Spatial equity: a parameter for sustainable development in indigenous regions

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Abstract

Spatial equity is an ambiguity. In a physical sense it can be the equitable development of land use. In a socio-economic sense it can refer to the equitable flow of goods and services from one spatial arena to another. But in both senses, this paper contends that spatial equity is a parameter for sustainable development especially in indigenous regions. Spatial equity can, therefore be defined as both a process and an outcome. As process, it involves the redistribution of the overall resources and development opportunities and/or the optimization of endemic or locally existing resources and development opportunities in an indigenous region or area by either the physical integration of all political spaces within it through a planned and rationalized system of physical infrastructure or by the social integration of the same spaces through a network of communicative devices based on indigenous socio-political structures enhanced by electronic technology. As an outcome, it envisions an indigenous region or area where such redistribution or optimization is achieved and sustained through an integrated indigenous socio-political structure, that is, through networked ethnicities such that peripheral spaces, formerly neglected or lacking prioritization, are given equal chances as the center to develop culturally, economically, and politically. This paper looks for a [re]definition of spatial equity through the lens of sustainable development.
Keywords: spatial equity, sustainable development, indigenous regions.

1   Introduction

Fainstain [1] has contended that spatial regimes have focused narrowly on economic growth as their objective claiming that growth-promoting policies result in the greatest good for the greatest number. Decisions arising from the

location of revenue generating centres have been at the expense of both environmental and social equity (as seen for example in the mining ventures and operations in the indigenous regions of the Philippines); and as such, the inter-relationship of spatial and social equity are intertwined in parameters for sustainable development.

The role of planning in addressing the interlinked concerns of spatial and economic equity comes into the forefront in the search for social justice. Habermas [2] has broached the idea of communicative rationality and the importance of discourse in building social relations and upending the tension between state-dictated policy and general public consensus. This has further been built upon by both Healey [3] and Forester [4] in the communicative approach to planning.

The planning instrument of local governments in the Philippines is the Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP). For municipalities in indigenous regions, where a majority of the land area under their territorial jurisdiction are forestlands, planning has been limited to built-up areas. This is because of the unique arrangement in the country, where forestlands-cum-natural resources are under the planning jurisdiction of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) instead of the host municipality. To complicate matters, the ancestral domains of indigenous peoples which are mostly in forestlands are also administered by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) with a separate planning framework in the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP).

Unless there is a vocal resistance by the indigenous people, planning by the local Municipal Planning and Development Staff (MPDS) and the DENR gives little regard to their rights over ancestral domains. Indigenous Peoples end up neglected, bypassed, and ignored because of their dispersed and small number as well as their distance from built-up centres. This issue of geographical reach can be attributed to what Healey [3] calls the "friction of distance"; where spatial interactions with built-up centres tend to decrease as the point from the said centre increases. With municipalities in indigenous regions ranging from third to fifth class in category, meagre economic resource are concentrated in built-up centres as attempts to overcome this "friction of distance" to ancestral domains involve time, extraordinary effort and financial resources (especially in planning). Although the indigenous peoples (IP) have the ADSDPP, sources of municipal government funding are state-mandated to be based on the CLUP. Thus, indigenous regions in the Philippines may be regarded as *areas of spatial inequity*.

2   The role of planning in spatial equity

In terms of development, indigenous people need alternatives that provide a means of controlling their integration into on-going economic processes, without which they face continued poverty, assimilation and cultural disintegration [5]. Planning can provide this alternative by bridging community concerns with the institutional support of the state. The author agrees with Lane [6] that this can be

achieved by combining a strong institutional capability with an effective operational approach to community-based planning in which indigenous access to mainstream organizations and policy processes is enhanced. This in essence is a step towards spatial equity: how this can be integrated into a planning framework for an environment that would link indigenous villages to larger scales of governance, access to basic facilities and services and how to work out social and spatial relations within and outside their communities for sustainable development.

Corollary to this is how to create awareness that the indigenous people can be considered agents of planning –that they have the agential power to influence planning directions and trajectories in the region. A third consideration is how to convince them to go beyond their "natural plans" and create a vision for their communities and from there in how to attain this vision. The plan is natural in the sense that it provides an indication of the true nature of things – the way things are organized in their attachment to the natural and necessary processes by which they are determined (Dehaene as cited by Murdoch) [7].

It is a misconception to restrict the concerns of indigenous people to purely traditional and cultural concerns, as indigenous interests also include employment, related economic benefits, and associated community development interests [6]. The proposed framework does not see the indigenous community as planned only within its confines but in relation to its wider environment for institutional support – especially funding for proposed projects. Lane sees the importance of the relation between the state's institutional capacity with local community-based implementation in order that indigenous policy interests are not marginalized within a larger institutional context [6]. The author sees this as a step towards spatial equity.

