Chapter 2: Models of Advocacy for Social Transformation

WHEN CIVIL SOCIETY TAKES OVER: INNOVATIONS IN LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL CITIZENS' ACTION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Maria Fides Bagasao

This paper illustrates how citizens' actions, both at the local and national level, demonstrate continuity in the use of participatory technology in mobilizing for social change. With the coming of information technology, such as the use of electronic mail, e-groups, cellular phones, and text messages, there is a dramatic innovation emerging in the practice of citizens' actions in the country.

Two cases are considered here, namely the Baranggay Pineda, Pasig eviction case and the recent People Power 2 in the Philippines. Both show that when traditional social mobilization methods are supported by the use of internet and cellular phone text messages in mobilizing support from various parts of the country and region, particularly at critical moments, conditions can develop leading to victories for citizens' initiatives.

However, in the paper I argue that the use of the information technology in citizens' action for social change cannot replace the social mobilization and education work needed prior to decisions to act. Undeniably, the presence of well-organized neighborhood movements, multi-sectoral coalitions, and regional networks are a prerequisite for developing successful strategies that use information technology.

Simply put, information technology provides a powerful cover to advance civil society aspirations for transparency and accountability of social institutions. However, it can only truly be empowering to civil society if processes of constituency building, from community consultations, information dissemination, consensus building, mass actions when necessary, and lobbying, remain its foundation.

Context of the Analysis

The emergence of information technology in civil society initiatives in the Philippines is not isolated from the recent initiatives of citizens groups in South Korea and Japan, where the internet was used to disseminate information to communities regarding track records of aspiring candidates for local and national political leadership positions. Regional networks and linkages provide opportunities for sharing of strategies and resources and, as mentioned earlier, the presence of a broad network of neighborhood federations and multi-sectoral coalitions at both the local and regional level is a pre-requisite for civil society to use information technology.

There must be a constituency in the locality, as well as beyond the geographical boundaries which aims for the same aspirations and agenda. This constituency will respond and act to the call of a campaign launched on the internet or through cellular phone text messages. Information technology is powerful only as far as a constituency is out there in the communities.

This analysis attempts to put into perspective the value of electronic innovation as illustrated by the two cases. Democracy flourishes when conditions allow citizens to act collectively as autonomous organizations from the state to bring about transparency and accountability from key institutions and leadership in society. Collective actions which use creative strategies such as the internet and mobile phones to disseminate information enhance the more fundamental and less glamorous aspects of organizing such as dialogues with communities, developing the grassroots agenda, and negotiations with the bigger stakeholders in society.

Advocacy campaigns and coalition work can change policies or oust corrupt leaders. Based on the experience particularly of People Power 2, what seemed an unimaginable objective for ordinary citizens (the impeachment of the President, who was popularly elected by poor Filipinos), when set at the early stages of the struggle, can be actually achievable in the course of events. However, at the end of the day, after all the drama, heroism and the river of everyday life has returned to its normal course, one urgent question remains. While these innovations and citizens' actions bring about changes in policies and programs, and even oust corrupt leaders, do these initiatives compel the minority, who control the economic resources of the country, to participate in the "culture of reform" that citizen action aspires to in order to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor?

As shown in the recent political crisis in the Philippines, the poor population of society can unleash a fury that threatens fragile democracies. Until the economic inequalities are sufficiently addressed, the stability of a society and its democratic processes will remain vulnerable. Civil society must find innovations in its practice and culture to compel those who control economic resources in the country to be serious stakeholders in the process of economic reform.

Tradition, Continuity, and Crisis: Role of Civil Society in Post-1986 Democratization to Citizens' Initiative for Estrada's Impeachment

The People Power Revolution of 1986 is celebrated as a non-violent overthrow of authoritarianism, wherein a broad democratic movement was mobilized to oust President Marcos from Malacanang Palace. To democratize political power, and move away from institutionalizing a single political party, then newly installed President Corazon Aquino through her policy environment encouraged the growth of civil society groups, particularly non-government organizations (NGOs) which support grassroots organizations.

