

Overview of the Workshop

Germelino M. Bautista

Maayo buntag. Unta mayo ka karon. Colleagues and friends, it is my honor and pleasure to welcome all of you to this Mindanao Conversation on the Economy and Environment. On behalf of the organizers, I would like to express my deep appreciation for your generosity of time and spirit.

It was in December 26, 2013 when some members of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus convened on the top floor of the Finster building of this University to engage in a “Jesuit Conversation on Mindanao”. The intense two-day meeting dwelt on issues ranging from wealth creation, the degraded state of the environment, the ethnic relations among Lumads, Muslims and Christians, the peace process and the poverty situation in the region. The need to systematically build capacity for economic analysis and research on these issues was one of the highlights of that meeting.

Fast track to the present. So after about a year and a half, we are now gathered here to continue the “Jesuit Conversation” on justice, sustainable and inclusive development and peace in this region, this time with a much wider community of co-Jesuits and lay partners.

This workshop is a special invitation extended to us -- economics and related social and natural science faculty and researchers in the social action centers of the different Jesuit universities in the region—for us to contribute whatever we can to a collective study of the economic and environmental challenges of Mindanao, their political and socio-cultural underpinnings, all in the hope of helping find or refine solutions to the region’s persistent problems.

To begin a conversation that aims to exchange ideas and eventually define the contours of a research agenda, we identified an initial group of resource experts, scholars, and public intellectuals, whom we requested to help us clarify and deepen our understanding of the issues confronting Mindanao and to share their views on critical issues, as well as some hypotheses that can be validated by further study or research. Possibly at a later time, some of our presentors may decide to provide guidance for our proposed studies and interventions.

Through a series of collective studies of strategic concerns, by members of the Ateneo community, we would be able to breathe life into JAIME or the Joint Ateneo Institute of Mindanao Economics. (If you wish to know how the acronym JAIME for the Institute was coined, please see the ADMU’s Vice President for Social Development, Atty Jaime Hofilena.)

What does ‘Mindanao Economics’ mean?

On a more serious note, if we are to accept the invitation to collaborate in creating and nurturing JAIME, we will need to problematize the notion of 'Mindanao Economics'. What would the study of a real economy within a given geography and at this historical juncture entail?

Our workshop topics initially suggest two perspectives although as we converse, we are certainly bound to find more ways of looking or defining 'Mindanao Economics'. As a non-Mindanaon, specifically a part-time Tagalog-Ilocano 'settler' in this Center, may I humbly put forward, just for the purpose of starting the conversation – two initial propositions.

Six Questions on Mindanao Economics

Proposition 1: the study of Mindanao economics (at a more basic level) may entail finding preliminary answers to at least 6 general questions, that include: 1) What is the state of the agricultural, natural resource, and energy sectors; and 2) the current and future impacts and challenges of global warming on these sectors and communities? 3) What are the challenges and implementation status of the MinDA Plan 2020 and the prospects of the Bangsamoro Development Plan? 4) What is the relation of resource rents to capital flight and its other outflow sources? 5) Has poverty become chronic and intergenerational, and the inequality condition much worse? 6) Lastly, what ought to be done to alleviate the given poverty and inequality condition?

Proposition 2: on a higher level, the relationship of the various topics suggests at least two sets of implicit hypotheses on persistent poverty and worsening inequality, with some drawn from variants of political economic discourses.

What accounts for chronic poverty and worsening inequality?

One, given the relationship of poverty and agriculture, is the current state of Mindanao's agriculture, its low productivity and unused lands largely attributable to any of the following: 1) the high cost (or price) of energy; 2) the impact of deforestation, the expansion of drylands due to declining precipitation, the frequency of El Nino episodes or droughts or the effects of global warming; 3) the insecurity of land tenure for peasant cultivators; 4) the diversion of agricultural lands for bioenergy production because of domestic and transnational demand; 5) the risks, prospects or actual occurrence of land dispossession and community displacements due to clan or all-out wars; and 6) the local elites' control of resources and the unproductive use of their surplus funds either for power maintenance and accumulation or for financing activities in the shadow economy (rather than improving agricultural productivity and investing in climate change adaptation).

Two, the extent chronic poverty and worsening inequality persist in Mindanao may reflect the following:

- 1) the outright take-over and delineation of the commons (the open-access lands) by the State (both colonial and post-colonial) for their exclusive use in timber, mineral, commercial crop or livestock production, if not for migrant resettlement areas;
- 2) the continued provisioning by the contemporary State (to a few) of privileged access to resource rents from the former commons (on land and sea) – and the failure to stop the flight of natural and financial wealth, which are allowed to be withdrawn without requiring the replacement of the depreciated natural capital and environment, compensation for the disruption or loss of livelihoods and food sources, community health and environmental damages, much less the protection of the community and environment from the local impacts of climate change (e.g. water stress, degradation and desertification);
- 3) the actions of non-state blocs (clans, dynasties, warlords) in 3 levels: i) to capture the local and subnational state through elections, legal maneuvers, if not the use of intimidation and armed force; ii) to grab and consolidate resources without providing any compensation or remedial action to cover livelihood losses; and iii) to appropriate local rent sources and establish new ones;
- 4) given the extensive unraveling of the tragedy of the commons, as landless or displaced poor households compete for subsistence over the use of the already degraded lands and depleted fishery grounds and other ecosystems, they only manage to obtain negative rents or below-subsistence wages;
- 5) with the region's depleted resource base, its unproductive subsistence-oriented agriculture, and the remaining commons in a state of tragedy, bereft of use values, the local elite (with its vested interest) can only provide limited, if not perverse economic production and employment opportunities. It may be the case that some offer commodities that are not available in the formal market (hence, are illegal), but are able to immediately generate enormous wealth for the risk-taking suppliers, without providing any social benefits.

There may be other issues and hypotheses that are worthy of focused discussion. By starting our conversation, and sustaining and substantiating it in the future, we will hopefully find our way towards a research-action agenda that will enable us to help Mindanao move towards an inclusive, just and sustainable economy and environment. By reflecting upon the issues, hypotheses and implicit theoretical constructs, (I would like to think) we will be near the threshold of establishing a 'Mindanao economics'

Without much ado, ladies and gentlemen, let us begin the sharing and conversation.