Reframing Inequality to Promote Inclusive Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The human effort to understand the link between inequality and democracy has been unceasing, yet the world continues to be deeply troubled by the intractability of inequality and the seemingly Sisyphean pursuit of more meaningful democracy.

There has been an observed trend in recent years of democracy retreating or contracting in many countries in the world. In Southeast Asia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Philippines, in particular, have experienced declines in democracy.

The Philippines is a particularly disappointing case because of the way the 1986 People Power Revolution, which overthrew the Marcos dictatorship, has backslid into an elite-dominated and distorted democracy despite the formulation and adoption of the 1987 Constitution, which specifically sought to decentralise power and install various safeguards against a return to dictatorship and political dynasties.

The Philippines today remains "partly democratic," in the reckoning of international and foreign organisations that provide comparative metrics on democracy and freedom.[1] Much political energy in the Philippines today is spent on a highly partisan struggle between the supporters of Duterte extolling his bold reformist rhetoric and action, and those who have been appalled by his rough and often anti-democratic style of governance.

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[1] *Esquire*. "Democracy in the Philippines Didn't Worsen in 2018, But It Didn't Improve Either", https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/opinion/democracy-philippines-state-a00200-20190109; *The Economist*. "Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy", https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy2018.

REDUCING INEQUALITY UNDER IMPERFECT DEMOCRACY

Neither extreme inequality nor perfect equality is a desirable outcome of democracy. But where democracy is in retreat, the question is, is it possible to expect greater equality among citizens in a society?

This article proposes that even with the imperfections of democracy, and even with the much-observed retreat of democracy, a reframing of how inequality is understood and acted upon by the people at the bottom or base of the pyramid (BoP) and by development agents who support them, can dramatically reduce inequality and enhance democracy. That is, one way of reducing inequality and enhancing democracy is to wear new lenses.

This insight comes from over a decade of work on development programme implementation with national development agencies (the "supply side") as well as social innovations work with local communities (the "demand side") in the Philippines over several decades. The main insight is that there are a lot of programmes undertaken by national government agencies that potentially could reduce inequality at the local level if only local governments and communities were sufficiently primed to take full advantage of these opportunities.

DILEMMAS OF EQUITY AND GROWTH IN THE ASEAN CONTEXT

One may think of three levels of inequality in the ASEAN region that policymakers are concerned with: (1) inequality among the ASEAN member states, (2) inequality within member states, and (3) inequality particularly experienced by disadvantaged groups or sectors within member states.[2]

The third level of inequality refers to conditions at the BoP in each of the ASEAN member countries. The BoP generally refers to those groups that are poor (lacking in assets), vulnerable (exposed to extreme risks), marginalised (geographically isolated), voiceless (lacking in influence in public policy), and disadvantaged (suffering exclusion due to identity, gender, age, and physical abilities). The disadvantaged sectors, more specifically, refer to four groups: (1) the youth, (2) women, (3) persons with disabilities (PWDs), and (4) ethnic minorities.

[2] OECD. "Inclusive Asean Selected Outputs of the Southeast Asia Regional Programme". Tokyo Ministerial Conference 8-9 March 2018, https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/events/regional-forum/Inclusive_ASEAN_Tokyo_Ministerial_March_2018.pdf.

The BoP has traditionally been seen largely as a problem to be solved by humanity. Recently, a shift in perspective among entrepreneurs now enables them to see the BoP as a vast market instead. Entrepreneurs now agree there is money to be made in and with the BoP.[3]

From the public sector side, the main shift in perspective has been to identify new policy approaches to make economic growth "inclusive" of the BoP. Such BoP-oriented innovations in public policy among ASEAN countries include:[4]

1. Level the playing field to increase inclusion of the BoP through special and dedicated programmes for youth, women, PWDs, and ethnic minorities, taking their special circumstances into consideration. These targeted policies could include subsidised credit, tax exemptions, social benefits, and streamlined business registration procedures.

