

The dream of Dorothy and Vic

The Philippines as my source of inspiration



by Joop van Hezik

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as my source of inspiration**

by
Joop van Hezik

**Dedicated to Rianne Pijnenburg
(my wife and so much more than that)**



Ecotopia

In 2008 I was walking in the barangay (neighborhood) Trinidad of the town Calbayog on the island of Samar, which in the Philippines was known as 'the forgotten island' – forgotten as in investment-wise by the government and it's one of the poorest island of the Philippines. And on this forgotten place attention was called to conserving the natural environment and the negative effects of global warming, in the form of murals. Anno 2021 I still remember how inspired I was by these murals, that are more current then ever with the current climate crisis. They mirror the Filipino fundamental right that people have to a healthy environment that is balanced and in accordance to the rhythm and harmony of nature.

“The State shall protect and advance the right of the people to a balanced and healthful ecology in accord with the rhythm and harmony of nature”.

Constitution of the Philippines,
1987

As a once graduated cultural philosopher of the utopian tradition in the history of ideas, I have been inspired and influenced by what I call 'a journey through ideas'. Moreover the actual travels to the Philippines inspired and influenced me. The Philippines is an archipelago of more than 7.000 islands big and small, about a quarter of them is inhabited. It's the land of contradictions, where poverty and unprecedented opulence live side by side, with Islamic and communist guerilla movements, child prostitution and where corruption reigns. But it's also a land in which the right of the people to live in harmony with nature and in line with the rhythm of the ecological system is enshrined in the constitution. 'People Power' is engraved in the soul and pride of the people. A typical cultural feature is 'bayanihan', which translates as 'community spirit'.

The following will show you how my travels to the Philippines have inspired me as an independent consultant, my company is called 'Ecotopia, consultancy for sustainable development issues'. I merged the terms 'ecology' - because I was involved in nature and environmental movements from a young age – and 'utopia' -because at the time I graduated as a cultural philosopher on the topic of utopian tradition in the history of ideas.

Rianne

I got to know the Philippines thanks to my wife Rianne. She seized the opportunity of a internship abroad during her training as a district nurse. That experience would shape her life.

In 1989 Rianne is staying with the Saint Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception at Saint Joseph's College in Manila. She gets, what they call in the Philippines, an 'exposure training'. This means as much as literally being exposed to life in a third world country. Medical missions into the mountains to indigeous people, sleeping in slums on huge garbage dumps, visiting degradingly full prisons and walking in protest marches. And then the counterpart: the opulence of the rich elite and the gigantic, American style 'megamalls'.

"I sometimes was a bit shaky by all the all military check points," Rianne writes in her diary after a protest march (a 'peace caravan' followed by 'no nukes concert') against the presence of American military bases on the Philippines.

Rianne is there to see the early and troubled start of a democracy, three years after dictator Ferdinand Marcos was deposed and fled the country. Whose predecessors were voracious and corrupt since the independence in 1946. Before that, the Philippines was a colony, first of Spain, then of the US. Prolonged Western domination has left a strong mark on the culture.

But by 1986 the people had had enough of self-enriching oppressors. After the assassination of opposition leader Aquino, the resistance grew. False election results gave the final push. The people had passed the fear and took to the

streets en masse. Called to this by Cardinal Sin, and with the nuns leading the way.

Peaceful protest marches swept the EDSA boulevard in Manila, and the military refused to open fire. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos fled the country. This nonviolent revolution is known in the Philippines as 'People Power' and has had an immense impact on the self-consciousness of the Philippine people.

However, with the departure of Marcos, the battle is not yet over. The aspiration to belong to the so-called 'newly industrialized countries' (NIC) brings the new democracy under a different yoke, the dictates of IMF¹ and GATT². Rianne's internship supervisor at the time, Franciscan sister Agnetia Naval wrote to me in 1995: "I agree with you when you say that to become a NIC (this is the present program of the Ramos government – to attain the status of NIC in the year 2000) we will be more and more under the rule of IMF and GATT. We are already experiencing the pains that have been brought about by GATT. We are also being held by neck by the IMF. It dictates very much our economy. More and more imported goods are coming to our country and this has killed our national production. As the imported goods are now much cheaper than the local products, so people will buy the imported goods rather than the local products. This is the same also when it comes to services, education etc. Our educational system is patterned to answer the needs of foreign countries more than our own needs. As a colonized country this has always been our experience as a people. Our education is foreign based, our taste has also become foreign and our cul-

¹ International Monetary Fund

² General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, currently World Trade Organization

ture, we are just starting to define what is real Philippino culture. This has been destroyed by nations coming to our land. Our environment ... see what has happened to our forests. Our seas that used to be beautiful and clean are now very polluted because of industries usually owned by foreigners.

They have been ravaged by the greed of other nations. Our seas ... who are fishing them ... countries like Japan, Vietnam etc. Who are taking advantage of our forests ... countries like Japan again and other First World countries. What remains for us are floods, from denuded forests, poisoning from our seas because of the dynamite they use for fishing, our whole ecosystem has been destroyed and it will take centuries to bring it back ... if ever. What will be handed to our children and our children's children but poverty and exploitation? We are sorry for what is really happening in our country. The Ramos government is no better than the previous government. So please pray for the Third World because powers that be want to keep the Third World as Third World and not to help move up the ladder of economically independent nations." In a post scriptum she adds: "I heard just now on the radio that another flash flood occurred in Aurora Province and also in my home town. I am just wondering since we never had flash floods in history, as far as I can remember. We are very much aware that calamities such as floodings are a result of logging which we are also not using. All these logs which are taken from our forests are exported for other nations to use."

Mind you, this is a religious sister speaking and not a political activist. Dorothy Segarra, a nurse who is a member of the human rights organization Karapatan, is. Rianne also meets her for the first time during her internship in 1989.

Dorothy writes six years later: "There is the joke that in the past – all the past governments they opened the Philippines with open arms,

but now under the Ramos government it opens arms and legs ... sorry for the form. I can't help it because everything here is being sold (privatized) just to reach the so called NIC hood status or Newly Industrialized Country under the global trend that is being pushed by the imperialist countries led by the US government."

Dorothy and sister Agnetia clearly think differently than the Asian Development Bank (DB), which takes a positive note in its 1997 annual report. The bank considers megacity Manila – despite pollution, crime and alienation – of great importance for economic development. Further degradation could be prevented by good governance. At the same time, the bank argues in favor of a withdrawing government to provide scope for private initiatives. The privatization of the water and sewerage company in Manila is cited as a good example.

The degradation of the natural environment in developing countries from World Bank and IMF Economic Reform Support Programs is damaging the natural environment in developing countries, according to the World Resources Institute. State of the World 1992 cites the developments in the Philippines as the most striking example of this.

In 1993, a group of 43 Filipino minors filed a lawsuit against the Department of Environment and Natural Resources granting logging permits. The group does this on behalf of future generations. The Supreme Court unanimously declares the charge admissible, which is a legal breakthrough. The wording of the statement is extraordinary: "This case has a special and



novel element. Petitioners minors assert that they represent their generation as well as generations yet unborn. We find no difficulty in ruling that they can, for themselves, for others of their generation and for the succeeding generations, file a class suit. Their personality to sue in behalf of the succeeding generations can only be based on the concept of intergenerational responsibility insofar as the right to a balanced and healthful ecology is concerned. Such a right considers the 'rhythm and harmony of nature'. Nature means the created world in the entity. Such rhythm and harmony indispensable include, inter alia, the judicious disposition, utilization, management, renewal and conservation of the country's forests, mineral, land, water, fisheries, wildlife, off-shore areas and other natural resources to the end that their exploration, development and utilization be equitably accessible to the present as well as future generations. Needless to say, every generation has a responsibility to the next to preserve the rhythm and harmony of nature for the full enjoyment of a balanced and healthful ecology. Put a little differently, the minor's assertions of their right to a sound environment constitutes, at the same time, the performance of their obligation to ensure the protection of that right for generations to come."

Let's make things better

In the Philippines, as she describes herself, Rianne has seen the world from below. To do something with her experiences, she becomes a volunteer at the Liliane Foundation, which helps children with a physical or mental disability worldwide. In the twenty years that she has been active for the Liliane Foundation, Rianne meets Florie Ladrero, a Filipino by birth. Florie corresponds with the Liliane Foundation's contact persons in the Philippines. They become friends, because of their mutual love for the Phi-

lippines. In 1997 Florie goes to the Philippines for work and family visits. She asks Rianne to come along. Of course I want to accompany her this time. At the Manila airport I am greeted by a large billboard with the then slogan of Philips: "Let's make things better". Manila turns out to be one big traffic jam. At first I think they are traffic lights, but they are pollution index lights. The colors green (good), yellow (fair) and red (poor) indicate the air quality. Although the air quality meters are green, everyone walks with a cloth over their mouth and nose. The congested traffic provides a source of income for the children from the slums. Walking among smoking cars in traffic jams, they offer food, newspapers and cigarettes for sale.

Rianne and I are staying with the Saint Francis Sisters of the Immaculate Conception again. The first thing I see when I walk in is a large painting of Saint Francis of Assisi. Below it, on a pasted strip of paper, is the text 'Patron Saint of Ecology'. It is heartwarming to reunite after eight years with sister Assumption, who is now 72 years old. "You're back! You are back!" She holds Rianne's hand for five minutes. As early as 1989, when she had been in Manila for less than a week, this woman was her favorite. Rianne writes in her diary on January 6, 1989: "My favorite sister is called Sister Assumption of the Blessed Virgin." And two days later: "Sister Assumption in particular continues to care for us. This afternoon she was standing at a closed door with soup. Isn't that sweet."

The Promised Land' and the Scavenger Union

Again 'exposure training'. Sister Agnetia, coordinator for the Liliane Foundation in the Philippines, prepared this. We visit the 17 ha garbage dump in the center of the barangay (district) Pa-

yatas. Every day, some 1,000 trucks dump 40% of Manila's garbage at this site, where some 34,000 people dig for a living from the trash. They live in a belt of slums around the garbage dump. They are called 'scavengers' (literally: animals living off carrion) and they sort everything that is still usable. Child labor also flourishes here, especially many street children are the victims. The stench is pungent. From some distance you can also see the rubbish dump 'smoking'. A large layer of white smoke hangs above it. Payatas is fast becoming the new 'Smoky Mountain', the immense garbage dump where Manila's waste used to be dumped. This garbage dump, which Rianne visited in 1989, was closed in 1995 and violently evicted. The stain was removed in view of the 1996 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation conference in Manila. Much of the people who previously lived on Smokey Mountain have now settled in Payatas, and Payatas is the fastest growing barangay of Quezon City in Metro Manila. Popularly, the district is cynically called "Lupang Pangako", "the promised land". People who come to Manila from the countryside in hopes of finding work end up here as human waste.

