

WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF THE PHILIPPINES*

Proserpina Domingo Tapales

INTRODUCTION

The current thrust toward sustainable development as a strategy for economic growth and societal survival comes at a time when the world has started to be concerned about the untoward depletion of the world's resources used to feed the demands of industrialization. Industrial growth which has propelled the North to its present level of development has been achieved without much regard for sustainability. Following the old growth models, their paradigms did not consider limits in the use of natural resources, the differing needs of diverse communities, the need for social equity, and the necessity of people participation.

Present strategies for sustainable development assure that the fruits of development are reaped not only by this generation but also by future generations. Pearce (1990) stressed that sustainable development is "based on the requirement that natural capital stock should not decrease overtime." The Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, as early as the 1970s, called for "another development," which would be "in harmony with the environment."

This new paradigm of development has been adopted throughout the world, especially in the South, where policy-makers have now become aware that pillage of their ecosystems does not lead to their own development, but contributes to further growth of the North at their expense. In many countries

*Paper presented at the 13th General Assembly and Conference of EROPA held in Tehran, Iran on 31 October-8 November 1993.

of the South, there is an increased awareness that the answers to their problems of poverty, inequality and uneven levels of local development lie in the new model of sustainable development.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE PHILIPPINE CONTEXT

The Philippines has aimed to pursue new strategies to attain sustainable development. As expressed in the Philippine Strategy for Sustainable Development prepared by its Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the strategy has these main features:

- Simultaneously addressing economic and environmental concerns in the planning and decision-making process;
- Improving resource management;
- Self-regulation in the exploitation of natural resources;
- Establishment of protected areas for the conservation of wildlife and ecosystem;
- Rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems;
- Residuals management;
- Integration of population concerns in development planning;
- Rural development, because it has been found that “the rural poor ... are destroyers rather than stewards of the very resources that can liberate them from poverty;”
- Environmental education; and
- People’s participation, especially through volunteer, non-profit organizations (called Non-Governmental Organization or NGOs in the Philippines).

Beyond the *Medium Term Philippine Development Plan* (1992-1998), and the *Philippine Strategy for Sustainable Development* quoted above, what is crucial in the Philippines’ approach is the Local Government Code, landmark legislation enacted in 1991 through Republic Act 7160, which enhances participation at the local level by locally elected officials and by the people themselves.

As stated in the working paper of the LGU/GO-PO/NGO Conference on Partnership for Local Development, the Local Government Code “is a foundation for sustainable development because it transforms local officials into area managers” (1993: 7). Moreover:

Sustainable development stresses democratic decision-making and shared responsibility for the ecosystem, thus, non-governmental entities and the citizens themselves should participate actively in local governance and development. ... SD further stresses that the communities themselves must be the primary managers of the natural resources in their area (Working Papers, 1993: 7).

Local legislative bodies have been given the responsibility of protecting the environment and imposing “appropriate penalties for acts which endanger the environment, such as dynamite fishing and other forms of destructive fishing, illegal logging and the smuggling of logs, smuggling of natural resources products and of endangered species of flora and fauna, slash and burn farming, and other such activities which result in pollution, acceleration of entropication of rivers and lakes or of ecological imbalance.” (Local Government Code, Sec. 468).

Direct people participation is achieved through sectoral representation in local legislative bodies, systems of initiatives and recall, and participation in local special bodies — the local development councils, health boards, school boards, peace and order councils, and people’s law enforcement boards. Except for the election of the sectoral representatives, the other mechanisms have been put in place in many local government units.

The mandate to village level governments (barangays) to provide certain basic services at their level is intended to preserve and enhance cultural diversity as well as to answer to the varied needs felt by the different communities.

In all these grandiose plans, however, the participation of women is merely subsumed under the different forms of representation in special bodies through organized NGOs and POs (people’s organizations). The sectoral representation of

women in the legislative bodies has not been achieved. There is still need to make women visible in the Philippines' strategy of sustainable development.

WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In her classic work *Women's Role in Economic Development* Boserup (1970) decried the negative impact of technological development on women. She said that in sparsely populated regions using shifting cultivation, women do most of the farm work. As the area becomes more densely populated, men do more farm work. In fact, in the urban areas, there are more jobs open for men. In the rural areas, women spend a lot of time "in processing of food before cooking, fetching water or fuel, and collection of vegetables for food." In the urban areas, while modern technology provides women more time for non-domestic work, there is less work available for them outside the home.

Vandana Shiva (1988:3) amplified Boserup's observations:

The displacement of women from productive activity by the expansion of development was rooted largely in the manner in which development projects have appropriated or destroyed the natural resource base for the production of sustenance and survival. It destroyed women's productivity both by removing land, water and forest from their management and control, as well as through the ecological destruction of soil, water and vegetables systems that nature's productivity and reliability were impaired.

She added that women's expertise and role in food production and processing have been displaced with modern know-how "which packs into a plastic bottle the nutrition that third world rural women conserve through their traditional food processing technologies." The image of women is therefore "transformed from being consumers and producers to being consumers and their productive roles in agriculture recede further into invisibility" (Shiva 1988: 112).

Shiva advanced the premise that the feminine principle is in harmony with nature and society. Because of this, women are fighting more than ever against programs and projects which deplete the world's resources and push them into further marginalization as mothers and daughters with responsibilities as food and water providers in the rural areas and as economic providers in the urban areas.

Ecofeminists see the correlation between women's issues and environmental issues, and contend that the pillage of the earth is based on the traditional, patriarchal paradigm, and therefore its salvation lies in an alternative model of development which connects feminism and environmentalism (Plant 1989). Ecofeminism "supports utopian visions of harmonious, diverse, decentralized communities, using only those technologies based on ecological principle, as the only practical solution for the continuation of life on earth" (King in Plant 1989:25).

While ecofeminism academically describes the advocacy by women of policies and programs for environmental protection and sustainable development, women activists in the Third World have been alternately advocating for programs of positive environmental impact and fighting against programs which have negative impacts on their communities, their families, and their lives.

But, as earlier discussed, poverty has forced its victims to be their own culprits against the environment. As Rodda documented, millions of women in India resort to illegal cutting of firewood for their livelihood (Rodda 1991). Peasant women assist their husbands in burning trees to make the soil arable, also for their livelihood. In the urban areas, unsanitary water and surroundings are caused by careless abandon of residents who have little knowledge or little regard for the impact of environmental despoliation on health.

Yet, there are culprits and there are activists. In many parts of the world, women organize to fight against the onslaught on the environment, to make the world safer for this generation and its children. In India, for example, success has been shown by the drought eradication campaign of the Mukti Snagharsh movement

while the Nari Balhim movement in Bengal was formed by women to defend their right to food.

The rest of this paper delves into these issues in the context of the Philippines.

WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines shares many of the problems of the "underdeveloped" world. In addition to these, it has problems of its own.

The 1990 census placed the Philippine population at 65 million, a big jump from the 48.1 million recorded in 1980 (*Philippine Statistical Yearbook* 1990). Males comprise 50.2% while females compose 49.8% of the population. The per capita national income cited in the same census report was a low P13,211. In the same period, it had a negative balance of trade in million US dollars of \$2,598, and a balance of payments of \$451 (*Yearbook* 1990). During the same period, the Philippine poverty line was 49.5%, but keen observers consider this as a low estimate, the more realistic being 70%.

What makes the Philippine case even worse is that it has a debt burden which keeps rising even as it tries to keep its obligation to pay. The debt burden this year is \$34 billion. The biggest chunk in its national budget, in the last few years, has gone to debt service, because a decree issued by President Marcos during the martial law years provides for automatic payment of debts. Despite clamor from the people and some legislators themselves for a debt cap, the government has continued with its policy of keeping its "debt obligations." Thus, the average debt service bill a year cuts into 40% of its annual budget.

Studies on the Philippine debt structure show that the Philippine government went on a debt rampage during the Marcos years, for projects such as integrated area development, infrastructures construction, energy development, etc. The last includes the controversial Bataan Nuclear Power Plant which,

aside from getting the Philippines into an overpriced contract of \$2.2 billion, has been criticized by environmentalists as hazardous not only to marine life but also poses risks to human lives. Due to clamor against its operation, the Aquino government did not operate this white elephant when the new regime came to power.

