

# **“It’s Just a Buzzword from Above”: Climate Change Challenge and Local Governance Indifference in the Philippines**

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## **Abstract:**

Though the irreversible effects of climate change is starting to take its toll in the archipelagic country and are increasingly felt by community residents, there seems to be no sense of urgency on the part of local government officials to respond despite prescriptions for proactive measures in high-level policy dialogues. While climate change dominated debates of academics and policy makers in recent years, the concept seems hardly understood, or worse, heard in the discussions of lawmakers and executives at local government levels in the Philippines.

The study used local government plans, programs, and annual budgets in the municipalities of the Province of Bohol since 2004, ten years after the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change was ratified by most countries. It also made use of thematic analyses of transcripts of interviews with local chief executives (mayors) and survey results of local legislators (sangguniang kagawads). The study revealed that the challenge of climate change was hardly responded to by local government units for two reasons – a very raw and shallow understanding of the causes, effects, and possible local solutions to climate change, and the pessimism that such a global solution can be addressed by local actors and actions. Bohol was chosen as a case study because it is an island province with tourism as a primary sector contributing to the local economy. Its tourism is largely dependent on natural resources – rivers, caves, beaches, hills – that are very vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

The study poses at least three significant challenges not only to the climate change discourse, but also to the future of the global environment. First, there is the challenge of information. Ten years has passed but the issue has not really permeated the consciousness of local actors, believed to be the focal stakeholders in climate change mitigation and adaptation, thus questioning the current forms of climate change education. Second, there is the challenge of prioritization. The study presents the tension between short and long-term time horizons, between current levels of deprivation and future cataclysmic effects, and between immediate responses and strategic solutions. How climate change should place itself in the current challenge of eradicating poverty is a question. Finally, there is the challenge of ownership. Undoubtedly, climate change is largely a ‘North’ conceptualization. The challenge is how this alarming phenomenon, urgent as it is and very critical, can be felt and experienced by people struggling for daily survival.

## Introduction

*“It’s just a buzzword from above. Nobody here cares about it.”*

- Mayor, a town in Bohol, Philippines  
(name withheld as requested)

The above phrase, made an integral part of this paper, came from an interview with a mayor, a local chief executive in a municipality in the Philippines, almost at the same time as state leaders and international actors were battling in intensive discussion on climate change commitments in Bali, Indonesia, in December of 2007. The statement was instructive in three ways. First, it projects a downright disownment of an inevitable trend that has a significant impact on people all over the world, and in cataclysmic proportions. Second, it signifies a divide and a lack of communication between international/national dialogues and local plans and priorities. Thirdly, it indicates a sense of apathy and indifference on a very crucial issue in this planet nowadays – climate change.

The problem of the statement is that it is not just a subjective and singular representation but rather a shared view of several local leaders in the province despite the fact that the province’s natural endowments are highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. Bohol, an island province in the heart of Central Visayas is the 10<sup>th</sup> largest island in the Philippines where 89% are dependent on farming and fishing for livelihood. The Philippine report on climate change indicates that the island has medium risk (Rincon and Virtucio 2008) and vulnerability to the adverse impacts of climate change as most of its towns and economic centers are located in the coastal areas. Economically, the province relies on tourism, more particularly on its white sandy beaches, rivers, forests, caves for economic growth and development. The risks of climate change are huge then, but it is puzzling to know that “nobody here cares about it”.

The aim of this research is to validate this striking statement and to ask further questions. First, is the statement, as indicated above, a shared view of most local leaders in the province? Second, what are the potential causes of this view? Third, how has this view affected the governance structures of climate change at the local level and what are its implications to the climate change challenge?

The paper is structured in five parts. To provide a background of the persuasiveness of local structures in influencing local initiatives to climate change, the context of local development planning in the Philippines is discussed. The second part discusses briefly the climate change challenge and how it relates to the thesis of this study. The findings of the study and how it relates to the challenges in the climate change discourse are discussed in the third and fourth parts, respectively. Finally, the last part presents three challenges regarding climate change governance as can be derived from the lessons in the preceding sections.

