

Proceedings of the Public Forum on Baguio City's Carrying Capacity and Its Impact on Neighboring Municipalities

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Prepared by Antoni Karl S. Riva



UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
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STUDIES

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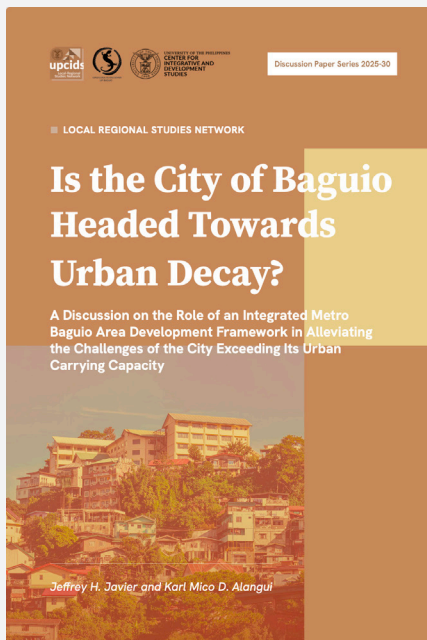
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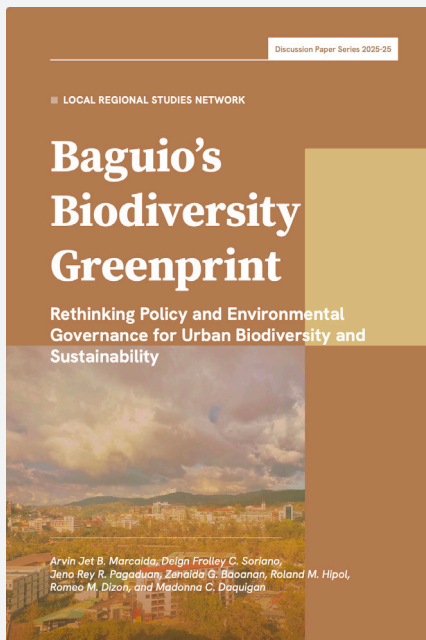
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About the Proceedings

The second Public Forum on Baguio City's carrying capacity was led by Mr. Jeffrey Javier, University Researcher I at the Cordillera Studies Center, University of the Philippines Baguio. Participants in the event included representatives from the following: the UP Baguio Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (OVCAA), the Dean of the College of Social Sciences (CSS), UP Baguio, the Project Leader of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS) project, faculty members from the UP Baguio College of Science, and representatives from the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), UP Manila, the City Planning, Development and Sustainability Office (CPDSO), the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), and Benguet State University (BSU).

Dr. Tala Aurora Ramos, Project Leader for the UP CIDS project under the CSC, delivered the welcoming remarks. She noted that the forum was part of a series aimed at examining Baguio City's urban carrying capacity. Dr. Ramos recapped previous activities related to the project and cited remarks from Arch. Donna Tabangin, who had highlighted that Baguio City has surpassed its thresholds in urban infrastructure, solid waste management, open spaces, and forest coverage. According to Arch. Tabangin, the city is not only in crisis but also lacks the minimum standards required for life support systems. Although Baguio envisions to become a livable, inclusive, and creative city by 2043, Dr. Ramos emphasized that such ambitions cannot be met with "business as usual." She challenged the audience to address the city's vulnerabilities, noting that any measures taken would also impact the neighboring municipalities within the BLISTT area (Baguio, La Trinidad, Itogon, Sablan, Tuba, and Tublay). Dr. Ramos underscored the importance of reviewing the impacts on these municipalities, reassessing existing policies, and identifying further policy actions and recommendations. The forum aims not only to highlight critical challenges but also set the stage for continued dialogue and action regarding the sustainable development of Baguio City and its surrounding areas.

Mr. Javier then provided the context for the UP CIDS project on Baguio City's carrying capacity. He introduced the initiative as part of the Local Regional

Studies Network—a UP CIDS program aimed at fostering research across local and regional areas, involving scholars and research centers from various UP System universities, including the Cordillera Studies Center. He also presented a brief background of Baguio City as a premier tourist destination and as the educational and business hub of the North. Mr. Javier reinforced Arch. Tabangin's earlier points by referencing several studies that confirm the city's exceeded carrying capacity. He explained that the project's objectives include providing a platform for stakeholders to discuss urban carrying capacity, reviewing existing studies and their recommendations, assessing current policy actions, identifying new areas for intervention, and assisting the city government in forming partnerships to address these issues. Finally, Mr. Javier introduced the resource person, Mr. Jose H. Dado, Jr., Chief Economic Development Specialist of the National Economic Development Authority – Cordillera Administrative Region.