Nevertheless, to keep its debt service obligations, the Philippine government has embarked on foreign exchange earning ventures like the export of human labor abroad. It has also cut down on certain basic services. Although the 1987 Constitution provides that education should be given the largest share of the budget, debt service continues to get the biggest share of the pie. Thus, education, health and social services which are most important for human development, have been given less priority.

In the meantime, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) faces tremendous problems — “only 115 of Philippine forests are left ... only 114 of Philippine coral reefs are in good condition, and fisheries production has dropped by half as a result of cyanide, dynamite, and other destructive forms of fishing” (Pineda-Ofreneo, 1993). Despite its efforts, DENR still has to make a dent on projects to save the environment.

Another aspect of sustainable development is a sound population policy. The Philippines still has to formulate a definitive population policy. Nevertheless, the Department of Health has become more active in pursuing programs on maternal and child health as well as on family planning, despite active opposition from certain quarters.

All these policies, of course, merely subsume women. Neither the *Mid-Term Philippine Development Plan* nor the *Philippine Strategy for Sustainable Development* make clear-cut references to women's role in development. Even the Local Government Code which provides for sectoral representation for women, has not made headway as far as women's local participation is concerned. Because women are not considered in plans and programs, the effect of these programs on them are unanticipated. Yet, even well-

meaning programs could have ill-effects on women, if they have been planned without regard to gender.

Women's groups have documented the effects of the traditional development paradigm on women. It must be pointed out that, sustainable development strategies notwithstanding, the Philippines continues to pursue aspects of the old development paradigm.

In the island of Leyte, a site for an industrial estate was designated in 1983. The site attracted three big corporations, including a copper smelting plant. A study of Aurora J. de Dios in 1991 showed that families in the vicinity of the copper smelting plant were uprooted because of pollution, which was also blamed to have caused genetic defects on children. The displacement of the families had adverse effects on the women. Whereas they performed important roles in agricultural production before, they could not find jobs in the uplands or in urban centers where they fled. They had to contend with service employment as laundry women or menial service workers. In the port cities, many were reduced to prostitution.

The same plight characterizes women in other rural areas where economic activities shift from agricultural to industrial estates, such as in Calabarzon south of Manila. While development is intended to upgrade the standards of living of the nation's populace, their effect on the people in the development sites tends to be adverse.

Women, who are often neglected in the process of development planning have seen these negative effects on themselves and their families. Many of them have bonded together to fight their degradation.

Some cases have been documented in *Development Dialogue*, 1992. In the town of Silang, province of Cavite, the UGIT, a peasant women's organization, blocked and drove a team of surveyors preparing the way for the construction of urban amenities which would pollute their river systems and destroy the soil. Later they called for a meeting of the village residents and drew up their position against the plan. They brought up their own plan to the *barangay* (village) chairman, who had to take up the issue with government authorities.

In Calabarzon near Metro Manila women also protested. They feared, rightly, that the construction of the industrial estate would displace their poor farming families and push them to upland areas, or to migrate to cities and towns where they, the women especially, face no job opportunities except in the entertainment industry. Aling Masang, a peasant woman, led a group of women and children armed with bolos and stones and formed a human barricade to shoo away the evacuation team.

In a study of gender sensitivity of public works project conducted in 1990-91, Jose and Dolores Endriga found that in rural organizations benefiting their communities, "where women are involved, ... organizations tend to be sustained." In a village in the province of Negros Occidental, they found that a "water and sanitation association composed solely of women was able to provide water as well as lend money to project beneficiaries to fund a few community projects (Endriga and Endriga 1992).

In another project involving rural roads, the Endrigas found that women beneficiaries are employed because the men have gone to more urbanized areas earning for their families. They also found however that the women were underpaid and paid two months late. Nevertheless, because they saw the roads as necessary for the village and a means to make it easier for the men to go to work and return home, the women continued to provide labor for the projects, on top of farming and household activities (Endriga and Endriga 1992).

