

Headline: Gut realities

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Today the United Nations' Rio+20 summit formally opens in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. About 50,000 people in all have converged on Rio for the conference and its side events. Imagine the words that will spew forth from the leaders and representatives of some 190 countries attending the summit, not to mention the reams of documents and position papers that the world's nongovernment organizations and civil society and political groups will add to the hubbub.

But even before today's opening, perhaps the conference's State of the Planet address, if you will, has already been delivered. In a statement issued on the eve of Rio+20, retired South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, now the global ambassador for Oxfam, a nonprofit organization working to end poverty in 85 countries worldwide, sketched out in stark terms why the conference cannot afford to fail: "We cannot continue to live as we do now. Climate change is threatening food production and creating more extreme weather. Fresh water is drying up. Fertile land is running out. Plants and animals are becoming extinct at alarming rates. Our seas are overexploited. Inequality is increasing as the incomes of the poorest fall even further behind those at the top, and the current economic crisis is pushing millions into deeper poverty. The lifestyles and choices made by the wealthiest threaten all our future security and prosperity, while almost a billion people go to bed hungry every night."

When it first convened in 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (now known as the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20) generated widespread hope and enthusiasm worldwide. "It captured the public's imagination," reported the UK Telegraph, "at a time when people were just waking up to the destruction of the rainforest, the hole in the ozone layer and loss of species."

But 20 years thence, the outlook is grim. The most recent Living Planet Report by the World Wildlife Fund says the environment has gotten much worse. In host country Brazil alone, 30 million hectares of rainforest have been wiped out. Carbon emissions have increased 40 percent worldwide in the last two decades, one in six people remains undernourished, and global demand for natural resources has doubled since 1996—"50 percent higher than the regenerative capacity of the planet." Meanwhile, from the current 7 billion, the global population is expected to rise to 9 billion by 2050. Without a change in the way food, water, energy, economic opportunity and the like are generated and distributed among the world's people, "we may be heading toward the end—the end of our future," warns UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon.

The Philippines need not look far to confirm just how urgent and serious the situation is. The country is in urgent need of rebooting its own economic and social development blueprint, to grapple with realities that include, at gut level, appalling hunger in some 4.8 million Filipino families, or about 1 in 4. Add to crushing poverty such other national ills as homelessness and displacement due to war and economic want, a weak law-and-order environment, continually shrinking forests and watersheds, cities fraying for lack of central planning, and, on top of all these—a dysfunctional political system that, like the larger global setup confronting Rio+20, inordinately tilts toward the rich and powerful.

None of that, however, seems to have made it to the report prepared for Rio+20 by the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (the body formed by then President Fidel Ramos to track and implement the Philippines' commitments under the 1992 conference). The report posted online is

bereft of concrete data showing how the country has held up, if ever, in the last 20 years. But it is brimming with lines like this: "The Philippine Agenda 21 or PA21 ... [has] people and human potential at its core. This emphasis on human development made the Philippine approach ecologically balanced and people-centered, reinforced by the values of peace, social justice, respect for gender, culture, morals and spirituality, participatory democracy, individual freedoms, and holistic science."

The Philippines, in short, appears to be going to Rio with spin. If the country is even half as serious about tackling its deep-rooted problems and, in solidarity with the goals of the world community, finding long-term solutions that will help forge a better, more equitable future for its citizens, then it should ditch the shibboleths and equip itself with something basic: honesty.

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