



Exploring Local Governance Initiatives in the Promotion of Sustainable and Livable Cities: The Case of Marikina City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT :

The development trend observed in most developing countries is towards rapid urbanization and economic prosperity which often result to social and environmental problems. This phenomenon, if left unchecked, can lead to the deterioration of the cities' human and natural resource base which is the very source of its competitiveness. In the Philippines, Marikina is an example of a city that balanced economic development with environmental preservation initiatives. The local government initiated reforms through the strict implementation of ordinances that regulated the spatial development in the city. It also introduced projects that promoted the quality of life of its citizens by providing livable and walkable surroundings. This paper will explore the modalities instituted by the local government of Marikina City in the promotion of a sustainable and livable city as well as the mechanisms that led to citizen engagement. Further, the study will examine the problems and prospects of local governance from the perspective of the city that can contribute to the sustainable development initiatives of other rapidly urbanizing cities.

Introduction

The continuous growth of cities has been considered as an important element in the overall development process of provinces, regions, countries and even the globalizing world. Cities serve as centers that provide specialized functions necessary for economic, social and political development. Characterized as having advanced infrastructure systems, these urban centers provide the processing and service activities that will propel economic development not only locally but even internationally. The existence of well integrated transport and telecommunication systems together with the extensive network of institutions/organizations in cities also facilitate political and social development. It is for these reasons that the development pattern that most municipalities would want to adopt is towards becoming a highly urbanized city.

While the prospects of being highly urbanized will lead to numerous economic gains to the local government and its citizens, it is also accompanied by social and environmental problems. The most common problems that cities have experienced include overcrowding, congestion, pollution, and the general decline in the provision of social services. Local governments in these areas are overtaken by the increasing demands of rapid urbanization in the quality and quantity



of the physical infrastructure and services to be provided. Often local governments of cities provide reactive measures rather than proactive measures in addressing these issues. This process of rapid urbanization, if unchecked, may lead to the stagnation and deterioration of the cities' human and natural resource base which is the very source of its competitive advantage. If this trend of unregulated rapid urbanization will continue, the future generations may not be able to reach the acceptable standards in their quality of life (i.e. nutrition, morbidity, longevity, etc.). Moreover, the future generations will be provided limited opportunities in improving their conditions because of the increasing rate that our natural resource base are being exploited and depleted. It is therefore important to emphasize the planning and management initiatives of cities in sustaining its human and natural resource base amidst increased economic development efforts in order to maintain its socio-economic prominence.

Exploring local government based initiatives in achieving sustainable cities is an important concern under the theme of urban planning, transport and economic development tensions, particularly the sub-theme on institutional challenges. The study on the sustainable development initiatives implemented by cities that have regulated the tempo of urbanization and its adverse effect on the environment will provide a framework that may be replicated in other urbanizing areas in developing countries that will guide them in the management of their development activities.

Urban Sustainability: Redesigning Cities for People

People now live in an urbanizing world. Aside from the growth of population itself, urbanization is the dominant demographic trend of this time (Brown, 2001). People living in the cities impose a heavy burden on its environment because of their growing needs and activities. Given the finite resources in the area and the growing population with growing needs and demands, the quality of life of the people will definitely be at risk.

A concern for most urban dwellers is the degenerating urban form that is characterized by pollution, congestion and traffic that often results to gridlock and longer commute time. This problem is further compounded by the rapidly increasing ownership of automobiles and the increasing use of the private car as the main urban transport. As societies urbanized, the conflict between automobiles and the city has become too noticeable with almost all of the world's cities now plagued with traffic, congestion, noise and air pollution (Brown, 2001).

If these urban practices will continue to be unchecked and not curbed urban sustainability may be at risk and the long-term future of the city may be undermined. This concern is particularly acute in rapidly growing cities and cities in poor countries where environmental regulation is weaker and environmental improvement may not be an important political issue (Panayotou, 2001 as cited in Short, 2006: 184).

