

THE NGOs and the concept of a  
CITIZENS ADVICE AND REFERRAL SERVICE (CARS?)<sup>1</sup>

The Philippines in comparison to many countries has a profusion of NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs). There is also a number of bodies which bring these agencies together with the purpose of attempting to coordinate their activities and to share resources. Nevertheless, it is the nature of NGOs to retain a high level of independence and to define for themselves the field of concerns on which to focus. This is certainly the case as the mission has experienced it here in Manila.

It is not possible in the packed schedule of visits and the short time available to the mission to fully appreciate the role, capacity and impact of these diverse and complex range of voluntary resources directed at the low-income populations in the urban situation. One suggestion is that it might be helpful to make a detailed inventory of these resources and assess their impact. This should not be an academic exercise but part of an on-going action programme an aspect of which will systematically accumulate the information. The planned utilisation of information should determine the nature of the exercise. However, it is clear that whatever might be the mission's shortfall in full understanding, must be compounded for the inarticulate poor, up against the incomprehensible forces in their plight. They will be certainly confused when they need to pinpoint whom to approach for assistance with the many unmanageable aspects of their struggle for survival.

This is fully recognised in the discussions with the NGOs and the desirability of a one-stop one-door location for help (whether ultimately it is appropriately sought from NGO or Government) has been voiced a number of times. The mission floated the idea of a Citizens Advice and Referral Service (CARS?) which might be considered to meet this need.

The suggestion is as follows:

In a selected area in the vicinity of a concentration of the poor, a shop front or similar premise, located in a prominent place, be secured and widely advertised as CARS, open to allcomers for anything with which they might be seeking information or assistance.

The CARS office would be manned on a tight rota basis by the volunteer workers drawn from each of the participating NGOs for

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<sup>1</sup> The following discussion may well be considered in relation to the District-based Approach to Urban Poor Organisation arising from

"...discussions conducted by the members of PHILSSA, FDA, ICSI, HASIK and UPA.. (which)..show that, even as strengths and potentials are recognised, there are certain gaps in urban poor organizing that have yet to be confronted..."

a few hours each week (month) to give face-to-face information, advice and counseling in matters of concern to the populace. The facility would be open when its target population are able to utilise its services and therefore not be restricted to the usual office opening times. The rota might also attract the services of retired persons whose backgrounds would provide a basis for this kind of task, and in addition, if they so wished, government workers off-duty (etc.)..

The management of this rota and the organisation of the office would of course require a full-time Organiser/Secretary to build the data-base, to follow through on what action is required, to maintain records, to contact and make appointments for the clientele, to monitor all requests for information and help to identify and summarise from the individual requests the significant wider issues which need to be referred to appropriate authorities, programmes and services...

One outcome of such an arrangement is that the volunteers whose terms of reference are ordinarily those of their parent organisation would find themselves for a short time, but on a regular basis, wearing another hat and having a wider perspective and loyalty to a complimentary organisation consisting of a group of general purpose workers different from whatever is their usual orientation. They would need to get to know exactly the full range of what all the other agencies can realistically provide and make the appropriate referral. They must also take on-going responsibility for identifying and making explicit what might be the gaps and inconsistencies and blind spots of services which are illustrated by the clientele and which will need to be brought to an appropriate organisation's attention.

In this way the participating agencies would in their daily practice and experience in their (so to speak satellite CARS agency) actually collaborate and cooperate around specific situations and issues which would give active substance to the repeated need and desire for effective coordination which unfortunately often remains a philosophical abstraction. Even so each agency would retain the areas of independence and specific orientation that it wishes to retain while at the same time being enhanced by regularly adopting a second identity in the servicing of CARS.

The data base would of course be that which could be drawn upon from each of the participating agencies and from the CARS activities and would grow cumulatively and be collated. Each worker would not of course be in a position to respond to everything that is presented to them but they would need to know where to go for sound information or where realistically to refer a client for the necessary assistance. The data base would be collected and arranged to develop materials that have been discussed by the mission in another context. That is, materials produced in such a way as to be comprehensible to those even of limited education which would explain, for example, what are the rules, regulations, and laws etc which are relevant to their



needs, and spell out simply step-by-step what they must do to pursue resolvment of their problem(s).<sup>2</sup>

Coming through the door of the CARS would be a wide range of matters which would serve to provide a pulse of what is happening in the area and the nature of the problems which are so frequent as to demand a wider approach than that which the individual request poses. For example the issues of tenancy rights, demolition and so forth have repeatedly come to the attention of the mission. The CARS might set out to provide as a subsidiary service on a permanent basis (that which is now being provided on a modest scale by the Alternative Legal Assistance Centre -ALAC-SALIGAN ) a free (affordable? to the poor) Legal Advice and maybe representation Service. This would require soliciting qualified lawyers to undertake to donate their time and skills on a voluntary basis say a few hours a week (month) and to be available at a given time and place to whom appropriate clients from CARS could be given firm appointments.

What is true for the legal profession in this example might be appropriate for other specialist professions who might be approached to donate the necessary professional time. The professionals may well find it personally and socially satisfying to work in the interest of a clientele who cannot ordinarily meet their fees or who raise important professional issues which are not usually brought to their attention by their wealthier clientele. It is a way in which the professional and articulate can be encouraged to serve the poor in ways that are modest in terms of professional time but perhaps crucial to the lives of those who have little or no coherent voice.

It is envisaged that the time given by the personnel of each NGO and worker as staff of CARS would directly enrich the work of their separate parent organisation and provide the basis for a wide range of collaborative activity around specific tasks and problems. CARS would be able to provide also a host of examples when making representations to government bodies and identify possible areas for serious research when meeting with academic institutions. CARS would also be able to feed to the

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<sup>2</sup> The PCUP has expressed the possibility of developing as one of its functions the production of a whole range of information to be researched and made available to all concerned with the condition of the urban poor. The urban poor are particularly remote from access to the vital information which is of vital importance to them. The PCUP might include in its mandate the necessity to provide in simple language (perhaps even in such popular media as comic strip form) the information that the poor need to know. This might be presented in the style of "How to.....guides". For example, how to legitimately defend against the threat of demolition, how to seek tenure, and so forth. Information is one way of achieving the oft repeated aim of "people empowerment".

municipalities profiles of the urban poor as illustrated by the clientele.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps CARS might be developed under the auspices of the People's Organisation who would see that the NGOs are very much at their service. In addition, such a bringing together of the NGOs in a servicing/coordinating agency of this kind might be taken a step further if Local Government were to provide premises (although not in the municipal offices) and assign their Facilitator (who will have the social brief in the municipal planning organisation) to the CARS secretariat as the close working link between POs, NGOs and government.

The mission has not heard of an existing arrangement as outlined above and the concept has been received here in Manila with some interest.

Experience exists elsewhere<sup>4</sup> with such an organisation and should the Philippines wish to examine this idea further and to set up a demonstration of such a service in Filipino conditions, it could perhaps become the subject of a project proposal which could attract technical assistance (UNV) and modest funding. It should be recognised, nevertheless, that the main contributing strength would be derived from the limited but regular amount of staff time seconded from each of the participating agencies and the will and dedication to work together on a daily basis. Participating agencies would also provide members of a Consultative Board to support the running of the collaborative CARS activities.

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<sup>3</sup> This could be a contribution to the PCUP intention wish to develop and sophisticate poverty mapping and could lead to definition of the different kinds of poverty for which different approaches would need to be devised.

<sup>4</sup> In the United Kingdom the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) was set up during the second world war and still continues to function. The USA examined the idea in a study supported by the