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Headline: Time to re-engineer Metro Manila

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All year round, we cope with bad air quality, poorly maintained roads, street garbage and outdated public transit in Metro Manila. But when the rains fall, the metropolis literally comes to a halt and reveals how unlivable the city has become.

Rains, floods and the ensuing traffic jams, it turns out, are the great equalizer.

All of this has been a gradual build-up of three converging phenomena (a perfect storm):

The growth of Metro Manila from small city to a megacity in a short 60-year period;

The growth in autonomy and the growing lack of cooperation between and among local governments in Metro Manila; and,

The growing impact and severity of climate change.

Growth of a megacity. Post-World War II (1948) Manila had an urban footprint of only 83 square kilometers. With portions of Caloocan, Pasay, Quezon City, San Juan and Mandaluyong, the total population then was 1.6 million.

In the 1960s, urban expansion included Makati, then considered suburbia. In 1975, the 17 cities and towns were merged into the Greater Manila Area (GMA) covering 636 sq km (less than 0.5 percent of the country's total land mass) with a population of 4.9 million.

By 1995, GMA morphed into Metro Manila, spilling north into Bulacan, east to Rizal and south to Cavite. The urban footprint was 778 sq km; the population 9 million.

By 2010, Metro Manila was the 11th most populous city in the world (11.6 million; 18,650 persons per sq km). The day population, however, including those living outside but working in the metropolis, was almost double (20 million).

And growth will not stop there. By 2015, Metro Manila will become the Greater Metro Manila Area (GMMA) with persons commuting from as far away as south Cavite, the lake towns of Laguna and Rizal, and central Bulacan. The urban footprint will be over 1,512 sq km (50 km north to south and almost 25 km east to west).

Growth in the autonomy of local governments. Up till 1992, the Metro Manila Commission (later Metro Manila Authority) had authority over the 17 cities in MM. The law creating the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) returned powers to the cities, leaving the MMDA with no real authority to coordinate planning and investment.

Since then, the power wielded by the MMDA has been personal rather than institutional. It is as assertive as the personality of the chairman or his closeness to the president. In truth, the MMDA does not have the muscle to even convene the council of mayors.

The result: no long-term planning, much less management of the growth of MM.

Growing impact of climate change. Climate change will be particularly critical for the Greater Metro Manila Area because the metropolis is built on an alluvial, deltaic plain at sea level. The Philippine Imperative on Climate Change predicts that over 60 percent of the metropolis would be submerged permanently if global warming raised the sea level even by only three feet. "This is not a fearless forecast," says Neric Acosta of PICC, "it is a reality check we must confront today."

What should all of this be telling us?

One, the problems of a megacity go beyond LGU jurisdictions.

Two, the problems transcend short LGU terms of office (three years with two possible reelections) and presidential administrations (six years, no reelection).

Three, the problems go way beyond project responses.

We need to seriously re-engineer Metro Manila's infrastructure and living/work arrangements. We need structural reform with four essential elements:

Political power and authority to call the 17 cities to task when necessary;

Professional and technical expertise in urban planning and land-use management to plan for the entire region;

Financial and material resources to manage shared services effectively; and,

Long-term infrastructure investment funds.

The time is ripe to look at the current MMDA structure and to re-engineer it into a regional authority with real political power to look after:

Major circumferential roads (e.g. Coastal Road, Edsa, C-5) planning, design and traffic management;

Garbage disposal (not collection), landfill sites and transshipment facilities; and

Flood control.

A re-engineered MMDA should also take over the following:

(a) The Pasig River rehabilitation program;

(b) Land-use planning, zoning (which all 17 cities must conform to);

(c) Construction of strategic water catchment basins and watershed management for flood control (and water supply);

(d) Takeover of the regional disaster coordinating council for disaster-risk reduction and the climate change-proofing of the metropolis.

None of the cities in Metro Manila can act beyond their political boundaries yet the problems go beyond these boundaries.

None of the cities in Metro Manila have any incentive to think beyond the short terms of office of mayors, yet the problems require long-term investment.

None of the cities in Metro Manila are responsible to each other and yet we all suffer because of this indifference.

A strong regional authority with political power is the solution. Otherwise, Metro Manila will not only be the unlivable megacity it has become, it will destroy value for the entire country in the process.

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