2. Create a "conducive ecosystem" of development agents for these target groups. This involves engaging the private sector and civil society organisations in promoting inclusive enterprises for the base of the pyramid.

3. Provide outright income supports such as conditional or unconditional cash transfers, as a way of shifting the BoP upwards into the middle class, in effect converting the socio-economic pyramid into a diamond.[5]

Inequality is a "wicked problem". The drive to resolve inequalities at one level (across countries) induces inequalities within countries. The process of industrialisation that emphasises export-orientation tends to develop selected geographic areas, e.g., special economic zones, and selected sectors, e.g., garments, electronics, and shoes. Emerging entrepreneurs and professionals widen the income gap between urban and rural areas. The influx into urban areas translates into the abandonment of agriculture.[6]

Extreme inequality hinders the workings of democracy. Economic inequality translates into differential abilities of citizens to inform themselves and attain the capacity for rational and critical thinking. In the Philippines, political dynasties that are the vanguard of the rapacious elite have tremendous influence over Congress, the Presidency, and the Supreme Court. Transparency and accountability institu-

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[3] C. K. Prahalad (2010). *The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid, revised and updated 5th anniversary edition*. Pearson Education.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Prahalad (2010).

[6] UNESCO (2014). *Policies and processes for social inclusion, volume 1: Possibilities from south-east asia*, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000231615.

tions and laws fail to curb the corruption associated with the elite. On the other hand, the people sell their votes and public officers are beholden to politicians.

Extreme inequality is dangerous to a democracy. A society with a large segment of poor people is clearly a precarious, revolution-baiting one. Keeping inequality manageable promotes public trust, reducing the sense that society is unfair, which too often translates into demands for a radical redistribution of wealth through revolution or autocracy.

Various regional conferences and summits will continue to generate innovative policy initiatives for reducing inequality and enhancing democracy within the ASEAN region and in member countries. The reality, however, is that it will take time before these policies gain much traction in reversing the conditions at the BoP, where inequality and lack of democratic practice is endemic.

THE BOP AS THE SPACE FOR REDUCING INEQUALITY AND ENHANCING DEMOCRACY

To reframe is to use a different conceptual framework or viewpoint with which to give a more relevant meaning to the same issue, problem, or situation. Inequality and democracy are themselves extremely important but complex phenomena for any society.

Such a reframe is critical because the people at the BoP are socially excluded and therefore unable to act, under current frameworks and dynamics, to reduce inequality and enhance democracy, even in societies that boast of being formal democracies. While this reframe is directed at the supply-side, this is more important for the BoP, which suffers from a lack of confidence in their ability to change their lives for the better, given their poverty of resources, capabilities, and opportunities. A new way of seeing their world may give them the motivation and the confidence to make use of underutilised resources – self-help, mutual help, and institutional help – that can be released by a change in their political and administrative ecosystem.

In efforts to reduce inequality among countries in Southeast Asia, countries trying to catch up develop a single-minded drive to increase economic growth, which oftentimes leaves their respective BoP further behind. It is often blithely assumed that over the long run, the benefits of the leaps in economic growth that is achieved will trickle down to the BoP.

It is now increasingly understood that "inclusive development" requires that the BoP develop faster than the rest of society, and not that they stay where they are in relation to the upper and middle classes. Inclusive development will not happen

without purposive action by national and local governments to formulate strategies and policies that will significantly increase social inclusion.

The middle class itself often competes with the BoP for reforms in society. The clamour for more and better university education can lead to the reduction of government funds for the implementation of universal primary and high school education, which benefits the BoP more. The middle class may have a greater influence on policymakers than the BoP.

Eventually, the answer to inequality is the shift of large segments of the BoP into the middle class through resource transfers, capability-building, and provision of relevant opportunities for income generation. This is like transforming the socio-economic pyramid into a diamond-shaped society where the bulk of the citizenry is in the middle class segment. This is precisely what Prahalad proposes. This kind of shift requires the active participation of the private sector, in their own interest, to promote inclusive businesses that increase the participation of the BoP in the creation of wealth.

