

Empowerment and Local Government Autonomy

GABRIEL U. IGLESIAS*

The Philippine development program places much concern on the rural sector which is the largest segment of the population. For its effective implementation, the involvement of the rural populace in government-sponsored programs and projects is solicited through the community organizations (COs). Systematic depoliticization and suppression of the more radicalized groups were however resorted to during the Marcos era to perpetuate the powers of the rural elites. Contrarily, the Aquino government is empowering the organized sector of the community and the autonomous local government units to perform functions and responsibilities to enable them to become effective partners of the central government in nation-building despite the worsening economic condition as exemplified by cases of malnutrition and increasing poverty of the rural households. It is posited that people participation in government activities develops the interest and commitment needed for the successful realization of development goals.

Introduction

Being predominantly agricultural and rural, Philippine development is significantly intertwined with past and current efforts to develop the rural sector.¹ To my mind, the most suitable definition of rural development is one that views it "as a process which leads to a rise in the capacity of rural people to control their environment, accompanied by wider distribution of benefits resulting from such a control."² This definition not only posits the rural people at center stage in the development process but also focuses on their capability to influence their own environment and their share in the fruits of development.

The current development strategy of the Aquino government is to promote decentralization through local autonomy and to increase the role of community organizations in development by the transfer of certain governmental functions to local communities.³

In view of this current thrust of the government, this paper examines the issues and problems in Philippine experience in organizing the

* Professor and Dean, College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines. Ms. Nora Romblon, a researcher of the College, assisted in the study.

Paper initially presented at the Colloquium Series on Rural Development held at the Development Academy of the Philippines, July 29-30, 1986.

community for development and the role played and strategies used by the government — the national ministries, agencies and local governments — in promoting and developing community organizations (COs) to accelerate development. As used in this paper, a CO is defined as "group of people belonging to a defined geographic area who have banded together to pursue a common interest or objective."⁴ The inclusion of the role of national agencies and ministries in community organization and development is inevitable considering their predominant role in providing sectoral services in the local area (e.g., health, education, public works, agriculture, etc.) and their more active involvement in organizing local communities as conduits in the implementation of the programs and services.

This paper limits its discussion primarily to COs organized or sponsored by government but does not preclude examination, whenever relevant, of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) set up by local or international charitable or sector/interest organizations (e.g., those concerned with family planning, health and nutrition, etc.) and those created by the community folk themselves with or without political orientation, such as civic or professional groups. It also considers formal local political organizations, such as barangays, whenever they are useful in illuminating the role of community organizations.

Strategies, Issues and Problems in Community Organizing

Community Organizations as Implementing Mechanism

Since the onslaught of the community development (CD) movement in the fifties, COs have functioned as the most persistent and ubiquitous instruments of government, particularly the national sectoral ministries, for mobilizing the rural communities to support various programs and projects. The sectoral composition of these COs varied greatly from farmers' and fishermen's cooperatives to nutrition, mothers' and rural improvement clubs. By and large, community organizations constitute a useful mechanism for drawing citizen participation because of advantages in the following aspects: (1) mobilizing local resources, (2) facilitating the collection of information needed to adapt programs to local conditions, (3) facilitating social change, and, (4) helping sustain demand for delivery of services.⁵

The thrust towards promoting the establishment of COs, aims to make them as the main channel for implementing various programs of the sectoral ministries and, to a lesser extent, the local governments. The strategy of employing community organizations in program/project implementation stems from several considerations.

People Participation Through Community Organizations

A noted rural sociologist asserts that the "most important approach in (eliciting) people participation is community organization."⁶ The active involvement and participation of the organized members of the community through COs, particularly the target beneficiaries or clientele of government programs and projects, had however been used as the overriding rationale for consigning the fate of the COs to that of "a tool or technique for achieving desired socio-economic changes (and)... as entry point in introducing a new project to the people."⁷

Because of the objective condition of powerlessness of the great mass of people in communities and other factors which impair or frustrate their efforts to change and control their environment, "community organization appears to be the methodology for participation."⁸ It is only through active involvement in the COs that the disadvantaged members of society can attain a sense of potency in lobbying for programs for their own welfare as well as in challenging the entrenched power elites in their communities. However, there is often a chasm between intention and reality, between the promise brought about by community organizations as a technique and strategy in transforming the lives of the disadvantaged sector and the results of our experience.

