

Presented at the Habitat Roundtable
10 August 1996
Philippine Social Science Center
Quezon City

The Promise of Habitat

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

The Promise of Habitat

Isagani R. Serrano
Vice-President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement



The Promise of Habitat



3

THE POOR HAVE SAID ENOUGH. THEIR VOICES have already gone deep into the halls of the United Nations and now figure prominently in official discourse and even reach up to summit levels. Their messages are now embodied in the language of policy, commitment and principle.

Our own government, a party to all UN processes and agreements from the beginning, has heard enough of what the poor in urban and rural communities had to say. The government knows their situation, or so it seems, has taken note of their message, and is now promising big changes for the better.

It is about time the poor started collecting on these promises.

A bundle of commitments

About the promises, there is quite a bundle. From the first Habitat Conference in 1976 in Vancouver to the second Habitat in 1996 in Istanbul, but especially from 1988 when the Global Strategy for Shelter to the year 2000 was adopted, one commitment after another has been made by our government in a succession of UN conferences intended to address just about any issue concerning the survival and welfare of every man and woman now living and yet to be born.

Let me do a quick rundown of these commitments. In 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, education for all to wipe out illiteracy. In 1990 in New York, protection of children's rights from all forms of abuse. In 1992 in Rio, a determined shift to a socially and environmentally responsible development. In 1993 in Vienna, human rights for all. In 1994 in Cairo, security and stability of the human population. In 1995 in Copenhagen, social development to eradicate poverty, unemployment and social breakdown and in Beijing that same year, women's rights and gender equality. In 1996 in Istanbul, health and sustainability of our living environments and finally in Rome, food security.

The 1992 Agenda 21 in Rio provides the umbrella framework for all UN summit commitments since it covers all and every issue related to the security of humanity and its life support systems. It is a plan of action that integrates economic development, social development and environmental protection to be pursued under a regime of democratic governance and inclusive participation.

The Istanbul Declaration and Habitat Agenda bind our government to the twin and closely interlinked commitments of (1) providing adequate shelter for all, and (2) ensuring sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world. These commitments integrate the entire Agenda 21 concerns and locate them in real communities of place. In other words, all about living and making life fuller, more livable and enjoyable for everyone.

One can say that Agenda 21 finally homes in on the Habitat framework. Which means that the ultimate testing ground for making good on all the promises is in where we live.

Challenges to the Philippine Habitat Agenda

Our government knows where and how Filipinos live, be they poor or rich. No one, whether poor or rich, but especially the poor, can be fully



secure in their living environments. And in the face of rapid modernization the goal of finding security in the privacy of our homes, in our work and learning places, in our neighborhoods, in the larger communities is getting more and more difficult and complex.

At the core of our national predicament is poverty in all its manifold dimensions. The government's own document, "A National Strategy to Fight Poverty" says it very clearly. Ours is one country that may well be divided into two worlds: the world of the poor and that of the nonpoor. The poor differ from the nonpoor in the goods they cannot buy, the work they do or cannot acquire, how they enjoy life after work, the diseases they suffer from, the education they can and cannot afford, the homes they live in, and, at the core of all these, the power they do not have over events and processes that affect their everyday lives.

Past and present strivings, to address poverty, whether collaborative or opposing, have all recognized these differences. The point that remains, however, is how to bridge them. The question of how can be both uniting and dividing. And up until now the latter has been consuming much of our time and energy in the difficult search for a common future.

The irony of it all is, there exists a fairly high level of national consensus on the analysis of our predicament and where we want to be. Economic prosperity grounded on social and environmental responsibility is as much the language of Philippines 2000 as the opposition to it. But this is like any motherhood assertion nobody dares to oppose. Beyond the abstract consensus, however, is an entirely different story of efforts going in different and opposing directions.