Governments, both at the national and local levels, are confronted with a number of political issues – economic prosperity, equitable distribution of wealth, provision of social and protective services and a high quality of the environment. Given the pressure on governments in less



developed and developing countries to provide employment and basic services to its people, often the issue on ensuring environmental quality is relegated to a least priority.

Local governments, especially those that heavily rely on national government for their financial resources, are faced with this dilemma – the trade-off between people’s economic needs and the protection and improvement of the quality of the physical environment. However, there have been a growing number of local executives that have come to realize the important contributions of environmental quality and citizens’ health and well-being to the overall economic competitiveness of its jurisdiction. There is now a heightened awareness on the importance of planning for a balanced spatial organization conducive for economic activities at the same time making it livable places for people.

Many studies on marketing the city have shown an increased attention to the quality of life, including a healthier, greener environment and cultural, recreational facilities (Goss, 1993 as cited in Short, 2006:121). Most cities are trying to create and project an image reflecting a vibrant, growing place with accessible locations conducive for business and recreation. This implies that quality of life has become an important consideration in revitalizing the image of cities to improve its competitiveness

There are several factors that should be considered in making urban places sustainable and livable. These factors include (but are not limited to) -- health services, waste management, safety, accessibility, road and transportation network, traffic and walkability. This paper will focus its discussion on the *livability* and *walkability* of cities in relation to urban sustainability.

Urban transport systems based on a combination of rail, bicycles and pedestrian walkways offer the best possible options in providing low-cost transportation and a healthy urban environment (Brown, 2001). However, rail systems are financially viable only to large cities with very high density. The creation or enhancement of bicycle systems and pedestrian walkways, on the other hand, can be easily adopted and established in cities of varying sizes and densities.

Bicycles can increase the mobility of people and address the urban problems of congestion, traffic and pollution. Bicycles are very affordable and can also contribute to the physical well-being of its users. Pedestrian walkways and sidewalks are vital components of sound physical development in urban areas.

Traffic measures and parking provision can also contribute to obtaining urban quality and improved movement for people. Vehicular plans should be supplemented by parking plans and traffic-calming measures which include parking restrictions, speed zoning and the physical reduction of excessive entry speeds in certain areas (Parfect and Power, 1997).

Marikina City Initiatives in the Promotion of a Sustainable and Livable City



In the Philippines, Marikina City has been widely recognized as a model of a sustainable and livable city. The local government of Marikina has exhibited its commitment in preserving the quality of its human and physical resource through the formulation and implementation of innovative policies and programs.

Located at the National Capital Region, this formerly industrial municipality was declared as a city in 1996. The transformation of Marikina into a livable and walkable city started with the election of Engineer Bayani Fernando as town mayor in 1992. As soon as he assumed the position of local chief executive he made a pronouncement that he would “uplift Marikina from mediocrity to prosperity”. The laid back people of Marikina were soon faced with a radical change in leadership style and a change in the physical landscape of the area.

One of the initial orders that Mayor Fernando instituted into making Marikina a livable city was the **clearing of the sidewalk of illegal vendors** in the marketplace. Clearing operations and confiscation of goods sold by illegal vendors in the streets were carried out every day. Goods such as fruits, clothes, plastic ware, snacks that were being sold in make shift stalls in the streets and sidewalks were confiscated and incinerated in full view of the illegal vendors and the public. These operations were constantly undertaken until no vendors dared to sell their goods illegally. Mayor Fernando was accused of the inhumane way by which he is clearing the streets but he however countered that these illegal vendors have been operating for so many years without any permits and the legitimate stall owners are the ones suffering because they cannot compete with the low prices that the illegal vendors are offering to the buyers because of the rent that they have to recoup. He further argued that these illegal vendors have thrived for so many years that they should have by then earned a lot and that it’s time that they make their operations legal. The people were now divided – while a lot of them welcomed the idea of clean and walkable streets, a lot also questioned the radical way that these changes were being he realized.