But the strength of the Philippine cultural characteristic 'bayanihan' (community spirit) is also apparent: There is an - sounds cynical, but it is not - Association of Scavengers, a Trade Union for Scavengers. And there is a micro credit program called the Tanggapan ng Lupang Pangako Savings Association where the social cohesion rate of return is an incredible 98%. The names testify to wry humor.

Philippinos laugh through their misery. 'Resilience' probably characterizes them the most. This certainly applies to the 120 children and young people with mental or physical disabilities of the Payatas Children Rehabilitation Program. It is

run by volunteers and 18 mothers who work as coordinators in the ward. Deaf children welcome us with a song in sign language. An incredible song. On the way back to St. Joseph's College, Sister Agnetia shows a so-called "mega mall" by way of contrast. This gigantic department store is fully air-conditioned and contains, floor after floor, hundreds of shops, boutiques and restaurants.

The American influence – the Philippines became an American colony in 1898 – is most evident today in the competition to build ever-larger mega-malls. The mega mall is called Shoe Market. Dorothy has written to me before about this phenomenon: "Yes, roads and buildings in a few big cities especially in Metro Manila are being constructed, but all this is not of help to the needy. There are a lot of big malls like Shoe Market in major cities outside Metro Manila, but all this is not a sign of development."

Pinatubo

The Philippines is a country of extremes. That also applies to nature. The archipelago has been internationally declared a 'hot spot' for biodiversity. Typhoons regularly whip the area. The country has its own continental plate and is located in what is called the 'ring of fire'. In 1991 the fire flared up. The belly of volcano Pinatubo began to rumble and lava erupted in June. It was the largest volcanic eruption of the 20th century. Massive volcanic ash emissions obscured the sun. The result is global climate cooling for three years, peaking at nearly 1 degree Fahrenheit.

In 1989 Rianne participated in a medical mission to the indigenous Negrito tribe Aetas (it literally means 'human') who consider the volcano to be sacred. *She notes in her diary: "It is a beautiful environment that is unfortunately sometimes disturbed by fighter jets and military*

helicopters that observe things here. As I write this, I realize that I feel good here. Flowing water in the background. A school with children who recite words. Here and there shouting, some children playing, some people talking. The wind blows, I sit in the shade and the sun shines. A rooster crows. It's peaceful here. People live in, with and from nature. The people here are called Aetas, the river Marowonot and the mountain in the background Pinatubo."

The Aetas worship the Pinatubo volcano as their "holy mother". The warning that their holy mother was ill and that therefore they had to leave this place turned out to be a catastrophic blunder. Because you don't leave a sick mother behind. Especially not if she's holy.

In September 1991 we receive a letter from Vic Buenaventura. He has always accompanied her during her internship. Vic: "Now, in those areas we travelled together, the cultural minorities, the Aetas, are gone, displaced by the volcano's wrath, and scattered to different evacuation and relocation sites. There is no more vegetation in the area and it is like a desert there, only desolation and a lonely empty landscape of sand and volcanic ash. The Aetas are the most affected. They may have survived the eruptions and the lahars, but they are left to the mercy of inept government relief and rehabilitation efforts, which treat them no different from animals and livestock."

Rianne and I decide to go and see it with our own eyes. Vic's description does justice to what we see. It is a desolate wasteland, where along the road people, dressed as Bedouins with only an opening for their eyes to protect against the dust, beg. The Pinatubo has emitted billions of tons of ash. And every rainy season, the monsoons create huge flows of ash mud ('lahar'), which

have now buried large parts of the central plain of the island of Luzon, the most important part of the Philippines for rice production.

Somewhere we walk into a church largely buried by lahar. The entrance is a window that used to be above the church door. A new altar has been built on the ash layer. When I extend my hand I can almost touch the chandeliers on the ceiling. Walking around the church, I see a statue of St. Francis, buried up to his waist in ash mud. Symbolically, this 'patron saint of ecology' shows me how insignificant man is to what nature can do. A good lesson, I think, as I visit an initiative to turn the volcano into an ecotourism site. The eruption of the Pinatubo has had another special consequence. What Rianne demonstrated for in 1989 with countless non-governmental organizations has literally been accomplished in one blow: the dismantling of the American naval and air force base Subic Bay. The camp is covered in a thick layer of ash. "The hand of God has a purpose for everything," says Aida Bacas, assistant to Sister Agnetia. To which Rianne, remembering the Aetas, reacts viciously that God must have had a very good intention with the people buried under the ashes.

During a next trip, in a shelter for Aetas, I will witness, how their original culture has been destroyed because they are Christianized. And Subic Bay has become a free trade zone, where unions are prohibited.

Ideological conflict

From Rianne's diary: "Talked to Vic about the situation in the country, how his mother reacts to the fact that four of her children are affiliated with NGOs, about the torture of his sister, the rape and murder of his girlfriend. Sometimes he finds it all very frightening, but he continues.



Dying doesn't frighten him, but torture does. His dream is to study and work abroad at the age of 35, then come back and set up his own small clinic."

Over the years, Vic, Dorothy and other Philippine friends of Rianne's send us regular letters. Vic and Dorothy also write about a devastating ideological rift between the Reaffirmists (RAs) and Rejectionists (RJs). In the Philippines, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist system had a special effect. The ideological conflict dates back to 1992. At the General Assembly of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), Jose Sison calls for reaffirmation of the strategy of longlasting popular uprising in a document entitled Reaffirm our Basic Principles and Rectify the Errors. This document analyzes past errors and formulates guidelines for the future.

Those who endorsed it were called "reaffirmists." Those who rejected it are called "rejectionists." The ideological strife has degenerated into a bitter controversy, with mutual accusations of corruption and betrayal of the revolution or of the people.

The NGOs are also torn along the abyss between the parties. Dorothy, in 1995: "You might wonder what Reaffirmists (RAs) and Rejectionists (RJs) stand for. It is about the debate on what is the present society of the Philippines. The RJ's say the Philippines is going to a precapitalist road, while for the RA's it is still a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society and agrarian at that." And: "Of course BAYAN, KMU, KMP, LFS, GABRIELA, LUPA, PISTON, KARAPATAN, SELDA, HEAD, CHA, IOHSAD are still upholding the same principles and are emerging on the right path. The organizations who are now collaborating (directly or indirectly) with the government pay-war campaign – meaning dividing people so as not to be able to realize why we are a poor country and backward – are DKMP, BMP, SANLAKAS, MAG and PHARA ³."

For Vic, the controversy has personal consequences. He lost his job as a teacher at a school for healthcare. And became disillusioned. "I feel sad and depressed because all of my life is to work and work in the interest of the Philippine masses, and after that all our effort was wasted. Dorothy and others have a position contrary to some other health groups.

³ Sighing under the years of Marcos military dictatorship, the Filipinos have learned to unite and seek support from each other. Examples include BAYAN (Bagong Alyansang Makabayan/New National Alliance of People's Organizations), DKMP (Demokratikong Kilusang Magbubukid ng Philipinas/Democratic Peasant Movement of the Philippines), HEAD (Health Alliance for Democracy, HWCL (Health Workers for Civil Liberty), GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reformes Integration Education Leadership and Action), IOHSAD (Institute for Occupational Health and Safety Development), KARAPATAN (Alliance of People's Rights), KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno (May 1 Movement; national umbrella of progressive trade union organizations), KMP (Kilusang ng Magbubukid sa Pilipinas (National umbrella organization of farmers' organizations), LFS (League of Filipino Students), MAG (Medical Action Group), PHARA (Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates), SELDA (Samahan ng mga Ex-Detainees Laban sa Dentensyon at Para sa Amnestiya/organization of ex-political prisoners). In 1986 the human rights organization for political prisoners Task Force Det inees of the Philippines (TFDK) was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The divide is about medical neutrality and the view of human rights. Other side of the divide in the underground movement is Reaffirmists versus Rejectionists. Heaaaaavyyyy all of a sudden the effort is wasted."

Dorothy: "Medical Action Group sides with the RJ's. They are now campaigning for medical neutrality – in disguise for political neutrality, with that I resigned that organization. Because for me to be on the side of the masses there is no such thing as neutral." About Vic she writes: "I was surprised that Vic mentioned my name, because the last time I heard from him through another friend, he was having a problem in his work. I just hope whatever decision he made, he finds genuine happiness and I hope it is for the good of the masses. You may wonder why I say this. It's because I heard he was affected by the split between the Reaffirmists and Rejectionists, and he I think decided to side with the RJ and then later on was being accused by the very persons he sided with. I just hope he will find time to think things over and be with the side of the people."

I've been looking forward to meeting Vic, if only because he wanted to propose to Rianne at the time. When I speak to him, he has recovered somewhat. He is currently providing training in healthcare as a freelancer. He still sees himself as an RJ. He rejects what he sees as the dogmatic Stalinist slant of the RAs. He accuses them of blindly following corrupt leaders. The RAs, he argues, are short-term focused and work with slogans without explaining anything. While according to him it is about; Explaining the arguments for and against people and then letting them choose for themselves, instead of forcing them to take a stand. 'You discuss it and then you unite.' Even if it takes much longer to bring about social changes. He agrees with the RAs on a few points: The rejection of the current system and the

need for armed conflict. Moreover, he finds the Western economic influence and cultural patterns much more dangerous for the Philippines than the US military presence before. Dorothy sees the debate between the Rejectionists and Reaffirmists quite differently. For her, the fault lies in the fact that NGOs and POs (People's Organizations) have allowed themselves to be encapsulated by the ruling elite. They have partnered with the government, while previously they were critical of that government and committed to change the system, not just reform it.

"In the 1970's PO's and NGO's were the strong critics of the dictator because they had a clear direction, which is to change the present system and not only reform it. But since the beginning of the 80's and when they played up the EDSA event as a miracle – which I think was not because the US government and the ruling class in our country played an important role in usurping the people's legitimate struggle and finally grabbed it from the very people who started it all in the countryside and in the cities, the struggle I mean – the ruling elite in our society again took over." That is why we have to look differently at 'people's empowerment' and the role that NGOs and POs play in this: "When the debate started many were shocked, even myself, because I couldn't believe that what we did all these years was a failure. Though I think we did a lot of positive things, I started to be critical and to investigate and analyze things. After two years of searching I finally saw the true meaning of the reaffirmists group. Yes, I am one with them because I believe they are going back to the basic questions/principles and objectives in what we do. In summing up our experiences we can pinpoint what went wrong in our organizing and empowering the people. Because I think I noticed then in our work we did not empower the people but instead we made them think that we from the NGOs are

their savior, that without us they cannot empower. This is the worst thing, I think, one can do to the people and I believe now to be able to empower them is to be with them, learn from them and work together with them. And only then when they are able to fight for their rights one can say that they are empowered. Don't you think so? So it's not only NGOs in counterbalancing the government but transforming the government through genuine people's empowerment. Only then I can say that we are effective in our work as NGOs/POs."

