When Local Government Works: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Local Participation as a Pillar of Community Development

by

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Abstract

Brexit, the British vote to leave the European Union, is only a recent and dramatic example of a phenomenon that is sweeping the world today: the push for political decentralization. After some eight centuries of increasing political centralization, a tide has turned. European movements to build the modern state can be traced to the 12th century. Then the Western imperialist thrust of the 16th-19th centuries brought the modern politically centralized state to the rest of the world. More recently we have seen attempts to build more centralized multistate systems, weakly in the League of Nations and United Nations and more strongly in the European Union. That movement now appears to have generated a counter movement. Today we see everywhere strong movements to decentralize political power and to bring more authority and responsibility back to local government.

This raises the profound and challenging question of what local governments can do and are positioned to do. The cases in this issue are an important response to that many-sided question. The articles in this issue consist of two groups. The first seven articles examine local leaders in six Southeast Asian countries that have identified a *problem*, created an *intervention* to address that problem, and either had a successful *outcome or learned valuable lessons*.[4] The second group consists of two additional cases from Japan and Thailand, structured using a different format, and provide further compelling examples of initiatives at local levels.

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The Evolution of Local Governance

Our understanding of local government in Asian settings continues to evolve. In Southeast Asia, administrative systems historically have been derived from, and then were to differing degrees, imitations of Western models. They were "imitations" because inevitably adjustments had to be made to fit the institutional, cultural and political contexts of each country.

M. Shamshul Haque (2007) observes that, as in other parts of the world, systems in Southeast Asia have moved through three stages of development. He labels these the *traditional bureaucratic model* common in the colonial period, the *developmental model* during the postcolonial years, and *new public management* that surfaced in more recent times. (Haque, 2007)

The *bureaucratic model*, hegemonic for decades in the West, guided post-WWII societies in Southeast Asia as they moved away from traditional hereditary and kinship based administrative systems. What was implemented looked somewhat different in each place after adaptation to local historical, political, economic and cultural environments.

The *developmental model* rejected rigidities associated with traditional bureaucracy and gave a higher priority to the capacity for setting and meeting development goals. It emphasized state-led economic plans and programs "though a new set of development-oriented public agencies and employees." (Haque, 2007, p 1303) This model in turn was intended to create economic growth, reduce poverty, enhance national security and strengthen competitiveness. Like the bureaucratic model, it was not indigenous in origin. Instead it resulted from following the development prescriptions and accompanying incentives offered by donor agencies, coupled with the desire of national elites for rapid economic and social progress. This model also took different forms reflecting the particular national setting.

New public management, or NPM, is a constellation of priorities that make up the third model influential in Southeast Asia. It encapsulated initiatives that emerged in the 1980s in developed economies. In the ensuing years "most countries in Southeast Asia have embraced the NPM model in various degrees with a view to re-engineering the public sector…" (Haque, 2007, p. 1307) NPM emphasizes the adoption of business practices, market incentives, competition and a greater role for the private sector as the path to more efficiency and flexibility in public organizations. *Efficiency* was prioritized because governments were experiencing a challenging combination of greater public demands for funds against budget shrinkage. It promised that fewer resources would need to be diverted from the private economy to support a government that wasn't making optimum use of them. *Flexibility* was crucial for reducing institutional rigidities while adapting to rapidly changing economic and political environments resulting from globalization. (Pratt 2006, 104)

Haque (2007) underscores that in the process of adapting the three models to local conditions these borrowed frameworks "often reinforced the power of state bureaucracies in developing societies, including in Southeast Asia." This in turn produced centralized elite

structures with vested interests in their own position, leaving little room for administrative innovation and more indigenous models of public administration. (p. 1317)[5]

In many places outside of Asia and Southeast Asia, innovation has resulted from experimentation at the local level. In the United States, which is a prime example of a "bottom-up" approach, local governments have been referred to as "laboratories of democracy," the places where government is "reinvented." These local jurisdictions experiment with ways to solve their problems using their own resources or with limited support from an often fiscally challenged national government. They typically rely on cross-sector collaboration to marshal these resources. This process in turn is linked to a strategy of addressing problems through a network that joins government, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. This interweaving of responsibility and resources is referred to as "governance" and its promise is a broader menu of approaches for tackling thorny public issues. In recent years the *governance idea* has spread widely, including into Asian societies.

Evan Berman (2010) pulled together themes that stood out from a collection of studies about public administration in Southeast Asia and concluded that key is, "the willingness of central governments to relinquish control and the ability to build up effective local governance – both of which are preeminent political questions." (p. 24) He argued that what has been done to date has not been commensurate with the problems that need to be addressed.

