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Challenging Governance:
Perverse Cultures and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The concept of sustainable development is relatively of recent origin. However, its meaning has undergone profound changes in the last few years. From the relationship between environment and the economy, the concept has been stretched to encompass social, political, economic, and environment aspects of development. This is demonstrated by the enunciation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations, which replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015.

The Philippine government has responded favorably and committed to the SDGs, just as it had embraced the MDGs before it. It has pledged to work on 17 SDGs in 15 years. Similar to its experience with the predecessor program, the government is attempting to mainstream the SDGs by building awareness and integrating the goals in its plans and programs. The Philippine Development Plan (Ambisyon 2040) reflects the incorporation of the SDGs.

But just like its performance with the MDGs, formidable challenges remain for the Philippines in meeting the SDGs. While some progress has been achieved in the MDGs, there is still a long way to go for the Philippines. Poverty and hunger still afflict millions. Inequality remains high while the country has yet to improve its inclusive growth and development performance. Millions of slum dwellers still have no access to secure tenure. Massive air, water, and terrestrial pollution is evident especially in congested areas. Problems of peace and justice linger, reinforcing social and political conflict.

A key factor to the persistence of such serious development problems involves governance. Governance is a process involving state-society relations. This paper argues that state-society relations are locked in a vicious circle characterized by perverse cultures and institutions. Despite recent high economic growth, this vicious circle continues to obstruct advances in national and local development. The paper discusses problems of local governance and perverse cultures that affect sustainable development.

The examination of problems of local governance is important because local governments are at the frontline in the delivery of public services. At the outset, many local governments do not have the will and capacity to undertake pro-active developmental roles. Political will and administrative capacity are adversely affected not only by leader interests and resource constraints but also by cultures of corruption, patronage, and impunity.

The will and capacity for sound economic and environmental management are hampered by a structure that encourages personal accumulation of wealth and power by local chief executives. Closely related is the perpetration and toleration of corruption by local leaders and bureaucrats. Corruption often represents personal accumulation at the expense of sound social, economic, and environmental management. In several instances, governors, mayors and barangay leaders are involved in economic activities that produce environmentally harmful practices (e.g., quarrying, open-pit mining, etc.). Further, given local executives' personal accumulation orientation and considering a three-year cycle, short-term tangible projects are preferred to longer-term projects whose benefits could only be realized beyond the election cycle. This political predisposition disadvantages work on SDG goals that are clearly geared for the long.

Attainment of SDGs at local levels is similarly affected by patronage. The patronage culture favors selective delivery of public goods rather than their universal application. A system of vertical patronage linkages helps provide local chief executives access to state resources. But while such patronage linkages could be instrumental to augmenting local capacities for sustainable development, the benefits local chief executives receive depend on other factors particularly affinity to top leaders of the state.

At the same time, a "palengke" culture as well as learned helplessness pervades in the attitudinal and behavioral setting of governance. The "palengke" culture is based on a worldview stemming from exposure to messy local public markets. It distorts the sense of order both among authorities and the governed. Learned helplessness refers to the people's state of frustration arising from repeated failed attempts to overcome negative circumstances they confront. The term is borrowed from psychology and particularly from psychologist Martin Seligman (1974) who discovered the phenomenon as an important source of depression.

Perhaps, worthy of discussion is the culture of impunity which pervades local leaders and the public-at-large. The culture of impunity is often used to characterize government actors and politicians. However, the lack of fear of consequences for their actions could be equally observed among ordinary citizens.

The research for this paper benefits from recent field work interviews with local government officials, business community, and civil society. Using the lens of state-society relations, the findings suggest the need for deeper changes in the polity's paradigm and government's approach to sustainable development.

Cited Works

Seligman, M. E. (1974). *Depression and learned helplessness*. John Wiley & Sons.