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MDG 7 Agenda and Strategy: Ensuring Environmental Sustainability

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Introduction

AT THE 2002 MILLENNIUM SUMMIT (UN, NEW YORK) the Philippines was among the 189 UN member-countries who committed to the achievement of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, reckoned from the 1990 baseline. Goal 7 is about ensuring environmental sustainability and includes the following targets:

1. Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs; reverse loss of environmental resources;
2. Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water; and
3. Achieve significant improvement in the lives of slum-dwellers.

This paper is about what lines of action Social Watch-Philippines might pursue to help achieve the MDG 7 specific targets.

The broad challenge

What would you do with a country that has all the right words to say about sustainable development and still could not do things quite rightly?

There's no shortage of policy and legislation on sustainable development in the Philippines. Democratic restoration has brought about greater citizen voice and participation in the running of society and the economy. We know of many positive initiatives by reformers in government, social and environmental activists, media, business, churches, schools, workers, farmers, fishers, women and youth organizations, and local communities. So far these have kept the hopes alive that one day the country can make a real shift to the path of sustainability.

The attempts to integrate sustainable development principles into the country's policies and programs have failed to bring about a fundamental shift away from what many of us believe to be an unsustainable path of development. Environment and social justice—what to us sustainable development means—remains a vision rather than a reality in this country.

The Philippine environment is in deep trouble but we are still hopeful. To green our country again we perhaps may need only to leave our existing forests and mangrove stands (whatever is left of them) and clear-cut areas be and they will most likely regenerate on their own. The Philippines is a wet country anyway.

But this kind of leave-alone strategy and its expected outcome assume a lot. And some of the assumptions might just be unrealistic.

One, more fairness in our society. This assumes that poverty and inequality would be reduced significantly within the MDG timeline. Which means that the rich and affluent are willing to do deep cuts and share their wealth, in other words, to shift from their current unsupportable consumption behavior to more sustainable lifestyles. The poor then would be able to avoid further stressing the environment just to survive.

Two, zero population growth. It's a must. We can argue endlessly from whatever perspective, equity or carrying capacity or both, but still a doubling time in one generation, as what happened from 1970 to 2000, is just too much for our fragile archipelago to bear.

Three, governance reform. Basic reforms in policies and institutions will have resulted in good governance in general and sound ecological governance in particular. Philippine democracy, already choking in bad



governance and corruption, needs more democratizing to really be a means to sustainability.

The MDG-7 agenda

How to arrest and reverse environmental decline is the main challenge for the Philippines.

The rehabilitation of our environment has seen little progress since 1992. Loss of environmental resources continues and existing laws intended to arrest, if not reverse, this trend have little to show ten years down the road from the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio.

The country continues to face three broad environmental challenges: [1] urban air and water pollution; [2] natural resource degradation; and [3] declining quality of coastal and marine resources. These are otherwise known as brown, green, and blue agendas.

The first set of challenges, or brown agenda, refers to pollution caused by industrial, urban, transport and energy sources and the measures to address them. Air quality has been declining in Metro Manila and key urban centers. Much of air pollution can be attributed to emissions by motor vehicles now numbering over 4 million. We see a parallel decline in water quality in rivers and coastal waters due in large part to increasing solid and hazardous waste generation and improper management.

The second, or green agenda, includes environmental impacts caused by agriculture, deforestation, land conversion and destruction of protected species and the conservation measures intended to address them. A sound land use plan could help arrest the decline of forest cover, loss of critical habitats and biodiversity, and land degradation. Adoption of sustainable agriculture could also help in no small way to avert the emerging water crisis, to arrest biodiversity decline, dramatically reduce dependence on costly and harmful chemical inputs, improve nutrition and prevent diseases.

The third, the blue agenda, refers to all forms of water resources management. Water supply and demand is increasingly unable to meet the needs of a growing population, especially in urban areas. Watersheds, which are being degraded faster than they could be regenerated, badly need policy and management measures. Coastal and marine resources continue to decline despite, or because of the poor implementation of, the fisheries code.



Sustainable access to clean and adequate water is a serious problem overall, but especially in urban and coastal areas. Only 36 percent of the country's river systems can be classified as sources of public water supply. Fifty eight percent of groundwater has been found to be contaminated with coliform and needs treatment. More than a third of illnesses monitored for a five-year period were caused by water-borne sources. Water shortages are common in many areas during dry season.

While poverty is worse in rural areas, living conditions for the rapidly-growing urban poor are not much better off. Already, more than half of Filipinos are city inhabitants and with rapid urbanization we can expect a dramatic increase by 2015. Improvements in the living conditions of urban poor are linked closely to arresting the decline and restoring the health of our environment.

What Social Watch must do?

1. Sustain critique of wrong-headed and incoherent policies.

The principles of sustainable development have been laid down in the Philippine Strategy for Sustainable Development (PSSD) of 1990 and the Philippine Agenda 21 (PA21) of 1996. A nagging concern among those who have lobbied hard for PSSD and PA21 is the inconsistency between these landmark documents and development plans at all levels. Medium-term development plans (MTPDP) and local development plans are basically plans for growing the economy, not sustainability plans that will deliver social and environmental justice.