Forum Proper

The Urban Carrying Capacity of Baguio City and the BLISTT Inter-local Cooperation Program

Mr. Jose H. Dado, Jr.

Chief Economic Development Specialist, National Economic Development Authority – Cordillera Administrative Region

Background and Current Challenges

Mr. Dado explained the necessity of estimating Baguio city's urban carrying capacity by outlining the city's pressing challenges. He noted that environmental issues (such as poor air quality, degradation of national parks, and the decline of forest reservations and heritage sites), resource shortages (including inadequate access to tap water), and infrastructure constraints (evidenced by extreme traffic congestion and the limited capacity of sewage treatment facilities) are contributing to urban decay. Historical data provided by Mr. Dado indicated that Baguio has exceeded several critical thresholds: for instance, the urban road length per 1,000 population reached 2.4 km in 1985, urban road area per capita hit 40 square meters in 1988, and solid waste collection became unsustainable by 1994 when the population was 216,000. He emphasized that the study's purpose was to establish a baseline for strategic development planning.

Population Trends and the BLISTT Inter-local Cooperation Program

The presentation also covered population projections, noting that although the overall growth rate has decreased, population numbers surge during peak tourist seasons, with an average daily load of 764,300 as of 2023. To

address these issues, Mr. Dado introduced the BLISTT inter-local cooperation program. The program is part of a regional plan that divides growth into two clusters—North and South—with the BLISTT areas falling within the southern cluster. This program, as detailed in the *Cordillera Regional Spatial Strategy and the Regional Development Plan (1988–1994)*, aims to facilitate cooperation among local government units (LGUs) in matters on transportation, solid waste management, water supply, eco-tourism, industrial expansion, housing, and disaster risk reduction. He stressed the necessity of collaborative action among BLISTT LGUs to sustain services, improve livelihoods, and enhance quality of life.

The Master Plan for Sustainable Urban Infrastructure Development (SUID)

Mr. Dado then discussed the Master Plan for SUID for BLISTT, which focuses on cross-cutting infrastructure projects affecting economic activity, environmental sustainability, and social services. Key projects include the BLISTT Integrated Solid Waste Management Facility, BLISTT Agro-industrial Economic Zone, Integrated Terminal Exchange, BLISTT University Community, and a multi-modal transport system. The plan also emphasizes the importance of private sector participation and social acceptability, supported by robust information-education campaigns. Notably, proposals from the SUID pre-feasibility study include developing a university community in Tuba, although concerns about limited suitable land persist.

Polycentric Development Strategy and Recommendations

The BLISTT strategy adopts a polycentric and dispersed development model, aiming to create multiple growth nodes linked by efficient public transit and non-motorized transportation systems. For example, La Trinidad is envisioned as a commercial and tourism hub within one such ‘growth node.’ Addressing issues related to ecology, Mr. Dado recommended measures such as massive reforestation and enhanced protection of forest reserves to maintain ecosystem functionality. To improve air quality, he called for strict regulatory enforcement and the development of an efficient transport system that minimizes emissions. Recommendations for water quality include regular monitoring and rigorous enforcement of pollution control and waste management laws, alongside safeguarding water sheds.

In the infrastructure sector, the study advises that the MBLISTT Development Authority forge partnerships with national agencies and private investors to explore renewable energy sources, such as solar power, and to secure new water supply sources. The transportation master plan should promote pedestrian and bicycle lanes, deploy well-trained traffic enforcers, and construct multi-level parking facilities. The study further outlines that lifestyle changes, facilitated by targeted information-education campaigns, are essential for achieving environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

Mr. Dado concluded by underscoring the importance of managing urban carrying capacity, noting that exceeding it under “business-as-usual” conditions adversely affects quality of life. However, with strategic management and technological innovations (such as Baguio LGU’s SMART City program), carrying capacity can be improved. He reaffirmed that effective governance by individual LGUs and the MBLISTT Development Authority is crucial for implementing priority projects and ensuring sustainable development. The private sector’s active involvement is also vital, providing necessary investments and driving economic returns, all of which contribute to a healthier, more sustainable urban environment.