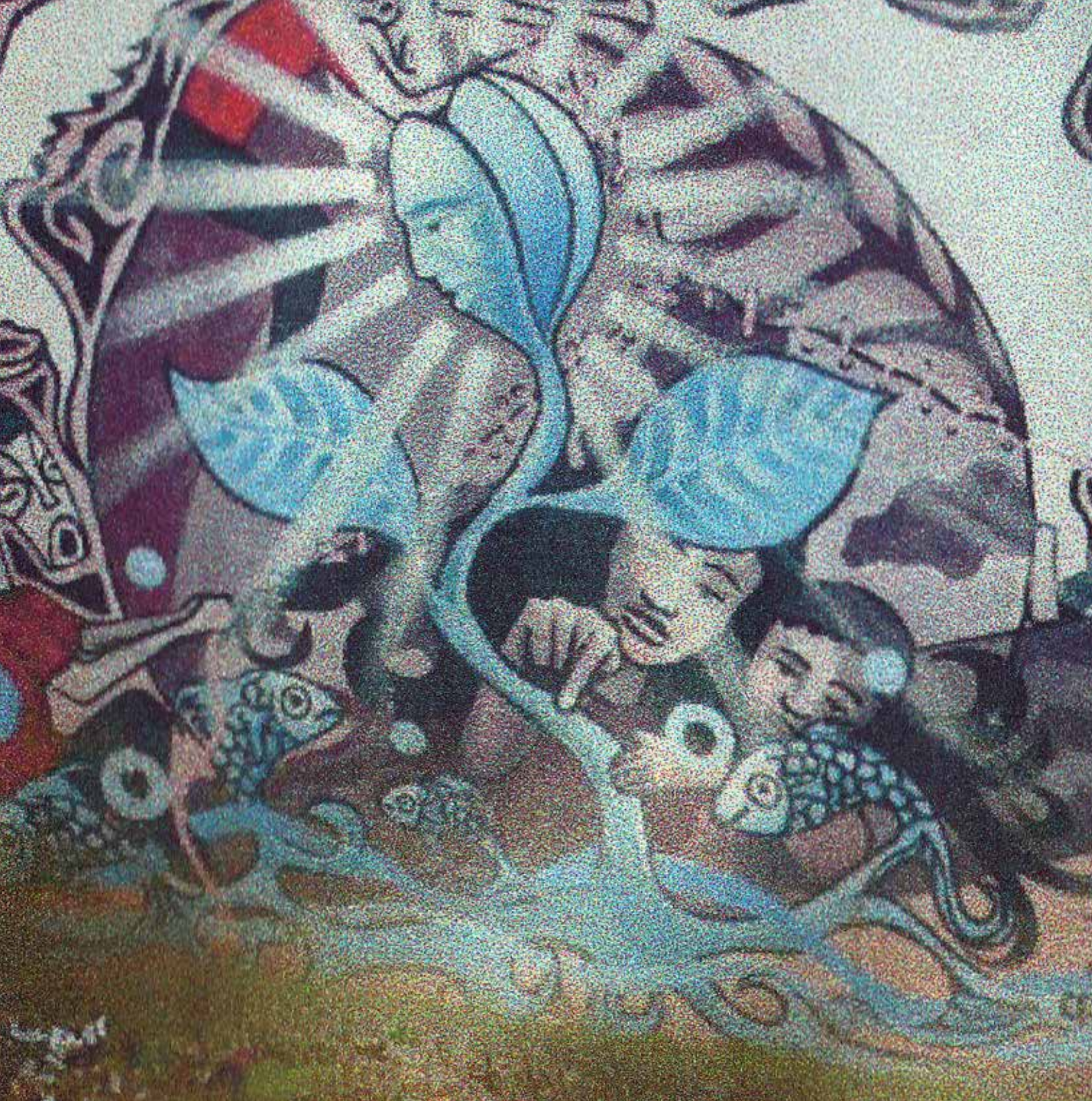
I cannot see Dorothy as dogmatic Stalinist, nor Vic as colluding with the enemy. I think Vic would totally agree with what Dorothy has learned about people empowerment. In any case, they both share the same dream, which Dorothy expresses thus: "All I wish for our country is to be free from foreign capitalists and also from greedy bureaucratic capitalists. A democracy that is enjoyed by the masses and not a democracy in the eyes of the capitalists." The ideological battle is especially sad, because it has driven people like Vic and Dorothy apart. Vic feels he is getting old. How much this struggle has disillusioned his, is visible in his idea that he still plans to work abroad to secure his retirement. He has since visited his brother in Norway who works there as a doctor. He feels like settling there. Sad and a loss for the Philippines. I hope that in the future he will remember his former dream. When we say goodbye, there are tears in his eyes. Rianne reminds him of happier times of which he thinks when he feels depressed and sad. Rianne means a lot to him. "You've done so much to me, especially your support and the way you helped me. I can't express my feelings of how much I appreciated it. I always remember you, your kindness, the way you make me laugh when I feel blue. You're always on my side. I missed all the times we spent together, making some discussion sharing in our common views ... I never forget it."

Sapat

The sisters at St. Joseph's College heard of my interest in nature and the environment. I can't help but give a lecture. In addition to practical matters such as how to deal with waste, they ask questions about the influence of APEC, GATT (WTO) and the impact of economic globalization on the environment. Back in the Netherlands I receive a letter from Sister Agneta Naval of the Office of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation of the Franciscan sisters. She writes that she regrets not being able to attend my lecture, she thought it would have been beneficial as she is involved in the establishment of a Center for Earth Literacy and Ecological Spirituality. "It has become indispensable to admit that what is currently occurring is nothing less than biocide and if we humans continue to think and make decisions that consider only our own convenience to our eventual destruction, it is basically because we have long disconnected and estranged ourselves from our physical roots – the natural World, and have unquestionably accepted the fallacy that we humans as the highest form of our life on earth can make all life forms subservient to us, to our own eventual destruction."

Her goal is that the center will grow into "an economically viable and happy community that lives in love and harmony with the natural world and which is constantly guided by the concept of a sustainable future for coming generations". At the heart of this concept is an 'ethic of enough'. She used this 'ethic of enough' from a booklet entitled SAPAT.

An Environmental Ethic for Personal and Social Transformation (1995) of the Ethos Group for Environmental Ethics and Endeavours in cooperation with the Inter-Franciscan Ministry of the Philippines. Sapat translates to 'enough'. The ethic of enough wants to put a stop to the human- and en-



vironmentally-destroying growth paradigm that underlies the capitalist system. The SAPAT ethic is literally fed up with this capitalist system because it is fundamentally anti-environmental and inhumane. The dominant values of the capitalist system are individualism, consumption, competition and profit. As a result, it alienates people from themselves and from nature. According to the SAPAT ethics the only aim is to maintain the system and it is a myth and misleading to say that economic growth is necessary for increasing the quality of life. Against this growth paradigm, the SAPAT ethic propagates a new paradigm, based on a socio-environmental ethic that unites ecological integrity and socio-economic justice and learns from the wisdom of the indigenous peoples of the Philippines. Such a paradigm shift teaches us that we no longer measure nature by its usefulness or potential usefulness, nor that we measure people by their productivity or marketability. It presupposes that we overcome our anthropocentrism and develop respect for nature based on its intrinsic value. "In the midst of a finite and declining natural world and of the marginalization and deprivation of many people the world over, justice today requires not further economic growth but sufficiency. It is in this view that we are proposing the ethic of SAPAT. SAPAT brings to light the real costs of development and affirms that limits must indeed be set to growth. As such it is critical on the notion that more means better and points to the need to decouple the well-being of humans from economic growth and dependence on ever-expanding markets. Alternatively, it encourages the pursuit of a more integrated path for living that is in harmony with the vast ecology of life. SAPAT advocates a creative partnership among peoples and with nature as it looks forward to a future where the option for meeting everyone's basic needs are expanded, not lessened." The text refers to St. Francis as an inspiring exam-

ple in the midst of a global capitalist world, in which the pursuit of infinite growth has taken on an almost religious obsession/inspiration. And warns that nature will eventually present us with the bill for the attacks we make on her, which may well prove that we will not be able to pay the interest it charges. The image of St. Francis, buried up to his waist in lahar, compels me. The specter of a desolate desert landscape, where man has lost his way. Even though I am not religious, the emphasis on the spiritual value of nature and the replacement of nature and environmental education with earth education in Sister Agneta's Center for Earth Literacy and Ecological Spirituality really appeals to me. As well as the focus on restoring biodiversity and natural ecosystems. This is reflected in the objectives of the center:

- Acquire a paradigm shift of viewing Creation in its proper perspective thereby developing a mutually enhancing relationship between the participants and the natural World toward an effective and holistic appreciation of Creation toward a sustainable development.
- Rehabilitate our forests for the regeneration of local biodiversity and natural ecosystems and the preservation and development of an ecological balance.

Sustainable development

Dorothy sends a card, with a quote from the Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility on the back: "Environmental Education must recover, recognize, respect, reflect and utilize indigenous history and local cultures, as well as promote cultural, linguistic and ecological diversity." In order to implement Agenda 21, the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development was established in 1992, which drew up its own *Philippine Agenda 21 in 1996, an National Agenda for Sustainable Development for the 21th Century*⁴.

After the first acquaintance by letter, I also started to correspond regularly with Sister Agneta. When I ask her how she views Agenda 21, the global action plan for sustainable development endorsed by 180 government leaders at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, she responds: "Yes, Agenda 21, seems to be more on paper than in reality. I kind of suspect that some of the state leaders accepted it more out of convenience than of conviction and belief in the urgency of saving our Planet from further destruction. And this is very deplorable. No wonder, the implementation of the policy apparently hasn't even gone to first base in most countries.

