



Higher education, bridging capital, and developmental leadership in the Philippines: Learning to be a crossover reformer



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ABSTRACT

The article presents findings from a research project which explored how experiences of higher education supported – or not – the emergence of developmental leadership and the formation of networks among leaders of three political and social movements in the Philippines in the post-Marcos era. Based on life history interviews with key leaders, the study points to the importance of different forms of social capital, especially bridging capital, in navigating a stratified system within this oligarchical democracy. Experiences of higher education were important for leaders' development, but not necessarily in predictable ways.

1. Introduction

This article interrogates the relationship between higher education and 'developmental leadership' through a case study of the Philippines. It presents the findings of a research project¹ which explored how individuals' experiences of higher education supported – or not – the emergence of developmental leadership and the formation of networks among leaders of three important political and social movements in the post-Marcos era.

The study was based on life history interviews (2012–2015) with 41 elite members of three political or social reform movements in the post-Marcos era. The article begins with a brief overview of the concepts and evidence that underpin the study's exploration of the relationship between higher education and developmental leadership. The study's findings are shaped profoundly by the political and educational contexts of these times in the Philippines. The article therefore then sets out relevant milestones and shaping factors in the political, economic and educational development of the Philippines in the post-Marcos era, given the importance of these for understanding the positioning of these developmental leaders. The methodology is explained subsequently. Finally, the findings are presented within the context of the theoretical framework and the concept of crossover reformists.

2. The relationship between higher education and developmental leadership: concepts and evidence

The concept of developmental leadership bridges political science and development studies. It acknowledges the human agency of reformist individuals as a significant causal factor in social and political change, and signals the role of coalitions and networks in overcoming barriers to collective action and facilitating the achievement of shared goals (Leftwich, 2009; Lyne de Ver, 2009). Conversely, predatory leaders and their networks can thwart social and political progress, even under the most promising of material and structural conditions (Bavister-Gould, 2011). At some point in their life trajectories, individual developmental leaders need to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that make their personal success as reformers possible, and they also need to form the networks and coalitions which allow them to exercise these. Given the well-documented correlation between education, aspiration and civic engagement (Campbell, 2009; Brannelly et al., 2011), study at university is likely to be a meaningful phase for developmental leaders in terms of their personal growth and also in relation to their accumulation of social capital of various forms. In general, higher education has the potential to promote social cohesion by, for example, creating opportunities to discuss sensitive issues and by modelling good institutional behaviours including tolerance, fairness and meritocracy. The realization of this potential, however, depends on good institutional governance as well as the nature of interactions

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Literature on developmental leadership offers considerable evidence that, on the one hand, there is a positive correlation between societies with higher rates of tertiary enrolment and good governance ingredients including voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of violence and terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (Brannelly et al., 2011). Additionally, there is evidence from studies in a variety of contexts that individual leaders who might be labelled as developmental are (with exceptions) much better educated than leaders who are not (Tadros, 2011; Jones et al., 2014; Sebudubudu, 2009; Brautigam and Diolle, 2009; Theron, 2011; Phillips, 2013).

Leftwich (2009, p 23) has argued that the thinking skills developed through high-quality higher education are key to this relationship.

Tertiary education – especially in the social sciences and law – enables participants to understand better the problems of collective action and that their resolution is essential for development. The capacity to think in terms of general concepts and relationships, and to understand, for example, the idea of public goods, beyond individual or group interests, appears to be one positive advantage of tertiary education. But above all is the capacity to analyse and understand complex socio-economic and political problems – what Stiglitz (2003: 77) refers to as ‘scientific’ ways of thinking – is one crucial benefit of higher education and a necessary but not sufficient attribute of effective developmental leadership.

In addition, leaders have to deploy ‘multiple framings’ for different audiences to ensure the compatibility of their messages with, for example, international conventions or religious frameworks or national constitutions. Higher education that promotes critical thinking, exposes future leaders to people who think differently from themselves, and develops debating and presentation skills can develop these (Jones et al., 2014). A survey of the above literature also suggests a further list of ingredients of institutions to facilitate a positive commitment to the values that underpin developmental leadership: meritocratic selection, a strong institutional ethos of patriotism and social consciousness, and close mentoring and role-model relationships between teachers and learners.

