

Forty Years of IRRI - Forty Years of Peasant Struggle Against Feudalism and Imperialism

Speech delivered by Rafael "Ka Paeng" Mariano, chairperson of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) at the "People's Forum on Forty Years of IRRI" on April 3, 2000

Rice is the staple food for half of the world's population and is grown on about 146 billion hectares. Of the world's total annual rice production of 535 million tons, 91 percent is produced by Asian farmers who till about 89 percent of the world's harvested rice area. It is expected that by 2025, more than 5 billion of the world's anticipated 10 billion people will depend on rice as their principal food.

Rice is extremely important for Asia where it provides 50 to 80 percent of the total calories consumed. It is therefore aptly described as a "political crop." He who controls the production and distribution of rice, has an invaluable weapon to control the whole of Asia.

These facts are very significant to understand the role of the International Rice Research Institute in the US power play. The power IRRI is wielding on the staple crop of the Asian continent and on its peoples is tremendous. No other institution in the world has a similar impact on the daily lives of millions of Asian rice farmers.

IRRI and the US Agenda for Asia

From its very inception in 1960, IRRI had a special mission that went far beyond rice research. As IRRI was established by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, two American organizations that are mere extensions of the State Department, it is not surprising that IRRI's mission is part of the Asian agenda of the United States.

In the 1950s, the US was still reeling from the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the subsequent successes of the Chinese revolution that brought the country on the path to communism. It had suffered a humiliating defeat against the communists in Korea when it attempted to put the country under its control by force. South Vietnam was rife with peasant unrest and the influence of the communists was increasing rapidly.

The US concluded that brutal military repression alone was not enough to contain the spread of communism in Asia. Military means had to be complemented by other strategies to quell further unrest, especially among the millions of poor and hungry peasants. Palliative reforms in the backward agricultural sectors of the Asian countries under its control, which were characterized by feudal relations of production, were unavoidable.

At the same time, US corporations wanted new markets for their products, new investment opportunities to get rid of their surplus capital and more favorable trade relations with the Asian neocolonies. For the US, the time was ripe to terminate the few nationalist measures it had allowed to its neocolonies because of the particular circumstances immediately after the Second World War.

"Modernization" of Asian agriculture was essential for the US to create an environment where foreign investment and export-oriented production were to generate growth.

Therefore, opening up the neocolonies for US investment and trade had to go hand in hand with reforms that would boost agricultural productivity. The backward agriculture of Asia had to become more productive in order to make it profitable for US corporations.

Because of the central role rice plays in Asian society, the US also had to take an initiative in rice research that would serve its twofold agenda of counterinsurgency and restructuring of Asian agriculture. This would become IRRI's special mission from its very inception.

Why Rice Research in the Philippines?

The US picked the Philippines for IRRI's headquarters because of its special characteristics:

- Since it had been granted formal "independence" in 1946, the Philippine government has been very loyal to US imperialism.
- The Philippine economy was already shaped by almost fifty years of American colonization and was therefore an easy prey for further imperialist exploitation.
- Southern Tagalog and especially Central Luzon, two major rice producing regions were the hotbeds of peasant revolt. Due to the widespread poverty in the Philippine countryside, peasant unrest could easily spread and expand to other regions.

Already in 1951, the Rockefeller Foundation wrote: "There was a special problem in the Philippines in regard to the relations of hunger and the appeal of communism, and that there was perhaps a special responsibility on the part of the United States government to do something about agriculture in the Philippines."¹

Finally, in 1959, the Rockefeller and the Ford Foundation forged an agreement with the Philippine government that led to the establishment of IRRI in Los Baños, Laguna. With its narrow-minded focus on the improvement of productivity, IRRI would serve the US agenda of counterinsurgency and increasing US domination of agriculture up to this day.

During that same period, the IMF and the World Bank started to play their role in restructuring the Philippine economy according to the interest of US imperialism. In 1958, the World Bank appeared for the first time in the list of "aid" givers to the Philippine government while the IMF gave a conditional loan of \$11 million.² The debt of the Philippines to these institutions, and consequently their influence in domestic economic policy, would increase ever since. The World Bank, which is still a major source of funds for IRRI, would later also push the implementation of the disastrous "Green Revolution" in the Philippines and other Third World countries.

