Renegotiating Decentralization and State-Civil Society Relations: A Re-interpretation of Naga City’s Experiment in Participatory Governance

Leonora C. Angeles

Introduction

The story of Naga City, located in the Bicol region of the Philippines, as an internationally renowned and award-winning local government for “best practices” in decentralized participatory governance has been told many times over. In academic books and journals, international development bulletins and regional and national magazines, Naga City’s outstanding achievements in various fields of governance – in health, nutrition, peace and order, child welfare, environmental protection, solid waste management, tax collection, government procurement, etc. -- have received well deserved accolades as a dynamic and liveable city in a “Third World” country. Naga’s impressive rise in the 1990s from a third-class to a first-class city in terms of income and revenue is matched by its city government’s commitment to the efficient delivery of social services, especially housing, health and education, using innovative public participation mechanisms. For its many creative and precedent-setting innovations, it has received at least 100 national, regional, and international awards since 1988 (see Appendix 1). Among the most prestigious ones are the 2002 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements that cited Naga’s Participatory Governance as one of the “Top 20 Best Practices” in the world, and the 2002 World Bank’s “Model City with Good Practices and Innovations in Government Procurement”. In the year 2002 alone, Naga garnered a total of 2 international awards, 9 national, 11 regional, and 6 individual awards given to its public officials, 3 of which went to its long-time mayor, Jesse Robredo, who has been widely credited for turning Naga into a “first-class” city since the 1990s.

Much of the stories on Naga’s experiment in participatory governance have been told with the aim of documenting its “good practices and innovations”, but little attention has been given to the question of how these fit into the larger paradigm of Philippine politics that is characterized by patron-clientelism, local “bossism,” party machines, and rule by rent-seeking oligarchic elites. Naga City therefore seems like an oasis in a desert of dry, undynamic local governments wilting under the sun of incapable leaderships, a puzzling misfit in a political culture where historical remnants of colonial rule and authoritarian states make corruption and patron-clientelism reign supreme. Can an alternative narrative or reading of Naga City’s governance under decentralization be told in light of such characteristics of the state and larger political culture, while recognizing the “paradigmatic shift” that has indeed occurred in the realm of state-civil society relations in the City? How would such alternative interpretation be informed, on the one hand, by the “grand narrative,” or macro-politics of state-led forms of participatory governance, and on the other, by the “tiny tales”, or micro-politics, of community-based initiatives, conflicts and contests, which in other cities have resulted in decadence, not dynamism, in fractious politics, not in fruitful civic engagement? What would such alternative
narratives bridging the macro and micro tell us about the future of traditional politics in the Philippines and the lessons for social learning within left-of-center social movements and progressive politicians, with regards to the potential forms of planning-for-governance and governance-in-planning that could be replicated not only in other localities but also scaled-up at the national level?

This paper aims to contribute to a holistic and interdisciplinary thinking about the relationship between participatory planning and governance, decentralization, and government/community capacity-building, using Naga City as a case study. I argue that a historically situated, discourse sensitive and theoretically informed re-reading of Naga City’s socio-political experiment is necessary if we are to derive meaningful lessons from its more than 15 year-long experience in participatory planning and governance. This alternative narrative or re-interpretation of Naga City’s experience is an exercise in “capturing complexity” in research on how state-civil society relations are shaped by the introduction of participatory governance. Such a methodological exercise must benefit from the multiple standpoints or angles, from which one can view the various dimensions of governance and contextualized planning practices that simultaneously combine forms of community-based initiatives for social transformation and features of state-led provisions of its welfare, capital accumulation and legitimation functions, while taking advantage of the spaces provided within patronage and rent-seeking politics in an urbanizing context. What is emphasized in this alternative narrative of Naga City’s revitalization is the sensitivity to the local political and organizational sociology – the micro-politics -- and city planning characteristics that provide the spark, synergy and sustainability of its wide-ranging and precedent-setting innovations. In the context of Philippine political structures and historical developments, Naga City has achieved a partial transformation of its state apparatus, including the City police, and much more successful attempts in restructuring the local state’s relationship with its citizenry and civil society and providing better city governance through a new brand of political leadership and public administration.

I will first situate Naga City and its progressive political leadership in the context of wider Philippine political economic trajectory and political sociological dynamics, particularly its decentralization efforts in the context of transnational developments. I will then describe the various participatory planning, governance and policy making processes in Naga that are on the one hand, embedded in the groundwork of civil society organizations, and on the other, ensconced by local and national state institutions. I will further illustrate these processes using the case of community-based housing development and education initiatives that bridge community action and state mobilization using participatory governance principles. I highlight the limits and possibilities of institutionalizing participatory planning mechanisms, and their implications for democratic governance, social capital formation, and state-civil society relations in the Philippines and other developing countries.

**Knowing Naga: Continuities and Change in Political Governance**
Naga City, which used to be called Ciudad de Nueva Caceres (New Caceres City) during the Spanish period, was one of the oldest Spanish settlements in the Luzon region. It was the capital of Camarines Sur until 1948 when it became an independent city and a major center of education and commerce in post-war Bicol. This medium-sized provincial city has approximately a population of 150,000 people residing in an area of 84.48 square kilometers located in an economically depressed region in the Philippines, i.e. Bicol, about 450 kilometers south of the bigger cities of Metro Manila and Cebu. It is a mid-sized landlocked city ranking 63rd in terms of land area and 53rd in terms of population out of 114 cities in the Philippines.

Naga’s history since the Spanish period showed some typical and also some unique features compared to other cities and provinces. Surely, numerous prominent people in the province were among those who were arrested and imprisoned for their anti-Spanish activities, including the so-called *Quince Martires* (“fifteen martyrs”) of Camarines who were executed in 1897 in Manila. However, the revolt in the province that ended Spanish rule was started and led not by the educated Masonic elites or the working class Katipuneros but by the *indio* (native) members of the Spanish civilian guards (Gerona 2003, 87-88). As independence was won without the support of the Revolutionary Government headed by Emilio Aguinaldo, the local leaders set up their own provisional government independent of the nascent national leadership. This transition was unusually orderly and peaceful, owing to the reconciliatory stance of the *Gobernador Politico-Militar* Elias Angeles towards the defeated Spanish officials. The Aguinaldo-appointed military government led by General Vicente Lukban later replaced the Angeles-led government, which out of respect to Aguinaldo, welcomed Lukban and his staff composed of Tagalog and Bicolano masons. The new administration however received very little support from the Nueva Caceres residents who resented not only the political invasion of the Tagalogs, but also their atrocities towards Spanish friars and prisoners, and also towards Bicolanos (Gerona 2003, 92-93).

This resentment towards intervention by outsiders, particularly from the imperial central government in Manila, was displayed time and again and replicated in other regions and provinces. Borne out of frustration with centralized Spanish and American colonial governments whose power depended on the allegiance of provincial elite leaders, efforts to reform heavy state centralization continued under all post-war governments during the period of dependence, up until the time of President Marcos’ authoritarian rule. It was not until the post-Marcos period of political democratization however, that the clamor of provincial leaders and civil society groups for more decentralized forms of governance, albeit for different reasons, became a reality. Under President Corazon Aquino, the Local Government Code was passed, providing for the devolution of specific functions from the central to local governments, including urban development functions of infrastructure provision, water supply, sanitation, drainage, land use conversion, etc, with matching taxation powers to widen the local revenue base. Decentralizing government powers was envisioned to meet several needs and objectives not best served by the old centralized framework: to promote the empowerment of civil society organizations and their partnership with government in decision-making and program implementation; to ensure that local governments have accurate information about the
needs and priorities of their constituents; and to promote government accountability, political transparency, efficiency and equity in the use of scarce resources (UN Habitat and Citynet 1997, 63-64). To help Local Government Units (LGUs) in assuming their new financial roles in raising revenue and budget allocations, the Code provided for major tax innovations such as new tax rates, tax sharing schemes, and widening (or narrowing) of taxing policies (Angeles and Magno 2003).

The call for decentralization in the Philippines was intensified by the confluence of international and national developments and demands from various domestic actors. International economic trends such as the global debt crisis, and multilateral development agencies, including financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF\(^3\), as well as bilateral donor countries, have also played important roles in pushing for decentralization in the Philippines and other countries. These influential international organizations calling for public sector reform coincided with the Philippines’ post-authoritarian search for a political framework that could address issues of public participation, government accountability and state legitimacy. The post-Marcos Philippine State and these international actors support market-based economic liberalization alongside political democratization. Sharing the view that a minimal state should be strong enough to create an institutional environment that sets the right policies and institutes public sector reform and good governance (Williams 1999), they promoted decentralization as an important element of a public sector reform program in the area of central-local government relations (Turner 1999, 2).

Domestically, national and local actors such as local government officials and leagues of provincial governors, municipal officials and village leaders, the national government and academe, and civil society organizations clamored for the enactment of the Local Government Code that brought about significant changes in central-local government relations. Decentralization may be seen as a state-led response to the demands of civil society forces to open up political spaces for state-society engagement. The post-Marcos democratic transition provided an impetus to decentralization by increasing collaboration between government and non-government organizations (NGOs) and encouraging people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. The increased involvement of NGOs and people’s organizations (POs) in local government structures is one means by which to decentralize and diffuse the power of a centralized politico-administrative machinery (Brillantes 1994).