Beyond the skills for individuals, tertiary education can provide excellent opportunities for coalition building. Not only are developmental leaders more likely to be well-educated: case study research from a range of contexts suggests that there are benefits to them studying together (Leftwich, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Brautigam and Diolle, 2009; Jones et al., 2014; Grebe and Natrass, 2009). This develops deep levels of trust and facilitates future collective agency. Boarding schools in post-independence Ghana and Somaliland, for example, created a particularly intimate setting that concentrated the capacity to nurture future leaders, generating the label ‘nurseries’ for developmental leadership. In Ghana, for example, university was the source of the most important connections that developmental leaders had in their future professional lives (Jones et al., 2014).

It is not only a question of meeting future direct collaborators. The findings regarding the role of networks formed through higher education point specifically to the importance of social capital, with its benefits of generalized reciprocity, facilitation of co-ordination and communication, and amplified sense of self from ‘I’ to ‘we’ (Putnam, 2000). However, different forms of social capital bring different benefits to the individual and potentially different social impact. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding capital refers to relations between homogenous groups (such as family ties or close networks of people from similar socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds), while bridging capital refers to interactions across heterogenous groups (Putnam, 2000). Bonding capital among kinship networks or the disenfranchised can be important in societies where there is declining trust in political institutions, including post-conflict contexts (Fukuyama, 2002). However, very closely-knit social

and political organizations can be prone to cartelization and rent seeking (Olson, 1971), vertical patronage and exclusionary practices (Fukuyama, 2002). Bridging capital has the potential to widen the radius of trust (Fukuyama, 2002) and – as this study finds – extend the reach of individual actors across sectoral, tribal, clan, dynastic or traditional elite loyalties, as found in Somaliland (Phillips, 2011) Botswana (Sebudubudu, 2009), Ghana (Jones et al., 2014) and Yemen (Phillips, 2013). It also helps leaders to understand ‘the other’ – whether that ‘other’ is an ally or an adversary. It thus supports leaders in building consensus and understanding the possibilities and limits of compromise. In our study, leaders drew on both forms of capital, crossing between them pragmatically and strategically, just as they crossed over between different economic and social sectors. As well as drawing on the concepts of bridging and bonding capital, the paper therefore builds on Lewis’ (2013) notion of crossover reformist activities, acknowledging the limits of linear understandings of the processes of reform in the context of permeable boundaries between sectors, and noting the importance of ‘border crossing’ between sectors for the successful agency of developmental leaders. Higher education can potentially be a site for the development of social capital including bridging capital, and for the skill set of the crossover reformer.

However, while the evidence points to positive effects of HE and suggests a range of conditions under which it might facilitate the developmental leaders’ personal growth and diverse networks, the evidence is not unequivocal. Even the strong prevailing pattern of more education = better leadership is fraught with surprising national outliers (Brannelly et al., 2011). The conditions outlined above for the development of, for example, critical thinking, are not necessarily prevalent in typical HE institutions, and this may be especially uneven in less developed countries. Elite institutions may offer higher quality teaching and resources, but selection processes based on the ability to pay tuition fees or be prepared for particular forms of entrance examination can be exclusionary and create conditions for cronyism (Brannelly et al., 2011) and the worst excesses of bonding capital. The question of the quality of HE is threatened on a number of fronts in the current climate: the strong MDG-era emphasis on funding for primary education, and contemporary cost-cutting and efficiency measures which include ‘unbundling’ of HE to provide only specific functions (the extreme example being MOOCs which separate teaching and learning from all paracurricular functions) and massification leading to commodification and therefore more stratified systems which reserve the best HE for those who can afford it and therefore reinforce social divisions (McCowan, 2016).

In this paper, we explore these issues in context, and what it is about this phase of education that may or may not have influenced future developmental leaders in the particular conditions of the post-Marco, pre-Duterte Philippines. Drawing on the personal reflections of a selection of such leaders, the research challenges prevailing human capital arguments regarding how higher education contributes to development.

3. Political, economic and educational development of the Philippines

Since independence, The Philippines has had a tumultuous experience with democracy, which was interrupted when President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in 1972. Ferdinand Marcos ruled the Philippines for 20 years. His presidency ended in 1986 when the ‘People Power’ Revolution (also known as the EDSA Revolution) forced him out of office and into exile. People Power demonstrations began in 1983 and culminated in protests which took place in Quezon City from the 22nd to the 25th of February 1986. The demonstrations were a response to the government corruption that proliferated under Marcos. The People Power movement reflected the strong culture of political participation in the Philippines. Civil society in the archipelago has long been “relatively politicized (at least compared with countries in South

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