The cases in this issue respond to the point Berman is making about this imbalance. They also represent something emergent: the belief that local government and governance have the required understanding of context, the needed flexibility, and the pooled capacity to more effectively address problems that most concern citizens. This emergence takes place in the light of the shortcomings to which both Haque (2007) and Berman (2010) make reference. These shortcomings include rigid centralized bureaucracies, networked elites, systemic corruption and the historic sense that local government is inferior to its national counterpart. From this perspective, these efforts may be the leading edge of how ideas of government and governance will be re-shaped in Southeast Asia and how local actions will build capacity to address critical public issues. How this emergence unfolds depends to a great deal on the course taken by decentralization.

Decentralization in Southeast Asia

After centuries of centralizing to build the modern state, Asian and Southeast Asian nations are now moving to decentralize governance. The World Bank (2005) distinguished three forms of decentralization, which it labels *deconcentration*, *delegation* and *devolution*. *Deconcentration* implies giving responsibility to local units for carrying out services under central guidelines. There is little local discretion in applying the rules and regulations of the center. *Delegation* implies actually giving to local units the responsibility for delivering specific services under some supervision from the center, but with considerable discretion. *Devolution* refers to the process of giving actual responsibility, authority and resources to local units to provide

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[5] Fred W. Riggs coined the term "bureaucratic polity" in his work on Thailand to describe a system of government characterized by a military elite, political cooptation of top civil servants, competition among bureaucratic cliques, politicization of civil service, and patronage and corruption.

services and perform other acts of government, such as taxation and policing. This is something of a continuum, underlying which is the degree of autonomy local units have for implementing policies and for initiating their own projects. In most countries, we can find examples of all forms. The articles in this issue are examples of real *devolution* in which local leaders identified a problem and initiated a means to address it. At the same time, each initiative was set in a larger complex of activities and government services that are examples of both deconcentration and delegation.

Kamnuansilpa et al. (2014) identified other useful dimensions of decentralization: *administrative* and *political*. Administrative decentralization gives local units responsibility for policy implementation and service delivery, or what the World Bank would call delegation; political decentralization gives local citizens the power to select leaders and varying powers of government. Political decentralization implies local elected councils and chief executives, such as mayors or village headmen, accompanied by great variations in what those councils may do. These papers describe local governments using new devolution-inducing laws to address a local problem. A case in Thailand, for example, shows how local leaders created a private foundation to promote rural development and community health.

There has been a great deal of resistance to decentralization, especially from governments that had become highly centralized in the process of building a modern state. Edward Shils (1960) published an important paper in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* noting both the importance of local government and the central governments' resistance to decentralization. It is easy to see why central bureaucracies resist decentralization. Any truly effective decentralization takes power and resources from elected and appointed officials of the national government and the central bureaucracy. The easiest way to resist decentralization is to claim the inexperience and incapacity of local units. Shils described a circular process in which local governments are weak, central governments do not trust their capacity to govern and provide services, and therefore keep away powers from them. This deprives local units of the kind of useful experience that would have given them the capacity they lacked. Without that experience, these local units remain weak and deprived by the center of any real authority.

Despite resistance, strong forces continue to push for decentralization. Economic development and urbanization are producing new classes, especially new educated middle classes, who wish to be involved in their own governance. Business classes are emerging with concerns about rules and restrictions that seem excessive and unwarranted. These upward pressures on central government often are driven by a desire for greater efficiency, but also for greater transparency and accountability. The educated middle classes do not like to be ordered about by a distant and powerful government, and businesses resist rules that may serve national elites but harm their competitiveness. In a number of cases decentralization has been driven by reactions against sometimes ruthless autocratic governments.

The case studies in this issue highlight the range of important public initiatives taking place in local government and governance in ASEAN countries and in Japan that can be a resource for other places undertaking their own important initiatives. The broad context is global experimentation with decentralization, which is likely to be even more active in the coming years.

Some of these cases describe initiatives that produced results that verge on miraculous. This includes Olasiman and Bascar's description of a Philippine city's efforts to find safe and comfortable housing for a displaced, vulnerable minority of "sea gypsies" and Neb's summary of

an NGO's work with local government in Cambodia to improve One Window Services and make them credible to local residents.

Other outcomes are less clear. Calata's case study from the Philippines reflects disappointments. It reads like a caricature of ineffective and corrupt government. Politicians and other public officials promised and then failed to deliver the needed follow up while allowing public favors to be granted to friends and allies. Despite what her Foundation has accomplished, Thamrongwaranggoon is not only critical of national economic priorities in Thailand but skeptical about the ability of local government to play a positive role in meaningful community development.