Briones (1992) said that women in the Philippines have been very receptive to issues of debt and the environment. As members of non-governmental organizations, they "have been organizing cooperatives, managing credit and financing institutions, producing goods and services and trading domestically as well as internationally." Women have been active in issue-based as well as sectoral organizations. Aside from the hundreds of active women's organizations, there are women's groups in other NGOs concerned with livelihood, health, and ecology.

Though women are active in organized activities the government itself should initiate programs and projects geared towards alleviating the plight of women.

The new strategy of sustainable development recognizes that the old paradigm of growth is not beneficial to all sectors of society. The thrust towards environmental protection, decentralization and people participation in communities is intended to solve the unanticipated ills of the old paradigm. Yet, as already shown, vestiges of the old model remain, even as the new model of development is aimed for. Nevertheless, as practiced in many countries, and certainly in the Philippines, gender balance which is one aspect of sustainable development is not achieved. In 1989 the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women succeeded in launching a *Philippine Development Plan for Women*. But the current *Medium Term Plan* has no reference to women in the sections dealing with macro issues. Development projects continue to be planned and implemented without sensitivity to the needs of women and very little to the needs of ethnic communities.

To pay the foreign debt, men and women are sent abroad as contract workers; for some reason, many women come home in coffins or with their ashes in urns; families back home are disrupted. To provide infrastructures for industry, families, even whole villages are relocated. To create industrial estates, families are dislocated. Following the framework of Boserup, it is easier for men to get jobs in urban areas, but women's physical transfer causes them further marginalization.

The strategy of sustainable development recognizes that poverty forces people who are victims of degradation of the ecosystems to become culprits themselves. For instance, forests are burned by landless peasants to use for agriculture. Since poverty has increasingly been feminized as many poor households are female headed, Shiva (1988) said that women are "both victims of and the prime movers against destructive forces." Following the Shiva and Plant formulations, sustainable development must recognize the role of women who traditionally have been keepers and caretakers of nature. Their role as nature keepers has been eroded by the paradigm of industrial development which disregard human need for the ecosystem. Therefore, as the new paradigm is followed, planners and implementors should equally consider the

needs of all sectors of the population, and should use gender analysis at the early stages of the policy process (Balayon and Ofreneo, 1992).

For the Philippines, the task should not be all that difficult. We only have to look back in pre-colonial times when the babaylans who were largely women served as religious leaders, astrologers, healers, and nature keepers. While modernization has changed women's occupations, their inherent capabilities as healers and nature keepers have remained intact. What the government should do is enhance these roles further by including women in the planning and implementation of strategies on sustainable development.

References

- Balayon, Theresa D. and Rosalinda Pineda Ofreneo. "Towards Gender-Sensitive and Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development Programmes in Asia and the Pacific." Paper presented at the ESCAP/UNDP Regional Meeting on the Role of Women in ESSD, Rayong, Thailand, 1992.
- Boserup, Ester. *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970.
- Briones, Leonor M. "Women, Debt and Environment." *Review of Women's Studies*. Vol. II No. 2, 1992.
- Development Dialogue*. Special Issue on Women, Ecology and Health: Rebuilding Connections. 1992. Vol. 1-2.
- Endriga, Jose N. and Dolores A. Endriga. "Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Responsive Development in the Department of Public Works and Highways." Report Submitted to the *National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women*. 1992.
- LGU/GO/NGO Conference on Partnership for Local Development. *Working Papers*. 1993.
- Ofreneo, Rosalinda Pineda. "Women, Debt and Environment: a View from the South." *Review of Women's Studies*. Vol. II No. 2, 1992.
- Pearce, David, et al. *Sustainable Development: Economics and Environment in the Third World*. Billing and Sons, 1990.

Philippines, Republic. *The Local Government Code of 1991* (Republic Act 7160).

_____. *Medium Term Philippine Development Plan*. 1992.

_____. DENR. *The Philippines' Strategy of Sustainable Development*. 1990.

Plant, Judith (ed.). *Healing the Wounds: the Promise of Ecofeminism*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989.

Ruddle, Annabel. *Women and the Environment*. London: Zed Books, 1991.