Boosting Productivity at the Expense of the Peasantry and the Environment

Due to CIA support to his campaign, Diosdado Macapagal replaced Carlos Garcia as President of the Philippines in 1962. Macapagal immediately heeded the demands of his imperialist masters, lifting exchange controls and devaluing the peso. The effects of this policy change were disastrous to the Philippine economy. Many US-based corporations, who were now able to repatriate their profits without restriction, took advantage of it to invest in Philippine industry, services and agriculture to the expense of local companies.

To make Philippine agriculture profitable for US companies, it had to become more productive. Traditional landlords, who were still predominant in the Philippine

countryside, were not interested in improving productivity. Therefore, to a certain extent the predominant system of sharecropping had to be replaced by other arrangements. The Land Reform Code Macapagal launched in 1963, based on the recommendations of American advisers, did just that. The law promoted leasehold tenancy but had obviously not the intention to break up the landlords' land monopolies. To the contrary, it intensified the exploitation by the landlord class through relations of production that were more appropriate to US interests.

Apart from the productivity-enhancing overhaul of the feudal rural economy, the US also wanted to introduce more productive farming practices. This was the task of IRRI. In 1966, it launched IR8, the first of a series of high yielding rice varieties that would bring the "Green Revolution" to the paddy fields. IRRI's high-yielding varieties (HYVs) required vast amounts of pesticides and fertilizers, jacking up the cost of production and destroying the environment. The native snails, frogs and crabs the farmers were used to bring home from their fields as free viands disappeared from the rice fields.

In the 1970s, the US-Marcos dictatorship made the promotion of IRRI's HYVs the centerpiece of its Masagana 99 program. This program had to spruce up the bogus land reform program Marcos had launched shortly after declaring martial law to quell peasant unrest. While his so-called land reform program was supposed to give the farmers the illusion of agrarian justice, Marcos' enthusiastic support for the "Green Revolution" had to project the image of modernization of the Philippines' backward agriculture. In reality, both programs were a means for Marcos and his cronies to consolidate their power in the countryside as well as an opportunity for TNCs to take advantage of the dictatorship to advance their business interests.

By linking credit with compulsory membership in the barrio farmers' association (Samahang Nayan), Marcos strengthened his political power in the countryside. Making fertilizer and pesticide purchases mandatory was an effective means of consolidating the feudal characteristics of rural society in the Philippines. The feudal and semi-feudal exploitation of the landlords, rural bankers, traders and merchant-usurers pushed the peasants more deeply in the quagmire of perennial indebtedness while agrochemical TNCs raked in superprofits.

President Aquino's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, which was extended until 2008, is a mere perpetuation of this disastrous policy. The characteristics of Philippine agriculture were not altered since Macapagal's and Marcos' US-dictated innovations. After more than forty years of so-called land reform, 68 percent of the peasant families has no access to land other than their residence.³

Through the bogus land reform programs of Macapagal, Marcos and Aquino, complemented with IRRI's "Green Revolution," the US was successful in restructuring Philippine agriculture. The focus on improving productivity without changing the power relations in the Philippine countryside made Philippine agriculture increasingly import-dependent, export-oriented and dominated by US imperialism and the local landlord class.

More "modern" forms of exploitation that served US interest better replaced old-style landlordism, which had become an obstacle for productivity improvement. The essential feudal characteristics of Philippine agriculture, however, did never disappear. To the contrary, they were complemented with semi-feudal forms of exploitation like usury, insufficient pay of farm and plantation workers, unfavorable lease agreements, overpriced farm inputs, and undervalued farm gate prices.

Through this shift from “old” feudalism to its “modern” variety, the plight of the Philippine peasantry only worsened. Their fundamental problem, the lack of land, became more evident than ever due to massive landgrabbing by landlords and foreign corporations. The combination of age-old feudal and semi-feudal exploitation increased the profits of landlords and corporate farms while bleeding the small farmers white. Forty years after the establishment of IRRI, not only the farmers, but also the country’s agricultural economy is broke. The mere fact that we are now importing rice, amounting to 2.2 million metric tons in 1998, should be enough to put IRRI to shame.

Forty Years of Peasant Struggle

After forty years of intensified exploitation by US imperialism and the landlord class, the organized peasant movement is more resolute and healthier than ever.