The push for decentralization comes strongly from the provincial and local government officials themselves, partly due to sheer demographic growth and increased complexity of political-territorial management.\(^4\) They stand to be the main beneficiaries of decentralization efforts that promised a greater share in the central government's income, more authority in running local affairs, and increased capability to solve local problems. Provincial governors, who constantly resented centralization, clamored for political decentralization through fiscal autonomy and more participation in the appointment of provincial administrative and military personnel (Walsh 1976). With the enactment of the 1991 Local Government Code towards the end of Robredo’s first term in office, Naga City was set to experiment on how decentralization could be maximized
for participatory governance as a tool of promoting a progressive political culture and improving the quality of life in the city. Soliman Santos, an avid Naga political observer, attributes the success of the city’s innovations in participatory governance to its rich tradition of political debates and discourses, albeit framed by religious and conservatives elements; an open and free press; and its people’s “continuing quest for meaningful politics and governance,” leaving generations of progressive political leadership that younger leaders could emulate and improve on (Santos 1998, 12-13). As a major political, educational and cultural center in Bicol since the Spanish period, Naga City provides a unique context for many innovative ideas several centuries later. This legacy of pluralist politics, liberal education, and communicative spirit, along with the presence of a vibrant civil society, partly explain why the City administration has not only accommodated progressive politicians but also fully institutionalized participatory governance through its dynamic People’s Council (Santos 1998, 13).

**The Robredo Factor: Querying the Aberration-Apotheosis Readings of Leadership**

Several factors are often cited to account for the innovative restructuring of state-civil society relations in Naga City: the Local Government Code that provided the legal environment for political decentralization; the presence of an enterprising and reformist-activist local government led by a visionary Mayor; the sustained human resource development of city officials and staff that proved indispensable in continuous improvement of service delivery, program development and community mobilization; and the active participation of civil society groups – roughly classified in Philippine political lingo as people’s organizations (PO), non-government organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) within and outside city-initiated programs, particularly through the Naga City People’s Council (NCPC).

Of these factors, perhaps the most frequently mentioned is the role Mayor Jesus “Jesse” Robredo has played in revitalizing Naga. Popular views of Robredo’s leadership often straddle between seeing his administration as an aberration in the midst of corrupt and predatory local officials, or an apotheosis, exalting the Mayor’s persona and his achievements – a charismatic Harvard graduate with an MBA from the University of the Philippines; multi-awarded, the best youngest mayor the Philippines probably ever had – as a Christ-like figure, “savior of Naga.” Robredo himself and his political observers would be among the first to dispute these popular readings of his leadership. Some point precisely to other young and energetic politicians – the “new generation” of local leaders (Kawanaka 1998, 10; 2002, 4) who are in tuned to international discourses and local impulses, while playing the “rules of the game” of the national political culture. Likewise, Robredo is certainly not an aberration when one considers his use of similar strategies, as other politicians who build their local political machinery in the absence of personal wealth and rich business patrons to back them up during expensive electoral campaigns. Perhaps Kawanaka (1998, 2002) had provided a more accurate and most comprehensive summary of the Robredo administration’s characteristic features, bridging the progressive platform of participatory governance with requisite functions of traditional political party machinery:
Firstly, it has shown good management of city governance, like sound fiscal management, innovative policies and minimal corruption. Secondly, it has a strong political machine at the grassroots level, which is well integrated with the city government. The case of Naga City shows that good governance alone is not enough to maintain firm political power. The political machine plays a crucial role in setting up the mechanism for controlling power through the monopoly and distribution of resources as well as the direct control of grassroots-level leaders who are responsible for collecting votes. Robredo set up his machine because he knows that a firm political power base cannot be established without such an institution, especially among the poor (Kawanaka 2002, 4).

Understanding Naga’s contemporary challenges in institutionalizing participatory planning and governance practices, and the political leadership characteristics that make these possible, would require an analysis of the City’s changing social and political economic landscape situated in the context of wider Philippine political dynamics. In many ways, Naga may be characterized as a “typical Philippine rural city” (www.naga.gov.ph) in that it has a long history of bustling commercial activity, a largely urban-dwelling population surrounded by a receding rural frontier, and a socially stratified structure composed of a tiny group of wealthy landlords and property owners, marginal entrepreneurs, middle-class professional and salaried employees, and manual workers. It is said that about twenty rich families own and control Naga’s agricultural and commercial lands and buildings, while the bulk of the white-collar middle-class employees are composed of government employees and teachers employed in Naga’s 42 primary schools, 13 high schools, and 17 post-secondary institutions (Kawanaka 2002, 27-28). In this political economic context, electoral fortunes are determined by “free votes” of the middle-class, low income earners and the poor, as opposed to “command votes,” more common in largely agricultural plantation economies dominated by landed oligarchic families.

Naga City’s elected politicians, career civil servants, and community-based organizations – as other cities and municipalities -- have operated within the national, provincial and local political landscape marked by patron-clientelism, rent-seeking, and the rule by oligarchic elite families. Like other provinces and cities, Naga has long been dominated politically by a few state-connected families whose strong kinship ties are only surpassed by their interlocking business and economic interests. The 1960s and 1970s were marked by contestations between four political clans -- that of Ramon Felipe Jr, Victorino Ojeda, Mariano Villafuerte and Vicente Sibulo – whose power and influence extended in the entire Camarines Sur province and Bicol region. Their rise to power was facilitated by their membership into the landed properties class, their well-educated professional backgrounds, and patronage by a powerful provincial or national figure, such as a cabinet member, a senator or political party leader (Kawanaka 2002, 32-34). From the 1970s to late 1980s however, Naga City politics was dominated by the then unchallenged political kingpin of Bicol, Luis Villafuerte, a personal friend of President Marcos who appointed him candidate of the government party, Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL) and later, became Minister of Trade for several years under martial law. Villafuerte’s father, Mariano Sr., became governor under Japanese occupation and a
twice-elected member of the Philippine legislature before World War II, while his brother, Mariano Jr, served as vice-mayor for one-term. As Marcos’ political power was on the decline, Villafuerte resigned from the government party and moved to the opposition United Nationalist Democratic Organization (UNIDO), a strategic and astute move that guaranteed his political survival in the post-Marcos era. As a leader of the opposition, Villafuerte was given important cabinet posts by President Aquino, and later concentrated on consolidating his political base in the province of Camarines Sur, just when Raul Roco, another opposition leader was becoming popular. Born to a farming family of modest means, Raul Roco was former legal counsel to the late husband of President Aquino, and rose to power as Congress Representative in 1987, and later became Senator in the 1990s. When Villafuerte’s anointed candidate lost to Roco in 1987, Villafuerte turned to his nephew, Jesse Robredo, to run for mayor in the 1988 elections. Thus began Robredo’s political career that did not go according to his uncle’s plans (Kanawaka 2002, 37-40).

Villafuerte made his nephew, Robredo, Director of the Bicol River Basin Development Program (BRBDP) in 1986, a post that became a good launching pad for his candidacy in 1988 under the banner of the Lakas ng Bansa. Raul Roco’s camp called the “Cory Coalition” fielded Raul’s brother Ramon as Naga City Mayor candidate. Ramon Roco, however, lost narrowly to Robredo, who was eventually elected for 3 successive terms, from 1988 to 1998. One year after the 1998 elections, the rift between Robredo and his uncle Villafuerte emerged, reportedly over the latter’s intervention in Naga City politics and attempts to undermine Robredo who was determined to pursue his independent course on city planning and governance. The political rift between Robredo and Villafuerte turned nasty in the 1992 elections when Villafuerte forged an alliance with the Rocos to defeat Robredo by fielding Villafuerte’s sister (Pura Luisa Villafuerte-Magtuto, principal of a national high school), while picking Roco’s supporters to run for vice-mayor and the council. As a result, Robredo, as incumbent, could not join the ruling party, and had to join Fidel Ramos’ newly formed political party (Lakas-NUCD), creating his own slate from among his supporters in government. Robredo’s won first-term achievements and his timely support for President Ramos and his political party helped in Robredo’s overwhelming victory over the Roco-Villafuerte-supported candidates. This popular mandate and support from the national government cleared the way for Robredo’s innovations in Naga City (Kawanaka 2002, 44-46). He was undefeated for three consecutive terms, the limit imposed by the new electoral laws, then run again successfully in 2001 and 2004, his fifth term in office.

While it is clear from the above account that Robredo is no different from other traditional politicians who enjoy kinship relations with traditional elites, he is also unique in steering away from his initial dependence on kinship-based patronage politics, and in cultivating his own political machinery based on his leadership record. From his first term of office (1988-1991) when he depended on the Villafuerte political machinery to win, Robredo faced difficulties in getting his budget and city ordinances passed by a council which only had three of his supporters. Realizing the importance of having a majority on the city council, Robredo worked hard to win a full slate in the succeeding elections, brandishing the slogan “Ubos kung ubos, gabos kung gabos,” roughly
translated as “all or nothing,” (Kawanaka, 2002, 88). The electorate understood its meaning and voted straight for Robredo’s candidates. A straight ticket meant ease and control in passing budgetary policies, enacting city ordinances, and allocating resources.

