

Participatory Governance: The Philippines Experience

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People Power and the Rise and Fall of Philippine Presidents

The current demonstrations in the streets of Manila, the hysterics of the Philippine press, and the rumors flying with the breeze about President Joseph Estrada's alleged ill-gotten wealth, vices, and corruption echo events in the country which toppled the authoritarian Marcos regime. Their 1986 experience taught the Filipinos that they could bring changes in government if they remain vigilant, and if they participate in the process of governance themselves.

Indeed, the post-EDSA* event brought with it an acceptance and appreciation of people's important role in governance. In the maelstrom of Martial Law, non-governmental (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) considered it their duty to augment basic service delivery to the people in neglected areas. Authoritarian forces clashed with what the Marcos military considered communist organizations, and swept down on hapless rural doctors and religious organizations active in what they considered the people's cause. The Aquino regime, which was brought to power through a coalition of different sectors including cause-oriented groups, enshrined "people power" in the 1987 Constitution, and operationalized the concept in grass-roots governance through the *1991 Local Government Code*.

By October 2000 people power had put a stop to Constitutional amendment in 1997-98 which would retain certain elective authorities in power, had experienced direct participation in governance, and is in the process of yet another attempt to oust a President.

Participation in Governance

The Philippines is an archipelago in Southeast Asia, which lies south of Japan and Taiwan, EAST of mainland Asia, and north of Indonesia. Its 70 million population are mostly of Malay extract, but have Chinese and Spanish racial influences. While speaking languages from the Malayo-Pilipinian linguistic family, its long history of colonization have turned out a people imbued with Spanish and American characteristics.

Four hundred years of Spanish colonization turned most of its native animist population into Catholics, except for the Muslims in the south and pockets of ethnic communities. Religion greatly affected the native culture, where modes of behavior reflect values akin to Hispanized Latin American countries.

The victory of the Americans in the Spanish-American war led to the Treaty of

* 1986 People Power event held at EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, Quezon City).

Paris of 1898 and the change in colonial master. The Americans brought to the Philippines a system of public education and introduced an alien form of politics and government. While under the Spaniards where only the elite were educated in parochial schools and friar-run universities, the American public school system brought education to the masses of Filipinos who were taught the three R's in the English language. As early as 1900 the Americans introduced the Civil Service system in government and the electoral process in politics.

Through all those years, however, even after independence from the Americans, the Filipino masses remained as beneficiaries of government largesse. There were, through the years, participative mechanisms developed, but real participation in governance is only a recent phenomenon.

Redemocratization and formal participation in governance came in 1986 after 20 years of authoritarian rule. As described by Cariño (2000), democracy "is that system of relationship between the governor and the governed that blunts their distinctive roles, so that citizens are not simply ruled over, but have more 'say' in matters affecting their lives." During the Presidency of Corazon Aquino where people's participation was institutionalized, what the people experienced was larger democratic space; NGOs and POs were "challenged to redirect their organizing and mobilizing capacities into a new unfamiliar political terrain" (Ateneo CSPPA, 1993). Empowerment of the people came from experiences in governance, through NGOs, POs, coalitions, and partnership with government agencies, the citizenry was "able to take responsibilities its own destiny, taking government the task to fulfill its sworn duties" (*Ibid.*).

Brillantes (1994) explained the NGO phenomenon in the Philippines as part of redemocratization process, "part of the operationalization of the general strategy of decentralization of the highly centralized system" of government. Tracing the development of people's participation in governance in the country, Briones (1992) said that while lesser modes of participation were already present in the decades of the 50s, 60s and 70s, citizens during "during tumultuous decade of the 80s raised the issue of participation as a major component of development ... thus, participation at present requires that citizens are involved right from the start and have a direct hand in planning and managing projects."

Participation becomes more feasible when government is decentralized. As the UNDP policy document (1997) stressed, "Decentralizing government enables people to participate more directly in governance processes and can help empower people previously excluded from decision-making." People have more chances to participate in community activities, projects, and governance itself. Decentralization, according to EROPA, "will lead to democratization by allowing fuller citizen participation in government affairs ... it will give local governments and communities a more active role in economic, social and political development." (de Guzman and Reforma, 1992) Henry Maddick, Earlier on, in 1963, formulated the "equation of democracy, decentralization, and development" in his book of the same title.

The decentralization which came about in the Philippines from the 1986. People Power revolution strengthened already existing mechanisms and installed new ones.

The 1987 Constitution and the 1991 Local Government Code have made it such that at different levels of government, but more specifically in the community level people empowerment is achieved. From hereon there is no turning back.

