

*Office of the Vice President
02 June 2017*

[KEYNOTE MESSAGE]

Launch of Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022, National Economic Development Authority, SMX Convention Center, Pasay City, 02 June 2017

Secretary Ernesto Pernia, Secretary Leoncio Evasco, OCS, and other Cabinet members present, Senator Loren Legarda, Mr. Bill Luz, representatives from international organizations, non-government organizations, and civil society organizations, members of the academe, fellow workers in the government, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Congratulations Secretary Pernia, the entire NEDA Family, and all the economists, staff, and experts who have put together Ambisyon 2040 and the Philippine Development Plan for 2017-2022. We are very pleased with the amount of work that has been done to put together this strategic plan for the next six years.

We appreciate how the PDP takes into consideration global trends, climate vulnerability, and geographic specificity. But what is most noteworthy is how the plan is anchored on the long-term vision of Ambisyon 2040, that concretizes what our people define as a better life for the Filipino family. These can serve as building blocks from one administration after another, until we realize our collective aspirations.

What impressed me most is the obvious effort to create inclusivity and focus on the last, the least, and the lost. These are those who, in traditional economics, will have to wait for the last trickle of development to taste the rewards of a growing economy. Pag naging maayos ang pamamalakad ng planong ito, makikita na rin natin sa wakas kung paano makakamit ng ating mga kababayan ang kanilang mga mailap na mithiin.

As you can probably tell, the kind of economics that gives us hope is what I call “laylayanomics”. In my view, those in the fringes of society deserve more of our effort and time than any other member of our society. They are the ones who have not yet discovered the art of asking for help, the skill of using media to deliver their messages, and for sure, do not have the lobby money to influence those who make policies and decisions. Thus, there is value in personally going to them, no matter how inconvenient; in listening to them, no matter how messy consultations can be; in empowering them, no matter how they might prefer doleouts and saviors sometimes, instead of a chance to make their own contribution to growth.

This does not mean that we don’t put as much effort on creating macroeconomic stability, global competitiveness, ease of doing business, eradicating corruption, and attracting innovation, among

other things. On these fronts, we know we have done well in recent years, our investment grade rating being the crown of these achievements.

But the cost of ignoring economic inequality is catching up with us. It is causing much frustration, anger, and distrust of institutions globally. The world's poor are crying out, and with technology and social media as powerful platforms, they can no longer be ignored. We need to find better solutions to our society's complex and systemic problems sooner rather than later.

We also need to find better ways of measuring our gains. We pride ourselves with 6% to 7% growth rates, only to be humbled by high maternal mortality and stunting among our children. In the front page of the Philippine Star today, it is reported that the Philippines ranked 96th of 172 countries in the 2017 End of Childhood Survey of Save the Children. The report says, and I quote, "the Philippines performed poorly on child stunting or chronic malnutrition which affects more than 30% of children across the country; child mortality ... and teenage pregnancy." These scores reveal a very disturbing reality which I personally have seen up close.

This is why, at the Office of the Vice President, we have vowed to put the poor at the front and center of all our endeavors. In the past 11 months in office, I have learned so much from our people as I went around the most remote and impoverished villages and barangays in our country. Through partnerships with corporations, development organizations, and NGOs, we have tried to walk where they walk, eat where they eat, and listen to their innermost fears.

As you discuss macroeconomic numbers and development strategies today, let me also add my voice to yours by telling you of a different kind of narrative. Together, I believe that our combined narratives will make all of us even more inspired to work with more urgency and more commitment.

Late last year, my small team and I travelled to a place called Agutaya in Northern Palawan. To reach Agutaya, you have to ride a boat for 10 to 14 hours from Coron on a good day. Yes, up to 14 hours, and here we are, complaining about traffic on EDSA.

There are no hospitals in Agutaya, so for those who live there, emergency healthcare is 10 to 14 hours away, once a week. The only elementary school in the barangay has been destroyed by Yolanda and remains dilapidated up to this day. Grade 5 students are small for their age, not much bigger than their Grade One counterparts. The doctor who was with us explained that they suffer from a condition called stunting, which is irreversible after age five. Stunting harms the brain, not just the body. Therefore, if our children now are not saved from this alarming trend, our demographic dividend is very much in danger.

Rev-Rev was one of the children I met in Agutaya. I worry about his future and that of the many other stunted children that I met as I visited the farthest and poorest municipalities around the

country. In fact, one need not go as far as Agutaya. Just this year, I visited an informal settlement community in Tondo, Manila upon the invitation of Helping Land, an NGO that feeds hundreds of children daily. While I felt consoled that hundreds of kids have their fill before they go to school, my enthusiasm was dampened as I saw hundreds, if not thousands more, who scavenge for food in the surrounding garbage dump.

The frustrating thing is that it doesn't take new technology, new discovery, or much money to put a bowl of nutritious meal in a child's stomach. Seeing stunted children face to face drove home the point to me, that we cannot waste a single day in the work of looking out for those who need help the most.

The second lesson is that helping doesn't have to be done in majestic gestures; when we first visited Agutaya, there were tears in their eyes. A few months after we visited, our OVP team returned with a few solar generators so that the residents could have a few hours of electricity each day. And right this moment, our advocacy team is probably just about to reach the beaches of Agutaya with eight Balikbayan boxes of toys for a new toy library and school supplies for the coming school year.

