

Building a new history of grassroots governance

Produced by the Institute for Solidarity in Asia in partnership with the Center for International Private Enterprise

Despite its significance in national revolutionary history and culture, Talisay only became a Philippine city in 1998. Since then it has been fighting to grow a separate identity from its metropolitan neighbor Bacolod, to whom many of its landmarks are still mistakenly attributed. Today local leaders make use of the Institute for Solidarity in Asia's (ISA) Performance Governance System (PGS) as a platform for transformation, harnessing the city's tourism-, agriculture-, and location-based strengths to reshape development and ensure sustainability through community involvement.

Talisay, a fourth-class city located in one of the Philippines' central regions, draws a yearly deluge of visitors to its vast sugar lands and well-preserved ancestral mansions. Its tourism industry is kept alive by a rich and colorful history that has left such landmarks as the traditional *Balay ni Tana Dicang*, built in 1883; General Aniceto Lacson Ancestral House, once the headquarters of the ill-fated Cantonal Republic of Negros established in 1898; and "The Ruins", a recently restored neo-classical work built in 1911.

Though these structures might suggest a travel-related development angle, the city government chose to dig deeper. In their first attempt to articulate a long-term vision for development, Talisay's leaders decided on working toward building "The Village City: A Model for Balanced Development" by 2040. Upon review, however, they decided that 2040 was too far away for them to be able to plan accurately. "Some of us could no longer grasp what path to take toward such a broad vision," says City Mayor Eric Saratan, an advocate of the involvement of civil society groups in local development.

Mayor Saratan, who is also a surgeon, believes in practicing governance the way he practices medicine. "As surgeons, we learn from

experience that we cannot do anything by ourselves," he says. "We need to listen, to learn from experts, to depend on the help of many." Thus, in his search for a more focused vision, he and his team reached out to the community to find out what trends and resources could be transformed into an economic strength.

Counseled by their elders

The choice to convert Talisay into a retirement haven was a confluence of several factors: (1) a huge property investment by leading real estate developer Ayala, (2) rising grey demographics, (3) location, and (4) community ownership. In November 2013, the city government conducted interviews with retirees to ask what they liked about living in Talisay and what more could be done in order for the city to become a better place for them to live in.

Atty. Cheryl Marie Ledesma-Despi, head of the city's strategy management office, recalls, "We gathered all of their suggestions and insights and used them to map out a strategy the next day." Together with community stakeholders, which included representatives from the Philippine Retirement Authority, the city government decided that by 2020 Talisay should be counted "among the top 5 retirement destinations in the Philippines."

Mayor Saratan is convinced that this new direction will lead to better recognition and new opportunities for his city. “We are located between an international airport and a seaport,” he explains. “We have good roads. Forty percent of the province’s remaining forest is in our city. Sixty-five percent of our land is agricultural, which means potential for future development.”

Open for business

The opening of Ayala’s The District North Point, the first large-scale, mixed-use integrated, master-planned community in the province has helped increase public acceptance of Talisay’s new vision. Located along the city’s national highway, the Php7-billion, 250-hectare investment connects three of the province’s major cities—Silay, Bacolod, and Talisay, and will be a space for residential homes, recreational facilities, schools, and businesses.

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“Having investors in our city shows there is trust and confidence in the local government,” Mayor Saratan says.

He also adds that Talisay’s investment incentive code is friendlier than that of other local government units. Building codes, zoning ordinances, and a local economic and investment promotion office have likewise been put in place for those who would like to do business in Talisay. “We have been moving to really market the city,” the mayor enthuses.



Peak interest in Talisay City can be attributed in part to heritage sites like “The Ruins”, now the city’s most popular tourist attraction.



Peter Uhlmann, a German national, has decided to retire in Talisay with his family. He describes life in the city as convenient and comfortable.

Former City Councilor Carlos Balcells, who was the city's point person for developments as part of Metro Bacolod, also mentions that Talisay is focusing on commercial residential development and that industrial developments will be placed in a separate zone. "It will be called the "Talisay Strip", like the Las Vegas strip because a lot of developers want to be positioned around the Ayala residential commercial," he points out.

Retirement perks

Arsenio Sansing, also a member of the city's strategy management office and formerly connected with the Marketing Department of Negros Navigation, says that one of Talisay's main goals is to encourage retirees to be more productive while living there.

"We would like to gainfully employ them or tap into their potentials," Sansing explains, citing foreign retirees who have been helping the city with safety and rescue planning after retiring from the same field. Some have also raised funds for calamity-struck areas.

Another of the city's initiatives is to create a database of retirees living in Talisay. "This

registry system will be automated so we can keep track of whether they are here or traveling, and who we can contact for them in case of an emergency." According to Sansing, they will have little problems with getting this information because of the kinship system inherent among Filipinos.

One of those already in the registry is Peter Uhlmann, a German married to a Filipina professor, who has been living in Talisay for the past 12 years. "We feel very comfortable here," he says. "It's peaceful and we have everything we need." Uhlmann, who is staying in one of Talisay's exclusive subdivisions, notes that another advantage of living in the city is its proximity to the airport, hospitals, beaches, and malls, as well as the abundance of healthy food. "Last but not least, what is different to the German people is that Filipinos are very friendly," he adds. "Until now I have not had any fights with any Filipinos and this is what I really appreciate."

