

Poverty's Political Face: The Case of Pasil, Cebu City

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Abstract - Coming from the notions of Amartya Sen and Robert Chambers, on poverty as “capability deprivation” and “absence of well-being”, this study seeks to portray a “political face” of the poor’s condition. Beyond the usual depiction of the poor as living below the “poverty line” what kind of lives do they have in the much larger landscape of the structure of power relations? How do they position themselves vis-a-vis the powerful politicians and how do they understand themselves as actors of political processes such as elections? The study believes that beyond the totalizing views of poverty in mainstream social science scholarship, the poor’s portrayal and understanding of their own condition must be considered, not to replace the existing explanations and views but in order to interrogate and eventually enrich some of its assumptions. A particular village, i.e. Pasil is used as a case in order to provide an empirical illustration of the study. The said village is located in Cebu City, a bigger proportion of which is a slum area. Methodologically, the study uses qualitative data collection techniques

such as Focus Group Discussion and Key Informant Interview; socio-political analysis and analysis of interview and discussion transcriptions are part of the interpretive process.

Keywords – poverty, political face, well-being, participation, deprivation

INTRODUCTION

A number of literatures in recent years has pushed for a multi-dimensional approach to poverty (World Development Report 2000/2001, 15; henceforth WDR). Maxwell (1993) argues that there is no single right definition of poverty although “current thinking does allow some simplification.” It has spurred the social imaginations of many social scientists and philosophers to think further about how this world can reduce the number of people with limited resources and capabilities (Vaughan 2009; Mead 1996); perhaps there is no other universal attempt that best concretizes this other than the United Nations MDG to reduce global poverty by 2015. But as a political scientist rightly puts it, it “will continue to pose one of the most difficult challenges for political theorists, economists, politicians, and societies” (Vaughan 2009: 15) and if I may add, for policy makers and development workers as well.

Therefore, within the context of a pluralist society that calls for inter-disciplinarity in the arena of public discourse, individuals or institutions who are concerned with the poor and all those whose efforts are directed to poverty alleviation must continually think and rethink their frameworks and approaches. Raquiza’s (2008) explanation is built on the poverty literatures of Laderchi, Glewwe and Der Gaag, Greeley, among others (1998):

How poverty is defined flows from epistemological assumptions which cannot be taken for granted. As well-argued in the literature, these assumptions and definitions of poverty have serious implications in how poverty is measured, who is targeted, and what policies are eventually formulated.

A review of the different views on poverty would show that a single approach or view (say monetary/income poverty) has its inherent theoretic deficit. An example of this is a philosophical approach to poverty, particularly Marxism. From a Marxist reading poverty is an inevitable consequence of a capitalist mode of production. Any analyst or social scientist who comes from this bias would not analyze the phenomenon in terms of deprivations or capabilities but merely as a consequence of a class divide – where capitalists dominate and sustain such privileged domination in the superstructure. They use the State and its legal system, the military and even religion/s in order to conceal the false consciousness, the ideology which further conceals alienation. Lenin's interpretation of Marx stretched the analysis further and up to the international or global level where capitalism reaches its highest level in imperialism. A Marxist analysis, particularly that which comes from the revolutionary strand, of poverty in the contemporary time – interprets the phenomenon as a consequential pathology of western expansionism that has been facilitated in the most diplomatic way, that is, through trade liberalization, removal of protectionist provisions, transplantation and implantation of western hegemonic culture in non-western States – albeit globalization.

Philosophical approaches to poverty (like Marx's) are powerful sources of symbolic explanations that could heighten human passion to struggle more for the removal of unjust structures. There also are reflexive and heuristic values in such approach. However, a philosophical reading or analysis of poverty is limited in that its tendency is towards abstraction where in the end it may get stuck in speculative explanations or "ought to be statements". This approach to poverty relocates the supposed-to-be central issue (poverty) to the margins of the discussion, where it becomes relatively significant to more central philosophical concerns like freedom and equality. Both method and framework prevent the social or political philosopher from giving empirical and quantifiable answers on the measure or extent of poverty, and more importantly, as to who is poor.