Robredo and members of his councils are neither wealthy nor landed, largely counting on their professional-managerial background and political record in getting electoral support. In Naga, there is an observed separation between the political elites and economic elites who would rather leave politics to these middle-class professionals. Without the personal wealth and business connections to back them up, the city council members had to rely on Robredo’s ability to utilize government programs and projects, funded by a combination of city revenues and pork barrel funds6 from the national government, to garner support during and in-between electoral campaigns. Robredo is astute in seeking the support of national leaders and Congressional Representatives in his district and province in order to access these funds. More importantly, Robredo and his supporters build their political base by working diligently with the barangay (village) officials and leaders of the sectoral organizations that make up the throng of grassroots leaders who drum up support for Robredo among the residents. Often, the barangay chiefs and councilors are leaders themselves of these organizations – from the women’s group, Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga (Women’s Power of Naga) Federation led by Robredo’s wife, to the Barangay People’s Foundation7 – thus facilitating easy networking, recruitment of new leaders, getting feedback from members on the city government’s service and management, and gathering intelligence information on leaders’ loyalty to Robredo or their potential defection to the opposition. Robredo himself would go directly to the villages to meet with his grassroots leaders, lead village-level meetings, and go on house-to-house recruitment or campaigns throughout the year.

Most critical to the formation of Robredo’s political machinery is the role played by various sectoral organizations noted above that operate in close coordination with the City Mayor’s Office. The independent Lingkod Barangay (Village Service) Office created by the Mayor to deal with the volume of requests for services coming from the sectoral organizations is largely staffed by casual employees paid by City Hall, and receive special assistance from the City Social Welfare and Development and the City Hospitals. For example, a member of the Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga or the Barangay People’s Foundation, who may have been mobilized during elections as a poll watcher or as house-to-house campaigner for Robredo’s camp can make use of city government services by showing their membership card, or by approaching a councilor or Lingkod Barangay staff to serve as intermediary when requesting service or dole-outs in the event of death, sickness of a family member, and other emergencies. Kawanaka (2002, 58) notes that Naga City has an alarmingly large number of non-regular or casual city employees (392 or 50.8% of total), mostly found in the Lingkod Barangay Office, compared to the overall ratio of casual to regular employees in local government units throughout the Philippines. Casual or non-regular employees occupy an average 27.6 percent of the total local government employment from 1993 to 1997. He argues that this unusually large number of city staffs “need to work hard to support the mayor in elections to keep their jobs,” thus this situation “places the bureaucracy under the mayor’s control and makes it work as part of his political machine” (Ibid.).
The implications of Kawanaka’s political reading of the formation of Robredo’s political machinery, particularly the clear suggestion of its use of government resources to build it, must be closely examined in light of what happened in the 1998-2001 period when Robredo could not run for office due to the constitutional provision that disallows a fourth consecutive term. In the 1998 elections, Robredo’s political camp faced formidable opposition from two sides: the ticket formed by the national administration’s Lakas-NUCD party and the Villafuerte-led coalition under the party of the presidential candidate, later president, Joseph Estrada, bankrolled by many wealthy elites. Meanwhile, Robredo’s camp got split when he endorsed Raul Roco’s brother, Sulpicio Roco, for mayor and some candidates, like his Vice-Mayor and two councilors, who did not get Robredo’s blessing ran under a different party. Despite the strong opposition, the Roco-Robredo ticket won by a straight victory and clear majority (62.9% of the votes for Mayor Roco). On the one hand, this may be read as evidence of the formidable political machinery Robredo has built for the last nine years; or on the other hand, as a clear vote on the part of Naga residents to see a continuation of political leadership and management, albeit sans Robredo in power. The two readings may be seen as complementary. This interpretation also tends to reduce the weight of the view that 392 casual employees in City Hall whose jobs depend on the Robredo’s approval could determine electoral outcomes. Moreover, it also gives credit to the voice and desires of Naga city residents who have seen the consistent and sustainable leadership record of Robredo. One must not also discount the role played by the long-time Naga City professional staff who had served under Robredo, particularly within the City Planning and Development Office, the City Assessor’s Office, the Metro Naga Public Employment Service Office, the City Department of Health, among others, whose jobs and security of tenure are protected under the Civil Service Code and not co-terminous with the Mayor’s. Hence, we have seen how the boundaries between elected government, meritorious staff within the bureaucracy, and civil society organizations gets blurred when these three are brought together in the same political machinery during elections, either compulsively, but more likely, with the actors’ own free will and cooperation. On the other hand, as we will see below, participatory planning and governance mechanisms perhaps may require, and even celebrate, the blurring of their oft-imagined boundaries and exploit their networking and synergistic potentials, such as when city government services are dispensed with greater ease and efficiency through civil society organizations.

Robredo himself is not completely immune to the temptations offered by the political culture that is so used to discretionary powers, patronage, clientelism, and rent-seeking practices. He has been observed to shrewdly use “carrot and stick” measures towards village leaders to secure their loyalty (Kawanaka 2002, 89). However, what is often overlooked is how Robredo creatively maximizes the spaces offered by these aspects of the political culture that are often circumscribed by law, in order to achieve the goals and objectives set by his administration. Aware of the heavy discretionary powers the chief executive has over city budgets revenue generation and expenditures, Robredo could have easily dispensed resources single-handedly, yet it is well-documented that not only has corruption been minimized during his office, revenues have also sky-rocketed, with yearly surpluses to boot. City contractors who handle public works in Naga do not
receive any special favors from the Mayor’s Office, but they nevertheless support the Mayor and welcome the innovations of his government. The role of the middle-class who form the bulk of the professional-managerial workers within the civilian bureaucracy, education and private sector, should also not be overlooked. Under Robredo’s administration, the middle class has not only grown but has also found a new confidence as they share his government’s aspiration for good governance and respect for human rights (Soliman 2004). While certain segments of the business elites resented the rise in real property taxes and other moves of the Robredo administration (Kawanaka 2002, 69), Robredo has enjoyed consistent support from the middle-class that like his responsible management of their tax money, minimization of corruption and illegal gambling, and fine achievements in expanding quality social services. They also like the fact that he has not personally accumulated personal wealth while in office, or practiced nepotism. He has also professionalized the civilian service bureaucracy, and the police, empowering them, and in the process, giving them honor, and respect in the eyes of the taxpayers. When balance sheets of accomplishments and weaknesses are compared, both the middle class electorate and the independent police and civilian bureaucracy are likely to overlook and even serve as willing conduits in Robredo’s use of direct and indirect inducements to court the political support of the working classes and the poor, who still form a sizeable portion of the population. Loyalties and votes indeed may be bought through money, bribe and promise of jobs, but they need not be dispensed when one can rely on observable, quantifiable and solid performance-based indicators and outcomes of “good governance”.

Yet, the expansion of “good governance” strategies have limits and work only to the extent other nearby jurisdictions are able to also practice its principles. Here, good governance expansion clashes with traditional political culture as Robredo pushes his way towards greater cooperation and complementation with other cities and municipalities in the Bicol region in order to address the challenges of regional economic development, transportation and environmental planning, tourism, and peace and order. He is well aware that Naga’s continued progress and peace depend on the prosperity of its neighboring areas. But it is a very difficult task to negotiate and collaborate with political leadership that do have neither the interest nor knowledge of the language and practice of participatory governance and planning processes. As one political observer suggest:

[Robredo] started in that direction only to find out that the road is booby-trapped. Playing big brother to old and seasoned politicians was a dicey act. Having to take their cue from a cub, especially one pictured as too bright and too popular, was unacceptable to some political leaders in Camarines Sur. And talk that Naga City was at the center of all schemes of complementation so far forwarded and was likely to smell the sweetest was dampening the spirit of cooperation in the province (Mable 2003, 13).

Framing a New Social Contract in the City
Reinventing a City and inspiring its citizenry to imagine its reinvention are herculean tasks. Naga City’s ability to reinvent itself is even more impressive when seen in the light of cynicism and disillusion Filipinos often express when yet another newly-elected administration promises to “eradicate corruption” and “serve the people”. Yet in a short span of 3 years, or one-term in office, the Robredo-led administration was able to convince not only the local residents, but also the rest of the country that hope and reforms are possible when sincerity, trust, and cooperation are generated on the side of both rulers and the ruled.

No city or town could move forward with its intended reforms without peace. Mayor Robredo was well aware of the importance of “peace based on justice” to any development efforts. Like other cities, the negative influence of military and police abuses and the communist underground movement on the peace and order situation plagued Naga. Naga City, as the region’s center of education, was often accused in the 1980s as the breeding ground of rebel students who supply the intellectual and human power to the communist insurgents. Hence, one of the first moves of Robredo upon election was the declaration of Naga as a “zone of peace,” sending a message to the communist organizations operating in the area that City Hall is interested in moving forward and accommodating progressive platforms of action. Except for a brief attack in 2003 by the communist New People’s Army on a police detachment in a village at the boundary of the city’s central business district (the reason for the attack has remained unknown), Naga City’s “peace zone” has not been disturbed by tragic military or police encounters with rebel groups in the last 15 years (Mable 2003, 13). Moreover, Robredo clearly “walks the talk” as he displays a reflexive style of leadership that endeared him to his constituents, especially the urban poor, even as he builds his political base among them. Hence, when Robredo claims that “Naga City’s basic strength is people participation,” (Interview with Robredo, in Mable 2003, 13), he is not simply paying lip service to participation as a new and required ingredient of good governance. The City, its people, administrators and elected officials are all striving to live and practice what participation truly means.

