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DECENTRALIZATION & PUBLIC EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND PROMISES FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Introduction

In most developing countries, the provision and delivery of public goods and services have always been the main concern of central government. As a public good, education is considered by the international community as a basic fundamental right of everyone, regardless of gender, class, race or religion. However, basic education that is free and accessible to everyone is not cheap.

Particularly in East and Southeast Asia, the need for governments to deliver universal public education is an uphill battle. Recently, a growing number of countries realized that the only way to provide education to most of its poor population is to transfer this responsibility away from the central government. This phenomenon is called *decentralization* or the transfer of power and authority from central to local governments. Aside from this, decentralization also highlights the crucial role of non-state actors such as civil society organizations (CSOs) in “state processes” such as lobbying, planning, budgeting, and monitoring of public services. As a public management strategy, decentralization has three main goals: a) to make service delivery efficient and to provide cheap but high quality basic goods; b) to make government more responsive to the needs of the people by bringing the decision-making process closer to the people; and c) to institutionalize people’s participation in the processes of governance.

Theoretically, the technical and political requirements of decentralization complements the so-called Four Pillars (or enabling conditions) of Social Accountability – organized and capable citizens, government openness, access to information, and context & cultural appropriateness. Put another way, social accountability efforts become relatively easier to pursue in decentralized setup.

Decentralization and social accountability are political mechanisms that allow the deepening of democracy in societies by making governments more responsive, efficient and transparent to the people it serves. However, if not well thought out in terms of policy development and structuring mechanisms for implementation and monitoring, both cause serious governance problems which could weaken the very institutions they seek to strengthen.

Social Accountability in a ‘Decentralized’ Public Education System

The philosophy behind decentralization is two-fold: a) it promises efficiency in the delivery of basic services that close the inequality gap in society, and b) it shifts power away from the elites towards the citizens (Bevir, 2009). The first one focuses on modernizing public bureaucracies as an efficient service provider while the second emphasizes the role of social accountability as a strategy and a tool for good governance.

In the Philippines, decentralization took off through the promulgation of Republic Act 7160 also known as the 1991 Local Government Code of the Philippines. The Code was intended to strengthen the country's local governments beyond merely territorial subdivisions and provided the legal framework for a more participatory approach to governance as expressed in the 1987 Philippine Constitution.

However, because the Philippines is a unitary state, local governments are still considered creations of the central government and thus, the scope of their powers are still determined and supervised by the central government. As a consequence, the 1991 Local Government Code only devolved five basic services – health, agriculture, maintenance of public works and highways, social welfare and environmental protection. Glaringly absent among these basic services is education.

Still, the potential of a decentralized public education system cannot be discounted. Although not devolved, the management of public education was “enhanced” by the creation of Local School Boards (LSB) in all local government units to help manage the concerns of public education in their localities. The LSB is co-chaired by the local chief executive and the DepEd representative with members representing the various local stakeholders. It also has its disposal the Special Education Fund (SEF) which is an additional 1% levy on local real property tax.

This experience of a *semi*-decentralized public education system has become a mixed bag of success stories and unfulfilled expectations. While there are attempts to promote social accountability, citizen participation, not surprisingly, remains restrained. Where regulatory frameworks, structures and organizational culture are not synchronized with each other, the advancement of decentralization and social accountability is stunted.

Thus, this paper hopes to put forward some of the issues and challenges of social accountability in the Philippines with regards to its public education system and efforts surrounding decentralization. These issues will revolve around the Four Pillars of Social Accountability. The questions will explore the challenges in terms of the design and processes involved when assessing social accountability prospects in a decentralized public education system.

ON ORGANIZED AND CAPABLE CITIZEN GROUPS

The dynamics of social accountability necessarily involves two key actors: government and citizens. In a social accountability engagement, it is assumed that citizens and citizen groups need to be organized and capable in order to engage government effectively in a constructive manner.

