

REVIEW

BOOK

The Case for S.T.R.U.G.G.L.E. (Security, Transformation, Rights, Unity, Genuine Reform, Grassroots Action, Livelihood, and Empowerment)* of the Philippines’ Land Reform: A Book Review of Sarah Wright and Ma. Diosa Labiste’s *Stories of Struggle: Experiences of Land Reform in Negros Island, Philippines*

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In *Stories of Struggle: Experiences of Land Reform in Negros Island, Philippines*, written by Sarah Wright (Wright) and Ma. Diosa Labiste (Labiste)¹ provides a deeply grounded and compelling analysis of one of the most persistent issues in the Philippines since time immemorial: land inequality. Throughout the book, the authors aim to move beyond a purely academic tone or a policy-driven critique, focusing instead on the experiences of the landless farmers and farmworkers themselves, who are the intended beneficiaries of the land reforms.² The book’s central thesis loudly shouts, genuine agrarian reform is not a state-led program implemented from the top down, but a relentless, people-led struggle waged from the ground up against entrenched historical and neoliberal power structures.³

This review will first summarize the book’s core content, moving from its historical overview to its examination of contemporary challenges and grassroots responses. It will then provide an analysis of the book’s contributions, with a focus on its use of collaborative methodology, its powerful narrative of “struggle,” and its emphasis on the articulation of a genuine, real land reform. Finally, this review will evaluate the book’s overall significance and the essence of this review’s title: “S.T.R.U.G.G.L.E.” Through this structure, this review aims to illustrate how this book offers an indispensable perspective on agrarian reform in the Philippines.

The Historical and Political Context

The book begins by tracing the roots of land inequality to over 350 years of Spanish colonization and nearly 50 years of American rule, which established the frankly unequal hacienda system that still dominates the province of Negros.⁴ This rigid

oppressive system is a colonial legacy of social order;⁵ described as an absolute dependency,⁶ a reality captured in the book that even a former politician and a prominent landowner like Hortensia Starke, also was notorious for calling those working under her as her *ulipon*,⁷ which literally translates as slave.⁸ In the succeeding chapters, the authors detail how this colonial legacy created a powerful landed elite whose economic dominance was reinforced by political power.⁹ This pattern has consistently persisted throughout the years.

The authors present a sharp critique of post-independence government reform programs. They argue that from the Marcos-era Presidential Decree No. 27¹⁰ to the post-People Power Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), state-led efforts have been consistently undermined by a landlord-dominated congress which produced legal loopholes in the law,¹¹ and was, in effect, “toothless.”¹² The book contends that these programs, while appearing to be significantly promising, were often designed to fail, which left large private estates untouched while creating bureaucratic dead ends for farmers.¹³

Contemporary Land Reform Challenges

The book’s analysis extends to the contemporary era, with a critical examination of the neoliberal turn in development policy.¹⁴ The authors cite and critique the World Bank-promoted shift from an expropriative,¹⁵ administrative model of reform to a “*negotiated land reform*,” which effectively reduces a social justice mandate to a “*real estate deal*” between unequal parties.¹⁶ The authors posit that this market-led land reform (MALR) strips agrarian reform of its social justice intent.¹⁷

The authors’ position is powerfully depicted through the case of Eduardo “Danding” Cojuangco and his model of “corporative scheme” in land reform,¹⁸ like in *Talapat*.¹⁹ The authors frame this “corporative scheme” not as a modern innovation, but as a direct evolution of the colonial hacienda or a neofeudal arrangement that maintains absolute elite control under the guise of market participation.²⁰ The book reveals how this joint-venture model, presented as a form of land reform, requires farmer-beneficiaries to sign away their right to manage the land, effectively reducing them to wage laborers on property they supposedly own.²¹

