

Decentralization and Local Participatory Development: Experiences from Cambodia and the Philippines¹

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(Paper for the South to South Forum on Sustainability, December 12-14, 2011, Lingnan University, Hong Kong)

The so called “march to democracy” worldwide, which is often coupled with decentralization with its attendant focus on “good governance”, brings to fore questions about state-market-civil society relations. Reshaping these relations now becomes even more compelling in the light of the financial and economic crisis. While the crisis is said to sound a death knell to neoliberalism, it remains the task of pro-poor and pro-democracy movements to shape alternatives at the global, national, and local levels.

This paper analyzes NGO engagement with the state to bring about local development in Cambodia and the Philippines. Decentralization reforms followed the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, and the post-conflict reconstruction in Cambodia. Good governance, civil society building and local development/anti-poverty programs, are key elements in the international package of support for democracy worldwide (see Carothers 2002). Thus, decentralization is claimed to be “a fashion of our time”². It is celebrated for bringing the state closer to the communities; ascribing it with meaning of promoting democratic and developmental ends, including the promise of good governance.

Indeed, in recent years, there is a growing convergence between the discourse of development and the discourse of democracy. The shift to the rights-based approach (RBA) in development allows NGOs and donors to engage with the “politics of poverty”. The search for a more meaningful democracy (and sustainable development) allows democratic activists, NGOs and social movements to bring back the people’s voice in democratic institutions, thru participation. Such parallel discursive movements find a meeting point in participatory local governance, the reconfiguring of central-local state relations and state-civil society relations facilitated by decentralization reforms.

In Southeast Asia, Cambodia and the Philippines present useful and relevant settings for learning lessons on civil society engagement of local governance and local development in the context of decentralization. In these countries NGO and ordinary citizens’ participation in local governance had been institutionalized and NGOs have undertaken a variety of

¹ This essay is drawn from years of experience and reflections on participatory local governance initiatives in Southeast Asia and engagements with human rights and development NGOs in Cambodia. Various parts of this paper appeared in the following: Alicias, Maria Dolores. 2011. “Decentralization and Democratization in Southeast Asia: Exploring the Potential of Local Development Funds for Local Governance Reforms”. Amsterdam: Burma Centrum Nederland; Alicias, Maria Dolores and Cruz, Abelardo. 2011. “Diakonia Partners’ Approaches in Engagement in D&D and Local Governance”. Phnom Penh: Diakonia; Alicias, Maria Dolores, Pellini, Arnaldo, et.al. 2010. “Governance Reforms in three South East Asian countries: the Role of Research-based Evidence in Promoting Innovations” in *Innovative Trends in Public Governance in Asia*. Amsterdam: IOS Press; Alicias, Maria Dolores and Cruz, Abelardo. 2010. “Scanning of Rights-based Approaches of Diakonia Partners in Cambodia. Phnom Penh: Diakonia; Alicias, Denden. 2008. *Pushing Local Democracy a Crack: Grassroots Activism and Local Governance in Cambodia*. Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy; Alicias, Maria Dolores. 2007. “Making Citizen Participation in Local Governance Transformative: A reflection from the Southeast Asian Experience”; Alicias, Maria Dolores and Velasco, Djorina. 2006. “Unpacking IPD’s Local Governance Work: Reflections from the Margins”.

² Manor 1999 as quoted by Hutchcroft 2001:1.

participatory local development strategies. The question is, to what extent are these participatory initiatives bringing about inversion of governance priorities in favor of pro-poor and sustainable development outcomes?

Consciously reminding ourselves of this key question is deemed critical at this time when the participation mantra has seeped through the various governance and development discourses. The preponderance of participatory programs promoted by different groups with diverse and sometimes conflicting agenda has pointed to the malleability of participatory processes (see Mohan and Stokke 2000). Elsewhere, we have concluded that decentralization does not automatically lead to democratic deepening (see Alicias and Velasco 2007). In the same vein, I argue, in this paper, that participatory development process does not always lead to pro-poor sustainable development outcomes.

