

Written for the
3rd Quarter Issue 1989 of the
RR Forum, PRRM's Quarterly Publication

A Scale of Sustainability

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

A Scale of Sustainability

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement



A Scale of Sustainability



3

A BIODISTRICT FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH TO operationalize an alternative development agenda. A critical mass of self-governing communities pushing this agenda. An aggressive policy advocacy that results at least in government's tolerance for alternatives and actual commitment of the needed public resources, if not in fundamental policy and strategy shift.

This may just be one answer to what seems to be an unending search for sustainability. But why a district scale?

The concept of biodistrict is of a fairly recent coinage. Credit is due in part to the environmentalists. But it could as well be said that it is an offshoot of the integration of discrete but interrelated concepts.

The biodistrict is derivative of the concept of water isolates or riversystems. Historically, riversystems determined the pattern of human settlements in the Philippines. The first habitats followed the contour of river basins. The current

state of demographics where we now find some 17 million in the uplands and about 20 or so millions in metropolitan centers is a development through time that may be attributed to modernization.

The concept of market poles likewise falls into place. These are the centers where people naturally converge to exchange their products. Assuming even only minimal penetration by outside forces and no income leakage, an economic district can be self-sufficient.

The organization of the whole country into political districts is a direct function of governance. This mainly answers the need of administrative efficiency from the point of view of the central government.

The first two concepts happen to correspond. With perhaps little deviation, they add up to 300 or so districts. The political division into congressional districts, which now number 200, does not jibe obviously. But as they are merely the result of the integration of at least two of the so-called natural districts, we can still assert the viability of the biodistrict and the concept of market pole.

In any case, what is important for our purposes is to define the critical scale of development intervention. The economic or ecological district can serve as the bottomline and the congressional district the maximum. And it would be just as appropriate and flexible to slide from one to the other, without in any way undermining the idea of critical mass.

Such concept of critical scale integrates two complementary ideas. One, it suggests the minimum level of devolution of elite power now concentrated in the primate metropolis and major urban centers. Two, it defines the optimum level of integration of a ground up process of people empowerment.

The two simply define a point of convergence, that is to say, at the district level, whether we talk of the ecological and economic or the political. It is at this level where the difference could be made, with the impact simultaneously felt at the local as well as the national level.

The economic district management system of EDMS provides us a model. This has been developed and is now being tested by a group led by Sixto K. Roxas, president of the Foundation for Community Management and Technology and also a board member of PRRM. This model is premised on an economic paradigm shift where household income and community welfare serve as prime determinants of growth and development instead of profit for the enterprise.



Since 1986, theory building, in PRRM has been on a parallel track. The empowerment paradigm developed then already suggested district scale. Indeed, it should be no less, otherwise the impact on changing the power structures would be minimal, at best, incremental.

Self-reliant development at the local level can be sustained only up to a point. To be sure, isolated villages and towns can hardly make a dent on entrenched structures. Even if fully organized, the specific needs of these villages and towns would hardly figure in policy formation. And the gap in impact gets more highlighted the higher one goes up the policy ladder.

To illustrate we can cite two examples. One is the organization of farm business. Ricemillers, rice traders, moneylenders and bankers, farm inputs traders and the like operate as cartels, at the district or provincial level at least. Farmers organization pushing for transfer of farm business from elite control cannot go far afield if they remain as a scattered mass.

Democratizing access to and management of natural resources is another major consideration. Communities must reacquire the power to control the means to live and develop — the land, the forest, the fishing ground, not to mention the monies and support systems required to harness these resources. However, it takes one hell of an effort and a clear sense of critical mass to bring about resource transfer.

It may be said that the level of organization of the farmers could be around ten per cent. But it is a jungle out there. This cannot be assumed to be an organized constituency speaking in one voice bound by a common reform agenda and strategy.

A ten per cent organized constituency, if it were a voting one and has the required three per cent spread per congressional district, as the 1987 Constitution provides, should be enough to start a process of initiating a piece of legislation. But it takes much more than this to democratize resources, especially if it is land that is in question. We could have a good land reform law but to make it really work is another question.

The concept of scale all the more gets highlighted the moment we factor in ecological sustainability. The interplay of upstream and downstream environmental factors already suggests a large scope. In this respect, we need to consider riversystems spanning villages and towns woven into an integrated ecosystem.



Sustainable development is all-encompassing. It is a vision that draws strength from both sides of the great ideological divide, precisely because there's just one common future at stake. The point, however, is how to get there.

Where we are now need not be further described. It should be enough to say that the present system cannot be justified and allowed to continue. The poverty, environmental degradation, the consequent social conflicts that continue to tear our society apart cannot be sustained for long.

Where we want to be has likewise been outlined many times over. Till now the problem bugging development workers and base groups alike centers on the strategy of how to get there and in the quickest way possible.

Why resources and decision-making power continue to remain in the hands of a few despite the unsustainability of such a setup, not only from the economic but also from the social justice point of view, should tell us enough where the main problem lies.

We may have the number but not the critical mass. We may have the organization but not on a scale where it really matters.



PRRM
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement
Conrado Benitez Institute for 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.