## 1. Local Development Planning in the Philippines

After the fall of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, the Philippines experienced significant reforms in governance structures hastened by democratization agenda. One of the

legislations passed in 1991 was the Local Government Code (LGC), a landmark legislation in decentralizing and devolving several powers that was then held by the national government (Rocamora 2003).

The legislation did not only open avenues for citizen participation (Fabros 2004) but also increased responsibility and accountability of the local government officials. The legislation had three particular features (Carino 1992) – the control of fiscal budgets, equipments, projects, and personnel; increased revenue sources as compared to the centralized government that precedes it; and the increased participation of non-government and people’s organizations in local governance. It goes without saying, that in the hands of local government stakeholders, both public and private, lay the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of local development plans.

It is interesting to note that over the years, local development planning in the country has greatly evolved, moving from simple to complicated, and finally to its current state of “rationalization”. At the very basic, local government units are tasked to prepare at least three basic plans – the Municipal Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP), the Municipal Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP), and the Local Development Investment Program (LDIP). Each has its own particular function, the CLUP, a spatial plan, the MDP a socio-economic development plan, and the LDIP, a translation of the development policies and strategies into specific programs and projects with set finance and time implementation requirements.

These plans are ought to be comprehensive and encompassing in nature. The CLUP contains policies on settlement, protection land use, production land use, and infrastructure. The CDP contains programs, policies, and projects on social services, economic development, infrastructure, environmental management, and institution building. The LDIP, on the other hand, which is a translation of the directions as set forth in the CLUP and the CDP, indicates the prioritization of strategies across timeline and with indicative resource costs on the part of the local government.

However, in several national government directives, there are more than 20 development plans required at the local level ranging from health, gender, shelter, land use, to poverty reduction, disaster management, forest management, revenue generation, and even information, communication, and technology. However, this are not necessarily complied with. Only 40% of the mandated plans were actually made by local government units primarily because of the lack of perceived relevant use and redundancy (Gotis 2008). As such, in the early part of 2007, the national government started implementing the rationalization of local development plans to harmonize and simplify the different planning mechanisms of local government units in the country.

Largely, the responsibility of formulating local development plans rests on the Local Development Council (LDC), composed of the local chief executives at their appropriate levels (mayor), local legislature - the Sangguniang Bayan (for municipalities) or the Sangguniang Panglungsod (for cities), and representatives from people’s associations and non-government organizations as required for by the LGC. Planning, in this case, is an essential part of local governance, as governments are required to not only manage a geographical space in behalf of the national government, but also deliver basic services and facilities to promote the general welfare of its people within its territorial jurisdiction.