Given this variability, what do these cases tell us about the opportunities and challenges facing the development of local government and governance? What lessons are there for places seeking to move away from historically centralized systems?

Factors Leading to Success

It is clear that multiple factors contribute to good outcomes, and what "works" in one place may not somewhere else. While accepting the impossibility of drawing lessons that will apply everywhere, it is important to ask whether there are common elements likely to bring desirable results. This question is critical because it focuses on whether these cases are (1) unusual and not likely to be repeated in other places, or (2) a future direction. Stated differently, if what is needed for successes at the local level is too difficult and rarely present, then the achievements described here mean less. On the other hand, if what increases the likelihood of positive outcomes is widely available, then these cases are a beacon pointing to the future.

As a starting point for answering the question, we can name a few elements whose importance in increasing the odds of success is hard to dispute. These include:
- identifying and focusing on a public issue that is widely viewed as a problem worth addressing;
- mobilizing sufficient resources over a sustained period of time;
- adjusting to changing conditions affecting how an intervention is implemented;
- keeping appropriate records; and
- operating from organizational boundaries that are soft enough to cross vertical and horizontal jurisdictions, engage the public, and include the voices of the targets of the intervention.

In addition to these elements, elected and administrative officials must embody the flexibility and responsiveness that is more readily available in local government and governance, yet at the same time remaining publicly accountable.[6]

With these basic elements in place we can explore what these cases point to as important to success. We also can pull out factors that, perhaps surprisingly, do not.

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[6] For an example of the importance of "responsible flexibility" at the local level see Pratt and Takahashi, 2013, "Musashino Place and the Concept of Responsible Flexibility: The Public Organization of the Future for Local Government?"

The Status of Decentralization and Central-Local Relations

The relationship between central and local government is complicated and ever-changing. These cases make it evident that if local officials do not have a substantial degree of autonomy in defining and acting on their understanding of a problem, their efforts are less likely to be successful. We can identify in these cases a movement from centralized and sometimes repressive governance to attempts to foster greater autonomy, including new laws to promote decentralization. We also can see local leaders and citizen groups that are receptive to the decentralizing initiatives and have stepped forward to prioritize issues and work with officials to address them.

The People's Plan for addressing homelessness in metropolitan Manila is a good example of a failure as well as a valuable lesson. Calata shows that the national government never gave local government what was needed to accomplish the goal of resettling tens of thousands of informal settlement families through its innovative People's Plan. He points out, for example, that although the National Housing Authority developed a long list of tasks for Local Government Units (LGUs) to perform, it failed to devolve both authority and resources to them. Only a small piece of what was needed was devolved and, worse, it was something the patrons of local elected officials could use for gain. He concludes that,

> *...since the approach's design requires collaboration between the people and the government there is no other form of government to collaborate with the [Informal Settlement Families] except the LGUs because they operate at the grassroots level. With the People's Plan approach, LGUs should have taken the lead in the implementation of the program on the local level.*

This contrasts with other efforts that went much further in achieving their goals. Reyes points to the passage of a national law mandating that local government units have a 10-year solid waste plan. A tragic garbage slide had

> *...triggered action by the Philippine Congress to enact Republic Act 0993 of 2000, the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act. It created the necessary institutional mechanisms and incentives, provided appropriate funds for solid waste management, and prohibited certain acts and imposed penalties for violations.*
> *According to the law, the local government units such as Quezon City would have primary responsibility for the implementation and enforcement of the Act within their respective jurisdictions.*

Neb acknowledges that his NGO's project to strengthen One Window Services in recently established communes could not have succeeded without changes at the national level. He believes Cambodia to be in a "major transition from a centralized autocratic society staffed by 'officials' to a more open and democratic country staffed by 'civil servants'." The viability of both the commune system and the *One Window Services* initiative are directly in line with that transition.

Myint pointed out that people living in the remote Mrauk-U area of Myanmar have never trusted *local* government. Under its past repressive government, Myanmar had built a local governing structure suspicious of local initiatives. R e c e n t l y h o w e v e r p u b l i c commitments ("oaths") were made at the national level urging movement toward a more democratic country. As a result, once unresponsive local officials were pushed by national officials to listen to local concerns.

The Importance of Political Will
"Political will" refers to commitments by one or more key public officials to continuing to support and advocacy for an intervention, despite the challenges. Efforts to address complex public issues are likely to face unexpected delays, unanticipated resistance, and unplanned costs. Dealing with these means spending precious "political capital." Moreover, each initiative is only one of many a public official is dealing with at any particular time. Spending political capital on one inevitably reduces what is available to spend on another. Clearly, political will is critical.

