Changing Role of Civil Society

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IN JUNE 1999, as the World Conference on Governance convened in Manila, 108 Filipino volunteers of the National Citizen’s Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) went to Jakarta, Indonesia to join election observers from other countries in what many hoped to be Indonesia’s first free election in more than 40 years.

These activities were symbolic for several reasons:

First, the Philippines sent the largest observer delegation to Indonesia. NAMFREL is one of the best symbols of Philippine civil society. It is composed of Filipino citizens from all walks of life whose only interest is to promote a public good: free, fair, and honest elections.

Second, the political changes in Indonesia were precipitated by Indonesia’s civil sector. Nobody predicted that former President Suharto would be forced to resign because everybody underestimated the power of the citizen. But citizen power prevailed over the dictator and it is now helping to stabilize politics in Indonesia.

Third, the fact that Indonesian authorities welcomed election observers from many countries signified the growing acceptance of the important role of civil society in governance. There is growing recognition worldwide of the need for partnerships between the state, civil society, and business in governance.

And fourth, the participation of NAMFREL and other foreign observers symbolized the kind of global citizen action needed for the new millennium. Such a global movement is imperative if we are to leave behind a sustainable planet for future generations.

New Forms of Governance

We have had several decades of history where the modern nation-state was the dominant force in governance. The functions of the state grew and it strongly governed countries and people.

But in many instances, the nation-state failed to address development problems. After the end of the Cold War, we saw several states crumble. Corrupt and inefficient states were deposed. Those with weak links with its people broke up. Many dictatorships in Latin America, Asia, and Africa became political democracies. Strong and powerful communist states were deposed.
Along with this development has been the rise of civil society with the resurgence of citizens and non-government organizations (NGOs). In the Philippines, in Eastern Europe, in South Africa, in Malaysia and in many other countries, citizens have sparked political changes becoming major partners of states in governance. Many states and international organizations have supported the development of civil society. They believe that a strong civil society is an important ingredient in a healthy, democratic and sustainable society. The 20th century has been dominated by state and market forces. However, they have failed to ensure a more equitable social order and a sustainable society.

The 21st century should be an era of new forms of governance different from what we have seen in the past. Ideally, it should be an era of citizens working together to build an equitable and sustainable society, and the role of the state is to try to make this happen.

The state’s role is primary because of its leadership mandate. It is the only organization that can claim to represent all of society. The State has to show that it can lead societies out of the problems that threaten human survival.

To succeed, the state must build consensus, partnerships, and coalitions in support of the common vision of an equitable and sustainable society. It must encourage and initiate dialogues and debates with civil society organizations and the corporate sector.

Another important function of the state is to improve people’s access to land, capital, and other assets. Government policies and legislative reforms should be oriented toward this goal. Democratization and decentralization are also tools for better governance which the state should expand.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) describes such a state as “activist” and “enabling.” It lists several state actions that can mobilize society toward a common vision of sustainable development:

- enabling people’s active participation at many levels of debate, dialogue, decision making;
- respect for and promotion of freedom of speech, free elections, human rights;
- complementary and constructive partnership with NGOs and private sector in providing public services;
- transparency and accountability to society;
- facilitation of bottom-up planning which is critical in planning of government programs and projects;
• fighting corruption and using public resources wisely;
• promoting civic education so that people are aware of their history and rights.

“Ending human poverty,” says UNDP’s 1997 Human Development Report, “requires an activist state to create the political conditions for fundamental reform. Above all, this requires a democratic space in which people can articulate demands, act collectively and fight for a more equitable distribution of power. Only then will adequate resources be invested in human development priorities, and access to productive assets become more equitable. Only then will macro-economic management be more pro-poor, and markets provide ample opportunities for the poor to improve their standard of living.”

Role of Civil Society

Civil society organizations hold the key to moving government and the corporate sector toward the common good. By organizing people to support critical issues and interests and by undertaking action, states and corporations are often forced to listen and respond. Civil society organizations must facilitate the empowerment of communities.

