Seeking an INGO’s Opportunity in developing the Public Health Sector in Timor-Leste — Insights from Community Health Education Activities

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Objective: This research paper presents the empirical findings on opportunities that International Non-governmental Organizations (INGO) can possibly take to empower local communities by supporting the public health service delivery in Timor-Leste (TL), so that people in the community are able to achieve healthy lives by themselves. Through this research, the authors aspire to share insights for the third sector to effectively work with the young public sector so that the sector will be eventually able to deliver social services on its own.

TL is one of the youngest nations in the world that have declared a full independence in 2002. The most urgent task for its one hundred million population was to establish the functional government; yet the challenge was that the implementation structures to provide social services were premature and human resources to handle service delivery were limited. Thus on top of the broad range of supports from the United Nations organizations to support the young government, various donor agencies and INGOs entered into TL.

Among them, Services for the Health for the Asian and African Regions (SHARE), a NGO from Japan, has started its activities in 1999 to promote health education at the community level, working together with the Ministry of Health and the District Health Services. The health indicators of TL remain generally low; especially infant mortality is 90 per 1,000 live births (UNDP 2006). The two most critical factors are high child malnutrition rate and lack of access to hygienic living environment, which the local communities face daily. Therefore, SHARE is committed to spread preventive health measures to them by providing health education trainings to community health volunteers and primary school teachers, which aligned to the public sector programs, so that SHARE can achieve its organizational mission “Health for All” in TL.

Through the SHARE’s experience in working with the TL public sector for a decade, this paper will address the possible contributions and roles that INGO can offer to the development of the young government.

Research Question: Should INGO be an agency to take a leading role to induce development or a supporting organization to work with the young government? If it should take both roles, how can INGO effectively introduce progressive dynamism in such a way through daily interactions with the government?

Theoretical Framework: The concept of neither agencies nor structures does not properly capture the dynamic processes of interactions among stakeholders, including SHARE. Rather than framing actors as agencies or situations as structures, dynamic interactions between agencies and institutions shall be carefully examined (Giddens, 1979). Especially, in the face of the newly emerging government that is under the processes of institutionalising governing rules and regulations as a set of systems, influencing the government through the daily practices of INGO shall better be analysed as a concept of structuration, which is a combination of an agent and an instrumental tool under the emerging institutions in the government.

Research Method: To not only observe but also pro-actively engage in the process and interactions between the INGO and the government, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is employed as a methodology for this research processes (Whyte, et al. 1991). One of the
authors will be involved in the activities to support health service delivery as a staff member of SHARE. Through the dual processes of working and, at the same time, observing what happens in everyday practices, she will engage in keeping records of her observations and describing the dynamics of the related parties while she does her own work as a staff member in the organization.

Theoretical and/or empirical findings: At the initial stage of the development, INGO must find a way to effectively support the government to deliver social services, since it may take decades or more to establish the functional government with adequate human resources for any nations. Therefore, INGO has a responsibility together with the government to fill the gap for the local population that is in need of social services at this moment. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the aforementioned dynamics can only be sustainable when INGO intends to gradually transfer a role of service delivery to the government and the government are willing to take over the role. Both INGO and the government should be aware who are the owner of the activities, i.e., eventually the ownership should be identified at within the government. This process requires a close and frequent coordination between the INGO and the government at various levels, to identify each other’s role in daily activities. Only through this cumbersome process beyond Agent-Instrument dichotomy, it is possible for such external organizations as INGO to support the development of a local government.

On the other hand, working with INGO exhibits various possibilities and limitations for the receiving government. Continuity of INGOs activities depends on the availability of funding and donations as well as the organizational strategies. Currently, maintaining stable funding sufficient to sustain activities are always challenges for a majority of INGOs. Therefore, the government should be also aware that fully depending on INGOs to provide social service delivery imposes a certain vulnerability to its population in terms of sustainability to access to social services.

Bibliography


