

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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Kathy Nadeau

Philippine Studies vol. 47, no. 1 (1999): 77–99

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A Basic Ecclesial Community in Cebu

Kathy Nadeau



Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), are small communities organized by Church workers seeking to transform Philippine political and social relationships by empowering the poor. Participants seek solutions to problems through collective prayer and Scripture study, and through collective planning, decision-making, and negotiating with officials, employers, and landlords. This article examines some of these characteristic strategies of the BEC movement currently at work in one community in the uplands of Cebu, Philippines. Its findings suggest that BECs are subject to internal divisions connected to divisions between Church-based Non-Government Organizations. A major implication is that organizers need to focus more on farmers' agendas than their own. The article, first delineates the theologies of struggle behind Cebu's BEC movement, and second, examines one upland corn-farming community with a BEC. Third, it looks at some of the problems that community organizers and farmers face in realizing their goals for sustainable agricultural development.

Theologies of Struggle

The theologies of struggle in the Philippines (like anthropology) stand in a complex and unclear relationship to Marxism, one more political in practice than in the literature. As in Latin America and Africa, however, liberation theology in the Philippines is a risky enterprise. Practitioners often push beyond the limits of danger.

In general, Philippine theologies of struggle expressed through the agencies of BECs embrace two different ideological approaches. Those associated with Socialist Democrats (SD), differ from those linked to National Democrats (ND) and Popular Democrats (PD). These liberational BECs, more political in practice than in the literature, are

not only Bible-sharing groups but political groups organized under distinctly different political and ideological orientations. For example, BEC community organizers with the SDs assume that the Philippines is on the threshold of capitalism and address problems within this framework. By contrast, BEC community organizers with the NDs see the Philippines as semi-colonial and semi-feudal, and operate within this framework. Yet, on the ground, such political affiliations are often ill-defined. BECs are as variable as the parishes, priests, religious, and lay participants who form them (Gaspar 1990; Bolasco 1988; De la Torre 1986).

The theology of struggle is in the first place, rooted in faith of a God who acts in history. If it is influenced by Marxism, it is in the form of Neomarxism. It is closer to the theories of Neomarxists like Althusser, Foucault, Frank, Wallerstein, and Worsley than to theories of more orthodox Marxists like the followers of Lenin and Mao Tse-dung. As in South America, Africa and Asia, some liberation theologians and practitioners in the Philippines may use Marxism, but they use it in a nondogmatic, indigenous, and contextual manner. Liberation theology of this sort, is allegedly more of a methodology than a theology: Local practitioners develop their theology by learning hermeneutically from the situation of the poor, by "getting in touch with the God in their history," and then Scripture.

However, theologies of struggle are worked out differently on the ground than in theory. For example in Cebu, there are two principal and opposing BEC models: liberational BECs and liturgical/developmental BECs. A liberational BEC derives from indigenous models of social and structural change (liberation theology), while liturgical and developmental BECs stem from Western and local elite models of top-down development (see Boff 1986). Cebu's Archdiocesan BEC office organizes liturgical BECs (read: Bible-Study groups). In contrast, the Basic Christian Community office organizes liberational BECs. Although some Bishops and priests unofficially approve of it, the Basic Christian Community office does not presently (1994) have the insignia of the Church hierarchy. This article concerns one such liberational BEC in an upland farming community in Cebu.

Ethnography of an Upland Christian Community

I have argued that liberational BECs are based on recent trends Neomarxism and liberation theology. I chose "Kabukiran" (pseudonym) for reasons of personal safety. While many upland communi-

ties are under military surveillance and subject to human-rights violations carried out by paramilitary and military personnel under local government officials, Kabukiran is not highly militarized. Its mayor, vice mayor, monsignor, barrio captain, Church leaders and citizens appreciated my interest, although, aware of the Mayor's staunch anti-communism, I avoided sensitive discussions with all except the monsignor and outside ecclesial organizers.

More specifically, Kabukiran's BEC-COs transform capitalism into a new system by resisting its repressive structures. As Kabukiran has been targeted by the central government for future development, organizers prepare Kabukiran's farmers to unite and stand ready to resist developers who may attempt to eject them from their land in order to develop industries, subdivisions, shopping malls, and tourist attractions. Organizers coordinate with other NGOs—specifically, farmer's organizations—who help document human rights abuses and provide training in organic farming and sustainable-development agriculture. They explicitly reject capitalist-oriented technological packages, even if the packages include farmers in key decision-making or offer discounted seeds and tools. Facilitators reject packages that view agriculture fragmentedly and ignore indigenous values. BEC practitioners also reject programs that reduce local biodiversity (e.g., programs that intensify production through pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and industrial technologies) and view bio-and cultural diversity as essentials of economic self-sufficiency. During seasonal activities (Easter, Lent, and Advent) organizers assist the parish in preparing presentations which touch on local life experiences. Facilitators touch upon such issues as poverty, political suppression, the dislocation of farmers from their land, and ecology.

From January to December of 1993, each week I visited this BEC, located in an upland corn-farming community on Cebu island. Members work with an agricultural team from an NGO, which acts as the socio-economic arm of the liberational BEC movement. The team takes an interdisciplinary approach to developing sustainable organic farming within the community and works with *alayons*, traditional groups of farmers who help each other in cultivation on a rotation basis, resurrected by organizers as a means to work cooperatively. Although they once worked in alayons for outsiders who paid them, they worked their own plots individually. In contrast, they now work for each other in alayons on an exchange basis, not for wages. The identity and location of this BEC has been concealed for security reasons.