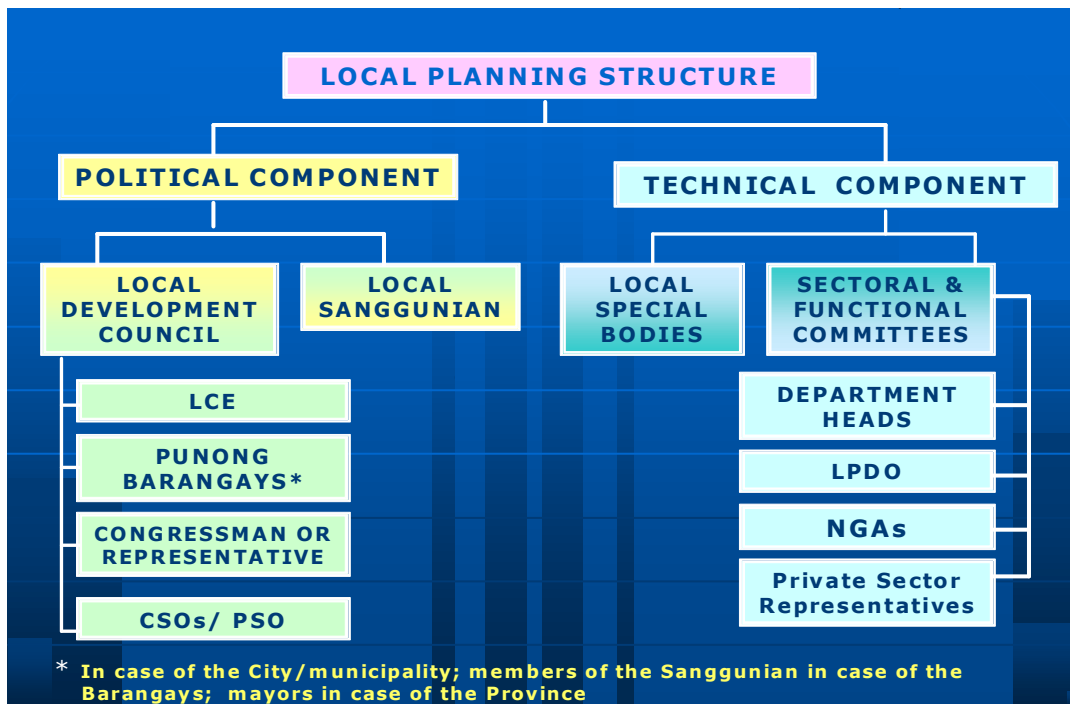


Figure 1. Stakeholders in the Local Development Planning Process (Gotis, 2008)

Generally, the LDC is to be convened by the local chief executive and plans are formulated at the assembly level where both ‘political’ (elected officials and civil society representatives) and the ‘technical’ (sectoral, thematic, and function-specific) stakeholders participate. The ‘political’ players though are the ones responsible in defining the direction of the local government and to make decisions in terms of administrative arrangements and institutional policies. While ‘technical’ stakeholders contribute knowledge and expertise and provide the technical content of the planning process, they generally do not have decision-making powers.

Thus, while technical stakeholders may find certain strategic actions as critical and urgent, when this is not supported by the priorities of the ‘political’ players, hardly will these actions be considered crucial in the plan and committed with local development funds. How the plans are translated into concrete actions and programs are dependent on the ‘prioritization ethic’ of elected leaders who have the political power to steer the Annual Investment Plan (AIP), which is the primary basis of the local government’s annual budget.

While the local development plans are of a long-term nature, this is implemented by elected officials with short-term horizons. In the Philippines, elections for local government leaders are done every three years in a multi-party contest setting. This means that elected leaders are not only accountable to their constituents but also to the priority platforms of their political parties and also to their personal committed projects. Thus, while the CDP exists, the actual activities done on an annual basis depends on the priorities, and even preferences of local leaders and their promises to their constituents, the achievement of which is a necessary precondition for their re-election.

## **2. The Climate Change Challenge**

Climate change has become the “defining development issue” (Delina 2008) in this generation and dominated policy and academic debates in recent years. The debate is oftentimes circuitous especially in the context of poverty, development and growth. Climate change for example will hit the poorest in developing countries, but the growth of developing countries, necessary to achieve goals in poverty reduction will inevitably result to having these countries as the major generators of carbon gas emissions in the near future (Stern 2006). There is, however, little doubt that climate change will tremendously impact on people’s lives and livelihoods.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change prescribes two options in addressing climate change. The first is the concept of mitigation by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing carbon sinks while the second is adaptation to the adverse impacts of climate change. In the first option, countries have already committed themselves to stabilising greenhouse gas emissions and reducing it by at least 5% compared to 1990 by the period 2008-2012.

Commitments on mitigation are adopted at the national level, but in most cases these are not translated to commitments at local level. Mitigation has become the playing field of international response and not of local actors. It would seem then, that in developing countries like the Philippines, there is a silent consensus that climate change mitigation is best addressed at the national and global level, unintentionally providing a hollow space for local actors to participate in.

In the case of adaptation,, which generally means the “adjustment of a system to moderate impacts of climate change, to take advantages of new opportunities or to cope with the consequences” (Adger et al 2003), little has been done in the science except for formulating frameworks of assessment (e.g. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the UNDP) and for supporting national adaptation programs in contexts of extreme weather events (e.g. UNFCC NAPA).

