Implications of Information Disclosure on Environmental Governance in Laguna de Bay Region, Philippines

Ria Adoracion A. LAMBINO

The Information age and the demand for transparency have popularized information disclosure strategies as a means of changing behavior. In the field of environmental management, information is being increasingly utilized to great effect in addressing environmental issues and is becoming an innovative tool for environmental protection. The growing interest in public disclosure due to its purported multiple benefits and low cost of implementation, merit closer study especially for the case of developing nations. The Philippines is one of the countries that have embraced public disclosure for pollution control but there have been no studies that have evaluated these programs' impacts and the mechanisms by which they work. This study attempts to fill the gap by looking at the Public Disclosure Program (PDP) being implemented in the Laguna de Bay Region. This research is also aimed at contributing to the emerging literature on the impact of information-based policies on reforms in governance processes by looking at the role of disclosure strategies in the bigger context of environmental governance.

The author monitored the outcomes of the PDP and conducted critical program evaluation using the program logic and implementation theory framework espoused by Weiss (1997) is used to provide a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the program, its underlying assumptions and the mechanisms by which it works. The information flows and dissemination platforms were also assessed. The role of the program in the bigger context of environmental governance in the region was also analyzed by looking at the extent of its fit and coherence with existing governance structures.

The environmental performance ratings of businesses included in the first 3 batches of the PDP were compared based on initial ratings and final ratings during the period 2006 to 2009. While findings indicated some trends for improvement rather than decline or maintenance of ratings, the lack of monitoring data for almost half of the firms analyzed made it difficult to make conclusions on the overall effectiveness of the program for the business sector. For Local Government Units, improvements in performance were observed, especially for those that have been shamed. The study finds that the program is characterized by weak information flows and limited dissemination routes which may explain the patchy outcomes. Analysis using program evaluation and logic models also revealed a number of implementation and monitoring inadequacies which hamper the program's potential to be effective. The study's findings suggest that aside from reputational sanctions, other mechanisms such as enhanced regulatory threats on top of disclosure may be more effective for businesses to become compliant. There was little evidence of pressure arising from clients, customers, communities and NGOs as an outcome of disclosure for businesses. Shaming seemed to work more for the local government units rather than for the business sector.

The study finds that the PDP was able to exhibit strong institutional coherence with the integrated water resources management framework, that the program's goals were congruent with participatory and co-management thrusts and that it complemented the existing regulatory schemes in the Laguna de Bay Region. While there remain a number of areas that need to be reworked in order for the PDP to become more effective, this compatibility with the context of environmental governance in the region provides a strong foundation for the PDP to be able to reach its goals and become a workable strategy. Its potential for implementation in the Philippines or in other developing countries is dependent on the degree of understanding of the actual mechanisms that will make the program work, as well as considerations of its design and context of application. If implementers are able to figure out ways in which to rework the design and operations of the program so as to fit the context in which it is being applied, and if enabling factors such as institutional commitment and capacity are present, then disclosure strategies can serve as a good complement to a mix of policies for environmental governance.

References

Weiss, C. (1998). *Evaluation.* (2nd ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.