Reyes refers to political will as one of several key factors that led to success in dealing with Barangay Holy Spirit's waste challenges.

Frivaldo points out that the push for relocation and resettlement in Marikina City in the Philippines had to be balanced against the need for those being resettled to participate in the design and implementation of the program. Political will and "community will" can be antagonistic if political will is perceived as over-riding and ignoring community interests. This is the case, for example, when national programs are imposed locally. It is of course also possible for political will to be aligned or represent community will and for them to be synergistic. Frivaldo writes that,

To deal with the community resistance to the demolition of their shanties, the local government of Marikina, headed by then Mayor Bayani Fernando, employed a strong political will to implement demolition and relocation. To pacify the resisting communities, he adopted a more consultative and participatory approach, conducting dialogues and hiring some of the prospective beneficiaries of the program into significant positions.

Neb underscores the importance of political will in expressing concern over its possible absence. Cambodia is taking the early steps toward a more decentralized system in which there is sufficient support for accessible, responsive and transparent One Window Service Offices (OWSOs). In this context,

The sustainability of OWSOs is a concern. OWSOs need to function beyond the donor supported project, and there needs to be a self- sustaining mechanism for this. One of the main challenges is how to maintain transparency when there is no longer the incentive of funding from development partners. This raises questions around whether or not Cambodia has sufficient political will at all levels to impose sanctions on people who defy their ethical code of conduct.

Political will often has been a tautology: if programs succeed it is because of political will; if they do not, political will is lacking. Kamnuansilpa et al. (2013) provided an operational

definition of political will that is independent of the outcome. If a leader makes repeated *statements* in favor of a project, creates a specialized *structure* to implement the project and *selects* strong and effective people to lead the effort, we can say there is political will. These criteria showed why and how Thailand has resisted decentralization so effectively for so long, despite the strong constitutional base it has developed for it.

This operationalization of *political will* is applicable to local government. In these successful cases someone spoke out for the program, created specific offices or structures to implement it, and if he or she did not continue to be directly involved placed effective people in charge.

Effective Leadership

Political will and leadership are different. Political will is about the willingness to devote energy, resources, and political capital, despite difficult challenges and over a sustained period of time. Leadership is having the skills, influence, and attitude needed to get diverse individuals and groups to embrace a shared goal and work on its behalf, or at least to not undermine it. A person may have a strong political will but not be a leader. The leadership needed to accomplish *public* goals can be particularly challenging since it almost inevitably requires dealing with so many different stakeholders and constituencies.

It is not hard to read between the lines of Thamrongwaranggoon's case to see that leadership was crucial to the success of the Sustainable Community Development Foundation in Thailand's Northeast Provinces. She and her husband had begun their work as physicians in a hospital but faced limits on how much medical treatment, even skillfully practiced, can do to reduce illness and promote individual and community health. They reframed the focus of their work -- reframing itself is an important aspect of leadership -- and embarked on establishing programs that changed how people in their community dealt with issues of underemployment, family conflict, debt, drugs and the loss of traditional wisdom. This required what is central to leadership: vision, effective communication, relationship building, persistence and adaptability.

Reyes, in response to our question, stated that Barangay had an important "champion" --- Captain Felicito Valmocina. He wrote that,

> *In the case of Barangay Holy Spirit, barangay Captain Felicito A. Valmocina is called the Champion and has made a significant impact on the community because of his enthusiastic leadership quality with unwavering determination, dedication and commitment in giving service. He acts as a catalyst, leading by example, which has encouraged and motivated the other members of his community to cooperate and take part in all his projects.*

Frivaldo points to a danger that is the opposite of having an engaged leader. Rather than missing a respected leader, the personality of the leader is too large. The mayor had become the focus of criticism for his "assertive style" of management. His continuing center-stage role prevented others from getting involved. Because of this, the resettlement program in the Philippines would have been better off being viewed "more as belonging to the city government rather than a pure initiative of the mayor." Being a city government program "would have produced a more participative and broader-based representation in decision-making…"

Public Participation

The participation of stakeholders impacted by an intervention, including individuals and groups primarily affected and segments of the general public, is a relatively recent development. It is integral to democratic practices and delivers two things that are critical to successfully addressing complex public issues: ideas and buy-in. The ideas invariably are more diverse than those of elected officials, administrators and experts because they emanate from a broader range of values, interests and personal experiences. The buy-in happens when individuals and groups believe they have been listened to and have helped to shape a program, giving them a feeling of ownership. It moves the program from "theirs" to "ours," a shift that can be critical in advancing and protecting an initiative from the inevitable challenges.