People and citizens' participation found in that fashionable expression "people power" and expressed through involvement in COs remains an elusive and perplexing tool and mechanism for social change. While the role of "people power" is considered an indubitable factor in the removal of the Marcos dictatorship, its role in introducing and securing more profound and lasting social and economic transformation is open to controversy, unless we include in its definition organizations whose ideology is explicitly anti-establishment, e.g., the communist party.

Issues and Problems

The socio-economic and political conditions, which breed inequity and unequal power and access to resources, nurture a general feeling of impotency and powerlessness among the vast majority of the poor and disadvantaged Filipinos. Centuries of colonialism and feudal conditions comprise one side of the problem. The other and more sinister side is the unwitting or, in some cases, deliberate employment by government of community organizations for its own ends, no matter how noble or worse, ignoble.

This "top-down" approach views COs as convenient conduits of government projects and services which not only limits participation but also leads to the eventual capture of organizational benefits by the rural elites.

This approach, reinforced by socio-cultural and economic conditions in the rural communities, tends to perpetuate existing power relationships where the few landed elites hold in bondage the numerous but powerless poor.

Findings of various studies suggest that the prevailing social and economic patterns show disparities in economic resources because of the inequitous land ownership structure which tend to reinforce a patron-client relationship between the local political and economic elites and their followers in a dyadic or mutual benefit relationship. One consequence of these is the tendency of government to funnel services and projects through the local elite system, or through organizations headed by them or organized with their assistance.⁹

The continuing poverty of rural households despite decades of reasonable growth and development, dramatized by the recent cases of children dying of malnutrition in Negros and elsewhere, attests to the fact that benefits accrued to the "upper 20 per cent of the rural households" which received more than 50 per cent of the total rural income . . . and the bottom 40 per cent received less than 15 per cent of the income . . ."¹⁰

The experience of other countries supports this finding. As noted by the father of the famous Comilla project in Bangladesh, the majority of rich and influential people in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka who controlled the management of the cooperatives, exert tremendous influence over the administration and appropriation of its resources, mainly credit and water distribution, for their own advantage.¹¹

Another problem besetting government-sponsored COs for the last fifteen years of Marcos dictatorship is the deliberate proliferation of pliant and depoliticized community organizations and the deliberate suppression or dismantling of the more radicalized and/or independent farmers' organizations because of the threat they pose to the regime's stability. As Hollnsteiner aptly noted, "while government may advocate grassroots access to power and participation as a desirable norm, they also know that when people do organize and develop a sense of efficacy, they constitute a threat to existing regimes that do not meet their expectations."¹²

Other problems which have cropped up from our experience in mobilizing people at the grassroots through community organizations include the following: (1) proliferation of COs created by various sectoral ministries leading to confusion among farmers because multiple membership in various COs complicates the process of technology transfer,¹³ (2) "stealing" of members from existing organizations by other ministries,¹⁴ (3) duplication of services,¹⁵ (4) lack of responsiveness to local needs,¹⁶ and (5) dependency of COs to government agencies for support and resource inputs.¹⁷

Dr. Gelia Castillo, an eminent rural sociologist, after reviewing many studies on the role of community organizations as vehicles for participation, came up with the following findings:¹⁸

1. (On the Samahang Nayon and other cooperatives). . . Next to the problem of "contracting landowners" are the problems of "motivating farmers to join Samahang Nayon . . . and organizing and maintaining compact farms . . . mediating or assisting in the mediating of agrarian reform conflicts."

2. The average barrio resident is usually asked to participate in the implementation stage of an organization's activities but is left out in the planning phase.

3. Rural groups studied neither articulate nor process local needs.

4. Because community organization work and participation in projects are time- and energy-intensive, many farmers tend to incur absences and eventually lose interest.