Historical Background

Government in the Philippines started with independent city states called *Barangays*. Although small in terms of territory normally encompassing only 100 families, the barangay government led by the *Datu* was supreme in all spheres. Barangay supremacy was supplanted only by confederations where barangays united through peace pacts or the spoilage of war.

Spanish colonization reduced the status of the barangays to mere barrios, their heads (*cabezas de barangay*) having had the only major function of collecting taxes for the central government in Manila. Although the Spanish King installed provinces (*provincias*), cities (*cabildos*) and municipalities (*pueblos*), those local government units established only served as extension arms of the Manila-based central government. Citizens were sources of taxes, forced labor and agricultural products, and were mere beneficiaries of government services. Although the heads of local governments were elected, the selection was made only by the Spanish friar and the *principalia* (educated and elite male tax payers in the locality) (Laurel, 1925).

The Americans, while introducing civil service and a system of elections, left the local government structure as accordingly designed by them untouched. That system was retained by the 1935 Constitution which was used by the transitory Commonwealth government and the post-colonial government from 1946 to 1971 until a new Constitution and Martial Law in 1972 further strengthened the centralist government. Thus, for the most part, people participation in governance was limited to what Mathur (1986) described as first mode (only educated and moneyed people), second mode (people as beneficiaries legitimize already identified projects) and third mode (beneficiaries are only consulted).

Participation very gradually grew from the 50s, when President Ramon Magsaysay inaugurated a nationwide community development program. During the Marcos years, "participatory strategies were used as control strategy to mobilize inhabitants for political consolidation." (Carada in EROPA, 1992). Yet, some of the rhetoric took more useful mechanisms. In 1978 the system of village justice was established. The village justice system aimed to amicably settle disputes at the community level through conciliation. Barangays heads and as many as 20 persons in the village form the conciliators in the village justice system inspired by the Muslim *Sharia* courts in Mindanao.

Needless to say, the system of popular elections taught by the Americans were a direct means by which people participated in governance. Officials had been elected at all levels of government except during the Martial Law years. But, as already mentioned, the developments beginning 1986 pushed forward and institutionalized the participation of people in governance.

The 1987 Constitution provides that the state "shall encourage non-govern-

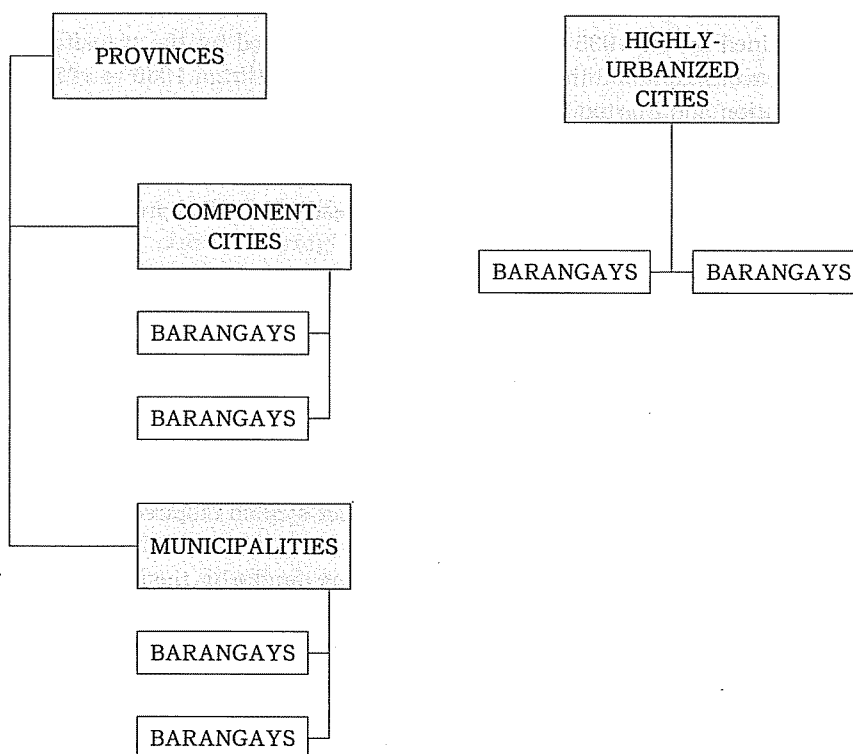
mental organizations, community-based or sectoral organizations that shall promote the welfare of the nation." Art. XIII promotes this principle further. Section 16 specifically guarantees "the right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political and economic decision-making."

