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GO-NGO Cooperation in Project Planning and Management

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DEVELOPMENT IS AN ALL-IMPORTANT QUESTION to be left to government alone. But it would be equally wrong for the NGO community to think it can take on sole responsibility for it simply because government is increasingly proving to be a failure. The two sectors have to find effective ways of working together to realize the vision of sustainable development.

How such development cooperation could be made possible is precisely the core of our problem. Before even one can get government and NGO to collaborate on a project a whole set of obstacles needs to be sorted out and hurdled. There's just too much hostility in the air, as it were. It goes without saying that development cooperation can hardly prosper under this atmosphere.

And yet one can argue just on the basis of project-specific terms that government and NGO can get on no matter

the prevailing environment. Indeed this has been the case in the past. Our own organization, PRRM, for its part can speak of a long story of collaboration with government.

But then again the question is, shall we just proceed with the task and just push to the back of our minds matters that keep us apart. It can be done as it has been done before. However, I personally believe, and this is a shared belief in PRRM, that it's about time we together confronted the fundamental questions that divide us even as we actively search for modalities of cooperation, all for the common good.

The Myth of Poverty Alleviation

A common understanding of the nature of Philippine development crisis should provide us the broader context of GO-NGO collaboration in project planning and management. Needless to say, we cannot get far afield without a clear perspective and vision of what we want to see happening for our country.

Let me go quickly into an illustration, caricature as it may seem to you. Government recognizes the reality of poverty, sees it basically as a question of growth of the economy and then projects that by the year 2000 this problem shall be licked by sheer expansion the NICs way. Immediately, I can say that we don't buy that. We do see that same problem which is all too obvious anyway but that's all there is to our commonality. Beyond this is a complete divergence in analysis of poverty's root causes and the solutions required not only for its reduction but, *moreso*, its eventual elimination.

There's no need to bring ourselves into a heady discussion to see the immediate relevance of this illustration to our subject. The choice of every specific project we could meaningfully collaborate on will be determined by our differing perspectives and visions of change.

The poverty picture in the Philippines is a continuing nightmare. By World Bank's account, it is surpassed within Asia only by Bangladesh. The worse part of it is, this poverty is not being reduced but is actually expanding. Add to this the massive destruction of our environment in the last two decades and we have a perfect scenario for social disaster. Certainly, we cannot keep the integrity of our society, from the village to the national level, as poverty increases and our life support system continues to be threatened.



After four decades from independence and a succession of nine governments the promise of development has yet to be delivered. Instead what we see around us is the stubborn persistence and further worsening of poverty, environmental degradation and social conflicts.

Something must be fundamentally wrong here. Again government and NGO differ widely in where to look. The leaders of government, industry and finance tell us that this is due to lack of development. What in effect they are saying is we need more of the same. More of the same development projects that result in the displacement of whole communities from their means of life. More of the same projects that give quick returns for the few but leave the majority hungry and jobless. More of the same projects that treat our precious natural resources as if these were limitless.

None of them have ever paused just once to look elsewhere. The model of development our leaders have chosen is itself the problem. This is the collective assertion of a growing number of development theorists and practitioners in the NGO community here and elsewhere. The poverty we have tried to alleviate on a small scale through micro projects is being reproduced wholesale by the very model or strategy of development that promises to reduce it.

But what about this model? Simply put, it is a kind of development strategy that is obsessed with growth at the expense of social equity and the finite capacity of our natural resource endowment. It takes as given the existing unequal structures wherein only a few commands the resources, controls decision and appropriates most of the benefits. It is a strategy hooked deeply to the continuous flow of foreign capital which in the end is paid for through a relentless over exploitation of our nation's patrimony and human resource potentials.

Such strategy cannot continue any more than we can tolerate its devastating impact on our national community and our life support systems. If something's got to give, this is it.

Alternative to Crisis

All these years, NGOs and the popular movement in the Philippines have been in search for alternatives that are empowering and transforming. At this point, they have gone beyond system bashing, beyond critique. In fact they have been able to integrate specific alternatives into a coherent strategy which they hope will eventually replace the prevailing one.



Informed by the overriding theme of sustainable development and popular democracy, the alternative strategy puts the multidimensional interest of the household and community as the primary object of growth and development. Such strategy implies a high degree of sensitivity to the fragile nature of the Philippine ecosystem.

Applied on the local level, the strategy framework for such an alternative is a habitat or an area the size of a district or a small province. The geophysical determinant is watershed systems. There are around 225 such areas throughout the archipelago, each with a total of some 300,000 inhabitants. Fortunately, these areas by and large correspond to the present political divisions.

It should be worth noting that the current drive for local autonomy augurs well for the alternative strategy. But of course there's more to this convergence than just the physical and demographic factors. Much more important are the principles that shall govern area development.