Mainstream development continues to be concentrated in urban centers and municipalities that have the economic resources leaving the indigenous people just the "trickle-down" effects of government development initiatives. Although infrastructure networks have connected indigenous cultural communities to main urban centers, economic flows towards villages have not been robust enough to spur noticeable growth. This structural economic inequity needs to be addressed by government to impel spatial equity.

A relational framework could provide spatial equity to the village by changing the philosophy of its being territorial space to one that is porous and open to flows. Ash Amin defines a relational framework as a conception of place "not as a close system or a container of intangible assets and structures, but as a relational construct through which heterogeneous flows of actors, assets and structures coalesce and take place" [8].

The concept of indigenous agency lies at the core of this paper's argument that planning in the indigenous regions in the Philippines could be guided and informed by a planning framework which privileges diversity as well as social and spatial equity. Planning for diversity could, therefore, merge planning theory with culture theory by adopting egalitarian multiculturalism that acclaims indigenous knowledge systems and institutions, over the modernist perspective characterized by development aggression.

3   Spatial equity as discourse

This reconciliation of planning theory (land use) with culture theory (identity and values) intrinsically implies a protection of land from culturally inappropriate land use. When this basic tenet is threatened and is left to hang in a precarious balance, indigenous agency confronts the state planning structure or the state itself to reprogram interventionist plans and programs, if not totally turning its back on them. There is also historical evidence of violent confrontations between the indigenous people and the state because two theoretical philosophies, both based on social relationships, have not been allowed to interplay in planning initiatives in the region. This resonates not only of indigenous agency but also of inherent indigenous power which Rovillos (2004) defines as "their knowledge, spirituality, and values of collective and common solidarity" (p. 92). In this regard, planning can be best understood as the task of integrating technical efficiency and social equality – where social justice balances these often conflicting values against one another [8].

The reconciliation of planning theory and culture theory in sustainable development involves also a rethinking of Philippine planning in indigenous regions. It does not discount mainstream planning with a focus on progress and modernity as embodied in the CLUP, but it should allow more than the mere ministerial incorporation of the ADSDPP into the municipal plan, to enable the communicative interaction between both plans in areas of constructive divergence and allow it to negotiate for spatial and social equity or its basic rights. Furthermore, such communicative interaction must take place within and utilize indigenous frameworks of dialogue and negotiations such as the *tongtongan* system in the Cordillera regions of the Philippines.

There is, therefore, a need for cultural elements to be elementally evoked from the indigenous psyche as these are so deeply embedded as to be virtually invisible. These elements must be allowed to surface as heuristic tools in negotiations and confrontations between the diametrically opposed but dialectically related forces of structure and agency; and to function in an indigenous planning framework that involves the contestation and dialectics of ideas, power, and movements. This does not argue for the replacement of existing planning tools but rather for the strengthening of the ancestral domain plan in order to appropriately engage the municipal plan through culturally embedded communicative mechanisms. This can be a form of empowering the ancestral plan to get problems accepted on the agenda and get action organized so that the problems can be solved in an intended way [6]. The constant engagement of the municipal plan and the indigenous plan through time could reduce areas of divergence and could produce a collaborative plan from the areas of convergence.

This indigenous-based communicative approach to planning is based on the presumption that the present and the future are being formed in inter-subjective learning processes between actors [9]. It is a search for a future scenario where all interests are met to some degree, or at least better than they would if they had not come together [10]. Thus, a normative deliberation about social justice

[spatial equity] manifests itself across the full range of practical discourse, from the very concrete to the highly abstract that relies on the most relevant methodological orientations – techno-empirical analysis, political economic analysis, and philosophical critique [11].
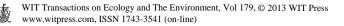
4   Spatial equity and governance/regional autonomy

The multi-ethnic characteristic of indigenous regions in the Philippines is a governance problem that could not be addressed by state-dictated policies that calls for regional autonomy using mainstream society and westernized models. Although the intent for regional autonomy by the state as a vehicle for economic development is note-worthy, it is however pushing a framework not endemic to multi-ethnic governance. This framework has been twice rejected by the IPs in two plebiscites. There is, therefore, a need to put in-place a framework of indigenous multi-ethnic governance if only to answer the call of the 1986 Philippine Constitution granting autonomy to indigenous regions.

Present government policy on multi-ethnic governance adopts the classic top-down model of a regional governor, effectively creating another echelon of government bureaucracy while maintaining the existing local government units. The relationship of these two levels of governance is problematic considering how indigenous leadership is extremely patrimonial and exclusive within ethnic boundaries.

