

# Giving the Earth Charter a Local Habitation and a Name in The Philippines



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In March 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development drew the world's attention to the "trends that the planet and its people cannot long bear: the failures of development and the failures of environmental management." Out of the two failures emerged the apocalyptic twins that threaten the very survival of the planet:

persistent poverty and environmental destruction. The Philippines stands out as a dramatic victim of these deadly twins. The country's present plight might be the planet's future. At the same time, in the Filipino people's deep and continuing involvement in the composing of the Earth Charter and in the carrying out in practice of its principles, the world may also view the model for the intellectual revolution, the moral transformation, and the institutional changes that mark the path to recovery.

The Philippines is a microcosm of all the major issues of the planet: poverty, environmental crisis and, social conflict. The root cause of these problems – the disastrous impact of an inappropriate theory and strategy for development – is nowhere more starkly viewed than in a country of fragile islands. The delicate balances of nature – the genesis of the Philippine cosmos and the Filipino's habitat, its internal balance, the evolution of man, and the human community in this country – are a cameo of the planetary process.

The Laws of Nature and the processes of her settlements are sharply depicted in this archipelago, as are the pathologies to which she is subject. A territory of seven thousand islands, formed over one hundred fifty million years of geological, volcanic, and biophysical processes on which originally a few hundred tribes dwelt in a lifestyle of harmony with their habitats, was brought into the Western historical

stream by a Spanish invasion and colonization in the sixteenth century. Four hundred years of Spanish civilization transformed these tribes into the Filipino nation of mainly Christian and Muslim faiths. Nearly a half-century of American colonization brought individualism and its modern enterprise culture.

An archipelago in the tropics has vulnerabilities peculiar to it. Made up not only of thousands of islands but also of thousands of micro-ecological niches which, over a period of several million years, by a process of selection, the Filipino archipelago species of flora and fauna have adjusted. Because of the multiplicity of those niches, there is a tendency to have a multiplicity of species and subspecies of both flora and fauna, but with relatively few individuals in each one. The worst possible force to release on the Filipino's island habitat were the waves of development interventions driven by single-purpose, sector-specialized entrepreneurs pursuing dreams of amassing personal wealth from the exploitation of nature. These interventions drew their scientific and ethical justification from the intellectual and ideological baggage of the eighteenth and nineteenth century revolutions in Europe and America.

Modern technology put tremendous physical power in the hands of man before it raised his awareness and his ethic to a level where he would use the power wisely. The self-seeking, profit-maximizing, achievement-driven class of

so-called entrepreneurs, who raped the environment, marginalized, and alienated great masses of the people, was glorified as the heroes of present day society. Their virtues were proclaimed. Over four generations, theirs were the values the youth were taught to glorify. A fragile ecosystem – what nature took one hundred fifty million years to build – took only a single generation of Filipinos to destroy.

Communities in nature are formed in families, villages, and towns which find their natural balance with their environments. “Livelihood systems” integrate with social, religious, and political systems. When powerful business and government forces take a sectoral view, they, in fact, disintegrate these natural forms and attempt to regroup them into sectoral-oriented and specialized institutions – into sugar towns, logging settlements, mining villages, industrial and commercial centers, and export processing zones. This process never succeeds in completely reintegrating the natural communities that are first disintegrated. Entire segments of the original population in a natural habitat become “marginal” to the new communities. The so-called “progress” itself recruits the prime talent of every community to the ranks of business and management with this style. The natural communities lose all of their leadership to this process, either through business or government

The approach to the Philippine problem requires a fresh ideology. A way must be found – and found quickly – to bring on a convergence among the activities that make people rich, those that give communities sustainable and adequate livelihood and those that restore and preserve the natural resources. This will require a new view of nature as having laws of its own that dictate the poise and balance of self-sustenance, and which man must respect if his use of nature for his own needs is to be sustainable as well. It will also require a new view of economic, social, and political organization that recognizes the natural human

community as the modality nature designed which best molds man’s operational institutions to the imperatives of his habitat.

Further, the new ideology will require the translation of that view into the ethical norms, values, laws, institutions, and project modalities that govern man’s day-to-day transactions in society. In short, humanity needs a code of sustainable behavior. It needs an Earth Charter.

Crises breed the leadership that responds to the needs and the social movements that transform anguish into the outrage that mounts forces for change. It was inevitable, then, that early on leaders emerged who pioneered action in civil society to awaken consciousness and combat the forces of destruction in an attempt to reverse the tide.

