Politically-informed programming: Taking account of the poor[1]

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Background

Development agencies are endeavouring to think and act more politically, but they typically overlook people's politics in the process. This is true also of the scholars and consultants who advise on and advocate politically-informed programming.[2] Despite there now being a range of approaches to politically-informed programming, overwhelmingly the political actors thought to matter are elites and program implementers. Although it makes a lot of sense to be concerned with the powerful when attempting reform (Hutchison et al. 2014) the responses of intended beneficiaries also make a difference. As the case study here shows, poor people's politics can derail the best intentions of even their closest allies and advocates. This is because poor people tend to occupy different political worlds to those that the development industry envisages for them (Bracking 2005; Robins et al. 2008).

It is practically *de rigueur* for poverty-reduction programs to encourage poor people's participation to enhance development effectiveness, whether for program implementation or political demands. Either way, participation has been recognised to involve additional burdens and risks for the poor. However, less acknowledged, are the everyday forms of politics that the poor are already engaged in, and from which they find it hard to exit.

Everyday politics of the poor encompasses the day-to-day, mostly routine practices and relationships by which the poor manage to get by within structural constraints (Lister 2004). By necessity, these politics are highly opportunistic, contingent and tactical involving the poor frequently 'getting what they can' from diverse sources to hedge their bets (Robins et al. 2008). This means the poor can be pursuing, simultaneously, relationships with local patrons, government officials, police, NGOs, donors and or criminal gangs so as to cover all bases. This everyday politics can also feature efforts to 'keep things the same … as the only real condition of a possible way out' (Simone 2010:293).

Introduction and research methodology

This paper argues that, if politically-informed programming is to account for poor people's politics, it needs to begin at the points where exit from everyday practices is difficult for poor people. To make this argument, the paper covers poor people's responses to a social housing program to relocate them from flood areas alongside waterways in Metro Manila, the Philippines. The program gave eligible households two options: either relocate to peri-urban areas to access row housing, newly constructed by the National Housing Authority (NHA), or sign on to an NGO-led participatory planning process to remain in-city through the construction of medium-rise dwellings. Remaining where they were was not an option. Under both scenarios, beneficiaries faced major disruptions to their current circumstances.

The research for this paper included interviews with informal settler households at seven sites in and around Metro Manila in 2014 and 2015. An NGO-led participatory planning process was underway at four of these sites. The other three sites were distant relocation sites, one within Metro Manila and two outside its boundaries, in neighbouring provinces. As it was not possible to determine the relative occurrence of particular responses, the paper focuses on accounting for interviewees' varied responses to the program and those reported to have been undertaken by others. Over three-quarters of respondents were women as interviews were conducted during the day.

The original waterway sites occupied by these households had been settled informally for upwards of 30 years, often with three generations sharing the one dwelling or residing nearby. The majority of those interviewed were homeowners, having built or purchased their own dwelling whilst the remainder rented part or all of a dwelling from a homeowner.[3]

Across the seven sites covered in the research, considerably fewer informal settlers selected the participatory planning route than anticipated by the NGOs involved. Moreover, many informal settlers moved to the distant relocation sites, despite expressing a clear preference for remaining in-city and, therefore, close to sources of employment, livelihoods, and services. What happened?

The social housing program

The Philippine national government has funded a large—PHP50 billion or approximately $US 1 billion—social housing program to resettle more than 104,000 informal settler households from Metro Manila waterways. In part the program is the direct product of urban poor NGO political advocacy. President Aquino signed a 10 point covenant with an urban poor alliance during his 2010 election campaign. This included commitments to a moratorium on informal settler evictions and delivery of social housing and tenure security through participatory processes of in-city relocation. Some months following his election, the president formed a national technical working group to advise him on how the covenant might be fulfilled.