It's not any better with us in the Philippines, you know. Looks like we are even doing worse, because many perceive that our top leadership is preoccupied only with one thing and that is progress for the year 2000 no matter how much it is going to cost our environment in this side of our Planet Earth and, of course, our poor and marginalized sector of society." Practice agrees with Sister Agneta. On World Environment Day, June 5, the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development releases dramatic figures. From 1989 to 1995, 130,000 hectares of rainforest were cleared annually, and only 800,000 hectares of the original 15.8 million hectares of rainforest remain. As a result, 5 million hectares of farmland are subject to severe erosion. 95% of the coral reefs, 50% of the sea grasses and 80% of the mangrove forests have also disappeared, while 121 animal species are threatened with extinction.

On the island of Samar, known for its beautiful waterfalls, I see a man standing in a river, sifting for gold with a bowl. On the same island I read an article in *Homelife* magazine of July 1995 with the headline *Requiem for our polluted and dying rivers*. Mining is, next to pesticides, the main cause of water pollution.

⁴ Principles for sustainable development from Philippine Agenda 21:

- Primacy of developing full human potential
- Holistic science and appropriate technology
- Cultural, moral and spiritual sensitivity
- Self-determination
- National sovereignty
- Gender sensitivity
- Peace, order and national unity
- Social justice, inter-, intra-generational and spatial equity
- Participatory democracy
- Institutional viability
- Viable, sound and broad based economic development
- Sustainable population
- Ecological soundness
- Biogeographical equity and community based resource management
- Global cooperation

Heavy metals end up in the 421 Philippine rivers and 59 lakes that supply water from domestic use to irrigation. Some of the natural water supply is now biologically dead or dying. The Philippines was named the most mining-friendly country in the world by international business in 1996.

The new Mining Act (Republic Act 7942) signed by President Ramos on March 6, 1995, with the support of the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Program, gives foreign mining companies free rein. Previously, a miner could be 40% foreign-owned, now it is 100%. The mining companies have legal priority over water use and exclusive rights to logging on the land where they are located. The number of procedures to exploit and expropriate private land belonging to the local population has doubled. 100% of the profits from the companies can be transferred out of the Philippines. In addition, the companies are exempt from paying taxes for five to ten years as well as from environmental impact reports for the duration of the operation. These rights are issued for 25 years, with the possibility of renewal for another 25 years. After years of correspondence, I personally meet Sister Agneta in the millennium year 2000. I go to her Garden of Covenant, 'Tipanang Harding'. In an oasis of greenery, surrounded by deforested slopes, is the Center for Earth Literacy and Ecological Spirituality. While there is talk in the Netherlands of replacing nature and environmental education for earth education, she is already doing that. A family there is engaged in organic farming. Rianne and I help with the ginger harvest. Heavy work.

Sister Agneta, as she herself feared, is not getting much good from the Philippine Agenda 21. According to her, the economy - Philippine

2000 program - has absolute priority. Despite this, the Asia Pacific Sustainable Development Initiative stated in 1996: "Operationally, Sustainable Development is development that draws the full human potential across ages and generations and is at the same time ecologically sound, politically empowering, socially just, spiritually liberating, gender sensitive, based on holistic science, technologically appropriate, built upon Filipino values, history, culture and excellence, and rests upon strong institutional foundations. From the start, sustainable development has been more than just ecology for the Filipino groups involved in it. Long before this was conceived in the West, they strived for a balance between ecological, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, with a focus on empowerment, gender, cultural diversity and above all spirituality and respect for indigenous peoples.

Walking Gene Suppliers

About the latter, respect for indigenous populations, we speak with 'Doc' Socrates as everyone calls him, in the capital Porto Princessa of the island of Palawan, in 1997. Doc is an orthopedic surgeon and runs his own rehabilitation center. An admirable man, who did not succumb to the big money abroad. The Philippines is the largest exporter of doctors and nurses in the world because of the American model on which training is based. This is referred to as a 'brain drain' in the Philippines. Doc Socrates has lived in London for eight years, studying medicine there, and regularly speaks about his profession at international symposiums. He just wrote an article about collecting genetic material from indigenous peoples in the Philippines. He refers to the practices of Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele when he talks about the Human Genome Diversity



Project of scientists from the United States, Japan and Europe. This project will collect human genetic material from more than 700 indigenous peoples threatened with extinction from around the world. It is used in the fight against diseases such as malaria, immune diseases, leprosy and cholera. Several indigenous populations are resistant to these diseases due to their unique genetic makeup. Eleven of the 32 Philippine indigenous peoples have been identified as "useful." The Human Genome Diversity Project is ostensibly for the benefit of humanity, were it not for the fact that the pharmaceutical industry is mainly concerned with patenting and marketing this genetic material. Bizarre context is that the indigenous populations in the Philippines, due to a lack of basic medical facilities, are dying out from easily curable conditions. As with natural biodiversity, it is Western companies that make commercial gains from this human biodiversity and morally relegate indigenous populations to wandering gene suppliers. Pasadeka, the federation of indigenous peoples on the island of Mindanao, has announced that it will welcome the scientists with spears and arrows⁵.

Small is beautiful

Two Batak, members of one of the indigenous peoples, sail us in a winged canoe across the South China Sea to the park ranger station of St. Paul Subterranean National Park. The semi-nomadic people, with the dark skin and curly hair, live in small groups in this forested mountain country. St. Pauls Subteranean National Park, as I read in the magazine *Bandillo ng Palawan*, is one of two areas where micro-projects were set up in 1996 by the Palawan Tropical Forestry Protection Program of the Palawan Council for

Sustainable Development. The starting point is protecting indigenous tribes by taking care of the tropical rainforest. The tribes, including the Batak who belong to the primal population of Palawan, depend on the rainforest for their existence. "Addressing their needs to survive and aspirations to live is addressing forestal issues".

In order to be able to stop shifting cultivation that affects the ecosystem of the tropical rainforest, viable alternatives must be offered. The micro-projects introduce new agricultural techniques and alternative livelihoods such as beekeeping, seeking as much connection as possible with the traditional way of life of the tribes: "They are born out of the traditional ways of people, which are more sustainable". The ultimate goal is to develop people's self-confidence, social cohesion and skills in such a way that they are able to build a life without outside help in a free market system⁶.

Whether it concerns the granting of micro-credits on the Payatas dump or the setting up of micro-projects with the primal population in the tropical rainforest of Palawan, both apply – in accordance with the title that Ernst Schumacher gives to his 'economic study in which people count again' – Small is Beautiful. Development, Schumacher argues, is about people: "Because people are the very first and the last source of any wealth. If they are left out, pushed around with them by self-appointed experts and arbitrary planners, there can never be real fruit."

⁵ UCAN, 30 april 1997

⁶ *Micro-projects provide livelihood opportunities in the hills, Bandillo ng Palawan, January-February 1997*

Development Aggression

The micro-credits and micro-projects are in stark contrast to the large-scale development projects under the Philippines 2000 pursuit of New Industrialized Country status. Projects that commit an infinitely greater attack on the tropical rainforest than ethnic population groups such as the Batak would ever be capable of. Moreover, the latter are often victims of it, are forcibly relocated and are displaced. According to the Center for Refugee Studies in Manila, these large-scale development projects are resulting in more and more people being marginalized and deprived of their right to exist. The center therefore speaks of development refugees⁷.

The human rights organization PAHRA (Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates) refers to these development projects and the associated paradigm as "development aggression": "When people become victims and not those who benefit; if the population is bypassed in the development plans and not treated as participants and partners in the development advocated; and if at most the population is seen as a resource for profit-oriented development and not as a central subject of development. Development aggression violates the human rights of our people in all its dimensions – economic, social, cultural, civil and political⁸." Preserving the natural environment is also a human right. Peace, development and environmental protection are indivisible, according to PAHRA, as also included in Resolution 25 of the Rio de Janeiro Declaration of the United Nations Conference

on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992.

The micro-projects of the Palawan Tropical Forestry Protection Program are closely aligned with Resolution 22 of the same Declaration. It assigned a crucial role to indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. It then called for recognizing the identity, culture and interests of indigenous peoples, supporting them and enabling them to participate in sustainable development. As mentioned, the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development has been set up to implement Agenda 21. Initially, the government's Philippine 2000 program was subordinate to the Council's objectives and development projects had to be assessed for environmental and social impacts. In 1996 the government forced the Council to change its guidelines. From then on, Philippines 2000 projects were given national priority. Since then, the preconditions for development - community involvement and environmental care - have been completely relegated to the background, according to the People's Environment Agenda Network - a network of 114 organizations of farmers, fishermen, urban poor, religious and scientists⁹.

⁷ A.V. Obnamia & C.Y. Medina, *Displacement in the name of Development, Philippine News and Features*, 10 mei 1994

⁸ M. de Mesa, *Vrede en Mensenrechten, in: Wij leerden mensenrechten niet uit boeken. De Filippijnen en mensenrechten in de periode 1986 tot 1996*, 1996

⁹ *De Filippijnen: vijf jaar na UNCED*, Tambuli, mei 1997

WESAMAR

From Palawan we travel to the island of Samar. To Trinidad, the birthplace of Florie. And get to know her family, who will become our 'extended family'. Later they will even build a house for us. We meet Remi Laurel, a cousin of Florie. Remi was imprisoned during the Marcos dictatorship, as usual without any form of justice. He studied political science and was a critical citizen. That last one was enough. When asked how he sees the situation in the Philippines after the People Power revolution of 1986, he succinctly formulates 'the dogs only changed their collar'. The biggest problem is corruption. He quotes the anarchist adage: "power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely". Yet Remi believes in the emancipation of the Filipino people. He is convinced that this people will eventually prevail and eradicate corruption.

Two years after our meeting, in 1999, Remi has a drink with his friend Melchor Nacario, mayor of the town of Calbiga on the island of Samar, before he travels to the Netherlands. Nacario will participate in an international training program of the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) on Local Agenda 21. Municipalities worldwide have been called upon to translate Global Agenda 21 to the local level. Remi still tells his friend that he should visit Rianne and me. But coincidence does not exist. On the other side of the world, in Oisterwijk, I had reported to the VNG with my Office for Sustainable Development Issues, Ecotopia, to guide Philippine participants in the Local Agenda 21 training program. Subsequently, the Dutch Volunteers Foundation in the Philippines started recruiting participants. Mayor Melchor Nacario had responded. In accordance with the Filipino hospitality, Melchor will come and stay at our home, with Rianne and me for two weeks.

It is the beginning of a friendship for many years, with someone who, like me, studied philosophy and eventually became politically active.

