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AS PART of my fellowship with the Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute, I had the rare opportunity to interact with Dr. Pamela Matson, an inter-disciplinary sustainability scientist and Dean of Stanford's Earth, Energy and Environmental Sciences from 2002-2017.

This article focuses on what I learned from Dr. Matson after discussions regarding Metro Manila. I have chosen to write this column at this critical time, especially after a recent traffic index study reported that Metro Manila has the worst traffic in the world. This builds on the 2023 World Population Review ranking of Metro Manila as the most densely populated city in the world with almost 185,000 inhabitants per square mile.

From ResearchGate, it is also worthwhile to mention that according to Environment and Resources Management Consultant Ram Regmi, the top five challenges of Metro Manila are the following:

1. High population density
2. Solid waste management
3. Poor quality of water bodies
4. Air pollution
5. Greenhouse gases

The possible solutions are varied and many. It is my belief that as long as the efforts are focused on a few high-impact strategic initiatives and the implementation is deliberate and intentional, there is a reason for optimism. For the purposes of this article, three initiatives are outlined: the further development of Metro Manila to Clark and Infanta, Quezon (Lungsod Silangan); upgrading the quality of Manila Bay, Laguna de Bay, and the Pasig River; and

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strictly enforcing solid waste management as well as scaling waste-to-energy facilities at the level of local governments in Metro Manila.

SUSTAINABILITY TOOLS

There are three useful and valuable sustainable tools that I have found useful and valuable:

1. Causal Loop Analysis. The analysis views Metro Manila as a social environmental system that identifies the different key variables and their inter-relationships: population density, per capita GDP growth, water quality, solid waste produced, etc. This helps stakeholders understand the complex system more explicitly and can be used by decision makers to agree on plans of action.

2. Theory of Change. This “theory” is essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. For example, the ultimate outcome is first determined. Working backwards, the intermediate outcomes are identified and the activities necessary to be undertaken are highlighted. A clear roadmap for system change is thus clarified and finalized.

3. Asset Framework. The framework involves the identification of the system’s assets for sustainable development into its five types: human, social, natural, physical, and financial. Each of these assets is then described in detail and the issues and pain points are enumerated. It provides directions on which problem areas could be addressed.

CLARK AND INFANTA

The reduction of population density in Metro Manila could be achieved by continuing to actively promote the Clark Freeport and Special Economic Zone as an alternative business destination to Metro Manila with its corresponding tax incentives, and aggressively positioning a Metro Manila-Pacific Coast Growth Corridor, with Infanta, Quezon (Lungsod Silangan) as the other node, as an alternative residential super district catering to all income levels.

Note that the Clark idea is nothing new. During the previous Administration, the Department of Transportation held office in Clark, not Manila. The concept of a Metro Manila-Pacific Coast Growth Corridor drew its inspiration from a planned city in the 1970s: Lungsod Silangan (City of the East).

WATERWAYS

An assessment of current efforts to restore the top water bodies and waterways of Metro Manila — the Pasig River, Laguna de Bay, and Manila Bay — is in order. Based on this review, restoration strategies could be drawn up.

The current Administration recently launched the Pasig Bigyan Buhay Muli (PBBM) as part of an initial phase to transform the Pasig River. The key is to update and/or complete an evidence-based assessment of the current states of the three bodies of water/waterways and for private, public, and civil society to either confirm, update, or identify the major projects that will deliver outsized outcomes.

SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT/WASTE TO ENERGY

The timing is perfect to review the implementation of Republic Act (RA) 9003 and develop a plan of action to fully implement the provisions of this RA in Metro Manila.

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The intention of this RA is to substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse. Except for certain local governmental units (LGUs), the nationwide implementation has its challenges and, therefore, a renewed campaign with the introduction of better enforcement mechanisms and systems of “carrots and sticks” could be introduced.

For financial viability and sustainability of solid waste management, a possible strategic initiative is to scale waste-to-energy facilities in Metro Manila to ensure that landfills are properly disposed while, at the same time, earning revenue and income from the sale of power. This will also invite direct investment.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

To make this all happen is easier said than done. All of these require better integration, closer coordination and collaboration at an unprecedented scale. This is where stronger and more effective governance led by the national leadership (after all, the National Capital Region’s share of the Philippines Gross Domestic Product is around 36%) is required.

Supporting this herculean effort will be the following key actors/multiple stakeholders:

1. Each of the 14.7 million residents of Metro Manila. After all, cities are built for people.
2. The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA), tasked with the implementation of medium- and long-term programs for the delivery of metro wide services, land use, and physical development within Metro Manila.
3. The LGUs of the 17 cities and municipalities that make up Metro Manila, each led by a publicly elected mayor.
4. Within the MMDA is an administrative council consisting of the mayors of each of the cities and municipalities.
5. All the relevant executive departments of the National Government.

The time to act is now.

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