

Presented at the Conference on
"Beyond the Mantra of Economic Growth:
Sustainability and Development in Harmony,
Experiences and Perspectives in Asia and in Europe"
02-04 November 2001
Konigswinter, Germany

The Philippines Ten Years from Rio

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

The Philippines Ten Years from Rio

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement



The Philippines Ten Years from Rio



WHAT COULD BE EXPECTED FROM A COUNTRY WHICH CLAIMS many firsts in sustainable development? The Philippines is proud to be the first in Asia to set up a national council for sustainable development. The first to translate Agenda 21 into a national sustainability plan. The first to come up with a GEF project.

And more, even prior to Rio. The Philippines already had translated the concept of sustainable development into a strategy, as early as 1989, when the idea of a Rio summit had barely entered the pipeline of UN resolutions. The country was one of the firsts to do a debt-for-nature swap, also in 1989. And much earlier on, the Philippines played a significant role in the predecessor conference of the 1992 Earth Summit, the UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972 in Stockholm. That conference triggered a good number of environmental legislations during the Marcos martial law years.

Reasonably so, expectations could only run high. Filipinos cannot blame foreigners to expect to see dramatic results by way of environmental restoration, at least, to say nothing about the sustainability of Philippine society as such.

But where's the beef?, as the question goes. This is a fair question to ask of us Filipinos, and of those of us who belong to the bunch of advocate-activists of sustainable development. How have we really fared as a nation in grappling with the problem of unsustainability and making progress toward sustainability? How far have we gone with the implementation of our local version of Agenda 21 ten years down the road from Rio?

What changes? In what direction?

Some things change, for the better or for the worse, others just stubbornly persist. Social and environmental reality in the Philippines is much easier to caricature than to understand and explain for why and how it sustains the way it does.

Stubborn poverty

Poverty remains at a high level at 34.2 percent in 2000. A succession of four post-Marcos regimes had declared war against this stubborn problem and managed to reduce it to that incidence level from a high of 44 percent in 1985. It had even gone down as low as 32 percent prior to the Asian crisis of 1997 only to rebound after.

Though steadily declining through time, poverty as one form of social exclusion is intolerable and cannot be allowed to continue for much longer. The promise of the present regime to eradicate it in ten years is too long a wait for those living in poverty. Over 4 million families or more than 24 million of 73 million Filipinos have been suffering under this deplorable condition.

Activists and critics usually suspect these official poverty statistics and believe they are grossly understated. And they may be right. Perception surveys on poverty have consistently come up with higher numbers, sometimes as high as 60 percent, of people who say they feel they are poorer and their lives more miserable now than previously.

The poor are everywhere, in city slums and neglected rural villages. Majority of the poor live in rural areas. They depend for their livelihood on agriculture and natural resource-based activities. So their lives are very much dependent on the health of the environment.



Unchanging inequality picture

The rich-poor gap is wide and doesn't seem to be narrowing down, although the latest official survey claims that income distribution has become less unequal in 2000. The income share of the richest 10 percent is said to have slightly gone down from 39.3 percent in 1997 to 38.7 percent in 2000 compared to the income share of the poorest 10 percent which remained at 1.7 percent during the same period.

The country is stuck in a situation of high inequality and low growth, even as the economy threatens to decline further, following the 1997 Asian crisis and the recent September 11 tragedy that jolted the global economy already rolling well into recession.

Deteriorating environment

Environmentally, not much has changed by way of restoration from the 1992 baseline.

The Philippines confront three broad environmental challenges: [1] urban air and water pollution; [2] natural resource degradation; and [3] declining quality of coastal and marine resources.

The first set of challenges is called "brown agenda", referring to pollution caused by industrial, urban, transport and energy sources and the measures to address them. The second is called the "green agenda", to describe environmental impacts caused by agriculture, deforestation, land conversion and destruction of protected species and the conservation measures intended to address them. The third, the "blue agenda", refers to all forms of water resources management.

....brown agenda

Pollution problems affect the whole country but cities account for a greater share of them.

Metro Manila in particular is so heavily polluted with levels of particulate matter exceeding by more than twice the national air quality standards.

Nearly half of the Philippines' classified rivers have water quality falling below quality norms.

Household garbage collection has improved somewhat but ecologically-sound disposal is a huge problem as many cities continue to dump their wastes in open pits. The practice of waste recycling is spreading



through the initiative mainly of local communities and environmental activists.

