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## **National Development Versus the People's Welfare: The Case of Bukidnon**

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## Notes and Comments

### National Development Versus the People's Welfare: The Case of Bukidnon

VINCENT G. CULLEN, S.J.

A farmer's wife told her story to the group. Armed men came to the barrio at night and knocked on the door of a neighbor's house shouting, "Open up or we will strafe the house." The residents, too terrified to respond, were silent. Shots rang out and the armed men departed. Inside the riddled house the mother of the family lay dying. "Now," the narrator said, "I have a question. If we answer we get shot; if we don't answer we get shot. So what do we do?" No one in the assembly of over two hundred people ventured to answer the question, for all knew that the story and the question vividly described their own situation and that of many rural folk in Bukidnon and elsewhere in Mindanao. They knew they had no answer to the question.

Armed bands, military, paramilitary, the communist New People's Army (NPA) and bandits, roam the countryside and woe to the farmer who is suspected of being on the wrong side. Despite government denials that salvaging (summary executions by military or paramilitary personnel) and hamleting are government policy, bodies continue to be found in the Pulangi River and along the roadsides. Farmers, some voluntarily, some under orders, and under whose orders is not always clear, move their houses from their farmsites into the barrios, and then must walk five or more kilometers back and forth to their farms. Those suspected of being NPA members or sympathizers are picked up, and some simply disappear. On the other hand, members of the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF) and *ronda* (unarmed barrio guards) run the risk of ambush or of having their houses strafed at night. Those

tagged as overbearing or corrupt officials or informers may be gunned down at any time, and a good number have been killed. Thus the people are caught in the middle of a vicious fratricidal struggle which they did not start and cannot control, because it is directed on both sides by those outside the community, and both the government and the Party pressure the people to take an active part in a fight that the people cannot fully understand. In the last ten years the people have gradually lost control over their lives and now these very lives are in danger and there seems to be little that they can do about it.

The purpose of this note is to examine some of the causes of this situation and to see what connection there is between efforts to remedy it and the Church and the Basic Christian Communities (BCC) of Bukidnon.

#### DEVELOPMENT BACKGROUND

During the past thirty years the Province of Bukidnon and most of Mindanao have developed from a raw frontier to a well populated and, until fairly recently, a relatively stable and progressive area. This development accomplished mainly by the small people was in answer to a dream, the dream of Mindanao as the land of promise, where people could acquire land and start a new life free of the many economic and social constraints of their old home provinces. So, from the early 1950s until the early 1970s hundreds of thousands of tenants and migrant workers came from Cebu, Bohol, Leyte, Negros and Panay, and even from Luzon, equipped with little more than *bolos*, blankets and cooking pots, a willingness to dare and to work, and dream: the dream of owning their own land and running their own lives. The population of Bukidnon rose from 63,500 in 1948 to 194,400 in 1960 to 414,800 by 1970 and is now more than 600,000.<sup>1</sup> As the population rose so did the agricultural production of the Province. Corn production rose in value between 1960 and 1970 from ₱6,744,943 to ₱74,673,770. During the same period rice production rose in value from ₱3,574,042 to ₱17,563,099.<sup>2</sup> Granted that this development was

1. Richard Ulack, "Migrations to Mindanao, Population Growth in the Final Stage of a Pioneer Frontier," *TESG (Tijdschrift voor Econ. Soc. Geografie)* 68, No. 3 (1977) and Bureau of Census.

2. Francis C. Madigan, S.J., *Mindanao's Inland Province: A Socioeconomic Survey of Bukidnon* (Cagayan de Oro City: Research Institute for Mindanao Culture, Xavier University, 1969), pp. 3 & 32.

largely unplanned, raucous, wasteful in natural resources, often inequitable and occasionally violent, yet it was done largely by the people who were actively participating in their own development.

