

The barangay as community in the Philippines

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In the Philippines, beginning with Presidential Decree no. 86, issued December 31, 1972, the organization of local units of government took a new direction, as citizen assemblies or *barangays* were created. They were to function as administrative agencies for government action, and to constitute the base for citizen participation in community affairs.

The significance of the *barangay* lies in the opportunity, through its creation, to reconstitute the realm of effective community at a scale which is both realizable and useful in the daily life activities of a large part of the Philippine population. It is an extension downward of the formal sociopolitical structure even to the level of streets and small compact dwelling groups.

Although it is partly rooted in tradition, the outright interjection of a new political structure by the central government introduces roles and processes unfamiliar to most people. It has been greeted with indifference, disdain, distrust, and with enthusiasm. To some, the new system is superfluous and has no relevance. Others see the new hierarchy of organizations with all the accompanying government propaganda as another false hope, another way for government to introduce structure without content, promises without results, and a way to legitimize a program of surveillance and a quiet suppression of freedoms.

But others see in the new processes an opportunity for a unique venture in harnessing the creative potential of individuals and groups in semi-autonomous, small-scale community actions. They feel that if the system is allowed to evolve and mature, and if small successes can be achieved, the central government will be forced to loosen its strictures and participation by citizens will increase in scope and depth.

The different outlooks clearly have evidence in recent events to support them. An accurate and brief picture of the *barangay* system, one generally valid, is exceedingly difficult to find and communicate.

Evolution of the barangay

In pre-Hispanic times, a *barangay* was a sailboat which carried early settlers and traders to the Philippine archipelago from Indonesia and Borneo. These early inhabitants built settlements which were also called *barangays*. They were simple communities, with a head man and a group of families clustered about. During Spanish colonial times, when the *barrio* system was imposed, the *barangay* as a sociospatial unit lost its original significance.

Much later, in the 1935 Philippine Constitution, designed under the influence of United States colonial pressures, certain central government functions were shifted to the *barrio* units. In 1955, an act was passed by the congress extending official government authority to *barrios*. Then the Barrio Charter was issued in 1959, defining specific powers and functions of the *barrio* council officials and assembly. In the 1963 revision of the Charter, *barrios* received greater autonomy and incentive for self-help activities, including the power of the citizens in the areas affected to create new *barrios*.

When President Marcos declared the New Society in 1972, he ordered the reorganization of local units of government (decree no. 86), and in subsequent decrees completed the transformation of all *barrios* to *barangays*, and created *barangays* in the cities, where no *barrios* had ever existed.

The accompanying chart outlines this evolution. The first part shows the stages in cities having early *barrio* systems, the second shows the stages in cities which had no *barrio* tradition (table 1, p. 16).

Under current organization, the *barangay* is the smallest formal unit of government. A *barangay* has a population of from 100 to 500 families (650 to 32,500 people). Each *barangay* is itself composed of perhaps ten smaller social units called *puroks* or *pooks*. A group of ten to fifteen *barangays* compose a *zone* (fig. 1, p. 17). It is interesting that there seem to be no clear rules for establishing the spatial limits for these levels. In rural areas there was no difficulty since one *barrio* (subsequently *barangay*) was one village, and a *purok* was usually associated with the community school, or an informal market place. But in the larger urban areas, where no *barrios* existed, the possibility of establishing a meaningful

Table 1
The evolution of the barangay

TYPE "A" CITY

	Before the New Society	Presidential Decree no. 86	P.D. no. 86-A	P.D. no. 557
Composition	Barrio council and barrio assembly	Barrio council and citizens assembly	Barrio council and barangay (citizens assembly)	Barangay council and barangay assembly
Head	Barrio captain	Barrio captain	Barrio captain	Barangay leader
Qualifications of assembly members	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Filipino citizen 2. 18 years and above 3. President of the barrio for at least 6 months 4. Registered in the list of barrio assembly members kept by barrio secretary 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Filipino citizen 2. 15 years and above 3. President of the barrio, district or ward for at least 6 months 4. Registered in the list of citizen assembly members kept by barrio, district, or ward secretary 	Same as P.D. no. 86 plus: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Literate and illiterate 	Same as P.D. no. 86-A
Functions and powers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To recommend to the barrio council the adoption of measures for the welfare of the barrio 2. To decide on holding plebiscites 3. To act on budgeting and supplemental appropriations and special tax ordinances submitted for its approval by barrio council 4. To hear annual report of the barrio council concerning activities and finances of the assembly 	Same powers as before plus: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Indirect national legislative powers <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Medium for plebiscite and referendum 6. Administrative <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Agency for community action (rice distribution and gas coupon rationing) b. Channel for passing down state edicts, and announcements 	Same as P.D. no. 86	Same as P.D. no. 86-A

