

Drawing the Marginalized Sectors into the Mainstream of Development: A DECLARATION OF THE MUSLIMS AND IPs COOPERATIVES

We, the participants to the 1st National Muslims and Indigenous People's Cooperative Summit representing the cooperatives of the Muslims and the IPs all over the Philippines and in alliance with allied groups from government, civil society, business and the academe have come together, with a firm collective intent to advance what we believe is our inherent right as concerned citizens of this nation and of the community of the Earth.

"We have witnessed hunger and poverty in an island oozing with ecological wealth as the land is blest with rich natural resources. Its hills and plains are fertile and verdant which continuously yield diverse agricultural products. Its hinterlands are still carpeted with the remaining natural forest, very rich in biodiversity. The God-given bounties do not end at the surface and shorelines. Beneath are minerals and ore deposits, described as the richest in the world. Its bays, lakes and seas are teeming with fish of every shape and hue.

We are well aware that the cause of economic deprivation is rooted in the powerlessness of the people to have access and control over their resources and over their utilities which are fast slipping through their fingers. The vast majority comprising mainly of the, Muslims IPs, small farmers, women, urban poor and subsistence fisherfolk are increasingly marginalized.

Even the millions of consumers of electricity are being deprived to exercise their rights as owners because those running the affairs of the so called electric cooperatives (ECs), who through all these years have formed powerful cabal of vested interest, are stubbornly insisting that these ECs are cooperatives despite the fact that they do not adhere to time honored and universally-accepted cooperative principles and practices and notwithstanding the fact that Supreme Court has ruled resoundingly on the EC's non tax exemption for not being genuine cooperatives.

However, instead of registering with CDA, what the ECs did was to "unleash formidable arsenal of lies, deceit, fear-mongering and cash-backed lobbying to ensure the continued proliferation and hold of private interest over electric cooperatives. Member-consumers were enticed with bags of grocery items and other goodies to sway their mindset. Lies and deceptions were employed to cast doubt on the economic viability of electric cooperative if it would be registered with CDA.

Having experienced the pains and bitterness of continuing conflict, the cooperative movement cannot just remain as bystanders knowing that the essence of cooperativism may yet be the long awaited answer for peace and stability in our country. Cooperativism's raison d'etre is to address the roots of the conflict which is social injustices, inequities and poverty.

Social scientists and development experts have come up with studies disclosing that poverty is rooted, not in the lack of resources (because we have so much), but in the powerlessness of the people; that to combat poverty, measure must be taken to empower them.

-That being the case, cooperativism may as well be the answer because cooperatives are the coalitions of the poor to collectively have access and control over their resources which are fast slipping through their fingers. Such can aptly be done through cooperatives which are increasingly becoming a vehicle of empowerment to democratize wealth and power and therefore lessen economic and social disparities.

We are supporting the Cooperatives' Nine Paths to Peace namely:

1. Peace through Sustainable Agriculture

Long Term development in Mindanao can be won or lost through agriculture. Poverty is very glaring in the rural communities which is highly attributed to a kind of farming system anchored on conventional agriculture. Because of this, farming has benefited everyone (the local compradors, the chemical fertilizer dealers, the usurers, etc.) except those who are doing the back-breaking job- the poor farmers. Conventional agriculture has robbed the rural communities of farming which should belong to them. The inhabitants are further marginalized, thus contributing to negative peace, if not, to conflict. As countervailing measures, the cooperatives are shifting to natural, organic, ecological and even bio-dynamics farming. A few are into manufacturing of organic fertilizer and pesticides. This will be presented during the Forum for up-scaling.

2. Peace Through Protection, Rehabilitation, Conservation and Preferential Use Rights of Natural Resources

The marginalized sectors (Muslims, IPs, small farmers, fisherfolks) be given the preferential use rights in developing their respective resources and that their cooperatives be accorded with the utmost priority in the use and management of such resources, giving them the license, franchise and whatever privilege to handle key economic activities, i.e. planting industrial crops, sustainable mining, fishing, etc. based on the universal principle that the use of the God-given resources should accrue to the benefit of the bulk of the people and not just for a few.

The ecological systems are only ours to protect for the coming generations but at the rate that we have devastated the environment, we have robbed our children of their inheritance . WE are now facing ecological crisis that unless soon averted will lead to an impending environmentally-based social, political and economic collapse. We have lost our ecological security. We must nurture our ecological disasters. Our quest for peace is one that is holistic that covers peace between *homo sapiens* and nature. Indeed, " if man has to saved from doom, development must be in harmony, not at the expense, of nature.

3. Peace Through Rights-Based Management of Utilities

-The cooperatives have long been advocating to cooperativize so-called Electric Cooperatives and Water Utilities. These advocacies will be further enhanced during the Forum. It is our firm belief that when these basic utilities are owned and managed by the member-consumers, it will lower down the cost and somehow reduce the incidence of poverty in Mindanao. More importantly the member-consumers will exercise their God-given right of decision making.

4. Peace Through Good Governance and People Empowerment

Good governance is a condition sine qua non to peace and development. It follows democratic processes. Unless the people participate in development processes, all the outpourings of development assistance will just be palliatives and cannot be the real solution.

Social change to have positive peace has been illusive all these years despite two people power revolutions and two decades of martial law. There might be changing of the guards but the structures that breeds violence and poverty are still as formidable as ever. As poverty is rooted in the powerlessness and social exclusion of the people, remedial measures must be taken to empower them. Increasing therefore their capabilities, enhancing their skills and developing their well-being are the imperatives for people to be empowered.

5. Peace Through Human Resource Development

A country that has not developed its human capital is now being penalized by slow growth. Enhancing the inhabitants' skills, knowledge and values is imperative to mitigate social exclusion and to contribute to peace building processes. Region 10 has now the land and money to establish the HRD (Peace) Center. Trainings will start after the construction. This will be presented to other regions as model.

The Mindanao Cooperative Forum for Peace will be the venue where the voices for Peace of some One Million Two Hundred Thousands active cooperative members in Mindanao will be heard through their delegates. Traditionally, peace initiatives are just coming from those not from Mindanao.

This time, the Mindanawons themselves will articulate the Peace Declaration, laying down in clear categorical term the roadmap to peace and development, crafted by the PEOPLE themselves.

6. Peace Through Conflict Transformation, Management and Resolution

Sheikh Ali Mamondiong said, "A boil cannot be cured by merely cutting it off with a blade. The contaminated blood will only produce more and more boils."

- Advancing the essence of cooperativism means mitigating, if not, uprooting the causes of conflict. As we draw all the cooperatives into the mainstream of peace-building, conflict transformation can be had to erase the factors to transform negative peace into a positive one.

7. Peace Through Promotion of Halal Food

It has long been the struggle of our Muslims' Cooperatives to undertake the Halal Food Program because of the increasing demand from the Middle East. However, it could not take-off the ground because the government is just paying lip service to it. The Halal National Accreditation Board has presented its plans that call for, among others, the participation of agricultural cooperatives.

8. Peace Through International Cooperation and Integration of foreign peace-making initiatives;

9. Peace Through Recognition and Acceptance of Cultural Diversity and Integrity.

It has been said that a strong army can conquer a kingdom but that the strongest army in the world can not stop an idea whose time has come. It is our firm belief that cooperativism has come of age in the beautiful but broken country and that we the Muslims and IPs are asserting our God-given right to participate in development processes so that those in the margins can be drawn into the mainstream of development.

Signed this 17th day of May, 2012 in Davao City.

Note:

Form a Cooperative Development Council