The limitations of the above mention approach brings us to one of the approaches to poverty in the Social Sciences. One of the economic approaches to poverty is the income or monetary approach, which discriminates the poor from the non-poor using a poverty threshold,

which is defined as the minimum income or expenditure that is required of an individual or family in order to meet the basic food and non-food requirements. No less than our Republic Act (8425) defines poverty as living in a conditions whether as an individual or as a family – below the poverty threshold (National Statistical Coordinating Board 2006, hence NSCB). Determining as to who is poor is easier using the poverty threshold. Certainly, all those families or households whose incomes are below the standard set (by whatever state agency is tasked to do so) are poor. This approach satisfies some analysts who content themselves with the mere availability of figures. Consciously or unconsciously, they seriously live by the orthodoxy of positivism where verifiability is a dogma.

However, poverty as a condition is not just about living below the threshold. There are also social dimensions to such a condition such as those that are political in nature. Poverty therefore is not just about low purchasing power much less is it just about not earning within the threshold above the poverty line.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The basic aim of this study is to present the political face of poverty using barangay Pasil in Cebu City as a case. The political face of poverty actually refers to the description of the kind of politics experienced by the poor. This political face must be expressed and articulated by the poor themselves.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employs qualitative data collection and interpretation. Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Information Interview (KII) were conducted by the researcher to gather data. Depth and detail in the answers are considered in lieu of numeric precision.

The criteria for the selection of respondents were identified and assessed by the researchers on the basis of the study's over-all theme and objective. The criteria for the selection of KII differ from that of the FGD. For the KII, the barangay officials, teachers who have been in contact with the main respondents because of their parish apostolates

and activities – were chosen. Their competence to speak on the matter, frequent contact with the main respondents, and political position in the barangay are bases of their competence to answer the questions. On the other hand, a different set of criteria for selection was made for the participants of the FGD. Initially, the respondents for the said (type of) interview were determined on the basis of low income or unemployment (this is to ensure that all the respondents live below the poverty threshold set forth by the NSCB. In the Philippines, there are many nuclear families and these may commonly exist in urban barangays. The respondents were asked as to whether they have sources of income other than that of their own livelihood, i.e. one for example may be jobless but then a child may also be working abroad as an OFW.

Also considered in the selection of the respondents is the area where they live in the village. The researchers are very well aware that although Pasil has been branded as a depressed urban area, some of its residents are actually not poor and in fact are earning way above the poverty threshold. In other words, it is not correct to sweepingly label or categorize all residents of Pasil as poor. Thus, a group of 7 to 10 persons were gathered for the FGD in separate sessions. The two groups (or sets) of respondents were all from the two identified sitios where people belong to the C, D and E classes live.

The study, being descriptive, presents the political condition of the poor in their barangay. Semi-structured questions are used as guides for a systematic flow of discussions. One overarching question serves as the starting point of the discussions among the respondents. Follow-up or sub-questions however are asked in order to allow more topics and issues to be touched or covered by the discussion.

Environment of the Study

The area of the study is Pasil, which is a coastal village in Cebu City with a population that is more than seven thousand (and close to eight thousand). It has been stereotyped as a slum area although a visit and immersion in the place would reveal the inaccuracy of this labeling. There are concrete houses as tall as three stories and some residences are actually well-furnished. There are areas however in

the said barangay where destitution is glaring or evident. Two sitios were identified by the barangay officials (Lawis and Mahayahay) and the residents themselves admitted how contrastingly different is their condition compared to those who are in the central part of the barangay.* Selling sea foods as well as fishing is a common livelihood among the people, although the folks are not themselves the owners of the big fishing industry. Vending and other small enterprises are also found in the area.

Analytic Lenses: Amartya Sen and Robert Chambers

This paper works within the framework that although poverty is economic (being poor may be measured in monetary terms) nevertheless it is also political (not just living below poverty line but being paralyzed in many dimensions of human existence of which participation in the established system is necessary, e.g. being able to vote). It is important therefore to allow the poor themselves to describe their condition instead of simply subscribing to what scholars have said about them (Chambers 2007, 2006, 2005, 2001, 1995; Maxwell 1999).

Initially, this endeavor theoretically builds on Amartya Sen's critique of the limitation of the income approach to poverty is Amartya Sen. From Sen's point of view, poverty should be rethought as it may not just be the lack or absence of the capability to purchase or acquire but also in terms of participation. In this sense, poverty is viewed as capability deprivation and not merely an economic depravity. For this Indian economist, poverty is not just having low income as it includes a condition that is tied up to some if not many unfreedoms. He goes beyond the reductionist definitions of poverty that is identifying the poor merely on the basis of their incomes (Sen 1999: 20 – 21). Poverty as capability deprivation means not being able to acquire those things that are intrinsically important (like health) (Sen, 89).

The "capability deprivation" view, though theoretically powerful and convincing, is not enough for Robert Chambers (2007, 14) who identifies three streams of research approaches to poverty: (1) economic reductionism which is quantitative and non-contextual, (2) anthropological particularism which is qualitative and contextual,

and (3) participatory pluralism. Chambers considers Sen's treatment of poverty as basically not different in terms of bias from the other approaches to poverty, say the monetary approach. This bias is evident in the question "what is poverty?" Although Chambers agrees with Sen that though income poverty is important nevertheless it is only one aspect of deprivation still there is a gap in such an approach because it reflects the "our's" of development experts and not the "theirs" of the poor themselves. For Chambers, poverty is deprivation and it is connected to social inferiority, isolation, physical weakness, seasonal deprivation, powerlessness and humiliation. Poverty for chambers is ill-being, the absence or lack of well-being (Chambers 1995: 173).

A summary of the different approaches and views presented above highlights the following: (1) poverty is not just the state of not having any income or money; (2) poverty as a state of life is characterized by both capability deprivation and lack or absence of well-being; and (3) poverty is not just economic depravity as it has so many dimensions that affect a person's participation to society's activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Political Deprivation in the Form of Symbolic or "Let-appear" Participation

Three unifying points are identifiable in the answers of the participants and they substantiate the contention that there is manipulation and taking of advantage over some people's powerlessness during election: (1) general perception among the participants is one of distrust; (2) cheating as an evidence of short-circuiting the democratic political process; and (3) representation as something not rectified after the election. The three are considerably factors that deprive citizens of genuine political participation because they hinder the exercise of rights without any constraint, coercion or any form of vitiating of choice.

Distrust among the participants in the system is a proof that they do not see the value of the process in the same way as how it is normatively understood by those in a condition of well-being. This does not mean that for the poor the electoral process does not have

any value, it's just that they see its use very differently. An evidence for this is the fact that despite their consensus that cheating does happen in their barangay during election they consider such to be normal, and they believe that nothing can be done to change such.

Cheating which has become part of the system in the barangay's election is also a form of deprivation on the part of the poor in the exercise of their political right. Although this paper does not seek to fault as to who cheats who nevertheless it is not without basis to say that the pervasion of cheating does not make the process credible, and if the entire process cannot be trusted then the legitimacy of the governance of the system is also questionable. The problem of cheating in Pasil – and of course the poor as among those most vulnerable to its ill-effects corroborated by no less than the Parish Priest of the area, according to him:

Genuine participation in a democratic system is not expressed merely by voting. Voting is not the end in a democratic system; in fact it is merely the means to an end. It is as Abueva, quoting Huntington (1991), would call the minimal or procedural meaning of democracy – albeit political participation. As such there must be something more in democracy than just voting, in other words and within the context of this study, political participation cannot be assessed only in terms of the people's involvement more so "mere presence" on the election day in their respective precincts. Abueva (1997: 2) argues that a political system is optimally and substantively democratic if:

"[B]eyond fulfilling the minimal, procedural criterion, the people's will is being effected in the processes of governance, and the declared constitutional and legal purposes and policies are being achieved through the functioning of governmental and political institutions, in relations to democratic norms and expectations."

The poor's perception of elections and their said-to-be electoral participation show that despite their involvement in the actual voting of candidates and their presence in the precincts on the day of the election, there has never been much participation.

Arnstein (1969) as cited by the Combat Poverty Agency (2009) identifies eight (8) levels of participation that can be further group into three (3) types (see Table 11), the highest level being citizen control and the lowest manipulation. The attendance, queuing, and voting of the

poor on election day commonly gives observers the impression that democratic and political participation in the Philippines is vibrant, forgetting that too much of emphasis on such things is nothing but a myopic view and understanding of democracy.

Again, applying Arnstein's model in order to determine political participation among the poor in Pasil, one cannot but conclude at this point that based on the participants perceptions and observations, manipulation is pervasive in the barangay. Manipulation is broadly defined as a "means of achieving public support for the plans of the authority" (Arnstein 1969; Combat Poverty Agency, 2009: 12). Actual manipulation happened in the forms of literal gate-keeping, violation of certain don'ts for political candidates and party watchers, and above all vote-buying. According to the same author's categorization of participation, manipulation is actually a form of "non-participation"; from a democratic point of view participation and manipulation are contraries. Thus, it is not without basis to say that the poor participants we have talked to are in away deprived insofar as political participation is concerned.

