

Presented at the
4th National Congress of the
National Movement of Young Legislators
07 November 1994
Western Visayas State University Cultural Center
Iloilo City

Development is Good Politics

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SOME POLITICIANS LOVE TO BUILD MONUMENTS.

A toilet here, a clinic there, a playground here, a park there. They build new public markets, school buildings, town halls and capitols or redo old ones. They construct border arches for welcomes and good-byes. They erect lampposts to light up villages. They pave roads, extend a few kilometers of asphalt and concrete into the farms and forests. They dike rivers, build canals and irrigation dams. All these have the names of the politician builders imbedded conspicuously somewhere. Politicians like to be remembered by these artifacts which endure long after they are gone.

Others prefer to build bureaucracies. On assumption into office, they set on a hiring and firing spree. Alongside dispensing with the disposables, mostly proteges of previous administration, they bring in their own – their wards, their relatives, their friends – returning favors with favors. Increase in resources becomes an occasion to increase salaries and perks. New rules and regulations

are piled on top of old ones, thereby creating an even longer red tape and limiting further citizen access. A big and contented bureaucracy gives them a sense of achievement.

These are the usual ways of politics and governance of old. These ways constitute a big part of tradition that dies hard. But things are changing. While many politicians choose to perpetuate or remain captive to the old mode, not a few are prepared to tread new paths. In recent years, it has dawned on a good number of public officials that development itself makes for good politics and governance.

Here I take development to mean simply as a continuous process of improving the quality of peoples' lives. Development is what we do to live a longer and healthier life, enjoy greater freedom of choices through education, access to justice, to rights and entitlements due every citizen, and to make optimum contribution to the common good. Development also means finding solutions to the outstanding issues of poverty and inequity, governance and people's participation, and sustainability of the process itself with respect to its environmental impact.

This definition is broad enough to encompass a whole range concerning human welfare. It is also specific enough to pinpoint what needs to be done by both politicians and ordinary citizens. But it is also an idea that is easier defined than done. In theory, we can easily come to an agreement, but we can go in separate and contradictory ways in practice. Let us remind ourselves that people do go to war on the very same set of values.

More and more politicians are taking up the challenge of development. But many more are still content to just repackaging old ways and calling them development. And true enough, we can also call building monuments and bureaucracies development. Indeed many things that people do can come under the rubric of development, a concept that is very user-friendly. In order to avoid any mix-up, it seems necessary to clarify my own perspective, vision and strategies of what development should be.

I stand for a local, autonomous, environmentally-friendly and participatory development. To my mind, mainstream development up till now has been anything but the way I describe it should be. It has always been state-directed, highly centralized and elitist, thereby excluding and marginalizing a great part of society, particularly its poor and powerless majority. Too, it has been causing more harm than good to our natural environment. There has not been any fundamental change



in this pattern despite recent shifts away from state direction toward a revived leadership by market or corporate forces.

To me, the bigger challenge for politicians, especially the young ones who are more predisposed to new and progressive thinking, is not so much to shift politics toward a more developmental orientation as to do the right kind of development. Dealing with traditional ways of politics seems easier. I think they will soon become a thing of the past. I fear more those politicians who have now embraced the new development discourse but are actually leading our communities, indeed the whole nation, toward the same unsustainable path of development that harms both our society and our environment. I call this intoxication with a religion called growth.

I must challenge the new politicians in the block to resist the growth orthodoxy. They should not mistake growth for genuine development. A country that beggars its labor force with poverty wages and poor working conditions just to induce growth in investment is not being true to its sustainable development rhetoric. Likewise, policies and legislations that downgrade even more our poor farmers and our dying agriculture and subject these to the vagaries of international competition cannot be consistent in any way with equitable and sustainable development. There are many more examples to show that political decisions and actions are headed in the wrong direction.

The national leadership speaks of democratic development. In other words, the promise is, the Philippines will become the new economic miracle of Asia, not via the authoritarian route but a democratic one. People's participation is to be a centerpiece theme. So is protection of our natural environment. Which is why the Social Reform Agenda and the accompanying environmental policies and legislations. The fine rhetoric and promises are very well appreciated. But the contradictions that we see in practice tells us a different story.

