CARP, beneficiaries' property rights often remain unresolved, as around 70 percent of CLOAs are still issued in collective form. These collective CLOAs (CCLOAs) were initially intended to accelerate land redistribution, with the expectation that they would later be converted into individual land titles. However, this intended progression has not been fully realized in practice. This concern is reflected in the experiences of farmer members of the UFSE, who note that although farmers' land ownership has been formally recognized, it remains insecure due to the lack of individual titles. At present, what they hold is the CLOA issued by DAR, which serves primarily as a stewardship document rather than a fully secured individual title.

This is also similar to the experiences of farmers in Leyte reported by Jadina et al. (2025), who described obtaining individual land titles as a difficult and slow process. For those with a CCLOA, land parcels must first be subdivided before individual land titles can be issued. The concerns raised in the said study involve the delays in land subdivision by DAR and the need to pay fees during the process. Because of these problems, some farmers ended up dividing the land informally among themselves (Jadina et al. 2025).

Fabella (2017) describes these property rights as a full rejection of the Coase theorem⁴. He argues that farmers with collective CLOAs cannot plan for the long term because their land security is uncertain. This discourages them from investing in things like irrigation or planting fruit trees that take years to grow. He also notes that collective CLOAs are not useful as collateral for loans (Fabella 2017).

Another issue in the process of acquiring land title is that farmers are likely to become trapped in a titling-payment "loop" (Jadina et al. 2025). As narrated by a farmer member of KMMB, they are required to pay the LBP in installments over a set period before they can receive the land title from DAR. She further explained:

4 The Coase Theorem states that if property rights are well-defined and transaction costs are low (or zero), private parties can bargain to resolve externalities efficiently, regardless of who is initially assigned the rights.

“Ang nahitabo, isa ra ka sitio diri ang naka-benepisyo diri sa titulo kay naay mga uban nga tituloan nga gipangbawi ra pod nila kay gipang cancel ang titulo kay nasayop daw pag process, pero nagbuhis na ang mga mag-uuma sa ilang kaugalingon titulo, pero naa ang cancellation sa DAR ra pod.”

(What happened was that only one sitio here benefited from the issuance of titles. In other areas, some titles were even taken back after being canceled due to alleged processing errors. This happened even though the farmers had already been paying taxes on their own titles. In the end, there was still a cancellation coming from DAR.)

This case follows what Sonny Africa of the IBON Foundation describes as a situation in which land is “awarded but later taken away from beneficiaries.” He explains that landlords and rural elites take advantage of the legal weaknesses of CLOAs and EPs, which are less secure than Torrens Titles⁵. Unlike Torrens Titles, which are protected by a one-year prescriptive period for legal challenges, CLOAs and EPs are not subject to the same time limit and can be challenged at any time.

This case can also be considered what the executive director of IBON Foundation, Sonny Affrica, referred to as “land being awarded but later taken away from beneficiaries”. According to him, Landlords and rural elites exploit a legal defect in CLOAs and EPs that limits the security of beneficiaries’ claims to the covered land. Torrens Titles have a 1-year prescriptive period for bringing cases against them, whereas CLOAs and EPs have no such limit.

This legal gap enables landlords to reopen and dispute the redistribution of previously redistributed land. In practice, they invoke belated CARP exemption claims as grounds for cancellation and utilize procedural and technical issues, such as errors in documentation, inconsistencies in the conversion of EPs to CLOAs, and disputes over the identification of legitimate beneficiaries, to secure favorable rulings.

Farmers Receive Little Long-Term Agricultural Support

One important way to improve the income of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) is by providing infrastructure such as farm-to-market roads, irrigation

5 The Torrens System is a land registration system that provides an official and authoritative record of land ownership and interests, introduced in the Philippines through Act No. 496 (Land Registration Act) and later incorporated into Presidential Decree No. 1529 (Property Registration Decree).

systems, bridges, and postharvest facilities. These are meant to help farmers improve production and access markets more easily. However, for many farmers, these forms of support are somehow distant from their actual experiences.