It soon becomes apparent that Melchor has another goal to come to the Netherlands. Its 20,000 inhabitants Calbiga municipality participates in the WESAMAR (Western Samar) project, of the European Union. Financing has been bogged down by bureaucratic and administrative rules. I support him in get the financing going. It makes me a kind of 'folk hero' in Calbiga and Melchor laughs that he is being taught intercultural communication. The aim of the WESAMAR project is to revitalize Maqueda Bay and create income opportunities for the population. Fourteen municipalities, which want to implement Local Agenda 21, have united in the Maqueda Bay Council. A series of projects has been set up: a pearl farm, fish farms, saltwater agriculture (seaweed), restoration of mangrove forests, seagrass beds and coral reefs.

Calbiga Caves

In addition, the municipality of Calbiga sees a future in ecotourism around the Calbiga Caves. The Calbiga Caves are part of the Protected Landscape under Presidential Proclamation No. 1126 dated November 4, 1997. The Ecological Society of the Philippines gives the following description: "The Calbiga Karst popularly known as Calbigas in Samar, is dubbed as the biggest karst formation in the Philippines and one of the largest in East Asia. It is described by an Italian Speleologist who explored the area in 1987 as a truly exceptional hydrogeological area, which drains immigrant watercourses. There are 12 caves found within



the protected area, 3 of which are the most prominent, namely: Gobingob, Lagum and Bitong Buhangin. All caves are endowed with magnificent rock formations, astonishing ground spaces and underground watercourses with the main gallery of the biggest caves measuring more than 5 kilometers in length, 50 meters in height and about 40 meters in width. It offers an ideal recreational ground for spelunking and nature trekking."

In the first chamber of this cave system, the stalagmites and stalactites have been mined, ground and sold on the Asian market as an aphrodisiac. Melchor wants to leave the remnants behind under the motto: 'Instruct, not destruct'.

In the following years I will support the municipality of Calbiga in developing ecotourism. Among other things, by having students from Dutch colleges and universities carry out research in Calbiga. And by making contact with the Italian speleologists of the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Verona who have mapped the cave system. In 2002, at the XI International Symposium of Biospeleology in Verona, I gave a presentation about the Samar Island Biodiversity Project, set up to turn the entire inner area of the island of Samar into a Natural Park. The island of Samar is known in the Philippines as 'the forgotten island', because it has been 'forgotten' by the government in terms of investments. There is deep poverty. However, being forgotten can also bring benefits. Samar therefore still has a lot of nature. Due to its poverty and inhospitable character, it is also a 'stronghold' of the communist guerilla NPA, New Peoples Army, popularly known as Nice People Above. In his War On Terrorism, United States President Bush has publicly declared war on the NPA.

When Rianne and I first enter the cave system in 2000, it is an NPA person who protects us from accidents. The NPA is not an army in the mountains, but woven into the population of the upland barangay's (neighborhoods). The cave system is not only overwhelming because of the immense size of the rooms. A river flows through it. The fauna (fish, crabs, insects) is special. The animals have developed in the darkness, so they have no pigment and are without eyes. Equally impressive is the immense number of bats that reside here and fly out at the same time at five o'clock to forage. The challenge will be to develop ecotourism in a way that benefits the people of the barangays, while not disrupting the fragile habitat of the cave system. A major threat is the presence of bauxite in the soil, which has led to ecologically destructive open mining in neighboring municipalities. That is at least an advantage of the presence of the NPA. This keeps multinationals that are only out for profit away.

At some point during the arduous treks to and from the Calbiga cave system, I suffer from heat stroke. On the urgent advice of the Franciscan sisters, I visit the doctor afterwards. I am received by his assistant, also a Franciscan sister, who asks me what the complaint is. Her diagnosis is crystal clear: I forgot to ask permission from the spirits of the cave to enter the cave. Catholicism has apparently never succeeded in completely supplanting animism. She gives me a kind of 'pranic healing', a combination of ironing with leaves and acupressure. Then she takes me to the doctor, trained in the USA. He stuffs me full of pills. I still don't know which of the two treatments cured me. But on a subsequent visit to the cave system of Calbiga, I thought 'if it doesn't help, then it won't hurt'. I just asked permission.....



21 reasons

The United Nation Conference on the Human Environment in 1992 resulted in an Agenda 21 for a sustainable world in the 21th century. The Agenda 21 contained a chapter on local sustainability that called on municipalities worldwide to develop a Local Agenda 21. Developing ecotourism is part of the Community Based Resource Management Program of the Municipality of Calbiga, which is carried out by about 15 young men and women. Interested as I am in their vision of sustainable development, I organize a workshop in which I ask them to give 21 reasons to work on Local Agenda 21.

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Calbiga, March 28 2000

21 reasons to work on Local Agenda 21, according to the people involved in the Community Based Resource Management Programme of Calbiga.

We want to work on Local Agenda 21:

1. to protect our planet and preserve the human race;
2. to help people survive by facilitating livelihood projects or at least uplift their economic conditions;
3. for food security, meet the daily needs;
4. to help the poorest in terms of education;
5. out of personal involvement to attain sustainable development;
6. to work with people in the community;
7. out of development consideration (best approach);
8. to give opportunity to the community/local people to participate in all aspects of their development endeavors/activities;
9. because sustainable development is anchored on a vision consensually evolved; a vision powerful enough to

keep you at work till midnight and which prompts to get up early to go to work;

10. to create through dialogues an atmosphere of understanding by learning from people or communities their woes and worries;
11. to motivate people, let them participate, give them responsibilities and empower them (people empowerment); doing this in a continuous effort and time will achieve the sustainability of economic, social and environmental aspects;
12. because localized implementation is more practical, workable, manageable;
13. because of the ease in drawing local people's participation from planning to implementation;
14. to convince the community not to destroy our natural resources;
15. because natural resources, which are the ultimate life support system of man, are located locally in the immediate environment of the individual humans and therefore management of the resources should be done locally to ensure adaptive, quick and participatory response;
16. to work with people living in a community on how to manage and be involved with the proper use of our natural resources;
17. to realize the potentials of community resources;
18. to develop potentials, improve existing situations, participate improvements;
19. to bring back awareness to local conditions or opportunities;
20. for Jesus to take flesh on me;
21. to obtain self reliance or a safety net to GATT.

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Mind you, these are young people in a community where the daily family income is often less than 1 euro. Their commitment to the community and vision of what they want to achieve is inspiring. And 'for Jesus to take flesh upon me' is typical of Catholic Philippines.

The Philippine delegation and the two crazy Dutch

I am reminded of the fifteen young people from Calbiga during the Nations In Bloom competition in Shenzhen in China, 2002. This Nations In Bloom competition (later renamed The International Awards for Liveable Communities) is an international competition between municipalities, originated from the Nation in Bloom competition in Great Britain and sponsored by the United Nations Environmental Programme. The criteria focus on improving nature and landscape, preserving the natural environment, preserving the cultural-historical heritage, and involvement of the community. The participating municipalities vary in size from a few tens of thousands of inhabitants to metropolitan cities of millions of inhabitants. The competition is primarily a glossy and over the top event, with the municipalities putting themselves in the window.

The municipal council of Shenzhen – a provincial town that has grown into a metropolis and free trade zone in just a few decades – is doing everything it can to get as much publicity out of it as possible. It strikes me that, apart from two large municipalities from South Africa and Chile, there are no participants from developing countries. I challenge the director of the Nations In Bloom organization, Alan Smith, to find a small community that, despite all its problems (slash and burn agriculture, open mining with mercury pollution, the presence of a communist guerrilla, an average daily income of less than

1 euro) works in all kinds of ways towards a sustainable future, from a developing country. He accepts the challenge. Melchor then submits a written application. The final of Nations In Bloom is in 2003, in Apeldoorn in the Netherlands, in the royal palace. Of the 236 registrations, 25 municipalities are invited to the final, including Calbiga. Because Calbiga has no money for that, Rianne and I pay for the flights and accommodation for the three-person delegation: Melchor Nacario, his wife Luzviminda and his friend Osmundo Orlanes. They spend the night in a simple hotel, because we cannot afford the expensive hotels where the other participants stay. The story about Calbiga's participation quickly spreads among the other participants, with metropolitan cities such as Chicago. They give us the nickname 'the Philippine delegation and the two crazy Dutch'.

Unlike the other participants who show all kinds of beautiful images, Melchor starts his presentation with the problems facing his community. He shows images of ecological destruction from open mining, dynamite fishing, trawl fishing, illegal logging, slash and burn farming. In addition, the Philippine delegation presents the Calbiga River, the reason why the establishment was founded about 400 years ago. They show the lifeline, Maqueda Bay, into which the river flows. Images pass by of the planting of fruit-bearing trees and mangrove forests. Cultural festivals are reviewed, the tradition of storytelling, oral tradition, and of 'folksongs' with which one's own history is recorded and transmitted, for which a museum is established. There is a video of a 96-year-old woman singing a song that has been passed down through the generations about the spiritual relationship between nature and man. The delegation from Calbiga proudly shows a video about the large demonstration against open mining on the island of Samar just

two months before the Nations In Bloom final. A caravan of cars and trucks full of people from all over the island flocked to the capital. Their motto was: 'YES to the Samar Island Biodiversity Project, NO to open mining'. Melchor illustrates the popular uprising with images of an abandoned mine that has poisoned the water of the neighboring river. He says: "Mining damage is too big an ecological footprint for our land to bear".

In the context of the protest against open mining, its own definition of sustainable development was formulated and contained in a prayer that was literally preached in the churches of the pulpits:

*Our environment
Is not God's gift
But His bequest
Not to us alone
But to all generations
Not just to feed us
But for us to feed as well
Not with our waste
But with our care
Not with greed
But with welfare
Not for now but forever*

The demonstration led to a presidential decree that declared the entire interior of the island of Samar a protected nature reserve. Open mining has become impossible as a result. The pride Melchor exudes is more than justified. Candidates who openly opposed open mining have been killed in previous mayoral elections. A real threat given the large amount of money involved in the corrupt Philippines. As a declared opponent, even on national television, his life is in danger.

At the same time, he is amazed that his municipality has made it to the final. "We are just trying to live in harmony with the rhythm of nature within the boundaries of sustainability," he tells a reporter. He also surprised the jury himself with his statement that his municipality is neither poor nor suffering from deprivation: "In the long and contentious debate about the opening of bauxite mines in Samar, our chief economist says that Samar is so poor because we do not allow the extraction of our mineral resources. I suppose I cannot fault him for such a patronizing statement. Economics that derived from the industrial revolution has yet to be reinvented. Production-oriented economics still defines our national policy. People who live in so-called modern communities think us so impoverished and deprived. Our houses are not lined with aluminum sidings. Our snacks are not packaged in aluminum foils. Our drinks are not contained in aluminum cans. But we are not poor, nor deprived. We are sufficiently provided for by Mother Nature. We derive sustenance from our forests, our farms, our river and our seas. That's why we care for them, and take care not to abuse them."