Overall, Mr. Dado’s presentation highlighted the interconnectedness of urban planning, inter-local cooperation, and sustainable development, offering a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the critical challenges facing Baguio City and the BLISTT region.

Open Forum

In her reaction to the presentation, Dr. Zenaida Baoanan from the Department of Biology and a faculty member at UP Baguio, mentioned that they also have a related study funded by UP CIDS on urban green print. She noticed that the plans presented by Mr. Dado is about connectivity of the city to nearby municipalities in terms of websites and online connectivity and also in transportation. In this context, Dr. Baoanan asked if this includes landscape ecology in terms of corridors or vegetation connectivity. She mentioned that in their project, they are looking at quality of urban green spaces. She sees that it is good to see since the nearby municipalities still have forest areas with native plants – that if there will be plans to reforest green spaces with native plants, sources will come from nearby municipalities with urban green spaces. She further asked if these can be included in the plans.

Mr. Dado said that what Dr. Baoanan mentioned on ecological or vegetation connectivity is not yet part of the master plan. However, Mr. Dado thinks that the idea is innovative in the development plan. It is a good input that can be considered by the MBLISTT Development Authority as they make their own plan.

Dr. Baoanan followed up by stressing that it is good that vegetation connectivity be included in master plan because urban green spaces are integrated in development. She also mentioned a forum on urban green spaces. In said forum, the resource person, according to Dr. Baoanan, explained that the government is having difficulties in protecting forested areas because these were already purchased by private owners. However, Dr. Baoanan asserted that it is important to keep the environment for the well-being of the city's residents. Dr. Baoanan mentioned that in the said forum, it was recommended by the resource person that government should buy lands that are privately owned to protect urban green spaces. She asked if the recommendation is feasible. Dr. Baoanan also recalled Arch. Tabangin's proposal on environmental fees on tourist visiting the city. She asked if it is feasible that the environmental fees collected can be utilized to purchase urban green spaces.

Mr. Dado responded that the recommendation is feasible and will depend on the local government through the ordinance of environmental fees and the allocation of these funds to purchase privately-owned forest lands. He stressed that the LGU needs to prioritize this on their budgeting and investment program because it will be purely LGU funded. According to Mr. Dado, the city can perhaps realize returns of investment by having purchased lands as parks wherein non-resident visitors pay a fee similar to the Botanical Garden. He emphasized that the realization of this proposal is dependent on the LGU's political will.

Ms. Virgie Anceno, a Senior Economic Development Specialist at NEDA – CAR, also provided an additional response and concurred with the views of Mr. Dado. She mentioned that with all the master plans presented by Mr. Dado, connectivity of green spaces was not yet considered. What is being prepared in relation to the plan, according to said person, is physical connectivity such as infrastructure and internet. In the Cordillera Regional Development Plan, Ms. Anceno insisted that they are adopting the said strategy due to green spaces in coming up with livable communities. These areas should be identified in order for them to be integrated when BLISTT development plan is implemented. This would allow build-up areas to have open and green spaces. Ms. Anceno also highlighted that should another forum on the plan be organized, they would invite Dr. Baoanan to join to identify these green spaces.

Meanwhile, Ms. Lorelei Gaco from the City Planning Office, said that while we are aware of Baguio city's carrying capacity, she is looking if the study was able to present the carrying capacity of each nearby municipalities. Ms. Gaco opined that if the carrying capacity of each municipality is accounted for, then it can start a study on how it would impact each area.

Mr. Dado revealed that there is no study on the carrying capacity of each nearby municipality, unless the DENR conducted one. However, he explained that the premise of their study is the breach of carrying capacity in Baguio city, that is why expansion will be on the BLISTT areas. The problems faced by the city are dilemmas also encountered by urbanizing areas such as La Trinidad, which can lead to future studies in their particular locality.

In her follow-up, Ms. Gaco said that it will be better for municipalities to identify their growth nodes. Mr. Dado mentioned that municipalities also

have their comprehensive development and land-use plan. There should be complementation of projects among the BLISTT LGUs – comprehensive and integrated programs, which is a challenge faced by the Development Authority.