In the name of economic growth, whether packaged as growth with equity, green tiger, or any other glorified name, government gives a green light to one project after another resulting in massive uprooting of the urban and rural poor from their living spaces. As the rich embark on a land acquisition spree, the poor get pushed out of the only and tiny bit of space they can call their own.

Development rhetoric has come a long way since the first Habitat in 1976. We are being made to believe that the so-called infrastructure development of old is no more. We are told that what we are about to see, if it has not arrived yet, is a socially and environmentally responsible development that will guarantee everyone a secure and livable living environment. But a reality check will reveal a different picture.



Twenty years down the road toward justice and environmental sustainability, most of the indications still point to business as usual. Where the action is, in the emerging growth areas and future mega cities, such as CALABARZON, SOSKSARGEN and many other places, big infrastructure projects — highways, airports, piers, megamalls, dams, energy and mining — have continued to be the dominant symbols of progress. These projects speed up the modernization of distant communities throughout the archipelago and facilitate their integration to a globalized economy ruled by mega corporations. But this linkage to a borderless exchange of goods and services that are generated anywhere and traded everywhere is just one part of the story.

The other parts speak of profound and lasting changes in the way people live —what they eat, wear, learn and like to enjoy. They speak of sad stories of dispossession, exclusion, disempowerment of local communities and loss of their cultures and stock of indigenous knowledge and practical wisdom. Without exception, all the so-called growth centers have been causing displacement of people from their homelands. Local economies and livelihoods are being destroyed faster than a decently paying secure job could be created. Job insecurity has become a universal condition, and so has the phenomenon of migration that consigns many people to near permanent refugee status. Likewise the local environment gets depleted and polluted much faster than it can be regenerated.

Our living environments have been deteriorating rapidly and faster than before any social and environmental reform agenda could be set into motion and produce significant results. Those of us who have worked so hard for justice and environmental sustainability now witness the gains of our struggles for reform disappear with economic growth and free trade.

Adequate shelter for all

Housing right is the core of this commitment. Habitat 2 got governments to commit to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing consistent with established international instruments.

The right to housing does not mean that we can begin to troop to Malacañang or the offices of the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council (HUDCC) and the National Housing Authority (NHA) and demand that they build us a house. It simply means that



government is duty bound to create an enabling environment that will equalize opportunities for access to adequate housing.

The commitment is addressed to the here and now, meaning the huge deficit involving millions of homeless and inadequately sheltered Filipinos. The figure can be anywhere between a third or two fifths of the present population.

But shelter is more than just a roof over our head. For Habitat 2, shelter is linked to the irreducible basic minimum that makes for human living. It spans a whole range — land, water and sanitation, infrastructure, basic services, leisure and freedoms. By this definition, the deficit can go much higher.

Land is a centerpiece theme of Habitat. A place under the sun, so to speak, is the most fundamental condition on which the Habitat Agenda is built. Because habitat is about a real community of place, land therefore is viewed in terms of all its uses — as space for human settlement, production, infrastructure or built-up, and environmental protection.

Land reform, though it is principally about ownership, access and tenure, should also include determination of uses as a responsibility not only of government but also of the local community. Agrarian and urban land reform is a significant part of the whole land reform agenda.

Monopoly of land ownership and access needs to be reversed. This form of injustice lies at the core of what the World Bank calls land market failure in the Philippines. Landowners in collaboration with the bankers have been bidding up land prices to levels unreachable even to a great many of nonpoor, not to mention those in the bottom poor category who could only dream about owning a 50-square meter-lot. A square meter of land can command a price of 250,000 pesos along Ayala Avenue. One hectare of former agricultural land in CALABARZON area may sell as high as over a million pesos. The pattern is the same in all growth centers and the areas close by.

The market is no place for redress. Government must have to intervene forcefully with appropriate policy and legislation. The ideal scenario that will put an end to land monopoly and speculation is to ensure that each of the 10 million or so families owns a piece of lot for housing at least and for production if its livelihood is land-based, as in the rural areas. Government must do everything to make it impossible for any one family to own land beyond a just property limit.