Public input was central to Neb's One Window Services project in Cambodia. His NGO's work was motivated by "…the dearth of information about public services and the lack of participation of citizens in the local government affairs." The project used a variety of formats to contact and receive feedback from over 40,000 Cambodians to correct for that.

Olasiman and Bascar describe the complex process of resettling vulnerable ethnic minority refugees following an attack by a rebel group that over several weeks devastated Zamboanga City. The task involved much more than moving a group of people to a new area. It required resources beyond what government could do *and* the building of trust and tolerance. In the end,

> *It was an opportunity for stakeholders to realize that rebuilding communities and helping displaced populations after a disaster are not the sole duty of government but everyone's shared responsibility. In a multicultural environment, inter-ethnic understanding and social cohesion are crucial components for peace and development. … Participants in these projects gain a greater sense of community and are given a real opportunity to conduct a dialogue and to better understand each other while assisting and addressing the needs of the project beneficiaries.*

Frivaldo's case of a long-term resettlement project points to the consequences of failing to engage in serious consultation. In the beginning, organizers did not engage the people targeted for resettlement.

> *First, at the onset of the program, there was no consultation or dialogue by the local government. The program implementation was carried out based on the city government's directives. That is why no association or group had helped to provide needed information to those targeted for relocation. This resulted in some violent reactions by the groups, such as throwing stones at the demolition teams. It was only in the later stages that the process became consultative and participatory.*

Less Important Factors

Decentralization and center-local relations, political will, leadership and participation stand out as factors in the degree of success local interventions are likely to have in addressing a

public problem. What potential factors seem less important, and which are surprising by their absence?

Ethnic and religious differences get little mention. That these differences are not a factor is less surprising since none of the cases directly touch on something that would challenge ethnic or religious values or trigger conflict.

Gender received little direct mention. The most direct came from Thamrongwaranggoon, who observed in response to one of our questions that women have a higher capacity to deal with certain community and individual issues, such as family health and the wellbeing of family members. This lack of attention does not mean gender does not play a role. Although there are some prominent female leaders, including heads of state, most of the important decision-makers referred to -- that is, the governors, mayors, or national officials -- are male.

The infrequent mention of misuse of political power, lack of transparency, and corruption may be explained by the focus on the effective performance of local government. Clearly there are, to varying degrees, problems in these three areas. Several explanations are possible for their low visibility. One, which seems less likely, is that neither corruption nor freedom of information affected the activities associated with these interventions. Another, more likely in some cases, is that the misuse of political power, corruption and the absence of information are so common as factors that must be worked around that none seemed worth mention. A third explanation, also very plausible, is that pointing to them in such a public forum may bring high costs to individuals or organizations.

The misuse of political power, absence of transparency and the presence of corruption have negative effects on public perceptions, especially when they are viewed as closely interwoven with the processes of decentralization. Since decentralization means having greater local control over public resources, the negative impact on perceptions can be devastating. At the same time, reducing corruption and increasing transparency is extremely challenging. It requires, among other things, ensuring that the staffs of local public organizations are adequately compensated and that systems of accountability and oversight are in place. A pervasive public service ethic also is needed, as is an attentive public that is ready and willing to express unhappiness about actions that harm or disregard their interests.

Future work

Rich opportunities exist for work that builds on the cases in this issue. One promising area is comparative analysis. At the 6th International Conference on Local Government held at Khon Kaen University in September 2015, a paper compared the impact of fiscal decentralization on public participation in Entebbe, Uganda and Khon Kaen, Thailand. (Kiwanuka, 2015) It showed that the Thai municipality is perceived to have comparatively less fiscal autonomy despite the fact that public officials there are seen as highly politically accountable and responsive to public needs, while public engagement with government is viewed as safeguarding a high degree of transparency. This suggests a justification and an opportunity for granting greater fiscal autonomy to local self-governing bodies in Thailand. Unfortunately, this is one of very few comparative papers to appear at the conferences and a reflection of the broader status of comparative work.

A number of specific topics warrant attention in future work in this area. These include:

The degree of relationship between official laws and rules adopted at the national level and the real support for development of local government and governance.

The importance of local political cultures as local jurisdictions plays a larger role in people's lives.

The relationship between *provincial* and lower level jurisdictions and the future role of provincial governments in more decentralized systems.

The most important qualities for effective elected and administrative leadership at local levels.

The role played by national and international NGOs and donor organizations in the development of local governance and government.

Moving from centralized authority to greater local autonomy always is challenging, but there is also a sense of inevitability that the direction we now are seeing will continue for the foreseeable future. It is our hope that these cases will help to meet those challenges, and that much more work, of the kind suggested here, soon will follow.

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