Disposal of hazardous and toxic waste has emerged as a major environmental problem.

...green agenda

Natural resource degradation and depletion have not abated and now poses a very serious threat to agricultural production, forests and biodiversity.

Massive conversion of forestlands and grasslands to urban use has worsened land degradation. About 45 percent of the Philippines' total land area of 30 million hectares suffers moderate to severe soil erosion.

Salinization and waterlogging are increasing in scope and severity causing major drops in agricultural harvests in lowland areas. Land scarcity and population pressure have driven millions of poor and landless people up into the mountain slopes, inducing cultivation of fragile upland areas and more soil erosion. Intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides have seriously poisoned the soil and contaminated surface and ground water.

Despite differing estimates of deforestation, nobody can deny the substantial reduction of Philippine forest cover in the past forty years. Among the causes are shifting cultivation, illegal logging, forest fires, and increasing urbanization. The number of timber licensing agreements (TLAs) may have been reduced since 1992 but illegal logging has continued despite heroic efforts by environmentalists and community groups to stop it. Reforestation programs by the government have been erratic, as indicated for example by low survival rates. Community-based forest management efforts have done better and promises to be a centerpiece approach to reforestation.

The rich biodiversity of the Philippines, recognized as having global significance, is now under serious threat due to the loss of forest cover and habitat. With the current growth of infrastructure, it is estimated that up to 1.6 million hectares of biodiversity-rich ecosystems will be affected. And this, on top of what had already been lost.

The number of protected areas has grown but so has the rate of destruction of forest and habitat. The institutional mechanisms responsible for managing the protected areas are handicapped by shortages of money and personnel. Indigenous and community



organizations in and around these protected areas and who live off them have not been fully mobilized and enabled by government to help protect these areas and benefit from their efforts.

...blue agenda

Water resources, fresh as well as salt water, are in serious trouble. The condition had come to a point where government was compelled to declare a national water crisis in 1995.

People used to take water for granted, as though it comes from bottomless sources. When nothing was coming out of the tap, water was all that mattered.

There's inequality in access to water. The rich could afford to fill their swimming pools even as the poor got nothing to drink. Urban dwellers consume proportionately larger amounts of water that comes from faraway sources.

Pollution, destruction of watersheds, saline intrusion into aquifers, overextraction, excessive use and misuse, rising demand by a growing number of people, commercial and industrial establishments are major causes of the depletion and degradation of water resources. Poor planning and management, and weak law enforcement have also aggravated the situation. Many of the Philippines' river basins are degraded and mismanaged.

The Philippines' coastal zones, fishing grounds and seawaters have seriously deteriorated because of marine and land-based pollution sources. Coral reefs have been stressed and destroyed by siltation, pollution, overfishing, and destructive fishing techniques. Mangrove forests are fast disappearing because of logging for construction and fuelwood, and conversion to aquaculture. Rising local and foreign demand for fish and marine products exerts further pressure on these areas. Poor artisanal fishers and their communities suffer the most.

Efforts at restoration by government and citizens organizations have not been as successful as hoped for. Regulation of open-access fisheries, especially in municipal fishing grounds, are generally unsuccessful because of official corruption and pressures from big fishers. Resulting tragedy of the commons hurt the small and poor fishers more than the big commercial ones.



Community-based coastal resources management seems to be making some headway.

A plethora of policies and legislation

Discourses and debates on sustainable development in the Philippines, though seemingly endless and paralyzing at times, almost always resolve in some policy or a piece of legislation. And if it's all there is to sustainable development, the country should have been well on its way to sustainability which doesn't seem to be the case.

There's no shortage of policy and legislation on sustainable development in the Philippines (see following Table). If nothing else, this country would never miss making a law or creating a committee for every problem.