The Local Setting

From the moment I met the BEC farmers, I decided to focus on this community because of its comprehensive BEC program, which included activities ranging from social analysis and creative theater to health care and sustainable agricultural development. I first contextualize the BEC by looking at some geographic, socioeconomic, and historic data, collected in part by farmers and NGO organizers as part of their labor apostolate. Their data combined with my own presents their situation from their own point of view. I analyze these findings as an outside observer.

Kabukiran is located on a mountaintop some 100 kilometers from Cebu City. With only one unpaved road leading to this barrio, travel is difficult. The road is narrow and steep; during the rainy season parts of it are washed out completely. One passenger jeep makes two trips daily to Kabukiran; several motorcycles are available for hire. Because they cannot afford to pay for transportation, most farmers walk to and from the town center, to the public market and parish center.

The farmers are mostly tenants who cultivate corn and raise chickens, goats, pigs, cows, and carabaos. Their homes are spread over hills, with wide spaces between them, and are constructed of light materials: Cogon grass or coconut leaves for roofs and bamboo (and, in some cases, hardwood lumber) for floors and walls. Only the barrio captain and three families have homes partially of concrete. There are 143 extended nuclear households, or 700 residents in Kabukiran, divided into three neighborhoods, each with its small chapel. Currently only 200 people, representing thirty-nine households, participate in BEC activities, apparently due to two factors: First, (the main factor) they have small children at home and are too busy caring for their farms; they simply lack the time and freedom of movement for BEC work. Second, in 1987 the military and leading anti-Communist propagandists such as Jun Alcover of BYLA radio visited this barrio and others to warn the farmers not to attend the BEC—"Communist front." At present, a paramilitary informer reports BEC activities to police and military officials and the mayor.

The average household consists of five members. Those over sixty-five years old live in separate houses adjacent to one of their married children, or with them. Male household heads and single men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five often migrate to neighboring towns or Cebu City as domestic servants, store

employees, hotel employees, factory workers, truck drivers, or construction workers. Farmers over forty tend to remain in the barrio. According to a survey conducted by Visayas Integrated Community Assistance Program (1993), seventy-six percent of the farmers are tenants who cultivate an average farm of 0.78 hectares. The other twenty-four percent are owner-cultivators, with an average farm of 2.3 hectares. The most common arrangement is that one-third of the harvest goes to the landowner and two-thirds of the harvest to the tenant. A few flatland tenants surrender fully one-half of their harvest. Tenants are pressured to pay landowners cash, at the rate of twenty-five centavos per harvested ear of corn. Absentee landlords (the town mayor, lawyers and other professionals) live in the town center or Cebu City. One retired landlord lives in the barrio. His father once owned nearly ninety percent of the barrio.

Ironically, the resident landlord confessed to be in financial difficulty. His extended family struggles to send children to secondary school and college. He could hardly pay for medicine for his wife, hospitalized in a public hospital. He is still wealthy by local standards; four of his tenant farmers barely survived the summer of 1993, eating rootcrops and *kamungay* (leaves of a kamungay tree).

Local farmers recommenced to cultivate their traditional variety of white corn in 1991, when the BEC introduced organic farming. During the 1970s and 1980s, they had cultivated a new variety of hybrid yellow corn but stopped because it attracted insects and required costly chemical fertilizers. BEC and non-BEC farmers now prefer traditional white corn to yellow corn because it can be stored and used for a longer time. This reason was given for their adopting the organic-farming program of the Church. The recent decision of the farmers to adopt the program and maintain their livelihood in terms of a "use-value" (as opposed to an "exchange-value" orientation) also can be seen as resistance based on cultural differences. As elsewhere in Asia, South America, and Africa, Filipino peasant cultures differ from the dominant cultures of European origin regarding land, food, and the economy. Readers can refer to my review on the clash between Filipino peasant culture in Northern Luzon and that of the Green Revolution (Nadeau 1992). Also for a well-known Latin American example see Tausig (1980).

Some farmers have been tenants for less than twenty years. They became tenants by mortgaging their land to other farmers or usurer-traders through a mortgage arrangement known as *prenda*. As Cynthia Hallare-Lara (1992, 20) explained, *prenda* compels farmers

to surrender their land title, and in some cases tilling rights, to other farmers or usurer-traders for cash over time. They usually work the land as farm workers while it is mortgaged, which takes an average of two to five years. Such a condition occurs when farmers are deeply indebted or lack capital for production. In the case of Kabukiran, many tenant farmers became indebted during the 1970s and 1980s when they borrowed money to buy fertilizers to cultivate new high yielding varieties of corn in vogue due to the Green Revolution. These farmers could not repay the loan balances in times of drought or poor harvest, and mortgaged and subsequently lost their land due to modernization.

