

# Greening Challenges in a Post-Ondoy, Post-Sendong Philippines<sup>♥</sup>

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The Philippines, a low-carbon-emitting archipelago, is in the short list of the most vulnerable to climate change (CC) risks, particularly to CC-induced disasters such as tidal inundations, droughts (El Niño), prolonged rainy seasons (La Niña), and fierce storms (typhoons). This vulnerability is compounded by the fact that the country has a degraded environment, which has weakened its capacity to handle risks and disasters as vividly shown in September–October 2009 when four-fifths of Metro Manila and half of Luzon were transformed into a giant lake by Typhoons Ondoy and Pepeng, and in December 2011 when Typhoon Sendong washed out whole villages in Cagayan de Oro and Iligan cities.

However, something positive has also happened -- typhoons Ondoy, Pepeng, Pedring, Sendong and others, by unleashing their deadly watery wrath, have raised the general awareness of Filipinos on what is climate change and the numerous risks it poses. There is a sudden realization that CC affects everyone and spares no one. These typhoons do not choose victims. Every critical area is flooded – from the villages of the wealthy to the informal settlements of the urban poor. Nor are the uplands spared -- massive deforestation in the past, by loosening the soil, trigger killer landslides, burying upland communities and isolating upland residents for days and even weeks because of impassable roads and bridges.

However, it is the poor, the numerous poor, who always get the brunt of the CC and environmental disasters. They live in houses made of cardboard and poor housing materials; they are also located in congested, hazardous and unprotected areas. Moreover, their livelihoods are severely affected because these are generally marginal economic activities in the large but unprotected informal economy. Verily, CC is a major development issue that should concern not only the environmentalists and agencies of the government but also, and more importantly, the basic sectors of society such as farmers, fisher folks, urban poor, workers, indigenous people and the business community.

Adjusting to CC reality and environmental degradation and managing/containing the threats to sustainability that they pose requires the highest policy attention. These CC challenges can not be addressed through the usual routine calls for environmental protection. Avoiding CC risks and disasters is not just a question of reducing GHG

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emissions; it is a matter of survival because CC-induced disasters affect lives, livelihoods and jobs.

### **Abysmal state of unpreparedness**

And yet, the Philippine readiness to CC risks is abysmally low. While the level of CC awareness is now high among Filipinos, the level of preparedness for possible disasters remains generally weak. Sendong in December 2011 revealed that the LGU-led disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) councils are not in place in most of the provinces, cities, towns and barangays despite the marching order by the DRRM law of 2010. Even the DILG, DND and DENR, which are supposed to lead in the formation of these DRRMs all over the country have obviously failed to lead in DRRM programming and propagation.

As it is, the entire archipelago is at risk, with 69 or majority of the provinces (out of 79) cited by scientists as the most vulnerable to CC risks. This general vulnerability of the country was validated in 2010, when the country experienced CC swings – from El Nino droughts for some Luzon provinces to La Nina floods in eastern Mindanao and Visayas. In 2011, the whole country – Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao – experienced in different months a series of typhoons that unleashed devastating floods.

The lack of preparedness is reflected in the ad hoc and disorganized official responses to disasters. Look at the confusion during the early days of the Sendong tragedy in Cagayan de Oro and Iligan in early December 2011. Also, disaster management remains “relief-based” and not “readiness-oriented”. Affected Filipinos, especially the poor, are not informed on who to call for help or where to go when disasters strike. Anticipation is missing in the government’s framework on disaster management, although there are efforts in select cities and provinces urging citizen’s preparedness during times of disasters.

### **Poor implementation of environmental laws**

The Philippines has also no shortage of laws protecting the environment.

The varied and mounting environmental problems facing the country — deforestation, loss of biodiversity, poor management of solid wastes, decimation of mangroves and coral reefs, urban congestion, deteriorating air and water quality, soil erosion, and so on — are all well documented. They have been articulated by environmental activists, who have been pushing for environmental reforms since the 1970s. One outcome of this environmentalism is the large number of environmental laws enacted by the country, from the laws on reforestation and EIA of the 1970s; the clean air and solid waste acts of the 1990s and the RE and biofuel acts of the past decade. Also, as a Party to both the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol and with its Climate Change Act of 2009 in place, the Philippines has committed to undertake various mitigation and adaptation measures outlined by UNEP.

The issue, therefore, is not whether the Philippines should embrace environmentalism or not or whether it should support or not the global campaign on CC. It has to, for its own sake and survival.

However, the woeful record of the Philippines in the implementation of its reforestation and other environmental laws is a sad testimony to the twin problems of policy inconsistency and indecisiveness. To these concerns, another policy issue should be added — incoherence. Are existing economic and development policies coherent or aligned with environmentalism and the challenges of CC?

### **CC proofing the economy**

The truth is that the entire country needs *CC proofing* – through a comprehensive disaster response-and-anticipation readiness program, coherent adaptation-mitigation program and full enforcement of existing environmental laws. But in addition to this, there should be a green shift in the economy. For the reality is that green laws, DRRM and adaptation-mitigation will only work in a green economy. We need a green and CC-ready economy!

#### **Greening potentials of the economy**

Greening can spur higher and sustained growth for the economy.

- Greening the agriculture sector through ecologically sound farming approaches such as organic, biodynamic, natural farming and quantum agriculture, among others, will help revive the soil poisoned by a century of chemical agriculture, will create more agricultural jobs (because of labor-intensive seed preparations and nature caring) and will foster national self-sufficiency in food.
- Greening the industrial sector means nudging industry to go higher value-added or higher rungs of industrialization, which means securing greater economic efficiency and productivity through higher public-private investments on skills and knowhow, technology and building up a culture of competitiveness based on decent (not casual) work. Uncompetitive manufacturing, therefore, should be transformed into higher value-adding producers, for example, export-led electronics and auto assembly plants should evolve into producers of value-added products such as original equipment manufactures and new industrial products. The point is that the Philippines should out of the rut of labor-intensive (which is not the same as job-intensive), low-technology and uncompetitive level of production, which is also environmentally damaging. For this, we need to ***combine industrial policy and environmentalism in support of green and value-adding economy.***
- Greening the services sector means the adoption of more eco-friendly and eco-

oriented business practices, including better treatment of workers through the culture of social partnership and respect for the rights of both workers and employers.

In addition to the above,

- Greening the forest lands. We have forest lands without any forests. But bringing back the forests can be a source of growth because it implies huge public investments on reforestation and massive job creation. There are cases showing the reforestation is sustainable, if undertaken or supervised by dedicated public and private institutions. The sustainable “rainforestation” scheme developed by the Visayas State University, has been used successfully by the Energy Development Corporation in regenerating the large EDC concession area (over 100,000 hectares) in Leyte and in generating jobs for the surrounding communities.
- Greening the community/habitat. CC proofing or renewing barangays nationwide is a big growth locomotive and a big job generator. This program, undertaken nationwide, has the potentials of creating millions of jobs and triggering robust economic revival. ILO’s experimental programs and the Filipinos’ tradition of “bayanihan” in community re-building show that idle or unemployed workers in each barangay can be mobilized to do low-cost but CC-important fortification projects such as dredging of waterways, concreting of flood walls and pathways, fortifying or rebuilding of multi-purpose community centers (which also serve as refugee centers in times of disasters), strengthening of dikes, etc. In short, community renewal can address the damaging impacts of CC in an economically productive, sustainable and anticipatory manner. It can target not just the popular adaptation and mitigation concerns but also the socio-development issues of poverty reduction and sustainable transformation of communities.

To summarize, a green shift in the economy means growing not only the green sector (renewable energy, recycling, etc.) but also the existing agricultural, industrial, and service sectors.

### **Greening the future**

A green shift entails a bold restructuring of the economy. This will obviously take time, patience, and policy boldness. This green shift also requires policy coherence, decisiveness, and consistency on the part of the government and other stakeholders in Philippine society.

A transition programme, as articulated by the ILO-UNEP and the DOLE’s Institute of Labor Studies (2009), is also clearly in order. This transition requires social consensus, which, in turn, requires deeper and sustained social dialogues between and among various stakeholders in society, for example, on key strategic thrusts enumerated by the ILS, namely: building knowledge assets, targeting green sectors, setting standards,

maximizing community benefits, linking green job creation with job training, partnering towards building adaptive capacity, mapping pathways out of poverty, and measuring results.

To conclude, the Philippines cannot afford to lag behind in the global race among countries to shift to a green economic arrangement.

The point is to make the green shift now!

### **The People's Framework Strategies on Climate Change\***

1. Make policies coherent.
2. Build green economy and society.
3. Adopt comprehensive, democratic and community-oriented watershed management.
4. Implement comprehensive land use and natural resource management.
5. Push for social justice, human rights and asset reform.
6. Strengthen community-focused adaptation-mitigation-anticipation and disaster risk management measures.
7. Build green habitat and communities.
8. Pursue just climate finance.
9. Raise climate change awareness, education and skills and capacity building.
10. Forge social partnership for sustainable society.

**\*Drafted by Dr. Ofreneo for the Climate Change Congress of the Philippines.  
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