During the interview, farmers linked the issue of securing land titles with the lack of support needed to cultivate their land. These are best summarized by farmers themselves: they have land but lack the necessary inputs and services to make it productive. In the rural municipalities of Ubay, Trinidad, and San Miguel in Bohol, one of the major struggles faced by farmers is the shortage of water supply for irrigation. According to a UFSF member, the water system was originally intended to support the agricultural lands in these municipalities. However, the local government later decided to distribute the water supply to households as well. As a result, the water that was supposed to be allocated for farming became shared with the residential areas, leaving only a limited supply for agricultural use.

In relation to this issue, one farmer stated:

"Mura ang problema karon, pagpauswag sa mga maguuma, pagpalambo ba. Unsaon pagpalambo sa mga maguuma nga hinay magkuan suporta."

(The problem now is how farmers can improve and progress when support is lacking.)

The "support" the farmer refers to mainly concerns access to irrigation water. While sharing, the farmers express their disappointment with the local government, feeling neglected and believing that their livelihoods as farmers are not being prioritized or valued. For them, sustaining their livelihoods has become difficult when the very resource they depend on has become insufficient and inaccessible.

In Cebu, KMMB and SRFA also feel that support for farmers is still lacking, especially in helping them fully secure and develop their land. FARDEC, as an NGO assisting the farmers in Cebu and Bohol, also believes that land distribution alone is not enough if farmers do not receive proper support to farm their land. They view CARP as "unfinished" because it does not fully provide the necessary support services. Many farmers still rely on simple tools and outdated farming methods. They argue that the government should provide essential assistance, such as tractors and free fertilizers, to improve productivity. With adequate support, farmers could increase their yields,

improve their incomes, and sustain their livelihoods rather than abandoning their land.

A common feature among the beneficiaries is that, before CARP, they were landless farmers and farm workers who depended mainly on farm wages for their livelihood. When they joined the program, many began their land ownership with existing debts. These debts, along with accumulating interest, are oftentimes carried for 30 years or longer. In some cases, the obligation is even passed down to their children and grandchildren (Jadina et al., 2025). Thus, they have to rely heavily on government support, particularly in agricultural production.

Similarly, Micabalo et al. (2024) note that while farmers in Central Visayas have adopted various adaptive farming techniques to maintain food security and income, the long-term sustainability and resilience of agricultural production still depend largely on collective community cooperation and stronger support from both public and private institutions, especially in terms of financing, mechanization, and infrastructure development.

Decreasing Agricultural Spaces

Based on the 2022 Census of Agriculture and Fisheries released by the PSA in 2024, the number of farms has steadily increased from 1960 to 2022. However, the total area of agricultural land has been decreasing since 1991. Table 2 and Figure 1 show that the country's farm area dropped from 9.97 million hectares in 1991 to 6.16 million hectares in 2022. This means that by 2022, the total farm area had declined by 38.2 percent from its peak, showing a huge reduction in land despite the growing number of farms.

Table 2. Total Number and Area of Farms in the Philippines (1960-2022)

| | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1991 | 2002 | 2012 | 2022 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| No. of Farms (in millions) | 2.17 | 2.35 | 3.42 | 4.61 | 4.82 | 5.56 | 7.43 |
| Farm area (in million ha) | 7.77 | 8.49 | 9.73 | 9.97 | 9.67 | 7.27 | 6.16 |
| Average Farm Area (in ha) | 3.59 | 3.61 | 2.84 | 2.16 | 2.01 | 1.31 | 0.83 |

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024. 2022 Census of Agriculture and Fisheries

Compared to earlier years, such as 1960 (7.77 million hectares), 1970 (8.49 million hectares), and 1980 (9.73 million hectares), the total farm area in 2022 was much smaller. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, the average farm size has also declined sharply, from 3.61 hectares in 1970 to 0.83 hectares in 2022, a decrease of 77.0 percent. This drop is even more evident when compared with more recent years, such as 2002 (2.01 hectares) and 2012 (1.31 hectares).

