

Participatory Approaches In Alleviating Urban Poverty The Naga City Experience*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to describe Naga's experience in using participatory approaches to address various dimensions of urban poverty more effectively. It will cover four key initiatives that played and are playing key roles in the city's evolving institutional experience in participatory governance:

- The *Kaantabay sa Kauswagan (or Partners in Development) Program* on securing tenurial rights for the urban poor, which laid down the groundwork for meaningful engagement with constituents;
- The *Participatory Planning Initiatives* that strengthened local capacity on participatory approaches;
- *Reinventing the Local School Board*, which marked the first time participatory approaches were used to influence a national agency to address a key local concern, and
- The *ongoing preparation of Naga's MDG-aligned local development plans*, which seeks to further institutionalize people participation in governance and development planning.

2.0 THE KAANTABAY SA KAUSWAGAN PROGRAM

Conceptually, the Kaantabay program is a form of social housing. It dates back to 1989, making it one of the oldest, most durable and sustainable initiatives of the city government.

Mechanics. At its core is securing tenurial rights for urban poor beneficiaries. This is accomplished by acquiring the landholding they are occupying through various innovative schemes, with the city government playing a critical facilitative and mediating role. When negotiations are completed, the beneficiaries are then able to amortize their homelots under very affordable terms through community mortgage. When the landholding is fully paid up, property rights to individual homelots are transferred to beneficiaries, thereby facilitating asset building by the poor.

Strategies. Two key program thrusts operationalize participation, albeit in a less structured manner.

Community organizing

Putting together a group of potential urban poor beneficiaries is a critical requirement under the Kaantabay program. A policy of dealing only with urban poor organizations, not individuals, compels interested applicants to take the initiative in organizing themselves. In implementing the program, the non-government sector (through the Community Organizers of the Philippines Enterprises or COPE) has played a key role in social preparation and community organizing. The city government recognizes that these areas lie outside its core competence. The partnership between City Hall and COPE therefore made sense. As a result of COPE's efforts, there are now around 80 urban poor associations belonging to the Naga City Urban Poor Federation (NCUPF) compared with the only nine in 1989 when Kaantabay began.

* Presented by Mayor Jesse M. Robredo of Naga City, Philippines during the UNDESA/Italy Side Event on Fighting Urban Poverty on June 20, 2006 during the World Urban Forum III in Vancouver, Canada.

Tripartism

The program's effectiveness also stems from a tripartite approach to problem resolution at the project level, involving the a) city government and other national government agencies; b) urban poor associations, aided by NGOs and POs; and c) private landowners. This mechanism enables the involved parties to sit down and cooperate in solving their disputes.

By adopting a pro-poor bias, the city government gives the program strength and credibility. This bias is particularly manifested in its treatment of urban poor associations as "partner-beneficiaries" which compels them to actively participate in every step of the process. Meanwhile, national government agencies extend operational and financial support to the program's land acquisition thrust.

Urban poor associations, on the other hand, signify their support and commitment to the project through their willingness to negotiate, get organized and raise equity if necessary, including money for land acquisition and labor for urban upgrading.

Finally, landowners show their cooperation through willingness to explore more peaceful means of settling tenurial disputes as an alternative to ejection of urban poor occupants and demolition of their makeshift shelters.

Outcomes. Kaantabay has fashioned innovative approaches to land acquisition, community development and project financing which enabled it to achieve near universal coverage. In the process, it overcame resource limitations that handicap national and local government authorities. As of December 31, 2005, it has covered a total of 8,763 urban poor households, representing 30 percent of the total citywide. In terms of direct benefit, 67 percent of the households covered are on their way to acquiring their property titles, having benefited from 27 completed projects under the program. Negotiations are ongoing for 14 more projects that will cover the remaining 33 percent. Thus, for roughly 2 out of every 3 urban poor households in Naga, agreement has been reached between the landowner, the urban poor association and the city government; the tenurial status of the occupants is already secured; and they are in the process of amortizing their homelots.

3.0 THE PARTICIPATORY PLANNING INITIATIVES

The Naga City Participatory Planning Initiatives (NCPPI), chosen in 1998 as one of the Ten Best Practices worldwide by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), has already outgrown its original planning focus. Today, it has spawned diverse applications of participative governance that continue to attract international attention.

Originally, the NCPPI represents a more structured effort of the city government to actively involve local communities and interest groups as stakeholders in the crafting of doable action plans on key health and environment concerns. Impelled by a revolutionary "Empowerment Ordinance" mandating greater people participation in governance, Naga tapped the USAID-assisted Governance and Local Democracy (GOLD) Project for technical assistance on how meaningful participation and stakeholderism can be ensured for action plans on these key areas. Under GOLD, a select group of city personnel and their NGO partners acquired basic and

advanced skills on the highly participative Technology of Participation (ToP) group facilitation techniques.

Outcomes. These efforts led to the development of local plans, which guided local river rehabilitation, solid waste management and health service improvement; and the revitalization of the moribund City Health Board which coordinates delivery of integrated health services by the city's five health-related agencies. It later led to the establishment of the city's own environment and natural resources office.

