

3rd International Meeting on Cooperation
16-18 October 2000
Beijing, China

NGO Networks and Coalitions A View from the Philippines

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

3rd International Meeting on Cooperation
16-18 October 2000
Beijing, China

NGO Networks and Coalitions A View from the Philippines

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Recontruction Movement



NGO Networks and Coalitions A View from the Philippines



A word on terms

Some key terms used here—NGOs, networks, and coalitions—need some explanation. By the original UN definition NGOs are voluntary non-state organizations interfacing with the UN system and functioning like a reference or sounding board. The new term CSOs (civil society organizations) covers a much broader range of voluntary associations of citizens, including NGOs, people’s organizations (POs) and community-based organizations (CBOs).

Networks and coalitions are formal or informal arrangements by which NGOs work together around a common goal—for example, to influence development policies and practices. They also suggest a strategic approach, that is, networks and coalitions are a means to leverage impact which NGOs, working separately, cannot do as effectively.

Building networks and coalitions has been a big part of Philippine development experience from the start. The commonplace reason is, development is too big a question to be left to government or any other single actor.

A bit of history

NGO as a development phenomenon in the Philippines is nearly as old as the country's postwar development history itself.

A more familiar example of NGO is the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). A pioneer in rural community development, PRRM was organized in 1952, a year ahead of the adoption by the UN of the name NGO. Before 1953, the label used for organizations like PRRM was private voluntary organization (PVO), adopted by the USAID and still in use today. The two are often used to mean the same thing.

NGO coalitions were never heard of in the 1950s. But partnerships and networking were nonetheless considered necessary, as suggested by PRRM experience.

PRRM early on already recognized the need to network and ally with others in order to carry out its mission of helping the poor help themselves out of their poverty situation. Its founders, led by Chinese scholar-activist Dr. Y. C. James Yen and the famous Filipino educator Dean Conrado Benitez, never had any illusion that their bunch of reformers could do it by themselves. To realize the dream of local democracy and development through mass education, they needed to leverage their own contribution with the efforts of many others. PRRM enlisted members and volunteers who had the credibility and capacity to inspire others and generate broad support. They came from government, academe and private corporations. Their position in society allowed them to access and mobilize resources, to influence state policies and programs affecting rural communities, to inspire thousands of professionals to serve the rural people, to get private companies to support PRRM work in distant villages



NGO networks and coalitions today

Building networks and coalitions are many times more complex today.

The sheer number of NGOs in the Philippines—about 60,000 by the end of the 20th century—is obviously a big challenge. These are tens of thousand development actors believing, valuing, thinking and doing different things.

NGOs would differ in their interpretation of the development situation, in what they want to do and how to get to where they want to be.

NGOs operate in different contexts. What works in one place cannot be easily replicated and generalized.

NGOs differ in capacity. What they can and cannot do depends on many factors. Some have more resources and experience than others. Some can do comprehensive programs while others can focus on only one or two aspects of very complex development work.

Organization and management matter a lot. Some NGOs are led and governed well, others not as well.

Attitude towards other players defines courses of action. Some NGOs see government as enemy, others regard government as partner. Some NGOs are ready to cooperate with business corporations, others consider profit-driven interests as incapable of contributing to social justice and the common good.

NGO networks and coalitions have come and gone. Many have been built since the 1986 regime change and democratic transition. There have been networks and coalitions created around a variety of development and environment issues. Some have sustained to this day, others have collapsed or faded for some reasons.

What makes for success or failure

The experience in building NGO networks and coalitions has been very diverse and complex in both processes and outcomes.

But what is it that spells success or failure in building networks and coalitions? The answers are by no means clear-cut. Based on PRRM experience, it seems that the presence or absence of any number of the following elements can make or break networks and coalitions:

[1] *Shared values and goals* — Development NGOs usually share values like concern for justice, equality and human rights, mutual support and benefit, caring for nature, etc. and these are woven around common goals like democracy and sustainable development.

[2] *Willingness to work with others* — NGOs share common values and goals without forming coalitions but they cannot form coalitions if they are unwilling to work together.

[3] *Ability to find common ground* — The diversity of NGOs is something to be celebrated and upheld. But this same diversity demands a high ability to seek and find common points for collective action.

[4] *High degree of tolerance for differences* — Though there will always be differences, coalitions need not fall because of them. Coalitions hold because participating NGOs respect each other as they strive to think and act in common.