Environment ranks low in government priority. The previous three state of the nation addresses (SONA) of PGMA had nothing at all to say about environment sustainability. The same goes for the new 10-point agenda reiterated in the July 26 SONA. Perhaps, the problem is not so much not having any environment agenda (there's DENR and its programs) as lacking appreciation of the environmental crisis at the highest level of government.

We must demand for a comprehensive assessment of how far the Philippines has complied with the many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) it has signed on to, like the conventions on climate change and biodiversity.

We have to point out the policy-action gap. Citizen lobbyists and legislators have done their part. Thanks to their strong and stubborn lobbying a bundle of laws addressing urgent environmental issues is now in place (e.g. air and water pollution, solid waste management,



GMO and biosafety, mining, and so on) and only awaiting effective enforcement. Sadly, these laws have been snagged in implementation bottlenecks, financing foremost among them.

And that says nothing about the inherent weaknesses of several of these laws to address inequality issues. For example, the 1992 Rio Declaration already recognized the historical, common and differentiated responsibility of the rich and the poor for the degradation/pollution, and therefore, payback. Government seems so gung-ho about running after poor tricycle drivers while letting the rich get away from just taxation of luxury cars. Power politics threaten to reverse legislative advances already made, as in what might result from a strong lobby to suspend or soften the anti-incineration provision in the clean air act, among other things.

There's also a long-standing institutional issue that must be addressed: the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) cannot continue to be an environmental protection agency and a franchiser of exploiters of natural resources at the same time. Our suggestion is for DENR to stick to regulation and protection of our environment and natural resources.

Merger proposals of natural resource-based agencies, like DENR, DAR, and DA, as studied and recommended since early on during the Aquino regime, should also be reviewed along with other institutional reform measures.

Do we need an environmental summit for all these? Our critique could be hyped by one. Perhaps this way we could dramatize the urgency of action not only on pressing environmental issues but also on what many perceive as an impending environmental crisis abetted by a disturbing lack of leadership at the top. One more wake up call probably won't hurt even if many of us have had enough of summits and have grown so cynical of easy and cheap promises made in those summits.

2. Sensitize the national and local development planning and budgeting.

Considering the fiscal crisis budget negotiations could be much more agonizing and contentious than previous ones. Expect rough sailing for a demand to increase appropriations for the environment sector. We can at least make a stand to protect the current level of environmental spending though this is not much, to begin with.



The planning and budgeting cycle starts in July. The earlier we get engaged the better our chances of getting our agenda into the mainstream and having it adequately funded considering competing claims for higher share among different sectors and units of government.

We should remind government planners and policymakers about the often-neglected environment agenda. Remember that environment has never taken high priority in public spending. DENR budget has always been comparatively lower. The three most recent legislations on solid waste management, clean air and water have yet to be funded, as already mandated.

3. Monitor the legislative pipeline.

Charter change is almost certain, though not as imminent as expected or wished. Whether or not this process will roll on in 2005, as agreed between Malacanang and the 13th Congress, we have to be prepared about what sort of change to support or oppose. What's a green charter for us? What's our green bottom line? What are the possibilities of this bottom line getting enshrined in the new charter? Or the chances that what little legislative progress there has been in the past could still be reversed? Expect neoliberals to push amendments that could do more harm than good to our already much-degraded environment.

There are crucial legislations needing to be passed. An environmentally-sensitive land use policy is long overdue. We cannot afford not to have a comprehensive and long-range plan in light of rapid urbanization. Cities cannot continue to sprawl spontaneously even if it might be good to see 60 percent or even two-thirds of Filipinos living in the urban areas by 2025. City-type human settlements can help free up more space for other land uses, like protection, agriculture and forestry, industry, and so on.

The Department Administrative Order (DAO) 17 which defines the boundary of municipal waters reserved for small fishers must be restored as soon as possible.

On the other hand there are bad legislations needing to be modified or nullified. For example, many provisions in existing land laws tend to be contradictory. Looking into the compilation of environment laws for similar conflicts might be a useful research project that can feed into advocacy of legislative reform.



4. Network with the environmental groups.

The environment arena is well covered by different groups. Land justice movements, SRI/sustainable agriculture movements, CB-CRM networks, anti-mining coalitions, ecological waste movements, and so on. There's no need to create a new movement. Social Watch needs only to develop close links with those groups and encourage them to reorient their work toward the MDGs.

Social Watch may support or help improve advocacy positions already taken by different groups. In any case we should be able to connect those positions to the MDGs.

The success stories in environmental campaigns should be spread across the Social Watch network. Members of our network who have been involved in those campaigns should take the lead. The recent campaigns around solid waste, clean air, clean water, GMOs, and the like should make for interesting cases.

5. Make MDG a household word.

What do people know about MDG or MDG 7? Next to nothing, it seems. Level of MDG awareness is apparently low both in government and among ordinary citizens. This however does not mean that people are not bothered by the sorry state of the environment and the lack of progress in ensuring environmental sustainability.

To be sure, environmental awareness has risen significantly since the 1992 Rio summit through the combined efforts of environmental activists, NGOs and people's organizations schools, mass media, and government.

Getting everybody to talk MDG might be expecting too much. But we can at least help spread the word around fast if we get mass media to buy into the MDG campaign.

A word of caution. There's much cynicism around about new buzzwords, and overdoing the MDG hype can backfire. As well, our promotion of MDG let's be mindful of the limitations of MDG to be a catch-all label for sustainable development.





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.