Currently, policy decisions and mechanisms for participation have become important components of the public education landscape. Through the Local Government Code of 1991, each local government unit is mandated to establish Local School Boards in every local government unit. The LSB's main duty is to allocate the Special Education Fund to meet the supplementary needs of the local public school system. Through the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA)¹, DepEd has

¹ DepEd Order No. 34, s. 2009: “Moving Forward in the Implementation of the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda”.

ordered the setting up the School Governing Councils (SGCs) to support the operational leadership of the school head in the school improvement process.² The central insight of these reform thrusts is that people most actively and directly involved in and affected by the schools' operations are the best people to improve the quality of these schools.

In all these public education reform initiatives where citizen participation is highlighted, one tends to take for granted the grassroots-based Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)³ whose ubiquitous presence in the public schools throughout the country can help spell an important difference when it comes to successful social accountability engagements in the public education sector.

The PTA is one of the oldest institutions working with the public school system and predates the country's decentralization law. PTAs around the country have been partners in school development, usually in support of infrastructure maintenance, and have provided check-and-balance in the management of schools. The PTAs, together with the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Red Cross, and Anti-Tuberculosis Fund, are the only authorized organizations by DepEd to collect fees and raise funds for school-related projects.⁴ However, not all PTAs are registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission because registration is optional.

While the actual impact of PTAs has not been sufficiently regarded and analyzed, one cannot question their crucial role for the simple reason that they are the one of the primary stakeholders in public education. From a social accountability perspective, the PTAs appear to fulfil the requirements of the enabling condition of "organized and capable citizen groups". (Of course, one can argue that while majority of the PTAs are "organized", their "capability" as social accountability agents is still questionable.) The PTAs are, by their nature, designed to provide schoolchildren with a voice. But in most instances, "participation" means raising money to cover operating shortfalls of the schools. The question is: "Have these long established organizations evolved into a muted voice where the primary focus is fund raising while the real issues plaguing the educational system are ignored?"

² The SGCs' thrust is that if schools are to deliver better outcomes in a sustainable manner, the key stakeholders, within the school and the community served by the school, must be enabled and empowered to manage their school-level affairs so that they deliberately and continuously improve the link between their own efforts and their collectively desired educational outcomes. Source: National Education for All Committee. (2006). "Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda 2005-2010". Quezon City: Department of Education. Retrieved online 10 September 2010: efa2015.110mb.com/BESRA%20brochure.pdf

³ The existence of parent associations in each school started as a national policy during martial law in 1974 through Article 77 of Presidential Decree 603. Originally intended as a control measure for juvenile delinquents through home and school collaboration, the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) eventually evolved into the Parent Teacher Community Associations (PTCA), which encompasses other sectors in the community, taking on a more pro-active role in educational development. When the local government code was enforced in 1991, the PTCAs assumed a legal identity, with the federated president sitting as a member of the local school board. Then in June 2009, DepEd issued Order 54 which revised and streamlined the guidelines for parent associations, basically removing the "community" component into the organization due to the many problems associated with unruly and unprofessional behaviour it encountered in the past. The case between the GPTCA and DepEd is now being heard by the Supreme Court.

⁴ DepEd Order No. 65, s.2010: "General Guidelines on the Opening of Classes, Including Collection of School Contributions, Enrolment, Student Uniforms, and Release of MOOE".

What, then, does “meaningful participation” by grassroots citizen groups, such as the PTAs, refer to given the risks of “elite capture” among those who claim to represent public education interests? By “elite capture” we mean those citizen groups who appropriate to themselves the interests of the public education sector without genuinely listening to the voice of parents and community members who, more than anybody else, have the future of their schoolchildren at stake. In what ways, then, and to what extent, should the voice of these PTA groups be heard amongst the clamour of other education players? Beyond education outputs (e.g. school infrastructure like school fences and waiting sheds), what is the role of PTA groups and how can they meaningfully contribute to quality education outcomes?

If, indeed, grassroots stakeholders such as PTAs are provided enough space for their voice to be heard, a corollary question is: What are the capabilities necessary to empower such groups so that they can effectively engage local public schools and local governments in a constructive manner? Dealing with government requires a certain competencies – sets of skills, knowledge, attitude, and orientation – in order to understand the intricacies of governance and to actively participate in meaningful decision-making. It is not enough that PTA members know who to talk to, but they must also have a good grasp of the oftentimes convoluted and technical world of the bureaucracy, without making them specialists.