If government can do nothing else, it must at the very least be able to respect the poor's living space no matter how much of an eyesore it may look to the rich. Eviction cannot be justified without a superior alternative.

There are existing policy norms on involuntary resettlement. For example, the policy of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for projects that they finance suggests first and foremost avoidance or minimization of dislocation. And if it can be justified that resettlement is really necessary the alternative must equal if not surpass the former condition of affected people.

As for the basic services required for a healthy community, the government needs only to implement its Social Reform Agenda (SRA). The SRA's minimum basic needs (MBN) approach is already comprehensive enough and can serve as an instrument for measuring progress.

The other agendas and programs, like the Philippine Agenda 21, Human and Ecological Security (HES), Anti-Poverty Agenda, and others which indicate government's inclination to keep its commitments to UN agreements should all contribute to realizing the goal of adequate shelter for all.

Two things need to be addressed at this point. One is to rationalize and integrate all these agendas and programs, including the processes and mechanisms for their implementation. The other has to do with grounding them locally to a point where they will now be the main content of development plans at the community, town and city, and provincial levels.

Sustainable human settlements

This commitment addresses the future of human settlements in a rapidly urbanizing world. It should build on the results of our work around the first commitment. The issues concerning sustainability remain the same — housing, land, food security, livelihoods, water and sanitation, education, health, leisure, freedoms — but they will be dealt with from a different context.

We are looking to a future dominated by cities. In 2025 more than two thirds of humanity will be city inhabitants. The Philippines will probably go the same way.



Like money, cities are one of the most creative of human inventions. Cities facilitate and make for the most intense human interaction. They are the exchange spaces where people are linked by a dense network of homes, workshops, schools and cultural centers, and other human artifacts. Through this network people are enabled to facilitate sharing of information, build friendships and solidarity, trade goods and services, encounter different cultures and traditions without having to travel far.

Cities contribute to stabilizing the carrying capacity of a country. Imagine a future mega city like Metro Manila. Right now one of seven Filipinos live here. Assuming this ratio to be constant till 2025, this megapolis will still accommodate a huge part of our population within just .002 percent of the country's land area.

Cities do us a great favor by accommodating so many in a small land area and freeing up a vast space for the rest of the population. If other existing and emerging cities go the same way as mega Metro Manila, there should be enough elbow room for agriculture, protection and conservation areas, and human settlements in the countryside.

These positive qualities and contribution of cities tell only a portion of the whole story. The downside makes up the rest. Again this brings us back to the fundamental issue of equity gap which tends to widen at the end of every development decade.

The first dimension of inequity that needs to be dealt with is spatial. Urban areas, Metro Manila in particular, enjoy an obscenely high share of resources compared to rural areas. Cities account for a huge proportion of consumption of food — grains, seafood, meat, fruits and vegetables — and energy that are produced mainly in the rural areas. Education, information, health, transport and other services, capital and technology are concentrated mostly in cities. In other words, cities are largely drawing on the carrying capacity of rural areas and sharing little in return.

The second dimension concerns the rich-poor gap within cities. The super rich enjoy a disproportionate share of land, water, energy, capital and financial resources, technology, education and information, amenities, freedoms, and decisionmaking power.

Disparity also expresses at the end of the pipeline, so to speak. Urban areas, because of their high consumption level, produce more waste than rural areas. Per capita CO2 emission and waste generation by the super rich is several times higher than that of the bottom poor. Even in shit the poor cannot be equal to the rich.



It may not be their role but still cities should strive to contribute in growing part of their food requirements. Urban agriculture may still have some space even in highly congested Metro Manila, and moreso in emerging cities. Rooftop gardening in Singapore, for example, can cover 20 percent of this city-state's demand for vegetable. A way should be found to produce food as close as possible to where it is consumed.