The jury of Nations In Bloom was very impressed with the video that Calbiga presented. What the jury did not know is that Nonoy Froilan and his wife Edna Vida were world famous ballet dancers. Danced the 'swan lake' in Moscow. In which Nonoy was even once invited to join the Dutch ballet. After his ballet career, Nonoy became a documentary maker for Philippine TV. He made the Nations In Bloom movie about Calbiga. And if you were born in Calbiga, you will be forever attached to it. His wife Edna tells us when we visit them in Manila that she is named after the volcano Etna in Italy. And she radiates that. What a passionate couple.



The last prize awarded during the Nations In Bloom meeting is the Bursary Award. It is the only prize to which a monetary amount is attached. Alan Smith announces that this award will go to a municipality that has resisted mining under intense commercial pressure. The release is great, even with the Philippine ambassador who sits at our table. The delegation from Calbiga receives a standing ovation that lasts for several minutes. In the Philippines, the victory is world news.

Philippine Daily Inquirer

The Philippine Daily Inquirer on the Bursary Award that Calbiga won during Nations In Bloom, Apeldoorn, 2003.

Philippine Daily Inquirer
November 01, 2003

Small Samar town judged one of world's most livable areas

By Vicente S. Labro
Calbiga, Samar

A SMALL, ancient town of Samar stole the lime-light in this year's Nations in Bloom, a prestigious international competition, when it won the contest and also got the coveted Bursary Award of 10,000 British pounds or about 850,000 pesos.

Nations in Bloom is the world's only international competition for communities that focus on good environmental management and the enhancement of quality of life. Endorsed by the United Nations Environment Programme, it is also the largest international competition for livable communities.

Calbiga, a fourth class municipality, won the bronze in the Category A competition of communities having a population of 20,000 or less. The other finalists under this category were Largs (Scotland), Maze (Japan), Killarney (Ire-

land), Soldiers Point (Australia), Lochristie (Belgium) and Chelsea (Canada).

A total of 25 communities around the world made it to the finals from the original 236 entries coming from 15 countries. The competition was held at Apeldoorn, the Netherlands on Oct. 3 to 6. The awarding night was on Oct. 6.

Calbiga, however, bested all the other contestants and won the Bursary Award. The award aims to assist a project supporting the objectives of Nations in Bloom, which include the improvement of the quality of life through the creation of livable communities, the exchange of good practices relating to the management of the environment and the encouragement of new initiatives.

The Bursary Award, which was open to all those who took part in the Nations in Bloom competition, will be given to the winner only after the completion of its proposed project that has to be finished within 12 months of the award.

The winning project Calbiga's proposed project is a nature park that would rise in a three-hectare area inside the town's 25-hectare Small Enterprise Park site in Barangay Bacayaran, which is between the national highway and the Calbiga River. The nature park will include a mini-zoo, a mini-forest, children's playground, an orchidarium and butterfly garden and miniatures of caves, waterfalls, rapids, the Calbiga River and the Maqueda Bay. According to Calbiga Mayor Melchor F. Nacario, the nature park will not only provide enjoyable recreational experiences to the locals and visitors but will also enhance the municipal landscape to create an environment that generates civic pride. The estimated project cost was P1.69 million, the amount to be taken from the proceeds of the Bursary Awards with a counterpart fund from the municipality.

Joop and Rianne van Hezik of Ecotopia, a Dutch couple who has visited Calbiga many times before, nominated Calbiga to the Nations in Bloom. The couple also facilitated the airfare and accommodation of the Calbiga delegation headed by Mayor Nacario.

The other Calbiga delegates were Osmund C. Orlanes of Currents Foundation and Luzviminda Nacario, the mayor's wife, who works with the Department of the Interior and Local Government.

Nacario's 35-minute Powerpoint presentation for the Nation in Bloom competition, dubbed as "Our Struggle for a Livable Community," was focused on the initiatives of Calbiga in the areas of environmental enhancement, protection and preservation and the anti-mining advocacy where he himself has been in the forefront.

Calbiga, which is located along the national highway, is 52 kilometers from the provincial capital town of Catbalogan, Samar in the north and around 55 km from Tacloban City, the regional capital in the island of Leyte, in the south.

Natural wonders

Endowed with natural wonders, Calbiga boasts of the Calbiga River, Calbiga Caves, the Lulugayan Falls, and the Literon Rapids, among others. All of these places are potential eco-tourism destinations.

Calbiga River, which runs 14 km from a lake in the forest down to the marine resource-rich Maqueda Bay, irrigates the farms, gives water to the homes and nourishes the lives of the Calbiganons.

The Calbiga Caves, a 2,968-hectare cave system which is dubbed as the biggest karst forma-

tion in the Philippines and one of the largest in East Asia, is located about six km away from the town proper. There are 12 caves found within the cave system, which is now a protected area. Italian speleologists who explored the caves in 1987 described the place as a truly exceptional hydro-geological area. The cave system swallows at least 20 important watercourses. A spring from the hydrological basin gives origin to Calbiga River, one of the big watercourses in Samar Island.

The hydrological basin, called Calidongan by the locals, is a round-shaped lake that overflows and provides water to the Calbiga River. This also gives birth to the spectacular Lulugayan Falls and the Literon Rapids, where the more adventurous ones can enjoy a 10-km, 22-layered white-water rafting.

Balance

During the presentation, Nacario also talked about how to balance man's economic needs with nature's ecological vulnerability, the involvement of the community in development efforts and their plans for the future, among others.

The mayor said that among the activities being undertaken by the people of Calbiga are reforestation of watershed areas, mangrove rehabilitation, river desiltation and erosion control, and sustained advocacy against illegal fishing and logging, among others.

But midway in the presentation, Orlanes took over to present the rich heritage of their hometown. He talked about the folk songs, dances, and poetry of Calbiga such as the "siday" (poem) and the "harana" (courtship song) and the plan of the municipal government to put up a museum where historical records would be kept for posterity.

Orlanes also mentioned the fiesta celebrations in Calbiga and its 41 villages, which in the past were highlighted by the "Sinulog," a street pageant depicting the raids conducted by pirates and slave hunters. Today, it is the Pahoy-pahoy (Scarecrow) Festival that adds color to the fiesta celebrations.

But what enthralled the audience during the presentation was when Orlanes and Mrs. Nacario presented to them live the Waray courtship dance-the "curacha." Although clapping was not allowed during the presentation, Mayor Nacario said the judges themselves led the audience in applauding the dance performance.

In closing his presentation, Nacario said: "People who live in so-called modern communities think us so impoverished and deprived. Our houses are not lined with aluminum sidings. Our snacks are not packaged in aluminum foils. Our drinks are not contained in aluminum cans. But we are not poor, nor deprived. We are sufficiently provided for by Mother Nature. We derive sustenance from our forests, our farms, our rivers and our seas. That's why we care for them, and take care not to abuse them. This is our livable community."

Standing Ovation

When they finally received the award, the delegates from Calbiga were accorded a standing ovation by all the participants and the audience. Nacario said he dedicates the award to the people of Calbiga and the province of Samar and the country.

Alan Smith, the executive director of Nations in Bloom, cited Calbiga for having "faced an amazing challenge that typifies some of the critical factors facing communities that are rich in natural resources but have weaker economies.

The community is attempting to change the traditional agricultural practices and has also banned mining in its land against great commercial pressures."

Philippine Ambassador to the Netherlands Romeo Arguelles also lauded Calbiga for winning the prestigious award. The ambassador attended the competition's opening day and the awards night.

Nacario thanked the Filipinos in the Netherlands who showed their unwavering support to the Calbiga delegation. The Filipino Catholic Community of Rotterdam even sponsored a cultural program to honor and support the Calbiga delegates.

The prestigious international award has placed this small town in Samar on the map of livable communities in the world. Calbiga, it seems, will continue to bloom as its people "work with the rhythms of nature" in their pursuit of a better life.



Wedding

The love for a country can go far. As far as the love for a woman. I already ask Melchor at our first meeting if it is possible for foreigners to get married in the Philippines. It turns out to be quite an investigation, with the conclusion: there is nowhere in the law that it is not allowed, so it is allowed. But it has never happened that two 'non residents' and 'non Filipinos' got married in the Philippines. When it's all sorted out, I'll propose. Very often I have said to Rianne: "For me we don't have to get married, and if we do get married we will do it in the Philippines." Rianne says "Yes". When we tell our parents, her father explodes with rage. My parents reacted resignedly: typical Joop.

When we collect our marriage certificate in Manila, our marriage threatens to come to an end, because Rianne is obliged to attend a session about sexual education. She is furious, especially when it is clear that a number of Filipino women who follow the session are pregnant. And the marriage certificate must be hung for 30 days, so that people can object to this marriage. That doesn't fit our schedule at all, because we've invited people to celebrate our wedding at Samar in Trinidad. Who in the Philippines could object to this?, I ask in despair. But the bureaucracy is inexorable.

In the end, on the day in question, we put the rings on each other in the morning ourselves. Made by Melinda, a niece of Florie. And in the Philippines, it is very common for a prospective couple to go to the town hall for the formal wedding before the wedding celebration. So nobody knows better.

In the backyard of Remi's house we celebrate our marriage with the people of barangay Trinidad on March 13. We don't have to invite

them, everyone comes. So is Sister Agnetia Lauzon, whom I meet personally for the first time.

Sister Agnetia never said a word about living "in sin" while staying at Saint Joseph's College in Manila. But now she can't help but point out that it was 'time for this marriage'. Because we didn't want a church wedding - I'm not religious - she arranged a priest to bless our marriage, with a 'blessing'. And you just don't say no to strong women like Agnetia and Agnetia.

Our legal wedding ceremony is on March 23th.

Since you can get married anywhere in the Philippines, I ask Melchor to marry us in a special place, in the opening of the Calbiga Caves. During the ceremony someone comes up with the playful idea that all those present put their names on a sheet of paper as witnesses of the marriage. Now we can also count a number of NPA members as witnesses. The legal witnesses are Sister Agnetia, Sister Agnetia and Remi. Back in the Netherlands, we do the wedding ceremony again. For Rianne's family and mine. And for the Filipino community in the Netherlands. We are transcribing our marriage. Philippine law recognizes Dutch law, and vice versa. So that's no problem.

However, the short Dutch wedding ceremony costs significantly more than to leave a Filipino barangay, drunk and sated.