ON GOVERNMENT OPENNESS

Traditional public management approach assumes government as an institution that is hierarchical, neutral, and rule-bound and its processes are confined within a closed system. The shift to a more flexible and open system of governance was a product of a world-wide movement in the 1990s that redefined the role of government as a ‘steerer’ rather than a ‘rower’ (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993) and repositioned the state from the central actor to only one of the many actors in a society’s political life.

In a way, this distaste for “too much state” shifted the attention towards a more performance-based assessment of government services. This change of perspective gave rise to the importance of social accountability as a management strategy to make sure that governments are efficient and responsive. The inclusion of an ‘accounting citizenry’ therefore underpins the conception of government as less bureaucratic and more open to participatory decision making.

While education as a public service remains centrally-managed, it is clear that the government, through DepEd, is trying to calibrate a decentralization process. This is shown, for example, in various policy pronouncements and legislations: the 1991 LGC provision establishing the Local School Boards, the BESRA policy setting up the School Government Councils, School-Based Management and Governance, principal empowerment, and others.⁵

⁵ The philosophy behind “principal empowerment” is to give principals the authority to manage the school’s funds for maintenance and other operating expenses; raise additional funds for the school through Parent-Teachers and Community Associations; design and develop his/her own school improvement programme in collaboration with parents and community leaders; participate in the selection, recruitment and promotion of teachers; plan and

However, questions need to be asked in this “pseudo-decentralized” setup. To what extent is this arrangement effective and efficient in terms of governance and education outcomes, given the very limited resources at the local school and local government level? And considering that some localities are more prepared than others in the decentralization of public education delivery, should such progressive localities remain encumbered by a one-size-fits-all policy, which will be a disservice to the Constitutional provisions mandating local autonomy and encouraging local education planning?

The fact that there is an abundance of citizen groups in the country willing to support government in improving public education bodes well for substantial support to fill gaps in school facilities and other needs. Private sector groups, carrying the banner of corporate responsibility, provide huge amounts of pecuniary resources, actual educational inputs (e.g. textbooks, school buildings, learning equipment, etc.), and technical services to individual schools, with the objective of making an impact on education outcomes. Yet for 2011, DepEd is asking for a Php207.3 billion budget, which represents 12.6% of the total national budget, to help meet the country’s shortage in classrooms, teachers, and educational material and facilities.⁶ While there has been a steady (but slow) increase in education impacts, the question of increased education inputs resulting in significant education outcomes still remain.

The facts just cited give rise to two sets of questions:

First, what are the conditions for and the capacity of the public school bureaucracy to be “open” to citizen-driven engagement where the latter plays a major role in mobilizing support for public education? How “open”, for example, are school heads to citizen-initiated social accountability actions? What are the risks in terms of “pseudo-openness” given the “pseudo-decentralized” setup of the public education system and a bureaucratic cultural mindset, not to mention the inability of the DepEd to have a strong information database for their operations?

Second, given the huge budget for education⁷ – if approved, it will be the biggest allocation for any government agency in the country’s history – what does it signify for a truly citizen-driven

develop an innovative curriculum, using the national curriculum as a framework. Through policies such as this, substantive decision-making powers are transferred to the school level, giving school principals more administrative authority and the corresponding accountability for improving teaching competencies and pupil achievement.

⁶ President Benigno Aquino III’s 2011 Budget Message: “The Department of Education, with P207.3 billion (including the Educational Facilities Fund) represents 12.6 % of the total budget, and retains the top position. There has been a sharp increase of 18.4 % (P32.3 billion) from its budget of P175.0 billion this year, attributed to the construction of 13,147 classrooms and the creation of 10,000 teaching positions. This will be the biggest increase allocated for education in over a decade.” Retrieved online 09 September 2010:
<http://www.dbm.gov.ph/index.php?pid=9&xid=31&id=1308>

⁷ Around 85 % of this “huge budget” is pre-programmed mainly for personnel salaries. Thus, there is a need to differentiate accountability on two levels: first, accountability for the 85 % of the budget and, second, accountability for the 15 % of the budget. On the first level, PTAs and other citizen groups can monitor school performance (including those of teachers and schoolheads) and the recruitment and hiring process of school personnel. On the second level, citizen groups can participate in the management of resources (e.g. planning, budgeting, expenditure management and procurement monitoring, and performance assessment).

engagement with government to account for such public resources? Will this mean, then, that in addition to providing supplemental resources to public schools, citizen groups – including those in the private sector – should be more strategic and active in monitoring how the public education budget is prioritized, allocated, and used? If so, how “open” is government in general and DepEd in particular to such third-party monitoring initiatives? And, reversing the pointing finger, how capable are citizen groups in conducting such monitoring activities?

