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Are We Building Back Better?

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Are We Building Back Better?

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many vulnerabilities in various aspects of Philippine systems. Although COVID-19 started as a health crisis, it soon triggered other crises. COVID-19 revealed the vulnerability of the Philippine economy. In 2016, the Philippines was considered an Asian tiger economy with a 7% GDP (gross domestic product) growth; however, in 2021, the Philippine GDP fell to -9.6%, which was the worst among the ASEAN countries. One of the reasons given for the poor 2021 Philippine economic performance was the drop in the tourism, hospitality, and travel industries (Mendoza 2021). However, other ASEAN countries which had larger tourism and travel sectors suffered smaller decreases in GDP than the Philippines. For example, from 2016–2021, Vietnam went from 6% to 3% only, whereas Thailand fell from 3.6% to -6%. One of the reasons for the large fall in Philippine GDP in 2021 may be attributed to the drop in the number of OFWs by 18.6% (PSA 2022), which reflects the over-dependence of the Philippine economy on foreign employment of its workforce. The share of agriculture, one of the major pillars of Philippine society and economy, has been shrinking for several years—threatening food security. Philippine agriculture fell from about 21% share of the GDP in 1996 to about 12% in 2014 (OECD-FAO 2017). During the pandemic, Philippine agriculture grew by only about 0.5%, whereas the population has been growing at a rate of about 1.4% (DA 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the wide socio-economic gap in Philippine education due to the wide disparity in access to the internet and digital technologies, which severely impacted the disadvantaged sectors of society. The government’s commitment to “free wifi for all” was too late for the pandemic since only less than 5% of the national internet program was targeted for delivery by December 2022 (UNDP 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was a perfect storm that exposed the deep systemic weaknesses of the Philippines.

In 2019, Department of Science and Technology Secretary Fortunato T. de la Peña challenged the National Academy of Science and Technology Philippines (NAST PHL) to undertake a science, technology, and innovation (STI) foresight study for the country. Working through the pandemic, NAST PHL—led by project chair Acad. William G. Padolina and NAST president Acad. Rhodora V. Azanza—assembled an interdisciplinary group of experts who were able to develop a 30-year STI foresight document, which was entitled “PAGTANAW 2050” (NAST PHL 2021). The idea for PAGTANAW was taken from Akademi Sains Malaysia’s 30-year “Mega Science 2050 Agenda” (ASM 2022). Thirty years provides a reasonable timeframe to develop a science and technology infrastructure to meet long-term needs.

PAGTANAW 2050 identifies 12 key operational areas that serve to unify the STI agenda. These are: the Blue Economy; Governance; Business and Trade; Digital Technology / Information and Communications Technology; Science Education and Talent Retention; Food Security and Nutrition; Health Systems; Energy; Water; Environment and Climate Change; Shelter, Transportation, and Other Infrastructure; and Space Exploration. These 12 operational areas address the systemic weaknesses that plagued the country during the pandemic. PAGTANAW 2050 introduces four key points: the need for foresight, the importance of interdisciplinary systems thinking, the role of scientific thinking in governance, and the archipelagic and maritime nature of the Philippines.

Since 30 years span six administrations, the success of PAGTANAW 2050 depends on the support of six presidents, as well as the buy-in and active support of the instrumentalities of government, the private sector, civil society, the whole science community, and the general public. PAGTANAW 2050 will fulfill its objectives only if the country supports it. It must be seen as a plan that will benefit all sectors of society. This is captured in the foreword that was written by Sec. de la Peña: “This Foresight document is firmly grounded on the Filipino people’s aspirations within the context of our natural and physical endowments—an archipelago with abundant marine resources—as well as our shared Filipino values and skills, and other potentials as contained in our Constitution and other national institutions.”

While PAGTANAW 2050 sets the general direction of development, it should be a living plan that is able to adjust to challenges and opportunities that may arise. PAGTANAW 2050 will hopefully prepare the country for future storms and opportunities that may come. Just as outbreaks can become pandemics if we are not prepared, our weaknesses can become national disasters if we do not act now with foresight. This is how we should build back better.

Essentially, PAGTANAW 2050 offers a national vision. “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29).

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