From then on, continued use of ToP promoted participative governance concepts and practices, leading to wide-ranging applications, not only in planning but also in most other government activities. These new applications include

- The creation of the Naga City Investment Board (NCIB) that is private sector-led, its membership consisting largely of nominees by the Naga City People's Council and the local business chamber
- The crafting and adoption of an Integrated Livelihood Masterplan (ILM) that rationalized existing national and local livelihood programs, including micro-lending for small entrepreneurs. Like the NCIB, a multisectoral body is directing its implementation.
- The development of the Naga City Citizens Charter, a guidebook on city government services that promotes citizen empowerment and accountability among city government service providers, and
- The strengthening of village-based people's organizations as well as sectoral groupings in the city.

4.0 REINVENTING THE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD

In 2001, the city government pioneered an initiative that sought to improve the quality of basic education in Naga, in the process engaging with local stakeholders of the public school system which is centrally managed and controlled by the national government through the Department of Education (DepEd).

Focusing on the city school board, a local special body provided for under the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC), it sought to address the governance of the local public school system, building on the city government's established competency as a leading exponent of good urban governance. Because the DepEd is an external agency, this initiative is one of the more difficult efforts of the city government, compared to other programs that involved entities belonging to the local bureaucracy.

Challenges. The program sought to improve the governance of public schools in Naga – with the end view of addressing local problems facing the sector which are symptomatic of the national situation. These include:

- Deteriorating quality of basic education (elementary and high school) that has far-reaching effects on their generation and the city's future
- The general lack of awareness about the current state of public education among stakeholders
- Weak mechanisms for meaningful parent participation in the education of their children
- Weak "soft infrastructure" support (textbooks, reference materials, continuing professional development, etc.) to facilitate the learning process

- An underperforming City School Board that has been reduced to a mere budgeting agency for local education funds
- Weak local involvement and participation in the delivery of public education services
- Weak planning and budgeting practices and processes that contribute to inefficient and ineffective use of local education funds, and
- The lack of transparency and accountability in the administration of the public school system.

Strategies. In response, the city government pursued two key strategies:

Empowered city school board

First, it reengineered the city school board to become an empowered entity that goes beyond its traditional function of providing budgetary support to local public schools. This, in itself is a controversial proposition. One school of thought held that the board can only operate within the limits prescribed by the LGC, which provide for its legal basis. But the city decided to deliberately embrace the opposite perspective – that what the law does not expressly prohibit, it allows.

Guided by this liberating mindset, it conducted the first ever meeting between stakeholders of the public school system in January 2002 – which clarified to everyone the real state of public education in Naga. In that meeting, local officials finally understood what the 42% achievement level meant – that in a 100-item test, the average Nagueño pupil is able to correctly answer only 42.

This new understanding underscored the urgency for education reform beginning with the school board. It also marked a watershed in school board budgeting. The stakeholders consultation validated results of a survey conducted by the board during the last quarter of 2001, and defined the priority areas it should address. And for the first time ever, its budget incorporated activities that, for more than a decade, fell below the board's radar screen. Since then, those priorities guided the board's allocation of the city's Special Education Fund (SEF), which is collected from a local tax on real properties.

Grassroots stakeholdership

The effort for education reform anchored on greater community engagement was carried down to the grassroots level. From February to March 2003, the board shared with local communities the real picture of education in Naga and the Philippines. Shuttling between schools, it presented a situationer on the public school system and what the board is doing about it, and asked them what more can be done. As a result, most parents became aware of the situation and pledged their support to ongoing efforts to improve achievement.

After completing a 3-year local education plan in 2005, a second round of school-level consultations updated local communities on gains made under the initiative (measured through access and quality indicators at the city and the school levels), and promoted the creation of local school governance councils that would anchor grassroots-based education reform efforts.

Side by side, sectoral consultations – in the form of consultative meetings with school principals and officials of the city teachers association – yielded very interesting insights that have helped

redefine the Board's directions. One is the overwhelming preference for "soft" infra – textbooks and other instructional materials, desks and armchairs – over school buildings. Another is the need for teacher training, performance-based incentives, and intervention to unburden lesson planning.

Outcomes. Five years later, the program has institutionalized a more responsive support system for local public schools indicated by:

- A 1:1 textbook to student ratio in the core subjects of English, Science and Mathematics for both the elementary and secondary levels. This is a significant improvement over the 1:2 textbook ratio four years ago.
- A 1:1 workbook-student ratio in the same core subjects for the elementary level. Previously, only those enrolled in private schools had this privilege.
- Standardized the quality of instruction in English, Science and Mathematics through printed lesson plans for the elementary level.
- The conduct of annual localized testing whose results serve as basis for providing performance-based incentives to public school teachers.
- Reduced average class size to around 45 students divisionwide (down from 55).
- Efforts toward transparent recruitment of public school teachers that sought to attract the best available, prompting the DepEd to incorporate essential elements of these efforts in its own recruitment process.
- A comprehensive IT education program for the public schools in Naga, built around a Computer Literacy and Instructional Center for Kids (CLICK) laboratory, with complementary internet access, in each of the city's 36 public schools; i-Link, a teacher training center working to upgrade teacher competency on IT education; the integration of IT lessons in the basic education curriculum; and wireless internet access to four rural public elementary and high schools.
- Localized and expanded an AusAid project that sought to improve children attendance in school. Now called Sanggawadan, this complementary program helps around 3,000 households in ensuring their school-age children stay in school.
- Allocation of P100,000 for each public school as its own School Empowerment Fund to support the conduct of community-identified developmental activities.