NGOs, trade unions, civic groups, women’s organizations, cooperatives, people’s organizations, church groups must continue their work of enhancing the poor’s self-reliance. They should also pursue efforts to mobilize the poor to press for social and economic reforms.

The problems we face today, in ecology, economy, politics, social, cultural, are much too complex for any one sector to solve. The solutions to these problems require new forms of governance partnerships between the state, business and civil society.

PRRM Experience

Before I joined government, I headed a rural development organization for twelve years, the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). In 1952, PRRM began as a mass movement for education. Its founders promoted education to fight illiteracy, health to combat sickness, livelihood to combat poverty, and self-government to fight civic inertia.

Over the years, PRRM modified its approaches to meet new issues and problems. When we took over PRRM, we focused on building communities and habitat. We developed sustainable rural district development programs.

In rural areas, we organized farmers, fisherfolk, and upland communities. We promoted sustainable agriculture, integrated coastal resources management, and appropriate upland technologies and practices. By June 1998, we had reached out to 105 towns and 502 villages.
In many instances, organized rural communities succeeded in getting local or national government offices to pass laws and policies in support of their efforts in building and protecting their communities and habitat. Without these organized actions, local and national governments, or even private organizations, would not have acted. For instance, in the central Luzon province of Bataan, fisherfolk organizations succeeded in getting municipal ordinances that made them the primary managers of their source of livelihood, the coasts.

Through our work in PRRM, we saw the importance of organizing communities and promoting self-reliance. Many gains were won by engaging local, national, and international organizations. But we also realized the limitations of our work.

When I rejoined government in 1998, I was given an opportunity to apply the lessons we at PRRM learned from over four decades of development work. I was challenged to promote sustainable development on a large scale, from micro projects to macro applications. It is what I have been trying to do at the Department of Agrarian Reform this past year.

Agrarian Reform

The Philippines has proven what a strong state and civil society partnership can do for social reforms. Agrarian reform is a good example.

A more comprehensive and far reaching program of agrarian reform was realized only after the people power uprising of 1986. That was when democratic conditions, ushered in by the people power revolt, and the long term threat posed by a growing communist-led insurgency, created favorable conditions for redistributive reforms.

Since land reform has only succeeded under less than democratic circumstances such as in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and China, some analysts have attributed its success with the nature of the state. The reason often cited is that strong, authoritarian states are able to curtail landlord opposition to agrarian reform. They are also able to generate the necessary surpluses to spur productivity, employment and enable more capital accumulation rather than consumption.

But the case of the Philippines, we have proven, to a certain degree, that strong states can be democratic, and their strength lies in their institutional capacity and their interaction with civil society. We can view democracy as a system of power under which no group can guarantee that its interests will automatically and always prevail.

Thus, a rich and pluralistic civil society serves as a powerful counterweight to the strength of landed blocs in any society. Civil society’s engagement with the state can tilt the balance towards ensuring redistributive reforms even in democratic settings. I firmly believe that it is not only the nature of the state that will determine the success of agrarian reform in the Philippines, but the manner of its interaction with civil society.
In short, a strategic engagement between state and civil society on a broad-based and far-reaching program of economic and empowerment is what counts. The means towards bringing the economically marginalized sectors of society into productive economic activity will vary widely; but it will necessarily include land reform, the strengthening of property rights, the provision of technology and credit, and the extension of training and capability building programs.

**DAR Programs**

To a certain extent, this is what the Ramos administration implemented earlier at the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). We are building on the gains that have been achieved by DAR’s partnership or interaction with civil society.

The implementation and outcome of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) should contribute to political democratization in rural communities and throughout society. We are committed to upholding state accountability to our rural constituency at all times. Thus, we are encouraging widespread citizens’ participation in agrarian reform-related policy making and implementation. We are helping strengthen autonomous peasant and non-government organizations.

