
WORK IN PROGRESS

DECENTRALIZATION AND
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN
THE PHILIPPINES:
EXPERIENCES AND ISSUES IN
SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

by Eleanor M. Gonzalez

INSTITUTE FOR
POPULAR
DEMOCRACY 

Occasional Paper No. 8
September 1997

Decentralization and Political Participation in the Philippines: Experiences and Issues in Societal Transformation

By Eleanor M. Gonzalez¹

Introduction

Decentralization and the development of civil society are two key ways of empowering peoples and communities and altering centralized forms of governance. Decentralization enables the state (through local government units, or LGUs) to be more responsive to the needs and preferences of communities. It leads to more accountable decision-making and greater innovation in how public services are delivered. On the other hand, civil society structures, specifically non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, and people's organizations, are critically important in two senses: they augment the role of LGUs as providers of public services at the local level, and they act as pressure points that compel local governments to be more efficient and effective in delivering local goods and services.

This paper hypothesizes that it is the synergy between decentralization and civil society structures that could pave the way for empowering peoples and communities. The congruence between decentralization and non-governmental organizations has its origin in a couple of breakthrough events in the Philippines. The first is the phenomenal rise of NGOs during the Aquino administration, and the second is the passage of a landmark legislation, the Local Government Code, described as "the biggest and most ambitious attempt (by the Philippine government) for decentralization" (Lim, 1992).

The paper is organized as follows: Part 1 explores the origins and persistence of the unitary, centralized bureaucracy in the Philippines, and its adverse consequences. Part 2 describes the rise of the NGOs and the decentralization initiatives of the Aquino administration. Part 3 examines the anecdotal evidence on NGO-LGU collaborations and their impact on governance and community empowerment. Part 4 examines some critical issues and proposes a number of policy recommendations.

An overcentralized state

Much like the government in many developing countries, the overcentralized state in the Philippines is a colonial legacy. The Philippines inherited a political and administrative apparatus whose locus of decision-making was Manila. This setup still remains in these modern times.

In the four centuries of Spanish colonization, starting in the 1600s, the authority that ruled over the political, social and economic life in the Philippines was vested on the *governadorcillo* or the governor general who was appointed by the King of Spain. The governor general controlled the country from Manila, the executive center. The Spaniards keeping the natives out of the government system conducted most of the affairs of the state. Provincial and municipal leaders were nothing more than executors of decisions on

policies, laws, taxes and governance made by the King or the gobernadorcillo.

When the Americans came in the 1900s, the center of power was retained in Manila. The American Governor General took his mandate this time, from the President of the United States. The government that the Americans instituted was a highly centralized presidential system. The Americans slowly incorporated the participation of Filipinos in governance. The first municipal elections were held in 1902. Philippine participation expanded in the legislature with Filipinos elected as representatives of their provinces, and then were elected as senators nationally.

The Americans played a pivotal role in framing the institutional setting for central-local government relations, according to Rocamora (1997). "Where the Spaniards had violently resisted the attempts of a nascent Filipino elite to be integrated into national colonial structures of power, the Americans carefully orchestrated this integration. Because few Filipinos held economic power that stretched beyond the local, it made sense that the Americans began the process with municipal elections. Provincial elections became occasions for coalitions of municipal elites. By the time a national legislative body was formed, the coalitional pyramid which became the characteristic structure of Philippine politics had been set."

The executive branch of government was handed over to the Filipinos after years of tutelage. The 1935 Philippines Constitution was patterned after the constitution of the United States of America. The constitution provided the President of the Philippines with executive powers not different from the office of the governor general of the Spanish and American occupation. The constitution

continued to strengthen a central government with wide powers vested in the executive.

After the Philippines won nominal independence from the US in 1946, central-local government relations were largely defined by the flow of resources from the center to the localities. The central government, through the President and the executive branch, was able to build a multi-layered system of patron-dependent local political factions by controlling the flow of funds earmarked for the budget of local government units.

