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ADDRESSING THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS IN A COLLECTIVE FASHION

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Abstract

The population of the Philippines, at the annual growth rate of 2.36%, reached 80 million in 2003 and is expected to double within 29 years if this rate does not decline. While the model of demographic transition predicts that all countries would, over time, go through the four demographic transition stages, it is recognized that the Philippines is now in a demographic crisis that needs urgent solution to ensure survival of future generations. The paper describes the current realities regarding population pressures in terms of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, environmental degradation, land conversion, urbanization, low economic growth and increasing overseas employment of Filipinos. The need for a relevant population policy that integrates the variables of population, health and environment is underscored. The paper describes the proposed Integrated Population and Development Act filed in the Congress of the Philippines.

Key words: population policy, demographic crisis, Philippines

Introduction

A scientific community acknowledging a demographic crisis in existence in our country would send a very strong signal to society and to our government leaders and draw reactions or actions from their end.

Official data show that in a span of only five years, the population of the Philippines grew by 7.7 million, from 68.8 million in 1995 to 76.5 million in 2000. This year, we acknowledge to have reached roughly 80 million. Our population growth rate is 2.36% per year, which means that the population doubling time will be within 29 years if the rate does not decline.

The model of demographic transition proposed in the 1940s described the stages in the relationship between birth and death rates and the overall change. The growth in the population due to changes in the birth and death is called the natural rate population growth. This model of demographic transition predicts that a population's mortality and fertility would decline as a result of social and economic development. It further predicts that all countries would, over time, go through four demographic transition stages, namely: Stage 1: Pre-industrialization: Stable Population Growth; Stage 2: Rapid Population Growth; Stage 3: Continued and Decreasing Population Growth; Stage 4: Stable Low Population Growth.

At the moment, some consider the Philippines to be in the second stage, that is, rapid population growth. While we may agree with some theorists that population trends will eventually solve their problems, say 15-20 years from now, *we cannot help but recognize that at the moment, we are in a crisis, a crisis that requires urgent solution, if we are to survive and ensure the survival of future generations.*

The Realities

Population momentum makes it a certainty that we will have a young population in the next three decades. In 1995, about 38% of our people were below 15 years, 23% were adolescents (10-19 years old), and 20% were considered youth (15-24 years). The contraceptive prevalence rate was 49% in 2002 in comparison with other countries, which have over 60%. In contrast, Filipino women's desired fertility rate is 2.7 against the actual 3.4.

Population and poverty variables appear to be closely associated. The 2000 level of 76.5 million population continues to grow at a fast pace. At the same time, the proportion of 15.3 million households below the poverty threshold also continues to increase in proportion to the total population. Poverty incidence was estimated at 40% or approximately 32 million individuals in 2000.

The number of unemployed has increased to 13.9% and there are one million working children aged 5-17 years old. A total of 15.6 million children are malnourished. While the percentage of families with children aged 6-12

years old enrolled in elementary school decreased from 91.1% in 1998 to 83.9% in 1999.

Because of the increasing population and intense exploitation of the environment, the various ecosystem and critical resources have been facing serious, if not worsening levels of natural resource depletion and environmental degradation. Among the problems in environmental resources associated with increasing population are: (a) deforestation, (b) agricultural land conversion, (c) soil erosion, (d) solid waste accumulation, (e) water crisis, (f) marine pollution, and (g) fishery resource depletion.

Land conversion activities in the country continue to transform the agricultural lands into residential and industrial sites. Most of these activities were noted in Regions III and IV where industrial expansion takes place due to their proximity to Metro Manila. In the CALABARZON area, out of 11,600 hectares of converted agricultural lands, 44% have been used as commercial and industrial sites, and another 36% for residential purposes. Of the total agricultural lands converted, 50% were rice lands.

As a result of rapid conversion, self-sufficiency in food production becomes a major issue. The increasing scarcity of arable lands for food production could further exert pressure on the already degraded uplands. Many farmers have converted portions of our forests to farm sites, and their farming practices have contributed considerably to the degradation of forested areas. Not only is this conversion detrimental to supply and ecological balance but it also deprives potential beneficiaries of the land reform law the opportunities of owning lands.

The low economic growth of the past decade has deepened poverty in many parts of the country. Limited opportunities in the less developed areas of the country and the increasing constraints in the more developed areas are major factors that have influenced the movement of people since the 1920's.

