

## **Pitfalls of setting up ‘coordinating agencies’**

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FOUR PRESENTATIONS made by the panel from the Institute on Disability and Public Policy for the ASEAN Region (IDPP) at a recent conference in Singapore outlined the need for a shift from a “health-based approach” to policies for persons with disabilities (PWDs) to a “rights-based approach” to policy and practice.

Such an approach carefully considers the need for institutions that provide political and social space along with participatory mechanisms to navigate such a space for persons with disability or, as quoted by Executive Director Dr. Derrick Cogburn: “Nothing about us, without us.”

The four country cases presented in the panel included Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, and drew a quick sketch of the policy environment in which the convention has been adopted and implemented at the national level. In all instances, national coordinative structures were created, along with some structures at the local level for implementation. Questions raised included the issue of monitoring the effectiveness of these structures, the implementation at the local level, and translating the goals into substantive, actionable policy,

Complex political realities, such as the plight of persons with disabilities in developing countries, are frequently dealt with at the national level with a high-level policy or directive to a diverse set of actors (different agencies, at different levels and branches of government) requiring the creation of a sometimes vague new entity: an “interagency task force,” a “coordinating committee,” a “consultative body.” These ad hoc entities are conceived at the policy-making level in the hopes that a governance miracle takes place once all the concerned groups and individuals are given a place at the talking table.

There always remains that hope. But, for the most part, institutions strung together in the expectation that new results will filter through are in for a rude awakening: the more coordination is required, the less action is actually done. Blame it on the ever-present issue of turfing among agencies and stakeholders, or “slippage” between the creation of the policy and implementation.

This type of dilemma rings true in the Philippine setting as well for other “coordinated” policy areas such as migration, disaster management, and the peace process, to name a few. These issues have long-standing repercussions that go beyond not just the current administration’s term.

Two possible bright spots for the continuation of important work in various sectors strung together by coordinative bodies are (1) the external push from bodies such as ASEAN to continue to develop mechanisms for important areas of policy; and (2) a more organic approach which involves solid local institutions and a genuinely participatory process at this level. The continuing role of civil society organizations, especially those who have transnational ties, are key as well to continuing the good work that may be displaced by a new administration.

Our politics is in a constantly experimental state -- a fine balance of what works in a plurality of settings, and usually there is more than one formula. Or 10. In such an environment, we must ascertain that coordinative bodies contribute to the balance, or at the very least, assure a voice for the most vulnerable in society.

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