The working group consisted of representatives from the key housing agencies, local government, urban poor NGOs and people's organisations. Significantly, it was headed by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and not the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council (HUDCC), the national agency with oversight of social housing issues. The secretary of the former department was an Aquino-appointed reformer whereas HUDCC is chaired by the vice-president, currently a political rival of the president.[4] The World Bank's Manila office was also involved from the beginning and helped to shape the final budget figure of PHP50billion.[5]

Meanwhile, in early 2011, the Supreme Court issued an order requiring the demolition of all informal structures and dwellings along the riverbanks and waterways linked to Manila Bay by December 2015. This order arose from an earlier case concerning the restoration of water quality in Manila Bay, but came on the heels of several severe flooding events across the city in 2009. When the technical working group reached a decision, it was to fund the rehousing of informal settlers presently residing in flood zones only.

From then on the working group was charged with developing operational principles, guidelines and procedures for the new program , across the areas of financing, social preparation, and site selection. A memorandum to outline these was not agreed to until March 2013. Moreover, not all agencies signed and it was not binding on those that did. The memorandum proclaims the program to be human rights based and, in keeping with this, states that 'the relocation of the affected families shall primarily be on-site, near-site and in-city'. NGOs leading the participatory planning component of the program were to have access to budgeted monies, along with the NHA. But due to the slowness of the participatory planning, around 85 per cent of allocated funds went to the NHA in the first three years of the project to build row housing in predominantly peri-urban areas.

The NGOs involved in negotiating the 2010 covenant with the president have a 40-year history of community organising and political advocacy with informal settlers in Metro Manila. For them, the PHP50billion program was a major victory: 'a dream come true' in terms of the size of the budget and the formal inclusion of participatory processes for in- and near-city relocations (Pers.com 2014).[6] One activist characterised the participatory planning process as a vehicle for the urban poor's social mobilisation and active citizenship (Patino 2016).

Some of the NGOs involved were beneficiaries of a five-year £1.3 million DFID program 'Institutionalizing Local and National Partnerships to Address Urban Poverty and Homelessness in the Philippines' that ended in 2013. That program aimed to 'organize and strengthen urban poor federations at city and national levels to claim rights and access to housing and community services'. Through it, several of the NGOs in this case study had already undertaken extensive community social mapping. This helped them to identify eligible households for recruitment into the PHP50billion program. Once the program began, The Asia Foundation received DFAT funding (through DFAT's Coalitions for Change Programme in Manila) to build capacity of NGOs to assist communities prepare to join the housing program. In short, the NGOs that worked with urban poor were in receipt of international development assistance that aimed to strengthen civil society organisations, with a view to supporting collective action by the poor to achieve in-city resettlement.

Responses of informal settlers

Overwhelmingly, informal settlers expressed a firm preference to stay or to have stayed where they were originally living. This means that they were prepared to endure the flooding, even having experienced the severe events in 2009. Interviewees became involved in the PHP50 billion program mainly because national and or local authorities ordered them to leave the flood prone areas. Whilst flood avoidance was never a reason given for relocating, many interviewees at the three relocation sites nevertheless expressed relief that the flood threat was now over and they no longer had to continually watch their children to prevent drownings. We 'sleep better at night' several women said.

Interviewees at the three relocation sites stated that the official order to leave only included the offer of NHA housing at a distant site and no other options. At the time, the interviewees did not have any contact with NGOs and so were unaware of the alternative, participatory planning option. Authorities informed them that if they did not take the NHA offer within a short time, it would lapse and they would be forced to resettle themselves. The interviewees at these three relocation sites reported that some households in their original communities did move on independently, generally to rent or live with relatives residing informally elsewhere. Alternatives were considered too expensive or were not available.

However, despite not wanting to agree to relocation far away, these interviewees did see in the NHA offer a rare opportunity to obtain a major asset especially those that had previously been renting. For them the NHA option generally held more attractions. But for a significant number of both renters and former homeowners, the decision to secure a major asset was separate from the decisions they made about their eventual place and mode of residence.

