Towards an inclusive and people centered ICT governance and policy development

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Abstract

One of the commitments outlined in the Philippine information society agenda is the promotion of civil society multi-stakeholder participation in ICT governance and policy development. This is also articulated in the documents produced at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). While there are policy pronouncements indicating enhanced public participation, the experiences of civil society organizations (CSOs) reveal institutional challenges that limit their engagements. To a certain extent, international processes like the WSIS can influence national policies. However, local power dynamics, political culture, and other institutional contexts still shape the policy ecosystem – that may facilitate or hinder people's participation in ICT governance and policy making. This policy note briefly discusses the drivers and hurdles CSOs face in sustaining a democratic, inclusive, and people-centered information society.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva and Tunis expressed the growing consensus on the need for increased people's participation in information and communications technology (ICT) governance. Considering the impact of the information economy especially to the developing world, it was deemed in the WSIS that citizens should have a greater voice in ICT public decisions. WSIS promoted the adoption of multi-stakeholder processes in crafting national ICT plans. Governments are then expected to provide spaces for citizens to engage policy makers by integrating participatory mechanisms for civil society in policy development.

In the Philippines, civil society organizations (CSOs) have participated in the ICT policy arena and have been active in engaging government in various public interests issues albeit the lack of formal spaces for participation, lack of interest and capacity of government agencies to engage, and the dominance of big business interests in the policy arena. However, CSOs still need to address several challenges and gaps to sustain meaningful citizen participation and harness democratic ICT governance.

CSOs identify the following as drivers and hurdles in sustaining relevant engagement with decision makers: of openness, receptiveness, and political will of government agencies to CSO participation; the lack of resources of CSOs and capacity and skills to engage the government; the lack of public awareness or wide policy audience; the need for more critical frameworks of analysis as well as collaboration among CSOs; the absence of institutionalized participatory mechanisms; and the political economy of the Philippine Information society.

Receptiveness of government to engage

Open-minded leaders, especially with those who have background in developmental work would accommodate non governmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organization (POs). Changes in the leadership is something that CSOs cannot control unless a participatory mechanism for appointing leaders is established. With the assumption that government agencies will not be open (at least initially), it is proposed that CSOs should be pro-active in seeking informal channels.

Civil society should be skillful and resourceful enough to find avenues and establish working relationships with government agencies regardless of the scale of activities and the scope of the issues. Civil society organizations sometimes find it disappointing if work invested in certain issues comes into a halt and falls short of being successful because of changes in the rules and composition of the agency. Civil society, will need to "sell" the issue effectively. Government agencies do listen if the political and administrative context and timing of the issue is relevant to their agenda.

Building a critical mass base

There is a need to develop a critical mass base. The issue on ICT policy and governance and its implications to development outcomes is not "sexy" enough to get public and political attention. CSOs working in human rights, environmental concerns, labor, agriculture or agrarian reform are considered more viable to media attention. This lack of public attention can be attributed to the weakness of consumerism. The large market shareof telecommunication companies can be mobilized to protect consumer interest and democratize the sector. The public base should be the consumers of ICT themselves.

Knowledge production and dissemination

Advocacies for relevant issues should be informed and intelligible. Developing research capacities for CSOs can help them in their engagement activities as research can provide credibility and legitimacy to their work. However, any research should also look on an inclusive framework --- one that centers on people especially marginalized sectors.

Presence or absence of (in)formal spaces

The absence of institutional mechanisms for participation limits relevant CSO participation. However, CSOs in the Philippines have learned to operate despite the absence of such mechanisms. CSOs have learned how to use the informal channels and alternative institutional routes. On the other hand, some CSOs think that providing an institutional mechanism may hinder relevant engagements. It may coerce NGOs or governments to a partnership that they would not be able to commit. The open-endedness of the process allows for greater creativity- mixing efforts at the formal and informal governance arenas.

Right to information and transparency

Some CSOs believe that institutionalizing participatory mechanisms are indeed

necessary in improving and democratizing ICT governance and policy making. The fundamental step to achieving this institutionalization is the passage and promulgation of the Right to Information Law. The lack of information concerning policy decisions of governments hinders CSOs and citizens alike to extract accountability from the government. The lack of public information impedes CSO participation as citizens do not have knowledge on how governmental processes work.

Elite politics in the ICT policy ecosystem

The political economy of ICT governance and policy making in the country is dominated by segments of the elite. The civil society lobbying for policies on new ICTs are those which are more aware on the politics in accessing and creating information through the internet and other communication tools. They are also joined by otherwise private individuals and small organizations that would otherwise have problems in competing with telecommunications companies and giant corporations.in making the policy game in favor with business interests. The influence of telecommunications sector on national ICT agencies was evident on several issues.

The weakness of the regulatory functions of government agencies allows for big telecommunication corporations pressure government in making the policy game in favor with business interests.

Global networks and linkages

The WSIS and the global civil society are important drivers. The commitments of the country in the WSIS should be upheld. The CSOs can utilize this to leverage, legitimize, and intensify their engagements with government agencies. WSIS must serve as a mandate for CSOs to actively participate in ICT governance and policy making. Harnessing network with and membership to global civil society can facilitate mobilization of resources and capacity to support initiatives at the local level.

Recommendations

CSOs have relatively gained success participating with government for promoting public interest discourse in various ICT and development areas and issues. However, people's participation on public decisions about the Philippine information society is not sustained and institutionalized. CSOs need to consider the following strategic actions:

Linking up with policy "champions" inside the government

With a fresh mandate given to the current administration, CSOs can leverage existing and new policy networks inside government. They can link up with reform-minded policy actors. CSOs can take advantage of the culture of "revolving doors" – as former CSO leaders serve in strategic positions in government as former public officials become active in CSO activities. Building social capital is critical.

Strengthen internal capacities

CSOs need to invest in internal capacity building. They need to develop institutional skills such as research capacity, communications capabilities, and advocacy strategies. These will help them strengthen their handle of the issues, enhance their legitimacy as an actor in the policy space, and generate public awareness and support.

Learn from experiences and leverage initial successes

CSO engagement is not always complete as policy reforms do not happen overnight – most of the time it does not happen at all! However, the advocacies should remain strong. CSOs should craft strategies that will leverage existing and past partnerships, resources, and capacities based on the lessons learned from previous engagements and initial successes.

Continue pushing for right to information law

The people cannot hold their government accountable nor can they participate in public policy if they do not have access to information. A democratic perspective on information and communication societies, in which information is crucial for citizens, is necessary to make choices grounded on the awareness of alternatives and opportunities.