

**THE PHILIPPINE COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
LIKE COOKING RICE CAKES**

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I. Establishment and Organization

It has long been a source of pride for the Philippine government that Manila was among the first to take action on its commitments to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). On Sept. 15, 1992, barely three months after the Rio Summit, then President Fidel Ramos created the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD). The Council was to be the key mechanism for fulfilling the Philippines' pledge to implement Global Agenda 21, UNCED's program of action for promoting sustainable development.

When it was established, the PCSD was unique in that its counterparts in other countries were government-dominated bodies with little participation by non-government or people's organizations (NGOs or POs). By contrast, the Philippine model gave strong representation to NGO/PO members (over a third of the council's 34 members). Though government representatives can easily outvote their non-governmental counterparts, the PCSD's practice of making decisions on the basis of consensus effectively gives the NGO and PO representatives influence on the mainstream of government policy-making. In retrospect, this factor should have come as little surprise, given the Philippines' recent history. NGOs and POs emerged from the long years of the Marcos regime as influential pressure groups pursuing various causes in the country's restored democracy.

During the post-Marcos period, the government of Fidel Ramos came into power starting in 1992. Through much of his six-year term, Ramos displayed an enthusiasm for multi-sectoral consultations on many issues -- poverty, local government, environment, etc. -- that seemed more appropriate for a populist politician than a career military officer. And so it was that multi-sectoral consultations and multi-stakeholder bodies became a trademark of the Ramos Administration. The PCSD soon became part of that trend. This raises the question, however of whether the PCSD has lived up to the participatory rhetoric surrounding it?

II. Emergence of the PCSD in the Development of a National Agenda 21

During the first few years of the PCSD's existence its members experienced a rather bumpy ride. NGOs and POs found themselves at odds with their government counterparts on a wide range of issues, and bogged down in protracted discussions over semantics. This confusion was fairly predictable considering the deep distrust between government and civil society sown by years of authoritarian rule under Marcos. The long-running debate over the composition of the PCSD reflected this turmoil.

Mindful of the importance of private business in any effort to promote sustainable development, the government moved to bring private sector representatives into the

council. But this was resisted by the NGOs and POs: “The NGOs argued that private sector representatives were not necessary because business was already represented by government,” says Raphael P.M. Lotilla, deputy director general of the National Economic and Development Authority (Manila’s chief planning agency) and PCSD coordinator since 1995. NGO resistance to business membership in the PCSD receded only in 1996, partly, it seems, because of a change in the composition of NGO representation in the PCSD. Thus, on Sept. 26, 1996, the fourth anniversary of the council, President Ramos issued Executive Order 370, which expanded the PCSD’s membership to include business and labor representatives.

On that same date, the PCSD issued *The Philippine Agenda 21: A National Agenda for Sustainable Development for the 21st Century* (PA 21). Drafted after 14 months of consultations between various sectors all over the country, the 163-page document is the PCSD’s most important accomplishment thus far. PA 21 is the translation into Philippine conditions of the Rio Summit’s Global Agenda 21. Its three major components are (1) The Principles of Unity; (2) The Action Agenda; and (3) The Implementation Strategies. While PA 21 is a dense and wide-ranging document, for the purposes of this paper several of its features stand out as particularly important:

- It calls for the institutionalization of a multi-stakeholder approach to planning and decision-making from the national to the local level.
- It stresses the critical need to integrate sustainable development concerns in decision-making structures and processes in government and civil society.
- It provides for action agendas specific to each ecosystem (i.e., forests/upland, lowland/agricultural, urban, coastal/marine and freshwater ecosystems).
- Finally, it stresses the need to develop local action agenda at the regional, provincial and municipal levels.

The launching of PA 21 was marked by what seemed to be the inevitable touch of controversy. The official document had a twin NGO version (issued by PCSD member Nicanor Perlas of the Center for Alternative Development Initiatives) which seemed to repudiate PA 21. Mr. Perlas for his part says that his paper was “very supportive” of PA 21, but adds that he wanted to call attention to the fact that some portions and entire chapters of the official document had not been approved by the council. In any event, PA 21 set the stage for stepped up activities by the PCSD. “After PA 21, it was possible to generate policy momentum,” Perlas said.