Civil society in this instance can be seen as "performing one function: that of synthesizing and legitimizing a particular line of action … [it] implies a view of society which consists of major institutional complexes, namely the state, business and political parties, surrounded by groups such as media, churches, academe, family, communities and other civic associations"(Caroll, 1999). It is through these groups that ordinary citizens articulate aspirations and needs and mobilize collective action to address such. It is in the process of consensus building and negotiation with other groups that pressure is brought upon the state, political parties, and business to address these needs. Thus, it can be said that the essence of civil society action is based on its moral power, as demonstrated in the People Power Revolution in 1986.

Using techniques developed in the 1970s and 1980s, the key actors in civil society in the country, the NGOs, assumed the role of delivering basic services for marginalized communities and advocating for policies aimed at increasing the access of the poor to economic resources and political representation. Another important aspect of the work done by this sector of civil society is the organization and support of grassroots organizations, and sectoral and multi-sectoral coalitions.

Constantino-David (1998) observes that behind much of this development work there is a distinct emphasis on community organizing. This means setting up autonomous people's organizations, wherein marginalized communities and sectors can participate in pushing for their development agenda through collective action. The tradition used in this grassroots organizing draws much from the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, known as the consciousness raising/dialogical method, whereby people evoke the community definition of their realities, analysis, and solutions to their conditions.

Thus, groups within the civil society use similar actions and processes such as community consultations, mass actions, and mobilizations at government offices to pressure officials, media coverage, signature campaigns, barricades and pickets, as well as fasting. Aside from social and development work, civil society groups have also directed efforts in shaping legislative processes such as agrarian reform, housing, and urban development. Under the Ramos government, civil society groups have succeeded in engaging the government, resulting in the Social Reform Agenda which led to the creation of the Anti-Poverty Commission. The Philippine Agenda 21 was a highlight of the negotiations between civil society leaders and the government during the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) Summit held in Manila towards the end of Ramos administration.

Under the brief Estrada government, civil society, namely organized sectors such as the church, media, and civic organizations, rose in protest "as media reports exposed President Estrada's ineptness in governing the country, aggravated by a succession of anomalies and scandals involving friends and relatives"(Gulane, 2001). Early in 1999, a number of civil society groups had started to demand accountability from the Estrada government. Finally, in August 2000, the National Peace Conference which was monitoring the government's Anti-Poverty Program initiated talks with various groups that resulted in the Citizens' Initiative for Impeachment.

All told, these processes and events illustrate the role of Philippine civil society in promoting autonomous citizens' actions that serve as a foundation for democratic processes. Obviously, there are weaknesses that need to be addressed such as its lack of impact in bringing about formal political representation in Congress and local governments. There is also the question of its impact on restructuring the economic inequalities that constrain the majority of the population from meaningful development in their quality of life and inclusion in formal political processes.

It is in this context of civil society's role in post-People Power 1 (1986) that the two cases of citizens' action are presented. As explained earlier, the cases demonstrate the tradition of civil society as being autonomous from the state, articulating community aspirations and needs, and using social mobilization and mass actions, as well as negotiations with decision-makers to effect

change. It is in these conditions that the use of information technology, as an innovation to the existing tradition of citizens' action, are described and examined.

The Baranggay Pineda Eviction: Grassroots Mobilization and the Role of Internet Advocacy

Notwithstanding that the 1986 Philippine Constitution explicitly states that citizens will not be evicted forcibly from their abode, evictions in the country, particularly in Metro Manila, affect at least 100,000 individuals annually (Urban Poor Associates, 2000). Infrastructure development to increase the commercial revenue of urban areas has resulted in the forcible displacement of thousands of poor families who cannot afford formal housing and end up squatting on private or government lands.

Baranggay Pineda is a riverside community, where the oldest residents have lived for the last 30 years. *Baranggay* is the old term for the smallest unit of a settlement, equivalent to a village. Pineda is located in the City of Pasig, which the major waterway in Metro Manila, the Pasig River, traverses. Along this river, more than 300 families live (a total of 26,000 families are affected by the project in whole Metro Manila). As in typical urban informal settlements in the country, the livelihood of residents revolved around the informal economy, which consisted of vending fresh and cooked food, serving as laundry women to middle class families, laborers for construction companies, tricycle or pedicab drivers, etc.