Then, there's Nanay Love (totoo po, yan talaga ang pangalan nya) who crosses three rivers, walks barefoot in the mud, and climbs elevated terrains two to three times per day to sell her vegetables in the Poblacion in Siayan in Zamboanga del Norte. She uses the money to pay for her children's school expenses. Despite the long trek, her children present her regularly with medals from their school activities. Siayan, you might recall, reported the highest poverty incidence of 97.5% for many years. The people of Siayan did not have enough income to eat three meals a day and did not even know what a "meryenda" was. But a proactive mayor named Flora Villarosa changed the town's future, through careful and collaborative planning.

When we went to Tangcal, Lanao del Norte last month, we discovered that most of the farmers there were women. The fathers of the households are the ones out fighting when there are threats to their security. As we spoke, they were in tears, telling us that every time they were fighting, they would lose everything and start all over again.

Lastly, just last weekend, we went to the poorest and farthest barangay in my district when I was still serving as a member of the House of Representatives. Punta Tarawal is just about an hour away from Naga City, plus another 10-minute boat ride. It is situated in the mouth of San Miguel Bay, and therefore bears the brunts of strong winds whenever there is a strong typhoon. The entire town goes underwater during big floods and women and children have to stay in an evacuation center in the mainland. The men stay behind and survive only by hanging on trees. On days where there are regular floods, children who go to its only elementary school are submerged up to their knees.

After graduating elementary school, most of the young people there leave their homes to get employed as maids in the cities. With the new school we constructed there, with the help of AGAPP Foundation, AGAPP is short for Aklat, Gabay, Aruga, Tungo sa Pag-Angat At Pag-Asa, Golden ABC Penshoppe, Matimco, and Boysen, perhaps we might get our first college student soon. What was once a one-floor, two-classroom, dilapidated school building is now a beautiful, two-story building, with PVC windows and walls sturdy enough against storms. Before we left, the PTA was already planning how to make sure that everyone takes care of their new school. Right now, their dream is to have more teachers as they only have three who handle Kinder to Grade Six.

Our Angat Buhay: Partnerships Against Poverty program is very small in size compared to other programs out there. But not in inspiration. It is our contribution to this administration, filling in the gaps that we see when we visit the poorest and farthest municipalities.

The lives of those who reside in these communities should be the lifeblood of any government economic development plan. People's lives span decades; so should plans that are supposed to turn our nation into a First World Country where poverty is the exception, rather than the rule. This is why I would like to commend you for adopting and continuing Ambisyon 2040, by bringing it a step further and plotting a PDP timeframe. This kind of careful, insightful, apolitical, and expert planning should be a big help to the people of Agutaya, of Siayan, of Tangcal, of Punta Tarawal and many others.

But the devil, as they say, is in the details. And may I add: in the implementation. Such a plan as this will never change lives on the ground if our implementing agencies are not able to work together, work fast, and work with flexibility. Our agencies have a tendency to work in silos. A tendency to protect their own parochial interests instead of looking at the bigger picture. A penchant for avoiding risks for accountability at the expense of results.

We need leadership to create an effective convergence strategy. This way, everybody is focused on the same metrics and results, taking out fluff, political noise, and other distractions. Poverty will not take care of itself; we need to actively fight it by working together. If we truly want the vision that no Filipino will be poor by 2020, we need to actively set the stage today.

My wish is for all of these plans to focus on the laylayan. If it is possible to push for high growth and inclusivity at the same time, that would be ideal. But if it is a toss up between high growth and inclusive growth, I am inclined to go for inclusivity.

As reflected in the PDP, the answer to reducing poverty is the agriculture and fisheries sector. If we want to build infrastructure, let us not build it for building's sake; let us make sure that money spent will benefit our poorest farmers. If we are to push for tourism, let us include our farmers and fisherfolk in the plans. If we are to create more jobs, let us focus on quality jobs in the agriculture and fisheries industries where the vast majority of poor Filipinos are. Let us create

opportunities for our farmers and fisherfolk to pick up their tools instead of take up arms. These are simple examples, in my practical experience, that hit development and inclusivity at the same time, with the kind of focus that creates results.

It is also important to agree on metrics that will allow us to measure our progress. Metrics that matter; metrics that make sense; metrics that measure quality of life. When I was still HUDCC Chair, agencies under HUDCC counted houses to show that they met their targets. Unfortunately, when we visited, many of the houses were unoccupied. They were never accomplishments. They were, in fact, a waste of money.

The work is cut out for all of us and there is no time to waste. We should all be impatient because it is such an injustice to let suffering continue as we debate and play politics. But we remain hopeful despite our many challenges today. This PDP provides a very promising “whole of government” approach to scaling up the solutions and to truly win our fight vs. poverty and inequality. In the face of our people’s difficulties, I see so much potential and fortitude and hope, and they spur us to action. By telling you their stories, fresh from the ground, I hope they will give all of us more reason to come back to work with vigor, energy, and purpose.

So, once again, congratulations once more on creating a laylayan-centered vision and long-term plan. Our prayer is for the wisdom in these pages to translate into real, inclusive change for our people.

Mabuhay po kayong lahat at maraming salamat sa inyo.