The average yield of corn per household in Kabukiran is 210 kilograms per hectare as of 1993. According to the BEC supervisor, the integrated organic farming program of the BEC aims to increase production to 4000 kilograms per hectare. Given present farm sizes, the average yield of 210 kilos per hectare cannot meet a typical family's daily subsistence. The farmers usually raise and sell poultry and livestock to purchase dried fish. In times of drought or poor harvest, their diet consists of dried fish and root crops like camote and cassava, high in carbohydrates and low in protein. Besides corn, farmers cultivate peanuts, cassava, ipil-ipil, madre de cacao, peppers, papaya, tomatoes, and bananas. Except for ipil-ipil and cassava, these crops are scarce and marginal to corn due to the dry soil conditions and lack of forest cover and water. Some farmers, typically fathers and sons, walk to the seashore evenings during low tide to collect and gather shell fish to supplement their family's diet.

Due to the steep and bare terrain, soil erosion constantly concerns the farmers. Some have recently started contour farming in alayons as part of their BEC work. They also have begun to raise earthworms and make organic compost from local products (manure, cacao leaves, corn cobs, and banana stems) to improve soil fertility. The topsoil, which ranges between ten to zero centimeters, is heavily mixed with rock. There are so many rocks in the cornfields that farmers often dig knee-deep in stones before they reach a viable layer of soil. The local corn farmers commonly borrow money from usurer-traders to raise poultry and livestock for trade or sale, and sell their produce to these traders for low prices because of their earlier loans. Farmers typically sell their poultry and livestock at a local rotating market on Saturdays, or to traders who go directly to their homes. The typical farmer's net income per month is 100 pesos (\$3.00) or less, excluding his/her share of the harvest used for food. The range of the

net income of corn farmers across the nation for a hectare per cropping year for crop year 1990-91, ranged between P368 and P5,000 per year, as calculated by the Philippine Peasant Institute. The monthly income of the farmers in Kabukiran, not unlike that of most corn farmers in the Philippines, falls substantially below the poverty threshold level of P3,864 per month or P122 per day (Hallare-Lara 1992, 25, 27).

Bypassing usurer-traders and creditor-landlords, who offer high-interest loans (twenty to thirty percent interest per month), BEC participants recently secured a low-interest loan through the parish priest in the town center. The priest borrowed the loan (at 1.5 percent interest per month) from CARITAS (a Cebu Archdiocesan Church foundation for the indigent) on behalf of the farmers, who used it to buy cows, goats, and chickens. After about four months they were to divide the profit of the sale of the original cow, goat, or chicken between themselves and the parish. Accordingly, two-thirds of the profit went to the caretaker, one sixth to the BEC, and one-sixth to the BEC parish fund, which serves as a revolving community fund for emergency;—for example, when a goat dies or fails to gain weight or produce offspring. This loan program enables farmers to avoid high-interest loans and other disproportionate sharing arrangements from local creditors to start their income-generating projects. Yet many BEC farmers cannot sell their chickens locally because they are branded "Communist chickens" by some non-BEC neighbors. Members continue to be (mis)labeled "Communists" due to a ten-year black-propaganda campaign waged presently by a local paramilitary informant, a resident landlord, and others who report to landlord-politicians in the town center. In emergencies, death or serious illness, BEC farmers must sell their produce to usurer-traders for quick cash.

The primary tools of the corn farmers are a pick mattock, for land preparation, and a bolo, for weeding. Repairs and sharpening are done in the town center, because there is no local blacksmith. Plowing is possible only in the foothills. In 1993 two farmers owned a carabao. A stone grinder processes corn into fine grits for corn meal, and corn husks and cobs serve as fodder. Most farmers have handcrafted their own stone grinders; others use their neighbors'. Only rarely, when a harvest is large, will a farmer go to the town center for milling.

Except for an elementary school with nine teachers, no other government facilities or services exist in this mountain barrio. Most people are barely literate, have only an elementary school education at

best, and often cannot afford to send their children to school beyond the elementary level. Although a health clinic stood in the barrio next to the school, it was vacant in 1993. The Department of Social Welfare midwife never came. One nurse, one social worker, and one midwife are on duty daily in the clinic at the town center, to serve 22,000 people. Although uplanders usually treat illnesses with home remedies, they sometimes travel to the clinic for diagnosis or referral. When hospitalization is necessary, Kabukiran residents need a written referral, or proof of their indigent status, from town health workers to be admitted for treatment at the public hospital in Cebu City.

According to the BEC volunteer health worker, most adult farmers are anemic. Children have diarrhea due to unsanitary water. Respiratory illnesses like asthma, coughs, colds, and pneumonia are common. A few children suffer such ailments as hydrocephalitis and deafness; adults with leprosy live in the peripheries of Kabukiran.

Many local farmers own radios. Postal services reach the barrio through the barrio captain's residence. Only one family, that of the school teacher whose husband works at an international hotel in Cebu City, owns a TV and stereo, having installed a generator and purchased a small TV and stereo at the end of 1993. Not even the barrio captain or the resident landlord has a TV or stereo, although one family has a Karaoke, connected to a motorcycle battery for use on special occasions, such as birthdays. Light posts are set up at the periphery of Kabukiran, but there is no electricity. As one farmer explained, "Everything is political around here. We were supposed to have electricity—look, the light posts are all set up—but we didn't vote for the mayor, so the electricity was never extended to our barrio. They have ways of knowing who votes for who." Residents use kerosene to cook and to light their homes. Instead of a kerosene lamp or flashlight, they light the ends of banana palms to illuminate their way during evening walks. They bathe and obtain drinking water at natural running springs and artesian wells in the foothills, which usually dry up in the summer.