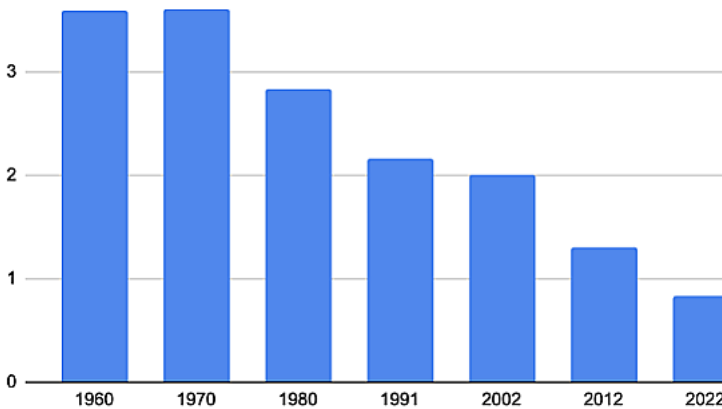


Figure 1. Average Farm Area in hectares (1960-2022)

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024. 2022 Census of Agriculture and Fisheries

This observed decline in farm areas can be attributed to the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses. Due to the growing demands of an increasing population, many agricultural lands are being repurposed for residential, commercial, and industrial development. Coupled with farmers' limited ability to defend and sustain their cultivated lands, many are eventually forced to surrender or sell their properties to private developers. The conversion of agricultural land for development projects often compels farmers to abandon farming, resulting in the loss of stable livelihoods and income sources.

Cebuano and Boholano farmers have personally felt the effects of the shrinking agricultural lands. One example is the 160-hectare farmland in Aloguinsan, which was threatened with conversion to non-agricultural use. A member of FARDEC shared that they, along with several POs, initiated a dialogue with the LGU to protect the farmland from conversion. However, according to the respondent, the mayor justified the proposal by saying:

“Di man gud, kay atong lungsod kinahanglan man mulambo, mukita.”

(Our town also needs to progress and generate income.)

The mayor proposed that 100 hectares of the land would be allocated for the construction of a Technology Business Incubator (TBI)⁶, while the remaining area would continue to be used by the farmers of Aloguinsan.

Apart from Aloguinsan, FARDEC also pointed out issues with land conversion in the province, particularly regarding the growing number of cement factories. According to the respondent, there are six such sites: one in Danao, one in Naga, two in San Fernando, one in Sibonga, and one in Asturias. As she explained, instead of truly supporting and uplifting our local farmers, the current development programs seem to take away the very lands that they cultivate.

According to Del Moro et al. (2024), the primary drivers of land conversion include rapid urbanization, population growth, economic expansion, and infrastructure development. Among these, urban expansion is one of the most significant drivers of agricultural land conversion, as investors seek profit opportunities through non-agricultural development. This process of rural urbanization is often accelerated by infrastructure projects such as highway construction and the expansion of urban centers like Metro Manila into surrounding rural areas.

In this context, the discussion also returns to CARP, particularly because the CARL allows the conversion⁷ of awarded lands after five years from the granting of ownership, provided that the land is no longer economically viable for agricultural use or that the locality has become urbanized, thereby increasing the land’s value for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes.

According to Borrás (2007), land conversion is a sensitive issue in the implementation of CARP because it is often linked to political and economic

6 A Technology Business Incubator (TBI) is a facility that supports start-ups by providing space and business development services. For aspiring technology entrepreneurs and new businesses, DOST-funded TBIs offer office space along with technical assistance and facilities to help them establish and grow their ventures.

7 Republic Act No. 6657, sec 65: Conversion of Lands.

interests. It is believed that some landlords work with government officials to secure approval for converting agricultural land to non-agricultural uses, either to avoid agrarian reform or to benefit from the higher market value of land intended for commercial and industrial use. He further distinguishes between legal and illegal forms of land conversion. Although it is difficult to determine whether the proposed conversion of 168 hectares of farmland in Aloguinsan is legal, the role of LGUs must be critically examined. Empowered by the 1992 Local Government Code to enact land-use zoning ordinances, LGUs have been noted for their tendency to ignore DAR rules and to fail to properly report land conversions (Borras 2007).

Pro-Landlord Reform

Above all, the participating farmers described CARP as having features that tend to favor landed elites. According to the World Bank Group (2011), opposition from landowners has hindered the full completion of land distribution in certain parts of the country. This is shown in the gradual reduction of its land distribution target. In 1988, CARP aimed to distribute about 10.3 million hectares, covering around 85 percent of agricultural land. However, by 2013, this target was reduced by 57 percent to 5.423 million hectares due to the exclusion of both private and public lands.

