Globalization, Agricultural Communities and Opportunities for Empowerment: Lessons from Third Sector and Community Responses to the Patenting of Plant Varieties in Bilar, Bohol

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This paper examines the impact of globalization and the responses of farming communities in Bilar, an agricultural-based municipality in the province of Bohol, Philippines. In particular, this study looks at the economic, political and socioeconomic impacts of the Plant Variety Protection (PVP) Act of 2002, one expression of the Philippine government’s commitment to the World Trade Organization, specifically to the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights. Using “everyday politics” as a framework of analysis, this paper also looks into the courses of action taken by civil society groups and farmers in response to the effects of the law. The capability of local governments to articulate the interests of communities in national government policy-making forums is also examined.

In brief, the PVP Act is silent regarding the issue of farmers as “breeders” to whom the Act confers the recognition and protection of rights. Furthermore, it denies the farmers the right over their seeds and at the same time threatens the farmers’ seed system — the traditional practice of using, selling, and saving/conserving seeds. Moreover, “patenting” of plant varieties is said to be against the concept of farmers’ customary rights, as articulated in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA). The threat to farmers’ rights over their seeds is also a threat to their livelihood system.

Recognizing the threats posed by the law to farmers, a non-government organization (the Southeast Asian Rice Initiatives for Community Empowerment) carried out a localization campaign on the PVP issue in Bilar, Bohol. After a series of consultations, these communities came up with diverse responses to the threats posed by the PVP Act, but all of them establishing something akin to community registries sanctioned by the barangay governments (community level local governments). Today, the community registry concept has been accepted at the municipal government level and there is now a campaign to have it recognized in other local governments in Bohol, including the provincial local government.

To address the issues set forth in the study, the research uses qualitative research methods such as the case study, document analysis, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. The study is significant because the process by which local communities react to the effects of globalization remains an under-researched area. It advances an alternative method of conceptualizing and investigating the phenomenon of globalization. It offers an ethnographic approach to understanding the international political economy that emphasizes the importance of perceptions and local community dynamics. Furthermore, the study attempts to provide a “history from below” based on the narratives of ordinary people as they share how they have lived their lives and how and why their experiences and behavior have changed over time within the context of a globalizing environment.
Often, globalization studies deal with the national government and policies but rarely on the local. But the paper will be able to provide insights as to the potential and limitations of local communities, farmers’ organizations and governments in articulating the interests of communities in national government policy-making forums vis-à-vis issues related to globalization. This is especially significant in the context of the ongoing devolution process in the Philippines since the 1990s and growing demands to further strengthen subnational governments. Finally, from a comparative perspective, by documenting and making available reports on the experiences of the Bilar farming communities, scholars can more systematically compare experiences of local communities and civil society groups in dealing with the impacts of globalization while other civil society groups and localities might gain insights and lessons from the paper on how to empower their ranks vis-à-vis the perceived excesses of globalization.

References:

