Understanding Notions of Local Governance in Libon, Albay (Philippines)

Ian James S. Secillano[1] and Dr. Pamela A. Custodio[2]

[1]Planning and Development Office, Local Government Unit of Libon, Albay, Philippines
[2]College of Development Communication, University of the Philippines Los Baños, Philippines

Abstract. Aiming to surface people's understanding of local governance practice in Libon, varied stories were gathered using interviews-as-conversations. Employing maximum variation sampling, study was participated by 11 constituents and 10 local government officials and employees. Stories were the primary data gathered, transcribed, and analyzed to surface and thread emergent categories. Major governance aspects that surfaced were leadership (*Pamayu*), responsibility (*Pagdara*), and participation (*Pagsale*) which work together to operationalize *Pagpadalagan,* an indigenous perspective of participatory local governance.

Introduction

1.1 Governance perspectives

Meanings of governance depend on who defines or uses it (Domingo 2010).

Governance, for dominant voices in the global discourse, is the use of authority to *manage* affairs in the society (UNDP 1997), the use of power to *manage* resources for development (World Bank 1992; ADB 1995), and the *process* of arriving at decisions and implementation it (UNESCAP n.d.).

While for 'other' scholars, governance is the *social coordination* to produce and implement rules and provide collective goods (Börzel and Risse 2010), the *process* of influencing and negotiating stakeholders to achieve a goal (Hambleton 2004), and the *act* of setting, applying, and enforcing rules (Kjaer 2004).

Governance is an abstract concept if not operationalized. Ordinarily equated with governance is government. Though these two are closely related, they are not the same.

Government is the institution with legitimate power to create and execute programs and policies for societal affairs (Kjaer 2004; Laberge, *et al*. 2009, LIFE 1997). It is through the government that the concept and structure of governance arises (LIFE 1997). As Osborne and Gaebler (1992) put the two together, "governance [is] at the heart of what government [is] about" (p.4).

1.2 Governance as local

Difficulties or problems in addressing needs in the communities result to 'inequitable and stunted' development of a nation (Brillantes & Moscare 2002). To address this, decentralization is now employed by many countries to bring the government near to or more owned by the people through politico-administrative devolution (Brillantes & Moscare 2002). Decentralized set-up is seen to enable faster service delivery and encourage more citizen participation in the practice of governance (Brillantes & Moscare 2002).

Local governance is the process of how people decide how to live and where they want to go as a community (SNV-NDO 2004; Shah & Shah 2006). For Klinken (2003), local governance is the 'role' of the local government to encourage participation and produce results in the community. On a local perspective, local governance is the partnership between the local government and network of community sectors for basic service delivery in the local set-up (Brillantes 1999).

1.3 Governance as social practice

Governments are composed of people who make governance 'operate' to serve its constituents. People are social actors who do not have any means to relate with one another but through communication. There

is no other way how we come to know and talk about our ideas of governance but through language.

Language is a medium used to construct personal identities and social realities (Poole & McPhee 1994). And the use of language in the process of communication produces, repairs, and transforms reality and persons communicating with one another construct their own social worlds (Griffin 2004).

Continuous communication generates many different versions of what local governance is. To understand people's notions of local governance, I have to listen to different stories of people from different standpoints. Thus, this research asked: How do Libongueños express and construct the concept of local governance in Libon, Albay? Specifically, this sought to answer:

1. Who are the actors in local governance?
2. What are these actors' roles and responsibilities in relation to local governance?
3. How is local governance practiced in Libon, Albay?
4. How is the notion of governance constructed in the stories people tell?

1.4 Theoretical grounding

This study adapted Gergen's (2009) social constructionism as interpretive lens and employed Saludadez's (2004) assumptions of stories.

Social constructionism (Gergen & Gergen, 2007:461) is a tradition of understanding that claims social relationships create knowledge, meaning, and understanding of the world constituted in the way these knowledge claims are articulated in everyday talk. Social constructionist inquiry assumes that:

1. We can understand the world in any way;
2. We describe and explain the world based on our relationships;
3. We recognize the significance of our constructions from their social utility;
4. We create the future as we interact; and
5. We reflect on our taken-for-granted worlds for our future well-being.

These assumptions do not imply that we reject our long-used traditions of understanding the world; rather these tell us that other ways of knowing are possible and are just equal and legitimate in their own terms (Gergen, 2009).

And one possible way of surfacing how people understand the world is through stories. Since Filipinos are natural storytellers, stories were the primary data gathered with the assumptions that stories are system of meanings (methodological), stories as takes and knowledge claims (epistemological), and stories as explanations (ontological) (Saludadez 2004).