ChanceEd

My love for the Philippines also stems from perhaps my greatest inspiration: the admirable children of our scholarship program. When we walk through the barangay Trinidad in 1997, where Florie was born and raised, she tells

us that it is her dream to do something for the children in her neighborhood who cannot go to school because of poverty. In her youth she also had to deny herself everything in order to be able to follow an education. We decide to make her dream come true by granting twenty children a scholarship for primary and secondary school. It is the beginning of the ChancEd foundation, a contraction of the words 'chance' and 'education'. Scholarships are a well-known phenomenon in the Philippines, a former American colony, and very prestigious. The fact that we grant the children a scholarship does wonders for their self-esteem and thus their academic performance. The motto of the foundation, conceived by the children, is: 'A chance is all I want and all I need ... and I will build my future from that chance'. With the support of Melly, Nene and many others, the number of children we grant scholarships has grown over the years from 20 to over 2000 children per year in 2012. In 15 years, more than 1500 children have graduated from high school. This was reason for the municipality of Calbayog, of which Trinidad is a district, to recognize ChancEd as an 'outstanding education partner'. There is hardly any dropout, because the children grab the opportunity presented to them with both hands. On one of our trips we meet one of our 'scholars', Riza. Victim of domestic violence, taken out of this situation by Florie's family and admitted. She wears a T-shirt with the text 'today I follow' on the front and the text 'tomorrow I lead' on the back. Years later, she will receive a scholarship from the University of the Philippines, a more than extraordinary achievement because this world-renowned university only awards ten scholarships a year. From victim of violence to student. To me, Riza embodies past and hope for the future of the Philippines.

On one of our last trips, when we visit a school where the children receive their diplomas, we

hear them singing a song like 'we are the children of yesterday's dreams'. Today they have made their dream of education come true. Tears are in Rianne's eyes when she listens to the song. And says: Whenever I am in the Philippines there is a moment when I break.

Graduation Song

'We are the children of yesterday's dream'

*We are the children of yesterday's dream
We are the promise of the future we bring
Waving the banner of love to all
To very nation, to rich and the poor
We are the world of the restless and young
And we need the hand to guide us
Helping each other, build each other
As long as were together, you and me*

*(ref) For together we stand, divided we fall
Together we climb to the top of the world
Be what we want for the world to see
That we are the children of yesterday's dream*

*We are the children of yesterday's dream
We have the yearning to do what is best
Be someone special for all the rest
Nation and brothers in unity
Building tomorrow for you and for me*

When at some point, accompanied by Nonoy Froilan who films everything, we make a home visit to our ChancEd children, even he – born in Calbiga after all – is impressed.

Rianne and I now belong to Florie's family. We are accepted as we are. For example, it is not a bad thing that we are more fond of our privacy than most Philipinos. The night before my birthday we sleep in a nipa (palm leaves) hut on the beach. At the rising sun we are awakened with a 'mañanita', a 'birthday rondelle' sung by the BNI choir of the Philippine Independent Church:

Mañanita

*How beautiful is the morning
As we come to waken you
With God's early morning blessing
With a pleasure we sing to you
On the day that you are born
The flowers come to bloom
And the baptismal toast
All the saints brought forth their song*

*The dawn is now appearing
The rays of the sun break through
Arise early this bright morning
As we sing 'hello' to you*

*How I wish I were St. Peter
How I wish I was St. John
As we bring this salutation
In the very early dawn*

*From all the stars in heaven
How I wish I could get you few
One to tell you good morning
And another to lit you adieu*

*With a lay of carnation
We have come to sing a song
And make your day full of adore
So that you may carry on
The dawn is now appearing
The rays of the sun break through
Arise early this bright morning
As we sing 'hello' to you*

Yolanda's Anger

Typhoon Haiyan swept across the Philippines on November 7 and 8, 2013, leaving a devastating trail. The 13th named typhoon—called Yolanda in the Philippines—and the fifth super typhoon of the year, is among the worst tropical storms ever recorded. Yolanda kills thousands of people. Hundreds of thousands are left homeless. Crops, houses, roads, everything that has been touched has been destroyed. Yolanda's anger causes utter havoc.

Three days later, on November 11, the international climate summit, COP19, starts in Warsaw¹⁰. The aim is, among other things, financial aid from rich countries in the event of climate disasters. It's storming there too. Warsaw shows a double face, by simultaneously holding an international coal conference and by being sponsored by major polluters who get a lot of exposure in exchange for petrodollars. Non-governmental organizations, including the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace and Oxfam International, are furiously leaving the summit. "Polluter's talk. We walk." (not for the first time, as will be shown below). WWF writes on the website¹¹: "Enough is enough. We have said we stand in solidarity with the millions impacted by Typhoon Haiyan, and with all climate impacted people. Our solidarity compels us to tell the truth about COP 19 – the Warsaw Climate Conference." Government leaders of the rich countries show more interest in economic growth than in solving the climate problem, as it turns out in Warsaw. Representative from the Philippines Naderev (Yeb) Saño urgently and emotionally calls for 'to end the madness'. Saño himself comes from the disaster area where Typhoon Haiyan wreaked

¹⁰ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change/ Conference of the Parties COP 19

¹¹ <http://wwf.panda.org/?212532/NGOs-Social-Movements-Walk-Out-Of-Warsaw-Talks>

havoc. Thrilled, he urges the world not to dismiss the deadly devastation on the island of Leyte as a natural disaster. "There is nothing natural about the scientific fact that global warming will lead to increasingly violent storms. There is nothing natural about the human species having a major impact on climate change." He calls it absurd that our polluting lifestyle threatens large areas on the globe and refuses to sign any more vague and half-hearted climate agreements. "Because that's how we ratify our demise." In the same speech, the Philippine delegate announced to go on hunger strike, in solidarity, until concrete constructive actions are agreed at the climate conference. "What my country is going through right now is sheer madness. The climate crisis is sheer madness. But we can fix this. We can stop the madness."

When Rianne and I see the television images of the destroyed Tacloban, the capital of the island of Leyte, we sigh: We have walked there. The neighboring island of Samar, where we are active with our ChancEd foundation, has also been affected, with the result that food prices are skyrocketing. We are starting a food program for our ChanceEd scholars.

But the Philippines amazes international aid organizations. After a few days of shock, rescuers everywhere hear the beating of hammers to build makeshift homes. The Filipino people are above all a resilient people.

7 years later

I wrote the above in 2014, it is now 2021. Rianne has volunteered for 20 years for the Liliane Foundation for children with disabilities in developing countries, and then stopped. We also stopped ChancEd after 20 years, with more than 6000 (!) children that we have helped to

get their high school diploma. To now focus on people with dementia and their carers in our own Netherlands for another 20 years. Rianne in her work as a dementia case manager in the municipality of Oisterwijk. I as chairman of the Dementia Cooperative Oisterwijk.

But the link with the Philippines will always remain. When Florie's younger sister, Thelma, received her high school diploma years ago, she asked Rianne to guide her. Normally one of the parents does that, so a special honour. And when, years later, she had twins, she asked us to become 'ninong' (godfather) and 'ninang' (godmother) to the twins. Again a special honor for Philippine standards. But also with obligations. We saved up with Florie to finance the college education (expensive) for the twins. And that's coming soon.

Thelma is married to Rick, who works in international shipping like so many Filipinos, and lives on Guimaras Island. And at some point, when we are in the Philippines with Dutch friends Marielle and Mark Bus, we come into contact with Rick's sister, Thelma's sister-in-law, Rebecca Tubongbanua. You are God sent, Rebecca says when she meets us. Because she has the opportunity to buy the buildings of an elementary school to make her business a real business.

Rebecca graduated as a chemist, but it paid better—absurdly—to be an au pair in Japan. So she did that for several years. Back on Guimaras, she started a mango business from home. Because Guimaras is a special island. It is the center for growing mangoes, with all precautions in the form of a hygienic 'cordon' around the island. Rebecca's company consists of 8 women. All women who were in financial trouble because their husbands had left them or had died. Rebecca is what you call a 'social entre-

preneur' in the Netherlands, who puts the creation of social value above profit. And she and her employees provide a breakfast program for the children of a neighboring primary school. She immediately stole my heart. Because this was so completely in the spirit of ChanceEd.

The building that Rebecca wants to buy costs, with all the land, about 16,000 euros. A fortune for her. After me and Marielle thoroughly questioned her in Dutch about the economic viability of her plans – Rebecca sighs 'I feel like I am being grilled' – we decide to support her financially, in the form of an interest-free loan. I never expected to see any of that in return, she just had my sympathy. But years later, she contacts us. To my amazement, she wants to repay part of her debt. Debt of honor is important in Filipino culture. And she has done a fantastic job, with numerous innovation awards and a prominent position on Guimaras Island. Even with interviews on national television. Rianne and I want to make one last trip to the Philippines - after the COVID-19 pandemic that has also wreaked havoc in the Philippines - especially to see Rebecca's company with our own eyes. And to meet our friends, Bert van Ruitenbeek and Mercy Palpallatoc again. Bert and Mercy, all those years our Dutch friends, who introduced us to the Filipino community in the Netherlands. Which I gratefully took advantage of when I sent students to the Philippines again. Bert got to know Mercy in the Philippines, through his work for CordAid, a Dutch international aid organisation. And who emigrated back to the Philippines after Bert's retirement.

Utopia

The madness of the climate crisis has not stopped. Has only gotten bigger, as the latest Climate Change 2021 report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows. The world is heading for a climate disaster with heat waves and droughts, floods and wildfires.