Table. Key Policies, Legislations and Programs

Marcos Era

- (1969) Republic Act 4850 - Creation of the Laguna Lake Development Authority
- (1975) Presidential Decree 705 - Forestry Code
- (1975) Presidential Decree 704 - Fisheries Code Revised and consolidated all laws and decrees affecting fishing and fisheries in the country
- (1976) Presidential Decree 1067 - Water Code
- (1976) Presidential Decree 984 - Pollution Control Law– Provides guidelines for the prevention, abatement and control of pollution of water, air and land
- (1977) Presidential Decree 1219 - Coral Reefs Conservation
- (1977) Presidential Decree 1181 - Vehicular Emissions Control Law– Prevention, control and abatement of air pollution from motor vehicles
- (1977) Presidential Decree 1151 - Philippine Environmental Policy– First mention of concept of environmental impact system
- (1977) Presidential Decree 1151 - Philippine Environmental Code - Provides guidelines on land use, air quality, water quality, waste management, and natural resources management
- (1977) Presidential Decree 825 - (1977) Presidential Decree 856 - Sanitation Code
- (1978) Presidential Decree 1586 - Philippine Environmental Impact Statement System – Mandates EIS for government and private sector projects affecting the quality of the environment
- (1979) Presidential Proclamation 2146 - Environmentally critical projects and environmentally critical areas
- (1980) Presidential Decree 600 - Marine Pollution (1976-as amended by PD 1698)



Post-Marcos Era

- (1986) Philippine Constitution – This contains the State's obligation to protect and advance the right of the people to a balanced and healthful ecology. (Article 2, section 15 and 16)
- (1987) Executive Order 192 – Creation of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources
- (1987) Republic Act 6657 – Comprehensive Agrarian Reform – Exempts lands devoted to reforestation, wildlife, etc. from land conversion
- (1991) Republic Act 7076 – People's Small Scale Mining Program (1 9 9 1)
- Republic Act 7160 – Local Government Code – Strengthens the role of LGUs in the country
- (1991) Ratification of the Montreal Protocol
- (1991) Inter Agency Committee on Climate Change
- (1992) Republic Act 7279- Urban Development and Housing Act
- (1992) Executive Order 15 - Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD)
- (1992) Republic Act 6969 - Toxic Substances, Hazardous and Nuclear Waste
- (1992) Republic Act 7586 – National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS)
- (1993) Philippine Population Management Program (PPMP)
- (1993) Power Crisis
- (1994) Ratification of Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC)
- (1994) Philippine Strategy for Biodiversity Conservation
- (1995) Water Crisis
- (1995) Republic Act 7942 – Mineral Exploration, Development and Conservation
- (1995) Republic Act 8172 – Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide or ASIN
- (1995) Social Reform Agenda
- (1995) Gathering for Human and Ecological Security (GHES)
- (1995) Executive Order 247 – Bioprospecting
- (1995) Executive Order 263 – Community-Based Forestry Management Strategy
- (1995) Philippine Action Plan for HABITAT II
- (1996) Philippine Agenda 21
- (1996) Executive Order 291 – Improving the EIS System established in 1978
- (1997) Republic Act 8371 - Indigenous People's Rights Act
- (1997) Republic Act 8435 – Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization
- (1998) Republic Act 8550 – Fisheries Code
- (1999) Republic Act 8749 – Comprehensive Air Pollution Control Policy (otherwise known as the Clean Air Act)
- (2001) Solid Waste Management Act

Sources:

Philippines Environment Monitor 2000, The World Bank, July 2000

Rio in Retrospect: The Philippines and Global Agenda 21 1992 – 1996, PCSD, 1997



If it's so good, why is it not happening?

Long on word, short on action. Or the word holds no sway on the action. Or the word makes little sense in the real world.

The Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD), established three months after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), a.k.a. the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, was intended to be the oversight body for sustainable development. Its main job is to ensure that the government's commitments in Rio are translated into a national sustainability plan and to monitor the implementation of the plan down the line. How did it perform?

Ten years had gone by and judgments of PCSD are at best ambivalent. Views vary widely. Some harsh critics of PCSD say it's a useless body. In contrast, gung-ho supporters of PCSD hold it to high heavens, as it were. Probably, neither of these views is right or fair. Those who say that PCSD is but an advocacy mechanism for promoting the concept and practical implications of sustainable development might be closer to locating where PCSD was and has been all these years.

Interagency mechanisms, like PCSD, are a talking shop of sorts. Their resources are barely enough to run meetings. Making sustainable development work rests on line agencies which have money and people to run programs and projects. And yet these same line agencies can just pay lip service to sustainable development and go about their business as usual without having to worry about any sanction from PCSD. Agencies in finance and trade hardly ever talk of sustainable development and yet their business has a lot to do with its success or failure.

Leading the crafting of Philippine Agenda 21 (PA21) might well be PCSD's signal contribution to sustainable development. There was broad participation in the process. The outcome document was good.

