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Bioregional planning

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PLANNING offices are regular features of provinces, cities and municipalities in the Philippines. These offices are mandated to chart the growth of their respective local governments and at the same time provide contingencies during crisis. But there are development issues that straddle across boundaries, giving birth to regional planning to effectively address concerns that are not exclusive to one local government. Regional planning has thus become a venue for sharing ideas, resources and actions so common problems can be attended to collectively.

However, recent environmental phenomena caused by climate change – like the flood that hit Iloilo City and neighboring municipalities – showed that regional planning may not just be enough to manage growth. In this era where the environment directs what development path communities should take, there is a need to look beyond political regions and start acknowledging that we don't just live in cities, municipalities and provinces but also in watersheds, ecosystems and ecoregions.

The Tigum-Aganan watershed, for example, is not just an area found in the mountains but extends down to the hills of Maasin, Alimodian and Leon, the plains of Cabatuan, Janiuay, Santa Barbara, San Miguel and Pavia and exits along the shores of Iloilo City and Oton. A watershed, per se, is not just a forested area but a



continuum of three environments – the mountains, the lowlands and the coast. All these three make up what scientists call a bioregion, thus giving birth to a concept known as bioregionalism.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) describes a bioregion as a land and water territory, the limits of which are not defined by political but the geographical boundaries of human communities and ecological systems.

Planning, therefore, should no longer be confined to a local government or a cluster of local governments, but should shift towards looking at a bioregion. In other words, planning should now be closely related to nature. Advocates of bioregionalism says that planning should take an all-embracing approach where the sustainable development challenge is addressed in an integrated and holistic, and not one where issues are dealt with separately – like environmental issues are dealt with by environmentalists, economic issues by economists and social issues by social scientists.

Over the past decade, we have seen the emergence of the Metro Iloilo alliance as a regional planning platform to address urban growth issues affecting Iloilo City and the neighboring towns of Leganes, Oton, Pavia, San Miguel and Santa Barbara. Agreeing to work on certain areas of collaboration, it has expanded the alliance to include Guimaras, having shared the same interest in the area of tourism development with the island-province, forming the Metro Iloilo-Guimaras region.

This governance model was found to be working well for man-made phenomena like urban sprawl, traffic congestion, solid waste mismanagement, sanitation inadequacy and poor infrastructure, among others. However, a value shift has to be made in addressing natural phenomena like flood, drought and food insufficiency. And it is here where bioregional planning can come in.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) says “bioregional planning refers to land-use planning and management that promotes sustainable development by recognizing the relationship between, and giving practical effect to, environmental integrity, human well-being and economic efficiency within a defined geographical space, the boundaries of which were determined in accordance with environmental and social criteria.”

An existing model for bioregional planning is the Tigum-Aganan Watershed Management Board (TAWMB) which is composed of Iloilo City, Iloilo province, the towns of Alimodian, Cabatuan, Maasin, Pavia, San Miguel, Santa Barbara and Oton, the Central Philippine University, the Metro Iloilo Water District, the National Irrigation Authority, the Philippine Information Agency, the Iloilo Province Irrigators Association, Kahublagan sang Panimalay Foundation and the Katilingban sang mga Pumuluyo sa Watershed-Maasin.

But a challenge that is facing the watershed management board is how to make each of its constituency contribute towards the achievement of its objectives. Currently, members consider their participation to be purely voluntary. What they don't understand is that they are part of the watershed, and there should be no more volunteers here. Everyone has to be foot soldiers fighting a war.

Or maybe perhaps, the platform for participation, or one which encourages participation, for bioregional planning was not fully established. For any plan to be successful, including a bioregional plan, it must be developed in a participatory manner so each stakeholder will ensure its full implementation and realization. Once it achieves its goals, stakeholders become co-owners of its fruits.

The Global Biodiversity Strategy, which was drafted by the IUCN, UNEP and several other international organizations, prescribes fundamental objectives and supporting actions to establish a framework for bioregional planning. These include creating institutional conditions to promote bioregional planning, incorporating biodiversity into the management of all biological resources, and soliciting private sector support for bioregional conservation initiatives.

As the devastating June 21 flood starts to fade from the memory of the people, steps has to be taken to promote bioregional planning so that the effects of cruel natural phenomena that may again come can be cushioned and minimized. Institutions like the Metro Iloilo-Guimaras Economic Development Council (MIGEDC) and the Tigum-Aganan Watershed Management Board (TAWMB) should start sharing ideas and actions to address much larger issues.

The flood has shown us that as far as nature is concerned, the boundaries of our barangays, municipalities, cities and provinces do not exist at all. Nature recognizes only the boundaries that it has set, and it is these boundaries that we must demarcate so we can chart the future of those living in an ecological system. And the answer to this is bioregional planning.