In his defense, Mayor Fernando explained that radical means are being utilized so that discipline will be instilled among the people in Marikina. His approach may be too overbearing and unpopular but he assured the public that he will get things done and soon the city will prosper. He further explained that development in the city cannot take place if the people’s attitude and values will not be transformed.

The **reclaiming of the sidewalk** then moved into the **residential areas** and an order from the local government was issued that private properties should ensure that they follow the standard setback required for buildings and structures. The order further stated that gates and other passage doors adjacent to the street should swing open towards the property and not towards the street. Residential homeowners reasoned that their homes have already been built before this ordinance was issued and that it was not their fault that they were allowed to build their structures beyond the standard setback. Homeowners did not oblige to make the necessary adjustments thinking that their appeal will be heard. But they were soon surprised when the personnel from the engineering office entered into their subdivisions with their heavy equipment. They did not listen to the angry homeowners and only stated that they were enforcing the ordinance. They demolished whatever portions of the private properties were abating setback and encroaching on the sidewalk. A lot of homeowners were inconvenienced because their driveways



were bulldozed and those gates that opened toward the streets were torn down. These actions sent a very strong signal to other residential neighborhoods that the local government was serious in their campaign in reclaiming the sidewalk and that no one will be spared. Homeowners complied with the ordinance and made the necessary adjustments in their structures for fear of being inconvenienced.

More people in Marikina detested the leadership and actions of Mayor Fernando as more and more of them were being adversely affected by the ordinances issued by the local government. The citizens of Marikina claimed that they voted for Fernando to work for them and not to do them harm. Mayor Fernando, however, claimed that he is not indebted to anyone and that development plans and actions did not cater to individuals but the general welfare of all the citizens of Marikina. He said that he will not be threatened by anyone and that he is ready to face any charges that will be filed against him. He believed that whatever actions were undertaken by his administration was mandated by law and that he was only strictly enforcing the law.

The local government complemented the clearing and widening of sidewalks with the **installation of lamp posts** in every block and the **installation of street signs** in the whole of Marikina. These projects were undertaken simultaneously with the **planting of trees and plants** along the sidewalks. With the overall physical development of Marikina gradually unfolding before the eyes of the residents, they soon came to welcome and appreciate the leadership style of Mayor Fernando.

The wide sidewalk and well-lit streets made the residents feel safer at night especially those who use the public transport that need to walk some distance before they reach home. Students of public schools were also thankful for the well-paved sidewalk that made their walk to school more convenient and safe. Those traversing by private vehicles also felt safer to drive at night. The clear, visible street and traffic signs made it easier for them to find certain locations that made their travel more efficient.

After the physical aspect of the plan was laid out, the local government then implemented programs that addressed the health and safety of the pedestrians. It implemented an ordinance that would **prohibit residents from leaving their garbage outside their properties**. Often, residents would bring their garbage bags outside their gates and fences and leave it there until these are collected by the garbage trucks. With the new ordinance in effect, residents are only allowed to take out their garbage during their neighborhood's scheduled collection day. For those who did not comply, they would find their garbage thrown back (literally) inside their properties. Schedule of garbage collection for each neighborhood was announced through flyers and public address system weeks in advance. Garbage collection was scheduled twice a week and garbage trucks were equipped with a sound system that would announce their arrival in the respective neighborhoods.

To complement the garbage management project, a **cleanliness project** was implemented. An ordinance was passed that would **prohibit individuals to throw trash on the streets** (i.e. candy wrappers and cigarette butts). Those who were caught throwing their trash in the streets were fined.



The city government further issued an ordinance on **animal control** that allowed the local government to impound all stray animals especially dogs roaming the streets. This ordinance was intended to keep the streets safe and also to educate pet owners to become more responsible in caring for their pets. Owners of dogs that were impounded must pay a fine before they can claim their pets from the animal pound.