Using a social constructionist lens to interpret people's stories, I forward that 'local governance' is a socially constructed concept and may have multiple

meanings created because of communities' varied contexts and experiences.

2 Methodology

Central to answering the question of how Libongueños understand the concept of local governance is "understanding [of] both the content and construction of such multiple and contingent realities" (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman 1993). Thus, the study employed qualitative research design using naturalistic inquiry.

Libon, Albay (Philippines) was the locale of the study. It has a land area of 22, 730 square meters with 47 barangays. Libon is located on the south-eastern part of the island of Luzon, belonging to the ethno-linguistic region known as Bicol region. It is 564 kilometres away from Metro Manila.

Participants whom I conversed with were four farmers, two professionals, two students, a women leader, an elder, a community volunteer, six local officials, and four LGU employees. The other variation criteria were participants' age and geo-topographical location in town (plain, hilly, lakeside, or coastal).

Data gathering methods were locale observation, bracketing, interviews-as-conversation, and writing journal entries. Stories, through interviews-as-conversations, were the primary data gathered given its methodological, epistemological, and ontological implications. This study also put special attention on dialects used in interviews-as-conversations because meanings of language are largely dependent in its historical and cultural context.

Data were analyzed in Libongueño (local) text to grasp the context and historical specificity of data. Interview transcripts were the primary data analyzed through coding. In vivo coding was used to prioritize and honour participants' voice (Saldaña, 2012). Axial coding reassembled codes that were "split" or "fractured" during in vivo coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 in Saldaña, 2012:159). Theoretical coding followed axial coding to integrate and synthesize categories that emerged from previous coding stages and to organize it to create a theory (Saldaña, 2012:164).

3 Knowing actors in governance

Actors in local governance are seen in individuals, in group of people, or in institutions composed of people. Actors, being called as such, are individuals or entities who are able to do something. All people in the community are actors taking different roles,

thus, with different responsibilities. Actors in local governance are divided into four: *Mga Tau* (people), *Mga Empleyado nyan Munisipyo* (local government employees), *Mga Opisyal* (local officials), and *Mga Taga-luwas* (entities outside Libon).

Mga Tau refers to the people or the whole constituency. All Libongueños are part of the constituency and *Mga Tau* include all Libongueños in and outside the town. Among the four groups of actors, *Mga Tau* is biggest in number.

Mga Empleyado nyan Munisipyo or local government employees have defined roles and responsibilities mandated by the government employing them.

Mga Opisyal or local officials are members of the constituency that hold public positions by virtue of people's popular vote. Local officials are actors who have defined constitutional mandate and legitimate authority and power to govern.

Mga Opisyal have four groups: Local chief executive (Mayor), municipal council (*Sangguniang Bayan)*, *Barangay* council, and youth council (*Sangguniang Kabataan*).

Mga Taga-luwas or entities outside Libon are people, organizations, and institutions outside Libon that interact with the inside local governance actors in Libon to achieve a goal or a purpose.

Actors have roles and these roles have corresponding responsibilities to fulfil. Each actor has set of responsibilities to act upon or to perform given the role that they take in local governance. These actors' roles and responsibilities are seen by people in leadership, responsibility, participation, and local governance.

4 *Pamayu*: Understanding leadership

Pamayu is our local term that captures the essence of leadership. *Pamayu* comes from the Libongueño word *payu* meaning head. Head is an integral part of a body, so as leadership in local governance. The head is the part of the body that thinks and is the center of how the whole body works and moves. The head thinks and decides what the body does.

Pamayu is primarily composed of local officials and local government employees. Local officials are composed of the (1) Mayor, (2) municipal council, (3) *barangay* Council, and (4) youth council. Then, local government employees are composed of appointed employees: department heads and staff (permanent or casual).

In the context of local governance, *Pamayu* sets how the body will work and move. Leadership sets the direction and means of achieving the goals and aspirations of the community. *Pamayu* also refers to the act of leadership (leading) and to the set of persons doing the act of leadership (leaders).

When local officials and local government employees are combined they form what the people call the *Munisipyo* or the local government. People see *Munisipyo* as the head of the family means providing and addressing needs of the constituents.

In doing so, local officials see the need to train fellow local officials to become better leaders so they can help together to lead and take care of the people in the barangays.

Leaders in the legislative shall not only craft ordinances and resolutions but shall also anchor their move with the priorities of the executive.