In the 1950s, it was also argued that centralized economic planning and heavy industrialization were the quickest path to development. Consequently, the need for a highly centralized bureaucracy and more concentrated economic power was stressed (Lim, 1992). During the elections from 1970-1985, then President Ferdinand Marcos manipulated the elections by declaring Martial law in the country and ensured his stay in power. He basically exploited the vast powers of presidential system to his advantage. With martial law, the centralized form of governance was carried to the extreme. The president's power over local politicians reached its zenith during this period.

Low-level political participation

The underside of centralized governance is the sorry state of political participation at the local levels. In the words of Lim (1992), "Weak or nonexistent institutions at the local level contribute to the requirements of strong central bodies managing and controlling local affairs." This too, has been a carryover of the Spanish period. Because the state's civil apparatus hardly penetrated the villages, Filipinos then scarcely had a chance to participate in the affairs of the state. Neither

Iberian influences nor policies and mandates handed down from the central government in Manila disturbed their lives as farmers, fisherfolk or hunters. The “natives” were left alone as long as they provide labor when necessary, paid their dues and taxes as needed and attended church services.

Americans, for all their “integration” efforts, did not really cultivate participatory processes in communities and villages. Instead, working mainly with a patron-client culture, the American civil authorities nurtured a rural oligarchy, which also run the local governments. Ruling landlords maintained vast areas of lands where tenant farmers provide labor in exchange for economic security and social protection by the landlords. This feudal situation allowed the rural oligarchy to control local elections as well, since tenants usually had no choice but to offer their votes for their landlords who run for office. This practice to some extent remains to date.

Since independence, popular participation in decision-making over the allocation of goods and services has remained low. The organizational weaknesses of local institutions and their lack of political clout contribute to the low level of participation, but it is also the pronounced cynicism of people over the efficacy of the political processes which plays a major role in participation failures at the local level. For instance, people treat elections in instrumental rather than in substantive ways (Kerkvliet and Mojares, 1991). According to Rocamora (1997), “since politicians do not have programs that they follow, voting on the basis of personal, clientelistic connections become the other major criteria for choice.” Elections during martial law were marred by a high rate of violence and conflict as the elite quarreled among themselves.

It is not that popular groups simply did not exist. People’s organizations were especially active during the 1930s, which was a period of social unrest in the Philippines. They were also active as underground guerilla groups during the Japanese occupation. But after the war, many of these groups were systematically repressed, especially those with communist leanings. Indeed, a group of socialists who were legitimately elected to the Philippine Congress in the early fifties found themselves legally disbarred from occupying their elective posts. Exclusion processes prevented many popular groups from participating in the formal political system. During martial rule, these instruments of exclusion were polished. To give a semblance of local participation, the regime coopted local politicians and prominent citizens, reorganizing barrios into political entities called “barangays.” These often became the instruments of acquiescence to the regime’s policies and programs.

The climate of repression ended in 1986, when a popular uprising led to the so-called People’s Power Revolution that installed Corazon Aquino to the presidency. The revolt itself was a culmination of political participatory processes, some of which were organized underground and others the result of spontaneous, if sporadic, mobilization at the grassroots level.

The perils of centralization and lack of participatory institutions

Apart from the evidence presented above, why are the two sides of the same coin—overcentralization and poor participation—politically and economically bad? Lim (1992) offers a number of reasons:

1 Without strong local institutions and organizations, it would be difficult for the centralized government to undertake distributional, equity and regional development measures.

2 Without strong local organizations and institutions, regional and rural schemes can easily be manipulated by powerful local politicians to further their own ends. More obvious would be the corruption and abuse of power that a centralized government can be capable of.

3 A top-heavy centralized form of decision-making becomes overburdened with red tape and bureaucratic rules, breeding inefficiencies, unnecessary delays and misallocation of resources. In the Philippines, horror stories of long delays and shortages are merely due to red tape as well as overload and congestion in the channels of administration and communication between the national and local agencies.

4 Overcentralization creates wide regional disparities as the metropolitan center becomes more developed (since most of the institutions and power centers are there) and get a bigger share of revenues. Migration patterns exacerbate regional disparities as massive flows of people from backward and depressed areas to metropolitan centers overburden the centers of power and control.