According to Sonny Africa of IBON Foundation, these changes are linked to CARP's design, which is favorable to landlords. He explains that CARP is not a free land distribution program. Instead, farmers must pay for the land they cultivate, while landlords receive compensation from the government. In this sense, land reform under CARP functions more like a land transaction, with the government acting as an intermediary between landlords and peasants. (Africa 2006).

The reduced scope of CARP also reflects concessions to large landowners. Africa (2006) further explains that the program allows landlords to retain five hectares of land, plus an additional three hectares for each heir. Earlier policies, such as Presidential Decree No. 27 (PD 27), allowed a retention limit of 7 hectares per landowner. Landowners took advantage of these rules by subdividing their properties and creating multiple titles to stay within the legal limits. Over time, exemption rules expanded further, weakening the reform's overall coverage (Africa 2006).

This situation is also evident in the experiences of farmers shared by FARDEC. Farmers had long wanted full ownership of their land so they could make

independent decisions about production, such as where to sell their copra or how to organize cooperatives. If they owned the land, they could manage cooperatives themselves rather than remaining dependent on landowners. As one account noted, farmers have for many years given a large share of their harvest to landowners. According to a bishop cited in their discussion, if this is calculated over time, the land has effectively already been “paid for.” In reality, farmers are left with little to no meaningful ownership or retention rights.

The State as a Dual Actor: A Mediator and A Barrier

Aside from examining the farmers’ perspectives on the implementation of CARP, this paper also explores their views on the state actors involved in land reform. These state actors include the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), the primary agency responsible for land acquisition and distribution; the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), which oversees land surveys and the distribution of public lands; Local Government Units (LGUs), which assist in the implementation, infrastructure, and local coordination; as well as courts and quasi-judicial bodies that handle land disputes and agrarian cases.

One of the findings from our conversations with the farmers is their perception of the state as distant and unresponsive to their concerns, particularly about land ownership. Farmers expressed a sense of neglect, as they viewed government agencies as failing to help secure their land rights. As one member of SRFA shared:

“Sa amoa, sa akong tan-aw, ang ahensya sa gobyerno, labi na sa hisgutanang DENR, DAR, way pagtabang namo diha ba na maamo ang yuta.”

(From our perspective, government agencies, especially the DENR and DAR, have not helped us secure the ownership of the land.)

From the farmers’ point of view, delays in the signing and release of land titles are closely tied to politics. They believe that agencies such as the DAR and DENR are influenced by local political leaders, particularly the mayor. This perception is reflected in their statement:

“... ang LGU o ang local government mo lusod sa among lugar nga dili bitaw na mo apil pa siyas mga problema namo sa kuan sa among lugar pinaagi sa pagangkon niya sa yuta. Kung di, tabangan mi makaangkon

mig kaugalingong yuta kuyog sa ahensya sa gobyerno sa Department of Agrarian Reform ug sa DENR, kay sila may makaproseso sa paghatag og mga titulo pag ... sa yuta. Sila may magkuyog sa LGU ana uban sa mga ahensya DAR.”

([We hope] ... that the LGU or the local government will come into our area not to take part in our problems by claiming the land for themselves. Instead, they should help us obtain our own land, together with government agencies such as the Department of Agrarian Reform and the DENR, which are responsible for processing and issuing land titles. They should work alongside the LGU, together with agencies like DAR.)

These accounts reveal the expectations that farmers, particularly agrarian reform beneficiaries, have of the state’s role. They envision a government that supports them in securing land ownership, works collaboratively across agencies, and prioritizes their welfare over political or economic interests, rather than relying on formal policies or procedures. In this sense, the perceived legitimacy of the state is contingent upon its capacity to deliver timely, concrete, and equitable outcomes, especially in addressing land tenure insecurity.

This is clear among farmers in Aloguinsan, many of whom are still in conflict with landowners. Respondents characterized their struggle for land titles as inherently political. They noted that the contested 168-hectare landholding is strategically located near a highway, which makes it valuable and attractive to the local government. Such conditions, they argue, contribute to the persistence of unresolved claims. Consequently, the land remains contested, and there is an urgent need to secure it as soon as possible so that farmers can finally cultivate it without problems.

Building on the discussion of the state as distant, another issue that emerged is the exclusion of farmers from decision-making processes related to land use matters. According to FARDEC, differences in how “development” is defined are unavoidable. However, even when FARDEC, POs, and the LGU engage in consultative discussions, the outcomes mostly reflect the LGU’s preferences.