For a new participatory governance orientation and consciousness to pervade in the City, the Robredo government had to forge a new social contract with its citizens using a variety of tools: from various program-based mechanisms and guidebooks, to e-governance facilities and new incentive structures. But a new contract is nothing without official documents and tools. Key to the framing of such binding contracts is a participatory planning process that starts from a collective analysis of the problem based on research and consultation with the Naga City People’s Council. From this problem-based analysis comes a visioning process to come up with creative solutions to address the problems, relying on existing strengths and possibilities within the political and social spaces in the city. The framing of quality concerns -- issues and problems that really matter -- is important in elevating the quality of public confidence, in a discursive, practical and programmatic sense.

One key area of concern that has been fully grasped and addressed by the City is the need for quality and up-to-date information about what goes on in City Hall, the school
board, the health department, and other government agencies that deliver critical services. How these bodies operate are often obscured from public view, or made known only to interested elite parties and those who either want to do business with the state or take the initiative to know more about their government. To address this information deficit problem, the City releases electronic and print version of the Citizens Charter, which provides detailed information on how it promotes accountability and transparency in service delivery, the steps or procedures on how to access services – from securing a building permit to filing sanitation-related complaints – the response time of service delivery, and the city officials and staff responsible for the service. The Charter, a guidebook of key city government services, is envisioned to be “an enforceable contract between the city government and its constituents” (Robredo, n.d., iii). Its framers see it as a “living document” that will grow from iterative processes of citizens’ feedback, government response, and widespread social learning. Informed by the most recent conceptual tools and development buzzwords liberally sprinkled in any World Bank or the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) handbook, the Charter is aimed at promoting the so-called “four elements” of “good governance” borrowed from the Asian Development Bank: accountability, participation, predictability, and transparency.

Designed to create a more legal-rational local state, the Citizens Charter is the result of lessons learned from several legislation and programs launched for over a decade in Naga City. Key to this is “Empowerment Ordinance of 1997” or City Ordinance 95-092, “An Ordinance Initiating a System for a Partnership in Local Governance Between the City Government and the City of Naga.” Mayor Robredo considers the ordinance “a revolutionary legislation which confirmed and cemented Naga’s place in the global map of innovative governance” (Robredo, n.d., iii). This Ordinance, authored by Councilor Jaime Jacob was envisioned to make the dream of “people empowerment” a reality by strengthening the civil society groups’ representation provisions of the Local Government Code, and institutionalizing people’s participation in local governance through the Naga City People’s Council (Jacob 1996; 1998, 40). The “Empowerment Ordinance” basically follows the general outline of the Local Government Code for the representation and participation of people’s organizations and NGOs in governance, the rules for their accreditation, their powers and responsibilities, among others. The Naga City Council however takes the Code even further by expanding the power of representatives within the Council and vis-à-vis City Administration, and by stressing the right to self-organization, making it a responsibility of both the City government and the People’s Council to organize residents of Naga City into cooperatives, unions, POs, NGOs and sectoral organizations, or at the very least to support and encourage their organizing efforts (Soliman 1998, 61-63). Community organizing has expanded exponentially, with the number of accredited POs and NGOs increasing from 40 groups in 1996 to 83 in 2001 (www.naga.gov.ph).

This Empowerment Ordinance governing the work of the Naga City People’s Council was the foundation of several programs created under Robredo. These programs may be categorised into two: professionalization-focused programs for human resource development of government service providers and quality service provision; and beneficiary-focused programs in basic service provision in health, housing, livelihood,
sanitation, etc. Some of the programs are government-initiated, others initiated by community organizations through the People’s Council, and they all attempt to employ participatory planning and governance mechanisms once institutionalized. One of the programs under the first category is the Productivity Improvement Program (PIP) launched during the early years of the Robredo administration aimed at using in the government service relevant productivity and efficiency techniques learned in the private sector. Using “Pip”, the hardworking ant, as mascot to market the Program, City Hall embarked on an ambitious overhaul of its service provision. The PIP was complemented by the “Quality Service Improvement Program” (QSIP), which focused on enhancing service quality in five pilot departments of the City – Health, Hospital, Social Welfare, Population and Nutrition, and Environment. These five health-related departments take a comprehensive and holistic approach to health issues in the local communities and collectively work on the Basic Customers Service Skills (BCSS) training program for frontline service providers.

All these beneficiary-focused programs on quality service provision took an expanded and more participatory nature under its “I-Governance Program” that won several national and international awards for institutionalizing stronger participation of individual citizens in governance. I-governance stands for:

- **Inclusive governance**, which seeks to embrace, rather than exclude, individuals, peoples, and sectors in running government
- **Information openness**, which demonstrates that information is power, and truly empowering when placed at the hands of citizens
- **Interactive engagement**, which puts premium on information exchange through continuing dialogue between authority and constituency, and
- **Innovative management**, which is committed to a culture of excellence sustained by creativity and innovations. (Citizens Charter, n.d., 5, original emphasis, see also www.naga.gov.ph).

As a result of these initiatives, the City in a short span of time, was able to achieve a first-class city category based on the level of revenues it generates and other indicators. Revenue increase was largely due to more business activity and more systematic tax collection through a streamlined bureaucracy delivering better quality services in a shorter period of time. For example, while road projects in other parts of the country cost 5.6 million pesos per kilometer of road; in Naga, the cost was lower at 4.4 million. Thus more money is made available for social services as the revenue base increases and savings are generated from prudent financial management. Economic gains get translated into social benefits that redound to the individual and household levels. Average household income grew 126 percent higher than the regional average in Bicol and 46 percent higher than national average. Citing 1998 figures from the Asian Development Bank Handbook, Naga City has lower poverty incidence at 29 percent, compared to Metro Manila’s 39 percent and Bicol region’s 49 percent (Mable 2003, 14). Naga’s unemployment rate of 5.2 percent is also much lower than the regional and national average. The City’s per capita gross product is 115% higher than the national figures (Naga City Website: www.naga.gov.ph).
There are limits, however, posed by the wider constraints and bottlenecks to development, such as the Asian financial crises in 1997 and austerity measures of the national government. Aware of the fiscal constraints faced by all levels of governments, Robredo, like other city government officials, is forced to swallow the neo-liberal pill of economic efficiency, often achieved by budget cutbacks and other austerity measures. Yet, the success of the Robredo administration in being able to “do more with less”, and even produce better outcomes than before, has to do with his planning and administrative staffs’ use of effective communicative and participatory planning, governance, and consultation strategies in making difficult budgetary decisions, in providing performance-based incentives to constituents, and in evaluating policy outcomes to inform future decisions and policies. It does seem easier said than done. But the difference between Robredo and other administrations lies in the former’s ability to go beyond the rhetoric and put their vision into reality. Too often, local political leaders and their staff fall into the trap of ritualistic consultations and public participation processes that only become vehicles for appeasing dissent, or worst, for manipulating public consent to decisions technocrats believe to best serve elite interests. The Robredo-led administration takes seriously the difference participatory planning and governance makes when it pursues the implementation of its programs that have utilized a number of innovative features that spring from its experience with the Productivity Improvement Program (see Box 1).

The following observations distills the principles and strategies used by the Robredo government’s administration and planning staff, and speak to the contextual nature of participatory planning and governance, and their conditional outcomes that depend on leadership quality and strategies of communicative action.

1. **Vision Matched by Action Builds Public Confidence, Minimizes Cynicism and Maximizes Optimism in Government-Community Partnerships.** Unlike populist and nationalist leaders who appeal to mythical notions of “community”, “nation” and “national interests” or simply lambast the status quo without providing any concrete alternatives, much less demonstrate how these might look like in practice, the Robredo administration promotes an empirically-grounded vision with corresponding action orientation to turn its vision into reality.

2. **Progressive Perspective in Participation and Partnership to Institutionalize Participatory Governance.** Participation and partnership need not remain idle rhetorical concepts. They could be put into actual practice that produce amazing and positive results when imbued with a progressive perspective and implemented with a strong political will and cooperative spirit. The institutionalization of participation and partnership may have its dangers when done prematurely or ritualistically and manipulated for political purposes, but it may also be a first necessary step in building public confidence, especially with the poor, and in ensuring sustainable results by linking institutional frameworks with performance-based outcomes.
3. **Direct Communication with Citizens Enhances Government-Community Capacities and Increases Public Confidence in Government.** Complacency and apathy among the citizenry thrive when they are ill informed and not given the opportunity to question and communicate directly with their political leaders, administrators, and city planners. Government and public sector capacity building in three areas – human resource development, organizational strengthening and institutional reform (Grindle 1997, 9) – is initiated, enhanced and sustained when organized civil society forces are also supported by government in their own capacity-building efforts.

How the above principles are played out in government-civil society interactions, and in the formation of Robredo’s political base, are further illustrated in the two cases below.