While the first Local Government Code (Batas Pambansa 337) provided for people's political participation, more teeth were given by the present Local Government Code (Republic Act 7160). In the Declaration of Policy, the state ensures accountability through recall, initiative and referendum and periodic consultations with "non-governmental and people's organizations and other concerned sectors of the community." Moreover, the Code also provides for "participation of the private sector in local governance."

People's participation in governance is achieved through the expansion of membership of the Local Development Councils (LDCs) and the creation of other special bodies, which include representatives from the NGO/POs and the private sector. The local development councils perform the task of planning and prioritizing local programs and projects. They exist from the lowest level (*barangay*) to the basic level (city and municipality) up to the provincial level. (See chart)

The LDCs are mandated to include members from accredited NGOs for as much

Local Government System in the Philippines



as one-fourth of the membership. The Code actually provided this from an earlier Executive Order by President Aquino.

Other special bodies where people through NGOs and the private sector are involved are the Local School Board, the Local Health Board, the Prequalification of Bids and Awards Committee, and the Peace and Order Council.

In the local legislatures, the Presidents of the Barangay Association and the Youth are represented. The Code's provision for sectoral member representatives from the women, workers, and another sector identified by the local Council has not been institutionalized. We can thus say that the more effective participation in governance is through the local special bodies.

Although used sparingly, initiatives and recall have been utilized in some LGUs. One governor was removed from office through recall and two mayors had almost been removed through it.

However, the referendum has been used in several areas where bills creating or changing the status of LGUs were presented to the people for ratification. About 25 municipalities have been converted into cities since 1992 upon approval by their residents through a referendum. The creation of the ARMM (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao) was presented to several provinces for referendum, but only four agreed to join the ARMM. Similarly, Congress has twice passed a bill creating the Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR), but both bills did not pass the referenda conducted in the provinces for which CAR was intended.

Thus, people participate in local governance in many ways. At the village level people have direct access to inexpensive and less tedious justice, where conciliation is affected by their peers. Village people also gather in general assemblies to discuss issues and approve barangay budgets and reports. People participate in governance through the political exercises of voting, sectoral representation of the village and in the exercise of initiatives and recall, however limited, in the referendums affecting the status of their community. In local special bodies, people participate through their accredited organizations.

Of course, the degree of people's participation depends on the area — the local political leaders who encourage participation and embark on programs which promote government-people partnership, and the active leadership of the NGOs and POs. When government and the community achieve an active partnership, local programs and projects become successful. Many success stories at the local level abound.

Governance as Partnership between the Local Government and the People

Aware of the powers provided by the Local Government Code to allow local government officials to be creative and innovative in the formulation and implementation of programs and projects, several governmental and non-governmental bodies have initiated awards to encourage local governments and communities to exercise full use of those powers. Among the more prestigious awards are: the *Galing Pook* (Good Local Area), HAMIS (Health and Management Information System), Clean

and Green, Konrad Adenauer Medal of Excellence (KAME) and *Pamana ng Lahi* (Heritage). Clean and Green and *Pamana* are awards bestowed by the central government. However, the HAMIS and *Galing Pook* are NGO-initiated with government support and KAME is entirely an international NGO award.

Some awardees overlap, because these are programs which have been very successful and had been cited several times. Many of them are on LGU-NGO-people cooperation, three ingredients which spell success for community programs.

The Center for Local and Regional Governance (CLRG) of the National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines conducted a study on decentralization for the UNDP in 1997-98. The CLRG chose three local areas which had been awarded for health programs by more than one body. For the island group of Luzon, the CLRG chose Irosin, Sorsogon; for the Visayas group, Balilihan, Bohol; for Mindanao, Surigao City. (Tapales, et al., 1998).

Looking at factors for the success of the programs, three were identified a catalyst for social mobilization which laid the ground for people's participation; a committed and active local government advocate (usually the local chief executive, who provided the leadership, funding and implementation machinery), and the people themselves who participated as early as the planning process.

Involvement of the people has been found as a necessary ingredient for local project success in many successful projects. The Governor of Nueva Viscaya who received the awards not for himself but for his province related his successful efforts in mobilizing the people. In his award-winning collaboration in Watershed Management through Responsive Participatory Action, he noted that environmental degradation in the watershed area was caused by people who had to resort to *kaingin* (slash and burn agriculture) as means of subsistence. Co-management arrangement provided for rights to families to occupy the area in return for conserving the environment. The families have kept their promise.