ON ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Crucial in public management is the accessibility of information for meaningful participation in decision-making. Similarly, social accountability work can only operate properly if relevant and useful information from public institutions is accessible to citizen groups.

In public education, the DepEd holds two kinds of information, among others, about the country’s state of education: (1) students’ performance (such as dropouts, cohort survival and participation rates) and achievement (National Achievement Test scores, Division-level tests, etc.); and (2) input requirements such as teachers, classrooms and textbooks. These data are submitted by all public schools on a yearly basis, where it is aggregated at various levels – by District, Division, Region, and then finally nationwide. These data are not usually available to the public, although securing permission through bureaucratic channels is one way of securing copies of such data.

However, there are other problems surrounding the issues on access to information. In general, good data is a pre-requisite for a good policy decision, whether at the local or national level. For effective decision-making, four basic requirements should be present: information must be (1) accurate; (2) updated; (3) reliable or trustworthy; and (4) useful. In many instances, information from the DepEd Central Office often falls short of these requirements. Thus, an issue about accessibility and availability of public education information is the following: Should social accountability efforts likewise focus on how citizen groups can help DepEd produce data that is more accurate, updated, reliable, and useful – rather than simply demanding access to data?⁸

Which brings us to a second issue: Do citizen groups have the capacity to help DepEd carry out the task of sorting, updating, and assessing data to make it more accurate, updated, trustworthy, and useful? There are two challenges to this question. One is technical and the other is cultural. The caveat, however, is this – only one of these challenges can be solved through capacity building.

The technical challenge involves finding ways and means to keep data accurate and up-to-date. But it is not just about keeping tabs of how many schools, classrooms, and teachers we have. It involves

⁸ For instance, Checkmyschool.org is a project proposed by ANSA-EAP as a tool to promote transparency and social accountability in the public education sector. Once operational, it will cover almost a fifth of the 44,000 public schools in the Philippines. The website also promotes citizens’ participation by giving them the opportunity to monitor the services allocated to their school and send their feedback online. At the end of each month, comments from the school page will be compiled and sent to the DepEd for appropriate action. ANSA-EAP, on the other hand, will identify schools with the most urgent needs and help at least one school a month. Available online: <http://checkmyschool.org/>

a more complex network of information about leadership (principals, teacher-in-charge, etc.), student performance, and school improvement indicators – their relationship with one another, what they really mean in terms of policy directions, and the significance on the way how data is assessed and appreciated. Most often, a formula is followed that, in many instances, does not make sense in terms of policy directions and assessment. Thus it is high time to focus not only on the numbers *per se*, but most importantly on how they were derived and what these numbers mean to public education stakeholders, especially decision-makers.

A more difficult challenge is a cultural one. By cultural is meant the value placed in keeping the data accurate. Honesty is the soul of all educational institutions, and that includes reporting data accurately because it is the right thing to do. The practice of “rounding-off” figures to the highest possible value is something that needs to be eliminated. Further, the relationship between citizen groups (such as the PTA) and the DepEd must be based on trust and not suspicion for this work to be carried out effectively.

ON CONTEXT AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS

Usually, political (and bureaucratic) culture is seen as a threat rather than an opportunity to strengthen social accountability efforts. Experience shows that centralism often leads to a repression of innovations especially those that are initiated by “outsiders”, such as citizen groups. In fact, social accountability is often perceived as a “counter culture” to the bureaucratic culture of corruption, red tape, lack of transparency and inefficiency. However, the trick is to identify those areas that can be enhanced to help sustain short-term engagements while at the same time work on the more stubborn ones in the medium term. Thus this begs the question: Should social accountability framework re-orient itself as culture enhancer rather than counter-culture? This re-orientation of the work requires some deep soul searching as many of us have been used to the idea that public institutions are broken and therefore need to be fixed.

