

Chapter 2

The Philippines: Understanding the Economic and Ecological Crisis

The Philippines experiences frequent earthquakes and typhoons, due to its location on the western rim of the Pacific Ring of Fire, a U-shaped series of more than 450 volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean that trace an arc along the coasts of South America, North America, Asia, and Australia. Just off the coast of Vietnam and China, south of Taiwan, and north of Borneo and Indonesia, in the South China Sea, it consists of, approximately, 7100 islands. The Philippines has a total landmass of 115,124 mile², 298,170 km², and current estimated population of 100,096,496 people (Worldometers 2015).

In the twenty-first century, the Philippines ranks number two in the world for being a country most at risk to climate-related disasters (World Risk Index 2014). Over the years, the islands have become more vulnerable and less prepared to deal with and prevent typhoon related disasters. Climate change is precipitating a new wave of super typhoons that are increasing in magnitude and occurring more frequently and unexpectedly from different pathways than before. Also, however, in large part, climate change related disasters are caused by mal-development practices and the misuse of local resources that continues to eradicate the once ecologically and biologically rich protective forest cover that, in the past, better buffered local communities from strong winds, waves, and rains. The natural and organic fertility of the soils in the earlier, by-gone, ecosystem had more deeply rooted plants and trees that played an immensely important role in preventing disasters from typhoons. Deep roots of plants and trees help to keep the soils in place, which effectively prevents flash floods and landslides, during the typhoon season. Before colonialism and modern day globalization-and neo-liberalization, the Philippines, as a whole, was better prepared to successfully adapt to weather changes.

Historically, before Spanish colonialism, the Philippines were interlinked into a pan-Asian trade network. It is well documented that Arabs, Indians, Javanese, Siamese, Sumatrans, and Chinese traded with the islanders in pre-colonial times (Nadeau 1995, pp. 44–45 and references cited). Colonization by Spain (1565–1898), the United States (1898–1946), Japan (1942–1945) and, later, the dominant Filipino elite, resulted in the total demise of the earlier tributary economy, incipient rise of

mercantile capitalism, and continued the penetration of the modern day neoliberal capitalist economy in the Philippines. The earlier economy existed in opposition to capitalism. It was based on use-value as opposed to exchange value. Surplus was produced, but only in the sense of an excess of goods normally used for consumption being set aside for appropriation and circulation; surplus circulated on the basis of its use value (tribute) rather than exchange value (sale for profit). The pre-Hispanic Philippines hosted a rich and lush tropical forest teeming with wild life and-aqua marine and riverine life forms. IBON Databank and Research Center (2006, p. 4) reports, at least, 90% of the pre-Hispanic Philippines was covered with forest. The sudden reduction of trees resulted from the Spanish colonizers cutting logs to build ships for the Galleon Trade, churches, and forts. The tearing down of forests also made way for the plantation system-and large-scale agricultural production of crops such as fast growing trees, sugar cane, rubber trees, oil palms, pine-apples, bananas, and other fruits for commercial purposes. By the time Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States only some 70% of the country still had a forest cover (Bautista 1990).

However, Reynaldo Raluto (2015, p. 25), who is partially credited for this discussion of the denuding of the Philippine forests, explains that the sudden and most dramatic reduction of woods came about when the United States colonized the Philippines. The American colonial government designated some 84% of the country's forests as part of the public domain, without regard for the local people, whose identities and livelihoods were intertwined with the life flow and creatures of the wilderness and its rivers and seas. The American colonial forest policy was to rapidly and mindlessly cut as many trees as possible for export and sale on the international market. The colonial government, explains Raluto, was mainly interested in cutting hardwoods, especially mahoganies, to meet the high demand for hardwood that was fueling the construction industry in the United States. Within a short span of 20 years, between 1900 and 1920, the remaining Philippine forests covered only 60% of the total landmass. The American colonial government then began to issue Timber License Agreements to private corporations and individuals, who were given exclusive logging rights to large forested areas for 25 years, renewable for another 25 years. Rather than replanting tree seedlings afterwards, the colonial government opened the cleared spaces up for homesteaders to farm. The American colonial administration offered to give away to disgruntled and potentially rebellious landless laborers, who together with their families, had been displaced and disenfranchised by the introduction of capitalist agricultural production on the northern island of Luzon, and elsewhere, a piece of land to homestead for 'free' on the southern island of Mindanao, which was undergoing rapid deforestation and so-called development. However, these land grants for homesteaders came with the cost of pushing the original local indigenous people and Islamic communities off their ancestral and ancient lands. This initial taking away of the land from the local indigenous and Islamic communities in Mindanao, by giving it away to in-coming Christian homesteaders, has been a leading source of a long and tumultuous history of conflicts between Muslims and Christians, which is not based on religion, into the twenty-first century. By 1950, the Philippine forests were reduced to 50% of the

total landmass. Raluto (2015, p. 26) documents that this drop falls below the minimum threshold of 54% forest cover needed by a mountainous country to maintain an ecologically habitable environment.