It is widely accepted that a large middle class promotes democracy in several ways. It moderates the often polarised conception, advocacy, and clash of the interests of the very rich and the very poor. It also raises the average socio-economic status and educational attainment of the population, which enables more citizens to be capable of competent and responsible citizenship. A large middle class also reduces the people at the base of the pyramid where the struggle for survival prevents the people from pursuing and achieving the higher-level social and political goals in the hierarchy of needs of humans. More importantly, democracy performs best when not all citizens are active partisans in each and every issue like unemployment, education, environment, and the economy. A large middle class ensures there is a large pool of uninvolved and inattentive citizens who, once reached by the policy debate, will swing their majority weight either way on an issue.

REFRAME 1: USING SOCIAL AUDIT TO SECURE TRANSFERS FROM NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO THE BOP

One action space for reducing inequality while increasing inclusive political participation at the local government level is through the use of social audit by target beneficiaries at the BoP to secure benefits due to themselves from the national as well as local governments. This approach will result in a net increase in the flows of resources – products and services – to the poor, vulnerable, and disadvantaged

sectors of society by organising and deploying them to perform simple but effective social audit processes.

Social audit, in its broadest sense, is a measure of institutional responsiveness to society: finding out whether the functions, obligations, and commitments of societal institutions – government, private sector, civil society organisations, church, media, and academe – have been fulfilled from the point of view of the needs and expectations of the people.[7]

The national and local governments are fair targets of social audits. National governments hog an inordinate share of the government budget, even when officially they have granted decentralisation and local autonomy. Local governments are directed to perform centrally formulated policies that are to be implemented with local funds. Local governments in the Philippines call these central directives "unfunded mandates".

In a country where the government is as highly centralised as it is in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and to a lesser extent in Indonesia, the national government provides the primary framework for national policies, including the interpretation and implementation of "inclusive development" programmes. Local governments can only provide tactical relief to make inclusive development happen in their localities when these national programmes are deficient in strategy, programme implementation, local flexibility, and performance management.

Shifting the ecosystem from primarily the national policy and development arena to the local arena can stimulate complementary civic engagement that can directly and dramatically reduce inequality and enhance the process and outcomes of democracy at local levels.

The shortfall in the effectiveness of anti-poverty programmes can also be seen as a failure of communities to ensure that what is due to them is received by them. The state of information and communications technology is such that information on the effectiveness of public service delivery can now be crowdsourced, enabling

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7   A survey of organisations and their social audit programmes and methods in the Philippines is presented in Segundo E. Romero (2010), "A Social Audit Toolbox for Philippine Civil Society. Transparency and Accountability Network", available at http://www.ombudsman.gov.ph/ UNDP4/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Social-Accountability-Toolbox.pdf. See http://www. ansa-eap.net/ for a regional NGO that undertakes training, promotion, and action projects for social accountability, the Affiliated Network for Social Responsibility in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP). The network's emblematic social audit projects include the "Citizen Participatory Audit" (CPA) and "Check My School" (CMS).

the target-beneficiary communities to perform the task of monitoring and evaluating the impact of service delivery.

Increased attention to measurement at the national level has masked the relative neglect of local metrics – in the case of the Philippines at the regional, provincial, city, municipal, and *barangay*[8] levels. This is a problem of the lack of social accountability and social audit mechanisms.

What are the areas where social audits can lead to a net increase in transfers to the BoP? These areas are the provision of health, education, and social services, infrastructure for mobility and connectivity, livelihood generation, and safety nets against natural adversities (typhoons, flooding, fires), which together increase the attainment of human development in the BoP beyond mere survival.

Communities can do social audits of government agencies that are supposed to provide them with public services. In the Philippines, communities participate in *Bayanihang Eskwela* (School Convergence) to monitor the construction of public school buildings. Communities may also do social audits of private sector organisations that harm their environment (chemical companies dumping wastewater into rivers, or private enterprises in residential zones emitting toxic smoke).