The Evolution of Kabukiran's BEC

In 1986, the Redemptorist mission team (a newly ordained priest and several seminarians and lay workers) established the BEC in Kabukiran, and until 1988 lived with the uplanders, organizing the

predominantly Catholic community into committees—Worship committee, Education committee, Service committee, Temporality committee, and Youth committee (WESTY)—to involve the community in the liturgy.

Prior to the BEC, a priest from the town visited Kabukiran to say Mass on special occasions such as barrio feast days or weddings. He brought his sacristan and choir and he was paid, usually by the resident landlord, whose great-grandparents donated the land on which the first chapel was built in 1881. According to this landlord, the chapel was constructed when eight persons carried the parish priest up the mountain with a covered hardwood chair. No road existed until 1957. The portable chair served a dual purpose: It also was a confessional box. "The priest in those days was very strict, not like the priests today. In those days, he was like a saint carried like a god to the people. When he was being carried he didn't want to be stared at, so he peaked out of the curtain and when people stared, he closed the curtain quickly making a face," the landlord told of it. His wife organized the Legion of Mary during World War II, and the couple has been in charge of the chapel organization since. Only when the BEC was established had the routine operation of the chapel changed. In an interview in 1993 he told me:

When the Redemptorists came, the priest asked us to turn the chapel over to the farmers. But, my mother and father told us not to let someone else take charge of the chapel. I'm the one who built the building. That priest is not even a priest. He has a wife. He's a Communist. He's not devoted to his career as a priest because he has a wife. (*Adto na lang dito na kanya comunista siya.*) I don't want my special visitors mingling with those people [the tenant farmers] not using spoons. He [the priest] had the wrong idea. He would not let us serve our special guests in the chapel. Many of our guests come from as far as Cebu City. So, we told the farmers they would no longer get the chapel. We would donate another portion of the lot to build them a chapel because that is a private chapel, that's our building and lot.

So, the farmers built a small chapel by the barrio captain's house but it's a failure. I would not turn over a place that has already been made sacred by a Mass. We would not have any entertainment for our guests from the town. We prefer to invite the priest and our visitors only. I'm not entertaining all those people who eat with their hands. That's why we rejected the priest's proposal because we have visitors from the city and I will not let them squat on the floor. I will not accept

that my visitors be brought to the chapel to mingle with all those people there from low classes. No, I have built the chapel and paid all the obligations of the priest.

According to the Redemptorist team leader who later helped establish the BEC-CO office in Cebu City, the mission team changed its organizing strategy on arrival in Kabukiran. At their previous mission areas, where they focused on social problems by asking uncomfortable questions, they had been labeled as Communists: As he explained:

So, in Kabukiran we zeroed-in on the chapel as a point of entry to organize a BEC. By zeroing-in on the chapel, we asked several questions which led to the same kinds of uncomfortable questions we asked in our earlier mission areas. For example, we asked: Who owns the land where the chapel stands? How is the chapel run? Who runs it? What happens during fiestas? The parish priest was reacting, he said when out of season we only find goats in the chapel, but later he realized that this was important. (Interview 1993)

In effect, the team assessed the barrio's socioeconomic, political, cultural, ecological, and historical plight through the perspective of religion. The team organized traditional religious activities such as a dawn rosary, in which processioners stopped to call out petitions for victims of militarization. The goal was to make faith integral, not dichotomized (a faith in which spirituality is limited to the sacristy). The team organized BECs by providing seminars in Kabukiran and five neighboring barrios—For example, daily seminars five days a week for six months, each in a different barrio. They organized the people at the chapel level into committees (WESTY). For example, when the priest arrived, a worship committee operated. For a baptism, the committee on education worked. When the chapel needed repair, the service committee worked, and kept the funds. The team formed the youth committee which participated in such events as cultural presentations and theatrical social satires on religious holidays, or BEC solidarity nights.

In 1987, led by a resident Civilian Armed Forces Government Units (CAFGU) member, a military troop with armored tanks and guns arrived in Kabukiran. To intimidate, they nailed a dog to the parish Church door. They threatened several farmers with death for participating in the BEC. At a forum they warned residents that "rebels" were starting to operate in the area, a Communist group of two

women and one man going from house to house. One of the women was a Sister, and the man was a Father. They distributed a list of forty so-called "red" priests. These announcements were recorded by the new monsignor from the town center, who brought a dozen diocesan seminarians. He had recently helped establish the BEC fellowship of priests. Some farmers stated that the BEC was performing a service for the community. The military accused the BEC of forcing farmers to join. But farmers stated that it was the military, not the BEC, who threatened them if they continued their Bible meetings. Finally, the mayor announced that "there were no Communists in his barrio. The BEC was welcome as long as it provided a service for the community." But he stipulated that he would "get them if any monkey business was going-on." In 1993, the mayor repeated his warning to me when he allowed me to conduct fieldwork in Kabukiran. He also cited an ordinance requiring all outsiders to register at his office. This ordinance was a cause of consternation among BEC personnel who frequently brought in church groups, student interns, and NGO personnel from Cebu City, Europe, and Japan.