III. Accomplishments and Activities

Over the past six years, the PCSD has undertaken numerous activities and realized some hard-earned accomplishments. Credit for these activities usually cannot be exclusively attributed to the PCSD, the council being a coordinating body that usually acts in concert with other agencies and organizations. Moreover, many of these activities are work-in-progress that will need time and much effort to bear fruit.

** Integration of SD and PA 21 into National Development Planning*

By producing Philippine Agenda 21 the PCSD has achieved the key accomplishment of integrating sustainable development concerns into the macro-planning processes of the national government. At the most broadest level, the Philippine National Development Plan for the 21st Century (Plan 21) uses Philippine Agenda 21 as its overall guiding framework. Plan 21 sets the broad development directions of the country and will serve as the basis for the detailed plans of the sector agencies. PA 21 will also be used as a guide for the revision of the government's five-year Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan which the new administration of President Joseph Estrada is undertaking.

The PCSD committee on socio-economic dimensions is developing a general framework for integrating sustainable development (SD) principles and parameters into the budgetary process to ensure that that public spending takes them more fully into account. Key government departments and agencies have also integrated PA 21 and sustainable development concerns into their plans.

The Presidential Executive Order, "Improving the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) System," aims to integrate the EIS system early into the project development cycle. It also encourages the establishment of environmental units (EUs) in all implementing agencies of government, including government-owned and controlled corporations and government financial institutions, particularly those whose mandate includes the introduction of physical plants and infrastructure. To date, 12 government agencies have already established EUs in their institutions. For example:

- The Department of Trade and Industries (DTI) has included environment support facilities in the 1997 Investment Priority Plan to support environmental and ecological services and facilities requirements of the country.
- The Department of Science and Technology has incorporated environmental agenda items into its Science and Technology Agenda for National Development.
- SD goals and the PA 21 Action Agenda have been incorporated into the research & development activities of the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resource and Development.

- The draft implementing rules and regulations of Republic Act 8435 (Agricultural and Fisheries Modernization Act) states that PA 21 shall be considered in the formulation of the Agricultural Modernization Plan to be implemented by the agriculture department.
- The Civil Service Commission and the Career Executive Service Board have made the Environmental Intelligence Quotient Scheme part of the exams for civil servants. The inclusion of environment and SD test items in these exams aim to motivate prospective examinees to be versed with environmental and SD concepts.

** Localization of the Philippine Agenda 21*

The PCSD has supported initiatives to create local SD councils through technical assistance and training. To date, 16 councils have already been formed, 11 of which are at the regional level, four at the provincial level and one at the municipal level. A number of regional councils were created as a committee under the regional development council. Other provincial, city and municipal structures for SD are separate and distinct bodies created solely for the purpose of implementing SD initiatives.

** Developing Financing and Monitoring Mechanisms*

The PCSD has supported initiatives to explore the use of market-based financing instruments (MBIs). A study on the “Implementation of Selected Market-based Instruments for Air and Water Pollution Control” was undertaken to examine the applicability of MBIs for air and water pollution reduction in the Philippines.

The Earth Council is considering the pilot testing of the Earth Capital Facility in the Philippines with the assistance of the PCSD subcommittee on financing arrangements. The Earth Capital Facility or Earth Fund is supposed to provide soft loans, grants and mixed credit to support multi-sectoral initiatives on SD. A proposal for technical assistance is being formulated by the NGO-PO Counterpart Secretariat of the PCSD with the Earth Council for possible funding by the ADB.

The PCSD is helping develop a Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluating (MRE) system on the state of environment and SD in the country. This will enable the PCSD to make timely decisions and ensure that the program for SD remains responsive to current and future demands. A source book of SD indicators has been completed.

** Promoting Unleaded Gasoline and Protecting Indigenous People's Rights*

In 1994, The PCSD Subcommittee on Atmosphere started consultations with the oil industry, car manufacturing association, government planning and policy bodies and NGOs to push for the phase-out of leaded gasoline. That same year, the PCSD drafted an executive order phasing out leaded gasoline in major urban centers (Metro Manila, Cebu, Davao) by Jan. 1, 1998 and throughout the country by the year 2000. After nearly three years of study and debate, President Ramos issued Executive Order 446 phasing out leaded gasoline in Metro Manila by the year 2000 and nationwide by 2001.

