



People's participation crucial in sustainable development

IBON Foundation, Inc. submission to UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression including Freedom of Information

We believe that a democracy that works, where the people are able to freely and responsibly discuss their situation, identify problems and propose solutions, is crucial in achieving sustainable development or social and economic progress that is inclusive and rights-based, protects and nurtures human and natural resources, and can benefit future generations.

IBON's story. Specifically, people's unhampered evidence-based exchanges in aid of campaigns to pursue progress is key. From our experience, our involvement in workshops and dialogues with the National Anti-Poverty Commission during the previous administration made it possible for IBON's research and analysis on the Philippine macroeconomy to be included in the government agency's Reforming Anti-Poverty Policy publication which pitches an alternative development framework towards the state's limiting and unambitious outlook on poverty alleviation. A water network which the institution secretariats started campaigning for a People's Water Code, specifically critiquing water privatization for hampering people's access to this very basic need back in 2004; in 2013 the water watchdog and its associates successfully lobbied versus a water rate hike that was computed based on the aim for corporate profit and that included charges unrelated to water services. A third example would be IBON's constant advocacy for decent jobs and wages that always features what official job figures do not count in terms of informality and discouraged work, and the group's estimate of the family living wage and thus the necessity for just wages; these are used by workers' groups and other sectors nationwide asserting and supporting the call for stronger local production industries for sustainable jobs, and a wage increase across-the-board. Fourth, with progressive party lists of the Makabayan bloc and environmental organizations specifically the Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment and Center for Environmental Concerns, the People's Green New Deal was crafted and filed in Congress, with the proposal underscoring the integration of environmental rehabilitation and protection in Philippine socio-economic transformation.

Some challenged policies. The institution's positions on the aforementioned issues challenged existing policies, measures and approaches: anti-poverty programs in place such as the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* which heavily relies on the periodic distribution of conditional cash

transfers without reforming the economy to be able to more strategically generate steady jobs and incomes; the privatized Metro Manila water system's rate rebasing stipulated in Concession Agreements between the government and private water firms as the profit-oriented method of determining water tariffs; various labor-related policies and structures such as the Labor Code which allows low-paying, insecure and temporary work under contractualization, and measly wages under Regional Wage Boards; and much rhetoric on climate adaptation and mitigation encapsulated in a climate action plan that is almost oblivious to effective laws already plundering and destroying the Philippine environment such as the Philippine Mining Act, rampant land use conversions, and coastal reclamation for grand transportation projects under the state's infrastructure plan.

Repressive measures. Since IBON's inception in the 1970s at the height of Martial Law in the Philippines until today, the freedom of expression including access to information have been challenged by, then an outright repressive state, and now one that appears quite popular (if election results are to be believed, despite of course the known proliferation of guns, goons and gold with the polls). The same combination of policies, military and police dominance and a tinge of civil society involvement have been used to incriminate progressive thinkers and activists – then through sheer fabrication of criminal charges to jail them, and now through a weaponized law and blatant structures used against critical thinking and opposition to the status quo. Aside from the National Task Force to End Local Communism and Armed Conflict (NTFELCAC) that has embarked on red-tagging sprees that usually preceded the killings and abductions of progressives, the Anti-Terrorism Law (ATL), Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) and the Anti-Money Laundering Act (AMLA) and the council behind it have labeled individuals and organizations – including anti-destructive dams and environmentalists, indigenous peoples, human rights defenders, peace educators, church workers and religious, teachers, journalists, lawyers and lawmakers, entire cause-oriented or advocacy institutions, offices and even development and media outfits – as 'terrorists' or linked with or supporting them and are thus answerable to the law.

The Anti-Terrorism Law faced huge opposition, with over 35 counter-petitions from various entities lamenting its being over-broad and ambiguous in defining 'terrorism', perilous for outspoken citizens who could be accused as 'terrorists' on the whim of the ATC, and that this draconian measure could result in gross civil and political rights violations. Yet the Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality. The most recent addition to the ATC's designated 'terrorists' is long-time community doctor Dr. Naty Castro who has previously been arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges and released because the tall tale case lacked merit.

The NTFELCAC has resorted to using a media outfit (Sonshine Media Network Incorporated) and former NTFELCAC officials who introduce themselves now as civilians to propagate the agency's staple narrative of red-tagging progressive organizations.

IBON, a research, education, information and advocacy institution, has constantly been red-tagged by the NTFELCAC as a child-rebel recruiter by virtue of its progressive textbooks, publications, articles and spokespersons. The government agency repeatedly accuses the research group on air of being led by 'Communist operatives'.

This is an open attack on a legitimate development institution. IBON's socioeconomic content and

analysis is widely used and quoted by a rather broad range of audiences from the youth, academe, religious, entrepreneurs, environmentalists, women, farmers, laborers, fellow development workers, artists, healthworkers, media, and other advocates. By the NTFELCAC's misinformation, the institution, its staff, and IBON's work are put in danger.