The next year, 1988, the mission team was called by their religious superiors back to the main seminary in Cebu City. In the words of one Redemptorist authority on the subject,

They over-politicized the BEC and got us a bad name for being a provocateur and that eventually excluded us. In the eyes of the establishment, for example, the Rotary Club and the Lions Club, the Redemptorist were already considered subversive. When the poor begin to organize they are called subversive. Our own Fathers [superiors] were not being very strong about it, but our mission team read and reflected on the Bible and brought people together. They really stay in the barrios. Our lay missionaries are criticized but they really have merit. (Interview 1993)

The team leader resigned from the priesthood, and continued his work at the BEC-CO office. In 1989, community organizers from this office were assigned to Kabukiran. Four joined the staff of the monsignor in the town center; one became the province's BEC supervisor.

According to the monsignor, the BEC in Kabukiran seeks self-reliance, with local resources. While the BEC laity had spearheaded the movement on Leyte and Samar islands, it was difficult for lay people to work for the BEC. In Negros, however, they worked within the hierarchy and transformed both Church and hierarchy. In the late

1980s, BEC organizers in Cebu decided to use this experience to start BECs through priests. Organizers assist local (diocesan) priests in planning, conceptualizing, and training BEC participants. They stay until participants can stand on their own, then transfer to another community.

The BEC supervisor clarified that from 1987 to 1988 the monsignor could not implement the BEC because of Black Propaganda:

The Redemptorist mission team started the BEC program but there was lots of trouble. [Kabukiran] was placed under military surveillance. One project leader was threatened with death. Military trucks with guns were in the area. We were not able to start work. Monsignor was still at the integration level [learning about the local situation]. He was a new parish priest then. We only started our work in 1989. (Interview 1993)

At that time, the BEC offered leadership seminars endorsed by the Synod of Cebu. According to parish staff, farmers from the mountain barrios were active and dedicated participants in the BEC leadership training seminars. One farmer from Kabukiran was later elected as the local Vice Mayor, because he was so popular in the BEC formation team.

In 1990, the BEC staff introduced Worship Education Service Temporalities and Youth (WESTY) committees at the parish level, but the Pastoral Council (of professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and business professionals) would not allow farmers to chair committees. So as not to antagonize the professionals, the BEC implemented a parallel organization for the farmers, the Structure of Care, which served the same functions as WESTY. According to the BEC supervisor, there were then so many committees that they no longer functioned. The parish staff met with the Parish Council once a month, but the agenda invariably concerned matters of finance and construction of projects, like renovating the plaza or the Church.

Also in 1990, the parish staff and the coordinator of an agricultural NGO conducted a preliminary socio-economic survey in the upland Kabukiran, but results were never taken seriously by the Parish Council, nor would the Council agree to meet with the Executive Board of the Structure of Care for discussions. The BEC participants reformulated their vision. They decided not to limit their work to the parish center but to facilitate organization in the mountain barrios. Their preliminary survey and experience of the

Redemptorist mission in Kabukiran told them that the poor majority cannot be organized through the liturgical aspect alone, because of their economic situation. They concentrated on upland socioeconomic projects.

Since 1991 to the present, the BEC farmers have worked with an agricultural extension NGO to improve their circumstances. First, the parish organizers invited the NGO to conduct a seminar on sustainable agricultural development in Kabukiran. The BEC-NGO team provided workshops on organic farming, contour farming, reforestation, vermiculture, herbal gardening and health care, and provided some of the farmer representatives with earthworms and seedlings. The team selected topics on sustainable agricultural development. Their 1990 preliminary survey had demonstrated a need for such. According to the former NGO coordinator:

The most appropriate and immediate response the BEC program had to implement, at that time, was contour farming because it offered the most effective and immediate means to control soil erosion. If the farmers did not solve the immediate problem in soil erosion, they could not expect to have food sufficiency in agriculture. There are other components of contour farming, livestock raising, tree planting, and organic compost production. We did not encourage synthetic fertilizers because it destroys the nitrogen content of the soil. But organic compost restores soil nutrients, and it is not ecologically hazardous. (Interview 1993)

In 1992, the NGO selected Kabukiran as their number one pilot area on Cebu island. At the same time, a new coordinator brought a different strategy for implementing the BEC program. The previous coordinator had been retired that same year by administrators due to his misuse of funds (e.g., he absconded money that was supposed to be used to purchase a jeep). But, perhaps due to his retirement from office having been handled internally, the decision of the administrators was not understood locally, and was a cause of friction and strife among BEC members in Kabukiran. The former coordinator with the assistance of both the parish priest and BEC supervisor, responded to the administrators' decision by establishing a second competing NGO in the area. One of their projects, implemented in late 1993, was a communal farm. As one farmer commented,

This [communal farming] movement came into existence after we [local farmers and BEC organizers] met together as a group and reflected that it is futile to work, while our individual families are hungry and

dying. So, we decided to put together our goats and chickens. One tenant farmer offered his land area so that we would have a place for our animals and farms. I do hope that through our united forces and binding interest that we could be an example of our barrangay that some of us may open their eyes that this BEC gives us a road of freedom. (Interview 1993)

These farmers are mutually supportive of each other and are aware that they participate in both the commercial market economy and their own subsistence economy, that they are being, in effect, further impoverished by those who control the market. Consequently, the BEC farmers are trying to lessen such contacts. In contrast to the acquisitive market model, the local BEC model is based on use-value: the everyday use of local resources in their surrounding natural environment.