The rise of NGOs and POs

It was during the time of President Corazon Aquino, 1986-1992, that democratic reconstruction took place: fair elections, independent legislature and judiciary, free press, free assembly leading to the creation of peoples' organizations and numerous non governmental organizations, to name a few. Democratic space widened, allowing media

to proliferate. As prisoners of conscience were freed, peoples' assemblies were allowed. As a result, many peoples' organizations blossomed and nongovernment organizations mushroomed in a determined effort to rebuild and strengthen democracy in the country (Pagsanghan, 1994). It is the existence of these institutions which generate local support, participation and responsibilities.

NGOs are self-help institutions engaged in activities to promote better life at the grassroots level. POs are composed of grassroots people who undertake self-help activities. NGO networks are "umbrella" organizations through which individual NGOs and POs express their unity in vision, access funds and undertake projects together. POs and NGOs work and coordinate for a common vision such as human rights, freedom, improving economic conditions, gender equality, sustainable development, and stewardship of the environment.

NGOs in the Philippines fall into three broad groupings (Gaffud, 1996):

1 Relief and rehabilitation group: those that provide welfare, relief and rehabilitation services in times of natural and man-made disasters or the care of elderly and street children;

2 Programs and projects group: those that undertake programs and projects aiming to improve the quality of life of the poor, whether in the urban or rural setting through community-based self-reliant initiatives;

3 Institutional and policy group: those that seek changes in the institutional and policy levels consistent with greater local participation, initiative and control, through advocacy and lobby work.

The first cluster of NGOs is involved in short-term emergency relief work. They respond to felt needs requiring quick humanitarian action such as in areas destroyed by typhoons, floods, fires, earthquakes, or in conflict and war situations. With the continuing natural disasters, typhoons, floods, earthquakes that visit the Philippines, these NGOs continue their services and relevance to many urban and rural communities.

The second cluster could be classified further into areas of concentration: a) enhancement of productive capacity, b) social services delivery, c) participatory research and planning, and d) mass-based organizing (Morales and Gaffud, 199_). In the enhancement of productive capacity, NGOs implement programs aimed at farm productivity improvement, provision of agricultural and aquaculture support services, livelihood and cooperative development for landless agricultural farmers, plantation workers, urban poor, upland communities, and small fisherfolk.

The scope of NGOs doing Social services are community health, housing and popular education. Health services are done through community-based health programs that incorporate indigenous health care practices and involve community residents as primary health care workers. Popular education techniques are used in information, training and delivery of services. Housing projects are for the urban poor and internal refugees whose homes are destroyed by situations of conflict or natural disasters.

NGOs concentrating on research and planning focus on capability building in area development planning, resource inventory and mapping, community-based research, and market development. Their efforts are geared toward strategies for sustainable development. Organizing of the different sectors in a community continues to be the

basic work of this type of NGOs. Their efforts are concentrated on mobilization of sectoral groups, community-wide organizing, and people's enterprises such as cooperatives and self-help groups in the effort for people empowerment. People's awareness is geared toward the Filipino tradition of community spirit through community-based activities.

The third cluster of NGOs undertakes their programs through national networks involved in policy formulation and changes. They are issue-centered. Examples are: Congress for People's Agrarian Reform, Freedom from Debt Coalition, Green Forum Philippines and National Coordinating Council for Local Governance. These are NGOs with national bases, but most of these NGOs and POs operate at the local level. It is estimated that altogether, about 65,000 NGOs and POs operate nationwide in the Philippines (Brillantes and Tigno, 1993).

The NGOs role in development has been given formal recognition by both the Aquino and Ramos administrations. NGOs now sit in national policy-making bodies such as the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development, and the Agrarian Reform Council. In the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Council, or APEC meeting held in Subic City, Philippines, NGOS were quite active either as "conscience blocs" within government (an environmental NGO, the Green Forum, managed to insert a sustainable development provision in the Philippine Action Plan) or as "alert groups" warning the government against the dislocating effects of trade liberalization.

The passage of the Local Government Code

A landmark legislation, the Local Government Code or Republic Act 7160, was also

enacted during Corazon Aquino's term. The LGC is known as one of the more radical laws passed by the Aquino government. It is her legacy of strengthening the workings of democracy from below and hopefully effecting a sustained decentralized economic and social development. She called it the linchpin of her political program. The Code devolves power and resources to local government units at the provincial, city, municipal and barangay levels², and allows for people's participation in local governance and development. The Code got its mandate from the 1987 Constitution which states that the territorial and political subdivisions of the Republic shall have "local autonomy" which Congress shall provide in a local government code. The LGC allows each local government unit to determine its own growth and directions according to its capabilities and resources.

