

Book Review

Transforming Local Government, edited by Ma. Regina M. Hechanova, Mendiola Teng-Calleja, and Edna P. Franco. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. Pp. 167. ISBN 9789715507769.

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If there were a “government” that people could easily identify with, it would be their local governments. Local governments are the closest manifestation of government to the people. I would even argue that the everyday lives and activities of every citizen are under the primary supervision of their respective local governments. Roles taken and assumed by local governments are therefore key to ensuring that people’s needs are attended to. In our country, local governments have taken the center stage ever since the implementation of the Local Government Code of 1991. For more than two decades, most governmental work have been decentralized, while some others have been devolved. In the process, local governments have found various ways of keeping up with the demands of the public, on one hand, while working on limited resources, on the other. This is especially true in lower income-class local government units.

The edited volume by Ma. Regina M. Hechanova, Mendiola Teng-Calleja, and Edna P. Franco, entitled *Transforming Local Government*, explores how the eight local government units (two provinces, four cities, and two municipalities) were able to “transform” their local governments. The key word here is “transform,” meaning to change or to morph into something new. It may also mean to improve from its previous condition, possibly through initiating reforms.

In the context of a Philippine local government unit, however, what does transformation imply? Why is there a need to be transformative in the first place? What are the requirements to ensure

proper and effective transformation? The examples of eight local government units in the edited volume provide the answers to these questions.

After a brief introduction and literature review on transforming local governments, the volume proceeds with two chapters featuring two provinces: Albay in the Bicol region, and Bohol in Central Visayas. Erwin A. Alampay's chapter on "Resiliency and Adaptation in Albay Province: Aiming for Zero Casualties" discusses the innovations made by the provincial government of Albay in dealing with the perennial problem of their region: typhoons and post-disaster rehabilitation. With the help of the locals, non-government organizations (NGOs), as well as the change in approach from risk reduction to adaptation, the province of Albay was able to institutionalize its disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) programs and improve citizen participation and their attitude.

The chapter by Ma. Ligaya M. Menguito and Ramon Benedicto A. Alampay narrates the journey of Bohol province "from poverty to sustainability," as the title of their chapter suggests. Being one of the poorest provinces in the country, Bohol initiated the Governance and Local Democracy (GOLD) project in 1996. The main challenge of this project was sustainability. With all efforts to improve governance, this is an area of key concern for local governments and political leadership, not only in Bohol but also elsewhere in the country. Similar to Albay, Bohol saw the need to partner with NGOs, as well as encourage more buy-ins from the locals. This enabled the provincial government of Bohol to promote a more inclusive form of governance through developing systematic and internal administrative processes.

The volume also presented the cases of four differently located cities: Mandaluyong and Marikina in the National Capital Region, Naga City in the Bicol region, and San Jose City in the province of Nueva Ecija. The City of Mandaluyong, also known as the Tiger City, has seen fast business and economic progress in the recent years. Located in the heart of the nation's capital, it seems inevitable for the city to achieve this status. Nonetheless, challenges in transforming the city remain.

The chapter by Raquel Cementina-Olpoc, Vanessa C. Villaluz, Aldrin C. Cuña, and Rommel O. Baybay looks at how the City of Mandaluyong was able to overcome barriers and move toward becoming a Tiger City. Mandaluyong City relied on partnerships and adopted the needs-based development approach that facilitated a more people-sensitive and people-centered governance. Empowering

the people and improving city processes through effective use of technology was instrumental to its development. The authors give credit to the mayor, not only for his leadership and vision but also for his desire to institutionalize all the initiatives they have started.

If the challenge in Mandaluyong was in the business aspect, Marikina's was more on environmental governance. Vanessa C. Villaluz and Joseph C. Sanchez write about the different issues in the City of Marikina and how these affected the local economy in their chapter "Innovations in City Development: The Marikina Experience." To develop the city, the local government took steps in promoting environment management, building citizens' accountability and discipline, improving structures to alleviate traffic, increasing city revenue, establishing partnerships, building on past gains, marketing the city to other areas, innovating and benchmarking in local programs, promoting the local culture, enhancing capabilities and competencies of the locals, and preparing for disasters.

