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THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT

By Jesse M. Robredo¹

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Sometime in June 1987, I was asked by a politician relative to run for Mayor of Naga City. Inspired by EDSA I, the People Power Revolution that catapulted Cory Aquino to the Presidency in 1986, and by a desire to make things happen in the city where I was raised, I accepted the challenge. I was only 29 years old then and a virtual unknown in local politics. As expected, I barely made it --- garnering only 24% of the vote.

When we took over city hall, in February 1998, the city was in shambles. We inherited a huge budget deficit. The employees were underpaid and morale was low. The local economy was sluggish. Employment opportunities were not forthcoming. Disorder and congestion characterized the Central Business District. The urban poor population had doubled from 2,000 families to 4,000 families over the last decade. The once proud center of commerce and education, the only first class city in the Bicol Region then, was relegated to a third class status by the Department of Finance. Compounding our problem was a weak mandate, with only three of the ten members of the City Council belonging to our party.

We had two options.

The first was “to do a quick fix” --- by providing a leadership that imposes its will on the constituency. To immediately have something to show to the voters, we would focus on infrastructure development and physical improvements. Following what is commonly perceived as the successful oriental model, we would “rule with a hard hand” and expect the constituency to follow.

The second was to venture on the untried and untested. --- by providing a leadership that is inclusive and consultative, that empowers and enables instead of rule, that promotes people participation and build stakeholdership over time. Instead of focusing on physical improvements, we would concentrate on “people development”.

Despite, or maybe because of the weak mandate, we opted for the non-traditional. Against the grain of convention, we put our fate fully in the hands of our people. We started by organizing and reaching out to all the sectors of the community --- from the ambulant and market vendors, jeepney drivers, farmers, and labor groups to the civic clubs, professional associations, business leaders, and non-government organizations. We believed that in the long run, for development to be sustainable, ***both the process and the outcomes should be inclusive.***

Knowing that no government effort will succeed when people do not trust their leaders, we wagered our political future by confronting the uncertain. To secure our constituency’s trust and confidence, we tackled head-on long standing problems that beset the community --- vice, urban blight, red tape and graft & corruption.

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Instead of viewing the poor as a burden, we envisioned them as our partners and assets, albeit untapped. Prosperity building must be tempered by an enlightened perception of the poor, whose upliftment should be an end-goal of governance. We began working with the urban poor, launching the *Kaantabay sa Kauswagan Program* (Partners in Development Program), a unique tripartite approach, which provided security of tenure to more than 6,000 squatter families by the end of 2003. (By the way, this program was cited as one of the 20 Best Practices in Housing and Urban Development during the UNCHS-Habitat Conference in Istanbul, Turkey in 1996.) The program revolved around the concept of the poor as “partner-beneficiaries” --- meaning they participate, together with our NGO partners, every step of the way in resolving their land tenure problems and assume obligations thereafter. Because we recognized that there are development roles that are beyond the competencies of governments, we entered into partnerships with both non-government and private institutions to address the needs of the poor. On hindsight, we succeeded because we knew what our strengths and limitations were.

We thence translated at the local level the abstract concept of “people power” and institutionalized the practice of participative governance by enacting a *People Empowerment Ordinance*, the first of its kind in the country. Thus, the Naga City People’s Council (NCPC) was established --- a federation of over a hundred non-government, non-profit organizations (NGOs) and people’s organizations (POs), which, among others elected among themselves their representatives to local special bodies of the city government effectively joining their elected officials in the policy making process. As a council, the NCPC was empowered to propose legislations, participate, and vote at the committee level of the city council.

By enlisting the support of NGOs, POs, and the citizens and expanding our network within and outside the country, we improved services dramatically. Montessori day-care centers and new public high schools were established. A city-run hospital for low-income families was built. Civic groups assisted the city government in addressing the locality’s health and nutrition problems. In partnership with professional and business associations, privately operated district markets were set-up and new livelihood programs were launched.

By the end of my third term as City Mayor in 1998, we had regained our stature as the *premier city of the Bicol Region*. In quantitative terms, we had one of the highest economic growth rates in the country at 6.5% per year. We had one of the lowest rates of poverty incidence at 29% compared to the region’s 50%. We had an unemployment rate of 5.2%, which is almost about half of the national average. The Nagueno’s per capita income, at US\$4,620 was 42% higher than the national average and 126% higher than the regional average. We built ourselves a livable city where the people’s pride has been restored, private sector confidence bolstered and productivity and morale among city hall’s employees raised.