With the passage of the LGC, the exercise of political power which used to be the sole privilege of the central government is now shared with the local government units. Examples of some devolved powers are to deliver basic services related to 1) health, including the running of hospitals for the provinces, 2) agriculture, 3) social services and 4) tourism. It also includes the "right of the people to a balanced ecology, in their respective territorial jurisdictions."

Within their coverage areas local government units can "ensure and support, among other things, the preservation and enrichment of culture, promote health and safety, enhance the right of the people to a balanced ecology, encourage and support the development of appropriate and self-reliant scientific and technological capabilities, improve public morals, enhance economic prosperity and social justice,

promote full employment among their residents, maintain peace and order, and preserve the comfort and convenience of their inhabitants." This general welfare clause shows that local governments can exercise just about any power as long as they adhere to the Constitution, national laws, public morals, and good customs.

The LGC has three main features. Carino (1992) summarizes it. First, local governments can now control their own budgets, equipment, projects and personnel which were formerly with the national government. Second, the LGC increased the finances³ accessible to local government units through a bigger proportion—upwards of 30 percent—in the internal revenue allotment. And third, it recognizes the significant role of the non-governmental sector, in particular NGOs and POs, in local governance.

The third feature institutionalizes the presence of NGOs as active partners in local autonomy. NGOs, POs, and other members of the community can now participate in the planning and monitoring of local government projects through "Local Special Bodies." These bodies include a) local development councils of the barangay, municipality, city and provinces; b) local school boards; c) local health boards; d) local prequalification bids and awards committees; and e) local peace and order councils. The LGC also specifically asks for the inclusion of representatives from the women's and workers' sectors, the urban poor, indigenous cultural communities, and disabled persons in local legislative bodies. The community through their people's organizations or non-government organizations can insist on being consulted before the central and local government implements any project in their area,

specially projects that will greatly impact their immediate environment.

The NGOs, POs and the local private sector can enter into an active partnership with LGUs in development work in terms of the following: a) participation of NGOs and POs in local governance, b) joint undertakings between NGOs/private sector and the LGUs, c) preferential treatment for cooperatives and marginalized sectors, d) providing assistance to POs and NGOs for economic, socially-oriented, environmental, or cultural projects, and e) people empowerment and strengthening accountability of LGUs (Villarin, 1996).

How have these partnerships fared thus far? Selected case findings suggest that frequent partnerships take place within the cooperative and socio-economic sector. A number of NGO-LGU joint activities center on providing relief and rehabilitation to recent victims of calamities and on maintaining peace and order (Brillantes and Tigno, 1993).

The variety of NGO-LGU collaboration

Taking stock of the degree of intensity and extensiveness of NGO-LGU collaboration is difficult because of the absence of a national survey of NGO-PO-LGU joint undertakings in the Philippines. Nevertheless, rapid field appraisals conducted by the USAID on decentralization in various regions of the Philippines, the GO-NGO Watch project of the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, and other documents offer anecdotal evidence on the extent of NGO-LGU coalition in the country.

Participation in local governance: Participation in governance has opened up considerably. Policy positions developed

through the NGO networks are now raised in local government councils which opened in 1991 to NGO and PO participation. The National Coordinating Council for Local Governance (NCC-LG), a nationwide NGO, has affiliates that are active in policy formulation and advocacy at the local level.

In different parts of the Philippines, NGO participation in governance is gaining ground as local special bodies begin to be organized. In Negros Oriental, for each of the seven district hospitals, a health board was created with several non-government representatives on each. In particular, the local health boards are now functioning. This is a result of an intensive effort by the Department of Health in late 1994 to orient and activate these local health boards. In most cases, health NGOs are very active in these Local health boards. In the City of Dagupan, most of the legislation adopted by the city council come from the active participation of its newly accredited NGO members.

