

Keynote address of Vice President Jejomar C. Binay  
to the  
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American author Jane Jacobs points out in her book “the death and life of great American cities:” that “dull, inert cities ... do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else.”

There is, for me, a touch of irony in having this regional forum at this time here in Bangkok on this theme, “sustainable shelter in an age of climate change and disasters.” For while none among our developing countries in the region are strangers to climate change and disasters, the most recent disasters that have washed away thousands upon thousands of homes and shaken the confidence of communities around the world have occurred in the most developed zones, namely Japan and the United States.

Last March, an 8.9 earthquake – tsunami devastated northeast Japan and took away tens of thousands of homes and buildings and hundreds of lives. In the last few days of August, tropical storm Irene swept through the United States east coast, submerging cities in raging floodwaters that claimed many lives and destroyed an infinitely greater number of homes, displacing the population and rendering them homeless.

Many of us had the opportunity of watching both humanitarian tragedies at close range. Wherever there are Filipinos abroad, my duties as presidential adviser on overseas Filipino workers concerns, in addition to my being chair of the housing and urban development coordinating council or HUDCC, immediately drew me to the scene, whether it was man-made like the Arab Spring, or natural, like the earthquake tsunami or Irene. In the case of the latter, I had just left New England, after concluding a senior executive’s education at Harvard, when Irene made its first landfall at the eastern seaboard; from Los Angeles to Manila, I listened to the 24/7 CNN reports on the damages and casualties, and came away with the conclusions that not even the most developed countries, who are presumably ahead of most everybody else in climate adaptation, risk reduction and disaster preparedness, could really prepare enough for disasters whose precise timing and severity can never be accurately predicted.

Although this forum is regional in character, the challenge before us is global in scope. But nothing ever rises to global proportions that does not occupy local or domestic space. Everything global is local to begin with. And unless we are here to give free rein to any unverified theory, we may have very little to offer that contains any proven worth or wisdom apart from what has worked and continues to work in our own respective jurisdictions. Of course, not everything works the way it should work, so we could recognize intractable situations which continue to defy our best efforts, and where new approaches must be tried.

Let me now speak of the Philippine experience.

The Philippines is among the fastest urbanizing countries in East Asia. The problems urbanizing carries in its train are hard to escape ---- high poverty incidence, environmental degradation and lack of urban housing and the proliferation of informal settlers. It is projected that by 2030, about 88 million of 114 million Filipinos or seventy-seven percent (77%) of the population will be residing in urban areas, driven largely by a strong rural-urban migration trend. The consequences are obvious. The present problems can only increase in severity and scope, if we simply sit on our hands and watch things go from bad to worse.

On top of the problems associated with urbanization is the impact of climate change. In 2004, the UNDP global report on disasters ranked the Philippines as highest in terms of tropical cyclone occurrence, and resultant deaths and third in terms of people exposed to such incidents annually. An average of 20 cyclones cross the country yearly, causing physical and economic destruction, injury and death.

Metro Manila alone, the seat of the national government and center of private business, commerce and education, is new home to an estimated 21 million Filipinos, three million of whom are considered informal settlers. Of this number, about 525,000 live in vulnerable areas (near waterways, esteros and under the bridge), completely exposed to and unprotected from the hazards of climate change.

Until recently, environmental considerations had played second fiddle to economic growth in the planning process. This was not healthy for economic development, and had to be abandoned and replaced by a more environmentally proactive development objective. We needed to mobilize and marshal all available resources in pursuit of such objective.

Under the Philippine constitution, the state is mandated to undertake a continuing program of urban land reform and housing, to make available at affordable cost decent housing and basic services to underprivileged and homeless citizens in urban centers and resettlement areas. This entails an integrated and coordinated approach at the national and local levels to the various aspects of housing and urban development.

A critical role of the national government is to orchestrate the formulation of a national framework strategy on climate change. Such a strategy must mainstream climate change adaptation at all levels of governance, consistent with existing laws, plans and policies, and in consultations with, and with the full participation of all stakeholders.

In order to ensure that plans, policies and guidelines are reflective of our green advocacies, the government housing sector has to make sure that appropriate sustainable zoning and green building practices are integrated into local planning guidelines, zoning ordinances and the building code, and that energy efficiency, renewal energy application, water conservation and reuse, and

biodiversity are all taken into account in the course of providing shelter resettlement sites and new town sites. The national strategy calls for optimum public-private sector participation and harnessing the full capacity the local governments units or LGUs in promoting sustainable development and environmental awareness.

At HUDCC, we make sure that the planning process reaches out to the grassroots and builds up the people

Capabilities as well as those of the LGUs two important legislations - the disaster risk management act and the climate change act, are truly empowering in that respect. The disaster risk reduction and management act mandates actions to address the underlying, man-made issues, especially in urban areas, that typically exacerbate the scale of destruction caused by disasters. This law heralds a paradigm shift away from disaster response to activate prevention of disaster risks, within the context of adapting to the challenges of climate change.

