Room for Maneuver: Social Sector Policy Reform in the Philippines

This policy brief summarizes the main findings from the book Room for Maneuver: Social Sector Policy Reform in the Philippines. That work seeks to improve understanding of the processes that lead to positive social policy change.

Despite a long democratic tradition and recent economic growth, poverty in the Philippines stubbornly persists. Slow progress on addressing structural constraints in economic and social policy has held back the country’s development prospects. In 2011, an earlier research effort focused on recent economic reform efforts. To better understand the dynamics of decision making on social policy issues, The Asia Foundation in partnership with the Developmental Leadership Program and with support from the Australian Government reviewed the experience of different social policy reforms through four case studies:

1. The successful passage of the Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act in 2004 that criminalizes all forms of violence against women in intimate relationships;
2. The successful passage of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act in 2012 that seeks to ensure universal access to methods and information on family planning and maternal care;
3. The thus far unsuccessful effort to introduce a Freedom of Information Act to establish legal procedures for obtaining government-held information; and,
4. The politics of introducing and passing the Governance of Basic Education Act in 2001 that altered the organizational structure of the national educational system.

Analytical Framework

The case studies used a conceptual framework that draws on the long-running debate in political science concerning the relationship between “structure” and “agency” to understand the process that shape social sector reform outcomes. Structure refers to both the broad features of the economic, political, and social structure of a society, sector, or reform issue, as well as the formal and informal institutional arrangements that shape (but do not necessarily determine) behavior within a given domain. Agency refers to the intentions, capacities, and abilities of actors (individuals, groups, organizations, or coalitions) to think and act strategically. In the context of the structural constraints and opportunities, agents make decisions to achieve their objectives and perhaps shape, reshape, or improve the institutional or policy environment.

Given the importance of “leadership” in policy reform efforts, the cases also analyze the manner in which leaders mobilize people and resources through a variety of forms of coalition building. The cases examine how reform coalitions managed their internal politics and established network links and avenues of influence with other players in the political system (gatekeepers, connectors, champions) in pursuit of their reform goals.

Lessons from Social Sector Reform Cases

Social reform cannot be understood apart from the socio-political context in which it happens. While the idiosyncrasy of social contexts is a given, there are recognizable patterns in the universe of factors that surface repeatedly in many social reform episodes through many diverse social contexts. The role of conjunctures, largely exogenous moments that change the political landscape, is an example. The human actors who labor painstakingly to enable
alternative futures for serious consideration and the coalitions these actors bring to life are another. Inherited rules and institutions, both formal and informal, that safeguard social stability can also be employed by vested interests to frustrate challenges to patent social failures are also common elements in the landscape of social change. In each case, local leaders, elites, and coalitions—at times with support from international development partners, and other times self-funded—found the room to maneuver within the structures and constraints to achieve their desired outcomes.

The four social sector reform cases covered illustrate the long and winding road to reform success. Despite the varied nature of the specific reform issue, the cases exhibit many commonalities and shared milestones in the process of reform. Based on analysis of the four case studies we have identified eleven main lessons that may be helpful in formulating advocacies and strategies that stand a better chance of achieving success:

1. **Reform processes are often long and complex.** Social policies are typically directed towards solving “wicked” problems which are difficult to define making the identification of clear solutions equally difficult, and have many interdependencies and multi-causal nature that can lead to little or no impact or to unforeseen consequences of policy intervention. Breaking through the gridlock and building political support for something lacking in technical clarity is challenging. The effort to pass anti-VAWC legislation began in earnest in 1996 and took eight years of concerted effort to pass. Through the process, there were serious disagreements and divisions among advocates that almost scuttled the advocacy. In the education reform case, the first formal efforts started in the early 1990s and concluded with passage in 2001. The legislative battle for a framework for reproductive health lasted over two decades. The ongoing campaign to flesh out the constitutional provisions on freedom of information can be traced back to 1998.

2. **Reform processes are typically non-linear.** While there are formal steps to approving a law, there are unpredictable events and conjunctures. Perennial power realignments in the political system generally serve to attenuate reform processes. However, such realignments can also throw up new opportunities, and capitalizing on trigger events, windows of opportunity, or reform conjunctures can dramatically improve an advocacy’s likelihood of success. Managing surprises and adverse events is a critical skill. In the case of the anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act, sensational episodes of violence against women, however unfortunate and disturbing, were effectively turned into tipping points to advance the cause. Previous efforts to create a comprehensive government policy and program on reproductive health had been stymied by an effective opposition. But the election of a new president supportive of the measure was a key conjuncture that favored reform. As a senator and as a candidate for president, President Aquino stated a commitment to passage of the Reproductive Health Bill and did not retreat from that position despite intense opposition.

3. **Reforms need to be technically sound and politically possible.** For some types of reforms, such as those related to economic policy, the impact of reform is easier to determine. For example, the successful policy to liberalize telecommunications industry led to a rapid expansion in access to service, lower prices, more choice and increased investment and employment. In most social sector reforms, however, the presence of many inter-connected factors hinder our ability to establish a baseline and determine impact and causality. For example, even after the education reform law was passed in 2001, educational outcomes continued to deteriorate. This highlights one of the major challenges of social sector reform: the difficulty in predicting with a high level of certainty that reforms will alter incentives and behavior of social actors to improve outcomes. While this should not deter reformers, it is a reminder of the importance of evidence-based work as they work to introduce technically sound, politically feasible reforms.