**Housing the Urban Poor**

The support of the urban poor and working class is just as critical as that of the middle class to ensure the survival and longevity of the Robredo administration and its social programs. By their sheer numbers, their role in voting and running the political machinery during elections are significant. Thus, one of the most pressing challenges faced by Robredo when he came to power was the resolution of decades-old land disputes involving urban squatters on private and public lands, and the provision of low-cost housing for the poor and low-income groups. Even before Robredo’s first election in 1988, the Naga City Urban Poor Federation (NCUPF) was already created in 1986 among a group of poor residents from several barangays (villages) gathered together to discuss their issues and problems. The formation of this federation, held after a series of village-level consultations on the position paper presented at the April 1986 National Congress of Urban Poor Organizations, formed soon after Corazon Aquino came to power.12 Meanwhile, members of local organizations within the NCUPF faced evictions from their homes where they have lived for 20-50 years. These developments made the urban poor realize the need to get organized and participate in the policy-making process (Angeles 1997: 97-98).

Robredo himself was personally concerned with the plight of the urban poor and their need for housing and services. One of the long-standing land tenure problems in the city was in the neighborhood at the back of his parental home, where some of his childhood friends lived (Email interview with Robredo by Soliman Santos, 7 June 2004). When he came to power, the local economy was in shambles, and jobs and social housing were scarce. A third of the three-story public market, which used to be the biggest in Southeast Asia, was burned down, and the central business district was over-crowded and poorly managed. Tax collection was poor. Corruption and illegal gambling were rampant. The City was suffering from yearly budget deficits, so there was little money left for social services, especially for the poor and the homeless, whose numbers doubled to more than 20 percent of the city’s household population (Naga City Website: www.naga.gov.ph).

Having found confidence in the democratization period and a champion in the newly elected Aquino government, the various urban poor organizations combined legal
and extra-legal means of action to get their grievances heard. In Naga, academics from local universities and NGOs, such as Heart for Peace (HOPE), Community Organizers of the Philippines Enterprise (COPE) Foundation, People’s Council for the Promotion of Rights and Welfare (PCPRW), and the regional federation, Bicol Urban Poor Coordinating Council came together to address urban land reform and housing issues in 1986 to 1988. The urban poor groups further built their organizational capacities in campaigns through seminars, workshops and consultations on public infrastructure needs; discussion and writing of position papers cum policy critiques and new legislative proposals; circulation of petitions to suspend scheduled evictions; setting up barricades, and holding public hearings to protest demolitions without proper community consultations. They also lobbied city government officials for potable water, public faucets, streetlights and sewage system provision; and held dialogues and negotiations with officials and representatives from the Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor (PCUP) on the community mortgage plan. More political forums to air their demands put further pressure on candidates during the 1988 election campaign, as urban poor groups talked to supportive city officials and candidates (Angeles 1997: 98-101).

These combined low and high profile activities made the NCUPF successful in pushing for the creation of the Urban Poor Affairs Office to coordinate work for the urban poor sector and implement the Urban Development and Housing Act in Naga City. Consequently, slum demolitions were minimized and arbitrary evictions of squatters from their homes were stopped. The Urban Poor Affairs Office implement, along with the NCUPF, the City Planning and Development Office, the City Engineers Office, the Public Service Employees Office, and other government and non-government agencies the “Kaantabay sa Kauswagan” or Partners for Development program as its centerpiece program. Based on the views that the urban poor must be seen as partners rather than as hindrance to development, this mass housing and poverty alleviation program is engaged in the delivery of basic infrastructure and services, campaigns against the demolition of urban poor homes, creating problem-solving mechanisms through dialogues between different stakeholders. The program employs several approaches to facilitate land acquisition and homelot ownership by the urban poor through on-site and off-site development (see Box 2). New resettlement sites were also provided, such as the declaration by the City Council of 99 lots in 27 villages as areas suitable for socialized housing as mandated by the Housing Act (Angeles 1997, 103). The program registered a 305% increase in the number of beneficiaries between 1994 to 2001 and a 174% increase in land area distributed to the urban poor, from 32.3 hectares in 1994 to 88.5 in 2002. As of December 2001, 41 on-site and off-site housing and resettlement projects have housed 6,940 urban poor household, representing 27 percent of the city population (www.naga.gov.ph).

This successful experiment in city governance on urban poor affairs relies on the important role of the city administration:

What the Robredo administration did...was to ensure...a mechanism for maximizing people’s participation in local governance. This was achieved by laying multiple channels through which specific sectors, groups or the entire
constituency could participate in identifying development priorities and in stamping their mandate – or disapproval – on major policy issues (cited in Angeles 1997: 102).

Mutual trust on the part of the local government and community organizations, particularly on people’s abilities to solve their problems, are shown in Robredo’s remarks when asked how he reacted to urban poor demonstrators who stormed his office. He said, “We were never threatened primarily because our interests are basically the same, and we believe that the government’s obligation is to the poor and underprivileged, while also taking into consideration other factors and parties involved” (Angeles 1997: 103). Political will, according to him, is the key “as well as the willingness to negotiate, a strong bias for the poor, and a strong desire to do good things.” To this remark, an NGO official added that political will “begins with an intrinsic feeling of what or how the poor lives [and] a clear, concise and objective understanding of the real issues besetting urban and rural poverty” (Angeles 197: 108).

With mutual trust as a foundation, the Kauswagan program is notable for its adoption of a “partner-beneficiary perspective” where urban poor see themselves, simultaneously, as program implementation partners and as beneficiaries. It has also institutionalized a tripartite mechanism that brings together the urban poor associations, government agencies, and private landowners to resolve land disputes and tenurial problems with the tripartite body making its final decisions. It adopts a policy of dealing only with urban poor organizations, not individuals, thus facilitating the organizing and capacity-building within this sector. More recently, the City adopted a work-for-pay scheme called “Bayadnihan” (a play on the word bayanihan, meaning mutual help, but using bayad or payment, as the root word) to enable the unemployed among the urban poor to keep up with their amortization payments by providing them with casual jobs in road works and other infrastructure projects. These policies may have also intentionally helped build the political base of Robredo’s administration among the urban poor, particularly through the Bayadnihan scheme and the work of the Urban Poor Affairs Office working directly under the City Mayor’s Office.

Reinventing the School Board: Participatory Budgeting and Education Planning

The sad state of the public educational system in the Philippines is reflected in the poor student performance and inadequate facilities and supplies in every municipality and city in the country. The 2002 National Diagnostic Tests results show that elementary students scored between 38 to 42 percent in basic subjects such as English, Science and Math, while high school students scored an even lower 27 to 30 percent in these subjects. Authorities are well aware that such results are due to the poor management of the public educational system and years of continued under funding. While other Southeast Asian countries spend around 20 percent of their annual budget on education, the Philippines is only spending about 16 percent, much of which is also lost to corruption and administrative inefficiency. While almost all Southeast Asian countries follow the international standard of publicly funding 7 years of elementary school and 5 years of high school, the Philippines continue to support only 10 years of schooling. Budget cuts
meant a drastic reduction of the Education Department’s proposed budget, creating a shortfall of 23,000 teachers, 15,000 classrooms, 4.1 million chairs and 9.9 million textbooks in the public school system in the year 2003 (Prilles 2003, 22). Yet, even the 1991 Congressional Commission on Education report noted that addressing educational problems through increased funding alone, even if the national and local governments are able to do so, would not be enough to tackle the situation.

Yet, despite these much-publicized findings about education, there is neither a remarkable social movement nor display of public outrage among Filipino parents that would deal with educational issues. The better-educated middle-class and affluent families, where most politicians and bureaucrats come from, have long given up on the public education system and could not be bothered championing its reform when they work hard to send their children to private schools. On the other hand, poor and working class parents who send their children to public school have only a vague idea of what tests scores mean, where and how school decisions are made, and what they could do to improve the quality of public education. They rarely realize that there are national and regional and international student performance standards beyond simply obtaining passing marks in their local elementary or high school.

The 35,000 public school children in Naga City, while already among the top in the Bicol region have averaged below 50 percent level in national tests. Their scores tracked the national performance of being among the third from the bottom from the 40 countries in The International Math and Science Survey (TIMSS) in 1999 (Prilles 2003, 22). Mayor Robredo himself only had a vague idea of what the test scores meant: “During my first three terms in office, whenever the Superintendent tells me that Naga topped the national achievement tests in Bicol, I felt I had done my part already. But at the back of my mind, I was curious about what the 40 or 50 score meant.” In January 2002, at the first ever meeting between Naga officials and other stakeholders in the public education system, it was was explained to Robredo, the city staff and other elected officials that 42 percent meant that in a hundred item test, the average pupil was only able to answer 42 correctly score. “And to think that ours is already higher than the national average! Naturally, I was scandalized,” exclaimed Robredo (Prilles 2003, 23).