At the end of the development intervention, each area shall have been transformed into sustainable development districts exhibiting measurable indicators. First, in terms of governance, a pluralist system of responsive public institutions and self managing communities is reigning supreme. Second, an ecologically sound and community-based local economy is growing steadily and translates in the material improvement in the position of the poor, the household and the whole community. Finally, ecological destruction shall have been arrested and a community - based natural resource management shall have been put firmly in place.

The realization of this scenario should be guided by the following principles:

Citizenship. The primary actors and beneficiaries of development are the citizens of the area. Outsiders can help but insiders themselves must do the job.

Inclusiveness. Development must embrace the whole community. The development of every individual or a section of the community should in the end lead to the development of all.

Social equity and social justice. Redress of inequity and injustice is a major first step. Development of the area can only be sustained if access to resources and the modes of their utilization are democratized.



Pluralism and diversity. Reality is too complex to be captured in one ideology of change no matter how superior to others. Society as well as nature abhors monopoly and intolerance.

Solidarity. The interlocking nature of development problems impels us to think globally while acting locally. Transformation in one area is linked to similar processes in the others.

GO-NGO Cooperation in area development

To come to a common understanding why development is not working is already a big step forward in GO-NGO collaboration. To be able to mainstream an alternative into public policy and have this supported with public resources is an even further advance in that direction. From here it would be no big deal to proceed with the business of collaboration in project planning and management.

Strategic planning. Projects must first be a part of a strategic plan of an area. The area so defined gives us a sense of scale of sustainability. The strategic plan gives coherence to every conceivable project and defines the location of each of the projects in the whole transformation project.

The initiative for this exercise can come from either government or NGO. The provincial government should be the ideal lead. Together with a lead NGO or a network of NGOs and people's organization (POs) present in the province, the provincial government should come up with a list of participants who can represent all the sectors. A joint committee may then be formed to do the initial design of the exercise.

The strategic planning exercise involves a comprehensive area scanning, defining a common vision for the province or area under consideration and formulation of strategies. The concrete final output of this exercise is a common action plan, along with a written pledge of commitment from all the participants.

A word on the provincial development plan. The least that could be said about it is the absence of NGO/PO participation. Stronger criticisms will point to its substance and relevance to transformation. Much has been said about 'swingline' approach, meaning to say the usual packaging technique of putting together discrete projects, mostly infrastructure related, evolved from the barangay level up. A more sophisticated critique of this technique will bring out the lack of coherence among the projects submitted and packaged.



This is not to say though, that the projects or the provincial plan itself is completely irrelevant. What needs to be emphasized here is that, projects should be informed and integrated by a sustainable development vision and a coherent strategy. In any case, provincial development plans can serve as one of the inputs in the strategic planning exercises. Government should in no way hold them sacred and instead should be willing to have them subjected to rigorous critique and eventual modification.

Project planning. This process becomes a meaningful set of activities within the context of a strategic plan for a sustainable area development. GO-NGO collaboration at this level should be consistent throughout the project cycle.

It goes without saying that project ideas can be generated by any stakeholder whether beneficiary or mediating agency and at any level from the household to the ecozone or area level. The important thing is, project selection protocols agreed by both sides come up to the norms of sustainable development as articulated or implied in the strategic plan.

The criteria used in project selection may be built into the monitoring and evaluation system which should likewise be commonly agreed upon, In any case the measurement indicators should faithfully reflect the kind of transformation desired for the area, the end-scenario which all projects should synergistically bring about. The further development of any project into a plan, the appropriate management and implementing structure to be set up, the operating systems required should also be worked out together. Government and NGOs involved in the project should exert their utmost to transfer the management of the project to the beneficiaries themselves. This requires technical skills transfer which should be considered right from the beginning.

On a broader level, a critical area where I believe there should be full community participation is framework planning. Up till now, the practice has been that the communities never had a hand in designing the town plan which defines land use.

A community-based land use planning is strongly suggested here. As stakeholders, the communities have every right to co-determine the highest and best use of every square meter of land in their area. Town planners can provide the technical assistance in coming up with a range of options but the primary decision should rest on the citizens of the area.



Land use is a critical issue in sustainable development. The pattern that has been set over the years stands to serious questioning. One conclusion that is gaining currency is, land use policy, as it has been, has failed to take full account of the delicate nature of our ecosystem. Given that, we cannot continue to ignore the citizens' right to participate in land use planning.

Project planning and management must be informed and in turn should reinforce sustainable use of our most precious natural resource.

Conclusion

GO-NGO collaboration in project planning and management is more than just technology and participation. It is a project vital to nation building that can only be pursued meaningfully within the framework of sustainable development. Such collaborative undertaking must contribute to the empowerment of communities and the transformation of the process and substance of Philippine development.

Success stories in GO-NGO collaboration are few and far between. The hostility and mutual distrust that have characterized the relationship between the two sectors may take time to erode. Government has the primary burden of showing the way. Bridging the gap would require a fundamental shift in government's development vision and strategy.





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.