Democratic development is potentially a common ground for rebuilding a national consensus. But we first need to agree on what it means. If this means as we define development above, then civil society organizations like PRRM would find little difficulty in pursuing the line of cooperation.

Development is a multi-actor enterprise involving government, business corporations and citizens. It will be a big mistake to confine the running of such enterprise to any of the three players. It will also be a mistake to assume that the three players are participating as though they were equals. The playing field is certainly unequal. From this starting baseline



emerges the need for an enabling policy and legislative environment that will make ordinary citizens, individually or collectively, a truly equal partner in development and governance. Government will be fostering an illusion if it claims that it is standing above society which is unequal to begin with.

To level the playing field, a fashionable phrase in official discourse, the direction that government should take is capacity building that is deliberately biased in favor of civil society organizations. The business of governance must be expanded beyond the state framework. Likewise, the task of building the economy must involve not only the business corporations but also citizens' groups who have long been building the social economy with or without state or corporate assistance. In other words, both governance (by state) and economic development (by market) need to be democratized.

The Local Government Code is a fine piece of legislation to the extent that it democratizes the state system through devolution and decentralization in decision making as well as resource allocation. But there are major issues that need to be resolved in order to optimize its positive features and potential.

One set of issues concerns local capacity building. Statecraft is a technology, or art if you will, that takes time to be transferred. Near monopoly of this technology by the central government has long denied local authorities the possibilities to enhance their level of capability, especially in development policy and programming.

It seems that on the aggregate level, the devolved resources as a portion of the national budget are substantial. How much of these goes to building a self-reliant local economy, to creating not just jobs but livelihoods, to building an efficient service delivery system, to restoring the micro ecosystems? Or are resources being wasted away on building monuments and local bureaucracies?

Another set of issues has to do with citizen participation. It is good enough that the Local Government Code opens a window for citizen participation in official governance. This should make for a good check and balance. But this is just a window. And no matter how representative and participatory, which often is hardly the case, this window will remain just a narrow space for accommodating citizen inputs.

The principal domain of citizen participation is outside the state system. It is the space of citizen action that is autonomous and independent



from state and the corporate community. More and more citizens, as individuals or in groups, are occupying this public space to be able to control events and processes that affect their everyday lives. Today, the surge of civic initiative is making tremendous impact on the way we deal with fundamental issues concerning development and environment. It is the mainspring of new and recovered communitarian values and traditions, new ways of thinking and doing things that contribute to the promotion of the common good.

Our society will be served much better if government will decide to support citizen initiatives with an enabling environment and necessary resources. The private corporations can very well take care of themselves. What government should do is to dedicate its assistance to building people's capacities to be more productive and to be able to engage in the market arena to a level comparable to that of the traditional business sector. People need land, capital and technology which government can very well provide.

Instead of enlarging itself, government should promote and support people's efforts at self-governance. Farmers, fishers, workers, indigenous peoples, women, youth, professionals and other sectors of society have long been engaged in organizing their own lives, in producing goods and services for themselves and the larger community, and in protecting the environment. The least that people need from government is restriction of civic initiative and autonomous action.

For too long, public resources have been subsidizing bad governance. So much taxpayers money has been wasted on graft and corruption. This outstanding governance issue can be addressed through a new electoral reform code which gives more possibilities for deserving leaders to enter public office. More important, a dynamic citizenry can help in a big way to ensure public accountability and responsiveness to the needs of local communities.

Local autonomous development is a central theme in the current development discourse. In this so-called era of globalization, another trendy buzzword, decisions and resources are getting more and more concentrated in the hands of a few powerful international institutions. At the same time, civil society organizations across the globe are linking up and bridging great distances to build a counter trend. Against the phenomenon of upward integration, small circles from below are struggling everyday to pull down decision making to the lowest possible level, as close to the local community as possible.



Given this global context, it is not enough to say that development is good politics. One has to decide which direction of development really makes for good politics. I will leave it to you, as young legislators, to make a choice.

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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.