Leaders shall also perform their responsibilities whether they like it or not for something to work or be done.

Among all these, leaders' major responsibility, may they be in the *munisipyo* or in the barangays, is to bring projects and programs to the people in the barangays. This then leads us to *Pagdara,* a significant concept in understanding responsibility in local governance.

5 *Pagdara*: Understanding responsibility

Pamayu (leadership) entails *Pagdara* (responsibility). *Pagdara* is a Libongueño term that means bringing. When one brings something, there is an entity doing the act of bringing and there is something that is brought.

There are two general categories of things that are brought in the barangay. First are physical projects, which are tangible projects and directly seen by the people. Second are social programs, which are also 'seen' but more of felt and experienced by the people. Despite the different nature of how people will 'see' and 'feel' these projects and programs, both shall be brought to the people in the barangays.

Physical projects are the most cited in our conversations where people base that there have been changes and improvements in the barangays and in town. It is because structures are readily observable and it is what people literally see. It is in these structures where people walk, consult, learn, meet, and so on. Structures are needed to facilitate living and serve significant functions to the delivery of social programs. Thus, they are considered as prerequisites for the social programs to be brought.

Social programs are needed to make physical projects work or have sense of purpose. Social programs are brought to complement the physical projects built. If physical projects are seen, social programs are felt. These are the means of the government to improve the lives of its constituents.

Pagdara also surfaces the implication of our understanding of responsibility as directional. We see our *Pamayu* as sources of actions or programs brought in the barangay. What do the constituents do? If there are people who bring, to whom do they bring it? This then leads us to *Pagsale,* a significant concept in understanding participation in local governance.

6 *Pagsale*: Understanding participation

Pamayu and *Pagdara* are two significant Libongueño concepts representing our leaders and their responsibilities. This part expounds Libongueños' view of the role and responsibilities of *Mga Tau* (people or constituents) and how important they are in the practice of local governance in Libon.

Constituents are considered essential actor in local governance. The constituents are the ones who 'receive' what the leaders bring.

Constituents, being one of the actors in local governance, have a role to fulfil which is to get involve. Getting involved comes in three levels: *pag-isi* (knowing), *pagsunud* (following), and *pagsale* (joining).

Pag-isi comes from the Libongueño word *isi* meaning know. *Pag-isi* or knowing is seen to be the lowest form of constituents' involvement in local governance. This role only entails knowing about programs or activities in the barangay or in the town for the sake that they know what is happening in their barangays. Knowing is being aware or getting involved by mind.

Pagsunud comes from the Libongueño word *sunud* meaning follow. Following is seen to be a higher level of getting involved in local governance. *Pagsunud* is more than knowing because following already involves action. But, *pag-isi* (knowing) is needed before *pagsunud* (following).

Pagsale comes from the Libongueño word *sale* meaning join. Joining or participating in programs and activities is seen to be highest level of getting involved in local governance. Participation is more than knowing and following because the constituents already initiate action after going through knowing and being willing to take part in programs or projects in the barangay.

People's participation are primarily affected by three reasons, people join activities or programs of the local government when they have time, when they will gain personal benefit, and if they can contribute to development.

7 *Pagpadalagan:* Operationalizing local governance

Pagpadalagan comes from the Libongueño term *dalagan* meaning run. When runing, we move from one place to another to a direction at a pace. *Pagpadalagan* is the native term that we use that closest to the meaning of governance.

Actors and their responsibilities come into play when they undergo the practices in local governance. These practices are what the actors should do or should undergo to make local governance work. These things materialize or objectify the concept of local governance by making the actors interact to produce action.

There are four categories of practices where actors interact as they fulfil their responsibilities. *Pagpadalagan* or running at a fast pace entails undergoing processes, following rules, communicating continuously, and working together.

7.1 Communicating continuously

Communication makes actors understand each other. It is through communication that actors in local governance coordinate their thoughts enabling them to 'produce' action. Communicating, being constitutive part of acting, shall be continuous. Communicating continuously enables actors to do cohesive and directed actions to reach goals they set. Communicating continuously shall be observed between and among all the actors in local governance.

Actors' common means of communicating with one another are through human (meetings, seminars, conversations), written (letters and memos), and technology-mediated (calls, texts, electronic mails, and even social media) modes of communication.

7.2 Undergoing processes

Processes are series of actions that actors have to do or undergo to accomplish a goal or purpose. These processes have to be followed by people. In local governance, all actors follow and undergo processes to have something done. Few of these processes in local governance are office transactions, planning, budgeting, and consultation.