Then in 1972, following the imposition of Martial Law, this period of free participative development came to an end, to be followed by a period of planning and control. There was control in the political, social and economic spheres, and this meant the loss of free participation on the part of the people. While many of the government programs designed to help the people at the grassroots level may have been designed for free participation, at the local level it was all too common that due to the general atmosphere of Martial Law, these programs were imposed from above on the people. In some cases the implementing personnel, themselves under pressure to produce results, put pressure on the people. In other cases local officials took advantage of the situation to become petty tyrants. Thus the implementation of programs like the *Samahang Nayon* (government sponsored cooperative) and the Presidential Assistant For National Minorities (PANAMIN) reservation program among the cultural minorities limited the people's freedom to run their own lives and in so doing adversely affected the results of the programs.

### CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT

More ominous still was the economic planning at the top levels of government and business that stressed the transformation of Mindanao from a land of small settlers into an area for agribusiness corporations producing export crops, for tree farming and mining as dollar earners for the economy.<sup>3</sup> This new stress on corporate development started in Bukidnon in the mid-1970s. First came the expansion of the Philippine Packing Corporation (PPC) plantation, which in 1970 controlled some twenty-three thousand hectares of land.<sup>4</sup> In 1974 PPC began to expand its control over another six thousand hectares in the Municipality of Sumilao, by acquiring the land mainly from native Bukidnon

3. For a more extensive study confer A. Van Oosterhout, "Spatial Conflicts in Rural Mindanao, the Philippines," *Pacific Viewpoint* 24, No. 1 (1983).

4. Ronald K. Edgerton, "Social Disintegration on a Contemporary Philippine Frontier," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 13, No. 2 (1983): 163.

farmers. Next there was the construction of the sugar mill at Paitan, Quezon, Bukidnon by the Bukidnon Sugar Company (BUSCO) and the gradual conversion of some twenty thousand hectares of corn and rice land to sugar. More recently about four thousand hectares of land have been acquired by the San Miguel Corporation and four other companies as coffee plantations.

While the methods of land acquisition differ, from outright purchase, to leases known as growers-marketers or management agreements, to sugar planting and milling contracts, one common factor is that large tracts of land previously tilled independently by private farmers have now come under the organized control of agribusiness corporations, whose products are mainly for the export trade. While some in Bukidnon have made a profit in the process, especially the land speculators and the owners of lands converted to sugar, there is little solid evidence that the switch has helped the ordinary farmers in Bukidnon economically. First, one may ask what happened to the tenants on the corn and rice lands converted to sugar? Though figures are not available, it would seem that after a cash settlement with the land owners, they either joined the ranks of agricultural labor or drifted into the forest zones as settlers in search of land. It is much the same story in the case of the landowners who had either sold or rented their lands to the pineapple and coffee plantations. In most cases, having spent the purchase or rental money, they became either agricultural workers, marginal farmers around the plantations, or went elsewhere in search of land. Those who became agricultural workers found that the available jobs were for the most part either seasonal, casual or contract labor and thus there was no guarantee of steady employment. So once again as elsewhere in the Third World, corporate development was making the rich richer and the poor poorer. But we cannot measure the loss merely in economic terms. This change, which is still going on, is directly contrary to the dream which caused the development of Mindanao in the first place. a dream not of great riches but of owning one's own land and of running at least to some extent one's own life. This new development pattern was also an attack on the social fabric of the area: on the self-respect and independence of the small farming communities which were the backbone of Mindanao society. It has also been a destabilizing factor in a society already suffering from serious tensions. Some of these tensions stem from the conflicts

between different linguistic and cultural groups, such as the Bukidnon and Manobo minorities versus the settlers, and also among the settler groups themselves, coming as they do from different areas in the Visayas and Luzon.