Without the active and effective participation of autonomous peasant organizations and other NGOs in CARP implementation, the program is likely to fail. The key to its successful implementation is the positive interaction between the state and civil society actors. We are institutionalizing this interaction at all levels, from the national to the barangay levels.

CARP provides for institutions of interaction between landowners, farmer organizations and NGOs, and state agencies. The two most important are the Barangay Agrarian Reform Committees and the Provincial Agrarian Reform Coordinating Committees.

We are promoting sufficient representation and effective participation of farmers in these basic local-level groups. They proved to be vital in successful implementation of land reform programs in several countries. We are also getting more local government units involved in land reform and sustainable rural development.

Building social capital is one of the major policies being implemented by the new team at the DAR. Aside from the revitalization of barangay and provincial agrarian reform councils, we are also promoting strategic partnerships and alliances with different civil society institutions around capability-building, service delivery and common advocacies. In addition, we now have programs designed to build a citizens’ movement for agrarian reform advocates and volunteers. We now have a volunteer program in state colleges and universities.

Through social capital development, we are increasing citizens’ participation in the different levels of governance. Ultimately, the existence of strong agrarian reform institutions will help nurture social capital for rural development.
CHANGING ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The Estrada administration is fully committed to accomplishing the remaining targets of the land reform program. President Estrada has directed the Department of Agrarian Reform to transfer an average of 250,000 hectares each year so that the remaining 1.3 million hectares of land under coverage shall be transferred to the rural poor by the end of his term of office. The President has also certified to Congress the need to allocate at least six billion pesos in next year’s budget, and for the next four years, to accomplish the targets for land acquisition and distribution.

My belief that state-civil society engagement counts in pushing the completion of the land reform process shall be tested in our current campaign to secure an Agrarian Reform Fund (ARF) that is adequate enough to meet our targets. I have already instructed our officers and staff, from the central to the municipal bureaucracy, to work closely with NGOs, people’s organizations, and all other reform advocates towards pressuring Congress to deliver a truly pro-agrarian reform budget. The President stands firmly behind this strategy.

Civic Entrepreneurship

We are also promoting partnerships with the corporate sector in the pursuit of broad-based rural development.

Agrarian reform provides a common ground for different stakeholders in rural development. Entrepreneurs and food producers may come face-to-face in the spirit of civic entrepreneurship. Civic entrepreneurs, such as farmers, businessmen, local and national officials, NGO managers, may participate in CARP through the following economic ventures:

Corporatives. These are economic enterprises, created by cooperatives in close partnership with a corporation. In corporatives, farmers bring in the use of the land as their equity while the corporation invests capital, technical expertise, and hardware.

Under this arrangement, farmers are assured of ownership of land, added income from work in the corporative, and representation in the corporative management. On the other hand, the former landowner-corporation maintains operations and is assured of being compensated for the land from the farmers’ share in the profits.

ARCs as Investment Sites. Since ARCs have benefited from government services, they have attained a higher level of social and infrastructure development. Thus, through partnerships with agri-business, they can serve as springboards for agro-industrial development. In addition, we also have coconut and sugar productivity programs and other joint venture schemes that promote civic entrepreneurship.

Retooling the Bureaucracy

The effectiveness of our strategies depends largely on the overall governance of agriculture and rural development. To meet new demands and implement our new strategies, agrarian reform-related bureaucracies are undergoing a retooling process. We are focusing on building the capacities of personnel so they can deliver services within our sustainable rural development
framework. Agrarian reform-implementing agencies are enhancing accountability and transparency.

The new millennium calls for new and creative ways of addressing our problems. The old ways have to be reviewed and reassessed, for they have failed us in the past. The basic requirement for establishing three sector partnerships is a realization by all sectors ~ state, market, civil society ~ that they cannot solve national and global problems by themselves. What is needed is a partnership of all sectors.