Another audience member commented on the master plan's recommendation on transportation whereby it promotes a walkable city through promoting pedestrian and bicycle lanes in certain business and tourist areas. However, the participant mentioned that based on the study, there are also proposals of Light Railway Transit operations from Baguio city to La Trinidad. They asked if this is not counterproductive because of the residential houses that may be affected, especially indigenous peoples who have no land titles. The participant further inquired if the LRT proposal would endanger indigenous peoples and put them at risk of displacement. The person then mentioned the experiences of indigenous peoples in Southern Tagalog with regards to their displacement due to the LRT extension in Cavite.

Mr. Dado explained that while there is a proposal of an LRT operation in the plan, it is not as massive compared to Manila—a smaller version comparable to the proposal of one in UP Diliman. The earlier recommendation was to build the LRT lanes along Balili River however Mr. Dado recognized that there are several environmental considerations in the construction and operation due to limited space. Furthermore, during the feasibility study, Mr. Dado mentioned that another issue is on the ridership—it is not enough as of the moment to recoup the investments of the private sector. In the future, with improvements in technology and increase in population, LRT operation continues to be an alternative transport system. Mr. Dado emphasized the role of advancing technology in seeking for solutions on these problems.

Additionally, the participant asked the possibility of various transportation be included in the dispersion of growth in the BLISTT. The audience member said that, transportation going to the nearby municipalities are only limited from Baguio City (ex. terminals at the back of Victory Liner). She asked the possibility of having transportation links to the BLISTT areas aside from and beyond Baguio City (ex. Point-to-Point bus transportation from Manila to La Trinidad).

Mr. Dado explained that there is a need to look at the efficiency of the transportation system. Baguio city has proposed a centralized terminal for buses in the Marcos Highway and from there visitors and commuters could use public transportation to proceed to the city itself and to nearby municipalities (BLISTT circumferential road network). This does not mean, according to Mr. Dado, precluding putting-up P2P transportation systems to and from nearby municipalities if it is feasible. With regards to vegetable transportation, there is a trading post in La Trinidad while some proceed to Baguio City. There are alternative routes of transportation going to the lowland market areas that vegetable traders utilize without passing through the city center.

Ms. Grace Batanes from NCIP Baguio conveyed her appreciation for being invited to join the forum. She hopes that the MBLISTT Development Authority can finally bridge the gap between the city and nearby municipalities. In relation to the master plan, the realization is there with several road constructions, however, there are projects that did not push through because of the lack of consultation with the owners of ancestral domain during the implementation. There was opposition to some projects due to the lack of prior information and consent from those affected. Ms. Batanes further stated that the master plan has a part that considers the status of a municipality with defined ancestral domains along with the owners and their rights. She mentioned the need for collaboration among government agencies in seriously implementing plans and considering the mandate of each institution. She hopes that the individual that will be selected as administrator of MBLISTT Development Authority is well-versed to the culture of Baguio City and Benguet.

Mr. Dado responded by mentioning that NEDA is part of the search committee for the administrator of the MBLISTT Development Authority. One of the criteria for administrator, Mr. Dado said, is being a resident of the BLISTT area. Cultural uniqueness is also recognized. On the issue of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) requirements and consultation, he stressed that it is mandatory. Stakeholders are consulted and FPIC is required in the implementation process of projects. The Regional Development Council (RDC) assists in ensuring the facilitation process of the FPIC to address social acceptability and environmental concerns. He welcomed the initiatives and ideas of NCIP and asked for their cooperation to provide copies of Ancestral

Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan to be considered in the regional and local plans.

Another reaction came from a representative from DENR who was involved in a program which started in 2022 where the agency conducted assessments of remaining green spaces in the city. This year, the representative said, their target is the urban conservation plan for Baguio city. During the assessment, the DENR has been collaborating with UP Baguio and the CEPMO. The representative mentioned that the presentation of the plan is on October 30. The representative shared that they are fortunate to be part of a training on climate resilience and local urban greening plan conducted by the climate change service of the DENR. They were able to draft a more enhanced urban conservation plan because of the said training, which included participants from the City Planning Office and other concerned offices. The representative also commented on the vision they came up with is also in line with that of Baguio City—a livable, inclusive, and green city.

Mr. Javier mentioned that different BLISTT LGUs were also invited to participate in the forum however they were not able to come.