Republic Act 9729, otherwise known as the Philippine “climate change act of 2009”, on the other hand, directs the mainstreaming of climate change into government policy formulations, the development of the framework strategy and program on climate change, and the establishment of the climate change commission. The act recognizes the role of local government units as the frontline agencies in the formulation, planning and implementation of climate change action plans in their respective areas. The law directs that “municipal and city governments shall consider climate change, adaptation, as one of their regular functions.”

The climate change act and its link and synergies with the urban development and housing act or UDHA constitute the platform by which we take on the opportunities to realize sustainable shelter development for the poor, both at the national and local levels.

The recently drafted national climate change action plan or NCCAP seeks to spell out a ridge-to-reef strategy to bring about sustainable climate change actions. In line with the NCCAP, HUDCC is working with un-habitat and other government agencies in defining details on processes and techniques to strengthen the poor’s housing and settlement as they face the downward risks from the ridge like flooding and landslide, and the inward risks from the sea like storm surge, strong typhoons and sea level rise.

We have piloted this strategy of making the climate change act and the urban development and housing act create synergies for the poor in a project with the city of Sorsogon in the Bicol region, which is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This required a number of basic steps:

First, make “climate science” understandable to local government executives so that they will know what the issue is all about, what exactly they can and must do to prevent, mitigate and prepare for disasters, and reduce and manage risks;

Second, identify expected or projected climate change impacts and scale them down to locality to determine better their effect on the lives of the poor;

Third, localize the housing policies and guidelines on site planning and house constructions with specific attention to local climate change scenarios, urban development and housing trends, and the poor's capacity to cope with disasters and extreme events. Throughout this process, the LGU must engage the poor in defining risks and appropriate actions, taking particular account of the special needs of women, children and the elderly who are usually the most affected during calamities and emergencies;

Fourth, define housing options that can match the current and potential financial capacities of poor families and their community;

Fifth, develop guidelines/templates which the poor can use to adapt their "incremental" way of building houses to the reality of climate change and possible disasters;

And lastly, institutionalize such process at the local government level so that the needs of the poor are given priority in local development planning. Strategies for building climate-resilient communities are mainstreamed into the local land use plan and the comprehensive sectoral plan whereby urban and housing development projects are rendered "climate-proof", that is to say, the poor get safe and secure shelters and decent jobs on a sustainable basis at the same time. Meanwhile, the city of Makati risk-sensitive urban redevelopment project piloted in barangay rizal was conceptualized and undertaken to show that land use and redevelopment planning can be powerful tools to enhance the physical, social and economic resilience of a highly urbanized, low income community transected by the west valley fault system. The project identified specific vulnerabilities and determined appropriate interventions through a consultative process with experts and the local community to generate a holistic multi-year redevelopment. The project will then be replicated among other communities in the city. Under our Pabahay or Filipino for "housing" caravan for comprehensive land use planning, we go around the country to help local governments integrate climate change mitigation and adaptation actions as well as disaster risk management measures into their development planning. We have invited un-habitat to be part of this caravan.

Our efforts to finance the climate change mitigation and adaptation and disaster risk reduction and management activities of local government units are mitigated by the disaster risk reduction and management act, which is a potential source of funds, and by the climate change commission, which has ruled that five (5%) of the LGUs' calamity funds can be used for that purpose.

Additionally, we are actively promoting the use of indigenous and green building technologies by the local construction industry. We are seeking the consolidation of accredited indigenous technologies for housing and tapping the marketing services of private developers to help us promote indigenous and green building technologies. We are coming up with prototype projects to

showcase the practicality and affordability of indigenous and green building technologies. All these, we are trying to do despite the constraint of limited sources.

In meeting the challenge of climate change and disaster preparedness, poor countries like ours should never be embarrassed to be found wanting of material resources but we should never allow ourselves to be found wanting of creative ideas and of the moral and political resolve to do what must be done. What we lack in resources we should be able to supplant with an abundance of ideas and the moral and political resolve to use whatever human resource we have to adapt to climate change, mitigate any disaster and cope with it. Ultimately, shall create climate-resilient communities not only by capacitating people with adequate knowledge but above all by empowering them to fend for themselves against life's challenges.

This begins by making sure that every family lives in a decent and affordable home, and by making sure that such family continues to be able to support the minimum standards of living for all its members. A climate-resilient community is possible only if the family, which is the basic cell of society, becomes climate-resilient.

But in today's world, this has more than one dimension. The climate change associated with hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis has its man-made equivalent in economic and financial meltdowns, as we have seen in what has happened to the world's most developed trans-Atlantic economies. We cannot afford to be safe from the one without being safe from the other. Human security and safety should be seen as a seamless web of protection from all dangers that threaten it.

As soft power and wealth creation shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific, it may be worth our while to ask ourselves how we could make our communities more resilient not only to climate change, but also to global economic and financial challenges. We can perhaps begin to explore new ideas on how to bring prosperity to our own peoples faster, together.

Thank you and have a good day.