In 2013, 710 dwellings were built and occupied at one of the NHA relocation sites. Eighteen months later, however, 30 per cent of households had either informally sold or were renting out their houses and living back in Metro Manila. Up to another 105 households had also moved back to the city having installed caretakers, or sometimes simply left behind teenage children to retain ownership. As a result, only around 60 per cent of dwellings remained occupied by original awardees.

At the four sites where the participatory planning option was underway, the NGOs involved reported they had found it difficult to recruit the number of households they needed to make their building programs viable. They also had incurred significant 'leakage' of households once the participatory planning process had begun.

For example, one of the NGOs had identified 1,200 eligible households in a particular area through a community mapping exercise it had completed previously with DFID funds. By mid-2014, only 320 of these households were engaged in the participatory planning process and the NGO needed to recruit more than 400 additional households to fill its revised total of 950 dwelling units. A year later, the NGO had approved 463 households for the 570 dwelling units it planned to build—and was expecting that in the near future another 10–20 per cent would drop out for financial reasons.

This NGO experienced its largest loss of householders in 2013, when the affected communities were presented with the NHA relocation option. Again, the informal settlers had

been told officially that the offer was a one-off. Hundreds of households left at that point. Reportedly, some did so because the NHA offer was considered more affordable while others argued that distant relocation was in fact more expensive. Whilst repayments on a NHA dwelling were lower than for a unit in a medium-rise building, the distant relocation could be more burdensome financially after factoring in the costs of commuting back into the city for employment and education.

Interviewees disagreed over the financial impacts of the two social housing alternatives, yet by their actions they indicated the importance of a *tangible* outcome and asset. When the relocation occurred in 2013, the NGO in question had commenced its participatory planning process, but still had nothing definite to show from it. Despite a suitable plot of land having been identified, planning approvals were not completed. To quote an NGO organiser, it was 'difficult to prove there was an ongoing project'.[7] By contrast, the NHA dwellings were at or near completion and prospective beneficiaries were invited to inspect them. If the participatory planning process did not deliver, households faced future eviction and risked missing out completely.

It is also important to note that the type of housing on offer from the NHA was closer to that to which the urban poor were accustomed. Some observers explain their preference for a 'house-and-plot' as cultural and habitual as it is relates to their material circumstances and the need to pursue multiple strategies. Although less flexible than a detached shanty, row housing allows more options than does a medium-rise unit. These include a boxed window extension to create a small retail area; the construction of semi-covered areas for food preparation; additional storage and space to keep poultry and maintain a small garden. These were all in evidence at the three relocation sites.

Moving to a peri-urban location, however, often necessitated additional new strategies. At two relocation sites in peri-urban areas, a number of male adults were working far away and returning only on weekends or less frequently. Interviewees at one of the in-city sites reported that some men were 'camping' back where they previously lived following the demolition of their former house. Women tended to remain in the NHA house with young children and pursued livelihoods there. Several families reported leaving their senior school-age children behind in the city with relatives to complete their education.

By contrast, by mid-2015, participatory planning processes were well underway at two of the in-city sites and construction of multi-rise dwellings had commenced some months earlier. The community at one of these sites had a history of involvement with the NGO leading the process. Previously, the NGO had helped the community through a series of demolition threats and established good relations on this basis. Nevertheless, in the course of the participatory planning process, almost a third of eligible households moved away and would not be accommodated in the new dwellings. At the other site, the local mayor was particularly sympathetic and had facilitated a staging site for participating households to remain on, between their order to leave and the completion of construction. For perhaps this reason, this involved the largest number of households.

Poor people's politics

A good number of the informal settlers forced to relocate from Metro Manila waterways were informed only of the NHA option by authorities despite executive political support for the NGO-led participatory planning component. Whilst the duration of many of the original informal settlements is testament to the defensive capacities of the urban poor, few communities were in a position to mount any opposition to their relocation under the PHP50 billion program. Notably, their traditional allies and advocates—local NGOs—were strong backers of the program and keen to avail of opportunities within in rather than protest against it. International development assistance also supported the NGOs' stance.