Processes on day-to-day basis are office transactions like meetings and follow-ups needed for program and project implementation. Processes not on a day-to-day basis include creating plans for various needs and interventions, allocating budget for programs and projects, and getting feedback of the people for the improvement of ordinances and measures in the town.

7.3 Following rules

Rules are set of actions of how things should be done. This includes the things that are restricted and allowed. And not following these rules entail sanctions to maintain order.

Rules in local governance are seen in laws and ordinances. Laws are applicable to anywhere in the national territory while ordinances are legislated to address concerns specific to the community. Ordinances supplement what the laws do not cover.

Some rules in local governance enforced through ordinances are on land use, waste segregation, business zoning, marital delivery, and promotion of children's and women's welfare.

7.4 Working together

Working together is a bigger practice over communicating, undergoing processes, and following rules. Individuals or set of actors cannot do all things in local governance, thus the help of other actors is needed. Interaction of actors is needed to harmonize their actions and share their resources to achieve their goals.

Actors have to work together in situations like identifying and implementing priority programs and projects of the *Munisipyo* and of the barangays. Unity, coordination, and support to one another are needed in working together, while there are times that misunderstandings occur.

In local governance, working together is needed because actors' abilities, responsibilities, and resources are limited. So it is through working together that actors maximize their strengths and complement their weaknesses. Actors, responsibilities, and practices in local governance come into play by working together to achieve goals set by the people. Working together is the essence of having leaders, responsibilities, and actions that make actors interact to produce action.

8 Reconstructing local governance

Pamayu is a native concept that represents local leaders and their roles in local governance. *Pagdara* is a native concept that represents the major responsibility of *Munisipyo* (local leaders and local government employees) which is to bring. *Pagsale* is a native concept that represents the highest level of involvement or participation of constituents in local governance. Lastly, *Pagpadalagan* is the native concept that threads leadership, responsibility, and participation into one cohesive explanation of our understanding of local governance. *Pagpadalagan* entails following processes and rules, communicating continuously, and working together as we run.

Local governance without leadership is like a moving body without a thinking head. Governance without leaders is impossible. Local governance without responsibility is working without purpose. Governance without responsibility and output is working without results. Local governance without participation is never possible. There is governance because there are people to be governed. The government exists because there are people. Governance without people's participation is a useless effort because there are no people who would benefit from the efforts exerted.

Using these four indigenous concepts on local governance, I take the courage to define local governance in our native terms and understanding.

   Local governance is the process how programs and projects are **brought** by the **leaders** to **the people** by following **rules and processes**, **continuous communication**, and **working together** in a fast pace towards a desired direction.
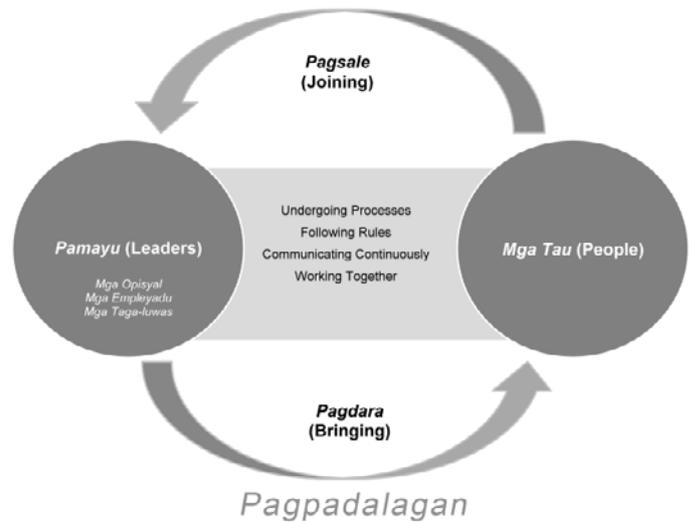
Figure 3. Conceptual relations of *Pagpadalagan* in Libon, Albay

Libongueños' understanding of local governance is encapsulated by the term *Pagpadalagan*. In the conceptual framework, local governance is illustrated as a cyclical practice that is continuously created and recreated by how the actors perform their responsibilities through local governance practices they engage in. But, the initial actions of leaders to engage the constituents in local governance through participation enabled for better brining of programs and projects. Thus, initiatives of the leaders to include the constituents in local governance paved the way for participatory approach to local governance.

From the aspects we look at and value in local governance, *Pagpadalagan* could be considered as an approach to governance that is participatory because it is inclusive. For *Pagpadalagan* to work, all actors shall undergo processes, follow rules, communicate continuously, and work together.

