

A People Caught in Its Own Dung

Fourth of a Series by Ado Paglinawan

Part Four: Restoring Rhyme and Reason back to Metro Manila

The governance structure of the entire Metro Manila area must be revisited in the light of the Ondoy disaster.

We can start with the lecture of Nathaniel von Einsiedel, former commissioner for planning of the Metropolitan Manila Commission, last February 2009 before the East-West Center in Hawaii. It was entitled "Governance and Planning in Metro Manila."

Dr. Einsiedel holds a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of the Philippines, Masters in Urban Planning from Columbia University

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Outside the Philippines, he is an active consultant for international urban development projects and programs of foreign funding institutions such as World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and UN-Habitat. In the course of his career, he has served as Regional Director for Asia-Pacific of the UN Urban Management Program. He is presently also an adjunct Professor in Urban Management at the University of Canberra in Australia.

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[Tony Abaya Calls Cory Aquino's Ring Dike Ridiculous and Presents Alternatives](#) (Part VI)

I have explained in the second article of this series how the Metro Manila Area was decreed by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1975 and how it was intended to be managed and operated by a superbody called the Metro Manila Commission.

But to refresh especially those who were born after the People-Power Revolution of 1986, Metro Manila Area has 17 local government units, namely: Manila, Quezon, Pasay, Caloocan, Malabon, Navotas, Valenzuela, Marikina

,
San Juan
, Mandaluyong,
Makati
, Taguig, Parañaque, Las Piñas, Pateros,
Pasig
, and Muntinlupa.

Eindeisel explained that as a commission-type organization, the Metro Manila Commission was composed of a Chairman/Governor, Vice Chairman/Vice Governor, and three Commissioners for Planning, Finance, and Operations.

The Commissioner for Planning was responsible for overall development planning including the coordination of sectoral and local-area plans; the Commissioner for Finance's primary task was

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to raise funds, prepare and implement the metro-wide budget and coordinate the budgets of the component local authorities; and the Commissioner for Operations took care of delivering metrowide services and coordinating the activities of component local authorities as well as of national sectoral agencies operating in Metro Manila.

The former MMC planning commissioner said that “while the mayors of the component local authorities formed a council, their role was mainly advisory inasmuch as the M
MC exercised both executive and legislative functions. With the country under Martial Law, local elections had been held in abeyance and the mayors were simply appointed by the President.”

“As can be expected, this spawned serious conflicts between the mayors and MMC,” he added.

Einseidel, however, said that “In spite of these circumstances, the MMC was able to introduce innovations in the planning and management of Metro Manila. Some of its major accomplishments include the establishment of a metro-wide land use plan and zoning ordinance, an infrastructure investments planning programming-budgeting system, and the local government development planning system.”

He further explained that “through partnerships with national government agencies, the MMC caused the implementation of the Metro Manila flood control system, the adoption of on-site upgrading of slums and informal settlements as a national policy, and the construction of

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medium-rise housing throughout the metropolis. It also introduced a coordinated solid waste management system which included the construction and operation of sanitary landfill sites, and a metro-wide traffic management system.”

But Einseidel said that at the end of 1985, or ten years since the creation of the MMC, “the problems of the metropolis remained the same if not more severe.” Caught by the collapse of our national economy a year before, it was apparent that the

MMC

’s capacity could not keep up with the rapid and massive increase in population and urban growth. Aggravating this, the anti-Marcos movement that began with the assassination of former Senator Benigno Aquino, was reaching its peak.

In dismantling the Marcos administration’s foothold, the then President Cory Aquino ordered a government-wide reorganization and that all systems established during the Marcos era be discarded and replaced with new ones.

In February 1986, President Marcos was ousted together with his wife, Imelda. Through the now famous “People Power Revolution,” Corazon Aquino was installed President.

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She immediately focused on restoring democratic processes in the country, including the reinstatement of Congress and the system of local administration that resulted in the return of powers to local governments including those comprising Metro Manila.

Einseidel qualified however, that “in dismantling the Marcos administration’s foothold, she ordered a government-wide reorganization and that all systems established during the Marcos era be discarded and replaced with new ones.

“It also resulted in the elimination of practically all of the positive improvements to metropolitan planning and management that had been earlier introduced.”

Consequently, the MMC was abolished and replaced by the Metropolitan Manila Authority, with the legislative powers over the metropolis given to the Metro Manila Mayors Council, and the executive powers to an appointed Chairman, a General Manager, and the Assistant Managers for Planning, Finance, and Operations.

With the national economy further deteriorating because of President Aquino’s unexplained phobia for foreign loans and investments, the management of Metro Manila during her term stood practically at a standstill.

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Her state of stupor over infrastructure somewhat created a signal of incompetence that encouraged "putchists" to stage coup attempts. As a result, Einseidel noted that hardly any new infrastructure and housing was built, and almost no private investments were made.

Many now bark that Cory Aquino restored democracy to the Philippines. Nobody can deny that, but what she really did was restore the form of government to what it was before martial law, denying the gains of the reengineering of government that Marcos attempted to do.