In Puerto Princesa City and the Province of Palawan, people have always guarded their forests and sea. The *Bantay Gubat* (Guarding the Forest) and *Bantay Dagat* (Guarding the Sea) have been very effective, and have won awards for both the province and city. *Bantay Dagat* program also exists in the municipality of Looc, Romblon where volunteers not only guard the sea but also employ coastal resource management.

Involvement of the people in the planning process has been the practice in many successful programs. Irosin, Sorsogon has a Municipal Development Council with a membership that is much larger than mandated, because all organizations in the municipality are represented in it. Balilihan, Bohol and Sampaloc, Quezon utilize the lowest administrative district, the purok for their integrated projects, such as data boards in tracking minimum basic needs and self-help livelihood projects. At the *purok* level, residents of 15-25 households in clusters are able to work together for their mutual needs.

Community level cooperatives have also served as conduits for local public service. The small town of Anao, Tarlac showcased "an excellent environmental, economic and people development intervention benefiting 1,963 households in 17

barangays" (Galing Pook Awards 2000). The municipal government provides a yearly allocation for the program to the Cooperative which implements it.

The City of Legaspi involved NGOs and POs in its Integrated Program for the neglected and Abused Children. Sorsogon Province set up "a community structure that can effectively manage and operate a floating clinic" (*Ibid.*); it organized the women to operate related activities, such as *Botica sa Barangay* (village pharmacy), Walking Blood Bank, and health education. The women of Balayan, Batangas are now conscious of their identity, rights, and responsibilities and those who have availed of training from the municipal Center for Women have become enthusiastic volunteers and spokespersons about the project. One health worker in Surigao City organized and used the network of women's clubs to bring services and information to beneficiaries. In both Balayan and Surigao, the men have also organized themselves to assist in the effort at primary health care.

Assistance from the private sector has been important to other LGUs. In Marikina City, national government and private sector funds were used with local funds to clean the river. The build, operate and transfer scheme where a private developer construct the project has helped Mandaluyong City in modernizing its market.

Where people cannot offer more than their labor, they contribute it for projects benefiting them. For example, in Baybay, Leyte the people contributed their labor in providing safe water to their villages (Innovations, 1995). Tree planting efforts of the people, for example, are encouraged by the local government of Quezon, Bukidnon by providing seedlings and supervising the planting.

The IULA (International Union of Local Authorities) came out with a document in 1999 on "Partnership for Sustainable Development: North South Cooperation within the Framework of Local Agenda 21." For Asia, the publication noted the experience in the Philippines where significant progress in the attainment of Agenda 21 objectives at the local level "through the establishment of local councils for sustainable development, thus encouraging the participation of diverse stakeholders" (IULA, 1999). In the Philippines, it emphasized that "the people themselves, in their own communities, are encouraged to take the lead in action for sustainable development ... (which) includes the development of monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems". The IULA further stressed that the formulation of the Agenda 21 itself has "been characterized by participatory decision-making by both government and civil society, a process which has involved consultations between the government, NGOs, people's organizations and the business and labor sectors" (*Ibid.*).

There are many more examples of local government-people participation in the Philippines in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of programs and projects.

Conclusions: The Unstoppable Surge

People participation in governance in the Philippines is moving like a current that can no longer be stopped. The flow started with a small trickle during Martial

Law when reformers from different sectors and including the religious groups treaded without fear in rural territory where they felt their efforts were needed. It became a big surge during the EDSA revolution in 1986 when democracy returned.

Those efforts were institutionalized through the acknowledgement of people's role in governance in the 1987 Constitution, and the ground-breaking Local Government Code of 1991 which provided the mechanisms for people's participation in local governance. The mechanisms already in place, the reformers were encouraged and made sure that efforts at people participation in governance would not be curtailed.

Initially, there was hesitance on the side of both government and NGOs. Operating in different playing fields, they tend to distrust each other. In the beginning, local officials chose, even established, their own NGOs to work with. NGOs, on their part, lacked familiarity with government structures, processes and procedures (Brillantes, 1994). Distrust characterized the uneasy relationship between LGUs and NGOs in the initial years.

Gradually however, both sides learned to work with each other. Training programs exposed NGOs to ways of working with the LGU. On the other side, local officials observed that people were willing and ready to be involved in local projects. The results were successful partnerships between the LGUs and the people, as evidenced by the documentation prepared for each local government award given.

People participation occurs at the local and national levels. The present administration, as the Marcos regime in 1986, is almost drowning in the din of people's voices asking for an end to the leadership.

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