[5] *Credible leadership* — Coalitions leaders must be able to command respect through their ideas and deeds.

[6] *Initiative and responsibility* — Coalitions tend to be hung up on issues of representation and become so bureaucratic. More, they usually move according to the pace of the slowest members. Dynamic coalitions have members who take initiative and are ready to account for what they say and do.

[7] *Participation and inclusiveness* — Initiative, if confined to a few, can be divisive. Those who lead must strive to include all or make sure each one feels to be participating.

[8] *Flexibility and sense of humor* — Noble causes and missionary zeal tend to make us rigid and rob us of our capacity to laugh at our mistakes.

[9] *Sense of satisfaction and fulfillment* — Good or bad times, coalition members got to have some feeling that they're getting somewhere.

Too many or too few?

Networks and coalitions are consolidating mechanisms resulting from the unprecedented growth of NGOs in the Philippines. Whether they enable the growth and development of individual NGOs and the NGO community in general depends on how the abovementioned principle elements are put into action to produce positive outcomes.

Of the 60,000 or so CSOs in the country there are about 3,000 NGOs said to be active in development and environment issues. Most of these are aligned with one or other kind of coalition. One large and formal supra-tertiary coalition—meaning, coalition of coalitions—claim a base constituency of two-thirds or more of those 3,000 NGOs. Other NGO coalitions have as their members primary NGOs and talk of much smaller constituencies.

Larger or smaller coalitions?

Size matters, but in relative ways. Big can be beautiful or ugly, as it were. The same is true for the small.

There is strength in numbers. Also, numbers suggest diversity and dynamism—traits often uttered in international development circles to describe the NGO community in the Philippines. Thousand small voices speaking as one certainly can heighten the profile and influence of NGOs.



Big coalitions seem to command more attention from government and politicians. Smaller coalitions suggest weaker voice and smaller vote. Projecting bigness is important for advocating reforms and more enabling policy environment. But implementation of specific projects can be spoiled by too many cooks, so to speak.

Donor agencies, who have been driving Philippine NGOs to coalesce in larger and larger formations since 1986, seem to believe that large coalitions are more efficient aid delivery mechanisms because they deal with only a few representatives. Unintentionally or otherwise, this tendency results in privileging the big at the expense of the small.

Chances are, primary NGOs stand to lose or diminish their individual identity and sovereignty more in bigger networks and coalitions than in smaller ones. It does happen very often that coalitions get dominated by executive committees, secretariats, and spokespersons. Large formations tend to create layers and layers of representation which stifle initiative and inclusive participation.

National and local coalitions

NGOs in the Philippines have been building coalitions at all levels. This way, no space is defaulted and NGO coalitions are able to engage government units across the board.

Since 1986, PRRM has been involved in building major national coalitions. Examples of these include the Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC), the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform (CPAR), Green Forum Philippines (GFP), National Coalition on Local Governance (NCC-LG), Convergence for a Community-Centered Area Development (CONVERGENCE), the Council for People's Development (CPD), the Philippine NGO Coalition for Rural Development (PhiNCORD), the Conference Against Poverty (CAP), among others. PRRM did not participate in the efforts to build supra-tertiary coalitions like the Caucus of Development NGOs or CODE-NGO for reasons that have been explained earlier. In our view, all these coalitions collectively have contributed hugely in shaping the course of development after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship.

Networks and coalitions at the national level have been a major factor in formulating national development policies and strengthening democratic institutions. Many of their demands have seen expression in the 1987 post-Marcos constitution.

Networks and coalitions formed at the local level have played a major role, too. They have proved useful not only in monitoring the implementation of national policies but also in reorienting local development priorities. Here national coalitions have been very helpful in upgrading local capacity.



Citizen participation

A widespread people's demand since the 1960s, people's participation continues to occupy a central place in development discourse and action.

People's participation in policymaking and project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are now commonplace in Philippine development discourse. The terms NGO and participation have become household words, so to say. Much of this is owed to the work of NGOs, acting individually or in coalition.

Still there remains a wide divide between word and action. Issues concerning participation in the Philippines have become more subtle now. Meaning, that people are no longer satisfied with just being consulted and listened to even if their message gets into the policy language.

People's participation must be demonstrated to be effective. It must be a reality in our everyday.





About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