Politics in Pasil especially during election period may be very hot – figuratively speaking – as defined by one interviewee. To quote, "*mas politiko pa silasmgapolitiko. Ang mga supporters maoanginitkaayo. Mu abotnaspuntona mag kantsaway, mag intrigahay, mag bugal-bugalay, magbutang-butangay, kanang di namaayo.*"

However the vibrancy of democracy cannot just be measured in terms of the numbers lining up in the precincts not even by the intensity of the carnivalistic atmosphere during campaigns. What or who drove them to line-up in order to vote or attend the politiko's discourse is also an important question to answer.

Coming from their own testimonies and perceptions there is no unreasonableness in saying that their presence in the precincts "may" not be indicative of vibrancy in the barangay's democracy as it could be part of the symbolic ritual that they believe must be complied as it is unconsciously part of their self-definition as poor.

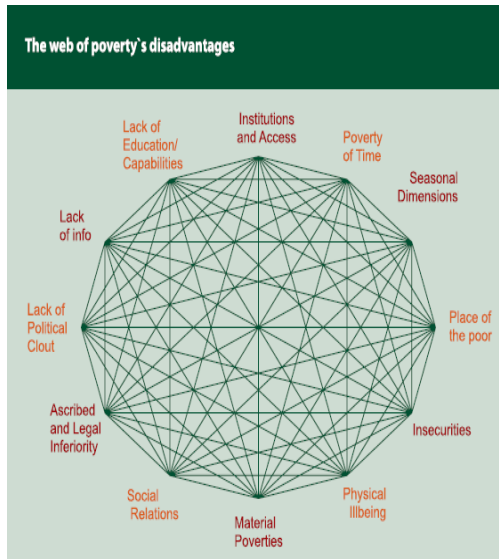


Fig. 1. Chambers (2006). "Poverty in Focus" in International Poverty Center: United Nations Development Program

Effects of Deprivation of Political Rights to Civil rights

The deprivation of political rights seriously affects the peoples' civil rights. The latter being the people's entitlement to protection of their life, liberty, and property (1987 Philippine Constitution article III, section 1) largely depends of course on the very political agency that is tasked to insure such a task. It goes without saying that the peoples' civil rights are at stake if the kind of government they get does not have the will to protect them and uphold the rule of law. This happens if the persons placed in power do not have any respect for the law itself as evidence by their lack of conscience to respect the law; manipulate the law instead and do all things possible just to stay in power.

People might not have noticed it but it is a serious matter to ask as to why, despite the local government's publicity of respect for human rights, violations of the rights of the accused have continued in Pasil – and becoming systemic? This challenges us to ask further as to what the elected officials of the Barangay have done in order to address the problem. In our conversation with the officials, they never get to

open the topic of unjustified warrantless arrests and cases of planted evidences. The village Captain stressed instead the problem of video carera, which of course is a lesser concern compared to the problem of substance abuse.

Cases of this nature make us realize that the poor are not just economically but also politically deprived, and this is what Chambers refers to as powerlessness, vulnerability, and humiliation. As shown in Figure 1, the economic aspects of poverty (material poverties) are interwoven to the political aspects of deprivation (e.g. institutions and access).

But again, the relation between the deprivation of political rights and the deprivation of civil rights is not a one way direction, that is, the matter must not be understood in the same way as a cause and effect model between two things – would appear. In more concrete terms, we aren't simply saying that the deprivation of political rights is the cause why civil rights are violated – hence the effect. The relation is more of a dialogic instead where every time civil rights are violated, such as the right to liberty, the constitutional rights of the accused among others, political rights (e.g. suffrage, petition the government) are also weakened such that in the end the people would not see any value of their citizenship.

Effects of Deprivation of Political Rights and Civil Rights to Social Rights and Economic Rights

The deprivation of political rights also affects the two other kinds of rights: social and economic (Co, Fernan and Santa Ana 2007). Sen's view in *Development as Freedom* is once again instructive in this context:

“The deprive people tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival, and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, and may even adjust their desires and expectations to what they ambitiously see as feasible” (1999: 63).

Social and Economic rights being generally understood as those entitlements that people use in order to deal with others and in the pursuit of self-expansion practically need the most basic entitlements

to life, liberty, and property. This means that in the absence of political and civil rights, social and economic rights are impossible to achieve. "Economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom" (Sen 1999: 8). The Indian economist's point is that the poverty has serious effects to a person's life and this means being limited in the capability to expand in the different dimension of life. He does not argue however for a one way reading of the causal relation between economic freedom and political freedom. Meaning to say it could also be that the reason why the person lives in a condition of poverty despite an income is due to the very limited opportunities to expand or improve one's condition.

