

Laporan Persidangan/Conference Report

**Regional Forum on Reinventing Government in
East and Southeast Asia: Public Sector Capacity
and Globalization**

Organised by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with Universiti of Science Malaysia, Penang, August 21-23 2004

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The United Nations Millennium Development Goals posits “good” governance and strengthening public sector capacity as the means to securing ‘maximum well being for the maximum number of citizens’ in an environment of globalization. Among other things, this has seen the world body being concerned with helping states “reinvent” government by learning and adopting best practices thereby enhancing their public sector capacity. *The Regional Forum on Reinventing Government in East and Southeast Asia: Public Sector Capacity and Globalization* organised by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, Malaysia, on August 21-23 2004 is an example of the enabling role assumed by the UN.

A total of 9 country reports from Southeast and East Asia were presented (Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei and Myanmar were not included) at the Penang Forum by academics, senior members of government and heads of institutions. Korea appears as most advanced in its preparedness for globalization as the presentation on strengthening E-government, incorporating Information Communications Technology (ICT) and access to ICT would attest. The Korean example highlighted the presence of institutional structures that facilitate citizen participation helping government to respond to citizens’ demands, at least in the economic sphere if not the political. The absence of such structures elsewhere in the region finds the state playing a leading role directing society.

If Korea charts the way to go the Malaysia, China, Laos and Mongolia country reports are more concerned with highlighting how demands for greater accountability, transparency and efficiency are being realized. The Chinese government is generally cautionary in its dealings with globalization while political exigencies in Malaysia, Mongolia and Laos have made them less so. To be sure, China is a world power and is able to have its weight (if not might) felt and taken seriously in contrast to Malaysia, Mongolia and Laos. In the case of the latter countries leaders’ desire to be different from their predecessors is

working in globalization's way. Thus, for example, it is evident from the Malaysia paper that incorporating members of the opposition and civil society to parliamentary committees and jointly deliberate social and economic issues, anti-corruptionism, E-government initiatives while demonstrating commitment towards accommodating globalization's needs also reflect Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's desire to carve out an image of his administration as more tolerant and democratic.

From the standpoint of strengthening public sector capacity the availability of trained personnel in Malaysia, Korea, and China has placed them in a markedly better position than Laos and Mongolia whose reliance on foreign assistance and expertise find issues of transfer of technological know how and skills pressing.

The Cambodia report highlights the plight of embracing globalization and liberalization whole heartedly when lacking in skilled personnel. Thus public sector capacity in that country remains weak, corruption the bane and citizenry subjected to the vagaries of foreign direct investment (notwithstanding the fact that that too has been lackluster). If the liberal economic stance did not improve Cambodia's socio-economic condition with income disparities remaining large discernable from the *Gini* coefficient for that country - the Indonesia and Philippines country reports decry shortage of funds not personnel as reason for their governments' slow preparedness for globalization. The Thailand country report was a stark reminder that availability of funds and personnel does not necessarily imply strengthening of public sector capacity. Prime Minister Thaksin managerial style with him positioned as Super CEO has led the country to be run like a company and government down totalitarian way, silencing opposition through intimidation and judicial procedures.

Concepts such as governance and globalization besides being well-beaten horses as themes of conferences and forums have helped build and advance academic careers and divert handsome research grants. More important as social scientific constructs they mean quite different things to different people. All the presentations articulate a sense of urgency and movement linked to globalization. That is unless countries make the necessary adjustments and work to meeting the demands of globalization speedily their societies would lag behind. Globalization promises the movement towards nirvana where needs are satisfied. Working together urgency and movement has ensured discussions on globalization cannot isolate governance from economic laws. To be sure, from a civilization standpoint it is the laws inherent to corporate capitalism that is determining the course of human history. Thus, it is not surprising globalization and governance centered on advancing it have met much opposition. It is plain to many that the process of globalization and the ideology of progress and development centered on it in reality does not promise nirvana as alongside wealth there is poverty, progress there is destruction, individual freedom greater unfreedom. To fuel rebellion against positivist perception of globalization that

is gaining hold, can something not be said about lateness (adopted from Adorno) then?

Lateness as used in Adorno suggests rebelliousness, a refusal to see things in bourgeois light of serenity and completeness and mellowing. Lateness suggests the possibility of questioning the nirvana promised inherent to globalization. More important, lateness allows measures to be set in place to control capitalism. Lateness also allows humanity to play an important role in civilization rather than have human history determined by laws inherent to the very institutions that have built by humankind which help secure entrenched interests of the dominant. To be sure, while trends such as these may help enhance efficiency it also strengthens the bureaucracy (or the government as shown in the Thailand country report), which organizes and stores information. We live in a world of nation-states and judging from the expectations and optimism placed on governments it appears globalization has strengthened rather than weakened the state - a worrying trend for hopes of greater democratization through globalization.

Recently concluded elections in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines indicate among other things globalization has placed rising expectations in society and accordingly affected political fortunes. In Malaysia such rising expectations has contributed to a weakening of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) support among the electorate. Much the same can be said of the influence of rising expectations have had on weakening support for Democratic Party of Indonesia led by Ms Sukarnoputri and also Ms Arroyo, the incumbent in the Philippines presidential elections.

The forum managed to highlight some broad trends taking place in Southeast and East Asia and make suggestions on how to enhance public sector capacity to manage globalization, access to services, E-government and E-commerce, participation and accountability. Bearing in mind the recommendory nature of the forum the question that begs is one related to the impact that such suggestions can have; and that may not be altogether a different charge. How can recommendations such as right leadership style, establishing structures to channel citizens' demands, availability of trained personnel, strengthening civil society, be transformed into reality in countries where they are most urgently needed? It would not an understatement to say that perceptions of the UN in the Third World are not favorable. Seen as a tool of the powerful United States, calls for its revamping and even dismemberment, ring loud.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Collin Powell's recent high profile visit to Sudan encouraging the government to rein in the armed militia now wrecking havoc in the Darfur region has had minimal impact. To be sure problems in that part of Sudan has much to do with the struggle over control and access to resources, but journalists accounts indicate the Sudanese state has done nothing more than make empty promises to alleviate the plight of Sudanese citizens in a part of the country where a great humanitarian disaster is waiting

to unfold. Thus, the developing world has reason to be skeptical of the UN capacity.

I would therefore think alongside high flown statements and requests on governments to develop public sector capacity, it is absolutely necessary to ensure checks and balances are in place. This is so to ensure that capitalist rapacity does not rule the roost. Thus, trade unions, subsidies, lobby groups, public transport and welfare all need to be strengthened and improved.

The findings and suggestions of the Penang Forum are intended to serve as a preliminary to the 6th *Global Forum on Reinventing Government* scheduled to take place in the Korean capital, Seoul, May 24-27, 2005. The Koreans will be showing the region how far it has gone “reinventing” government in tune with globalization’s demand. A success it would be in rejuvenating a sense of urgency, fuel perceptions of globalization as leading to nirvana and further entrench capitalist ideology.

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