Public infrastructure projects have always been considered a major source of corruption in the Philippines. These include the construction of roads and bridges, and public buildings such as schools and offices. A maverick non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGG), said enough was enough and took on the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and contractors who built a critical bridge in their province that led to nowhere, as it did not connect with the other side. This was either too blatant an ineptitude or too gross a corruption for decent citizens to allow to go unchallenged. A decade later, the CCAGG has become a worldwide sensation, a shining example of ordinary citizens conducting a social audit and enforcing social accountability. The CCAGG powerfully demonstrated that Filipinos could also develop innovative tools for curbing corruption.[9]

Social audit tools help reduce inequality and promote democracy because they help the BoP ensure that they get what they deserve. It gives them a venue for exercising vigilance in facing up to authority and the psychic satisfaction of civic action.

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[8] The barangay is the smallest political and administrative unit in the Philippines, into which municipalities and cities are divided. There are about 42,000 barangays.

[9] http://www.ombudsman.gov.ph/UNDP4/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Social-Accountability-Toolbox.pdf.

REFRAME 2: MOTIVATING AND MOBILISING THE BOP THROUGH THE "PEOPLE'S PLAN"

It takes a formal democracy to open the doors for social inclusion. In the case of developing countries like the Philippines, it is democracy that can make the dream of reduced inequality possible.

"Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society – improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity."[10] Social exclusion is a reality in every country. Various mechanisms work to prevent the full participation of certain groups of people in the political, economic, and social arenas. These mechanisms include laws and policies, ownership of land and resources, opportunities for income and livelihood. They also include discriminatory attitudes and practices that are based on social identity, often an amalgam of gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, disability, and location. Exclusion often means a poor quality of life – loss of dignity, security, and opportunity.

Under what condition or level of democracy could social inclusion be actively pursued, especially at the local level where policies and actions have greater traction?

One suggested approach is to use the "Social Inclusion Assessment Tool", which is "a four-question methodology to help policymakers and development practitioners assess how social inclusion can be addressed in projects, programmes, policies or in analysis".[11] Another approach is to foster alliances with local authorities to produce socially inclusive municipal policies. An example is how municipalities in India are assisted to address exclusion against internal migrants through articulation and operationalisation of policy briefs, training modules, and toolkits.[12]

Other approaches would include fostering innovative or creative cities, promoting deeper decentralisation, mainstreaming of the "technology of participation", increasing public support and confidence through evidence-based inclusion policy, maximising and demonstrating the socio-economic dividends of social inclusion, and bringing science and technology to drive transformation in the BoP.

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[10] World Bank. "Social Inclusion", https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/social-inclusion.

[11] World Bank. "The Social Inclusion Assessment Tool", http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/478071540591164260/SiAT-Logo-web.pdf.

[12] UNESCO. Social Inclusion, Social Tr4ansformations, Social Innovation. Available at http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/BPI/EPA/images/media_services/Director-General/ConceptNoteSocialInclusionSocialTransformationsSocialInnovationEN.pdf.

A good way of integrating all of these mechanisms is to promote and deploy the use of "People's Plans" in communities, not only for resettlement problems but for other complex community problems as well.

A People's Plan[13], as used in the Philippines, refers to a modality of resettling informal settler families residing in flood-prone waterways and other danger zones or in project areas of government infrastructure projects in the Philippines. The People's Plan is an integrated legal, administrative, financial, and infrastructural framework by which informal settler communities are organised, mobilised, and empowered to design their own resettlement plans, locate suitable relocation sites, engage contractors, and work with government agencies, in effecting a re-settlement process that responds to their specific needs and circumstances. This modality has been successful in enabling in-city relocation that engenders im-mensely greater satisfaction than off-city relocation.