To further contribute to the livability of the city, the local government embarked on the **rehabilitation of the Marikina river**. The river was dredged until it became clean and ready again for biological organisms to survive. The sides of the river were developed into a park with jogging and bike lanes constructed along the river. The establishment of the Marikina River Park encouraged biking as a form of a healthy recreation for children and adults in the city.

In 2000, the local government implemented the **Marikina Bikeways project** that aimed at promoting low cost and environment friendly transport system within the city. The project was expected to encourage more residents to use the bicycle as an alternative means of transport in the city with the provision of space dedicated for bikeways in existing roads. The total length of the road where bikeways were designated was 49.7 kms. The project involved 30.8 kms of road repairs and asphalt topping of delineated bikeways in existing roads, 18.9 kms of road widening, upgrade of about 8.2 kms of existing bike lanes, and the construction of approximately 8.4 kms of new bike lanes. The project included the setting up of bicycle parking lots and facilities such as bicycle racks and sheds in existing parking spaces of malls, markets, government offices, schools, recreation parks and industries. Parking spaces were also constructed in open spaces within the business district of the city.

Today, Marikina City is the only city in the Philippines that has established an **integrated bikeways system**. This considerably improved the mobility of the local residents and enhanced their access to frequent destinations such as markets, schools, groceries, parks and other recreational places. It provided an alternative means of transport that entailed a lower cost of travel for short distance trips in the city. With the rising cost of gasoline, the affordability of bicycles allowed the poorer segment of society to lessen their transportation cost within the city. Finally, the bikeways system brought about a reduction in air pollution as well as traffic congestion.

Challenges and Prospects in the Promotion of Sustainable and Livable Cities

Marikina is an example of a city that has deliberately chosen to balance economic development efforts with environmental preservation initiatives – a decision that is difficult to make for cities in developing countries that are often pressured to select economic gains first over environmental integrity. The city government redirected the development path of the city and started with the formulation and strict implementation of local ordinances that regulated the growth and development of the city. It prioritized the implementation of environmental and social programs that revitalized the growth potential of the city and consequently re-established its importance in the country.



The local government of the city has received numerous awards for its innovative programs in advancing sustainable development and has been awarded the hall of fame recognition by the Department of Interior and Local Government in its nationwide search for the Clean and Green Cities in the Philippines.

The path taken by the local government of Marikina in reaching its present status as a sustainable and livable city was not easy. It all began with a vision that no matter how difficult to achieve, was adhered to by the local chief executive.

The then elected Mayor, Engineer Bayani Fernando, exhibited a **strong political will** in starting the transformation of Marikina from a sleepy, complacent, dormitory locality into a clean, vibrant city with disciplined residents.

In a society that is generally characterized by *patronage politics*, often elected officials are bound to cater to the needs and wants of all sectors. Most elected officials are pressured to give in to the demands and appeals of strong groups in his constituents as this can be vital in his bid to stay in office. In the case of Marikina, clearing the streets of illegal vendors was a very bold move that needed a very strong political will since these vendors come from the low income group that comprise majority of the voting population in the area. The same is true with the residential owners whose comfortable living was shaken when the local government implemented its drive to reclaim the sidewalk. Residential homeowners also comprise a big percentage of the voters and together with the low income group can potentially end the rule of a local official. This however did not deter the local chief executive. His chances of staying in power may have been compromised but he managed to prove a point that no one will be favored when it comes to making Marikina a better place to live.

The radical and unpopular means by which the development plans were executed shocked the residents of Marikina. But upon closer inspection, it became clear to them that whatever actions were undertaken by the local government was mandated by law—the only **difference now is that the law was strictly being implemented**. Still it was not easy for them to accept the changes that were taking place in the community especially for those who were negatively affected by these changes. Gradually, as the overall picture of cleanliness, orderliness and safety in the city became evident, more and more residents came to realize that everyone would have to contribute in the efforts to achieve a meaningful change. One cannot only reap benefits without being part of the scheme.

