

## **Introduction**

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## Introduction

### *Sustaining the Reinvention of Governments: Civil Society and Local Governance*

#### I

In most general terms, the articles in this book explore and analyze a phenomenon in public administration that has been observed over the past two decades: that of increased civil society in the process of governance in general and local governance in particular. Such a development has led not only to the redefinition of the notion of governance itself (“from government to governance”) but also introduced new paradigms and perspectives in looking at conventional public administration. Indeed the increased involvement of civil society, business and the private sector in the whole process of governance has contributed to the whole “reinventing government” movement which gained prominence in the early nineties.

As the articles in this volume will show, the participation of civil society in the process of governance has not been without its share of challenges and concerns. These include the continuing imperative to define and refine the relationships between government and civil society organization, the implications upon the autonomy and independence of civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations and their resultant “cooptation” by government organizations, the need to strengthen the capacities of the civil society organizations and non-government organizations, and the lack of financial resources, among other things. As the articles show, through, If anything, the involvement of CSOs in the process of governance has overall been to help make governmental processes and procedures more responsive to the people. CSO involvement in governance has helped to make governments more participatory, transparent and accountable.

#### II

The term civil society suggests at least two common interrelated meanings. Civil society is referred to as a public sphere where individuals and groups, be they organized or not, interact with each other pertaining to public issues and concerns. As an arena for interactions, civil society is host to varied kinds of interactions. This means that some interactions may remain at the level of articulation and discourse without leading to specific resolve or action; while others would lead to certain consensus or action. The interactions can also be cooperative when the participants put up a united effort to address common concerns. But this may not always be the case. Civil society is also host to antagonistic interactions when individuals and groups are polarized on a given issue or issues. Civil society in this sense is thus a

venue and springboard for individuals and groups to engage each other on a wide range of issues affecting them, where interactions can lead to consensus or otherwise.

Civil society is also used to refer to groups and organizations that are neither part of the state nor the profit/market sector. These groups voluntarily organize and bind themselves around common interests and concerns. They are located between the state and individuals who otherwise could not speak for and act on their own behalf. This is the common notion of civil society – as non-government organizations that represent and fight for the interests of citizens and groups, usually those who are marginalized, voiceless and powerless.

Civil society organizations are increasingly emerging as an important actor in politics and society at the international, national and local levels. Governments and development organizations have set their sights on non-government organizations (NGOs) as vehicles of democratization and development. Citizens alike have turned to these organizations as a venue for redress and for influencing public policies and programs.

In a number of ways, civil society organizations clearly fulfill certain societal functions that may not be readily and effectively accomplished by governments, development organizations and market-oriented enterprises. They are engaged in practically every aspect of development like gender, health, agriculture, environment, micro-finance, livelihood, human rights, and peace and conflict resolution. They engage in training, education and empowerment of people and communities. They undertake research and advocacy on significant global and public issues and influence the shaping of public policy. They implement and manage projects that directly benefit communities and people. They speak for and advocate causes in behalf of the underprivileged and marginalized sector of society. They initiate creative and participatory approaches to development. Of late, their potential contribution to democratization has been underscored.

The last two decades saw an undeniably dramatic growth in size, scope, capacity and power of civil society organizations around the world. Civil society organizations are attracting attention because of their magnitude, role and impact on international development and the political and economic life of nations and communities where they are operating. Too, attention has been turned to civil society organizations as an alternative social change agent owing to declining public trust in government. It is within this context that this volume offers a view of civil society in selected countries in Asia and the Pacific. In particular, the analysis and discussion of civil society organizations is situated within the context of local governance in these countries. This is the approach used in view of government reforms implemented in these countries which impact on civil society organizations working at the community level. Nine papers that describe and analyze seven country experiences in civil society are included in this volume. The countries are India, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, People's Republic of China, Philippines, and South Korea.

### III

Several points have come to the fore from the country experiences of civil society and local governance.

The rise of NGOs has been associated, one way or another, with social movements, reform movements and regime changes at particular points in the history of some countries. India, for instance, during post-independence years saw the coming together of social movements, voluntary organizations, anti-state movements and non-government organizations in their struggle for political and social reforms. In the Philippines, NGOs have been active in social and political reforms in the countryside and urban centers starting martial law. In Indonesia, the people had worked through civil society organizations in leveraging with economic crisis and political regime change in the 1990s. Experience from South Korea also points to increased civil society participation as the country moved from dictatorship to democracy. In countries like Nepal and Japan, the tradition of citizens' volunteer activities and self-help groups became the foundation of civil society organizations.