But these assessment frameworks are also very useful in the context of local government units with highly vulnerable geophysical characteristics. The occurrence of extreme weather events as floods, droughts, tropical cyclones, heatwaves, and coastal storms do not only bring physical harm but have significant consequences on health, production, water access, sanitation, and economic development. While the problem is distinctively global in nature, contextual vulnerabilities, and thus, contextual adaptation measures are critical. But just the same as in the case of mitigation measures, prescriptions on assessments and adaptation are still largely on a national scale (eg. WHO 2003).

## **3. The Global is also Local**

However, recent debates on climate change has started to refocus measures from global and national playing fields to local spheres, with the belief that “the “local” is also an important site in governing global environmental problems” (Betsill and Burkeley 2006). The Stern Report in

2007 has clearly indicated that communities need to be empowered so that they can actively contribute in vulnerability assessment and implementation of adaptation. Further, it argues that climate change needs to be incorporated into development planning at all scales, levels, and sectors (Stern 2007).

This paper takes the view that the local leaders are critical actors in drafting, implementing, and evaluating development programs that address both strategic and short-term considerations of local government units. How they perceive the necessity and the urgency of a policy agenda or a program of interventions is important to ensure that not only these are incorporated in local development plans but are also correspondingly allocated with development funds. However, their perceptions of necessity and urgency are grounded on how much they know about a particular issue and concern. In the climate change discourse, it is widely admitted in several studies that there are “significant knowledge gaps” as well as “impediments to flows of knowledge and information relevant to adaptation decisions” (Adger et al 2007).

The review of local development plans of 60% of the municipalities in Bohol, Philippines revealed that climate change concerns are not incorporated into the plans. What the plans contain are environmental projects and policies that are not necessarily related to climate change issues, or drafted not with climate change mitigation and adaptation in mind. There has never been a climate change vulnerability assessment conducted, nor discussions related to mitigation and adaptation policies. Thus, it would seem that climate change as a global problem is never a local concern, precisely because of the reason that there are significant knowledge gaps that constrained problem recognition and solution.

The important question to be asked then is what and how much do local leaders in the province know about climate change. Knowledge, in this case, is not just about what climate change is, its causes, and its effects, but also about the relevant means by which climate change can be addressed and the role that local governments can play. What local leaders know will affect how they perceive the necessity and urgency of climate change as an issue and will correspondingly determine the manner by which they would react.

To answer the question, a survey was conducted with local legislators (Sangguniang Kagawads) to test knowledge on climate change issues, causes, and potential solutions (n=100). Local chief executives (mayors), non-government organizations representatives, and other stakeholders (n=30) were also interviewed regarding the same variables used in the surveys. Finally, a thematic analysis of the results of the survey and interviews was conducted.

#### On Knowledge:

Local leaders were asked what comes to their mind when they hear the word “climate change”. Most of the local leaders (98%) said that climate change is about “change in the weather”, more particularly with the world “getting warmer” and with “unpredictability of the weather”. Most (90%) also think that this is caused by human activities. Half of the local leaders (50%) thinks “climate” has been changing for the last one hundred years, while a several (24%) thinks that this has been so for the last million years.

Most of the local leaders (89%) said that climate change is caused by the increased emission of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. Most of them said (75%) that this happened more

particularly during the start of the industrial revolution. Most local leaders (86%) also know the particular activities that would increase greenhouse gas emissions and that if unabated, this would lead to increase in the earth's temperature causing the glaciers to melt and increase water levels.

#### *On Perceived Gravity of the Problem*

Most local leaders (76%) think that climate change will drastically affect the lives of people in the next 20 years. They even think that climate change poses a personal threat to their lives. However, more than half of the local leaders (58%) think that there are more pressing problems in their town than climate change and likewise thinks that poverty is a more urgent problem to respond to than climate change. Only few though (21%) thinks that climate change is a problem that would most likely affect the poor.

In terms of urgency, most of the local leaders think that climate change will become a serious problem in their municipality in the next 11-25 years. However, majority agreed that climate change already has shown indications in their localities. These are unpredictable season (28%), excessive heat (31%), temperature change (11%), heavy rains and flooding (9%), rising water level (8%), and drought (7%). Nevertheless, many of them (48%) think that there is still sufficient time for the people of the world to deal with the challenges posed by climate change.

