

60 years of PRRM

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PRRM did not go to the countryside to disperse buffalos though that's not necessarily a bad thing. PRRM did disperse buffalos and other farm animals but it went to the countryside for nobler reason---the liberation of the peasant from poverty and oppression. It sought to do this through mass education and mass movement.

By 2012 PRRM will have spanned a period running in parallel to the postwar development history of the Philippines. It was founded in 1952 during the administration of President Magsaysay, called "Man of the Masses". PRRM peaked in the 1960s, declined in the late 1970s through to the 1980s, and rebounded after the 1986 EDSA revolution.

PRRM's founders were a motley group of prominent educators, journalists, politicians, industrialists and bankers led by Dean Conrado Benitez of the University of the Philippines (also co-founder of the first women's university in Asia). The *guru* was Dr. Yen, born to a Chinese family of scholars, educated at Yale and one of ten awardees of the Copernicus Citation for outstanding "modern revolutionaries". PRRM is part of a global south family of RRM's in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Development work, as we know it now, is not much different from Dr. Yen's Ting Hsien experiment in China in 1919. This experiment brought us the four-fold approach to rural reconstruction (education, livelihood, health and self-government) addressed to the interlocking problems of illiteracy/ignorance, poverty, disease and civic inertia commonly plaguing feudal China and much of the developing world.

So much has changed in the past six decades, but many things remained the same. One of the villages where PRRM started, Nangka, Marikina, a short biking distance away from old Manila, is hardly recognizable now from how it was before. Probably two-thirds of Filipinos would soon be city inhabitants. The future is urban, so it's said. Most of humanity will soon be urbanites. Will this mean the end of rural reconstruction? Why would PRRM choose to stick it out in the rural?

Rural won't disappear with urbanization. It's probably our saving grace from the seamy sides of modernization. Cities cannot sustain without the rural. As we recognize what's positive in cities---like density of interaction and services, optimal use of space, technology---we likewise see the positive in rural---*bayanihan* (voluntary cooperation) and community spirit, culture of conservation, caring for nature.

Like money, cities are one of the most creative of human inventions. Cities facilitate and make for the most intense human interaction. They are the exchange spaces where people are linked by a dense network of homes, workshops, schools and cultural centers, and other human artifacts. Through this network people are enabled to facilitate sharing

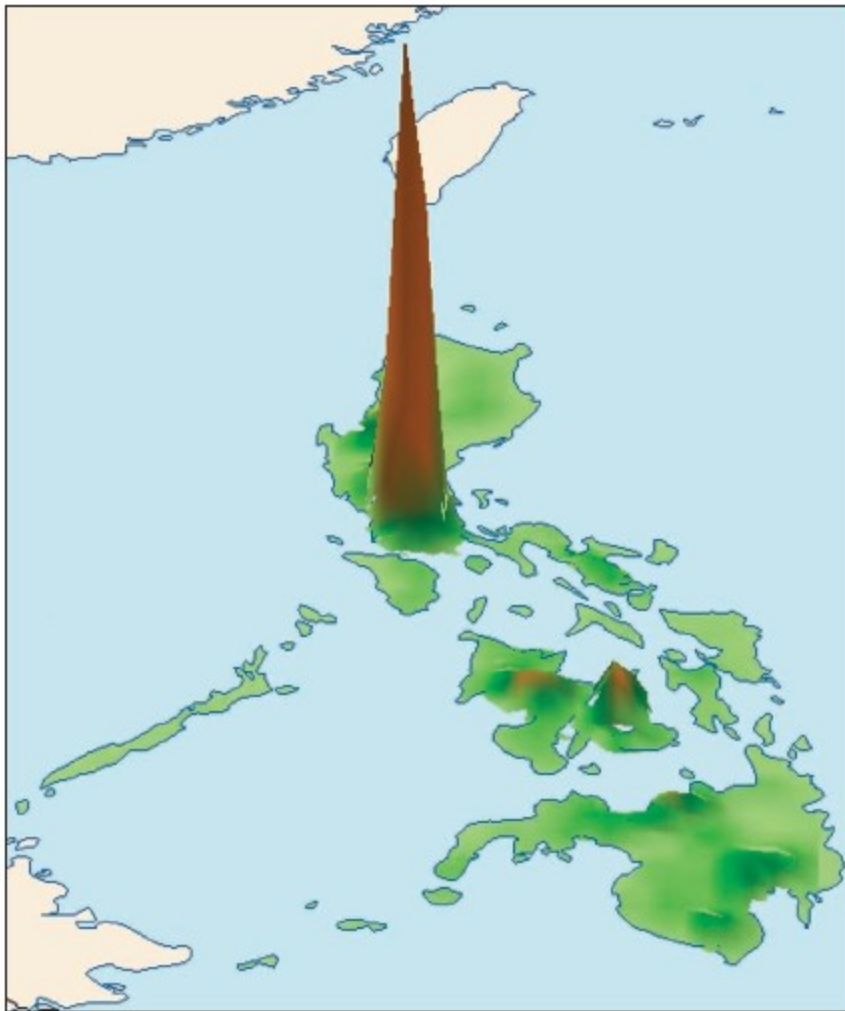
of information, build friendships and solidarity, trade goods and services, encounter different cultures and traditions without having to travel far.

Cities contribute to stabilizing the carrying capacity of a country. Imagine a future mega city like Metro Manila. Right now one of seven Filipinos lives here. Cities do us a great favor by accommodating so many in a small land area and freeing up a vast space for the rest of the population. If other existing and emerging cities go the same way as mega Metro Manila, there should be enough space for agriculture, protection and conservation areas, and human settlements in the countryside.

But cities, as in the Philippines, are also an icon of stark inequality. It represents wealth concentration by class, by region.

The country's economic geography (Figure 1) illustrates highly uneven development and unequal distribution of created wealth. Big cities suck up most of the resources. It is no wonder therefore why small savings deposited in faraway rural banks end up eventually in big banks in Metro Manila and then lent to big borrowers who prefer to invest in already highly-developed areas.

Figure 1 Economic density in the Philippines, 2007



Source: World Bank 2009b.

Note: Expressed in terms of gross regional domestic product (GRDP) per square kilometer.

And rural reconstruction is not about developing rural into urban.

The term “rural reconstruction” meant at least two things. One was with reference to postwar recovery. Dr. Yen used it first to describe the movement he started in China after his turning-point experience in Europe during the first world war. The term was used in the post-WW II US-Sino Joint Commission of Rural Reconstruction (JCRR)---a major China project similar to the Marshall Plan for Europe, with Dr. Yen as one of the co-authors---intended to prevent the communist takeover of China. The World Bank was born of reconstruction, too.

The other meaning suggests a worldview. Dr. Yen’s scenario of transformation begins from a baseline of inequality moving towards equality. The world to be changed is divided between the rich one-fourth (city, developed or ‘the haves’) and the poor three-

fourths (rural, backward or ‘the have-nots’). The change is brought about through a mass education movement and manifests as change in values and behavior. It’s not class struggle or violent revolution. Dr. Yen saw the strategic role of the rural reconstruction movement in closing the equity gap and in enabling people and nations to catch up with modernization. To use another Yen metaphor, from peasant to farmer.

For the PRRM founders democracy was assumed as the preferred order. The task of PRRM is to bring democracy to rural villages, to the grassroots.

There was no indication in the past PRRM literature of questioning the linear path of development that plunged the country from one crisis to another and the classes and regimes responsible for them.

The problems confronted by PRRM in the 1950s are still very much with us today, suggesting that development as usual is not working. Whether and how rural reconstruction can offer a way out is yet to be seen and proven in a big way.

