

Decentralization: Governance From Below

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The discipline and praxis of local government administration and decentralization in the Philippines has undergone serious reexamination over recent years. To a certain extent, this was brought about by the enactment of the Local Government Code of 1991 which significantly devolved powers, authorities, and responsibilities to the local government units throughout the country and provided the infrastructure for direct participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) in the process of governance.

It should be noted, though, that the enactment of the Local Government Code of 1991 was a culmination of the long and arduous struggle for autonomy among the local government units in the country which were historically held hostage by a highly centralized politico-administrative system. It was a system that saw most decisions made, and financial resources concentrated, in 'imperial Manila.' This brought about waste, inefficiency, red tape, and even corruption resulting in the general unresponsiveness of the system that thrived on maintaining the dependency of local structures upon the central

government. The inequitable relationship between the center and the periphery perpetuated itself. It was towards breaking this unequal and uneven relations that local governments demanded autonomy.

It is within the above context that this paper will discuss decentralization as a process designed to bring about more effective and responsive governance from below. This paper will raise issues that are currently being confronted by theorists and practitioners of local government administration and relate this to the broader concerns of the Philippine state. With the general objective of contributing to the discourse and debate on governance and decentralization, the paper will also identify concerns that have to be addressed in the continuing search for more effective and responsive politico-administrative institutions at the local level.

The Philippines as a Weak State

It is commonly agreed that the Philippine state is essentially weak because of its general inability to deliver basic services and to effectively enforce laws. For instance, the level of health and social services are certainly inadequate to meet the needs of the Filipino population. The maintenance and preservation of law and order continue to be major challenges to the state structure. Like any other Third World country, the government's provision for basic services required for 'development' — ranging from physical and communications infrastructure, energy, to other social infrastructure — continues to be relatively deficient. To a certain extent, therefore, the state's politico-administrative structures have been unable to adequately and effectively perform its fundamental function of providing for basic services, which is its *raison d'être*. Thus, in this particular sense, the Philippine state has been correctly characterized as a weak state.

It is, therefore, within this context that we now turn our attention to decentralization as a major strategy for strengthening the Philippine state by effecting governance from below.

Decentralization

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(within the context of empowerment) towards the general objective of making government more responsive to the people. Additionally, with meaningful decentralization, the provision of basic services to the people would not only be adequate but responsive and relevant as well. Equally important is the fact that the decentralization of governmental structures and processes would contribute towards strengthening the state.

The framework for the decentralization of the structures and processes of governance in the Philippines is provided by the Local Government Code of 1991 that devolves substantial powers and authorities to local government units and encourages the active participation of NGOs and POs in governance. The following are the highlights of the Code:

1.) It transfers the responsibility for the delivery of certain basic services including health, agriculture, environment and natural resources, social services, and certain infrastructure projects which were formerly the responsibility of the national government, to the local government units.

2.) The Code transfers the enforcement of certain regulatory functions (including licensing and registration functions, e.g., aspects of environmental protection; agricultural services like meat inspection; and transportation services like the registration of tricycles), which were formerly the responsibility of national government agencies, to local government units.

3.) It increases the share of local government units in the internal revenue allotment (financial resources generated by the state mostly

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from tax and customs collections) from 20 percent (but in actuality was only 11 percent) to 40 percent. This means that even the lowest level of local governments, the barangays, would have a budget of at least P80,000, certainly a significant increase for barangays that did not even have a budget of P5,000 before the enactment of the code.

4.) Finally, the Code provides the policy infrastructure that would encourage active participation of the citizens through NGOs and POs in

the process of governance. The NGOs and POs are actually allocated a certain percentage of seats in various special local bodies. For instance, NGOs and POs can occupy up to one-fourth of the seats in local development councils.

There is no doubt that the Local Government Code of 1991, if implemented properly, will radically transform the power structure and dynamics of national-local relations. It has the potential to reshape the very face of the local politico-administrative system of the country by fundamentally increasing the powers, responsibilities, and accountabilities of local government units to enable them to be more responsive and effectively deliver basic services. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the decentralization of powers to local institutions lays the infrastructure for the operationalization of people empowerment through what can also be referred to as ‘active citizenship’ through NGOs and POs.

