# Reviving Bicol recovery plan

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A proposal to put up a Bicol Rehabilitation and Recovery Fund (BRRF), with an initial outlay of P20 billion for 2025 to support efforts to rebuild communities devastated by Severe Tropical Storm “Kristine” (international name: Trami) in the region, was put on the table last week by Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Raymund Villafuerte Jr. It is to be a multiyear fund that will finance mainly the revival of the Bicol River Basin Development Program (BRBDP), which President Marcos himself earlier prioritized for review.

Launched in the early 1970s by the late President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., it was a groundbreaking attempt at regional development that was independent of political administrative boundaries. The premise was that economic development throughout a region would ensue by concentrating on an contiguous area with high growth potentials and improve the lives of the people. The Bicol region, comprising mainly four adjoining provinces of Albay, Camarines Sur, Camarines Norte, and Sorsogon, was chosen because it had one of the highest poverty incidences and was then beset by insurgency and political unrest.

Among its main objectives were to raise farm yields through better irrigation, drainage, water management, and general farm practices; construction of new road and flood-control systems; raise private sector investments, and enhance local government support of health, nutrition, and population programs.

## Continuity of the program

However, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a major partner of the government in the program, had early in the program’s implementation sensed the early signs of a creeping problem that eventually led to the BRBDP’s doom. In its Project Impact Evaluation Report No. 28 released in 1982, it noted that “sustainability of the [program] will depend on the success with which farmer participation is further encouraged, on farmers’ productivity rising sufficiently to offset their higher costs of production, and on creative new leadership and a fresh mandate for the [Bicol River Basin Development] Program Office in addressing ‘second generation’ as well as lingering ‘first generation’ problems in the region.” In short, the issue was the continuity of the program, no matter who would get elected national and local officials in all the local government units that comprise the Bicol region.

The Bicol recovery fund proposal is therefore critical because Bicol today remains one of the poorest regions in the country and a perennial victim of the typhoons that pass through the Philippines each year and the lesson learned from the BRBDP.

## ‘Negative growth’

Given the President’s backing and the House of Representatives’ support for the BRRF proposal of Villafuerte, the Senate may as well give the go-ahead to providing an initial funding of P20 billion under the 2025 national budget to get the program rolling.

As a side note, the comment of the German green foundation Heinrich Böll Stiftung, in its article titled “Climate Change and Disasters in the Philippines” dated Jan. 21, 2022, aptly sums up what has been the playbook during a disaster. “Despite the calamities, its leaders still romanticize ‘resiliency’ among the people … [B]and-aid solutions are the most likely response in disaster-prone areas,” it said. Despite the existence of environmental laws and building codes that can withstand extreme situations, it lamented that these are “useless due to corruption.”

The fact that the Bicol region has remained impoverished through the decades is another timely wake-up call for Bicolanos in the midterm election in May 2025. Earlier data from the National Economic and Development Authority showed that between 1975 and 2018, some regions managed to increase their gross regional domestic product over a span of slightly more than four decades. In contrast, it noted that Bicol saw a troubling trend of “negative growth,” with a decline from 3.5 percent in 1975 to just 1.8 percent in 2018.

## Sustainable development

Come election day next May, Bicolanos are well advised to pick politicians who have the welfare of the residents, and not their pockets, at heart. Only these individuals can help ensure that the proposed fund to revive the BRBDP will be used for its intended purposes. Their future depends largely on themselves.

The USAID 1982 assessment report in fact mentioned a local mayor, whom it did not identify, commenting on the BRBDP. After pointing out various problems of one delayed project against a background of much premature hoopla, the USAID mission said the local mayor concluded with good-humored irony: “I’m happy to have shown you around, to show you what a big joke this project is. But the bigger joke is on us, on me for being here, and especially on you for coming all the way from Washington, D.C., to see it!” The USAID team disagreed with this opinion, but it is worth emphasizing that politicians of this type are not the people that Bicolanos need to lead them to a sustainable development path.