Local Participatory Development Planning in Cambodia

Cambodia is regarded as a paradigmatic case of a new world order, wherein the United Nations became an interventionist for peace, command economy a passé, and democracy a new game worldwide (Ojendal and Lilja 2009, Hughes 2009). The country was a test case for post-conflict reconstruction and as such was at the receiving end of an unprecedented volume and form of international assistance, making it an “aid-dependent community” (Hughes 2009). In less than a decade (1995-2003), more than USD 4 billion in aid was infused into the country and had distorted the economy (Earl 2009).

The outpouring of international aid went into reconstruction and development work, which in the early 1990s were spent mostly on humanitarian and relief work in the country’s border provinces with Thailand. After the UNTAC-sponsored elections in 1993, more bilateral and multilateral donors with sizable budgets came together in Cambodia to assist in the transition to liberal democracy and market economy. There was a surge in international and local NGOs working on various development themes, as donors directly channeled aid money through NGOs in the hope of developing Cambodia’s civil society (Meas and McCallum 2009, Richardson 2009). From 40 NGOs (all international) in 1990, international and local NGOs there increased to over 600 active ones in 2007/08 (Meas and McCallum 2009:16).

The NGOs have played a key role in the way development work progressed in Cambodia from the 1990s to the present³. However, by early 2000, major donors looking for measurable impacts have begun to be skeptical of the effectiveness of NGOs in bringing about development results and political reforms (Ibid:12). Such skepticism coupled with shifting donor thematic priorities “hastened a growing emphasis on the empowerment of local authorities and groups through the process of civil society development and the championing of decentralization” (Ibid).

³ But, there are also observable changes in the growth and dynamism of civil society and grassroots mobilizations. There is an observed unprecedented level of NGO and social movement activities and the “seeds of an organized, possibly benign, challenge to authorities” are emerging from these activities (Ojendal and Kim 2008). Although most of NGOs work as government contractors, consultants or watchdogs (monitoring policy implementation and providing feedback on service delivery) there are those working to build citizens’ capacity for demand or claim-making (Richardson 2009). A DFID study reported of the second generation of NGOs and social movements which could be drivers for change, as can be observed through community struggles over land and forest rights and other issue-specific concerns (Burke 2004). The World Bank also concluded of the emergence of social movements in rural Cambodia (World Bank 2006 as cited by Vimelea et.al 2009).

Thus began the push for decentralization reforms in the country which was institutionalized through the passage in 2001 of two laws--the Law on Election of Commune/*Sangkat* Councils and the Law on Administration and Management of Communes/*Sangkats*. In 2002, Cambodia had a taste of local democracy with the first commune elections.

At the outset, decentralization was purposely crafted for poverty reduction through increased service delivery and local investment. By allowing citizens to participate in local development planning, the designers had hoped that imbuing a sense of community ownership to development path will churn out favorable outcomes to alleviate poverty. The other two implicit aims of decentralization were to enhance collaboration among political parties and to build a culture of peace. These were seen as necessary remedies for a country coming out of a conflict situation (see among others Rusten, et. al 2004, Hughes 2007). As the decentralization reform progresses, its aims have shifted to promoting “democratic development”⁴.

CSOs and villagers’ participation in local development is particularly emphasized in coming-up with Commune Development Plan (CDP) and Commune Investment Plan (CIP), a participatory bottom-up planning process⁵. This participatory process starts with community meetings at the villages and ends in commune integration meeting which harmonizes all development initiatives implemented by service providers and NGOs at the commune level.⁶ More recently, community-based organizations (CBOs) are mandated to participate in the local public bidding of services as “local service providers”.