#### *On Local Responses*

Most of the local leaders (72%) think that the climate change problem cannot be solved locally, though they also do not agree that these can be solved only at the level of national and international organizations. Most (77%) think that ordinary people can do something to deal with the challenges posed by climate change.

When asked what should be done to deal with the climate change challenge, the top three responses were as follows – solid waste management (24%), tree planting (19%), and public information and education (17%). It is interesting to note that 17% of the local leaders do not have answer to the question. Thus, when asked about current programs that the municipalities are implementing, it is not surprising that the top three responses were also solid waste management (39%), tree planting (22%), and public information and education (19%). Also, 19% of the local leaders said that no significant program is implemented to address the climate change issue.

It is important to note that more than half (58%) of the local leaders said that there is not enough information available that allows them to understand the local impacts of climate change on people and livelihoods. More than half also things (60%) that there is insufficient information available that allows the constituents in the municipalities to understand climate change and how it would affect them and their livelihoods. This is the reason why most (72%) of the local officials think that the impact of climate change on people and the environment is not well understood by all.

#### **4. Did we get the questions right?**

There is something wrong with the results of the study. If local officials knew something about climate change and that they perceive it to be something urgent, how come they are not addressed specifically in the local development plans? If they did know something about it, why did they think that there is insufficient amount of information for them to understand climate change and how it would impact lives of people and their livelihoods? If indeed they know that climate change is urgent, why the insufficiency of local measures installed for “adaptation” and “mitigation”? There are some observations that we can posit here.

First, it is obvious that not one of the local government units covered in this study has actually assessed the risks and vulnerabilities of their specific areas to climate change. It is also evident that local government units have not actually analyzed local adaptation practices in the change of climate, which is present ever since humanity existed, as societies have to adopt coping strategies to unwelcome changes in climate (Adger et al 2003). If we have to locate the scientific debate regarding mitigation and adaptation in the local context, there seems to be a hollow in the discussion, notwithstanding the fact that planting trees, for example, are processes for carbon sequestration and proper solid waste management practices are necessary activities in ensuring reduced greenhouse gas emissions. But solid waste management programs were not a response to climate change challenge but a requirement of a national legislation – Republic Act 9003.

Second, it is evident that local officials only have a very basic understanding of the climate change issue. The admission of local government officials that there is no sufficient information available for them to understand the impact of climate change on people and livelihoods, the inability of some to answer the question of what possible solutions are necessary, and the absence of climate change language as “mitigation” and “adaptation” in the responses, indicate the lack of adequate understanding as well as a shallow appreciation of the issues. While indeed they think that local responses are important, they actually do not know how households and local governments can effectively respond.

Third, while most of them felt the urgency of a climate change response, they think that there is a far serious and urgent problem than climate change that needs to be addressed, like for example, the problem on poverty. In Bohol, poverty incidence in recent statistics showed that 38% of households live below the poverty line, using conventional income measures. The provincial government mandate is to contribute to the goal of reducing poverty. While some (48%) of the local leaders believe that the failure to address climate change issues in the long run will have extreme effects on poverty condition, they are caught between the tension of direct impact programs and long-term goals.

Fourth, it is not true that local stakeholders are indifferent to the issue of climate change. There is a growing concern to respond but how this is translated to action is constrained by the lack of information on what is to be done and on the lack of resources to pursue what could have been identified as priority action steps. The “indifference”, as can be gleaned from local development plans, is brought about by a myriad of causes that speak not only of the readiness of local governments but also of the lack of support from national and global actors in enabling the capacity of local stakeholders to participate effectively in mitigation and adaptation measures.

For example, Bohol's primary economic driver is tourism which is argued to generate significant greenhouse gas emissions especially the transport sector (Peeters 2007). How the effects of this activities on the environment needs to be addressed, but local capacities are wanting in terms of analysis and assessment of these impacts.

## 5. Implications on the climate change debate

**The challenge of information.** The results of the study pose at least three significant challenges not only to the climate change discourse, but also to the future of the global environment. First, there is the challenge of information. Ten years has passed but the issue has not really permeated the consciousness of local actors, believed to be the focal stakeholders in climate change mitigation and adaptation, thus questioning the current forms of climate change education.