5. One of the most important contributions of community organizations in rural development is the identification and development of rural leaders.

The Role of COs in Participatory Development

Many lessons, some painful, have been learned from decades of efforts to accelerate development through community action and participatory strategies. Although the experience on the role of government in community organizations and development had been a checkered one, many studies tend to show that despite many problems, the government-sponsored and created community organizations have yielded some beneficial results, particularly in modernizing rural communities.¹⁹

A great number of cases show that concerted action through community organizations remains one of the more effective channels through which beneficiaries and the community can influence the formulation, implementation and evaluation of government programs, projects, and services. Institutional involvement of the irrigators' association in the design, construction and in assuming control of the communal irrigation system led to improved planning and implementation of communal irrigation projects.²⁰ A study made by Ocampo and Tancangco revealed that the participation of the community tend to improve technical decisions, "help reduce costs, meet problems of coordination and make them more interested, committed and prepared to own, operate and maintain a system."²¹ Strong involvement of the beneficiaries in various phases of project life expands their understanding and provides strong motivations for participation.

The value of empowerment of the organized sector of the rural community through viable and effective participation of community organizations stems from the increased capability of the disadvantaged and poorer members of the rural community to influence decisions affecting their lives and welfare. Genuine development — economic as well as social —

cannot take place so long as the rural development strategy falls short of empowering the more numerous but poorer members of the society. Thus, actual transfer of government functions and responsibility accompanied by the requisite resources can only qualify as a feasible strategy if and only if community organizations can become effective partners in the development process. This privatization strategy should be accompanied by actual devolution of political powers to the barangays, the lowest level of local government.²²

Policies which should be examined regarding the role of government in community organizations should stress the following: (1) to create COs which will eventually be independent of the ministry or agency which sponsored it; (2) to provide COs' well defined and important roles that will have impact on the improvement of the management of programs or the delivery of services; and, (3) to provide institutional mechanisms for eliciting the participation of community groups in key phases of the activity, as in the communal irrigation projects.

The strategy of strengthening community organizations should be matched by decentralization of governmental powers through greater devolution of functions accompanied by commensurate authority and resources to perform these tasks. Without increased local autonomy, the empowerment of community organizations to support local developments will be less effective.²³

In the final analysis, while economic development and progress are important, a United Nations study showed that these tangible benefits "are less important than the social process that is generated by the intervention — that is, in fact the counter process."²⁴ Indeed, social transformation and modernization are the handmaidens of more permanent development. Community organizations serve as dynamic forces in achieving these social and economic changes.

Endnotes

¹For a review of experiences in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian Countries, see Gabriel U. Iglesias, "Management of Rural Development Projects in Asia," in Iglesias and Romeo B. Ocampo (eds.), *Studies in the Management of Rural Development Projects: Cases from Asian Experiences, Vol. 1*, Southeast Asia, (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Center [APDC], 1984.)

²Inayatullah, (ed.), *Approaches to Rural Development: Some Experiences*, (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Administration Center (APDAC) 1979), p. 11.

³Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), *Economic Recovery and Long-run Growth: Agenda for Reforms, Vol. 1, Main Report* (May 1, 1986).

⁴David K. Leonard, "Analyzing the Organizational Requirements for Serving the Rural Poor," in Leonard and Dale Rogers Marshall (eds.), *Institutions of Rural Development for the Poor* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1982), p. 6.

⁵ Gaspar E. Nepomuceno, "Community Organizations in Rural Waterworks Management," *Philippine Local Government Journal*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1984), p. 55.

⁶ Gelia T. Castillo, *How Participatory is Participatory Development* (Manila: PIDS, 1983), p. 487.

⁷ Nepomuceno, *op. cit.*

⁸ Ma. Concepcion P. Alfiler, "Stability, Developmental Destabilization and the Development Workers: Some Reflections," in *Snowball: Alumni Newsletter*, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, New Series, nr. 13.

⁹ Gabriel U. Iglesias, "Mobilizing Local Groups for Rural Development: Approaches and Problems," in Amara Raksasataya and L.J. Fredericks (eds.), *Rural Development: Training to Meet New Challenges* (Kuala Lumpur: APDAC, 1978), p. 1020.