The NGO agricultural team proceeded to conduct a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) of Kabukiran's socioeconomic conditions, and adopted the PRA strategy to involve the farmers as equal partners in defining local problems. Their aim was to eradicate the outmoded idea by which farmers saw themselves as beneficiaries of an agricultural program: "We [the NGO] are trying to erase this idea because it encourages them [the farmers] to depend on us for doleouts." The NGO also wanted to make the farmer's alayons more participatory, to make alayons include the community by training the farmers to work collectively, in larger numbers. Another aim was to encourage farmers in their traditional pre-capitalist practices, such as not counting the hours they work. As one NGO staff member stated:

They [the farmers] are not yet business people. We're trying to retain the attitude that they don't have to count. Their only capital is their labor and time. So, we try to encourage them to work cooperatively because one way of getting enough or producing more resources is to multiply their labor. We also do not have any alternatives because they do not have any finances. (Interview 1993)

However, the Participatory Rural Appraisal method only promoted conflict between the NGO and farmers. Farmers saw the PRA as superfluous; they had already discussed their socio-economic problems a year before with the former NGO coordinator, who had conducted a Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). Readers interested in a review of PRA and RRA methods are referred to Chambers (1991) and Mascarenha (1991). Apparently, they were also (mis)informed by

the former coordinator that the new coordinator and team were withholding funds designated for projects such as a nursery and livestock-raising project that he had scheduled for 1993. One farmer representative and catechist since 1982, explained the conflict in the following way:

Agricultural trainings were provided for us [between 1991 and 1992] like the techniques of composting and livestock raising. But they [the NGO team] decided that the program was not yet [sic] fitted to be launched. So, they gave us another training in looking at the real problems of Kabukiran, and at what we want to obtain. In the beginning, the members were interesting but they urged us to walk and look around the mountains. Afterwards, they asked us the same questions again. At this point I felt bored and tired. So, I started complaining until the time of evaluation. They evaluated me. They said that I destroyed the purpose of the PRA. So, I decided to stop attending their meetings. Now almost all of us here in my sitio [neighborhood], especially my neighbors do not attend the NGO meetings or seminars. (Interview 1993)

Apparently, many farmers were dissatisfied with the PRA method of the NGO in 1993, when it was being implemented. Although some viewed the debates as healthy controversy, others withdrew from meetings altogether by December 1993. One BEC farmer provided the following view of the NGO participants' general discontent:

At the general assembly there were seven projects presented [by the NGO staff] but only the multipurpose center won as the first project. Most of the people preferred the livestock-raising project to be first [for reasons of convenience, not individualism] because livestock can be raised in our backyards and it is tied-up with our daily needs. As for myself it would be better if livestock raising were the first project because it would have encouraged the [farmer] participants. But the NGO heads indirectly manipulated the selection of projects. The reaction I observed from my colleagues was that they felt dry, discouraged, and some of them stopped attending the meetings because the NGO heads did not launch the livestock-raising project. The problem of the multipurpose center is that there is no budget, and we have to solicit materials for this project and spend days in building it. (Interview 1993)

Another BEC farmer representative rejoined:

The NGO taught us how to reconstruct our barren land. They encouraged us to plant a variety of trees in our farm lots. They gave us earthworms to improve our soil's fertility. As a whole the NGO is good and it helps us to know about our basic problems. It helps us to know the causes of our problems such as poverty and inequality of distribution of wealth among the Filipino community. The NGO also helped us establish our integrated [BEC] farmer's organization. (Interview 1993).

The Community and Prayer

Kabukiran's Basic Ecclesial Community members, formed in alayons, meet to read and reflect upon the Bible regularly—for example, on birthdays and special occasions which occur once or twice a month. These Bible-sharing activities motivate, validate, and solidify the BEC community for cooperation and economic/political action. Participants view Bible-sharing as a time of interaction and learning from one another's interpretations, rather than as a form of reflection and prayer (e.g., novenas and rosaries). They see Christ's faith-life experiences as an expression of their own community values and faith. One example: The message of Christ to help one another and love one another serves to encourage families to help neighbors by working (effectively with limited resources financially) for each other without pay in alayon. Men and women participate equally in reading Scripture; their sharings may be called genuine and earthy. There is an element of spontaneity in their reflections, absent from BECs under the guidance of religious and lay leaders in town centers. For example, one member compared the resurrection of Lazarus to a caterpillar transformed into a butterfly, and how a farmer's life too can so transform by, for example, turning the sale of a cow into land. In this instance, resurrection is interpreted as transformation and not just the continuation of Lazarus's life. The social contexts in which BEC members interact with other people (landlords, government and military personnel, disinterested neighbors) and the institutional Church are situations in which new ideas and cultural forms are continuously introduced, negotiated, and transformed. While the Church may incorporate or exclude many indigenous religious customs and beliefs, BEC participants, like people everywhere, continue to assert their own religiosity and culture. They consciously resurrect traditional practices (not all of which are superstitious or super-

natural, as when a farmer reveres a corn field) to resist being fragmented by capitalist relations of production. Some BEC participants continue to hold indigenous requiems and prayer services, which include rituals for feeding the dead, and maintain beliefs concerning holy amulets and sacred objects and blessing rituals that use the sprinkling of blood from livestock. Other examples include their localization of the Passion Play, and circular processions to shrines or around mountaintops. Some of these processions are reminiscent of Buddhist, Hinduistic, and Tantric processions made to stake out sacred space. The Church is in transition between old ways (e.g., fall/redemption spiritualities) and new (creation-centered spiritualities): The BECs are the concrete expression.

