

## A Springboard for Discussion:

*With this "think-piece" the Philippine Journal of Public Administration hopes to encourage and be the forum for the exchange of ideas and observations not only on local developments but on other trends in the field and practice of public administration and other related social sciences, as well. We welcome readers' contributions to this dialogue and we await reactions to or comments on this initial piece.*

# Thinking on Trial—Observation of Think-Tanking in the Philippines

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The immediate impression a scholar gets when introduced to the operation of Philippine think-tanks is the constant motion of young thinkers doing something. The frequent mention of the word "development" conveys the seriousness of these people in being part of a grand design to develop the country. Discussions about project mobilization and management, systems' engineering, management techniques, and integrated and holistic thinking further create the impression that this is a team grooved on scientific work.

There is a great deal of truth to this image. The enthusiasm and commitment of the young thinkers are unparalleled and beyond doubt. But enthusiasm and commitment are not enough to produce good work. Skills in research and training are also

necessary. A review of the outputs and the man-hours spent on projects indicates that the work can be improved further at a lesser effort and time. Many outputs indicate a certain weakness in grasping conceptual options and the lack of economy in generating data. Although many other issues can be raised, we will limit the discussion to the problems of developing concepts, misapplication of concepts and the management of research.

### Development of Concepts

Gripped by the fever of "development-itis," members of Philippine think-tanks have an affectation, if not an affliction, for the word "development." A closer look at project reports indicates the following:

(1) Development is simply assumed with very little clarification as to what it is.

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(2) Where a view of development is articulated, the view is taken as the gospel truth especially if it comes from a high official or an "expert."

(3) Since there is very little opportunity to challenge or review ideas, projects and policies, the concept of development is not well polished. Researchers or trainers who discuss development are merely projecting their advantageous class position and hence, their solutions to problems are benevolent and patchwork amelioration rather than structural general surgery. In the case of others, their views of development bare their lack of knowledge of the intricacies of inter-linking factors in and of the different schools of development.

A discussion of schools of development would be useful but to do justice to it would involve a lengthy and separate paper. For the purpose of this discussion, we will just take cognizance that societies have different ends and means. While the welfare of the masses is a recurring theme of national development programs, for instance, countries differ in relation to its immediacy and the ends to achieve it. Thus, confusion characterizes the current state of developmental thinking. Due to the varied and sometimes contradictory views of development, some scholars of development have reached a point to dismiss the term "development" as having any real meaning. They refuse to use the term and prefer to view countries as *proceeding* somewhere and whether the essence and direction constitute development is open to debate.

An awareness of the different interpretations of development and of the confusion that goes with it is a better starting point than to simply assume that there is development. To do this would require an understanding of the evolution of developmental thinking. A consciousness of the third world position as underdogs leads us to the conclusion that the world of underdogs is different from the world of overdogs. Logically, the options for the exploited would be different from the options of the exploiters. Unfortunately, third world scholarship pays lip service to this reality. Developmental thinking in the third world did not evolve independently but is more of a reaction to the concepts formulated by Western scholars. This is unavoidable due to the structure of cultural imperialism and to the fact that a great deal of the social sciences has been developed and refined mainly in the West.

The critical problem then is how to reformulate Western concepts of development to reconcile with the realities in the third world. To put it another way, the task is how to scale down or simplify grandiose and complex schemes to fit third world conditions. Experienced scholars of third world conditions, influenced by professional consideration to measure up to the sophistication of their counterparts in industrial societies, discover that simplification can be a more difficult task. This exercise goes through three stages:

(1) an inventory of various schools of development, an awareness of the

confusion especially in the use of key terms such as "traditional," "transitional," "emerging," "modernizing," and "development," and a recognition of the time and cultural frame of such concepts;

(2) an understanding of the social, economic, cultural and political objective reality of third world countries; and

(3) determination of the applicability or non-applicability of Western concepts to third world situation.

The above is a standard exercise in centers of development studies. Since there are very few universities in the West that offer developmental studies as a field, it can be assumed that except for a few, Filipinos who received their Phds. abroad have not been exposed to this exercise through formal training. Unless they corrected this weakness through self-study, they can easily commit the mistake of misapplying Western concepts to third world conditions. This danger is already evident in some outputs of Philippine think-tanks. Frameworks of analysis applicable mainly to industrial and capitalist societies surface frequently in research and training projects.