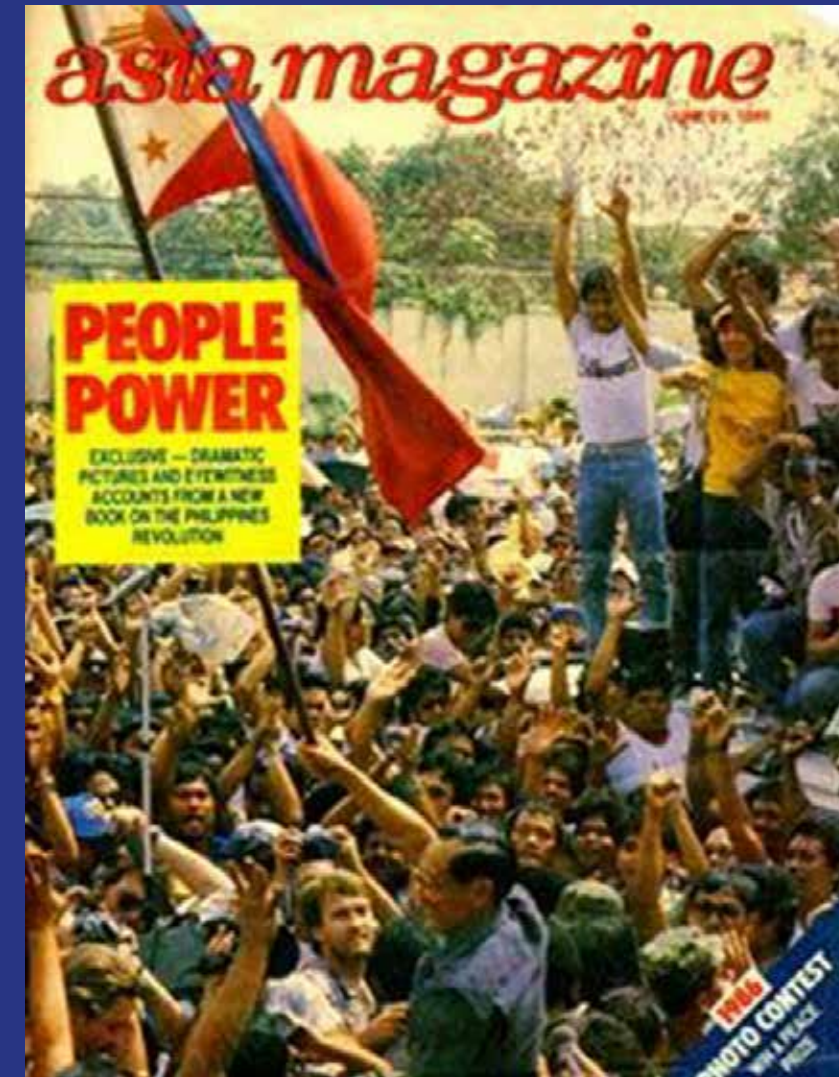
And the COP 26 in Glasgow (Scotland) on Climate Change from October 31 to November 12 2021 brought no solution. Most memorable was the speech of Prime Minister Mia Amor of the island of Barbados. A 2-degree Celsius rise in global temperature would be a 'death sentence' for island and coastal communities. "We do not want that death sentence, and we have come here today to say 'try harder': "This is immoral and unjust." "Are we so blinded and hardened that we can no longer appreciate the cries of humanity?" "If our existence is to mean anything, then we must act in the interest of all of our people who are dependent on us." "And if we don't, we will allow the path of greed and selfishness to sow the seeds of our common destruction." "Make no mistake, we are still on the road to hell", is the headline of the newspaper the Scotland Sun the day after the closing of the conference.

The Philippines consists of island and coastal communities. It makes the murals in Trinidad more topical than ever. And also the Philippine fundamental right that people have the right to a healthy living environment that is in balance and in accordance with the rhythm and harmony of nature. It should become a universal fundamental right.

I once graduated as a cultural philosopher on the utopian tradition in the history of ideas. Thomas More's Utopia is situated on an island, and the Philippines is an archipelago. Discovered in 1521 - five years after Thomas More released The best state of a commonwealth and the new island of Utopia - by Ferdinand Magellan who named the islands after King Philip II of Spain.

Strange that you can discover a country where people already live. The explorer Ferdinand Magellan also experienced this when he came face to face with chieftain Lapu Lapu. And was killed and then eaten. Lapu Lapu is still a folk hero in the Philippines. In the following centuries, the Philippines will be colonized by Spain and the United States. This has resulted in a typical Filipino saying: 'We lived in a monastery for three hundred years, then a hundred years in Hollywood.'

At first glance, the islands of the Philippines are the last place you would look for Utopia. But in a new utopian story, I would certainly focus on the spiritual sense of living in harmony with the harmony and rhythm of nature, the typical Filipino culture feature of 'bayanihan' (community spirit), and a philosophy of Sapat (enough) and small-scale. And the road to this utopia through 'people power', a nonviolent revolution. In fact, Dorothy and Vic's dream.



The **EDSA-revolution** of 1986, also known as the **People Power Revolution**, was a day's long peaceful demonstration that led to the fall of the authoritarian regime of president Ferdinand Marcos. Most important location of the demonstrations was the circular road of Metro Manila, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, in short EDSA.



The marriage of Rianne and me on March 27 2000 at the entrance of the Calbiga Caves by mayor of Calbiga Melchor Nacario on Samar island.



Congratulations!
 JOOP and RIANNE

Melchor Nacario Melchor Calbiga Felice Fajana Rolando C. Calbigan Jr. ROZALDO P. PRUDENTE VIVENCIO A. BEATO Sr. EDSON J. CABRILAS VALENTINO FIGUEROA Orlando Poga DANILLO N. LABAGALA CLARE P. PARIJILLO Lindo Nacario Gasco Sabate Corilo Plantada	Florie Willocks Lourdes Maculas John C. Delido David Daguro Bernice A. Fajana WILLIAM C. LATOBE CARO PABLO R. FRANK LATOBE FIDEL D. NACARIO JR. SIMPLICIO DACALLOS JOSE I. ELVIBE Rina N. N. Salvador Nacario Terrellbant
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CALBIGA CAVES
 MARCH 27, 2000

Rianne on a medical mission in 1989 to the indigenous Aeta on the Pinatubo volcano on the island Luzon.



It is a beautiful environment that is unfortunately sometimes disturbed by fighter jets and military helicopters that observe things here. As I write this, I realize that I feel good here. Flowing water in the background. A school with children who recite words. Here and there shouting, some children playing, some people talking. The wind blows, I sit in the shade and the sun shines. A rooster crows. It's peaceful here. People live in, with and from nature. The people here are called Aetas, the river Marowonot and the mountain in the background Pinatubo." (diary Rianne)



Nations in Bloom 2003 'the Philippine delegation and the two crazy Dutch' in Apeldoorn (palace Het Loo) in the Netherlands

From left to right:
Osmund Orlanes, Rianne Pijnenburg, Joop van Hezik, Luzviminda Nacario,
Melchor Nacario



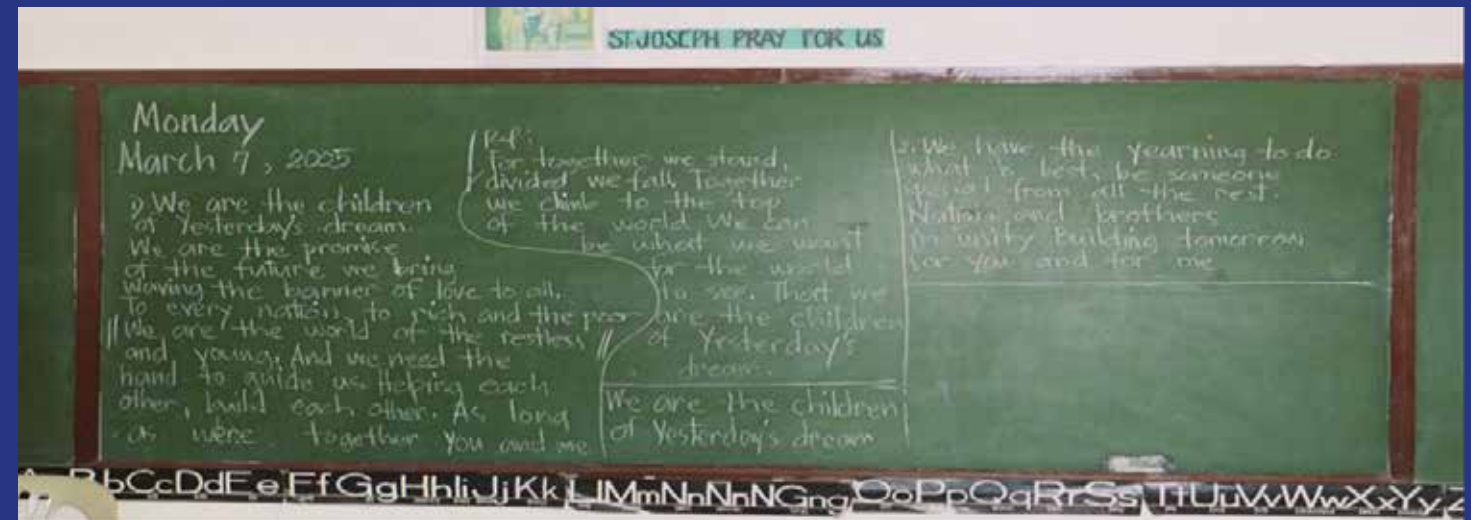
Children of the ChancEd scholarship foundation
 ("A chance is all I want, and all I need ... and I will built my future from that chance")

Graduation Song 'We are the children of yesterday's dream'

We are the children of yesterday's dream
 We are the promise of the future we bring
 Waving the banner of love to all
 To very nation, to rich and the poor
 We are the world of the restless and young
 And we need the hand to guide us
 Helping each other, build each other
 As long as were together, you and me

(ref) For together we stand, divided we fall
 Together we climb to the top of the world
 Be what we want for the world to see
 That we are the children of yesterday's dream

We are the children of yesterday's dream
 We have the yearning to do what is best
 Be someone special for all the rest
 Nation and brothers in unity
 Building tomorrow for you and for me





Workshop '21 reasons to work on Local Agenda 21' in Calbiga with members of the Community Based Resource Management Program of the Municipality of Calbiga

The United Nation Conference on the Human Environment in 1992 resulted in an Agenda 21 for a sustainable world in the 21th century. The Agenda 21 contained a chapter on local sustainability that called on municipalities worldwide to develop a Local Agenda 21.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joop van Hezik graduated in 1988 from the combined doctoral program in philosophy/anthropology, in the combination of philosophy of culture, social & political philosophy and economic anthropology. From 1988 to the present, he has been an independent consultant under the name of the Bureau for Sustainable Development Issues Ecotopia (a contraction of 'ecology' and 'utopia'). In addition, from 2003 to 2006 he was chairman of the GreenLeft faction in the Provincial Council of the province of Noord-Brabant. From 2006 to 2012, he was alderman/deputy mayor of the municipality of Oisterwijk, with, among other things, the portfolio 'biodiversity and climate'. From 2013 to 2018, he was director of the Nature For Health (NFH) foundation, and has since become a board member of this foundation. Internationally, he was a member of the World Environmental Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) from 2015 to 2017. Since 1997 he has made several trips to the Philippines. And was co-founder with his wife and friends of the ChancEd foundation (a contraction of 'change' and 'education'), which from 1997 to 2017 helped about 6000 underprivileged Filipino children with a high school diploma through a fellowship.



**“A map of the world
that does not include Utopia is not worth
even glancing at.
For it leaves out the one country
of which Humanity is always landing.
And when Humanity lands there
it looks out and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is
the realization of Utopias.”**

(Oscar Wilde, The Soul of man under socialism, 1891)