As they stated:

“Tungod sa kana nga kahintang, naningkamot unta ta nga ang FARDEC, and PO, ug ang LGU magkatinabangay unsaon. Mura na nuo’g nagkabulag sa hinungdan gali nga gibutangan sila og kanang kampo sa military dinha para mapadayon unsa’y gusto sa gobyerno based sa ilahang land use plan

kay sila rama'y naghi[m]o sa land use plan. Kung tan-awon baya unta nato ang land use plan, naa ni tanang participation dinha sa community. Pero, wala gani nakahibaw ang community nga mao na na'y ilahang plano."

(Because of that situation, we tried to make FARDEC, the POs, and the LGU work together. But it seems they have become divided, especially since a military camp was set up there to ensure that the government's plans, based on their land-use plan, will be carried out, as they were the ones who made that plan. If we really look at the land use plan, it is supposed to include community participation. However, the community was not even aware that this was already their plan.)

Aside from the limited attention given to farmers, respondents also observed that the agricultural sector in general is often less prioritized by the government. According to them, the government tends to favor projects and investments that generate higher tax revenues rather than supporting agriculture. As shared by a member of FARDEC:

"Ang LGU sa Aloguinsan, kinahanglan siya mukita og dakong buhis kay... unsaon man makadakog buwis? Iyang ihatag didto sa negosyante, kay ang mga mag-uuma mas gamay raman ang mga buwis ngadto sa munisipyo."

(The LGU of Aloguinsan needs to generate large tax revenues. How can it collect bigger taxes? By giving opportunities to business investors, because farmers contribute only small taxes to the municipality.)

A similar situation was observed in Ubay, where former rice fields were converted into gamefowl breeding farms. Farmers attributed this transformation to the government's tendency to side with landed elites and large capitalists. As narrated by a member of PAFFO:

"Pareha anang aring Ubay, tuas Looc-an, basakan pa na. Dako nga erya, karon gihimo nang manokan sa huntoras. Kung maingon ana tanan ba, tanang basakan nato, atong luto sa humay mo gamay. So ma wa, mo gamay atong bugas sa atong nasud. Kung ingon ana ang mahitabo. Unya ang DAR pud, siya man untay departamento nga mo depensa aning mga panginanghalanon sa uma, pero wa sya mo depensa. Tua siya mo kampi sa mga dagkong kapitalista."

(In Ubay, particularly in Looc-an, those used to be rice fields. It was a large area, but now it has been converted into gamefowl farms. If this continues to happen everywhere, our rice fields will shrink, and our country's rice

supply will also decline. The DAR is supposed to defend the interests of farmers and agricultural lands, but instead, it sides with large capitalists.)

Land conflicts are also accompanied by the use of force and intimidation, including militarization, red-tagging, and harassment. Members of SRFA in Aloguinsan reported experiencing harassment from the Gantuanco family and the military. Similarly, members of KMMB in Toledo City also experienced threats from government authorities, especially after some of their cultivated lands were converted into roads by the LGU. These incidents occurred despite the DENR having already recognized the farmers as legitimate claimants to the land.

As narrated by one member of KMMB:

“Naay kaguliang na ang mga maguuma ug ang tag-iyá sa yuta mo abot dayon ang pulis kay ang tag-iyá kay maro mana. Mo tawag dayon og pulis. Pulis gyod na dayun na ilaha. Kami, mo ingon man sad mi, ‘Sir, wa ra baya moy katungod ani nga nahitabo.”

(Whenever conflicts arise between farmers and landowners, the police immediately arrive because the landowners quickly call them. The police usually side with them. We would also tell them, “Sir, you actually have no right over what is happening here.”)

Farmers’ organizations in Bohol, such as PAFFO, NAGMATAMO, and UFSF, also experienced red-tagging to discourage them from asserting their land claims. Members of UFSF further shared that they were threatened with the loss of government assistance, such as 4Ps benefits, if they participated in cooperative meetings and collective actions. According to members of these organizations, such intimidation and red-tagging create fear among farmers and discourage others from joining their cooperatives and people’s organizations.