The residents experienced previous demolitions and organized into an association that attempted to negotiate with the local officials to help them secure tenure, but to no avail. Decades before, the First Lady Imelda Marcos launched the "City of Man" campaign to beautify Metro Manila, including the Pasig River. This initiative was revived under the Ramos government that made the rehabilitation of the Pasig River a major undertaking.

While Danish and Philippine studies pointed to major pollution resulting from industries and the untreated domestic liquid waste of the metropolis, program implementors identified the relocation of riverside communities as the first move to clean up the river.

Non-government organizations had supported the neighborhood associations in their struggle for security of tenure, such as the Foundation for Development Alternatives (FDA) and the COTRAIN (forerunner of Community Organizers Multiversity). Another NGO, Urban Poor Associates, in responding to emergency requests from the communities threatened by eviction, organized community gatherings to discuss the threat. Options on how to approach the problem with the help of legal and media specialists and community organizers were discussed.

Support from prominent academicians influential with the multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) were sought, and resulted in an unprecedented dialogue between Bank representatives and the poor families. ADB was providing investment funds to the government by financing the grant for the Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) and the loan for the river cleanup, as well as other components of the river development plan.

The community asked the ADB to ask the Philippine Government, through the Pasig River Commission, to refrain from demolishing the homes of the families until the resettlement area

had sufficient basic services. Water, health clinics, transportation, and (above all) livelihood opportunities were all absent from the resettlement sites.

In any case, in September 2000 when the ouster campaign for President Estrada was in its early days, the homes of riverside families were demolished. About 100 police and a demolition crew came for the eviction. During the demolition of one of the homes a commotion started, resulting in the death of one of the members of the demolition crew. While suspects have been apprehended, up to the present, the identity of the assailant has not been established.

The residents picketed at the ADB and sent letters to the media. The neighborhood association also got in touch with the regional network, named Leaders and Organizers of Asia (LOCOA), which promised to circulate the information about the eviction. LOCOA mobilized one of its volunteers to set up a website. A letter asking the ADB to refrain from funding projects that lead to eviction could be downloaded from the website and sent directly to the Bank. In the span of two weeks, about 100 Japanese and South Korean visitors on the website signed the letter and sent it to ADB. The ADB responded to LOCOA stating that it would look into the resettlement issue.

Meanwhile, the community association conducted mobilizations, media coverage, and negotiations. Harassment against the leaders began, while a number of families were unable to secure entrance to the resettlement site because their slots were taken by people who were not residents in Baranggay Pineda. As a result of all these actions by the community, its support groups in the city and in the region, the ADB agreed to visit the resettlement sites with the leaders of the community.

Based on ADB's assessment, the government failed to observe the provisions for resettlement. Thus, the bank formally asked for the suspension of the movement of families to the relocation site. To date, no demolitions have taken place. Furthermore, the ADB made a provision for the Philippine Government to work on a "People's Plan" with the affected community, before the bank releases the loan.

Because the community site stands on government land, President Macapagal Arroyo recently visited the community and promised to instantly proclaim the land for social housing. This visit and dialogue was facilitated by the NGO supporting the neighborhood association.

The ADB recently adopted an urban renewal policy, which aims to develop community revitalized zones. The revitalized zones will consist of upgrading or reblocking existing community sites. This policy is undeniably a signal from the bank that it wants to support more on-site or in-city resettlement rather than distant relocation.

At present, multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC) conduct dialogues with affected communities threatened by displacement resulting from the said institutions' funding of government projects. The banks are likewise conducting efforts to link the project's resettlement consultants with the affected communities and the NGOs supporting the communities towards securing options for in-city resettlement.

People Power 2: The Uprising Mobilized by Text Messaging

The four-day People Power 2 that led to the transfer of government leadership to Vice-President Macapagal Arroyo last January 20, 2001, was the finale to a tumultuous campaign by civil society for the ouster of President Estrada. As early as 1999, the stirrings for the resignation of President Estrada had begun, particularly after a series of exposés on corruption, cronyism, and government handling of the Islamic secessionist movement in Mindanao.