In terms of actual gains in student academic achievement, Naga's efforts have clearly paid off, judging from the city's comparative performance in the National Achievement Test from 1999-2005.

- At the elementary level, improvement in academic achievement in the core subjects of English, Science and Mathematics registered an average annual increase of only 3.7 percentage points between 1999 and 2004 (from 32.07 to 50.58). But with strong intervention under the program, the city attained a 9.5 percentage point improvement for 2005 (with a divisionwide achievement rating of 60.10).
- At the secondary level, a 2.2 percentage point increase was attained between 1999 and 2004 (from 37.26 to 48.31). This year, it went up by 6.2 percentage points (on a divisionwide achievement rating of 54.56).
- Both improvements are in line with the medium and high annual target under the city's education plan for the next three years.

5.0 DEVELOPMENT OF MDG-ALIGNED LOCAL PLANS

Beginning this June, the city government, through its local planning office, has begun updating Naga's development and land use plans, providing it an opportunity to further institutionalize participative approaches in local governance processes. In so doing, the following innovations were adopted:

1. *Using the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Public Governance Scorecard (PGS) outputs as planning targets.* By adopting the MDG and the PGS vision-mission statement and scorecards, the city will no longer need to reinvent the wheel and go through a time-consuming visioning process. This also means that it will be updating the local land use and development plans with a 10-year time horizon. The planning process will therefore focus on revisiting these outputs, refining the targets set, and aligning the city plans towards attaining these 10-year targets.
2. *Working with existing and mandated local councils and special bodies as basic planning unit.* This involves tapping existing and mandated councils under the umbrella of the City Development Council (all of which have strong civil society representation) in coming up with sectoral components of both the land use and development plans. For instance, in regard to the social sector, the city will have to work with the Children's Council, the Women's Council, and the Youth Council in establishing the baseline data, assessing needs; crafting programs, projects and activities (PPAs) that will respond to these needs in the context of the MDG and PGS targets; costing out these PPAs, and laying out a 10-year action plan for implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

This approach has the following advantages:

- a. There will be higher data quality as stakeholders will have to opportunity to validate and reconcile both official (i.e. those generated by the city planning staff) and non-official data
- b. The process will ensure shared ownership and responsibility over the output plans, and
- c. It will enable local councils and special bodies to play a more strategic and meaningful role in the city government's institutional planning processes.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Naga's journey as a trailblazer in participatory governance for close to two decades highlights the following:

1. *The urban poor are a key constituency in urban development.* Very early on, the city government recognized that the urban poor – their economic and social status notwithstanding – are vital sector that local authorities must engage with in actualizing urban development. The Kaantabay program is our response to that need, and it opened the doors towards more meaningful engagement and more functional partnerships with civil society.
2. *Local capacity for participatory approaches must be developed.* While Kaantabay sowed the seeds, our Participatory Planning Initiatives made sure they will grow and bear fruit. It provided local government and non-government staff with skills on structured participatory

processes, i.e. the ToP facilitation techniques whose use and applications went beyond planning.

3. *Participatory approaches can work, even in the difficult effort to influence external entities.* Our School Board education reform initiative demonstrates this very well, whereby a local authority has succeeded in leveraging its expertise in participatory governance to introduce positive changes in the centrally managed and controlled public school system.

4. *Local development planning can further institutionalize people participation.* The ongoing updating of local plans shows that Naga is coming full circle, with a twist. Traditionally, planning occurs at the initial phase of any process or activity. Here, it has emerged as the newest opportunity to integrate and tie in all these innovations together, when they already have individually achieved momentum and attained maturation.

5. *For optimum results, participation must form part of the institutional development agenda.* This is perhaps what separates the city government of Naga from most other local authorities. Its institutional experience with people participation has evolved into its own governance framework that anchors all development initiatives of the city government. (See box.)

The Naga Governance Framework

In this framework, three elements form the foundation of good urban governance:

- **Progressive Perspective.** In the model, it lies at the apex of the triangle because it is a function of leadership which the local administration must provide. Among others, a progressive perspective seeks to build prosperity for the community at large. But the goal of prosperity building is tempered by an enlightened perception of the poor, whose upliftment is an end to governance.
- **Functional Partnerships.** These are vehicles that enable the city to tap community resources for priority undertakings, in the process multiplying its capacity and enabling it to overcome resource constraints that usually hamper government.
- **Participation.** These are mechanisms ensure long-term sustainability by generating broad-based stakeholdership and community ownership over local undertakings. Partnerships and participation lie at the base of the triangle because they are the elements that provide it sustainability.