It should be made clear that “constructive engagement” in social accountability, as the term suggests, is not meant to be fundamentally adversarial or to destroy institutions and personalities. Cases have been reported, however, of PTAs and other “aggressive” citizen groups launching unwarranted attacks on public school officials, often masquerading as social accountability demands but driven by personal vendetta and or politicking. These citizen groups should do well to remember that social accountability is anchored on constructive engagement with government institutions and officials – with emphasis on “constructive” – the end-goal of which is three-fold: a) effective delivery of public services, b) protection of rights, and c) enhancement of community welfare.

On the side of DepEd, a cultural aspect that can make social accountability more palatable is to make use of its strong internal accountability structure in seeking for and identifying social accountability champions inside the bureaucracy. While lower level bureaucrats may not have the power and energy to initiate a more socially accountable way of doing things, bureaucratic bosses can lead the way in enhancing a more open culture.

Aside from DepEd leaders, local chief executives such as mayors and governors can also provide the necessary impetus in enhancing the culture of bureaucratic accountability. While it is more natural for elected leaders to view accountability as client-centered, rallying champions among their ranks will help improve the institutionalization of people participation to modify public administrative practices into a more democratic one.

EMERGING CONCERNS

Synthesizing the issues discussed in the preceding sections concerning the four pillars of social accountability in relation to public education and decentralization, one important aspect of the work is glaringly absent: a universally acceptable measure of success of two interrelated concerns: social accountability efforts as *a means* and the improvement of the quality of education as *an end*.

Decentralization in practice is messy because it transforms government into a 'multi-layered bureaucracy'. With the presence of several mini-bureaucracies spread over various layers of government, demanding accountability becomes a challenging task. In practice, social accountability framework has always been flexible because, by nature, it is context-sensitive – from macro engagement such as the G-Watch and Textbook Count initiatives to micro ones such as community and parent involvement in school activities.

However, this same strength is its weakness. Given the many active stakeholders in and providers of support for public education, is there an emerging robust multistakeholdership that is disciplined by a clear shared agenda, differentiated roles, and clear lines of accountability? Or does the "plethora of supporters" actually mean "busy-ness" resulting in a cacophony of voices and helpers who are not steered towards focused and strategic objectives? For example, there has not been any critical assessment of the roles played by the different groups neither a good comparative description of the contributions and actual impact of the assistance provided by these groups.

We see countless of these engagements all over the country, and yet there seems to be no one overarching framework that would make social accountability work more cohesive. In the absence of such a common framework (and with it, performance indicators), one cannot perceive a sense of progress in the engagements between and among the various public education stakeholders. In other words, we acknowledge that social accountability engagements must be flexible enough to accommodate the nuances that decentralization brings into the management of public education. At the same time, we see a need to define a cohesive framework to guide all stakeholders – big or small, national or local – in their engagement for the purpose of agreeing on a common "yardstick" akin to a "social accountability index for education". Such a framework will help groups and institutions to explore what sort of measures they should use for social accountability evaluation and institutionalization – a quantitative and qualitative index that would capture political, managerial, and educational factors showing progress toward the goals of quality education.

Which leads us to the second concern: a need to establish a more practical and sensible measure of what quality education should be. In practice, social accountability in public education is

characterized by a very ends-driven engagement – such as monitoring that promises are kept and plans are actually pursued by government, e.g. counting and keeping track of the quality of educational inputs such as textbooks, school furniture and equipment, classrooms and school buildings, etc. This includes keeping track of the National Achievement Test scores of the schools over the years, and how such results are used to enhance planning interventions. However, what seems to be lacking is the need to be more critically aware about whether these “ends” are indeed the right ends to begin with. Thus aside from the “social accountability index”, there is a need to establish a more culturally-sensitive and context-based “quality education index”.