IV. General Assessment

Noticeably absent in this fairly lengthy list of accomplishments and work in progress of the PCSD are many of the cutting edge issues that have preoccupied environmental and development organizations in the Philippines recent years. This has made the PCSD the target of sharp criticisms for years.

In a letter to NGO members of the PCSD back in June 1996, Marvic Leonen, executive director of the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center, argues that the PCSD has not made a significant dent on policy. He cites discussions on the environment code and the ancestral domain law as examples of vital issues in which the PCSD has been largely irrelevant. Moreover, he argues that when it comes to matters concerning government commitments to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the PCSD has been ignored. Instead, the PCSD has been preoccupied with an agenda too abstract to be of much practical value to proponents of sustainable development. The net result, Leonen fears, is that the PCSD has become an instrument for the “complete greenwash” of the Ramos administration.

This inability to tackle controversial or difficult issues seems to be built into the PCSD system. Since the council operates on the basis of consensus, it has been incapable of addressing issues that divide the multi-stakeholder body. “This has been the source of much frustration, particularly on the part of NGOs and POs,” concedes Habito. He admits that when faced with such issues as the mining code, and tariffs and import liberalization policies, the PCSD has simply been unable to act.

The PCSD may thus be a case where process triumphs over results. Creating a multi-sectoral constituency for sustainable development through a multi-stakeholder process is a handsome political achievement, especially when you bring to the table parties and forces that have long been at loggerheads. But this prize can be purchased only at a steep price. Decisions have to be made on the basis of consensus, a painfully slow process that is vulnerable to hot heads on the one hand and entrenched vested interests on the other. PCSD may thus end up dealing with crumbs, not the structural causes of society's deep-seated problems.

NGO members of the PCSD admit the council's weaknesses, but still take a more sanguine view. "It's like cooking rice cakes," says Corazon Juliano-Soliman of the Community Organization Training and Research Advocacy Institute (COTRAIN) and a member of the PCSD. "You need heat above and below the rice cakes."

From this perspective, PCSD is just one arena of advocacy. "Organizations outside the PCSD process have to keep hitting the hard issues," says Roger Birocel of the Earth Savers Movement. He sights a good cop, bad cop phenomenon. The value of being the "good cop", argues Birocel, is that, as part of the PCSD process, you have access to long-term planning process and this institutionalizes a multi-stakeholder approach.

Ms. Soliman adds that the PA 21 and PCSD give the green movement not just a "strategic handle" with which to influence long-term policy, but also tools to use in tactical struggles. She cites a recent case where community groups opposing the construction of a new highway through a forested area in a province south of Manila, argued that the project went against the principles of PA 21. The project was stopped. "PA 21 is nice to have. But you've got to organize," she says.

Attacking resistance to environmental concerns on several fronts is a very appealing, clever and arguably indispensable strategy. But one wonders how those folks who choose to slug it out in the trenches, confronting business or political organizations with a penchant for bashing the heads of their opponents, may feel about their colleagues who elect to lobby in consensus-driven, mainstream policy forums.

For Mr. Habito, there is hope in the drive to organize local sustainable development councils and to develop local versions of PA 21. He says that at the local level it may be more possible to overcome the obstacles that tend to block action at the national level. He cites the case of the province of Palawan, often referred to as the last unspoiled area in the Philippines, where in an unexpected turn of events, local officials and environmental groups -- after years of bitter antagonism -- have been able to work together to implement a comprehensive environmental program.

Birocel concurs that local action offers promise. But he adds that proponents of localization must be skillful in tapping existing groups at the community level and aligning their activities with those that are already been undertaken or supported by local government officials.

For Mr. Perlas, PA 21 and PCSD are part of a larger vision, arguing that these represent an alternative to the "Philippine 2000" development paradigm of the Ramos administration which relied on import liberalization and export-led development. While there is some interest in replicating the PCSD experience in other countries, the more immediate question is how will the council will fare under the new government.

Mr. Habito expresses concern that the long-term prospects of the PA 21 process are uncertain under the new Estrada administration. The new government does not have its predecessor's appetite for multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral exercises. In a sense, this is ironic: Elected a minority president, with just 23% of the vote, President Ramos found it made sound political sense to sponsor all sorts of participatory consultative mechanisms. Having won a convincing mandate with about 40% of the vote and arguably the most popular Philippine president among ordinary Filipinos since Ramon Magsaysay, President Estrada apparently finds little need for such devices.

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