TYPE "B" CITY (e.g. Manila)

Composition	No barrio council No barrio assembly	Citizens assembly	Barangay (citizens assembly)	Barangay assembly
Head		Barrio captain District or ward leader	Barangay leader	Barangay leader
Qualifications of assembly members		Same as type "A" city	Same as type "A" city	Same as type "A" city
Functions and powers		No governmental powers <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Administrative <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Agency for community action rice distribution, gas rationing) b. Channel for information 2. Indirect nat. legis. powers <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Medium for plebiscite 	No governmental powers <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Administrative Same as P.D. no. 86 	Same as P.D. no. 86-A

Source: *Primer on the Barangay*, Department of Local Government and Community Development, Quezon City, Philippines.

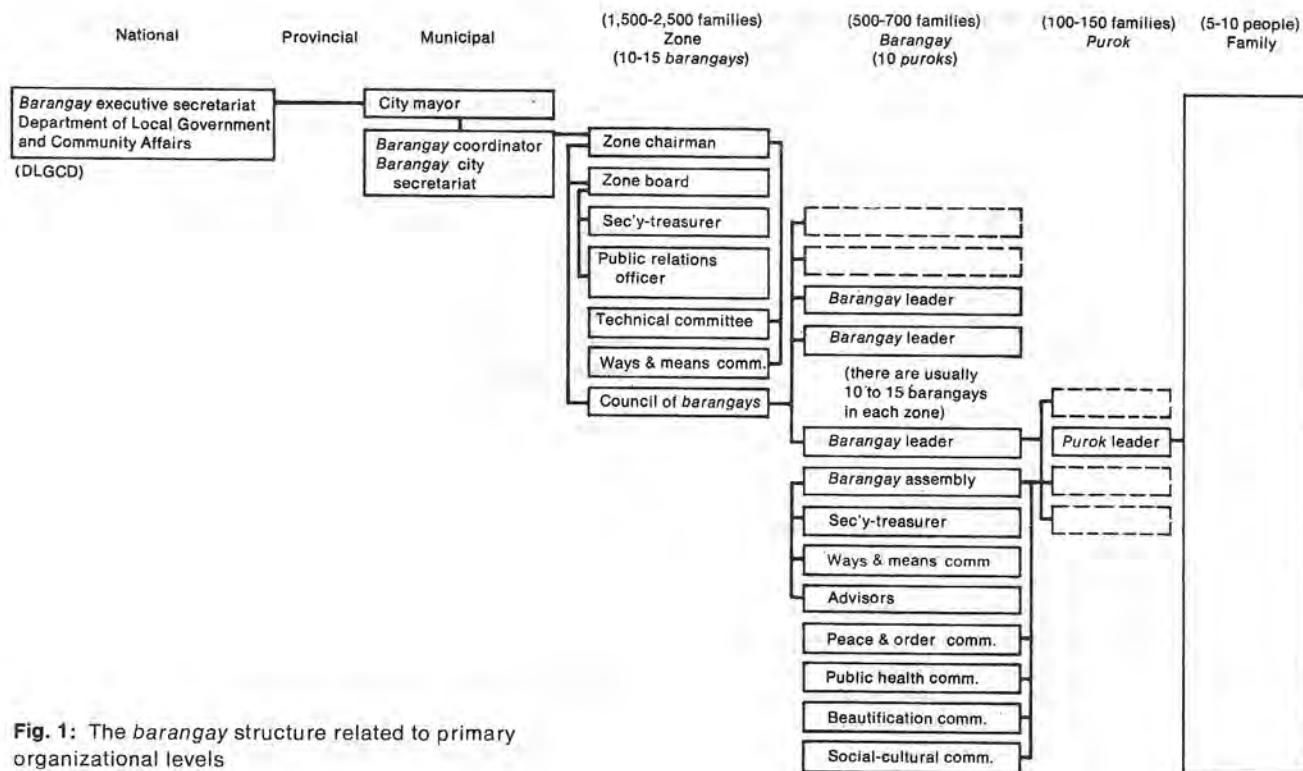


Fig. 1: The *barangay* structure related to primary organizational levels

relationship between spatial and social organizations seems so far to have been lost.