Thus began his administration’s campaign to reform the public education system, and introduce participatory budgeting efforts, as it negotiated with perhaps the most sacrosanct, and powerful, yet often weak, educational decision-making body, the local school board. In Robredo’s first three terms as mayor, the school board operated only as a local budgeting body that meets at the beginning of the year to decide on how to spend the Special Education Fund (SEF). The city government collects the fund from taxable real properties within their jurisdiction. The fund is intended for the exclusive use of supporting public education, but most members of the eight-person board, composed of the local chief executive, division superintendent (for provinces and cities) or district supervisor (for municipalities), the treasurer, the local youth representative and presidents of the teachers, non-teaching personnel and Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), tend to be conservative, favoring investments in physical facilities as key in improving the quality of education. Moreover, in other jurisdictions, the SEF had often been diverted for
other unproductive purposes, such as buying motor vehicles for the use of the mayor and staff. Education Undersecretary Chito Gascon cited the case of a governor in one of the richest provinces who had instructed his staff to invest the SEF in long-term financial instruments instead of using it to improve public education (Prilles 2003, 23).

Bolstered by the development assistance given by the Ford Foundation in August 2001 to restructure and reform the school board, the Robredo administration started a series of stakeholders’ consultation meetings, including parents and students, to help define the priority areas they should address. As local chief executive who also sits on the school board, Mayor Robredo and the board staff went from one school to another to explain to parents the state of education in Naga and in the Philippines, as they exhorted parents to take a more active and responsible role in the education of their children. The priority areas identified in these meetings and surveys conducted by the board, included items that have been neglected in previous years, such as books, hiring new teachers, and local pre- and post-testing of students. The city acquired its own textbooks directly from the source at 30 percent discounts to cover the 30,000 book shortfall based on the national government’s funding allocation to Naga. With this move, the city was able to achieve a 1:1 student-textbook ratio in English, Math and Science in all grade levels. In addition, the board also created the School Empowerment Fund, a 100,000 pesos financial subsidy to each of the 29 elementary and high schools. The local schools and the PTA would decide the use of these funds, with the proviso that these are spent on developmental needs, not on basic operational costs like water and other utility bills (Prilles 2003, 22-3).

Closer coordination between the local school board and the division office also developed, enabling better resource allocation and the hiring of more teachers. About 26 additional teachers were hired at competitive salary levels in order to reduce class sizes and enroll more students. Locally hired teachers now make up 12 percent of the total, and these new hires enabled the opening of two new high schools in 2001. Teacher training was also improved and a monthly incentive fund was given to teachers to upgrade the quality of instruction. Since 2002, the school board has funded localized pre- and post-testing of students from elementary to high school. The board created a performance incentive fund to reward the public schools that showed the highest improvements in test scores, thus linking teachers’ rewards and incentives to students’ performance. Initial results showed that these reforms are working, as the Naga School Division test scores increased by 16 percentage points, from an average of 35 percent in July 2002 to 51 percent in March 2003 (Prilles 2003, 23).

A priority area not envisioned by the school board only two years ago became a reality, starting with the meeting of the Naga City Teachers and Employees Association (NACITEA) in January 2003 to discuss the year’s budget. In the summer of 2003, 100 public school teachers spent their vacation months preparing sample copies of lesson plans and workbooks earmarked for distribution to all elementary pupils. These locally made lesson plans covered all subject areas, while the workbooks covered only the tool subjects of Math, Science and English from Grades 1 to 6. These workbooks were sent to all parents with a letter from the Mayor saying, “Education is not the responsibility of
teachers, of the Department of Education or City Hall alone. It is our shared responsibility.” These prepared lessons plans and workbooks were intended to help educators, parents and students. The lesson plans aimed at easing the burden of daily lesson preparation on the part of the teachers so that they could concentrate on more effective classroom instruction. The workbooks, on the other hand, aimed to provide parents with tools to bond with their children as they help them in their homework, and jointly participate in the learning process.

The above achievements were made possible by the visionary, communicative, and action-oriented city administration that focused on possibilities, not limitations. As Mayor Robredo explained,

“The key to really doing more with less is to adopt what we call ‘the half-full glass perspective.’ Even our colleagues in the board have cautioned us that we might be going beyond what the school board is conceived for by law. But this perspective is self-limiting, akin to seeing a half-filled glass as half-empty when it is also half-full. So we say that what current laws on local school boards do not prohibit, they allow. And using the budget as legal basis, it has enabled us to go into participative budgeting, localized achievement testing, performance-based teacher incentives and more transparent teacher recruitment.” (Interview with Robredo, in Prilles 2003, 23).

This positive attitude and pro-active and progressive participatory approach to undertaking drastic reforms was made possible by creating long-lasting and far-reaching partnerships with various stakeholders and civil society organizations that have formed part of the Robredo political machinery. Beginning with the school board and the division officials, and the various parents, teachers and school employees associations, City Hall was able to take advantage of existing decentralization mechanisms to upgrade classroom teaching and school management. The Mayor’s Office also ensured that public meetings are strategically organized and graced by invited dignitaries and important politicians who could be useful in championing Naga City to the national government and the outside world. Social capital in the form of having “friends in high places” is often seen as important in a patronage-based political culture, but in the case of Naga City officials, these ties are forged for productive uses, and not for particularistic gains and predatory purposes.

For example, the visit of Education Undersecretary Chito Gascon in September 2003 to see the reforms going on at the school board was timed with the distribution of the “Made in Naga” workbooks and lesson plans and the launching of “Surog-Adal” (alliance for learning). This is a school board project under its “adopt-a-school program,” where local civic and professional organizations, such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club, Filipino-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and Philippine Institute of Civil Engineers “adopt” five of the most depressed elementary schools in the City for fund-raising and other forms of assistance. The school board also signed a partnership agreement with the University of Nueva Caceres for its faculty and engineering students to provide free maintenance service to 210 computers recently purchased by the board. These partnerships were
showcased during Gascon’s visit, which was also turned into a productive meeting where participants in the local workbook and lesson plan development shared insights on how to further enhance the outcomes of the project in the long-term. The School Superintendent said that the lesson plans and workbooks would not automatically translate into higher test scores and must be accompanied by other measures. Thus, she has mobilized the area supervisors and school principals to think of new approaches to teacher supervision, create opportunities for training teachers in the use of these tools, and to review and improve on the content of these workbooks and lesson plans. The principal of the Universidad de Santa Isabel high school stressed the importance of on-going faculty development in view of rapid technological changes in schools and industries. A PTA president underscored the importance of parental involvement in the learning process but also in addressing the financial troubles of local schools.

To suggest that the Robredo administration’s educational policy reforms and participatory educational planning initiatives are merely intended to court the political support of public school teachers, who generally hail from lower to upper middle class backgrounds, is largely unfounded. Not only does it ignore the fiercely political independent stance and consciousness of thinking public school teachers, demonstrated in various points in history, and their ability to form strong civic and political organizations themselves. It is more plausible to suggest that the city administration’s attempts to reinvent the school board and engage various civil society forces, including parents and students, in educational planning and participatory budgeting, are part of its vision to strengthen local civic-mindedness and citizenship rights, particularly their right to quality education. Although unarticulated by the city administration, this example of community-building and citizenship formation could also be envisioned to assist the emergence of a new generation of young leaders and parents in Naga City who value education as a right and public participation as a means to strengthening civic consciousness and engagement in schools, family, and the workplace.

Conclusions

The insights generated in this paper have broader relevance to theories on state capacity building, city civic tradition, civil society revitalization, and social capital formation, i.e. the norms of trust, reciprocity, networks and cooperation that facilitate collective action and community-building. These insights are also relevant to other countries undergoing decentralization and participatory governance initiatives. If indeed, participatory, community-led interventions in solving local problems are more effective in strengthening civic traditions and social capital than formal, hierarchical government initiatives (Warner 1999), then how do we characterize the nature of civic-ood and social capital created by such “initiator states and governments,” like in Naga, that not only facilitate civil society and social capital formation, but also purposely create legislation and planning mechanisms to support new civic organizations and their capacity-building? Are the civil society organizations and state-civil society linkages initiated by the state more sustainable and conducive to community-building than those that organically develop outside the aegis of state influence? Are the forms of social capital generated under conditions where the state served as catalyst of their creation
more easily invested in other situations, and thereby used for productive ends, than the
types of social capital that rely less on their bridging, vertical links to the state? What
would be the ideal role for community and government planners in mediating a
successful and effective relationship between the local government and civic
organizations? Contrary to Putnam’s (1993) view that social capital is the root cause or
primary determinant of democratic and effective governance, the relationship between
good governance and social capital may not be necessary linear or unidirectional, nor
correlated at all times. As we have seen in the case of Naga City, there is a dialectical,
mutually reinforcing relationship in that trustworthy, progressive governance, as the one
led by Robredo, could influence the character of civic organizations, and in turn, these
organizations could enhance the politics of governance and planning towards more
participatory and democratic direction, further developing the city’s civic tradition.