This task of embedding democratic and participatory values and practices was never easy. Until recently, Cambodia never had an instance when ordinary citizens participate in governance affairs. Accountability is an alien concept to Cambodian parlance, often misunderstood to mean “accounting” (COMFREL 2008). Hierarchies and patron-client relations have been the dominant features guiding social and political relations (see among others Chandler 1993, Ledgerwood 1992, Freison 1996, Ojendal 2005). Moreover, the people’s relation with the local state is peppered with suspicion and apathy. The commune council is historically a weak administrative unit which gained a bad reputation when it was largely used an instrument for political control for the mobilization of forced labor and soldiers (Ojendal 2005). In terms of community identity, the village (as opposed to the commune) is the primary source of social and geographic entity of most Khmers.

⁴ Democratic development in this sense includes local autonomy, elements of good governance (accountability, transparency, responsiveness); public participation and gender equity (see Organic Law Article 12).

⁵ Article 8 Prakas on commune/*Sangkat* development planning (MOI and MOP, No 098 PRK), emphasize the participation of every civil society organization in the commune/*sangkat* development plan and investment programme preparation, and to be responsible for representing the interests of localized communities and specific stakeholders groups like women, youth, the poor and ethnic groups, as well as Community Fisheries and Community Forestry; contributing knowledge and ideas to the preparation of the commune/*sangkat* development plan.

⁶ The CDP is a 5 year strategic development plan of CCs in each mandates and the CIP is the annual action plan of CCs. Each commune is required to set a development strategic planning framework achievable within 5 years; the annual CIP is the implementation plan for the strategic plan. In each CDP and CIP, the Commune Council, especially, budgeting and planning committee, consider all issues relating to achieving the CMDG, such as: food security, education, gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, developing partnership for development; and zero-target for land mines.

Nevertheless, there are certainly glimpse of dynamism evolving out of local participatory governance experiments. It has been observed that more and more ordinary people are taking part in development planning and more people (even women) have become interested in local politics and governance affairs, cutting the distance between the state and society (COMFREL 2008; Ojendal and Kim 2009; Alicias and Cruz 2010/2011). Even if to a large extent, citizens' participation is just an instrument for something else, changing attitudes are observed among local officials and ordinary citizens, and in local political dynamics, which might lead to a positive change in political culture. Ojendal and Kim (2006/09) conclude that people are no longer afraid of local governments/officials-- that the culture of fear is replaced by high admiration. Improvements on the discharge of administrative functions of commune councils are noted by local authorities and the villagers. As one commune chief explains, "in previous time, local people always avoided the authorities (CC), but now they are asking questions and are giving suggestions to improve their living conditions. At present, it seems the local authorities have changed attitudes and understand their functions better" (Alicias and Cruz 2011).

The socio-economic projects (micro-credit, cow and rice banks, communal irrigation management, alternative agriculture, natural resource management) borne out of participatory local development processes create a meaningful contribution in improving local economy (in terms of food security and increasing income opportunities and employment); developing human resources and social groups in the villages; and enhancing community cohesion. There is also an observed shift in the nature of local development projects—broadening the infrastructure-biased projects (road, bridges, school buildings) to include livelihood, and other social services such as health and sanitation as well as natural resource management.

Unlike the situation before when development programs were focused on infrastructure projects and only private business companies were able to get government contracts, the new local bidding mechanism enabled community groups to co-deliver local services, thus enhancing citizen's influence in the design and implementation of select services.

Yet, despite these positive developments, serious challenges confront participatory local development in Cambodia as participatory processes operate outside of existing political dynamics while satisfying donors' interest for participation and measurable impacts (Rocamora 2007).

The country is still far from the pluralist democracy envisioned by the UN-assisted transition. The current political situation clearly shows a skewed distribution of political power, in favor of the Cambodia People's Party's (CPP) dominance⁷. The political system and electoral system (not to mention political culture) enhances upward accountability by the elected politicians and bureaucrats to the party and higher-level officials rather than to the electorate. This upward accountability dampens dynamism at commune level and limits the possibility of pro-poor sustainable development outcomes.