A recent study of this modality sums up: "The People's Plan framework un-leashed energy and dynamics among stakeholders to address practical matters and open up public and institutional spaces to forge new roles and rules that fit changed circumstances. The People's Plan as a process raised awareness and har-nessed the self-initiative, self-responsibility and self-reliance of communities, which are important elements for community resilience. Essentially, the People's Plan is a transformation of the poor and marginalised from 'informal' to active citizenship".[14]

The People's Plan is a mechanism for reducing inequality and enhancing de-mocracy at the community level. But it has met with various pushbacks, among which are the complicated administrative paperwork and multisectoral nego-tiations it requires, which the informal settler beneficiaries lack capabilities and resources for. But the policy framework has sought to create a conducive ecosys-tem for the effective use of the People's Plan, including the formal engagement of civil society organisations that will help the informal settler communities come up with and implement the People's Plan.

The People's Plan is an idea about capturing the imagination of the BoP com-munities through a combination of inclusive people empowerment policies that is given traction at the local community level. It is contrasted against the engagement

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[13] Shelter Development for Informal Settler Families (PH0054), https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/philippines/commitments/PH0054/.

[14] "International Institute for Environment and Development. Building resilient and safe communities against poverty and disaster", 9 Feb 2016, https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/building-resilient-and-safe-communities-against-poverty-and-disaster.

of the BoP in piecemeal, commodity-oriented slices. It is giving them the power to conjure up and build their own "cathedral".

REFRAME 3: ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS FOR "COMMUNITY PROBLEM-SOLVING"

A Greek proverb states that "a civilisation flourishes when people plant trees under which they will never sit." In the hierarchy of political engagement that sustains democracy, volunteerism for the long-term common good is among the highest citizens can show, higher than political awareness and arguably higher than political behaviour like discussion, attending political rallies, voting, and contributing to and joining political interest groups and political parties. Volunteers who serve at the community level increase social capital and become ready and mobilisable for contributions at the higher and broader national level. Volunteers also demonstrate higher levels of awareness of community issues and problems, which in turn creates a higher sense of political efficacy. Democracy is more robust when the people practise self-help and mutual help, and feel habitually empowered to do so. Political alienation, cynicism, and nihilism are the absence of the civic spirit that powers democracy.

This critical nature of volunteerism is true even in traditional mature democracies like Great Britain. Martin Lewis notes that the weaknesses of political democracy are being increasingly exposed, but he counters,

> And yet the best form of democracy, I would submit, is in front of our very noses in the shape of a formidable constituency of over 15 million people – that's 50 times more than the combined membership of our main political parties. They are the people who volunteer at least once a month to help others in society – who have identified a problem, a need or an issue in their local community and have got together with friends, colleagues and neighbours to do something about it.[15]

One reason why local-level democracy is impaired is that people in communities, especially those at the BoP, do not have a strong problem-solving orientation apart from being low in political resources and efficacy. Communities exist, but they are often merely primarily an amalgam of families. Community problems are

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15 "Volunteering – the best form of democracy", https://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/lend-a-hand/10869043/Volunteering-the-best-form-of-democracy.html.

not as well recognised and diagnosed as family or individual problems. There are no systems and capability for community problem-solving.

Another reason is the lack of a conscious effort to create mutual-help relationships among individuals and families, among neighbourhoods, among villages, and among *barangays* and higher levels of local government. These mutual-help arrangements need to be constantly activated, in order that they do not deteriorate and fade away.

The People Power Revolution of 1986 gave the Philippines a vigorous decentralisation push. The Local Government Code of 1991 provides the strategy, systems, and structure by which local governments are able to function with more local autonomy. This has opened up a large space for local communities to actively participate in discussions, decision-making, and implementation of community-problem-solving initiatives.

However, the inertia of poverty and lack of efficacy have prevented local communities from taking advantage of this participatory space. There has been a lack of a complementary source of skilled human resources to help jumpstart community engagement.

Over the years, since the People Power Revolution of 1986, there has been a surge not only in the number of non-governmental organisations and people's organisations, but also a revitalised local government system. That vitality and creativity has increased institutionally inspired local participation in development, captured in the annual Galing Pook Awards. Since 1993, the Awards programme has promoted innovation and resonance in local governance through the heralding, documentation and replication of best practices at the local level through partnership among civil society, government, and the private sector.