As well, the creation of local PCSD mechanisms has helped in a big way to promote sustainable development locally and to re-orient local development plans along this concept. Since the establishment of the first such mechanism, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, and that even prior to the formation of the PCSD, several other regional and provincial councils have been organized. As multi-stakeholder bodies involving state and non-state actors, these mechanisms serve as a platform for debating issues and building social consensus.



How far these mechanisms have enabled the shift to a sustainable path remains a subject of review. As yet, nothing conclusive can be said as to whether regions and provinces which have organized these mechanisms are really that much different in the way they pursue development from those that have not followed suit.

But then again we cannot ascribe to PCSD and PA21 everything that's going right about sustainable development in the Philippines any more than we can blame them for everything that's not working and continues to go wrong. For all we care, people and institutions responsible for those rights and wrongs may not even have heard or bothered at all about PCSD or PA21. Certainly, PCSD and PA21, to say nothing about the leadership of the economic development planning minister who had presided over them from the start, have helped in a big way to raise government and public awareness about sustainable development.

The inquiry as to why sustainable development is not happening in the Philippines must go deeper and beyond PCSD and PA21.

It can't be sustainable development

Partly, yes. But wholly? Surely not.

Way back to when government subscribed to the Rio Declaration, the Agenda 21 and the three other Earth Summit agreements on biodiversity, climate change, and forest principles, the Philippines has been doing mostly development as if the problem of unsustainability didn't exist. The regime that enabled the creation of PCSD and PA21, the Social Reform Agenda, and a number of other reform measures was indeed profuse in sustainable development rhetoric. But action, as we know it, speaks louder.

The Ramos regime wanted the Philippines to become the next tiger of Asia, referring to the newly industrializing countries (NIC) of Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. But with a difference. It's not just a tiger but a "green tiger", meaning a NIC subscribing to sustainable development principles.

How on earth this could happen was a huge problem of strategy. The NIC phenomenon was basically a story of "growing now, paying later". In other words, grow the economy at any costs and do the social and environmental payback later, if at all. The NIC strategy made sense then, under the circumstances and processes through which the strategy was played out. It's a big wonder if it would work in the Philippines



under post-Marcos authoritarian conditions.

In any case, the Philippines is way, way off the mark. It's far from becoming a tiger, much less a green one. It has never even come close enough to applying some of the positive lessons of the NIC experience. And that is, that those countries [a] made good on asset reform, especially land reform; and [b] invested hugely in human resource development, especially education and training in science and technology.

The successor regimes to Ramos' have been merely a continuation along the same path of development.

Curiously enough, not much has changed since Marcos. And that is, with respect to adhering to the dictum of growing the economy to reduce poverty without altering the structure of inequality in society, and with environment and people's participation as mere add-on. That early, Marcos had already drawn up a NIC strategic vision that seems to fascinate Philippine presidents who came after him. And though contested, there are claims that, comparatively and nominally, the Marcos regime transferred more lands to small tenant farmers than all successor regimes did. Too, many environmental legislations were enacted in Marcos time. The growth strategy then even included a mix energy scenario balancing fossil fuels and new and renewable sources.

But that was Marcos. An authoritarian era, a time when we had only voiceless growth. And that made a big difference.

Democratizing democracy

Yet about now, from the post-Marcos regime of Aquino in 1986 to the present, the Philippines can't seem to do things quite rightly.

Democratic restoration brought about different sorts of trade-offs and pains. There has since been greater citizen voice and participation in the ways and means of running society and the economy. Media's having a field day, at times to the point of license and outright sensationalism. So are the other institutions, like the churches, wanting to project their clout and power on governance. There has been a strong resurgence of social and environmental activism. The so-called Philippine civil society dynamism has surged so high as to be able to bring about regime changes, to the extent of being branded at times as uncivil, arrogant and moralist. Unsympathetic critics in media and elsewhere sometimes joke about this civil society as "evil society".



There had been many rebellious challenges to government's legitimacy and capacity to govern.

All these had had both destabilizing and strengthening effects on our democracy.

Post-Marcos regimes have come and gone in constitutional and extra-constitutional ways. These regime changes and transitions have been occasioned by people power revolutions, so-called EDSA 1, EDSA 2, and EDSA 3. Recent stirrings among the massive underclasses, the urban poor of Metro Manila especially, suggest of a coming EDSA POOR which the current regime has been trying to pre-empt.