An awareness of the recent revolution in Western social sciences is vital to go through the above exercise meaningfully. This revolution could have escaped the attention of Filipino scholars who returned in 1972 and have not bothered to keep abreast with the literature since then. What is happening in Western social sciences? By 1968, young graduate

students and Phds., affected deeply by the war in Vietnam, started debunking liberal capitalist views of development and those which tended to place the third world evolution along the path of Western industrialization. Questions were raised about the pattern variable dichotomies of Parsons, the "achieving society" of McClelland, the prismatic society of Riggs, the economic determinism of Marx, the stages of capitalism of Rostow, the civic culture of Almond and Verba, the rationalization of authority and differentiation of functions of Huntington, the conflict-consensus approach of Field, the "sunshine sociology" of Lipset, Glazer and Etzioni, and the "weeping underdog scholarship" of Horowitz. Notions of capitalist management were likewise questioned starting from the ideal bureaucracy of Weber, the classic school of Taylor, Gulick and Urwick, the human relations school of Mayo, McGregor and Argyris, the empirical school of Newman and Drucker, the social system school of Presthus, Selznick and Simon, to the "new school" popularized by McNamara's quantification of Pentagon operations and the Vietnam war.

The young scholars dismissed the notion of "scientific," "rational," and "objective" scholarship. They claimed that every process carried its own advocacy. It was not valid, they asserted, to simply accept integration, unity, penetration, legitimacy, participation and welfare distribution without asking for whom and why. They challenged industrialization and ur-

banization as measures of development in view of the finite resources and degradation of the environment.

Based on social science books that started coming out in 1973, the revolution has succeeded. As Thomas Kuhn would describe the revolution of science, the anti-establishment paradigm of 1968 has now become the new establishment view of Western social sciences.

It is stylish for Filipino thinkers today to dismiss American social science concepts as inapplicable to Philippine conditions. But an examination of the substitute concepts reveals that not only are these American in nature but they represent a trend of thinking that has been rejected by American scholarship in 1968. This error indicates a lack of understanding of the sociology of social science trends.

#### Misapplication of Concepts

Westernization creates problems in the conceptualization of development in the third world. We will focus on some areas where third world conditions become distorted to fit Western models.

An area where the misapplication of Western concepts is frequent is planning. By planning, we refer to future orientation and the rational management of resources. Colombia, for instance, already has a vision of the metropolitan growth by 2001. In the Philippines, there is a futuristic study, projecting mainly the biases of Western and urban educated "experts,"

which envisions the Philippines in 2001 as no more different from Pigsville, USA of 1955 complete with the trappings of urbanization, industrialization and corporate power. Not only does this posture follow the ecologically questionable precedent of capitalist urban and industrial development in the West but it downplays other options such as ruralization which seems to be more appropriate for the rural condition of the third world.

Some third world scholars have adopted cybernetic models used to study processes in Western societies. There are planners who propose ambitious integrated regional area development models for war zones. Some of these regional plans blindly impose a decentralized structure without accounting for the key support variables such as the transfer of revenue generation and disbursement and personnel administration to the lower level. The most important aspect these planners overlook, however, is that the planning models are based on more *stable conditions* in *industrial societies*. A preliminary and thorough investigation of the volatile condition of rural societies is a necessary step before such models can be applied meaningfully.

Other scholars develop concepts of innovation along time orientations which assume that the peoples of agrarian societies see time in the same manner as the peoples of industrial countries. But hungry peasants, who deal constantly with the elements,

cannot see 30-40 years into the future. Neither can politicians and bureaucrats who might be forced to exploit today for fear that a political upheaval tomorrow can throw them out of office. The task of survival forces third world peoples to relate to yesterday, today and tomorrow as if they were all the same.

In short, planning is different in third world countries. The conditions are more volatile. The future orientation is also short. In addition, third world countries have lesser capability and resources to forecast and engineer social, economic and political changes.

At least two lessons in planning can be learned. First, it is harder to deal with human beings than to plan physical, technological and industrial change. Second, critical to planning is understanding the politics of planning, or to put it differently, planning the plan. Planners, as Waterson points out, have a tendency to feel central omnipotence or omniscience where they think that to move society is just a simple matter of educating ignorant politicians or workers. It is more complicated than this. One must not forget the organic nature of change where several sectors have to be orchestrated to produce the desired result. One, for instance, cannot aspire for China's miracle by using only bits and parts of the formula. Under volatile conditions, the process of planning is more difficult and hence, planning has to be continuously resolved through combinations of integration, domination, avoidance, deadlock and

compromise. The planners have the responsibility to help create the condition upon which the plan can move. If they operate without it, they can end up as part of the problem than the solution.

