

Local Links at Work

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Santos, Soliman Jr. M., ed. *The Theory and Practice of People's Councils: Focus on the Naga Model*. Quezon City: Institute of Politics and Governance (IPG), 1998, 156 pp.

Santos, Soliman Jr. M., ed. *Working Group, Working Papers: NGO-PO Perspectives for the Local Government Code Review*. Quezon City: Institute for Politics and Governance (IPG), 1997, 176 pp.

The passing and implementation of the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC) has provided a wealth of case studies documenting the best as well as the worst practices in the field of local governance and democratization initiatives. *The Theory and Practice of People's Councils: Focus on the Naga City Model* and *Working Group, Working Papers: NGO-PO Perspectives for the Local Government Code Review* edited by Soliman M. Santos Jr., Executive Director of the Institute of Politics and Governance, add to the growing list of worthwhile readings.

The Theory and Practice of People's Councils: Focus on the Naga City Model is a compilation of papers and documents that focuses on the Naga City People's Council (NCPC). These are actually discussion papers of the Task Force People's Council (TFPC) and the Inter-Agency Consultation on People's Councils in 1987 written from the popular democracy (popdem) or a mass and people-based perspective. The NCPC is said to be "the most developed experiment so far" (p. 9) in actualizing the concept of people's councils. The editor admits, however, that the concept and theory of people's councils remained vague and incomplete despite these early initiatives toward theorizing.

The Theory and Practice of People's Councils describes the NCPC's enabling "Empowerment Ordinance," its precursor — the Naga City NGO-PO Council, and the outstanding LGU-NGO partnership in Naga. Most of the articles were written by city councilors who conceptualized the "Empowerment Ordinance" creating the NCPC and non-government organization (NGO) people and researchers who discussed some of the experiences of the NCPC. The book contains NCPC basic documents such as its Mission, Objectives and Strategies statement; Code of By-

Laws; and List of Members. Also included are documents on other Naga innovations like the Healthy Naga project; Draft First Ordinance; Resolution Submitting for Ratification or Approval by the People, Certain Approved and Proposed Ordinances; Resolution Creating a Special Committee for the Election of Sectoral Representatives; and Resolution Declaring the City of Naga as a Peace Zone.

Participant observation provided by the writers comes in handy with descriptions of the dynamics in the actual development and operation of the NCPD from the point of view of several Naguēños. However, one cannot fail to notice the fact that some of the articles are not actually essays but notes and outlines. While the original purpose of these materials was to be working group papers and report notes instead of book chapters or articles, they could have been transformed into full essays upon consideration for inclusion in the book.

Working Group, Working Papers: NGO-PO Perspectives for the Local Government Code Review is also a compilation of papers and other documents of the Working Group on the Local Government Code Review. The book intends to make known to a wider audience the work and output of the Working Group, a loose coalition of NGOs, POs and individuals in the field of democratization and empowerment. Specifically, the Working Group seeks to make substantial contributions to the review the Local Government Code. One particular venue for popularizing its work is through publication. The activities of the Working Group are designed to help the NGO-PO community return to the mainstream and contribute to policy discussions on local governance.

The 1991 Local Government Code (LGC), or R.A. 7160, is subject to a mandatory review every five years (sec. 521). Studies assessing the effectivity of the LGC are abundant. Most of these are case studies. However, in view of the mandatory provision for review, some of the studies have gone beyond purely descriptive form and have taken a policy-oriented stance, with emphasis on possible amendments to the LGC in order to improve performance of local government units as well as strengthen the participation of non-government organizations and people's organizations (NGOs and POs) in decision-making. *Working Group, Working Papers* is one such work.

The Working Group has adapted two frameworks in dealing with LGC questions. The first framework is the three “i’s”: implementation, improvements, and interrelations. Briefly, this means: faithfully implement the LGC to reach full maturity; support it through capability-building; defend the gains of devolution; improve its empowerment aspects; harmonize it with other laws and programs; and relate it with the basic sector agenda. The second framework is the 3 “De’s”: devolution, democratization, and development. The Working Group supports devolution as a rule, subject to the considerations of democratization and development — more precisely sustainable development.

The first chapter is largely made up of narrative reports by the IPG to the Ford Foundation which has funded most of IPG’s local governance programs, including areas for activities of the Working Group. The rest of the chapters contain various papers generated by the Working Group. The second chapter contains papers before the formation of the Working Group, showing that NGO-PO participation has helped to improve local governance through specific case studies cited. The third chapter largely shows trends and issues on a nation-wide scale and in Mindanao in local governance. It points out that the main obstacles to NGO-PO contributions to local governance are uncooperative or hostile government officials.

In the process of its advocacy, the Working Group saw the need as well as its role to mainstream the undercurrent of democratization on the agenda. It wants to bring power not only to local governments but communities as well. The fourth chapter, thus, focuses on the Abad/Flavier “Empowerment Bill” (H.B. 5636/S.B.1348) which the pre-Working Group formation helped in crafting. According to the Working Group, the bill is the best available legislative instrument for advocacy. The fifth chapter creates a matrix of the emerging points of agreement and disagreement among key stakeholders, especially NGOs, POs and local governments, as regards local governance. A contentious issue here is sectoral representation. The sixth chapter looks into the Working Group’s strategic alliance with the 3 major leagues of local governments in the context of the LGC review. Finally, the seventh chapter looks into another contentious issue: land conversion. Here is where there seems to be the most developed work in interrelating the LGC with another major Code (National Land and Water Use Code) and concerns of a major sector; i.e. agrarian reform and rural development.