It is also noted that increasing involvement of non-government organizations in governance has been paved by democratization process, central government reforms and explicit decentralization policy in these countries. These developments had led to the creation of a supportive statutory environment for civil society participation in governance, albeit the scope of frameworks may not be uniform in all countries.

For instance, Nepal has implemented the Local Self Governance Act that allows civil society organizations to participate in local planning. The Philippines has also secured the societal function of non-government organizations and people's organizations through its Constitution. The participation of these organizations is further elaborated on in the Local Government Code that was enacted in 1991. The role of these The National Wastelands Development Board and Planning Commissions in India provide funds to NGOs as their partners in implementing government programs in social welfare, rural development and environmental programs. Japan had enacted "The Law to Promote Specific Nonprofit Activities" which frames the cooperative undertakings between local governments and non-profit organizations. In addition, Japanese reforms towards a leaner government and improved public service efficiency and effectiveness are driving local governments to consider NGOs in public tendering of public services delivery.

Indonesia has Law 22 subsequently replaced by Law 32 which provides the framework for non-government organizations and local government engagements. China's Constitution sets the basis for the formation of residents' committees and villagers' committees that will be involved in the management of public affairs and social services in their respective areas and serve as vehicle for bringing the people's ideas, demands and suggestions to the grassroots organs of the central government. The decentralization policy framework adopted by the government of South Korea in 2003 aims to promote civil society as a vehicle for realizing citizen autonomy.

NGOs in the seven countries clearly perform a variety of roles. They are in-

involved in many aspects of development like health, agriculture, social welfare, environment, microfinance, education, livelihood, to name a few. They act as important channels for delivery of social and economic programs. When they do this, they complement or fill the gaps in government's delivery of services. This role is significant especially in areas that are hardly reached by government. The advocacy work that they do in behalf of communities makes them articulator of the interests of the people and communities they work for. Such NGO activities link people to the state and political process. They act as pressure points and watchdogs of government. The NGOs also act as enablers of people. Through the capacity building activities they undertake, people are trained and acquire knowledge and skills that they can use in improving their lot, leveraging with political decision-makers and shaping public policy.

The NGOs in India, for example, are being tapped and funded by government agencies such as the National Development Board Wastelands and Planning Commission to implement programs in social welfare, rural development, micro-finance, environmental projects, monitoring and evaluation of state delivery processes. Many NGOs in the country working in communities are engaged in projects in health, livelihood, and capacity building. In China, there is the China Environmental Protection Foundation which is the first non-government foundation dedicated to environmental protection. Nepal's NGOs particularly community-based organizations are generally engaged in community development programs which are supposed to be coordinated with local government institutions. In Japan, local governments are rethinking on the role of NGOs in contracting-out of delivery of local public services. The activities of NGOs in Indonesia include helping shape local policy and regulation through participation in public hearings and providing inputs, monitoring and evaluation of government programs. The Philippine cases illuminate the mobilization and advocacy work being performed by NGOs and people's organization to shape public policy and programs. In South Korea, NGOs mobilize mass media and information and communications technology to apply pressure to government and drum up support for improvements in human rights and democracy, environmental protection, national reunification and other national issues.

As the Asian NGOs perform these roles, they must confront, too, the issues and challenges that they face in the course of their work. Some issues are shared by the civil society organizations in these countries, and some are unique to a few countries. While civil society is much more defined in most of the seven countries, civil society in China is in infancy and both government and civil society organizations are still groping for a proper definition of the role and relations of the latter to the former and the larger society. Whether the civil society there should promote political democracy yet remains one of the biggest challenges. In Japan, the nature of relationship between civil society organizations and local governments is being redefined in the context of local government sourcing out the delivery public services. Another issue confronting the NGOs in these countries concerns civil society autonomy. Many civil society organizations rely on external funds for their projects and programs. Their great reliance on donors can seriously undermine their capac-

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ity to make independent decisions for their organizations. Their sustainability hinges as well on the continuous financial support of their donors.

#### IV

As a final remark, the contribution of NGOs in improving the links between government and people and carrying out development work that directly benefit the communities they serve cannot be overemphasized. Their experiences provide valuable lessons and inspiration to further deepen the foundations of governance that is accountable, transparent and participatory. It is clear, too, that the countries included in the volume attach great importance to civil society. Their governments provide support, in one form or another, to NGOs so the latter can assist people and the government, too, in responding to public problems more effectively. The challenge ahead is how they can utilize each other's strengths that can result in better partnerships for good governance and better life for the public that they are working for. The challenge ahead is to make the process of governance more participatory, transparent, accountable and predictable. As we know, this is at the core of any ideology or movement to "reinvent" and "reengineer" and reform government.

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