Magnifying the human rights violations of Marcos during martial law, she demonized her predecessor big time, not discriminating bad from good and in effect dismantling even projects of the past regime that truly served the people like flood control, waste management and rational land use. With the restoration of Metro Manila governance to what it was before 1972, the common good once again took the back seat to turf politics, each mayor to his own.

Thus, Einseidel said "as population and urbanization continued to increase, the backlog in urban services also increased and the overall quality of life in the metropolis further declined."

This was the situation inherited by President Aquino's successor, President Fidel Ramos.

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During President Ramos' term, Congress passed a law abolishing the Metropolitan Manila Authority and replacing it with the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) which exists up to the present.

The law streamlined the metropolitan management system and organizational structure, returning to the component local authorities most if not all the powers that were taken from them by the former MMC. The law also clarified the term "metropolitan-wide" which had caused some controversy between the metropolitan and local government officials, and reduced the metropolitan body's intervention to regional planning and traffic management.

In effect, Einseidel said the law removed from the metropolitan body the functions of local governments and national government agencies, such as housing, garbage collection, and infrastructure development and maintenance.

Another major development during President Ramos' term was the passage of the Local Government Code which strengthened the autonomy of local authorities.

Einseidel pointed out that "this law did not make any distinction between local governments in the country and thus was also applied to those comprising Metro Manila. While it gave these local authorities more powers, the law in essence weakened metropolitan management inasmuch as all major actions by MMDA are subject to review and approval of the Metro Manila Mayors Council."

“At the root of the problem is the fact that the Chairman of MMDA is appointed (by the President) while the mayors of the component local governments are popularly elected. Under the present set-up, the mayors are first and foremost responsible to their own respective constituencies. This is their primary and full-time responsibility, while their involvement in metropolitan affairs is secondary and part-time”, he analyzed.

So where are we now? Presently, the MMDA is widely perceived to be focused only as a super-consultant. Its interventions in metropolitan (or regional) planning is hardly felt except in a few specific project-related instances where MMDA is a member of some inter-agency coordinating body, such as the Pasig River Rehabilitation Council and the Anti-Squatting Task Force.

Editor's Notes: Readers may like to read the following articles in this website's database about the Pasig River and Metro Manila being a low-lying metropolis in these hyperlinks:

[Database for the Pasig River and Other Rivers in RP](#)

[RX for the Pasig River and Other Philippine Waterways \(As Updated\)](#)

[Reinventing New Orleans, Manila and Other Low-Lying Cities \(Part 13 of the Global-Warming Series\)](#)

E in seidel said that “the metropolitan land use plan and zoning ordinance introduced by MMC have been replaced by individual and often uncoordinated local government plans.”

He however said that all are not lost, “Fortunately, the infrastructure investments planning-programming-budgeting system which MMC also introduced has found its way into the guidelines for local governments known as the “Rationalized Planning System” that have recently been promulgated by the national government.

Additionally, the system of local development planning that MMC also introduced in the ‘70s has been adopted and further strengthened by the Local Government Code and the Urban Development and Housing Act.”

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Metro Manila's (and the Philippines') total population continues to increase but at relatively lower growth rates. The gross deterioration of the quality of life is visible in street beggars and unmitigated slums. Hard times have also created a backlog of urban services and the air is one of the most polluted in the world.

I find this good in paper. But for the past ten years, I have been trying to weave in and out of the bureaucracy because the local civil code of Mandaluyong City allows me to build a twelve-storey apartment building in a land my siblings and I own near Epifanio de Los Santos Avenue (EDSA). But if I intend it to be a condominium, the national government's Housing Land Use Regulatory Board would clear only up to four storeys. At one-third the potential, the proposition cannot even break even.

Conflicts and confusion, just like this personal experience of this writer, are not uncommon in Metro Manila. Everything seems to be fine, until you start dealing with government.

Total population continues to increase but at relatively lower growth rates. The gross deterioration of the quality of life is visible in street beggars and unmitigated slums. Hard times have also created a backlog of urban services and the air is one of the most dangerous in the world.

Einseidel observed that “MMDA and the component local governments are faced with serious challenges to effective growth management together with serious financial constraints and inadequate institutional capacity.”

What seems to aggravate matters is the proverbial capacity of the Filipino to engage in destructive polemics.

All over the metropolis, Bayani Fernando, the current chairman of the Metropolitan Development Authority, is lauded by the citizens for his untiring efforts at easing the traffic along EDSA. But he is equally demonized by all the Metro mayors, especially when he announced plans to run for the presidency.

The conclusion of Nathaniel von Eindeisel is that “The conflict between them on matters of metropolitan versus local concerns will likely continue which will be likely addressed by reactive rather than proactive measures.

“Perhaps the solution lies in establishing a system of a special province where the Metro Manila governor is popularly elected, similar to the system in Bangkok, with appropriate powers to override individual mayors on matters affecting the metropolis as a whole.”

Meanwhile, Ondoy has taken its toll and it seems the ordinary people are still busy picking up the pieces. But the crisis enabled all Filipinos to work together for the common good. Amidst the flood, we saw heroic acts becoming commonplace.

I am afraid, however that since the institution, that once brought rhyme and reason for a better quality of life in Metro Manila, has been dismantled before the altar of licentious freedom, the common good would fly out of the window as the Filipino's short memory settles and business becomes usual among politicians. # # #

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