In Cotabato City, Muslims, indigenous peoples or Lumads, and Christian settlers have bound themselves for common projects such as health provision and participation in electoral governance through the Ummah Development Center. It relates with other inter-faith group of NGOs and POs and local government units for common projects. In Puerto Princesa City, although the local development council meets only once a month, NGOs have been very active in drawing up the city's policies, especially on environment, tourism, land use and ethnic groups' affairs.

Delivery of basic services: There are examples of LGU-NGO partnership in the implementation of service delivery program and operation of public enterprises. In Albay, "Simon of Cyrene" (a health NGO) has

attached its operation to the provincial hospital, so that referral on physical rehabilitation can more easily be accomplished. In Naga City, the LGU-NGO collaboration is basically in social service delivery and economic development related activities.

The provincial governments and NGOs in the provinces of Negros Occidental, Cavite, North Cotabato, Palawan, Aurora, Surigao del Norte, Benguet, Camarines Sur, Nueva Vizcaya, and Davao del Norte have concluded comprehensive health care agreements, or CHCAs, with the Department of Health to implement health programs. The DOH provides grants to these LGUs which are required to put up counterpart money to continue the provision of basic health services to various communities.

Joint undertakings between NGOs/private sector and the LGUs: Development oriented NGOs often tap private businessmen in funding local projects. In Guagua, Negros Oriental, private stallholders, encouraged by a local NGO, constructed a market on a lot owned by the municipality, with a seven-year rent holiday from the municipality as an incentive. In Benguet, the province has recognized NGOs involved in monitoring major infrastructure projects in the province. In nearby Baguio City, collaboration with the private sector, particularly civic groups, has been strongest in the area of tourism promotion. This includes activities such as mounting of special events/festivals and the hosting of visiting dignitaries, as well as in the regular cleanliness drive of the city.

Preferential treatment for cooperatives: Cooperatives remain as the most visible area of economic partnership between NGOs and LGUs. In Juban, Sorsogon, the LGU and the Juban Agriculture Development

Cooperative are collaborating in operating nurseries benefiting 53 lowland farmers. In Castilla, Sorsogon, the LGU-Sorsogon Integrated Hog Raising Cooperative partnership developed the corn belt area in Castilla and constructed feed and edible oil mills.

In the province of Davao del Norte, it was reported that in the municipalities of Panabo, Carmen and Maco, LGU-NGO collaboration is evident in livelihood projects such as in animal dispersal programs. In Tagum, the LGU and the Davao Federation on Non-Agricultural Cooperative, Inc. (DAFENACO) have gone into a joint venture for the construction of a Tagum Food Terminal. In Digos, Davao del Sur, a partnership between LGU and NGO emerged through the "ALIS PAGOD" Project where a cooperative is tapped as the municipal government's collector of market fees.

In Bulacan, the loans being offered to the cooperative sector are now managed by a trust fund guided by an all-NGO advisory council called the Sangguniang Magsasaka. In Davao City, LGU-NGO partnership is exemplified by the following undertakings: 1) privatization of comfort room operation in Agdao district public market through a cooperative which is renting it at P10,000 per month and 2) privatization of the terminal building operation also in Agdao district, renting it to a cooperative for P20,000 per month. Plans are underway to privatize its slaughterhouse and eventually its public markets.

Providing assistance to POs and NGOs for socially oriented, environmental, or cultural projects: Some of the areas open for NGO-LGU cooperation are in social and environmental undertakings. Regional ecumenical councils composed of Protestant leaders in different parts of the

country form part of networks of church NGOs collaborating with LGUs and other NGOs in undertaking projects ranging from delivery of relief and rehabilitation services, health training in AIDS, herbal gardening, community medicine, to small livelihood projects such as marketing of rubber, advocacy for peace, and debt reduction. They are a nationwide network and they coordinate closely with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. In Midsayap, So. Cotabato, a number of professionals formed MIDSAYAP as a multi-sectoral group which aims to gather resources to contribute to the municipality's development. This group now regularly interacts with the LGU.

Sometimes, the relationship with the LGU is adversarial. Citizen's groups in Baguio City successfully opposed the top-down plans developed for Camp John Hay by the Tuntex Corporation, even though the local government was willing to accept those plans (given certain conditions). In Bolinao, Pangasinan, local opposition to a proposed cement plant prevented the project from being issued a certification of "social acceptability" by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The project had the support of the local government.