For instance, rights-based organizations working on land and common natural resources conflicts are frustrated with the fact that these issues are still decided at the top-level despite the presence of local mechanisms for resolution. In other words, even if the Commune Council has a mandate, local authorities waive their rights to dialogue and settle land

⁷ The CPP dominates in the National Assembly (90 over 123 seats); in the Commune Councilors (61%) of and Commune Chief positions (98%, some 76% of the provincial governorship and 75% of District Governorship in 2009 Provincial and District elections.

conflicts especially when the perpetrator of the conflict are higher authorities or wealthy people with government connection. The ruling party tends to enforce strict party discipline which makes it difficult for elected officials—especially at the Commune and District level to address the issues brought to them without violating party expectations. In fact, land issues and land rights are not at all taken-up in the CDP planning.

Moreover, while the CDP planning and other local participatory mechanisms are characterized by active participation from the CSOs, villagers and local state (Commune Council and village officials) the disciplining effect of these institutional arrangements discourages people to raise issues and make demands outside the prescribed norms and rules. Therefore, while there is accommodation of CBO/NGO's involvement in terms of social services projects which are seen as non-controversial (health, education, small-scale livelihood projects), there is indifference to the issue of rights to land and common natural resources where conflicts with the rich, with higher-level government and with big business often occur.

Echoing Hughes (2009:217-218) circumspect conclusion of a participatory local development project in Cambodia, it seems participatory local development have “delivered tangible, popular, and useful benefits to villagers, in response to their own assessments of their needs. However, it was less successful in empowering villagers with respect to a wider, imagined sphere beyond the lived world of the village, kin and patronage networks, and in encouraging face-to-face encounters between villagers and influential elites outside those usual networks”.

Local Development Planning thru Participatory Rural Appraisal in the Philippines:

In the Philippines, decentralization reforms came in the early 1990s. The Philippine Local Government Code of 1991 not only devolved substantial powers and functions to sub-national government units, it also opened up active engagement of civil society organizations in local governance, and allowed the entry of new, and sometimes reform-minded and progressive, players in local politics⁸.

The experience of Barangay Bayan Governance Consortium (BBGC)⁹ in citizens' participation in local governance offers valuable lessons and challenges. BBGC's signature initiative is the *barangay* (village) development planning through participatory resource appraisal or BDP-PRA. The strategy maximizes available institutional mechanisms for citizen participation to push for pro-poor development policies and programs at the village level.

⁸ The key features of the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC) include the following: “1) grant more powers, resources, authority and responsibility to local government units (LGUs) to enable them to function with limited national support; 2) transform LGUs into local planning units for development and innovative governance; 3) institutionalize people power in local governance; 4) promote the interface or collaboration of people's organizations, non-government organizations, and the private sector with LGUs through sustained partnerships; 5) promote joint ventures and undertakings between LGUs and Pos-NGOs/private sector; and 6) provide measures to enhance the fiscal autonomy of LGUs” (Villarin 2004). The 1997 barangay elections, the first after the LGC, registered the highest number of voters and candidates. A significant number of community leaders and activists won in that election (Patino 1999).

⁹ The network was established in 1997 by nine Metro Manila-based NGOs, a mixture of research institute, development NGOs, legal institute. In 2003, the consortium has 233 members operating in 28 of 79 provinces of the country (Villarin 2004).

In most cases, citizens' participation in these planning processes is proven positive—priority projects reflect “a shift away from traditional (village) projects, which did not always address people's development priorities and were often a source of patronage through kickbacks” (Estrella and Iszatt 2004). The novelty of the process was a welcome respite from the traditional patronage way of determining development projects and distributing resources. It was also a new way of churning out needed information and a learning experience for decision-makers. As elected local officials in the town of Surallah in Mindanao explains, “there's a big difference in the sense that before when we made plans there was no certainty about our plans, unlike now where we have specific targets and goals to achieve”; “we're very happy because it made the council realize their functions and obligations” (Iszatt 2004:171).

The pledging session accompanying the BDP-PRA process has also facilitated and widened the LGU's access to national level resources (Ibid:175-176). An equally significant impact is the way the BDP-PRA process provided a sense of empowerment to ordinary citizens and facilitated direct participation of citizens in local governance. The following words of a woman participant ring true for most participants: “We became aware and critical of what was happening in our community. We realized that women have capabilities as well” (Alicias 2004:200).