The *Primer on the Barangay* prepared by the Department of Local Government and Community Development and the National Media Center states:

The *barangay* system today is simply the revival of the old system wherein families and residents of a particular locality are grouped together to discuss and work on community interest and concerns. The *barangays* afford members direct, active, and regular participation not only in the local government affairs, but on the national level as well. The *barangay*, therefore, as conceived by the administration, is the basic government unit in our present political structure.

The old *barangay* system was revived in order to broaden the base of citizen participation in the democratic process. . . . The *barangay*, which is a small, closely and interpersonally related group, is hoped to draw out more responsive opinions and ideas from its members. The revival of the *barangay* should also awaken the interest of the people in the affairs of the government and in the conduct of their officials while the nation is redirected towards consciousness, unity and involvement.

The *barangay* specifically aims to:

- Develop and promote sanitary and decent environmental conditions in the zone neighborhood;
- Undertake community beautification projects;
- Help in the food production campaign;
- Promote social/cultural activities;
- Improve intergroup relations and communication between authorities and the zone neighborhood;
- Foster closer relations between the police/military authorities and the zone neighborhood;

- Assist in the prevention, reduction, or elimination of crimes, gangs, intergroup tensions, etc;
- Reduce juvenile delinquency, assist in the prevention and detection of drug abusers and pushers;
- Propagate and establish cooperatives to help curb prices;
- Galvanize community action in cases of emergency;
- Enlist public interest and concern of zone residents for latest orders, laws, and ordinances;
- Maintain an information center and liaison group through which pressing and common problems can be received, studied, attended, and referred to appropriate persons or agencies.

The barangay as community

As in most societies in which well-being is associated with the acquisition of Western technological equipment, the utility of close community structure drops sharply as incomes rise. The rush for appliances and machines continues parallel to the search for autonomy and withdrawal, often called "privacy." Under these circumstances, community organization has a different utility, if any kind of community survives at all.

Among poor people, survival and the first movements toward higher living standards are dependent on community. The composition of these communities of dependence is determined by the cultural milieu of the people. In societies where extended families have historical significance and resilience, community was often not strictly place-bound, but

encompassed friends and relatives from distant towns. The extended family and network of friends who can "drop in" any time and in fact do so, is a social reality in the Philippines, and has probably had some effect on the success, or lack of it, of the government-directed *barangay* system. The new system suggests roles, relationships, and processes unfamiliar and perhaps suspect to families.

In Manila, it is possible to observe at least two distinct attitudes toward community. In the wealthier residential areas, and areas which were once wealthy, streets are very often simply channels of space bordered by open drainage ditches. People and cars enter houses through heavy steel or wooden gates, watched by armed guards. Although shrouded and hung with flowers, vines, and plants of all species, the walls and gates and guards leave doubts about the kind of community that can flourish here. In the middle-income and poor areas, as well as among the marginal settlers, such awesome techniques of isolation found among the affluent do not exist, perhaps only because of lack of resources, perhaps because of lack of indoctrination in the Western values of "privacy." For whatever reason, these areas are much more vital places where community is perhaps expressed more openly in the currents of movement and talk between street and dwelling. Yet even here, where they can, people



Fig. 2: Public services in the Tondo Foreshore area of Manila are very scarce. Water is bought by the pail from vendors. Many of the 26,000 families bathe their children, cook their food, and dry their laundry on the street. (Photo by Gwen Bell)

begin to set their dwellings back from the public passage, and erect fences, beginning the transition, perhaps, to the isolated compounds of the rich. But clearly another kind of community is expressed in these transitional and changing areas.

Both kinds of physical settings are now *barangays*. In both, the intention of the government is to foster community participation. But the wealthy have little need for cooperation to get community services. It is in the slum and marginal areas that some organization to deliver community social and physical services is needed. There, the need for water lines and taps, waste management, health services, educational facilities and staff, family planning and counseling, employment centers, and other programs and services that the poor can obtain only through collective action is often desperate.

Has the *barangay*, as part of the government hierarchy, been able to channel and speed the delivery of community services to the places where the need is greatest?

Delivery of community services

The situation in the Tondo Foreshore area of Manila, although not typical of all *barangay* situations, is a testing ground for the potential of the *barangay* in marginal settlements, and can serve as an illustration. This area is directly adjacent to the core of Manila, and abuts the port facilities, where many of the residents are employed. Approximately 26,000 families live here in an area of about 147 hectares, with an average net density of 1,155 people per hectare. It is the largest marginal settlement in Manila. Incomes are extremely low, and public services nonexistent or very scarce (figs. 2 and 3).