Today, urban problems are so acute that they are no longer viewed as mere local government problems but as major sub-regional and national concerns. We have about 230 urban areas with populations exceeding 50,000,000. These include Metro Manila and Metro Cebu, which are counted as single metropolitan areas and not as multiple local jurisdictions. The number of urban areas is expected to increase as new cities and urban clusters are formed around older settlements. A 2000 World Bank study estimates that by 2020, the Philippines may have at most 600 urban centers. Thus, we are classified among the world's fastest urbanizing countries. Urban areas grew by 5% between 1980 and 1990.

On the other hand, we are the second largest labor-sending country in the world, next to Mexico. On the average, about 2,500 Filipinos leave the country everyday and about 10% of our population is classified as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) distributed in 182 foreign countries.

Is There a Solution to this Crisis?

According to a book published this year by the Philippine Center for Population and Development (PCPD) entitled *The Ties that Bind: Population and Development in the Philippines,* "Research has never proven a direct link between poverty and population growth; it would be misleading to assume that one directly depends on the other. We cannot discount the other factors like political shocks or external economic conditions, which add to the poverty problem, but we also cannot discount what research calls the 'mutually reinforcing' relationship between the two that traps communities and families in poverty."

It says further, "If population growth is complemented by higher level of agricultural output, accessible education and is supported by a framework of responsive government policies and programs, then it can serve as a catalyst for growth by providing a strong labor force that can drive the economy forward. But when population growth goes beyond what the domestic economy can absorb and provide for, the result can be a widening of the poverty gap.

Still, one does not necessarily cause the other, and same research contends that 'slower population growth creates the POTENTIAL to increase the pace of aggregated economic growth,' which in turn widens the scope of the debate –population growth does not just affect the poorest of the poor but the citizens of the nation. In a world of limited resources, everyone is affected by the reallocation, and shrinkage, of the proverbial pie."

The Proposed Integrated Population and Development Act

What can we therefore do? Many of the policy recommendations call for additional funding while others require the most costly–**political will**. Both will arguably be difficult to come by in the near future, and thus many of the proposals suggest focusing on getting the most from the current limited resources.

For my part as a member of congress, I have filed Senate Bill 791 or the Integrated Population and Development Act. I understand that this measure is now due for floor deliberations at the House of Representatives, House Bill 6123. My bill is geared towards a new population policy that integrates the variables of population, health and environment into a holistic development, planning and implementation at the national, sub-national and local levels. While there is no doubt on the inherent interrelationship between and among population, health environment, and development in general, there is less agreement on the need for policy and programs in our government that would integrate and address these issues. There is no debate that overpopulation puts a strain on the government to provide the essential basic services, including food, housing an education, yet, we witness apathy in our society towards this issue.

The rational for an integrated population and development act mandates *the state to promote a just and dynamic society order that shall ensure the prosperity and free the people from poverty through policies that provide adequate social services, promote full employment, a rising standard of living and improved quality of life for all.*

Further, the State must protect and advance the right of the people to a balanced and healthful ecology in accord with the rhythm and harmony of nature.

Towards this end, the state shall ensure sustainable development and guarantee human rights. As such it shall recognize the dynamic interrelationships of population, development and environment through their integration national and local policies, programs, strategies and plans including the appropriation, allocation and mobilization of resources at all levels."

The realization of human potential is therefore central to this proposed measure with a general objective that "*the State shall create an enobling environment where population, development and environment-sensitive policies are inextricably linked instrument for the realization of a healthy, educated, and empowered people. The State shall also prioritize human development, promote human dignity and respect human rights, including the right to development.*"

We recognize that human beings are, and should be at the centers of concerns for sustainable development. And the right to development is a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights, and human person is the central subject to development. The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet the population, development and environment needs of the present and future generations.

With this proposed Integrated Population and Development Act in place, we envision a better and responsive government and society that will put a paramount consideration to people, health and environment in undertaking major development office.

A Challenge

To all the academics and professionals who are more capable of understanding the implications of rapid papulation growth of human development, you must take part in arousing the complacency of our leadership into taking more serious and sustained measures at addressing our crisis. Individually, we can help in this endeavor by reproducing responsibly and rearing our children to become responsible citizens. Collectively, we can raise our voice so that the unenlightened of our society will be awakened to the fact that we have a nagging demographic crisis that should be addressed with comprehensive solutions transcending religious, social and political biases.

The time to act is now.