Training programs also manifest the misapplication of Western concepts. There is a ballyhood training program for government officials which tends to prepare them more as managers of Ayala Corporation with dosages of scientific management and industrial psychology instead of developing them as officials of a peasant society. One cannot help but suspect that the trainers assembled simply imposed their restricted fields of expertise hoping that the combination would result in officials more skilled and responsive to the needs of this society. To train officials for the people — which are composed mainly of peasants — would require a different orientation. Besides exposing them to concepts of development and management, there should also be an equal emphasis on the limits of such concepts. In addition, sensitivity to the bureaucratic environment should be developed through classroom and experiential learning. The most critical element, however, is scaling down concepts to local conditions. What the desired model of a local administrator is could be arrived at through studies and experiments. But we can expect the official of a peasant society as someone who transcends careerism and sharpens the capability for inventiveness, self-reliance and localization of problems and solutions in order to

maximize output under conditions of scarce resources.

The training program also reflects an elitist view by concentrating on top officials instead of disseminating management techniques down to the people where these could matter more in the lives and survival of communities.

Another example of the misapplication of Western concepts is in the use of system models. There is a tendency to indiscriminately impose sophisticated systems' engineering concepts developed in industrial societies. A police administrator trained abroad and exposed to more sophisticated gadgets would come back and think that the system for intelligence can be improved by buying all sorts of hardware. An urban transportation specialist exposed to futuristic transportation systems abroad would think that we can improve the transportation system here with superhighways and all sorts of packaged traffic systems. Either example is absurd since what this country needs is not sophisticated but simply basic hardware. The continuous use of sophisticated system models raises conceptual issues. In the light of the urban decadence and industrial waste in the West, are we headed in the same direction wherein such sophisticated models eventually can be useful? If so, is it the right time to utilize these models? Should we look, instead, the opposite way and scale down the models to suit our needs? What is happening, at the moment, is that conditions in this society are distorted to fit these mo-

dels in order to gain model consistency.

Third world scholars also forget that these models are predicated on the autonomy of the system. These models do not emphasize the structural imbalance between rich and poor countries and between the rich and poor classes which allow for the perpetuation of external and internal colonization. A recognition of the structural imbalance is important to help us understand the pace or absence of development in the third world. The new generation of Western social sciences is taking cognizance of this. The usual approach of diagnosing problems along social, economic and political lines is not meaningful unless related to the structural imbalance. This logically leads us to the realization that the world of the underdogs is different from the world of the overdogs.

This consciousness is not reflected in the works of Philippine think-tanks. There is very little study which monitors the impact of foreign forces on domestic development. In case this is misunderstood, the purpose of such a study is not to stop foreign entry but to reconcile it with the priority needs of the country. In addition, there are not enough studies that investigate and propose new avenues for the restructuring of society.

Think-tanks can play a vital role in the shaping of the society with studies that monitor the role of foreign technology, capital, labor, culture, military and tourism on domestic development.

In addition, they can embark on strategic studies that stipulate policy and institutional requirements for the role of major groups such as the civilian bureaucracy, military, political leaders and the people toward the restructuring and growth of the society. Finally, think-tanks should seek to define priorities of research, transcend costly gimmickry or impact studies with superficial effects, and get down to the "nuts and bolts" studies that can lay the foundation of the society.

The misapplication of Western concepts will continue as long as third world scholars are intimidated by the standard of Western scholarship. In terms of third world development objectives, the greater challenge is not in measuring up but in scaling down sophisticated concepts to local conditions.

### Management of Research

It is not our intention to subject the entire administrative system of a major think-tank to a review although such can be said about items such as the antiquated auditing system which slows cash-flow and hence operation, and the personnel administration which shows gaps in quality recruitment and career development. We will just raise a few issues in the management of research.

The management of research seems to manifest also the misapplication of Western administrative concepts. There appears to be a failure to distinguish between a research center and an industry. We find a tendency

to over-emphasize system's flow, an engineer's favorite tool, to chart the progress of research. Creating ideas is not like producing shoes where a given combination of energy, mass and technology in a given time would result in a number of shoes. Since this basic distinction is not made, research teams end up wasting time trying to put into a PERT/CPM chart how an idea is supposed to flow instead of getting down to work and giving birth to it.

Due to this "industrial" mentality, there is a tendency to over-emphasize the role of management. There is a top-heavy bureaucracy with a high ratio of administrators to thinkers. There are aspects regarding mainly logistics which require top management and which administrative-type managers can handle better. However, one must not lose sight of the essence of a think-tank which is thinking. The quality of and the efficiency by which an output is produced depends *almost totally* on the ability of the thinkers. There is very little to manage if there is a good team of thinkers and whatever is left to manage involves mainly conceptual matters and hence requires conceptual managers. In think-tanks abroad, administrative type managers are limited to the task of providing the necessary logistical support so that thinkers could have the most favorable working environment to maximize thinking.