The Cebu Experience

In Cebu (1993) there are two competing Church-based groups organizing Christian communities. On the one hand, there is the Basic Ecclesial Community office that has the official insignia of the Church hierarchy. On the other hand, there is the Basic Christian Community-Organizers' office which does not have the insignia of the Church hierarchy, although some bishops and clergy members unofficially approve it. Currently (1997), this office is regaining the official approval and support of the local hierarchy. The two organizing offices can be said to be similar, because they "build" BECs which are based on small groups and are Bible-oriented. However, they differ from each other because they are using different approaches to, and interpretations of, human and economic "development." Although there are BECs being organized in Cebu independently from these leading offices, they parallel either of them in their views toward development.

The official Archdiocesan office in Cebu seems to be drawing upon an approach to economic and human development based more on trickle-down development theory than liberation theology. Trickle-down development means that poor countries who follow the same path to modernization and industrialization taken by industrial capitalist societies can achieve the same "level" of development. For example, the archdiocesan BEC office seems to promote the idea of reforming the Philippine capitalist system from within by developing "modern cultural values." Although it provides on request a seminar to encourage savings in small credit unions, the Archdiocesan

office never gives seed money for cooperative or income-generating projects to BEC groups, I was told, because it causes dependency. To the project manager Philippine culture is a "damaged culture," a culture poorly adapted to American culture, as can be seen in the way Filipinos are paying for foreign debt and for imports. The solution is thus to adopt the value system of the more positive values, such as love of country and Filipino products. However, as Guareschi (1989, 26-27) would stress, this view of society and culture leads Filipinos to think that their poverty is their own fault.

The Archdiocesan office was commissioned to develop BECs in every parish in Cebu. Its strategy was to train BEC leaders in the different parishes who will continue to develop BECs by way of giving additional seminars and forming small Bible-study groups. Similar in design to Catholic Bible-sharing groups in the United States, the Archdiocesan BECs meet weekly in small groups in members' homes, or sometimes in parish halls or classrooms, to study passages from the Bible that will be read in the following Sunday's liturgy. They typically keep a record of attendance, which is turned in to their local parish Church office for forwarding to the Archdiocesan BEC office files. These BECs are composed of seven to eight members, mostly women. When I asked why more men were not present, invariably I was told that it is partially because of the machismo of Filipino men and the view in the Philippines that religion is only for women. These BECs are new and growing, however, and I have learned from their members that they feel that the BEC has made a difference in their lives, especially at the level of the family. For example, one member told me that since she started attending the weekly BEC Bible study group she has been able to get along better with her teenage children and her husband. Before that she used to swear and curse and say unkind things to people, but now she has more understanding regarding the failings of her husband and others. Since she changed her own attitude and behavior, her husband has also mellowed. Now, she says he comes home in the evenings and sleeps early.

In contrast, the "unofficial" office (BEC) seems to draw upon an approach for development based more on recent trends in Neomarxism and sustainable development theory. The sustainable development concept has been broadly defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) as "development that ensures that utilization of resources and the environment today does

not damage the prospects for their use by future generations." Barrameda (1993) who reviewed the theoretical applications of sustainable development in the Philippines, refers to development as a process that cannot be understood outside of an already existing (mind-body-society-nature) "totality" because everything is interconnected. According to her, development refers to a social and structural process for achieving ecological sustainability and human well-being within a community as a whole. It refers to the qualitative improvement of all groups and individuals in a society. The liberational BEC plan is to develop self-reliant communities that meet the needs of all residents by using local resources. They aspire to be indigenous sustainable development experiments. They network with each other to build mutually interdependent communities and to develop diversified organic farming and social services that are supported by local industry. Members are encouraged to organize themselves into mutual self-help groups and to develop alliances with other poor communities. They are encouraged to reinterpret Christian symbols and texts to reflect their own themes for liberation. A key method in this approach involves establishing a critical awareness among the poor regarding their circumstances (Freire 1973).

The "bottom-up" plan of the BEC provides an alternative to Western and ruling local-elite models for the development of poor communities and works to reconstruct social, cultural and ecological relationships, by involving the poor and powerless in their own development process. The BEC model contradicts the predominantly "top-down" and export-oriented approach of the current Philippine government, otherwise known as the Medium Term Development Plan (National Economic and Development Authority, Manila). Designed under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the medium term plan entails a fast track of structural loan adjustments, export-oriented industrialization, economic liberalizations, and other policies designed to attract outside investors to the Philippines. The top-down government plan considers progress to be determined largely by market forces. It implies that economic growth will someday trickle-down to benefit the majority of local people by generating the surplus needed to solve their problems, including poverty and environmental damage. However, trickle-down development theory obviously fails to address the Philippine problems of poverty and environmental degradation.