Maximo Kalaw, Jr.’s personal history eminently suited him to become the leader of the movement in the Philippines, organizing the Philippine Institute for Alternative Futures, transforming Haribon into an activist environmental foundation, forming a coalition of over 800 foundations, peoples, and organizations into the Green Forum. This Forum conducted nationwide participatory consultative sessions in eight regions of the country in order to draw from the people their own notions of what sustainable development means for them and their local communities.

On February 21, 1986, the bloodless “People-Power” revolution toppled the Marcos regime and Corazon Aquino assumed the Presidency of a revolutionary government. In 1987, a new Constitution restored a democratic republic. In the same year, the Brundtland Commission report on Environment and Development highlighted the twin problems of failed development and failed environmental management – failures that created the catastrophic twins of poverty and environmental destruction. Shortly

thereafter, the sustainable development movement began in the Philippines. In February 1988, a Conference on Spirituality and Development entitled “Kaburuan,” the Filipino words for wholeness, brought together government, academe, non governmental organizations (NGOs), students, farmers, fisherfolk, laborers, religious organizations and spiritual movements of all faiths, indigenous peoples, women’s groups, artists, business groups – consumers who produced the Kaburuan Declaration of Principles for Spirituality in Philippine Development. This was considered the precursor of the Philippine Contribution to the Earth Charter of 1991.

A draft Filipino Earth Charter was ratified on September 7, 1991. Prior to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in June 1992, the Philippines expected that a Global Earth Charter would embody the covenants of the nations of the world as a basis for a sustainable development path. A People’s Earth Charter, which embodied the Southeast Asian Contribution, was drafted at the Paris NGO Summit in La Villete, France, in December 1991. In June 1992, UNCED in Rio de Janeiro adopted Agenda 21 but, unfortunately, not an Earth Charter. Nevertheless, the Philippine Earth Charter process continued.

It is important to note that the Philippines was the first country to have had an official Earth Charter, recognized by their government in June 1995. This was not the text of the Earth Charter that we have now; it was a text drafted in the Philippines through a process of consultation with communities and government. It was a follow-up to the Earth Charter 92 process and a contribution to the drafting of the international Earth Charter. President Fidel Ramos signed this Filipino Earth Charter, known as The Filipino Contribution to the People’s Earth Charter, in 1995.

On June 17, 1995, representatives of the Philippine government and civil society

adopted the Philippine Contribution to the People's Earth Charter (PCPEC) at a gathering about Human and Ecological Security, a Conference on Population, Environment, and Peace. Signatories to the PCPEC were members of the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development and local government officials. This Charter embodied principles from the original Filipino Contribution to the Rio Earth Charter but was enriched by the experience of state and civil society collaboration to advance a virtues-driven agenda for Philippine development.

During this same time, there were efforts to link the process of articulating a Filipino covenant for pursuing a development modality that preserves Mother Earth to the older Filipino struggle for freedom from the shackles of colonialism, and to ground this struggle in the sacred and esoteric roots of the national independence movements and the ideals of our national revolutionary heroes. By linking Earth Charter dedication rituals to sites and dates dedicated to memories of the Philippine Revolution against Spanish colonialism, the Charter principles became associated with the memories and emotions related to events defining our people's struggle for freedom. For example, the signing of the June 1995 Filipino Contribution to the People's Earth Charter marked the centennial of the signing in the Pamitinan Cave in Rizal Province of the Covenant that launched the Philippine Revolutionary Movement in April 1895.

The principles of sustainable development were first articulated in grassroots discussions all over the Philippines, embodied in formal declarations at different levels, enshrined in a final document called the Philippine Contribution to the Earth Charter Process, and solemnized in religious rituals and State ceremonies. This merged the movement with the spirit of the Philippine revolution of 1896 and made the Earth Charter process an integral part of the sacred historical traditions of the Filipino nation. The Philippine Contribution thus

rose from the depths of peoples' concerns about poverty and habitat destruction in every corner of the country.

It was fitting that Maximo Kalaw, Jr., who was the leading force in the Philippine movement, became the Earth Council's principal facilitator and coordinator in crafting the global consensus that has become the Earth Charter. Kalaw passed away in November 2001, but the Philippine process continues to deepen the Principles of the Earth Charter in the nation's consciousness, preserving them in ritual symbol and practical action.

Since the launch of the Earth Charter in 2000, Philippine efforts to embed the principles of the Charter in the Filipino psyche and in memories of the historical events in Philippine history have evoked the most fervent national emotions. There has also been theoretical exploration, with work of economists and social scientists, in re-examining the enterprise paradigm and advocating an ecosystem-based, and community-centred, management praxis. A new perception of nature has provided the design for both strategy and structure.

Understanding the roots of problems in the Philippines may give an inkling of their causes elsewhere on the planet as well. The strategy for addressing the crises in the Philippines may help us understand what is necessary to meet them globally. ●