The conclusions reached by a study done with residents in the US and not local government officials seemed to apply in this case. There are several misconceptions on the issue of climate change, and this "flawed mental model" restricted the leaders' ability to "distinguish between effective and ineffective strategies" (Bostrom et al 1992), sometimes resulting to inaction. As early as this time, calls for making public communication of risks and climate-related policies more relevant were already highlighted in literature.

How is the public information on climate change structured? It would seem that at the global level, discussions have significantly moved forward in terms of national commitments. Several studies have already identified funding requirements for adaptation and mitigation activities (Spratt 2009) but it is evident that how information flows to the local level seems to be at question. Studies on the best ways to adaptation and mitigation have populated academic journals, but these are not disseminated to local policy circles. In this case, it is the implicit responsibility of national governments to bring the discussions to the local levels. Unfortunately, this has not happened in the last fifteen years. The challenge is how to forward global and national discussions to local spheres, a task that most international and national governments have the difficulty of doing. Once again, the interaction between global and local spheres in climate change needs to be highlighted (Willbanks and Kates 1999).

**The challenge of prioritization.** Second, there is the challenge of prioritization. The study presents the tension between short and long-term time horizons, between current levels of deprivation and future cataclysmic effects, and between immediate responses and strategic solutions. How climate change should place itself in the current challenge of eradicating poverty is a question. If poor communities require economic development for poverty to be addressed in a sustainable manner, and if such requires initiatives that would have adverse impacts on the atmosphere and contribute to global warming, what should local communities do?

In developing countries like the Philippines, a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line. Thus, local programs and projects are largely affected both by the context of poverty and the program of achieving the Millennium Development Goals, more particularly that of halving poverty by 2015. Local governments are challenged to strike a balance between

immediate concerns (e.g. malnutrition, low literacy levels, access to water) and long term goals (e.g. achieving self-sufficiency, and to a large extent, environmental concerns).

As earlier stated, local leaders only serve a term of three years; the ability to respond to pressing concerns are important if one seeks re-election. These can either be tangible programs addressing access problems (e.g. potable water systems, farm to market roads) or one that touches on livelihood and employment (e.g. agricultural production, livelihood finance). With decentralization, all funds are generated locally, except the share that local governments get from the national government as Internal Revenue Allotment. All local programs are funded from one and the same pie, thus the difficulty to fund all necessary programs prompting leaders to prioritize.

Local leaders however are not ignorant of the fact that local people, especially the poor, are more vulnerable to climate change impacts. Research has shown that vulnerability to climate change is unequal even within countries and geographical spaces (Tol et al 2004). As such, not only is there a need to prioritize climate change in development planning, but also to ensure that significant vulnerabilities in local spaces are identified and addressed in these plans.

**The challenge of ownership.** Finally, there is the challenge of ownership. Undoubtedly, climate change is largely a 'North' conceptualization. While changes in climate is a universal phenomenon occurring all throughout history, "climate change" as a theoretical concept subjected to rigorous debate over the years generally comes from the North. It is a fact that the climate is changing and people in local areas have adapted to its effects. The ownership factor, in this case, becomes difficult in local communities, especially when they do not participate in how the questions and solutions are structured.

It is a sad fact that "the most vulnerable communities" are "those that are already the poorest and least able to adapt to these changes" (Najam et al 2003). But local communities that are vulnerable to climate change impacts are sidelined in the discussions on climate change (Paavola and Adger 2002). People in local communities are hardly informed about what their national governments have committed at international policy-level dialogues. It is but hard for local people in the South to participate in a problem-solving exercise when the problem is at all not clear and hardly understood by them.

But in these contexts, local residents also have short-term horizons as deprivation is rampant and poverty is a lived reality on a daily basis. For example, in the annual public opinion polling conducted by the HNU Center for Research and Local Governance, Boholanos do not identify climate change as a pressing and urgent problem that needs to be addressed by local government units, but poverty and lack of livelihood opportunities always topped the list. The challenge is how this alarming phenomenon, urgent as it is and very critical, can be felt and experienced by people struggling for daily survival.

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