The question of political leadership, its autonomy and linkage with planning
professionals, local civil society leaders, and outsiders to the city, is also relevant. If
interventionist approaches on the part of government leaders, or even planners, can help
build civic communities (Ostrom 1990), then how do we ensure that such approaches
employ strategies that also forge trust, respect and cooperation among community
members as they come together to solve their problems? To say that the often
interventionist innovations of Naga City in participatory planning and governance to
build stronger and more civic minded communities and organizations would not have
taken place without the role of a progressive and reform-minded Mayor may be placing
too much faith in a key tenet of methodological individualism, that it is individuals who
think, act, and make a difference in the real world, and thus neglects the role of the state,
classes, organizations and other institutions and collectivities in the process. To say
however that Mayor Robredo -- his background, biography, and personal interests -- have
not much to do with Naga City’s achievements, downplays the role of political leadership
and tends to lack the “sociological imagination” (Mills 1959) that sees social structures
and institutions as products of the intersection of people’s biographies and social
histories. This alternative reading of Naga City’s decentralization and participatory
governance experiences therefore avoids the pitfalls of methodological individualism
without ignoring the role that leaders and individuals play in shaping the history and
policies of their city. Moreover, this reinterpretation brings together a sensitivity not only
to state-civil society relations and state-elite connections, but also to the shaping of such
relations by professional city planning practitioners and community organizers who are
relied upon by elected officials to shape policy directions and programmatic decisions.
This reinterpretation also supports the view that the political economy and its deeper
structural problems largely determine the nature of decision-making and quality of civic
tradition of communities.

The complete story therefore of how participatory planning and governance practices
operate, and their implications to community building and civil society capacity building,
could not be told without paying attention to the micro-politics of such relationships, and
how their purported principles are observed, or ignored, in actual mechanisms and
strategies put in place. A good test therefore of how and why, and whether or not in the
first place, participatory principles are working or not to build strong communities, lies
not in the number of international awards or individual citations a city and its leaders receive, but in an examination of the level of confidence of its people in the political leadership and their support for its policy, planning and governance directions. Voting for their leaders consistently in successive elections is a good first-level indicator. Similarly, testing decentralization’s contribution to participatory democracy rests upon an analysis of how its institutionalization has led to better outcomes for the poor and other marginalized social groups through their participation in decision-making and implementing programs that affect their lives.

Lastly, the Philippine and Naga City experiences in using decentralization as an instrument of democratic, participatory planning and governance demonstrate the highly dependent and contextual future of civil society on the nature of the local political economy and political leadership. Decentralization and devolution of powers under the Local Government Code have produced rather uneven results within and across Philippine cities and municipalities. While some cities and municipalities experience improved local governance in areas where NGOs and POs could fully participate in its implementation, there are also others were the new Code provisions had either been laid to waste or used by vested political interests to sidestep the opposition (Santos 1997). While there are limits to using decentralization as a tool of participatory democracy, limits posed by social class stratification, rent-seeking political culture, and near-monopoly of traditional elite over political party machinery and state resources, decentralization also opens up possibilities for communities and civil society forces, especially with the support of elected officials, to take initiative in experimenting with new innovations, institutionalizing them, and protecting their gains from erosion. Indeed, communities and their local governments stand to either lose or gain from decentralization, begging the question: Why do some communities succeed in maximizing the LGC provisions for civil society representation in local government councils, while others do not?

The case of Naga City has shown some of the conditions and strategies under which good political leadership and cooperative government-civil society interactions happen to truly make decentralization an effective instrument of participatory planning and governance. Discussions of participatory and democratic governance raise the question of which social forces will lead the state to greater democracy and who will benefit most from this transformation (Dowbor 1998). The answer to this question is clear in the minds and practices of Naga City government officials and civil society proponents. Naga City has creatively used a decentralization policy to support diverse goals such as promoting economic productivity and social justice, reducing poverty and community participation in the delivery of basic services, and in building urban infrastructures. To Robredo, the benefits of decentralization are clear: “More resources were provided. Little intervention allowed more initiative.” (Email interview with Robredo by Soliman Santos, 7 June 2004). While Robredo sees initiative as a responsibility arising from less intervention; other politicians see less intervention as a reward and a right that does not bring with it any corresponding duty to their citizenry. The City has clearly demonstrated that decentralization, to be an effective tool of community building and articulation of public interest through participatory democracy, must incorporate more than political
representation and rights (McCarthy 1994). It must also be accompanied by a framework for the political representation and participation of once-excluded communities to effectively channel resources to local needs (Geddes 1997). By institutionalizing various forms of participatory governance, or the participation of people in the governmental and programmatic decisions affecting their lives, Naga City has achieved a partial transformation of economic inequalities and clipping of the state’s coercive powers that often destroy cooperation, trust, and confidence-building, especially among the poor. In doing so, decentralization-induced mechanisms of participatory planning and governance have become meaningful instruments in upholding the public good, bringing about greater democratization and economic prosperity for marginalized and powerless groups.

In “Third World” societies where political rent-seeking is strong and where political parties and corporatist bodies are dominated by oligarchic families and male-dominated interest groups, decentralization may either be used by elite parties to further entrench themselves in power and marginalize opposition, or it may open up formal mechanisms for the active participation of a broader civil society to support participatory planning and governance. In Naga City, decentralization has clearly resulted in substantive participation for poor and socially marginalized groups in political decision-making, without alienating and threatening the middle-class, business, and economic elites. It has also aided in the local organizational capacity of community-based groups, NGOs and other civil society organizations, reinforcing the ability of people to trust one another, mobilize resources, resolve conflicts, and work together in solving their common problems and achieving agreed-upon goals. Capacity building on the part of both government and community organizations, is a necessary ingredient and outcome of participatory planning and governance, that enables people to rediscover their strengths and limitations, empowering them to take control of their lives and develop their fullest potential. When civil society organizations are supported by government and used as conduits in communicating directly to citizens for their own political education and concerted action, civil society groups in turn, could move beyond mere advocacy politics and participate effectively in the arenas of policy-making and program implementation.

Bibliography:


*Naga City Citizen’s Charter: A Guidebook on Key City Government Services*. n.d.. Naga City: Naga City Hall.


**Box 1. Innovative Features of Naga City Government’s Productivity Improvement Program (PIP)**

**Confidence Building.** Guided by the recognition that its personnel are the organization’s precious resource, the city government implemented empowering policies that include: (1) Implementation of a better and competitive compensation package; (2) Setting up of a reward system based on aptitude and competence; (3) Activation of Merit and Promotions Board, using employee representation to eliminate patronage; (4) Cultivation of an “atmosphere of competition;” and (5) adoption of a more open, deliberative and participative system of management;

**Performance metrics.** To promote accountability and efficiency in service delivery, the city government applied private sector management systems such as: (1) Implementation and institutionalization of private sector human resource management productivity seminars and semestral surveys, to set benchmarks and measure performance; (2) An incentive system rewarding employee innovation, and (3) A “Contract of Deliverables” specifying services, the person responsible, and response time for services of every city government department.

**Program development.** Through the Productivity Improvement Program, the City Government helped crystallize and operationalize the following sectoral programs: Emergency Rescue Naga (ERN); *Kaantabay sa Kauswagan*; Metro Naga Development Council (MNDC); Socialized Program for Empowerment and Economic Development (SPEED); Local Initiatives for Economic Activities and Partnership (LEAPS); City Government Computerization Program (CGCP); Naga Early Education and Development (NEED)

**Organizational Development.** As a consequence of program development, the city government created new organizational units that will address the accelerated need for urban basic services to improve its responsiveness. These include: (1) Urban Affairs Office; (2) Lingkod Barangay Office; (3) Naga City Hospital; (4) Electronic Data Processing Unit; and (5) Investment Promotion and Action Center.

**Institutionalization.** The Productivity Improvement Program was institutionalized through the passage of City Ordinance No. 97-002, and placed under the City Human Resource Management Office (CHRMO).
**Capability building.** The city government embarked on a continuous internal improvement program, creating a facilitating team in the Technology of Participation (TOP) methodologies and skills to improve productivity and service quality through the following: (1) Performance evaluation system; (2) Merit promotion plan and system of ranking positions; (3) Employee suggestions and incentives awards system; (4) Grievance machinery, and (5) Adoption of qualification standards (QS) for certain positions.

Source: Naga City Website (www.naga.gov.ph).

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**Box 2. Approaches and Strategies of the Urban Poor Housing Program**

**On-Site Development** Approach: facilitates land ownership transfer from government and private owners to current occupants using any of the following strategies:

- **Direct Purchase** - purchase of land occupied by the urban poor from its owner by the city government itself. The occupants amortize the cost of their homelots to the city government.

- **Land Swapping** - urban poor-occupied property is exchanged by a private owner with another lot, of roughly equal value, purchased by the city government. Amortization on individual homelots is paid to the city government.

- **Land Sharing** - a mutually beneficial arrangement that allows both private landowners and urban poor occupants to satisfy their respective land use and needs.

- **Community Mortgage** - allows the wholesale purchase of a private property occupied by members of an urban poor association, using the Community Mortgage Program of the National Home Mortgage Finance Corporation.

**Off-Site Development Approaches:** establishes safety nets for victims of eviction and demolition, and potential homelot owners, using any of the following strategies:

- **Establishment of Resettlement Sites** - The city government acquires properties, either through direct purchase or land swapping, and are consolidated and developed as relocation sites for victims of eviction and demolition.

- **Disposition of Public Lands** - The national government's Department of Environment and Natural Resources authorizes disposition of public lands within the city's territorial jurisdiction, with urban poor families as priority beneficiaries.