In several areas such as Baguio City, NGO "re-greening" movements, which begin as citizen initiatives, pool national government expertise with resources raised from both the private sector and the local government. In yet another example, Plan International works exclusively with barangays in selected municipalities in Benguet as part of its child sponsorship program. Community organizing and preparation of a barangay development plan, which is a Plan International requirement prior to extending assistance, is done through the barangay captain and officials. Its projects include

health camps, water supply systems, access roads and multi-purpose centers, where (for infrastructure projects) the barangay's counterpart is labor. It also recently started a house building and toilet bowl distribution program for its sponsored children in Tublay.

Several of the Puerto Princesa City government's programs are implemented in cooperation with broad based NGOs and people's organizations. Among these are the Bantay Puerto program, Oplan Linis, Poverty Alleviation Project, City Tourism Promotion and Development Program and Barangay Mangingisda. NGOs have likewise been active in work among the ethnic groups residing within the city's boundaries and the prevention of slash-and-burn agriculture.

Like the city of Puerto Princesa, the provincial government has several undertakings where NGO support is considered vital. Among these projects are the Bantay Gubat Project (a resettlement project) and Support Services to Tribal Communities. NGOs join provincial government teams during inspection sorties under the Bantay Gubat and Dagat programs.

A joint program between the municipality and the Batangas Livestock and Poultry Association (BALPRA) stipulates that BALPRA shall actively support the municipality's drive to maintain environmental stability by monitoring compliance with the municipal ordinances relating to environment. The local federation of NGOs, the SANDIWA, has also supported the municipal government in its campaign to improve the environment.

NGOs cooperate with Palawan LGU in conducting information campaigns among kaingineros (slash-and-burn farmers), educating the latter on the need for more sustainable approaches to agriculture and fishing. HARIBON, Palawan has been

exceptionally active in this area. In Eastern Visayas, NGOs actively support the implementation of health projects by spearheading information campaigns, providing vehicles and mobilizing volunteers.

People empowerment and strengthening accountability of LGUs: The key to strengthening the LGU-NGO alliance is through capability building and human resource development. A group of NGOs, the Institute for Popular Democracy, Education for Life, and the Institute for Public Governance have participated in training local community leaders towards participating in the coming barangay elections in May 1998. The training include leadership formation and electoral campaign management. Several of these training programs occurred in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. In Bohol, a joint undertaking of the province, coastal municipalities, and the PROCESS Foundation led to the organizing and training of fisherfolk to protect coastal resources. The resulting organization is now actively lobbying local government units on issues regarding coastal resources.

The Jaime V. Ongpin Foundation or JVO, likewise, works at the barangay or community level. While its activities include mostly community infrastructures like roads and livelihood projects, it also conducts training and planning sessions with barangay and municipal officials and representatives. LGU counterparts for these are usually labor for the infrastructure projects and costs of travel for its participants to training programs or planning sessions.

Reinventing collaboration and governance

The decentralization of power and authority mandated by the new LGC has given community residents, through NGOs and

POs, far greater chances than ever before of advocating their interests and demanding accountability from their local leaders (Racelis, 1994). The trajectory of LGU-NGO cooperation now seems to go beyond the conventional idea that non-governmental groups merely supplement government functions at the local level. The emerging partnership suggests that the NGO-PO sector can “have a substantive, dynamic and proactive role in community development just as well as government” and “have a strong capacity to underwrite governmental initiatives (e.g., delivery of basic services, relief and rehabilitation, socio-economic and entrepreneurial ventures)” (Brillantes and Tigno, 1993). That would enhance their influence and political legitimacy at local levels.

Some critical issues

The biggest test facing NGO-LGU collaboration is whether the Local Government Code will fall by the wayside as a result of efforts to resist decentralization. Already, there have been a number of bills being seriously considered by the Philippine Congress reclaiming for national agencies powers that have been devolved to LGUs by the LGC. So far, the Ramos administration has demonstrated strong political will by vetoing a major legislation aiming to recentralize health services. NGOs will have always have to function as “alert mechanisms” which will warn policy-makers against insidious attempts to weaken decentralization in the Philippines.