¹⁰ Asian Development Bank, *Rural Asia*, Vol. 3, p. 5.

¹¹ "Integrated Rural Development," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. XXI, No. 1 (January 1977), p. 28.

¹² Mary R. Hollnsteiner, "Report on the Workshop in Access, Development and Distributive Justice," paper presented at the Conference on Strategic Factors in Rural Development in East and Southeast Asia, Council for Asian Manpower Studies, Manila, December 1976.

¹³ Dioscoro L. Umali's study revealed that "25 organizations – 19 of them initiated by government – operate in a typical village," *Keynote Address*, National Conference on Participatory Strategies for Countryside Development, February 1983, UP-ISWCD. See Also Angelito Manalili, "Strategies for Influencing National Policies and Programs to Suit Local Needs," in Amara and Fredericks, *op. cit.*, p. 1123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ A World Bank study stressed the need for coordination of farmers' organizations to mitigate the effects of "unnecessary conflicts and duplication of services (which) exist among farmers' organizations to a degree which could be considered detrimental," *The Philippines: Priorities and Prospects for Development* (Washington, D.C., 1976), p. 123.

¹⁶ Ledivina V. Cariño observed that generally the central government's decentralization strategy fails to appreciate significant differences in local conditions, needs and capability. See "People's Power: Towards the Long Term Efficacy of a Revolutionary Tool," paper presented at the Symposium on "People's Power: Pitfalls, Promises and Performance," held June 24, 1986, Development Academy of the Philippines. Cristina Montiel, "The Role of Organizations in Rural Development: The Philippine Case," in *Role of Rural Organizations in Rural Development: Summaries* (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Center for Development Administration, 1976), p. 39 notes the discrepancy between felt needs of the community and the priorities imposed on local organizations by national ministries.

¹⁷ Clare Oxby, "Farmer's Groups in Rural Areas of the Third World," *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 1983), p. 54. He also observed that one common weakness of local organizations is their strong links and dependent relationships with government ministries . . . , *ibid.*, p. 53. This observation was also confirmed by G. Shabbir Cheema when he noted that "without effective linkages and the support of government agencies, most rural organizations will not be able to function effectively," "The Role of Rural Organizations in Rural Development in Malaysia: In-Depth Study," in *Role of Rural Organizations . . . , op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁸ Castillo, *op. cit.*, pp. 534-537.

¹⁹ Thavatchai Sankatiprapa, Communication Role Performance of Agrarian Reform Technologists in Batangas and Laguna, unpublished M.S. thesis, UPLB, 1978. For a summary of key issues and problems in managing rural development in the Philippines, see Gabriel U. Iglesias, "Managing Integrated Rural Development: Key Issues and Problems," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 (January 1982).

²⁰Iglesias, "Management of Rural Development Projects in Asia: An Overview," in Iglesias and Ocampo, eds., *op. cit.*

²¹Ocampo and Luzviminda Tancango, "Bicol's LICIAID: Interagency Relations and Farmer Participation in Philippine IRD Project," in Iglesias and Ocampo, *ibid.*, p. 174. See also Loretta Makasiar-Sirat and Ric Tan Legada, "Planning and Management of Communal Irrigation Systems in the Philippines," in Iglesias and Ocampo, *ibid.*

²²Victoria A. Bautista, "People Power as a Form of Citizen Participation: Boon or Bane," paper presented before a symposium sponsored by the Philippine Association for the Advancement of Science, University of the Philippines, Diliman, May 23, 1986. See also Horacio Morales, "Cooperative for Development," in the Technical Panel, Center for Research and Development, *The Philippines at the Crossroads: Some Visions for the Nation*. (Manila), 1986.

²³Interview with Dr. Gaudioso Sosmena, Director, Bureau of Local Government Supervision, July 28, 1987. See also Bautista, *op. cit.*

²⁴ESCAP, *Poverty, Productivity and Participation*, Bangkok, 1982, p. 119.