The crafting of both these indices presents a greater opportunity for social accountability to be institutionalized in the decision-making process that should lead to improved education outcomes – such as the demand for regular publicly-held meetings of the Local School Board, the conduct of a school and community planning at least once a year, and the right of parents to set key result areas for performance monitoring together with school and local government officials. This engagement points to a more “politicized accountability” of sorts rather than an administrative one, as what most organizations and networks are currently busy with at the moment. Like decentralization, key in the manner of proceeding with social accountability is to strike a delicate balance between its political and administrative nature.

In conclusion, decentralization is a promising platform for social accountability in the arena of public education and vice versa. However, if not designed and implemented well, both can cause serious problems that can damage the structures and processes concerning the institutionalization of social accountability as well as the management of a country’s education system.

Where do we go from here? Key to the success of decentralization lies in the ability of societies to create conditions that encourage rather than restrict the democratization of governance structures and processes of the state. A scan of decentralization literature⁹ suggests various conditions that can be loosely categorized into three: (1) a strong local fiscal capacity; (2) a strong local administrative and technical capacity, and (3) a strong local democracy. Local fiscal capacity helps local governments fund urgent social investments to promote local economic development. Local administrative and technical capacity allows local governments to transform itself from being a facilitator of goods and services coming from the national government to one that produces and provides the goods themselves. A strong local democracy ensures that the culture of transparency and accountability is seen as a necessity rather than a threat. Hence, social accountability engagements must be framed around these three conditions to make it more meaningful and lasting.

Finally, schools in developing countries like the Philippines do not have time to philosophize on the foundations of education. Their hands are already full just trying to deliver basic skills and learning competencies on a very, very tight budget and under stressful conditions. When push comes to

⁹ See works of Shiavo-Campo & Sundaram (2001), Guess (2005), King & Guerra (2005) and Hannaway & Carnoy (1993).

shove, schools and communities rely on each other to survive and make sense of what 'quality education' really means. This presents an opportunity for social accountability to thrive. But like decentralization, if not designed and implemented properly, it may cause more harm than good.

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Appendix A: Unpacking Decentralization

For many governments, decentralization is seen as an important effort in being able to provide effective delivery of services with the end goal of reducing economic and social inequalities among its people. However, if not structured and carried out properly, decentralization can also cause serious governance problems which can aggravate the poverty gap even further.

In simple terms, decentralization means a transfer of responsibility from central to local agents of authority. There are, however, various dimensions and degrees of decentralization in literature. For this paper, however, we focus on two: administrative and political.

Administrative decentralization is also called *deconcentration*. It is the transfer of administrative responsibilities from central bureaus of agencies to a subordinate field office. Deconcentration involves mainly a re-designing of the organization to decongest the workload of the central government by establishing and/or assigning field offices and field staff in the regions, provinces and town or districts. Therefore, it is basically an internal efficiency measure and does not involve a downward transfer of decision-making authority (Schiavo-Campo and Sundram with Vista-Baylon, 2001).

Shifting decision-making powers from central to the local level of government is called *devolution*. Devolution is considered political decentralization because it entails a higher degree of independence so as to enable local governments to formulate and implement policies without the intervention of central government (Schiavo-Campo and Sundram with Vista-Baylon, 2001). For devolution to work, sub-national governments must be able to recruit their own staff, raise their own money, and interact with other units in society. As opposed to deconcentration, devolution involves a more institutionalized external efficiency measure through citizen participation in managing local affairs.

At this point, it is necessary to stress that while administrative decentralization is easier to undertake, most countries vie for the attainment of political decentralization due to the many benefits derived from it. However, closely tied to a successful devolution venture is fiscal decentralization. This involves the transfer of expenditure and revenue responsibilities from central to local or sub-national governments. Fiscal decentralization takes a number of forms but the most challenging by far is the expansion of local tax and nontax revenues necessary in the fulfilment of the roles demanded from sub-national government units when pursuing political decentralization.

This emphasis on fiscal decentralization is mentioned by Guess (2005) in his attempt to identify performance indicators to measure the success or failure of decentralization. He offers six indicators, the first three of which pertain to fiscal capacities of local governments, particularly: (1) capacity to increase own-source revenue; (2) ability to increase funding stability and (3) increase of budget autonomy. The last three indicators pertain to improved delivery of services, ability of citizens to monitor and conduct social audits, and greater local authority to manage local personnel.