Even if the partnership survives this test, a number of collaboration problems remain at various levels. NGOs fear, for example, that the mainstream bureaucratic tendency of LGUs might restrain NGO initiatives. On the other hand, LGUs are concerned that

NGO thrusts in local governance are an intrusion on their traditional authority and tend to weaken their political power (Brillantes and Tigno, 1992). At the other extreme is collaboration gone bad, when NGOs and POs are drawn into the political mainstream only to be manipulated for clearly vested political objectives.

NGO-LGU initiatives remain sporadic. They are not coordinated at higher levels. NGO participation often is at a project-to-project level, rather than an full-blown effort to put forth an NGO agenda for local governance and development. In part this is occasioned by a poor civil society structure in the Philippines. NGOs and other non-governmental entities cannot match the breadth of the Philippine bureaucracy. In many parts of the country, NGOs are simply non-existent. Where they have considerable presence, NGOs are often strangers to government mechanisms, are ineffectual in relating with local government officials, and are at a quandary on the extent of opportunities offered by the LGC to advance the interests of the non-governmental sector.

Local governments likewise often limit the collaboration to what is nominal or ceremonial, such as attending meetings. Rather than harness NGOs for local governance, LGUs use them to “rubber stamp” policies already decided by local authorities. In some cases, LGUs tend to exclude NGOs whose political principles or operating ways are not compatible with those of the local authorities. Even politically friendly NGOs suffer from the impression that they are a cost burden and unnecessary administrative layer at the local level.

Outside of the NGO-LGU partnership, NGOs face a serious dilemma in their own backyards. NGOs tend to direct, and impose on, POs. Tadem (1996) argues that NGOs, being managed by urban middle class and

highly educated people, are able to articulate the sentiments and grievances of the voiceless and marginalised sectors of society. The high profile taken by NGOs has created relations of dependency with POs. Just as leaders of political organizations tend to dictate on their followers, so are NGOs also seen as supplanting POs and reducing them to a client status. This can be a potential area of tension, especially since in many cases, both NGOs and POs can have serious differences in strategies and goals. They also often compete for funding from basically the same sources.

Policy recommendations

It is necessary to strengthen the legal framework for NGO-LGU collaboration. NGOs have a demonstrated edge over local governments in many cases, especially in pursuing developmental goals. LGUs need the support of NGOs in catering to the needs and preferences of communities because of the latter’s proximity, commitment, flexibility and responsiveness to the people. NGOs, on the other hand, can benefit from LGUs broad political mandate and resources to carry out its programs. Because both LGUs and NGOs can benefit from each other’s comparative advantage, it makes political sense to fortify the NGO-LGU alliance. If the LGC were to be amended, therefore, it should be in the direction of giving more authority to both LGUs and NGOs, rather than in the direction of recentralizing powers back to the center.

Separately, NGOs as a countervailing force need to be given more legal support. Apprehensions over decentralization often rest on the argument that the LGC would become an instrument for local authorities to strengthen their grip on power, and consequently use their control of local governments to sustain their own interests.

After all, many local politicians are also political warlords. Yet what the LGC has done is to transform Philippine politics from a multi-tiered system of patron-client relationships into “complex, miniscule groups that are increasingly difficult to mobilize around old leaders, loyalties and symbols.” Mojares (1995) indeed suggests that “while such disengagement from familiar loyalties makes mobilization difficult, it also makes for a more democratic situation.” He makes the caveat, however, that without compelling principles to backstop the change, decentralization can also lead to depoliticization and demobilization.

In this context, the exposure of the NGOs in local governance can be considered a countervailing force to check on abuse of authority by local government officials and make certain that the policy environment remains highly politicized. Carino (1992) argues that NGOs should be able to choose to maintain their identity apart from, rather than as a part of, government, and use their membership in the local legislative bodies to see to it that actions of government on the local level are directed towards addressing the people’s needs.

On their own, NGOs should be able to demand what is rightfully theirs under the LGC. While the LGC does provide them broad, unprecedented opportunities, the government can give them legal support in their quest to be accredited in the local special bodies, and to be proactive in the partnership.