The Nongovernmental Organizations as Surrogate Institutions

The process of formalizing land rights has placed NGOs in an important position in agrarian struggles. Faced with these structural and institutional limits, farmers’ associations and NGOs become surrogate institutions, spaces of mutual aid, technical learning, advocacy, and, at times, protection. One important characteristic of NGOs is their ability to work closely with communities, particularly in areas where government services are limited. Their

accessibility also makes it easier for them to support grassroots organizations and implement local programs.

NGOs often engage in agricultural research to demonstrate that alternative farming methods and development models can work (Olano 1993). Many of these efforts promote sustainable agriculture. However, sustainable rural development cannot be fully achieved unless the issue of landlessness is addressed through genuine agrarian reform and rural development programs.

Farmers also shared that NGOs played a major role in their struggle for land rights. NGOs helped them organize cooperatives and strengthen their organizations. In the case of SRFA, farmers were able to improve their livestock production with assistance from FARDEC. Members of NAGMATAMO shared that they were able to establish irrigation systems and learn sustainable farming practices with support from NGOs such as the Women's Development Center (WDC), Sibol ng Agham at Teknolohiya (SIBAT), and FARDEC. Meanwhile, UFSF was able to formally organize and register its association with the help of Camillian Disaster Service International (CADIS International). There is also the Visayas Primary Healthcare Services Inc. (VPHCS), which works closely with UFSF, NAGMATAMO, and PAFFO.

In other words, the role of NGOs is not limited to development work alone, but also extends to advocacy and the protection of marginalized communities. As explained by Danilo Songco (2006), NGOs act as a “distributed” or “delegated” conscience of society, in which citizens entrust NGOs to represent and defend concerns such as human rights and social justice.

During land conflicts, farmers often turned to NGOs, especially FARDEC, for help in protecting their cultivated land from land conversion. As shared by a farmer member of PAFFO:

“Dangop mi’g DAR. Isurrender man mi. Dangop mi’g DENR. Kay wa mi daganan kay kontrolado ang Quitanar. Iya gaskop sa title ba.... Mao to nga wala mi lain kaduolan, di ari mi FARDEC.”

(We sought help from the DAR, but they surrendered us. We also went to the DENR because we had nowhere else to go since the Quitanars controlled everything. They even covered it under their land title. That is why we had no one else to turn to except FARDEC.)

To sum up, with the help of NGOs, Cebuano and Boholano farmers' associations were able to mobilize the following strategies:

1. Self-help infrastructure and pooled labor to repair wells or maintain communal assets when the state fails to do so.
2. Collective bargaining and legal coordination to contest land-grab attempts or to push LGUs for signatures and recognition.
3. Informal credit mechanisms and linkages to microfinance or cooperative systems when formal banks remain inaccessible.

However, the discussion also revealed the limitations of NGOs as support institutions. According to Olano (1993), one of the major challenges NGOs face is a lack of resources. This was also evident in FARDEC's experience, which reported that some of its research and development programs intended to help people's organizations adopt sustainable agrarian practices had to be discontinued due to insufficient funding. By their nature, NGOs are non-profit organizations and therefore do not generate sufficient financial resources to sustain their programs and operations.

Where is the Government?: A Critical Analysis

The empirical evidence from Cebu and Bohol, coupled with national data on Philippine agriculture and agrarian reform, reveals a disjunction between policy frameworks and the lived realities of agrarian reform beneficiaries. While CARP has existed for almost four decades and renewed cooperative support has been incorporated into every reform, farmers' narratives and quantitative indicators indicate that agrarian reform remains partial, conditional, and uneven. This section critically examines where the government is, or is not, in the everyday struggles of farmers, highlighting the interplay of structural and implementation failures, bureaucratic constraints, and political dynamics.

Synthesis of Findings

Across the field interviews, three patterns emerged: first, formal entitlement does not equate to effective emancipation; second, government presence is

experienced as inconsistent, transactional, or mediated by local politics; and third, NGOs act as surrogate institutions that bridge the gaps left by the state.

Farmers repeatedly emphasized the paradox of “land but no support”: while legal titles and debt condonation relieve historical burdens, the absence of irrigation, credit, training, and post-harvest infrastructure severely limits productive capacity. National data support this perspective: only 21.8 percent of the agricultural population possesses secure land rights (PSA 2023), and poverty among farmers remains significantly above the national average at 27 percent (PSA 2024). Even where government programs reach farmers, their effectiveness is mediated by local bureaucratic capacity, political gatekeeping, and logistical challenges.