Naga City’s dramatic rebound as described by *Asiaweek Magazine* was “more institutional than physical”, where citizens played a great part. When it acclaimed Naga City as one of the four *Most Improved Cities in Asia in 1999*, the *Asiaweek* article took special mention of our “unique law that authorizes citizens to meddle in city policies, institutionalizing the spirit of the 1986 People Power Revolt in the Philippines.” The Ramon Magsaysay Award which I received in the year 2000 lauded Naga City and its

people for “giving credence to the promise of democracy by demonstrating that **effective city management is compatible with yielding power to the people.**”

Because we constructively engage with our constituency, we learned *when to lead and when to be led*. Governance and leadership is not simply about outcomes but processes as well. Effective governance is “*people centered*” and not “*leader centered*”. In fact, our best resource is really our people. In 1998, Naga City was presented the *Dubai-UNCHS International Award for the 10 World’s Best Practices in Urban Governance*, for its *Participatory Planning Initiatives Program*. By the end of 1998, we had received 50 international and national recognitions in diverse areas of governance --- a testimonial that by simply working together we can make our lives better.

But, ladies and gentlemen, this is not the end of the story. My previous term ended June 1998 as a result of term limits. I took a one-year sabbatical after which I returned to work with a non-profit organization. In the year 2001 elections, many felt I should run for Congressman, as it would give me the opportunity make a name in national politics. Against their advice, I decided to run for Mayor again to take up the challenge of stepping up our people initiatives in the city. Unlike the first, when only five of us were elected in 1988 (myself, the vice-mayor and three councilors), this time, like the second and until I left, all twelve of us (myself, the vice mayor and all the ten city councilors) were given the mandate.

The Author and PUP Dean Roman R. Dannug of the College of Economics, Finance, Politics, Public Administration and Governance, in his book **Politics and Governance**, noted our city’s transformation into what he calls “a global model for metropolitan development”. He had specifically pointed to our i-governance program which he accepted as inclusive and which seeks to embrace rather than exclude individuals, peoples and other sectors in running our government. He also cited our concept of effective governance as a mindset, an attitude for leaders to be the *best that they can be in the delivery of public services* and that it is about becoming excellent in meeting public expectations. This was practically the avenue left for us to rise above the economic stagnation that characterized Naga in the late 80s.

The People Empowerment Ordinance dealt with bringing the partnership-driven model of governance through organized groups and people’s organizations. This time, we looked at the individual as the focal point of what government enterprise is all about. Along this line, the city’s *i-Governance Program* was born. *i-Governance* does not stand for technology advances.

i-Governance stands for information openness, interactive engagement, inclusive governance and innovative management. It focuses on the individual member of the community who has to have a face and a voice amidst technological and socio economic complexities that characterizes expanding societies. It is a paradigm shift. It not only recognizes the citizens’ right to know but encourages them to engage their government by freely providing them with information on what their elected leaders are accountable for.

i-Governance has two basic tools: the **naga.gov.ph** website and the **Naga City Citizens Charter**. Both are designed to empower the citizens by promoting transparency and accountability in government affairs. With these tools, the city’s services are made accessible through the website and the printed version, otherwise known as the Citizens

Charter. Their strength lies in how the services are presented: the step-by-step procedure for availing each service, the standard response time for its delivery and the city officials responsible. Moreover, the website features the city's budget and procurements, bidding notices and other finances so that ordinary citizens would know how their money is being spent.

In short, while the People Empowerment Ordinance institutionalizes engagements with interest groups, the *i-Governance Program* provides the vehicle for our citizens to know, to act, to praise and even censure the performance of their city government given agreed and transparent benchmarks. In both instances, Naga City's triumph rests on its people. Despite the promises of technological advances, it is really people that matter, not only because they remain to be the key drivers of technology but because they are the primordial reason for humanity's unending quest for a better place to live in.

Much has been said about the failures of democratic governance and the non-readiness of our people to fully participate in the process. We can state with pride that at this point in time, some of the democratic principles that we have experimented on are not for the books alone. They are for real, because in Naga City, they worked! The search for tools to innovate government principles and operations should be a continuing process. The challenge is to make it as a way of life!

Some Asian countries say that democratic principles will not work in the region. Naga City, in the Philippines proves that at least at the local level, it does. Our success in participative processes is our best argument against the traditional or authoritative way of managing people and government. And we have the outcomes to further prove our point! It may be true that our quality of life may be not at par with the standards of developed countries. What we may lack in material wealth is compensated by our sense of community --- how we interact with our fellow citizens; how we share our scarce resources; and how we confront our misfortunes with resilience and hope that things will turn out better. It is our faith in each other, which makes us move forward however limited our means maybe.

People, despite the rising aspiration for material want and comfort, remain to be our best resource. I do believe that the goal of government is not simply to put as much food on the table for as many people as possible. Government must effectively engage the hearts and minds of the governed to make such efforts sustainable. Government should not wait for the worst of times to derive the best from its people. Giving their best should be second nature to a constituency, which considers their government as their servants and not their masters. Technology can never replace human nature.

In closing, let me go back to our story. True, we had the worst of times, but we always managed to survive, step-up and excel. In the process, we help teach the world a lesson or two on people empowerment, personal liberty vis-à-vis collective goal setting, and aversion to human apathy and indifference. We are a happy people because we build bridges instead of walls. Our participative governance, if replicated will, in no small measure, invaluable contribute to man's search for good order, dignity, social justice and empowerment. Many thought it was not possible. But as they say, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

Thank you.