Source: Naga City Website (www.naga.gov.ph).
Appendix 1. Sample International and National Awards Received by Naga City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Award</th>
<th>Year Awarded and Citation</th>
<th>Granting Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTERNATIONAL AWARDS:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient, United Nations Public Service Awards</td>
<td>2004, Application of ICT in Local Government</td>
<td>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient, Award for Women-Friendly City</td>
<td>2004, Contest of Gender Responsive Local Government for Asia-Pacific</td>
<td>UN-HABITAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient, CyberCity Award for Asia-Pacific</td>
<td>2003, For Developing Effective and Efficient Model of Utilizing ICTs for Promoting Good Governance</td>
<td>The Urban Governance Initiative (TUGI), United Nations Development Program (UNDP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalist, World Habitat</td>
<td>2002, for the <em>Kaantabay sa Kauswagan</em> Program</td>
<td>Building and Social Foundation and UN-HABITAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winner, International Award for Best Practices in Improving the Living Environment</td>
<td>1998, for Naga City Participatory Planning Initiatives</td>
<td>UN-HABITAT and Municipality of Dubai, United Arab Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HABITAT II Top 40 Best Practices</td>
<td>1996, for the <em>Kaantabay sa Kauswagan</em> Program</td>
<td>United Nations Center for Human Settlements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NATIONAL AWARDS:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-all Best Local Government Unit Website</td>
<td>2004, First National Computer Search for Best LGU Website</td>
<td>Department of Science and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award for Continuing Excellence (ACE) Award</td>
<td>2003, Recognition for LGUs that were awarded for 5 consecutive years the <em>Gawad Galing Pook</em> Award</td>
<td>Ford Foundation, Asian Institute of Management and Department of Interior and Local Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient, Most Business-Friendly Local Government Unit</td>
<td>2002, for commendable efforts in best practices in governance and promoting the interest of the business community for the benefit of the citizenry</td>
<td>Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Salas Population and Development Award</td>
<td>2003, 2000, in recognition of the city’s highly innovative population and development programs</td>
<td>National Population Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-Friendly City</td>
<td>2003 (First Runner-up); 2002 (Second Runner-up), for programs promoting children’s rights and development</td>
<td>Department of Social Welfare and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Peace and Order Council of the Philippines</td>
<td>1999, 1998, for peace and order innovations by City Council</td>
<td>National Peace and Order Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel Quezon Memorial Award</td>
<td>1994, for outstanding achievement in tuberculosis control</td>
<td>Department of Labor and Employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Endnotes:

1 I am highly indebted to Soliman and Doods Santos for sharing materials and encouraging me to do research on Naga City. I also thank the Sol and Doods, Jo-Anne Lee, Penny Gurstein, Clare Mochrie, and Alex Imperial and reading previous drafts of this paper.

2 Mayor Robredo has received the 2000 Ramon Magsaysay Award, Asia’s equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize; the 2000 Konrad Adenauer Medal of Excellence, the 1996 Ten Young Outstanding Young Persons of the World (TOYP), the 2002 Outstanding Mayors of the Philippines Award, the 2002 Jose Rizal Awards for Excellence, the 1991 Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Philippines (TOYMP), and the 1990 Dangal ng Bayan (Honor of the Nation) Award. Florencio Mongoso, Manager of the Metro Naga Public Sector Employees Office received the 2002 TOYMP Award for public service and the 1999 Dangal ng Bayan Award. Three other Naga City civil servants – Antonio Amparado, David Casper Nathan Sergio, and Salvador del Castillo – received the award from the Civil Service Commission in 1996, 1997 and 1998, respectively. The Head of the City Population and Nutrition Office, Teresita del Castillo, also received the 2001 Gawad Parangal Award from the Commission on Population and have been responsible for city programs that received the Rafael Salas Population and Development Award.

3 The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are perhaps the best known international development agencies pushing for decentralization as part of their emphasis on “good governance” and public sector reforms to improve project or program efficiency. The World Bank defined governance as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of the country’s economic and social resources for development.” Good governance is “epitomized by predictable, open, and enlightened policy-making (that is, transparent processes); a bureaucracy imbued with professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; and a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law” (World Bank 1994, vii). In the Philippine case, the World Bank and the IMF have likewise pushed for administrative decentralization in the form of privatization of state corporations, most notably public utility companies, as part of its structural adjustment program loans. Decentralization in the form of fiscal autonomy of local units seems to be the logical consequence of massive cuts in the national public investment programs and operations and maintenance expenditures since the adoption of Fiscal Austerity Measures in response to the 1983-1985 crisis.

4 The change towards decentralization seems to be inevitable in light of the increase in population and proliferation of many politico-administrative units. As of 1999, there are already 78 provinces, 83 cities, and over 40,000 barangays or village units in 1,526 municipalities or towns. The barangay is the basic and smallest politico-administrative unit headed by a kapitan (captain) and kagawad (councillors). Both the municipal and city governments are headed by mayor assisted by a vice-mayor and several councillors that are elected for a limited term, with possible re-election. Together, they compose the local government’s legislative body, the Sangguniang Bayan (Municipal Council) or
Sangguniang Panlungsod (City Council). Likewise, officials at the provincial level are all elected. The provincial government is also called the Sanggunian Panlalawigan (Provincial Council or Board).

Among these local leaders are Mayor Edward Hagedorn of Puerto Princesa City, Mayor Eddie Dorotan of Irosin City, Mayor Mauricio Domogan of Baguio City and Mayor Rosalita Nunez of General Santos City.

There are at least two categories or sources of pork barrel funds: the Countrywide Development Funds allocated in the national budget to every Senator and Congress Representative for infrastructure, materials and equipment; and the Congressional Initiative Allocation devoted to the Lower House members’ discretionary use of the “Special Purpose Funds” in the budgets of specific government agencies and departments, such as the School Building Fund in the Department of Education, Culture and Sports; the Public Works Fund in the Department of Public Works and Highways, and other congressional insertion in the budgets of the Department of Health and the Department of Interior and Local Government. Much of these pork barrel funds are dispensed during and in-between election campaigns in exchange for political support, and also become the source of corruption when funds are diverted for these purposes, bribe and other inappropriate use of public funds (Rocamora 1998; Parreno 1998).

The sectoral organizations under the influence of the City Government, and their corresponding membership estimates, that collectively form the backbone of Robredo’s political machinery are as follows: Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga Federation (15,000); Lakas ng Kababaihan Cooperative (5,000); Seniors Citizen League (10,000); Naga City Youth Federation (3,000); Barangay People’s Foundation (6,000); Padyak (pedal-driven bicycle with sidecar) Operators and Drivers Association (2,000); Trimobile (motorcycle with a sidecar) Operators and Drivers Association (4,500); Market Stallholders Federation (6,000); Metro Naga Vendors Federation (1,000); Vegetable Planters Federation (4,000); Karetela (horse-driven carriage) Association (150); Rabzu (zone) Naga (no estimate). See Kawanaka (2002, Table 6.1, 77).

Kawanaka asserts that in the 1998 elections, 26 out of 27 barangay leaders supported Robredo, although not all gave their firm support. He documents Robredo’s stance towards leaders who showed wavering loyalties: “When a barangay chief is not loyal to the mayor, Robredo will turn to a loyal councilor …and designate him/her as a barangay coordinator. The mayor will then channel all city government projects in the barangay through this…coordinator and exclude the disloyal chief from access to the city government. The mayor will use the barangay coordinator for election campaigning, in which case, the disloyal barangay chief loses access to the resources [putting] the chief into a difficult situation…because he has no access to resources for distributing to the residents.” (2002, 89).

In detail, these four elements are “Accountability or the building of government capacity to make public officials answerable to the people; Participation or participatory development process that ensure people’s access to institutions that promote
development; **Predictability** or legal frameworks, which is not only the presence of rules that regulate behavior but also their fair and consistent application, and **Transparency** or information openness, the availability of information to the general public” (Citizens Charter, n.d., 1, original emphasis, see also Naga City website: www.naga.gov.ph).

10 Living its Performance Pledge, based on the “5-S” (sorting, sweeping, sanitizing, systematizing, self-discipline) and “3-R” (reduce, reuse, recycling) mantras frequently used by environmentalist, City Hall through PIP was able to cut down office waste, promote efficient operations, and deliver effective delivery of frontline services, down to the response time or minutes per transaction promised in the Citizen Charter.

11 The QSIP was developed with funding assistance from the USAID’s demand-driven technical assistance project called Governance and Local Democracy (GOLD). In the extension phase of GOLD in 1999-2000, the City used technical assistance funds to create the Public Service Excellence Program (PSEP) that institutionalized City Hall’s role as a “service provider” instead of a bureaucracy.

12 The key position papers at the National Congress focused on the creation of a national agency for the urban poor and the repeal of the Anti-Squatting Law (or Presidential Decree 772) signed by Marcos. The Congress took place in the midst of other progressive developments on housing under Corazon Aquino’s government, such as the urban land reform bill that created the Urban Development and Housing Act, the introduction of the community mortgage plan, and creating of an office for the Presidential Commission on Urban Poor Affairs. Never before have urban poor and social housing issues been on the radar screen of the national government since this period.

13 The program operates alongside similar programs such as Naga City Socialized Program for Empowerment and Economic Development (Naga SPEED), which creates consultative channels like the multi-sectoral meetings called “Oralay-olay sa Sektor” (deliberations in the sector), village consultative meetings called “Bayanihan sa Barangay” (mutual helping hands in the village) and the expanded City Development Council (Angeles 1997: 103).