Farmers’ experiences with government offices highlight a recurring theme: the state is present, but selectively so. Many respondents reported that access to land recognition, support programs, or technical assistance depended on mayoral approval or personal connections, rather than institutionalized, predictable procedures. This pattern mirrors the “street-level bureaucracy” phenomenon described by Lipsky (1980), in which frontline officials exercise discretion that can either facilitate or obstruct policy realization.

In the context of street-level bureaucracy, bureaucratic institutions often appear responsive to marginalized sectors by providing formal channels for complaints and grievances. For farmers, these offices may seem to offer recognition and assistance; however, they frequently process concerns through lengthy administrative procedures without addressing the structural roots of rural inequality. In agrarian reform, this is evident when farmers are repeatedly referred to government agencies, mediation bodies, or legal mechanisms that acknowledge their claims yet provide limited long-term solutions regarding land security, agricultural support, and livelihood sustainability. As a result, these processes can help preserve the image of a responsive state while diffusing demands for more substantial institutional reforms that could challenge existing power relations in the countryside.

Finally, in the absence of consistent state support, farmers’ associations and cooperatives have emerged as important mediators, pooling resources, providing technical training, facilitating access to credit, and advancing advocacy. These community-driven mechanisms reflect practical, localized strategies to achieve the objectives of emancipation even when formal institutions falter. However, they remain fragile without systemic, sustained government backing.

Structural vs. Implementation Failures

The gap between policy and practice can be conceptualized as a combination of structural and implementation failures. Structural constraints are embedded in the historical and socio-economic conditions of Philippine agriculture. These include small, fragmented landholdings, limited irrigation infrastructure, dependence on rainfed agriculture, and entrenched poverty among smallholders. Even robust legal reforms, such as RA No. 11953⁸, cannot, by themselves, overcome these systemic barriers. As Deininger (2003) and Borras (2007) note, emancipation is multidimensional, encompassing not only formal ownership but also economic viability, access to technology, and agency in governance.

Implementation failures, on the other hand, occur when existing policies and resources fail to reach the ground. Farmers frequently cited bureaucratic delays, unclear procedures, and uneven program delivery, particularly in remote or politically contested areas. For instance, in Aloguinsan, farmers described repeated trips to LGU offices and DAR field stations without tangible results. The reliance on mayoral signatures as a de facto approval mechanism represents both an operational bottleneck and the personalization of institutional authority, thereby compromising systematic delivery. This distinction between structural barriers and implementation gaps is critical: emancipation requires both adequate policy frameworks and functional mechanisms to operationalize them.

Centralization, Budget Constraints, and Political Will

The effectiveness of agrarian reform also depends on broader issues of centralization, budget allocation, and political commitment. Despite the Marcos Jr. administration's renewed policy focus, agricultural spending remains modest relative to sectoral needs. For example, while DAR emphasizes post-transfer support, cooperative strengthening, and modern agricultural technologies, budgetary allocations for irrigation, extension services, and cooperative facilitation remain limited, particularly at provincial and municipal levels.

8 Republic Act No. 11953. An Act Emancipating Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries From Financial Burden By Condoning All Principal Loans, Unpaid Amortizations And Interests And Exempting Payment Of Estate Tax On Agricultural Lands Awarded Under The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program.

Centralization further complicates delivery. While national programs define objectives and frameworks, field-level execution depends heavily on LGU cooperation, leading to variability in access and outcomes. Farmers' testimonies repeatedly highlight the gatekeeping role of local mayors: without their approval, ARBs may not receive recognition, infrastructure support, or implementation of debt relief. This underscores a tension between national policy intent and local political realities, and indicates that genuine agrarian reform is as much about political will as legal entitlement.

Moreover, the presence of militarized actors and private interests in some agricultural areas, as reported by farmers in Cebu, further complicates state engagement. Security threats, land disputes, and coercive actors create conditions where the formal state apparatus cannot operate effectively, leaving farmers reliant on local negotiation, advocacy, and collective action.

Implications for A New Agrarian Reform Approach

The empirical findings and structural analysis suggest that agrarian reform in the Philippine context is incomplete. While programs like CARP promised to provide land redistribution and land tenure, farmers' lived experiences point out the limits of legalistic or top-down approaches. Land reform is not only a question of land transfer; it also entails access to productive resources, protection from coercion, and the ability to participate meaningfully in local governance.