### FOREST LANDS

Even in the forestry lands there were problems. No longer could settlers move into the forest with impunity. The Bureau of Forest Development was alarmed, and understandably so, at the destruction of the forests, and secured the passage of Presidential Decree 705, which equated cultural minorities with squatters and thus abrogated the cultural minorities' rights to their ancestral lands, guaranteed them by the right of ancient possession and Presidential Decree 410. Farm management programs were initiated which severely limited land possession and also required the growing of trees on these private lands which could not be owned but only leased from the government. Thus in another way the security and the freedom of the people which was based on land ownership was threatened. It was the companies, especially the logging companies, which stood to gain most from the tree farming programs. They had the capital and were best organized to plant the fast growing *acacia falcata* and giant *ipil-ipil* needed for paper pulp at home and for export. The small farmer could not make much of a profit in tree farming because he needed a timber license, and had no way of independently marketing his trees.

These political, social and economic pressures on people who had come for land and a measure of free participation in their own development were bound to produce heat. The farmers, whose lot was already hard due to the rise in the costs of farm production and to the perennial fluctuation in the market, were now subjected to added pressures and many succumbed, becoming generally poorly paid agricultural workers with no job security; and they did not like it. Bukidnon during the period of settler immigration had been a rough and ready place, with generally unorganized violence and occasional strife between the settlers and cultural minorities. Starting in the mid-1970s, groups interested in more organized violence began to gain strength in the province.

These groups were fanatic sects which flourished mainly but not

exclusively among the cultural minorities. Then there were bandit gangs and finally the Communist Party. By 1980 there was extensive party organization in many of the barrios in southern Bukidnon, extending northward to the municipality of Malaybalay.

Naturally the rural people, under severe pressure and knowing nothing of the Berlin Wall, the tragedies of Kampuchea and the boat people of Vietnam, listened to the Party organizers, who at first merely presented but did not impose their ideas. However as the Party organization gathered strength the people learned that it too could apply pressure. First there was the "clean the barrio" campaign, during which abusive officials, thieves, unjust storekeepers, drunkards and womanizers were given three warnings and, if these went unheeded, ran the risk of liquidation. There were quite a few such liquidations. Armed CHDF and military were fair game and suspected informers were liquidated. Next, those considered obstructionist, such as the Catholic chapel leaders who preached against violence, came under pressure. Ambushes of the military caused counter-measures: military sweeps, enforced surrender of barrio people said to be communist sympathizers. As the violence escalated after the middle of 1981, "salvaging" became common—sometimes performed by fanatic sects on the grounds that those who refused to join the sect must be communist sympathizers. Thus, we have the present situation.

#### THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

At the time of the meeting referred to in the first paragraph of this note the people had come to feel that, pressured by the conflicting forces, they had lost all control over their lives. This particular group turned to the Catholic Church, which in Bukidnon functions within the framework of Basic Christian or Ecclesial Communities. The Basic Christian Community is held suspect both by the military who believe it to be innately subversive, and by the Party because the Church in Bukidnon is opposed to violence as the solution to the present situation. Actually the BCC's in Bukidnon are not ideologically oriented but are simply the Church at the grassroots, expressing its faith as community in the face of these overwhelming human problems, and through people's reflection and participation, seeking ways to confront these problems. So the people came to strengthen their faith, to look for hope

in solidarity with people from other barrios. They listened to talks on the situation, on the Church's teaching on human dignity and human rights, and on their rights before the law, and they participated in the discussions. They did not get any prefabricated solutions to their problems, but they must have carried away something from the meetings, for one participant wrote: "From my observation, all the participants especially the farmers were overcome by fear and they had almost given up hope. But thanks to the meeting, their courage which was almost gone was restored. The people, deeply depressed in their fear, but listening to the word of God, even though we are sinners, felt that there was still time to stand up and do what He wanted them to do."