There are two kinds of organizations struggling to change the situation in Tondo. One is an informal group of civic organizations; the other is the formal government hierarchy which includes the *barangay*.

The civic organizations help organize people to pressure the government for the services and rights that they feel are due to them. In some instances, their pressure has resulted in government releasing funds. But then they are released through the "official" channels and the *barangay* leader, who claims this to his credit, often alienating the civic leaders and the people. Perhaps because of these actions which are perceived as devious, and because of close and sympathetic contact with people, the civic organizations which are supported by churches and private funds seem to have a strong base of support.

The *barangay* leaders of the formal government are not directly elected by the people, but are appointed by the mayor of the city. The leaders are not paid, although they receive Medicare and some insurance benefits. In many cases, apparently, old political leaders have been appointed to be *barangay* leaders. These leaders often resist demands by the people to

hold elections for the choice of leader, claiming that the people are not ready.

The *barangay* structure is highly articulated with a complete hierarchy of officers, councils, committees, each with detailed and extensive responsibilities (fig. 1).

In the established hierarchy of channels, a request or demand for services must be approved by the *barangay* council, then by the *barangay* leader. The request is passed to the Manila Action Center, Barangay Affairs Section, for approval. It is then sent on to an appropriate government agency. The agency then administers the service request and channels the funds, if it does, back down through the chain of command, or through the newly created TIAAC, the Tondo Interagency Action Center.

TIAAC was organized in 1974 by concurrent decisions of P.C. METROCOM (Philippine Armed Forces and the Manila Metropolitan Police), TFDA (Tondo Foreshore Development Authority), and the President's Security Command. METROCOM has the task of supervising and staffing TIAAC, and in fact has been deeply involved in the evolution of the *barangay* structure in Manila from the outset, since one of the initial reasons for establishing *barangays* was to coordinate crime control activities — to enforce law and order from a community base.

TIAAC is a referral and coordinating agency, as well as being the implementing arm for the social services programs initiated by TFDA. TFDA is in charge of the comprehensive government planning for the Tondo Foreshore and the projected resettlement project.

TIAAC can provide some medical assistance, law enforcement, crime investigation, emergency transportation, and some assistance in finding employment. It also initiates training seminars on subjects such as family planning and fishermen's cooperatives. The agency has also made a survey of "indigent" families, organized youth councils, initiated "clean-up" drives, and in coordination with TFDA has surveyed "illegal" buildings in the Foreshore.

There is little question that within the TIAAC organization, and within TFDA as well, there is hostility toward the civic organizations in Tondo, and toward their leaders. In fact, some of these leaders have been imprisoned on several occasions, on questionable evidence. Government policy guidelines stipulate that all segments of opinion must be heard. These guidelines may in part exist because of conditions placed by international organizations as a basis for funding. In any case, recent discussions involving the difficult issues of landownership and tenure, community service needs and delivery, resettlement plans and so on, have included people from the civic organizations as well as the *barangay* councils.

At TIAAC and TFDA there was real hostility toward the people and groups who were not following the directives of the formal structure. Deviance was

clearly a threat; people and groups were called "the other side," "obstructionist," people who "want their way." The government representatives' answers were "we are here to stay," and "we will continue to do what is necessary. . . . We could, of course, sanitize the area, you know, clean it up. . . ."

At the birth of the *barangay* system, there was clear purpose: to cut down a serious crime problem and to ration rice and gasoline during the food and energy crises of 1972-73. "Clean Zone" campaigns were initiated to sweep up the streets and collect refuse, and a "Green Revolution" campaign was initiated by the First Lady to encourage people to grow vegetable gardens and to plant trees and growing things wherever possible.

But after the initial surge of programs, the daily, monthly, and yearly demands of administering and coordinating programs and delivering them into situations where there was no clear basis of community coherence began to dampen the enthusiasm and early momentum. It is still difficult to see that any of the government agencies which could be called community service oriented have restructured their procedures and allocative decision processes around the *barangay* system. At this time, TIAAC seems to be the necessary kind of intermediate organization actually to make the delivery of services possible, although it can be argued that its organizational set-up, methods, and personnel are not appropriate to its assumed task.



Fig. 3: The electricity lines coming into the Tondo Foreshore area of Manila are reflected in the open sewer. Well-organized citizen groups actively campaign for improvements that often are not given high priority by the official government representatives. (Photo by Gwen Bell)