Existing greenparks and heritage areas must be preserved. The plan and design of new cities should make provisions for green spaces or an equivalent of rural protected areas within the urban or brown ecosystem.

Rising pollution faces the cities. Urban inhabitants should not expect other communities to be a willing host to wastes that they cannot manage within their own backyard. Likewise they should deal with the transboundary effects of their waste emissions and find ways of bringing these down to acceptable levels. It is mainly the responsibility of the nonpoor and the super rich to lead in reducing energy consumption.

Water can be a major source of conflict in the future. It is urgent that government address the inequality in water service provision and the efficiency of the delivery system. Watershed protection and related environmental measures should be vigorously carried out. The Water Crisis Act of 1995 should be able to avert a future crisis scenario in ways that address not only the supply side but also the inequality in water consumption. It is inhuman to fill up the swimming pools of the rich while the poor make do with only a bucket of contaminated ground water.

A major shift to a people-friendly transport system is in order. Presently, our road networks are biased in favor of carowners. Every kilometer added and paved or space widened simply tends to increase the demand for private carownership. The current transport setup is not designed to unburden the poor who spend a good part of their waking hours and money on transportation, on top of exorbitant expenses on food, education and health services.

Crime and corruption, a persistent problem in our society, may become more serious as the country gets more urbanized. So much resources have been wasted away to reduce their incidence but with unsatisfactory results so far. Needless to say, we all want our streets and neighborhoods to be safe and free from criminals and drug abuse. Here we need civic vigilance and involvement. But first government must do its job and prove that it is worthy of public trust.



It is in the cities, more than in rural villages, where the need for building social capital is greatest. Mutual trust, sharing and caring, the feeling that one belongs to a community tend to be lost easily in the hustle and bustle of the cities. And yet we all know that no city, big or small, can endure for long without them.

If cities are indeed inevitable, then we have to strive to make them a desirable place to live in. Their linkage to the rural areas should be strengthened in ways that promote the values of equity, solidarity and respect for nature.

Governance and citizen participation

A major feature of the Habitat Agenda that sets it apart from other UN Summit agreements is the key role it gives to local authorities and civil society institutions. The bigger burden of making this Agenda work rests on the local government units and community based voluntary organizations. This is but logical since from the beginning the Habitat process has been oriented towards building community from below under an enabling environment created at the national and global levels.

This is a great opportunity for those of us who have been promoting local autonomous development and decentralized democratic governance. We are already favored by an enabling legislation, the Local Government Code of 1991, and we need only to exhaust all the possibilities that it allows.

The process of localizing the implementation of our government's commitments would have been much harder without a legal framework such as the LGC. Before 1991 resources and decisionmaking power was nearly monopolized by the national government and its line agencies. After having been invested with more public resources and authority, local government units should have more latitude in pursuing the development of local communities.

This is not to say, though, that it will be an easy sailing for the Habitat Agenda. We still need to confront many outstanding issues related to democratizing governance and making a decisive shift toward sustainable development.

The patronage system in our politics is not about to go. The political culture and practice that it has bred and cultivated over the years are more entrenched than they seem to be. There is enough evidence to



show that it is just as easy to lose progressive politicians as to reproduce traditional ones from the new breed. It does happen that local politicians turn out to be worse than their national counterparts.

Development literacy varies across the local government units, from high to nearly zero. Local officials who have had more exposure in development discourse and interface with NGOs and other civil society institutions prove to be in a much better position to define their development priorities from a progressive perspective.

The Habitat Agenda is too big a responsibility to be left to government alone. Improving our living environments need broad citizen and community participation. We have to generate greater public awareness of what the Habitat Agenda is all about. Let us help local communities realize that the Habitat Agenda is for them and that its success rests for good measure in their taking a big part of the action and compelling government to make good on their commitments.

It is difficult to say how near or how far we are from realizing the dream of Habitat. But through struggle and cooperation, one day we will find our living environments a better place to live in than they have ever been before.



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.