One of the main reasons for the rejection of the state-ordained organic act for the creation of the Cordillera Autonomous Region is the absence of indigenous political and social institutions in its governance framework. The proposed research will not change the tenor of the organic act in the vertical relation of the region with the state, but will instead look into strengthening horizontal relationships between ethnic groups (that are interestingly enough geographically based in municipalities such that the ancestral domains of an indigenous group can be almost exactly superimposed over the political jurisdiction of a municipality) thereby enhancing indigenous agency in relation to the state structure. This horizontal relationship (among ethnicities) is proposed to be the platform for the establishment of a "space of flows," a precondition before but may well continue to exist during the formulation and development of a vertical relationship with the state [12]. The horizontal and vertical flows of power relations are seen to coalesce into an acceptable governance framework for regional autonomy; one that is empowering, sustainable, authentic, non-fragmenting, centripetal, non-disintegrating, respectful of individual ethnicities, and developmental.

The author submits that network analysis can be used to understand the dimensions of spatial equity as a driver for sustainable development within the Philippine setting in general and in indigenous regions specifically. In particular, the approach arouses interest in the social, spatial and technological characteristics associated with equity and how to create networked environments that foster growth and equitable innovation. While studies have addressed the role of networks and network analysis in development from the planning

perspective, spatial equity has not yet been focused on especially in planning indigenous regions. For instance, the agglomeration arguments have dominated such substantive applications of network analysis as they do in mainstream planning paradigms within the country.
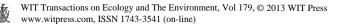
In the context of this paper, network analysis offers conceptual and methodological approaches to model and measure the relationships between actors for whom spatial equity is sought. This allows the exploration of the idea that while the arrangement of actors in the physical space or spatial structure is correlated with their attributes and behavior, the same correlation may be recognized in the network structure referring to the relational space in which the different actors find themselves in.

Traditional planning methods measure attributes of actors such as municipalities (in the Philippine Provincial Physical Framework Plan or PPFP), barangays (in the Municipal CLUP), and/or indigenous territories (in the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development Plan) and try to discover something about the relationship between actors based on those attributes. This approach, as argued earlier, goes against special equity in as much as the target essentially is to identify areas of primacy that could function as development nodes or hubs for the overall unit of planning. To the contrary, in essence, therefore, the author proposes an inverted or reversed planning framework that starts with a focusing on how networks are constructed, manipulated and measured in what is seen as a prior step towards the construction of spatial equity. Because social equity is seen as the end of networking, questions related to the nature and influence of social capital and communities as well as those relating to collective action and governance are integrated in planning.

5   Conclusion

This paper has attempted to position the concept of spatial equity as both a unique perspective and unique methodology with respect to planning in indigenous areas. This stems from the view that spatial equity should be defined as both process and outcome. While being two different conceptualizations, process and outcome converge in the concept of networks that serve as means to achieve spatial equity (i.e., optimizing of endemic resources through networking) as well as goals (i.e., networked ethnicities). The value of networks in facilitating a (re)definition of spatial equity in relation to planning is seen in the way it provides a way of visualizing and analyzing structure and agency in terms of a relational network, distinct but not separated from the geography of place.

The examination of the role of planning in development done in the first part of the paper advanced the idea that in indigenous regions, room should be accorded to indigenous agency in the planning process through a framework that adopts egalitarian multiculturalism where the concept of spatial equity serves as a basic goal. This demanded, on the other hand, a discourse on spatial equity that emphasized the process of allowing negotiations between indigenous agency and state structure. This basic understanding of spatial equity saw concrete application in the establishment of governance networks in the context of

indigenous regions in the Philippines where the multi-ethnic characteristic translates to development questions with spatial equity as an end. It is concluded that spatial equity achieved in term of networks has the potential to advance a relational planning framework which may be used immediately in resolving the issue of autonomy in indigenous regions in the Philippines.

It is imperative that spatial planning recognize spatial equity both as a goal and objective and a parameter for sustainable development in indigenous regions. A relational planning approach is, thus, recommended, one that recognizes the value of understanding that diversity and interdependence of actors are the most important inputs in planning processes that can be used to produce better outcomes and ensure the morphogenetic adaptation of plans. What is needed is first, the comprehension of how actors in planning processes are already set within existing indigenous social networks (i.e. traditional alliances, *bodong* agreements, *tongtongan*, *katulagan,* and others as well as formal governance networks such as local government and regional set-ups, international linkages with "sister cities," etc); second, how the structure of those networks enables or inhibits such actors; and finally how mechanisms of communicative action can be patterned or based on indigenous communicative or negotiative practices and subsequently employed in horizontal and vertical relations of the indigenous populations, the state, and non-state actors in planning growth and development.

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