As compilations, both books suffer from the unevenness of form and substance. The materials in *The Theory and Practice of People's Councils* vary in quality. This is understandable as some of them were written initially for other purposes and different audiences instead of being part of a book, e.g., as working papers for workshops, articles for newspapers, and notes of researchers. In addition, the differences are also understandable due to the diverse backgrounds of the authors. In fact, the diversity provides an interesting as well as a more representative, dynamic approach to the subject of people's councils. National NGO researchers focused on the theory of people's councils while local public and NGO leaders focused on an actual example of a people's council.

However, some of the documents are not properly presented and integrated with the other parts of the book. For instance, while the full text of the "Empowerment Ordinance" and related resolutions of the City Council form a central aspect of the NCPC, they should be placed together with the article on the salient features of the ordinance rather than be treated as separate sections or chapters. In addition, NCPC documents, like the mission statement, by-laws, and list of members, might be better placed as appendices rather than as separate parts or chapters. Furthermore, the inclusion in the last part of the book of other Naga innovations, while important, deviates from the main focus of the book which is the NCPC. These other innovations can be the subjects of other books or studies.

Likewise the articles included in *Working Group, Working Papers* vary in quality and academic value. This is understandable because while the members of the Working Group share similar views on the LGC, they still have different backgrounds. Some of the writers are from research-focused NGOs while the others are into advocacy work. Some have taken a more focused, specific sector approach to the LGC review while others looked into comprehensive themes. Some articles are just short notes or outlines while others are full essays complete with tables, matrixes, diagrams and flowcharts as well as analysis and contributions to theory-building.

Admittedly, the more developed articles have presented the issues in a more successful manner than the others because of their comprehensive treatment of the subject matter as well as the use of

illustrations and matrixes to succinctly explain their points. In a sense, the diversity in the articles reflect the plurality of the member organizations comprising the Working Group. Yet, despite these differences in writing styles, it is obvious that since the papers have mostly provided a list of proposed amendments to the LGC, some of the concerns listed overlap so much so that some points in one article appear again in some other articles. This shows a growing consensus within the Working Group about certain parts of the Code.

While the theoretical base or framework of *The Theory and Practice of People's Councils* is from a popdem perspective, an overarching concluding article analyzing the phenomenon of the NCPC as well as bringing together the theory and practice of people's councils and the larger process of democratization is lacking. The editor's introductory article noted some aspects of the political, cultural and social context of the NCPC but did not delve deeper into some salient aspects and issues of the people's participation in governance. For instance, despite the success of the NCPC, it is not without problems. Some of the articles have already pointed out certain issues of the NCPC, like being dismissed by some sectors as a mere support organization of Mayor Jesse Robredo, as well as problems in LGU-NGO partnership, particularly the NCPC's participation in the local *sanggunian's* standing committees. There could also be a portion in the book discussing the prospects for the NCPC after Mayor Robredo.

The Theory and Practice of People's Councils shows the advantages and limitations of focusing on a particular case study. On the one hand, it has focused, albeit lacking in more systematic analysis, on some of the dynamics of an attempt to operationalize the dynamics of popular participation at the local level. However, there is a need to link the experience of Naga with the experiences of other parts of the country. While the NCPC is being held up as an exemplar, comparative studies are also required. For instance, what elements were present in the experience of the NCPC which may be lacking in some failed attempts towards people's council initiatives, for example, the Calocan City case? How replicable is the NCPC experience in other parts of the country?

The Theory and Practice of People's Councils adds to the growing number of literature seeking to document and describe various initiatives at the local level to deepen the concept of democracy in the country. For

this reason, the book is an important document discussing an exemplary case of a local initiative and is a welcome addition to the growing literature on case studies on local democratization. The Naga experience can be held up as an inspiration for other areas and groups throughout the country aspiring to make governance more participatory. What remains is the need to link local experiences such as this to the larger process of democratization in the Philippines, on the one hand, and to theory-building, on the other.

In the introductory part of *Working Group, Working Papers*, Santos is correct in saying that the unfolding of the LGC is far from complete. In much the same way, the work of the Working Group is also far from being complete. Some issue-areas of the Code have been studied and highlighted more than others. Nevertheless, the book provides a link to most of the case studies available and the implementation of the LGC. It has shown that while much work is still needed in trying to translate these proposals into concrete policies and significant amendments to the Code, there are groups, primarily from the NGO/PO sector, already advocating improvements. Thus, this book is recommended for NGOs, POs, LGUs, members of Congress and other people interested in local governance. Perhaps, people reading this book can contribute their own assessment about the LGC and can highlight issue areas that have not been looked into yet.

In sum, *Working Group, Working Papers* is a very significant contribution to the field of local governance. Its most obvious practical relevance would be its review and proposed amendments to the LGC in light of the mandatory review processes. While drawing conclusions and recommendations from previous researches and case studies as well as consultations with NGO, PO and local government representatives from all over the country, the Working Group has clearly moved beyond descriptive analysis and went into policy proposals. By adopting the frameworks of 3 “i’s” and 3 “De’s” for tackling the LGC review, the articles written by different people are linked together. Furthermore, the frameworks link the proposed LGC amendments track to the larger frameworks of democratization and development. ❀