A representative from City Planning Office reacted to the purchase of lands in the BLISTT area, especially of lands owned and sold by government agencies.

Mr. Dado explained that selling of land properties owned by government agencies is not allowed. Any sale of government properties needs to go in the process of approval. All government transactions need to go into bidding. He emphasized that there is no policy promoting the sale of government properties except on asset privatization. Mr. Dado stressed that with regards to national government offices in the city, NEDA is not aware of anything related.

Mr. Dado mentioned one of their advocacies in the RDC for Cordillera regional autonomy. He stated that regional autonomy for CAR is enshrined in the Philippine constitution. However, he explained that there are many factors to consider such as crafting an acceptable legislation or an organic law. He mentioned this because it is important to consider this in relation to self-governance provided through the constitution. Regional autonomy pertains to self-governance and resource use which is related to land ownership. The ownership of land that is secured and not necessarily prescribed by national

laws that might not be appropriate to the region. Control of one's natural resources including land needs to be considered not only in the BLISTT areas, but the whole region. Mr. Dado hopes that with an informed decision the residents of CAR will have a choice to establish an autonomous region.

In her reaction, Dr. Ramos shared the talk of Arch. Tabangin who mentioned that the vision for Baguio city in 2043 is not just a city that is livable and creative, but also inclusive. Dr. Ramos asked if there are plans that are incorporating community-based solutions which are identified by the different BLISTT areas and how they are being incorporated into the plans. Since cultural uniqueness is considered and because the BLISTT area is made up of IP communities, Dr. Ramos asked how these communities will be included despite the plans to be able to address the problems mentioned in the presentation.

Mr. Anceno responded to the questions of Dr. Ramos. In terms of inclusivity, Ms. Anceno explained that it is in the development plan because when they define or describe livable communities it already involved inclusivity. She emphasized that in defining livable communities, there is an aspect of social development which includes poor families, indigenous peoples, children, etc. People are considered based on how they engage with each other within the community. According to Ms. Anceno, social cohesion and social development are in the outcome goals of the plan, while at the same time, she mentioned the consideration resiliency. While infrastructure is emphasized, she explained that green spaces are also prioritized under livable communities. People are always considered in the concept of livable communities. As a structure, resiliency and creative is already part of livable communities.

Mr. Javier also asked a question with regards to tourism circuits to decongest the city. He asked what will the involvement of travel and tours agencies be in this plan will be. He mentioned that most travel and tours agencies are either usually from outside the city or are concentrated to the city of Baguio. One possible recommendation is that the travel and tours agencies can facilitate handling guided city tours.

Ms. Anceno answered that there was one proposal they evaluated about tourism circuits around the BLISTT areas coordinated by the Department of Tourism. The proposal identified certain areas, however, it was still pending approval because it was deferred since the areas identified were still lacking

for the tourists and the price is expensive. Travel agencies, according to Ms. Anceno, participated in this proposal, including identifying the tourist guides. She hoped that once the MBLISTT council is assembled, these proposals can be reviewed once more.

Mr. Dado also added to the responses to Mr. Javier. He mentioned that tour operators were involved because they will be implementing and promoting the plan – from transportation, accommodation, to food needs of their clients to visit the BLISTT areas. Mr. Dado highlighted the participation of the private sector is important because they are the investors and partners of government. He also mentioned civil society organizations as stakeholders.

Mr. Dado also gave his views about the questions of Dr. Ramos earlier. He understood the question meant economic inclusion—which is talking about carrying capacity, sustainable development, and livable communities. He relates it to the Philippine Development Plan and regional development plan as their guides—based on the aspirations of the Filipino people (promote employment, poverty reduction, inclusive development, and better income for quality of life).

Closing Activities

Dr. Ramos provided the closing remarks of the forum. She explained that what is interesting is the last slide of the presentation of Mr. Dado which says: the carrying capacity is not fixed and can be increased by various management and technological development. In other words, according to Dr. Ramos, there is hope in addressing the problems that the city is facing and there is a lot that can still be done aside from what was proposed. It is important that there is a way by which we can decongest Baguio City by sharing the resources of our neighboring municipalities. Suggestions from the participants can also be included to address Baguio City's carrying capacity concern. Dr. Ramos also reminded that growth nodes and cultural uniqueness of each municipality should always be considered in the plans that is intended to be carried out.

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