A more expansive local participation and volunteer mobilisation effort is required. A highly successful project that shows how skilled volunteers can be harnessed for local social inclusion is the Filipino Patriot Scholars Project,[16] which the Science Education Institute (SEI) of the Department of Science and Technology has been implementing over the last two years. The Philippine government provides science and technology scholarships at the secondary, college, and graduate levels. SEI college-level scholarships provide a monthly stipend of US$140, among other

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[16] SEI. "The Filipino-Patriot Scholars' Project", https://www.facebook.com/FilipinoPatriotProject/.

benefits.[17] There are over 30,000 scholars nationwide, primarily from poor but deserving families.

Over the past two years, the Patriot Scholars Project has undertaken over 25 two-and-a-half-day orientation workshops in different regions of the country, participated in by 150 to 250 scholars at a time. The programme instils the values of servant leadership, social responsibility, and professional excellence through various engaging lectures and exercises. The highlight of the programme is the hands-on, team-based learning of community problem-solving skills, preparatory to travelling to five to ten poor communities to engage in parallel group-to-group conversations with the community residents, who have been grouped into six socio-demographic groups – women, youth, senior citizens, men, PWD, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual or allied (LGBTQIA) or indigenous groups, whichever is present in the community. Interviews with local officials and an observation tour of the community are conducted by other designated student groups. Back in the workshop, the students share, synthesise, and reflect on the learnings, using community profiles and maps they draw, and solution tree analyses they perform.

The students are deeply affected by their encounter with the poor communities, sharing in the end-of-programme reflection sessions how selfish and guilty they now feel about thinking only about their own family's escape from poverty. They do some sharing on their likely "pathways to patriotism". The programme emphasises that the starting point is volunteerism – if they do not learn and practise volunteerism at the local community level now, they will never be able to do it when they are already successful professionals, entrepreneurs, scientists, and leaders.

A Phase Two of the orientation workshop runs scholars who have taken Phase One through a two-day course together with *barangay* officials from a selected set of five or more *barangays*. The workshop ends with project plans and schedules to be pursued by the joint teams.

The idea of engaging Patriot Scholars to provide poor communities with the knowledge and skills required for effective problem-solving can have parallels in many ASEAN societies. There are already existing initiatives in these countries. What needs to be done is to scale up these initiatives across the BoP in each country.

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[17] SEI. "DOST-SEI Scholarships hit new record with 9,852 S&T qualifiers", http://www.sei.dost. gov.ph/index.php/news-archive/258-dost-sei-scholarships-hit-new-record-with-9-852-s-t-qualifiers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

One of the most powerful attempts at reframing governance is the book *Reinventing Government*[18] by Osborne and Gaebler (1999). The book emphasises that the goal of a democratic enterprise is to make governments reach deeper to engage and respond to the needs of local communities. Apart from the salutary benefits arising from democratic practice, it is also the way to achieve immediate levels of inclusive development.

There will always be national-level strategies, policies, programmes, and projects to enhance equality in society. Many of these are introduced by national governments, regardless of whether they are democratic or autocratic. Inequality breeds distrust and dissatisfaction, and in extremes, could evolve into revolutionary movements and consequences. Inequality is undesirable under both democratic and autocratic constitutions. Democracies should do better in reducing inequality because participation is key to acquiring the resources, capabilities, and opportunities required for holistic human development.

The big picture in the ASEAN region consists of three nested levels of inequality. The most compelling inequality to address is the inequality that separates the powerful elites and the base of the pyramid. Three orientational reframes, illustrated through Philippine examples, can create space for greater social inclusion through civic engagement: (1) Using social audits to secure transfers from National and Local Governments to the BoP; (2) Motivating and mobilising the BoP through the "People's Plan"; and (3) Engaging patriot-scholar volunteers for "community problem-solving". Reducing inequality is best understood as promoting social inclusion, and promoting democracy is best understood as promoting participatory community problem-solving. This ensures that the BoP will be the main drivers of their own transformation.

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[18]   David Osborne and Ted Gaebler. *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*. 1993.

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