In the 1950s, the peasant movement was in disarray because of the treason of its leadership. The backbone of the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan, the peasant army that courageously fought both Japanese and American imperialism, was broken because of the successive erroneous insurrectionist and capitulationist tendencies of its leaders.

Because of their worsening conditions, the Philippine peasants never abandoned the militant struggle for land and against foreign domination. Upon the establishment of the New People’s Army (NPA) in 1969 and its subsequent spread all over the country, many farmers embraced it as their army and joined it in droves.

The success of the NPA in organizing and guiding the peasant struggle would be the main reason for the US-Marcos dictatorship to declare Martial Law in 1972. Predictably, this could not quell peasant unrest because feudal and semi-feudal exploitation was only intensified under Marcos’ dictatorial rule. Armed with the teachings of Marx, Lenin and Mao and under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the NPA was guiding the peasant struggle to a new height throughout the 1970s.

On 12 September 1981, the Alyansang Magbubukid ng Gitnang Luzon (AMGL – Peasant Alliance of Central Luzon) staged the first peasant mobilization against the Marcos regime after the declaration of Martial Law in front of the Department of Agriculture. The 3000 demonstrating farmers denounced the increasing monopoly control of landlords and TNCs on agriculture and demanded a reduction of the prices of pesticides and fertilizer. With these demands, the peasants showed that they were well aware about the role IRRI and its “Green Revolution” played in the aggravation of their hardships.

With the advance of the people’s national democratic movement, many more peasant organizations came out in the open and waged militant struggles to complement the armed struggle waged by the NPA, the National Democratic Front (NDF) and its peasant organization PKM. In February 1985, for example, thousands of farmers from Central and Southern Luzon picketed the Department of Agriculture for more than one week.

In July 1985, local peasant organizations from all over the country founded the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas. This was a qualitative step forward for the peasant movement as KMP united all Philippine peasants who advocated genuine agrarian reform and offered them a platform to air their views on a nationwide level.

KMP also raised the Philippine peasant struggle to the international level and fostered solidarity with organizations of peasants the world over. In October 1986, KMP hosted the International Solidarity Conference with the Filipino Peasantry and ten years later it

successfully initiated the Anti-Imperialist World Peasant Summit. Last year, KMP was one of the organizations that spearheaded the International People's Assembly against the WTO in Seattle. Currently, KMP is preparing to participate in the First International Assembly of the International League of People's Struggles later this year.

Although KMP had to deal with the betrayal of some elements who advocated a reformist and economist line, it is still the biggest and most militant national peasant federation. It unites hundreds of thousands of small farmers who are furthering their democratic and nationalist demands through legal means. At the same time, an increasing number of peasants are pursuing the same aspirations through armed struggle.

The worsening condition of the peasantry because of the intensified landlord and imperialist control during the last 40 years has made the peasantry more resolute in their struggle. Their courage and unity has brought the strength of the peasant movement to a new height.

The present US-Estrada administration doesn't even try to hide its pro-landlord bias. Estrada is insulting the farmers by calling a notorious landlord like Danding Cojuangco "the godfather of land reform" and is openly attacking farming communities through the merciless war he incited in the countryside. Moreover, the US-Estrada regime has lost any support outside the crony factions of the elite.

Conditions are favorable to intensify the peasant struggle in unity with the working class and other progressive sections of society. We aim to forge the broadest unity against the most hateful tools of imperialism and feudalism, be it IRRI or Estrada. The mere ouster of Estrada or the closure of IRRI will not solve the dismal situation of the farmers. But it will be another major step toward our common goal: genuine land reform and national industrialization in a nationalist and democratic society.

¹ "Oryza Nirvana? An NGO Review of the International Rice Research Institute in Southeast Asia" Nicanor Perlas and Renée Vellvé, Southeast Asia Regional Institute for Community Education, 1997, p. 30

² "The Philippines: The Continuing Past" Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, The Foundation for Nationalist Studies, Quezon City, 1978, p. 339

³ "Agrarian Reform in the Philippines: Past Impact and Future Challenges" Klaus Deininger, Francisco Lara Jr., Miet Maertens and Agnes Quisumbing World Bank, 1999, p. 4