Discussion and Summary

This article looked at an example of a provincial government's unsuccessful attempt to intimidate farmers from establishing an anonymous BEC in Cebu. I have argued that the bottom-up approach of the BEC provides a more holistic development approach than traditional packages that may emphasize increasing agricultural production for the market but not social and ecological well-being. Two projects BEC participants and non-active-participants engaged in are contour farming and raising earthworms as a natural means of fertilizing and replenishing the soil. Although the farmers built small terraces around corn-fields to prevent soil erosion, these were ineffective. Farmers planted corn vertically to the slope, which only enhanced the erosion process. Farmers also used chemicals and experimented with new hybrid varieties of corn. Experience and the aid of the NGO showed that their traditional varieties of corn were more pest-resistant than were the new hybrid varieties. Farmers started planting traditional corn horizontally across the side of the mountain. These kinds of techniques are sustainable because they help to replenish the soil and require little capital input. The farmers also are planting trees and medicinal herbal gardens, projects started by Cebu's BEC fellowship of priests.

However, the problems of development in rural communities are complex, but different. Different, seemingly contradictory views often do make sense depending upon the direction from which one is looking at them. Professional BEC-NGO members met with members from the alayons of the BEC to plan out a course for the coming year. They spent seventeen days over five months listing and prioritizing problems. Local farmers, composed equally of men and women, drew a large community map designating water sources and types of farm lands, crops, and soils. They walked with an anthropology student over the terrain to cross-check the map, and listed their problems in order of priority to be addressed during the year. On the surface, this appeared to be on the cutting edge of participatory socioeconomic and agricultural development, but in reality farmers were teaching team members and the student—not the reverse. They were also frustrated because the farmers wondered what had happened to projects such as a plant nursery, for which they had obtained materials under the auspices of the NGO but had not yet started. The farmers voiced their complaints to the BEC supervisor, who visits them from

time to time to keep in touch, and told of how they had dealt with the NGO staff, by allusion, verbal confrontation, and boycotting meetings.

In 1993, three Kabukiran farmers were trained as local leaders by the BEC supervisor. Their training required them to collect basic demographic and household data. Now they are subject to amassing data for others to serve as pioneers. Conversely, BEC supervisors are also vulnerable to use by other NGOs and community organizers, — for example, to introduce them to communities, even when some NGOs may be “fly by night” NGOs (ghost NGOs). Much manipulation is going on next to altruism. Local residents can gain from their relationship with BEC-COs and NGOs, who steadfastly bring innovations, funds, and connections to new social networks. They can also lose valuable time and resources by accommodating outsiders who simply come and go.

Perhaps as one facilitator said, local leaders who learn to collect socioeconomic data by practicing on their neighbors are also learning to organize and fend for themselves against manipulation by outsiders. They are learning, for example, to analyze and to select what they need from different NGOs for their communities, rather than to see their community as a mere pilot area of a particular NGO in competition with other NGOs. These local leaders are also being groomed to evangelize their neighbors who are as impoverished as themselves and who are wont to believe them first before any outside parish worker.

In summary, BECs favor poor people by providing an alternate method to restructure Philippine society. Evidence from Kabukiran supports the BEC viewpoint that a direct relationship obtains between unsustainable development and the present international economic system. Agriculture may intensify to increase economic productivity but diminish environmental productivity. This has been illustrated, amid a discussion on the Green Revolution's effects on the ecology of Kabukiran's farms. Another well-known example is the slash-and-burn method of Southeast Asian lowlanders who move to the highlands. Although yields are high after the first year, they must abandon their plots after a third year because productivity of their land is no longer sustainable. Similarly NGOs and farmers must not concentrate just on increasing yields. This explains in part why Kabukiran's BEC is experimenting with and gradually bringing into being more holistic conceptions of production in agriculture.

Finally, the liberational BEC-NGO team frankly is living and working with the farmers to improve local conditions. They also currently are working out their problems and misunderstandings. Facilitators are unabashedly making errors and learning, while they are adapting their organizing skills and ideas on the basis of fresher experiences and realities. Why was it that the Church of Cebu attempted to coopt this liberational BEC movement by channeling donations to a parallel office that merely provided seminars on how to start a liturgical Bible study group? Could it be that the conservative Church of Cebu tried to coopt the liberational BEC movement to protect its own interest in the prevailing socio-political and economic system? More studies are needed on liberational BECs as socioeconomic experiments in the Philippines, and elsewhere. A finding relevant to practitioners is that farmers are caught in the struggles between, for example, "competing" cause-oriented NGOs and "fly-by-night" NGOs or "ghost" NGOs. Cause-oriented NGOs, in turn, often work under pressure from foreign funders who may expect them to implement projects proposed on paper even when later deemed inappropriate in practice. An implication often repeated in the development literature is that today's practitioners need to focus more on farmers' agendas than their own. Research also suggests that foreign funding agencies need to become more aware of the differences between NGO models and more wary of government and Church officials' assessments of them. Clearly "on-the-ground" efforts to help people are more effective than abstract theories. Anthropologists can serve to encourage bottom-up efforts such as those of liberational BECs in Cebu, by working to include them in political strategies for sustainable development.

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