Jorre Tamparon, 57, was born in Talisay but worked as a nurse in the United States for decades until finally retiring here. Instead of staying in his family's ancestral house, he has decided to stay in one of Talisay's exclusive villages and is even the vice president of their homeowners' association.



Jorre Tamparon, a returning resident, has chosen to spend his retirement in Talisay, which he finds to be convenient and secure.

"One of Talisay's main goals is to encourage retirees to be more productive while living there."



Workers arrive to deliver the first set of plants donated by a local landscaping company to be used in the city's beautification efforts. This partnership is the result of a team-up between city hall employees and local residents.

“My house now is just a few meters away from the mall, where I can get good shopping and fine dining. I don't have to travel anymore,” says Tamparon. “I have a place in Manila, too, but the traffic and the busy lifestyle are just not a convenient thing for retirees like me. That's why we chose Talisay as our retirement place.”

Tamparon, who is also part of a citizen's group that advises the city government on community issues observes that retirees' needs are well catered to. He mentions that in city hall there is even a help desk retirees can approach for immediate needs such as medical attention. “Those are being taken care of now,” he says.

Both Uhlmann and Tamparon likewise agree that safety and security have played a big part in their choice of Talisay as a retirement haven.

Grassroots partnerships

There are many things a city must put in place before it can be transformed into a “haven”.

“Barangays¹ must be clean, orderly, and safe,” Mayor Saratan says. “We need to create a congenial environment, improve traffic, improve the peace and order situation, and make sure that governance is excellent when it comes to providing services and supporting business. We should also be open to suggestions from stakeholders.”

In order to mobilize local residents, the city government assigned groups of employees within city hall to work with barangays on specific projects. These partnerships have resulted in early successes. In Zone 6, 12 city hall employees and the barangay council have managed to beautify a once barren town garden by entering into an agreement with a local landscaping business at no cost to the city. In Zone 5, city hall employees teamed up with the barangay council to organize a “Run for the Mangroves” in order to raise funds for mangrove restoration along the barangay coast. Finally, city hall employees and barangay residents have begun to plant flowering shrubs along the Talisay-Bacolod border in Zone 15 in order to contribute to delineation efforts.

¹Barangays are considered to be the smallest political units in the Philippines. In Talisay, they are also referred to as “zones”.

“Mayor Saratan considers community and investor support to be one of the biggest indicators that Talisay has found its way to lasting development.”

Zone 6 is gradually shedding its reputation as “*barangay basura*” (“garbage town”) thanks to the leadership of barangay captain Rolando Macariola, himself a senior citizen, who has lighted up the area’s dark alleys and cleaned up a waste dump that accumulated behind the town church. There are plans to convert the former dumpsite into a children’s park.

Aside from planting flowering shrubs, Zone 15 barangay captain Joemar Estrope also organized a volunteer security group assigned to Ayala’s The District North Point mall area. “We check to see that everyone is safe and that there are tricycles or taxi cabs to ferry the last workers and customers in the evenings.”

Waswas Bugsay, Talisay!

One retiree who has decided to help put Talisay on the recreation map is former public servant

Ricardo “Cano” Tan. Coming from political defeat, Tan one day decided to visit a five-hectare property he bought in the Campuestohan highlands in Talisay.

It was not love at first sight, but the panoramic views and cool weather convinced Tan and his wife to build a rest house there, even if it meant pouring in 400 truckloads of material to help make the roads passable. Building that first log cabin led to the development of the Campuestohan Highland Resort, which features a restaurant, 3D swimming pool, family-friendly accommodations, and zipline, sky bike, and suspended obstacle courses. It is considered today to be one of the biggest recreation parks outside Metro Manila.

Considering this development, the city government of Talisay decided to buy nearby land to safeguard the area’s watershed cradle and create space for future ecotourism projects.



Talisay City Mayor Eric Saratan visits the General Aniceto Lacson Ancestral House, which is being restored to become part of the city’s heritage route.

Mayor Saratan considers community and investor support to be one of the biggest indicators that Talisay has found its way to lasting development. He now heads an aggressive media drive to promote the city as a retirement destination, making use of traditional press attention as well as social media channels.

In the Philippines, Mayor Saratan was among the first city mayors to make use of a Facebook account to promote the city's goals and achievements. Online, he is followed by more than 7,000 users who have access to weekly updates on Talisay's efforts toward governance. These stories have also appeared on the front pages of provincial weeklies.

Mayor Saratan compares the effort of transforming his city into a top retirement destination to that of steering a dragon boat. "*Waswas Bugsay, Talisay*—that is our battle cry," he says. Literally translated, it is a call to action for the city to "paddle hard" toward its goals.

By inviting grassroots participation, the city government has taken a diligent and enduring approach to transformation, creating greater consciousness among locals and investors and setting an inspiring example of collaboration. Indeed, Mayor Saratan's Talisay is on its way to

accomplishing what it set out to do from the beginning: give justice to a proud heritage by building a new history of progress.

For more information on Talisay's transformation journey visit <https://www.facebook.com/docericsaratan>.



Retired public servant Ricardo Tan has contributed to Talisay's development efforts by putting up Campuestohan Highland Resort (below), located near the site of the city's future eco-tourism projects.



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Acknowledgments

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Carlos Balcells
Anna Balcells
Jorre Tamparon
Ricardo Tan
Peter Uhlmann