Grassroots Running and People-Led Reform

From these compromised states and market-led programs, the book then proceeded to introduce the true drivers of reform: the persistent, people-led struggle.²² Chapter 4 introduces the Paghida-et sa Kauswagan Development Group (PDG), a central actor in the narrative.²³ It was formed after the 1986 People Power Revolution. PDG aimed to be a legal, organizational, and technical support to farmer movements and embody a model of change that is deeply allied with and responsive to what the community needs.²⁴

Substantiating the book's core thesis, the authors presented case studies found in Chapters 5 to 8. For one, the successful, decades-long struggle of farmworkers at Hacienda Bino against a powerful landlord illustrates how persistent mobilization can overcome immense legal and political resistance; similarly, in the people-led land reform undertaken by the Mahalang Small Farmers Association (MAFA). The MAFA occupied unused land while simultaneously pursuing official recognition. This demonstrates a successful, albeit alternative model of direct action.²⁵ For the authors, these stories are not just examples of success; they are presented as the very essence of meaningful land reform.

Analysis and Evaluation of the Book

The strength of the book primarily lies in its methodological approach and its focus on providing a platform for the real intended beneficiaries of land reform. By foregrounding the experiences of the landless, the book crafts an authentic narrative that redefines the very meaning of success in agrarian reform.

Centering the Voices of the Landless

The book's most significant contribution is its fulfillment of a stated aim: to fill a critical gap in the existing literature by centering the perspectives of the land tillers themselves. The authors explicitly note that in most analyses of land reform, the voices of those the program is meant to serve "are often absent."²⁶ To remedy this, they employ a collaborative research methodology developed over more than ten years. This involves workshops and in-depth interviews with over two hundred community members.²⁷ This approach moves beyond simply extracting stories; it incorporates the farmers' own critiques and analyses into the fabric of the book.²⁸ The result is a narrative that is not merely about the landless, but a story that they themselves shape.²⁹ This methodology gives the book credibility and depth that quantitative studies or high-level policy reviews often lack.

The Transformative Power of "Struggle"

The book reframes the concept of "struggle."³⁰ It contends that rather than viewing it as a means to an end, which is the acquisition of land, the authors, guided by their subjects, present struggle as a transformative process of empowerment. For instance, in the case of Hacienda Bino,³¹ the farmworkers faced Hortensia Starke, a landowner who viewed any attempt at land reform as a violation, saying that "*Your land is like your favorite dress. If it is taken away from you, it is as if you have been stripped.*"³² The succeeding campaign against her involved the process of land occupations, pickets, and personal hardships. It was described in the book that the personal cost of this struggle was intense, as the wife of one member died from birthing complications after the family, penniless from being blacklisted,

could not afford hospital care.³³ Yet it was through this process that they developed the skills and cohesion necessary to transition from dependent laborers to independent farmers. This transformation is embodied by the emergence of fierce local leaders, three women who became known as the *Tres Malditas* (three bad women), whose dedication drove the movement forward through years of hunger and intimidation.³⁴

This analytical framework is best articulated by Nancy Vingno of the KABUHI-AN Association, whose words serve as an epigraph for the chapter:

*Our story is a success story of agrarian reform, but only because we struggled... It was a success, not of the program but of our struggle.*³⁵

This distinction between the “success of the program” and the “success of the struggle” is a significant analytical insight. It recasts land reform not as a gift from the state, but as a right won through collective action, a process that fundamentally alters the social and psychological landscape for its participants.³⁶

Conclusion: The True Framework for Land Reform

In sum, the *Stories of Struggle* delivers a compelling, data-based argument that genuine agrarian reform is and must be a relentless, people-led process, waged from the ground up against entrenched power structures. Thus, the book’s title, particularly the word “struggle,” seemed to be defining the stories of the land reform; it is more than just a descriptor, it is a conceptual framework—an acronym that encompasses the required elements for the success of a real land reform that moves beyond a glaringly flawed system. The authors demonstrate that the true reform lies in the transformative process captured by the components of Security of tenure and peace of mind, leading to a profound Transformation of feudal social and economic relations. This change is driven by tillers fighting for their Rights to land and livelihood, sustained through Unity and collective action. The primary objective is the Genuine reform governed by Grassroots mobilization, which enabled productive and sustainable Livelihood, and culminating in irreversible Empowerment.