Joshi and Moore (2000) reflect on how the allies of the poor might need to interact with the poor to make a difference with respect to how the poor respond to participatory pro-poor programs. The issue they are interested in is the extent to which poor people consider collective action to be worth doing or not. Joshi and Moore point to the importance of variables that connect to the problem of the poor having confidence in a program's eventual effectiveness. As the authors note, promises are continually made to the poor, by politicians, NGOs, donors and criminals. It need not matter that many such promises are empty to start with, because even best intentions can fail. What matters is that, either way, the poor are routinely let down. The authors therefore suggest three variables that can make a difference to poor people's willingness to participate. These are:

1. The extent to which program outcomes are recognised to be enforceable entitlements or *rights*;
2. the *predictability* of the program—how stable it is in form, content and governance; and
3. the *credibility* of implementing actors—the extent to which they are convincing and can be believed by beneficiaries (2000).

In the case of the PH50 billion program, informal settlers' formal entitlement to a participatory planning process for in-city resettlement was government-funded but not communicated to eligible households by the relevant authorities. NGOs were active in informing communities of this entitlement within the program, but had great difficulty in demonstrating in the first couple of years that they could deliver. Thus, in relation to program predictability, the NHA's input initially performed better than the participatory planning alternative. Further, for informal settlers, the existence of the completed NHA dwellings only served to underline the certainty of their eventual eviction—and the urgent need to respond.

As stated, informal settlers were more familiar with the type of housing on offer from the NHA which was more appropriate to their needs and diverse livelihoods. By contrast, moving into a multi-rise dwelling entailed more uncertainties, adjustments, and reduced livelihood options such as petty trading, home gardens and small livestock. NGO organisers admitted that it took a good deal of 'social preparation' for households to be able to make the transition. At the two in-city sites where construction was underway by 2015, interviewees listed complications

relating to building design, impacts on livelihoods, keeping animals, and estate management.

With respect to the credibility of program implementers, NGOs fared much better than the authorities. Informal settlers tended to mistrust authorities' intentions whereas, at one in-city site, the community had sought the assistance of NGOs when they realised they faced eviction. With respect to the participatory planning process, the issue for NGOs was less one of personal or organisational credibility, but their capacity to deliver timely, tangible outcomes, given the need for them to obtain various approvals from national and local authorities.

This factor was critical because the poor could rarely afford to hold out for a potential future gain that did not really meet their diverse needs. Their immediate needs were not easily foregone. In the situation where the local mayor provided a staging site, perceptions of the predictability of the program were enhanced and a real material need of the urban poor was met.

Joshi and Moore (2000) point to an important issue vis-à-vis collective action by the poor: the need for the program to be considered genuine by beneficiaries in order for them to participate. However, in this instance, where the program necessarily entailed major disruptions to their current circumstances due to the requirement to relocate, many informal settler households could not commit to a drawn-out planning process in the interim. Many did not view the NHA offer as a housing solution in the way program designers imagined. Instead, they took the opportunity to treat their allocated dwelling as a major asset and in around a third of cases sold immediately.

Conclusion

Their structural disadvantage means that poor people can find it hard to comply with the development aspirations of even their long-term allies and advocates. The issue is material rather than ideological as poor people generally try to get what they can from a variety of sources through 'tactical improvisation rather than strategic engagement' (Robins et al. 2008:1081). By being involved in the PHP50 billion program Metro Manila's informal settlers face major disruptions to their everyday means of getting by. Their responses tend to illustrate how these disruptions can be difficult, no matter if the eventual outcome is pro-poor in policy terms. Politically informed programming needs to take account of the poor by fully appreciating what is hard for them to forego under their current circumstances.

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