What did these people get from the meetings? First, a strengthening of faith at a time when there was little else they could believe in; secondly, a renewal of hope when hope was almost lost; and a sense of solidarity with others who believe as they do. But this was not merely a "religious" experience unconnected with the reality of their daily lives. The Gospel message taught in the Basic Christian Communities helps to enlighten and purify their value system, important if we believe in the active participation of the people in the development process. Secondly, from the Gospel they learn the meaning of the dignity of the human person which is basic to the development process. If human dignity is not respected and protected there can be no true human development, and no lasting development at all. How can you have development without people? Thirdly, they are learning that, because of their inherent human dignity, they have certain inalienable rights in the political, economic and social spheres that must be respected if there is to be a just, stable and truly progressive society. And lastly, they learn, and this is the hard part, that rights carry mutual obligations to respect and defend the rights of others; and that unless while working for one's own good one also works for the common good, it is likely that neither will be achieved. Thus the message of the Basic Christian Communities is not political or ideological but the ethical basis for human development. But more than Christian conscientization is needed. The next step is organization towards people's power; a power to be exerted within the framework of just laws, a peaceful power to be used to change oppressive laws and oppressive situations; a power granted by God to all men because they are men and by the Constitution

of the Philippines to all its citizens. But organization is the sticky part because it is considered subversive. As one military man put it, "Anyone who organizes the people must be on the other side." It can also be considered obstructionist by those who choose violence because it may slow down the process of the revolution.

#### PRESENT RELEVANCE

But does all of this have any relevance to the present Philippine situation? For those who think in terms of gross national product, balance of payments and dollar reserves, perhaps not. They may feel that it is all well and good but does not solve any of the country's economic or political problems. They may feel that it is not practical. And so it may seem in the short term; but one cannot help but wonder whether the neglect of these principles has not helped to get us where we are, in the middle of fratricidal strife, with no clear way out. As to being impractical, one might also wonder how the increases in the GNP due to corporate development projects balance with the expenditures for military operations in Mindanao for the past ten years. After all, the largest item in the national budget is for the military. We would also have to add the loss in revenue to the government and private business resulting from the violence in Mindanao. We might discover that in the long run, respect for human rights and people's free participation in development is good business after all.

One cannot help wondering during this time of political ferment whether not only the planners from the public and private sectors but also the fomenters of demonstrations in Makati have given this alternative any serious thought. It would seem not, since corporate development, unfortunately sometimes backed by military force, is still very much the in thing and the people are still very much out of it. At present one hydroelectric dam is being constructed on the Pulangi River at Maramag, Bukidnon, and another larger one is planned upriver. Pulangi III when completed will inundate 7,662 hectares of land, destroy 17 barrios and displace 35,000 people.<sup>5</sup> The people have been asked to express their views, and they voice their objection to the dam. They do not want the money offered them. They do not want relocation, for they know

5. "Infrastructure: Pulangi Dam Project," *Mindanao Focus*, Davao City, n.d., p. 17.

that there are no suitable or adequate sites for relocation in the area. They want to fulfill a dream, even a poor dream, which they have been working on for the past ten, fifteen, twenty years: to live in their own homes which they have built, to till and own the land that they have worked on, to live in the barrios that they have built among the people they know, and to have a little something to hand on to their children. Granted there is a need for electric power, most of it though, would go for the kind of industrialization that elsewhere has not clearly benefitted the majority of the people. There is also a need for development in wood product industries and in mining, and maybe even for pineapples and bananas as dollar earners, but must the development process take place on such a scale, at such a pace and in such a way that it destroys the lives of the people of Mindanao? Must it destroy the dream of the people?

#### TRUE RECONCILIATION

There is a good deal of talk about reconciliation these days. Certainly the barrio people of Bukidnon want reconciliation if it means an end to the shooting, and they want it just as much as the people of Manila do. But the question remains: can there be true reconciliation if the root causes of the present situation are not honestly examined by all involved, including the people, and remedies honestly sought which include everyone, especially the people? Unless these questions are seriously faced, and granting that violence is not the way to solve social and economic problems, have we a right to expect that there will be true reconciliation instead of mere slogans?

The people of the rural areas of Bukidnon know because they have been through this process of "development" and violence and have learned that this road leads nowhere except to more violence and perhaps to chaos. But the question remains, do those who have not been through this experience, the elite of government and the business world, do they know what the people know (and if not, can they learn it) — namely development without people, without respect for their dignity and without their free participation cannot be true human development, that in the long run it cannot work? That is the question.