The over-emphasis on management tends to place a high status on and bends the reward system to favor ad-

ministrators. If these administrators happen to be the administrative type, this situation might be hard to reconcile in a think-tank. Thinkers with high self-esteem and competence could feel that they are prostituting their services to further the career of people whose competence in the battle of ideas, in the first place, is questionable. This situation can occur at the program or project level if the technical competence of the administrator is not credible or established.

If the administrators are of the conceptual type, their position could draw them away from research where they are most needed. Their importance in research rather than administrative work is underscored by the fact that there is a scarcity of scientists in this country, much less, of good scientists.

The over-emphasis on management also places importance on authority. Assertive administrative-type managers could delude themselves to be also the intellectual leaders. Their limitation could muffle ideas from subordinates while the generation of data, owing to their lack of competence, could take a long time and hence be uneconomical. Even thinkers in positions of authority can succumb to the temptation of thinking that they know everything. This is especially true of Phds. who ride on the title than on the output. Such posture is inexcusable in Western research centers where a Phd. is nothing until he produces. The emphasis on authority can intimidate subordinates into silence. A complex begins to take shape where-

in to contradict a superior is to be anti-institutional and to be anti-institutional carries a stigma. The idea of a trickledown thinking process is valid provided the thinker at the top is always correct but a case can be developed to show that many thinkers at the top sometimes go beyond their level of competence and that subordinates have a better grasp of the topic.

If management means extracting the most with the least effort and cost, then the right questions should be asked. Is the think-tank recruiting people who can think? If not, is there staff development to sharpen the capability for conceptualization? Does the reward system offer adequate psychic and material satisfaction to thinkers?

A review of the personnel of this major think-tank indicates that the people with proven credentials as thinkers are the exception.

It also shows that the better ones of the scarce pool of scientists are outside of this think-tank. It does have many young researchers with potentiality to be good thinkers. In addition, there is a residue of people with little capability and confidence and some of them have found their way to administrative positions. This group reflects a phenomenon in universities where those who cannot make it as scholars choose, at an early stage, to go via the administrative route to further their career and to veer towards politics as a way of survival. The politicking creates personality



conflict not over schools of thought but over power. Such an environment dissipates energies and is not conducive to creative thinking.

As far as staff development is concerned, much is to be desired. There are mini-training programs but they are not institution-wide and hence do not reach many members, much less, provide a standardized quality. The think-tank can benefit from an institution-wide seminar exposing the members to concepts and their limits with regard to development, management techniques, and research, sensitizing them to objective conditions and to the bureaucratic environment in the Philippines, and letting them go through the exercise of scaling down concepts to conditions. It is suggested, however, that the potential thinkers should improve their skills through advanced formal education. There is a limit as to what the experience in a think-tank can do towards sharpening the conceptual skills especially if that experience consists mainly of repetitive mechanics such as project development. The emphasis on formal education does not suggest that the right substance is always taught. This is proven wrong in the case of Phds. from Western institutions. What formal education at the graduate level gives are the skills in research and conceptualization in order to learn more as well as unlearn if necessary.

As far as the reward system is concerned, we have mentioned earlier that it favors more the administrators than the thinkers. There is the pitiful ex-

perience of a productive scholar with ten years of experience in prestigious research and training centers abroad who joined this major think-tank and could hardly even get a table and a chair. Meanwhile, other members with less, if not questionable, credentials have carte-blanche access to logistics including cars. This does not build professionalism. Neither does it speak well of the government's *balik-scientist* program. From a management point of view, the best course of action should have been to give full support and get the most mileage out of the tested productivity of this scientist instead of dissipating logistics on people who are just beginning to get an idea of what a think-tank is. It might be noted, in this regard, that a recent NEDA-sponsored conference of the country's top 250 scientists underscored the scarcity of scientists vis-a-vis developmental research needs and emphasized the need of acknowledging and supporting the strategic and important role of scientists to national development.

### Conclusion

In attempting to upgrade the quality of work in a think-tank, we must go back to the essence of a think-tank which is thinking. The situation can be improved not through continuous organizational revamps but by improving the quality of thinkers. This would require the recruitment of better thinkers, staff development, better logistical support, and rationalization of a reward system that sustains professionalism and places greater importance on thinkers.