9 Promoting participatory local governance

Pagpadalagan as participatory approach to governance roots from our understanding that local governance needs reciprocity and collaboration between and among actors so we can run towards a direction at a fast pace. If any of the actors do not participate in *Pagpadalagan*, running forward will be less coordinated, more difficult, and thus slower. Participation is necessary in *Pagpadalagan* because actors' actions are interrelated and interdependent, so *Pagpadalagan* is maintained and sustained by participation.

Participatory local governance is an approach to governance that is set and highly influenced by all

actors based on their needs and lived experiences. It aims to achieve a 'common ground' that actors continuously create and recreate through dialogue. Thus, the practice results to more needs-based and experience-based programs and projects in the community.

Pagpadalagan is making all actors own the needs, priorities, and means in the community. It is an approach where actors can express, discuss, and decide on matters that concern them. It is an inclusive and collaborative way of recognizing the needs, setting priorities, and implementing the means. *Pagpadalagan* is making people think, decide, and act on what they agree together that is good for them, which has the same principle as development communication.

Pagpadalagan is a long and tedious process so the actors have to continuously talk, agree, and set-up mechanisms to facilitate this process. Despite this tedious process, if voices from the grassroots are heard and considered, *Pagpadalagan* will bring out negotiated goals, priorities, and means. Thus, actions and results are also negotiated and inclusive.

With a participatory approach to local governance, the Munisipyo shall initiate in establishing and maintaining open and constant communication with its all its stakeholders. It shall communicate its programs, projects, and activities to stakeholders constantly so people will know and understand what the *Munisipyo* does.

Messages that are communicated by the *Pamayu* to its stakeholders shall be based on the needs and priorities identified by all the actors. And the ways and means how these messages are communicated shall be language-appropriate, informative, open for suggestions, and invitational. Communication approach shall be appropriate to Libongueños' view that in local governance there is reciprocity of actions and inclusion, thus participatory.

Conclusion

Using a social constructionist lens to interpret Libonguenos' stories, I came to surface our indigenous understanding of local governance. Though there are dominant voices in the local governance discourse, we Libongueños have our own terms, claims, and understanding of local governance. These terms, claims, and understanding enable us to work with one another and to work as a community. Our native terms, claims, and understanding of local governance are not necessary the same with those communities outside us because *all* things, including our understanding of local governance, are socially constructed.

Thus, the historical and contextual understanding of people's view of local governance could lay the ground to innovate historically- and culturally-appropriate local governance policies, programs, and projects in Libon.

References

1. ADB. *Governance: Sound Development Management* (1995)
2. M. Domingo. *Good Governance of Civil Society Organizations and the Role of Boards* (2004)
3. UNDP. *Governance for Sustainable Human Development: A UNDP Policy Document* (1997)
4. UNESCAP. *What is Good Governance?* (n.d.)
5. T. Börzel, T. Risse. *Governance without a state: Can it work?* Reg. & Gov. **4**, 113–134 (2010)
6. R. Hambleton. *Beyond New Public Management – city leadership, democratic renewal and the politics of place: City Futures International Conference* (2004)
7. A. Kjaer. *Governanance* (2004)
8. M. Laberge, L. Moretto, S. Narang, & A. Wilde. *A User's Guide to Measuring Local Governance* (2009)
9. Local Initiative Facility for Urban Environment. *Participatory Local Governance: Technical Advisory Paper 1* (1997)
10. K. Gergen, M. Gergen. *Social Construction and Research Methodology,* 461-478 (2007)
11. K. Gergen. *An Invitation to Social Construction* (2009)
12. J. Saludadez. *Research Collaboration Stories: Communication as constitutive of temporary organization* (2004)
13. T. Lindlof, B. Taylor. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods,* 2nd ed. (2002)
14. A. jr. Brillantes, & D. Moscare. *Decentralization and Federalism in the Philippines: Lessons from Global Community* (2002)
15. SNV-NDO. *Strengthening Local Governance: Finding quality advisory approaches.* (2004).
16. A. Shah, & S. Shah. *The New Vision of Local Governance and the Evolving Roles of Local Governments* (2006)
17. R. Klinken. *Operationalising local governance in Kilimanjaro. Dev. in Prac,* **13**, 71-82 (2003)
18. A. jr. Brillantes. *Decentralization, Devolution, and Development in the Philippines* (1999)
19. L. Locke, M. Spirduso, S. Silverman. *Proposal that Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals* (1993)
20. J. Saldaña. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2012)