Governance issues continue to dog the nation. High in the list is corruption assumed by many as having permeated government bureaucracy from top to bottom and seriously infected the social fabric as well. The economy continues to stagnate. Social inequality is as entrenched as ever.

It seems our brand of democracy needs a lot of democratizing to be a means to sustainability.
Beyond words

A quick scan of discourses in the Philippines would tell us there's hardly anything that's not been debated about sustainable development. The list of policies, legislations and programs is one clear indication.

So what's exactly eating us? Political will, as often many would say? Strangely or not, it seems there's enough of that around, except that it's a weird kind of political will. Which is, that there's one part of this political will that makes politicians say the politically correct things and another part that drives them to persist at politics and development as usual. And how so easily people can shift from one to the other and manage this sort of schizophrenia without apologies.

We've gone past the narrow debate around economic growth. Growth with equity, equity with growth, growth with equity and environmental responsibility, growth with social and environmental justice, and so on. Put it any which way you will. It may be said that we're still caught up in the frame of sustainable growth, which is not sustainable development. In many ways and senses, yes, and without being defensive about it.

That the Philippines needs to grow is out of the question. Where we are divided is around the nature and quality of growth. Government



insists on a liberal path, which in reality means sidelining social and environmental costs and postponing full-cost accounting for later. Social and environmental activists and reformers in and out of government insist otherwise. Land and asset reforms, poverty eradication, more social spending on education, health, housing, and poor-friendly infrastructures, environmental restoration, citizen participation all the way, etc. in the here and now and not later.

The debate on globalization has sharpened the divide. Government sees mostly good in globalization and wants to orient the whole economy towards the global trading system. Opponents tend to see more of the downsides, without dismissing the benefits of global linkages that comes with the process of globalization. But they insist on putting more emphasis on strengthening the local economy before plunging in what they believe is a highly unequal playing field where countries like the Philippines surely stands to lose more compared to what might be gained. The 1997 crisis, the agonies and hardships of farmers as a consequence of hooking our agriculture to global trade, and many of the same outstanding issues concerning global inequalities are making a good case for social and environmental activists.

Such is the nature of the divide. And this would express in many ways and forms of engagement, ranging from plain lobby and advocacy for policy reforms to street mobilizations and people power revolutions, to development cooperation, even to the extreme option of armed struggles, such as those being launched for many years now by communist and Muslim rebels. For good or ill, things just tend to get polarized.

Living stories on strivings for sustainability are many and diverse. It needs time and effort to track them. These are stories worth telling the people.

A number of these have been reported already by the Philippine government in connection with the Rio+5 review. Three PRRM cases, among many others, have been included in that report: [1] sustainable agriculture as practiced and promoted by ecological farmers of KALIKASAN in the province of Nueva Ecija; [2] community-based coastal resources management in Orion, Bataan being co-managed by a local fishers organization SUGPO with the municipal government; and, [3] new and renewable energy to light up a small distant mountain village, utilizing local indigenous knowledge and modern technology, in the northern highland of Ifugao.



The Local Government Code of 1991 is a landmark legislation that creates an enabling environment for sustainable development. By breaking the concentration of resources and authority, the law allows wider latitude for local government units in deciding their development priorities. Greater local autonomy, of course, does not necessarily bring about local sustainability. Indeed, it might cause the return of negative localism, as in renewed dominance of local bosses and patronage politics of old. Much of what could happen depends on civic initiative and vigilance, public awareness and readiness to move local development in a more sustainable direction.

Good practices at the local level are increasing and getting duly rewarded. If it is any indication of brighter prospects for sustainable development, the Galing Pook Awards, a program to honor best practices in local governance, has so far honored 120 LGUs since 1993. These practices cover a broad range of concerns—environment, health, basic services delivery, agriculture, economic enterprise, organizational development and disaster management.

There are many examples of local government-citizen cooperation for the environment. These range from public information and awareness raising campaigns to solid waste management and cleaning up of river systems. Reforestation programs that have succeeded in many parts of the country account their performance to this kind of cooperation. A number of business corporations have also gone past green-speak and have launched environmental projects jointly with civic groups and local communities.

It's not all gloom and doom in the Philippines. There are many positive stories to tell about how sustainable development is struggling to be the central concern of nation building. These stories are being created everyday by reformers in government, social and environmental activists, media, business, churches, schools, workers, farmers, fishers, women and youth organizations, and local communities.

Hopefully, these struggles will one day succeed to bring our country closer and closer to the path of sustainability.





About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