By August 2000, the National Peace Conference held exploratory talks with other groups who wanted to push for a Citizens' Initiative for Impeachment. At that stage, the idea of securing the support of 75 congressmen to approve the articles of impeachment seemed improbable. However, the October exposé of Estrada's close ally, Governor Chavit Singson, triggered nationwide anger against Estrada. The exposé virtually tagged him as the head of a high level syndicate which received payoffs from gambling lords all over the country. The Kongreso ng Mamamayang Pilipino (KOMPIL) II was organized to work with various multi-sectoral coalitions, not only to conduct protest actions, but more importantly to serve as a nerve center for securing various sectoral agendas. These sectoral agendas later served as the basis for negotiations with then Vice-President Arroyo, particularly after a consensus was established that, despite the groups' misgivings about her, she was the constitutional successor to President Estrada in the event of an impeachment.

Although the grassroots served as the base for the countless mobilizations during the ouster campaign prior to People Power 2, "political scientist Artemio Rivera notes that middle class activists, intellectuals and professionals provided leadership in the left wing as well as the pluralist coalitions" (cited in Bautista, 2001). The church-based association, Couples for Christ, was one such group that was mobilized which had no previous record in political mobilization, but supported the ouster campaign during rallies, prayer vigils, and the four days of the uprising.

The church, led by Cardinal Sin, and former President Corazon Aquino once again rallied civil society against Estrada, who had lost the moral authority to govern. The use of information technology in this situation came in the form of organized electronic discussion groups and signature campaigns. Filipinos overseas were instantly linked to the local protest through the internet. The cellular phone became the main source of information exchange throughout the ouster campaign.

Bautista (2001) cites that according to the December 2–15 nationwide Pulse Asia Survey about half of the middle-class and 12 per cent of the upper-lower-class own cellular phones. Furthermore, the Filipino middle-class has an obsession with text messaging, so that before the Senate investigation of the Singson exposé, the volume of text messages in the Philippines was supposedly higher than the European community.

A five-fold increase in the volume of text messages was reported during the Christmas period, shortly before the uprising in January 2001. The 40 million text messages reported by Smart Communications was itself twice the total volume for the rest of the world, the 200 million relayed between January 16–20, 2001 (Bautista, 2001).

People Power 2 was supported by organized grassroots networks and the business community. In the final hours of the uprising, the support of the top leaders of the country's armed forces tilted the balance in favor of the People Power 2 at EDSA. On January 20, early in the morning, a 30,000 strong contingent of marchers went to Malacanang Palace. The military provided both land and air cover for this march, believed to be the final act which forced President Estrada to exit from the palace. By noon, around the same time the 30,000 marchers were negotiating their way towards the palace, pro-Erap supporters were blocking some of the streets leading to Malacanang. Meanwhile, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was being sworn in as the 14th president of the Philippines, also the second woman president to be installed resulting from a popular and non-violent uprising.

While the uprising began with various groups calling for the resignation of President Estrada, it must be noted that various organizations from NGOs to grassroots organizations conducted community education on the impeachment process and the corruption charges by showing videotapes of the exposés from the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. Lively discussions and debates arose from these exercises. In fact, it was the community discussions that were most challenging, because the majority of the poor communities voted for Estrada. It was noted in the surveys that even among the poor segments where Estrada has his mass support his ratings fell at the height of the trial in the Senate.

It was only when smuggled videotape of the former president was shown on television, handcuffed and surrounded by police, that Filipino sympathy for the underdog was aroused. The rest is history. The city's poor trooped to EDSA and showed their solidarity for Estrada, culminating in the May 1 assault on Malacanang. This last episode dramatically illustrates that citizens' actions indeed provide opportunities for democratic actions, but they can also be used by forces for their own interests.

The value for consciousness raising and community education remain the most daunting tasks for civil society, as the majority of the poor communities remain unorganized. In the context of deprivation and poverty, the environment for poor communities being manipulated and used for the selfish interest of various groups poses a threat to society and democracy. The upliftment of their economic conditions remains a basic impediment to development and democratic stability.

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