There have been hints at an imminent raid of the office after the government agency started to terrorist-tag IBON. Some of its board members have been charged with trumped-up cases. The IBON website has been the subject of DDOS attacks.

There are instances in our research when government agencies would not provide information. Worse, IBON, despite most extensive and longest track record of any civil society organization on Sustainable Development Goals issues and endorsement by the offices of the UN Development Program, the Commission on Human Rights and the Belgian embassy, was denied membership in the stakeholder chamber of the National Economic and Development Authority's SDG sub-committee.

IBON values CSO engagement and involvement in pursuing SDGs in multiplatforms which its partners of a broad range can attest to. However in the aforementioned circumstances, important mechanisms for CSO participation are ironically used to exclude CSOs.

Pushback. IBON reached out to the government's National Security department to demand evidence of accusations hurled against it by state representatives. It has also been three years since IBON filed a complaint at the Ombudsman's office seeking administrative sanctions against then NTFELCAC officials spreading false information about the legitimate research organization. IBON's efforts to reach out have been in vain as no evidence against it has been shown; the Ombudsman also has not acted decisively and expediently on the institution's plea.

We narrate this to illustrate that despite efforts by those accused of terrorism or supporting it to clear their name and, most importantly on the part of IBON, to pursue our research, education, information and advocacy work unhampered, more accusations are thrown and this misbehavior by red-tagging government officials and their supporters has not been institutionally reprimanded by the state. Meanwhile, despite calls to defund the NTFELCAC, military and police persecuting activists, progressives or others deemed as critics, the defense budget has even been further beefed up and human rights violations against those asserting their economic, social and cultural rights – mostly farmers, indigenous peoples, workers, youth and women – keep intensifying.

Digital platform. While social media has become an additional tool of raising public consciousness on important issues of the day, the world wide web and other related digital tools are also not only used to suppress freedom of expression and information but also to spread disinformation, distort history and feed the wrong information. Additionally, Facebook standards, the threat of removing Twitter, and in the Philippines the mandated registration of SIM cards are putting millions of ordinary people at the risk of disenfranchisement and lost access to vital communications and other social services previously available for everyone through their basic and android phones.

Policy-making. Citizens have throughout history been unwavering in asserting their right to expression and information in relation to their struggle for good working conditions and incomes, improved production, a healthy environment, affordable efficient and accessible services and utilities,

equal rights, a better quality of life, and ultimately, genuine development. This, as the government has on the other hand historically prioritized the elite and powerful through big business- and wealthy-biased economics and governance that has resulted in even worse income inequality – in fact the worst in the world recently, according to the World Bank.

People's participation in crafting policies has sadly been superficial so far. There have been numerous invitations from government and policymakers to workshops and consultations where multi-stakeholders did present their positions and people-centered proposals yet at the end of the day government measures remain elite and exclusionary. Still, there is no substitute for constant dialogue with the aim of arriving at possible measures that will benefit the many.

Reporting. The primary role of the media in informing the public of the state of the people and the nation is unarguable. Yet, those who choose to report the facts - including Rappler, ABS-CBN and the Philippine Daily Inquirer, have also faced varying levels of persecution along with rights and environment defenders. In recent years the Philippines has ranked among the most dangerous places both for journalists and environmentalists. There have been anti-mining journalists and advocates counted among basic sectors who have been felled by bullets for being vocal in the media or on other open platforms against rights abuses. Alternative media outfits that cover the news not ordinarily narrated by the mainstream have also been the target of electronic attacks, DDOS and blatant terrorist-tagging.

In defense of asserters. A Human Rights Defenders Bill is waiting to be lobbied for in Congress and to be granted an audience with the Philippine Senate. The bill encompasses the protection and rights assertion of truth tellers be they from media or other groups or institutions. This became most imperative amid public and rights advocates' widespread furor over rampant rights violations under the Duterte administration that combined a bloody anti-drugs war and a crackdown on opponents, critics and activists. It has become ever more imperative now as the current President, only son of ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos, adopts an open and positive posture that can be shallowly differentiated from the crass character of the former administration's chief, while in various parts of the country a trail of blood continues to grow longer as killings, illegal arrests, hamleting, even bombings and air strikes proliferate.

Key issues. From over four decades of working with the social movement and drawing lessons from the people's campaigns and struggles, IBON has campaigned People Economics as an alternative pro-poor and sustainable economic agenda comprised of six pillars that must be tackled integrally: developing the countryside, building Filipino industries, protecting the environment, financing development, and striving for economic independence. But addressing these areas of work have to also be done alongside upholding a genuinely people-centered framework that prefers people's participation over elitist politics, and an economy for the many over an economy that is designed to benefit and enrich only a few. ###