It is usually the case that residents advance only their self-interest. In some cases, they have even done so at the expense of other individuals. Such is the case with the residential homeowners who have abated the setback in the construction of their properties. The ordinance on setback has long been passed as a law that residents should comply with. But since the ordinance was not strictly enforced, others saw this as an opportunity to further advance their individual interest. It was only when they were faced with the threat of punishment and penalty that they complied with the regulation.

The initial reaction by the residents of Marikina who have been used to the lenient implementation of regulations was that of resistance while others did not take seriously. This



value system has been a product of a long period where **discipline and citizenship** was not promoted.

Values and attitudes are difficult to shape especially adults who have become accustomed to certain practices over a long period of time. This is why Mayor Fernando used radical and bold means (such as confiscating and incinerating goods sold by illegal vendors in the streets and the bulldozing of residential driveways) to put across a strong message of reform. Thus, whatever compliance and support the local government got was involuntary.

But as the impact and benefits of the ordinances and projects were directly felt by majority of the residents, the support that was given to the mayor and his administration became voluntary. They welcomed the reforms that were taking place in the city – reforms in the physical form of the area and reforms in the values and attitudes of the citizenry.

Mayor Bayani Fernando even managed to get re-elected twice and served the city for a total of 9 years as mayor. After the third and final term of Engineer Bayani Fernando as mayor, it was his wife, Mrs. Marides C. Fernando, who won the elections and took over the local chief executive position in 2001.

Whatever was started under the administration of Mayor Bayani Fernando was continued under the present leadership of Mayor Marides Fernando. The physical rehabilitation of the city and the new urban character that the city and its residents possess now allowed the present administration to bring in investors and businesses in the area. The city is also thriving as a leading tourist and recreational destination in Metro Manila.

With the new urban character of the Marikina City, it can now position and market itself not only to local investors but even to foreign investors that will bring economic gains in the locality. Hence, past efforts in prioritizing the resident's needs and safety further strengthened the city's competitiveness and brought about more economic gains to its people.

Conclusion

The role of leaders is a vital component in advancing sustainable and livable cities. Leaders with strong political will are needed that will strictly enforce of laws and ordinances without favoring any sector of the constituency. Trust and commitment must first be exhibited by the leaders before the residents will commit and volunteer themselves to the cause of society in general. Advancing reforms can cause political risks and may compromise their bid to stay in position but leaders must be confident that the outcomes will benefit the community that will later affirm their leadership role. Urban planners and designers can come up with elaborate and well thought of plans but the execution of these plans will ultimately be the role of the political leaders. This is a challenge to elected leaders especially those in developing countries.



This challenge has been described well by Michael Middleton in his book *Man Made the Town*:

All planning is a matter of trade-offs. There are many routes to many solutions, but there is never any perfect solution.... In the last analysis, the machinery of planning is turned by attitudes, vision, and political will. If our environmental programmes are too often tentative, short-term and lacking in consistency, it is because society itself remains uncertain as to its real objectives, and its leaders too often fail to foresee the secondary effects of their decisions (Middleton, 1987 as cited in *Parfect and Power*, 1997: 21)

Citizenship also plays an important role in promoting livable cities. Citizens should recognize that individual rights should be balanced with responsibility. In order to enjoy a clean, safe and livable surroundings one must willingly and actively engage in the process of change. One cannot simply wait to reap the benefits without contributing to achievement of these goals. Hopefully, the kind of citizen support and compliance will not be one that is brought about by the consequence of fees and penalties but one of genuine concern for the community's quality of life.

Voluntary citizen support may not be a distant aspiration. It has been observed that in cities around the world, rich and poor, developed and less developed, the struggle to live in a better urban environment is a fundamental source of mobilization and action (Evans, 2002 as cited in Short, 2006: 184).



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