During the postwar years (1950–1973), big logging concessions became more technologically advanced and systematically cut the remaining forests. According to the *United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization*, in 1963, only 40% of the Philippines' total land area was covered in forest. Then, the dictator, President Ferdinand Marcos (1965–1986), gave out Timber License Agreements to reward his cronies. Although he temporarily banned logging in 1975, in response to the increase in landslides and natural disasters that were occurring when heavy winds and rains swept across the country, this was short-lived. His cronies complained, so Marcos gave in by reinstating a Selective Timber License Agreement that gave him the power to selectively allow those in favor, to continue large-scale logging and mining operations. Many of the human and environmental tragedies that happened, during the Marcos era, then as now, could have been avoided if development practices were regulated. Tragedies caused whenever mudslides flow quickly down bare hills, over the surrounding communities, could be easily prevented, if investment agents and developers were not allowed to rambunctiously bulldoze the mountains and hills of vegetative cover, while dislodging human communities from their land and livelihoods. The rapid depletion of forested areas continues to seriously concern today's environmentalists and conservationists. The Philippine wilderness areas with ecologically diverse and wild animal, insect, and plant species are in danger of becoming totally extinct. They continue to be destructively diminished by on-going legal and illegal logging and mining concessions that pollute the environment and cause violent conflicts over land rights. The forests also are disappearing as a result of the increase in tree plantations, especially palm oils, and overpopulation (Butler 2014). This on-going clearing away of everything green in the Philippines is aggravated and encouraged by current unsustainable construction and mal-development trends. Remaining green zones around cities and towns are being cleared faster, of all vegetative life, as new housing suburbs and fancy gated communities, with large areas of rolling golf courses and recreation resorts for the better off, are becoming increasingly popular in a contemporary Philippines that is, at the same time, stricken by poverty and oppression, water, land, and air pollution. The national capital of Metro Manila, for the most part, is nearly treeless, and what little green areas remain are covered in soot, as mega shopping malls, old historic buildings, new skyscrapers, and makeshift housing structures keep rising upwards with air conditioner boxes, protruding from windows, over bare, congested, and badly polluted thoroughfares. The present Philippines no longer exports hardwood on the international market. During the last decade of the previous twentieth century, Nadav (1994) reported that there were no significant mahogany and hardwood forests left. The *Philippine Forest Management Bureau* and the *World Food and Agricultural Organization* estimates that the once rich forests now cover less than 24% of the country's total land area. As Raluto (2015, p. 4, 27) rightly argues, the on-going destruction of the last remaining forests and poverty are the real culprits that place the Philippines in danger of climate change disasters.

Currently, many local citizens live in extreme conditions of abject poverty. In 2006, the archipelago's official poverty rate stood at 33% but in rural areas the poverty rate stood at 46% and 71% of all poor people living in rural areas (World Bank 2010). The rural population is heavily dependent upon subsistence aquaculture and subsistence agriculture and 50% of those engaged in the former live in poverty while 44% of those engaged in the latter live in poverty (DENR Climate Change Office 2010). These people have livelihoods requiring access to natural resources, such as fertile soil and clean water, and environmental deterioration will diminish their ability to meet their basic needs; as Broad and Cavanagh (1994, p. 814) wrote:

To live, poor people eat and sell the fish they catch or the crops they grow- and typically those who manage to subsist in this way do so with very little margin. Natural resource degradation often becomes a threatening crisis- a question of survival

There is a strong link between poverty and environmental degradation, which makes poor people more vulnerable to climate-change related disasters. Consider, for example, the Municipality of Governor Generoso, in Davao Oriental, which has 45,000 people living on only 7000 km² of land suitable for agriculture (De La Cerna 2005; interview). In Governor Generoso, 58% of the people live in poverty and the population overwhelmingly consists of subsistence farmers and subsistence fishers. As Jerry De La Cerna, Mayor of Governor Generoso from 2004 to 2007, stated, "We get our bread from the ocean and we get our bread from the land; we should protect the ocean and we should protect the land" (De La Cerna 2005; interview). Any form of environmental degradation that disrupts access to natural resources will thrust the poor from subsistence into destitution. Poverty and environmental degradation combined puts the poor at greater risk than better off people, by making them more vulnerable to experiencing the direct impact of disasters when climate change related calamities happen to occur.

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