Confidence-building measures are needed to consolidate LGU-NGO partnership gains. NGO-LGU collaboration must build on the positive attitude and sentiments of both the government and NGO partners. Constructive experiences shared by the partners should be highlighted, and be made a model for other localities to follow. Some of these

collaborative undertakings have been made possible even before the LGC took effect. The partnership situation can rely on more positive reinforcements, such as the ready availability of resources, and the elimination of red tape and dilatory bureaucratic maneuverings. Government can step in to sponsor teambuilding sessions for LGUs and NGOs, and capability-building programs for NGOs.

Indicators of the outcomes of LGU-NGO collaboration are important. It will be vitally necessary to construct indicators which will chart the progress of the LGU-NGO partnership, in terms of their intended outcomes. The indices should be able to measure how substantive the participatory process is, and how sustainable the partnership would be. In the end, however, the collaboration should be evaluated by its social impact. Its success can be measured by rises in income levels and productivity in the localities, higher quality of life for the communities, increased quality and access to basic social services, and greater grassroots participation in decision-making. These indicators must provide the baseline data with which to monitor and evaluate the progress of the partnership.

In conclusion, it must be said that the essence of the NGO-LGU alliance is not to consolidate local power, important though it may be. Its substance is to harness local strengths and willpower in order to promote greater freedom and responsibility at the local level.

References

Brillantes, Alex B. and Jorge V. Tigno. "GO-NGO-PO Partnerships in the Philippines and the 1991 Local Government Code: An Anatomy of the Empowerment Process," in Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, GO-NGO Watch, September 1993.

Carino, Jessica. The Local Government Code of 1991 and People's Organizations and Non-Government Organizations in Northern Luzon. Working Paper No. 20, Cordillera Studies Center, University of the Philippines. Baguio City: September 1992.

Eleria, Wilbert, et.al. A Strategy for Devolution: The Comprehensive Health Care Agreement of the Philippine Department of Health. Paper submitted to the Health Finance Development Program, 1995.

Gaffud, Romualdo, in "Citizen Participation Under the 1991 LGC: Addressing Theoretical and Operational Issues." Draft 1996.

Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Operationalizing People Empowerment and the Local Government Code of 1991: Summary of Case Findings from Selected Local Government Units. Manila: September 1993.

Kerkvliet, Benedict and Resil B. Mojares, "Themes in the Transition from Marcos to Aquino: An Introduction," in From Marcos to Aquino: Local Perspectives on Political Transition in the Philippines. Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 1991.

Lim, Joseph. "The Macro Aspect and the Political Economy of Decentralization" in Joseph Lim and Katsumi Nozawa (eds.), Decentralization and Economic Development in the Philippines. Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1992.

Mojares, Resil B. "The Dream Goes On and On: Three Generations of the Osmenas, 1906-1990," in Alfred W. McCoy, An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines. Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 1995.

Racelis, Mary. "POs, NGOs and Civil Society: From the Fringes to the Mainstream," in Intersect, April-May 1994.

Pagsanghan, Joel. "An Assessment of Past Electoral Experiences," in Popular Participation in Electoral Reform and Governance. Institute of Politics and Governance, 1994.

Rocamora, Joel. "The Constitutional Amendment Debate: Reforming Political Institutions, Reshaping Political Culture." Draft, 1997.

Tadem, Eduardo C. "Reflections on NGO-PO Relations," in Communique, Nos. 34-35, March-June 1996.

Villarin, Tom S. People Empowerment: A Guide to NGO-PO Partnership with Local Governments. Quezon City: KAISAHAN, 1996.

Endnotes

¹Director for Outreach and Publications, Institute for Popular Democracy, Manila, Philippines. Paper presented at the "Conference on Cooperative Development and Peace in Asia" held on March 7-14, 1997 at Chandigarh, India.

²Barangays are the smallest political unit in the Philippines. Several barangays constitute a town or a city. Several municipalities and cities constitute a province. The LGC also recognized the participation of local peoples organizations and non governmental organizations in local governance.

³The local government code provides for the increase of resources of local government units by 1) broadening their power of taxation; 2) increasing their