In sum, the question, "Where is the government?," can be answered in three dimensions: (1) it is present in policy but uneven in practice, (2) it is structurally constrained by historical and economic conditions, and (3) it is mediated by local political dynamics. Recognizing these realities is essential to developing agrarian reform approaches that move beyond symbolic emancipation toward meaningful, durable empowerment.

A Call for a Community-Led Land Reform

The Philippine CARP is one of the few state-led land reform programs still being implemented today. However, its implementation largely depends on the government's political will and authority. Based on the experiences of the interviewed farmers, many laws and policies related to agrarian reform are either weakly enforced or poorly implemented. In some cases, even agencies such as the DAR and DENR were perceived as unresponsive to farmers'

concerns. These conditions weaken the rule of law and reduce trust not just in the farmers but in the community as a whole in state institutions.

The experiences of the farmers also expose the limitations of state-led land reform when it encounters existing social, political, and economic relations on the ground. Because agrarian reform is often implemented through a top-down approach, important realities on the ground are sometimes overlooked. The conditions in which farmers are excluded from decision-making processes, militarization, red-tagging, and intimidation are evidence that bureaucratic and centralized approaches hinder actual land tenure arrangements and local power relations.

Given these limitations, there is a growing recognition of the importance of shifting from a purely state-led approach toward a more community-centered form of land reform. One possible alternative is community-led land reform, which recognizes the importance of local communities, actual land arrangements, and local political initiatives. The community's ability to lead genuine land reform is exemplified by insights shared by organizations such as SRFA, KMMB, PAFFO, NAGMATAMO, and UFSF.

A community-centered approach to land reform also raises important issues regarding the relationship between the state and communities, particularly regarding power-sharing and authority. Hence, it is important to note that community-led land reform does not eliminate the state's role in agrarian reform. Instead, it calls for a state that is more responsive to the demands and realities of local communities (Sikor and Müller 2009). This requires genuine democratic participation, in which communities are not only consulted but also given real power in decision-making processes concerning land and rural development. At the same time, clear legal support is necessary to protect the authority of communities to make and enforce decisions about their land. While communities may lead these efforts, support from government agencies and NGOs, therefore, is still important, particularly in providing legal, technical, and organizational assistance.

Conclusion

This paper looked into the experiences of farmers' organizations in Cebu and Bohol to understand why agrarian reform in the Philippines remains an unfinished conversation. Although CARP has redistributed millions of hectares of land and formally recognized many agrarian reform beneficiaries,

the findings reveal that land redistribution alone does not guarantee genuine agrarian emancipation. Farmers still experience land tenure insecurity, weak institutional support, land conversion, indebtedness, and exclusion from decision-making processes. These realities expose the limitations of a largely state-led and top-down approach to agrarian reform.

The experiences of the farmers also prove that the success of agrarian reform cannot be measured solely through accomplishment reports and hectares distributed. Genuine agrarian reform requires the protection of farmers' rights, robust agricultural support services, purposeful participation in governance, and stronger mechanisms to prevent elite capture and land conversion. Without these, beneficiaries remain vulnerable to poverty and displacement.

The paper further argues that there is a need to strengthen community-centered approaches to land reform. Farmers' associations, cooperatives, and NGOs have shown that local communities can organize themselves and develop collective solutions to rural problems. This is important because if the main goal is to strengthen communities' self-reliance, development efforts must actively involve the people they are meant to benefit.

This call for community-led land reform means pushing government agencies to move beyond bureaucratic and politically driven approaches and instead prioritize the actual needs and realities of farmers. This includes improving irrigation systems, providing accessible credit and agricultural support services, strengthening legal protections for beneficiaries, and ensuring genuine participation in land-use decision-making processes.

Lastly, agrarian reform remains unfinished because the struggle for land is also a struggle for social justice, dignity, and democratic participation. The experiences of farmers in Cebu and Bohol show that agrarian emancipation is not achieved simply by issuing land titles, but by creating conditions in which farmers can securely cultivate their land, sustain their livelihoods, and participate in decisions that affect their communities. Genuine agrarian reform, therefore, requires not only redistribution of land but also redistribution of power.

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