Another exemplary city is Naga. Ramon Benedicto A. Alampay's chapter on "Naga City: Governance for and by the People as a Way of Life" talks about the state of the city government following the Jesse Robredo administration. Dubbed as a "tough act to follow," the city government continued and improved on what Robredo had started. From updating the vision, to coming up with a fancy city program, to creating new offices, Naga was on the road to further growth and development. An outcomes-based leadership and leadership-by-example kept the city within its goal of preserving previous gains and even in scaling them up. In the end, it is the visionary leadership and strong local political institutions, together with the people's participation in governance, which fully enabled this process of transformation.

The last city featured in the volume is San Jose City, Nueva Ecija. The chapter of Ma. Gisela H. Tiongson on "The Business of Local Governance: The Transformation Story of San Jose City, Nueva Ecija" presents the case of a third income-class city in Central Luzon. Despite being classified as a city, the concerns of San Jose are primarily agricultural. Improving the livelihood of the people is one of the challenges encountered by the city government. The city government, together with NGOs, initiated programs to improve farmers' entrepreneurial literacy. This eventually led to the formation of a local cooperative of farmers in the city. True to form, the cooperative has bolstered the cooperation among farmers, but not without challenges.

Nevertheless, the leadership of the local chief executive and the people's support paved the way for positive developments in this area.

The last two local government units featured in the volume are the municipalities of Dumingag in Zamboanga and Upi in Maguindanao.

Mendiola Tang-Calleja writes about the municipality of Dumingag, a second income-class municipality, in her chapter titled "Dumingag's Transformation Story: Achieving Great Leaps through Innovative Local Governance." This transformation story focuses on the agenda of liberating the people from poverty through sustainable agriculture, and centers on the shift to organic from a largely chemical-based farming. This also entails a shift in perspective and appreciation of the organic means of farming. Dubbed as the "cultural revolution," massive education and cultural activities were introduced to highlight the municipality's collective efforts to fight poverty. Like the other cases, these efforts required the cooperation of the people and an effective leadership.

Upi in Maguindanao is the only local government unit featured from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Official statistics show that most of the local residents in the region suffer from extreme poverty. Marshley J. Baquiano's chapter on "Upi, Maguindanao: Left Behind No More" shows how Upi is truly no longer behind in terms of development. With a shift in governance perspective, the local government is now encouraging more citizen participation, inclusion, and consultation. Learning from other local governments, Upi worked to foster a more transparent and accountable bureaucracy with the help of civil society groups and the locals. Several challenges, both material and social, were encountered but were hurdled through initiatives and programs that addressed literacy, cooperation, and leadership. This resulted in a better quality of life for the people of Upi, as well as a sense of pride for their locality.

After presenting all these cases, Tang-Calleja, Hechanova, Alampay, and Franco formulated, in the final chapter of the volume, what could be considered as a model for local government transformation. Focused on citizen engagement and transformative leadership, the transformation begins with a vision. The vision then informs what strategies, programs, and initiatives will be instituted and implemented by the local governments. Considered key to this process are the institutional transformation strategies that range from a simple restructuring of the bureaucracy to ensuring leadership succession

for sustainability. Hopefully, these strategies will yield the desired outcomes and inform the vision as it is regularly reformulated. All of these transpire in the context of internal and external environments.

The volume presented cases of varying local contexts such as low-income municipalities in poor provinces and rich highly urbanized cities. It argues that the transformation of local governments from merely performing perfunctory roles to more innovative and responsive ones is necessary. One of the themes highlighted is the role of the citizens and the political leadership in the process of transformation. These two feed into each other and the absence of one can incapacitate the local government's attempt to transform itself. While the argument of transforming local governments is clear, what might be unclear in the entire volume, however, is the justification for transformation. The authors seem to take transformation as the only way to go. Why should local governments desire to transform and what kind of transformation should be desired? Transformation for its own sake is not enough a reason. There might also be factors that hinder full transformation, which are beyond the local government's control. This is especially important in the context of the recent discussions to federalize the country.

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