Appendix B: Decentralization and Public Education in the Philippines

Countries undertake decentralization for a variety of reasons. In the case of the Philippines, the decentralization effort by then President Corazon Aquino was seen as a political decision to strengthen the country's local governments beyond merely territorial subdivisions. Aside from this, this move was also considered as a strong indication of the country's commitment to democracy coming from a long history of centralization imposed by its colonial masters and strengthened by an authoritarian government during the late Ferdinand Marcos' regime. Penned in 1991 and ratified into law in early 1992, Republic Act 7160 otherwise known as the Local Government Code of the Philippines was a commitment to the advancement of local autonomy in line with Section 2 Article X of the 1987 Philippine Constitution that states local governments "shall enjoy genuine and meaningful local autonomy to enable them to attain their fullest development as self-reliant communities and make them more effective partners in the attainment of national goals." In order to capacitate local governments with new responsibilities that come with decentralization, local governments were now considered corporate entities. This implies that they are granted powers to enter into contracts, to acquire and convey real or personal property, and to sue and be sued among others (Cabo, 1998). Thus it is not surprising that among developing countries, the Philippines' decentralization program is considered one of the most far reaching (Guess, 2005).

However, because the Philippines is a unitary state, local governments are still considered creations of the central government and thus, the scope of their powers are still determined and supervised by the central government. As a consequence, devolution was limited to five basic services – health, agriculture, maintenance of public works and highways, social welfare and environmental protection. Glaringly absent among these basic services is education.

It took the Philippines ten years after the passage of the Local Government Code to realize that DepEd as a highly centralized bureaucracy¹⁰ was becoming less efficient as evidenced in its very poor performance in internal¹¹ and external¹² standardized assessments. In 2001, the Governance of Basic Education Act was passed reorganizing basic education administration putting emphasis on empowered school leadership with transparent school-based management as goal. This shifted the central DepEd's role to policy formulator and assigned its field offices as main implementers of educational programs, projects and services. Aside from decongesting the central office, this Act

¹⁰ At present, DepEd supervises close to 44,000 public elementary and high schools and close to 500,000 teaching and non-teaching personnel.

¹¹ The mean percentage scores of the National Achievement Test (an annual examination covering Math, Science, English, Filipino and HEKASI, administered throughout the country) has consistently been under the minimum competency level of 75%, although gains were recorded in the last three years, from 54.66% in 2006 to 66.33% in 2009.

¹² The Philippines ranked poorly in both the 1999 and 2003 Third International Math and Science Survey (TIMSS). In 1999, it ranked #36 for both Math and Science out of 38 countries, recording an average score of 345 for both subjects which are significantly lower than the international mean score of 487 (math) and 467 (science). In 2003, it ranked #42 and #43 respectively for Math and Science out of 46 countries, averaging 378 and 377 respectively. Again, these are significantly lower than the international scores of 467 for math and 474 for science.

provided the opportunity for local governments to develop one of its weakest local special bodies¹³ created under the Local Government Code – the Local School Board (LSB). Under this law, all local government units are required to create a LSB, a body made up of elected political leaders, professional educators, and community representatives to manage the affairs of public education in their respective localities. It is co-chaired by the local chief executive (elected by the public in the locality) and the local DepEd representative (appointed by the central DepEd office). The LSB also has a built-in financial resource mechanism that provides for the Board's budget, the Special Education Fund (SEF) which is an additional 1% levy built onto real property tax of the locality.

But even with these developments of transforming DepEd into a more compatible and relevant bureaucracy using decentralization as a framework, much of the governance of major education inputs remain centralized such as such as textbooks (review, purchase and distribution), curriculum, hiring of teachers, standardization of salaries, financing and resource allocation and policy-making. The DepEd field offices handles local issues such as supervision, student performance and achievement, school management and community relations.

¹³ Other local special bodies are the Local Development Council, Local Health Board, Local Peace and Order Council and the Prequalifications, Bids and Awards Committee.