Overall, by centering the voices of the landless, the authors successfully portrayed that a mere reform program does not achieve land reform, but rather it is through the transformative struggle waged by the people. This important analysis offers a powerful corrective tool to market-led and state-centric approaches, which proves that land reform remains the key not only to equity but also to stimulating national development in the Philippines. Lastly, the collected experiences detailed in the book provide a validation of the historical inequities dramatized in F. Sionil Jose’s novel *Tree*³⁷ (1978). Both these books narrate the enduring struggles rooted in the Philippines’ colonial past, where exploitative landownership patterns persist through systems similar to feudalism or “new feudalism.” While Jose’s narrative was set in the mid-twentieth century, where he utilized the “balete tree”

to symbolize how the oppressive elites or landowners overshadow the hopes of the tenant-farmers,³⁸ the *Stories of Struggle*, on the other hand, demonstrates that decades later, the CARP has been similarly overshadowed by elite resistance, corporative schemes, and manipulation of existing legal loopholes. This shows how the narratives found in these kinds of books have the power to resonate deeply with their readers, and it provides a caveat of what society would be in the future if the problem still persists. These are the kind of narratives that raise awareness, especially those voiced by people who have experienced these oppressions, like in the *Stories of Struggle*.

Endnotes

- * The reviewer turned the word “struggle” into an acronym: S.T.R.U.G.G.L.E, where each letter stands for a specific theme or rights demanded, and operational methods that are specifically outlined by the farmers’ organizations (such as KABUHI-AN and MAGHIMAKAS-TA) and their supporting non-governmental organization.
- 1 Collectively referred to as “*authors*.”
 - 2 Sarah Wright and Ma. Diosa Labiste, *Stories of Struggle: Experiences of Land Reform in Negros Island, Philippines* (University of the Philippines Press, 2018), Chapter 1, page 7; Chapter 8, page 161.
 - 3 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, page 7.
 - 4 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, page 1; Chapter 2, pages 15–16 and 19; Chapter 7, page 142.
 - 5 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 8, pages 158–59 and 161.
 - 6 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapters 2 and 7.
 - 7 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, page 78.
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 2, pages 22–23.
 - 10 Otherwise known as the Decreeing the Emancipation of the Tenants from the Bondage of the Soil, Transferring to Them the Ownership of the Land They Till and Providing the Instruments and Mechanisms Therefor, October 21, 1972. See Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 2, page 25.
 - 11 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 3, pages 36 and 39–41; Chapter 4, pages 57–58.
 - 12 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 3, page 36.
 - 13 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 3, pages 36–37, 41–42, and 49.
 - 14 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, page 7.
 - 15 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 8, pages 160–61.
 - 16 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 3, pages 46–47. See also Chapter 6, page 105, and Chapter 8, pages 160–61.
 - 17 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 3, pages 35–36.
 - 18 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 3, pages 47–48.
 - 19 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, page 10; See also Chapter 6.
 - 20 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 8, pages 160–61.
 - 21 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 6, pages 105–06.
 - 22 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, pages 6–7.
 - 23 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 4, page 56.
 - 24 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 4, pages 56–60.
 - 25 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 7, pages 131–33.
 - 26 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, page 7.
 - 27 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 1, pages 6–9.

- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 8, page 159.
- 30 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, pages 84–85.
- 31 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5.
- 32 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, page 77.
- 33 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, page 82.
- 34 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, pages 78–85.
- 35 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, page 77.
- 36 Wright and Labiste, *Stories of Struggle*, Chapter 5, page 97.
- 37 Sionil F. Jose, *Tree* (Solidaridad Publishing House, 1978).
- 38 Elizabeth G. Yoder, “Under the Belete Tree,” *World Literature Today* 62, no. 4 (1988): 82–84.

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