A crucial part of the reform advocacy is identifying and convincing reform allies and policy champions to use their political capital in driving change. Reform agendas compete over the use of scarce political capital. Building trust and understanding the

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motivations and interests of political actors is an important element of engagement. The chief executive, the department secretaries, and the committee chairmen in both houses of Congress, all had to be brought together to support the proposed reforms.

4. Effective coalitions and networks are essential to reform. In each of the successful reform cases studied, there were strong bonds between civil society reformers and groups within government that were critical for success. Reformers had to develop good relationships with key internal players in the executive and legislative branches. There is a growing development literature of the importance of coalitions and networks in achieving reform. Advocates who work through coalitions can call on the existing structures, resources, and networks of member organizations towards a critical mass in pursuit of their reform objective.

The coalition supporting the Reproductive Health Bill was sufficiently broad and united to counteract strong opposition during the final legislative process. It was resilient enough to overcome internal disagreements arising from the broad, diverse nature of the coalition membership. The delicate integration and management of advocates of diverse perspectives, especially the partnership between political elites and mass-based organizations, affords reform coalitions both the competence and constituency needed to convince government leaders to intervene. Advocacy coalitions composed of diverse social groups and ideological strains can take advantage of the varied competencies and strengths of its broad and heterogeneous constituencies to organize and mobilize the social classes or sectors with which each member are most familiar.

5. The role of values and motivations in reform coalitions is unclear. The importance of having shared values and motivations among all reform coalition members is unclear. Some advocates believe that successful reform is achieved by establishing a shared set of clearly articulated values that can serve as a basis for coalition unity and longevity. These values can temper the centrifugal tendency of a broadening coalition with heterogeneous interests and identities.

To others, the importance of building a formal coalition based on a consensus of core values is unnecessary. The key is the willingness of coalition members to use their political capital towards the same reform regardless of their motivation. In other words, coalition members and leaders do not have to share the same values. This view recognizes that there are many motivations for supporting a reform and participating in a coalition and sincere commitment to achieving a desired reform is more important than having a shared set of values and motivations.

6. Passionate, well-connected leaders drive change. While networks and coalitions provide credibility and support for the reform initiatives, these groups are usually being driven and sustained by key individuals whose ideologies, history, vast networks, and important positions in society and government enable them to be effective leaders of coalitions. In the anti-violence against women and children and the reproductive health reforms, leaders were able to broker trust-building and collaboration among various advocates that did not agree with each other on a number of issues.

7. The chief executive is important but there are limits to presidential power. The cases highlight the critical role that the president plays in determining the legislative process. The likelihood of a legislative reform bill making it into law increases significantly when the issue is designated as a priority bill by the president. Both the anti-violence against women and children and the reproductive health bills were designated as priority bills by the chief executive. Signifying a priority bill raises the political stakes so presidents are careful to ensure they are picking reforms that not only reflect their political priorities but also have sufficiently broad support in Congress and with the general public. Even with presidential support passage is not guaranteed so the president has to identify allies in Congress willing to champion specific reforms towards securing final passage of reform measures. Strong public support for the RH bill eventually enabled President Aquino to secure the necessary legislative majority against strong opposition from the Catholic Church. On the other hand, less clear public support coupled with the President’s own misgivings have meant that passage of the Freedom of Information bill has not been prioritized.

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8. Framing matters. Framing the issue in a non-confrontational manner avoids unnecessary controversy. For example when bringing forward ending violence against women and children legislation to a male-dominated Congress it was framed in a way that enabled lawmakers to appreciate the importance of the law to women and support its passage. Reframing the issue of population policy as a reproductive health reform rather than a population control issue swelled the ranks of the coalition and garnered enough support to overcome opposition to the bill. Reframing the case for Freedom of Information legislation, which is currently stalled, may help to broaden its support.

9. Reform strategies require flexibility. While policy reform advocacy needs to be well planned, advocates should also be able to quickly adjust to shifting political realities and change tactics as needed on the fly. Changing realities may call for compromises and advocates need to be ready to compromise, keeping in mind their critical set of technically sound non-negotiable provisions. Since some reforms challenge current deeply imbedded beliefs in the existing political culture, advocates should be willing to experiment with different political strategy mixes.

10. External technical and financial support can be helpful. Policy advocacy can be an expensive battle and reform advocates often work with very limited funds. Support from donors can make a great difference. By the same token, donors need to be sensitive to the needs and preferences of the reformers and not to impose overly onerous conditions on them. For external donors wishing to support social change, assistance needs to be flexible in accounting for changing circumstances of domestic politics. Program design should be sufficiently flexible to enable quick intensification of support during unexpected windows of opportunity. An effective understanding of local political economy considerations will help donors make better, more informed choices.

11. Align the stars and connect the dots. Successful social sector reform requires interlinked political, public, and advocacy constituencies to come together. A president is unlikely to spend his political capital on a bill that does not have clear public support or a high probability of passing both Houses of Congress. Leaders and advocacy groups that are unable to spark the public interest, line up political reform champions, and stay united behind a core common platform, often over many years, are almost certain to fail. The experience of the RH reform demonstrates how, when the political, public, and advocacy stars align, even contentious and divisive reforms can be successful.