The reason why people are asked to participate in the electoral process is for them to choose the best person who is not actually expected to make them rich in an instance – but someone who governs the locality and perform the constituent and ministrant functions of the State in order to insure the people's political and civil freedoms. It would be hoped that the people can lead their lives in a space where opportunities are available, and where threats and coercions are absent. And so is this the case in Pasil?

The experience of manipulation in Pasil during elections is the one of the reasons why they have been fixed in a location and space that has defined their lives and identities as a people and not the other way around. One would get to wonder for example why there is a relatively significant number of unemployed and sick people in a barangay where people are supposed to be free to choose those persons that could help them in their problems; and again, the caveat is, that in principle as well as in practice the elected officials are supposed to help and not solve all the problems. But this help, understood in the context of democracy, is not just any form of whispering to the political elites in the higher level, more so not to broker for the poor in some kind of a bargaining process. It must be understood as governance that has a vision and function of creating opportunities for the people to improve their lives.

It was said at the onset that not everyone in Pasil. There are moneyed individuals in the barangay and against their improved lives is the very contrast of the poor's disabilities to perform due to lack of education and social network. Interestingly, these poor have been

perceived as more active and even more interested than those who belong to classes B and C in the area. To borrow the description of the kagawad who was interviewed, the difference in the participation among the rich (mgadatu), middle class (he calls it pobrenga middle) and the poor (pobrengapobregyud)

Ironically, the poor are not so much the beneficiaries of the politicians whom they have supported and placed in power. One old woman admitted that she really does not know their locality's policies. For one there seems to be some confusion from her end as to what policies are and how it differs from ordinary rules. If by policies we mean the over-all set of principles governing the barangays direction, then rules that carry sanction on gambling, cleanliness, etc are not policies.

Such complex distinction set aside – considering their academic nature, still it is evident that the poor's condition of deprivation is evidenced by the fact that the barangay itself has not translated into concrete things the deliverables that the poor are expected to bring. The implementation of programs on cleanliness may be cited here as a typical example. RA 7160 clearly provides that one of the things that the Sangguniang Barangay should do (duty) is to “organize regular lectures, programs, or for on community problems such as sanitation, nutrition, literacy, and convene assemblies to encourage citizen participation in government” (sec. 391 [17]). The villager's policies remain to be inadequate in addressing the seemingly perennial problems of health, order, and more importantly sanitation. As regards sanitation, the problem of the drainage is a concrete issue that shows the less attention given by officials to the people's problems.

The effect of this is that the poor's condition of deprivation has been continually sustained not just in terms of the absence of money, the lack or absence of capability in genuinely participations in politics, but above all – concrete and physically structured in their isolated locations – a real condition in a physical location that has literally prohibited them in expanding in several things. For example, it is their location and condition that makes them vulnerable to human rights violation; privacy is lessened in the absence of secure doors and gates and clear boundaries. Poor sanitation makes them physically weak. All these being the picture – the face of poverty it is understandable we believe

of how easy it is for them to be contrasted from those who are not like them. Such contrasts now come in the form of wealth, strength, literacy, good health, and above all power – which are characteristics possessed by a few men in their area. The contrasts being sustained, then the political face of poverty is the face of a complexity of deprivations in the different areas of political participation.

Policy is supposed to be the very litmus test as to whether elections and representation are genuine. “Democracy is put to the test of policy performance – the capacity of institutions and leader to deliver what is promised and expected” (Abueva 1994; Miranda 1997). What we seen unfortunately in Pasil is the opposite.

CONCLUSION

The political face of poverty as concretized in the situation of Pasil is a condition of marginalization and manipulation on the part of the poor in the power structure. There is consciousness on their part about this but their limitations disable them from refusing the offers of the rich and the powerful. The political system is for them both a means to take advantage in order to gain money that can be spent even just for a day. They do not see the system as transformative, i.e. transformation happens because of formal processes and structures.

Politicians have been mouthing a lot on the difficulty and complexity of poverty as problem. Whether consciously or unconsciously however this problem has been used as the very means of division between the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the vulnerable, the healthy and the sick, the knowledgeable and the ignorant, and all other social distinctions. In some cases poverty has been the reason why only a powerful few has stayed in power, a privilege they have sustained through the years, and this is because they are difficult to replace

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