However, despite its successes in opening-up spaces of participation and changing patronage-based governance processes, the BDP-PRA process faces challenges in sustainability and scaling-up. As the innovation relies heavily on the political will of incumbent reform-minded officials, it is vulnerable to changes according to the electoral cycle. As the case of Surallah illustrates, the BDP-PRA process ceased when the incumbent Mayor lost the election and was replaced by a new politician (Iszatt 2004). Local governments face severe constraints in terms of fiscal and human resources, which affect the realization of development projects. Although some communities have been able to implement many of their priority projects (an indication of effective resource mobilization), many village development plans end up in unfunded wish lists (Ibid, p.310-312).

This has led to a realization of the need to scale-up the participatory development planning process to the municipal (town) level where there are more power and available resources. But, opening up municipal governance to participatory processes proved difficult. Wary of the political risks involved in opening up governance to participation, local politicians would oftentimes prefer the patronage/populist way of delivering public goods and services, as this would certainly bring about victory in the next election.

More importantly, concern over the extent to which such a process contributes to deepening democracy and transforming local governance or whether it is just a way of creating new local political patrons was raised on several occasions. “...Individual officials can capitalize on the BDP-PRA to gain access to resources, take credit for *barangay* achievements, and earn votes, with little serious regard for creating democratic, accountable institutions and supporting people's participation in governance. The BDP-PRA and other consortium programs may inadvertently create ‘sophisticated traditional politicians’...” (Naraval 2004:60)

Conclusion and Propositions:

To establish a linear connection between citizen participation and pro-poor outcomes is tempting but naïve; more so if we blindly equate participation with empowerment and transformation. This is not to say that participation isn't valuable, because it is, especially within the framework of democratic deepening. At the core of the deepening democracy perspective is the idea that ordinary men and women are capable of taking initiatives and making decisions; that collective action offers possibilities for change.

But, as experiences in Cambodia and the Philippines suggest, local participatory development does not always bring about pro-poor sustainable outcomes. In Cambodia, local participatory development is in shaky ground as it operates outside of political dynamics; the potential for democratic dynamism is bunged by a host of political-economic factors. Acquiescence of most development NGOs to government's plans and rules brings about concrete and responsive impacts to the communities but at the same time limits the possibility of even talking about development issues beyond the purview of the commune. Such situation runs the risk of participatory development that ends-up maintaining the status quo. In the Philippines, the participatory development process and its resulting projects could not be sustained as they are contingent to electoral cycle and the availability of development funds, which often flow through the circuits of patronage. Moreover, participatory development could unexpectedly produce "sophisticated traditional politicians".

Making local participatory development deliver pro-poor sustainable outcomes takes more than just citizen participation. There is more to transformative participatory governance than having participatory mechanisms. This calls for relating participation to politics and issues of power. Hickey and Mohan (2004) argues that for participation to be transformative, it should be linked to broader political project of deepening democracy, social and (environmental) justice. For it to be empowering it should aim to transform power.

Taking an empowering perspective on participation calls for establishing a clear link between participation and accumulation of power. Progressive development work means delivering the goods and raising the political temperature at the local level, so that people can actively engage in a wider range of everyday democratization struggles in their localities. It means more than "thickening civil society". It means raising people's political acumen so that they can creatively mobilize at different levels. It means contributing to the realizing the power of the "powerless" in autonomous spheres.

A progressive development work should therefore also facilitate the flow of information and analysis to inform people's long-range views of local development. It means linking local governance concerns with social movement struggles and issues of sustainable development. The 'local' can no longer be taken at face value, i.e anything at the sub-national or grassroots level. The roots of local problems are always in part found elsewhere.

Finally, unleashing the transformative potential of participation also entails contextualizing participatory processes within the existing political dynamics. For Southeast Asia, this means situating participation within the process of political reform and democratization.

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