The following sections focus precisely upon these concerns: Within the broad context of decentralization, how has direct participation of NGOs and POs in the formal structures and processes of governance led to the redefinition of the very notion of ‘governance’? And, how has such NGO and PO involvement strengthened the Philippine state by operationalizing the value of ‘governance from below’?

NGO-PO Participation in Formal Structures of Governance

The participation of NGOs and POs in the formal structures and processes of local governance has led to a redefinition or, to refer to the contemporary work of David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government*, a 'reinvention' of the notion of governance. It will be recalled that these authors largely limited the notion of governance to the *formal* structures and processes of government. The Local Government Code has further reinvented the notion of governance.

In most general terms, the notion of governance is anchored upon the term 'govern' which implies the following: 1.) the delivery of basic services to the people; and, 2.) the leadership role played by the formal structures of government in the delivery of such services. Recent Philippine history has shown that NGOs and POs have played a significant role in governance even before the enactment of the Local Government Code. With the Local Government Code of 1991 that allocates a significant percentage of seats in various special local bodies for NGOs and POs, the doors for NGO and PO involvement in local governance have become wide open.

The other aspect that is wide open for active citizenship through the NGOs and POs is in the area of promoting local accountabilities through initiative and recall. These processes entail substantial citizen mobilization. It is widely accepted that the 'comparative advantage' of NGOs and POs is their ability to organize and mobilize people.

Finally, the participation of NGOs and POs in local development processes is actually a form of decentralization; it is also

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referred to as 'debureaucratization.' To a certain extent, therefore, debureaucratizing the delivery of services to the people can actually lead to more effective and responsive structures of governance (now redefined and broadened to go beyond the confines of the formal structures and processes) with the net effect of contributing towards strengthening the state, more specifically in the sense that it 'enables' the state to effectively perform its fundamental function of delivering basic services to the people.

Operationalizing 'Governance From Below'

Indeed, the Local Government Code of 1991 has provided the policy infrastructure that could operationalize the much valued concepts of empowerment and governance from below. However, implementing the Code has brought with it a number of downstream concern -- both at the analytical and normative levels -- that have to be addressed. This include concerns pertaining to the state, the very notion of 'governance' and decentralization as a strategy to bring about active citizenship. The following, therefore, are some of the major questions that should be addressed in this continuing discourse on decentralization:

- 1.) Historically, has the Philippine state become weak because of the tradition of centralized governance?

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With most decision-making powers and financial resources concentrated in 'imperial Manila,' development of the countryside has been neglected. This has resulted in the general inability and failure of government to deliver basic services to the people, not only in the center but also in the periphery. It is, therefore, imperative for the highly centralized politico-administrative system to decentralize. More importantly, this means devolving powers and authorities to the local government units, which are, after all, in the

frontline of the long chain of governmental structures. For many people, local governments *are* the government. If local governments are unresponsive, so is the national government. It is, therefore, imperative to strengthen and 'capacitate,' i.e., increase the capacity of, local governments.

2.) Can the direct involvement of NGOs and POs in the processes of governance actually contribute towards bringing about more responsive state structures and processes?

The Local Government Code provides for such NGO-PO involvement within the context of active citizenship. Thus, it is an instrument that is available. But it would be a mistake to consider it the only instrument. There is empowerment beyond the confines of the Local Government Code. In fact, it might be parenthetically mentioned that the Code's provisions on such could be double-edged in the sense that they can even be misinterpreted and misused as a variation of the corporatist strategy of the state, one that was employed quite effectively by the Marcos dictatorship.

3.) Can the increased presence and assertiveness of NGOs and POs in the general processes of governance, especially within the context of taking the lead in the delivery of basic services in some parts of the country (mostly in areas where government's presence is not felt), be a function of government's inability to 'govern,' i.e., deliver basic services to the people?

Perhaps, the framework that can be adopted in understanding the increased assertiveness of NGOs and POs in the processes of governance and local development in particular, is that they are able to complement and supplement the actual delivery of services to the people, especially in areas -- both sectorally and geographically -- where the government is weak and incapable. That NGOs and POs are able to offer alternative service delivery processes should likewise be appreciated. Hence, the very notion of 'governance' itself has to undergo reexamination and reinvention.

The process of rethinking dominant paradigms in local governance should, therefore, be a continuing and sustained process.