Appendix C: Problems of Decentralization in Philippine Public Education

Like many political undertakings, the effort to decentralize public education in the Philippines is not without problems.

First, the legal instrument of the country's political decentralization excludes public education as a devolved function. One possible reason for this is the involvement of public school teachers in the elections process of the country¹⁴. In a country where election periods are marked by the upsurge of killings, vote buying and massive cheating operated by the political elites and local strongmen, public school teachers in a completely devolved education system become a vulnerable target in the struggle of power among the local elites. In fact, in cities and municipalities where Local School Boards have more resources to spare, political patronage is stronger because professional education managers become less loyal to the bureaucracy and more devoted to the politician who are considered 'allies' in education development. Apart from this, there exists a danger accused as loyal to the elite rather than the bureaucracy. But more than the problem of loyalty is the problem of efficiency. The 'mixed' design of education decentralization created confusion among school personnel because it unintentionally empowered two bureaucracies to improve the delivery of basic education in the country – the highly centralized DepEd and the multi-sectoral Local School Board. Thus, instead of achieving efficiency, the delivery of public education services became complicated and expensive as projects and directives overlap each other.

Second, the problem of education financing is two-fold: at the local government level is the question of its ability to increase its fiscal capability to fund education needs while at the national level, questions about the way how it was utilized and allocated is more important than those that query about the increase in education spending. In the Philippines, financing public education remains to be the responsibility of the central government. Based on the 2009 national budget, education enjoys the top-most allocation among public services¹⁵. However, about 85% of DepEd's budget is dedicated to covering the salaries of its personnel. The remaining 15% or so covers education-related inputs such as books, instructional materials, classrooms, teacher training and others¹⁶. Meanwhile, local governments in the Philippines generally try to offer assistance in terms of investments in the schools within their jurisdiction. However, because most of the towns are

¹⁴ During elections, public school teachers and administrators act as election officials – from Precinct Officers to Board of Canvassers.

¹⁵ In 2009, the Philippine government allocated 13.5% of its 1.17 trillion pesos (or approximately 158 billion pesos) budget to DepEd. Next to education, public works account for 11%. However, beyond public goods, the national government's highest allocation in 2009 was debt servicing which accounts for 21.5% of the budget – higher than the country's education budget.

¹⁶ This fund is called the Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE). At present, the MOOE is disbursed directly to the DepEd field offices which are responsible in providing education related inputs necessary given their local situations and conditions.

economically dependent on their share of the national government income, known as Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), assistance to improve public education remain marginal. As previously stated, for decentralization to work, capacities of lower levels of government to generate resources on their own must be strong enough to handle new responsibilities such as investing heavily in public education. Highly urbanized cities, however, are exception to this challenge since they are more than capable of generating resources to support basic services such as education.

Third, the schools which are the most affected by these political shifts and organizational re-orientation at the top are the least empowered among the key players in public education. In the Philippines, because the basic education is a constitutional right, public schools are not allowed to impose mandatory fees either for cost recovery or user charge. Thus in reality, schools rely on its Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) and other local government and non-governmental agencies to support its many needs that cannot be provided by the central government due to budget constraints. Technically, principals are empowered to generate resources on their own so as to improve their school's conditions. However, because most schools are situated in economically challenged communities, most assistance are in kind (such as free labor from parent-volunteers during the annual school maintenance week) rather than cash.

Finally, decentralization of public education in the Philippines 'stopped' at the level of school districts and divisions – which explains why schools are the least empowered institution in the country's educational system. Within the walls of the district and division offices that policy decisions and directions are issued, allocation and use of national (MOOE) and local (SEF) education budget are decided upon, and the hiring and deployment of teachers and principals are determined. More importantly, this level of the DepEd bureaucracy provides no opportunity for citizens' participation simply because it is a closed system. Unlike the LSB which is a multi-sectoral body, the DepEd central and field offices are organically part of the larger state bureaucracy and therefore its decision-making processes are considered exclusive. Concomitantly, this implies that the framework for accountability is a traditional one – where every personnel is accountable to the structure (or the bureaucracy) and its political leadership. This runs counter to the social accountability framework that emphasizes public servants being accountable to the clients through a more transparent public management.