

Headline: Letter from Venice

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VENICE, Nov. 7. My wife and I got here in the afternoon of Oct. 31 by taxi, and promptly got lost.

Marco Polo Airport is on the Italian mainland. The causeway for motor vehicles goes only up to Piazzale Roma, from which it would supposedly take only 10 minutes, crossing two footbridges, for us to walk to our two-star hotel, one of those recommended by the 2012 conference of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS), held in Venice on Nov. 1-4.

The most popular physical exercise of tourists in Venice is bump-dragging a standard 20-kilogram check-in bag, plus cabin bag if any, over the steps of the canal bridges. A canal bridge is actually a double-staircase, of 10-20 steps up, then a landing, and then 10-20 steps down. It's more fun to cross when it's raining.

We turned left instead of right at the foot of our second bridge, and proceeded over two more bridges, in the rain, before concluding we were lost. People gave us conflicting directions, which in hindsight were all correct. The GPS on my wife's iPhone only sent us around in a circle. It took phoning the hotel, another hour, and re-crossing bridges four and three, to finally get there.

In the morning we discovered Venice's acqua alta. In front of the hotel, people were wading in rubber boots through one foot of high water. When I phoned the ISQOLS president (who is from Florence) about the problem, she said not to worry; she was also marooned in her hotel, but the tide would go down in the afternoon, and the program would only start at 3 p.m. anyway.

The tide went down, so we bought rubber boots, and brought them on the walk of 45 minutes (claimed by the hotel to be 20 minutes) to the University Ca' Foscari, the conference site. Naturally, the acqua never again became so alta for the boots to be actually needed in our entire stay; later we donated them to the kind Pinoys who helped us with our luggage. Luckily, the spot most vulnerable to acqua alta, Piazza San Marco, was dry on the day we were able to visit it together.

ISQOLS and Rio+20. ISQOLS is a professional association of researchers dedicated to meaningful depiction of human well-being, i.e., using indicators more reliable than the aggregate value of economic production. Its journals are Social Indicators Research, Journal of Happiness, and Applied Research in Quality of Life.

The 240 participants of the ISQOLS conference found their work reaffirmed by two very important international meetings earlier this year. The first was the June 2012 Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, the best-attended United Nations conference ever. It is called Rio+20 since it follows on the UN Conference on Environment and Development in June 1992, also in Rio.

Rio+20's outcome document, "The Future We Want," starts with a commitment of the heads of state and government and high level representatives who met, with the full participation of civil society, to the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for present and future generations.

It looks like the next statistical buzzword will be Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is whether or not the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are met on schedule in 2015. Setting SDGs does not mean downgrading the top MDGs of lessening poverty and hunger.

Paragraph 2 of "The Future We Want" states: "Eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. In this regard we are committed to free humanity from poverty and hunger as a matter of urgency."

The OECD Forum. The other 2012 meeting of great relevance to ISQOLS was the OECD World Forum, "Measuring Well-Being for Development and Policy-Making," held in New Delhi on Oct. 16-19, just two weeks earlier. It was the fourth in a series under OECD's global project on measuring the progress of societies.

The forum aimed to further discussions on various aspects that make for a good life today and in the future in different countries of the world, and to promote the development and use of new measures of well-being for effective and accountable policy-making.

Special initiatives on measuring progress are ongoing in Australia, Bhutan, China, the European Union, France, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In May 2012, the OECD itself launched a Better Life Index, using indicators in the 11 domains of housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, governance, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance. Australia, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand and Norway are the top five among 34 countries with this index.

It was a pleasant surprise to see the world map flashed by OECD to the ISQOLS conference people with one entry for the Philippines: Social Weather Stations. Perhaps this is because SWS is the only contributor of statistics on the well-being of Filipinos to Wikiprogress.

Let's stop imagining that the foreign exchange rate, the country's credit rating, the remittances of OFWs, and even the rate of economic growth are reliable indicators of Philippine progress. The No. 1 question is still: What's happening to poverty?

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Note: Thanks to recent changes in management at the National Economic and Development Authority and the National Statistical Coordination Board, official Philippine statistics on poverty will be issued annually starting next year.

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